

Matthew Arnold and “Dover Beach”

Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888) was an English thinker who addressed the issues of his times in poetry and prose. He was educated at Rugby School (where his father Thomas Arnold was the famous headmaster) and later graduated from Balliol College, Oxford.

During his early writing career, Arnold worked as an Inspector of Schools in England. Later he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857 which initiated his career as a literary critic. It was during this time that Arnold delivered some of the most important lectures on literary topics, which were later published as essays. Arnold’s *Essays in Criticism* (published 1865, 1888) laid the foundation of modern criticism.

Among his major poetical works are *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* (1849), *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* (1852), *Sohrab and Rustum* (1853), *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse* (1855) and *Rugby Chapel* (1867). Two very famous pastoral poems written by Arnold are “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Thyrsis”.

As a social thinker, Arnold’s greatest contribution is *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), where he offers an insightful critique of the socio-political trends of his age.

Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” is a lyric poem addressing the Victorian crisis of faith. Arnold is responding to the conflict between religion and science in his own times. Though the poem was written around 1849-51, it was published in 1867 as part of a collection of poems titled *New Poems*.

According to critics, some sections of the poem were composed during Arnold's honeymoon tour of the continent in 1851. Hence the person addressed in "Dover Beach" could be Arnold's wife. But "Dover Beach" transcends its personal context to become a universal poem which captures the Victorian mood of disillusionment and melancholy at the loss of faith and certitude.

Arnold's "Dover Beach" opens with a moonlit night landscape which suggests placidity and calmness. Dover Beach overlooks the English Channel which separates England from the rest of the European continent, the nearest country being France. The lyrical speaker describes the beach in romantic terms.

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

The speaker invites his beloved to enjoy the night air and the magical seascape bathed in moonlight and then later, to listen to the sound of the sea waves. However, the sea is no longer calm, but restlessly active- the sound of the sea waves evokes a strong feeling of melancholy in the listener.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

This initial impression of calmness is soon dismissed as an illusion by the speaker as he concentrates on the sound of the “the grating roar” which tells an entirely different story associated with this moonlit picture. The sound of the sea waves reminds Arnold of the misery of human existence. The sea no longer brings happy thoughts, but reminds him of the inherent and unchanging sorrow at the heart of human life.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

Arnold brings in a reference to Sophocles, the fifth century Greek dramatist who had composed great tragedies, the most famous of them being the Oedipus trilogy. Arnold alludes to Sophocles as an ancient mind who heard the message of futility of human existence when he listened to the sound of the sea waves.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

The predominant metaphor of the poem is that of the Sea of Faith. In the abovementioned line, the sea of faith is compared to a bright girdle which is capable of shielding the world from all kinds of danger. The sound of the sea waves retreating from the seashore leaving the "drear" edges and "naked" shingles exposed symbolically refers to the loss of faith in the Victorian age.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The person addressed here could be Arnold's wife. The world is compared to a land of dreams. Dreams are illusory, not real. Arnold views the apparent achievements of his times as illusory, just like dreams. The speaker emphasizes love as the only power that can bind us together in this crisis of faith and offer some respite. The poet imagines the modern world as a darkling plain, lacking light, hope, joy or love. According to A. Dwight Culler, the "darkling plain" is Arnold's "central statement" of the human condition.

The poem closes with the most powerful metaphor of “ignorant armies” fighting a battle in the darkness of night. Here Arnold is alluding to an ancient battle fought at night during the Athenian invasion of Sicily, as narrated in Thucydides' *Account of the Peloponnesian War*. The battle was meaningless, since members of the same army ended up in killing each other in the darkness. Arnold's “Dover Beach” has been regarded as the most memorable expression of the pessimism and disillusionment of the Victorian times.