

Dover Beach Study Guide



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Summary

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a poem set near Dover, along the southeast coast of England, where Arnold and his new wife spent their honeymoon in 1851. It is believed that the poet wrote the early draft of "Dover Beach" while here, overlooking the English Channel toward the coast of France, about twenty-six miles away. Arnold and his wife are often considered the models for the speaker and listener in the poem, although any young man and woman could represent the two figures in the tale, caught in a moment of their early lives.

"Dover Beach" is most often classified as a dramatic monologue, a poetic form that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and especially Robert Browning, found extremely attractive. The monologue, or poem spoken by a single voice, is made dramatic by the presence of a silent audience of one or more listeners, whose responses may be indicated by the speaker, or persona. In this way the poet may be empowered to express views using another person's voice, as William Shakespeare is known for doing.

This strategy may have been particularly attractive to Arnold, for the views of his speaker are diametrically opposed to his own education and upbringing. Matthew was six years old when he was moved into the Rugby School after his clergyman father Thomas Arnold became its headmaster, or principal. As headmaster, Thomas Arnold gained a reputation for educational reform, based on his commitment to the high seriousness of making students aware of the moral as well as the social issues that would make them responsible citizens.

"Dover Beach" has often been read as a kind of seismological record of the shock waves in traditional religion brought about by the New Science in the mid-nineteenth century. The geology of Charles Lyell and others was forcing Europeans and Americans to rethink how life began on the planet. Lyell's discoveries of fossils dating back more than one million years were making it increasingly difficult to accept the traditional notion in the book of Genesis that the world is the work of a creator a mere six or seven thousand years ago. By 1851, when "Dover Beach" was probably written, Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace, and other scientists had already theorized the essentials of evolution, but it would take Darwin another eight years to publish his findings. Even then, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) only at the urging of his friends, who warned him that others would publish first if he did not set aside his concerns for the devastating moral and spiritual consequences of challenging the traditional story of how life began. It is probably no coincidence that Arnold himself postponed the publication of "Dover Beach" until 1867.

The poem begins with a naturalistic scene, clearly within the Romantic tradition established by William Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth, Arnold understands the elegance and power of simple language: "The sea is calm tonight./ The tide is full, the moon lies fair/ Upon the straits." As often noted, the first stanza contains fourteen lines and the second and third stanzas have six and eight lines, respectively, suggesting the sonnet

form, but without its more complicated meter and rhyme systems. From its initial visual images, the first stanza and the subsequent two stanzas move toward the dominance of auditory images. The shift is justified by the obviously limited opportunity to see, even with moonlight, but also by the strong impact of the waves breaking on the beach. By the first stanza's end, the persona, or speaker, has established the poem's central metaphor of the waves' "tremulous cadence slow" to represent an "eternal note of sadness." Additionally, a mere five lines into the poem, the voice has introduced a listener in the scene—telling the reader to "Come to the window"—setting up a tension: Who is the listener? What will be the effect of the melancholy poetic statement on that listener?

This "eternal note" draws the persona further from the directly visualized opening scene with its simple but strong language. The allusion to the ancient Greek tragic dramatist Sophocles offers a context for the speaker's growing "sadness." (Arnold was among one of the last generations for whom a classical education entailed learning ancient Greek and Latin to read the classics in their original languages.) The allusion also draws the poem into the more didactic strategy of a statement—asserting rather than implying meaning—and the deployment of something like allegory—a "Sea of Faith" once at its "flow" but now at its "ebb." This third stanza also reveals evidence of the poet's effort at elevating the language, producing the difficult opening lines in which that sea once "round earth's shore/ Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled," a choice of words guaranteed to confuse the modern reader. This "girdle" is appropriate to the classical context of Sophocles, but not to the modern world, where it denotes an article of intimate apparel. However, attempts of academics to clarify that meaning have distracted attention from the figurative logic of a sea as a "girdle," or belt, as well as from the unfortunate combination of sounds in "girdle furled." Another issue left unaddressed is the dominance of pessimism in the persona's inability to attend to the logic of this "Sea of Faith": Whatever ebbs will inevitably flow in the future.

The final stanza recalls the earlier reference to the listener—"Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!"—to focus on the melancholy consequences of the weakening of faith. To the persona, and presumably the poet, the world truly is "a land of dreams," pipe dreams with nothing to believe in, not just God and an afterlife but "joy," "love," and so on. This is Romantic love at its most radical. Without love between a man and a woman, the world is as confusing—and as lethal—as a night battle, fraught with friendly fire. In a sense, Arnold is announcing the big question for the modern world, intent on forcing love to bear the enormous weight of providing human lives with meaning: If love is all humans have, what do they do when they cannot find love, or keep it? It is a question that resonates through the novels, too, of Ernest Hemingway, such as in his *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), or in the contexts of wedding receptions, where some have to suppress the depressing thought, will this be the one of every two marriages that ends in divorce?

"Dover Beach" is the most anthologized text in the English language, and a frequent source of allusions for writers in their own works. One index of the poem's effect on readers of poetry is a poem by American poet laureate Anthony Hecht. In his "Dover Bitch: A Criticism of Life" (1996), Hecht focuses on the silent listener in Arnold's poem, developing her character as a woman who is definitely not the speaker's wife, and identifying the persona in his poem as someone who knew Arnold, the speaker in "Dover Beach." Hecht's poem indicates that the woman responds to Arnold's expression of melancholy, but her first response of sadness is displaced not by erotic desire but by anger at his treating her as "a sort of mournful cosmic last resort." Although Arnold specialists Kenneth and Miriam Allott may attempt to defuse Hecht's parody as "an irreverent *jeu d'esprit*," this is no "witty or humorous trifle." The perceptive Hecht grasps the shabby treatment of the woman by Arnold's speaker, who is using her as a consolation prize for his loss of faith. By implication, Hecht also addresses the sexual mores of Arnold's time, when the young poet could never have lived with his future bride and may well have resorted to Hecht's less respectable female character. Unlike brides in Arnold's day, bridegrooms were not expected to come to the marriage beds as virgins.

Hecht's poem speaks to his confidence in his reader's familiarity with Arnold's poem. That familiarity is evident in the usual catalog of references to "Dover Beach" in popular culture, including in the rock album

Snakes & Arrows (2007) by Rush, the American film *The Anniversary Party* (2001), Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961), Norman Mailer's Vietnam protest book *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and a composition for string quartet and baritone by Samuel Barber. To further demonstrate the poem's continuing influence, reference to "Dover Beach" is included in the climactic scene of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005).

Additional Summary: Summary

"Dover Beach" is a brief, dramatic monologue generally recognized as Arnold's best—and most widely known—poem. It begins with an opening stanza that is indisputably one of the finest examples of lyric poetry in the English language. The topography of the nocturnal setting is a combination of hushed tranquillity and rich sensory detail. It is the world as it appears to the innocent eye gazing on nature: peaceful, harmonious, suffused with quiet joy. The beacon light on the coast of Calais, the moon on the calm evening waters of the channel, and the sweet scent of the night air all suggest a hushed and gentle world of silent beauty. The final line of the stanza, however, introduces a discordant note, as the perpetual movement of the waves suggests to the speaker not serenity but "the eternal note of sadness."

The melancholy strain induces in the second stanza an image in the mind of the speaker: Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, creator of *Oidipous Tyrannos* (c. 429 b.c.e.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715) and *Antigone* (441 b.c.e.; *Antigone*, 1729) standing in the darkness by the Aegean Sea more than two thousand years ago. The ancient master of tragedy hears in the eternal flux of the waves the same dark note, "the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery." Thus, the speaker, like Sophocles before him, perceives life as tragedy; suffering and misery are inextricable elements of existence. Beauty, joy, and calm are ephemeral and illusory. The speaker's pessimistic perspective on the human condition, expressed in stanzas two, three, and four, undercuts and effectively negates the positive, tranquil beauty of the opening stanza; the reality subsumes the misleading appearance. In the third stanza, Arnold introduces the metaphor of the "Sea of Faith," the once abundant tide in the affairs of humanity that has slowly withdrawn from the modern world. Darwinism and Tractarianism in Arnold's nineteenth century England brought science into full and successful conflict with religion. "Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar" suggested to Arnold the death throes of the Christian era. The Sophoclean tragic awareness of fate and painful existence had for centuries been displaced by the pure and simple faith of the Christian era, a temporary compensation promising respite from an existence that is ultimately tragic.

The fourth and final stanza of "Dover Beach" is extremely pessimistic. Its grim view of reality, its negativity, its underlying desperate anguish are in marked contrast to the joy and innocent beauty of the first stanza. Love, the poet suggests, is the one final truth, the last fragile human resource. Yet here, as the world is swallowed by darkness, it promises only momentary solace, not joy or salvation for the world. The world, according to the speaker, "seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams," offering at least an appearance that seems "So various, so beautiful, so new," but it is deceptive, a world of wishful thinking. It is shadow without substance, offering neither comfort nor consolation. In this harsh existence, there is "neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain."

Arnold closes the poem with the famous lines that suggest the very nadir of human existence; few poems have equaled its concise, sensitive note of poignant despair. Humanity stands on the brink of chaos, surrounded in encroaching darkness by destructive forces and unable to distinguish friend from foe. The concluding image of the night battle suggests quite clearly the mood of the times among those who shared Arnold's intellectual temperament, and it is one with which they were quite familiar. Thucydides' *Historia tou Peloponnesiacou polemou* (431-404 b.c.e.; *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1550) describes the night battle of Epipolae between the Athenians and the Syracusans. Dr. Thomas Arnold, Matthew's father, had published a three-volume translation of Thucydides' text in 1835; it was a favorite text at Rugby. Another ancillary source was John Henry Newman, who, in 1843, published a sermon, "Faith and Reason, Contrasted as Habits of

Mind,” in which he alludes to the growing religious controversy of the time, describing it as “a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together.”

Themes: Themes and Meanings

The prose work of Matthew Arnold, addressed to a more general audience, attempts to suggest to those of his day some relatively public, institutional substitute for the loss of the unifying faith that men once shared, most notably what Arnold called “Culture.” Arnold’s poetry, however, is more personal and ultimately less assured. Virtually all of Arnold’s poetry is the record of his personal search for calm, for objectivity, for somewhere firm to stand.

As a broad generalization, the poem presents the common opposition between appearance and reality; the appearance is the opening six lines, which turn out to be a dream, while the reality of life, which the poet accepts, is the desolate beach and the confused battlefield. The poem also presents the eternal conflict between the wisdom of the heart and the wisdom of the head. The heart is attracted by the pleasant appearance of the view from the window, but the head is forced to take heed of the eternal sound of the surf, which says something entirely different. It is notable in the poem that the poet does not make a clear choice between the two; in fact, he accepts that the world is the way his reason tells him. The problem is how to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable forces. The answer given, tentatively, is that perhaps true love between two people can somehow supply meaning in a world that is still filled with confusion and struggle.

In “Dover Beach,” Arnold is doing two things: chronicling and lamenting the loss of faith and seeking a substitute, here the possibility of human love for another individual. (In other poems, Arnold suggested other substitutes.) Arnold firmly believed that Christianity was dead. His reason and his knowledge and investigation of such mid-Victorian intellectual trends as the Higher Criticism of the Bible and quasi-historical concerns about the historical Jesus had convinced him that a reasonable man could no longer believe in Christianity. Yet Arnold’s heart and instincts told him, not that Christianity ought to survive, but that humankind desires and indeed must have something in which to believe in order to truly live, to be truly human. Humankind wants something which can give force and meaning to life, which the modern world with its science and commercialism cannot supply. Arnold’s best-known expression of this problem is in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” where he finds himself “Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born.” The dead world is Christianity, the world powerless to be born is the modern world with its deceptive attractions.

Though on one level one may call “Dover Beach” a love poem, the possibility that human love and communication can somehow make the loss of faith and certitude bearable (because it will not make the world go away) is really given short shrift. The images of sadness, melancholy, and desolation dominate the poem, while the possibility of love gets no more than two short lines. Even those two lines are overwhelmed by the emotional impact and vividness of the final image. The effect of the poem would seem to emphasize that the possibility of love is tentative at best, while the poet cannot seem to purge from his consciousness his horrifying vision of human life.

Analysis: The Poem

“Dover Beach” is a dramatic monologue of thirty-seven lines, divided into four unequal sections or “paragraphs” of fourteen, six, eight, and nine lines. In the title, “Beach” is more significant than “Dover,” for it points at the controlling image of the poem.

On a pleasant evening, the poet and his love are apparently in a room with a window affording a view of the straits of Dover on the southeast coast of England, perhaps in an inn. The poet looks out toward the French

coast, some twenty-six miles away, and is attracted by the calm and serenity of the scene: the quiet sea, the moon, the blinking French lighthouse, the glimmering reflections of the famous white cliffs of Dover. He calls his love to the window to enjoy the scene and the sweet night air; there is one element out of tune with the peaceful scene, however, and the speaker strongly urges his love to “Listen!” to the rasping sound from the shingle beach as the waves, flowing in and out, drag the loose pebbles back and forth. This repetitive sound underlies the otherwise peaceful scene like background music and suggests to the speaker some unspecified, unrelenting sadness. To this point (line 14), the poem has been essentially straightforward description.

In the second section, the speaker (presumably grounded in the classics as Matthew Arnold was) is reminded that the Greek tragic dramatist Sophocles had heard the same sound in the Aegean and it had suggested to him the turbid ebb and flow of human suffering, which had been the dominant subject of his plays. (The precise passage referred to in Sophocles is obscure; several have been suggested.) The poet and his companion—or perhaps the “we” of line 18 is more generalized—are also reminded by the sound of a related but somewhat different thought.

Like the sea, Faith (principally Christianity) once girded the world, like an attractive, bright-colored scarf tightly binding all together. Now, however, the sea of faith is receding; the power of religion to give unity and meaning is waning, leaving behind only the chill wind whistling over the desolate beach. The imagery of the last four lines of this section indicates that the loss of faith is not simply unfortunate but also results in a great sense of emptiness and sterility.

In the final section, the poet turns from the troubling scene to his love, almost in desperation, seeking to find some meaning and stability in a world that is otherwise a void, and cries out for them to be true to each other, because in the vision of the poet, there is nothing else possible to give meaning to life. The world, which is apparently beautiful and new (recalling the opening six lines), is in fact not so. The world can offer none of the promises it makes: joy, love, light, certitude, peace, help for pain. What the world is really like is a battlefield at night where soldiers rush about, pursuing and firing at shadows, unable to tell friend from foe; it is a dark plain “Where ignorant armies clash by night.” This famous final image of the confused battle was probably inspired by Thucydides’ description of the battle of Epipolae in *Historia tou Peloponnesiacou pole mou* (431-404 b.c.e.; *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1550).

Analysis: Forms and Devices

Though a dramatic monologue, “Dover Beach,” Arnold’s most famous poem, has notable meditative and lyric elements. The poem makes no particular attempt to follow the clipped, elliptical, semi-conversational style of the more realistic monologues of Robert Browning, but rather presents a more meditative poem, dominated by three extended images that not only carry the meaning of the poem but also provide much of the emotional and imaginative impact.

The first image mixes sight and sound and occupies the entire first section of the poem. The poet begins with a broad general view from the horizon, coming closer to that which is in the forefront of his view, the sea meeting the moon-blanching land, whence comes the disturbing sound. The deceptive calm of the opening lines is undercut by the grating surf on the beach. The deliberately plain opening, a common poetic practice in Arnold, emphasizes nouns and verbs and their emotional impact. It is only in the fourteenth line, with the mention of “an eternal note of sadness,” that there is any indication that the reader will be exposed to anything more than a simple description, that in view of what follows one shall have to reorient oneself to the significance of the initial description.

The second dominant image in the poem is in lines 25 through 28, expressing the emotional impact of the loss of faith. The individual words add up—melancholy, withdrawing, retreating, vast, drear, naked—re-creating

the melancholy sound of the sea withdrawing, leaving behind only a barren and rocky shore, dreary and empty. These images, emphasizing the condition after faith has left, present a void, an emptiness, almost creating a shudder in the reader; it is perhaps a more horrifying image than even the battlefield image with which the poem closes.

The last important extended image closes the poem; it is a very common practice for Arnold to supply such closing, summarizing images in an attempt to say metaphorically what he perhaps cannot express directly. (Such closings are to be clearly seen in “The Scholar-Gipsy,” “Sohrab and Rostum,” “Tristram and Iseult,” “Rugby Chapel,” and others.) The calm of the opening lines is deceptive, a dream. Underneath or behind is the reality of life—a confused struggle, no light, nothing to distinguish good from evil, friend from foe; it is the result of the thought suggested by the sound of the surf. The poem makes clear that one is not viewing this battlefield as from a distance; one is in the middle of the fight.

Arnold reinforces the impact of these images with an often subtle but evocative use of sound and syntax. The convoluted syntax of lines 7 through 14, coming as it does after the plain statements of the opening, reflects not only the actual repetitive sound of the scene but perhaps also the confusion and lack of certainty in the poet’s own mind. The first fourteen lines may well also suggest a sonnet, since this gives certain appearances that it is a love poem. While the rhyme scheme and line length do not conform to the sonnet tradition, the poem is divided into octave and sestet by the turn at the first word of the ninth line, “Listen!” As if to further emphasize this line, which begins with “Listen!” and ends with “roar,” it is the only line in the whole poem that does not rhyme.

Bibliography

Further Reading

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Quotes: "Melancholy, Long, Withdrawing Roar"

Context: With a loved one, the poet looks out across the Straits of Dover toward the French coast and listens to the endless washing movement, landward and seaward, of the waves which seem to him to "bring/ The eternal note of sadness in." In ancient Greece, Sophocles heard the sound and was reminded of "the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery. . . ." To Arnold, whose religious faith—like that of many of his contemporaries—had been weakened by the influence of such scientific ideas as those of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, the waves' sound has a very different meaning, and he sadly comments:

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.

Quotes: "The Sea Of Faith Was Once, Too, At The Full"

Context: Arnold, critic of nineteenth century life, could not accept the old religious faith with its worn conventions and could find no solid basis for a new faith that he struggled toward. In "Dover Beach" he describes the ebb and flow of the sea, which brings in an "eternal note of sadness." His mind bridges the centuries to Sophocles, who heard the same note on the Aegean. Arnold then compares the full tide of the sea at Dover Beach with the "Sea of Faith." He says:

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.

Quotes: "We Are Here As On A Darkling Plain"

Context: Arnold, critic of nineteenth-century life, saw in his contemporaries only narrowness in thought and confusion in religion. Observing with a loved one the ebb and flow of the full sea, which brings in an "eternal note of sadness," he is reminded that Sophocles heard the same sound on the Aegean. To Arnold, the "Sea of Faith" was once full, but only a melancholy, withdrawing roar comes to the land now. He pleads with his love to remain with him to soften the harshness of the religious and political struggles. He says:

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.