

# Dover beach essay



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Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867) is a moving dynamic of the older poetic philosophy of Romanticism and its evolution into the more cynical Modernism of the Industrial Revolution. As an individual work, analyzed for its own deliberate virtue, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" would hold a great deal of personal meaning to any secular agnostic that may feel that the pious creativity of most poets excludes them from their readerships. Arnold's work, "Dover Beach", in a beautiful sort of melancholy, laments the uncertainties and bitter world that we as peoples of a modern civilization find ourselves a part of.

This "darkling plain" (35), as Arnold so describes it, is what has come to replace the divine intervention of God's protection and divine salvation. Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888) was an English poet and critic who wrote avidly about the social, religious, and educational issues of his day. In an era where Britain was embracing the efficiency of industrial production, and the marvels of technology and science began their first infantile steps into the role the church once held in the lives of many Europeans, poets like Matthew Arnold, ever the mirrors of culture, began to artistically document this shift.

It was a movement away from the social Christian norm of a world created by God, towards a colder, crueler reality of soulless steam engines, and evolutionary theory. This first step towards poetic acknowledgement of this new age was Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," and his work becoming the poetic forefather of "Modern Sensibility." The opening stanza of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a soothing description of what is believed to be Matthew Arnold looking out the window of his honeymoon cottage over a moonlit pebble beach of the Dover area of Southeastern England.

All, save for the last line, is poetic romanticism at its finest; describing the “moon-blanch’d land” (8) as it’s rhythmically washed by the sea, and the sound of the rasping pebbles echoing across the shoreline. The opening stanza of “Dover Beach” is meant to lull the reader into a peaceful composure, imagining the scene with the entire divine splendor that Arnold was writing with.

The final line, however, Matthew Arnold ominously calls this scenery the medium that brings “the eternal note of sadness in” (14); the emotional music, that carries with it spiritual manna, bares the stinging bitter-sweet realization that none of it is actually real. Sophocles (495 – 406), the Greek tragedy playwright, is described by Matthew Arnold as hearing the same sound in the Mediterranean when inspired to write his tragedies such as *Antigone*, *King Oedipus*, and *Electra*. Arnold describes it as having “brought into his mind the turbid ebb and flow of human misery” (16).

This comparison to Sophocles’ Theban plays, in their pitiless misfortunes, foreshadows the mood of the following stanzas. The touching enchantment of first devout stanza of “Dover Beach” is now enveloped by the ugly and secular truth of the world. Matthew Arnold describes the “sea of faith” (20), the divine protection of religious devotion, as an encompassing “bright girdle furl’d” (22) that is now retreating before human reason, “the breath of the night-wind” (25). In the final stanza of “Dover Beach”, Matthew Arnold writes “Ah, love, let us be true / To one another! or 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, or light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;” (28-33). In these emotionally charged lines Arnold pleads that they

cling to each other against a land that is beautiful as only an exterior to an unfeeling, Godless world. The beautiful world, the world of the Romantic, is a lie; there is only the callous Modern world, devoid of answered hopes or prayers.

Matthew Arnold writes in a very similar fashion to William Wordsworth, “ we are here as on a darkling plain” (34), to convey how we stand in the darkness of our contemporary lifestyle and must now suffer with our realization of secular doctrine and the destruction of God. Matthew Arnold’s modern sensibility shines through like a poetic eulogy, a poignant lamentation for the future of mankind in a world without spirituality. The beauty of the Dover Beach that Matthew Arnold describes serves as only a momentary elation that soon descends into an ominous melancholia of understanding that none of the emotion that he finds in the landscape is real.

To Matthew Arnold, Dover Beach is sour manna, poisoning his creativity as it feeds it. The Poet, Mathew Arnold is standing by the seashore and watching the gentle waves splashing the sandy shores of the Straits. There is a weak breeze that blows gently and the sea looks calm for the night. The tide is full of potential yet under self control and the moon looks bright as it shines its beams on the quiet sea. From the French Coast across the English Channel to the high sea cliffs of England, the light shines pleasantly and softly, and gets weakened towards the tranquil bay of England.

The poet tells his companion to come to the window of his cabin and enjoy the sweet aroma of the night air. Watching the seashore from this height,

one can only witness the waters of the sea that acts as a catalyst when they touch the moonlit blended Colour of the sands. Sometimes they hear the roar of the sea when the pebbles cross over to the high sandy beaches and move back suddenly with the withdrawing waves. This phenomenon continues every evening throughout the night with a slow trembling note and the presence of melancholy is felt.

The poet makes his reference to ‘Sophocles’ a famous Greek dramatist long ago, of the 5th Century B. C. to a passage in his play ‘Antigone’(line-583). Here the same eternal note of sadness can be heard on the ‘Aegaeon’: an elongated embayment of the Mediterranean Sea, between Southern Balkans and Anatolia. This brought to the dramatist’s mind the muddy movement of the tide away from the land and its flow, the tide of misfortune that rules human misery. That same similar sound can be heard in the thoughts from the distant sea in the north.

The mighty sea was once a beholder of faith with its vastness that touches all the shores of the earth around the globe, lay folded like a bright girdle cord worn around the waist and rolled up fastened and firm. Yet now, the sounds of the waves in the sea are only notes of melancholy; long drawn; advancing and retreating at the breath of the night wind that blows down the vast yet dull and gloomy edges of the bare shingles of the world. The beaches that are covered with coarse sand and large stones.

The poet finally appeals to his beloved companion to be honest with each other, for the world that they live in, which looks so beautiful and new, and lay before them like a land of dreams, does not have joy, love or spiritual

light. There is no certainty for help in times of trouble and peace. All the mortals live in this world in a dark state of mind and the struggle for survival is no less different from ignorant armies that fight throughout the night. The poem “Dover Beach” written by Matthew Arnold is about a human misery. Nature especially the sea is used in order to draw a comparison between the fights of nature and the human misery.

The poem consists of four stanzas which have a different amount of lines. The first stanza consists of 14 lines, the second of six, the third of eight and the last line of nine lines. The rhyme scheme is very irregular. For example, in the first eight lines of the poem it is abacdbdc. The first stanza can be divided into two parts. In the first part (line one to line six) the lyrical I describes the motions of the sea in a very positive way. The words “to-night” (l. 1), “moon” (l. 2) and “night-air” (l. 6) show that it is night. To create a very harmonious mood the poet utilizes adjectives such as “fair”, “tranquil” and “calm”.

Matthew Arnold uses an anaphora (“Gleams” and “Glimmering” l. 4/5), to underline the harmonious atmosphere of the first six lines. The word “only” in line seven can be seen as a caesura. After line seven the harmonious mood of the first lines is changing into a sad mood. The word sea is personified by the verb “meets” in line seven. The personification and the expression “moon-blanch’d land” create a mystic atmosphere. With the words of sound “listen”, “hear” and “roar” in line nine Arnold wants to activate the reader’s perception of senses to involve him in his poem.

Also, he involves the readership by using the imperatives “ come” and “ listen”. The verbs “ begin” “ cease” and “ again begin” show that the pebbles” motions are a never ending movement. By using the words “ sadness” and “ tremulous” the pebbles” motions are illustrated in a woeful and threatening way. The first stanza can be seen as a description of a present status, whereas the second stanza is a reference to the past. In the second stanza the poet uses “ Sophocles”, an ancient Greek philosopher, to show that the people for a long time thought about a comparison between sea and human misery.

The verb “ hear” in line 16 and in line 20 can be regarded as a connection to the words of acoustic perception in the first stanza. The expression “ distant northern sea” is another connecting element between the both stanzas. By mentioning the countries England and France the first stanza is talking about the northern sea. The main topic of the first stanza is the motion of sea. The reader can only guess that it refers to human misery, but the second stanza talks about to the human misery in line 18. The third stanza abstracts the image of the sea and uses it as a metaphor (“ sea of faith”) to show that “ once” (l. 2) humanity was more religious. The metaphor of “ bright girdle furled” emphasizes that faith was inseparable to earth. The words “ But now” in line 24 are a caesura. The first three lines of the stanza create a feeling of hope, whereas the last lines sound sad and hopeless. The word “ only” show that the lyrical I feels only the sadness of the world. To amplify the negative mood of the last lines Arnold utilizes words such as “ melancholy”, “ drear” and “ naked”. The last stanza refers to the misery of humanity and can be seen as a conclusion of the preceding stanzas.

The lyrical I compares the world to a “land of dreams” which is “various” “beautiful” and “new”. This means that the world and the people who live on it might be happy and live together in peace. To underline the positive mood, the lyrical I uses the word “love” at the beginning of the stanza. The verb “seems” shows that it is only a dream or an illusion of the lyrical I which can never become reality. Line 33 is a caesura, wherefrom the lyrical I describes his real life. The enumeration in line 33 and 34 “nor love, nor light, nor peace” shows the cruelty of the world.

The plural form “us” and “we” illustrates that not only the lyrical I but also many other people feel the cruelty. The words “sweep” and “clash by night” both together form an allusion to the preceding stanzas. The motions of the sea are used to clarify the bad relations between other people. The poem illustrates the contrast between hope and reality. There are many caesuras in the poem, which definitely show the changing mood of the lyrical I. It wishes a peaceful world, but it also knows that it is almost impossible. Maybe Matthew Arnold refers to the industrial revolution which was a big change of life for everybody.

Many people were very unhappy with their new life. The first time I read the poem “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold, I got the impression of somberness, uncertainty, and melancholy. To me, it conveys the ideas of self-deceit, change, consequence, humanity, and a struggle for truth. I had to look up the word “shingles,” because it’s not used as a reference to roofs, but piles of small stones on a beach. In order to understand it better, I interpreted and paraphrased the poem as follows: ‘Our faith in ourselves



and the world was once strong, and earth was full of texture, quality, and diversity.

But now I only hear those things ebbing away, leaving us to destroy nature and become dull and emotionless. Let us love one another! For the world seems to have everything we want, so diverse, so beautiful, so new, but it really doesn't have joy, love, goodness, certainty, peace, or solace; we are mentally and emotionally blind, fighting in secret, confused, not knowing what we're fighting about. ' " Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold- the name of the poem may be a reference to an actual place, a beach that has rocks instead of sand, suggesting that it's rather bare and dull.

This is a lyric poem, because there aren't events that happen sequentially like in a narrative poem. It doesn't exactly change topics between the two stanzas; however, the focus does shift a bit, because in the first stanza, it's talking about a beach, giving an example to represent the world in general, which is what the second stanza is about. There are several sensory images in the poem. For example, when it says " melancholy, long, withdrawing roar," it appeals to the sense of hearing and gives the reader a feeling of desperation and emotional pain.

When you read that line, you can just hear in your mind the long, desperate cry of a person struggling with some unknown, internal force. Engaging the reader's sight, the " round earth's shore" and " the folds of a bright girdle furled" come into play, giving off a positive, beautiful feeling. This may be because the poet wanted to give the reader an intimation of what the world

was like when it had the “ Sea of Faith,” when we still appreciated nature and had faith in it and ourselves.

The phrase “ a darkling plain” brings to mind darkness of course, showing that people don’t know what they’re doing; we’re just swaggering around with blindfolds on. The last few words of the poem, “...ignorant armies clash by night” gives a sense of confusion and stupidity, but at the same time secrecy. As far as I’m concerned, this entire poem is a series of metaphors all merging together. The first line, “ The Sea of Faith,” is probably referring to the faith and appreciation that people put in nature and in themselves.

So when it says that the sea of faith was once, too, at the full, it’s saying that people had a lot of faith in themselves and in nature but we don’t anymore. “ 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” means that people are losing their faith, so the world is becoming much more dreary, bare, and without beauty or texture, probably because of humans placing less importance on nature and emotions, and emphasizing technology, dehumanizing society in general.

The last two lines of the poem, “ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight where ignorant armies clash by night,” most likely refers to opposing people fighting and going to war, but they don’t even know what they’re fighting about. Drawing on “ clash by night,” the fighting is done in secret so that the majority of people don’t know that there’s even a problem. There are three similes in the poem- “ and round earth’s shore lay like the folds of

a bright girdle furled” shows that before we lost ourselves, the earth was predominantly natural and full of life and diversity.

The second simile is “ For the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams... ” A land of dreams would contain everything you could ever want, everything beautiful and painless, so the poet is saying that that’s how most people perceive the world. Lastly, “ and we are here as on a darkling plain” compares being in a dark place to the fact that our society doesn’t really know what it’s doing even though it thinks it does, and if we just shoot blindly, there might be negative consequences.

There is a repetition of the words “ so” three times, and “ nor” five times, in the second stanza of Dover Beach, probably to emphasize the contrast between the perceived world and how it actually is. It especially draws attention to the lines about the world not really having all these great things like love, joy, certainty, or peace, which is significant because humans have made it this way. The word “ roar” is an onomatopoeia, drawing attention to the feelings of anger and desperation. Clash” can also be an onomatopoeia, showing the forceful struggles of the “ armies. ” There are a few couplets in the second stanza, but only two really draw the reader’s attention because of the rhythm of the lines, the places where you pause. For example, the rhyming lines in ‘ for the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams’ isn’t nearly as noticeable as ‘ nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; and we are here as on a darkling plain’ or ‘ swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight where ignorant armies clash by night. The author may want to draw attention to those four lines because they contain one of the most imperative messages- we should think about the consequences of what

we do before we just stab wildly in the dark. This poem uses first person point of view. The mood is dreary and very reflective. The theme is that people should place their faith in the world, because if you change things too much without thinking of the consequences, negative things will probably happen.

The poet calls attention to the phrase Sea of Faith by capitalizing it, because that's what the whole poem is about and that's essentially the most important thing according to the poet, having faith in ourselves and our world. The first time I read "Dover Beach," I really didn't have a clue what it meant, but as I read it carefully and thought about it deeply, the more I came to understand it. Just like Mrs. Phelps in the novel Fahrenheit 451, I feel like I can make a connection with the poem, making it more meaningful.

As for Mrs. Phelps, her husband was going to war and therefore she could relate to the poem; it speaks of fighting for no reason and although Mrs. Phelps may not realize it, deep down she knows there's no reason for the war and there really shouldn't be one. She still retains that human element under the surface and she does care a lot about her husband and doesn't want to see him get hurt. The effect this poem has on the reader has a lot to do with the techniques Matthew Arnold used.

For example, if the mood was extremely cheery and upbeat instead of somber and dreary, it wouldn't convey the message nearly as well; it wouldn't make the reader reflect on society and him or herself nearly as much, so the whole point of the poem wouldn't come across. The message also wouldn't come across as well if the poet hadn't used all the metaphors

that he did, especially when it comes to being on a dark plain and armies clashing by night, because that really illustrates the point that we on't know what we're doing when we do half the things we do. I'm still uncertain about several aspects of the poem, because there are so many ways you can interpret everything. Who exactly are the " armies? " Do shingles symbolize the empty quality of the people in society, or the bareness of the world because people are ignoring nature and advancing technology so much?