

Dover beach

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Essay Two: The theme of ' Illusion versus Reality' in Matthew Arnold's ' Dover Beach' ' Dover Beach' is a poem by the English poet Matthew Arnold. The locale of the poem is the English ferry port of Dover Kent, facing Calais, France. This was the place where Matthew Arnold honeymooned in 1851 (Wikipedia Contributors).

In Matthew Arnold's ' Dover Beach', the speaker draws visual imagery to show that what is generally perceived is false and hence an illusion, and he contrasts it using aural imagery to show what is truly real, the bitter reality of losing faith in one's tradition, culture, and religion. The poem is unevenly divided into four stanzas. The first stanza has fourteen lines, whereas the second, third, and fourth have six, eight, and nine lines, respectively. Ruth Pitman calls this poem a series of incomplete sonnets (109).

The poem has no particular rhyme scheme except for stanza four which follows the rhyme scheme- abba cddc. The events described in the poem allude to the Victorian Era (1837-1901) (Wikipedia Contributors), which was a time of industrialization and introduction of scientific theories and ideas such as the Theory of Evolution which questioned major principles of Christianity. Some critics say that the speaker in the poem is Matthew Arnold himself because the location where the events in the poem take place is

Dover beach, where Arnold went for honeymoon with his wife. The poem is thought to be composed in 1851 and that is the year when Arnold honeymooned (Wikipedia Contributors). The speaker paints visual imagery of the scene in lines 1-8. Words such as ' calm' and ' tranquil' create an image of stability whereas words such as ' glimmering' and ' vast' describe the

visual beauty of the scene. The first stanza also uses words like 'roar' and 'tremulous cadence' to draw an aural image of the scene.

Notice the contrast Arnold draws by using visual and aural imagery; the former expresses illusion (calm, beautiful, tranquil, etc.) and the latter expresses reality (tremulous cadence) which induces sadness. The beginning of the first stanza describes the beauty of 'Dover beach'. Midway through the stanza, the speaker invites his love (mentioned in stanza four) to 'come to the window' (line 6) and listen to the grating roar of the pebbles. By saying 'come to the window' the speaker wants his love to see things from his perspective.

Alternatively, it could also mean looking at things closely as implied by lines seven and eight where the speaker mentions that 'only, from the long line of spray where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land' (the shore) can you hear the 'grating roar of pebbles'. The sound made by the pebbles when it is drawn and flung by waves, creates a note of sadness in the speaker's heart. The first stanza shows the incompatibility between what is perceived and what is truly real. The material things of the world are in a way an illusion created by the world but the truth can be only known when we closely inspect everything.

By introducing Sophocles (Greek playwright) in the second stanza, the speaker wants to emphasize the fact that he is not the only one to experience sadness induced by the sound of pebbles tossed about by the waves which 'brought into his (Sophocles') mind the turbid ebb and flow of human misery' (lines 17-18). The speaker feels the same. This poem was written in the Victorian Era. It was a time of industrialization, economic

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prosperity and introduction of scientific ideas such as ‘ Darwin’s Evolution Theory’ which made people question tradition, culture, and religion.

People lost all their faith; though on the outside they seemed calm, happy and in control, the speaker feels that deep down inside they all experienced sadness due to their lack of faith (stanza 3). In the third stanza, the speaker talks about faith. The speaker feels that people used to be full of faith but due to the modern age and its ideas, people have lost their faith in tradition, culture, and religion. The speaker illustrates this by using the image of clothes. When people had faith in religion, the world used to be clothed (Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled).

Once they lost their faith, they were stripped of these clothes like ‘ naked shingles of the earth’. Thus, the third stanza brings out the bitter reality of that time. Depressed by the condition of humans the speaker turns to his lover and wants them to be true to one another. Stanza four brings back the illusion presented in stanza one. The speaker says, “ 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” (lines 30-34).

Here the word ‘ seems’ implies that the world isn’t what it is normally perceived (it is an illusion) as (land of dreams, beautiful etc.) but it has bitter reality attached to it. This melancholy awareness of the poet is put perfectly by Rodney Delasanta; he wrote, “ The theme of the poem (the poet’s melancholy awareness of the terrible incompatibility between illusion and reality) is supported by the use of visual imagery to express illusion and auditory imagery to express reality” (1).

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Wayne Schow points out an interesting thing; the phraseology of the poem is similar to Romans 8: 38-39, where Paul writes: For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God. This shows that Arnold knew the Bible well. He could have used it deliberately to contrast the piece of scripture from Romans to emphasize the current state of humankind (27).

Arnold's "Dover Beach" uses imagery, symbolism, and other poetic devices to reveal the theme of illusion versus reality. Throughout the poem we can see the speaker's struggle which is well supported by the inconsistent rhythm and meter. The speaker beautifully describes it by using visual imagery to express illusions and aural imagery to express harsh reality. The speaker expresses his desire to have faith and be honest with his love but towards the end of the poem slides back to pessimism due to the realization of the reality.

Works Cited

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