

A critical appreciation of dover beach



**ASSIGN
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“ Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold was first published in the anthology titled New Poems in 1867. The poem laments the transition from an era of spiritual faith and harmony to an era of rapid erosion of tradition and faith. It is Arnold’s critique of the Victorian society, where unprecedented industrialization and groundbreaking scientific discoveries caused a paradigm shift in man’s perception of himself. The age-old theocentric identity eroded away to make for an anthropocentric understanding of man. This, along with the rising materialism brought about the loss of harmony among men.

This poem gives poignant expression to Arnold’s own pessimism about the mechanical Victorian age where men became rootless without the unifying bond of religion. The preoccupation with this crisis is also reflected in Arnold’s other poems like “ The Scholar Gipsy” in which he reiterates man’s sense of disassociation and social fragmentation rising from religious doubt. This, he popularly refers to as the “ strange disease of modern life”. The poem deceptively opens with the tranquil image of the glimmering sea in the moonlight where the speaker looks out at the sea from his vantage point at Dover beach. But readers soon realize that beneath this veneer of calm, there’s something much more unsettling. The speaker calls upon his companion to share the sweetness of the night air but uses odd adjectives to describe the landscape. He calls the moonlit beach “ blanched” and refers to the sound of the sea waves flinging the pebbles on the beach as “ grating roar”-as if it’s a harsh sound that disturbs the serene landscape. Through the image of the ebbing sea, Arnold symbolically alludes to man’s retreating faith in religion. The monotonous movement of the sea which takes the

pebbles from the beach and flings them back creates a melancholic rhythm that Arnold refers to as the “ eternal note of sadness”. The image of the pebbles being flung out creates a sense of helplessness, typical of the Victorian age. The tumultuous sea is a symbol of timelessness and it stands witness to all of mankind’s sufferings which it mournfully sings through the slow cadence of waves. To describe this timelessness, Arnold claims that Sophocles, the classical Greek tragedian also heard this mournful note of the sea on the Aegean and it had the same effect on him as it did on Arnold. Sophocles’ stoicism as expressed in Antigone was born out of the fact that life in ancient Greek society was extremely difficult because they were plagued with wars. Death became ubiquitous which lead people to adopt a fatalistic a view of life. In such a context, life and death became synonymous.

Arnold’s stoicism was due his apprehension of a bleak, godless society where man is helpless without anything to place their faith in. In the third stanza, Arnold metaphorically refers to religion as the “ sea of faith”. Just as the vast endless oceans encircle the earth’s landmass, mankind too, was once surrounded by spiritual faith. It gave them a sense of belonging and security as they were held together by the common belief that they were all God’s children. But the Darwinian Theory that emerged during the Victorian period made man skeptical about such religious postulates that he had trusted since time immemorial. He now, began to question the veracity of his own origin. The poet symbolically refers to this growing doubt with the auditory image of the “ withdrawing roar” of the sea of faith. Faith has become ephemeral and elusive like the “ breath of the night wind”. As a result,

mankind lies unprotected, exposed to the unknown consequences of faithlessness. Arnold compares this insufferable isolation of humanity to the “naked shingles” i. e. pebbles that lie on the beach after being flung out of the sea. The last stanza opens with the poem’s speaker addressing his companion: “Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!” It is an emotionally honest appeal where he ardently wishes that their love is true in nature as it is the only thing that can bring a ray of hope amidst all the bleakness. Interestingly, Tennyson, another notable Victorian poet wrote in the dinosaur cantos of his *In Memoriam* about humans finding comfort in each other “behind the veil”, implying that marriage and love will console us against our loss of faith.

Through his speaker, Arnold points out the difference between the deceptive appearance and the reality of the Victorian world. With the exceptional progress, it might seem glamorous like a world of dreams but in reality, it does not offer essential human qualities like compassion, “certitude” or “help for pain”. Arnold compares this harsh reality with the historical event of the battle of Epipolae that took place two thousand years ago, as described in the *History of Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. In that ill-fated Sicilian expedition, the Athenian troops unwittingly killed their own men as they could not differentiate between themselves and their enemies in the darkness of the night. With the disappearance of the light of faith, there will be nothing to morally guide men or hold them together. Thus, Arnold apprehends that men will mistrust each other and end up harming one another, just like those “ignorant armies”. This idea of dying light of faith can perhaps be linked to the light on the east coast of France that the

speaker saw from the Dover beach- a light that disappeared after gleaming for a fleeting moment.

Thus, Dover Beach provides justice to Arnold's poetic sensibilities. It rightly illustrates his apprehension about a dark future of mankind where the long standing pillars of religious faith had crumbled under the weight of empirical knowledge leading to man losing his humane sensibilities. This idea of faithlessness, isolation and subsequent dehumanization later became the major of modern poetry.