

A critical study of matthew arnold's "dover beach"



Famous poet and literary critic, Matthew Arnold was born on 24th December 1822 as the second child of Mary Arnold and Thomas Arnold. He began his career as a poet, getting recognition since his youth as a student at the Rugby School, where his father was a headmaster who was well known for his administration of the school. Arnold completed his undergraduate degree at Oxford in 1844 and returned to Rugby School as a teacher. In June 1851, he married Frances Lucy, daughter of Sir William Wightman, after finally being appointed as one of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, thus solving his problem of financial instability that had long restrained him from getting married. He is considered by some as the third great Victorian poet, along with Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. He gained significance in English Literature not only as a poet but also as a great critic, whose criticism focuses on various branches of learning: literature, journalism, and social science, as well as religion. Even after his sudden and untimely death due to heart failure in 1888, Arnold's position in English literature as a remarkable Victorian writer, poet, and critic remains unchanged.

"Dover Beach," though originally published in 1867, is believed to have been written around the year 1851. The poem is set near Dover, a town in South East England, where the poet and his wife Frances Lucy spent their honeymoon in 1851. Thus, this arrangement establishes the popular presumption that the characters in this poem, the speaker and the silent listener, are the poet and his wife themselves. The poem, despite its use of simple language and ordinary setting, is not an easy one to analyze. It takes the form of a dramatic monologue, a type of lyric poem very commonly used and perfected by Robert Browning, where the poem is constituted by a

speech of the character with a silent audience. However, unlike Browning's famous dramatic monologues, the poem is commonly considered to be spoken by the poet himself and not by a fictional character. The poem is characterized by numerous metaphors and vivid imagery; beginning with a line "The sea is calm tonight" (Arnold 1), followed by a detailed and lucid description of the setting, the image drawn by the beginning lines is quite a vivid one. Through these simple yet strong lines, Arnold first gives his readers a clear description of the setting where the poem is being written i. e. one night at the beach of Dover, overlooking the calm sea, viewing the full tide and fair moon. The power of visual imagery dominates these beginning lines as the poet continues to give a yet more explicit detail to describe the location, a place where he can see the light gleaming on the French coast, with the vast cliffs of England standing tall, glimmering "out in the tranquil bay" (Arnold 5). This description adds very patent details on the geographical location of the setting. The first stanza, which comprises 14 lines, towards the middle gives an introduction of a listener, whom the poet has asked to "come to the window" (Arnold 6), following this we see a shift from the visual imagery of the beginning lines to aural imageries. The poet asks his listener to listen to the "grating roar" (Arnold 9) of pebbles, giving such powerful description to a sound created by something as trivial as pebbles, the narrative tone can be seen shifting from the subtle, vivid, and simple description of the setting seen in the beginning lines to a much more exaggerated, aggressive, and melancholic tone towards the end of the stanza.

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melancholic tone with which the first stanza ended; by bringing in a Greek allusion of the great classical figure Sophocles, Arnold draws a connection between himself and the great dramatist. He talks of Sophocles contemplating human misery through the "ebb and flow" (Arnold 17) of the Aegean sea like he himself is doing in this poem. The third stanza opens with an introduction to the calm English Channel of the preceding stanzas as a metaphorical "Sea of Faith" (Arnold 21), which was once, like the beginning of the poem, "at the full", giving an introduction to the poem's central idea of the withering faith of the Christian society during Arnold's time. The poet tells the listener of how he now only hears the melancholy of this "Sea of Faith" (Arnold 21), once risen at its full now retreating with a "withdrawing roar".

The final stanza is often claimed by some to be a separate poem as there is a shift in the narrative tone. However, this stanza can still be connected to the previous stanzas; with a different view of the world after the death of Christian faith seen in the first three stanzas, the poet requests his listener to be true to him, as he will be to her, as that seems to be the only thing that matters to him now that the world seems hopeless and devoid of true joy. The poem, being one of Arnold's most significant poems, has received several critical appraisals, most of which are contradictory to one another. However, the recurring theme of melancholy that usually constitutes most of his works is undeniably evident in this poem as well. "There is, ..., the well known Arnold melancholy: the man of little faith in a world of no faith, who still hopes to maintain the spiritual dignity which the world of no faith seems to deny him." (Krieger 40). The poem is often read as a record of the

changes in viewpoint and belief brought about by the New Science of the mid-nineteenth century. The discovery of fossils by Charles Lylell dating back more than a million years ago, brought about a doubt on the traditional belief that the earth is a creation of just a few six or seven thousand years old, as is seen on the Bible. In addition to this, various scientists like Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace had stated their theories on the evolution of mankind, contradicting the Christian belief that human beings were created by an omnipotent God. Such findings and theories, though rejected by many, still gained numerous following, resulting in a change in the beliefs of a large section of the population. This dying faith in the traditional beliefs of Christianity is what constitutes the main theme of the poem

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created by an omnipotent God. Such findings and theories, though rejected by many, still gained numerous following, resulting in a change in the beliefs of a large section of the population. This dying faith in the traditional beliefs of Christianity is what constitutes the main theme of the poem *Dover Beach*. Arnold in this poem, uses the naturalistic setting of Dover beach to metaphorically express this 'dying faith' and the despair it brings along to his heart, as well as the way this new light darkened his view towards life. Arnold seem to have been affected immensely by the "withdrawing roar" (Arnold 25) of the "Sea of Faith" (Arnold 21), causing him eternal sadness, which can be seen in his description of his view towards life in the final stanza.

As have been mentioned before, a gradual shift in the setting and narrative tone can be detected from the beginning till the end: first, starting with simple and serene visual imagery of naturalistic setting with no sign of an underlying theme, switching to a more exaggerated and complicated use of aural imagery, with no change in setting and subject matter, finally ending with a melancholic and hopeless emotional outpouring of the poet. This style is often adopted by Arnold in his other works as well, "In this poem, however, the development from the natural scene to the human levels into which it opens is much more successfully handled than elsewhere in his works." (Krieger 41). Despite the change in setting, these stanzas are not divided into diverse sections lacking any connection; every stanza, from the first till the last are significantly connected. Throughout the poem, the poet uses the natural setting of the English Channel mentioned in the first stanza, even when the tone changes, the same subject matter is still used as a

metaphor to introduce us to the 'dying faith' which the poet attempts to speak of, and later this natural setting recurred when the poet refers to these "land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new" (Arnold 31-32) as lacking an essence of true joy, so as to express his "eternal note of sadness" (Arnold 14). His love for nature is clearly evident from the poem, "His passion for natural scenery was, indeed, Arnold's strongest aesthetic emotion." (David 5). This recurring use of nature to express the emotional anguish, through a very simple narrative technique, reinstates Arnolds identity as a Victorian artist often considered to be a bridge between Romanticism and Modernism. "The speaker of Dover Beach is an embodiment of Romanticism in its most alluring and devastating modern form-existential despair- that Classicism in its most austere and most strengthening ancient form constructively contradicts." (Buckler 105). The poem is written with a nostalgia towards the classical notion of religion, as well as the romantic idea of love and the emotional connectedness which he believes can gain him the values which had started to fade away with his venture into the new 'modern world'. "The general decline of faith and Arnold's own resultant bewilderment and melancholy" (Jump 36), as well as, "the belief that in a successful love-relationship he may discover values which are not readily to be found in 'modern life'" (Jump 36), constitute this poem. The poem with its Romantic use of simple language and natural setting, expressing so beautifully the agony of the 'dying faith' and the darkness it gave to the poet's perception of the whole world, while hinting a little glimmer of hope attainable through his lover, gives a subtle Romantic element to the poet's eternal melancholy which drives the whole poem. The vivid imagery of the poet, causing us to experience and feel his gradually

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