

Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach': A Critical Appreciation/Attitude to Modern Life

'Dover Beach' is the most famous poem by Matthew Arnold and is generally considered one of the most important poems of the 19th century. First published in 1867, in the collection New Poems, its condensed thirty-seven lines with a subtly interwoven and shifting rhyme have a memorable theme: the crisis of faith in the mid-Victorian world, which was generated by the German developments of biblical Higher Criticism. In the first six lines, Arnold evokes the moonlit seascape of the English Channel, tranquil and sweet, and the reassuring "cliffs of England" of the Strait of Dover. "Only," opening the seventh line, begins the transition, unfolding through the "tremulous cadence" of the waves to the "eternal note of sadness." The Anglo-Grecian connections of Sophocles and the Aegean are only momentarily relevant "by this distant northern sea," for this is the Sea of Faith – or was, and that image withdraws in its turn and the vision turns windy, vast, naked and drear. In "Ah love..." the accumulated poetry conveys the momentary view that love is the bulwark against the uncertainties of the modern (Victorian) world – the solution the Victorian reader expected – "only" Arnold then undercuts this declaration with a despairing litany of the failure of culture, to end with the prophetic imagery of the last three lines.

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' 'moon,' and 'night-air' 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'), 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. The poet 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' 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 self 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 self 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 self 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 self 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 self. It wishes a peaceful world, but it also knows that it is almost impossible.

Arnold refers to the industrial revolution which was a big change of life for everybody. Many people were very unhappy with their new life. In 'Dover Beach' Arnold is talking about how the question of faith has left the world in darkness. In the beginning of the poem, he expresses how calm everything seems, and it is like any other night. However, as the poem progresses, he mentions how Sophocles heard the sadness in the Aegean Sea, just as he was hearing the sadness in his own sea. In mentioning the Sea of Faith, he reveals that while it

looks calm and normal on the surface, really, the sea is singing a song of sadness and despair. During this time, people began questioning religion and turning to Darwinism. Arnold is expressing how people used to not think twice about what they believed, but now the world was unsure. To him, the world was left in darkness by the threat against faith. In telling his love to stay true to him, he is hoping that at least one thing in the world will remain the same and true. Thus, the poem's discourse shifts literally and symbolically from the present, to Sophocles on the Aegean, from Medieval Europe back to the present – and the auditory and visual images are dramatic and mimetic and didactic. Exploring the dark terror that lies beneath his happiness in love, the speaker resolves to love – and exigencies of history and the nexus between lovers are the poems real issues. That lovers may be 'true / To one another' is a precarious notion: love in the modern city, momentarily gives peace, but nothing else in a post-medieval society reflects or confirms the faithfulness of lovers. Devoid of love and light the world is a maze of confusion left by 'retreating' faith.

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