**Matthew Arnold "Dover Beach"**

**Poem Text**

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits—on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,

Listen! you hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,

At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago

Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery; we

Find also in the sound a thought,

Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

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.

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! 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;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

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**Poem Summary**

**Lines 1-6**

Arnold begins the poem with a conventional description of the seashore in the moonlight. The speaker is standing at a window overlooking a stretch of beach in the south of England, near Dover. From there he can see across the English Channel to the French coast just 20 miles away. The moon is full and illuminates the English cliffs standing at the edge of the sea. Arnold writes, “the tide is full,” which seems to imply that the tide is high. The speaker describes this scene to someone else in the room and in Line 6 calls to his companion to join him at the window. In these first six lines Arnold presents a beautiful and tranquil scene. He uses words like “calm,” “fair,” “stand,” and “sweet” to establish this mood.

**Lines 7-8**

Lines 7 and 8 mark a transition in the stanza. The phrase “long line of spray,” which describes what results when the sea meets the land, introduces action and perhaps even contention in the poem.

**Lines 9-14**

In direct contrast to his peaceful and pleasing description of the seashore, the speaker begins to contemplate the movement of the waves. Arnold uses words like “grating roar” and “fling” to achieve a feeling of tension and energy. He moves from the visual images of the first lines to sound descriptions as he details a darker side of the scene. He describes the way the waves pick up pebbles as they move across the shoreline and deposit them again as the tide turns. The endless motion of the waves described in Lines 12-14 evokes sadness in the speaker. “Eternal note of sadness” is echoed again later in the phrase “human misery” in Line 18 and seems to describe the malaise of mankind throughout history rather than the specific problems of the speaker.

**Lines 15-18**

In the opening lines of the second stanza, the speaker considers the Greek tragedy writer Sophocles and wonders if long ago, in ancient Greece, this writer may have sat beside the Aegean Sea and also been reminded of the endless suffering of man. Again, Arnold likens sadness to the constant motion of the sea: “the turbid ebb and flow / of human misery.”

**Lines 19-20**

Lines 19-20 provide a transition from the speaker’s speculation about Sophocles to the main point of the stanza. Though observing a different sea, the speaker, like Sophocles observing the Aegean, finds a larger message in the motion of the sea. Again, Arnold speaks of the sound of the sea, rather than the visual images of the water.

**Lines 21-28**

In these lines the speaker expresses the idea that watching the sea has elicited. The “Sea of Faith” is a metaphor for the faith in God that comforted humankind in earlier periods. Like the ocean at high tide, which surrounds the land, faith, the poem implies, used to permeate people’s lives. The context of the poem suggests that faith provided meaning and comfort in past ages. However, the “Sea of Faith” has receded like the ebb of the waves. Here Arnold employs such words as “melancholy,” “withdrawing roar,” “retreating,” “drear,” and “naked” to convey a sense of loss and despair, and he uses images of the sea, which he did not employ in the description of the shoreline that opens the poem. The sea is no longer calm, the night air sweet, and the shoreline glimmering in the moonlight. Now the waves roar and the wind blows down the dark and naked shoreline.

**Lines 29-30**

In the opening lines of the third stanza, the speaker addresses his companion directly. He beseeches her that they must comfort each other, be faithful to one another. Only the loyalty and comfort of personal relationships can fill the void produced by the disappearing faith in God.

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**Themes**

**Nature and Its Meaning**

Prior to the Victorian Era, Wordsworth and his fellow Romantic poets perceived in nature proof of a benign supernatural order, a cosmic design—whether Christian or pagan—that not only included man but was also sympathetic to him. To these poets, man’s spiritual unease was the result of his increasing tendency to turn his eye from nature—to alienate himself, in other words, from the very core of his own mystery and thus from the cure to his discontent. By Arnold’s time, however, nature had assumed colder intimations. Many of the era’s intellectual advances—evolutionary theory, sociology, archaeology, and textual criticism of the Bible to name a few—had challenged religion’s explanations for the way the cosmos had originated, functioned, and would proceed in future times. Under the weight of seemingly irrefutable evidence, people gradually were forced to accept that it was science, not religion, that best described nature. Yet science provided even less spiritual comfort than uncertainty had done. In the scientific view, nature was an unyielding mechanical operation, random except for a few basic physical laws. The world was an arena that spared no “special place” for man as the Bible had promised. In fact, man himself was simply the product of evolution, an opportunistic and successful animal, and his presence on earth was secured only because he had survived the battle for the “survival of the fittest.” But science also suggested that nature had long preceded and would long endure man’s victory in that battle. Thus, the cosmos was not only oblivious to his presence; it had sewn into its fabric the certitude that man was only an accidental blip doomed to eternal extinction in the vast silence of time.

Given the implications of such concepts, Victorians such as Arnold found the need to redress the entire meaning of nature in poetry. In some ways, of course, the natural world remained unchanged. Its beauty and complexity still retained the power to move the human observer and to conjure, as it always had, shades of man’s internal life. Yet as science changed man’s view of nature and his place in it, so did it alter his conception of the internal life itself—the soul. Thus, the pessimistic speaker in “Dover Beach” might genuinely note the “sweetness and light” (Arnold’s famous phrase from elsewhere) inherent in the tranquil night scene along England’s shore—the moon “fair / Upon the straights,” the cliffs “glimmering and vast”—yet at the same time acknowledge that nature’s beauty barely conceals its darkness. This gloom—the world in the end not characterized by light but as a “darkling plain”—finds metaphorical expression also in sound, in the “turbid ebb and flow” of the sea that brings “the eternal note of sadness in.” Such noise, including the mechanical processes of the tides, which proceed apace like all of nature and are unaware of any individual’s personal stake, remind the speaker that man is essentially on his own—left to struggle fruitlessly against the machinelike forces of decay and competition that science has established as nature’s guiding principles.

**God and Religion**

What comfort, then, was left to man if indeed science had supplanted religion? According to the Victorian essayist Thomas Carlyle, the answer was none. “The loss of [man’s] religious belief,” he wrote in Sartor Resartus four years before Queen Victoria’s coronation, “was the loss of everything.” Devoid of faith, the universe “was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb.” Arnold’s assessment in “Dover Beach” is only slightly less troubling. From the sound of the sea, which reminds the speaker of the “ebb and flow of human misery,” the speaker conjures a metaphorical contrast between the days of belief and the present, skeptical age. While formerly the “Sea of Faith” was “at the full,” providing man with certainty and hope, now that sea is “retreating, to the breath / Of the night wind,” exposing a dreary and naked world. In such a world, its one great hope removed, none of the smaller, pleasant hopes of past times can survive. While in brief moments of beauty the world “seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams,” such fancy requires the type of belief that is no longer possible given the greater doubt at hand. Gone with faith, in fact, are the joy, love, light, certitude, and peace that are themselves articles of the faithful heart.

In light of this, it may seem paradoxical that the speaker’s one bit of consolation is that lovers might remain “true to one another.” It was natural, however, for the Victorians to conclude that a cosmic order lacking any hands-on divinity required humans to look after one another. Evolution described a world in which not only species but also men struggled against one another in their competition for resources: a world in which “ignorant armies clash by night.”

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**Style**

Matthew Arnold is one of the first poets to experiment with free verse and “Dover Beach” is written in this form. Free verse is a form of poetry in which meter is not used to structure the verse. Instead cadence, syntax, and images play an important role. There are no set number of syllables per line nor a regular rhythmic pattern. A poem written in free verse may have an irregular rhyming structure, as “Dover Beach” does, or may not rhyme at all. Line breaks and stanza formation may appear to be arbitrary, but poets such as Arnold use the irregular structure to emphasize words and meaning and to set a tone. The first two stanzas of “Dover Beach” read more slowly because of the phrasing and sound of the words as Arnold builds the tempo of the poem. His third stanza reads more quickly and thus makes his conclusion more powerful.

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**Critical Overview**

“Dover Beach” is often referred to as the first modern poem. In his Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now, James Dickey argues that the poem deserves this distinction not because of its unusual free verse style but rather on the basis of its subject matter. Dickey states that the “psychological orientation” of the poem, the malaise of modern society as science replaces religion, foreshadows a fundamental change in thought. Ultimately, what most critics come back to is Arnold’s unique ability to capture the mood of the Victorian period. In The Victorian Experience: The Poets, Miriam Allot claims that “Dover Beach” displays at its best Arnold’s gift for expressing the feelings of the transitional times—the indecision, the confusion, the regret.” Furthermore, Dorothy Mermin argues in The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets that the poem is a representative statement of the age. And in The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, Philip Drew writes that Arnold reveals the Victorians’ belief that personal relationships provide a balm for the blows of a rapidly changing world.

Many critics agree, however, that Arnold was also successful in customizing the structure and elements of his poem to achieve its somber mood. Mermin notes that Arnold creates natural and convincing dialogue and that the voice of the speaker does not sound contrived. Writing in The Fortnightly Review, Algernon Charles Swinburne comments that the cadence of Arnold’s lines imitates the sounds of waves, “regular in resonance, not fitful or gusty, but antiphonal and reverberate.” By portraying the motion of the waves, Dickey contends, Arnold elicits the element of sadness within “Dover Beach.” Dickey praises Arnold’s word choice, particularly the poet’s creation of sound-imagery and states that Arnold’s line breaks create “subtlety, force, and conviction.”

Some scholars have found fault with Arnold’s third stanza. Dickey comments that the metaphor of the sea, which stands for faith, is not entirely successful. If the Sea of Faith retreats, in the nature of waves, it must also return, and Arnold gives the reader no indication that he believes the loss of faith is only temporary.

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