

## A Comprehensive Note on the theme of Arnold's *Dover Beach*

*Dover Beach* is Matthew Arnold's most famous poem, as well as one of the standard poems in all Victorian canons. It was written sometime between 1848 and 1851 but not published till 1867, when Arnold had essentially ceased writing poetry. In the preface to the 1853 edition of his *Poems*, Arnold had said (following the German poet Friedrich von Schiller) that poetry is only justified if it gives its readers joy. (Arnold was also following his great master William Wordsworth, who had notoriously asserted that poetry flows out of "the grand universal principle of pleasure, in which we live and move and have our being" [preface to *Lyrical Ballads*]). Arnold observed that such enjoyment does not require that poetry depicts joy, and indeed, tragedy seems to offer its spectator the deepest joy when the calamity it depicts is most terrible. This is a standard thing to note about tragedy, but it is perhaps more a critical than a poetic observation. The tragic writer may not mean to give joy but intensity. That such intensity has a component of joy for the spectator is a feature of human psychology (probably derived from the interest in each other's fate that is the human evolutionary inheritance) and not of a writer's explicit intention.

Arnold nevertheless understood the joy that even the most tragic writers can offer—for example, the Greek dramatist Sophocles, who has heard the same “eternal note of sadness” (l. 14) that he himself hears in the lapping of the waves on the night when the poem is set. He knows that Sophocles has heard it because Sophocles has captured the sadness in his own tragedies; and those tragedies give Arnold pleasure to contemplate. Therefore, he can hear in the sound of the sea the literature he loves. This is part of Arnold’s point: The world is a difficult and lonely place, and it does not keep the promises we in our youth think it makes. But in its depiction of the world as a lonely place, literature can console us and even give us joy in the representation of that loneliness.

Arnold’s poem is less about Sophocles than about the English romantic poets about whom he was so ambivalent, in particular John Keats and Wordsworth. Wordsworth was an obsession of Arnold’s, and in his best poems he is more or less consciously trying to rewrite him. The scholar Harold Bloom has rightly identified “Tintern Abbey” as a source of “Dover Beach,” which repeats the strains of that poem’s “still, sad music of humanity.” One can also hear Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” here, despite Arnold’s stated disapproval of Keats. Where Arnold hears the same sea sounds that Sophocles did, he is really remembering Keats hearing “this passing night” the same nightingale voice that was heard in ancient days

by emperor and clown, and that found a path through the “sad heart of Ruth” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” ll. 64–66).

Such a thought is consoling, and what it consoles for is the loneliness of the world depicted in the last stanza. There Arnold is echoing William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and the consolation the disguised Duke offers the condemned Claudio (a passage from which T. S. Eliot will derive his epigraph to “Gerontion.”) Life, the Duke says, is not worth it, and the poetic representation of life’s sorrowful emptiness is the only consolation that we may have. Arnold goes further, however, and also finds consolation in the possibilities of love.

How does the poem arrive at those possibilities? It is in the mode of a crisis lyric—that is to say, the kind of poem that Wordsworth wrote in the *Intimations Ode* as well as “Tintern Abbey.” Through the poem the poet thinks himself out of despair and into consolation. The form that consolation takes in the romantics is one whereby a perceived loss of intensity in oneself over time is transfigured into a feeling of the intensity of loss. Arnold, however, has a more objective or general perspective than that of the high subjectivity that the romantic poets explore. If the poem was written in 1848, what Arnold is perceiving across the English Channel is a sense of the revolutions occurring on the continent, perhaps most notably for him in France. The world is a grim place not because we lose

freshness but because it is a grim place. Its grimness consists in the fact that there is no possibility for human community or cooperation: no joy or love or light or certitude or peace or help from pain, to reproduce Arnold's list (no doubt influenced by the Bible's Book of Ecclesiastes as well as by Shakespeare).

Put more briefly, there is no human community. Ignorant armies clash by night (l. 37), and that night refers explicitly to the Greek historian Thucydides' account of the night battle of Epipolae between Athens and Syracuse, where no one could tell friend from foe (Arnold's father translated Thucydides), but more generally to the long night of human experience, the night in which we can hear the ebb and flow of human misery (l. 19). We hear it here in the north (on the English Channel) just as clearly as Sophocles heard it on the Aegean Sea.

This connection between Sophocles and our modern selves is essential to Arnold's hopes, both as poet and as the critic who promotes culture against the anarchy of the world (see also his account of the nightingale in "Philomela"). The world is one of anarchy and misery, but that very fact joins or should join together all who understand this fact. The ignorant armies may not understand it—they represent anarchy, and the crucial word is *ignorant*. If they were not so, they might realize the community of

sadness that we all share and the fidelity and love we should show one another in confronting this sadness.

The joy we take in great literature is the joy we take in love: not the joy of triumph or transcendence, but that of recognition. The world is a place (as Arnold repeats in all his great poems) where there is no love or real connection between us. We are all “enisl’d,” as he says elsewhere. But literature shows that there is real love and connection in the discovery that others are alone just as we are, and this discovery is the way Arnold seeks to turn loss or despair into the poetic and literary gain offered by the common, even universal, recognition of this experience of loss and despair. In “Dover Beach” the woman he addresses will come to see the delusory world, but in doing so they will stand together and show their truth to one another.

‘*Dover Beach*’ by Matthew Arnold was published in 1867 in the volume entitled *New Poems*. This piece is made up of four stanzas containing a variable number of lines. They range in length from fourteen to six lines in length. There is no consistent rhyme scheme but there are a number of random end rhymes such as “-and” and “-ay” throughout the poem and it is written in irregular iambic pentameter. Arnold’s poetry is known for its contemplation of isolation, the dwindling faith of his age, and his

subtle style. His work is often compared to that of Sylvia Plath and W.B. Yeats.

“*Dover Beach*” by Matthew Arnold is a dramatic monologue lamenting the loss of true Christian faith in England during the mid-1800s as science captured the minds of the public. The poet’s speaker, considered to be Matthew Arnold himself, begins by describing a calm and quiet sea out in the English Channel. He stands on the Dover coast and looks across to France where a small light can be seen briefly, and then vanishes. This light represents the diminishing faith of the English people, and those the world around. Throughout this poem the speaker/Arnold crafts an image of the sea receding and returning to land with the faith of the world as it changes throughout time. At this point in time though, the sea is not returning. It is receding farther out into the strait.

Faith used to encompass the whole world, holding the populous tight in its embrace. Now though, it is losing ground to the sciences, particularly those related to evolution (*The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin was published in 1859). The poem concludes pessimistically as the speaker makes clear to the reader that all the beauty and happiness that one may believe they are experiencing is not in fact real. The world is actually without peace, joy, or help for those in need and the human race is too

distracted by its own ignorance to see where true assistance is needed anymore.

Arnold begins '*Dover Beach*' by giving a description of the setting in which it is taking place. It is clear from the title, although never explicitly stated in the poem, that the beach in question is Dover, on the coast of England. The sea is said to be calm, there is a beach on the water at full tide. The moon "lies fair," lovely, "upon the straits" (a strait is a narrow passage of water such as the English Channel onto which Dover Beach abuts).

Although useful to imagine the speaker in a particular place, the setting is not as important as what it represents.

The speaker is able to see across the Channel to the French side of the water. The lights on the far coast are visibly gleaming, and then they disappear and the "cliffs of England" are standing by themselves "vast" and "glimmering" in the bay. The light that shines then vanishes representing to this speaker, and to Arnold himself, the vanishing faith of the English people.

No one around him seems to see the enormity of what is happening, the night is quiet. There is a calm the speaker refers to as "tranquil." But as the reader will come to see, many things may seem one way but actually exist as the opposite.

Now the speaker turns to another person that is in the scene with him, and asks that this unnamed person comes to the window and breathe in the “sweet...night-air!”

The second half of this stanza is spent on describing the sounds of the water that the speaker is viewing. The speaker draws his companion’s attention to the sound that the water makes as it rushes in over the pebbles on the shore. They roll over one another creating, “the grating roar.” This happens over and over again as the sea recedes and returns. The slow cadence of this movement, and its eternal repetitions, seem sad to the narrator. As if the returning sea is bringing with it, “The eternal note of sadness in.”

The second stanza is much shorter and relates the world in which the two characters are into the larger picture of history. The speaker states that “long ago” Sophocles also heard this sound on the Ægean sea as the tides came in. It too brought to his mind the feelings of “human misery” and how these emotions “ebb and flow.” Sophocles, who penned the play *Antigone*, is one of the best-known dramatic writers of Ancient Greece.

Arnold is hoping to bring to the reader’s attention the universal experience of misery, that all throughout time have lived with. This short stanza ends



with a return to the present as the narrator states that “we” too are finding these same emotions in the sound.

In the third stanza of *‘Dover Beach’*, it becomes clear that Arnold is in fact speaking about the diminishing faith of his countrymen and women. He describes, “The Sea of Faith” once covered all of the “round earth’s shore” and held everyone together like a girdle. Now though, this time has passed. No longer is the populous united by a common Christian faith in God by, as Arnold sees it, spread apart by new sciences and conflicting opinions.

The comparison that he has been crafting between the drawing away, and coming in of the sea is now made clear as his speaker says there is no longer any return. The sea is only receding now, “melancholy,” and “long.”

It is retreating from England and from the rest of the lands of the earth and leaving the people exposed.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza, it becomes clear that the companion who is looking out over the water with the speaker is most likely a lover or romantic partner.

He speaks now directly to her, and perhaps, to all those true believers in God that are still out there. He asks that they remain true to one another

in this “land of dreams.” The world is no longer what it was, it is more like a dream than the reality he is used to. It is a land that appears to be full of various beautiful, new, and joyous things but that is not the case. This new world is in fact without “joy...love...[or] light...certitude... [or] peace,” or finally, help for those in pain. It is not what it appears to be.

The poem concludes with a pessimistic outlook on the state of the planet. As the people are suffering around the world on “a darkling plain,” confused and fighting for things they don’t understand, real suffering is going on and faith is slipping away.