Dover Beach

BY MATTHEW ARNOLD

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 Ægean, 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.

Summary (Critical Survey of Literature for Students)

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a poem set near Dover, along the southeast coast of England, where Arnold and his new wife spent their honeymoon in 1851. It is believed that the poet wrote the early draft of "Dover Beach" while here, overlooking the English Channel toward the coast of France, about twenty-six miles away. Arnold and his wife are often considered the models for the speaker and listener in the poem, although any young man and woman could represent the two figures in the tale, caught in a moment of their early lives.

"Dover Beach" is most often classified as a dramatic monologue, a poetic form that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and especially Robert Browning, found extremely attractive. The monologue, or poem spoken by a single voice, is made dramatic by the presence of a silent audience of one or more listeners, whose responses may be indicated by the speaker, or persona. In this way the poet may be empowered to express views using another person's voice, as William Shakespeare is known for doing.

This strategy may have been particularly attractive to Arnold, for the views of his speaker are diametrically opposed to his own education and upbringing. Matthew was six years old when he was moved into the Rugby School after his clergyman father Thomas Arnold became its headmaster, or principal. As headmaster, Thomas Arnold gained a reputation for educational reform, based on his commitment to the high seriousness of making students aware of the moral as well as the social issues that would make them responsible citizens.

"Dover Beach" has often been read as a kind of seismological record of the shock waves in traditional religion brought about by the New Science in the mid-nineteenth century. The geology of Charles Lyell and others was

forcing Europeans and Americans to rethink how life began on the planet. Lyell's discoveries of fossils dating back more than one million years were making it increasingly difficult to accept the traditional notion in the book of Genesis that the world is the work of a creator a mere six or seven thousand years ago. By 1851, when "Dover Beach" was probably written, Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace, and other scientists had already theorized the essentials of evolution, but it would take Darwin another eight years to publish his findings. Even then, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) only at the urging of his friends, who warned him that others would publish first if he did not set aside his concerns for the devastating moral and spiritual consequences of challenging the traditional story of how life began. It is probably no coincidence that Arnold himself postponed the publication of "Dover Beach" until 1867.

The poem begins with a naturalistic scene, clearly within the Romantic tradition established by William Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth, Arnold understands the elegance and power of simple language: "The sea is calm tonight./ The tide is full, the moon lies fair/ Upon the straits." As often noted, the first stanza contains fourteen lines and the second and third stanzas have six and eight lines, respectively, suggesting the sonnet form, but without its more complicated meter and rhyme systems. From its initial visual images, the first stanza and the subsequent two stanzas move toward the dominance of auditory images. The shift is justified by the obviously limited opportunity to see, even with moonlight, but also by the strong impact of the waves breaking on the beach. By the first stanza's end, the persona, or speaker, has established the poem's central metaphor of the waves' "tremulous cadence slow" to represent an "eternal note of sadness." Additionally, a mere five lines into the poem, the voice has introduced a listener in the scene—telling the reader to "Come to the window"—setting up a tension: Who is the listener? What will be the effect of the melancholy poetic statement on that listener?

This "eternal note" draws the persona further from the directly visualized opening scene with its simple but strong language. The allusion to the ancient Greek tragic dramatist Sophocles offers a context for the speaker's

growing “sadness.” (Arnold was among one of the last generations for whom a classical education entailed learning ancient Greek and Latin to read the classics in their original languages.) The allusion also draws the poem into the more didactic strategy of a statement—asserting rather than implying meaning—and the deployment of something like allegory—a “Sea of Faith” once at its “flow” but now at its “ebb.” This third stanza also reveals evidence of the poet’s effort at elevating the language, producing the difficult opening lines in which that sea once “round earth’s shore/ Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled,” a choice of words guaranteed to confuse the modern reader. This “girdle” is appropriate to the classical context of Sophocles, but not to the modern world, where it denotes an article of intimate apparel. However, attempts of academics to clarify that meaning have distracted attention from the figurative logic of a sea as a “girdle,” or belt, as well as from the unfortunate combination of sounds in “girdle furled.” Another issue left unaddressed is the dominance of pessimism in the persona’s inability to attend to the logic of this “Sea of Faith”: Whatever ebbs will inevitably flow in the future.

The final stanza recalls the earlier reference to the listener—“Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!”—to focus on the melancholy consequences of the weakening of faith. To the persona, and presumably the poet, the world truly is “a land of dreams,” pipe dreams with nothing to believe in, not just God and an afterlife but “joy,” “love,” and so on. This is Romantic love at its most radical. Without love between a man and a woman, the world is as confusing—and as lethal—as a night battle, fraught with friendly fire. In a sense, Arnold is announcing the big question for the modern world, intent on forcing love to bear the enormous weight of providing human lives with meaning: If love is all humans have, what do they do when they cannot find love, or keep it? It is a question that resonates through the novels, too, of Ernest Hemingway, such as in his *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), or in the contexts of wedding receptions, where some have to suppress the depressing thought, will this be the one of every two marriages that ends in divorce?

“Dover Beach” is the most anthologized text in the English language, and a frequent source of allusions for writers in their own works. One index of the

poem's effect on readers of poetry is a poem by American poet laureate Anthony Hecht. In his "Dover Bitch: A Criticism of Life" (1996), Hecht focuses on the silent listener in Arnold's poem, developing her character as a woman who is definitely not the speaker's wife, and identifying the persona in his poem as someone who knew Arnold, the speaker in "Dover Beach." Hecht's poem indicates that the woman responds to Arnold's expression of melancholy, but her first response of sadness is displaced not by erotic desire but by anger at his treating her as "a sort of mournful cosmic last resort." Although Arnold specialists Kenneth and Miriam Allott may attempt to defuse Hecht's parody as "an irreverent *jeu d'esprit*," this is no "witty or humorous trifle." The perceptive Hecht grasps the shabby treatment of the woman by Arnold's speaker, who is using her as a consolation prize for his loss of faith. By implication, Hecht also addresses the sexual mores of Arnold's time, when the young poet could never have lived with his future bride and may well have resorted to Hecht's less respectable female character. Unlike brides in Arnold's day, bridegrooms were not expected to come to the marriage beds as virgins.

Hecht's poem speaks to his confidence in his reader's familiarity with Arnold's poem. That familiarity is evident in the usual catalog of references to "Dover Beach" in popular culture, including in the rock album *Snakes & Arrows* (2007) by Rush, the American film *The Anniversary Party* (2001), Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961), Norman Mailer's Vietnam protest book *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and a composition for string quartet and baritone by Samuel Barber. To further demonstrate the poem's continuing influence, reference to "Dover Beach" is included in the climactic scene of Ian McEwan's novel*Saturday* (2005).