



Dover Beach: A faithful and spiritual belief by Matthew Arnold

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Abstract

'Dover Beach' is one of the best-known and best-loved of Victorian poems, and the most widely anthologised poem by a Victorian figure whose poetic output was considerably slimmer than that of many of his contemporaries, such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson or Robert Browning. Time has not been overly kind to Matthew Arnold either: the poems for which he is remembered in the popular imagination tend to be confined to 'The Scholar-Gipsy', 'To Marguerite: Continued', 'Shakespeare', and – most of all – 'Dover Beach', which has been subjected to much critical analysis already. The main theme behind Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" is the idea that earth used to be full of faith, but change has negatively affected the value of faith in humans and in God.

Keywords: Dover Beach, Matthew Arnold, Victorian, Robert Browning

Introduction

Matthew Arnold was a distinguished nineteenth century English poet and critic who brought about a revolution in the world of English literature with his critical essays, prose and poetry. His standing in the literary world rests as much as on his poetries as his narratives and essays. Although Arnold is deemed as the third great Victorian poet after Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, it was in prose that he found his true expression. While his poetical works have been tagged as gnomic and elegiac, his polished, didactic, and satirically witty prose works have earned him quite a big fan following. Arnold believed that poetry should be the 'criticism of life' and verbalize a philosophy. Then again, his narratives and descriptions were pleasant and picturesque, loaded with outstanding similes to produce a lingering effect on the readers' mind. Apart from being a poet, he was a critic who refused to succumb to Orthodox Christianity in his youth and chose to become an agnostic instead. However, he admired people who entirely devoted themselves to religion.

Dover Beach is a 'honeymoon' poem. Written in 1851, shortly after Matthew Arnold's marriage to Frances Lucy Wightman, it evokes quite literally the "sweetness and light" which Arnold famously found in the classical world, in whose image he formed his ideals of English culture. In fact, those public values are privatised in the very word the poem conjures for us: honeymoon. *Dover Beach* fundamentally seems to be about a withdrawal into personal values. Historical pessimism moves in swiftly as a tide.

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Description of Noise

In *Dover Beach*, Matthew Arnold is describing the slow and solemn rumbling sound made by the sea waves as they swing backward and forward on the pebbly shore. One can clearly hear this monotonous sound all the time. The withdrawing waves roll the pebbles back towards the sea, and then after a pause, the returning waves roll them up the shore. Arnold's description of the noise of the waves is superbly accurate. Even when he ventures into Miltonic (and Greek) mode, with that "tremulous cadence slow," he maintains a certain realism. "Tremulous" may be emotive, but it also brilliantly evokes the soft rattling of the millions of pebbles and grits as the waves redistribute them.

Arnold's classical learning is unpretentiously apparent. The verse-movement, with its fluid alternation of three, four and five-beat lines, suggests the rhythmic flexibility of Greek choral poetry. Stanza two, with its reference to Sophocles, brings home a sense of tragic fatedness. The following lines from *Antigone* may be relevant:

"Blest are they whose days have not tasted of evil. For when a house hath once been shaken from heaven, there the curse fails nevermore, passing from life to life of the race; even as, when the surge is driven over the darkness of the deep by the fierce breath of Thracian sea-winds, it rolls up the black sands front the depths, and there is sullen roar from wind-vexed headlands that from the blows of the storm."

A dual experience - between celebration of and lament for humanity

The poet explains the gradual loss of man's faith in a grand and suggestive simile. He compares faith in religion to a sea that surrounds the world. The sea has its full tide, and then it ebbs away with the mournful music over the pebbles and the grating of the pebbles brings the "eternal note of sadness in". The poet reminds the world in which there was full of faith

and men believed in religion. But now that faith is gradually passing away and men's minds are like pebbles on the shore. The passing of faith causes the minds to be isolated in the border between belief and disbelief. It is a sad melancholy state. When the poet hears the grating roar of pebbles of the sea, he is reminded of the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of faith as it retreats from men's minds. It is a chilly prospect, like the breath of the night wind, and it brings into the mind a dreary feeling of helplessness, as though the mind is left stripped and bare on the vast and dreary edges of an unknown land.

The lines from *Dover Beach* give bitter expression of Arnold's loss of faith, his growing pessimism. The world seemed to be strangely unreal, without anything real to cling to or grasp. It has variety, beauty and freshness. But it is all blind negation: there is in it neither love nor joy nor light nor peace. There is nothing certain in it. Therefore he compares men struggling in the world with armies struggling on a plain at night. There is a sound of confused alarms and struggles, but the soldiers are ignorant as to what they are fighting for and why?

This poem describes his battle with love, life and faith in his religion. He narrates a story, through this poem, trying to talk to his wife about their relationship and what he thinks love should be, using the sea and the waves to support his depiction. Throughout this poem, there is a sense of series of metaphors merging together. It is noticeable from the first line, "The Sea of Faith," which refers to the faith and appreciation that people put in nature and themselves. So when the poet writes that the sea of faith too, was once at the full, he means to say that people had a lot of devotion in themselves and in nature but we don't anymore.

The second stanza is an indication to the past. Arnold uses "Sophocles", an ancient Greek philosopher, to illustrate that the people, for a long time contemplated about an evaluation between sea and human misery.

The third stanza is where Arnold points out a contrast between the tide of the sea and his own personal faith using imagery. The tide of the sea symbolizes the unsympathetic world.

The fourth stanza is where the poem discovers both, a considerate as well as a hasty mood. Arnold speaks to his wife in the lines, "Ah, love, let us be true to one another!" Through these lines he exemplifies his profound love for her and requests her to be faithful to him, saying that for the sake of their marriage they need to be faithful to the other.

To a particular extent, human beings are inferior to nature and the spiritual beliefs. The desertion of the doctrine of religion with the help of Industrial Revolution is only an ineffective act against the power overwhelming nature. Spirituality and faith should remain in humanity, so paying no heed to it would result in the ambiguity and vulnerability of modern man.

The poem continues explaining a battle worth fighting, for what one accepts as the truth, whether you think of the poem about love and the wife of Matthew Arnold, or whether as a poem signifying the ongoing religious dilemma of that time period. In the end, the only person you can count on is yourself and the one you love. All the mortals live in this world in a dark state of mind and the struggle for survival is no less different from ignorant armies that fight throughout the night.

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