

Poetry (For Detailed Study)

Arnold: Dover Beach

- ❖ "Dover Beach" is a lyric poem
- ❖ It was first published in 1867 in the collection *New Poems*,
- ❖ Its composition may have begun as early as 1849. The most likely date is 1851.
- ❖ The title, locale and subject of the poem's descriptive opening lines is **the shore of the English ferry port of Dover, Kent, facing Calais, France**, at the Strait of Dover, the narrowest part (21 miles) of the English Channel, where **Arnold honeymooned in 1851**.
- ❖ Arnold begins **with a naturalistic and detailed nightscape of the beach at Dover** in which auditory imagery plays a significant role ("Listen! you hear the grating roar").
- ❖ The beach, however, is bare, with only a hint of humanity in a light that "gleams and is gone".
- ❖ Reflecting the traditional notion that the poem was written during Arnold's honeymoon
- ❖ A critic notes that "the speaker might be talking to his bride" ^[6]

The sea is calm to-night.

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-blanch'd 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.

- ❖ Arnold looks at two aspects of this scene, its soundscape (in the first and second stanzas) and the retreating action of the tide (in the third stanza). He hears the sound of the sea as "the eternal note of sadness".
- ❖ **Sophocles, a 5th-century BC Greek playwright who wrote tragedies on fate and the will of the gods, also heard this sound as he stood upon the shore of the Aegean Sea.**
- ❖ Critics differ widely on how to interpret this image of the Greek classical age. One sees a difference between Sophocles interpreting the "note of sadness" humanistically, while Arnold, in the industrial nineteenth century, hears in this sound the retreat of religion and faith.

- ❖ A more recent critic connects the two as artists, Sophocles the tragedian, Arnold the lyric poet, each attempting to transform this note of sadness into "a higher order of experience".

Sophocles long ago

Heard it on the Ægæan, 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.

- ❖ Having examined the soundscape, Arnold turns to the action of the tide itself and sees in its retreat a metaphor for the loss of faith in the modern age, once again expressed in an auditory image ("But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar").
- ❖ This fourth stanza begins with an image not of sadness, but of "joyous fulness" similar in beauty to the image with which the poem opens.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear^[15]
And naked shingles of the world.

- ❖ **The final stanza begins with an appeal to love, then moves on to the famous ending metaphor.**
 - ❖ **The metaphor with which the poem ends is most likely an allusion to a passage in Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War (Book 7, 44).**
 - ❖ **He describes an ancient battle that occurred on a similar beach during the Athenian invasion of Sicily.**
 - ❖ **The battle took place at night;** the attacking army became disoriented while fighting in the darkness and many of their soldiers inadvertently killed each other.
- ➔ **In summary, 'Dover Beach' sees the (male) speaker addressing his lover ('Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!')**, in what amounts almost to a dramatic monologue (see the speaker's gestures and phrases which remind us of where he is and what he's doing: 'Come to the window', 'Listen!').
- ➔ Matthew Arnold's **speaker looks out at the sea from his vantage point at Dover on the south coast of England**, the nearest point to mainland Europe ('on the French coast the light / Gleams and is gone'), and reflects on the calmness of the sea and the serenity of everything. He is so close to France (from Dover to Calais it's only about 20 miles), so he can even see the lights on the French coast in the clear night air.

- He reflects that underneath this appearance of calm, there is something more volatile and unsettling: ‘the grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, / At their return, up the high strand’.
- This sounds like a simple description of the waves tossing the pebbles about the place on the shingly beach, but behind it there lurks the geological fascination with pebbles, shells, and other remnants of the Earth’s distant past.
- Geology had been a hot talking point for the Victorians ever since Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* appeared in 1830-33 (indeed, this was several years before Victoria came to the throne in 1837).
- These pebbles may be more than window-dressing (as it were) for Arnold’s poem, then: they may be an oblique reference to the science of geology that had done so much to undermine many Victorians’ faith in the Biblical account of Creation.
- Anyway, back to Arnold at that window, gazing out with his beloved at Dover beach and analyzing the scene.
- The movement of the waves here in the English Channel put Arnold in mind of the ‘ebb and flow’ of the tides in a different sea, the Aegean (near Greece), and a different time in human history: **Sophocles was one of the great tragedians of ancient Greece** (famous for writing *Oedipus Rex*), and lived over two millennia before Arnold, yet Sophocles, too, heard the ‘cadence’ of the sea’s movement and was put in mind of the human condition.
- Arnold probably mentions him not just because he wrote tragedies but because he was pre-Christian, living in the fifth century BCE, over 400 years before Christ.
- **Arnold is reflecting on the retreat of the ‘Sea of Faith’**, and for him (as for all Victorians) this means a receding sea of *Christian* faith. As already mentioned, geological discoveries in the nineteenth century cast doubt over the veracity of the Bible’s claims, but the broader philosophical discussions going on also contributed to this growing sense of religious doubt among Victorian Christians: some fifty years earlier, Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* had critiqued the Bible, exposing its internal inconsistencies, with Paine concluding that there was no basis for believing the Bible to be literally the word of God.
- In short, by the 1850s when Arnold is thought to have written ‘Dover Beach’, there were many reasons why a Christian might be having doubts over his or her own faith.
- So, the ‘Sea of Faith’ is retreating. What hope is there for humanity? Arnold calls upon his newlywed wife to show solidarity and fidelity: if we cannot have faith in religion, we can have faith in each other, in human companionship and love.
- It’s possible that **Arnold’s bleak vision of a (potentially) godless world was influenced by Tennyson’s famous depiction of a bleak world – of ‘Nature red in tooth and claw’ – in his popular 1850 poem *In Memoriam*.**
- Interestingly, Tennyson’s ‘dinosaur cantos’ also seem to end by entreating human beings to find comfort in each other, with his ‘behind the veil’ implying that marriage and love will console us against our loss of faith in a divine plan for our future and well-being.
- There are several problems with Arnold’s analogy of the ‘Sea of Faith’ if we analyse it more closely or take it too literally. For one, Arnold implies that the Aegean is tidal (see the ‘ebb and

flow'), yet the Mediterranean has only very limited tides. Similarly, in likening man's receding faith in God to the ebb of the sea, Arnold (probably unintentionally) suggests that this loss of faith will be but temporary: after all, the tide flows back in, and then out again, and then back in, in an endless movement of ebb and flow. Why should we despair, if the retreating Sea of Faith will, like the tides, come back again in time?

- Perhaps it is to mistake Matthew Arnold himself for his speaker, standing at the window, gazing out at Dover beach.
- 'Dover Beach' is a great Victorian poem, one of Arnold's finest, and an important one to grapple with, read, discuss, analyse, and consider when dealing with Victorian responses to faith and doubt.

The Scholar Gypsy

Go, for they call you, **shepherd, from the hill;**
Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes!

And the **tired men and dogs all gone to rest,**
And only the white sheep are sometimes seen
Cross and recross the strips of moon-blanch'd green.
Come, shepherd, and again begin the quest!

... at noon, comes back his stores to use—
Here will I sit and wait,

— All the live murmur of a summer's day.

Of bloom on the bent grass where **I am laid,**
And bower me from the August sun with shade;
And **the eye travels down to Oxford's towers.**

And **near me on the grass lies Glanvil's book—**
Come, **let me read the oft-read tale again!**

The story of the Oxford scholar poor,

Of pregnant parts and quick inventive brain,
Who, tired of knocking at preferment's door,

One summer-morn forsook

His friends, and went to learn the gipsy-lore,

And roam'd the world with that wild brotherhood,

And came, as most men deem'd, to little good,

But came to Oxford and his friends no more.

**But once, years after, in the country-lanes,
Two scholars, whom at college erst he knew,
Met him, and of his way of life enquired;**

This said, he left them, and return'd no more.—
But **rumours** hung about the country-side,
That **the lost Scholar long was seen to stray,
Seen by rare glimpses, pensive and tongue-tied,
Shepherds had met him on the Hurst in spring;
At some lone alehouse in the Berkshire moors,**

And then they land, and thou art seen no more!—
Maidens, who from the distant hamlets come
To dance around the **Fyfield elm in May,**

And, above **Godstow Bridge**, when hay-time's here
In June, and many a scythe in sunshine flames,

At some lone homestead in the **Cunner hills**,
Where at her open door the housewife darns,
Thou hast been seen, or hanging on a gate
To watch the threshers in the mossy barns.
Children, who early range these slopes and late
For cresses from the rills,
Have known thee eyeing, all an April-day,

**In autumn, on the skirts of Bagley Wood—
Where most the gypsies by the turf-edged way
Pitch their smoked tents**, and every bush you see
With scarlet patches tagg'd and shreds of grey,
Above the forest-ground called Thessaly—
**The blackbird, picking food,
Sees thee**, nor stops his meal, nor fears at all;

And once, **in winter, on the causeway chill**
Where home through flooded fields foot-travellers go,

But what—I **dream!** **Two hundred years are flown
Since first thy story ran through Oxford halls,
And the grave Glanvill did the tale inscribe
That thou wert wander'd from the studious walls**

**To learn strange arts, and join a gipsy-tribe;
And thou from earth art gone**
Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid—
Some country-nook, where o'er thy unknown grave
Tall grasses and white flowering nettles wave,
Under a dark, red-fruited yew-tree's shade.

—No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours!
For what wears out the life of mortal men?
'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;
'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,
Exhaust the energy of strongest souls
And numb the elastic powers.

**Thou hast not lived, why should'st thou perish, so?
Thou hadst *one* aim, *one* business, *one* desire;
Else wert thou long since number'd with the dead!
Else hadst thou spent, like other men, thy fire!
The generations of thy peers are fled,
And we ourselves shall go;
But thou possessest an immortal lot,
And we imagine thee exempt from age
And living as thou liv'st on Glanvil's page,
Because thou hadst—what we, alas! have not.**

The Scholar Gipsy" (1853)

- ❖ It is based on a 17th-century Oxford story found in Joseph Glanvill's *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661, etc.).
- ❖ Arnold prefaces the poem with an extract from Glanvill which tells the story of an impoverished Oxford student who left his studies to join a band of gipsies, and so ingratiated himself with them that they told him many of the secrets of their trade. After some time he was discovered and recognised by two of his former Oxford associates, who learned from him that the gipsies "had a traditional kind of learning among them, and could do wonders by the power of imagination, their fancy binding that of others." When he had learned everything that the gipsies could teach him, he said, he would leave them and give an account of these secrets to the world.
- ❖ **Arnold begins "The Scholar Gipsy" in pastoral mode, invoking a shepherd and describing the beauties of a rural scene, with Oxford in the distance.**
- ❖ He then repeats the gist of Glanvill's story, but extends it with an account of rumours that the scholar gipsy was again seen from time to time around Oxford.

✦ Arnold imagines him as a shadowy figure who can even now be glimpsed in the Berkshire and Oxfordshire countryside, "waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall", and claims to have once seen him himself.

✦ He entertains a doubt as to the scholar gypsy's still being alive after two centuries, but then shakes off the thought. **He cannot have died:**

For what wears out the life of mortal men?

'Tis that from change to change their being rolls:

'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,

Exhaust the energy of strongest souls,

And numb the elastic powers.

The scholar gypsy, having renounced such a life, is

Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,

Which much to have tried, in much been baffled, brings,^[6]

and is therefore not subject to ageing and death. Arnold describes this strange disease of modern life,

With its sick hurry, its divided aims,

and implores the scholar gypsy to avoid all who suffer from it, in case he too should be infected and die.

✦ Arnold ends with an extended simile of a **Tyrian merchant seaman who flees from the corruption of Greek competitors to seek a new world in Iberia.**