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16.0 OBJECTIVES

- The unit focuses on the analysis of "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold.
- The unit will encompass the summary, themes, form, meter and setting of "Dover Beach".
- The necessary critical analysis of the poem "Dover Beach" will be presented concisely and lucidly.

16.1 BACKGROUND

"Dover Beach" stands at the head of Arnold's shorter poems as his most perfect work of art. As a presentation of ideas, it is one of the simplest because, although the archetypal image of the sea is rich in suggestion, there is almost none of Arnold's usual discursive analysis: he only turns away from a dark world emptied of religious meaning to cling to human love. The poem may initially seem strange as the product of a brief wedding trip, which it appears to have been. However, it is, after all, a distillation, an extreme one, of Arnold's grimmest and gloomiest thoughts and feelings of earlier years. Marriage would reinforce the idea of love as

an anchorage in a Godless, chaotic, hostile world. Here, as in other poems, very limited salvation comes through feeling, not reason, although love is only a desperate refuge; it does not bring profound self-knowledge and intimations, however dim, of a reality beyond the self. However, it is the negative theme that matters most, and "We are here as on a darkling plain" may be taken as "the central statement Arnold makes about the human condition.

16.2 INTRODUCTION

He wrote at least a portion of 'Dover Beach' on a honeymoon trip with his bride to the seaside town of Alverstoke following their wedding in June 1851. Later in the month, they visited Dover as well. Arnold delayed the publication of 'Dover Beach' until 1867, but eventually, it became one of his best-known poems. In it, he weaves together allusions to the present, classical Greece, and medieval Europe. Critics have found echoes of Sophocles, Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats, among others, but Arnold achieves unity by effectively juxtaposing sight and sound imagery. 'Dover Beach' is a jewel that Arnold had kept to himself since the beginning of his married life. Although Victorian readers did not immediately appreciate it, it was destined to be read by later generations of readers as an essential poem in its own right and representative of Victorian consciousness.

The poem also illustrates how Arnold's deepest structures of feeling throughout his literary career are grounded in his religious heritage. At the emotional climax of the poem, the speaker addresses his companion: 'Ah, love, let us be true/To one another! for', and it describes the senseless violence of the world that underlies its seeming beauty.

16.3 SUMMARY

“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-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.”

The opening of *Dover Beach* is a more subtle blend of assurance and disquiet. The speaker observes the tide and the moon reflected on the calm sea. The speaker stands next to the English Channel and observes the French and English coasts. The speaker then invites another person to come and have a look at the scene that the speaker had been observing. The speaker senses something uncomfortable and describes the water meeting the moonlit land. The speaker urges the companion to listen to the waves as they clash against the rocks and pebbles. The speaker associates the flowing of the waves with sadness.

Against apparent peace and stability are the facts of the vanishing of the light and the glimmering of the cliffs. There seems to be untroubled serenity in "Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!" Nevertheless, then we meet the ominous "Only," the hint of alien coldness in "the moon-blanch'd land," and the full recognition of the sinister in "the grating roar" of the pebbles drawn back and flung up on the strand. This endlessly repeated process brings "The eternal note of sadness in." What follows confirms the hint that men are like pebbles, forever swept back and forth by circumstances and forces beyond their control.

“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.”

We stand on Dover beach and hear the same note Sophocles heard on the Ægean, the same that the age hears as the sea of faith retreats 'down the vast edges of the drear and naked shingles of the world. Suddenly, the speaker thinks about the famous Greek tragedy playwright Sophocles and

imagines how Sophocles would have become sad when he would have stood on the Aegean Sea, just like the speaker feels. Sophocles associates the sound of the waves with the general sorrow of humanity. The speaker then acknowledges the sea as the sea of faith that once flowed with a high tide. At that time, religion and faith swirled around the earth like a girdle. Unfortunately, now, the speaker only feels the sea of faith completely retreat, meaning that humanity has lost faith in God. Suppose Sophocles likening human calamities to the stormy sea is not strictly relevant. In that case, Arnold's allusion to his favourite Greek dramatist has the effect of the myth in Philomela-of joining past and present in one long chain of suffering. His association of the tide with "the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery" is wholly logical, though it must be granted that his transfer of the impressive image to "The Sea of Faith" is not, since it does not perpetually ebb and flow but has ebbed once for all; however, we need not be upset by that any more than we are by Keats's making the mortal nightingale immortal.

“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.”

The speaker is addressing the companion as "love" for the first time, which makes us believe that the speaker was in the company of a lover till now. The speaker frankly confesses and requests the lover to be honest because the speaker does not feel that the world offers joy, love or clarity. Neither claims the speaker can the world provide any certainty, peace, or relief from eternal pain. The speaker is pessimistic about their situation and compares standing on a flat, dark piece of land, caught up and surrounded by the fighting chaos. Here, battles between unknowing groups continue under cover of darkness. Nevertheless, despite a bleak, 'modern' view of the human condition, the poem affirms romantic love. The conclusion is unexpected-if one may speak thus of such a familiar poem and quote such familiar lines.

The conclusion was written before the preceding lines 1-28. The final picture of ignorant armies clashing by night refers to a disastrous battle in Sicily. The image breaks away from that of the sea, which has hitherto

been dominant, yet the conclusion depends on its whole meaning and impact on what has preceded it. There are particular links between the fact of darkness and the lines "for the world . . . pain," which return to and reject the delusive beauty and security described in the opening lines. Nevertheless, "that we have no sea in the last section is the very point of the poem" may be thought of as an over-subtle forcing of the metaphor.

16.4 THEMES

Loss of Faith

"Dover Beach" strongly reflects the theme of loss of trust. The beach also plays an important role throughout the poem. For the speaker, losing credibility is like losing certainty. Dover the beach itself embodies this loss in its sights and sounds. The poem initially does not allude to the theme of loss of faith. Instead, elements of beaches, pebbles, and waves echo the theme of sorrow. We see an analogy between God and the immateriality. However, this does not mean that religious beliefs will return, but that something will take their place (in this case, dominance of science).

The speaker's position on this loss of faith becomes clear in the third stanza. Faith once made the world "full" and "bright". Its loss, then, represents "melancholy." Moreover, the "Sea of Faith" once touched the shores of the entire world but is now "withdrawing." The poem essentially says that this loss of faith is global, suggesting the vast reach of scientific advancements at the time. The speaker doubles down on the idea that scientific advancement represents a loss rather than a gain in the poem's final couplet, saying that the new era will herald "confused alarms of struggle and flight," and "ignorant armies clash[ing] by night." In other words, the speaker believes that scientific advancement will bring only scientific—not spiritual—certainty and will lead to more doubt and questioning (which is, in fact, an essential part of the scientific method of inquiry). Overall, then, the poem expresses a kind of resignation. The speaker fully admits the change in the process—as inevitable as the waves rising and falling—and challenges the reader to consider whether this loss of faith is progress or a wrong turn. "Dover Beach," then, is a profoundly pessimistic poem that questions the dominant values of its day and embodies the grief that some felt at the prospect of losing religion. This question remains in the 21st century, and readers should consider whether their lives are spiritually fulfilling.

Nature and Alienation

The changing relationship of people to the natural environment is tied to the idea of a loss of faith – Dover Beach, written shortly after the era when romantic poets praised nature as an antidote to overly rational

thinking. ” recreates the relationship between humans and nature. Ask naturally. Instead of finding happiness or sublimeness in the natural environment, the speaker (while acknowledging the beauty of the beach) finds a deep sadness. Cold indifference and the mighty forces of nature make the speaker seem small and insignificant. The poem thus seeks to capture the complexity of human experience as part of the natural world, rather than as the center of it.

At the heart of this poem is the tacit acknowledgment that humanity is only part of a larger system, the natural world. The sight of nature prompts the speaker to think about the timescales that render his life meaningless. A striking reminder. The beach and the sea are the most prominent characters in the poem. The product of millions of years of erosion and movement of water, they represent timescales far beyond the breadth of human life and perhaps beyond the mind's ability to comprehend them.

This deep sense of time takes the speaker away from the natural scene they are observing. This scene dwarfs the speakers and the sense that nature is almost hostile to the trials of mankind, as evidenced by the "roar" of the beach accompanied by the "eternal sound of sorrow" as pebbles move with the waves. The reference to eternity here clearly ties the concept of time to the alienation of the speaker. Without God guaranteeing an eternal afterlife, the timescales evoked by nature seem mocking of man's limited place in the world.

The speaker's thoughts on the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles further emphasize the tragedy that the speaker believes is happening now. The speaker imagines hearing at sea the same loneliness and sorrow that Sophocles hears in his poem. To an orator, human life is inherently sad, and Sophocles, as a tragedy performer, must have heard the same sorrow at sea. On the one hand, the poem claims that nature always has this alienating effect. On the other hand, however, the speaker seems to be particularly focused on the present moment, the moment the poem was written. The use of the present tense throughout indicates that the speaker feels the present moment is an incredibly alienated time.

The poem's natural setting makes the speaker question everything about human existence that was once guarded by religious beliefs. In addition, the beach has a paradoxical property - it constantly changes its shape. Nevertheless, it has remained roughly the same for millions of years, always changing and always looking the same. This paradox embodies the way people try to make sense of their lives when the world offers no

certainty. It is often assumed that ultimately, "Dover Beach" reveals the subliminal melancholy of striking natural scenes. The speaker recognizes the beauty of the scene, but that beauty cannot compensate for the way the scene makes the speaker seem small and insignificant.

16.5 FORM AND METER

"Dover Beach" meter is very unpredictable. Whenever a pattern seems established, it is quickly broken. This unpredictability is exhibited both in stressed and unstressed syllable patterns and in line length. For example, line 10 contains the iambic pentameter (5 ft) "Of the pebbles that the waves pull back and throw", and line 21 contains the iambic pentameter (2 ft) iambic pentameter (The Sea of Faith) line. This restless variation is highly unusual for the Victorian era in which the poem was written. In addition, readers can experience the speaker's psychology in real time. This is confusing, unsettling, and importantly, unpredictable.

At first, the poem appears to be establishing an iambic rhythm, even if the line lengths vary from the outset:

The **sea** is **calm** tonight.
The **tide** is **full**, the **moon** lies **fair**
Upon the **straits**;

These lines are highly regular, with a reliable shift from unstressed to stressed, creating a gentle rocking motion in keeping with the discussion of the sea and its tides. However, as line 3 continues, a kind of metrical battle begins, in which the iambic pattern tries to re-establish itself but is constantly disrupted:

Upon the **straits**; on the **French coast** the **light**

"On the French coast" is a pyrrhic foot followed by a spondee, two unstressed syllables before two stresses. This is unusual in itself, but that it occurs in the middle of the line is doubly daring and lays down a metrical challenge to the iambic opening lines. This signifies the conflict in the speaker's psyche between the outwardly beautiful scene and the symbolically troubling world it seems to represent to the speaker.

The final stanza embodies this tussle between iambs and irregularity too. Lines 33 and 34 are straightforwardly iambic "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain", but lines 36 and 37 defeat this stability "Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night". Considering that these two lines introduce the idea of an uncertain future dominated by "confused

alarms of struggle and flight" and "ignorant armies," metrical confusion plays a relevant role. The unreliability of the metrical pattern embodies the "confusion," "struggle", and "clash" that these lines discuss. The poem's subject is about a rupture or breakage, as a world founded on faith is changed by the rise of science, and the meter of the poem itself seems ruptured, underscoring and amplifying the poem's subject.

16.6 SETTING

There are two settings for poetry. As the title suggests, the first is a literal take. Dover beach. Dover is on England's southeast coast and is a major port. The cliffs the speaker refers to are mostly chalk. That is, it is white and shimmers in the moonlight. There are also steep slopes where the coast ends abruptly and joins the sea. The sea the speaker sees is the English Channel that separates England from France (which is why the speaker can see France over the sea in the first place). The setting also embodies the speaker's psychological conflict that develops throughout the poem. The scenery is beautiful from the outside, and the cliffs are impressive, but there is also a vague sense of threat. Since England is an island nation, anyone wishing to attack it (before air travel) must reach the coast by sea and land.

The beach itself is a transitional space. That said, while the beach may look the same year to year to the casual observer, it's always changing. Every time a wave comes and goes, there is a subtle difference. Similarly, a beach is where land and sea meet. It's like an intermediate zone where you don't know where the land is and where the sea is. This is important for poetry because the speaker is concerned with similar moments of historical transition. From the speaker's perspective, society (and perhaps humanity more generally) is moving from faith to a science-based understanding of the world. As a result, the intellectual and spiritual life of the world is in transition. The tranquil nature of the beach therefore makes the speaker think more deeply about faith, change, loss and love.

Considering this, there is another meaning that the framework of the poem is the narrator's spirit itself. The reader thus follows the narrator's journey from equanimity to doubt, love for others, sadness, and anxiety about the future.

16.7 KEYWORDS

Aegean Sea	an arm of the Mediterranean Sea, located between the Greek peninsula on the west and Asia Minor on the east
Allusion	hint
Chaotic	in a state of confusion
Grimmest	very serious; not smiling
Hostile	having very strong feelings against somebody/something
Immateriality	of no substantial consequence, unimportant
Medieval	connected with the period in history between about 1100 and 1500 AD (the Middle Ages)
Myth of Philomela	While the myth has several variations, the general depiction is that Philomela, after being raped and mutilated by her sister's husband, Tereus, obtains her revenge and is transformed into a nightingale (<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>), a bird renowned for its song
Paradoxical	opposite
Refuge	protection from danger, trouble, etc.; a place that is safe
Subtle	not very noticeable; not very strong or bright
Tacit	understood but not actually said

16.8 LET US SUM UP

“Dover Beach” is a poem which insists on love and honesty especially at a time when the spiritual faith is waning. The speaker of the poem laments the loss of faith that hugely prevailed at one time on the earth. The speaker acknowledges that the world has lost joy, hope, certainty and peace. Disillusionment prevails when ignorant armies are clashing during the dark of the night.

16.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Choose the correct option:

- 1) Dover beach is a metaphor for _____.
a) loss of faith b) innate kindness
c) darkness of humanity d) a honeymoon

2) "The Sea of Faith was once, too, at the full, ... But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, retreating, to the breath..." is a metaphor for _____.

- a) dover beach
- b) the poet's wife
- c) the poet's honey moon
- d) humanity's loss of faith

3) What country does the speaker see on the other side of the English Channel?

- a) Italy
- b) France
- c) Hoboken
- d) Belgium

4) What's the famous land formation at Dover that's mentioned in this poem?

- a) The Pit of Despair
- b) The Great Waterfall of Dover
- c) The Sea of Faith
- d) The White Cliffs of Dover

5) What Greek playwright makes a cameo in this poem?

- a) Euripides
- b) Sophocles
- c) Aeschylus
- d) Kermit

❖ **ANSWER IN BRIEF:**

1) What is the mood of the poem "Dover Beach"?

2) Analyse the poem "Dover Beach" and discuss how the loss of faith (during his times) affects the poet and his thought?

3) How does the speaker describe the beautiful night scene at Dover in the poem?

4) How is the metaphor of sea used in the poem?

5) The poem brings out the loss of faith in the modern world. Discuss with close reference to the text.

Write a detailed note on the following questions:

1) Does Arnold take a reflective or an emotional stance in his poetry?

Explain.

2) What is the central idea of the poem?

Answers:

1) – A 2) – D 3) – B 4) – D 5) – B

16.10 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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