

## Notes on Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold:

Matthew Arnold was a pretty serious dude. He believed in the Power and Beauty of Art with a capital P, and was all about the value of really understanding the past and the great tradition of literature. He was a poet, a scholar, a critic, and one of the big-name literary figures of the Victorian era. Sounds like the recipe for a great career, right?

But he was also living in an uncertain time. The winds of change were blowing, and he lets us hear them whipping by in his poetry. See, in the decades before he wrote this poem, England had gone through rapid industrialization, which in many ways upended a way of life that had been stable for centuries. The British empire was beginning to expand its reach across the globe, and the conflicts that would come with that expansion were picking up steam as well. In other words, Arnold was a man on the brink between the old world and the new, right on the edge of the modern era, and he has a really cool, visionary sense of what that means.

"Dover Beach" is one of his most famous poems, although he wrote many more. It's still included in anthologies and memorized by school kids today, almost 150 years after it was published in 1867. Why that staying power? Well, we think this poem does a brilliant job of capturing just how lonely it can be to live in the modern world.

You know what we're talking about. As family ties rupture, as old systems of faith diminish, it's easy to feel as if we've been abandoned on "a darkling plain" (35) without friends or hope. What's cool about this poem is that it both describes this suffering and helps to make it better. It tackles the pain and the uncertainty of living in the modern world, but does it in a way that leaves us feeling like poetry can still matter, even in our times. In that way, Arnold fuses the literary tradition he loved with the new world that he could see coming—the one we're living in right now.

### WHY SHOULD I CARE?

We're all for poems that talk about the happy stuff like love and birds and trees and taking a nap (okay, maybe we don't know of any nap poems, but you get the idea). At the same time, that's not all poetry can do.

It can also tackle the rough stuff in life, like pain and fear and suffering and loss. "Dover Beach" is a great example of a poem that's honest about how dark and scary life can be sometimes. The speaker of this poem just flat out tells us that we shouldn't expect life to be full of "joy" or "love" (33). He wants to shake us awake, to tell us that, in the world we live in now there is no certainty, no "help for pain" (34). It's not like there isn't any love and happiness in it (the first stanza is full of it) but he doesn't sugarcoat the bad stuff either.

So why would you want to read a poem about how life can be hard? Well, we think most people figure out that life isn't all good stuff about the time they find out Santa Claus isn't real (yeah, we're still kind of bummed about that one, too).

So why should we save the beauty and power of a great poem for just the bright side of life? We feel like being able to talk about lurking darkness and fear makes it all a little less scary. Sure, "Dover Beach" is about loneliness, but when we read it, we somehow feel less alone—and we bet you will, too.

"Dover Beach" opens with a quiet scene. A couple looks out on the moonlit water of the English Channel, and listens to the sound of the waves. Then, all of a sudden it zooms out. And we mean way out.

See, the sound of the waves makes the speaker think first of ancient Greece. Yep, Greece. Then he turns the sound of the surf into a metaphor for human history, and the gradual, steady loss of faith that his culture has experienced. The poem ends on a gorgeous, heartbreaking note, with the couple clinging to their love in a world of violence and fear and pain.

Line 1

The sea is calm tonight.

This first line gives us two simple, basic facts. It's nighttime, and the sea is calm. Can't you just picture it? Hey, that's all we need to start building a mental world.

As you'll see, "Dover Beach" will end up running back in time and all over the world, but that image of the ocean at night will always be front-and-center. In addition to giving us the image that will anchor the poem, this line sets a very particular tone. The words are short and clear.

The line ends with a period, making it a complete, simple sentence. There's no activity, just stillness and simplicity. In a word, this line is calm, just like the ocean.

Line 2

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Here we get a little more description of the setting of this poem. It's high ("full") tide, the moon is out, and it's beautiful ("fair").

We've pointed out how the first line was self-contained, a complete thought in itself. In this line, the end of the line isn't the end of the sentence, so the phrase "the moon lies fair" isn't complete. It makes the reader want to know where the moon lies fair, or how. To find out, you have to continue to the next line. That poetic technique, where a sentence is broken up across more than one line, is called enjambment.

We also want to point out that little break in the middle of the line (marked by the comma). The line takes a pause here, between two complete phrases. That fancy little trick is called a caesura, and it divides the line into two parts.

Line 3

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

That moon that's lingering from the last line? Well, it turns out that it "lies fair / Upon the straits." That just means that the moonlight is shining on a narrow body of water ("the straits"). The speaker tells us that he can see across the strait to the coast of France.

If we put this together with the title "Dover Beach," we get a pretty clear idea of where the speaker is. He's on the coast of England, looking out at the English Channel, which separates

England from France. Dover is a town (you might have heard of its famous white cliffs) right at the narrowest point in the channel. The French town of Calais is just a little over twenty miles away, which is why he can see the light there.

Notice the enjambment in this line, too. Arnold keeps us rolling from line to line here, building up momentum in the beginning of the poem.

Lines 4-5

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Suddenly the light that he saw shines out and then disappears (with Arnold's much prettier alliteration, it "Gleams and is gone").

When the light in France disappears, the speaker looks back at his own coast. Here he sees the famous white cliffs of Dover, which are shining in the moonlight out in the bay. The bay, he reminds us, is "tranquil." This picks up the image of calm water from line 1.

And once again we've got a break in line 4. See how the line pauses at the semicolon, and then the speaker turns to a new thought? Yep, that's another caesura.

Line 6

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Here we get a little more information about what's happening in the world of the poem. We learn that the speaker is indoors (in a room with a window).

We also find out that he's talking to someone who must be in the room with him—that's his audience.. We don't learn much about that person yet, but our speaker wants him or her to come to the window to smell the "sweet" air.

The tone of the poem is still really calm. Adjectives like "tranquil" and "sweet" establish a relaxing, comforting mood here at the beginning of things.

Lines 7-8

Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blached land,

Now, all of a sudden, we've got a little shift on our hands. As we look out with the speaker and his companion, he says "Only." (Here that means something like "But.")

Only what? What's the matter with this scene? Arnold is just beginning to build our expectation. The speaker draws our attention to the edge of the water and the surf ("the long line of spray"). Instead of looking at the beautiful landscape as a whole, we're looking at the specific point where the sea meets the land.

And check out that vivid image of the "moon-blached land." Blached means "whitened"—we might say "bleached." You know how bright moonlight can make the whole world look white? Well, that's what our speaker is talking about.

Line 9

Listen! you hear the grating roar

Before, we were imagining what this scene looked like. Now the speaker tells his companion (and us) to change the frame, to use one of our other senses.

Suddenly we're going to "Listen!" (that exclamation point is meant to wake us up) to the sound of the water.

Turns out that sound isn't "calm" or "tranquil" like the moonlight on the water. The speaker describes it as a "grating roar."

The harshness of the word "grating" might be a little surprising, since there's nothing relaxing about a grating sound. It seems that the atmosphere of this poem is changing. Let's keep an eye out for more shifts in the future.

Lines 10-11

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,

That "grating" sound from line? That comes from the sound of pebbles. Those little rocks are being pulled out by the waves as they go out, and then thrown back up on the beach ("strand" is another word for beach or shore) when the waves come back in.

Maybe you've heard that sound before, like a rhythmic rumble, a giant breathing. The speaker really focuses in on the sound of the waves. He wants us to really feel their inevitable, steady force. Because if one thing's for sure, it's that waves will continue to crash on beaches all the world over.

Lines 12-13

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The grating sound of the pebbles starts, and then stops, and then starts again. The speaker has a fancy way of describing this rhythm of the ocean. He calls it a "tremulous cadence slow." Let's break that one down, huh? "Tremulous" means shaky or trembling. We think that comes from the fact that this one big sound is made up of many little sounds of rolling pebbles.

"Cadence" refers to the rhythm of that repeated sound. That's a significant word to use in a poem of all things, where rhythm is so crucial to the reading experience. The speaker hears a slow rhythm in the sound of the waves, and it mingles in with the rhythm of his poem.

And just what is the rhythm of this poem? Well, Arnold plays around with that a little. The basic meter for the poem is iambic, which has just the same kind of rolling rhythm as those waves.

Line 12 is actually a great example of that: Begin, and cease, and then again begin. See? Perfect iambic pentameter.

That's not the case everywhere though; he switches things up a fair amount. For more on that, see our "Form and Meter" section.

Line 14

The eternal note of sadness in.

Now the rubber really hits the road in this poem. We started out calm and tranquil, but the first stanza ends on a much darker note, with the introduction of a "note of sadness."

We think the word "note" is pretty key here. It picks up on the word "cadence" up above, and makes us think that the sound of the world is something like music.

This isn't just a temporary sadness, either. It's "eternal." Our speaker clearly thinks that the music of the world has an endless sadness built into it.

Lines 15-16

Sophocles long ago

Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought

Now the sound of the pebbles in the waves turns into a kind of time machine, and takes the speaker (and us) on a mental journey back to ancient Greece.

He imagines the famous playwright Sophocles heard the same sound as he stood next to the Aegean Sea (that's the part of the Mediterranean that separates Greece from Turkey).

This little allusion to the past keys us into Arnold's interest in the past, and especially classical Greece and Rome. It also creates a connection between the great poetic mind of Sophocles and our speaker. They are linked, across the centuries, by the act of listening to the sea and thinking about humanity.

Lines 17-18

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery; we

Sophocles was one of the great Greek authors of tragic plays. You know, those bumper dramas where everyone ends up dead or miserable. So, it's probably not that surprising that the ocean makes him think of "the turbid ebb and flow of human misery." "Turbid" means "cloudy, stirred up, muddy and murky" and it's often used to refer to water.

So, Sophocles is imagining an analogy between human unhappiness and cloudy water moving in and out ("the ebb and flow").

Also, have you been keeping an eye on how much enjambment this poem has? This particular stanza (lines 15-20) is just one long sentence broken up over six lines. This makes the connection between the distant past and the present seem almost seamless.

See how he slips that "we" in at the end of line 18? He's zooming us back to the present, without even ending the sentence. He could have easily stopped and started the next line back in the present (although breaking it up the way he does helps with the iambic meter). Instead, he just zips back, without stopping, forcing us to keep moving at his pace.

Lines 19-20

Find also in the sound a thought,

Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

Now we're fully back in the poem's present, back on the shore of the English Channel. Here he calls the Channel "this distant northern sea." By distant he just means far away from Sophocles and the Aegean.

Just like Sophocles, "we" find a thought in the sound of the waves. Who's this "we," by the way?

Line 18 is the first time the speaker has referred to we. Maybe he just means him and his companion (whom he invited to the window in line 6).

We've got a hunch he means something bigger though. If it was just he and his companion, he wouldn't need to talk about it.

We think he's including a lot of people in his "we"—his readers, and maybe all of the people living in his time and place. It's a way of both drawing us in and making his observations seem universal.

Lines 21-22

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Ooh, now we're really getting deep. Suddenly the sea grows from being just a thing you look at or listen to, to a full-blown metaphor. Here the "Sea of Faith" represents the "ocean" of religious belief in the world—all of our faith put together. Notice that Arnold capitalizes this term and puts it all by itself at the top of the stanza, so we're sure to notice that it's super-important.

There was a time, the speaker says, when that "Sea of Faith" was at high tide "full" just like the English Channel is right now.

He's really driving this whole ocean-as-metaphor thing hard.

But what's he referring to? Perhaps an earlier time, when religion was more important in people's lives?

Line 23

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

When that ocean of faith was at its height, it was like a "bright girdle" (that's like a fancy belt) rolled up ("furled") around the world. See what he did there? He just used a simile to compare his already-metaphorical ocean to a beautiful belt.

This is kind of a tricky image—it's a little hard to tell how an ocean can be furled around the world, or why exactly a girdle would have folds. We think the whole idea is meant to be a little ornate and complex, because what the speaker is describing, (the high tide of the sea of faith) is so mysterious and beautiful.

For a moment, in this line, we're back in safe territory, away from human misery and grating waves.

Lines 24-25

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Sadly, in this moment, the speaker thinks the sea of faith is a long way from high tide. It's ebbing (getting lower) just like the ocean does.

The only sound he hears now is the roar of faith pulling away. We think "melancholy, long withdrawing roar" has a totally sad, desolate feeling—don't you? The world's loss of faith makes our speaker truly miserable.

Lines 26-27

Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

Here he keeps up the simile he started at the beginning of the stanza, comparing all the faith on earth to an ocean that's steadily pulling away.

Faith is "retreating" from the world. It ebbs to "the breath of the night wind." That's another great image of a powerful, rhythmic force in nature, just like the "cadence" of the pebbles in the waves in line 13.

Check out how dark the language of this poem has turned all of a sudden. There's a scary sense of size in those "vast edges" and real misery in the word "drear." We've come a long way from the calm moonlit night that started out this poem.

Line 28

And naked shingles of the world.

First, we should point out that in this case "shingles" refers to the loose stones on the seashore (not something that goes on a roof).

The idea of the world being covered in "naked shingles" like a wet, desolate beach is so spine-tinglingly bleak. It's such a hopeless image. As faith pulls away, it leaves nothing behind but dreary desolation.

Lines 29-30

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems

At the opening of the last stanza, we're back where we were at the beginning of the poem, in the room at the edge of the Channel.

The speaker finally lets us know who's he's talking to: his "love."

We spent the whole last stanza hearing about the fate of the world, and the metaphorical ocean of faith. So this feels like a pretty big shift. Suddenly the speaker's tone is personal, intimate, even desperate, as if he was clinging to his love to escape the terrifying things he's just been describing.

The idea of lovers being "true" to each other also picks up on the image of lost faith from up above. Even if the world has lost its faith, maybe they, in their small way, can hold on to some of it.

But note the enjambment between lines 29 and 30. First, he says to his love, "let us be true." That could be a more general statement about personal integrity. But then, squish it up with line 30, and you realize that he wants them to be true to one another, which is a much smaller, more intimate idea.

Maybe, just maybe, the idea of being true in the modern world is just too big to handle. So in the end, all we can do is be true to one another. Let's see if that plays out in the final lines of the poem.

Lines 31-32

To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,

There's been a contrast running through this whole poem. On the one hand, there's the pretty view of the moonlit water that opens the poem. So in the present, in the world the speaker and his lover can see before them, things seem pretty much okay.

This happy world is "various" (that just means full of variety) and of course beautiful and new. We think there might be a little allusion to the story of Adam and Eve, the couple alone together with a beautiful new world before them. Do you agree?

There's also a hint of trouble in the way the speaker calls this "a land of dreams." On the one hand, that might mean that it's wonderful, but it might also suggest that this beautiful world is somehow unreal, which makes it all the more precarious.

Lines 33-34

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

Now we see the truth, (or at least as the speaker sees it). It's not that the world is part good and part bad. It's that the pretty part, which you can see, the world of calm night and moonlight and peaceful beauty is an illusion. It's the world he hears in the roaring of the surf that is real. And it's awful.

The reality of the world is nothing but grim chaos. All of the things that should make the world wonderful are gone. There is no joy, love, light, certitude (that means "certainty" or security) or "help for pain."

The speaker has clearly lost that faith he was talking about in the third stanza (lines 21-28). One thing faith can do for you is allow you to believe in order and goodness in the world even when all you see is ugliness and pain. Our speaker has lost that ability to believe in order, and sees only the nightmare.

Even though these lines are grim and sad, they are also kind of beautiful. There's something so sharp, so simple, so raw in the way the speaker cuts away all those wonderful things, one by one. We're gearing up for one heck of an ending,

Line 35



And we are here as on a darkling plain

Arnold brings the whole thing to a crashing finish here, with a famous simile. Yep, this is one for the ages.

He begins the simile in this line, comparing the faithless ugliness of the world to being in a flat and lightless place ("a darkling plain"). That's just one gloomier image in what is shaping up to be a pretty dark ending to this poem.

Line 36-37

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The poem slams shut on us with the end of this final simile that the speaker began in line 35. The speaker and his love are not just stuck in the dark, but they are "swept" by noise and confusion. People are struggling, running away (in "flight") and sounding alarms. The world is not merely a dark and comfortless place. It's a battlefield. But on this battlefield, the fighters can't see each other.

They are fighting at night, and presumably killing their friends as well as their enemies. There's no marching, no even lines, no fancy hats and polished buttons. Just misery, pain, terror, and confusion—a clash.

We've come a long way from the scene of peaceful beauty that opened this poem. The mask has been ripped off the world, and "Dover Beach" has shown us the chaos and ugliness within.