

DOVER BEACH

About the poet :- Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) was born near Staines, received his education at Rugby, Winchester and Balliol college, Oxford. He served as a private secretary to Lord Lansdowne from 1847, afterwards accepting the inspectorship of schools in 1851. He published 5 volumes of poems between 1849 and 1858. His first volume "The Strayed Reveller" and Other Poems" was published in 1849. "Dover Beach" is an early poem of his published in "New Poems".

Basic theme of the poem :- "Dover Beach" represents the main movement of the Victorian mind in the last quarter of the 19th century. The poem is the quintessential expression of the melancholy of a Victorian intellectual brooding over the loss of faith in religion in particular, and humanity in general. The poem shows great depth and range. It reflects neither 19th century optimism nor pessimism; rather it offers a tragic vision which transcends both, and foresees the impending intellectual and spiritual crisis.

The text :-

DOVER BEACH

-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,
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd sand,
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 tremolos cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also I 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 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
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.

About the poem:-

The poem “Dover Beach” is set in the Victoria era and deals predominantly with the loss of faith in religion with the advancement in various fields like geology, archaeology, science. In the opening line of the poem the poet talks about the sea which is calm and quiet and the two coasts of England and France. The French coast slowly loses its light which the English coast gleams brightly. The sea water kisses the bay but ultimately is food retreating and moving away from the bay. This is symbolic of the crisis of faith. Faith in religion, st like the sea, seems to move away from human beings and starts getting replaced by something more evolving and predominant, most probably, science. This receding faith of religious casts an eternal sorrow of mankind, troubling the very existence of men and women.

Here, Arnold speaks of Sophocles who had talked about the ‘ebb and flow’ of the waves in a similar manner and also compared the movement of the sea to eternal sadness. The loss of faith in some way becomes equivalent to the loss of certainty, an existential crisis builds up. In the 3rd stanza the poet says that the sea of faith was not always at a loss, and that it was full and complete at a certain time, and guarded the earth’s shore like a strong belt. But now, it only sobs like melancholy, losing to something more predominant.

The poem is essentially saying that this loss of faith is *global*, suggesting the vast reach of scientific advancements at the time. the poem’s final couplet, says 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 important part of the scientific method of inquiry). The poem expresses a kind of resignation. It is ahead of its time in talking about absurdism and existentialism which appears in the next century, that is in the 20th century.

A GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT TERMS:-

1. Straits – a narrow passage of water connecting two water bodies (here, the English Channel)
2. Tranquil – calm or placid
3. Moon-blanch’d – tinged with the moonlight
4. Grating – producing harsh or pleasant sound
5. Tremulous – shaking
6. Sophocles – a Greek tragedian (496-406 B.C.) famous for his The Theban Plays, of which the most important is Oedipus te King.

7. Aegean – sea bordering the eastern side of Greece, a extension of the Mediterranean Sea.
8. Turbid – turbulent
9. Northern sea – the English Channel which is on the North of Greece
10. Girdle – belt
11. Furled – rolled or folded
12. Shingles – rounded pebbles on the sea-shore
13. Certitude – feeling of certainty