

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,
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-blanchèd 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.

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 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.

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.

Summary

“Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold is a dramatic monologue lamenting the loss of true Christian faith in England during the mid 1800’s as science captured the minds of the public. The poet’s speaker, considered to be Matthew Arnold himself, begins by describing a calm and quiet sea out in the English Channel. He stands on the Dover coast and looks across to France where a small light can be seen briefly, and then vanishes. This light represents the diminishing faith of the English people, and those the world round. Throughout this poem the speaker/Arnold crafts an image of the sea receding and returning to land with the faith of the world as it changes throughout time. At this point in time though, the sea is not returning. It is receding farther out into the strait.

Faith used to encompass the whole world, holding the populous tight in its embrace. Now though, it is losing ground to the sciences, particularly those related to evolution (The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin was published in 1859). The poem concludes pessimistically as the speaker makes clear to the reader that all the beauty and happiness that one may believe they are experiencing is not in fact real. The world is actually without peace, joy, or help for those in need and the human race is too distracted by its own ignorance to see where true assistance is needed anymore.

Poem Analysis

First Stanza

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-blanced 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 begins this poem by giving a description of the setting in which it is taking place. It is clear from the title, although never explicitly stated in the poem, that the beach in question is Dover, on the coast of England. The sea is said to be calm, there is beach on the water at full tide. The moon “lies fair,” lovely, “upon the straits” (a strait is a narrow passage of water such as the English Channel onto which Dover Beach abuts).

Although useful to imagine the speaker in a particular place, the setting is not as important as what it represents. The speaker is able to see across the Channel to the French side of the water. The lights on the far coast are visibly gleaming, and then they disappear and the “cliffs of England” are standing by themselves “vast” and “glimmering” in the bay. The light that shines then vanishes representing to this speaker, and to Arnold himself, the vanishing faith of the English people.

No one around him seems to see the enormity of what is happening, the night is quiet. There is a calm the speaker refers to as “tranquil.” But as the reader will come to see, many things may seem one way but actually exist as the opposite.

Now the speaker turns to another person that is in the scene with him, and asks that this unnamed person comes to the window and breathe in the “sweet...night-air!”

The second half of this stanza is spent on describing the sounds of the water that the speaker is viewing. The speaker draws his companion’s attention to the sound that the water makes as it rushes in over the pebbles on the shore. They roll over one another creating, “the grating roar.” This happens over and over again as the sea recedes and returns. The slow cadence of this movement, and its eternal repetitions, seem sad to the narrator. As if the returning sea is bringing with it, “The eternal note of sadness in.”

Second Stanza

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 second stanza is much shorter and relates the world in which the two characters are in to the larger picture of history. The speaker states that “long ago” Sophocles also heard this sound on the *Ægean* sea as the tides

came in. It too brought to his mind the feelings of “human misery” and how these emotions “ebb and flow.” Sophocles, who penned the play *Antigone*, is one of the best known dramatic writers of Ancient Greece.

Arnold is hoping to bring to the reader’s attention the universal experience of misery, that all throughout time have lived with. This short stanza ends with a return to the present as the narrator states that “we” too are finding these same emotions in the sound.

Third Stanza

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.

In the third stanza of the poem it becomes clear that Arnold is in fact speaking about the diminishing faith of his countrymen and women. He describes, “The Sea of Faith” once covered all of the “round earth’s shore” and held everyone together like a girdle. Now though, this time as passed. No longer is the populous united by a common Christian faith in God by, as Arnold sees it, spread apart by new sciences and conflicting opinions.

The comparison that he has been crafting between the drawing away, and coming in of the sea is now made clear as his speaker says there is no longer any return. The sea is only receding now, “melancholy,” and “long.”

It is retreating from England and from the rest of the lands of the earth and leaving the people exposed.

Fourth Stanza

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.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza it becomes clear that the companion who is looking out over the water with the speaker is most likely a lover or romantic partner.

He speaks now directly to her, and perhaps, to all those true believers in God that are still out there. He asks that they remain true to one another in this “land of dreams.” The world is no longer what it was, it is more like a dream than the reality he is used to. It is a land that appears to be full of various beautiful, new and joyous things but that is not the case. This new world is in fact without “joy...love...[or] light...certitude... [or] peace,” or finally, help for those in pain. It is not what it appears to be.

The poem concludes with a pessimistic outlook on the state of the planet. As the people are suffering around the world on “a darkling plain,” confused and fighting for things they don’t understand, real suffering is going on and faith is slipping away.