



## Poem Analysis: Dover Beach

### The Poem

#### Dover Beach

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.

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.

—Matthew Arnold

## The Poem Analysis

—by Sara Barkat

Matthew Arnold achieves a lonely tone in the poem “Dover Beach,” through the use of imagery, simile, and personification.

The poem begins with a simple statement: “the sea is calm tonight”. At this early moment this is as yet nothing but a statement, waiting for the rest of the work to give it meaning. The statement bodes of the significance the sea is going to play as a an image in the poem. The first part of the stanza seems to reflect on the sea’s calmness. As yet, there is no emotion or thought, only images, quiet. But! By the fourth line, already, something has changed. An ephemeral contrast to the timeless sea is introduced: “on the French coast the light gleams and is gone” (emphasis mine). Lonely imagery builds: the “cliffs... glimmering and vast”, the “tranquil bay.” In line nine another voice is added to the melody, literally—sound. “Listen!” the line starts, and goes on to add to the still, silent imagery that came before it—a voice, a presence, a roar—and movement, movement of waves which until now have not been described as moving. How are they moving? Out and in, returning ever, a cycle unending. This imagery will appear again and again in the poem. The last two lines of the stanzas start to add the feeling more pointedly, now that the mood has been set: the waves have a “tremulous cadence slow, ” that brings “the eternal note of sadness in.”

In the next stanza, the sound imagery continues, even as the poem reaches out through history—“Sophocles long ago heard [the eternal note of sadness] on the Aegean [sea]” and it brought to his mind human misery. Here we have a comparison between human misery, ebbing and flowing, and the sea, ebbing and flowing. Arnold continues the comparison by adding another note: not only is human misery like the sea, so too is human faith, which “was once, too, at the full, ” and then with a bit of simile continues: “like the folds of a bright girdle.” Perhaps that would count as personification of the earth, because a girdle is something humans wear. But the persona who speaks now hears only its “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” The tide is going out, leaving the “naked shingles” of the world, which literally means the loose pebbles that collect on beaches, but of course also brings to mind a lonely house.

The last stanza goes back to the beginning, to those beautiful calm images, and says, “the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new, ” isn’t any of that. Really, the world “hath neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor help for pain.” The speaker and the listener, perched at the window (an edge-like place), are like the light that

gleams and is gone from the edge of the land (the French coast). The poem ends with its strongest lonely image of “a darkling plain... where ignorant armies clash by night.” The speaker and the listener’s lonely state—which they are trying to fend off with their mutual love—extends to all of humanity, as suggested in this final dark picture.

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