

## MATTHEW ARNOLD'S "DOVER BEACH": ITS MODERN RELEVANCE

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### Abstract

Matthew Arnold's famous poem "Dover Beach" is relevant, and inspiring, more than ever, in the present times. It has an important message, for people in the present day and age. This extraordinary poem is indeed timeless, and although it appears melancholic, it actually inspires one to love, to be happy, peaceful, emotional, sincere, and hopeful. This paper explores in detail the modern relevance of Matthew Arnold's famous philosophical poem "Dover Beach".

"Dover Beach", by Matthew Arnold, in spite of its melancholic inclinations, is a poem of love, empathy, longing for peace, and happiness. Its philosophical overtones and humanitarian concerns, sympathetic understanding, quest for eternal joy, and everlasting peace makes it unique.

Matthew Arnold was born in the year 1822, in Laleham on the Thames, he spent his childhood near the river, which influenced his life in an amazing way, and it inspired him tremendously. "Dover Beach" is a dramatic monologue, which is one of Arnold's most important poems. He was a very religious man, and he lived during the Victorian age, which makes this poem more poignant and inspirational. It was written in the year 1867, when the industrial

revolution changed the whole fabric of the British society, and the poem beautifully portrays, the chaos of the Victorian age, when there was a clash between the modern industrial world, and the crumbling value systems, of the old world, which was rapidly changing, as everything was disintegrating. Like Alfred Lord Tennyson, Arnold was also worried about the descent and decay, and downfall of England. The disillusionment of man, in a rapidly changing world, a shift from the age of faith, to modern industrial, mechanized world, an era of no humanitarian concerns, or altruism or compassion, but only practical science and technology, rapid industrialization and shallow beliefs, and crafty acts of disgracefulness, influenced negatively and filled with despair, the whole atmosphere around the poet. For sensitive people it was a massive tragedy, hitherto unknown and unexpected.

Matthew Arnold's much loved, and powerful poem "Dover Beach" reads as follows:

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 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.

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.

Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" starts with, the poet sitting besides, the English Channel at Dover. The white cliffs are shining bright, reflecting the mesmerizing moonlight. On the other side, of English Channel, the French Coast, and Calais is visible dimly, a beautiful quiet moment is captured by Arnold here, later published in 1867 as 'New Poems'. The poet experiences the mesmerizing, majestic, divine, and never-ending creations of God. He calls to the sea, which is serene, and deep that night. The waves are rising high, the moon is in full vigour. The other end of the sea is clearly visible. There lies the coast of French Calais.

In England the cliffs are standing mighty and tall above, glistening in the moonlight, the beach is filled with a tranquil insouciance, and unperturbed peace. The strait implies the Strait of Dover, between the English Channel and the North Sea. On some days, the lights flickering on French coast are clearly visible. It could also metaphorically mean the fluctuations of faith, that are affecting the hearts of the people of England, and which might lead to the decline of England one day, which does not seem very far off, because of too much materialism, and wrongful means, and wicked ways to fulfill these materialistic desires, that appear to be the result, of rapid industrial advancement and lack of spirituality.

A profound sense of melancholic inclinations is observed throughout the whole poem, and the rich imagery only enhances it. Moonlight reflects an ominous sense of despair. A spiritual disharmony is evident; there is calmness and peace, but only on the surface. Arnold calls on his love, to experience the beautiful nature, which brings serenity to the human soul, heart and mind, and brings a rare co-ordination and serene alignment to the human composition.

The beach drenched with drops of water and covered with the bright moonlight, makes the sand appear white. The noisy sound of the pebbles, caused by the ebb and flow of the sea, bring in a rare contrast, which collides with the beauty of nature. It produces a tragic resonance, these mighty contradictions bring, a deep sadness, a profound grief, a melancholy that pervades the modern man, already struggling with so many modern self-created, and distressing maladies. Matthew Arnold's reference to Sophocles also alludes to the depressing despondency, which pervaded the Aegean Sea, once upon a time. Human destiny seems to be bounded in a harrowing similarity, with the torturous aspects of the sea.

The poet observes that no human being is spared from suffering, their melancholic depression, rises and falls, like the ebb and flow of the sea, the sea reflects the sentiments of the sensitive human beings, and their misery, and existence in a world which is increasingly

becoming consumed with negativity, ignorance, insincerity, hatred, malice, untrustworthy-ness, pretense, doubt, sin, vengeance, lack of generosity, and ill-will. A human being suffers and is precarious due to his desires, and accepts as his destiny, the fate that befalls him because of his wrong-actions.

Rapid industrial advancement and growth, changed the world around Arnold, he did not identify with it, or its new ethos. The sea of faith that protected the world like a girdle, fastened around the waist of a person, now receded, people became increasingly vulnerable, fearful and doubtful of one another, the values rapidly started degenerating, and eroding from the society's value-system. A new order of things was slowly emerging, which was absolutely terrifying and worrisome.

The strong roar of the sea is representative of the faith of individuals, which was now giving way to a gloomy roar; the night wind is symbolic of doubt and disbelief. 'Naked Shingles' refer to the pebbles that are now exposed because the water that covered them has now receded. The final stanza expresses vividly, the intense torment and grief that the poet feels. To him there is no remedy to it but pure love, it is the healing power of love that will save the human beings, from the massive onslaught, of loss of humanity and humanitarian values. It is a consolation that he offers to his beloved and himself.

Arnold says that the world is facing a remarkable loss of faith, values, and sincere people are in a fragile state of intense trauma, the industrial revolution has led to a deterioration of values so rapidly, that no one is able to understand, what is going on, and where and what will it all lead to.

In a gloomy atmosphere like this, love is the only answer, the only rescuer; the world is a delusion, it is deceptive, it gives one nothing, but trauma and disillusionment. There is no real happiness, no peace, no calmness, no joy, no certainty, and no cooperation from anyone. Lovers thus, should be there for each other, to make each other strong, comfortable, joyful, hopeful, as the human beings are intensely protective of those they care about, they bring solace and constancy in each other's lives, otherwise, existence will become increasingly difficult and devoid of happiness and all other beautiful feelings.

Human beings fight with each other because of the doubts, and despair enveloping them. They mistrust each other's intentions, and are at war with one another, on every false alarm. They have lost their human goodness, and are indulged in useless acts of destruction, their actions are furthermore harming not only themselves, but also humanity as a whole.

“Dover Beach” makes a person aware of the terrible state of affairs pervading all over, especially in England. It inspires the readers to understand the serious situation, and be more loving, kind and forgiving towards each other, so as to save humanity, and it’s essential joyfulness, and to retrieve it’s original beauty of the glorious oneness, and goodness of all human beings, and only love, understanding, sincerity, sympathy, compassion, and grace can save it from terrible upheaval and complete destruction.

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