Overview:

Matthew Arnold:
The undefinitive legacy of Mathew Arnold leads many modern critics to question the authority of his status of one of the influential ‘big three’ poets of the 19th century. However, the breadth of his scope and influence is so immersing in proceeding poetry that one is merely looking for ripples in an ocean of water. The 19th century was a revolutionary time for the strong holdings of poetry. The academic style was being challenged by non-institutional radicals, religious conservatism by transcendentalists, and so on. Arnold endowed upon himself the responsibility of being a stabilizing rational force, and in his position as a mediator, served as a progressive and frustrating protagonist to all his contemporaries. His poetry exhibited the complexities of the “modern consciousness”—religious skepticism, societal animosity, and melancholy loneliness for a few. But, his person could not abandon all values of the indoctrinated traditional culture: his roots drew deeper than his intellectualism. He adhered to form and structure in this avocation of classicism, he believed in the culturally constructed institution, but he drew close to the opposing lines of romanticism: the benevolence of nature; the apocalyptic fission of human spiritualism. Arnold did make verbal and technical advancements of the poem, and his thoroughness revealed new depths of feelings: that of isolation, perpetual incoherency, and an incapability “participation in the work of the modern world”. Arnold’s influence in the sweeping transformations of modern culture and literary criticism make him an indispensable figure in 19th century literary history.

- Dover Beach:
Dover Beach has been said to be a great representation of the Victorian Period as a whole, and depicts a tone and mood of society and how they felt at the time. For instance, at around the same time Arnold was in his prime and taking on this poem (1851-1857), London had just underwent a rapid population growth, going from 2 million to 6.5 million inhabitants (Norton 1363). In doing so, this also marked the time in which London became the first country to move towards an industrialized society, making many feel useless and no longer necessary with such technological advancements taking over so quickly (Norton 1886). Many suffered from this fast-paced expansion in the early part of the Victorian era, making it known as the Times of Trouble, taking a large toll on human happiness (Norton 1886-89). This accounted for several writers to take on a melancholy tone in their work, Arnold being known for this, especially in Dover Beach. Dover Beach represents the Victorian era so perfectly, because Arnold doesn't ground himself or have a specific focus. He seems lost and lonely, making no mention of another human being by him. Universal problems that Victorians experienced at the time are made present, such as a loss of faith. With these rapid developments, many were forced or given new beliefs, more scientific views and discoveries, rather than religious ones. While he starts off hopeful, by the poem's end, the last stanza is the reality of the harshness of the world and his discontent with the way things were shifting at this point. For in the Norton Anthology, it says that Victorians, "suffered from an anxious sense of loss, a sense too of being displaced persons in a world made alien by technological changes that had been exploited too quickly for the adaptive powers of the human psyche" (1886). Giving reason behind Arnold's somber tone, as if he is coming to terms with the way things work in the world, feeling depressed and lost, as if everything he had come to know prior, was all a lie, or false reality of the world.
Matthew Arnold
Fun Facts on Arnold

- Born: 24 December 1822
- Died: 15 April 1888
- Hometown: Middlesex, England
- Key facts: Matthew Arnold was born in Laleham, a village near Thames, which is about sixteen miles from London. The son of Dr. Thomas Arnold, he went to Rugby School, which his father became headmaster. He had two brothers: Tom Arnold, literary professor, and William Delafield Arnold, a novelist and colonial administrator. Arnold refused to be serious and irritated his friends with his outlandish jokes. This nature of his reached into his writing style as well, coloring his prose to reflect his outlandish nature. In a letter to his mother, Arnold describes that "My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it. It might be fairly urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn as they have had theirs." (Norton 2093)
- Fun/Interesting facts:
  * Matthew Arnold's niece was Mary Augusta Ward

All outside information pertaining to the biography section on Matthew Arnold, unless otherwise noted, can be found in the works cited section under The Norton Anthology.
“Dover Beach” is an expression of melancholy and the condition of human nature. It is a lyrical poem that explores the inner substance and spiritualism of being. It is modeled in the Romantic style, which embellishes in the sacred representation of nature, and relates to it in human expression. Arnold makes strong allegorical connections with this device. The imagery of the night and moon in the beginning create a tone that is mysterious, somber, and capable of depicting the immense emotions of realism.

The strong sense of internal confliction is repeated throughout the poem, especially in the sensual image of the “grating roar” of the sea. Other examples of sensuality enhance the persona of the poem. The idea of melancholy is depicted in a cold, raw way, “Retreating, to the breath/ Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world”. The particular technical dynamics support the sincere voice of the poem. The short length of the lines and sentences avoid the complexity associated with an introspective theme. For example line 17, “Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery; we”.

The inverted foot of the poem has the same affect. The repeated stressed vowels of spondee and trochee form is used in several lines, giving the tone a estranged quality, for example, “Ah, love, let us be true! To one another! For the world, which seems/ to lie before us like a land of dreams.” Strong devices such as alliteration and end-of-line rhyme are also exemplified in this passage.

The poem finalizes with a concluding passage of “And we are here as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night.” It is the summation of Arnold's expression, the combination of the sincere mood, the melancholic tone, and the conflicted voice. In the essay “Dover Beach and a Tragic Sense of Eternal Recurrence”, as Murray Krieger explains that the main character is constantly in a struggle, saying that “the man of little faith in a world of no faith, who still hopes to maintain the spiritual dignity which the world of no faith now seems to deny him” (6).

Analysis of form:

- Type of poem:
  - Dramatic Monologue
  - Dominant form of Victorian Literature
  - Romantic Lyric
  - Conversational poem

Themes

- Faith
- Different definitions of faith:
  - (1) Belief and/or trust in God.
  - (2) One’s own firm belief in something.
Faith in the Victorian Age:

- The beliefs and values of Victorians at the start of the period were very conflicted the moment society shifted towards a more modern, industrial world (Norton 1885).
- This shift was the result of numerous social and economic problems, because England was the first country to become industrialized, making many ignorant or lost with these new transformations and advances in technology (Norton 1885).
- A loss of faith for many became a phase throughout Victorian society as a whole.
- While some writers adjusted, others reacted differently to the paced faced transformation that England was making (Norton 1886).
- Many writers, like Arnold, saw this period as, "taking a terrible toll on human happiness" and "abandoning traditional rhythms of life and traditional patterns of human relationships" (Norton 1886).

Arnold’s stance and use of faith in the poem:

- He strongly lacks a concrete position on faith, but instead, chooses to focus on the loss or removal of faith in the nineteenth century.
- In Victorian Poetry, Dover Beach was said to have been a "representative of a whole phase of Victorian thought because it refuses to ground itself exactly: it has, intriguingly, neither specific focus on what kind of faith it considers nor on the causes of its decay" (O’Gorman 312).
- This lack of direction refusal to clearly define faith is probably because many Victorians at the time were very conflicted about their beliefs and what to trust with the constant, changing world around them.
- Everything that they knew, or placed a belief in, was being uplifted and exchanged with a faster paced, more technological advanced way of living, leaving many, Arnold included, unsure of what to really think or feel about certain elements.
Different Types/References of Faith in the Poem:

1. Religious
   a. The Sea of Faith
      i. i.e. "Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore /
            Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled" (21-23).
   ii. Deeper, underlying meaning connected to the Victorian period:

   In-text references to loss of faith:
   - "Ah, love, let us be true [] for the world, which seems / To lie
     before us like a land of dreams, [] Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" (29-34).

   Religion
• Religion in the Victorian Age:
  • In the middle of the Victorian era (1848-70) people began to adjust and make changes accordingly to this new way of life.
  • Increasing debate about religious belief surfaced.
  • Victorian age moved away from the social Christian norm, there wasn’t one religious belief anymore, making it harder for Arnold to have a specific focus or set ideal on religion (Norton 1891).
  • Church of England was split up into three divisions:
    • Evangelical (or Low Church)
    • Broad Church
    • High Church
  • This division and change in the way the church ran could largely account for religious faith being lost as well (O’Gorman 312).

• This poem takes some philosophy from the late Romanticism Period, which occurred right before the Victorian Period.
• Visited Dover Beach on his honeymoon (1851) allowing some elements of poetry used in the Romantic Period to be useful to Arnold.
In-text examples/references to romance in the poem:

- “Ah, love, let us be true / To one another! For the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams (29-31).
- “The sea is calm to-night / The tide is full, the moon lies fair” (1-2).

- Scene of Arnold looking out his honeymoon cottage at Dover Beach. Meant to lull the reader in and imagine the beauty of the scenery/Dover beach and take it all in as he did looking out of his cottage.
- “Where the sea meets the moon-blanchèd land” (8).
- Rhythm and tone attempt to lull the reader in, a use of poetry in the Romanticism Period.

Who is his love/lover in the poem?
- Wife

- Addressee of “Dover Beach” has been said to be Frances Lucy Wightman. The two were suspected to have been married two or three weeks prior to the honeymoon on June 10, 1851 (Claussong 281).

- Dover Beach itself? Seems he spends more time on the beauty/his love for the place and the memories while there.
- Comparing his wife to the beauty of Dover Beach and the tranquil setting (Claussong 281).
Arnold is obsessed with water.

Water and the sea are constantly referred to throughout the poem.

Water = symbolism for sadness, misery, tears.

The Sea (of Faith): A catalyst that moves the poem forward

Water/sea the only thing Arnold still finds faith/consistent belief in.

In-text examples where the use of the sea and water are referenced:

- "Where the sea meets the moon-blanchéd land, / Listen! you hear the grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, / Begin, and cease, and then again begin" (8-13).
- "the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery; we / Find also in the sound a thought, / Hearing it by this distant northern sea" (16-20).
- "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled" (21-22).
- "Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world" (25).
Human Isolation/Sadness

Relevance to the Victorian Period as a whole:

- Melancholy became a characteristic of the spirit of the Victorian period (Norton 1896).
- This was in large part of the huge cultural and social shift at the beginning of the era. Many poets and writers at the time did not know what to make of such drastic shifts towards an industrialized world (Norton 1896).
- Writers felt that the leadership in an industrial world was "being paid for at a terrible price in human happiness" because much of what they had known/based their beliefs off of was being taken away from them (Norton 1896).
- In light of these changes and views, they suffered "from an anxious sense of something lost, a sense too of being displaced persons in a world made alien by technological changes that had been exploited too quickly for adaptive powers of the human psyche" (Norton 1896).
- Basically, what that means is, for some, like Arnold, they felt that this shift was too sudden and/or drastic, happening too quickly for them to be able to adjust. With the advances in technology, they felt like their roles and duties were being taken out from underneath them.
- This in large part can account for much of Arnold’s mood and are feeling of sadness throughout Dover Beach, a poem that can be seen as a representation of the Victorian phase.

In-text references of sadness:

- "Of human misery; we / Find also in the sound a thought, / Hearing it by this distinct northern sea" (18-20).
- "But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind, down the vast edges dear / And naked shingles of the world" (24-29).
- "for the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, [] for the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, [] Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (29-34).

All information pertaining to the themes listed above was taken from the Norton Anthology (3) and the Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology (1) and can be found in the works cited section.
The three similes of Dover Beach have unifying themes. All of the comparisons are in reference to land and setting. The similes are also used to describe the way in which something lies. Even the first stanza uses metaphorical language to personify the way the “moon lies fair.” Because Arnold emphasizes similes in regards to nature, he compels readers to ponder the literal and figurative function of nature within his poems.

- “The Sea of Faith/Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore/Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled” (21-23).
  - This simile compares the sea to a girdle. It describes the tide as being full, so the waters surround the shore. It is curious that Arnold intentionally uses a girdle—an intimate undergarment—to represent the tide. It is one of the moments in the poem when the description of the land aludes to romanticism.

- “...for the world, which seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams...” (30-31).
  - Here, Arnold compares the world to a land of dreams. It hints that the world is full of falsities or illusions, and that what seems to be fantastic "hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light." This simile not only serves as a comparison, but a suggestion of insufficiency. The world is like a land of dreams, but fails to actually equal one.

- “And we are here as on a darkling plain /Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight” (35-36)."
  - The last simile of the poem insinuates that the narrator and his love are in a dark or obscure land. Earlier in the poem, the narrator mentions that the world lies before them, suggesting that they are at an observatory location. The "darkling plain" may be metaphorical for a mental state of despair, or it may be a literal description of Dover Beach at night.

- Arnold also frequently uses metaphorical language in Dover Beach, as well as his other poems to compare life to a sea. In his poetry he proposes that these various modes of water actually “enisle” or alienate humanity, and that mankind has a deep desire to gain a connection with the surrounding world.
• "Yes! in the sea of life enisled/With echoing straits between us thrown /Dotting the shoreless watery wild/We mortal millions live alone" ("To Marguerite--Continued" 1-4).
  - This excerpt from "To Marguerite--Continued" is an example of Arnold's use of the sea as a metaphor for the alienation of life. The comparison uses a literal picture of a vast body of water encompassing islands, while also setting up a figurative picture of a life of loneliness.

• "For surely once, they feel, we were /Parts of a single continent" (To Marguerite--Continued" 15-16).
  - The idea of separation is further evidenced by these lines in "To Marguerite--Continued," in which Arnold suggests a longing for connection. Arnold seems to say that humans have an innate desire for companionship, which may stem from a subconscious knowledge of a more communal way of living. The lines may be a reference to Pangaea. Perhaps Arnold views nature as a key reason for the loneliness of life.

• "The Sea is calm to-night" ("Dover Beach" 1).
  - The opening line of Dover Beach references the sea, which may imply that Arnold is describing an instance of life is calm. As the poem proceeds, Arnold includes other descriptions of a "grating roar of pebbles" and the clash of ignorant armies. This may suggest that he is commenting on the facade of a peaceful life. Perhaps Arnold believes that there are many disruptions beneath a calm surface. He may be suggesting that most men and women merely act satisfied with life, and are secretly hiding their fears of alienation.

• "A man becomes aware of his life's flow" ("The Buried Life" 88).
  - Near the end of Arnold's poem, "The Buried Life," he uses this statement to describe a person reaching enlightenment in regards to their life's meaning. Again, Arnold is using the idea of a flow or a movement of water to describe a journey of life. The statement could also be referring to someone finally understanding that life is a moving, dynamic body. Perhaps Arnold believes that the realization that life is like a flowing stream of water is crucial to self-fulfillment, thus accounting for his frequent use of the metaphor.
In his contemplative writings, Arnold places a lot of emphasis on the functionality of the senses, especially sound or hearing. In “The Buried Life,” he compares the alienation of life to being “benumbed” or “stupefied” (“The Buried Life” 24, 70). This implies that the absence of feeling or sensation causes mankind to remain ignorant to the meaning or purpose of life. By utilizing sensory language to stress the importance of speaking and listening, Matthew Arnold suggests that honest communication with others is the purpose of an individual life.

- “Listen! You hear the grating roar/Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling...” (“Dover Beach” 9-10).
- This line is an example of Arnold calling on his companion—his reader—to listen. The use of an exclamatory mark may suggest that Arnold stresses the importance of listening within relationships, as it will contribute to a clearer understanding between partners.

- “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” (“Dover Beach” 15-20).
- This excerpt depicts sound as having an ability to arouse contemplation. A lot of emphasis is placed on the act of hearing. Arnold may be suggesting that by soaking in the expressions of others it is possible to gain enlightenment. This is an example of how Arnold uses the senses, such as listening to a sound, to convey meaning throughout his poetry.

- “When our world-deafened ear is by the tones of a loved voice caressed—a bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast, and a lost pulse of feeling stirs again” (“The Buried Life” 82-85).
- This may be read as saying that mankind is not only deaf to their own feelings and purpose, but also to the verve of the world. However, he also suggests that this emotional barrier can be broken by interaction between two people, specifically two people who love one another.
In “To Marguerite—Continued” Arnold writes that “echoing straits” exist between the alienated islands of mankind (2). When these reflecting sounds are heard they force humans to recognize their disaffection. Perhaps he is describing the echoes as merely the remnants of an original sound, which do not maintain the genuineness of the initial thought.

- Yet still, from time to time, vague and forlorn, from the soul’s subterranean depth upborne as from an infinitely distant land, come airs, and floating echoes, and convey a melancholy into all our day” (“The Buried Life” 72-76).
- This idea reinforces the claim that there is a subconscious knowledge of companionship or community. However, the recognition is depressing, because the echoes come from so far away. This causes the goal of unity to seem unreachable.

All quotations are extracted from Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology (1) and can be found in the works cited section.

Outside Resources and Links

- Jane Eyre (contains Matthew Arnold's quote)
- A Panoramic View of Dover Beach (gives readers an idea of the poem's setting)
- Dover Beach (a book of the same title)
- Audio (reading by Angela Lansbury)
- Criticisms:
  - The Dover Bitch
    - Helps us understand the piece more thoroughly, but through the girl's point of view (Hecht 52).
• Puts poem into more modern lingo that we use today (Hecht 52).
• Brings humor to the darkened view of life that Arnold conveys in the original poem.
• Views poem as giving off sexual connotations.
  "she had in mind /The notion of what his whiskers would feel like /On the back of her neck."
  (9-11)
• "Thinking of all the wine and enormous bed /"
  (14)
• "And I give her a good time."
  (26)
• Goes into even more detail of the "erosion of life."
• "Try to be true to me /And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad. All over, etc., etc." (3-5)
• Describes a more liberated relationship.
Reductio Ad Absurdum

Dover Beach as a Conversation al Poem

A Manual of English Literature, Historical and Critical by Thomas Arnold

A book written by Matthew Arnold's brother Thomas Arnold the Younger.

Collection of Matthew Arnold Poems (including Dover Beach)

Discussion Questions

1. Does Matthew Arnold have a lover in this poem? If so, who?
2. Who is Arnold addressing as his reader in the poem? Is it specifically for his lover? Or someone else?
3. Do you think the rapid expansion and changes made in the Victorian society influenced Arnold?
4. What are his views on Victorian society and the nineteenth century?
5. What is Arnold's mood in this poem? Is he happy with life? Content? Sad?
6. How does “Dover Beach” differ as far as Arnold’s other poems?
7. Why did he choose Dover Beach of all places to construct/base this poem off of?
8. Do you see water as a constant theme in the poem? If so, what does it represent?
Arnold Discusses Jane Eyre:

“Miss Brontë has written a hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted novel... one of the most utterly disagreeable books I've ever read... [because] the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage and therefore that is all she can, in fact, put in her book” (5).

Charlotte Bronte discusses Arnold:

“His manner displeases, from its seeming foppery... the shade of Dr. Arnold seemed to me to frown on his young representative” (Norton 2091).

Musical Adaptations:

Tuli Kupferberg Version:

Samuel Barber Version

Bangles Song of the Same Title

Online Reading of "The Dover Bitch"

Broken macro

All clips and additional resources were used and can be found on youtube.com
All images were taken from Wikimedia Commons.

Works Cited


This website was established Spring 2011 at the University of Iowa for Victorian Literature by Taylor Casey, Shane Evans, Robert Koehler, and Autumn Williams. All analysis and information provided is the work of the people listed above unless otherwise noted.