

Poetry
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Lecture 43
Matthew Arnold

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Matthew Arnold
- Arnold's Views on Poetry
- "Dover Beach"
- Analysis
- Anthony Hecht's "The Dover Bitch" I
- Comparison between the poems



Hello, we are going to discuss Matthew Arnold and his poem "Dover Beach" in this lecture. First, we will see the historical and literary context in which Matthew Arnold was writing his poems and then see briefly his views on poetry in an essay called the study of poetry. Read his poem Dover Beach, analyze it linguistically and rhetorically. And then, we will also refer to another poet Antony Hecht, who has written a poem called "The Dover Bitch" in response to Arnold's own poem Dover Beach. And finally, we will compare these two and end this lecture.

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Historical and Literary Context



- King George IV (1820-1830)
- William IV (1830-1837)
- Queen Victoria (1837-1901)
- Rise of the middle class and the novel
- Rapid advancements in science and technology
- **1851**: the Great Exhibition at Hyde Park
- Decline of faith in religion
- Need for a secular way for guidance to the people
- Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Robert Browning
- The Pre-Raphaelite focus on art for its sake



Let us see the historical and literary context. Three monarchs ruled this British land at this time, King George IV, William IV, and Queen Victoria. During this period, we find the rapid rise of the middle class in society and the novel in literature. We also have rapid advancements in science and technology in terms of transport, communication, medicine, and so many other fields.

The technological developments were showcased in 1851 through this great Exhibition at Hyde Park, it was an engineering marvel for the whole world. As science and technology were growing more powerfully, faith and religion declined. Religion was losing its power also because of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution. At this time, there was a felt need for a secular way of guidance for the people to hold on to life and find some meaning. We have such poets like Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Robert Browning writing during this time. Immediately after this, we have Pre-Raphaelite poets writing for the sake of art.

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)



- Known for both poetry and criticism
- A school inspector to influence reading of poetry in school education as an alternative to religion
- A professor of poetry at Oxford (1857)
- The first to give lectures in English
- A poet to articulate the question of faith and doubt memorably in “Dover Beach” (1867)
- A critic to introduce the touchstone method of criticism
- A social and cultural critic of high seriousness
- A poet who gave a truly modern perspective



To give you a brief introduction to Matthew Arnold, we must remember that, he was well-known for both poetry and criticism. Maybe we can say he inaugurated this cultural criticism; he wrote so much about culture during his time. He was primarily, professionally a school inspector, but he went on to influence reading of poetry in school education as an alternative to religion.

Later on, he was appointed a professor of poetry at Oxford University and he gave lectures. He was the first to give lectures in English, not in Latin or Greek. Arnold was the first professor of poetry to give lectures in English at the university of Oxford. He was a poet who articulated the question of faith and doubt memorably in his famous poem ‘Dover Beach,’ published in 1867.

He was a critic to introduce the ‘touchstone’ method of criticism, to compare the best poems with the recent poems to assess the quality of recent poetry or literature. He was a social and cultural critic with high seriousness. And also, we have to remember that he was one of the early poets to give a truly modern perspective on our society and life.

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Arnold's Views on Poetry



- "The Study of Poetry"
- First appeared as the introduction to T. H. Ward's anthology, *The English Poets* (1880)
- "the strongest part of our religion [*science/ technology*] today is its unconscious poetry."
- "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us"
- Poetry is "a criticism of life."



To discuss the views of Arnold on poetry, we refer to this essay, "The Study of Poetry." It first appeared as an introduction to an anthology of poetry called, 'The English Poets,' edited by T.H. Ward, published in 1880. In this introduction Arnold says, "the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry" because science and technology have taken over the role of religion.

Further, he said, "mankind will discover that we have to turn poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." This kind of consolation, sustenance, therapy, support, psychological mental support we find in poetry at all times; during the Victorian time, now and earlier and even after many years you will find this role of poetry intact. At last, he concluded that poetry is a criticism of life; it reflects life in its full measure. So, we have to read poetry and take lessons from poetry for living as religion was giving lessons in life earlier.

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“Dover Beach”: Context



- **Length:** A poem of 37 lines
- **Structure:** Four verse paragraphs:
1-14, 15-20, 21-28, 29-37
- **Location:** Dover beach, a southeast part of England
- **Speaker:** A lover
- **Listener:** A beloved
- **Occasion:** Honeymoon
- **Question:** How do we live in a meaningless world?
- **Answer:** True love



Now, let us move on to this poem Dover Beach with a brief background. We have totally 37 lines in this poem. Structurally, we find 4 verse paragraphs from line number 1 to 14, then 15 to 20, then 21 to 28, and lastly from 29 to 37. The whole poem takes place at a place called Dover Beach which is a southeast part of England. We have a speaker and a listener, that is the lover and the beloved. We also have a context or an occasion that is the lover and the beloved have their honeymoon.

We have a huge question in this poem. How do we live in a meaningless world when we do not find meaning because religion has lost its power, because science is rapidly growing? How are we to find meaning? how do we live in this world? the answer is also given at the end of the poem, that is true love. True love is a great source of finding meaning in life. Love, loyalty, faith, caring for someone else, having good interpersonal relationship; these are the ways of life which will give meaning to us. We understand all these dimensions but somehow, we are carried away by the progress in science and technology, we have today.

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Dover Beach, 1-5

The sea is calm to-night,
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.

5



Here is the poem, Dover Beach, first section, 1 to 5. We also have the map of England here, that Dover Beach location is easily found between this England and France. We have this Strait of Dover; we can easily locate it. We are given the picture, so that you can understand how Matthew Arnold, the poet is addressing his beloved in the location called Dover Beach, looking at France:

“The sea is calm to night,

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.”

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Dover Beach, 6-14



Come to the window, **sweet** is the night-air! 6
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the ebb meets the moon-blanch'd sand,
Listen! you hear **the grating roar**
Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling, 10
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. 14



Next section,

“Come to the window, **sweet** is the night-air! 6
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the ebb meets a moon-blanch'd sand,
Listen! you hear **the grating roar**
Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling, 10
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring 14
The eternal note of sadness in.”

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Dover Beach, 15-20



Sophocles long ago 15
Heard it on the Ægæan, 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. 20



Next section,

“Sophocles long ago 15
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.” 20

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Dover Beach, 21-28



The sea of **faith** 21
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**, 25
Retreating to the breath
Of the **night-wind**, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world. 28



Next,

“The sea of **faith** 21
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**, 25
Retreating to the breath
Of the **night-wind**, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.” 28

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Dover Beach, 29-37



Ah, **love**, let us be **true**
To one another! for **the world**, which seems 30
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 35
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.



The last one,

“Ah, **love**, let us be **true**
To one another! For **the world**, which seems, 30
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 35
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

We have underlined the last line, ‘where ignorant armies clash by night.’ That is a reference to the meaningless wars people have fought in different periods throughout history.

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Thematic Contrast

- Calm and Restless
- Day and Night
- Light and Dark
- Happiness and Sadness
- Faith and Doubt
- Love and Death
- Lovers and the World
- Certitude and Incertitude
- Pleasure and Pain
- Peace and War
- Knowledge and Ignorance



When we pay attention to the thematic contrast in this poem, we find, calm is contrasted with restless, day with night, light with a dark, happiness with sadness, and the key point that is contrasted is faith and doubt, then love and death. Later on, we have more lovers and the world, certitude and incertitude, pleasure and pain, peace and war, knowledge and ignorance. How are we going to manage the contradictions that we have in life when we do not find meaning in life because we do not have something to hold on to?

The only certitude that we can have is True love, being loyal to each other by loving each other. History does not give meaning to us, science does not give meaning to us, society does not give meaning to us, humanity does not give meaning to us. Because there is so much of ignorance, they clash by night, in darkness, in ignorance.

Matthew Arnold was referring to the kinds of many wars people have fought in darkness, in ignorance and killed their own Brethren. They could not distinguish between enemies from friends because of darkness, because of ignorance. Metaphorically, this is an ignorance of humanity because we do not understand that we are all brothers and sisters.

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Poetic Devices

- **Parallelism and asyndeton:** 1-2
“The sea is calm to-night,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair/ Upon the straits;”
- **Assonance:** tide, lies (2)
- **Personification:** sea bring in sad note (14)
- **Allusion:**
Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægæan (15-16)
- **Metaphor:** the ebb and flow of human misery (17-18)
- **Metaphor:** the sea of faith (21)
- **Simile:** like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd (22)
- **Metaphor:** shingles (28)



Arnold has used a number of poetic devices in this poem. We notice the parallelism and asyndeton in the very first lines; “The sea is calm tonight, the tide is full, the moon lies fair upon the Straits.” Parallel structures subject verb, complement like this we find in all the three phrases. And then, we also notice that, Arnold has not used the conjunction and to connect them, that is where we have this asyndeton. We have assonance in two words, in line number 2, tide and lies.

We also have the personification of sea bringing in sad note to the poet and to the reader. We have this famous allusion to Sophocles. Sophocles is a great dramatist; he wrote about the human misery at that time. Sophocles long ago heard it on the Aegean. Then we have the metaphor, the ebb and flow of human misery. It is a river; our misery is the river that is flowing from the beginning to the end of time.

We also have another metaphor, ‘the sea of faith.’ This river of misery can be easily crossed if we have the sea of faith, but today the ocean or the sea is full of troubles. So, we are not able to have faith. Then we have the simile, ‘like the folds of a bright girdle furled.’ And also, we have this metaphor in ‘shingles.’

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Poetic Devices



- **Simile:** like a land of dreams (31)
- **Tricolon:** *repetition in threes*; (32-34)
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
- **Metaphor:** ignorant armies clashing by night (37)
- **Alliteration and Assonance:** (31)
To lie before us like a land of dreams



We also have more poetic devices. Here we have simile, ‘like a land of dreams.’ Then we have a rhetorical figure called tricolon which is used for the purpose of giving more emphasis:

“So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain”

In threes, we have three lines. So, there is more of emphasis on this so various, so beautiful, so new. Similarly, we also have the emphasis on nor certitude, nor peace, nor help.

We have this famous metaphor at the end of this poem, ‘ignorant armies clashing by night.’ When their ignorant armies, who are unable to distinguish between friends and enemies and they clash by night, they kill each other without knowing what they are doing. We also have the case of alliteration and assonance, ‘to lie before us like a land of dreams.’ ‘L’ is the case of alliteration and ‘I’ is a case of assonance.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** No specific rhyme in the poem but some end rhymes are noted especially the last five lines: light, pain, plain, flight and night
- **Caesura, Enjambment, and End-stopped lines:**
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world. (27-28)
- **Rhythm:** generally iambic
- **Meter:** Variation from 6 syllables to 10 syllables
The sea | is calm | to-night,
The tide | is full, | the moon | lies fair
[variation of spondee]



When we pay attention to rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem, we find that there is no specific rhyme in the poem. But some end rhymes are noted especially, in the last five lines. We have this light, pain, plane, flight, and night. We also have Caesura, Enjambment, and End-stopped lines. Here we have an example,

“Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.”

Drear continues with and naked. We have the caesura after night wind, we have enjambment after drear, and at the end of the world we have full stop. Then the general rhythm that we can find in this is, Iambic and the meter can be seen here through this canción. We have 6 syllables and 10 syllables lines. “The sea is calm to-night, the tide is full, the moon lies-fair.” From these lines we find that there are also variations including one spondee that we can notice here, ‘lies fair.’

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Form

- No fixed form like a sonnet
- A lyric poem
- A speaker and his love
- A listener is present
- Suggestive of dramatic monologue
- Lineation like the ebb and flow of the waves



There is no fixed form like a sonnet in this poem. It is a lyrical poem. There is a speaker and his love, the speaker shares his love for his beloved. The listener is present, response to the poet or the speaker. The whole poem is suggestive of a dramatic monologue because we have a speaker, we have a listener and also, we have an occasion. The lineation of the whole poem is like the ebb and flow of the waves. The flow of human life, perhaps.

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Overall Impression

- A lover and his beloved stay at Dover and watch the moonlit night over the Dover Beach across the Strait of Dover.
- The calm and moonlit night gives happiness but it is short-lived as they listen to the waves closely.
- The sound of waves takes the speaker to the past Aegean sea where the Greek dramatist Sophocles also listened to the same sound of human misery.
- In a world without faith, the speaker suggests that they could be true to each other and live their life, though without much meaning as it is an ignorant world where soldiers do not know which side they are fighting for in darkness.
- The metaphor of the ignorant armies clashing by night points to the faithless and meaningless existence of the human condition.



To give an overall impression of this poem, let us look at the following points. A lover and his beloved stay at Dover and watch the moonlit night over the Dover Beach across the Strait of Dover. The calm and moonlit night gives happiness, but it is short-lived as they listen to

the waves very closely. The sound of waves takes the speaker to the past Aegean Sea, where the Greek dramatist Sophocles also listen to the same sound of human misery.

In a world without faith, the speaker suggest that they could be true to each other and live their life meaningfully, though without much meaning as it is and ignorant world where soldiers do not know which side they are fighting for in darkness. The metaphor of the ignorant armies clashing by night points to the faithless and meaningless existence of the human condition.

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“The Dover Bitch” - I



So there stood **Matthew Arnold and this girl**
With the cliffs of England crumbling away behind them,
And he said to her, "Try to be true to me,
And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
All over, etc., etc." 5
Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read
Sophocles in a fairly good translation
And caught that bitter **allusion to the sea**,
But all the time he was talking she had in mind
The notion of what **his whiskers** would feel like 10



Now, let us see the poem by Anthony Hecht a modern poet. We have only one sample here. It is a longer poem, those of you interested can read the whole poem and compare the whole poem with the Dover Beach.

“So, there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl

with the cliffs of England crumbling away behind them,

And he said to her, “Try to be true to me,

And I will do the same for you, for things are bad

All over, etc., etc.”

5

Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read

Sophocles in a fairly good translation

And caught that bitter allusion to the sea,

But all the time he was talking she had in mind

The notion of what his whiskers would feel like.”

10

Because it is honeymoon time, but he was thinking about literature, that too Greek literature with a Melancholic tone.

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Dover Beach and Bitch



Arnold, “Dover Beach” (1867)

- British, 19th Century
- Married couple
- Once a lifetime visit
- Faith is remembered.
- Unable to enjoy their life happily due to the male speaker recalling Sophocles, generalizing the human condition

Hecht, “Dover Bitch” (1968)

- American, 20th century
- Unknown strangers
- Annual visits
- Faith is forgotten
- Says he enjoys his visits to Dover with his girl and gives the girl a good time plus celebrating it with a bottle of wine



Let us compare “Dover Beach” by Arnold with “Dover Bitch” by Anthony Hecht. Arnold's poem was published in 1867 and Hecht's poem was published in 1968, almost hundred years difference. Arnold was a British poet living in nineteenth century and Hecht was an American poet living in twentieth century. Arnold and his wife they were married, so we have a married couple in Dover Beach but in the case of Hecht's poem we have unknown strangers. In the case of Arnold, it was once a lifetime visit for the purpose of honeymoon. But here, in the case of Hecht, it is kind of annual visit.

Faith is remembered and valued by Arnold in his poem. But in the case of Hecht, faith is not at all remembered, it is ignored or forgotten. In Dover Beach, we find a situation where the couple are unable to enjoy their life happily due to the male speaker, recalling Sophocles

generalizing the human condition. But in Hecht, he says, he enjoys his visits to Dover with his girl and gives the girl a good time plus celebrating it with a bottle of wine.

Both poems are by men and feminist make question the way in which they have represented the human condition. And it is one perspective. We may have other perspectives on the whole situation by women poets differently.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Matthew Arnold
- Arnold's Views on Poetry
- "Dover Beach"
- Analysis
- Anthony Hecht's "The Dover Bitch"
- Comparison between the poems



To summarize, we looked into the historical and literary context in which the Victorian poet Mathew Arnold wrote his poem Dover Beach along with some views of Arnold's on poetry from his essay, The Study of Poetry. We analyze the poem linguistically and rhetorically; compared the poem with Anthony Hecht's poem called "The Dover Bitch" echoing Arnold. And the comparison shows two different kinds of social perceptions, individual perceptions on love, and marriage, society, life, humanity.

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References



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- Kokernot, Walter. 2005. "'Where Ignorant Armies Fight by Night' and the Sikh Rebellion: A Contemporary Source for Matthew Arnold's Night Battle Imagery," *Victorian Poetry*, 43 (1): 99-108.
- Sneyd, Rose. 2018. "Matthew Arnold and Giacomo Leopardi: Modernist Lyric Poetics and Stoic Pessimism in 'Dover Beach,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 56 (4): 455-475.



We have some references; the second reference is very interesting because Kokernot has found some influence of this Sikh Rebellion of 1857 in Arnold's poetry. Arnold was familiar with the war of independence in India. Historians have reported that, British soldiers fought with each other in night and killed each other. Let us know more about our own history through this poem by reading this essay. Thank you.