

DOVER BEACH

First Stanza

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits;

The poem opens with a vivid and romantic description of pure natural loveliness. It is night. The calm and quiet sea is filled with water at the time of high-tide. The moon is shining brightly (fair) upon the narrow English channel (straits). The strait refers to the Strait of Dover between the English Channel and the North sea.

...on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

The speaker is staring at the French coast some twenty miles away on the other side of the channel. He sees the light on the French coast gleaming to disappear soon. The light that 'gleams and is gone' in the literal sense, brings into picture a light that's flickering on the French coast. Metaphorically, however, the light is regarded as the fluctuating faith in God and religion. And now, as the light has gone off, he concentrates on the English shore instead. The famous cliffs (steep rocks on the sea shore) of Dover stand tall and glimmering in the tranquil (calm) bay. The cliffs of England composed of limestone or chalk make it look bright and huge.

The natural scene presents a sense of harmony and peace established by the words calm, full, fair and tranquil.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

The speaker asks his ladylove to come to the window to enjoy the sweet 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.

He now asks her to listen to the continuous and discordant (grating) sound of the pebbles drawn by the waves. The waves are drawing the stones backward to the sea and then again throwing (fling) them back onto high shore (strand) on their return journey. The sound of the waves begins and stops, and again begins. The trembling rhythm continues slowly. The jarring and grating roar of the pebbles and the "tremulous cadence" caused by the ebb and flow of the sea create a striking contrast to the pleasant atmosphere described in the first few lines. It produces a depressing, tragic and undulating appeal. The continuous and endless movements of the waves bring in a deep sense of melancholy which is everlasting - an "eternal note of sadness". The word "only" (line 7) introduces the note of disquiet as the beauty of the moon blanch'd land is offset by the grating roar of the sea with its tremulous cadence which brings in the eternal note of sadness.

The tone of the poem now changes from cheerful to melancholy.

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

Here is an **allusion** to the famous dramatist Sophocles. Sophocles (495 – 405 B.C.) was one of the most celebrated Greek tragedians. His famous plays are *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra* and *Antigone*. His plays are deeply pessimistic and picture the flow of human misery. His presentation of life is marked by irony which has been called Sophoclean irony or tragic irony.

The speaker imagines that Sophocles, the famous Greek dramatist of the 5th century B.C. must have experienced the same melancholic feeling when he stood on the shore, looking at the despondent and monotonous waves of the Aegean Sea. The rushing of the turbid waves on the shore and the withdrawal of the same from it, with the long, melancholic roar, must have reminded Sophocles of the alternate rise and fall (ebb and flow) of human sorrow. The ebb and flow of the sea waves symbolizes the disordered rise and fall of human misery and suffering.

The speaker and his beloved hear the same quivering musical sound produced by the ebb and flow of the northern sea (English Channel) and this sound charges his mind with a feeling of despair and sadness at the thought of human misery, the wild confusion and distress prevailing in human life. The speaker like Sophocles finds himself deeply affected by the tragic aspect of the sea and of human fate.

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.

The sea, earlier, was a symbol of eternal human misery but now a symbol of faith.

Faith once covered the earth like sea water. It was at its fullest as the tide is now. This comparison is further extended through the simile of a girdle which protects and encircles. Faith covered the earth like the folds of a bright girdle folding (furled) well. The comparison suggests that it was not loose, but tightly attached to this world. It was the time when faith made everything easy and solved many problems, made people united and brought meaning to life. Faith, like the sea, girdled the world and sustained human beings.

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.

The speaker regrets that those days are now things of the past. Faith is fading away from the society just like the waves receding from the shore leaving behind bare and naked shingles. Now he only hears the sorrowful roar of the retreating steps of faith with the receding tides. It only leaves behind the chill night wind whistling (breath) over the desolate beach with dull (drear) edges of the cliffs and raw (naked) pebbles (shingles). The poet here creates a fearful picture of the underlying nakedness of the colourful modern world.

Faith in religion that, owing to advancement in science and materialism, was rapidly losing its significance is compared to a sea. A sense of doubt and despair pervaded the Victorian era, leaving man vulnerable and dejected. The spiritual and religious faith that was once unbreakable was shivering now. The sea of faith that enveloped the world just like a girdle is fastened around the waist of an individual was now receding. Science questioned and challenged the religious and spiritual ideas, inducing doubts in people's minds. The dominating and loud roar of religious faith was now retreating. The loud and intense roar of the sea of faith was now replaced by a gloomy and withdrawing roar. The **night** wind here symbolizes disbelief and doubts. Faith had been darkened by science.

'Naked shingles', in the literal sense, refers to the pebbles that are naked because the water has receded. However, it hints to the idea that when faith is lost, there is spiritual crisis in the shape of doubts, confusions and uncertainties.

The poet thus laments over the loss of men's faith in religion. His heart writhes in pain to think that faith which once filled the minds of men and vivified their whole being, has now become a thing of the past. He is appalled to see that the society has fallen a prey to doubt, disbelief, distraction and fear. With the disappearance of faith the society looks like a naked shingled beach.

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;

The final paragraph opens with an expression of intense despair and sorrow pent up in the mind of the speaker. The desolate speaker now again turns to his beloved and urges her to be faithful to each other. The poet is aware of the fact that the world that lies before them, like a deceptive land of dreams, is beautiful and charming, full of newness and variety. However, this seemingly beautiful world has in it no joy, love, light of knowledge or certainty about anything. It is devoid of peace. It has no remedy for any pain or sorrow. Love is thus invoked as the ultimate solace with a sense of a certain consolation. According to the poet, in a world that has been tormented by deception, lies, and gloom, love is the ultimate truth. Thus the speaker asks his beloved that they should be true to each other, because there is nothing else to give meaning to life.

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Now the speaker compares this world to a dark place where we are completely unaware of what we are doing. We are in a confused struggle as if ignorant soldiers are fighting with each other in the darkness. **ALLUSION** – The image of the ignorant armies clashing by night is significantly an echo of Thucydides' description, in Book VII of his History of the Peloponnesian War, of the last disastrous battle between Athenians and Spartans in Sicily, fought at night in darkness and confusion. They could not distinguish between friends and foes and thus did not know whom they were fighting. According to the poet similar is the case with men in this world. They are striving hard without knowing what they are striving for. They are in the dark as to the purpose of their life. The poet thus compares all human strife, struggle and exertion to an aimless, confused battle at night. Without faith human beings are totally confused. They have become ungodly, skeptical and materialistic and are thus in endless misery, despair and hopelessness. This is Matthew Arnold's assessment of the morally corrupted modern world full of vanity. In this world of darkness, confusion and chaos, true love with its comfort of constancy may prove a source of consolation and peace.

'Dover Beach' Themes

- Religious uncertainty (Loss of faith in God and religion)
- The consolation of love (Love as the last solace)

Dramatic Monologue

Dramatic monologue is a type of poem written in the form of a speech of an individual character. The following are the three features of the *dramatic monologue* as it applies to poetry:

1. The single person, who is *not* the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment.

To say that the poem is a **monologue** means that these are the words of one solitary speaker with no dialogue coming from any other characters.

2. This speaker addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence, and what they say and do, only from clues given by the single speaker.
3. The main focus of a dramatic monologue is to reveal to the reader the speaker's temperament and character.

These poems are **dramatic** in the sense that they have a theatrical quality; that is, the poem is meant to be read to an audience. To say that the poem is a **monologue** means that these are the words of one solitary speaker with no dialogue coming from any other characters.

"Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold fits the definition of a dramatic monologue in that the entire poem is expressed by one speaker, who is the mouthpiece of the poet.(point 1)

The speaker is presumably a lover standing at the window and describing the beauty of the seashore to his companion, which we come to know from phrases such as "come to the window" , "Listen!" , "Ah, love" and "let us be true".(point 2)

The action is internal i.e., the development occurs in the speaker's mind. He shares his innermost thoughts and becomes philosophical and contemplative. (Point 3)

Assignment:

What does the speaker see from the cliffs of Dover? What effect does the scene have on him? How can you relate to this poem?