

Dover Beach: Matthew Arnold: Critical Appreciation

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SUMMARY

In Dover Beach Matthew Arnold is describing the slow and solemn rumbling sound made by the sea waves. The sea waves swing backward and forward on the sea shore. The sea waves create monotonous sound all the time. The withdrawing waves roll the pebbles back towards the sea, and the returning waves roll them up the shore. The poet says that this sound suggests the eternal sadness in human life. Here he points out that in ancient times Sophocles heard the same sound of the pebbles on the shore, and it reminded him of the flow of human misery. Now this poet hears the sound of this Dover Beach, and he finds in it the same thought. The poet explains the gradual loss of man's faith and compares faith in religion to a sea that surrounds the world. The poet is reminded of the world which was full of faith and men believed in religion. But now that faith is gradually passing away and men's minds are like pebbles on the shore. The passing of faith causes the minds to be isolated. It is a sad melancholy state. It is a wintry night and the wind is blowing like the breath of night. The night wind brings into the mind a dry feeling of helplessness, because the mind is left stripped and bare in the vast, unknown land.

Critical Appreciation

The lines from 'Dover Beach' give bitter expression of Arnold's loss of faith, his growing pessimism. The world seemed to be strangely unreal. It has variety, beauty and freshness. But it has neither love nor joy nor light nor peace. There is nothing certain in it. Therefore he compares men struggling in the world with armies struggling on a plain at night. There is a sound of confused alarms and struggles, but the soldiers are ignorant of what they are fighting for and why.

The first stanza opens with a calm, bright moonlit sea which reflects the serene and peaceful mood of the poet. He calls upon his companion to share the sweetness and tranquillity of the night air, but he is conscious of 'the grating roar' which disturbs the peace, the calm and the sweet music. The stanza ends on a 'note of eternal sadness'.

In the second stanza the poet effectively uses a metaphor where the flow of human misery is compared to the tides of the sea.

The poem falls into two parts. In the first part, Arnold speaks of the resonances of sea-waves on the pebbly shore. In the second he speaks of armies struggling ignorantly at night. There is perhaps not very clear connection between the earlier and the latter part. Yet the poem reads well because it is held together by a unity of sentiment. The two descriptive analogies are drawn from classical sources, but the unifying sentiment is romantic in its haunting pessimism and lack of faith.

Arnold through 'Dover Beach' describes the effects of industrialization of the 19th century England. Victorian world was changing very rapidly with the growth of science and technology. This poem condemns the loss of faith, religion and the meaning of life resulting from the industrialization and advancement in science and technology.

Arnold describes the difference between the appearance and reality of the Victorian world. It looks new and beautiful like a land of dreams but in reality this world does not really have joy, love, light, peace, certitude or any help for pain. He describes the world as a dark plain which is becoming even darker as the time passes. He compares the people struggling and running in their ambitions to the armies fighting at night, unknown of why and with whom they are fighting.

Although, this poem had shown the loss of faith, religion and love of 19th century it is similar in the context of the 21st century as well. People have lost their faith in God. They are engaged in commerce. They have become materialistic which has decreased their satisfaction in life. They are more isolated and lonely. So, the poet wants to aware all the human being of this disaster created by the sufferings, sorrows and melancholy. The only way out of this disaster according to Arnold is to love and to have a faith in one another and do believe in God and live in reality rather than the land of dreams.

Arnold's skillful use of elaborate similes and lively images has made the message of the poem even more poignant.