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Matthew Arnold: An Analysis of 'Dover Beach'

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Introduction

Matthew Arnold is one of the most important intellectual figures of the Victorian period. He was not only a distinguished poet but also a major literary critic and cultural thinker. His works reflect the intellectual crisis of the nineteenth century, a time when scientific discoveries, industrialization, and social change challenged traditional religious beliefs. Through both his poetry and criticism, Arnold attempted to address the moral and spiritual uncertainty that characterized Victorian society. Arnold's poetry often expresses a sense of melancholy, doubt, and philosophical reflection. Among his most famous poems is *Dover Beach*, first published in 1867. This poem is widely regarded as one of the best representations of Victorian anxiety about the loss of faith. Through vivid imagery and reflective language, Arnold explores the decline of religious certainty and the emotional consequences of living in a world where traditional beliefs are fading.

Matthew Arnold as a Poet and Literary Critic

Matthew Arnold was born in 1822 in England and was educated at Oxford University. He worked as a school inspector for many years, which gave him a broad understanding of social conditions in Victorian Britain. In addition to writing poetry, Arnold became one of the most influential literary critics of the nineteenth century.

Arnold believed that literature should serve a moral and cultural purpose. In his critical works, especially *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), he argued that culture and education were essential for improving society. He famously defined culture as “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” Arnold believed that poetry could replace religion as a source of moral guidance in an increasingly secular society.

As a poet, Arnold differs from other Victorian poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. While Tennyson often expressed hope and perseverance, Arnold’s poetry frequently reflects pessimism, spiritual uncertainty, and intellectual doubt. His works are more contemplative and philosophical, focusing on the emotional consequences of modernity.

Background of the Poem Dover Beach

The poem *Dover Beach* is set on the coast of Dover in England, overlooking the English Channel toward France. The speaker describes the peaceful night scene while standing by the sea with a companion. At first, the natural scenery appears calm and beautiful, but gradually the mood of the poem becomes darker and more reflective. The sea in the poem becomes a powerful symbol of faith and belief. Arnold uses the changing movement of the waves to represent the decline of religious certainty in the modern world. As the poem progresses, the peaceful natural setting transforms into a metaphor for human isolation and spiritual loss.

-Imagery and Atmosphere in the Opening of the Poem

The poem begins with a calm and beautiful description of the sea at night:

“The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits.”

These opening lines create a peaceful and almost romantic atmosphere. The natural scenery appears harmonious and tranquil. The calm sea and shining moon symbolize order and beauty in nature. At this stage, the poem resembles Romantic poetry, which often celebrates nature’s beauty. However, Arnold soon introduces a more serious and reflective tone. The sound of the waves becomes an important element in the poem’s imagery:

“Listen! you hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling.”

The sound of the pebbles being moved by the waves creates a sense of melancholy and repetition. This sound becomes symbolic of the ongoing struggle and sadness of human life.

The “Sea of Faith” Metaphor

One of the most famous passages in *Dover Beach* introduces the central metaphor of the poem: the “Sea of Faith.” Arnold describes a time in the past when religious belief surrounded the world like a protective ocean

“The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.”

In these lines, faith is compared to a sea that once covered and protected the world. Religion provided meaning, certainty, and moral guidance for human life. However, Arnold then describes how this sea is gradually retreating:

“But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.”

This powerful image symbolizes the decline of religious faith in the modern world. The retreating sea represents the loss of spiritual certainty caused by scientific discoveries and intellectual developments of the nineteenth century, particularly those associated with figures such as Charles Darwin.

The Theme of Human Isolation

As the poem progresses, the speaker expresses a deep sense of loneliness and uncertainty. Without the guidance of religious faith, the modern world appears confusing and unstable. Arnold describes the world as lacking clarity, certainty, and peace.

One of the most famous lines in the poem expresses this idea:

“And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight.”

The “darkling plain” represents a world filled with conflict, confusion, and uncertainty. Humanity appears lost, like soldiers fighting blindly in the darkness.

This image captures the intellectual and emotional crisis that many Victorians experienced as traditional beliefs were challenged.

Love as a Source of Meaning

Despite the pessimistic tone of the poem, Arnold offers one possible source of hope: human love. In the final section of the poem, the speaker turns to his companion and asks for mutual faithfulness:

“Ah, love, let us be true

To one another!”

In a world where religious certainty has disappeared, personal relationships become an important source of stability and meaning. Arnold suggests that although society may be filled with confusion and doubt, individuals can still find comfort in loyalty, love, and human connection.

Style and Characteristics of Arnold’s Poetry

The poem demonstrates several important characteristics of Arnold’s poetic style. First, his language is simple and clear, yet deeply symbolic. Rather than using highly ornate language, Arnold relies on powerful metaphors and imagery.

Second, his poetry often combines description with philosophical reflection. The natural landscape in *Dover Beach* is not merely decorative; it becomes a symbol for larger intellectual and emotional ideas.

Third, Arnold’s poetry reflects the Victorian concern with the conflict between faith and doubt. His work expresses the anxiety and uncertainty that resulted from rapid scientific and social change.