

Dover Beach

BY MATTHEW ARNOLD

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.
Come to the window, sweet is the 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.

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.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
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.

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

Prestwick House

Poem of the Week

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Mr. R, my twelfth-grade English teacher, acted amazed that my seventeen-year-old self was swept up in the sentimentality of "Dover Beach." He was a cynic.

Still, despite the criticism, there is something in this poem—the imagery of the sea at high tide, the full moon on the sand—the way the words, when read aloud, mimic the sound they are describing, the emptiness evoked by a line like "the eternal note of sadness."

The power of this poem wasn't in what it meant but how it evoked.

Later, as a teacher myself, I realized that the couple in the poem has just had a fight. The poet fears a separation. They are the ones "swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight." He retreats to the window and expresses the desire for them to stand together against an otherwise-disenchanted world.

Anyone who's experienced an exquisite connectedness with another human being knows the dread of losing it.

Mr. R has gone the way of the retreating tide (though we did have letters and phone calls before he died). "Dover Beach" might not be the most profound piece he taught his students, but forty-two years later, I'm still talking about it.

That's got to mean something.



Matthew Arnold
(1822-1888)

Matthew Arnold is considered to be one of the great English Victorian poets. His poetry is meditative and often focuses on psychological

isolation. He was also a literary and social critic. His essays address issues such as religious faith, morals, education, and literary standards.