

Dover Beach: Introduction

Matthew Arnold, a Victorian writer and pedagogic figure, wrote “Dover Beach”, which is his most famous poem. This poem is a crisis of faith. The speaker thinks that Christianity does not have the same standing anymore. In the view of the speaker, they are unable to withstand the oncoming tide of science. In fact, new research and intellectual inquiry will debunk the special and central place of humankind in the order of things. The speaker of the poem is almost subconsciously aware of this development. The speaker sees it and hears it in the sea that the speaker is looking out upon. The poem is often read as a remarkably prescient precursor to 20th-century crises of faith like Existentialism and Absurdism as it beautifully encapsulates alienation, doubt and melancholy. That is its essence. It is an inquiry into what is to be human, to be alive.

The speaker gazes out at the tranquil sea, that the tide is at full and the moon is shining in the sea. Gazing along the English coast across the channel, I see the French lights fade away, the English cliffs shine bright and looming, and the bay lies pretty and serene. All of a sudden, the speaker speaks to someone else and requests this someone to come see what the speaker is seeing and enjoy the refreshing night breeze. The speaker feels that something is slightly off, and gives a description of the spray where water meets land in a moonlit night. The speaker tells the other person to listen to the pebbles, as the waves move it back and forth, as it goes up the beach and down again. The speaker identifies this slow and repetitious action with some form of everlasting sadness.

All of a sudden, the speaker remembers that ancient Greek playwright Sophocles. So she imagines that Sophocles hears the same sadness in the Aegean Sea that she hears now on the English coast. In the opinion of the speaker, Sophocles assumes that the sad sound of the waves is akin to the general sorrow of humanity which waves on. The speaker then observes another thought which accompanies the sound of the sea.

The speaker explains the next thought that the religious faith was like a sea which was full like the tide. During that period, it surrounded the earth like a belt. The speaker only hears the sad retreat of the sea. As the speaker observes, when the Sea of Faith shrinks, it fades into the air and leaves the world's shoulders bare.

The sudden address of the companion as “love” and the desperate need for the two to act “real” to each other. The world is full of variety, beauty, and novelty. Although it has a

dreamlike quality, it does not bring joy, love and light. The speaker denies that it can also provide certainty, tranquillity, or painlessness. The speaker then says that like a flat dark piece of land that is at the mercy of fighting, we too have a similar situation. The other parties here continue to fight under the cover of night. The speaker concludes the poem on an ominous note with himself and his love and perhaps others standing on a darkling plain. He illustrates images of fighting armies and the related presence of ignorance and confusion. Although the speaker in the poem does not say why the new world would be a cause for stress, Arnold's poem ends before he can clarify it. The metaphorical darkness ahead stems from our uncertainty, our fear of what life means, or does not mean, in changing times.