

# Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold: Summary, Analysis & Short questions and answers

## “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold: About the Poem

English Victorian poet Matthew Arnold’s most famous poem “Dover Beach” is a **dramatic monologue** where the poet expresses his **frustration and hopelessness of the modern chaotic world**. He also expresses his view that this kind of situation where there is “neither joy, nor love, nor light, / nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” has been created by the **decline of ‘faith’**, religious faith to be precise.

The poem begins with a straightforward description of nature and the speaker calling his beloved to see the beautiful sea and to hear the sound of the waves. The **setting** is inside a room, may be a hotel, on the coast of the English Channel near the English town Dover. The speaker and his beloved are looking outside their window at the French coast across the sea.

So, at the beginning it would seem to be a love poem, or even a sonnet, as the first stanza consists of fourteen lines like a sonnet, with a change of tone at the ninth line as it should be the case for a sonnet. But, obviously, the rhyme scheme does not comply.

It is only in the fourteenth line of the poem that the readers are introduced to some serious thoughts with the “eternal note of sadness”. The unpleasant roar of the waves brings a **sense of melancholy** to the speaker’s mind. In the second stanza the speaker is reminded of the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles who also heard the sounds of the Aegean Sea and then wrote tragedies on human misery. In the next stanza, the speaker laments the lack of faith in the modern society. Here he compares faith with the receding tides. In the last stanza of ‘Dover Beach’, the speaker urges his ladylove to “be true to one another” as the new world, that seems to be so beautiful apparently, does not evoke much hope for him.

To talk about the stylistic aspects of the poem, the lines are mostly rhyming. The poem consists of 37 lines and is divided into four unequal stanzas. Use of **enjambment** (continuation of a clause or sentence to the next line of a poem) gives the poem faster pace.

Example: *The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; ...*

It is also rich in the use of **visual and auditory images** while describing the sea and the waves.

Example: *On the French coast the light gleams and is gone;* (visual imagery)  
*... the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,* (visual imagery)  
*you hear the grating roar of pebbles* (auditory imagery)  
*... tremulous cadence slow,* (auditory imagery)

**Metaphor** has been used in the line “*The sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore*“. And there’s a **Simile** in the line “*Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.*”

## Line-by-line Explanation of “*Dover Beach*“

### First Stanza

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

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).

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

Our 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. 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 with their large wavering reflections in the quiet sea.

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,

The speaker asks his mistress to come to the window to enjoy the sweet night-air coming from where the sea meets the moonlit land of France.

Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,

He now asks her to listen to the continuous and irritating (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.

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

The sound of the waves begins and stops, and again begins. The trembling rhythm continues slowly. But now, it brings the eternal note of sadness — the monotonous rhythm of the waves makes the speaker depressed. 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.

The speaker is now reminded that Sophocles also heard the same sound sitting on the shore of the Aegean Sea. That brought to his (Sophocles') mind the picture of human sufferings like muddy water (turbid) going in and out (ebb and flow).

Our speaker has also found a feeling of sadness hearing similar sound beside the northern sea (The [Strait of Dover](#) is between the English Channel and the North Sea.) far away from Sophocles' Aegean Sea.

## 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.

Human Faith, the religious faith and faith in fellow people once covered the earth like sea water. It was at its fullest as the tide is now. 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 problem, made people united and brought meaning to life.

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 past. Faith is fading away from the society just like the wave is from the shore. 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.

## 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 desolate speaker now again turns to his beloved and urges her to be faithful to each other. The dreamy modern world which seems so beautiful with its varieties, is not really a source of joy, love, light, certainty, peace or help for pain for the speaker. This chaotic artificial world doesn't induce much hope for him.

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. This is Matthew Arnold's assessment of the morally corrupted modern world full of vanity.

## **Short questions and answers on "Dover Beach"**

(1) What do you appreciate in the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- We appreciate the clarity of expression, gravity, dignity of thought, proportion and harmony in the poem "Dover Beach".

(2) When was the poem "Dover Beach" published?

Ans:- The poem "Dover Beach" was published in 1867.

(3) What does the poet express in the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- The poet Mathew Arnold expresses pessimism in the poem "Dover Beach".

(4) What classic reference does the poem "Dover Beach" display?

Ans:- The poem "Dover Beach" displays the classic reference of Greek poet Sophocles in the line "Sophocles long ago/Heard it on the Aegean".

(5) What kind of faith does Arnold refer to in the poem "Dover Beach" ?

Ans:- In the poem "Dover Beach" Arnold refers to religious faith.

(6) Is Arnold a poet of nature? What does 'Nature' mean to Arnold?

Ans:- No, Arnold is not a worshipper of nature like Wordsworth. To Arnold 'Nature' is quite indifferent to man. It is man's love for each other that helps.

(7) What does 'The Sea of Faith' symbolize in the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- In the poem "Dover Beach" 'The Sea of Faith' symbolizes 'Religion'.

(8) What is the setting of the first stanza in the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- The setting of the first stanza in the poem "Dover Beach" is the straits of Dover.

(9) What is the meaning behind the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- The Poem "Dover Beach" expresses a crisis of faith, with the speaker acknowledging the diminishing standing of Christianity, which the speaker sees as being unable to withstand the rising tide of scientific discovery.

(10) How many lines are there in the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- There are 37 lines in the poem "Dover Beach"

(11) What is the meaning of the line 'naked shingles of the world' in the poem "Dover Beach"?

Ans:- The meaning of this line is that mere pebbles without the sea-water on and around them look ugly and empty; similarly without faith everything in life loses its beauty and vitality.