

Arnold's "Dover Beach" : A Commentary

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Comments on Form and Structure

"Dover Beach" [\[text\]](#) consists of four stanzas, each containing a variable number of verses. The first stanza has 14 lines, the second 6, the third 8 and the fourth 9. As for the metrical scheme, there is no apparent rhyme scheme, but rather a free handling of the basic iambic pattern. In stanza 3 there is a series of open vowels ("Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" (l. 25). A generally falling syntactical rhythm can be detected and continues into stanza 4. In this last stanza one can find seven lines of iambic pentameter (l.31-37), with the rhyme scheme of abba**cc**ddcc.

According to Ruth Pitman, this poem can be seen as "a series of incomplete sonnets" (quoted in Riede 196), and David G. Riede adds:

The first two sections each consist of 14 lines that suggest but do not achieve strict sonnet form, and except for a short (three foot) opening line, the last section emulates the octave of a sonnet, but closes with a single, climactic line instead of a sestet — as though the final five lines had been eroded. (197)

The thoughts do not appear as obviously structured and organised as in "Calais Sands", which is accentuated by the fact that run-on lines are mixed with end-stopped lines. In the first stanza the rhythm of the poem imitates the "movement of the tide" (l.9-14). [Roy Thomas, *How to read a Poem?* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1961) 102. Hereafter cited as "Thomas."]

Terms of Art

"Dover Beach" is a melancholic poem. Matthew Arnold uses the means of 'pathetic fallacy', when he attributes or rather projects the human feeling of sadness onto an inanimate object like the sea. At the same time he creates a feeling of 'pathos'. The reader can feel sympathy for the suffering lyrical self, who suffers under the existing conditions.

The repetition of "is" in lines 1-4 is used to illustrate the nightly seaside scenery:

The sea is calm tonight, The tide is full, the moon lies fair Upon the straits; on the French coast the light Gleams and is gone; . . . [emphasis mine]

It leads up to an eventual climax with 'the light/ gleams and is gone' . The first two is portray what can be seen. The last 'is' emphasises that the light is not there, that it cannot be seen any longer, but is gone and leaves nothing but darkness behind. In a metaphorical sense of the word, not only the light is gone, but also certainty. The darkness makes it hard to define both one's own and somebody else's position, and one can never be certain that the light will ever return.

A repetition of neither...nor in stanza 4 underlines a series of denials: ". . . neither joy, nor love, nor light/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;" (l. 33-34) [emphasis mine]. All these are basic human values. If none of these do truly exist, this raises the question of what remains at all. With these lines, Arnold draws a very bleak and nihilistic view of the world he is living in.

As in "Calais Sands", he uses a lot of adjectives to enrich the poem's language, such as "tremulous cadence" (l.13) and "eternal note of sadness" (l.14). These help to increase the general melancholic feeling of the poem.

Exclamations are used at various points of the poem with quite opposite effects. In the first stanza, Arnold displays an outwardly beautiful nightly seaside scenery, when the lyrical self calls his love to the

window ("Come . . . !" (l.6)) to share with him the serenity of the evening. First she is asked to pay attention to the visual, then to the aural impression ("Listen!" (l.9)).

In the fourth stanza, however, after he has related his general disillusionment with the world, he pledges for his love to be faithful ('true') to him. ("Ah, love, let us be true/To one another! . . ." (l. 29-30))

A simile in stanza 3 ("like the folds of a bright girdle furled," l. 13)) contrasts with "Vast edges drear/And naked shingles of the world." (l. 27-28). Peter Hühn calls this "Kleidervergleich" and explains:

Es tritt andeutungsweise noch ein weiteres Bild zur Meeresmetapher hinzu, der Kleidervergleich, der die Sinnentleerung als Prozess der Entblössung wiedergibt . . . Eine wichtige Implikation dieses Bildes ist die Vorstellung, dass der Sinn nicht den Dingen selbst innewohnt, sondern ihnen vom Menschen (seinem "Glauben") erst übergezogen wird." [74]

Throughout the poem, the sea is used as an image and a metaphor. At first, it is beautiful to look at in the moonlight (ll.1-8), then it begins to make hostile sounds ("grating roar" (l. 9); "tremulous cadence" (l.13)) that evoke a general feeling of sadness. In the third stanza, the sea is turned into a metaphoric "Sea of Faith" (l.21) — a symbol for a time when religion could still be experienced without the doubts brought about by progress and science (Darwinism). Now, the 'Sea of Faith' and thus the certainty of religion withdraws itself from the human grasp and leaves only darkness behind.

Theme and Subject

The first stanza opens with the description of a nightly scene at the seaside. The lyrical self calls his addressee to the window, to share the visual beauty of the scene. Then he calls her attention to the aural experience, which is somehow less beautiful. The lyrical self projects his own feelings of melancholy on to the sound of "the grating roar /Of pebbles, which the waves draw back, and fling/ At their return, up the high strand" (ll.9-11). This sound causes an emotion of "sadness" (l.14) in him.

The second stanza introduces the Greek author Sophocles' idea of "the turbid ebb and flow of human misery" (ll.17-18). A contrast is formed to the scenery of the previous stanza. Sophocles apparently heard the similar sound at the "Aegean" sea (l. 16) and thus developed his ideas. Arnold then reconnects this idea to the present. Although there is a distance in time and space ("Aegean" — "northern sea" (l. 20)), the general feeling prevails.

In the third stanza, the sea is turned into the "Sea of Faith" (l.21), which is a metaphor for a time (probably the Middle Ages) when religion could still be experienced without the doubt that the modern (Victorian) age brought about through Darwinism, the Industrial revolution, Imperialism, a crisis in religion, etc.) Arnold illustrates this by using an image of clothes ('Kleidervergleich'). When religion was still intact, the world was dressed ("like the folds of a bright girdle furled" (l. 23)). Now that this faith is gone, the world lies there stripped naked and bleak. ("the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world" (ll. 27-28))

The fourth and final stanza begins with a dramatic pledge by the lyrical self. He asks his love to be "true" (l.29), meaning faithful, to him. ("Ah, love, let us be true /To one another!" (ll. 29-30)). For the beautiful scenery that presents itself to them ("for the world, which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams,/ So various, so beautiful, so new" (ll.30-32)) is really not what it seems to be. On the contrary, as he accentuates with a series of denials, this world does not contain any basic human values. These have disappeared, along with the light and religion and left humanity in darkness. "We" (l.35) could just refer to the lyrical self and his love, but it could also be interpreted as the lyrical self addressing humanity. The pleasant scenery turns into a "darkling plain" (l. 35), where only hostile, frightening sounds of fighting armies can be heard:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night." (ll.35-37).

According to Ian Hamilton, these lines refer to a passage in Thukydides, The Battle of Epipolae, where — in a night encounter — the two sides could not distinguish friend from foe" (144-45).

