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The Heart as Island

A Thematic Analysis Of “Dover Beach”

The simplicity of “Dover Beach” is, much like the first stanza, the simplicity of the *first look*: unrevealing and deceptive. Arnold actually offers a complex and occasionally moving look at the way things were and the way things are, from the surface and largely metaphorical level, where we observe the vastness of dynamics in the socio-historical sphere, to the depths of the soul, where the resolute importance of individual love is illustrated.

There is then a good deal of deception in the opening stanza. The night, peaceful and gentle, the becalmed sea and the “fair moon” in the heavens create a superficiality of health, of all being safe and sound. Indeed, all *is* sound in this audible imagery and atmosphere; in this world by night. Soon, with an abrupt increase in volume, the “grating roar” of pebbles, thrown about by the arbitrary forces of the sea, provides the first indication that the idealic is flawed. And yet the “eternal note of sadness,” *inspired* by that “roar,” is given definition only by the auditor, for sound of itself, like black squiggles on a white page, is granted meaning only when the consciousness is combined with culture—in the

most general and uncomplicated sense of anything taught to successive generations, rather than the mores of society or the dainty fingers of fine art—can grant meaning. The “sadness” of the sound is the first clear indication that the external world, stretching out and away from Dover beach, is used metaphorically to describe the inner world of man. The use of metaphor is doubly appropriate, since the inner world stretching in and towards Dover beach, that personal world is here, much like a metaphor, a world of *association*.

If we turn from the sounds to the sights of the first stanza, we encounter first the fib of the fair moon, followed shortly by the fading light of the distant shore.

The exact meaning of that “light” on the French coast is problematical, though it seems, when related to the lack of light in the final stanza, to represent false promise and vanished faith. There can be no doubt, however, that evanescence is its main quality—at least from the vantage point of Dover beach. The light, which “Gleams and is gone” is contrasted on the next line with the cliffs of England, which stand “Glimmering and vast.” There is, in the vastness of the cliffs, a fortress like impression,¹ solid and unalterable, differing greatly from that fleeting French light. It is the very nature of the island and these rocky walls that provides protection, but this nature also causes solitude. The insular nature of the island, protected and closed off, is, of course, used metaphorically to indicate the isolation of the human heart.

¹Perhaps less obvious in the line than in viewing the cliffs in real life.

Here then, in the sounds and the images—and the ideas conjured up by both—of the first stanza, we have the introduction of the several themes of “Dover Beach,” where the inner world of feeling—“The eternal note of sadness”—is shown to be the product of associations between the outer world’s realities and learned knowledge; where faith in the universal God—the light that “Gleams and is gone”—is no more; and where protection—the metaphorical “cliffs of England”—leads inevitably to personal isolation.²

The following three stanzas, in turn, treat these three issues.

In the second stanza, the sad sound is shown as a continuation of one which has existed throughout history, whose nature is made apparent by the cultural background of the auditor. Further, the timelessness of the sea’s “ebb and flow” is shown as a metaphor, relating the similar qualities of “human misery”. We should appreciate the incredible force of that “ebb and flow” too, for it is one beyond our control, and perhaps the smoothing and “smalling” effect the sea has on the pebble beach is similar to the effect of melancholy on the human spirit. There is also a paradoxical feeling of perpetually moving inertness in that sound of sadness, whose *timbre* will change—as the translators of the sound will change—but whose *pitch*—the underlying cause—remains forever the same. If things have been thus since the time of Sophocles, the suggestion is clearly that the “note of sadness” must

²These are not three separate ideas, but connect associatively, for our idea of self, our place and purpose, must necessarily be tied to our idea of the nature of the universe.

always be, as the waves must always brake, even during times of calm, upon the worlds' shores; and that it is mans' consciousness and culture which not only make it so, but make him *know* it is so. The relating of man singular to all the world of man is central to the poem's theme of a singular truth in the plurality of lies; specifically: the truth of heartfelt affections in a world of misconceptions, uncertainties and delusions.

The next stanza likens the actual sea to the sea of faith—though this seems to be less than satisfactory. At high tide, the sea closely caresses the lands of the world. As the tide retreats, the land is left high and dry—so to speak. The low tide must necessarily be then followed by another high tide, yet there is no indication in the poem that the decline of faith might be nothing more than a part of the ebb and flow of history, that its “withdrawing” will be succeeded by an eventual return. Setting this initial inconsistency aside, the metaphor works well, for we see, with the displacement of the sea of faith, the exposure of “naked shingles.” Man is thus revealed, the waves of protective faith cover him no more. He is truly alone, and that solitude is made all the more terrible and all the more ironical by its multiplication in the countless pebble-people. He is alone not only in the world, not only in the universe, but most distressingly, inside himself. The Supernatural has been replaced by the natural: “The sea of faith . . ./Retreating, to the breath of the night wind.”

We also have, in this stanza, an echo of “The eternal note of sadness.” Now, the sea of faith gives a “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” There is, evidently, a connection between the two. The sound of those initial breaking waves, which might once, during a time when the

tide of faith swelled high, have been given a less sardonic meaning, is now mentally translated instead by inherited culture—if we might allow a momentary redundancy for the sake of emphasis— which gives rise to the sense of sadness.

The sea and beach images and metaphors are relinquished in the final stanza, though unity is maintained by another form of repetition, where the manner in which we were misled in the opening stanza is reproduced here, in the closing one: The world, at first seeming to be a land of beautiful dreams, in truth, “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light.”

Even the word world is misleading. Seen from Dover beach, it stretches away from the traveller much like the future: mysterious and promising. Indeed, its rendition here seems to suggest a good deal of future and much less of 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 . . .

It “seems to lie before us,” and appears so “new.”³ This future world seems a land of dreams, away from the sea of eternal human misery. It is perhaps more like a world about to be explored, where the imagination provides full promise, though the well-studied guidebook (of

³This reading is supported by autobiographical and contextual evidence, for “Dover Beach” was written during Arnold’s honeymoon, when thoughts naturally enough tend to lead into an idyllic future.

history and culture) allows for only a continuation of that “eternal note of sadness.” The wishful thinking is a secular faith, a blind faith in the future. This faith though is all delusion. There are only two truths:

One: Human misery is unending, that the sea—present and past—and the land—future—differ little.

Two: The only means of *support* is love.

The universal faith of religion, succeeded momentarily by a delusory faith in the future, finally is replaced by personal truth.

The note of desperation in the voice, which attains the greatest degree of pathos here, certainly suggests that the protection offered by truth—by being true to another pebble-island heart—by no means compensates for the loss of religious faith nor blind faith in the future. Indeed, the act of being true to another leaves the world revealed in its real colours.

How is this combination world/future? Not certain, nor at peace. Without joy.

How is this love? Arnold speaks of no grand love, nor love for our fellow man, for the possibility of that, it seems, has slipped away with the loss of faith and the loss of faith;⁴ but of pure and simple love: the love between one man and one woman.

In actual fact, we are speaking here of yet another form of faith, for being true to another means, essentially, being *faithful*. This kind of faith, this faithfulness, provides not only support, but perhaps the possibility of an alternative reality, enclosed within itself. Or is this

⁴Poetic licence please: I refer to the *two* faiths mentioned above: religious and of the future.

more of that wishful thinking? Is this another empty promise of the imagination? The question is, to what extent is that island with its vast cliffs a fortress? “Ah, love, let us be true,” certainly comes like a fresh sea breeze, pungent with the scent of hope. And yet the melancholy tone of the poem, typified in:

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

together with the pointed last line, seem to lean in the face of that breeze, denying its truth. As well as this, isolating the words: “To one another!” seems to suggest not a joining of hearts, but the separate presence and mutual support of hearts.

The loss of religious faith meant stark “naked” exposure. This, combined with the loss of faith in the future, or, for those who disagree with the world/future reading, with the casting off of delusion, results in the recognition of the essential solitude of singular man, with no external universal binding force, and only the strings of culture, allowing the possibility of mental association, providing any sense of continuity. It is our minds then that grant our place in the stormy scheme of things and the *possibility* of support from faithfulness. Unfortunately it is also our minds that recognise the stormy scheme of things, and so the endless “human misery.”

Works Cited

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