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The Eternal Note of Sadness:  
An Analysis of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"

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It seems a bit ironic that Matthew Arnold, who put timeliness far down on the list of requisites for poetry, should have given us the most timely of poems in “Dover Beach.” First published almost a hundred years ago (1867), this is a poem after the heart of a modern lover of poetry. The teacher who uses “Dover Beach” in his classroom is fortunate: there are no barriers of intricate verse form to be overcome. Attention to mood and thought can be immediate.

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

A stillness that is almost breathless grips the reader or listener from the very first lines. The muted tones of the poem never vary. In the first eight lines the appeal is to the sense of sight: “ . . . the cliffs . . . stand / Glimmering and vast . . . ” After the first eight lines the sense of sound moves in on the reader’s consciousness. The sound is far off, still muted in “tremulous cadence slow.”

The mood for the entire poem is set by the last line of the first stanza, “The eternal note of sadness . . .” Completely consistent, as he urged all poets to be, Arnold brings to our attention the eternal Sophocles who heard the same note of sadness on the Aegean. How skillfully the poet ties his own age with the age of Sophocles in finding in the “sound a thought.” How natural it seems for us to follow.

In the manner of many good poets, Arnold now moves from the specific of Dover Beach and the Aegean Sea to the general of the “sea of faith” that once “Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled” around the world. From now on in the poem the sense of melancholy presses on the reader with an almost deadening pall. The last stanza is man’s unchanging cry of despair.

The world . . .  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . .

Man is left on “a darkling plain” and rounding out the total effect of sound, the nocturnal clash of the ignorant armies comes to his ears. Arnold leaves him there; can we? To do so would be to miss some of the fine points of the poem. The pessimism of Arnold need not be contagious.

The students must now take over the interpretation of “Dover Beach.” They know of (and marvel at) the conflict between science and religion of Arnold’s age; they have followed unerringly the reasoning in INHERIT THE WIND. This poem is timely, as we said in the beginning, and we will move it from its Victorian frame.

What are the ignorant armies who clash by night in our time? First, the opposing ideologies who battle for the mind of man; next, the forces of materialism; then, the trivial battles of age and youth. Not to be disregarded are the selfish political forces which exhaust some of the best minds of our nation. This can become a long list if time permits. It should end with a look at the ignorant armies of race against race which are clashing on the darkling plain.

Can we find a note of hope even in “Dover Beach”? At least twice in this poem, Arnold makes a personal appeal. Earlier than his “Dover Beach” days he speaks of the “eternal objects of Poetry among all nations and at all times.” These objects are human actions which powerfully appeal to great human affections, independent of time. To
paraphrase Arnold further, we find him stating that prolonged mental distress without hope or resistance is morbid and monotonous and offers nothing poetic. Therefore, his line, “Come to the window, sweet is the night air!” acts as an opening between the uncertainty and restlessness of life and the certainty and restfulness of the tide.

In the last stanza we read, “Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!” Here human affection is an absolute in the mirage of the world “which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams,” but which “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” It is not asking too much of students to make their own applications here.

Absorption in thoughts and philosophies of this poem should not blind us to Arnold’s skillful use of words. The flinging of pebbles by the waves recalls the students’ visits to the beach at vacation time; the “Tremulous cadence slow” and the “long withdrawing roar” of the sea remind them of the sounds when they awake in the night in unfamiliar surroundings. Very few poets have achieved a finer imagery than the “naked shingles of the world.”

Especial mention should be made of the poet’s use of the word darkling. This word seems to be the peculiar property of poets, and students are delighted at its recurrence in poems they study: Keats’ “Darkling I listen”; Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush”; Arnold’s “We are here on a darkling plain.”

Matthew Arnold makes an unforgettable impression on the classroom of today. In our devotion to the moderns, we should not overlook him.

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Red Hanrahan’s Song About Ireland

The old brown thorn-trees break in two high over Cummen Strand,
Under a bitter black wind that blows from the left hand;
Our courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies,
But we have hidden in our hearts the flame out of the eyes
Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknarea,
And thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.
Angers that are like noisy clouds have set our hearts abeat;
But we have all bent low and low and kissed the quiet feet
Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

The yellow pool has overflowed high up on Clooth-na-Bare,
For the wet winds are blowing out of the clinging air;
Like heavy flooded waters our bodies and our blood;
But purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood
Is Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS