

Dover Beach



POEM TEXT

1 The sea is calm tonight.
 2 The tide is full, the moon lies fair
 3 Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
 4 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
 5 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 6 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
 7 Only, from the long line of spray
 8 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
 9 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 10 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 11 At their return, up the high strand,
 12 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 13 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 14 The eternal note of sadness in.

 15 Sophocles long ago
 16 Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
 17 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 18 Of human misery; we
 19 Find also in the sound a thought,
 20 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

 21 The Sea of Faith
 22 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 23 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 24 But now I only hear
 25 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 26 Retreating, to the breath
 27 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 28 And naked shingles of the world.

 29 Ah, love, let us be true
 30 To one another! for the world, which seems
 31 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 32 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 33 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 34 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 35 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 36 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 37 Where ignorant armies clash by night.



SUMMARY

The speaker looks out upon a calm sea, and observes the fullness of the tide and the moon reflecting on the water. Looking across the English channel, the speaker sees the lights of the French coast fade away, while the cliffs of the English coast stand tall and bright, and the bay seems calm. Suddenly, the speaker addresses someone else, and implores this person to come and look at what the speaker is looking at, and to enjoy the night's pleasant air. The speaker senses something is not quite right, and describes the spray where the water meets the moonlit land. The speaker instructs the other person to listen to the sound of the pebbles as the waves shift them back and forth, up the beach and down again. The speaker notes this slow repeating action, and identifies it with eternal sadness.

All of a sudden, the speaker thinks about the ancient Greek playwright, Sophocles, and imagines Sophocles hearing the same sadness in the Aegean Sea as the speaker hears now on the English coast. Sophocles, in the mind of the speaker, likens the sad sound of the waves to the general sorrow of humanity, which moves like the waves. The speaker then notices another thought that comes with the sound of the sea.

Explaining this next thought, the speaker describes religious faith as a sea that was once full like the tide. At that time, it reached around the earth like a girdle. Now, though, the speaker just hears that sea's sad retreat. As the Sea of Faith becomes smaller, says the speaker, it disappears into the atmosphere and leaves the edges of the world naked.

The speaker suddenly addresses the companion as "love," and states desperately that the two of them need to treat each other with honesty and authenticity. This is because the world, though it has a dream-like quality of variety, beauty and newness, doesn't actually offer joy, love or clarity. Neither, claims the speaker, can it provide certainty, peace, or relief from pain. The speaker then compares their collective situation to standing on a flat and dark piece of land, which is caught up in the chaos of fighting. Here, battles between unknowing groups continue under the cover of darkness.



THEMES



LOSS OF FAITH AND CERTAINTY

Written during the Victorian era, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" admits to and laments the loss of religious faith that came with advances in various fields at the time: evolutionary biology, geology, archeology, and textual analysis of the Bible, to name a few. The poem senses the turn

of a historical epoch and finds this change echoed in the transitional figure of the beach—the blurry border between land and sea. The poem thus asks the reader to consider what is lost in humankind’s movement away from the (debatable) certainties of the Christian faith.

For the speaker, loss of faith equates to loss of certainty. The Dover beach itself seems to embody this loss, both in its sights and its sounds. At first, the poem offers no clues that its main subject is the loss of faith. Instead, it begins by describing the atmosphere in which the speaker stands. The descriptions of the sea and the sound of the pebbles on the beach are lyrically beautiful at first, but they mask “the eternal note of sadness” that is revealed at the end of stanza 1. This sudden intrusion of sadness hints at the speaker’s sense of loss, which finds fuller expression later in the poem. Through the symbol of the sea, the poem suggests two key ideas: firstly, that major shifts in the fabric of society occur subtly—the beach’s slow, repetitive movements symbolize the gradual but inevitable loss of faith that the speaker senses in this historical moment.

Secondly, mapping the loss of religious faith onto the movement of the waves implies that these kinds of historical changes come in cycles—waves, in other words. Indeed, the speaker imagines the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles hearing the same sadness in the sea that the speaker hears now. That is, the speaker sees an analogy between the irrelevance of the classical Greek Gods in the speaker’s time with the coming irrelevance of the Christian God in the near future. That doesn’t mean that religious faith will return, but more that something will come along to take its place (in this case, the dominance of science).

The speaker’s position on this loss of religious faith becomes clear in the third stanza. Faith once made the world “full” and “bright”—that is, it offered comfort and joy in its certainty. Its loss, then, represents “melancholy.” What’s more, the “Sea of Faith” once touched the shores of the entire world, but is now “withdrawing.” The poem is essentially saying that this loss of faith is *global*, in turn suggesting the vast reach of scientific advancements at the time. The speaker doubles down on the idea that scientific advancement represents a loss rather than a gain in the poem’s final couplet, saying that the new era will herald “confused alarms of struggle and flight,” and “ignorant armies clash[ing] by night.” In other words, the speaker believes that scientific advancement will bring only scientific—not spiritual—certainty and will lead to more doubt and questioning (which is, in fact, an important part of the scientific method of inquiry). Overall, then, the poem expresses a kind of resignation. The speaker fully admits the change that is in process—it is as inevitable as the waves rising and falling—and challenges the reader to consider whether this loss of faith is progress or a wrong turn. “Dover Beach,” then, is a deeply pessimistic poem that questions the dominant values of its day and embodies the sense of grief that some felt at the prospect

of the loss of religion. This questioning still stands up in the 21st century, calling on its readers to examine whether their own lives are spiritually fulfilled.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-14
- Lines 15-28
- Lines 30-37



NATURE AND ALIENATION

Linked to the idea of a loss of faith is a shift in the way people relate to the natural environment. Written shortly after the era of the Romantic poets, who praised nature as an antidote to overly rational thinking, “Dover Beach” questions humankind’s relationship with nature. Instead of finding happiness or the sublime in the natural environment, the speaker finds a deep sense of sorrow (even while admitting to the beach’s beauty). The cold indifference and vast power of the natural world make the speaker feel small and insignificant. The poem is therefore an attempt to capture the complexity of human experience as just one part of the natural world, rather than its center.

Central to the poem is an implicit admission that mankind is merely one part of a larger system—the natural world. The natural scene prompts the speaker to think about timescales that make their own life seem less significant. The speaker looks out on a scene that is, on the one hand, beautiful, but on the other, a powerful reminder of nature’s indifference to humankind. The beach and the sea are by far the most prominent figures in the poem. As products of millions of years of erosion and water movement, they represent scales of time well beyond the expanse of human life, and perhaps beyond the mind’s capacity to comprehend them too.

This sense of deep time alienates the speaker from the natural scene that the speaker is observing. The scene makes the speaker feel small and creates a feeling that nature is almost antagonistic towards the trials of humankind, as demonstrated by the harsh sound of the beach, which “roars” with the “eternal note of sadness” as the pebbles move with the waves. The mention of eternity here specifically links the idea of time to the speaker’s alienation—without God to provide the certainty of eternal afterlife, the timescales evoked by nature seem almost mocking of humankind’s limited place in the world.

The speaker’s thoughts about the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles further emphasizes the tragedy that the speaker believes is occurring. The speaker imagines Sophocles hearing the same loneliness and sorrow in the sea as the speaker does in the poem. For the speaker, human life is fundamentally sad—and Sophocles, as a writer of tragedies, must have heard that same sadness in the sea. On the one hand, then, the poem argues that nature has always had this alienating effect. But on

the other hand, it also seems that the speaker is particularly mindful of the present moment, the moment when the poem was written—the use of present tense throughout demonstrates that the speaker feels that the current moment is an *especially* alienating time.

The natural setting of the poem, then, makes the speaker question everything about human existence, a state that was once made certain by religious faith. There is a paradoxical nature about the beach—it is always shifting in shape, yet it can stay roughly as it is for millions of years, seemingly always in transition *and* always the same. This paradox embodies the way in which people try to make sense of their lives while the world itself offers no certainty. In this way, the poem is a precursor of 20th century [Existentialism](#) and is often considered ahead of its time. Ultimately, “Dover Beach” exposes the underlying melancholy of awe-inspiring natural sites. While the speaker does admit to the scene’s beauty, that beauty doesn’t compensate for the way in which the scene makes the speaker feel small and insignificant.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 7-14
- Lines 15-20
- Lines 24-28



LOVE

With the retreat of religion causing a crisis of spiritual faith, the speaker turns to love as an answer for the loss of God. Perhaps, the poem suggests, love between people can compensate for the loss of the connection between God and mankind. But the poem only argues that love has the *possibility* of creating the certainty that religion once did—it doesn’t make the case that this is inevitable.

It is generally agreed that Arnold wrote “Dover Beach” while on his honeymoon. Whether or not this is definitely true, the speaker is certainly not alone in the poem. The speaker’s interactions with an off-stage (off-page) lover demonstrate the possible restoration of a different kind of faith—in love, rather than in God. The first five lines of the poem give nothing away in terms of whether the speaker has an addressee (beyond the reader). But lines 6 and 8 offer clear instructions to the speaker’s companion to come and share the experience of looking out at Dover beach. Given that the beach scene inspires such melancholy in the speaker, the speaker’s attempt to share the experience is an argument for intimacy and honesty between people. Togetherness, the poem argues, can help in any situation.

Stanzas 2 and 3, however, lack the direct address to the other person, and therefore seem to show the speaker retreating into their own psyche. The melancholy of the sea echoes the loss of

religion, and almost swamps the speaker’s psyche entirely. But out of these depths comes the final stanza, which *is* spoken directly to the speaker’s lover. If the two lovers can be true to one another, suggests the speaker, then that will in part provide solace and certainty in a world that offers neither of these. The poem ends on a literal cliff-hanger, with the two lovers standing *together*—only the second time the poem uses “we”—awaiting what will come. Love, then, may be the only answer to the problems identified by the speaker: loneliness and loss of faith.

But the poem does not end on an optimistic note, casting doubt on the idea that love will save the day. Instead, the speaker anticipates confusion, struggle, and violence. Though love might not be able to defeat these, the speaker presents it as the only potential solution. Love, then, is definitely valued in the poem, and the reader in turn is asked to share in that value. But love shows up in only a few brief moments, leaving its meaning far from certain. The poem can’t say for sure that love will be able to make life meaningful, and perhaps even suggests that it ultimately can’t—but it is presented as the best option, and worth trying.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 6
- Lines 9-14
- Lines 29-37



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

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

The poem begins with a deceptively simple and seemingly innocuous statement—that the sea is calm. The [end-stop](#) in line 1, combined with the simple vocabulary and regular iambic meter, makes the language feel calm too:

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

The use of [anaphora](#) also contributes to this sense of quiet calm. The first three phrases all begin with “the” followed by a noun, setting up a gentle rhythm that mimics the slow movement of the waves.

Everything here suggests regularity—nothing is out of the ordinary. It also conjures a sense of simplistic beauty, bringing the speaker’s vantage point to life. The [consonant](#) sounds, too, are gentle and have a meditative quality. The three “l” sounds in lines 1 and 2—“calm,” “full,” and “lies”—have a sleepiness to

them, also helping to establish the sense of night that is important to the poem. Likewise, the "n" sounds between "tonight," "moon" and "upon" tell nothing of the speaker's internal struggle that is to come.

The reader, then, is lured into a poem that seems to be a description of a beautiful but ultimately uninteresting coastal scene. This is in part reflective of the speaker's initial state of mind, as the speaker looks out and perceives beauty in a natural scene. But this calm beginning is also part of the poem's strategy to evoke a movement from spiritual security to existential worry. The reader is meant to experience the speaker's thought processes in real time, and the first three lines gently draw the reader into this psychological world. Put another way, this opening lures the reader into a false sense of security which will unravel as the poem goes on, a strategy that mirrors the way that the poem chronicles a move away from faith and certainty towards doubt and anxiety.

LINES 3-5

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

The text after the semi-colon in line 3 and up until the end of line 5 develops the speaker's visual perspective and, by extension, the reader's too. These lines make it clear that the speaker is standing at the Cliffs of Dover, looking across the English Channel towards France. Again, the language here seems fairly calm, in keeping with the opening statement. But the speaker also subtly (subconsciously, perhaps) begins to add a hint of worry to their description of the coastal scene.

First, it's important to think about the geographical situation. England is an island country and for a long time ruled much of the world. Its self-containment, set off from the rest of Europe and indeed the rest of the world, lent it a certain self-confidence (this boldness is mirrored in the sound of "England stand"). As this poem is about the *loss* of confidence, there is an unsettling quality to the sight of France across the water. France was often an enemy of England and numerous wars were fought between the two, the last conflict having ended just a few years before Arnold was born. The sight of France itself, then, adds an atmosphere of insecurity. Furthermore, France is technically connected by land all the way to easternmost Russia and southern Asia. It thereby represents something of a gateway to a significant section of the rest of the world, and this thought—of the vast size of the world, and its unknowability—is in the background of the speaker's thoughts.

The light is important here, too. The French coast is initially visible, but its light fades. Of course, it's still there—and this sense of both hidden presence and sudden absence is at play throughout the poem. The fading light is gently suggestive, too, of the diminishing divine light—the light of God and truth—that

the speaker comes to feel is fading away.

Another way in which these lines introduce a subtle note of worry is in the meter. Whereas the first two and half lines were extremely regular, the speaker now switches to a rhythm which *could* still be part of an overall iambic scheme, but which contains many metrical substitutions and certainly doesn't have the secure, regular feel of the poem's opening. The third line, for example, takes the unusual step of using a [spondaic](#) foot in the middle of the line (spondees are more often be found at the beginning of a line):

on the French coast

This upsets the iambic regularity that has come before. Lines 4 and 5 are similarly disrupted, both opening with a stressed syllable. The overall effect introduces a sense of unease into the poem even *before* the speaker has consciously come to recognize or address their own anxiousness. Gently, then, these lines anticipate the speaker's internal confusion and concern that is made explicit later in the poem.

LINES 6-14

*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,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.*

Line 6 marks the first surprise in the poem and a sudden shift in tone. Using [apostrophe](#) to address someone "off-stage," the speaker is suddenly inspired by what they are experiencing—though as yet it isn't clear what emotion is behind this tonal shift. "Come" is an imperative verb, an instruction with the same laid-back, almost dull descriptive language that has come before. At first, the reader might think that there is a positive feeling behind the speaker's call—"sweet" suggests this, along with the enthusiastic urgency of the exclamation mark.

But in just one word, line 7 begins to introduce the speaker's doubtful anxiety. The scene is beautiful, yes, but the word "only" that starts line 7 suggests that something is wrong. These lines jolt the reader's attention in the same way that the speaker's own experience of calm and peace is being disrupted. While lines 1 to 6 presented a sight that was aesthetically pleasing but without any obvious implications, the speaker's closer attention now perceives both movement and sound. The sea is not as calm as it first appeared, but rather, it is undergoing active movement as shown by the "spray"—the foam created by the motion of the waves.

This image introduces the idea of transition. The speaker is looking out on a kind of border zone—the point where the land meets the sea. It isn't easy to define where land becomes sea, and this murkiness of definition is suggestive of the increasing doubt that develops throughout the poem. Transition is an integral concept to the poem, as the speaker later outlines a worry about the transition from a religious society to one more ruled by scientific advancement.

The purpose of the interruption becomes clear in line 9, with the speaker using another imperative: "Listen!" This command marks another type of transition, a sensory switch from sight to sound. Whereas the visual aspect of the sea and the moonlight evoked calmness and stillness, the noise of the waves—their effect on the pebble beach—negates this calm. Here, the language becomes less gentle, with the speaker bringing to life the harsh sound of the shifting stones. The "r" sounds of "grating roar" have a loudness at odds with the poem's quiet beginnings, and the proximity of different vowel sounds creates a dissonant effect. Line 10 is jarring in both its vowels and its consonants, verbally representing the "grating" noise of the beach.

Lines 10, 11 and 12 describe the repetitious movement of the pebbles as they are dragged forward and back by the waves. The pebbles are constantly settling, only to be almost instantly unsettled by the next wave; the pebbles are therefore symbols of uncertainty. The punctuation of these lines emphasizes this sense of restless movement, with the frequency of commas creating an almost nauseating motion. Line 12 starts and ends with the same word—"begin"—to show that the movement of the waves is unceasing, a process without end.

Lines 13 and 14 illuminate the effect of the speaker's sudden unsettling awareness of the beach's sound: the speaker hears a sadness in the sound, with the unceasing nature of the sound bringing to mind eternity as well. With the introduction of this sadness the language of the poem begins to settle once again; the idea of eternity seems to slow the speaker down. The [sibilance](#) of the "s" sounds in "tremulous cadence slow" and "sadness" once again calm the language of the poem, but now the calm is melancholy rather than the content, distance calmness of the opening three lines of the poem. The use of musical language—"cadence" and "note"—further emphasizes that the speaker's experience in these lines is an aural, and not visual, one.

LINES 15-20

*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.*

Line 15 marks another psychological shift in the speaker. The

break from one stanza to the next indicates a development of thought. In this case, the speaker ceases to directly experience the scene at Dover and is instead inspired to think back to ancient Greece. One might argue that the repetitive, seemingly unending motion of the sea has affected the speaker's perception of time, with the sound of the waves working on their psyche almost like a hypnotist. Or that the eternal timelessness of the sea has given the speaker a way to imaginatively connect to the past, and to the people of the past who themselves experienced the ceaseless waves of the sea.

The poem doesn't make clear the precise reasons why the speaker focuses on Sophocles, but there are a number of overlapping possibilities. Sophocles was an ancient Greek playwright, whose works were mostly tragedies. They were full of "human misery"—feuds, murders and injustices—and perhaps this provides the clue to interpreting Sophocles's sudden appearance in the poem. Given that the way the poem unfolds feels like a fairly natural development of thought within the speaker's psyche, Sophocles comes up just after the notion of eternal sadness is presented. Accordingly, it seems fair to presume that it is Sophocles's role as a poet of tragedy that causes the speaker to connect the playwright and the speaker's lived experience of Dover beach. It's also possible that the speaker is thinking of Sophocles's play, [Antigone](#), in which the gods are presented as inflicting ruin on humanity on a cyclical basis that is directly compared to a tide. Perhaps there is a further clue here in the fact that the gods of Sophocles's day are, by the time of the poem's writing in the 19th century setting, defunct. The speaker sees a parallel in the loss of faith in the classical Greek gods with the impending "death of God" in Western Christianity. Finally, Sophocles's life spanned the great Greek triumph against the Persians in the Persian War all the way to the terrible intra-Greek conflict between Athens and Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, which brought to an end Athenian dominance. Sophocles, then, witnessed a world transforming in a variety of ways. In imagining that Sophocles heard the same eternal sadness in the sounds of the waves suggests that the speaker sees a similar transition facing the speaker's own society.

More broadly, the allusion to ancient Greece also emphasizes the speaker's growing belief that "human misery" is an inevitable fact of human life—it was there thousands of years ago and, by implication, will remain in the millennia to come.

The meter in this stanza is also notably unsettled. The iambic regularity of the first three lines of the poem is long gone, replaced by a shifting and restless sense of rhythm that represents the speaker's increasingly fractured mind.

Line 18 brings another shift, which is also something of a surprise for the reader—the sudden inclusion of the first-person plural pronoun, "we." This "we" can be read as referring to the speaker and the speaker's companion, the one addressed in lines 6 and 9 (and in the poem's final stanza). Or perhaps this

"we" is a more universal stand-in representing the speaker's society—or even the entirety of humanity alive at that time.

LINES 21-28

*The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
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.*

Lines 21 to 28 mark another shift in the poem, demonstrated by a stanza break. This shift is probably the most significant of all, providing the crux of the poem and giving the clearest expression of what troubles the speaker so deeply.

As with the prior stanza, this one is a comparison of two different times. Whereas the second stanza weighed the classical period against the speaker's present, this stanza looks at the more recent past that informs the speaker's mind. The speaker is grieving for a loss of faith. The historical context is important here—Victorian-era scientific advances in evolutionary biology, geology and textual analysis of the Bible had shaken the certainty of Christian faith in a literal understanding of the Bible. Whether that faith had ever truly provided the kind of certainty that the speaker implies is up for debate, but there's no doubt that this stanza shows that the speaker views this loss of faith as a crisis.

The speaker, influenced by the coastal setting, uses [metaphor](#) to describe faith as a sea that was once full. That is, there was a time when faith flourished—when people believed in God, and that belief gave them spiritual and existential certainty. The capitalization of "Sea" and "Faith" is a way of honoring this prior importance of religion and showing the central role in society that it once occupied. Likewise, the shortness of line 21 places the "Sea of Faith" in its own space, both reinforcing this importance and suggesting a newfound state of increased isolation. That is, as fewer people believe in God, faith itself becomes more remote.

The speaker then adds another layer of figurative language, applying a [simile](#) to the sea-as-faith metaphor. The "Sea of Faith" was once like a girdle—a type of belt—that encircled the world. A girdle is typically used to hold a garment together and prevent it from falling open. The implication of this simile is that, without religious faith, humankind is naked. That is, the faith that gave it spiritual warmth is gone, leaving it exposed to the elements. This idea of nakedness is picked up in line 28 too, with the words "naked shingles." The "brightness" of the girdle links back to the light at the beginning of the poem, hinting at the dimming light of Christian faith.

Lines 24-28 link the loss of faith to the sound of the waves and the pebbles. Whereas religion once made sense of the world,

the natural elements now offer only a reminder of man's insignificance. The abundance of strong "r" sounds in this section brings sonic life to the idea that faith is letting out a dying "roar." The letter "r" sounds very close to the word itself, and is picked up by "girdle," "hear," "withdrawing," "roar," "retreating," "breath" and "drear." In other words, this [consonance](#) dominates the stanza, signifying both the way the "roar" preoccupies the speaker's mind and the far-reaching implications for humanity that come with the loss of faith.

Line 25 also uses [assonance](#) to color this "roar" as a slow process. The second, third and fifth words of the line all have long drawn-out "o" sounds, bringing the poem almost to a standstill. This suggests that the loss of faith is not something that will happen overnight, but rather over decades or even centuries.

"Retreating" is also an important word in this section, hinting at the military imagery to come in the poem's fraught final lines.

LINES 29-34

*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 fourth and final stanza marks another shift in the speaker's psyche. Having fallen into profound worry about the fate of a world lacking in religious faith, the speaker searches for a way to hold back the tide of modernity (the scientific advances that have cast Christianity into doubt).

The speaker now turns back to the companion addressed in lines 6 and 9, who is now revealed to be not just a companion, but a "love." The recurrence of [apostrophe](#)—again with an exclamation mark—underscores the urgency of the speaker's feeling. That is, the speaker feels that they and their lover really need to commit to being "true to one another," right there and then, because the "Sea of Faith" is irrevocably lost. In this way, love—authentic love—is presented by the speaker as the only possible solution to the loss of faith, perhaps because it goes some way to replacing the love between God and humankind. But the use of "ah," the imperative tone, and the exclamation mark also lend the moment an air of desperation. Indeed, what follows this remark is *not* an explanation of what love *can* provide, but rather a list of things the world can no longer offer. Despite the speaker's embrace of love, doubt and uncertainty still lurk in the speaker's mind.

What follows in lines 30 to 34 is a list, outlining the speaker's fundamental problem. Without faith, the speaker believes, the world becomes an illusion. The natural world offers not wonder or splendor, but only a reminder of human insignificance. As in the first stanza, the speaker is trying to get their companion to see things from their perspective. They survey the world—not

only the physical world that is before them, but the fading spiritual world too. Interestingly, the imagery applied here is "land" rather than "sea." This perhaps illustrates the fraught psyche of the speaker—looking out to sea and talking about land. Regardless, the point the speaker is making is that the "various," "beautiful" and "new" qualities of the world are illusory. Most likely, this is because the speaker feels that without spiritual certainty there is no meaning in the world—without meaning, the world merely reminds mankind of its own insignificance, and negates the experiences of variety, beauty and novelty. The use of [alliterative](#) "l" sounds in line 31 ties these concepts together: "lie...like...land." Reversing these, the land is like a lie—that is, the world is built on dreams, not reality.

The speaker uses [anaphora](#) in line 32 through the repetitions of "so." The effect lends a bittersweet sound to the illusory qualities of the "land of dreams," and perhaps even has a hint of sarcasm or resignation. This anaphoric structure is picked up by lines 33 and 34 as well, only this time the words describe a lack rather than abundance—"nor" instead of "so." And, of course, there are twice as many things that the world does *not* as things that it appears to have (in line 32). To summarize, a faithless world appears to have:

- variety
- beauty
- newness

And in reality, it lacks:

- joy
- love
- light
- certitude
- peace
- relief from pain

These positive facets of the world are what make life most meaningful, but for the speaker they are now gone, and it is the loss of faith that has made them disappear. All of these qualities are associated with the Christian religion as well, and for the speaker they are inseparable from one another. Without God, life loses its meaning.

LINES 35-37

*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

The last three lines mark another interesting shift in the poem, representing a further development in the speaker's psychological state. Some critics have criticized these lines for not occupying the same imagistic and figurative ground as the preceding lines, but the lines can be understood as a reflection

of the speaker's psyche. If lines 32 to 34 represent an acceleration of the speaker's anxiety about the loss of faith, the final lines of the poem represent the residual image that this negative emotion leaves in the speaker's mind.

First, it is important to note the first person plural pronoun, "we." As with the first use of "we" in line 18, it's not clear whether the speaker intends it narrowly, as a reference to the speaker and the speaker's love, or as a more universal term to refer to humanity in general. And, in fact, that lack of clarity is almost certainly purposeful, and allows the "we" to refer to both sets of people, to both two people in love and to all of humanity.

So, this "we" stands on a "darkling plain." That is, they stand on land, with the light fading around them (which can be read as the divine light going out). But crucially, the speaker describes them through a [simile](#); they are "here *as* on a darkling plain." They aren't *actually* on a darkling plain. It is only *as if* they are standing there. This is a disorienting strategy, mixing up the poem's "reality" with its imagery. Throughout the poem, the speaker has stood by a real sea, which has inspired the speaker's thoughts. Now suddenly the speaker imagines an unreal darkling plain, which seems to stand in for the real world. Put another way: the speaker has plunged fully into their own anxieties about the future, and no longer sees the natural world at all.

This "darkling plain" is a chaotic, terrifying place. It is full of "alarms" of "struggle and flight," of warring "ignorant armies." The implication is that the speaker and the speaker's love, or all of humanity, are caught up in a terrible confusion and danger. Implied by the nature of this "darkling plain" is the speaker's position regarding the value of religious faith versus that of the new "religion" of scientific skepticism. For the speaker, the modern era doesn't represent an increase in clarity or a better understanding of the world. Instead, it undoes the certainties of religion—its moral codes, spiritual promises, the way it adds meaning and purpose to existence—and replaces them with confusion, a perpetual state of not-knowing. This idea of humankind's collective knowledge being diminished, not increased, is reinforced in line 37 with the word "ignorant." As with the "alarms" of line 36, there is a frightening anonymity to these "armies." The reader doesn't know who they are or what they fight over. This uncertainty intensifies the idea that the end of the era of faith will usher in an era of conflict—the speaker implies that humankind will lose its way, and fight itself blindly in the darkness of spiritual meaninglessness.

Additionally, the last two lines are the only point in the poem in which there is a rhyming [couplet](#), suggesting the victory of the confusion outlined above. The two rhymes of this couplet chime with "light" from line 33. These three rhyming lines outline the speaker's logic: humankind once had the "light" of God, but it has now taken "flight" and is destined to live in a state of perpetual "night."



SYMBOLS



THE SEA

The sea is a multi-functioning symbol that courses throughout the entire poem. At first, the sea is still and calm, creating a sense of security that the poem eventually undoes. But the speaker begins to observe the sea more closely, and notices that it is not as calm as it first seemed. The detail of their observation increases alongside the speaker's increasingly troubled psyche—the sound of the sea and the way it moves the pebbles becomes unnerving. In this sense, then, the sea is a symbol for the speaker's own inner thoughts.

The sea also functions as a representation of time. In the second stanza, the sea becomes a vehicle through which the speaker is mentally transported to ancient Greece. The body of water that covers the earth has always been there, and the speaker imagines Sophocles, the great Greek tragedian, reading the same symbol of misery in the sea as the speaker does. It's in part a symbol of the past, as well as the way the connections between humans across eras.

A third figurative use of the sea is in the speaker's concept of the "Sea of Faith." In its uniformity and far-reaching connectivity, the speaker reads a similarity to the way that religion once covered the world. The sea, then, is also a representation of the globe itself and religion's place within it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The sea"
- **Line 5:** "the tranquil bay"
- **Line 8:** "the sea"
- **Line 10:** "the waves"
- **Line 16:** "the Ægean"
- **Line 20:** "northern sea"
- **Line 21:** "The Sea of Faith"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) occurs throughout "Dover Beach."

In line 2, the "f" sounds of "full" and "fair" contribute to the opening's relaxed feel, tying in with the calmness of the sea.

In lines 4 and 5, the "gl" sounds tie together conceptually with light, the softness of the sound evoking the way the light is fading.

The "f" sound returns in "Faith," "full," "folds," and "furled" in the third stanza. The use of these many similar sounds suggests the way the "Sea of Faith" used to be "full," creating a sense of abundance and also mimicking the way that—in the speaker's

view—faith used to reach far around the world. The poem withdraws these sounds after the conjunction of "But" in line 24, which moves the discussion on from how things used to be to how the speaker sees them to be now, changing the sound of the language to match.

Alliteration is also found in the final stanza. Line 31 links "l" sounds together across "lie," "like" and "land." The alliteration ties these three words together conceptually, playing on the double meaning of "lie:" the world both lies before the speaker and the speaker's "love" in the spatial sense, but it is also dishonest in its promise of variety, beauty and newness, as stated in the following line.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "full," "fair"
- **Line 4:** "Gleams"
- **Line 5:** "Glimmering"
- **Line 7:** "long line"
- **Line 21:** "Faith"
- **Line 22:** "full"
- **Line 23:** "folds," "furled"
- **Line 31:** "lie," "like," "land"

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) occurs in three key moments in the poem.

In the first two lines, three phrases are constructed with "the" plus a noun. This has a settling effect that contributes to the opening sense of calmness as the speaker looks out over the sea. It also contributes to the steadiness of the rhythm, again making the poem's opening feel reassuring and untroubled.

Anaphora next occurs in line 32, with three uses of "so" in a row. At this point, the speaker is outlining what they see as the illusory nature of a world without faith, what they call "a land of dreams." Each "so" introduces a desirable but false characteristic of the world, things that the speaker thinks cannot be true without God. There is an almost sarcastic quality, each "so" seeming to make each characteristic feel more and more distant from reality.

The third instance of anaphora is not really separate from the previous one, but rather represents an intensification of the speaker's bleak psychological outlook. Lines 33 and 34 contain five uses of "nor," each introducing another thing that a faithless world cannot provide. Nor is a negative word, and the effect of so many in such a short space emphasizes the darkness that the speaker sees in the world. In other words, the speaker sees a world of limited possibility.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The sea"
- **Line 2:** "The tide," "the moon"

- **Line 32:** "So," "so," "so"
- **Line 33:** "nor," "nor"
- **Line 34:** "Nor," "nor," "nor"

APOSTROPHE

There are three instances of [apostrophe](#) in "Dover Beach."

The first is a very surprising moment in line 6, in which the speaker suddenly addresses a companion (who is later revealed to be the speaker's lover). It is surprising because all the language up until this moment has been descriptive, fairly neutral, and perhaps even a little mundane. This apostrophe reflects a sudden change in the speaker's mentality, which occurs when the speaker notices the noise of the beach and that the sea is therefore not as calm as the speaker first thought. The speaker then calls out to a companion, wanting this other person to share in the experience, which links with the way the speaker later calls for the two of them to be true to one another in the final stanza.

The second apostrophe is also in the first stanza, appearing in line 9. This is an imperative instruction: "Listen!" It shows the speaker's newfound focus on the sound of the beach and how that seems to represent eternal sadness. It also focuses the reader's attention on the sense of hearing, not just in imagining the sound of the beach but also in paying close attention to the sound of the poem—which in turn brings linguistic life to the sound of the waves and pebbles.

The third apostrophe appears in lines 29 and 30. Having delved into the anxiety brought about by the beach scene—that is, the fallout from the loss of religious faith—the speaker reaches out to the companion again, revealing that the two are lovers and imploring them to be "true" to each other. This shows that the speaker is hoping that love can be an antidote to the loss of faith, with the connection between people standing in for the lost love between mankind and God.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Come to the window"
- **Line 9:** "Listen! you hear the grating roar"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is first used at the beginning of the poem: across the first three lines, the vowels gently swing from "o" to "i" sounds, providing a rocking effect that mimics the flow of tides in the sea. It's doubly clever, because the two main nouns in this section are indeed the sea and the moon—and it is the moon that causes the earth's tides in the first place. "Tonight," "tide" and "lies" chime together, as do "moon," "upon" and "on." These sounds continue with the discussion of the beach scene up until line 9, but sit with a further variety of sounds as the speaker's

perspective begins to introduce a hint of doubt ("cliffs," "glimmering," "tranquil," "window," "night" with the "i" sounds; "gone," "come," "only," "long" and "moon" with the "o"). Indeed, these sounds continue throughout the poem here and there, creating a sense of tidal flow throughout—though this comes to be significantly disrupted from line 9 onwards.

The next key example of assonance is in line 25. Here, the vowel sounds are long and drawn-out, emphasizing the longness of the sea of faith's "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." The pace of the poem is slowed almost to a stop by these sounds, giving the reader an experience of retreat and withdrawal which mirrors the loss of faith that worries the speaker.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

ALLUSION

The poem makes one [allusion](#), which comes in the second stanza. Having just heard the "eternal note of sadness" in the sound of the sea, the speaker is suddenly put in mind of Sophocles, one of the main tragic playwrights of the ancient Greek era. The speaker feels an affinity with Sophocles, who he feels would have heard the same "note" in the Aegean Sea (which separates Greece from Turkey). It's not explicitly clear why the speaker gravitates towards Sophocles specifically. Perhaps it's because Sophocles's plays—works like [Antigone](#), [Electra](#), and [Oedipus Rex](#)—are full of human suffering, and the speaker feels that, in this sense, the world has changed very little in the past millennia. In addition to this connection, the allusion to Sophocles might tie in with the specific worry that the speaker has about the mid-19th century world: the loss of faith. Sophocles's time had a completely different faith system, with a host of gods whose previous importance is only matched by their later irrelevance. In that way, the speaker, who is educated enough to know about Greek tragedy, feels there is an analogy between the metaphorical death of those gods and the death of the Christian god.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Ægean"
- **Lines 16-18:** " , and it brought / Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery;"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) occurs throughout the poem, first by contributing to the temporary sense of calm conjured by the poem's beginning. Here, it works with assonance to create a sense of gentle security. This is primarily through "l" sounds, which are present in almost every line of the first stanza, e.g. "calm," "full," "lies," "gleams," "cliffs," "tranquil." This is a soft, almost seductive sound, and its repetitions help lure the reader into the poem

and the speaker's state of mind.

But the poem shifts dramatically in line 8, with the sudden emphasis on "r" sounds found in "grating" and "roar," and continuing with "draw," "return," "tremulous" and "eternal" as the stanza unfolds. The effect of the "r" sound is powerful, because taken in isolation the letter "r" sounds very close to the word "roar." Accordingly, the roar of the moving pebbles can be heard throughout the whole stanza, shifting position just as the pebbles do with each wave.

This same sound recurs in the third stanza, though now the speaker provides an idea as to what is making the sound: the death of faith as it retreats from its prominent place in the world. Here, the "r" sound intensifies: "round," "earth," "shore," "bright," "girdle," "furled," "withdrawing," "roar," "drear." All of these contain that same roar that the speaker has linked to the "r" sound, and evoke a kind of desperation, as though faith is a beast screaming out its death throes.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

CAESURA

There are [caesurae](#) throughout "Dover Beach," and at their most basic level they allow for the unpredictability of form in terms of phrase and line length (which was quite unusual at the time of the poem's writing).

In line 2, the caesura provides a gentle pause midway through the line that suggests the "fullness" of the tide and gives the line a gentle rocking motion.

The caesurae in lines 3 and 4 allow for the development of thought, which occurs in stages that aren't wedded to starting a new line. Line 3's caesura introduces the observation of the French coast; line 4's brings in the English coast.

The caesura in line 7 comes early, and disrupts the meditative quality of what's come before (this disruption began in line 6). This disruption is important, because it begins the descent into worry and anxiety that characterizes the rest of the poem.

The caesurae in lines 10, 11, 12 and 13 also contribute to this sudden sense of doubt that is brought on by the sound of pebbles being moved by the waves. They make the lines feel rhythmically erratic, which reflects both the random movement of the pebbles under the strength of the waves *and* the increasingly fraught psychological state of the speaker.

Stanza 2 returns to the thought-development use of caesura. Line 16 introduces the idea that Sophocles heard "human misery" in the sea, and line 18 brings in the speaker's development of this misery—his analysis of what's causing it for his generation.

In line 25, the caesura helps slow the line down, which emphasizes the "longness" of the Sea of Faith's "withdrawing roar."

Line 30's caesura is also important, serving a different function from what's come before. Here, the speaker implores their lover that they be true to one another, essentially as a way of putting up a defense against the loss of faith. The exclamation mark and the brief pause that follows lend this statement forcefulness, and suggest an element of desperation on the speaker's part—the speaker sees love as the only possible, but not certain, way of maintaining meaning in a faithless world.

Lines 32 and 33 use caesura (with [anaphora](#)) to offer a list of all the things that the world "seems" to be, but, without God, isn't. These caesurae add a pained insistence to the lines, as a host of positive traits about the world are denied to the speaker, lover, and the reader in quick succession.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- Line 2: ^(//) ,
- Line 3: ^(//) ;
- Line 4: ^(//) ,
- Line 5: ^(//) ,
- Line 6: ^(//) ,
- Line 7: ^(//) ,
- Line 9: ^(//) !
- Line 10: ^(//) ,
- Line 11: ^(//) ,
- Line 12: ^(//) ,
- Line 13: ^(//) ,
- Line 16: ^(//) ,
- Line 18: ^(//) ,
- Line 22: ^(//) ,
- Line 25: ^(//) ,
- Line 26: ^(//) ,
- Line 27: ^(//) ,
- Line 29: ^(//) ,
- Line 30: ^(//) ,
- Line 32: ^(//) ,
- Line 33: ^(//) ,
- Line 34: ^(//) ,

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) is integral to the form of the poem. "Dover Beach" is a kind of real-time expression of psychological development, as the speaker moves through different stages of thought brought on by the sensory experience of the beach scene. And just as thoughts do not always develop in a simple logical order, neither does the speaker's mental journey from the beauty of the beach, to the sadness of the waves, to Sophocles, to the Sea of Faith and to fear of the future. There is a sense that the lines and stanzas can barely contain the psyche of the speaker, and enjambment forms a key part of this effect.

Enjambment occurs between lines 2 and 3, 3 and 4, 7 and 8, 9 and 10, 13 and 14, 15 and 16, 16 and 17, 17 and 18, 18 and 19, 21 and 22, 22 and 23, 24 and 25, 26 and 27, 27 and 28, 29 and

30, 30 and 31 and, finally, 35 and 36. In other words, it occurs a lot! Principally, this device allows the poem to wildly vary the length of phrases, without the pressure of having to stick to a rigorous form. This creates a sense of flow, which is also unsettling for the reader, who expects a pattern to emerge but is ultimately disappointed. The two enjambments at the beginning of the poem, for example, do create a sense of flow, but it is interrupted almost immediately by [caesurae](#).

The enjambment between lines 13 and 14 sets up a momentary tension, with line 13 ending on "bring" and requiring completion from the following line. This creates a sense of real-time drama, with the reader at this point not being initially told much about the "sadness" that the sea evokes. A similar effect is achieved in lines 24-25.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "fair"
- **Line 3:** "Upon," "light"
- **Line 4:** "Gleams"
- **Line 7:** "spray"
- **Line 8:** "Where"
- **Line 9:** "roar"
- **Line 10:** "Of"
- **Line 13:** "bring"
- **Line 14:** "The"
- **Line 15:** "ago"
- **Line 16:** "Heard," "brought"
- **Line 17:** "Into," "flow"
- **Line 18:** "Of," "we"
- **Line 19:** "Find"
- **Line 21:** "Faith"
- **Line 22:** "Was," "shore"
- **Line 23:** "Lay"
- **Line 24:** "hear"
- **Line 25:** "Its"
- **Line 26:** "breath"
- **Line 27:** "Of," "drear"
- **Line 28:** "And"
- **Line 29:** "true"
- **Line 30:** "To," "seems"
- **Line 31:** "To"
- **Line 35:** "plain"
- **Line 36:** "Swept"

METAPHOR

[Metaphor](#) occurs most prominently in the third stanza of "Dover Beach." In this stanza, the speaker describes religion as a sea—indeed, as a sea named in honor of religion: "Sea of Faith." This Sea of Faith, according to the speaker, once spread fully around the world, but now is "withdrawing" or "retreating." The metaphor, then, allows the speaker to do a number of things. First, it allows the speaker to suggest that faith links all

corners of the world, the same way that the waters of the Earth can be seen as connecting all of its distant lands. Second, by describing the sea as "retreating" it shows the way that the loss of faith (which the poem connects to the rise of science) as resulting in a *loss* of connection. In other words, faith used to make the earth spiritually whole—and the speaker fears that the loss of faith will have a corrupting effect on the people who live on the planet.

The metaphor is slightly problematic in that Arnold was specifically concerned about the loss of Christian faith—and the metaphor does little to imaginatively include the diversity of faiths across the world. Alternatively, it could be argued that the speaker sees the loss of faith in the Western world as a signal of a more global shift to come.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-28:** "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled. / 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."

SIMILE

[Simile](#) is employed twice in "Dover Beach." It first occurs in line 23, in which the Sea of Faith—itsself a [metaphor](#)—is said to have once "lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled." It's a little bit disorientating to have the metaphor of the sea of faith then characterised as being like a garment—that's two slightly contradictory conceptual leaps that the reader has to make in quick succession. Regardless, the purpose of this simile is to emphasize the way in which faith once covered the globe. The specific image of a girdle's "folds" is linked to the waves of the sea, which seen from the beach (or from cliffs) might look like folds of cloth. The girdle, too, has religious connotations, and is an item of clothing often worn in Christian religions.

The second use of simile occurs in line 35, set up by one small word: "as." The speaker here is comparing the state of modern life — of a world where faith has become less powerful, less certain — to standing on a dark "plain" and surrounded by shouts of struggle and the warring of "ignorant armies." The simile here allows for a conceptual departure to take place, as the poem shifts from its sea- and shore-based imagery to something more far-reaching and psychologically troubled. The simile, then, focuses the reader's attention on the setting of the poem—which is not just the beach, but also both the speaker's anxious mind and the entire experience of modern life as it is affected by the changes of the 19th century.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled."
- **Line 35:** "And we are here as on a darkling plain"

END-STOPPED LINE

[End-stops](#) occur in lines 1, 5, 14, 20, 23, 28, and 34.

The general function of the end-stops is to allow a pause before the next stage of the poem's development. For example, the full stop at the end of line 5 creates a space for the sudden shift in line 6, when the speaker addresses a companion (who up until that moment has gone unmentioned).

The end stop in line 1 emphasizes the apparent "calm" of the sea. It's almost as if the speaker's thoughts could end there, and there would be no poem—but then the speaker starts to look closer at the scene, and other thoughts arrive.

Line 14's end-stop, combined with the stanza break, allows the "note of sadness" to linger for longer, which emphasizes its "eternal" nature. Again, it also creates the space for the next stage in the speaker's thought process to develop, as the speaker begins to think about Sophocles at the beginning of the next stanza.

The end-stop in line 23 creates a disruption between the imagined past, when, according to the speaker, the sea of faith was "full." After the end-stop, the speaker's attention switches from the past to the present/future.

Overall, then, the end-stops allow for developments in the speaker's thoughts. Sometimes these thoughts jump erratically, and the end-stops are part of the way the poem makes the changes convincing to the reader.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tonight."
- **Line 5:** "bay."
- **Line 14:** "in."
- **Line 20:** "sea."
- **Line 23:** "furled."
- **Line 28:** "world."
- **Line 34:** "pain;"

cadence (Line 13) - Cadence has two meanings. It can either refer to the rhythm and pitch of a voice, or to a particular way of ending a section of music (through a specific chord change, for example).

Sophocles (Line 15) - Sophocles was one of the three foremost ancient Greek tragedians, who wrote plays such as [Antigone](#) and [Oedipus Rex](#).

Aegean (Line 16) - The Aegean Sea is a large body of water between Greece and Turkey.

turbid (Line 17) - Turbid is an adjective to describe something that is murky or muddy, but it can also mean "confusing."

ebb (Line 17) - Ebb is the movement of the tide out to sea, with the water moving away from the land.

girdle (Line 23) - A girdle is a type of belt. In some religious outfits, it is made out of cloth and holds a garment in place.

furled (Line 23) - To be furled is to be rolled or folded up.

drear (Line 27) - This is an old-fashioned way of saying "dreary." It means that something is depressingly boring or repetitive.

shingles (Line 28) - Shingles refers here to a large number of pebbles.

certitude (Line 34) - This is just another way of saying "certainty."

Darkling (Line 35) - Darkling means either "in the dark" or describes a transition into darkness (synonymous with "darkening").



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Dover Beach" has been noted by many critics for its unusual form. The poem is highly irregular and does not fit with any specific poetic form, and as such is considered an early precursor of [free verse](#) and other 20th century experimentation with form.

The poem consists of four stanzas, each of different length. The first stanza is 14 lines, the second is 6, the third 8, and the fourth 9. The poem shows a speaker trying to grapple with a subject that they find difficult and not a little unnerving: humanity's loss of faith (in particular, the fading of Christianity). Accordingly, there is an instability to the speaker's psyche which expresses itself in numerous ways, including the poem's form. While much of Victorian poetry embodied principles of uniformity and strict obedience to form, this poem's departure from that rigidity signals a break with the past — which makes sense, given that the poem's subject is also focused on a rupture from the past brought on by new scientific learning that threatens and diminishes religious faith. As shown by the last stanza, in which the speaker predicts a new era of



VOCABULARY

straits (Line 3) - A strait is a naturally formed narrow waterway, in this case a reference to the English Channel that runs between England and France.

moon-blanch (Line 8) - To be blanch is to turn white or pale through loss of color, in this case by the light of the moon.

strand (Line 11) - Strand is another word for shore.

tremulous (Line 13) - Tremulous is an adjective that describes something that shaking slightly, perhaps nervously.

"confused alarms of struggle and flight" and "ignorant armies," the speaker senses that the times stand on a historical precipice, a transition point away from the certainties of faith to the skeptical rigor of science. The resistance of standard form embodies the speaker's fraught mental state, which is brought on by worry about what will happen to their society when it does away with the moral and spiritual reassurances of religion.

The use of stanza breaks follows the most significant developments in the speaker's mental journey, with each stanza focusing on a coherent set of thoughts:

- Stanza 1 deals with the speaker's initial experience of the beach, which shifts from calmness to disquiet brought on by the sound of the moving pebbles.
- Stanza 2 introduces Sophocles, as the speaker imagines ancient Greece and believes that the tragic playwright must also have experienced the same sort of pain and doubt that the speaker is experiencing now.
- Stanza 3 develops the specific reason why the speaker hears such sadness in the sound of the sea: the loss of faith.
- And stanza 4, finally, tries — without entirely succeeding — to build a defense against the future faithless world by professing the value of authentic love.

METER

The meter in "Dover Beach" is highly unpredictable; any time a pattern seems to be establishing itself, it is soon disrupted. This unpredictability plays out both in the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables and in the lengths of the lines. For example, line 10 features iambic [pentameter](#) (five feet) whereas line 21 is a line of iambic [dimeter](#) (two feet). This restless variation is quite unusual for the Victorian time period in which the poem was written, and it contributes to the reader's real-time experience of the speaker's psyche, which is disturbed, worried, and — crucially — unpredictable.

At first, the poem appears to be establishing an iambic rhythm, even if the line lengths vary from the outset:

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

These lines are highly regular, with the reliable shift from unstressed to stressed creating a gentle rocking motion in keeping with the discussion of the sea and its tides. But as line 3 continues, a kind of metrical battle begins, in which the iambic pattern tries to re-establish itself but is constantly disrupted:

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

"On the French coast" is a [pyrrhic](#) foot followed by a [spondee](#), two unstressed syllables before two stresses. This is unusual in itself, but that it occurs in the middle of the line is doubly daring and lays down a metrical challenge to the iambic opening lines. This signifies the conflict going on in the speaker's psyche, between the outwardly beautiful scene and the symbolically troubling world it seems to represent to the speaker.

The final stanza embodies this tussle between iambs and irregularity too. Lines 33 and 34 are straightforwardly iambic, but lines 36 and 37 defeat this stability. Considering that these two lines introduce the idea of an uncertain future dominated by "confused alarms of struggle and flight" and "ignorant armies," metrical confusion plays a relevant role. The unreliability of the metrical pattern embodies the "confusion," "struggle" and "clash" that these lines discuss:

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The subject of the poem is about a rupture or breakage, as a world founded on faith is changed by the rise of science. That the meter of the poem itself seems ruptured underscores and amplifies the poem's subject.

RHYME SCHEME

Like other aspects of its form, the rhyme scheme in "Dover Beach" is erratic and unpredictable. It can't quite be said that there *isn't* a rhyme scheme—lines certainly do rhyme strongly—but they don't settle into an overall pattern.

For instance, technically speaking, the rhymes for the first stanza go as follows:

1. A
2. B
3. A
4. C
5. D
6. B
7. D
8. C
9. E
10. F
11. C
12. G
13. F
14. G

Every line rhymes with some other line in the stanza, but there doesn't seem to be an actual pattern of which line matches with which other line. The "rhyme scheme" of the poem, then, creates a conflict, between order and disorder, pattern and chaos. This confusion represents the speaker's psyche, which shows itself in tones that are sometimes measured (e.g. the

opening of the first stanza) and at other times panicked (e.g. the opening of the final stanza). The speaker *wants* the world to make sense—and feels that religion once fulfilled this role. Now, however, with faith in retreat before the learnings of science, the speaker fears the future and its potential chaos. Reflecting the speaker's concerns, the use of rhyme occupies a similar transitional space—the rhymes are there, playing on the ear's recognition of pattern, but they don't fall into order.

One particular moment worth mentioning is in the final two lines of the poem. Here, the reader encounters the poem's only true couplet, as the speaker rhymes "flight" with "night." The sudden use of a couplet lends the lines a sense of finality, and helps the poem end on a deep sense of uncertainty. Both words have negative associations and in a way defeat the same rhyme from line 33—"light"—by coming as a pair. "Flight" speaks to fear," and "night" speaks to the loss of divine guidance.



SPEAKER

The speaker in the poem is often equated with Matthew Arnold. Though the poet certainly shared the speaker's concern with the loss of religious faith, there isn't enough in the poem to say that the speaker *is* Arnold, but it is fair to say that they at the very least have plenty in common.

In essence, the poem is a journey through the speaker's mind. At the beginning, it almost feels like the speaker is trying to write an entirely different poem, one which praises nature—a kind of night-time pastoral—using distant, descriptive language. But as the speaker looks and listens a little closer, suddenly everything changes. The speaker becomes overwhelmed by the "eternal note of sadness" that seems to linger in the sound of the sea lapping over the pebbles of the beach. The poem then becomes a mental journey through the speaker's psyche.

Stanza 2 gives the reader further insight into the speaker's intellectual perspective. The way in which the speaker suddenly thinks of Sophocles suggests that the speaker is an educated person—the classical [allusion](#) doesn't seem forced, but rather seems to have occurred quite logically according to the speaker's inner mentality.

Stanza 3 demonstrates that the speaker is also deeply religious, and that the speaker fears society's loss of faith. Perhaps, too, there is a sense that the speaker's own faith is diminishing or even already gone. For the speaker, this change leaves the world vulnerable and confusing—without the light of God, the world will be left "naked" and exposed.

Stanza 4 represents the speaker's take on the future. Without faith, the speaker sees the world as a "land of dreams"—that is, an illusion. It contains none of what is supposed to make life worth living—joy, love, beauty—because there is no longer spiritual certainty. This lack of certainty destabilizes man's place in the world, and this is why the speaker hears

sadness—not beauty—in the sea.

Finally, it's important to note that the speaker is not alone. Rather, the speaker has a companion—just off-stage/off-page—who never speaks. Three times in the poem, though, the speaker directly addresses this companion. The last of these is the most telling. Lines 29-30 show that the speaker believes that love might provide a solution to the problem of the loss of faith, but that only a love that is authentic and true can hope to fill the gap created by a loss of faith.



SETTING

The setting for the poem is two-fold. First, there is the literal setting as suggested by the title: Dover Beach. Dover is on the southeastern coast of England and is a major port. The cliffs that the speaker mentions are largely chalk, meaning that they are white, which is what makes them glimmer in the moonlight. They also have a sheer drop, with the coastline ending abruptly and giving way to the sea. The sea that the speaker looks out upon is the English channel, which divides England from France (which is why the speaker can initially see France across the water). The setting also embodies the speaker's psychological conflict that develops throughout the poem. The scene is outwardly beautiful—the cliffs are very impressive—but there is also a sense of vague threat. Because England is an island nation, anyone wanting to attack it (before the time of air travel) would have to arrive by sea and land at the coast.

The beach itself is a transitional space. That is, while to the casual observer a beach might look the same from one year to the next, it is constantly undergoing change—subtle differences are made each time the waves come in and recede. Likewise, the beach is the point where land meets the sea; it is a kind of in-between zone, at which it is difficult to say where land ends and sea begins. This is important to the poem, because the speaker is expressing worry about a similarly transitional moment in history. As the speaker sees it, society (and perhaps humankind more generally) is moving from faith to a science-based understanding of the world. The intellectual and spiritual life of the world is in transition. The transitional nature of the beach therefore makes the speaker think more deeply about faith, and change, and loss, and love.

With that in mind, then, there is another sense in which the poem's setting is the speaker's psyche itself. The reader goes along on the speaker's mental journey, from calmness, to doubt, to love for another, to sadness and worry for the future.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Dover Beach" was first published in 1867, though it is

generally believed to have been written around the time of Matthew Arnold's honeymoon in 1851. It is a stand-out poem in the Victorian canon, and often claimed to be the greatest poem of the era. Partly, this is because it is so different from the other poetry of its day. Poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson (the poet laureate of England) and Robert Browning wrote with strict formality—indeed, much of Arnold's other poetry is similar to theirs—but this poem stands out in its refusal to settle down into a reliable shape or pattern. In this sense, the poem is a precursor to literary movements of the 20th century—to the innovations of Modernism and, in its fraught psychology, the spiritual doubt of Existentialism. Thomas Hardy's poetry probably comes closest to expressing similar concerns, in particular the close look at the fading of faith in the blinding light of scientific advancement. Another useful comparison is with William Wordsworth's poem "[Tintern Abbey](#)." In that poem, the natural environment provides the speaker with a sense of "tranquil restoration," in keeping with the generally positive associations of nature in Romantic poetry. In Arnold's poem, the sea does the opposite, ushering in a sense of deep, even eternal sadness and melancholy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the poem never explicitly mentions its historical context, apart from the vague reference to a prior era in which the Sea of Faith was abundant, most critics agree that the particular intellectual, spiritual and social moment in which it was written is key to its understanding. The poem expresses fear and anxiety about the loss of faith, and the historical context explains where this comes from. The 19th century in England was a time of significant changes in the way humankind saw itself in the world. For example, Charles Lyell's innovations in the study of geology had suddenly cast an almost undeniable doubt over the alleged timescales of the world's creation as described by the Bible. Similarly, Mary Anning—known as the "fossil lady"—had made discoveries of bizarre skeletons in the beach areas of southern England (which, like the poem's geographical position, look out over the English Channel), adding to that sense of doubt. Advances in evolutionary biology had unsettled the idea of man as the center of a universe created by God. In summary, Arnold was writing in a time of large-scale readjustment and anxiety. The poem gives

expression to this mindset, ending on a fearful note about what the future holds.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Map](#) — A map showing the geographical position of Dover Beach in relation to France. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strait_of_Dover#/media/File:Strait_of_Dover_map.png)
- [A Reading](#) — Reading of the poem by actor Tom Hiddlestone. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijvohCLc_PY)
- "[Calais Sands](#)" — Another poem by Matthew Arnold, this time set on the opposite shore in France. (<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/arnold/writings/calais.html>)
- [Portraits and Photographs](#) — Portraits and photographs of the poet held in London's National Portrait Gallery. (<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00139/matthew-arnold>)
- [A Painting of Dover](#) — A painting of the white cliffs of Dover by JW Turner. (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-dover-d18154>)



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