

**II BA ENGLISH LITERATURE-IV SEMESTER**

**BRITISH LITERATURE III**

**CEN 41**

## UNIT 2

### TOPIC:1. DOVER BEACH- MATHEW ARNOLD

#### **Dover Beach**

BY MATTHEW ARNOLD

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; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
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.

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

The 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.

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;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain

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

*Dover Beach*” by Matthew Arnold is a dramatic monologue lamenting the loss of true Christian faith in England during the mid 1800s as science captured the minds of the public. The poet’s speaker, considered to be Matthew Arnold himself, begins by describing a calm and quiet sea out in the English Channel. He stands on the Dover coast and looks across to France where a small light can be seen briefly, and then vanishes. This light represents the diminishing faith of the English people, and those the world around. Throughout this poem the speaker/Arnold crafts an image of the sea receding and returning to land with the faith of the world as it changes throughout time. At this point in time though, the sea is not returning. It is receding farther out into the strait.

Faith used to encompass the whole world, holding the populous tight in its embrace. Now though, it is losing ground to the sciences, particularly those related to evolution (*The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin was published in 1859). The poem concludes pessimistically as the speaker makes clear to the reader that all the beauty and happiness that one may believe they are experiencing is not in fact real. The world is actually without peace, joy, or help for those in need and the human race is too distracted by its own ignorance to see where true assistance is needed anymore.

### Analysis of *Dover Beach*

#### First Stanza

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; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
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.

Arnold begins *'Dover Beach'* by giving a description of the setting in which it is taking place. It is clear from the title, although never explicitly stated in the poem, that the beach in question is Dover, on the coast of England. The sea is said to be calm, there is a beach on the water at full tide. The moon "lies fair," lovely, "upon the straits" (a strait is a narrow passage of water such as the English Channel onto which Dover Beach abuts).

Although useful to imagine the speaker in a particular place, the setting is not as important as what it represents.

The speaker is able to see across the Channel to the French side of the water. The lights on the far coast are visibly gleaming, and then they disappear and the "cliffs of England" are standing by themselves "vast" and "glimmering" in the bay. The light that shines then vanishes representing to this speaker, and to Arnold himself, the vanishing faith of the English people.

No one around him seems to see the enormity of what is happening, the night is quiet. There is a calm the speaker refers to as "tranquil." But as the reader will come to see, many things may seem one way but actually exist as the opposite.

Now the speaker turns to another person that is in the scene with him, and asks that this unnamed person comes to the window and breathe in the “sweet...night-air!”

The second half of this stanza is spent on describing the sounds of the water that the speaker is viewing. The speaker draws his companion’s attention to the sound that the water makes as it rushes in over the pebbles on the shore. They roll over one another creating, “the grating roar.” This happens over and over again as the sea recedes and returns. The slow cadence of this movement, and its eternal repetitions, seem sad to the narrator. As if the returning sea is bringing with it, “The eternal note of sadness in.”

## Second Stanza

Sophocles long ago

Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery; we

Find also in the sound a thought,

Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The second stanza is much shorter and relates the world in which the two characters are into the larger picture of history. The speaker states that “long ago” Sophocles also heard this sound on the Ægean sea as the tides came in. It too brought to his mind the feelings of “human misery” and how these emotions “ebb and flow.” Sophocles, who penned the play *Antigone*, is one of the best known dramatic writers of Ancient Greece.

Arnold is hoping to bring to the reader’s attention the universal experience of misery, that all throughout time have lived with. This short stanza ends with a return to the present as the narrator states that “we” too are finding these same emotions in the sound.

### Third Stanza

#### The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

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.

In the third stanza of *'Dover Beach'*, it becomes clear that Arnold is in fact speaking about the diminishing faith of his countrymen and women. He describes, "The Sea of Faith" once covered all of the "round earth's shore" and held everyone together like a girdle. Now though, this time has passed. No longer is the populous united by a common Christian faith in God by, as Arnold sees it, spread apart by new sciences and conflicting opinions.

The comparison that he has been crafting between the drawing away, and coming in of the sea is now made clear as his speaker says there is no longer any return. The sea is only receding now, "melancholy," and "long."

It is retreating from England and from the rest of the lands of the earth and leaving the people exposed.

#### Fourth Stanza

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

At the beginning of the fourth stanza, it becomes clear that the companion who is looking out over the water with the speaker is most likely a lover or romantic partner.

He speaks now directly to her, and perhaps, to all those true believers in God that are still out there. He asks that they remain true to one another in this “land of dreams.” The world is no longer what it was, it is more like a dream than the reality he is used to. It is a land that appears to be full of various beautiful, new, and joyous things but that is not the case. This new world is in fact without “joy...love...[or] light...certitude... [or] peace,” or finally, help for those in pain. It is not what it appears to be.

The poem concludes with a pessimistic outlook on the state of the planet. As the people are suffering around the world on “a darkling plain,” confused and fighting for things they don’t understand, real suffering is going on and faith is slipping away.

About Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold, poet, and essayist, was born in Laleham, Middlesex, in 1822 and was quickly recognized for his talent. He completed an undergraduate degree at Balliol College, Oxford University after which he taught Classics at Rugby School.

Arnold would then work for thirty-five years as a government school inspector, during which time he acquired an interest in education that influenced his poetic works. He established his reputation as a poet and became Professor of Poetry at Oxford and wrote a number of critical works during this time.

His poetry is known for its contemplation of isolation, the dwindling faith of his age, and his subtle style. His work is often compared to that of Sylvia Plath and W.B. Yeats. Matthew Arnold died in 1888 in Liverpool.

## UNIT 2

### TOPIC:1. MY LAST DUCHESS- ROBERT BROWNING

# My Last Duchess

Launch Audio in a New Window

BY ROBERT BROWNING

*FERRARA*

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read



Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps  
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps  
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech—which I have not—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—  
E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your master’s known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

#### Summary

This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century. The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke’s marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl. The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. His musings give way to a diatribe on her

disgraceful behavior: he claims she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his “gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name.” As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise: when her behavior escalated, “[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage, with another young girl. As the Duke and the emissary walk leave the painting behind, the Duke points out other notable artworks in his collection.

#### Form

“My Last Duchess” comprises rhyming pentameter lines. The lines do not employ end-stops; rather, they use *enjambment*—that is, sentences and other grammatical units do not necessarily conclude at the end of lines. Consequently, the rhymes do not create a sense of closure when they come, but rather remain a subtle driving force behind the Duke’s compulsive revelations. The Duke is quite a performer: he mimics others’ voices, creates hypothetical situations, and uses the force of his personality to make horrifying information seem merely colorful. Indeed, the poem provides a classic example of a dramatic monologue: the speaker is clearly distinct from the poet; an audience is suggested but never appears in the poem; and the revelation of the Duke’s character is the poem’s primary aim.

#### Commentary

But Browning has more in mind than simply creating a colorful character and placing him in a picturesque historical scene. Rather, the specific historical setting of the poem harbors much significance: the Italian Renaissance held a particular fascination for Browning and his contemporaries, for it represented the flowering of the aesthetic and the human alongside, or in some cases in the place of, the religious and the moral. Thus the temporal setting allows Browning to again explore sex, violence, and aesthetics as all entangled, complicating and confusing each other: the lushness of the language belies the fact that the Duchess was punished for her natural sexuality. The Duke’s ravings suggest that most of the supposed transgressions took place only in his mind. Like some of

Browning's fellow Victorians, the Duke sees sin lurking in every corner. The reason the speaker here gives for killing the Duchess ostensibly differs from that given by the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" for murder Porphyria; however, both women are nevertheless victims of a male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality. The desperate need to do this mirrors the efforts of Victorian society to mold the behavior—sexual and otherwise—of individuals. For people confronted with an increasingly complex and anonymous modern world, this impulse comes naturally: to control would seem to be to conserve and stabilize. The Renaissance was a time when morally dissolute men like the Duke exercised absolute power, and as such it is a fascinating study for the Victorians: works like this imply that, surely, a time that produced magnificent art like the Duchess's portrait couldn't have been entirely evil in its allocation of societal control—even though it put men like the Duke in power.

A poem like "My Last Duchess" calculatedly engages its readers on a psychological level. Because we hear only the Duke's musings, we must piece the story together ourselves. Browning forces his reader to become involved in the poem in order to understand it, and this adds to the fun of reading his work. It also forces the reader to question his or her own response to the subject portrayed and the method of its portrayal. We are forced to consider, Which aspect of the poem dominates: the horror of the Duchess's fate, or the beauty of the language and the powerful dramatic development? Thus by posing this question the poem firstly tests the Victorian reader's response to the modern world—it asks, Has everyday life made you numb yet?—and secondly asks a question that must be asked of all art—it queries, Does art have a moral component, or is it merely an aesthetic exercise? In these latter considerations Browning prefigures writers like Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde.