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Existential Uncertainty, Loneliness and Suffering in Arnold's "Dover Beach"

Dr. Vishwas M. Damodhar

Head, Department of English,

Milind Mahavidyalaya, Mulawa

ABSTRACT

The poem, "Dover Beach" (1867), is the dramatic epitome of Matthew Arnold's pensive contemplation of the inner self reconciled with the outer world. According to the poet, poetry is the criticism of life, which should be used to spread the philosophical way of thinking. He further says that true happiness comes from within. So, people should seek happiness within themselves while accepting outward things. However, Arnold argues that people should not live in the belief that they will one day inherit eternal bliss. We should moderate our desires and expectations rather than merely dreaming of something that may never be attained. Such a philosophy of life is the poem's central idea.

Keywords: *uncertainty, doubt, melancholy, spiritual faith*

FULL PAPER

“Dover Beach” was published in 1867. This poem is regarded as a representative poem of the poet himself, containing his general outlook on life. It is an example of Arnold’s sensitivity, his sceptical nature and his melancholy. According to J. D. Jump, “Dover Beach”, I believe, is such a great poem. As far as it is impossible for a single short lyric to do so, it represents the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and it is the one work by Arnold which ought to appear in even the briefest anthology of great English poems”(1).

Matthew Arnold was deeply influenced by the Victorian Age, during which the Industrial Revolution increased the nation's wealth and prosperity. As a result, people became materialistic in their attitude. Meanwhile, in 1859, Charles Darwin introduced his theory of evolution. So, people started to raise doubts and questions about the teachings of the holy book, the Bible. Victorians were deeply confused about the relationship between religion and science. An old religion was gradually breaking down. Matthew Arnold felt like an orphan, detached from his religious faith, as he entered a new era governed by scientific discoveries. “Dover Beach” is an appropriate example of Arnold’s melancholic temperament and despair at the retreating tide of religious faith. Arnold writes in this poem:

*The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the whole and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I can hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing road (2).*

Faith in the teachings of Christianity was gradually losing its grip over the minds of the Victorian people. In short, the poem represents Arnold’s ‘self’ and his attitude towards life. In this connection, W. J. Long writes, “'Dover Beach' is the best expression of Arnold’s ideals and methods.” (3)

Hugh Walker writes about the poet, “Matthew Arnold was an elegist of deep tenderness and solemnity; a strict poet of high seriousness, his poetry is entirely reflective. He does not shine while constructing a story. He can express a feeling of melancholy as in “Dover Beach”, with rare purity and when he chooses, even with an emotion that is sometimes poignant.”(4) Arnold had a significant influence on Classical Literature. So, he compares his grief with that of the great Greek dramatist, Sophocles, who had a similar expression of listening to the sound of the ocean waves, and he, too, found the notes of sadness. Arnold writes:

*Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, 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. (5)*

Of course, Sophocles heard the sound of the waves of the Aegean Ocean while Arnold listened to the sound of the waves of the English Channel. Though the ocean and time in the case of Sophocles were different, the interpretation of Sophocles about the sound of the waves was the same as Arnold's.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet expects that he and his beloved should love each other honestly and sincerely because only true love can be a source of comfort and happiness. The world is barren because it has lost religious faith. Though the world seems full of variety and looks beautiful and charming, it is an illusion or a mirage. The poet further says that the world lacks joy, love, hope, certainty, peace of mind and relief from distress. There is nothing to comfort a troubled human being. The world cannot attain any peace or joy in the absence of spiritual faith and a genuine belief in God.

Matthew Arnold describes the condition of an ordinary man detached from religious faith. These lines appropriately portray the contemporary situation of the Victorian people.

*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (6)*

In this way, Arnold compares all the feverish activity, strife, struggle, and exertion of human beings to an aimless, purposeless struggle. The last three lines of the poem are the most famous in English literature. The poet had a significant impact on Classical history. Here, the poet referred to an ancient battle between the Greeks and the Sicilians. The Greek State sent its army on ships to invade Sicily. They arrived at night and disembarked. In the darkness of night, the soldiers could not see their enemies. So, it was not clear to them whether they were fighting with an enemy soldier or one of their own. That is the confusion. The word 'ignorant' means 'unknowing'. In this way, Victorian people also struggled with religious uncertainty, as the armies of Greece did in the darkness. People are becoming insane; they have lost all sense of value. They have become materialistic, ungodly, sceptical, and agnostic.

In short, the poem "Dover Beach" offers an accurate picture of the confused psychological state of Victorians. J. D. Jump writes, "'Dover Beach' is Arnold's one of the greatest poems"(7). In this regard, Sidney Feshbach also writes about the poem in his book, 'Empedoclean at "Dover Beach"', "the speaker is addressing humanity through this device. Victorian theologians and Darwinian scientists challenged the variety of once absolute religious truth cloaked in supernaturalism. This displacement of the moral stay of man's spiritual self left him eddying about in nothingness, wandering between sciences awaiting the resolution of his predicament by the idealism of progressive history"(8).

"Dover Beach" defines the loneliness and suffering of an individual. The poet's imagery of sea waves captures the history of the self's collective suffering. Symbolically, the sea represents contemporary religious faith, which contributes to the concept of alienation. According to Dwight Culler, "an idea of the fragmented self results from the flowing of the sea of faith through the landscape of Arnold's poetry. The couple at Dover find themselves alienated from the world, on a darkling plain 'swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight.' The expressed confusion of the speaker seeing himself as a participant in the action on the plain, affirms a divided self, to be united only through the hearing of the murmurs of the buried stream evidenced in overtures of love and statements of truth"(9).

The poem "Dover Beach" is remarkable for its symbolism and imagery. The opening lines of the poem contain vivid descriptions, for example, the sea is calm; the tide is full, the moon shines fair; the light twinkle of the French coast; sweet is the night air. In this connection, David Daiches writes, "the opening of 'Dover Beach' is perhaps the finest expression of that symbolic scene of night quiet which provided the setting and the emotional background of so much of Arnold's elegiac meditation"(10).

Conclusion:

To conclude, Matthew Arnold is the greatest elegiac poet of the Victorian Era. There are specific incidents in Arnold's life that were responsible for the composition of these elegies. He wrote "Rugby Chapel" after the death of his father; "Thyrsis" after the death of his friend. He also wrote "Dover Beach" as he lost all hope and confidence in his future. In short, he lost his father, friend and hope in his life. As I mentioned earlier, Arnold's father, Dr Thomas Arnold, was a blend of discipline, honesty and generosity. In Rugby Chapel, the poet not only commemorates the death of his father but also mourns the loss of good values, customs and faith in Christianity. These good virtues and moral values represent the personality of Dr Thomas Arnold. In the same way, the untimely death of his friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, was an excellent shock for Arnold. He collapsed from a heart attack. A loss of a friend means a loss of a present for Arnold. He was paralysed entirely by these two incidents in his personal life. From such a melancholic attitude, he wrote "Dover Beach", in which he depicts his helplessness, fear, concern, lack of confidence, lack of hope, and tension. He says in the poem that their religious faith is crumbling due to the scientific inventions and evolutionary theories. He was in fear that the world would remain alone without religion and belief in the existence of God.

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