

This poem is carefully plotted, so I have taken some care to carefully plot it. You can read the poem fresh, then continue on to the vocabulary words and comments. The definitions are drawn from Wiktionary and are really wonderfully applicable imo.

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.

Vocabulary:

blanch (*verb*)

- From Old French *blanchir*. Cognate with *blench*: to deceive, to trick

1. a.) to grow white
*his cheek **blanched** with fear*
*the rose **blanches** in the sun*
- b.) to take the color out of, and make white; to bleach
*to **blanch** linen*
*age has **blanched** his hair*
- c.) to cook by dipping briefly into boiling water, then directly into cold water.
- d.) to whiten, as the surface of meat, by plunging into boiling water and afterwards into cold, so as to harden the surface and retain the juices
- e.) to bleach by excluding the light, as the stalks or leaves of plants, by earthing them up or tying them together
- f.) To make white by removing the skin of, as by scalding
*to **blanch** almonds*
- g.) to give a white luster to (silver, before stamping, in the process of coining)
- h.) to cover (sheet iron) with a coating of tin.
- i.) (figuratively) to whiten; to give a favorable appearance to; to whitewash; to palliate
2. a.) To avoid, as from fear; to evade; to leave unnoticed.
- b.) to cause to turn aside or back.
*to **blanch** a deer*
- c.) to use evasion.

strand (*noun*)

- a.) the shore or beach of the sea or ocean.
*Grand **Strand***
- b.) An individual length of any fine, string-like substance.
***strand** of spaghetti*
***strand** of hair.*
- c.) (figuratively) A sequence of linked events or facts; a logical thread.
***strand** of truth*

strand (*verb*)

- a.) to run aground.
- b.) to leave someone in a difficult situation; to abandon or desert.
- c.) to break a strand (of a rope).

turbid (*adjective*)

- From Latin *turbidus*: disturbed,
and *turba*: mass, throng, crowd, tumult, disturbance.

- a.) (of a liquid) Having the lees or sediment disturbed; roiled; muddy; thick; not clear.

shingle (*noun*)

- Probably cognate to the Norwegian singl (“small stones”) or the North Frisian singel (“gravel”), both imitative of the sound of water running over such pebbles.

- a.) a small, thin piece of building material, for laying in overlapping rows as a covering for the roof or sides of a building.
- b.) a rectangular piece of hammered steel
- c.) A punitive strap such as a belt, as used for severe spanking.
- d.) a small signboard for a professional office
- e.) a small production company
- f.) small, smooth pebbles, as found on a beach.

shingle (*verb*)

- From dialectal French chingler (“to strap, whip”), from Latin cingula (“girt, belt”), from cingere (“to girt”)

- a.) To hammer and squeeze material in order to expel cinder and impurities from it, as in metallurgy.
- b.) To lash with a shingle.

COMMENTS:

This is a poem which tosses the reader back and forth, like the sea that drags through its lines. Or it is a poem which leads the reader into the sea, and leaves them in the lurch. Arnold seems a sneaky one to me here, bringing us into a lovely romantic scene and then trying to deprive us of all hope and faith in life with a few smooth words.

Arnold even begins with that deceptive first line, “the sea is calm tonight.”

This poem rhymes, and has traditional lyric imagery, an emotionally pitched reflection, and a cogent flow of rhetoric and narrative, and in these ways is a romantic era poem. The first two stanzas have envelope structures to their rhyme, by which I mean that the beginning mirrors the ending. So there is a rhyme (generically) “aba” at the beginning and end of both stanzas. In the first stanza, the lines between that envelope are disordered in scheme; seeming to form a pattern, or beginning to, but proving irregular.

Here the hook is the suspended meaning; while the meaning he intends is the suspended form. The last line of that first stanza “and bring/ the eternal note of sadness in” gives a sense of the target he is aiming for. The first stanza is a kind of faux-sonnet, one which cannot settle, but almost helps give the impression of a bachelor speaker, similarly leading on a woman.

Let's skip the second stanza and look at the fascinating third. [In entirety:]

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**.

This stanza is the only place with partial rhymes on end words. The “obvious” one is the faith/breath rhyme. There is a fascinating technique Arnold employs here to embattle and disrupt the harmony of the proper fullness of that rhyme by the other intervening words. One of those intervening end words is *roar*, which actually occurred in the first stanza, where it was the only unrhymed word in the whole poem. Now it appears again as the poem has gathered momentum and meaning and so here the long slow drag of that dismal sucking sea is in effect. In paraphrase, it is,

'faith was full,
but now I hear a long roar,
in a drear world.'

The words *hear*, *roar*, *breath*, and *drear*, (lines 3-6), form one body of association, and are given a negative spin in context. Together they add concreteness to the essentially empty assertion in the first three lines, while adding rhetorical weight to the last line. Just the placement of the rhymes are an image of a person stranded before a vast, inhospitable, empty, and uncaring world. That is, the faith is stranded in the stanza, (and the poem, and Arnold's picture of the world I suppose).

While it is debatable I suppose, in my opinion, there is also a second partial rhyme in this stanza. That rhyme between “furled” and “world” is very close to full, but “furled” has a slight vowel space between “fur” and “led” - almost “fur-earled”. “World” on the other hand is fully one syllable. If this kind of theory of rhyme is correct, perhaps the shift here indicates a move away from a romantic sentiment, towards a matter of fact description, popping the balloon of sentiment. I say that based on comparing the first three lines, capped by that rhyme “furled”, and comparing it with the last four lines, capped by the rhyme “world”, and weighing that effect. So the word “world” is kind of the deflated parallel of the early religious terms “faith” and “furled”.

I know this may sound like reading too much into the poem. But poetry is all about such verbal dynamics and whether we pick up on the fine points or not, it is the fine points that make the verbal music communicate, because poetry is not on the prose wavelength. It would be like trying to judge an opera by just reading a libretto.

The primary sense of the word *shingles* is probably gravel or pebbles. There may also be the notion of industrial development, regarding metal and wooden shingles, and also there may be given a meaning of the cruelty of a punitive world, (since a shingle is also a paddle), and the notion of a world of corporate enterprise.

Turning to the last stanza, the speaker makes his words drip his sweet (perhaps threadworn) lines, but is his speech the words of love?

Psalm 55:21,22

The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords. Cast your burden on the LORD, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.

The last stanza is an octet following a very ordered and systematic sonnet pattern – but with a line added on the end, making a couplet. In it he attempts the coup de grace of the nihilistic preacher, imaging all the beauty (or glimmering) of the world as nothing and merely the stage of some kind of wild war. This is perhaps meant to be misread as an overture of attempting again the sonnet of the first stanza, but on a more traditional rhyme pattern, only the ninth line abruptly cuts it off and ends the poem. The first nine lines and the last nine can be read in an overlapping way, and have a bit of resonance.

CONCLUSION:

Is Dover Beach self-expressive or merely a verbal trap? Does the poem follow the expressive heart, rhyming with disorderly impact in a kind of chaotic tumult that at the same time possesses psychological coherence? Or does it reflect the speaker's (and author's) conscious deployment of shrewd tactics of rhetoric with an Apollonian design? (By Apollonian design I am referring to Nietzsche's classification of the "Apollonian" drive for order and form.) Now of course the poem can be only a mock-up of a shrewd design. The consciously pursued dramatic end of the poem, combined with Arnold's subtle care to maximize the negative power of the speaker's rhetoric through word choice and rhyme, argue that there is a very intentional design to kill the innocent happiness in the person he is speaking with. That is, the speaker is casting a spell of fear, almost horror, that necessarily involves the introduction of doubt.

But on the other hand, perhaps the speaker is also acting with a measure of innocence in the sense that the larger forces he pits against one another, (light and darkness for instance), are inherently greater than any single position on the shore. That is, we cannot in summoning a grand view sufficiently hold our perspective guaranteed that we ourselves will not be swept or moved to a much greater, or different position. Let us assume the worst, that the speaker is lost and has renounced hope, so his pain bursts forth in a kind of subterfuge; yet he is still expressing pain, even if he testifies to the power that holds him in its thrall. The eternal note of sadness implies goodness, as does the speaker's romantic gesture in the end. And this existence of goodness lends meaning and significance to his words, in my opinion, sufficient here, to make this poem self-expressive. That is because the speaker here is wrong, (as he knows), and it is not *only* "ignorant armies that clash", but rather there is a very enlightened army of the Lord of Hosts, there is a free kingdom to escape to providing perspectival positions, private ones, even if they are sad, even if they are all on the same shore.

Only in the man's eternal commitment to one side or the other, does the positional shore remain regardless of the motion of larger forces. And this is part of the tension of the poem. Will the person hearing the speaker, an Eve perhaps, bite into the apple? But even if the speaker is caught in the pain of estrangement and perdition, he still may have an expression of his heart that could in some ways – I would hope – be meaningful as a testimony of his human condition, and not be only a scheme.

Ecclesiastes 9:3,4

Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

