

## Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach” (1867)

“Dover Beach” has become, for later readers the most iconic example of a growing sense of uncertainty about religious truth and their own place in the universe which troubled the Victorians, faced as they were with discoveries of geology and biology respectively associated with the names of John Tyndall and Charles Darwin as well as the hideous social problems of the period. According to the scientists, the world was immeasurably older than the Bible narrative suggested while the human species itself was now seen as a result of evolution rather than a creative act of God. Faced with this new intellectual landscape, Arnold felt the need to transform the Christian culture that he had received into a liberal ideology based on art and imagination rather than grace and redemption. His answer was to invoke the “sweetness and light” of classical Greek culture as a model—and hence he called for the Hellenisation of England, believing that it was the critics’ job to identify “the best of what had ever been thought and felt” and to take it as a standard for modern artistic and intellectual production. In developing this idea, Arnold laid the foundation stones of modern literary criticism. He also held the Chair of English at Oxford and created the first chair of Celtic Studies. His idea was that Celtic literature—the source of European romance—was an important tributary of English Literature. The Irish thought otherwise and used his support to launch their own literary revival.

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.



Matthew Arnold (1822-88)

Arnold was the son of leading educator, Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby College. After an education in Cambridge he went on to become a leading critic in the widely-read journals such as the *National Review* and was appointed Head Inspector of Schools and later Professor of English at Oxford. His concern with the state of the nation led to the publication of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which he branded the new middle class as ‘philistines’ for their degraded materialistic values. But if those were philistines, what were the others? Aristocrats? Greeks? The Elect? ‘The children of light was a phrase he liked ...



Dover Beach (facing France)