

Dover Beach: Matthew Arnold

Lec-~~ser-~~ ~~4/4~~ GIANGESH KUMAR: A.N.C. Patory.

"Dover Beach" is a famous and celebrated poem of Matthew Arnold. Arnold belonged to the Victorian age, the age supposed to be transition period. The influence of this transition period is apparent in Arnold's "Dover Beach". We shall better understand this poem if we know two things. Firstly, the impact of Hellenism, fascination for folk tales and legends and the solitary meditation of the 19th century, that reigned the romantic period. Secondly, the rise of reason, and scientific approach that resulted in the rapid industrialization, urbanisation and <sup>evolution of</sup> new scientific theory that took place in the mid 19th century to early 20th century. These two distinctive strains vividly appear in the poem "Dover Beach".

In this very poem the poet uses the means of "Pathetic Fallacy" to express his feeling by attributing the feelings of sadness to an inanimate object like sea, etc.

Now, come to the poem, here the poet, standing on 'Dover Beach', enjoys the beauty of natural scenes and is impressed by the calmness of the sea and brightness of the moon.

He visualizes Sea as Calm but its tide is at its peak. But his joy is unmix'd. The tide is ebbing and the retreating waves make a garting sound over the pebbles on the sea-shore. The poet perceives this sound of retreating waves as a note of melancholy. This melancholy sound reminds the poet of the eternal note of Sadness in human life:

"The Sea of Faith  
was once, too at the full and round Earth's shores  
lay like the fold of a bright girdle furled"

Through these lines the poet gives us beautiful comparison between human society and religious faith. Just as in the full tide Sea rises and surrounds the earth with a girdle of shining waves, similarly in ancient days, a deep religious faith surrounded mankind and protected it from all evils. But the situation has radically changed because of the rise of materialism that brought about the decay of faith and filled people's heart with doubt and thought of scepticism and misery.

"But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar  
Retreating to the breath.....  
And naked shingles of the world."



3

Arnold expresses note of sadness and pessimism and laments for the rapid and inevitable decline in the mid 1800. He mourns a society that has lost its cultural, moral and spiritual significance, giving rise to cruelty, deception, uncertainty and hopelessness. This has been beautifully depicted with the imagery of two armies meeting each other at night on a dark battlefield which is unknown to both. A struggle ensues and the one army is completely routed. Then follows a confusion. The defeated soldiers flew in different direction ~~to~~ in order to save their lives. The result is disorder for defeated army. This is exactly what happens to mankind in this world when the wave of materialism sweeps away all faith and love from men's mind and this happens because of the diminished standing of Christianity which the poet sees as being unable to withstand the rising tide of scientific discovery.

As we know that Arnold being classicist, wrote for head rather than for the heart. He was cold and critical rather than enthusiastic. For this model he clung to Greek poets which he regarded as the sure guidance of what is true and sound in poetical art.

In 'Dover Beach', too, Arnold took the reference of Sophocles who had heard the same sound from the shore of the Aegean Sea and found in it a symbol of the ebb and flow in man's sorrow. Here, the poet standing on the Dover Beach is reminded of the ebb and flow in man's faith.

Thus, the poet, in form of a dramatic monologue, is addressing a silent audience. The effect is of one person directly addressing another. While the reader listens in.

— x —