



Matthew Arnold (1822–1888)

The British poet Mat-
thew Arnold was also
a literary critic and a
commentator on so-
ciety and education. Interestingly, Arnold
stopped writing poetry after 1850, turn-
ing more and more to “public” matters
under discussion in England. The poetry
he did create was principally about the
individual in a modern, industrial world,
often marked by a melancholy tone. “Do-
ver Beach,” widely read during Arnold’s
lifetime, survives as his best-known poem,
despite its bleak outlook, and it was writ-
ten while he was on his honeymoon. (The
next poem here, Anthony Hecht’s “The

Dover Bitch,” makes ironic use of that fact.)
Though influential and much honored,
Arnold did not make his living as a writer;
instead, he worked first as a secretary,
then as an inspector of schools, and wrote
his poetry and essays on the side.

AS YOU READ Consider how the poet’s use of concrete and abstract imagery establishes mood within the poem. What, for instance, does Arnold mean by “the sea of faith,” and who might he describe as “ignorant armies” that clash? It might help to know that the “white cliffs of Dover” bear roughly the same relation to the idea of England as the Statue of Liberty or the Grand Canyon does to the idea of the United States. For more on Sophocles and the Aegean Sea, look at Chapter 32 on Greek drama.

Dover Beach (1867)

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,
5 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
10 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.

15 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,
20 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

Writing from Reading

<p>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 25 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, Retreating, to the breath Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear And naked shingles of the world.</p> <p>30 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; 35 And we are here as on a darkling plain Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night.</p>		
<p>Summarize</p> <p>1 What is meant by “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery”?</p>	<p>Analyze Voice</p> <p>3 Describe how the speaker’s mood changes throughout the poem. What does he want, and when?</p>	<p>Interpret the Poem</p> <p>5 What might the poet mean by “the eternal note of sadness” in the first stanza?</p> <p>6 Look up the word <i>elegy</i>. Is this an elegy? If so, to what?</p>
<p>Analyze Craft</p> <p>2 How does the concrete description of the sea (“long line of spray,” “pebbles”) compare with or contribute to the speaker’s more abstract thoughts?</p>	<p>Synthesize Summary and Analysis</p> <p>4 Describe how word choice in the poem contributes to the overall mood of the poem.</p>	

ALLUSION

Poets often refer or allude to the work of other poets; this is, after all, a way of maintaining tradition and tipping a cap to the past. Matthew Arnold’s nineteenth-century poem refers to “Sophocles long ago” and compares the present world situation to what the Greek dramatist once heard and thought; “The Dover Bitch” refers to Dover Beach in a less serious but similar way. Both poets and poems are allusive; there’s an added dimension to and pleasure in the reading when you know what went before.