

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach": A Depiction of Victorian Doubt and Faith

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ABSTRACT

Dissatisfied with his age Arnold turned towards Greek Culture and literature. Victorian age was an age of doubt and faith. Religious faith was in melting pot. Darwin's 'Origin Of Species' (1859) shook the Victorian faith. Darwin questioned the very basic statement of 'The Holy Bible'. Arnold considered literature as a weapon to established the broken faith of Victorians. He took Greek literature as reference to write literature. Arnold keenly observed Greek art and culture and find solace in it. He used Greek Art and Culture as the tool of morality and it has the healing power to wounded Victorian faith. Arnold's 'Dover Beach' is a poetry of vanished past and vanished faith.

Keywords: Reflective elegy, Vanished Faith, Victorian Doubt and Faith, Sea of faith.

INTRODUCTION

**"Listen! You hear the granting roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back
and fling
At their return, up the high stand
Begin, and cease and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in." (Dover Beach- Stanza 1)**

The concluding line of first stanza indicates the eternal sadness of human existence. Perhaps symbolized the shattered value system of Victorian age.

In the second stanza of the poem Arnold give a touchstone to his poetry and resembled his feelings with Sophocles. Arnold says that Sophocles perhaps able to

hear the tragic song of Oedipus and Antigone produced by the waves of Aegean Sea. Perhaps like Sophocles Arnold's heart also damaged by his ages tragedy.

Arnold established the symbol of 'Sea of Faith'. According to Arnold the sea full of water symbolized the past religious faith of Victorians. Now the spiritual faith, now vanished-

"The Sea of Faith Was once, too, at the full
and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd."

The advancement of technology and mechanism defoliated the mindset of Victorians and thus human faith is vanished-"But now I only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

Perhaps Arnold shaped the base of T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'-the trade of war demolished the mindset of modern men, religion is on melting pot, faith, values, morals are gone, sexuality is emotionless. Therefore, individual is not perfect.

The prolific Assamese poet Nabakanta Barua also driven by Arnoldian philosophy -his poem 'Iyat Nodi Asil' portrayed his dissatisfaction with his age. 'River'(Nodi) symbolized the decaying values, love and integrity of his age. Poets are sensitive, so they know that modernization is a process of mechanism-the human souls become machine- therefore human emotion is imperfect.

'Dover Beach' is not a personal elegy, but have a universal appeal. Arnold disconsolately lamenting the death of faith. As a champion of culture and ideas Arnold

could not surrender himself in front of materialism in its most filthy form. In such misbalanced time poetry which is based upon peace and faith, is not possible. Like Wordsworth, Arnold Can't take refuge in Lake District. So in a letter to Clough,

Arnold wrote " My dear Clough , those are damned time- everything against one- the height to which knowledge is come , the spread of luxury, our physical enervation , the absence of great natures the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends."

Arnold was not an antagonist to his age, he was iconoclast. He wanted to established his age by his original ideas. It was the malady of the age, where "wealth accumulates and men decay."

Arnold says love is a tremendous feeling, but the world is illusion. The world is transitory, there is no helping hand. Melancholy is everywhere, anxiety, frustration is common disease. But love is permanent; it can heal the wounded world-

**"Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which
seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams."**

At the end our poet says that modern men are fighting in dark night, without knowing the purpose. They can't trust each other. Their purpose is hollow, emotionless like machine. The concluding lines of 'Dover Beach' signifies that Arnold points out the psyche of Victorians-

**"And we are here on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggles
and fight
Where ignorant armies clash by night."**

These lines give a universal tone to this poem. Arnold's tone is fully negative and melancholic but he give a reminder that our past was heroic and glorious. He appealed his people-turn towards past

values and reshape lives. Arnold was not an absurdist like Camus. He just adopt negativity against materialism. In other words he propagated humanism in Baconian way.

In 'Dover Beach' Arnold used natural landscape as background. He was a naturalistic with high philosophy. Her nature was serene, not like Shelley's west wind. Arnold painted a calm picture of sea in midst of polite moonlight.

"Dover Beach is reflective elegy, it is not personal, it is an elegy on humanity.

H.W. Paul said "Profoundly melancholy in tone, it expresses the peculiar turn of Mr. Arnold's mind, at once religious and sceptical, philosophic and emotional, better than his formal treatises on philosophy and religion."

CONCLUSION

Arnold was a poet of Victorian unrest. His melancholy is not personal, but for whole age, for Victorians, against materialism. As a classicist he considered Dante, Homer and Shakespeare as his master. He believed that the true fragrance of civilization can be felt in our past culture- so he considered poetry as a criticism of life by taking references from old classical art and culture. I must say Arnold was a propagandist, not absurdist like Camus, not homesick like Wordsworth but an iconoclast like Shaw. Somehow Arnold set a vast background for Eliot. Last but not the least he was not a poet of elite class but the poet of masses.

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