

19th Century British Literature

University of Calcutta

ENG-A-CC-4-10-TH/TU

Poetry: Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach'

Dover Beach as Representative of Victorian Unrest (Essay)

Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold reflects the intellectual and spiritual distress of the 19th century. Arnold's distress is poignantly expressed in stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse in which he speaks of himself as "wandering between two worlds, one dead/ The other powerless to be born." Between the two worlds Arnold finds a wasteland which is blinkered, blind and ultimately dying no longer capable of giving direction.

Arnold's attitude to the contemporary world is one of scepticism and doubt. As Lionel Trilling observes, "The world of bourgeois enterprise which arranged its own self-glorification in the Great Exhibition of 1851 could find little charm for Arnold." It was apparent that beneath the veneer of confidence and prosperity there was a deep conflict between science and religion. Breakthrough discoveries made by Charles Darwin and geologists undermined the very grounds of Christian faith. The impact on scientific discoveries on religious faith turned many believers in philosophical sceptics. However, the overarching sense of doubt psychologically dented the spirit of the age more than anything else.

"We mortal millions live alone"- these prophetic words by Arnold speak of the burden of the age where human optimism regarding the continual progress of human society had been sadly belied by the aggressive industrial culture. The sons of democracy and industrial revolution are isolated men. Liberty and equality seem to negate fraternity. Science creates a cosmos without a soul and the subsequent loss of belief in cosmic order requires men to selfishly retreat into their individual selves. There occurred a breach in the "community bonds" in which the individual had earlier sought protection. The individual found himself marooned psychologically in an island. The collective reason, the product of the wisdom of thousands of years of experience could no longer guide or safe-guard him. It has become scattered.

The poet's attitude towards the subject of the poem is revealed through key words. The most obvious one of these is "the sea" with its nostalgic nature and ability to represent time and timelessness simultaneously. "sadness", "misery", "melancholy", "pain" these all accompany this effect and reveal the overall sense of regret and helplessness the author feels before the powers of time and inevitable change. The melancholic note in the poet's mind gets reflected in the landscape described in the poem. A cursory reading of the poem discloses that all the stanzas except the second are built on a similar two-part structure and that each recalls the