

## THREE CRITICAL APPROACHES IN LITERARY CRITICISM: AN EXAMPLE ANALYSIS ON MATTHEW ARNOLD'S *DOVER BEACH*

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**Abstract.** To approach a work of literature can be done in different ways. Some approaches can be used to analyze a literary work, such as psychological, historical, sociological, etc. To analyze one literary work, more than one approach can be applied. This article is an example of analyzing a poem, Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* from three different critical positions, the formalist, the sociological, and psychoanalytical. The formalist critics view work as a timeless aesthetic object. We may find whatever we wish in the work as long as what we find is in the work itself. The sociological critic views that to understand Arnold's 'Dover Beach', we must know something about the major intellectual social current of Victorian England and how Arnold responded to them. All psychoanalytic critics assume that the development of the psyche in humans is analogous to the development of the physique. 'Dover Beach' is richly suggestive of the fundamental psychic dilemma of man in civilization.

**Keywords:** *approach, formalist, sociological, psychoanalytical*

### INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism has to do with the value of literature, its goodness or badness, not with the history of literature. Because value judgments tend to be highly subjective, lively, and sometimes even acrimonious, debates among literary critics accompany their diverse responses to and judgments of the same work. The judgment a literary critic makes about a story or poem is bound to reflect his own cherished values. The truth of the work of art is, obviously, very different from the truth of a mathematical formula. Certainly, one's attitude toward war, religion, sex, and politics are irrelevant to the truth of formula but quite relevant to one's judgment of a literary work.

Yet, any examination of the broad range of literary criticism reveals that a group of critics (and all readers, ultimately, are critics) share certain assumptions about literature. These shared assumptions govern the way the critic

approaches work, the elements he tends to look for and emphasize, the details he finds significant or insignificant, and finally, his overall judgment of the value of the work. To illustrate diverse critical methodologies, Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" is chosen. It is analyzed from three different critical positions: the formalist, the sociological, and the psychoanalytic. These three critical positions are selected not because they are the only ones, but because they represent three major and distinctive approaches of literary criticism that may help readers (or our students) formulate their responses to a work of literature.

It does not mean that one approach is more valid than the others or that the lines dividing the approaches are always clear and distinct. Readers will, perhaps, discover one approach more congenial to their temperament, more "true" to their sense of the world, than another. Again, they may find that some works seem to lend themselves to a different approach.

More likely, they will find themselves utilizing more than one approach in dealing with a single work. What the reader will discover in reading the three analyses of Arnold's poem is not that they contradict one another, but that, taken together, they complement and enrich his understanding and enjoyment of the work.

## METHOD

This is qualitative research study that focuses on three different approaches. Those are Formalist approach, Social Criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism. The data of this study is a poem by Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. The formalist approach is focusing on the poem structure and its literary devices. Then, Social criticism focuses the social context that can be found inside the poem. The last psychoanalytic criticism focus on the development of author experiences based on the poem.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Formalist Criticism in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*

The formalist critic insists that the function of criticism is to focus on the work itself as a verbal structure and to discover how the work achieves or does not achieve unity, although he would not deny the relevance of sociological, biographical, and historical information to a work of art. The job of criticism is to show how the various parts of the work are wedded together into an organic whole. That is to say, we must examine the form of the work, for it is the form that is its meaning. In other words, the formalist critic views work as a timeless aesthetic object; we may find whatever we wish in the work as long as what we find is demonstrably in the work itself.

From the perspective of the formalist critic, the fact that Matthew Arnold was deeply concerned with how man could live a civilized and enjoyable life under that pressures of modern industrialization or that Arnold appears to have suffered in his youth an intense conflict between sexual and spiritual love ought not to be the focal point in analysis of his poetry, although it may be interesting.

"Dover Beach" is a dramatic monologue, a poem in which a speaker addresses another person at a particular time and place. In the opening lines, Arnold skillfully sets the scene, introduces the image of sea that is to dominate the poem and establishes a moment of tranquility and moon-bathed loveliness appropriate to a poem in which a man addresses his beloved. The beauty of the scene is established through visual images that give way, beginning with line 9, to a series of auditory imagery, a contrast that is developed through the entire poem, Arnold embodies one of the poem's major themes: appearance differs forms reality.

In the second stanza, the "eternal note of sadness" struck the final line of the first stanza is given a historical dimension and universalized by the allusion to Sophocles, the great Greek tragedian of fifth-century B.C. Athens. We become aware that the sadness and misery the speaker refers to are not the consequences of some momentary despair or particular historical event but are rather perennial, universal conditions of man's mortal life. Indeed, the allusion to Sophocles and the Aegean extends the feeling not only over centuries but over an immense geographical area, from Aegean to the English Channel.

The third stanza develops further the dominant sea imagery. But the real, literal seas of the earlier stanza now become a metaphor for faith, perhaps religious faith, which once gave unity and meaning to man's life but now has ebbed away and left man stranded, helpless, bereft of virtually any defenses against sadness and misery. The "bright girdle furled" suggesting a happy and universal state, turns into a "roar" down the "naked shingles of the world".

In the final stanza, the poet, therefore, turns to his beloved, to their love for each other as the only possible hope, meaning and happiness in such a world, and his words to her echo the imagery of the opening lines with the important difference that the controlling verb *IS* of the opening lines, denoting the actual and the real, is now replaced by the word *SEEMS*. The beautiful world is an illusion that conceals the bleak truth that the world provides no relief for man's misery. This grim realization leads to the powerful final image which compares man's life to a battle of armies at night. We have moved from the calm, serene, moon-bathed loveliness of the opening scene to an image of violence in a dark world where it is impossible to distinguish friends from foe or indeed even to understand what is happening.

"Dover Beach" is then, a meditation upon the irremediable pain and anguish of human existence, in the face of which the only possibility for joy and love and beauty is to be found in an intimate relationship between two human beings. The depth of the opening lines of the beauty of the scene. The first eight lines move with quiet ease and flow with liquids and nasals, a movement enhanced by the balancing effect of the caesuras. In lines 9 to 14, the sounds

also echo the sense, for now, the sounds are much harsher as the plosives intrude and most of the lines are broken irregularly by more than one caesuras.

We have already noted that the dominant image of the poem, the key to the poem's structure, is the sea. It is the real sea the speaker describes in the opening stanza, but when it sounds the "eternal note of sadness", the sea becomes symbolic. In the second stanza, the speaker is reminded of another real sea, the Aegean, achieved, not only at the literal level but at the symbolic level. The third stanza author develops the sea image but presents something of a problem, for it is not clear what the speaker means by "Faith". If he means religious faith, and that seems most likely, we face the problem of determining what period of history Arnold is alluding to. "Dover Beach" establishes two reference points in time – the present and the fifth-century B.C. Athens – that are related to each other by negative auditory images. Since the function of the lines about the Sea of Faith is to provide a sharp contrast to the present and fifth-century Athens, the time when the Sea of Faith was full must lie somewhere between these two points or earlier than the fifth century. Since a formalist critic deals only with the work itself and since there appears to be nothing elsewhere in the poem that will allow us to make a choice, we might conclude that these lines weaken the poem.

The final stanza, however, presents the most serious problem. The lines are indeed moving and memorable, poignant in the speaker's desperate turning to his beloved in the face of a world whose beauty is a deception, and powerful in their description of that world,

especially in the final image of ignorant armies clashing by night. But the formalist critic will ask, what has become of the sea image? Is it not strange that the image which had dominated the poem throughout, has given it its unity, is in the climactic stanza simply dropped? On the face of this, formalist critics would have to conclude that the abandonment of the unifying image in the concluding stanza is a serious structural weakness. On the other hand, a formalist critic might commend the poet for his effective alternation of visual and auditory imagery throughout the poem. The first four lines of the final stanza return to visual images of an illusory “good” world and conclude with a simile that fuses a somber vision of darkness and night, with the harsh auditory images of alarms and clashes.

### **Sociological Criticism in Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach***

In contrast to the formalist critic, the sociological critic asserts that since all men are the products of a particular time and place, we can ever fully understand a work without some understanding of the social forces that molded the author and all that he did and thought. The sociological critic feels that the formalistic and self-evident fact that authors do not (and can not) divest themselves of all the shaping forces of their history and environment. Consequently, the critic must look to those forces if he is to understand a man’s work.

To understand “Dover Beach” we must, according to the sociological critic, know something about the major intellectual and social currents of Victorian England and how Arnold responded to them. By the time Arnold was born in 1822, the rapid advance in technology that had begun with the Industrial

Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was producing severe strains on the social and intellectual fabric. An agrarian economy was giving way to an industrial economy, and the transition was long and painful. The new economy was creating a new merchant middle class whose growing wealth and power made it increasingly difficult for the upper classes to maintain exclusive political power. These years were marked by severe social crises: depression, unemployment, rising. Indeed during these critical years when England was attempting to cope with the new problems of urban industrialism, the agitation and rioting of the lower classes created genuine fears of revolution.

The ferment was no less intense and disruptive in the world of intellectual and theoretical debate. Despite sectarian strife, perhaps the greatest stabilizing force in pre-industrial England was religion. It offered answers to the ultimate questions of human existence. The technology that made industrialism possibly grew out of the scientific discoveries and methodologies that challenged some man’s fundamental assumptions and faith.

Matthew Arnold, born into a substantial middle-class family and educated at England’s finest schools, established himself early as an important poet and as one of the leading social critics of the period. In much of his poetry and his voluminous prose writings. Arnold addressed critical questions of his time. The old values, particularly religious were crumbling under the onslaught of new ideas; Arnold recognized that a simple reactionary defense of the old values was not possible. Unless some new system of individuals. And since the destiny of the nation was devolving into hands of the middle class, Arnold spent much of his career

attempting to show the middle class, Arnold spent much of his career attempting to show the middle class the way to a richer and fuller life.

For an understanding of "Dover Beach", however, Arnold's attempt to define and advance cultural values is less important than his confrontation with the pain and dilemma of his age. Caught in what he called in one of his poems "this strange disease of modern life", Arnold found that modern discoveries made religious faith impossible, and yet he yearned for the security and certainty of his childhood faith. In his darker and more despairing moments, it seemed to him that with the destruction of old values the world was dissolving into chaos and meaninglessness.

"Dover Beach" expresses one of those dark moments in Arnold's life – a moment shared by many of Arnold's contemporaries and modern readers as well who, in many years, instinctively the responses are still very much with us. Simply stated, it is a poem in which the speaker declares that even in a setting of the utmost loveliness and tranquility, the uncertainty and chaos so permeate the life and consciousness of the speaker that everything he sees, everything he meditates upon, is infected. The scene of silent loveliness described in the opening lines turns into a grating roar that sounds the eternal note of sadness.

In the second stanza, the speaker turns to ancient Greece and its greatest tragic playwright to generalize and thereby lessen and defend against the overwhelming despair he feels. If the confusion and chaos of modern life are part of the eternal human condition, then perhaps it can be borne with resignation. Yet the

third stanza seems to deny this possibility, for it suggests that at some other time in man's history Christian faith gave meaning and direction to life but now that faith is no longer available.

Trapped in such a world, the speaker turns in the final stanza – turns with a kind of desperation because no other possibilities seem to exist – to his beloved and their relationship as the only chance of securing from a meaningless and grim life some fragment of meaning and joy. Everything else, he tells her, everything positive in which man might place his faith, is a mere "seeming". This real-world is a powerful and stinging modern image, is like two armies battling in darkness. Whether or not the final image is an allusion to a particular historical battle, it is a graphic image to describe what modern life seemed to a sensitive Victorian who could see no way out of the dilemma.

For the sociological critic, then, an understanding of "Dover Beach" requires some knowledge of the major stresses and intellectual issues of Victorian England, because the poem is a response to and comment upon those issues by one of the great Victorian poets and social critics. Our description of those issues and Arnold's ideas is extremely sketchy and selective; it merely illustrates the approach a sociological critic might take in dealing with the poem. Despite the formalist critic charge that the sociological matters that he loses sight of the work he set out to investigate, the sociological critic would agree with the comment made by Leon Trotsky, the Russian Marxist revolutionary, in his book *Literature and Revolution*:

*The methods of formal analysis are necessary, but insufficient. You may count up*

*the alliterations in popular proverbs, classify metaphors, count up the number of vowels and consonants in a wedding song. It will undoubtedly enrich our knowledge of folk art, in one way or another; but if you don't know the peasant system of sowing, and the life that is based on it, ... you don't know the part the s... plays, and if you have not mastered the meaning of the church calendar to the peasant, of the time when the peasant marries, or when the peasant women give birth, you will have only the outer shell of folk art, but the kernel will not have been reached.*

As a final note, a few remarks need to be made on a special form of sociological criticism, namely, ideological criticism. While the sociological critic differs from the formalistic critic in his approach to literature, the sociological critic tends to share with the formalistic critic the view that works of art are important in their own right and do not need to be justified in terms of any other human activity or interest.

### **Psychoanalytic Criticism in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach***

Psychoanalytic criticism always proceeds to form a set of principles that describe the inner life of all men and women. Though there is now a great diversity of conviction about the nature of inner life and how to deal with it, certainly all analysts, and all psychoanalytic critics, assume that the development of the psyche in humans is analogous to the development of the physique. Much of that criticism is based on a relatively few universal

principles set down by Sigmund Freud which describe the dominating human drives and the confusions they produce.

"Dover Beach" is richly suggestive of the fundamental psychic dilemma of man in civilization. And since man in civilization is, by definition, discontent because his social duties require him to repress his primal urges, it is not surprising that the opening visual images of the poem which creates a lovely and tranquil scene -- calm sea, glimmering cliffs, a tranquil bay, sweet night air -- are quickly modified by the ominous "only" that begins the seventh line of the poem. That "only", in the sense of "in contrast", is addressed to a lady who has been called to the window to see the quiet and reassuring scene. No reassurance finally remains as the images shift to an auditory mode:

*Listen! You hear the grating roar*

*Of pebbles which the waves drawback, and fling*

The tone is strangely changed, the emotional impact of "roar" suggesting something quite different from the serenity of the opening image, and the second stanza closes with the sounds of the surf bringing "the eternal note of sadness in".

Why should sadness be eternal note? And why is the visual imagery largely pleasing while the auditory imagery is largely ominous? The answer to these questions provides the focus for a psychoanalytic reading of the poem.

The "eternal note of sadness" (an auditory image) represents Arnold's recognition that, however sweet the night air and calm the

sea, the central human experience is sadness. At the point in the poem where that sadness is recognized, the poet recalls the great Greek tragedian Sophocles who heard that same note of sadness over 2.000 years ago. It is, after all an eternal sadness. For Sophocles, the sadness brings to mind the "turbid ebb and flow of human misery". Now Sophocles's greatest and best-known tragedy, Oedipus Rex, ends with the chorus pointing out that no man should count himself happy until at the moment of his death he can look back over a life without pain. Fate, as it afflicted Oedipus, afflicts us all. And the fate of Oedipus provided Freud with the name of that psychic mode through which we all pass. We would be all guilty of punishment. The dilemma, the guarantee of guilt or the guarantee of discontent, defines that eternal note of sadness which the poet hears.

We might go further. There is an agreement that in infancy and very early childhood the tactile and the visual senses are most important. Somewhat later auditory sense increases in importance. Consequently, the child recognizes security – certitude, peace, help for pain – tactilely and visually, in the warmth and the form of the omnipresent and succoring mother. Later, through his ears comes the angry "no!" When discipline and painful interaction with others begin, he experiences the auditory admonition which frustrates his desire. It is immensely interesting to the psychoanalytic critic that in "Dover Beach" the tranquilities are visual but the ominous sadness is auditory—the "roar" which brings in the "note" of sadness, the "roar" of the sea of faith retreating to the breath of the night-wind, the "alarms", and the "clash" of ignorant armies by night.

We need to look at the opening lines of the final stanza, certainly, the principal agency developed by the society to enforce the morality it required was religion. Ancient religious teaching recognized those very primal urges that Freud systematically described and made them offenses against God, Faith, then became the condition that made society possible; religious injunction and religious duty served as a sort cultural superego, a mass of conscience, that not only controlled human aggression but substituted for it a set of ideal behavior patterns that could guarantee a set of gratifying rewards for humanity. Hence the poet recalls:

*The sea of faith*

*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's  
shore*

*Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.*

This is a strange image, surely the emotional tone of "the folds of a bright girdle furled" is positive – that bright girdle is a good thing. Yet, that girdle is restrictive. It is furled ( i.e. bound) around the land. In short, the Sea of Faith contains limits, strictly controls the land. In the context of the poem, that containment is a good thing, for without the restricting Sea of Faith the world, despite appearances,

*Hath neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
no certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.*

Without strong religious faith, as a cultural superego, the primal aspect of men are released – aggression comes to dominate human activity:

*And we are here as on darkling plain*

*Swept with confused alarms of struggle and  
flight*

*Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

A certain confusion persists. On the one hand, the Sea of Faith serves a useful function as an emblem of the superego (the conscience), the name Freud gives to the guilt-inducing mechanism that incessantly “watches” the ego to punish it for certain kinds of behavior. When it is at the full, ignorant armies, presumably, do not clash by night. On the other hand, the superego as associated with auditory imagery is ominous. It reverberates with the painful experience of frustration. Finally, however, the usefulness of the Sea of Faith is illusory. The note of sadness is eternal. Sophocles, long before the foundation of Christianity, head it. What emerges from the poem’s images, understood psychoanalytically, is a progression from a mild note of sadness (frustrated desires) to alarms and clashes (threatening uncontrolled aggressiveness desire). The calm sea and the fair moon suggest a land of dream – illusory and without substance. Sadness, struggle, and flight are real.

We need to deal with the girl to whom the poet speaks, we need to understand his relationship with her. The quest for that understanding involves another psychoanalytic principle, another set of images, and a reconsideration of the image of the Sea of Faith.

In the earliest infancy, the ego, the sense of self, is not yet formed. The infant child considers the mother, particularly the mother’s breast, as part of himself. A gradual and painful recognition must occur in which the child is dissociated from the mother. The process begins with birth trauma. In the womb, the child is utterly safe, never hungry, never cold. After birth, there are discomforts. But for a time the mother and her nourishing breast are so much present that the infant does not distinguish where he ends and the other, the mother, begins. But this state of affairs does not continue, and the infant becomes increasingly dissociated. Slowly he learns what is “him” and what is not, what he can control by will (moving his arms, say) and what he cannot (his mother’s availability). In short, he learns the borders of his being, the edges of his existence.

Images of borders and edges constantly recur in the poem. Such images may be taken as emblems of dissociation – that is, symbols of the separation between the warm, nourishing mother and the child. Consequently, they are symbols of painful dissatisfaction. The Sea of Faith that

*..... round earth’s shore*

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled

Seems, on the other hand, much like that warm, encompassing mother who, to the infant, was a part of himself. But dissociation occurs, and the distressed poet perceives that comforting entity withdrawing, retreating “down the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world.” He has an edge and can no longer reside safely in close association with the source of comfort and



security. Instantly the poet turns to the girl and says:

*Ah, love, let us be true*

*To one another*

He perceives his companion not erotically but as the source of security, as a replacement for the withdrawing emblematic mother. He offers his "love" a mutual fidelity not to reassure her of his commitment but to assure himself of hers. He wishes to dissolve the edges of his ego and associate, as in infancy, with his "mother". Such an association will protect him from a world in which "ignorant armies clash by night."

## CONCLUSION

Different points of view would likely lead to different ways of approaching a work of literature. Yet, the different results of those analyses are not contradictory. They even compliment, for each would contribute different information which could, in turn, enrich the reader's knowledge of the work.

Such analyses are very helpful for students of the English Department, especially in the classes of literary appreciation and criticism. Learning a certain language can not be separated from understanding the culture of the people using that language. One of the ways of learning the culture is through people's literary work. Those three approaches to a work of literature would widen student's horizons in viewing literary works which in turn would contribute to their knowledge of the culture of the people from creating the work.

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