

Dover Beach: Literary Devices at Work

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ABSTRACT

Dover Beach is essentially a poem that can be read as a dirge for the faith once alive in the people of Arnold's England. With profound realisation about the severity of loss that England suffered by losing her faith in religion, Arnold has composed this poem, where he first laments the death of religion and then comes up with an antidote for the consequent despair. Arnold has carried out this process in a very solemn poetic way by making use of as many literary devices as he seems to have had knowledge of. Ever since "The Canterbury Tales" were conceived, the use of literary devices has been inevitable. Be it the simile Chaucer uses in his poem "To Rosamond", where he compares the man in love to fish, cooked in sauce or the metaphysical conceits, popularised by Donne, literary devices have not only served as embellishments for poetry but also as carrier of themes, meaning and central thought of poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Victorian age, 1837 – 1902, has been called as the age of doubt and despair. Although England was economically and politically on the acme of success, as almost half the world was subordinate to her, yet something was amiss. It was also a period of rapid industrialisation and science was also progressing. But amidst all this, Victorian age is known in history as the age of despair and doubt. It is an irony that the things that were supposed to change the fate of the Kingdom in a good way, changed a lot of things but in a negative way. In 1859 Charles Darwin came up with his famous work and published "Origin of Species", which led to hue and cry among the people of England. This book tried to trace evolution of man and linked the origin of men to monkeys. This assertion went against Christian beliefs and stories of genesis as a result of which people saw that their religious beliefs were being shaken. This led to the religious crisis of the age. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* came in 1867. *Das Kapital* talked at length about oppression which was normalised in economic spheres in England. Marx questioned oppression and provided a new way of looking at power and God. He believed religion to be opium of masses which seduced them by providing illusions for calm and peace. To add to all this chaos, industrialisation saw a changed attitude of people towards nature. People in masses started to migrate to urban London. As a result of which the urban areas were overcrowded and this led to the development of unhygienic slums and overcrowded areas. Industrialisation deadened

emotions of people towards nature. Many poets lamented this in their poetry.

William Wordsworth in his work worth mentioning "The World is Too Much With Us", writes, "Little we see in nature that is ours", Mathew Arnold happened to live during these unfortunate times. Born in 1822, Matthew Arnold is a representative poet of Victorian age. Along with Tennyson and Browning, Mathew Arnold has written many poems that express Victorian anxiety. Tennyson's "In Memoriam" is a specimen of Victorian era. In his *The Scholar Gypsy* also, Arnold has expressed his disappointment in modern times which are defined by isolation and anxiety.

Dover Beach

Dover beach is a poem of four stanzas. Known to have been written when Arnold was on his honeymoon with his new wife Francis Lucy in 1851, this poem was published in 1859. Written in the form of a dramatic monologue, Arnold has very effectively lamented the loss of Christian faith in England during the mid 19th century.

The emotions are so real that a reader feels cathartic. This brief poem makes use of literary devices in galore the artistic effect of which can be discerned when one reads the poem minutely and feels the emotions and thoughts that the poet has tried to convey.

Dover Beach: A Romantic Monologue

Dover Beach can safely be called a love poem or a romantic poem. What more romantic can a poem be than the one written on honeymoon? Love and loyalty to each other is the only drug for the diseased modern world. This poem is a dramatic monologue which is spoken by one person, who also has a listener as his companion, who listens silently. "Dramatic monologue is a lengthy speech by single person." In a dramatic monologue there is "a single person who is patently not the poet...this person addresses and interacts with one or more other people...." (Glossary of Literary Terms, M H Abrams and G G Harpham, 2011, 96).

In a dramatic monologue, therefore only one person speaks to a listener who is silent. Arnold has very beautifully made use of this genre to express his fears, doubts and worries as a Victorian man who has seen faith and hope crumble in his English brethren.

The speaker of the poem is addressing a listener, first describing the scenery of the Dover beach and then slowly creating gloomy air. We come to know about the presence of the listener in line six first when the speaker says “come to the window, sweet is the night air”. In line number nine, the speaker says “Listen! you hear the grating roar”. The speaker wants the listener to listen to the irritating and unwanted noise which can be heard when the water of faith has dried up and only the pebbles are left. In line 27, the speaker has a message or an advice for the listener. The advice is that of being true to each other. The speaker believes that love is the only antidote for the despair England is going through. If anything at all, it is love that can sustain people in the world where there is no joy or certitude and no peace or hope.

Setting: Dover Beach: The Protagonist

Dover is a port in the South Eastern coast of Kent, England, 21 miles away from Calais in France. Also called “Key to England”, Dover is a connect between France and England. The poem gets its title from the Dover Beach which also provides the poem its setting. Arnold has very intelligently made use of this setting for the purpose of emphasising the theme of the poem. The speaker, along with the listener, is in a room, as we have the speaker say, “ come to the window...”. Through the window what can be seen is a very beautiful and serene scene. The sea is calm, the tide is full and the moon lies fair. This peaceful setting of the poem in initial lines of the poem, conflicts with the trauma that is to follow in succeeding stanzas. The speaker talks about the French coast light that goes on and off, as if mocking and teasing the viewers, who are the speaker and the listener and also the readers. This light which “gleams and is gone”, foreshadows the “darkling plain “ and the “night” talked of in the last few lines of the poem.

This peaceful and enlightened setting is only temporary and it is going to be replaced by something very unpleasant and undesirable. The speaker brings his companion’s attention to the sweet air which is blowing and the long line of spray where the sea and the moon blanching land are united, foreshadowing the separation. The separation of the moon and the sea is figurative and that of faith and the people, literal. One can almost feel the beautiful things, just to be led to disturbing images that are to ensue.

Conflicting Imagery

The poem is rich in imagery. Arnold has used the tool of imagery to mourn the death of faith and peace. Imagery is a literary device through which writer paints a picture with the use of words. When a writer describes anything in such a way that we can picture the mental image, we call it to be an imagery.

“Image is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception refer to in a point or other work of literature...”, (Glossary of Literary Terms, M H Abrams and G G Harpham, 2011, 172)

Dover Beach is full of images. Arnold has not made use of just one type of imagery, but a number of them can be found in this poem. The imagery used in the poem has made it easier for Arnold to set up the tone and aura of the poem. Dover Beach has a peaceful and mellow opening where the listener and the speaker are in a room. The speaker wants his listener to notice the view outside the window. He deliberates upon the scenery. There is a sea which is calm, “the tide is full”, “the moon lies fair”. This is a scene which is no less than a blessing in the time of industrialization when people were distanced from nature.

The image of the light of the French coast which “gleams and is gone” is so vivid and almost real. A reader does not even need to close his eyes to picture this image. The speaker further goes on to count one more blessing which is the long line of spray, where the sea meets the moon blanching land.

But this is not it. The imagery used in rest of the poem is not as pleasant. Arnold has used the auditory image to describe the chaos and disturbance that Victorian Christians were going through. The sound imagery of “grating roar”, pebbles being drawn back and flung are in complete contrast to what we saw in the first stanza.

The imagery of waves blowing with disturbing “tremulous cadence” is harbinger of sadness and hopelessness which has been there all the time. Tremulous cadence gives the atmosphere a shivering quality as if the crisis of faith has led people to tremble in insecurity, fear and worry. By blending positive imagery and negative imagery in the poem, Arnold suggests the conflicting minds of English Christian of that time who were suffering from crisis of faith. People were torn between whether to go with the lines of “Origin of Species “ or with the hymns of the Bible.

Classical Allusion

“Allusion is a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or or to another literary work or passage.” (Glossary of Literary Terms, M H Abrams and G G Harpham, 2011, p. 13)

Arnold was very impressed by classical poets and their “high seriousness”. Dover beach has an allusion to one of the best classical playwrights, Sophocles. In stanza 2, Arnold alludes to Sophocles and says that the writer of Antigone must have heard the same disturbing noise on the Aegean Sea. The speaker says that Sophocles must have heard the same note of sadness and that of human misery.

By making mention of Sophocles, Arnold means to say that the human misery is not new but has been there since ages.

In the last stanza of the poem also the poet has made reference to the battle of Peloponnesian. This battle is known for being fought at night where neither of the parties of the war could tell their friends and foes apart.

The Greek writer Thucydides wrote an account of battle of Epipolae and this book was translated by Arnold's father, Thomas Arnold. Arnold must have gone through that book and learnt about the Peloponnesian war and used it as a reference in his poem. The poet means to say that if we are not true to each other and if people don't love each other and keep fighting each other like the two parties fought in the battle off Peloponnesian, there is no hope for our sustenance and survival in the world. To Arnold only love and honesty can prop us to live in the times when there is no hope of survival. The world which is bereft of peace and hope can be made a better place by love and honesty only.

Metaphors

Metaphor means the direct comparison of two dissimilar things. Arnold has used metaphors like "The sea is calm tonight", to acknowledge the security and peace of mind that religion provides. When people are under the shelter of faith, the world is serene and worth living in. Once faith is replaced by modernization and industrialization, there is a storm in the sea. Another metaphor used is "sweet is the night-air!". Again the poet is explaining how it feels to be firm in one's faith. The sweetness of dark night is possible only because of one's faith.

Personification

When a poet attributes animate characteristics to inanimate objects he is said to have used the device of personification. By attributing the quality of calmness to the sea, the poet accentuates the idea that religion is a direct source of calm and composure for people.

Before the scientific discoveries, theories, inventions and industrialisation, there was a sense of certitude within Christians. Using another personification, Arnold says that the tide was also full when people were holding on to the clutches of religion. He means to underscore the feeling of completeness and satisfaction that faith bestows.

The moon is described as being fair, thus personifying it.

By attributing the quality of fairness which is generally associated with beautiful ladies, the poet highlights the effect of faith on one's surroundings. When the faith of people is intact, everything around feels ecstatic.

Anaphora

Anaphora is the repetition of a word in a poem or a literary piece of work. In this poem, the examples of anaphora can be found in last few lines. Arnold thinks of the world as a place with dreams "so various, so beautiful, so new". By repeating the word "so" he presents the variety that the world has to offer. He is also conveying the idea that if people have faith and don't meander outside it, the life has beautiful shades and is worth living. The poet writes about the world where there is, "neither joy, nor love, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain". By repeating the word "nor", the poet wants to emphasise on the helplessness that the world is going through. With each nor, one realises how abject the world is when the sea of faith dries up. With the demise of faith few of the most important and needed things have left the world.

Alliteration

"Alliteration is the repetition of a speech sound in a sequence of nearby words. The term is usually applied only to consonants, and only when the recurrent sound is made emphatic because it begins word or a stressed syllable within a word." (A Glossary of Literary Terms, M H Abrams and G G Harpham, 2011, p. 12).

A beautiful example of alliteration in Dover Beach can be found in the third stanza where the poet writes, "left like the folds of a bright girdle furled". The repetition of consonant sounds 'b', 'f', 'r' is very beautifully and rhythmically made by the poet. He means to say that the sea of faith once acted like a security belt for people but now with the death of religion, the sea of faith does not provide security to people anymore.

Enjambment

The word enjambment comes from French, which means "a striding over". Enjambment is a poetic device by the use of which a poet continues a verse or phrase of his poem to the next line without pausing or stopping. In Dover Beach, plenty of examples of enjambment can be found. In the first stanza only the poet writes:

"...the tide is full, the moon lies fair, Upon the straits on the French coast the light Gleams and is gone....."

In line 7, the poet writes "listen! you hear the grating roar Of pebbles which the waves drawback, and fling At their return, up the high strand

Begin, and cease, and then begin again."

By making the use of run on lines, without pause, the poet actually means to say that the misery and the pain and the hopelessness of Victorian Christians is never ending. It is a

persistent crisis which people have to suffer from without any pauses or stops. It is the suffering that ancients had to go through, whose grieving was heard by Sophocles on the Aegean Sea, and it continues to be there hundreds of years later, witnessed by the Victorian poet.

CONCLUSION

The poem "Dover Beach", wakes up a reader to the importance of religion and faith. It makes one realize the anxieties of modern world where the absence of faith and calm has left a huge void. But Arnold doesn't leave his readers without a remedy. He advises us to love each other and be honest to make the world a happy place. With the

help of literary devices, Arnold has written a didactic poem that will teach the generations to come.

REFERENCES

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