Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach": A Cultural Materialist Reading .

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Abstract: Despite the fact that almost all critics agree that Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" is greatly important, many of them have found the poem difficult or enigmatic. Arnold's "Dover Beach" encompasses many of the essential aspects of the Victorian age. This is why this article has adopted the cultural materialist approach to analyse this poem. Cultural Materialism takes to its focal concern the social, the political, the economic and the religious dimensions of the poem side by side with the literary aspects of the text. Cultural Materialism, thus, avails itself of the contextual discourse that helps with analysing the text; it also looks at the text as important in revealing many of the contextual aspects in which the text was written and published. Through this approach, the cultural (social, religious, political and economic) aspects of the poem are investigated side by side with the literary analysis of the text...

Keywords: Poetry, Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach", Cultural Materialism

Introduction

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) has stood out as one of England's greatest poets. Ever since his time, he has, undoubtedly, been considered one of the greatest English poets, highly esteemed and greatly cherished by poets. There have been debates about many poets and the value or authenticity of their contributions. Arnold's own has been held in such a high esteem that only few poets have attained. Thomas Hardy always thought of him as a "literary authority" (Davie 10). From Arnold, Hardy learnt that poetry should be a "criticism of life" (Davie 61). In his book A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, Raman Selden asserts the permeating influence Arnold had on such critics as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and William Empson (15). Elsewhere in the book, Selden admits of Arnold's unignorable influence on a generation of notable critics, foremost among which was F. R. Leavis, who was "profoundly influenced by Matthew Arnold" (24). Even Eliot who attacked the Romantics and the Victorians greatly, was remarkably reserved when it came to discussing Arnold the poet and critic. Thus, while Eliot, in his book The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, was scathingly critical of Romanticism, as a poetic movement, and Romantics and Victorian poets, and while he called Romanticism a poetic "disease" (Eliot 128), he aggrandized Matthew Arnold as a poet-critic.

This article aims at investigating M. Arnold's "Dover Beach" to show how this poem stands out prism-like of the Victorian culture. The article aims at providing a cultural materialist reading of M. Arnold's poem "Dover Beach", a poem that is believed to represent the worries, cares, fears, and hopes that, above all else, underlay Victorian England.

Arnold's reputation as a poet has, more than anything else, been associated with this very poem...

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Difficulty, it is true, sometimes arises from familiarity. Some of the poem's passages and metaphors, asserts a critic, have become so well-known that they are hard to see with "fresh eyes" (Akraminejad). The poem has, indeed, been accepted as signposting the Victorian era. Ostensibly, the poem is simple. The speaker in the poem describes the beauty of time and place where he and his companion (mostly his wife) are, then he reflects on some of the problems that preoccupied his mind as the poem proceeds, the speaker gets further and further busy thinking about problems that troubled the age and afflicted and blighted one of Britain's greatest poets of all times. The simplicity of the poem is only deceptive as the poem teems with ideas worthy of exploring

The article assumes that despite its great importance in the poet's career, and despite its cultural significance, Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" has not received due critical attention from readers and critics alike. Many of the facets the poem underscores have remained unexplored. This article endeavours to provide an in-depth, and encompassing analysis of this poem. In so doing, the article will show how the Victorian world was masterly encapsulated by the poet in this poem. Many poetry sites place this specific poem on the top of their list of selected Victorian poems suggested for reading as it marks a passageway to such the upheavally diverse Victorian world. The article will look at the macrocosm of the Victorian era through the microcosm of the poem.

The cultural materialist approach will be applied. Coined by Marvin Harris in his 1968 text, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, Cultural Materialism explores the text as well as the paratextual contexts: social, political, religious, etc. during which the text was published. The theory denounces the overgeneralising assumptions of the universality (universal truths) of literature. It, simultaneously, rejects Formalist and New Critical ontological ideas that the text is self-sufficient in the sense that it includes everything a critic needs for an analysis (interpretation) of a 'poem', a term that New Critics use synonymously with any literary text. Cultural Materialism insists on "studying literary texts in relation to their historical, social and cultural contexts"; the theory, thus, avails itself of the textual as well as the contextual (cultural) availabilies that help with interpreting a literary text. Jointly, the textual as well as the contextual (social, historical, religious) elements comprise a composite that should be considered for better evaluation of the literary text. The approach takes to its pivotal concern the mutual relationship of the textuality of the context and the contextuality of the text. From this perspective, Cultural Materialism is comparable to the *Gestalt* theory that pinpoints the idea that our minds tend to understand better when different elements are grouped together (Morner 92). However, whereas the *Gestalt* theory focuses on visual elements, Cultural Materialism takes literary texts to its focal concern.

Cathrine Belsey, Jonathan Dollimore and Allan Sinfield, three leading cultural materialists, pinpoint the indispensable significance of examining "the historical circumstances and conditions under which texts were written, disseminated and read". In so doing, assert cultural materialists, a critic can uncover the potentially subversive elements of literary texts: what they say about the dominant ideas of the period in which they were written, and what ideological perspectives, intentional or unintentional, they reveal (Padley 151). Conformably with Peter Barry's views, a cultural materialist attempts to "recover" the "histories" of the text (187). This theory gets down to the social interactions that affected common people's lives, thoughts, and outlooks on life. This accounts for the affinity existing between Cultural Materialism and Marxism (Buzney). Originally, Marxism is "a set of social, economic, and political ideas that its followers believe will enable them to interpret and change their world" (Bressler 273). It should be noted that Cultural Materialism takes to its focal concern both the literary text and the (political, social, economic, religious) *milieu* that produced it. Charles Bressler refers to such elements collectively as the political unconscious. A cultural materialist, asserts Bressler, "will expose the political unconscious of the text" (184). It is appropriate at this point to explore the multifacetedness of Matthew Arnold: the educationist, the poet and the critic. As this will help unveil important dimensions of the poem.

Arnold the Educationist

Arnold spent about thirty five years as an Inspector of Schools, a job that secured him financially; he would earn him £ 700 a year, and, more importantly even, through the job he acquired a first-hand

knowledge of all sorts of minds, dialects, traditions, social norms and cultural backgrounds of that greatly intricate tapestry that is simply called Britain. In 2011, Michael Gove, a former British Secretary of State, made a plea for schools to return to traditional teaching values, invoking Arnold's 'civilizing power of the humanities' argument which was the dominant rationale for class readers

The Eminent Victorian and muscular liberal, Matthew Arnold encapsulated what liberal learning should be. He wanted to introduce young minds to the best that had been thought and written…All children have a right to the best…it takes effort to prise open the door to his world. That effort is rewarded a thousandfold…all these creations of one mind can, today, move and affect the minds of millions with a profundity almost no other work of man can achieve. (qtd in Mason 142-3)

Arnold's dedication, remarkably emanating from a recognition of his responsibility as an educationist made him iconic to the English nation.

Matthew Arnold: The Poet-Critic

Arnold was a Professor of poetry at Oxford for some time. His increasing sense of the responsibilities he had to undertake as a poet turned his vocation as a poet into that of a leading guardian of the English culture. When dealing with the modern world [Arnold's] tone of voice is educated, wistful, regretful – not unlike Tennyson's, but much less personally involved (Bernard 130). He was concerned with the survival of culture and, above all, "the problem of how religion could be adapted to the modern mind" (Merryn 159). This encouraged Arnold to speak in his own voice, in a way that distinguished him from his contemporaries. In many of Arnold's poems, the speaker is identifiable with the poet himself. This made Arnold's voice easily distinguishable among his contemporaries who created countless *personae* different from themselves in their poems. In his book *How Poetry Works*, P. D. Roberts finds that even though the "references" "'I', 'you', 'us' and 'we'" are "unexplained", they are meaningful (65). In fact, unlike Tennyson and Browning, Arnold usually speaks in his own voice with neither dramatic monologue nor narrative (Ward 73-4). His poetry does nothing but "face the great changes of mid-Victorian England this "strange disease of modern life", which he felt like a personal burden (Ward 73).

By the time he was forty years old, Arnold had written most of his poetic *oeuvre*. For rest of his life, a period of about two and a half decades, he was more of a literary, social and religious critic than a poet. In its entirety, however, his literary, social and religious critical output can simply, like his poetry, be described as 'criticism of life'. Prior to getting to grips with further ideas this article is about to tackle, Arnold's life-long adopted maxim of poetry as "criticism of life" should be disambiguated as it has more often than not been misunderstood and misinterpreted. Commenting on what he meant by poetry being a "criticism of life", Arnold proclaimed, "it is the critic's first duty – prior even to his duty of stigmatising the bad – to welcome everything that is good" (Coombes 139).

A few poet-critics can compete with the paramount poet-critic-intellectual Arnold has been. Arnold's poeticity, criticism, views on education, religion and the different aspects of life at this time still seep vibrantly into the different disciplines of English literature, literary and social criticism, education, religion, and culture in general. No treatise about the English identity can, in any way, ignore the contributions of this profoundly influential figure. His has proved to be such a remarkably far-reaching influence that enriched English literature greatly. Many politicians, the former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2019-2022) for instance, have acknowledged the influence of such a profoundly influential poet (Brett). Indeed, even American Lawmakers have found Arnold's views, both on poetry and criticism, invaluable (Richardson). Significantly enough, during his own lifetime, M. Arnold

became a hugely influential critic, and was a marked influence on some of the 'modern' authors such as T. S. Eliot and the critic F. R. Leavis. Increasing interest in literary theory has led to a resurgence of interest in his critical writing, partly for its literary and theoretical content but partly because of what it reveals about the late-Victorian attitudes and thinking. (Stephen 255)

This quotation significantly ushers readers into a consideration of how the poet-critic Matthew Arnold could, through his criticism-of-life poetry, evaluate life as he saw it, and, as importantly, pass

essential judgments on it.

A true and genuine influence Arnold's impact has been on the English cultural scene. His "in-fluence", to employ Seamus Heaney's way of writing the word (Heaney 44), seeped into the psyches of his contemporaries as well as those of the following generations not only poets, critics but educationists as well. He strove to bring about a change that would help the culture of his nation survive. His impact still remains far-reaching. Robert Bernard comments that "Often one feels that he works out his relationship with the cool, ugly, post-Christian world *via* the works of other great writers. When one comes back to re-reading him, one finds many memorable passages that one feels one has always known, but it is astonishing how often these refer to other authors" (130).

The article assumes that in this poem Arnold crystalised, so to speak, the *zeitgeist* of the Victorian age. The poem, thus, stands out as epitomizing one of the world's most important cultures. With words, the poem draws a great, minute mosaic of its times. Comparable to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", this poem dwells and casts light on all aspects of the Victorian culture. Arnold's poem shows how the mindscape finds its counterpart in the external landscape. This is worth considering. Arnold's "Dover Beach" has proved to be such an inevitable gateway elemental to exploring Victorian England with its, niceties and nuances. This is what this investigation of the poem proposes to do. The poem encompasses, the Victorian era in such a way that no other poem has probably done. Indeed, the like of such a poem is not only hard to find out among Arnold's own *oeuvre*, but even among the great poems of the poet's contemporaries.

"Dover Beach" was first published in 1867, in *New Poems*; the poem was written many years earlier. It opens quite simply with the speaker describing a picturesque view of the location (Dover) at night. Dover, in Kent, is one of England's most ancient harbours. The city has an antique history not only of trade and cross cultural communications, but, more importantly, of wars and conquests; for many centuries, Dover has been looked at as the gateway to England. Spurr comments on the importance of the location of Dover by pointing out that "The setting has its particularity as it marks the nearest point between England and Europe; it was through this very point, however, that many conquerors invaded England. In addition, the location is marked by its being "a reassuring resonance of Englishness" (16). Dover overlooks the English Channel (strait) that separates England from the landmass of Europe. It can, thus, be looked at as epitomizing England. On the opposite side of the English Dover lies the French Calais, that the poet refers to in the poem.

Many critics have looked at "Dover Beach" as a gauge indicative of the poet's prowess and craftsmanship. The poem's sophisticated making aroused many critics to accept the challenge of trying, each in his own way, to evaluate the poem. Many critics and readers have got astonished by the intricate making of the poem which attests to the greatness of the poet behind the lines. Even though the poem has baffled many readers, who still look at the poem as enigmatic, most readers and critics believe that the poem is weighty and praiseworthy. The richness of ideas underlying the poem urged Stefan Collini, a notable literary critic, to assume that "Dover Beach" is a difficult poem to analyze. The poem laconically and tersely contracts in thirty seven lines a great span of the Victorian era that many assert to be of crucial importance in the history of Britain. A meticulous investigation of this poem will, undoubtedly, unveil lots of the constituent elements that went into the making of this well-knit poem.

The Poet as a Critic of Life

"'Dover Beach' is a criticism of life", asserts Spurr, and continues, "each verse-paragraph contains a word or phrase of what can be dubbed criticism of life (Spurr 16). The way the poem introduces readers to the intricate Victorian world is comparable to the door that led Tom, in P. Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, to the Victorian world, and the small hole that Sissy Jupe peeped through and observed a whole world (of the circus) in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. It is also comparable to the handful of dust that can show readers fear (of all types) that T. S. Eliot's *persona* promises to show readers in "The Waste Land". Compact as it is, the poem is also comparable to the lamp that can contain and release a giant, as in the story of "Aladdin and His Wonder Lamp" in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Thus, despite its economy, the poem teems with elemental insights that should be unveiled for this

epoch-encapsulating poem to be properly evaluated.

Two astonishing facts about this poem lie in numbers. The lines of the poem are 37; in 1837, Queen Victoria ascended the throne. The number 37 seems to encode, and historically chronicle, the poet's experience of living in Victorian England. The poem is, thus, meant to be the poet's implicit comment on Queen Victoria's reign, up to 1867, the year in which the poem was published. Further, Queen Victoria was crowned when she was 18 years old. In the noticeably short line 18 of the poem, the poet speaks "Of human misery". This remarkably short line located at the centre of the poem can be taken to infer the poet's outlook on the political situation of his time. The poem can, thus, be considered as Arnold's criticism of Queen Victoria's policies, especially of the Queen's imperial expansions, that made the age come to be dubbed "England's…imperial century" (Poetry), with the hyperbolic epithet: "the empire on which the sun never set". At the zenith of her reign, Queen Victoria's imperial Britain colonised nearly one third of the globe, and it was the most resourceful third. The claim about the poet's disapproval of the British colonial expansions and the "human misery" it led to is not groundless; it can be supported by the fact that he called aristocrats (the highest social class) "barbarians" in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). In the poem, the image of clashing of armies is supportive of the poet's political stance as suggested here.

Arnold was so keen and discreet a poet that he avoided any direct confrontations with the political regime of his time. The end of the poem, comments a critic, points directly to three of the worst things that strike human fate, namely: "ignorance, violent warfare and night (darkness) (Spurr 16). The poem takes the form of dramatic monologue. Varying poetic *personae*, it is to be noted, was a popular trope that turned later on into a characterizing feature of many poems in the Victorian era. Poets of the time, foremost among whom are Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy, for instance, experimented with this trope. The latter's "Voices from Things Growing from a Country Churchyard", "A Trampwoman's Tragedy", "To an Unborn Pauper Child", "Ah! Are You Digging on my Grave", and "The Man He Killed" are all poems in which the speakers cannot be identified with the poet. The former's "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover", and "The Laboratory" are, in their turn, poems with dramatic *personae*, that is *personae* that are not identifiable with the poet. Recognizably, that tradition of dramatic monologue (dramatic *personae*) seeped remarkably into the poetic output of many poets of next generations; T. S. Eliot and Philip Larkin experimented a lot with dramatic monologue, in which (fictional) dramatic *personae*, rather than the poet, are the speakers. This accounts for Eliot's admitting that poetry is an escape from personality, not an expressing of it (Spurr 17). Eliot must have learnt this poetic practice from his predecessors, specifically Victorian poets.

In his critical treatise *The Function of Criticism* (1864), Arnold depicts the deplorable state of Victorian urban reality in his reference to dismal Nottinghamshire: "the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child!". The corruption of institutions and the grinding poverty which resulted in great suffering of millions are also exposed in the novels of Charles Dickens such as *Hard Times* (1854), in which Coketown is based on Preston, a centre of cottton manufacturing in Lancashire. In his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold ridicules the shortcomings of society in each of its classes – Barbarians, Philistines and Populace (Spurr 239). By Barbarians he meant Aristocracy, that is the hereditary ruling class that held political power but who, according to Arnold, are also "intellectually impoverished, resistant to new ideas, and focused mostly on preserving their material privileges" (Arnold).

Structurally, the poem is written in "verse-paragraphs (stanzas) with looser rhythmical and rhyming structures. Such divisions signal stages in the speaker's thought, [and] the argument of the poem. The poem is divided into four sections that jointly contribute to perfecting of the mosaic of the age. The numbers of the lines and their lengths vary significantly in each section. The first stanza has fourteen lines, the second has six, the third has eight, and the fourth has nine. The lines in the different sections total thirty seven. The first stanza opens as follows:

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,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. (*Virginia*)

This is how the speaker in the poem simply ushers readers into the poem without mentioning anything negative. The idea in the first line (sentence) is directly stated without any ambiguity or twisting of structure. This is further supported by a sequence of other romantic descriptions of the place such as the "quite" "sea", the "full" "tide", and the "fair" "moon" lying on "the strait". Such images imbue a sense of relief in readers. The stable tranquil state created is, however, perturbed by the idea in the fourth line that light which the speaker sees gleaming on the French coast "[gleams and is gone]".

Despite its heavily melancholic and pessimistic tone, "Dover Beach" is a honeymoon poem. The poem opens quite simply with the following end-stopped line: "The sea is calm tonight". In harmony with the ideas goes the structure and the diction in this first line. The poet then extends his view to give readers a panoramic view that reaches the French coast. Readers can easily be tricked by this somber mood of the poet's; they may think of the poem as a paean (pee-an), i.e. a lyric poem or song that expresses triumphant joy, or praise. His dream-like tranquility, as readers discover, soon comes to an end. After the speaker's initial descriptive opening of the seascape that harmoniously corresponds to the mindscape; the poet invites his beloved to "come to the window" to enjoy the sweet air, "Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!" The addressee is most probably Arnold's own wife.

Biographically, in 1849, Arnold proposed to Frances Lucy Wightman (1825-1901), daughter of Sir William Wightman, Judge of the Court of Queen's Bench, but the proposal was rejected by Frances's father who thought that Arnold was not financially secured enough. It should be mentioned that by that time Arnold had shown prominence and brilliance; he had actually been recognised as one of the best graduates of Oxford at the time. This is significant to the cultural materialist reading this article provides as this rejection is an indication of the fact that materialistic thought was a remarkable feature of the age. Arnold's poem "Calais Sands", published in 1850, is also believed to be the poet's expression of love to his would-be wife. His financial situation improved a lot after being employed Inspector of Schools, in April 1851, with the help of Lord Lansdowne. Arnold married Frances on 10 June1851. Around two weeks later, the couple spent few days in Dover, and then they took a ferry to Calais, and from there they travelled to Paris to spend the honeymoon there. According to biographical accounts the poem was written a few weeks, probably days, after the couple's marriage. "That was mostly the event that inspired the poet to write this poem" (Spurr 16). It is vital to reading this poem, however, to keep in mind it was not published until eighteen years later, which definitely means the poem must have undergone many essential changes and editing.

Throughout the poem, the concepts of succession and intermittence, advancing, interruptions and retreating are invested by the poet's adroit and skillful employing of sounds. Thus, while alliterative "long line", "meets the moon", "which the waves" assert sequence and succession, the caesuras, exclamation marks, full stops, and semicolons all assert interruptions and discontinuation. The long-short array of lines as they appear on the page stimulates, and represents, the very motion (the ebb and flow) of the sea waves. Thus, the uniformity with which the poem appeared, and which inculcated a sense of regularity and stability in readers, was replaced by the unrhythmic, irregular long and short lines clearly indicative of absence of order.

Significantly enough, the poet uses the landscape to reflect the British turbulent mindscape of the time. Orthography, thus, i.e. the very way the long and the short lines appear on the page, is meant to deliver a message that should not escape keen readers' attention. The lines are meant to mimic the waves, and, henceforth, the perturbed, discomforted minds that have been plighted with repining restlessness, especially when it comes to religion, as will be pointed out later. Each of the first and sixth lines stand out independently as complete sentences and end in full stops. The first stanza continues as follows:

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,

Listen! you hear the grating roar

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. (*Virginia*)

Critics generally agree that "Only" in the seventh line is the first word in the poem that marks a turning point and change of tone from what seems to represent a carefree mind to a mind overwhelmed by cares and worries that trouble the speaker greatly. The poet's psychological worries can by no means be overlooked. This shift in tone was, however, preceded by another one. As early as the fourth line in the stanza, it should be noted, the on-off light intermittence infuses a sense of uncertainty which challenges, even threatens, readers' sense of comfort. This is further supported by the idea of the intermittent motion of the pebbles on the shore being washed up and down the shore in lines 10 to 12 of the first stanza. The negative note of intermittence, which connotes uncertainty introduced early in the first stanza, proliferates and becomes the dominant tone in the stanzas that follow, and the tone of the poem becomes remarkably darker in mood. A deeply sad tone dominates the poem. As the poem progresses even, the tone turns from pensive and plaintive to pessimistic.

It is conventionally accepted in poetry that a poem begins with a problem or a question which gets gradually solved or answered as the poem progresses. Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", W. Shakespeare's sonnet "18", Edmund Spenser's sonnet "73", John Milton's "On His Blindness", John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", S. T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", R. Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", and Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier", and S. Heaney's "Digging" are but few of countless examples in this respect. Arnold's "Dover Beach", however, inverts this conventional symmetry of the poem by turning the hierarchy upside down. From this perspective, it can be said that, despite the peaceful attitude it apparently shows initially, the poem is essentially revolutionary; it sets the norm for a new type of poem in which the poem proceeds from what seems to be solutions to problems or from solutions to questions. The poem starts in a contemplative and reflective mood that suggests a carefree speaker enjoying time, place and the company of a person he feels secure with. This comfort-imbuing atmosphere, however, changes and the overwhelming sense of relief, comfort, and security vanishes gradually, though at a rapid pace. Spurr subtly comments on the untraditional arrangement of the ideas in the poem by saying, "The poem opens with a vivid description of the natural setting, Dover Beach in England, presented. This grows into a seascape. The work closes in a highly charged emotional climax" (15).

The grandeur of the poem, together with its epistle-like trope, can speak volumes of the poet's increasing sense of vocational responsibility. This is reminiscent of the great works that poets and critics addressed to younger, new generations of writers. From this perspective, Arnold's poem is reminiscent of such works as Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*. The trope can even be traced as far back as Horace's time. Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which has been accepted as the critic's *magnum opus*, is an informal epistle directed to the new generations of poets and critics.

In the second stanza, the speaker in the poem alludes to Sophocles (c. 496–406 BC), the classic, Greek dramatist and poet whose masterpieces *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* (collectively referred to as Theban plays) have had a lasting influence. The poet's allusion to Sophocles is meant to assert the farsightedness of ancient poet. The speaker in Arnold's poem, as he stands looking at the English Channel (the sea), is reminded of Sophocles, who looked at the Aegean Sea, and unfolded his visions to humanity through his different works, and foretold them about eternal sadness and fateful events that would play havoc with human destiny. Looking at the sea and, so to speak, prophecying has, it seems, turned into a poetic ritual, similar to an invocation.

Images of the sea and the ships proliferate in English poetry. These are among the givens of the English culture. The sea, it is true, has always been an effective and formative influence on the British identity. This explains why it has been a recurrent image in English poetry. Different English poets have utilised the image the sea to express the greatness of their country. In his poem "Composed upon

Westminster Bridge", W. Wordsworth expresses pride in the sights, which are essential elements of power of Britain:

> Earth has not anything to show more fair:
>
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
>
> A sight so touching in its majesty:
>
> This City now doth, like a garment, wear
>
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
>
> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
>
> Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

Significantly, the image of London as seen from Westminster Bridge, in the W. Wordsworth's mind is that of a solemn, powerful queen rather than anything else. The poet's carefully selected diction supports this idea: "majesty", "garment", "wear / The beauty". The poet's capitalizing of the c in "City" suggests that the word "City" has itself become a proper noun of London, in the same way the Continent, with a capital c, has been accepted to refer to Europe specifically. For many centuries, British ships have been accepted as a symbol of British power, and the sea as the way to power and dominion. This accounts for Wordsworth's mentioning of ships before all other elements of power. After the poet's skillful personifying of the city, he brings the poem to a close by stating that London is the "mighty heart" of the world.

Even in Arnold's own poetry, the sea recurrently appears. To give one example, in his poem "To Marguerite—Continued," the poet suggests that we "mortals" are indeed "in the sea of life enisled." The line reveals the poet's preoccupation with the sea. Intertextually speaking, this poem of Arnold's resonates with Donne's assertion that "No man is an island". The line is, thus a response to Donne's own:

> Look, the world tempts our eye,
>
> And we would know it all!
>
> We map the starry sky!
>
> We mine this earthen ball,
>
> We measure the sea-tides, we number the sea sands; …
>
> We shut our eyes, and muse
>
> How our own minds are made.
>
> What springs of thought they use,
>
> How rightened, how betray'd
>
> And spend our wir to what most employ unnamed. (Ward 78)

Interestingly, even though the image of the sea has noticeably dominated English poetry as a symbol of power, Arnold skillfully changed it in "Dover Beach" to symbolise religion instead. "Arnold is simply and rhetorically emphacizing how desperate his and England's plight has become". He offers no solutions, but he warningly portends of evils he sees to be forthcoming in case his vision (poem) is not seriously taken. (Ward 79-80).

Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Prophet

Matthew Arnold is a poet of a special caliber. His concept of his mission as a poet is worth

considering. He always believed that to be a poet is more of a mission than a profession. So, poetry to him was a mission that necessitated a mission and vision to be expressed. The poet's mission and vision are worthy of exploring. To understand Arnold's viewing of poetry and what it means to be a poet, the idea should be traced back to its ancient roots that extend as far back as to Plato's, Aristotle's and Horace's times.

At Arnold's time, poetry was the pre-eminent literary genre (Bertens 2). Moreover, in giving poetry this illustrious, almost sacred, function Arnold builds on ideas that had earlier in the nineteenth century been formulated by Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1882), who had attributed a special, visionary status to poetry. He also builds on a long tradition that extends back to the classics, a tradition that gives literature, poetry in particular, special powers. It was only natural, then, for Arnold to view poetry as the major embodiment of 'culture'.

Since ancient times up to Arnold's own time, poets had been held in high esteem in Europe. Even Plato, who scathingly attacked poets, had to acknowledge not only that poets are divinely possessed and inspired but that they are also inimitable, divinely related creatures. Thus, despite being humans, they are sacred beings due to the fact that they are related to the Muse (the Goddess of poetry). Arnold could, no doubt, acquire (regain) such a position while he was still alive and after. His reputation rests largely on his ability to vision and foresee. Strikingly as it may sound, even Plato himself, through his multitudinous attacks on poets, as revealed in his *Ion* and *The Republic*, asserted this very idea of the poet being a sacred being due to the relationship a poet holds with the Muse, the goddess of poetry. Plato says:

If a man…who was capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things should arrive in our city, bringing with himself the poems which he wished to exhibit, we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us, and we should send him away to another city, after pouring myrrh down over his head and crowning him with fillets of wool. (14)

To better understand Arnold's (genuinely neoclassic) perception of his vocation as poet, it is appropriate to shed some light on the classic etymologic meaning of the word poet. Sidney's argument is taken from tradition that it appeals to ancient Roman and Greek reverence of poetry, "The Roman term for the poet was *vates*, meaning "diviner, fore-seer or prophet." The ancient Greek definition of poetry is even more important: the Greek origin of the English word "poet" was the word *poiein*, meaning "to make" (92).

Arnold always believed that poetry is a noble, and even sacred, vocation whose salient aim, above all else, is to guide people and teach them morals. He also adopted the notion that poetry should teach people, "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (Bertens 2). According to Arnold, "the 'best' is not necessarily confined to poems, but there is no doubt that he saw poetry as its major repository" (Bertens 2). Arnold's gratifying of the mission of poetry puts him in line with a number of poets and critics, such as Aristotle, Horace, Sidney, Pope, and Shelley who believed firmly in the noble mission of poetry. Like Aristotle, Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, and contemporarily Seamus Heaney assert the idea that the poet is a sacred being due to being divinely related. Heaney, in his turn, asserts that the Romans looked at a poet as "a Diviner" (Heaney 48). Furthermore, in his critical treatise *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley admits that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world". A step further back in history takes us back even to Sir Philip Sidney who, in his *The Defence of Poesy* (also known as *An Apology for Poetry*), published posthumously in 1595, confesses that poets were considered sacred beings due to the belief that they are divinely related. This reveals the poet's aggrandizing of the role poetry, and more accurately a poet, is entitled to play in bringing about morality, and imbuing his nation with the safeguarding the guidance and wisdom a nation needs. Thus, historically speaking poetry's has been a guiding and moralizing role. Poetry (literature), it is no wonder, has always played the role of a major, indispensable to religion. This setting of the background to Arnold's conceptualizing of the mission of a poet is necessary to properly perceive the poet's vision of the world around him and the role he is entitled to play in his world.

The third, penultimate, stanza marks a significant shift in the poem. The shifts in this poem, it is to be noticed, are drastic in the sense that they are meant to startle readers. Each stanza escalates the degree of serious thoughts in the poem; tension is steadily increasing as the poem progresses, and there seems to be no relief. Interestingly enough, even though the poem is made up of four stanzas, separated with skipped lines, each stanza can stand on its own as an independent poem. In other words, the four stanza comprising the poem can be looked at as four different poems. Coherence and continuation or development of ideas are almost absent. In the first and last stanzas, however, the poet addresses his companion that does not utter a single word throughout the poem.

Noticeably, Longer and hyphenated words, such as "melancholy", "withdrawing", "retreating", "shingles" and "night-wind" feature prominently in the third stanza. They are adroitly employed to intensify readers' awareness of the gloominess of the poet's outlook on what religion has turned into. Even the alliterative "Faith", "full", "folds", "furled" are distanced from one another by words that seem to negate and deny any sense of cohesion or tenacity. The proximity of alliterative sounds is, thus, only ostensible. The practice is almost void of its effect, just as religion itself that was once the guidance of people has turned into sheer nominality by then. In this stanza, the poet turns to one of the most thorny issues of the time, "the disappearance of faith…was really Arnold's theme, asserts Coombes (57):

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

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world. (*Virginia*)

The weight of this poem consists eminently in the fact that it sums up the poet's entire endeavour and lifetime concern to hold Christianity in its conventional, high esteem. The poem crystalises Arnold's vision and mission as a poet-critic. In this poem the poet and the critic merge (commingle) inseparably. The poem not only crystalises the views of Arnold the poet, but of Arnold the literary, social and religious critic as well. That is why many critics assert that this particular poem is typically Arnoldian.

His deep sense of vocational devotion emanates, before all else, from his deeply rooted sense of his responsibility as a poet. It is difficult to say whether Arnold was lucky or unlucky that he lived at a time when he witnessed religion (Christianity) losing its grand, antique position, not only in England, but in the Continent in its entirety. For many centuries prior to the poet's time, religion had been the most important components of European culture. With his sharp-sightedness, Arnold the poet predicted that religion would lose its position, and a considerable substitute, he knew, was needed. Arnold realised that only poetry could substitute religion. Poetry had, since ancient times, been cherished and, as Aristotle admits, repository of human wisdom, and that it advocates "universal truths" (Habib 18). Above all else, poetry, it was believed, was divinely inspired, and the poet was divinely related:

Arnold saw English culture as seriously threatened by a process of secularization that had its origins in the growing persuasiveness of scientific thinking…With the spiritual comforts of religion increasingly questionable now that the science – *particularly Darwin's theory of evolution* – had thoroughly undermined the authority of Bible and church, Arnold *foresaw* a crucial, semi-religiously role for poetry especially:

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us

for *religion* and philosophy *will be replaced by poetry*. (Bertens 2) (My italicising)

Hawlin stresses Arnold's "neoclassical leanings" when it comes to Arnold's trustworthiness of the poet-as-prophet identification, a prominent idea in ancient Rome. Arnold, says Hawlin, "had urged writers to use materials and principles from the past" (121).

The poet-as-prophet creed that Arnold has practically adopted and stuck to sums up Arnold's vision of the mission a poet should undertake. In his own case, the poet-prophet foresaw the dangers of disbelief that would engulf his nation, and the poem at hand is but a warning of the negative consequences that would befall the English nation in case they do not stick to their Christianity, which was actually at stake. Arnold's own was an unshakable belief in Christianity, but, prophetically foreseeing, he warns his people of the evil effects that would befall them in case they give up their religious belief:

Even in his greatest poem, *Dover Beach*, dealing with the slow ebb of religious faith, we have no sense of anguished personal involvement. The poem is not about his lost faith, but about what it is like to live in an age in which faith is decaying. (Bernard 130)

The quotation above sums up the predicament that preoccupied Arnold's mind as a poet; one that took the poet a dedicated lifetime to fulfill. Hardy once wrote, "But…the life-seer's voice [is] so lasting" (Williams iv).

The Victorians, asserts Merryn, came to feel that the world was "frightening, planless, and dangerous" (77). As a result, "a great many of the most thoughtful and intelligent Victorians turned to agnosticism (meaning not knowing whether God existed or not). Among those that became agnostics are John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and George Eliot (Merryn 78). This instability (that quickly turned into loss) of faith in religion seeped into many literary texts of the time. To give one example, George Eliot, a great novelist of the time, had been brought up to be a devout Christian, but turned to agnosticism. She expressed her feelings as follows:

She stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as he text the three words which have been used so often as the aspiring trumpt-calls of man – the words *God, Immortality, Duty* – pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivably was the first, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third*. (Merryn 78)

Hardy's poems "In a Wood", "A Hymn to Man", "A New Year's Eve" and "God's Funeral" reflect the *zeitgeist*, i.e. the spirit of the age when it comes to England's re-visioning of Christianity. The poems reveal a vehemently full-blooded revolutionary intellectual; one who has broken all the bonds of what used to be called religious belief. Indeed, Hardy often expressed his pride in being one of the first advocates of Darwin's theory, despite the fact that Hardy was only nineteen years old when the theory appeared. Significantly enough, Hardy even attacked those who tried to defend Christianity against the skepticism Darwin's theory aroused about it. This led Hardy to criticise Matthew Arnold himself. Merryn pinpoints the idea that Hardy was starkly "disapproving of [Arnold's] efforts" that earnestly aimed at regaining the supremacy of Christianity and restoring to religion its position. Hardy, Merryn explains, "thought that if religion had to be propped up by 'hair-splitting' like Arnold's it must be a desperate state" (159).

In the fourth stanza, the poet tell his companion that the world stretching before their eyes is illusive and untrustworthy. He, therefore, invites his companion (beloved) to trust each other as the world, which is but an extensive vast illusion and that it is just mirage like, and should never be trusted. He is appallingly stunned by the disillusionment that has left him shocked and that would probably exercise the same effect on coming generations:

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;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night. (*Virginia*)

The world stretching before the poet's eyes is fearful mainly because it is faithless. It is a world dominated by ignorance and war; one where, "ignorant armies clash by night," as Arnold admits, and foresees. The radical changes in religious belief that took place during the Victorian era following the emergence of Darwin's theory can well be elicited from the following quotation:

Browning's 'God is in his heaven: all's right with the world' which was a commonplace for many of Hardy's contemporaries turned into 'God's *not* in his heaven: all's *wrong* with the world," Angel Clare says in anguish in *Tess of the D'urberville* (Merryn 77).

Conclusion

Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" addresses the Victorian age, one of the most important eras in the history of England. The poem shows Arnold as a neoclassic poet who, not only asserts affiliation with the great Greek and Roman classic poets, but also as one who believes that a poet has prophetic visions. Out of his inherent sense of responsibility, the speaker in the poem (Arnold himself) warned his companion, ad all readers of the poem of the forthcoming dangers that would most probably engulf and ruin humanity, through wars, if religion is given up. The poem unveils the retreating state of religion and shows how it has been dwindling. Absence of religion has turned the earth into a frightening planet where nothing and no one can be trusted. The cultural materialist approach has been applied to analyse the poem. Through exploring the literary, social, political and religious situation of the age, the meaning of the poem got clearer, and applying this particular literary theory of Cultural Materialism has helped unveil the important aspects of the poem.

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