



The Representation of the Loss of Faith in Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century is largely recognized for the controversial disagreements between the newly scientific discoveries and religious theories. Thus, this paper presents data on the Victorian period and more specifically the poem *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold. Meantime, it highlights the loss of faith in the Victorian society of England through the lens of New Criticism and New Historicism theories. The research aimed at illustrating the loss of religion and the melancholic tone evoked by Matthew Arnold in his Well-known poem *Dover Beach*. At the beginning, it provides a critical insight on the principles and the histories of these two theories. Additionally, in the introduction, the paper contains significant information on the message of *Dover Beach* and its linkage to the theories. Equally important, follows it the discussion and analysis section, which is probably the fundamental part of the research. Finally, a brief conclusion is provided at the end.

1. Introduction

England in nineteenth century embraced controversial theories in science and literature. It was the time when romantic literature and new scientific discoveries emerged, which arguably both sides opposed and influenced each other. Meanwhile, the century is widely known for the controversial discordance between the newly scientific discoveries and religious beliefs. Therefore, 19th century Literature, and more specifically the second half of the century is largely affected by the prevailing



clash between science and religion. It caused both poets and ordinary People to contemplate about religious doubts generated by scientific theories, for example the theory on the origin of species by Charles Darwin in 1859. (Rachel Fenn, Anna McGlynn 2019, 50-51)

Furthermore, among the thinkers and poets influenced by the nineteenth century romanticism and the ongoing clash between religion and science was Mathew Arnold. He felt the need to modify the arts and thematize religion in literature. (John H. Cartwright, Brian Baker 2005, 270) Moreover, Arnold was brought up by a religious family and he felt highly sorrowful by people's doubtful perception and skepticism on religion. To illustrate, "Mathew Arnold's poem, *Dover Beach*, reputedly one of the most beautiful poems in the English language, is a compelling lament on the loss of faith in the poet's beloved England." (Peter A. Fiore, O.F.M 2010, 28)

Significantly, until the end of ninetieth century, understanding literary works required a convenient knowledge on the biographical and historical aspects of the texts. Meantime, twentieth century is undeniably reach in its introduction to vast forms of literary schools for interpreting literature. Starting from the pioneers of modern literary criticism T.S.Eliot, I.A.Richards and F.R.Leavis and probably ending with Edward Said's orientalism on post-colonial theory. Throughout the age, the emergence of each Literary theory offered a distinct and often opposing perspective to the previous theory on the way that texts should be analyzed, and what aspects or elements must be considered when interpreting literary works. (Das 2005, 215)

2. Materials and methods

The paper used a descriptive and analytic method in generating the explanations it has proposed. In addition, the paper used two contrasting literary theories in the process of analyzing the poem *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold. The theories used are the New Criticism from Formalist school and the New Historicism. At the beginning, it provides a critical insight on the principles and the histories of these two theories. Additionally, in the introduction, the paper contains significant information on the message of *Dover Beach* and its linkage to the theories. Finally, a brief conclusion is provided at the end.



2.1 New Criticism and New Historicism Literary Schools

Prominently, in the twentieth century, literature was separated from its restricted sentimental form, and divorced from being read only by the elites. Hence, the century embraced distinct and significant literary schools of criticism, including new criticism. New criticism is a literary theory developed from formalist school of criticism, which perceives the text as an organic unit in which all its literary elements contribute to complete the overall meaning of the text. New critics excluded any outside influence including political, social, biographical, cultural and religious backgrounds on the process of generating meaning. They believed that the text can stand-alone and all the words used in it function separately in generating the meaning of the work. The movement highly emphasized on objective close reading when underlining the meanings and connotations of literature. Additionally, new criticism highlights the importance of literary elements such as metaphor, simile, tone, symbolism, paradoxical images and ambiguity in the course of making meaning in any text. New Critics argued that once the text is read in accordance with the author's biographical facts, a fundamental mistake is made which is called "intentional fallacy" (Rob Allison, Brian Chanen 2012, 12-13)

Moreover, New criticism was considerably popular in 1940s and the two proceeding decades. The name was firstly given to the theory by Crowe Ransom with his book entitled *The New Criticism* in 1941. However, it is argued that New Criticism started much earlier with the modern Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot; with his hundreds of essay publications on the way that texts should be read and understood. Eliot stated, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry". (Childs 2013)

New Historicism is analyses literature in relation to its social, political and historical context. As well as determining the significance of the reader's socio-political background on the process of interpreting the texts. New Historicism was largely popular in 1980s and the term was firstly used by Stephen Greenblatt in his introduction to *The power of forms in the English Renaissance* in 1982. It was considerably a reaction to the new critics from formalist school, which they claimed that literature and specifically poetry should be read independently without being engaged with any outside influence on the process of analysing it. (Coroban 2019, 4)



Additionally, New Historicists like Michael Warner, Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault and Hayden White, argued that literary texts could not be interpreted by the historical events surrounding it merely. Rather it is also the critic's perception, which determines how truth is constructed in the texts. They believed that the concept of understanding the truth about literary texts is historically formed, and history changes on cultural and individual basis over time. What these theorists understood was "that subjectivity exists within all societies and meaning changes for a particular text with the passage of time". (Hopkins 2011, 28)

Adding to that, Michel Foucault was one of the prominent literary critics who had a profound influence on promoting the ideologies of New Historicism and establishing the constitution of truth as a cultural phenomenon. According to Foucault, truth is culturally shaped and laws of nature are determined by dominant powers in Societies. According to Foucault, truths are determined by powers within the societies. Largely influenced by Karl Marx, Foucault believed that different powers in fact dominated all the aspects of life in the way they generated the concept of truth and how things should work. For example, according to Foucault, "all definitions of 'insanity', 'crime', and 'sexual perversion' are social constructs by means of which ruling powers maintained their control. We accept these definitions as 'natural' only because they are so ingrained in our culture". (Tyson 2006, 284-285) Hence, it can be observed that any analysis of New Historicism is purely subjective, and both the reader's historical background and the historical reasons that influenced the way that texts are written; should be taken into consideration when analysing literary works.

2.2 Discussion and Analysis

As stated above, the paper attempts to analyze the poem 'Dover Beach' using the new criticism literary theory in order to scrutinize the symptoms of alienated society and the loss of religion in nineteenth century. Hence, the research takes into account every single literary aspect of the poem in order to represent the loss of faith and the lack of cohesion in England. Firstly, beginning with the title, 'Dover Beach' is one of the busiest and most beautiful ports of England. Everyday thousands of visitors come to see the white cliffs and the ancient castle of Dover. Definitely, giving the poem this title adds an initial significance to the poem. Moreover, importantly, the title of the



poem is the setting of the poem as well. The speaker reveals to be in one of the rooms in Dover watching and describing the sea spectacle in front of him. To mention, Dover is located in England, it stands between England and France and Arnold uses the sea scene as a metaphor for the state of faith in society in which he describes in different situations. In this way, he gives us a pre-conception that the title considerably significant in the poem.

Furthermore, text's ambiguity and paradoxical imagery is central to new Critics for understanding the texts. Generally, in *Dover Beach* the poem portrays distinct paradoxical images. To explain, in the first stanza there are two images; one is when the poet pictures the beautiful Dover cliffs and the sea scene. Here are the images 'the sea is calm', 'the tide is full', 'the moon lies fair', 'on the French coast the light gleams', 'the cliffs of England stand glimmering' and 'the moon blanch'd land'. Remarkably, these descriptions give us a tremendous feeling of pleasure and calmness. The images are drawn very beautifully and they make the reader imagine the picture in his/her head. But in the last lines the entertainment that the speaker feels is distracted by the disturbing 'roar of pebbles' and unstable movement of the sea waves that brought in to his mind 'the eternal note of sadness'. Again in the second stanza, the same image is shown that appeals to our sense of hearing in the Aegean coast that Sophocles long ago heard.

Likewise, the third stanza contains a paradoxical image as well. One is when faith dwelled in everybody's heart tightly like a girdle that encircles people's waists 'like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd'. The other is when the faith is vanishing and drear and he only hears 'its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar', again we have auditory image. In addition, the last stanza carries two opposite images. First, when the world is looking beautiful like 'a land of dreams' and the other is the real image of the world which is 'a darkling plain' where 'armies clash by night. To conclude, the different images that Arnold draws associate in conveying the message of the poem better. Generally, the beautiful, calm and peaceful world proves the beauty of the world when it has religion in it. In addition, the darkness, irritating sounds and uncertainty depict the ugly image of the society where religion is lost in it.

Meantime, the third stanza begins with 'The Sea of Faith' in which he again capitalized the first letter of each word (sea and faith) to highlight their importance in the poem.



Additionally, he explains that once religion was at the climax just like the full tide of the sea and it was wrapped around the universe similar to a girdle that encircles around people's waist. He uses the sea as a metaphor for religious beliefs in the world. But now he only hears 'it's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' that is 'drear' and 'retreating, to breath'. He means that religion, basically Christianity, is fading away and he is only hearing its gloomy withdrawing sound. This stanza contains a paradoxical image of the world; that in former, society was cohesive and united like the full tide and furl'd girdle when religion clothed everyone's heart. Unlike now that, the world is suffocating and sad since religion is retreating to exist and breathe.

In the last stanza, the speaker of the poem asks his love (listener) to be honest and faithful to one another since the world that seems like 'a land of dreams' and very beautiful; is in fact painful and uncertain. There is 'neither joy, nor love, nor light'. Moreover, they are confused by the 'alarms of struggle and flight' between probably the two 19th century forces; arguably, religion and science that lead them to be in a faithless planet that he refers to as 'darkling plain'. To sum up, the variety of descriptions in each stanza manifests the theme of disorder and separation of society due to the loss of religion.

Additionally, the poet uses the three narrative techniques in the poem not only one. Generally, the poem is written in the third person narrative that includes the observations of the speaker; but he shifts to the second narrative technique too when he utters 'come' in line six and 'listen' in line nine. Again, he moves to the third narrative when he uses the words 'we' and 'us' throughout the poem to make the readers and the listener all his observers. The variety of narrative techniques during the poem represents the lack of oneness and unity owing to the loss of faith.

Following that, the tone is another essential element to New Criticism for interpreting the meaning of the poems. Certainly, the poem has a changeable tone; it changes constantly from one line to another. Briefly, in the first stanza the tone is calm and peaceful as the speaker is watching the beautiful scene in front of him and it.; as these words show 'tranquil bay', 'the sea is calm', 'sweet is the night air' and 'the light gleams. Suddenly, he gets distracted by the irritating sound of pebbles 'you hear the grating roar of pebbles' and the tone changes to 'the eternal note of sadness' at the end of the stanza. In the second stanza, the poet recalls the same irritating roar that



Sophocles heard; the tone is disappointment and sympathy that we feel for 'the flow of human misery' that both writers associate it with the sound of roaring pebbles. In the third stanza the tone is delightful and nostalgic as he states that life was beautiful in the past when religion united and tightened the society. But again in the last lines the tone changes to gloominess and depression as Arnold believes that religion no longer exists and he only hears 'its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar'. Finally, the last stanza starts with 'Ah love!' and the tone changes to personal feelings and intimacy, when he addresses to his companion to be true to one another. Following this, again the tone is happy and peaceful as he describes the beauty of the world like 'a land of dreams'. Further, in the last lines of the final stanza the tone changes to a sad, surprising reality when he shows the ugliness of the world, as 'Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain'. To conclude, the irregular tone of the poem depicts the unstable and shattered society of England that lacked cohesion and unity due to the loss of faith in 19th century.

Another key point is the use of tense and punctuation marks. The writer shifts continuously from present to past and vice versa. In addition, he uses a vast number of punctuation marks that again represent instability and the lack of cohesion.

Another point is the use of various types of rhyme in the poem. Arnold used different kinds of rhyme such as: alliteration, assonance, consonance, perfect rhyme, half rhyme, end rhyme and general rhyme; but mainly alliteration and assonance. For instance, alliteration (full, fair) (gleams, gone) (long, line), assonance (tide, lies) (long, withdrawing, roar), consonance (sweet, light) (blanch'd, land), perfect rhyme (night, light) (seems, dreams), half rhyme (coast, light) (again, begin), end rhyme (plain, pain) (flight, night), general rhyme (England, stand). Obviously, this variety of rhyming within one poem represents the lack of cohesion and oneness that Arnold seeks for. More, we can argue that the rhyming diversity functions as a motif in helping developing the message of the poem that has been previously explained.

Finally, we light upon the use of metaphor in the poem. The main metaphor of the poem is [The Sea of Faith] in which the sea stands for the state of faith in England. The writer described the image of religion in two different worlds by using the description of the sea in Dover port. Not to forget, the world is hailed as an important figure in the poem since the word is used four times in the poem and it is capitalized



twice. Concisely, the sea is used to represent the loss of faith in the Victorian England in many ways that have been clarified before. To mention, the poem also uses many enjambments in the poem. He does not complete ideas and sentences in one line; he jumps to another line several times. Indeed this is another clever technique used by Matthew Arnold to symbolize the separation and the divided society in nineteenth century due to the loss of faith.

Contrarily, New Historicists derived the meaning from the text in relation to its biographical, social and political situations of the time it was written. As well as considering the critic's psychological and socio-political factors that contribute to the way, he/she understands and interprets the events and thematic aspects from the text.

Ultimately, the researcher aims at explaining the meaning of *Dover Beach* poem by adopting the New Historicism Literary theory. Therefore, the poem should be first related to Arnold's biography and socio-political events surrounding that time. Firstly, Mathew Arnold was raised in a devoted Christian family. His family's religious beliefs can be widely reflected in his works. According to Arnold, because the number of the intellectual individuals who could live by their rationality was very few in that time, he believed that they should be guided by virtuous Christianity values. Moreover, he stood uneasy between the two opposing forces of the Victorian England. Those who followed the Orthodox Church and those secular voices of the era. As Guenterin Lewy in the preface to *God and the Bible* (1875) states, "At the present moment two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is that men cannot do without it; the other, they cannot do with it as it is". (Lewy 2017)

Consequently, the author's religious beliefs towards the power of Christianity to bring people in to order and his discontent about the crisis of religion can be largely seen in *Dover Beach*. As explained before, Arnold depicts two contradictory images in the poem just like the two opposing values of Victorian era. Throughout the whole poem, the poet laments the loss of faith, lack of stability and certitude in his society in comparing to past. In addition to that, it is crucial to identify the narrative technique and the speaker of the poem. The speaker of the poem is Arnold himself as it can be seen in the fourth line of the first stanza when he says 'but now I only hear'; the



pronoun (I) is a certain evidence for that. Consequently, the speaker's biography functions as a big clue to grasp the theme of the poem since as previously mentioned that Arnold strictly believed in Christianity and social cohesion. Therefore, it can be added that the poem represents the voice and the thoughts of the poet.

Meanwhile, Matthew Arnold wrote *Dover Beach* in 1951 briefly after getting married with Frances Lucy Wightman. (Black et al, 2011, 452) Considering this point, one can identify the setting and the absent listener whom Arnold addresses to as 'love' in the last stanza of the poem. Dover cliffs in England and the south coast could actually be the setting of the poem and the real life setting of Arnold and his wife where they spent time together after being recently married.

Finally, the poem is a dramatic monologue. A type of poem developed in the Victorian era in the English literature. Owing to that, it can be argued that Matthew Arnold wrote *Dover Beach* in a dramatic monologue as a reflection and under the influence of Victorian literature. Since as stated before, the speaker of the poem could be Arnold himself. As he used the pronoun 'I' and he is seemingly addressing a second person, most probably his wife as he calls her in the first stanza 'come to the window, sweet is the night-air!' and in the last stanza addresses her as 'Ah, love, let us be true to one another!'. (Harrison 1998, 32) Moreover, the poem contains various auditory and visual reflections of nature. For example, in the first stanza there is 'the Sea is calm', 'grating roar of pebbles', 'Cliffs of England', 'Tranquil bay'. These elements of nature were highly influential and inspirational for romantics when composing poetry. Additionally, for romantics, poetry was retrospective and sentimental. Hence, Arnold's poem can act as an ideal portrait for romantic poetry. Since the poem is spontaneously written as the speaker depicts the nature in front him in a sentimental and melancholic way.

3 Conclusion

Given these points, depending on the researcher's analysis drawn through the lens of New Historicism and New Criticism literary theories, it can be concluded that the 19th century poet and critic Matthew Arnold was highly concerned about the loss of faith and lack of unity in England. Additionally, New Historicism concentrates on analyzing literary texts in relation to the social, historical and political backgrounds of the text.



While New Criticism theory studies the texts as independent bodies detached from any socio-political backgrounds. Moreover, the research has provided extensive and detailed analysis through the lens of the mentioned literary theories to diagnose the symptoms of loss of faith and disunity in England in the poem *Dover Beach*. In the findings, the researcher has concluded that Mathew Arnold wrote his well-known poem '*Dover Beach*' to represent the uncertainty and fragmentation of society when religion vanishes in it. He gives the readers an educational and spiritual message that life is more certain and enjoyable when people are socially united and religious.

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