

“Dover Beach” Discussion Questions

Carefully read Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and fully answer the questions below. Be sure you are specific and are using the poem as evidence to support your answers/reasoning.

1. Who is the speaker of this poem? Who is he talking to? What is their relationship like? What is the setting that is described in the first stanza?
2. Use a fancy electronic device to look into why religious faith was being criticized when this poem was first published in 1867. What was going on in 19th Century Europe?
3. What is the relationship between the setting in stanza one and the description in stanza two of what Sophocles heard beside another sea? What is the relationship of the first and second stanzas to the “Sea of Faith” described in stanza three?
4. What is the poem’s sequence of thought?
5. What are some implications of the opening metaphor of the sea by the French coast and cliffs of Dover? Why the reference to Sophocles? What metaphor does Arnold use to describe Victorian “Faith”? To what kinds of faith may he refer?
6. What does the speaker advocate as a shelter in a chaotic world?
7. What is the speaker’s assessment of the world? How do the sounds of the last stanza reinforce its meaning?
8. What effect is created by the classical metaphor, “Where ignorant armies clash by night”? What is the poem’s final tone?
9. What does this poem suggest about love and the then modern world?
10. Between lines 28 and 29 there is a shift. Explain it.
11. The primary theme of the poem is derived chiefly from the speaker’s disenchantment with the world. Defend this theme with specifics from the poem.
12. There is some evidence that suggests that Arnold wrote this poem while on his honeymoon. How does this change your perception or affect the meaning of the poem?
13. Think about the images of nighttime by the sea in the first stanza. Contrast them with the images in the second stanza. To which senses do these images appeal? Why do you think auditory images are given such importance?
14. The “Sea of Faith” (line 21) is Arnold’s metaphor for active and widely held religious beliefs. In lines 24-27, what does Arnold suggest has happened to his faith?
15. Write a sentence or two explaining what you think Arnold means by “eternal note of sadness” (line 14). Be sure to analyze this phrase in context.
16. There are images of light and dark in this poem. Based on the textual evidence, what do you think light and dark symbolize?
17. Why does Arnold ask his love to be true to him (line 29)?