**Conflict between Religion and Science in “Dover Beach”**

"Dover Beach" is the most celebrated poem by Matthew Arnold, a poet, literary and social critic of the Victorian era. The poem expresses a crisis of faith caused by the rising tide of scientific discovery. New research and intellectual inquiry cast doubt on mankind's central and special role in the universe. The speaker in the poem senses this change almost subconsciously. In its expression of alienation, doubt, and melancholy, the poem is often interpreted as a remarkable precursor of the 20th century crises of faith—like Existentialism and Absurdism. In essence, the poem is an inquiry into what it means to be alive.

The poem laments the loss of religious faith that came with the advancement in various fields at the time: evolutionary biology, geology, archeology, and textual analysis of the Bible, to name a few. The poem senses the turn of a historical epoch and finds this change echoed in the transitional figure of the beach—the blurry border between land and sea.

The poem begins by describing the atmosphere in which the speaker stands. The descriptions of the sea and the sound of the pebbles on the beach are lyrically beautiful at first, but they mask “the eternal note of sadness” that is revealed at the end of stanza 1. This sudden intrusion of sadness hints at the speaker’s sense of loss, which finds fuller expression later in the poem. Through the symbol of the sea, the poem suggests two key ideas: firstly, that major shifts in the fabric of society occur subtly—the beach’s slow, repetitive movements symbolize the gradual but inevitable loss of faith that the speaker senses in this historical moment. Secondly, the comparison of the loss of religious faith with the movement of the waves implies that these kinds of historical changes come in cycles—waves, in other words. Indeed, the speaker imagines the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles hearing the same sadness in the sea that the speaker hears now. That is, the speaker sees an analogy between the irrelevance of the classical Greek Gods in the speaker’s time with the coming irrelevance of the Christian God in the near future. That doesn’t mean that religious faith will return, but more that something will come along to take its place (in this case, the dominance of science).

The speaker's position on this loss of religious faith becomes clear in the third stanza. Faith once made the world “full” and “bright”—that is, it offered comfort and joy in its certainty. Its loss, then, represents “melancholy.” What’s more, the “Sea of Faith” once touched the shores of the entire world, but is now “withdrawing.” The poem is essentially saying that this loss of faith is *global*, in turn suggesting the vast reach of scientific advancements at the time. The speaker believes that scientific advancement will bring only scientific—not spiritual—certainty and will lead to more doubt and questioning (which is, in fact, an important part of the scientific method of inquiry). Overall, then, the poem expresses a kind of resignation. The speaker fully admits the change that is in process—it is as inevitable as the waves rising and falling—and challenges the reader to consider whether this loss of faith is progress or a wrong turn. “Dover Beach,” then, is a deeply pessimistic poem that questions the dominant values of its day and embodies the sense of grief that the poet felt at the prospect of the loss of religion.