Dover Beach as a Love Poem

“Dover Beach” is a celebrated poem by the Victorian poet Mathew Arnold, written in 1851 and first published in 1867. The poem was inspired by the two visits the poet and his second wife Frances made to the south coast of England, where the white cliffs of Dover stand just twenty two miles from the coast of France. It is generally agreed that the poem is a honeymoon poem.

The poem begins in a romantic note depicting the picturesque beauty of the Dover Beach in an evening. The speaker looks out upon a calm sea, and observes the fullness of the tide and the moon reflecting on the water. Looking across the English Channel, the speaker sees the lights of the French coast fade away, while the cliffs of the English coast stand tall and bright, and the bay looks calm. The speaker now addresses his beloved and invites her to look at the scenic beauty and to enjoy the night’s pleasant air. However the romantic note with which the poem began, gives way to a feeling of sadness as the poet perceives that human existence is actually identified with eternal sadness.

The final stanza of the poem directly begins with an appeal to love. The speaker now addresses his beloved and states desperately that the two of them should treat each other with honesty and truthfulness as the world will not be true to them. He says that though the world looks like ‘a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new’, in reality it is not so. The world has ‘neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor help for pain’. The speaker compares the world with a darkling plain­-- a place invaded by darkness and obscurity which offers no comfort or consolation.

Though the dominant mood of the poem is pessimistic, it glorifies mutual love in an atmosphere of spiritual crisis. With the retreat of religion causing a crisis of spiritual faith, the speaker turns to love as a panacea. Perhaps, the poem suggests, love between people can compensate for the loss of the connection between God and mankind. But the poem only argues that love has the *possibility* of creating the certainty that religion once did—it doesn’t make the case that this is inevitable. If the two lovers can be true to one another, suggests the speaker, then that will in part provide solace and certainty in a world that offers neither of these. Love, then, may be the only answer to the problems identified by the speaker: loneliness and loss of faith.

The poem does not end on an optimistic note, casting doubt on the idea that love will save the day. Instead, the speaker anticipates confusion, struggle, and violence. Though love might not be able to defeat these, the speaker presents it as the only potential solution. Love, then, is definitely valued in the poem, and the reader in turn is asked to share in that value. But love shows up in only a few brief moments, leaving its meaning far from certain. The poem can’t say for sure that love will be able to make life meaningful, and perhaps even suggests that it ultimately can't—but it is presented as the best option, and worth trying.