Dover Beach
Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the strait;—on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon—blanch'd 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.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle

Contrast between line 1 and line 37 & stanza 1 & 4.

Stanza 1: Sea is "calm" and peaceful.
Beautiful image of tranquility with the moonlit bay spread out before him.

The speaker is addressing someone in lines 6, 9 & 29.

Speaker introduces a different note: "the eternal note of sadness" that comes from the pebbles that the waves throw continuously up the beach in a "grating roar".

Stanza 2: It is not the same sea as in stanza 1. The speaker mentions "Sophocles" & "the Aegean", referring back through history to the 5th cent. BCE.

The sea is now a remembered body of water. Symbolic of emotion & human conditions.

Stanza 3: The sea changes again.

The title accurately reflects the contents of the poem, because an image of the sea is created throughout the poem and the title is referring to Dover Beach, which is a sea.
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.

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.

*straits – narrow channel of water
*blanch'd – whitened
*Sophocles – cassical Greek author of tragic dramas, much admired by Arnold.
*the Aegean – part of the Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Turkey.
*turbi – muddy
*girdle – belt
*shingles – pebble beaches

**Stanza 4 (lines 29-37):**
The speaker explains the view of the world & of life in general & it is not optimistic.

**Images in lines 31-32, 35-37:**

**Anaphora:**
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain

**Simile:**

**Certainty**

**Dark/Confusing**

**Open space**

**Smile**

**Allusion:** Reference to a statement, person, place, event or thing that is known from literature, history, religion, mythology, politics, sports, science, or popular culture.

**Anaphora:** The deliberate repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of several successive verses, clauses, or paragraphs.

**Enjambment:** The running on of the thought from one line, couplet, or stanza to the next without a syntactical break/punctuated pause.
**Onomatopoeia:** The use of word whose sound imitates or suggests its meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Literal meaning (denotation)</th>
<th>Figurative meaning (connotation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>land of dreams</td>
<td>Wishes/Dreams fulfilled.</td>
<td>Contains many different things that are not worn out (still “beautiful” and “new”).</td>
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<tr>
<td>a darkling plain</td>
<td>Becoming darker.</td>
<td>Creates a picture of an empty, flat, dark, uninhabited space. Retreat of faith and rise of secularism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>confused alarms of struggle and flight</td>
<td>Confused about the war.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ignorant armies</td>
<td>Refers to war.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clash by night</td>
<td>Refers to war.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What is the poem about?

What is the subject of the poem?
Poem written in Victorian Era. During this era there was a loss of people’s faith in God and Christianity.

Who is speaking?
A man talking to his female partner.

What is the location/setting of the poem?
The poem begins with a beautiful image of tranquility, where the sea is calm and peaceful, and the moonlight bay spread out before him.

Themes and messages of the poem:
The speaker sees religion as a positive light, as a force for good in the world. On the other hand, he is witnessing the slow retreat of religion as secularism gains the upper hand and people move away from faith. The poet is clearly saddened by this, and calls for a return to love and the other virtues of religion.

Stanza 1: Description of the beautiful night/beautiful sound of the sea.
Stanza 2: Sadness and misery of life.
Stanza 3: Retreat of faith and religion.
Stanza 4: Confusion of the modern world.

Attitudes and feelings in the poem:
Emotions and feelings of the speaker:
The speaker is very sad and confused.

Tone of the poem:
This poem is not a cheerful poem. Tone of sadness, melancholy, disillusionment and despair.

Form and structure of the poem (rhyme, rhythm, line length, stanza length, etc.):
No rhyme scheme – free verse (lines with no prescribed pattern or structure).
The effect of free verse is to make the poem sound like normal, natural conversation between two people. We are “eavesdropping” on a moment between two lovers.
Made up of 4 stanzas. The speaker evokes a scene of order in the first 3 stanzas, but this is overthrown by an idea of chaos and disorder in the final stanza when he begins to speak about war and the destruction it brings in its wake.
By rejecting the conventional patterns of regular rhyme, equal line lengths and uniform stanzas, Arnold is emphasising the doubt and uncertainty he feels at this time.

Arnold creates a wonderful sense of movement and rhythm using words such as “draw back” (line 10), “return” (line 11), “begin, and cease, then begin again” (line 12), “tremulous cadence” (line 13) in the first stanza and “turbid ebb and flow” (line 17) in the second stanza to emulate the backwards and forwards motion of the waves.

**Type of poem:**
*Free verse* (lines with no prescribed pattern or structure).

**Poetic devices (e.g. metaphors, similes, enjambment, alliteration, personification, etc.):**
- Explained in the poem above.
- The poem is held together by the use of enjambments, alliterations, metaphors and images. These poetic devices give the sonnet great power, contributing to a greater understanding of its theme.

**Image of the sea:**
- In the first few lines the speaker draws a picture/image of himself and his loved one standing at a window looking out over the Dover sea – that lies between England and France.
- In the first stanza, the sea is “calm” and peaceful, and the speaker creates the image of tranquility with the moonlit bay spread out before him.

**Personal response to the poem (how do I feel, what impact does the poem have on me):**
*YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSE!*