In 1851, Matthew Arnold was on his honeymoon along the shore of England. One of his most recognized poems, “Dover Beach” was presumably written on a ferry ride between England and France, alongside the White Cliffs of Dover. In the midst of the Victorian Era with major societal changes taking place, Arnold was challenged with the fact that religion was slowly losing its strength in England and that science and technology were becoming more prevalent. In his poem “Dover Beach,” Matthew Arnold gradually detests the modernization of the society he lives in and comes to believe that secularism will be the downfall of humanity.

The first half of stanza one features very calm and soft imagery. Arnold remarks that “The sea is calm tonight” (1) and “the moon lies fair” (2) which provides a tranquil mood to the poem. He then describes a light on the French coast which “Gleams and is gone” (4), presumably coming from a lighthouse symbolizing the shift between the traditional religious nature of English society and the new wave of scientific interest. Finally, from where the poem derives its title, Arnold exclaims “the cliffs of England stand, / Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay” (4-5). The chalk-white cliffs described in lines four and five seem to be as insurmountable as the strong Christian culture that has existed in England for so long; however, now they are being challenged by the flickering light of science across the bay. The second half of the first stanza has a bit of a darker tone. Arnold notes “the grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves
draw back, and fling” (9-10) and describes how the tides “bring / The eternal note of sadness in” (13-14). To Arnold, the tranquility in the beginning of the poem symbolizes life before scientific advancement, and slowly the poem progresses with a darker tone as science gains weight in society.

Continuing to construct the idea of the existential sadness that Arnold is feeling, in the second stanza he mentions “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery” (17-18) referring to both the swinging of human emotions and the changing of times. Furthermore, by using words such as turbid, misery, and distant, the second stanza carries the “eternal note of sadness” (14) through the poem and allows Arnold to fully develop his ideas in the following stanzas. In stanza three, Arnold claims that religion “Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore” (22), draped “like the folds of a bright girdle furled” (23) over society. However, now competing with science, the only remnants of faith are “Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” (25). In the fourth stanza, Arnold laments that without religion the world no longer has “joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (33-34). Finally, in an allusion to the Battle of Syracuse, Arnold concludes that society is “on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night” (35-37).

Arnold begins “Dover Beach” describing the beautiful sights of his country and considering the dark turn the poem takes, it is surprising that it was written during his honeymoon. The progression from a bright, joyful first stanza to a dark mood throughout the remainder of the poem shows that Arnold had conflicting feelings about the world he lived in. As a newly wed, he saw the world “like a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new” (31-32). However, due to the societal changes taking place at the time and his believe in the importance of religion, Arnold could not help but believe that the world had lost its luster and
that humanity was doomed. Furthermore, he could not have chosen a better historical event to allude to in order to portray the theme of his poem. In the Battle of Syracuse, the Athenian army ignorantly attacked the Syracusans at night in a harbour featuring cliffs similar to those of Dover Beach. Both armies could not tell each other apart, and multiple soldiers from each side fell off the cliffs to their deaths. Arnold believed that his country’s desire to advance technology and progress into a modern era and break the influence that Christianity had over England for so many years was a decision just as ignorant as that of the Athenians. By focusing on science and technology over religion, Arnold was sure that the peace and love in humanity would be forfeited. Sadly, Arnold had this idea to worry about on his honeymoon, a time in a relationship that should be free of worry. Just as the ebb and flow of the ocean and time, or the fighting of armies in the dark, Arnold's happiness regarding his marriage and his sadness regarding the world were two constantly clashing ideas that are portrayed in “Dover Beach.”
Works Cited
