

## **NATURE, CRITICISM OF THE WORLD, AND LOVE IN “DOVER BEACH” AND “LOVE AMONG THE RUINS”**

Ayşe GÜNEŞ  
Çankaya Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi,  
İngiliz Edebiyatı ve Kültür İncelemeleri  
aysegunes@cankaya.edu.tr

### **ABSTRACT**

Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Robert Browning’s “Love among the Ruins” have been analyzed comparatively with other poems. However, there has not been a comparative study of these two poems written by two Victorian poets, and such a study is valuable as these poems have common qualities. To cite a few, in both poems, nature is a prevalent theme portrayed through ambivalent images, and the world is criticized for different reasons. These reasons are loss of faith in “Dover Beach” and foul human nature in “Love among the Ruins,” and war in both of them. In relation to the theme of criticism against the world, change is a concept portrayed through contemplation of the past. In “Dover Beach,” this change is expressed through the depiction of loss of faith, and in “Love among the Ruins,” the change is physical within the context of a fallen empire. Love is appreciated in both poems for different reasons. In “Dover Beach,” it is the only saviour, and in “Love among the Ruins,” it is considered as a peaceful and eternal force. This paper attempts to make a further study to compare “Dover Beach” and “Love among the Ruins” which share remarkable thematic similarities as well as differences in terms of their imagery of nature, criticism against the world, and appreciation of love.

**Key Words:** Victorian poetry, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Dover Beach, Love among the Ruins

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Victorian poets, Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning portray the troubled man of Victorian age in their poems, “Dover Beach” and “Love among the Ruins” respectively in the form of dramatic monologue. Both poets emphasize love as a dependable force in the face of certain problems such as of faith in “Dover Beach,” and foul human nature in “Love among the Ruins” which are two differing thematic elements in these poems. In “Dover Beach,” love is presented as the savior in an age devoid faith, and in “Love among the Ruins,” it is portrayed as an eternal concept unlike the material glories ancient civilizations which have perished from the face of earth. Although each poem has been comparatively with other poems, there has not been a study concerning a comparison of these two poems. This paper attempts to analyze Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Browning’s “Love among the

Ruins” which share remarkable thematic similarities as well as differences in terms of their imagery of nature, criticism against the world, and appreciation of love.

The Victorian Age was characterized with transitions, upheavals, and great changes not only in the lives of people but also in their thought and belief systems and the appreciation of the world they live in as it was a period of religious, political, and scientific controversy. Industrialization brought social problems, but also made England an imperial power. Religion was challenged by the theory of evolution and women’s place in the society was being questioned. Early Victorians were enthusiastic about development. However, at the end of the long reign of the Queen, English intellectuals had become much more critical towards the social and moral values of the age and were hostile towards change. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens sheds light on the minds of Victorian people by his description of the age:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...(5)

As Arnold and Browning wrote during the Victorian age, “Dover Beach” and “Love among the Ruins” have more similarities than differences in terms of their themes. As Carol T. Christ suggests, in this age of transition from Romanticism to Modernism, Victorian poets created works that were in line with both schools (11-12) whose traces can be found in the themes of “Dover Beach” and “Love among the Ruins” as nature is used as a theme like Romantics, but with a critical point of view and ambivalence like Modernists. Stacy Johnson analyzes Victorian poetry by using some poems including “Dover Beach” and “Love among the Ruins” and points out the similarities and differences between Romantic and Victorian literature. As Johnson states, Victorian literature is “so easy to misrepresent by any generalization;” however, it has certain common qualities differing from Romantic and Modern literature as “questions of a man’s proper relation with other man and with God or the Universe, are peculiarly serious” to Victorians. This issue is reflected in “Dover Beach” with the expression of retreating of “the Sea of Faith” (21), and in “Love among the Ruins” by associating the great achievements of civilization to “folly, noise and sin” (81). Furthermore, the ambivalent imagery of nature is another difference compared to the Romantics. In relation to their use of imagery, Johnson claims that the concept of beauty activates different emotions in Romantic and Victorian poets. In her comparison, she notes their difference as follows:

[T]he predominant imagery of the Romantics, imagery of growth, interfusion, and constancy which assumes the organic wholeness of Nature, with the imagery of the Victorians, which tends toward polarity and tension rather than unity. The symbols remain, but they are pictured with more intense ambivalence, so that Victorian flowers and fruits can be lovely and false, Victorian sunlight brilliant and painful, the Victorian sea magnificent and bitter. (Johnson 1-4)

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Within this context, the ambivalent portrayal of nature can be identified in “Dover Beach” as the sea described in positively at the beginning of the poem is later described negatively as the “turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery,” and in “Love among the Ruins” the calming images of nature at the beginning is complicated as it is contrasted with the ruins, symbols of human vainglory. Also, as Johnson suggests, ambiguity of dramatic voices is another characteristic of some Victorian poetry which is inherent in “Dover Beach” and “Love among the Ruins” as both make use of dramatic monologue (5).

Both poems have a similar structure as they begin with calming images of nature which inspire deep philosophical thoughts about life. In both poems, the settings are in the titles: one is Dover beach, which is at the southeastern coast of England, and the other is among the ruins which was once a great ancient city whose exact location is controversial (Parr 128). Arnold makes use of visual and auditory imagery heavily throughout “Dover Beach,” and the first stanza begins with visual images. The poem starts with the description of a beach during nighttime. The sea is calm; there is high tide; the moon is out and shines beautifully on the English Channel. The persona is in Dover Beach where he can see the light from the French coast. Looking at the French and the English coasts, he mentions how the white cliffs at Dover Beach shine under the moonlight. The image of night in these opening lines is central to the poem as it will be used to set the mood throughout the poem.

The auditory imagery in the following lines, with “the grating roar of pebbles” (9-10) suggests a change in the tone of the poem, as the word “roar” (9) contradicts with the romantic scene drawn at the beginning. That the “waves draw back, and fling” (10) and have a “tremulous cadence” (13) implies that the sound of the sea has a trembling repeated rhythm that stops and starts again, and this reminds the persona of the endless sad music of the world.

The imagery of the sea leads to the theme of criticism against the contemporary world which is the second common theme. In the second stanza, nature turns into a source that inspires disturbing thoughts as the speaker notices a relationship between the Aegean Sea in the ancient times and “human misery” (18). The poet continues to use auditory images in this stanza, as well. The sound of the pebbles takes the speaker to a mental journey back to ancient Greece, and the persona imagines the Greek playwright Sophocles hearing the same sound, saying:

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. (15-20)

In his “Preface” to *The Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840–1867*, Arnold claims that modern poets should turn their faces to the classical ages to produce good poems (par. 24), and “Dover Beach” forms an example to this ideology. By identifying a relationship between Sophocles and himself, the persona draws a resemblance between the situation of human beings at present and in the past. In addition, the use of the metaphor “turbid ebb and flow” (17) suggests a correlation between the tide and fluctuations

in human suffering. This creates a sense of hopelessness as nothing has changed about human since then.

In stanza three, the persona criticizes a phenomenon related to the Victorian period, the loss of faith, by drawing an analogy between “the sea” and “faith” (21) which is full of doubts, and thereby, turning “the sea” (21) into an image completely different from the one at the beginning. The persona begins to think about a time when religious belief in the world was more important in people’s lives. However, now the persona can only hear “the Sea of Faith” (21) retreating from the world leaving a wet desolate beach behind with no “certitude” (34). This loss might be related to all kinds of faith but particularly religious belief, full of doubts brought especially by Darwinism.

In the last stanza, the theme of love is introduced as the speaker asks his beloved to be “true to one another” (29) and tells that this world is not beautiful as it is full of illusions. In “Dover Beach,” love is portrayed as “an anchorage in a Godless, chaotic, hostile world” and “a desperate refuge” (Bush 40-41). Until the last stanza, the poet points out that the world is full of suffering, and there is nothing to hold on to, and then, love is presented as the only positive dependable concept in this world devoid of faith:

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 (29-37).

At the end of the poem, war is introduced as a motif since “the world, which seems [t]o lie before us like a land of dreams” (30-31) is a battlefield “where ignorant armies clash by night” (37). The confused state of the world resulting from the loss of faith is expressed through this image related to war. Here, the world is resembled to a dark battlefield where fighters kill their friends well as enemies as they are blinded by night and cannot distinguish one from the other. “This is almost unanimously thought to be a passage from Thucydides’ account of the night battle of Epipolae” (Kokernot 99). However, it may also refer to the conflicts in Arnold’s time. The image of a dark battlefield stands in stark contrast with the peaceful nature at the beginning of the poem. As Arthur Dwight Culler points out, “‘We are here as on a darkling plain’ may be taken as ‘the central statement which Arnold makes about the human condition,’ a statement that no Romantic poet ever made and no Victorian poet before Hardy made ‘with such uncompromising severity’” (qtd. in Bush 41). Arnold makes a powerful conclusion by expressing his pessimistic views about the world as the dream-like

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land, which was suggested with the peaceful description of nature at the beginning of the poem, turns into “a darkling plain” (35).

Similar to “Dover Beach,” at the beginning of “Love among the Ruins,” we are presented with peaceful images of nature which also serve as an inspiration for the persona’s critical thoughts. Throughout the poem, there is a heavy use of visual imagery as the descriptions are almost like a painting. The persona is a shepherd in love whose thoughts go back and forth between the present and the past state of the place. He starts by describing the rustic countryside with sheep heading home as the sun is setting, and he is suddenly reminded of the history of the place as the ancient “capital” (9) city:

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,  
Miles and miles  
On the solitary pastures where our sheep  
Half-asleep  
Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop  
As they crop—  
Was the site once of a city great and gay,  
(So they say)  
Of our country's very capital, its prince  
Ages since  
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far  
Peace or war. (1-12)

Throughout the poem, this peaceful image of nature is contrasted with the image of the populous ancient city, and criticism against the world is presented in the form of criticism against foul human nature. The present state of the place is associated with positive qualities such as simplicity, “solitary” (3), and “love” (84), while the city is associated with negative qualities such as “folly, noise and sin” (81). Although the city was once “great and gay” (7), it is just a rumor as the persona continues the next line with “(So they say)” (8).

In the third stanza, the portrayal of the country as one that does not “even boast a tree” (13) is curious since it expresses the simple and primitive state of the present landscape. The grassy landscape of the present is contrasted with the past and its civilized constructions like the “palace,” with its “spires up like fires” (19-20), “hundred gated circuit of a wall” (21), a “tower” (43), “temples... colonnades... causeys, bridges, aqueducts” (63-65), “a brazen pillar high as the sky” (75-76). In that sense, the present is horizontal apart from the remaining turret while the past is vertical since it is full of high buildings. Within that context, the words “verdure” (15) and “fires” (20) are used to juxtapose the green of the present rustic nature with the red of the past city.

In Browning's poem, nature and the present are associated with positive images. For instance, "grass" is described as "plenty and perfection" (25), and the speaker claims that there "never was such a carpet" (26-27) in the past. Within this context, pastoral peacefulness is complicated through the persona's reminiscing of the past, and the present is glorified in this way. "The single little turret" (37) is the only remnant of the past as it was a part of the tower, which once "sprang sublime" (43-44), and "the monarch and his minions and his dames" (47) watched the races of the "chariots" making "a burning ring" (45) there. The solitary present, in this way, is contrasted with the past full of excitement. In this respect, the imagery of nature and portrayal of the present in "Love among the Ruins" are different from those of "Dover Beach." In Arnold's poem, unlike Browning's, past and present alike are full of human misery as "Sophocles," like the persona, heard the "turbid ebb and flow of human misery" (17-18).

The persona relates the ostensible great deeds of men in the past to "folly, noise and sin" (81), and decides that "love is best" not "triumphs" and "glories" (83-84). As highlighted in the last lines of the poem, the past is associated with transient human achievements and complication while the present is associated with lasting love and simplicity. The ruins are symbols of human vainglory, and the speaker identifies the wicked nature of human beings as a reason of the troubled world, and this idea is stressed through the repetitions of "gold" (35, 78). In these lines, the speaker criticizes materialism by indicating that the fall of the kingdom is a consequence of not only war, but also men's weakness for money since "gold" is what corrupted them. The persona says:

Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe  
    Long ago;  
Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame  
    Struck them tame;  
And that glory and that shame alike, the gold  
    Bought and sold. (31-36)

In stanza seven, the speaker expresses that "Now—the single little turret that remains / On the plains," (37-38) is what is left of this heroic past. The poet uses the symbols of past glory to show how quasi-triumphs of the past have turned into dust, and thereby, he creates a situational irony. To this end, Browning draws a resemblance between the city, the past, and temporality, as he examines these in contrast to the pastoral, the present, and permanence. Thus, the enduring stature of love is emphasized through its juxtaposition with a fallen kingdom.

Finally, the persona introduces the theme of love like Arnold's persona. As Troy Organ states "Love plays the central part in [Browning's] philosophy of life" (18). The lover is introduced as "a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair" (55) who is waiting for the persona in the turret in a peaceful evening, and this reminds him of how "the king looked where she looks now" (59) and saw a splendid city and his men all around. While the poet associates his beloved with nature, the past is associated with the crowds. As Eric Gray states, hereby, a dichotomy of public and private is established by associating the past with a teeming civilization and the present with his lover (522). Then, the persona thinks of his lover again and describes how they will meet using tactile images highlighting their intimacy:

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When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,  
    Either hand  
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace  
    Of my face,  
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech  
    Each on each. (67-72)

There is a close relationship between nature and love in “Love among the Ruins.” As Stefan Hawlin comments on the significance of nature, “this is seemingly the ideal scene in which to appreciate and realize the absolute value of love. Landscape ... seems to suggest exactly what the speaker is searching for – a spiritual and emotional ‘nakedness’, a sexual freedom and intimacy...” (99). Browning’s countryside that does not “even boast a tree” (13) creates a secluded environment for the lovers to meet freely. Furthermore, the speaker of “Love among the Ruins” associates nature with his beloved. Shosuke Kinugawa contends that “[a]lthough the alignment of women with nature is often interpreted in terms of feminine subordination,” in this poem, nature and women “take on a position of greater prominence, revealing a world where, in due time, patriarchal civilization falls subordinate to nature and women.” (235). In the poem, a glorious kingdom is overthrown by nature as the persona says a carpet of grass ”o'er-spreads / And embeds / Every vestige of the city” (27-29)

Similar to “Dover Beach,” love is interpreted as a dependable force in “Love among the Ruins.” However, as Carson suggests, Browning has a more optimistic view compared to Arnold (1). The expression of love in “Love among the Ruins” is more intimate and optimistic than “Dover Beach.” As a result, there is a great difference in the tones of the poems. While Arnold’s poem ends with a pessimistic image of a “darkling plain” (35), Browning ends with the optimistic line “Love is best.” (84):

O heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!  
    Earth's returns  
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!  
    Shut them in,  
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!  
    Love is best. (79-84)

In this study, thematic similarities and differences between Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Robert Browning’s “Love among the Ruins” have been analyzed. In both poems, nature is a prevalent theme inspiring the persona’s thoughts related to the change between the past and the present. In “Dover Beach,” this change is expressed through the depiction of loss of faith, and in “Love among the Ruins,” the change is physical within the context of a fallen empire. Although the world is in both poems, the reason for criticism is loss of faith in “Dover Beach,” and foul human nature in “Love among the Ruins.” Love is appreciated in both poems. In “Dover Beach,” it is the only savior in an age devoid of faith, and in “Love among the Ruins,” it is pictured as a peaceful and eternal force unlike the material glories of ancient civilizations. Evidently, these two poems have more similarities than

differences as both consider love as a powerful feeling that can overcome human misery and a stable concept to hold on to in a state of turmoil.

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