

DOVER BEACH: SEMIOTICS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract: Decoding the dramatic situation, intertextuality, and connotation of a poetic text can be very helpful for its interpretation. How the theory of those three aspects of semiotics might be applied in *Dover Beach* is to be the focus of this article.

Key words: communicative act, dramatic situation, intertextuality, denotation, connotation, vehicle, tenor.

From the vast repertoire of semiotic theories, the reader will undoubtedly find the following three steps extremely helpful in reading poetry: supplying the dramatic situation that is lacking because of the elliptical nature of a poem; supplying an intertextual reading of the poem; and supplying a denotative and connotative reading of the poem.

DRAMATIC SITUATION OF A POEM

The main focus of semiotics is actually to analyze the features of a communication. The six features of a communicative act as popularized in Jakobson's diagram are (1) sender, (2) receiver, (3) contact, (4) message, (5) context, and (6) code (Jakobson, 1960: 350–377).

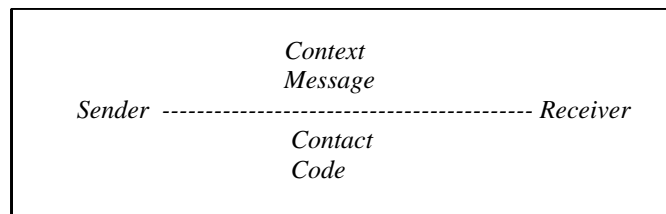


Figure 1. Features of Communicative Acts (Jakobson, 1960)

In poetry, however, those six features lose its simplicity and become multiple or ambiguous. To illustrate the point, first, we may start with the “*sender*.” In a poem we sense that the poet may not be the speaker of the poem. Thus semioticians say that the words in a poem are spoken by a “*persona*,” meaning, as the word implies, that the poet has donned a mask. Indeed whenever a communicative act encourages the reader to sense a difference between the writer (poet) and speaker, we enter the realm of poetry. Secondly, there is the question of the “*receiver*” of the poem. The words in a poem seem to be aimed not directly at us (the readers), but at someone else. This ambiguous situation is essentially poetic. We seem to overhear the *persona* speaking to some addressee in the poem. Thirdly, the “*contact*,” which normally includes the physical channels of communication and the psychological connections between the sender and receiver, is not simple either since spoken words in a poem are presented to us in writing. Consequently, such physical channels as posture, gesture, and other body language are translated into verbal ones. Similarly the psychological connection between sender and receiver can only be inferred from the written text. Fourthly, the “*message*,” which is comparable to Chomsky’s concept of *performance*, may take the form of ironies, ambiguities, paradoxes, and other ambiguous features of poetic messages. The fifth and sixth features of communication, the *context* and *code*, are probably the most complicated. *Context* involves three related binary oppositions: *absent* vs. *present*, *semiotic* vs. *phenomenal*, and *abstract* vs. *concrete*. For instance, if two people are looking at the rain outside the window together and one says, “It is raining,” the *context* is *concrete*, *phenomenal*, and *present*. If, however, they open a book and read the words, “It is raining,” the *context* is still *concrete*, potentially *phenomenal*; and yet, because it is *absent*, the meaning can no longer be referred to the rain outside the window. It is raining not in present reality but in a space we call fictional. Since

it is fictional, we have a *context* that is ambiguous. The final feature in communication is the *code*, which is comparable to Chomsky's idea of *competence*. If *message* is *performance*, then *code* is *competence*. In semiotics, every act of signification is dependent on the *code* or *competence* of the sender and receiver. Actually *code* involves all of the features of *sender*, *receiver*, *contact*, *message*, and *context*. Thus the ambiguity of code involves the ambiguity of all the other features. The study of a poem, then, must involve the study of all those features, and especially the development of the codes that govern the communicative process of the poem.

For practical purposes this essay will use the term *dramatic situation* rather than *communicative process* since poems certainly generate fictional contexts that can be decoded as dramatic enactments. Chatman has made clear the distinctions of various dramatic situations that a poem may occupy (Chatman, 1968: 29–36). Arranging his list in the order of how explicit the persona and addressee are characterized, Chatman has drawn up the following types: (a) a sequence in which the characters appear in the way the characters of a play do; (b) A framework consisting of a persona with a specific addressee. But they are not to be identified as the poet and his reader; (c) a structure in which the persona is not addressing any addressee in particular; (d) a construction in which the persona might be identified as the poet, but the addressee is obviously not the reader; (e) an arrangement in which the persona might be identified as the poet and the addressee, his reader; and (f) a device consisting of neither a specific persona nor a specific addressee.

Applied to *Dover Beach*, the Chatman system may yield the following process of elimination. It would be impossible to classify *Dover Beach* into type (a) since the poem introduces no clear-cut characters who are actually addressing one another. Type (b) shows a good chance of meeting the case. The presence of a persona and an addressee can be detected from a number of lines.

Come to the window sweet is the night (line 6)

This line clearly reveals the presence of a persona speaking to an addressee beckoned to come to the window by the persona. Then again in:

Listen! You hear the grating roar (line 9)

We may conclude that the persona was turning to the addressee and calling the latter's attention to the sound of "the grating roar". These two lines completely eliminate the possibilities of Chatman's type (c) and (f).

Further investigation reveals that by juxtaposing line (9) to line (6), the “*you*” of line (9) cannot possibly refer to the reader. Line 6 “*come to the window ...*” makes it quite clear that the “*you*” must have been someone present in the very room where the persona is to be found. This shuts the door for (c) of the Chatman list, and leaves only (b) and (d) to choose from. Consequently, the only remaining problem to settle is whether the persona *is* or *is not* to be identified as the poet. This question also applies to line 24:

But now I only hear

Could the “*I*” presumably be Matthew Arnold himself? With regard to this I would favor an intertextual reading of the poem with Matthew Arnold’s biography. By delving into the biography of Matthew Arnold, the reader might relate the dramatic situation of the poem to some seaside rendezvous between Arnold and Marguerite.

However, it does not make much difference whether or not the persona and the poet are one and the same person. Chatman says:

“Many lyric poems use a framework in which the speaking voice is not expressly different from the poet’s (or more exactly, there, is no particular reason to distinguish the two) but where the addressee is clearly different from the reader. We overhear the address—we are not spoken to directly”(Chatman 1958: 29 – 36).

As it stands, both (b) and (d) can fit the case.

The framework in which the persona and addressee occurs has been identified; the next job to tackle is the one of finding out what sort of *context* the dramatic situation makes up. The *context* (or setting) of the dramatic situation is of the utmost importance. One of the key-lines in catching the *context* of the work is:

Come to the window, sweet is the night- air! (line 6)

We may conclude from it that the persona was indoors and gazing out of the window. He was inviting his companion to take in the seascape as illustrated in the opening lines (lines 1-4):

*The sea is calm tonight
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone, the cliffs of England stand.*

Here the poet shows us that it was a moonlit night. Faraway across the channel lights were seen flickering on the French coast. A map of England will readily point out Dover as being the English seaside spot closest to the French coast. It is not surprising that the persona could catch the twinkling lights in the background of the scenery. On the foreground, on the other hand, stood the cliffs of England towering over the English Channel.

Then in line 29 we overhear the persona sighing, “*Ah, love, let us be true.*”

This reveals the relationship between the persona and addressee. It is made clear that the poem has to do with a couple in love. What then is projected from this dramatic situation? At this stage the reader going through this poem needs only to sum up the three points gathered so far and leave the rest to the play of his imagination.

- It was a peaceful night
- A beautiful moon shimmered over the calm waters
- The two lovers were in a room *alone*.

At this point the *contact* or psychological connection between the persona and addressee can be decoded. Anyone will immediately sense the intimacy of the situation. We cannot help getting curious about what they were actually there for.

After figuring out the dramatic situation of *Dover Beach*, we are ready to take up the next step in a semiotic reading–intertextuality.

INTERTEXTUALITY

The semiotic notion of intertextuality introduced by Julia Kristeva is associated primarily with *poststructuralist* theorists who believe that each text exists in relation to others. A text, as Kristeva writes, is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text,” in which “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect ...” (Kristeva: 36). Texts are framed by others in many ways. To illustrate how a text exists within a vast ‘society of texts’ (Fiske,

1987: Chapter 7), we can resume our reading of *Dover Beach* and trace the intertextual references the poem may possibly have.

We can safely assume from the title of the poem that stanza I describes the view of Dover, the English seaport closest to France. But stanza II opens into a wider scope, the image of the sea does not limit itself to the English Channel but also presents the Aegaeon Sea where Sophocles, the Greek poet, also saw and heard the very things that the persona sensed on his Dover Beach. This requires an intertextual reading on the part of the reader to find out what it is about the sea that has made such a deep impression on these two poets. What do the sound of the roar of pebbles, the withdrawing roar of the tide, and the turbid ebb and flow of human misery signify?

The reference to Sophocles in line 15-18 is presumably an intertextual reference to his third chorus in *Antigone* (Sophocles: 482):

Fortunate is the man who has never tasted God's vengeance! line 465)
Where once the anger of heaven has struck, that house is shaken
For ever: damnation rises behind each child
Like a wave cresting out of the black northeast,
When the long darkness under sea roars up
And burst drumming death upon the windwhipped sand. line 470)

Under a curse the house of Oedipus declined into a world of human misery. And Matthew Arnold feels that such a curse still lives through all ages and keeps on affecting all of us. To Matthew Arnold, this was an “*eternal note of sadness.*”

The last stanza of *Dover Beach* closes with the striking image of “*a darkling plain.*” The shift of imagery from the sea to this “*darkling plain*” will at first strike us as out of tune. The change of image seems to be too abrupt. But a closer study on this “*darkling plain*” shows how natural it flows out of the waters of the sea. The image contained in the last three lines of the poem can intertextually be traced back to the battle of Epipolae in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

The way events turned out for the Athenians during the battle fully corresponds with the movement of the sea image in the previous stanzas. It is this parallel of movement that makes it quite natural for the poem to draw up the battle of Epipolae out of the ebb and flow at the beach. The way the sea has shaped the image of Epipolae can be illustrated as follows:

The sea is calm tonight (line 1).

The tide is full, the moon lies fair (line 2).

These two lines projects the image of the Athenians moving onwards in full tide. Everything went on smoothly. The tide of fortune was in their favor. Mounting by the hill of Euryalus they set out for Epipolae, unobserved by the enemy's guards. They went up to the fort, took it, and killed part of the garrison in a blitzkrieg. A large number of the enemy, however, managed to escape and gave the alarm to the other camps at Epipolae. These at once advanced to stop the Athenians. But the tide was still with the Athenians, after a sharp battle the defenders were completely routed.

... from the long line of spray (line 7)

where the ebb meets the moon-blanch'd sand, (line 8)

The long lines of spray disturbs the smoothness of the calm sea. It reminds us that the flood is on the move. Nothing will last forever. The tide of events will change with the turning of tides. As the Athenians were still enjoying the tide of their success, some signs of a turning of tide were in sight. In their eagerness to achieve the targets of the attack while the goings were still hot, the Athenian commanders ordered the men to push on without any break. But, intoxicated with their victory, the soldiers advanced in some disorder, wishing to break through the force of the enemy as soon as possible.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

The roaring sound of the sea withdrawing with the ebb tide goes in line with the turning of tide on the battlefield of Epipolae. When fresh reinforcement troops came to the rescue of the defenders, the Athenians fell into great disorder. With only the moon to light the place, the combatants could recognize no one except the ones in his own immediate vicinity. This resulted in:

... a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The Athenians got fresh reinforcements too but in the darkness they saw one another only as outlines of figures without being sure whether they were friends or foes. A large part of these forces had either only just climbed the hill, or were still ascending, so they did not know for sure which way to march.

Meanwhile the first troops were already partly defeated and scattered. Some of them were made to retreat and on their way back clashed with their own reinforcements who took everyone in front of them for enemies. They kept demanding the watchword their only means of recognition. But since they were asking it all at once, it only caused great confusion among themselves. To make matters worse the enemy overheard and discovered their watchword! The result was that if the Athenians came across a weaker party of the enemy, it slipped out of their hands by giving the proper watchword. On the other hand, if they themselves clashed with stronger troops, they were put to sword.

Another intertextual reading involves the analogy between the Peloponnesian war and the persona's relationship with his addressee. This intertextuality is also brought about by the use of powerful imagery. The two major elements dominating the imagery of the poem are the sight of the sea and land, and the sound of the withdrawing waters. The first stanza starts with the image of the English Channel at full tide, in stanza II this image is allowed to flow over to the Aegean sea. In doing so we get the impression of an existence starting far away in the past and moving up to the present. In both stanzas the image is closed with a disturbing projection—stanza I carries a “*long line of spray*.” While stanza II pictures a “*turbid ebb and flow*.” These disturbing elements contrast sharply with the calm moonlit sea of the opening lines. This contrast of peacefulness and restlessness is carried on in the imagery of stanza III. Here the poem has entirely left the denotative sea and turned to a wholly metaphoric one. This metaphoric sea starts with the image of the waters at full tide and secured safely upon the shores like a “*bright girdle*.” But the security of this “*bright girdle*” is not to last very long. As soon as the “*girdle*” is removed the waters withdraw from the shores, leaving behind a gloomy beach and naked shingles. The sea has always been with us since the beginning of time. We have learned to take it for granted. But on the shore, as we watch the long line of spray, we come to realize that the sea has a life of its own. It does not remain “*calm*”, “*full*”, and “*tranquil*” but, at times, it also “*retreats*,” “*withdraws*,” “*ebbs and flows*.” This elusiveness of the sea makes the persona see still another image – his love! For him the sea has turned into a vehicle to represent the image of his love. At the onset his love appeared “*so various*”, “*so beautiful*,” and “*so new*.” At first everything on earth and his love, above all, seemed constant, tranquil, and permanent. However, at the height of their rendezvous, the persona becomes acutely aware of a disturbing thought. Can it be that his love, too, is not there to stay? Will his love, too, turn restless and move away with a turning tide? These gnawing thoughts come

upon him at the point when intimacy is at its highest. At that particular point the poem launches a suggestive range of images – a girdle taken off; a garment flowing away; and a state of nakedness. At that point where love has reached its sexual expression, “*a long line of spray*” comes into sight. The persona realizes that some time in the future “*Faith*” may recede. The woman, whom he has put all his faith in, may possibly retreat, withdraw and degrade into a disillusion of love. She might be “*neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.*” Thus the desperate sigh “*Ah, love, let us be true*” in line 29. When passion is at its highest, the two individuals turn “*ignorant,*” the loveliness of their relation becomes a disturbing “*long line of spray*”.

The second major element of the imagery—the sound of the waters—start with the grating roar of pebbles reaching our ears as a pleasant musical cadence. And when panorama of the English Channel moves into the metaphoric waters of the “*Sea of Faith*” the sound rises to overshadow the sight until it completely fills the imagery of the poem. At this point the persona sighs:

*“Now I only hear
Its melancholy, withdrawing roar.”*

So much is he absorbed by the melancholy of the roar that he becomes oblivious of the panorama around him. The musical cadence starting in line 9 has risen into a larger volume of roar in line 25, and in the last three closing lines everything turns into “*a darkling plain,*” where nothing is visible except the sound of the “*confused alarms.*” At the end of the poem the imagery of sound does not only change in volume but also in quality. The musical cadence has given way to the harsh chaotic sounds of a “*clash by night*”.

If we take the movement of sound and sight together, we will see a clear pattern of an image in illusion and disillusion. Mathew Arnold has used the imagery of sight to project still another image—the image of illusion; whereas the imagery of sound represents disillusion. Our eyes find delight in the peaceful image of a moonlit sea, but our ears warn us that the peace and beauty of the sea is soon to withdraw. At first our eyes only see the image of love as something calm, quiet and everlasting, but our ears catch the withdrawing roar in the tide of our love. When finally sex comes in to play all beauty is switched off, the only thing to remain is the realization that someday *faith* may flow away. The sound of the “*confused alarms*” on the “*darkling plain*” has shattered the “*land of dreams*”.

The poem may appear to satisfy itself with description for its own sake. Al-

though even the casual reader is likely to be impressed with the magnificence of such phrasings like “*the moon-blanch’d land,*” “*begin, and cease, and then again begin,/ With tremulous cadence slow ...*” etc.- he/she may wonder about what the description leads to, if anything. The explicit statements made in the poem will offer little assistance in this regard. For they only amount to something like: “The moonlit waters of the English Channel is beautiful. However, the water is not there to stay. It flows away with the next tide. The world is really much of that sort, nothing is of permanence”. But there is more to it than what appears on surface. What this poem contains is, technically considered, expressed mostly through its imagery and intertextual references. The poem says a great deal, but only indirectly. The withdrawing waters of the falling tide, the element that makes this poem exceptionally remarkable is not measured for us in term of surface level or other visible surface changes. The stereo metric spectacle of a change of tide is converted by the poet into a stereophonic experience. It is the sound of the withdrawing roars on which the persona dilates. He hears it on Dover Beach, and he knows that Sophocles heard it too on the Aegaeon sometime in the past. As the persona is taking up the sound of the falling tide, it suddenly strikes him how impermanent the nature of thing is. The temporary nature of the full waters intermingles with and becomes a part of his personal existence, above all, the love of this life. He turns to his lady and sighs: “*Ah, love, let us be true*”.

One cannot claim originality for this association of wayward love with the coming and going of tides. It is an obvious cliché that must have occurred at one time or another to most of us. But the poet has invoked this connection quietly and unobtrusively. The historical associations of Sophocles is also of great suggestive value. Centuries after Sophocles has turned to dust the withdrawing roar is still heard, its continuity with the past remains unbroken. Throughout the ages the world has shown nothing of everlasting value. All things come and go. This phenomenon is admirably summarized in the line “*Begin, and cease, and then again begin.*”

Is this interpretation pushing too far? If it goes in the right direction, there is no such thing as too far. The problem might be that an intertextual reading requires the active participation of a skilled reader for its interpretation. All the things the reader has ever read or encountered in his/her life will enrich his/her reading of a poem.

Besides dealing with the dramatic situation and the intertextual references, the reader may also want to go into a denotative and connotative analysis of *Do-*

ver Beach, and this will, in turn, take him/her into the play of the metaphors and metonymies of the poem.

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

In semiotics there are different 'orders of signification' (levels of meaning). Semioticians distinguish between denotation-what a sign stands for- and connotation-its cultural associations. References to the signifier and the signified are sometimes described as the *first order* of signification-that of denotation, while connotation is described as a *second-order* signifying system.

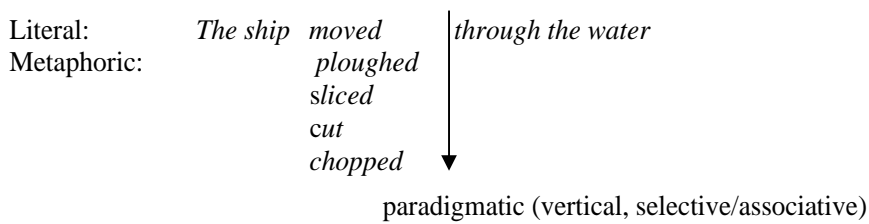
In conventional semiotic terms, connotation uses the first sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. Connotations 'derive not from the sign itself, but from the way the society uses and values both the signifier and the signified' (Fiske & Hartley, 1978: 41). Connotation involves emotional overtones, subjective interpretation, socio-cultural values and ideological assumptions. A car, for example, may connote virility or freedom in Western cultures.

In poetry, connotative meaning is often generated by the use of metonymy or metaphor. *Metonymy* involves the invocation of an idea or object through the use of an associated detail (so 'the crown' invokes the notion of monarchy). Advertisers use both metaphor and metonymy: 'the sign of a mother pouring out a particular breakfast cereal for her children is a metonymy of all her maternal activities of cooking, cleaning and clothing, but a metaphor for the love and security she provides' (Fiske & Hartley, 1978: 50).

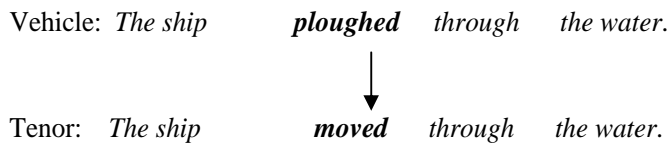
Unlike metaphor, metonymy is based on *contiguity*: it does not require transposition (an imaginative leap) as metaphor does. This difference can lead metonymy to seem more 'natural' than metaphor. Any attempt to represent reality can be seen as involving metonymy, since it can only involve selection (and yet such selections serve to guide us in envisaging larger frameworks). *Synecdoche* is a form of metonymy in which a part stands for the whole or vice versa (e.g. workers are sometimes called 'hands'). As Monaco points out, 'many of the old clichés of Hollywood are synecdochic (close shots of marching feet to represent an army) and metonymic (the falling calendar pages, the driving wheels of the railroad engine)' (Monaco, 1981: 136).

Fiske interprets metaphor as a paradigmatic dimension (vertical, selective/associative) and metonymy as a syntagmatic dimension (horizontal, combinative) (Fiske & Hartley, 1978: 50).

The sentence ‘*The ship ploughed through the water*’ may illustrate this point.



What is happening, then, is a process of metaphoric transposition from ‘*moved*’ to ‘*ploughed*’.



Semioticians will say that “*a ship ploughed through the water*” employs a metaphor. The image of a ‘*ploughshare*’ is inferred to describe the action of the ship. The metaphor ‘*the ship ploughed ...*’ expresses the figurative (known in literary jargon as the ‘*vehicle*,’ which is short for ‘sign vehicle’) to represent the literal (the ‘*tenor*’)—‘*the ship moved ...*’ The *tenor* and the *vehicle* are normally unrelated, thus we must make an imaginative leap to understand a fresh metaphor. This imaginative leap involves our creativity to transpose the characteristics of *ploughshare* to the *ship*. Characteristics of the *ploughshare*, such as its powerful, relentless heaviness are transposed to the ship. Similarly, characteristics of the earth, such as the *furrows* made by the *ploughshare*, are transposed to the water *parted* by the *ship*. Geoffrey Leech defines tenor as “the literal part of the expression with its reconstructed literal context” and vehicle as “the figurative part of the expression, together with its reconstructed context” (Leech: 154).

Another important feature of a metaphor is that it exploits a *similarity* and a *difference* simultaneously. It is in this sense that a metaphor operates paradigmatically, since the “vehicle” and the “tenor” must have not only enough *simi-*

larity to put them into the same paradigm, but also enough *difference* to convey the intended contrast. In other words, they are *different* units within the *same* paradigm. Thus the metaphor 'ploughed' is a *different* unit belonging to the *same* paradigm of words bearing the meaning of: 'sliced,' 'cut,' 'chopped' etc.

Another element in a connotative reading of poetry is the explication of metonymy. If a metaphor works by transposing qualities from one plane of reality to another, metonymy works by associating meanings within the same plane. The basic definition of metonymy is *making a part stand for a whole*. If we talk of 'the crown' to represent 'the king,' we are employing a metonymy.

A metonym is said to involve a syntagmatic combination, since it works on a horizontal axis. For example: *The Crown of England* is in crisis can be seen as a derivation of *The [King's] Crown of England* is in crisis in which 'king's' and 'crown' are on the same horizontal axis. Metonyms can also be seen in the following: *During the invasion into Iraq, Bush said that they needed more boots in Iraq.* 'Boots' is obviously a paradigmatic derivation of '[military] boots'.

What all of these add up to is that there are three steps a semiotician may take in a process of connotative reading, i.e. (1) to discover a metaphor and see on what grounds the vehicle represents the tenor; (2) to determine the connotative sense of a word or phrase; (3) to examine the impact of every metaphoric element in the work. Each of these basic steps, when properly tackled, will enable us to see the sensory images emanating out of the poem.

Dover Beach may offer a perfect illustration of how those three steps operate. The opening of stanza I presents a picture of a scenery well-balanced in beauty and tranquility.

*The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the Straits ...*

The calm sea reflects a picture of nature at peace, while the full tide stimulates the image of a sea contented with itself. And this night of serenity and contentment is further enhanced with the soft glow of the fair moon. The moonlight, in this piece, accentuates the serenity of the picture with a touch of dreamy colors. It is a beautiful line but we do not find any clear metaphor (step 1 of our connotative reading), so this line will not lead us to continue to step 2 and 3.

The second line, on the other hand, introduces the first metaphor. The moon, as one of the planets in our solar system can impossibly be lying upon the straits. But now the problem is to find out which of the two—"the moon" or "lies

fair/upon the straits” is acting in a metaphorical sense. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English lists as one of the meanings of “lie” (verb): *exist; be arranged in some position or manner; be to be found*.

The predicate of line 2 is clearly not operating in a metaphorical sense, since it is not improbable for something to lie (“*exist*”) upon the Straits. “*The moon*” on the other hand, cannot possibly be found on the surface of the waters. What we do find is not the planet moon itself, but only its reflection. “*The moon*”, in line 2, is only acting metonymically as the vehicle of the tenor “*the moon’s reflection*.” But that is not the end of it. We have only completed step 1 of our connotative reading and need to continue to step 2 where we determine the connotative sense of the word/s. Taken in its connotative sense, this metaphor will reveal the presence of another image. “*The moon*” is commonly associated with the symbol of a demure, gentle and lovely lady. And so within the shimmer of the moonlight upon the calm waters we sense the metaphoric impact of a lady reclining beautifully. This is, in fact, step 3 of our connotative reading. As following sections will confirm, this metaphor is the initial introduction to the impact of a subtly emerging theme of sex and love.

The next two lines again appeal to the reader’s sense of sight.

*...on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand
Glimmering and vast, out, in the tranquil bay*

The tranquility of the seascape is now briefly interrupted by a disturbing flicker of light on the French coast. But this brief flicker is properly balanced with the closer cliffs “*glimmering and vast*.” The flicker connotatively suggests how elusive and impermanent the nature of things are, while the vast and glimmering cliffs presents an image of solidity and constancy. Then the poet continues his poem as follows:

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air! 6

The “*window*” of this line frames the scope of the seascape. It shapes the whole scenery into a vista of seascape seen in a perspective depth.

In “*sweet is the night air*” the reader’s senses are excited in more than one way. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English lists a number of meanings for “*sweet*” (adjective) that can be applied to the context, e.g.: *fragrant; melodious or harmonious in sound; fresh; highly agreeable or attractive or gratify-*

ing, amiable; gentle; delightful.

The fresh air gently caresses over our skin, while the pleasant, soothing sound of the sea breeze over the waves lulls us into a dreamy night. And as we inhale the air, there is the peculiarly agreeable smell of the sea air. In short, “*the sweet air*” penetrates our whole being. Then follows:

<i>Only, from the long line of spray</i>	7
<i>Where the ebb meets the moon-blanch'd sand,</i>	8

In line 7 and 8 the persona has turned his eyes to the more immediate view of the moonlit beach. He sees the sands as being “*moon-blanch'd*” Taken in its denotative sense, the where-clause of line 8 will stimulate an image of the water flowing away from the beach and leaving behind a mass of white sand. And from line 7 we learn that at the place where the sea meets the beach the water splashes into a long line of spray. In its connotative sense, however, the “*ebb*” brings up the image of an unfavorable turning of fortune, while “*blanch'd*” reminds us of the paleness we see in sickness or fear.

<i>Listen; you hear the grating roar</i>	9
<i>Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling</i>	10
<i>At their return, up the high strand</i>	11
<i>Begin, and cease, and then again begin,</i>	12
<i>With tremulous cadence slow, and bring</i>	13
<i>The eternal note of sadness in</i>	14

Now the imagery of the poem is switched toward our hearing. We hear the “*roar*” of pebbles. The Webster’s Third New International Dictionary lists its meanings as: *the sound of roaring; the deep loud cry of some wild beasts; a loud deep cry of emotion; a loud continuous confused sound; a boisterous outcry.*

Though these definitions do not readily apply to the context, we know at least that there has been some kind of a “*loud, deep, confused sound.*” But next to these dictionary meanings, the context has colored this “*roar*” with a couple of descriptive phrases:

The grating roar (line 9)
Begin, and cease, and then again begin (line 12)
With tremulous cadence slow (line 13)
Bring the eternal note of sadness in (line 14)

These four phrases describe the very kind of “*roar*” sounding in the poem.

“Grating” modifies it in a denotative way, referring to a sound brought about by pebbles rubbing against one another. And “begin, and ceases, end then again begin” shows how the sound fades in and out with the oncoming and retreating waves. At this point some of the readers will probably associate this “roar” with “an unpleasant noise.” However, the “roar” in this poem is anything but unpleasant as the phrase “with tremulous cadence slow” shows it. Chatman has elucidated this prepositional phrase as “modulated in volume, and rhythmic” (Chatman 1968:62). And from line 14 we learn that this “roar bring(s)/the eternal note of sadness in.” Here we have to do with another metaphor. The quality of “being sad” can never be literally attributed to the waters of Dover Beach. In line 14 more than one metaphor is at work. First, there is “the note” which we may readily see as the vehicle representing the tenor “roar”. Then, there is “bring(s) in”, customarily the waves can only bring in sand, shells and pebbles, but never “note(s) of sadness”. To find the tenor of this metaphor we may consider the fact that it is actually the persona who senses this note of sadness. Thus “bring(s) in” is the vehicle of the tenor “brings to mind.”

Now we have come to the second stanza. It introduces the theme of human lot at large and still projects the image of the sea on a big scope.

<i>Sophocles long ago</i>	15
<i>Heard it on the Aegaeon, and it brought</i>	16
<i>Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow</i>	17
<i>Of human misery; we</i>	18
<i>Find also in the sound a thought,</i>	19
<i>Hearing it by this distant northern sea,</i>	20

It is clear that the sea still dominates the picture. There is the “ebb, and flow” and “the distant northern sea.” And in this stanza the imagery is still switched towards our ears rather than our eyes. In line 16 we have the phrase “heard it.” At this stage of reading this poem we are well advised to stop for a moment to identify the antecedent of this “it”. In doing this we could observe the following clues:

Heard it on the Aegaeon, and it brought
Into his mind ... (line 16)
Listen you hear the grating roar (line 9)
bring/the eternal note of sadness in (line 14)

Presented in juxtaposition, those lines will yield clear leads towards the identification of the pronoun “it”.

*you hear the grating roar ... Heard it on the Aegean
bring/the eternal sadness in ... it brought into his mind ...*

It will then be clear to see that “it” refers to “the roar”. In this second stanza this “roar” is linked to another image—“the turbid ebb and flow of human misery.” Taken denotatively ebb and flow can only refer to water. But in this line it serves as a vehicle representing the tenor “the alternations of good and bad fortune.” The roar of the withdrawing waves reminds us of the sad fact that good fortune in love and life is not here to stay.

Then in line 18 we come across another pronoun “we”. An identification of this “we” may lead to two kinds of response on the part of the readers. Some may consider it as the persona and addressee, others may see it as a generic—we. In this case both answers are acceptable.

In the third stanza we are still in the midst of the imagery taken from the sea, shore, and small pebbles (“shingles”). And all the time our ears keep on sensing the presence of “the roar” and “the night wind”.

<i>The sea of faith</i>	21
<i>Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore</i>	22
<i>Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;</i>	23

Line 21 introduces an explicit metaphor – “the sea of “Faith” in which “sea” is the vehicle and “Faith” the tenor. The Webster’s Third New International Dictionary has attached the following meanings to “Faith”: *the set of wholeheartedly and steadfastly believing in the existence, power, and benevolence of a supreme being; firm or unquestioning belief in something for which there is no proof; an assurance, promise, or pledge of fidelity, loyalty, or performance; authority; something that is believed or adhered to, the true religion from the point of view of the speaker.* Many critics have associated the “faith” of line 21 with “religious belief” or “belief in God.” This train of thought leads us to identify the “ebb” as a decline in religion, and the “roar” as “lamenting for the spiritual nakedness of the world”. But, as subsequent sections will show, the picture of a decline in religion is not the only image coming out of this metaphor. It should be borne in mind that a metaphor, as soon as it is switched on, will project itself in all directions and produce a simultaneous flashing of many different images. As John Ciardi puts it: “As one might expect of poetry, more

than one thing is happening at once, and the good reader must be prepared to respond at all levels simul-taneously”(Ciardi 1959: 868). Along these lines, the reader should keep his mind open to all the possible denotative as well as the connotative senses of “*Faith*”.

Anyway we may gather from line 22 that this “*sea of Faith*” (whatever the image we attach to it) did once flow to the shores and rested there at full tide. This image accentuates the sea with an air of content and completion. And line 23 promotes this image of content to a greater degree. There is the “*bright girdle*” which introduces us to see the flowing mass of water as being neatly secured with it. Consequently, this will give the association of “*Faith*” (the tenor of the vehicle “*sea*”) as being safely and securely established. But unfortunately this sweet sight of the full and secure waters is soon to be disturbed by the sound of a commencing ebb tide.

<i>But now I only hear</i>	24
<i>Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,</i>	25
<i>Retreating to the breath</i>	26
<i>Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear</i>	27
<i>And naked shingles of the world,</i>	28

Again our ears are haunted by the “*withdrawing roar*”. In line 27 the sight of the shore turns into “*vast edges drear*” which, translated denotatively, describes the picture of a gloomy shore. This image of a gloomy shore is further furnished with “*naked shingles of the world.*”

Explicated, the metaphors of line 24 to 28 will yield the following tenors. Since “*sea*” stands for “*Faith*” the “*withdrawing roar*” can be identified as “*the decline of Faith.*” This “*decline*” leads in “*retreating, to the breath of the night-wind,*” which may well be seen as “*the darkness of our existence.*”

In going through the imagery of stanza III, the reader is advised to draw his careful attention to the possible images evoked by “*girdle*” and “*naked*”. Here again there are some hints of a theme of sex. And still in agreement with our suspicion of such a theme, it is best to find out whether “*Faith*” is only limited to “*religion*” or whether it also launches the idea of “*loyalty or fidelity*”. Now the poem finishes with the last stanza:

<i>Ah, love, let us be true</i>	29
<i>To one another! for the world, which seems</i>	30

To lie before us like a land of dreams, 31
So various, so beautiful, so new, 32

The image of the sea and the beach is switched off. The screen is projected with a picture of the persona turning to the addressee and begging her to be “true” (loyal in love!). In line 31 we have another explicit metaphor consisting of “*a land of dreams*” as the vehicle and “*the world*” the tenor. The image of this dream land is pictured as being “*various*” “*Beautiful*” and “*new*”. But the persona realizes that stripped off its illusive dreams the world was actually something that:

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, 33
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; 34

Then the poem closes with an extended metaphor carrying the key-image to the major theme of the work.

And we are here as on a darkling plain 35
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight 36
Where ignorant armies clash by night 37

First of all we need to find out who the “we” of line 35 refers to. For this purpose, it would be helpful to juxtapose line 29 and line 35.

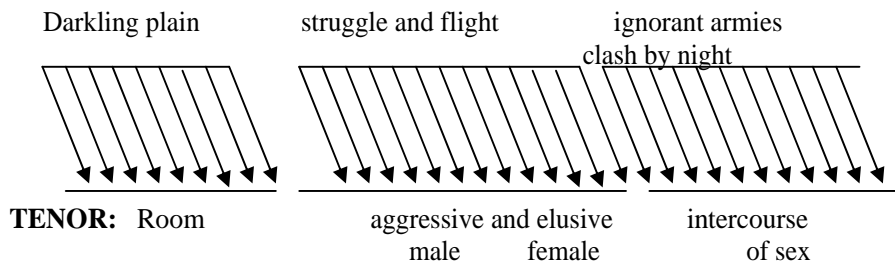
Ah, love, let us be true 29
And we are here ... 35

This proves beyond doubt that “we” stands for the persona and addressee.

There is the problem of explicating the metaphor underlying these three final lines. The word “*as*” in line 35 makes it sure that we have to do with an explicit metaphor in which “*a darkling plain*” is the vehicle and “*here*” the tenor. But the big problem is actually to find out about this “*here*” – the whereabouts of the persona and addressee. This problem, however, has been solved previously in the discussion of the dramatic situation of the poem. We have arrived at the conclusion that the persona and addressee are alone in a room. This room then can be considered as the tenor of “*a darkling plain*” since the adverb-of-place “*here*” refers to “*room*.” And as this metaphor is carried on into line 36 and 37 we are made to see the image of “*ignorant armies clash(ing) by night*” “on this “*darkling plain*”. We have learned that the persona and addressee are to be found alone in a room. Then we have learned further that the “room” is rep-

resented in line 35 by the vehicle “*a darkling plain*”. From this point we may then assume that the vehicle “*ignorant armies clash(ing) by night*” is to represent the tenor “*the persona and addressee clash(ing) by night.*” At this point the theme of sex has fully materialized. These last lines make up the image of a man and woman in a desperate act of passion. The room is “*swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight.*” The words “*struggle*” and “*flight*” evoke the image of the aggressive male and elusive female. But the expression of passion on the part of the persona is clouded with the fear that his love may perhaps offer “*neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.*” In brief the method of imagery in these last three lines can be schematized as follows:

VEHICLE:



CONCLUSION: STRENGTHS OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

A semiotic approach to poetry is neither immensely different from other helpful approaches nor perfect as a method. What it offers is probably a methodology that is explicit, reliable, and therefore pedagogically justifiable as a way of developing interpretive flexibility and sensitivity in readers of poetry. In dealing with poetic texts, wherein meaning is primarily implicit, there is definitely a place for an approach to interpretation that aims at making the dramatic situation, intertextual references, and connotations as explicit as can be.

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APPENDIX

Dover Beach

<i>The sea is calm tonight</i>	1
<i>The tide is full, the moon lies fair</i>	2
<i>Upon the straits; on the French coast the light</i>	3
<i>Gleams and is gone, the cliffs of England stand,</i>	4
<i>Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.</i>	5
<i>Come to the window, sweet is the night!</i>	6
<i>Only, from the long line of spray</i>	7
<i>Where the sea meets the the moon-blanch 'd land</i>	8
<i>Listen! You hear the grating roar</i>	9
<i>Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling</i>	10
<i>At their return, up the high strand,</i>	11
<i>Begin, and cease, and then again begin,</i>	12
<i>With tremulous cadence slow, and bring</i>	13
<i>The eternal note of sadness in.</i>	14
<i>Sophocles long ago</i>	15
<i>Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought</i>	16
<i>Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow</i>	17
<i>Of human misery; we</i>	18
<i>Find also in the sound a thought,</i>	19
<i>Hearing it by this distant northern sea.</i>	20
<i>The Sea of Faith</i>	21
<i>Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore</i>	22
<i>Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.</i>	23
<i>But now I only hear</i>	24
<i>Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,</i>	25
<i>Retreating to the breath</i>	26
<i>Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear</i>	27
<i>And naked shingles of the world.</i>	28

<i>Ah, love, let us be true</i>	29
<i>To one another! for the world, which seems</i>	30
<i>To lie before us like a land of dreams,</i>	31
<i>So various, so beautiful, so new,</i>	32
<i>Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,</i>	33
<i>Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;</i>	34
<i>And we are here as on a darkling plain</i>	35
<i>Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight</i>	36
<i>Where ignorant armies clash by night</i>	37

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)