The poem “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold, published a few years before Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, explores the issue of religion in contrast to the emerging scientific, rational view of human origin. German philosopher Martin Heidegger held the view that “No biology of parentage can answer why we came into being. Neither do we know toward what our existence has been projected, apart from our position in relation to our death” (Hornsby). Heidegger’s concepts of “being” and “thrownness” can be applied to the narrator’s struggle to reconcile these conflicting views of reality. It should be noted that Heidegger was a philosopher of the twentieth century, and the use of his philosophy in this essay emphasizes a contemporary reading of Victorian anxiety. Heidegger believed that philosophy should aim to examine the meaning of being (Hornsby). The struggle to understand human “being” is central to the Victorian struggle between science and religion that the narrator of this poem experiences on a personal level.

Arnold uses vivid imagery from the natural world in order to illustrate the individual’s struggle to come to terms with the competing discourses of science and religion. The use of descriptive language evokes images that represent the complexity of emotions experienced in the midst of the natural world. The narrator does not simply admire nature from afar; he enters into the realm of nature and his emotions move through it. Throughout the poem, the narrator’s cognitions and emotions are connected to nature. This reflects the idea that humans are physical and tangible beings who are tied to the natural world, rather than transcendental, spiritual beings.
designed to fulfill God’s fate. Steiner summarizes Heidegger’s ideas about “being-in-the-world”:
“To be human is to be fixed, embedded and immersed in the physical, literal, tangible day to day
world (qtd. in Hornsby). Many aspects of the natural landscape are personified or exaggerated to
achieve a dramatic effect, showing the intrinsic connection between ‘being’ and the physical,
natural world. Pebbles exhibit a “grating roar” as they are manipulated by the waves, which
“draw back and fling” them (Arnold 9-10). Nature is depicted as a contingent and unpredictable
force rather than stable. The connection between natural forces and human psychology is
emphasized, and the sea comes to represent the existential struggle to determine the human
being’s place in nature, amidst a questioning of religion. Just as nature is contingent, ever
changing, and sometimes turbulent, so too is a human’s understanding of the world in which they
live.

Previous to the Victorian era, religion had been considered a relatively reliable and stable
institution that played a significant role in shaping the individual’s worldview. However, the
scientific advancements of the Victorian era threatened to undermine this authority, which led to
anxiety and uncertainty as people’s firmly held beliefs about humanity’s place within nature
were questioned. The “Sea of Faith” is referred to in the past tense: it “was once” full (Arnold
21-22). Religion was once the path that would help the individual understand his or her place in
the world and make meaning out of his or her raw experiences. However, the questioning of
religion’s authority resulted in a shattered sense of security, leading everything having been built
upon the foundation of religion to subsequently fall apart.

This sense of decay is evoked when the narrator can only hear the sea’s “melancholy, long,
withdrawing roar/Retreating, to the breath/Of the night wind” (Arnold 25-27). The sea is not
depicted as sinister or malevolent; words like “sad”, “empty”, “melancholy”, “withdrawing”, and “drear” create an impression of loss and absence (Arnold 14-27). The sea acts as a metaphor for the narrator’s anxiety, providing a detached psychological evaluation of this tension. The wind travels “down to vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world”, suggesting gloomy unease and vulnerability (Arnold 27-28).

The next stanza, however, provides a more blunt analysis of the narrator’s thoughts. The narrator presents a romantic view of nature, focusing on the appearance of the world as an idyllic dreamscape: “A land of dreams,/So various, so beautiful, so new” (Arnold 31-32). This view of nature emphasizes an optimistic perspective, perhaps one connected with faith and God, in which natural forces converge to create beauty and order. This stands in contrast to the cynical view that the author later reveals. In reality, the world has “neither joy, nor love, nor light/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (Arnold 33-34). The narrator presents nature as cold and indifferent and the world becomes merely the site of arbitrary human suffering. This can be connected to Heidegger’s idea of thrownness, the concept that “Human beings are thrown with neither prior knowledge nor individual option into a world that was there before and will remain there after they are gone” (qtd. in Hornsby). This view of existence can be connected to the fears and anxieties that people felt in response to scientific research, which presented a view of the world in which the place of the human being was unstable and uncertain. The narrator ultimately resigns to a cold and indifferent universe and the poem reaches its bleak conclusion. The narrator decides on his place in the world, “here as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/Where ignorant armies clash by night” (Arnold 35-37). Ultimately the tension between religion and science remains unresolved, and religious sentiments “clash” with cold scientific realism. However, the fact that the “armies” are ignorant, and they fight “by
night” suggests an element of futility; night signifies darkness, obscurity, and a lack of illumination and clarity. This suggests that the battle between scientific rationality and religion is futile, because ultimately the two cannot be reconciled. There is room for mystery and the unknowable in life; rationality cannot encompass all facets of existence.

Works Cited
