

Look We Have Coming to Dover!



SUMMARY

We sail across the English Channel through a harsh fume-laden wind, the diesel motor of our boat going at full speed across the water. We are splashed by spit-like surf, sent flying toward us by cruise ships, on which rich tourists stand tall as if in command of the obedient waves.

Seabirds and other coastal creatures make angry noises at us; we huddle together as the boat goes past the huge, crumbling cliffs of Dover. We hurry across soggy ground while an aggressive thunderstorm crashes all around us; we make it ashore, and bundle into a small van.

Once inland, we work various jobs—especially in agriculture—for years. We try to avoid being detected by the State or those who might harm us. If we have to, we sleep in chilly parks. Life is tough but we are proud, and together we are an important, powerful force (like electricity).

There are crowds of us working through the darkness, avoiding the light of the moon, hoping that one day the metaphorical sun will shine on us—that a rainbow will appear, and we can officially live happier, freer lives. Then, and only then, we will pull ourselves up and proudly walk out into the light.

I imagine myself, my lover, and our friends living the good life, with money, cars, nice clothes—in a word, with freedom. We'll raise glasses of champagne toward the East above sunlit tables, chatting in our own language, happily freckled with the chalk dust of the British coastline!

foot on land: the country's citizens (and even the landscape itself) treat them as unwanted invaders. As the speaker arrives in England in a boat with other immigrants, even the sea seems antagonistic, churning up "gobfuls of surf" to spit at them. Those "gobfuls" come from the wash of cruise ships carrying privileged tourists who can come and go as they please—unlike the speaker. "Lording the ministerial waves," these wealthy travelers suggest the huge gap in status and power between people who are legally allowed to be in the country and people who are not.

That gap only becomes clearer when the speaker ironically describes the immigrants "inva[ding]" England in "swarms," using language that suggests that England (or sections of its population) sees new immigrants as enemies or pests, not just people trying to live their lives. Existence as an undocumented immigrant, then, demands courage, resilience, and determination—and the ability to keep going even when one's adopted country treats one badly.

England's hostility doesn't magically go away as the immigrants settle into their new country, the poem implies. In fact, that hostility defines how the immigrants must go about their lives, limiting their options and leaving them in fear of discovery. Even though the immigrants "graft" (or work hard) at low-paid but essential jobs like farming, keeping the country running, the UK refuses to legally acknowledge them. They have no access to proper housing or medical care, they're forced to sleep in parks, and they must constantly evade detection (being "clocked by the national eye") and the threat of violence ("stab[s] in the back"). Because the UK sees them as dehumanized "swarms" of invaders, they're forced to live without many of the basic certainties that the comfortable world around them takes for granted.

In these painful and frightening conditions, the speaker and friends survive through hard work and hope of making a better life someday. But the poem offers no assurances that the immigrants' hopes will come true, suggesting that the uncertainty of immigrant existence doesn't necessarily get better over time. Dreaming of a "miracle" by which they'll be "passport[ed] to life"—the day when they can be fully-fledged citizens without having to hide—the speaker envisions a rosy future in which the speaker and their "love" will be in the "clear," raising a toast towards the "East" from which they arrived. They'll have money, a nice car, smart clothes. As the poem puts it, they'll be "free."

But this is just what the speaker "imagine[s]": there is no guarantee that any of this will become a reality. The poem's celebration of "Britannia" at the end, then, doesn't quite ring true, sounding more ironic than sincerely joyful. Being an



THEMES



THE HARDSHIP AND HOPE OF IMMIGRATION

"Look We Have Coming to Dover!" explores the lives of undocumented immigrants in the United Kingdom. The speaker, one of a group of immigrants from the "East" who make the dangerous journey from the European mainland to Dover, describes the difficulty of their new life in the UK. While the speaker seems to feel hopeful for the future, the poem's ironic tone suggests that the speaker's new country is as likely to thwart the speaker's dreams as to fulfill them. Being an undocumented immigrant, this poem suggests, means both hoping for great things from one's new country, and facing seemingly endless barriers from that country's government and people.

Newly arrived immigrants, the speaker observes, encounter hostility from their adopted country from the moment they set

undocumented immigrant, this poem concludes, can mean clinging to a hopeful vision of the future even in the face of overwhelming difficulties and uncertainty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Stowed in the ...
... into the tide,*

The poem opens with an [epigraph](#) taken from a much earlier poem, Matthew Arnold's 1851 "Dover Beach." In that poem, a first-person speaker looks out to sea from the cliffs of Dover in the southeast of England, and worries about the future—in particular, about his sense that Christian civilization is on the wane.

Nagra [alludes](#) to this poem [ironically](#). "Look We Have Coming to Dover!" is a poem from the perspective of a recent (and undocumented) immigrant, and Nagra's quotation here plays on populist fears that the arrival of immigrants in England signals some kind of degeneration, a threat to a particular way of life. The speaker in *this* poem has the reverse perspective, looking towards England, not out to sea. The "various," "beautiful," and "new" land in Arnold's poem is, from the speaker's perspective, a land of dreams. The arriving immigrants hope that they'll start a new and better life when they reach shore.

Dover Beach is a historically important site in English history and has always been a major gateway to the country—especially for hostile forces. The opening lines here establish the poem's use of [metaphorical](#) language related to invasion, describing how the speaker and others are:

*Stowed in the sea to invade
the lash alfresco of diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide[.]*

England's right-wing press and anti-immigration rhetoric frequently use this kind of language, heightening the sense that immigrants pose a threat to the basic structure of society. Like the [allusion](#) to "Dover Beach," this military lexicon is also ironic: the speaker and the others on the boat are not really invading the country. They are trying to get to England via unofficial channels in the hope of a better standard of life.

They feel themselves "invad[ing]," not England, but the "lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze"—that is, the harsh, fume-laden air that surrounds their small boat. "Alfresco" is an Italian word that translates as "in fresh air," but in English specifically refers

to outdoor dining—a luxurious [connotation](#) that feels intentionally awkward and out of place. It anticipates the poem's [juxtaposition](#) between the immigrants on their little boat and the tourists on the nearby cruise ships, who enjoy gourmet food while the immigrants struggle to survive the crossing.

LINES 3-5

*with brunt ...
... the ministered waves.*

As the immigrants approach the shore, they encounter a hostile new world. The waves that wash over them are "brunt / gobfuls of surf" caused by the wake of the tourist cruise-ships nearby. [Metaphor](#) depicts these waves as being spat ("phlegmed") at the immigrants, an image which suggests that those "cushy" tourists in their ships look down on the immigrants, and even despise them. The sharp [enjambment](#) between "brunt" and "gobfuls" (lines 3 and 4) makes this moment feel all the more sudden and violent, as though the reader, too, gets a face-full of frothy water.

This section of the poem [juxtaposes](#) the immigrants with "cushy come-and-go / tourists," who, though sharing the same sea, live very different lives. The immigrants may not even make it to the shore, while the tourists sail in comfort and luxury. This juxtaposition stands in for more general differences between the immigrants and those who, just by virtue of where they were born, can enter and exit the country at will. It's the difference between poverty and wealth; between living under the radar and official citizenship; in short, between an easy life and a tough one.

Relative to the immigrants, the tourists are in a position of such privilege that they metaphorically "lord[]" (rule) over the waves, which are "ministered" to their command (a word choice that might also suggest the official power of governmental "ministers"). That is, the waves have little effect on a big cruiser—while to the immigrants, one big wave could mean death. There's an obvious metaphor about society here: everyone's on the same "ocean," but some cruise high above it, protected, and some have to battle the elements face to face.

Notice, too, how this stanza's lines start out short, but grow gradually longer. This pattern repeats throughout the poem, creating a wave-like effect on the page. This could represent the ocean waves themselves, but also gestures towards the metaphorical language surrounding immigration: influxes of immigrants are often described as "waves."

LINES 6-10

*Seagull and shoal ...
... a Bedford van.*

In the second stanza, the immigrants arrive on the Dover shore. The poem uses dense and disorienting language to create an atmosphere of nightmarish intensity, painting even the sea life

along the coast as hostile. Of course, this idea stems from *human* hostility towards immigrants, which is in plentiful supply.

The speaker [anthropomorphizes](#) this wildlife, imagining the seabirds squawking angrily at the immigrants. Take a look at the way the speaker describes this experience in lines 6-7:

Seagull and shoal life
Vexin their blarnies upon our huddled

"Vexin" and "blarnies" are both unusual words, used in unusual ways. To "vex" usually means to irritate someone, rather than to do something in an irritating way, as the speaker uses the word here. And the word "blarney," meaning roughly "the gift of the gab," is distinctly Irish: it comes from a legend surrounding [Blarney Castle](#). While these two words wouldn't normally be strung together in this way, they're also evocative: the reader can really hear the aggressive, nonstop chatter of seagulls in the sounds of the words. The poem's strange use of language might suggest that people who aren't accustomed to the way that English is "supposed" to work might be able to see and hear the English landscape—and the English language—in striking, inventive ways.

But the speaker's creativity and fresh perspective doesn't mean the country is interested in welcoming them. On top of the aggression from the animal kingdom and the sea, the rain seems to hate the immigrants too. A thunderstorm "unbladders" (urinates) its "yobbish rain" over them—a rain which seems to have it in for the new arrivals. (A "yob," in British English, is someone who is rude and confrontational—another moment of distinctly British slang.) As with the seagulls and shoal life, this [personification foreshadows](#) the way British citizens will harass, insult, and degrade the immigrants.

Miraculously, the speaker and the other immigrants make it to shore, where they are "hutched in a Bedford van." The word "hutched" evokes both cramped conditions (just like those in the boat) and dehumanizing ones: hutches are cages for rabbits or chickens. And Bedford vans were a kind of car that police often used to transport prisoners. While in this case the van is a getaway car and not a police van, the word choice again suggests that these immigrants are about to be seen as subhuman criminals merely for daring to exist on English soil.

LINES 11-15

*Seasons or years ...
... pylon and pylon.*

The third stanza marks an important shift in setting, in terms of both space and time. The immigrants have arrived in England, and in lines 11-13 the speaker now focuses on what comes next:

Seasons or years we reap

inland, unlocked by the national eye
or stab in the back, [...]

This "reap[ing]" is both literal and [metaphorical](#). The immigrants literally "reap" in the fields, doing under-the-radar agricultural work—the kind of labor undocumented people are more likely to find. But they also figuratively "reap" years, losing their lives to the seemingly endless limbo in which some immigrants find themselves waiting for citizenship.

The life of the undocumented immigrant, this speaker stresses, is one of constant uncertainty and danger. Immigrants don't just have to do backbreaking jobs, but try to remain "unlocked by the national eye"—that is, unseen by the sweeping [metaphorical](#) "eye" of the [Big-Brother-like](#) government. And they're always in danger of getting a "stab in the back," being betrayed to the authorities.

What's more, they have to suffer through tough living conditions, "teemed for breathing / sweeps of grass through the whistling asthma of parks" (lines 13-14). These impressionistic lines relate to another problem that comes with living in the country unofficially: the lack of access to housing and healthcare. The "whistling asthma of parks" might evoke both the wind blowing through a park where the immigrants are sleeping rough, and their literal wheezing breath as they try to deal with untreated lung problems. Notice how the [sibilance](#) in line 14 ("sweeps of grass," for instance) suggests both of those sounds.

But in the speaker's view, while this life is seriously difficult, it's also something to be proud of. Though life is tough, immigrants are nevertheless "ennobled" by their determination to work hard. They "pol[e] sparks across pylon and pylon"—a line that perhaps suggests that immigrants are a kind of unseen force (like electricity) that keeps the country running. That is, their labor contributes much more than the comfortable citizens who scorn them realize. The prominent [alliteration](#) in "poling" and "pylon" jumps out boldly, like a spark.

LINES 16-20

*Swarms of us, ...
... for the clear.*

Like stanza 3, stanza 4 discusses the ongoing experiences of immigrants over years spent "inland." Once again, the speaker [ironically](#) describes the immigrants in the (often racist) language used by those who *oppose* immigration—for instance, describing the immigrants as "swarms," like swarms of insects. This type of [metaphorical](#) language both dehumanizes the immigrants and casts them as dangerous invaders.

The immigrants, continues the speaker, "graft" (or work hard) in metaphorical darkness. They labor in secrecy, always afraid that they might be discovered by the authorities and forced to leave the country. Even the moon, so often a symbol of romance and beauty, here transforms into a kind of prison "spotlight,"

emphasizing the immigrants' need for secrecy. The [assonance](#) of "shot" in line 17 and "spotlight" feels as sudden and surprising as a searchlight's glare. It's almost like a prison break film, except the prisoners are trying to *stay*, rather than escape.

Ultimately, though, the immigrants want to live in the metaphorical *light*. They hope for a "miracle of sun"—for a rainbow to appear and signal the arrival of better, happier, and easier times. They hope to become official citizens, permitted to live and work in peace—a dream that the speaker describes as a "passport" to life.

"Passport" here works both literally and figuratively. The immigrants are defined by their *lack* of British passports. So an actual passport—or some kind of official documentation—would be a real victory. But it would also give them metaphorical access to a fully-lived life, like a kind of ticket to freedom.

If the immigrants can attain official status, says the speaker, *then* it will "be human to hoick ourselves, / bare-faced for the clear." In other words, they will be able to pull themselves up (or "hoick" themselves) from the metaphorical shadows and live a less fragile life, "bare-faced" and unafraid. Then they will be free from the prison-like purgatory of non-citizenship, breaking for the "clear" (which also fits in with the prison [analogy](#)).

LINES 21-23

*Imagine my love ...
... crash clothes, free,*

The poem ends on a hopeful vision of the future, but it's up to the reader whether to take this at face value. In essence, the speaker imagines being a legitimate, official member of English society—and specifically of the middle classes, with a nice car, smart clothes, and money. But the poem is so shrouded in [irony](#) that it's hard to see this as a truly optimistic moment.

The last stanza begins with an [allusion](#) to Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (the same poem quoted in the [epigraph](#)). Just as Arnold's speaker turns, at the end of that poem, to address his beloved, the speaker here asks the reader to "imagine my love and I." But Arnold's speaker appeals to his lover for togetherness against a frightening world, whereas Nagra's imagines a much brighter future.

In the speaker's vision, his "love" and "sundry others" (various other people) will one day be "Blair'd in the cash / of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes, free." In other words, they'll be comfortably legitimized and comfortably wealthy. The allusion to former Prime Minister Tony Blair here suggests that the speaker will be part of the establishment, as much a citizen as the PM himself.

It's a bold, exciting, and arguably naïve picture of the future—and it's one with no guarantees.

The speaker presents this dream in charged, passionate language full of intense [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and

[consonance](#):

[...] Blair'd in the cash
of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes, free,

These lines crackle and spark with sound patterning, suggesting a life of material abundance (signaled by the sheer number of matching sounds) and thrilling possibility. But the key word here is "free." All the speaker really wants is the same chances at life afforded by those who already live in England: to work hard, enjoy life, and feel safe. The speaker wants freedom from threat and danger, to live without the looming threat of violence or deportation. Notice how the [caesura](#) before "free" gives the word its own little space in the poem, emphasizing its importance.

LINES 24-25

*we raise our ...
... chalk of Britannia!*

In the poem's closing image, the speaker envisions raising a toast with his "love." It's a picture of triumph that imagines that the hardships of immigrant life will, one day, be a thing of the past. The speaker and his love lift up "charged glasses," most likely suggesting fizzing champagne, toward the East. In other words, they celebrate their decision to emigrate from the "East" in order to start new lives in England. It's a movie-style happy ending.

But given that the poem often feels [ironic](#), readers don't have to take this at face value. Perhaps the reader's wildly optimistic vision of the future only reinforces the real-life difficulties of the immigrant experience.

In the speaker's vision, he and his love toast "over unparasol'd tables." [Symbolically](#) speaking, they have *made it*, no longer needing to hide in the [metaphorical](#) shadows. In full sunlight, they can drink their champagne—a drink strongly associated with luxury and riches—and live freely.

They can also freely "babbl[e]" their "lingoes." Babbling might suggest freewheeling chitchat, so one meaning here is that the immigrants will no longer have to watch what they say (and who they say it to). They can talk freely, breezily, without a care in the world. And "lingoes," referring to the immigrants' shared language, similarly suggests that they won't have to give up their own native tongues in order to be part of British society. In other words, they can enjoy the best of both worlds.

But perhaps there's also a hint here of the way that certain xenophobic Brits might hear this happy couple's conversation as mere meaningless "babble," their language as a half-baked "lingo[]." Again, there's some ambivalence and danger in this picture of future happiness.

The final image—still part of the overall celebratory toast—takes the poem back to the English coastline. The

speaker imagines being "flecked by the chalk of Britannia"—an [allusion](#) to the famous chalk of the "white cliffs of Dover." It's a curiously romantic image that speaks to nostalgic ideas of Britain's past.

Britannia was the Roman word for the British Isles, and also a mythological [personification](#) of the British Isles as a female warrior with a trident and shield. She's the star of the famous patriotic song "Rule, Britannia," which proclaims Britain's dominance over "the waves" (the oceans and, thus, the world).

The speaker's use of the word here, then, uneasily evokes Britain's imperialist past—the very past that left many countries in the immigrants' "East" subjugated and impoverished. To be "flecked with the chalk of Britannia" might suggest being naturalized, showing marks of Britishness while still retaining one's cultural identity. But it might also suggest being stained by chalky-white British colonialism and racism.

And even if the reader takes these lines in the most hopeful sense, it's important to note that everything the speaker describes here is just "imagine[d]": there's no guarantee that the immigrants will ever make it to this picture-perfect future.

In the end, then, the poem unpacks the real struggle and danger of the immigrant life—and suggests that the dreams that drive these immigrants might always be a little out of their reach. The hostility immigrants meet in their new countrypeople remains a constant threat.

But the speaker's exuberant, inventive use of British slang also suggests that, in "coming to Dover," the immigrants have also brought Britain a whole new way of seeing and hearing itself.

Later on, alliterative sounds draw attention to important moments in the poem. Take a look at these lines from the third stanza, for instance:

burdened, ennobled, poling sparks across pylon and pylon.

Here, the speaker pictures the immigrants as a kind of [metaphorical](#) "electricity" keeping the country running through their unseen work. The strong /p/ alliteration here emphasizes this idea, connecting one word to another just like electrical wires linking "pylons."

Alliteration also plays a thematic role in this poem. Daljit Nagra has said that he wanted the strong alliteration and consonance here to recall the punchy, repetitive sounds of [Anglo-Saxon verse](#). And Anglo-Saxons, of course, were some of the earliest immigrants to the British isles!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Stowed," "sea"
- **Line 4:** "cushy come-and-go"
- **Line 5:** "cruisers"
- **Line 8:** "camouflage," "crumble"
- **Line 9:** "cliffs"
- **Line 13:** "back," "breathing"
- **Line 15:** "poling," "pylon," "pylon"
- **Line 20:** "human," "hoick"
- **Line 22:** "Blair'd," "cash"
- **Line 23:** "beeswax'd," "cars," "crash clothes"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#), like [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), helps bring the poem's many images to life on the page, and intensifies the different moods in each stanza.

The first two stanzas describe the immigrants' perilous crossing from the European mainland to Dover in a small boat. Here, alliteration conjures an atmosphere of threat and potential danger, as well as the terrible weather.

For instance, listen to all the /c/ alliteration and /s/ [sibilance](#) in lines 8-9:

camouflage past the vast crumble of scummed
cliffs, scrambling on mulch as thunder unbladders

All these harsh /c/ sounds work with consonance (e.g. "scummed" in line 8) to make this whole section terrifying: an onslaught of hard, rocky sounds mirrors the intensity of landing on a pebbly beach in a gale. And the sibilant /s/ sounds evoke the stormy hiss of wind and waves.

ALLUSION

"Look We Have Coming to Dover!" [alludes](#) to a much earlier poem, "[Dover Beach](#)," by the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold. It's well worth giving that poem a read before looking at this one! In Arnold's poem, a speaker stands on the cliffs of Dover and worries about the future. In particular, Arnold's speaker feels that English society—and perhaps the entire western world—is losing touch with its Christian values. The speaker stands on English soil, and imagines trouble on the literal and [metaphorical](#) horizon.

Nagra's poem [ironically](#) reverses this perspective. Nagra's speaker starts the poem looking *towards* England, traveling on the very same sea in which Arnold's speaker hears the "long, withdrawing roar" of Christianity. In a way, Nagra positions his speaker as the arriving threat so feared by Arnold's speaker, gesturing to the parts of English society which demonize immigrants as a "threat" to the English way of life.

The poem also alludes to "Britannia," the old Roman name for the British Isles. The speaker imagines raising a toast to the horizon, "flecked by the chalk of Britannia"—itself an allusion to the famous chalk of the white cliffs of Dover, where the poem

began.

On the one hand, this speaks to the immigrants' hope that they will assimilate into British culture. But that white chalk has potential racial overtones, too, suggesting that the immigrants might find themselves "marked" by white people's racism.

Britannia—often [personified](#) as a kind of goddess of the sea—once "ruled the waves" (in the words of a famous patriotic song) through merciless colonialism, and the British Empire had a particularly devastating effect on much of the "East" to which the speaker imagines raising a glass of champagne. There's thus more than a little [irony](#) in this allusion.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "'So various, so beautiful, so new...' / — Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach"
- **Line 21:** "my love and I,"
- **Line 25:** "the chalk of Britannia!"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) works with [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) to intensify the poem's many images.

For instance, as the immigrants make their dangerous journey across the sea, the assonance lurches wildly from sound to sound:

the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide, with brunt

These veering /a/ and /ee/ sounds mimic the tiny boat's jerky progress over the terrifying waves.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lash alfresco," "diesel-breeze"
- **Line 3:** "speed"
- **Line 7:** "upon," "huddled"
- **Line 8:** "past," "vast," "crumble," "scummed"
- **Line 9:** "mulch," "thunder unbladders"
- **Line 11:** "Seasons," "we reap"
- **Line 13:** "stab," "back," "teemed," "breathing"
- **Line 14:** "sweeps"
- **Line 15:** "ennobled, poling," "pylon," "pylon"
- **Line 17:** "shot"
- **Line 18:** "spotlight"
- **Line 22:** "cash"
- **Line 23:** "beeswax'd," "crash"
- **Line 24:** "charged glasses"

CAESURA

[Caesurae](#) work together with [asyndeton](#) to make the poem feel densely compressed. Almost every stanza in the poem is one

long sentence rich in multiple clauses—and this is made possible by caesura.

This density has different effects depending on what the speaker is talking about. In the first stanza, for instance, this compression creates a sense of urgency as the immigrants try to reach the English coastline. In lines 3 and 5, caesura and [enjambment](#) throw the poem this way and that:

ratcheting speed into the tide, || with brunt
[...]

tourists prow'd on the cruisers, || lording the
ministered waves.

Notice how these breaks, which push and pull at the lines, mimic the push and pull of waves on the immigrants' tiny boat.

The speaker hopes that a day will come when the immigrants can live free and happy lives, untroubled by the threat of deportation. A strong caesura in line 19 emphasizes one word in particular:

span its rainbow, passport us to **life**. || Only then

The prospect of a good "life" motivates the immigrants to make their dangerous trek in the first place. The speaker's emphatic period here draws attention to that fact, and creates this a poignant pause in an otherwise relentless poem. This pause also makes that longed-for good life seem more far-away, more dream-like.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "tide, with"
- **Line 5:** "cruisers, lording"
- **Line 9:** "cliffs, scrambling"
- **Line 10:** "escape, hatched"
- **Line 12:** "inland, unclocked"
- **Line 13:** "back, teemed"
- **Line 15:** "burdened, ennobled, poling"
- **Line 16:** "us, grafting"
- **Line 18:** "spotlight, banking"
- **Line 19:** "rainbow, passport," "life. Only"
- **Line 20:** "ourselves, bare-faced"
- **Line 22:** "others, Blair'd"
- **Line 23:** "cars, our," "clothes, free,"
- **Line 25:** "East, babbling," "lingoes, flecked"

CONSONANCE

"Look We Have Coming to Dover" is packed full of [consonance](#), which works with [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#) to bring the poem's images to life on the page.

In the first two stanzas, the poem uses a lot of [sibilant](#) consonance. This helps conjure the stormy coastal atmosphere

as the immigrants approach Dover in their little motor boat. Notice here in lines 8-10 how sibilance combines with relentless /m/ and /c/ sounds to create a tempest of consonance on the page:

camouflage past the vast crumble of scummed
cliffs, scrambling on mulch as thunder unbladders
yobbish rain and wind on our escape [...]

The sounds here are so intense that they almost overwhelm the poem, evoking the immigrants' feeling of threat and danger.

Meanwhile, at the end of the poem, the speaker imagines raising a toast to the "East" at some point in the future when life is happier and more secure. "My love and I," says the speaker, "will be 'flecked by the chalk of Britannia.' A fleck is a very small patch of color or light—and this consonance totally captures that effect, *flecking* the line with this one particular sound.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Stowed," "sea," "invade"
- **Line 2:** "lash alfresco," "diesel-breeze"
- **Line 3:** "ratcheting," "speed," "into," "tide," "brunt"
- **Line 4:** "gobfuls of surf," "phlegmed," "cushy come-and-go"
- **Line 5:** "prow'd," "lording," "ministered"
- **Line 6:** "Seagull," "shoal life"
- **Line 7:** "Vexin," "blarnies upon," "huddled"
- **Line 8:** "camouflage," "past," "vast," "crumble," "scummed"
- **Line 9:** "cliffs," "scramming," "mulch," "thunder unbladders"
- **Line 10:** "rain and wind," "hutched," "Bedford"
- **Line 11:** "Seasons," "years"
- **Line 12:** "inland, unlocked"
- **Line 13:** "stab," "back," "breathing"
- **Line 14:** "sweeps," "grass," "whistling," "asthma," "parks"
- **Line 15:** "burdened, ennobled," "poling," "sparks across," "pylon," "pylon"
- **Line 16:** "Swarms," "us"
- **Line 17:** "shot"
- **Line 18:** "spotlight," "sun"
- **Line 19:** "span," "rainbow," "passport"
- **Line 20:** "human," "hoick"
- **Line 22:** "Blair'd," "cash"
- **Line 23:** "beeswax'd," "cars," "crash clothes"
- **Line 24:** "glasses," "unparasol'd tables"
- **Line 25:** "babbling," "lingoes," "flecked," "chalk"

ENJAMBMENT

Most lines in the poem use [enjambment](#), giving the poem a rip-roaring energy: the lines seem to be propelled forward like the immigrants' boat over the stormy sea.

In the first two stanzas, for instance, the speaker discusses

arriving at Dover, being smuggled across the border in a small boat. The journey is hasty, urgent, and fraught with difficulty—and that's exactly how the poem sounds. Abrupt line breaks split phrases in jolting places:

the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide, with brunt
gobfuls of surf phlegmed by cushy come-and-go
tourists prow'd on the cruisers, lording the
ministered waves.

All these enjambed lines, one running into the next, make the poem feel propulsive, energetic, and nervous.

That tense energy runs throughout the poem, and also evokes the fragility and danger of immigrant life ashore:

Seasons or years we reap
inland, unlocked by the national eye
or stab in the back,

The shock of these sudden line breaks evokes the way that the immigrants' situation can change completely in an instant (if they're caught by the authorities, for example). The poem's sentences duck and dive, as if dodging the "spotlight" of the law.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "invade / the"
- **Lines 2-3:** "diesel-breeze / ratcheting"
- **Lines 3-4:** "brunt / gobfuls"
- **Lines 4-5:** "come-and-go / tourists"
- **Lines 6-7:** "life / Vexin"
- **Lines 7-8:** "huddled / camouflage"
- **Lines 8-9:** "scummed / cliffs,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "unbladders / yobbish"
- **Lines 11-12:** "reap / inland,"
- **Lines 12-13:** "eye / or"
- **Lines 13-14:** "breathing / sweeps"
- **Lines 16-17:** "in / the"
- **Lines 17-18:** "moon's / spotlight"
- **Lines 18-19:** "sun — / span"
- **Lines 19-20:** "then / can"
- **Lines 21-22:** "I, / our"
- **Lines 22-23:** "cash / of"
- **Lines 23-24:** "free, / we"
- **Lines 24-25:** "tables / East,"

IRONY

The poem often [ironically](#) uses words that portray immigrants in a negative light, implicitly criticizing many English citizens' attitudes toward immigration.

Over the past decades, many English politicians and newspapers have derisively described immigrants as

"invade[r]s" (line 1) and "Swarms." In fact, such rhetoric was used prominently in the debate around Britain's exit from the European Union.

This kind of language dehumanizes immigrants, and has [connotations](#) of both military power *and* insects—connotations that make immigrants seem threatening and inferior at once. But when the poem's speaker (who *is* an immigrant) uses this language, it sounds absurd, drawing attention to how ridiculous and cruel such attitudes to immigrants really are. A few frightened people in a rickety boat hardly constitutes an invasion, for example.

The final stanza ("Imagine my love...chalk of Britannia") can also be read ironically. Here, the speaker imagines raising "charged glasses" of champagne to a future good life, when the immigrants will be rich, happy, and, above all, "free." They'll toast the "East" from which they came, and they will be "flecked by the chalk of Britannia" as they do so, comfortably integrated into British society. It's a highly optimistic vision—and one that stands in stark contrast to all the misery and struggle the speaker describes in the poem's previous stanzas. Imagining a very English vision of a life well lived, the speaker also ironically hints that this vision might never truly be possible for people whose adoptive country treats them so poorly.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Stowed in the sea to / the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze / ratcheting speed into the tide"
- **Line 1:** "invade"
- **Line 16:** "Swarms of us"
- **Lines 21-25:** "Imagine my love and I, / our sundry others, Blair'd in the cash / of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes, free, / we raise our charged glasses over unparasol'd tables / East, babbling our lingo, flecked by the chalk of Britannia!"

JUXTAPOSITION

The first stanza of the poem [juxtaposes](#) the immigrants in their small vessel with tourists on big cruise ships. The immigrants are close to the surface of the water, feeling every wave. The tourists are more like lords, sailing high above the immigrants, safe and comfortable:

Stowed in the sea to invade
the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide, with brunt
gobfuls of surf phlegmed by cushy come-and-go
tourists prow'd on the cruisers, lording the
ministered waves.

The immigrants and the tourists share the same sea, but have totally different lives. The juxtaposition marks the many

dividing lines between the immigrants and the tourists:

1. Danger vs. safety. The immigrants are in a small boat at the mercy of the sea, whereas the tourists barely even feel the waves crashing against their huge ship.
2. Desperation vs. luxury. The immigrants seek a new and better life. The tourists have a "cushy" life, with money to spare.
3. Undocumented vs. official status. The immigrants have to hide themselves, not only on the journey but once they make it ashore. The tourists have the right passports, and so are free to "come-and-go" with impunity.

To put it in a nutshell, this juxtaposition suggests the tourists' lives are *easy* compared to the immigrants'.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Stowed in the sea to invade / the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze / ratcheting speed into the tide, with brunt / gobfuls of surf phlegmed by cushy come-and-go / tourists prow'd on the cruisers, lording the ministered waves."

METAPHOR

[Metaphor](#) appears in nearly every line of the poem, making for an exciting but sometimes disorienting read. (In fact, there are so many metaphors here that we've treated some of them in other sections of this guide—see the personification and irony entries for more.)

In the first stanza, metaphors come and go at a fierce speed. One key metaphor is the description of crashing waves as "gobfuls of surf phlegmed by cushy come-and-go/ tourists" (lines 4 and 5). This presents the waves churned up by the cruise ship as mouthfuls of spit sent flying by the tourists. This metaphor paints a picture of hostility and indifference, anticipating some of the attitudes that the immigrants will face in their new lives.

Once the immigrants reach the shore, they make a quick escape inland "hatched in a Bedford van" (line 10). "Hatched," a word that normally refers to the kind of cage in which people keep rabbits or chickens, makes the immigrants sound like animals, less than human. This metaphor also speaks to the idea that the immigrants are "caged" by their situation, desperately striving to avoid "the national eye" (a [metonymic](#) metaphor for the watchful authorities).

The poem describes this need for secrecy as a metaphorical darkness: the immigrants have to work in "the black" (line 17), avoiding the "spotlight" (line 18) of the moon. They dream of emerging into the metaphorical light, a "miracle of sun" that will "span its rainbow" and signal a freer, happier, more secure way of life.

If they can acquire official citizenship somehow, then they will be metaphorically "passport[ed] to life" (line 19), transported to a whole new world of openness and ease. This metaphor is also an example of anthimeria, a technique that transforms nouns into verbs. The choice of "passport" shows how much hinges on this one little document.

The last stanza also uses anthimeria. Here, the speaker imagines a day when life will be great, and the immigrants will be "free." They will be "Blair'd" (line 22) in cash, nice clothes, and cars. In other words, they'll have it all—but no more than the tourists in the first stanza already have simply by virtue of where they were born. "Blair'd" [alludes](#) to the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had a (not altogether justified) reputation as a pro-immigration leader. The metaphor borrows some of the optimism around Blair's early years in power and applies it to the immigrant speaker—though not without a heavy dose of [irony](#).

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 9-10
- Line 10
- Lines 11-13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 18-19
- Line 19
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 22-23
- Line 25

PERSONIFICATION

In the poem's opening scenes, [personification](#) makes the English landscape itself seem aggressive towards the immigrants. Though they travel to England in search of a better life, what greets them in the second stanza is a terrible storm and hostile animals:

Seagull and shoal life

Vexin their blarnies upon our huddled
camouflage past the vast crumble of scummed
cliffs, scrambling on mulch as thunder unbladders
yobbish rain and wind on our escape, hatched in a
Bedford van.

The seagulls squawk angrily as they fly around the immigrants' boat. Of course, the seagulls don't really care about the new arrivals—but the *appearance* of anger anticipates the human

hostility that awaits the immigrants in their new country.

The terrible weather—which could also be read as [pathetic fallacy](#)—creates a tense, threatening atmosphere. The thunder "unbladders"—Nagra's own coinage, meaning "urinates"—on the immigrants (pretty hostile!). To make matter worse, this unbladder'd rain is "yobbish," or boorish and aggressive. The rain, in other words, seems to hate the immigrants and wish them harm. Again, personification here speaks to the realities of immigrant life *inland*. It's worth noting that "yob" is a characteristically English word (reverse slang of "boy"), and suggests a characteristically English kind of hostility.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Seagull and shoal life / Vexin their blarnies"
- **Lines 9-10:** "thunder unbladders / yobbish rain and wind on our escape"



VOCABULARY

Stowed (Line 1) - Packed—with connotations of "hidden," like stowaways.

Lash (Line 2) - A strong wind, like the "lash" of a whip.

Diesel-breeze (Line 2) - A wind that smells of diesel oil—presumably from the motor of the immigrants' boat.

Alfresco (Line 2) - This Italian word can simply mean "outdoor," but in English it has [connotations](#) of outdoor dining. This elegant word feels a bit [ironic](#) here, where it's used to describe the harsh whip of gas-scented wind!

Ratcheting (Line 3) - Quickly getting faster.

Gobfuls (Lines 3-4) - Mouthfuls.

Brunt (Lines 3-4) - An intense, brutal force—used here as an adjective.

Surf (Lines 3-4) - Frothy water near the shore.

Phlegmed (Lines 4-5) - Spat out.

Cushy (Lines 4-5) - Comfortable and easy-going.

Cruisers (Lines 4-5) - Large cruise ships. Also means a type of warship, which ties in [ironically](#) with the idea that the immigrants are "invad[ing]" England.

Prow'd (Lines 4-5) - A [pun](#) which takes a noun—prow—and turns it into a verb. The prow is the front part of a ship, on which these tourists stand. The pun is on "proud": compared to the immigrants, these tourists have everything going for them, and seem pretty arrogant about it!

Lording (Line 5) - Ruling over, like lords.

Ministered (Line 5) - Ruled. The waves are "ruled" by the tourists who "lord" over them.

Shoal (Line 6) - A group of fish.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

Vexin (Lines 6-7) - Causing annoyance and anger.

Blarnies (Lines 6-7) - "Blarnies" here describes the squawk of the seabirds (as though they are talking continuously). This line [alludes](#) to Ireland's Blarney Stone. Those who kiss this mythological stone are granted the gift of the gab—the ability to talk quickly, charmingly, and with great flattery.

Scummed (Lines 8-9) - Dirty.

Scramming (Line 9) - Moving hastily (scrambling).

Mulch (Line 9) - Loose, squelchy earth.

Unbladders (Lines 9-10) - Nagra's own coinage, as though the thunder urinates rain on the immigrants.

Yobbish (Lines 9-10) - Aggressive and rude.

Hutched (Line 10) - Placed in cramped, cage-like conditions.

Bedford Van (Line 10) - A type of vehicle that used to be very common in England—often used as a police van.

The National Eye (Line 12) - State authorities, or those who would do the immigrants harm.

Unclocked (Line 12) - Unnoticed.

Teemed (Lines 13-14) - Usually means to be full of something—here perhaps means "prepared for."

Pylon (Line 15) - A tower for supporting power lines.

Grafting (Line 16) - Working hard.

Banking (Line 18) - Counting on.

Hoick (Lines 19-20) - To pull up forcefully.

Sundry (Line 22) - Various, perhaps suggesting a big social group.

Blair'd (Lines 22-23) - Tony Blair was the UK prime minister from 1997 to 2007. This allusion suggests the speaker imagines being as much a citizen as the PM himself.

Beeswax'd (Line 23) - Well kept and shiny.

Crash Clothes (Line 23) - Nicest outfits.

Unparasol'd Tables (Line 24) - Tables without umbrellas.

Charged Glasses (Line 24) - Champagne. The "charge" here might suggest that the glasses fizz with bubbles as if they were electrified—or that the speaker imagines "charging" this expensive drink to a credit account.

Babbling (Line 25) - Chatting freely and enthusiastically.

Lingoes (Line 25) - Languages, slang, ways of speaking.

Chalk (Line 25) - A reference to the white chalk cliffs of Dover.

Flecked (Line 25) - Spotted, freckled.

Britannia (Line 25) - The old Latin name for the British Isles.

FORM

"Look We Have Coming to Dover!" is a dramatic monologue, giving voice to an immigrant speaker who chronicles the life of immigrants more generally. That monologue uses five stanzas of five lines each (also known as quintets or [cinquains](#)).

This isn't a conventional poetic form like the [sonnet](#) or the [villanelle](#), but it is pretty tightly organized. Each stanza starts short and grows longer on the page as the lines unfold, so the whole poem takes on a wave-like shape. This recalls the rough seas the immigrants travel to get to Dover, but also gestures towards the way that people sometimes [metaphorically](#) refer to "waves" of immigration.

The poem also responds to (and [ironically](#) subverts) Matthew Arnold's famous "[Dover Beach](#)," which it quotes in an [epigraph](#). Where Arnold's speaker, a worried Englishman, stands on the Dover cliffs looking out to sea, Nagra's speaker rides in on the sea looking up at the Dover cliffs—a mirrored perspective that shapes the poem's ideas about belonging and identity.

METER

"Look We Have Coming to Dover!" is written in [free verse](#), which means that the speaker can shape this poem's wild and unpredictable lines without worrying about [meter](#). The poem's loose shape, of course, is no accident: it mirrors the uncertainties the immigrants face both on the journey to England *and* once they're ashore, trying to survive in their new country. A regular meter might sound too organized and official, and wouldn't capture the chaos and danger of these undocumented immigrants' lives.

RHYME SCHEME

"Look We Have Coming to Dover!" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#): a tight pattern of rhymes would read too neatly, and wouldn't reflect the many uncertainties of immigrant life. Instead, the poem plays with sound through devices like [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#).

For instance, take a look at the dense repeating sounds in lines 16-18:

Swarms of us, grafting in
the **black** within shot of the **moon's**
spotlight, banking on the **miracle** of sun —

All that alliteration and assonance gives these lines an almost claustrophobic feeling, evoking the immigrants' fear and stress as they live clandestine lives, hiding from the English authorities.



SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an immigrant who makes the journey across the English Channel to Dover in the hope of starting a new life. While the first two stanzas deal with this particular risky voyage, the poem later zooms out to discuss the immigrant experience more generally—its pitfalls, its hopes and dreams. The speaker seems optimistic about their new life, but the poem is so drenched in [irony](#) that it's hard to take the poem's closing visions of a cheerfully wealthy future at face value.

The speaker's lively, attentive, creative personality comes through in their inventive vocabulary. In each line, the speaker coins words—and clangs words together—like some kind of 21st-century Shakespeare, playing with the English language in all sorts of lively and unusual ways. The speaker throws in, not just British slang, but words like "alfresco" (Italian) and "blarnies" (Irish), as well as words of Indian origin, and nouns turned into verbs. Through the speaker, the poem undermines the idea that there is one true English language, or English way of life, or even England—and reminds the reader that all of these are in constant flux, and all the richer for the contributions of those that make their lives in "Britannia."



SETTING

As the title promises, the poem is set (at first) in Dover, a town on England's south-eastern coast. Famous for its white cliffs, Dover has been one of the country's main gateways for thousands of years. The Dover Strait is the narrowest part of the Channel (the body of water between England and France), making it a key passage to and from the European mainland for travelers both official and undocumented.

By setting the action here, Nagra grounds the poem in the controversial reality of modern-day Dover, which is still a place where many undocumented immigrants secretly arrive. At the beginning of the poem, the environment itself seems hostile to the immigrants (e.g. the "thunder" and "yobbish rain" in lines 9 and 10), anticipating the kind of response they might get further inland over the years.

And in fact, much of the rest of the poem describes the hostility the immigrants face as they try to make lives in the UK. Appropriately enough, the poem never tells readers exactly where the immigrants end up, a choice that gestures to the fearful secrecy of their new lives.

Dover is also the setting of Matthew Arnold's poem, "Dover Beach," from which this poem's [epigraph](#) is taken. Arnold's speaker stands ashore, fearing that the world is shifting away from Christianity—in other words, the world *beyond* England seems threatening. Here, that perspective is reversed, and England itself takes on a sinister atmosphere.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Look We Have Coming to Dover!" is the title poem is from British poet Daljit Nagra's award-winning 2007 debut collection. Nagra's book won widespread acclaim for its inventive wordplay, its wit, and its ability to tackle complex subjects like Britishness, immigration, and identity.

Many of the poems in this collection draw on Nagra's own background. Though he himself was born in England, his parents immigrated to Britain from India in the 1950s, and poems like "[Singh Song!](#)" explore cross-sections of British and Indian identity. The title of this poem (and the collection) is also grounded in [allusions](#) to other British writers: it's a play on W.H. Auden's "[Look, Stranger!](#)" and D.H. Lawrence's "[Look! We Have Come Through!](#)"

But the clearest influence on "Look We Have Coming to Dover!" is a much earlier poem: Matthew Arnold's "[Dover Beach](#)." Arnold was a Victorian poet, and his speaker looks out to sea from the cliffs of Dover with melancholy and foreboding, fretting about what the world—particularly the western, Christian world—is becoming. This sentiment is not far removed from some of the reasoning behind anti-immigration rhetoric, which often suggests that an influx of new immigrants can erode a country's given culture or way of life. Nagra's poem reverses that perspective, with a speaker who looks *towards* England, not away from it, presenting an optimistic (if perhaps [ironic](#)) take on the country's future.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Nagra wrote this poem, Tony Blair was Prime Minister of the UK; his government was known (perhaps not altogether justifiably) as friendly to immigrants. When the poem's speaker imagines being "Blair'd in the cash / of our beeswax'd cars," perhaps the [allusion](#) suggests hope for a comfortable life in a welcoming England. But immigration was and remains a much-contested issue in England, and it's one with a long and complex history. In truth, England—and the UK more generally—is a country *produced* by the forces of immigration (and, in its earlier history, invasion).

The poem's dazzling display of linguistic invention testifies to the fact that English is a particularly wild and complex language, the product of multiple peoples and eras: the Romans, the Normans, the Anglo-Saxons, post-war emigrants from the Commonwealth, and so on. That evolving language also reflects an evolving population, shaped and reshaped by invasions and large-scale immigrations across thousands of years. Any attempt to precisely define Englishness (especially in an exclusionary way) usually falls apart pretty quickly!

Dover has always been at the forefront (or *shore-front*) of the country's changes, which is why Matthew Arnold set his poem

on its cliffs, and why Daljit Nagra does the same. The strange, sparky English of Nagra's poem suggests that a close-minded, hostile view of immigrants fails to acknowledge the way that immigration has *always* shaped and reshaped the English language—and England itself.

- [Immigration and Britain](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2mn2p3/revision/1) — Learn more about immigration in British history. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2mn2p3/revision/1>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DALJIT NAGRA POEMS

- [Singh Song!](#)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-A46MN3GsM) — Listen to Daljit Nagra reading the poem aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-A46MN3GsM>)
- [An Interview with the Poet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huoSYy2RfFE) — Hear an interview in which Nagra talks about his beginnings in poetry. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huoSYy2RfFE>)
- [Dover's History](https://www.dovermuseum.co.uk/Dover-History/Dover-History.aspx) — Learn more about the White Cliffs of Dover—and the ways that immigration (and invasion) have shaped British culture. (<https://www.dovermuseum.co.uk/Dover-History/Dover-History.aspx>)
- [More Poems by Nagra](http://www.daljitnagra.com/poem.php) — Read more of Nagra's poetry on his own website. (<http://www.daljitnagra.com/poem.php>)



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