

MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822-88)

- Arnold is the most important critic of the Victorian Age
- Victorian criticism in general may be classified in to two categories

- ▶ Critics who followed the school of Plato.

- This included critics like Carlyle and Ruskin.
- They used art and literature for the service of society.
- They set standards in morality religion and arts.
- They used literature for didactic purposes.

- ▶ Critics who followed the school of Aristotle.

- This included critics like Walter Pater.
- They advocated 'art for art's sake' philosophy.
- They considered the primary purpose of art to be imparting pleasure.

■ Matthew Arnold strictly speaking did not belong to either of the above schools.

■ He was influenced by writers like William Wordsworth, John Keats, John Henry Newman, Goethe et al.

■ He Influenced writers like George Saintsbury, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling et al.

- ✚ Matthew Arnold was concerned about the decline in the standards of morality.
- ✚ He found the aristocrats wanting in culture.
- ✚ The middle class was developing philistine qualities.
- ✚ The English nation was provincial and uncivilized.
- ✚ Arnold took upon himself the responsibility of elevating the moral status of the country.
- ✚ He discusses in detail about the various aspects of culture in his essay *Sweetness and Light* included in the collection *Culture and Anarchy*.

- ✚ He describes culture as having its origin in the love of perfection.
 - ▶ Culture is the study of perfection
- ✚ As he observes culture makes reason and the will of God prevail and it believes in perfection.
- ✚ T S Eliot considers Arnold's essay *Study of Poetry* a classic in English criticism.
- ✚ Arnold hints at poetry taking the place of religion.
- ✚ He expected society to keep the best of poetry as our models.
- ✚ Charlatanism should not be allowed to prevail.

- ✚ According to Arnold poetry to be ranked as great poetry should possess truth and high seriousness.
- ✚ Moral seriousness is a very essential aspect of high poetry.
- ✚ The best poetry is what we want; thus the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining and delighting us as nothing else can.
- ✚ He does not consider Chaucer and Burns as great poets because they lack truth and high seriousness.
- ✚ For poetry to take the place of religion poetry should be morally spirited.

- ✚ He rejected the poetry of the Romantics and the Elizabethans.
- ✚ He favored poems which were particular, precise and firm.
- ✚ He published a series of essays on various authors.
- ✚ *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, an important critical work was originally published in the *National Review* in 1864.
- ✚ In the *Essays in Criticism* he looks at the social function of the critic.
- ✚ Criticism is referred to as the disinterested endeavor.

- ✚ In the essay *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* he asks the critics to steer clear of practical and political considerations.
- ✚ Criticism should be disinterested and should focus on its own elements.
- ✚ Business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world and to create a current of true and fresh ideas.
- ✚ Watson says that Arnold was an adapter rather than a coiner of terms.

- ✚ Arnold was of the opinion that the critic's job is to pave the way for high culture.
- ✚ His concept of criticism being a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world is derived from Sainte Beuve.
- ✚ Arnold rated English Romantics very low.
- ✚ He was critical of Byron
- ✚ He criticizes Romantic poetry in the following words.
 - ▶ The English poetry of the first quarter of this century with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force did not know enough.

⚡ According to Arnold

▶ The romantic poet Byron was empty of matter.

▶ Shelley was incoherent.

▶ Wordsworth wanting in completeness and variety.

⚡ He called Shelley a beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.

⚡ He calls Coleridge a poet and philosopher wrecked in the mist of opium.

⚡ He calls the letters of Keats 'love letter's of a surgeon's apprentice'

⚡ In *Function of Criticism* Arnold says for good literature to flourish two powers are necessary

1. The creative

2. The critical

⚡ The critical power is of a lower order than the creative.

⚡ The critical power establishes an order of new ideas and makes the best ideas prevail.

⚡ Arnold considers literature and religion as two indivisible parts of culture.

- ✚ Arnold was of the opinion that it is a mistake to believe that a dull subject can be made interesting by the poet's treatment of the subject.
- ✚ Arnold was of the opinion that tragic circumstances should be represented in literature as enjoyable.
- ✚ H W Garrod calls Arnold's tone 'high church ceremonial'.
- ✚ Arnold thought that Greek literature should serve as the model for aspiring poets.
- ✚ He did not rate Victorian literature very high.
- ✚ Eliot says that Arnold had little gift for consistency or for definition.

- ✚ Arnold had a very low opinion of Carlyle, Ruskin, Tennyson and Swinburne.
 - ▶ He calls a Carlyle a moral desperado.
 - ▶ Ruskin eccentric
 - ▶ Swinburne a pseudo Shelley
 - ▶ And Tennyson's *Maud* a lamentable production.
- ✚ He was convinced that the Alexandrine and the couplet form were inadequate for poetic expression.
- ✚ Cultural and critical values seem to be synonymous for Arnold.

- According to Arnold Grand Style arises when a gifted poet treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject.
- To Arnold poetry itself was the criticism of life: 'The criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty'
- Scott James, comparing him to Aristotle, says that where Aristotle analyses the work of art, Arnold analyses the role of the critic
- As a critic Arnold is essentially a moralist

- ▶ Arnold even censored his own collection on moral grounds.
- ▶ He omitted the poem *Empedocles on Etna* from his volume of 1853.
- ▶ He had included it in his collection of 1852. The reason he gave
 - The poem is too depressing in its subject matter.
 - It would leave the reader hopeless and crushed.
 - There is nothing in it in the way of hope or optimism

- Such a poem could prove to be neither instructive nor of any delight to the reader.
- # Arnold took up Aristotle's view, asserting that true greatness in poetry is given by the truth and seriousness of its subject matter
- # According to Arnold, Homer is the best model of a simple grand style.
- # While Milton is the best model of severe grand style.
- # Dante is an example of both.
- # Even Chaucer, in Arnold's view, in spite of his virtues such as benignity, largeness, and spontaneity, lacks seriousness.

- # Burns too lacks sufficient seriousness, because he was hypocritical in that while he adopted a moral stance in some of his poems, in his private life he flouted morality.
- # T. S. Eliot praised Arnold's objective approach to critical evaluation, particularly his tools of comparison and analysis
- # Allen Tate in his essay *Tension in Poetry* imitates Arnold's touchstone method to discover 'tension', or the proper balance between connotation and denotation, in poetry.

Arnold as a Classicist

- ✚ Quoting Goethe and Niebuhr he asserts that his age suffers from spiritual weakness because it thrives on self-interest and scientific materialism.
- ✚ He expected modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration.
- ✚ Classical literature, in his view, possesses
 - ▶ pathos,
 - ▶ moral profundity
 - ▶ noble simplicity.
- ✚ Modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry.

✚ Modern literature doesn't possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry.

Preface to Poems of 1853

- ✚ In *Preface to Poems of 1853* he warns young writers not to imitate Shakespeare.
- ✚ Young writers should imitate only Shakespeare's excellences.
- ✚ They should avoid Shakespeare's technical accessories like quibble, conceit, circumlocution and allusiveness.
- ✚ Arnold admires Shakespeare's use of plots from history.

✚ Shakespeare had what Goethe called the architectonic quality.

- That is his expression matched the action.

✚ But at the same time Arnold quotes Hallam to show that Shakespeare's style was complex even where simplicity was required.

✚ He observes that Shakespeare's 'expression tends to become a little sensuous and simple, too much intellectualized'.

✚ Arnold catalogues Shakespeare's merits

1. The architectonic quality of his style that is the harmony between action and expression.

2. His reliance on the ancients for his themes.

3. Accurate construction of action.

4. His strong conception of action and accurate portrayal of his subject matter.

5. His intense feeling for the subjects he dramatises.

✚ He advises young writers of the dangers of imitating the following qualities of Shakespeare

1. His fondness for quibble, fancy and conceit.

2. His excessive use of imagery.

3. Circumlocution, even where the press of action demands directness.

4. His lack of simplicity.

5. His allusiveness.

- # As an example of the danger of imitating Shakespeare he cites the example of Keats's poor imitation of Shakespeare in his *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*.
- # He commends Italian writer Boccaccio for handling the same theme successfully in his *Decameron*.
- # Arnold wants the modern writer to take models from the past because they depicted human nature better.

- # Characters such as Agamemnon, Dido, Aeneas, Orestes, Merope, Alcmeon, and Clytemnestra, leave a permanent impression on our minds.

The Study of Poetry

- # In *The Study of Poetry*, (1888) which opens his *Essays in Criticism*, Arnold recalls Sainte-Beuve's reply to Napoleon.
- # Sainte - Beuve replied to Napoleon's comment that charlatanism is found in everything saying that charlatanism might be found everywhere else, but not in the field of poetry.

- # Because in poetry the distinction between sound and unsound, or only half-sound, truth and untruth, or only half-truth, between the excellent and the inferior, is of paramount importance.
- # Arnold was against charlatanism in poetry.
- # In *The Study of Poetry* Arnold advises the critic not to be affected by historical or personal judgements.
 - ▶ historical judgement is a fallacy because we regard the ancient poets with excessive veneration,
 - ▶ personal judgement is a fallacy because the critic is biased towards a contemporary poet.

The Study of Poetry

- # Arnold's criticism of Vitet a French critic, illustrates his 'touchstone method'
 - The touchstone method states that in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry,
 - These passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry.
 - Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose.

- ‡ He was an advocate of touchstones that is short passages even single lines, which will serve our turn quite sufficiently.
- ‡ Some of Arnold's touchstone passages are:
 - Helen's words about her wounded brother, Zeus addressing the horses of Peleus.
 - suppliant Achilles' words to Priam,
 - Ugolino's brave words, Beatrice's loving words to Virgil(Dante)
- ‡ From non-Classical writers he selects

- ▶ From *Henry IV Part II* (III, i),- Henry's expostulation with sleep - 'Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast . . . '.
- ▶ From *Hamlet* (V, ii) 'Absent thee from felicity awhile . . . '.
- ▶ From Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book I, 'Care sat on his faded cheek . . . ', and 'What is else not to be overcome

- ‡ Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the 'prose classics' of the 18th century.

■ As for poetry, he considers Gray to be the only classic of the 18th century.

- ▶ Gray constantly studied and enjoyed Greek poetry
- ▶ Arnold considers Gray as the 'scantiest, frailest classic'

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