

# IDHAYA COLLEGE FOR WOMEN, KUMBAKONAM



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# MATTHEW ARNOLD

Poetry; a criticism of life under  
the conditions fixed for such a  
criticism by the laws of poetic  
truth and poetic beauty.

Matthew Arnold

quote fancy



# THE STUDY OF POETRY BY MATTHEW ARNOLD

- ❖ Wrote extensively on social and cultural issues, religion, and education
- ❖ Father of modern literary criticism
- ❖ Foremost poets and critics of the 19th century.
- ❖ Arnold's most famous piece of literary criticism is "his essay 'The Study of Poetry.'"
- ❖ In this work, Arnold is fundamentally concerned with poetry's "high destiny;" he believes that "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us" as science and philosophy will eventually prove flimsy and unstable
- ❖ At the root of Arnold's argument is his desire to "illuminate and preserve the poets he believes to be the touchstones of literature, and to ask questions about the moral value of poetry that does not champion truth, beauty, valour, and clarity.

# THE FUTURE OF POETRY

- ❖ According to Arnold, The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay.
- ❖ There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.
- ❖ Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry

# VICTORIAN CRITICISM

- ❖ Art and Morality: Art for Art's sake
- ❖ Carlyle Ruskin : Moral view should be the benchmark to judge the work of literature. Art should be for the betterment of life.
- ❖ Art and Aesthetic pleasure: Art for Art's sake-Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde: Aesthetic and artistic delight should be the benchmark to judge the work of literature. Art should be for delight and pleasure of mankind.

## MATTHEW ARNOLD – THE CRITIC

- ⦿ The business of criticism, is not to find fault nor to display the critic's own learning or influence, but it is to know „the “best which has been thought and said in the world and by “using this knowledge to create a current of fresh and free thought.
- ⦿ The Study of Poetry: The first essay in the 1888 volume was originally published as the general introduction to T.H. Ward's anthology, The English Poets ( 1880) “

- ❖ His Classicism: He did not like the spasmodic expression of Romanticism. He advocated discipline in writing and recommended the classical writers.
- ❖ He says-We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto.
- ❖ More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry .
- ❖ If we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence.
- ❖ We must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict judgment.

- ❖ According to Arnold, Homer is the best model of a simple grand style, while Milton is the best model of severe grand style. Dante, however, is an example of both. I think it will be found that that the grand style arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with a severity a serious Subject.
- ❖ Aristotle says that poetry is superior to History since it bears the stamp of high seriousness and truth. If truth and seriousness are wanting in the subject matter of a poem, so will the true poetic stamp of diction and movement be found wanting in its style and manner. Hence the two, the nobility of subject matter, and the superiority of style and manner, are proportional and cannot occur independently.
- ❖ Arnold took up Aristotle's view, asserting that true greatness in poetry is given by the truth and seriousness of its subject matter, and by the high diction and movement in its style and manner, and although indebted to Joshua Reynolds for the expression grand style, Arnold gave it a new meaning when he used it in his lecture On Translating Homer (1861):

# FUTURE OF POETRY

- ❖ The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, our race, as time goes on, will find an even surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken. But for poetry, the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches emotion to the idea,; the idea is a fact.
- ❖ The strongest part of our religion, to-day is its unconscious poetry. We have t “ o turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.



# **POETRY IS CRITICISM OF LIFE**

- ⊙ Arnold asserts that literature, and especially poetry, is, 'Criticism of life'. In poetry, this criticism of life must conform to the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Truth and seriousness of matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner, as are exhibited in the best poets, are what constitutes a criticism of life.

## **KEY COMPONENTS OF POETRY**

- ⊙ Thus, the superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner.
- ⊙ Even Chaucer, in Arnolds 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.

# CLASSICAL VIEWS AND VALUES

## Return to Classical values

- ❖ Arnold believed that a modern writer should be aware that contemporary literature is built on the foundations of the past, and should contribute to the future by continuing a firm tradition. Quoting Goethe and Niebuhr in support of his view, he asserts that his age suffers from spiritual weakness because it thrives on self-interest and scientific materialism, and therefore cannot provide noble characters such as those found in Classical literature.
- ❖ He urged modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration. Classical literature, in his view, possess pathos, moral profundity and noble simplicity, while modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry, and don't possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry. Arnold turns his back on the prevailing Romantic view of poetry and seeks to revive the Classical values of objectivity, urbanity, and architectonics. He denounces the Romantics for ignoring the Classical writers for the sake of novelty, and for their allusive writing which defies easy comprehension.

# TOUCHSTONE METHOD

- Touchstone Method– His general principles was - the "Touchstone Method" which introduced scientific objectivity to critical evaluation by providing comparison and analysis as the two primary tools for judging individual poets. Thus, Chaucer, Dryden, Pope, and Shelley fall short of the best, because they lack "high seriousness". Arnolds ideal poets are Homer and Sophocles in the ancient world, Dante and Milton, and among moderns, Goethe and Wordsworth.– Arnold puts Wordsworth in the front rank not for his poetry but for his "criticism of life".

# FALLACIES OF REAL ESTIMATE

## Fallacies of Real Estimate—

- ◉ Arnold while giving his touchstone method makes reader aware about the fallacy in judgment. He is of the view that historical fallacy and personal fallacy mars the real estimate of poetry. While expressing his views of the historic, the Personal, the Real he writes that ‘... in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious’.

## ON CHAUCER ,DRYDEN AND POPE

### On Chaucer

❖ Arnold praises Chaucer's excellent style and manner, but says that Chaucer cannot be called a classic since, unlike Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare, his poetry does not have the high poetic seriousness which Aristotle regards as a mark of its superiority over the other arts. On Dryden and Pope

❖ we can regard Dryden as the glorious founder, and Pope as the splendid high priest, of the age of prose and reason, our indispensable 18th century. Their poetry was that of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the prose classics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

# ON THOMAS GRAY

## On Thomas Gray

- ◉ As for poetry, he considers Gray to be the only classic of the 18th century. Gray constantly studied and enjoyed Greek poetry and thus inherited their poetic point of view and their application of poetry to life. But he is the scantiest, frailest classic since his output was small.

# ON ROBERT BURNS

## On Robert Burns

- ◉ Like Chaucer, Burns lacks high poetic seriousness, though his poems have poetic truth in diction and movement. Also like Chaucer, Burns possesses largeness, benignity, freedom and spontaneity. But instead of Chaucer's fluidity, we find in Burns a springing bounding energy. Chaucer's benignity deepens in Burns into a sense of sympathy for both human as well as non-human things, but Chaucer's world is richer and fairer than that of Burns. Sometimes Burns poetic genius is unmatched by anyone. He is even better than Goethe at times and he is unrivalled by anyone except Shakespeare.

## ON SHAKESPEARE

### On Shakespeare

- Praising Shakespeare, Arnold says In England there needs a miracle of genius like Shakespeare's to produce a balance of mind. This is praise tempered by a critical sense. In a letter he writes. I keep saying Shakespeare, you are as obscure as life is. In his sonnet On Shakespeare he says;Others abide our question. Thou are free./ We ask and ask – Thou smilest and art still,/ Out- topping knowledge.

## CRITICISM OF HIS VIEW POINT

- ◉ Arnold's criticism of life is often marred by his naive moralizing, by his inadequate perception of the relation between art and morality, and by his uncritical admiration of what he regarded as the golden sanity of the ancient Greeks.— For all his championing of disinterestedness, Arnold was unable to practice disinterestedness in all his essays.— In his essay on Shelley particularly, he displayed a lamentable lack of disinterestedness. Shelley's moral views were too much for the Victorian Arnold.— In his essay on Keats too Arnold failed to be disinterested. The sentimental letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne were too much for him. But Arnold's insistence on the standards and his concern over the relation between poetry and life make him one of the great modern critics



# CRITICISM OF HIS VIEW POINT

- ⊙ George Saintsbury: A History of English Criticism: “all literature is the application of ideas of life and to say that poetry is the application of ideas to life under conditions fixed for poetry, is simply a vain repetition. T.S.Eliot: ‘His observation that ‘poetry is criticism of life’ is repeating Aristotle. Nothing novel is contributed as a critic.’

THANK YOU

