

**Analysing Mathew Arnold's notion of criticism and his conception of poetry as a spiritual panacea**

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**Abstract**

English literature is rife with critics across literary canons. Different critics espouse different ideologies and propound other ways of interpreting a text. Mathew Arnold is one of the most influential critics. It is believed that before him, English criticism was in absolute shambles. Moreover, if there were remnants of criticism of any kind, they were not facilitated by a stringent or consistent mechanism. Any attempt at concretizing criticism was meted out with censure. Although Dryden is addressed as the first English critic, he repudiates the need to formalize criticism as his criticism is based on sympathy and knowledge, not on a particular order. This is precisely why the authority and position of Aristotle – the founder of criticism – remain unchallenged. The criticism of Arnold warrants an exclusive study of its own because it marks a departure from the more dominant form of criticism that lays its foundation in creativity and imagination. The arrival of Arnold in English Criticism brought to the forefront a critic who desisted from making any abstractions an index of significant criticism; he laid down some principles following which poetry could be critiqued. Conflating criticism with censure leads to a misconception that criticism only means launching a rant against a work. This distorted understanding of criticism obfuscates what it entails. Criticism is the sine qua non since it protects a literary oeuvre from the tyranny of a single interpretation. Matthew Arnold harbored an exalted notion of the role of a critic. Averse to Philistinism and Charlatanism pervading British life, Arnold realized that the contemporary times were culturally and intellectually barren. The bourgeoisie was bereft of ideals of its own. This impelled Arnold to civilize the populace and smash to smithereens the cultural anarchy he found everywhere. Because of this precarious milieu, Arnold accords a cultural function to criticism. This paper It is an honest attempt to explain Arnold's notion of criticism concerning his essay The Function of Criticism at present and The Study of Poetry.

**Keywords:** Criticism, Mathew Arnold, poetry, disinterestedness, content, historical context

## **Background**

Herbert Paul saliently comments, "Arnold's critical thought was the focal point of his age. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a propensity to consider feelings as an index of truth emerged. Like George Eliot, he, too, placed artists on a higher pedestal. His nonchalance to Coleridge's theory is also discernible in his repudiation of transcendental thought in support of "hard realities of immediate experience." (Shumaker, 386) This enables us to evaluate Arnold's notion of criticism from the complex contours of his theory of "disinterestedness." Unlike Wordsworth's views, which upheld creative faculty over critical faculty, Arnold opines that it is better to accept critical activity than an inferior kind of creative activity. Arnold does not negate the creative nor conform to the prevailing notion of the critical being subservient to the creative. From the readers' vantage point, Arnold suggests interdependence between the two. Although creative power is "the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness" (Arnold, 2), it is criticism that makes creation possible by employing creative power for the production of great works is not under the contours of viability at all times in all epochs. These unfavourable times call for consolidating conditions that would make creation possible. Arnold staunchly believes that ideas apparate in situations like these. creativity of an artist can reach full fruition only when surrounded by an intellectual ambiance that propagates the best ideas. To that end, for creative power to burgeon, two powers must concur, 'power of the man and power of the moment.' The 'moment' or an atmosphere where creativity can take place is built.

When a critic is backed by the knowledge that sheaths not only literature but also theology, philosophy, etc., a current of best ideas is disseminated, making society a better place to live. Arnold insists that criticism enables one to know the best known and thought in the world. The moment a body of work becomes the mouthpiece of certain political parties who want to further their agendas; it marks a drift from its purpose of circulating a current of fresh ideas. This is where he introduces the concept of 'disinterestedness'; that is to say, critics should desist from affiliating themselves with money-minting and avaricious political parties who do not disinterestedly pursue ideas. For instance, the current condition of journalism (the umbrella term for print media, electronic media, and social media) in India would have perturbed Arnold as much, for no media house exhibits the audacity to operate on its own without any financial backing from political parties who in turn expect them to spread information (unverified more often than not) to meet their filthy ends, consequently failing to address issues objectively. Arnold, however, does not lose hope and invests faith in England, reeling under the aftermath of the Revolution. Arnold's idea is that a critic must be aloof from practical considerations as they stifle and thwart the free play of mind. This leads us to another function of criticism - by detaching itself from exterior influences, criticism extricates English society from the adamant grips of complacency. Arnold evinces how complacency hampers progress and corrodes the human spirit. What a critic does is he directs his inquisitiveness towards challenging and questioning, not letting the mind stagnate and engaging humans in dialectic meant to "lead [them] towards

perfection by making [they are] mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty of things" (Arnold, 10).

However, Arnold's disinterestedness problematizes the critic's function, his role as a medium to help humanity reach perfection because if he engages with society, is he not defying the Grounds for objective disinterestedness? This boils down to how we wish to perceive his disinterest - whether it means dealing with a text that is not even remotely influenced by ideological frameworks like Feminism, Marxism, or Structuralism. For the creation and representation of that which is literary, it becomes necessary for the critics to seek the most suitable approach. If that means engaging with society, then he is not vitiating his stance on disinterestedness. In a way, Arnold's is an "interested disinterestedness." If Arnold's idea of criticism was seen as an epistemological endeavor, it considers judgment (thought to be an indispensable aspect of criticism) secondary. Assessment is not intrinsic for Arnold; he strives to acquire and communicate new knowledge. Only by disseminating knowledge will the world receive a current of ideas capable of reinstating order. Arnold not only mastered the craft of criticism but also identified with the cause of criticism to the extent that T.S Eliot dubbed him "rather a propagandist for criticism than a critic." His Touchstone Method mentioned in 'The Study of Poetry' is seen as a yardstick for judging some works while recommending lines from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton as touchstones to detect the absence or presence of high poetic quality in works of other poets. Arnold betrays his stance on judgment and introduces this method as he creates a hierarchy. According to the touchstone method, Chaucer, Dryden, Pope, and Shelley lack the required "seriousness" and thus fall short of the best. Arnold harkens back to the greatness of Homer and Sophocles, moves to Dante and Milton, and appreciates Goethe and Wordsworth among the modernists. Perhaps this is why the Decadent Movement carrying the label Art for Art's Sake excluded Arnold for his conception of art as something moral- Art for Truth's Sake because he was never satisfied with works that fell short of achieving the ideal of perfection.

### **Arnold's Perception of Criticism**

Matthew Arnold's criticism encapsulates an accurate estimate, which is an unbiased fusion of the historical context and the creative content/faculty while deconstructing a work of poetry. For Arnold, the existence of an accurate estimate is the most rudimentary parameter in the judgment of poetry. He, however, advocates the shunning of these two estimates when looked at singularly because he believes that it is incumbent upon critics to keep striving for the absolute classic since the two 'estimates' dissuade them from looking at poetry from a holistic and objective approach which thus defeats the purpose of the project altogether. Arnold vehemently opines against the glorification of a poet by stating that it "blinds criticism by conventional admiration and renders the investigation of literary origin unacceptable." He was understandably wary of the human propensity to allow one's likings, inclinations, and preferences to influence their interpretation of the poet's work. He exhorts quashing these dangers by an innate desire to learn to absorb and consume the best works in a way that invariably instils a sensibility to understand the difference between the higher and

lesser forms of poetry. The higher qualities of poetry lie both in the matter and style. These qualities enable a reader to judge the stylistic anatomy of poetry accurately.

However, the criticism propounded by Arnold is not impervious to criticism itself. He contorted it slightly while trying to demystify it for the literary intelligentsia. His views about his theory are admirable when unearthed from a critical vantage point. However, when he uses Milton's quote himself:

Moreover, courage never to submit or  
yield, And what is not to be  
overcome?

Although the lines above are fraught with moral strength and moral depth, they do not add value to the overall syntax and semantics. Arnold quotes the lines because they serve to ascribe Milton to an exalted status, and thus, the purpose is to moralize while placing Milton on a consecrated mantle. This is because Arnold, as has been argued, considers his duty to invoke and pique the moralistic impulse of society to eschew the infamous yet overarching moral vacuity. This sense of responsibility supersedes his sense of responsibility to literature. This can also be corroborated.

R.A. Scott James remarks who claims that "Arnold's powers of appreciation might be twisted by his preconceived schemes of moral excellence." (Kolanchery, 147) Arnold's willingness to divest society of its vices is a sharp antithesis to his theory of disinterestedness. The inconsistency is also evident in his harsh treatment of Keats concerning Fanny Brawne. Eliot is known to remark that "his creative and his critical writings are essentially the work of the same man. The same weakness and the necessity for something to depend upon make him an academic poet and critic."(Kolanchery, 147-148) His stance on and preoccupation with morals has impeded his judgment. For Arnold, poetry has no solitary existence; it cannot exist without a didactic purpose. He pompously talks about the greatness of poetry instead of its genuineness. His criticism predominantly entails comparing one passage with another, which is not a just way to measure the quality of work in its entirety. Arnold focuses on absolute impression. While underscoring the difference between the historical, the personal, and the accurate estimate, he has downplayed the importance of the 'personal'. An inevitable part of the criticism is that one is always in a position of vulnerability vis-a-vis their "personal affinities, likings and circumstances", more so in work prolifically known within the literary circuit. Thus, active and meticulous readers must keep themselves in tandem with the author and the context of the work. Eliot also extensively avers how some criticism is reasonable; when the critic attempts to

Envisioning the author's personality and imbibing in himself his sensibility, and manufacturing his voice through it is when the chances of good criticism proliferate. Wordsworth was the first of the poets to garner Arnold's admiration, and the source of this adoration was their propensity towards the personal estimate. This also shows how Arnold has little to no interest in poetry that does not qualify as significant for him. Eliot says this is because, for Arnold, "poetry meant a careful selection and order of poets. It conveyed as for

anyone else the poetry that he liked that he re-read." Arnold's dislike (bordering contempt) for poetry not laced with didacticism has been mulled over. He reels under the burden of seeing poetry as an instrument of reform rather than a work of art. A critic's competence rests on his ability to segregate man from himself. Arnold could not achieve the desired scale of detachment despite his firm belief in his theory of disinterestedness. However, he should be credited abundantly for keeping poetry divorced from charlatanism and following a criticism standard, regardless of its reception amongst the myriad modern critics.

#### Poetry as Criticism of Life

So far, we have established Arnold's thoughts on how he thinks the role of poetry is reformative; he vociferously speaks against the popular notion that poetry is meant to please one's, visceral faculties. He sees poetry "as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and beauty." Arnold construes 'criticism of life' as a lofty incorporation and application of ideas to life. He believes poetry is not a reflection of life, so to speak, because the poet feels a sense of responsibility to orchestrate something from what they observe and absorb. When given the garb of poetry, this observation heavily contributes to Arnold's criticism of life. Poetry inspires a man to be gentler, nobler, and unassuming, but it does so not by overtly moralizing or by taking recourse to reason and logic but by appealing to the Soul of man. A poet's beliefs and the most profound thoughts find expression in his poetry. Through his poetry, he lays bare the workings of his psyche and the depths of his soul. How a poet strives to apply his ideas to life and meditates upon the vagaries embodying life reinforces his greatness. He uses his poetic mind and understanding to answer the ultimate question of how to live in a world marked with vicissitudes. Thus, poetry not only helps us unravel the odds of life but also acts as an enabler in aiding us to navigate the crises encompassing life. To be more precise and nuanced, poetry evinces a keen understanding of life in two ways. For example, it interprets by giving an apt discourse on the countenance of the outer world and by divulging in excruciating detail the ideas and the tenets populating the inner world of man. Arnold believes that poetry's deconstructive and interpretive nature becomes more pronounced owing to its moral profundity and spiritual richness. For him, poetry plays a significant role in rummaging through people's consciences; its moral function supplants every other part it can assume. He popularly remarks, "a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas in a poetry of indifference towards life". However, he vouches for morality that strengthens and not obfuscates, revitalizes, and is not informed by insipidity. Since our life is driven and guided by moral ideas, poetry is the medium that can sustain humanity in all its forms—the fundamental question on which life anchors - how to live - is predicated on morality. Man is perennially occupied with this question and works arduously to find its answer.

Nor love thy life, nor hate;  
but what thou livest, Live well,  
how long or short permit to heaven.

The lines mentioned above by Milton hammer home a moral idea. The emanation of moral beliefs through a work of art is seldom forced. When Shakespeare remarks in *The Tempest*:

We are such stuff as dreams are made on,  
And our little life is rounded with sleep.

He attempts to plant a moral idea underscoring the illusory nature of life. For poetry to assert such moral truths, resolutions, and convictions, Arnold notes that it has to be of the highest quality. It ought to be remarkable in terms of matter and manner. The most important aspect is its ability to impart universal truths with the utmost gravity and its natural appropriacy of an order that seamlessly amalgamates with the matter.

### **Conclusion**

What unites the most significant authors, poets, theorists, and philosophers across periods is unanimous belief in the ethical view of life being equivalent to the total picture of life. For Arnold, it had become all the more imperative for these two views to coincide with extricating the age from the adamant shackles of materialism that had grown to have a despicable grip over the lives of the common populace. Arnold's exaltation of poetry also came at a time when he observed and resented the slow dissipation of the time's religious values due to science's development. Arnold had no qualms in expressing his remonstrations towards age and its disorders. He was driven by an eagerness to permanently eradicate the vices that led to the effacement of moral and ethical values that Arnold vigorously espoused. Thus, Arnold's criticism heavily valorized poetry; poetry embodied ethical values that were thought to save humankind from retreating into moral and spiritual ruin. Hence, he set some unassailable benchmarks in the domain of poetry and called for a unique assemblage of the best subjects and the highest expression.

Order. Arnold's poetry is coterminous with life and cannot exist bereft of it. Amongst his counterparts, Arnold was most influenced by the seemingly irreversible and permanent changes caused by the advent of science and industry. The kind of poetry he was a purveyor of was a stark reflection of these changes. If Tennyson concerned himself with the salient issues of democracy and war, and Browning dissected the idea of psychological insight, then Arnold's poetry was a commentary on life. For Arnold, poetry had a significant purpose and was not merely a medium to please the sensual in man.

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