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RESEARCH ARTICLE



CRITICISM, CULTURE AND CONSCIENCE: AN INCLUSIVE READING OF MATTHEW

ARNOLD'S "THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME"

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ABSTRACT



This article introduces the main currents of Victorian literary criticism and assesses Matthew Arnold's foundational contributions within that context. It highlights Arnold's core and kernel critical ideas and establishes his position as the foremost critic among his Victorian contemporaries. Deliberating on a close explication of *the selected essay*, the paper unravels and unpacks its chief themes and arguments to back a comprehensive and inclusive reading. In a nutshell, the study positions the essay as a foundational manifesto that encapsulates Arnold's critical thought and illuminates his long-lasting impact on literary criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Age (1837-1901) in the history of English Literature is immensely rich and profound, so far as the production of literature across genres is concerned. Almost all forms have found fertile soil to grow in and have reached full flowering. With the exception of drama, all major literary genres-notably poetry, fiction, non-fiction and literary criticism have been created in abundance with new experiments yielding adequate outcomes for the artists of coming generations. In the domain of literary criticism and theory, the Age has witnessed the emergence of both practical and theoretical criticism. The good and great literature of bygone times has been read and researched to foster a balanced approach to creating and critiquing literature. It is not only creative writing but also the critical literature during this era that shouldered the responsibility of socio-cultural reformation and regeneration. The traditional life supported by culture, its spirit and flair, has been found in shambles. Critics like Matthew Arnold have realized that criticism could play a powerful role in promoting cultural ethics and ancestral values, so it is worthwhile and effective. The Victorian criticism seeks order and balance to overpower the chaos and commotion resulting from materialistic and rationalistic thought of life. It strives for realism and matter-of-factness. This critical approach shows the deep-entrenched impact of Hippolyte Taine (1828-1898) and Sainte-Beuve (1804- 1869), both hailing from French soil. These critics emphasized the essence of a writer's time and the life in literary art. Taine believes race, milieu, and the moment are the three prime ingredients behind the creation of a work. Therefore, their consideration in the evaluation

of literature is a prerequisite. Moreover, the Victorian criticism displays two contrasting perspectives. There is a group of critics- John Stuart Mill, Thomas Macaulay, Aldous Huxley, John Morley, and Herbert Spencer demonstrating a rationalistic and materialistic stance. While John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, Walter Pater, Arthur Symonds, and John Addington Symonds are thoroughly idealistic, impressionistic, and romantic in nature. This romantic colour in Victorian reading and writing is supplemented hugely by Pre-Raphaelites, an association of painters, poets, and critics during the period. The Victorian literary criticism is also known for its two contradictory cults: 'Art for life's sake', and 'Art of art's sake'. The former believes that art and literature ought to serve the moral purpose of life, as Mathew Arnold asserts that 'poetry should be a criticism of life'. On the other hand, 'Art for art's sake' strives for the beauty of art to the exclusion of social reality and life. Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater are the main proponents of this creed of literature.

MATHEW ARNOLD AS A LITERARY CRITIC

Mathew Arnold is universally acknowledged and critically acclaimed as a major critic of the Victorian Age. This image of being above all contemporary critics is well-founded in his contributions and individual experiments. But this fact of being a towering critic does not overshadow his quintessential, unique space in the field of poetry. He is equally recognized as an established character in both genres. He is the part and parcel of the lineage of the well-known poet-critics tradition of European literature to which belong such adorable names- Sir Phillip Sydney, Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel John, William Wordsworth, Samuel



Taylor Coleridge, and his successor Thomas Sterne Eliot. Arnold begins his career as a poet and gains unparalleled popularity in the field, but ends his literary odyssey as a first-class critic. Overall, as a creative writer, Arnold exudes a concern for the pervasive social and cultural malaise. He expresses despondency, dissatisfaction, and spiritual barrenness of Victorian life. He is seen ceaselessly striving to create an order and balance between materialistic and spiritual life, and Christian faith and rationalistic science. He is a great advocate of culture and morality. He shows a sense of urgency about reviving a traditional lifestyle saturated with ethical ideals and religious values. He is a propagator of 'art for life's sake'. Everywhere, he emphasises the use of literary art as an instrument to improve a deteriorated life devoid of everything prerequisite for ultimate peace and gratification. He believes that great and good literature is born when the ideal atmosphere replete with traditional practices, moral ideals, and human values exists in individual life and in social structure. Therefore, the primary task of a successful critic is to reflect on what is best and sweet in terms of thinking, believing, saying, and doing. Mathew Arnold is a prolific and versatile writer in terms of both quality and quantity. His main and influential books in the area of criticism are as follows:

- a) *The Preface to the Poems* (1853)
- b) *On Translating Homer* (1856)
- c) *Essays in Criticism- First Series* (1865)
- d) *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1866)
- e) *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)
- f) *St. Paul's Protestantism* (1870)

g) *Literature and Dogma* (1873)

h) *God and the Bible* (1875)

i) *Essays in Criticism- Second Series* (1888)

CONCEPT AND FUNCTIONS OF CRITICISM

The essay "The Function of Criticism at present" is just like a manifesto document, followed by Arnold's entire body of criticism and his main critical thought. In the essay, he incubates ideas of diverse kinds regarding creative as well as critical art and these ideas are developed in the successive works. The seeds of ideas are sown here, and their flowering will be enjoyed and the fruits harvested in the forthcoming time. The essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" is part of the work *Essays in Criticism* (1865), the first well-acclaimed work of Arnold in the domain of literary criticism. He defines the task of criticism as "A disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought of in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and noble ideas". The word 'disinterest' signifies the objective and impartial type of reading or interpretation free from all historical and personal prejudices. While analysing Arnold's definition of criticism, the three important things come to fore: that a critic must be well aware of reality and life before writing anything and get the things as they are; they ought to promote and share their thoughts with others and make the best ideas prevail in social setup; and that they must prepare an ambiance for the creation of genius writers of the posterity by fostering the honest, noble, and true ideas.

Mathew Arnold excorticates the idea that the production of great and good literature is possible



only in the presence or concurrence of 'power of man' and 'power of the moment'. The phrase 'power of man' refers to the strength and potential of a writer whereas 'power of moment' indicates the favourable atmosphere or external condition the writer lives in. He elaborates the idea by citing German Wolfgang Goethe and English John Byron. Though both these writers possessed tremendous imaginative and creative power, Goethe's literature is more powerful, meaningful, and enlightening because of his rich cultural background. Arnold adds that despite being not a voracious reader, Shakespeare's fame and eternal appeal are the result of his fortune time and inspiring literary climate. Moreover, Arnold emphasizes that while reading a literary work, the critic intends to 'see the object as in itself it really is'. Historical, psychological, and sociological information and understanding are irrelevant, and relying on them is merely unprofessional. This idea has triggered the approach of objectivity later on in the domain of literary criticism and theory as advocated by Modern and New Critics.

WEAKNESSES OF VICTORIAN LITERATURE

Mathew Arnold censures the literature written during his Age. He is of the opinion that there is no adequate mechanism of criticism due to the division of society, particularly intellectuals, into small political and religious sects that prevent them from assessing things from the right perspective. He points out several works of Victorian Literature ostensibly promoting the writers' personal and political agenda or religious beliefs. The *Edinburgh Review* demonstrates the views and policies of Whigs; the *Quarterly Review* represents the ideas and values of

Tories; the *British Review* shows the predilections of political Dissenters; and the *Times* mirror reflects the rationale of the 'rich Englishman'. Arnold also criticises the 'constructive' by Bishop Colenso and Miss Cobbe. He denounces the British commoner as he sees him lacking in creativity and productivity. Further, Arnold says that the French Revolution, with its stalwarts like Rousseau and Voltaire, yielded stronger results than the English Revolution of Charles. However, the English Revolution is considered more successful due to its "appeal to an order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent". The French Revolution moves away from the intellectual domain and embraces a temporal political ideology, thereby missing the elements of permanent and universal meaning. It has led to the 'epoch of Concentration'- a period of single-mindedness which proved vanishing. It has paved the way to the 'epoch of expansion'- an era of creative thoughts. The writings of Edmund Burke are well-received and appreciated, yet they are not 'disinterested' because they are an admixture of politics and creative thought.

THE INTERSECTION OF CREATIVITY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

According to Matthew Arnold, the creative writer is greater and more powerful than the critic, as "creative activity is the true function of man". However, he adds that the critic extracts the true meaning of literary art. He says that criticism "the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is" makes it a precondition for a genuinely major creation. He opines that quality in creation is impossible if fresh ideas are not available



to the people. In the absence of the best ideas, cultural anarchy comes in. Arnold states that unbiased criticism produces a feeling of creative happiness in a critic. He equates the emotional state of writing criticism with the emotional state of creative writing. The good writing is the result of great ideas, and the critic performs the essential task of identifying such ideas with disinterest and transporting them to the masses. Besides, he argues that critical writing is an inherent and important part of free creativity:

It is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power, that a free creative activity, is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness. But. It is also undeniable that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art. (*The Function of Criticism at present and An Essay on Style: 9*)

Arnold states that a successful critic, criticism must be essentially the activity of curiosity. He defines the term as the desire to know the best. This curiosity is to be accompanied with disinterest state of mind: "Judging is after spoken of as the critic's own business, and so in some sense it is but the judgement that forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one; and thus knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern for himself" (78-79). This knowing and understanding should be the main concerns of a good critic. Arnold says further that in his quest for the best, a critic is free to go through world literature rather than limit himself to native

writing and writers. This approach would certainly promote ideas fairly and impartially.

ARNOLD'S APOLOGY FOR CRITICS AND CRITICISM

Mathew Arnold is called a 'critic's critic' for his humongous contribution to the meaningfulness of criticism in the domain of literary art. He argues that a substantial body of literature from European countries has been used for criticism. But English people have not encouragingly written a significant amount of critical literature due to the undesirable tendency of writers towards criticism. He cites the example of Wordsworth, who believes that critical writing is a futile exercise for both the author and the reader. He also admits that huge damage can be done through critical writing, but little harm is possible through creative literature. Arnold defends this argument that if a person has a competency in one field of writing, he must not be insisted to produce original writing by suggesting that critical writing is of no use or worth at all:

It is almost too much to expect a poor human nature that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature should, for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another. Still less is this to be expected from men addicted to the composition of the "false or malicious criticism" of which Wordsworth speaks. (*The Function of Criticism at the Present Time and An Essay on Style: 6-7*)

Arnold identifies the contradiction in Wordsworth's view of criticism by noting that the latter is himself an established critic. To counter the



nihilistic view of criticism, Arnold has shown that criticism plays multifarious, significant roles and should be seen as an art form no less than creative literature. He has a strong notion of the vocation of a critic and the value of criticism. He asserts that a critic belongs to life, society, religion, and culture, and works for their betterment and amelioration.

CONCLUSION

This undertaking demonstrates that the dominant currents of Victorian literary criticism are clearly articulated and contextualized, situating Matthew Arnold as a central and influential theorist within that critical terrain. By isolating and systematically analyzing the essential propositions of "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," the study elucidates Arnold's recurring concerns: his opinion of criticism's moral and cultural function; the need for disinterested judgment; and the critic's role in negotiating between literature and society—and displays how these thoughts anchor his wider critical landscape. This close reading offered here renders Arnold's theoretical stance accessible and coherent, authenticating the essay's status as a typical manifesto of his critical thought and underscoring his enduring essence for understanding Victorian literary criticism.

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