

ARNOLD'S 'DOVER BEACH' AS A CRITICISM OF LIFE

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Abstract

The present article deals with Matthew Arnold's theory and practice of poetry. Arnold was a Victorian poet-critic, who evolved his own theory of poetry and defined poetry as 'criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty'. He wrote poetry in conformity to his definition of poetry and his poetry is a criticism of life in the Victorian Age. As a Classicist, Arnold reacted to the Victorian Age marked by loss of religious faith, fast dying traditional values, materialism, scientific temperament, industrial growth, unrest, doubt, despair and skepticism. As a Victorian poet, he observed facts and condition of life and presented them in his poetry critically. Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* is the best example of Arnold's theory and practice of poetry as criticism of life. It deals with materialistic world and resultant feeling of melancholy and Despair.

Matthew Arnold (1822 -1888) was a Victorian poet turned critic who evolved his own theory of poetry. As prolific and versatile writer, he produced a large number of works both in verse and prose. He produced poetry of various types, such as narrative, dramatic, lyric, elegiac and reflective and various forms of prose criticism, like literally, social, political, educational and religious. Like most of the great poets, he had a theory of poetry. Arnold's theory of poetry can be gathered from his *Essays in Criticism; Preface to the Poems of 1853 and 1857* and his *Essays on Translating Homer*. Like the prefaces of Dryden and Wordsworth, Arnold's prefaces also contain true observations. Dryden's criticism is embodied in the preface, epilogues and letters of dedication which he fixed to his poetic and dramatic works. These prefaces and dedications are valuable because they are in the nature of self-justifications and contain expositions of his theory and practice of poetry. Like Dryden, Wordsworth's criticism consists of '*Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballad*', 1798, '*Preface to the Lyrical Ballad*, 1800, '*Preface to the Lyrical Ballad*', 1802, '*with an appendix on poetic diction*. Wordsworth's aim in writing poetry was to give an elaborate account of his theory of poetry as well as to justify his new kind of poetry. In this way, it was a tradition of great English poets to express their ideas and thoughts regarding the theory of poetry in the prefaces and appendices. Matthew Arnold like Dryden and Wordsworth belongs to the traditional of poet – critic, who gave his concept of poetry and drama in the prefaces and essays.

‘Thought and Feeling’ are two important sources of poetic inspiration. The poets of the Victorian age divided themselves into two groups. One group, followed the contemporary movement in intellectual and critical thought, and pointed out the need of objectivity and endeavored to attain the precision of idea. Emotion, love for beauty, flights of imagination coloured their poetry. This group may be labeled as the direct descendent of Romanticism – of course in a modified form. Matthew Arnold belonged to the first group; the intellectual group of poets. W.J.Dawson aptly comments: “He is a poet of the intellect, and his force as a poet is purely intellectual. He has no passion, no kindling flame of forever, no heart force; he speaks of his poetry is mainly the result of intellectual art (336)”.

Arnold reacted against the romantic conception of ‘spontaneous art’. He was an apostle of classicism. Though he could not remain completely unimaginative and objective yet he tried his best to strike a classical balance of imagination by reason. The views expressed by Arnold regarding the theory of poetry are in general and sometimes in the nature of justification. Sometimes it seems, Arnold advocates his opinions in the prefaces and essays and turned them into practice by writing tragedies and poetry, keeping less disparity between his theory and practice.

He defined poetry as a “criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” Arnold himself explains criticism of life as ‘the noble and profound application of ideas to life’. He also explains ‘the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty as ‘truth and seriousness of substance and matter’ and ‘felicity and perfection of diction and manner’. Arnold believes the poetry does not present life as it is rather the poet adds something to it from his noble nature and this something contributes to the “criticism of life”. Poetry makes men moral, better and nobler, but it does so not through direct teaching, or by appealing to reason like science, but by appeal in to the Soul, to the whole of man. The poet gives in this poetry what he really and seriously believes in, he speaks from the depth of his soul and speaks it so beautifully that he creates a thing of beauty, and so perennial source of joy. Such high poetry makes life richer and has power of “sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can”, It answers to the question, “How to live?”, but it does so indirectly, by conforming to the ideal of truth and goodness and thus by uplifting and ennobling the soul. Arnold is against direct moral teaching. He regards didactic poetry as the lowest.

In this way, Arnold was a poet turned critic who derived his theory of poetry from the thinkers of the past. Prof. Williams Says: “Arnold’s theory of poetry is based on the thinkers of the past and chiefly Aristotle, Goethe and Wordsworth, and he wrote poems in a definite illustration of his theory” (xxvi). In order to emphasize his point, Arnold has spoken of poetry as a ‘criticism of life’ in his essays on Wordsworth, Joubert, Byron and The Study of Poetry. Arnold in his essay on ‘Joubert’ writes:

There are famous men of literature, - Homers, Dantes, Shakespeares, of them we need not speak; their praise is forever and ever. Then there are the famous men of ability in literature. Their praises are in their own generation. And what makes this difference? The work of two orders of men is at the bottom the same, - ‘a criticism of life’. The end and aim of literature, if one considers it attentively, is in truth, nothing but that. But the criticism which the men of genius pass upon human life is permanently acceptable to mankind; the criticism which men of ability pass upon human life is transitorily acceptable (445).

In this way, according to Arnold the end and aim all literature is ‘a criticism of life’. But the criticism passed by Homer, Dante and Shakespeare is permanently acceptable to mankind; on the contrary, the criticism passed by men of ability is transitorily acceptable. Thus, the very concept of literature as ‘a criticism of life’ by Arnold tends to convince that he chose to be thoughtful and intellectual rather than passionate and emotional. Douglas Bush explains Arnold’s role behind his concept of literature as ‘a criticism of life’. He says:

Taking literature in general as criticism of life, Arnold took literature and criticism not only as an educator and guardian of public opinion and the taste but as an intellectual and philosophical discover of ideas, a necessary precursor of valuable creative activity. Thus he imposed upon criticism, a much weightier function that it had been accustomed to bear (33).

Criticism has a wider sense. It is not only an act of passing judgment but also includes critical spirit in general. Rene Wellek comments: “Arnold is first of all a very important apologist for criticism. He considered not simply literally criticism but rather the critical spirit in general (156). Arnold his in essay on ‘Byron’ explains his concept of ‘a criticism of life’ in a better way. He says:

So far from it, that when I first used this expression a criticism of life, now many years ago, it was to literature in general that I applied it, and not to poetry in especial. “The end and aim of all literature, “I said, “is, if one considers it attentively, nothing but that: a criticism of life.” And so it surely is; the main end and aim of our utterance, whether in prose or in verse is surely a criticism of life. We are not brought much on our way, I admit, towards an adequate definition of poetry as distinguish from prose by that truth; still a truth it is, and poetry can never prosper if it is forgotten. In poetry, however, the criticism of life has to be made conformably to the laws of poetics truth and poetics beauty. Truth and seriousness of substance and matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner, as these are exhibited in the best poets, are what constitute a criticism of life made in conformity with the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty; and it is by knowing and feeling the work of those poets, that we learn to recognize the fulfillment and non-fulfillment of such conditions (368).

In this way Arnold’s poetry is criticism of life in the Victorian age. In order to understand his poetry as a criticism of life in the Victorian age, it is necessary to understand salient characteristics of the Victorian age which are reflected in his poetry. Arnold was Victorian poet and his poetry reflected literary, social, and religious and trends and beliefs prevalent in it. Combining his sensibility as a poet with his intellectual powers as a scholar and critic, he observed the facts of contemporary life and presented them in his poetry. The Victorian age to which he belonged was a period of great changes in all fields of life – religious, scientific, social and literary.

The loss of religious faith and the decline of spiritual and moral values because of the growth of materialism are significant. The various social evils caused by the unbridled industrial and mechanical progress, filled his heart with gloom. The spiritual unrest, aimlessness and conflicts in the world around him, troubled his mind. The romantic poetry of the preceding age, with all its exuberance, subjectivity and emotional glow, could not satisfy his classical temper which favoured the qualities of objectivity, restraint and wholeness in powers, he could not but

react against the conditions prevailing in his Age, and express his reaction in his poetry as well as in critical reaction has found, its way into his poetry as well as in prose. His reaction is critical and not emotional and this critical reaction has found its way into his verse. His critical method has two aspects: 1) reviewing the situation existing in the fields of literature and society; and 2) commenting or passing judgments on it. Thus, he sticks in practice to his theory of poetry and makes his poetry a criticism of literature as well as life. His poetry is more of critical than creative nature. Hugh Walker explains the critical nature of Arnold's poetry at some length in the following lines:

His much condemned definitions of poetry as 'a criticism of life is at least true of his own poetry. Even in a literary sense, there is a surprising quantity of wise criticism in his verse. Goethe, Byron, Wordsworth and Senancour are all examined with wonderful insight; and in the *Epilqueto Lessing's Laocoon's*, we have a discussion of the principles of the arts of music, painting and poetry. But Arnold's verse is critical in a far deeper sense than this. It is, in accordance with his definition, critical of life. In all his deepest poems, in *Thyrsis* and *The Scholar Gipsy*, in *Resignation*, in the *Obermann* poems in *A Southern Night*, Arnold is passing judgment on the life of his age, the life of his country, the lives of individual men (335).

DOVER BEACH as a Criticism of Life:

Arnold's *Dover Beach* is one of the fine pieces of verse-criticism of contemporary life and society. It is an example of Arnold's concept of criticism of life. The glooms, joylessness, despair, the loss of faith and excessive reliance on the scientific and materialistic formulas have been exposed to the poet's critical attack. Arnold used the natural landscape symbolically for conveying the moral instruction. That's why J. D. Jump comment : "As far as it is possible for a single short lyric to do so it represents the main movement of the mind the last quarter of a century"(39).

In '*Dover Beach*' Arnold describes the tranquil English Channel at Dover. The tide was full and the Moonlight was reflected on the water. The poet asked his beloved to listen to the harsh sound of waves alternatively advancing and retreating and carrying away the pebbles from the sea-| beach and fling them back to the beach. The poet wanted his beloved to notice how the pebbles move along with the waves of the sea. The process of advancing and retreating continues ceaselessly. Inspire of harsh sound there is a rhythm in it. poet found a note of sadness in the rhythmic movement. He recalls that the famous tragic play *Wright Sophocles* also heard a note of sadness in the waves of the Aegean Sea, which symbolized for him the rise and fall in human life. It is a noble and profound application of ideas to life.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

Then, Arnold returns to the present and remarks that melancholy sound of the sea produces in him thought about the suffering in human life and the miserable lot of man on this earth. Thus, both *Sophocles* and *Arnold* experience the same lot of human misery on this earth. In his essay on '*Wordsworth*', Arnold says: "The great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority, from

his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth; from his application, I say to his subject whatever it may be of the ideas

on the man, on nature and on human life .

(Essay on Wordsworth)

It is Arnold's application of ideas to life, that contributes to the criticism of life.

Arnold next, compares the sea with religion. He considers the sea as a symbol of religious faith. Once, the sea of faith was full. People in the past had a deep religious faith. But in the Victorian age, the sea of faith has run dry. People are skeptical. It is now leaving the world barren and dry. With the decline of religion men are getting more and more materialistic. When the waves of the sea recede, pebbles on the dry shore are exposed. The religious faith declined and the loss of higher values entailed miseries doubts, despair, and dull materialistic life. Doubts and despair disturbed the tranquil and harmonious life, which was fortified against such evils by higher religious values. It is nothing but the situation of Arnold's own age. Thus, it is a criticism of life in the Victorian age. What Arnold observed was true.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Arnold compares and contrasts the religious situation of the Victorian age with the previous age when people believed in the religion fully, and finds that it is declining. Arnold offers a solution to the problem by decreasing the situation in the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Arnold warns against the situation and advises to be loyal and faithful in love because what around them is dreamy and illusionary world. Love is the only source of solace in life. In such uncongenial atmosphere of disbelief and incertitude, Arnold says that the only thing that endures is love. Arnold suggests that with the help of true love man can live well. Arnold finds to his horror that the traditional values and religion are fast crumbling down. There is no joy or comfort anywhere. In such a state of chaos and disintegration, Arnold hugs the found belief that love can sustain mankind. For love is unchanging,

The world has lost its joy, love, security, peace. The world is a darkling plain. In this world men are fighting in the dark, completely ignorant of whom they are fighting against, and what exactly they are fighting for. It is nothing but the Victorian situation. It is a cross-section of Victorian, life and hence it is 'a criticism of life'. Arnold does not take the Victorian age lightly. From the beginning the tone is gloomy, melancholy and sad and serious enough.

It is a criticism of life in a sense that what Arnold described in his essay on Byron. He says "Truth and seriousness of substance and matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner, as these are exhibited in the best poets, are what constitute a criticism life made in conformity with the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty". (Essay on Byron). Taking in to account the criteria mentioned above 'Dover Beach' has a truth of substance. It is marked by reality, aim, melancholy, intensity, vastness. The reality in a sense that what Arnold describes is a true to the Victorian age. Aim in sense that Arnold has specific intention to expose the deficiencies of the Victorian age. Intensity a sense that the tragic vision of the world gets darkened for example

"Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain".

Vastness in a sense that personal becomes universal in the poem. Truth of substance is a superb artistic skill and deft craftsmanship. The abstract thinking is closely linked with an actual personal situation and is conveyed through concrete descriptions and imagery. The poem has a psychological depth of feeling and universally applicable thought content. And both are presented in a skillful artistic manner. Thus, 'Dover Beach' has truth of matter and felicity of expression. It is nothing but a criticism of life.

Thus, Arnold was a Victorian poet who defined poetry as a criticism of life and wrote poetry in conformity to his definition of poetry. His poetry is a criticism of life in the Victorian Age marked by loss of religious faith, loss of spiritual and religious values due to growth of materialism, scientific spirit, unbridled industrial and mechanical progress, unrest, aimlessness and conflicts. As a classist, Arnold reacted to it and was repelled by the conditions of contemporary life. His critical attitude towards life and society is responsible for critical rather than constructive nature of his works. Due to his ability to combine the qualities of poet and critics he is considered as one of the great poets of the Victorian Age. In addition to his other poems, *Dover Beach* is the best example of his concept of criticism of life as it contains an expression of his favourite theme of loss of faith in the material world and resultant feeling of melancholy and despair. It reveals his habit of using natural scene symbolically and embodies his critical attitude towards the world around him and human destiny in general.

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