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MATHEW ARNOLD'S IDEA OF CRITICISM OF LIFE FOR SOCIAL AWARENESS

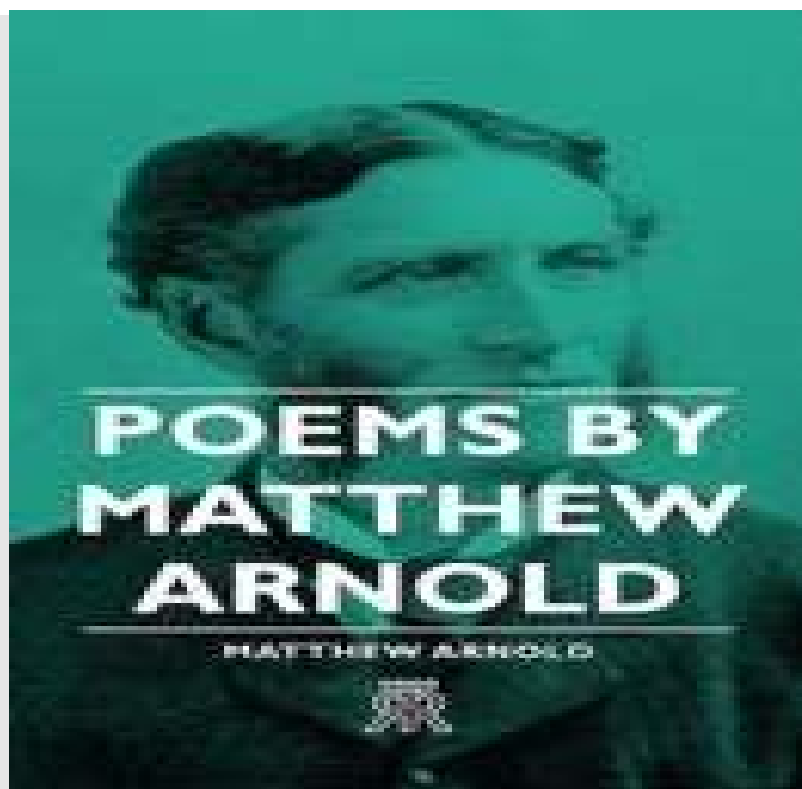


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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Mathew Arnold is one of the best Victorian poets. He believed poetry as criticism of life. His poetry is in real sense a criticism of his contemporary society. He doesn't criticize the society only for its faults but suggests perfect remedies to the society. The reading in between the lines of his poetry provides us with such suggestions and remedies for us in this century as well.

KEYWORDS

Faith, reason, conflict, science, religion, age of science, new world, criticism.

INTRODUCTION:

Mathew Arnold, one of the foremost Poet Critic of 19th century is also known as the father of modern English Literary Criticism. As a critic he got recognition with the publication of his work "Preface to Poems" published in 1853. As he was basically a classicist, it reflects Arnold as a classicist who loved art, literature, and Hellenic culture. It can be looked as a manifesto of his poetic and critical doctrine. The "The Study of Poetry" is his popular piece of literary criticism, in which he talks about poetry's 'high destiny' and believes in poetry to interpret life for us. He considers best poetry as criticism of life. He considered poetic truth as representation of life, and poetic beauty for him was manner and style of poetic composition. According to him a poet should be a man of high direct and indirect experiences of life. The indirect experience denotes to versatile reading that enhances his intellectuality which deepens the perception of the world and life of the poet through critical thinking that is the outcome of his versatile reading. He believes poetry as an application of ideas to life. Here he lays emphasis on experience and not the emotions; ideas and not the facts. He believes in the ideas that strengthen morality in a broader sense. He affirms that science will not be complete without poetry. Poetry will replace philosophy. He professed that instead of appreciating the beauty poetry should have a greater purpose of criticism and application and appreciation of noble and profound ideas.

DISCUSSION –

As Mathew Arnold takes poetry for criticism of life, the time period he lived in must be considered. It was the period when the 'new age' had begun. It was the beginning of age of science and the beginning of age of industrialization. The Victorians were torn between 'faith' and 'reason', and criticized the new age for the loss of 'faith' and also for the loss of art, scholarship, morality, etc. Mathew Arnold had been a keen observer of all these. Hence we find that he talks about scholarship, art, and regaining the morality and faith through his poetry. No doubt we find very fair criticism of his age and life in his poetry, along with this we find his noteworthy ideas, his philosophy of life and many times some teachings, some suggestions for happy life, for success in life, for achieving and completing the goal, for deciding the aim, for establishing the moral values and so on in between the lines in his poems.

Along with other Victorian poets Arnold also looked at his contemporary society as full of dirt of sin and crime. He describes it in his poem 'Dover Beach' –

"-----The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
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."

According to him previously the world witnessed all piece of mind and happiness and pleasures because 'faith' had reined the world. Due to the absence of the 'faith' in the world of science now the different crimes and sins are seen all over the world. The world once which was surrounded by 'faith' is now surrounded by moral dirt and hence there is no real joy, real pleasure, no real love, no help for pain,

and so on. Such is the gloomy picture of the new world.

But he doesn't merely cry for the worst condition of the new world he has a remedy also for this. The remedy is that we have to regain the 'faith'. He says-

" -----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 "

In the popular poem 'Dover Beach', he suggests the remedy over the problem of loss of faith. He suggests the regaining the faith once again. In the poem the narrator talks to his beloved to be true to one another. The world is consisting of couples. The simple remedy is that the couples should be truthful to each other; the couples must have faith in each other. Thus one day the earth will be again reined by 'faith'. 'Faith' is the only thing to make the new world and its people happy and content, when the world is fighting like two unknown armies on a battlefield confused with alarm in darkness. The people don't believe each other, and no one knows who is being cheated or killed by whom through corruption and such social evils.

Arnold doesn't talk of the loss of the 'faith' only. He doesn't talk of the worst social and mental conditions of the new world and its people; he talks about the art and scholarship like other Victorians. In one of the best poems by him 'Scholar Gypsy' the central character the -gypsy has to go through many sufferings and is not accepted by the society. He is not accepted by the contemporary education system to educate him, and yet he goes in search of education and knowledge and becomes an example for the scholars and gets a high place in Glenville's book that attracts Mathew Arnold and enchants him.

"Whereat he answer'd, that the gipsy-crew,
His mates, had arts to rule as they desired
The workings of men's brains,
And they can bind them to what thoughts they will.
"And I," he said, "the secret of their art,
When fully learn'd, will to the world impart;
But it needs heaven-sent moments for this skill."

The great 'Scholar Gypsy' knocked many doors in the university area, but in vain. At last he went in search of the secret knowledge of his community called the art of knowing the working of mind of people called – Hypnotism. He learnt it by heart to impart is knowledge to his community and the world. He became such a great scholar, and Arnold with his example finds and suggests us the way of achieving the aim and success in the poem.

"This said, he left them, and return'd no more.—
But rumors hung about the country-side,

That the lost Scholar long was seen to stray,
Seen by rare glimpses, pensive and tongue-tied,
In hat of antique shape, and cloak of grey,
The same the gipsies wore."

Arnold goes on discussing the secret of Gypsy's success as a scholar as a contrast to his own society where scholars were rare and scholarship was vanishing fast. He compares the way the Gypsy lived life in search of knowledge and achieved success with the way of the people and scholars in the contemporary society.

"No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours!
For what wears out the life of mortal men?
'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;
'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,
Exhaust the energy of strongest souls
And numb the elastic powers.
Till having used our nerves with bliss and teen,
And tired upon a thousand schemes our wit,
To the just-pausing Genius we remit"
Our worn-out life, and are—what we have been.

Arnold here goes on criticizing the contemporary society, its people and the way of life for not having the decided aim. According him we the people living in modern society are not able to decide the aim. Our lives are divided in so many aims. So we can't concentrate on one aim. In our society we don't get success even in one single aim. In fact we have so many aims, hence we are complete failures at all levels. He ironically says that because we don't get success in any of our aims, our life becomes a series of failure, our life is a 'journey from failure to failure' The result is that due to these successive failures our life becomes a bundle of frustrations and sorrows. The worst thing is that we call a person great person who has suffered great in his life, he is our ideal. The more the failure, the more the sufferings. The more the sufferings, the more the great is that person,

On the contrary the Gypsy followed one aim in his life and could get success in becoming such a great scholar. With the example of the Gypsy, Arnold suggests and teaches us the secret formula of how to be successful in life-

"Thou hast not lived, why should'st thou perish, so?
Thou hadst one aim, one business, one desire;
Else wert thou long since number'd with the dead!
Else hadst thou spent, like other men, thy fire!
The generations of thy peers are fled,
And we ourselves shall go;
But thou possessest an immortal lot,
And we imagine thee exempt from age
And living as thou liv'st on Glanvil's page,
Because thou hadst—what we, alas! have not"

Arnold suggests and teaches one formula of how to be success with the example of Gypsy- "one aim , One business, one desire". One must feel at the bottom of his heart that he needs to do certain thing in life, and then only the aim is decided and determined. Then one has to follow one aim at a time. Because when one works at many aims at a time, means the energy also is divided at many aims. One cannot work with all the energy; hence there is no success in achieving the aim. As we are divided in many aims it becomes our strange disease. In view of Arnold this is the disease spread all over the new world as it is very infectious. Arnold is too much sink of the disease of the contemporary society that he asks and begs and pleads the 'Scholar Gypsy' to run away from this world and never to come in contact. Such contact will definitely give the infection and he also will be divided in aims and become a sufferer.

"But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!
For strong the infection of our mental strife,
Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest;
And we should win thee from thy own fair life,
Like us distracted, and like us unblest.
Soon, soon thy cheer would die,"

CONCLUSION –

Mathew Arnold didn't criticize the society for its faults only, on the other hand we find a great combination of a fair criticism as well as remedies and suggestions over these faults of the society.

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