

What are the limitations of Victorian criticism?

Writer: Matthew Arnold | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) wrote "The Study of Poetry" in 1880. In this work, he studied poetry and also gave views on criticism. He pointed out the limits of Victorian criticism. These critics often failed to judge poetry properly.

Focus on History: Victorian critics placed too much emphasis on history. They judged poems based on the poets' age and background. Arnold called it the "historic estimate." He said this view hides a poem's true worth. History should not rule literary value, as Arnold says,

"Our estimate of poetry should be governed by the real estimate, based on the presence or absence of high poetic quality."

Too Much Personal Taste:

Victorian critics often used their own feelings. Arnold called it the personal estimate. They praised poems they liked personally. This method ignored the deep truth and real value. Arnold warned readers to avoid this weak judgment. He claims this method to be faulty in the following quote.

"... two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious."

No Clear Standards:

Arnold said Victorian critics lacked strong standards. They did not use a fixed method to judge poetry. They mixed personal views with unclear ideas. This made their criticism less useful and confusing for readers.

Less Moral Power: Arnold believed poetry needs moral and spiritual truth. Victorian critics often missed this deep value. They failed to see if a poem had "high seriousness." So, they

could not show what makes poetry truly great.

In conclusion, Arnold found many faults in Victorian criticism. It used weak and narrow ways to judge poems. He wanted critics to seek true value, not personal or historic praise. That is why he showed its clear limits.

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