

## What is the Touchstone method? What are its merits and demerits?

Writer: Matthew Arnold | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

**Write a critical note on the “Touchstone Method.” [NU: 2020, 22] Or, What is the touchstone method? What are its merits and demerits? [NU: 2018]**

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) was a famous Victorian poet and critic. He wrote about poetry and its value. His essay “The Study of Poetry” came out in 1880. In this essay, Arnold gave the touchstone method. This is a special way to judge poems. Let us learn what this method is and its merits and demerits.

**The Concept of the Touchstone Method:** Arnold wanted a fixed way to judge poetry. He did not trust only personal taste. He said we need a standard just like a touchstone tests gold. The touchstone method means using short, great lines from classic poets. We can see if a poem is great by comparing these lines or passages. Arnold suggests,

*“...have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry.”*

These are the best lines that act as a measure. New poems are tested against the best. This method is for finding real poetic quality.

**Importance of the Best Poetic Passages:** Arnold did not use whole poems as his standard. He chose only the best lines or short passages. He preferred some lines by poets like Homer, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare. He believed these lines had real poetic truth and beauty. Only those lines that have deep thoughts, beauty, and power can be touchstones. They show the true heart of poetry. Arnold says,

*“ Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently.”*

These lines must touch the mind and heart. This makes the touchstone method very strong for real critics.

**Merits of the Touchstone Method:** The touchstone method brings clear rules for judging poetry. It helps us avoid personal likes and dislikes. He emphasizes the real estimate. He says,

***"Our estimate of poetry should be governed by the real estimate..."***

We use only the best lines of poetry as examples. This keeps our judgment fair and strong. The method teaches us about real greatness in poems. It helps us know which poems are really strong. We can compare quickly and easily. It protects us from being tricked by pretty words but weak meaning. Good touchstones make us careful and wise judges of poetry.

**Demerits/Limitations of the Touchstone Method:** The touchstone method is not perfect. Some critics say a line may sound great alone. But it may be weak in the poem. Poetry is not only small parts but a whole work. We may miss the poem's full message if we judge only by small lines. People feel poetry in different ways. What touches one person may not touch another. Arnold's method can be too strict or too narrow. Tastes and languages keep changing. So, true quality is not always easy to check with a few lines. Sometimes a whole poem works, even when single lines do not shine. T. S. Eliot and W. H. Garrod criticized him.

**Modern View:** Many people like the touchstone method because it gives clear tools to judge. It helps students and new readers know what great poetry is. However, some critics want more freedom in judging poems. Modern critics believe both the whole poem and small lines matter. They agree that touchstones are useful. At the same time, they want to look at all parts of a poem.

In conclusion, the touchstone method is Arnold's tool to judge poetry. It asks us to use great lines as our standard. This way is fair and helpful, but not perfect. It teaches us about real poetic value, but it may sometimes ignore the whole spirit of a poem.