

The Study of Poetry Summary

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Background

In the 1880s, the essay was first published as the general introduction to the anthology "The English Poets" edited by T. H. Ward. The second series of the essay "Essays on Criticism" was published in 1888. "The Study of Poetry" was originally written as an introduction to an anthology of English poets.

Parts of the Essay

The essay is divided into two parts:

- The first part is about the nature and function of poetry.
- The second part is about evaluating English poets from Chaucer onwards.

Must Focus on the Terms

- **Criticism of Life:** Poetry must express deep truths about human life and help people understand how to live meaningfully.
- **High Seriousness:** Great poetry should deal with noble ideas in a serious and respectful tone.
- **Charlatanism:** Charlatanism means pretending to offer truth or knowledge but actually giving something false or shallow.
- **Touchstone Method:** The Touchstone Method is a way of judging poetry by comparing it to the best lines from great classical poets.

The Future of Poetry: Arnold's Vision

Matthew Arnold begins his essay with a strong message. He says that poetry will be more important in the future. He believes that religion has lost its power. Science is too dry and technical. Philosophy is too abstract. These things cannot fully satisfy the human heart.

Arnold says that in the future, people will turn to poetry. Poetry will help them understand life. It will guide them in sorrow and joy. It will give moral and emotional strength. Poetry will become a spiritual and emotional force in people's lives.

He believes poetry is not just art. It is a serious tool for human growth. It interprets life. It comforts people. It helps people feel, think, and act in better ways. Arnold says that the future of poetry is immense. This means poetry will not fade. It will grow stronger. It will replace other systems like religion or philosophy. Poetry will be the best way to express deep human truths.

Poetry as Criticism of Life

Arnold believed poetry is not just art. It is a tool for guiding human life. He gave a famous idea called "Criticism of Life." According to this view, poetry must deal with the reality of life. It should help people understand human nature and experience. Poetry must express serious thoughts about love, death, sorrow, and truth.

Criticism of Life means poetry must teach and guide. It must reflect the moral and spiritual truths of life. It is not enough to be beautiful or imaginative. A good poem must touch both the heart and the mind. It should help people live better and understand deeper truths.

Charlatanism: Arnold's Idea of False Knowledge

Matthew Arnold uses the word charlatanism to describe something false, misleading, or insincere. A charlatan is someone who pretends to know, but actually does not. In the essay, Arnold says that other branches of knowledge have become charlatans.

He mentions theology, philosophy, and politics. Arnold says religion has become doubtful and weak. Philosophy has become dry and incomplete. Politics often deals with power, not truth. These fields no longer satisfy the human spirit.

Arnold calls them charlatans because they pretend to guide people, but fail to give deep moral or emotional truth. He says that only poetry can escape this charlatanism. Poetry speaks with honesty, feeling, and truth. It connects with the human heart. It does not pretend. So, Arnold believes poetry is the most trustworthy guide for life.

High Seriousness: The Mark of Great Poetry

High Seriousness is one of Arnold's most important terms. He uses it to describe the moral depth and noble tone of the best poetry. According to Arnold, true poetry must deal with important issues, such as life, death, love, duty, and truth.

High Seriousness does not mean that the poem must be sad or boring. It means the poet should treat the subject with dignity, respect, and depth. The poet must express serious thoughts that help people understand life and human nature.

Arnold says only the greatest poets show High Seriousness. He finds it in Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton. They write about universal themes. Their poems carry truth, beauty, and noble feeling. Arnold says without High Seriousness, poetry may be pleasant but cannot be great.

Qualities of Good Poetry

Arnold gave three important rules for great poetry. **The first is High Seriousness.** This means the poet must treat the subject with depth and respect. The poet should focus on noble and universal themes. High Seriousness is shown in poems that deal with truth, morality, and deep emotions.

The second quality is poetic truth and poetic beauty. Truth in poetry means emotional and moral truth. Beauty means the graceful use of language, rhythm, and structure. These two things must work together to make the poem powerful and meaningful.

The third quality is grand style. This is a special kind of expression that only great poets use. It includes noble thoughts, strong diction, and musical rhythm. The grand style makes the poem sound rich, serious, and lasting. These three qualities form the base of Arnold's theory of good poetry.

Function of Poetry and Its Acceptability

Arnold believed poetry had a big role in life. In his time, religion was losing power, and science was becoming too technical. Philosophy was also too cold and abstract. Arnold thought that poetry could take their place. Poetry could guide, comfort, and shape human lives.

Poetry gives strength in times of sorrow. It brings hope in dark times. It helps people understand their emotions. It brings beauty and depth to everyday life. Poetry teaches moral values and inspires noble thoughts. For Arnold, poetry was not just for pleasure. It was a spiritual and emotional guide.

Many readers and critics agree with Arnold. His views are acceptable because poetry does more than entertain. It connects people with the deeper parts of life. It gives joy and wisdom together. His ideas about the function of poetry are still useful today.

2nd Phase of the Essay: Evaluation of English Poets (Synopsis)

In the second part of the essay, Arnold discusses different English poets. He praises Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton as true classics. These poets show all the key qualities: Criticism of Life, High Seriousness, and grand style. Their poems are noble, deep, and

universal.

Arnold gives a mixed view of Geoffrey Chaucer. He praises Chaucer's natural storytelling and musical language. He even compares his style with that of later great poets. But Chaucer lacks High Seriousness. His works are not deeply moral or spiritually strong. So, Arnold does not call him a classic poet.

Arnold is critical of Dryden and Pope. He says their work is clever but too much like prose. They use wit and balance (poetic structure) but not depth or emotion. Their poems do not express grand ideas or moral weight. Arnold respects their skill in prose but does not call them great poets.

Arnold also talks about Romantic poets. He praises Wordsworth for his strong ideas and emotional truth. He calls him a modern classic. But he is not impressed by Shelley. He says Shelley is too musical and emotional. He lacks control and seriousness. Arnold prefers poets who balance feeling with thought.

The Touchstone Method

One of Arnold's key contributions to criticism is the Touchstone Method. This method helps to test the quality of poetry. A touchstone is a standard of judgment. Arnold says we must compare modern poems with lines from the great classical poets.

These great lines are taken from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton. They have emotional power, moral value, and perfect style. If a new poem has the same effect, it is good. If it fails to reach that level, it is not great poetry.

The Touchstone Method is like a tool for critics. It helps avoid wrong judgment. It keeps the critic honest and fair. It brings discipline to literary study. It also teaches readers what makes a poem excellent.

Merits and Demerits of the Touchstone Method

The Touchstone Method has many advantages. It gives a clear standard for judgment. It protects poetry from fashion, emotion, or personal taste. It allows comparison with the best works. It helps readers and students know what to admire. It is simple and practical for teachers and scholars.

However, this method also has some limits. One line may not show the whole value of a poem. Poetry should be judged as a full work, not just a single part. Also, modern poetry does not always follow the classical style. Many modern poems are simple, short, or playful, but still

meaningful.

The method is most useful for classical poetry. It works well with serious and noble works. But it may not fully understand soft, new, or creative forms of modern poetry. Still, it remains a powerful idea in criticism.

Different Estimates: Real, Personal, and Historical

Arnold gives three kinds of estimates for judging poetry. The first is the **Personal Estimate**. This happens when a reader likes a poem because of personal taste or feelings. It is often used for living or modern poets. But it is not reliable because it is emotional.

The second is the **Historical Estimate**. This happens when a poem is praised only because it is old. Some poems become famous because they are part of history, not because they are great. This estimate also gives a false value.

Arnold says we should use the **Real Estimate**. This means judging poetry by its own quality. It should be tested using the touchstone method. It should have truth, beauty, and High Seriousness. The Real Estimate is honest and fair. It gives proper respect to great poetry.

Qualities of a Classical Poet

Arnold gives three qualities of a classical poet. First, the poet must show High Seriousness. This means his work must talk about noble ideas. He must write with dignity and purpose.

Second, the poet must follow poetic truth and poetic beauty. He must express emotions and moral lessons. He must do it with elegance and harmony.

Third, the poet must have grand style. His words must be strong and musical. His tone must be serious and noble. His work must move both the heart and the mind.

Classical poets are universal. Their works are loved at all times. Arnold believes only a few poets reach this level. He calls Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton true classics.

Arnold's View on Homer

Arnold greatly praises Homer as a true classic. Homer's poetry is full of noble ideas. His language is strong, clear, and musical. His stories have action, emotion, and moral depth. Arnold says Homer shows High Seriousness. His work expresses universal human truths. He also uses the grand style with power and grace.

For Arnold, Homer is a model for all poets. He believes Homer's poetry is a perfect example of Criticism of Life. Homer's greatness is beyond time or culture.

Arnold's View on Dante

Arnold considers Dante a classic of the highest rank. Dante's poetry is serious, deep, and spiritual. He writes about religion, sin, and salvation. His work reflects great emotional and moral strength. Arnold says Dante's poetry has High Seriousness. He uses poetic truth and beauty with perfect skill. His style is grand, rich, and noble.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an example of real poetic power. Arnold uses lines from Dante as touchstones. For him, Dante stands beside Homer and Shakespeare.

Arnold's View on Chaucer

Arnold writes about Chaucer with mixed feelings. He praises Chaucer's storytelling and lively style. Chaucer's language is musical and free. His poems are joyful and natural. But Chaucer does not show High Seriousness. His works do not deal with deep moral ideas. They are more like stories than spiritual guides. Chaucer's poetry is pleasant but not powerful.

Arnold calls Chaucer the father of English poetry. He respects his role in history. But he does not include him in the list of classical poets. Chaucer is great in charm but not in depth.

Arnold's View on Shakespeare

Arnold sees Shakespeare as a supreme poet. He admires his wide knowledge of human nature. Shakespeare's characters are full of life and feeling. His poetry combines wisdom, truth, and beauty. Arnold believes Shakespeare shows great Criticism of Life. His works deal with love, death, ambition, and betrayal. He also uses High Seriousness in many of his plays.

Shakespeare's poetic language is rich and musical. He blends emotion with philosophy. Arnold respects him as a master of grand style and a touchstone of greatness.

Arnold's View on Milton

Arnold praises Milton for his noble thoughts and majestic style. Milton's poems have a serious purpose and deep feeling. His themes are about God, man, and moral choice. Arnold says Milton perfectly balances truth, beauty, and seriousness. His diction is strong, his rhythm is powerful, and his ideas are high.

Milton's poetry is full of religious and philosophical meaning. He always writes with dignity and depth. For Arnold, Milton is a classic poet of grand style and High Seriousness.

Arnold's View on Dryden

Arnold criticizes Dryden's poetry. He says Dryden is a master of prose, not of poetry. His poems are full of wit and reason, but not deep feelings. Dryden focuses on politics, history, and society. His lines are sharp and clever. But they lack emotional truth or moral power.

Arnold calls Dryden a great writer in form and logic. But he does not see him as a true poet. Dryden belongs more to prose than to the poetic tradition.

Arnold's View on Pope

Arnold also criticizes Pope. He says Pope writes in heroic couplets with great skill. His lines are balanced and polished. But they lack spiritual strength. Pope's poetry is about manners, satire, and style. It sounds more like prose than poetry. Arnold thinks it has no grand style or High Seriousness.

Like Dryden, Pope is seen as a classic of prose. Arnold respects his craft but not his poetic greatness. He places Pope outside the list of real classics.

The Age of Prose and Reason: Arnold's View of the 18th Century

Arnold calls the 18th century the "Age of Prose and Reason." This means that poetry during that time became more like prose. It focused on logic, wit, and cleverness, not on emotion, imagination, or moral power.

Poets like Dryden and Pope were the main writers of this age. They used strict form, balanced lines, and neat rhymes. But their poetry lacked deep feeling. It did not reflect High Seriousness or spiritual strength. Arnold said their verses were polished but cold.

Arnold believed that the 18th century valued reason over emotion and form over truth. This made poetry lose its soul. It became more like speaking or writing prose. That is why Arnold respected their skill, but did not see them as great poets.

Limitations of Victorian Criticism

Arnold also talked about his own time. Victorian criticism had many weaknesses. Critics often judged poetry by their personal likes. They praised poets without fair study. They supported popular names without real value.

Many critics in the Victorian era ignored moral truth. They cared more about beauty than seriousness. Some focused only on English poets and forgot world literature. Others followed politics or religion too closely.

Arnold wanted to fix this. He gave new rules for fair criticism. He asked critics to respect real greatness. He wanted them to show their best to readers. His method helped criticism grow as a serious subject.

Arnold's View on Wordsworth

Arnold respects Wordsworth as a modern classic. He praises Wordsworth's love for nature and simple life. Wordsworth writes about human feelings, sorrows, and joys. Arnold sees strong moral power in Wordsworth's poetry. His poems teach people to live calmly and truthfully. Wordsworth avoids empty beauty. He follows truth and simplicity.

Arnold believes Wordsworth's work reflects Criticism of Life. His poetry may not always be musical. But his ideas are noble and serious. For Arnold, Wordsworth is a poet of real value.

Arnold's View on Shelley

Arnold is not fully impressed with Shelley. He thinks Shelley is too emotional and musical. Shelley writes with passion but lacks control and order. Arnold believes Shelley's poetry lacks High Seriousness. His themes are often dreamy or abstract. He does not always deal with real life or moral truths.

Though Shelley is a great lyric poet, Arnold finds him less strong in meaning. He values thought more than emotion. So, he does not call Shelley a classic poet.

Arnold's View on Other Notable Poets

Arnold also gives brief opinions on several other important poets. He speaks with mixed feelings about them. Some showed natural genius, while others lacked depth or maturity.

He praises **Robert Burns** for his natural emotion and charm. Burns writes from the heart. His poems are full of honesty and passion. Arnold says Burns is like Chaucer in spirit. But he also says Burns lacks high seriousness. So, Burns is admired, but not placed among the classics.

Arnold discusses **Thomas Gray** with sympathy. He respects Gray's artistic control and fine taste. Gray's poems are elegant and careful. But he did not write much. Arnold believes Gray had great potential, but fear or doubt held him back. So, Gray remains a limited but talented poet.

About **Lord Byron**, Arnold has a balanced view. He calls Byron bold and powerful. Byron's poetry shows strong emotion and personal energy. But Arnold says Byron lacks noble thought and control. His poetry is too loud, and not always deep. So, Byron is praised for force, not for greatness.

John Keats is admired for his love of beauty. His poems are full of rich images and musical words. Arnold says Keats had the gift of poetic style. But he died too early to become fully great. Keats showed promise, but did not reach the height of classic poetry.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is mentioned briefly. Arnold says Coleridge had deep imagination. His poems are full of mystery and sound. But Arnold does not praise him much. He thinks Coleridge lacked strong thought and serious purpose. So, Coleridge is remembered for charm, not power.

Together, these poets show talent in different ways. But for Arnold, true greatness needs more than emotion or beauty. It needs high seriousness, moral depth, and grand style. Only poets with these qualities can be called true classics.

Arnold as a Critic

Matthew Arnold was one of the greatest critics. He gave criticism a high purpose. He wanted it to be serious, fair, and moral. He believed literature should improve life.

He respected classical standards. He gave importance to noble ideas. He rejected cheap popularity. He believed poetry must show what is best in human thought and feeling. He also brought discipline and method into criticism. His touchstone method is a good example.

He made criticism clear, honest, and helpful. But Arnold had some limits. He did not accept modern forms. He was too focused on old poets. He gave less value to emotional or playful works. However, his ideas are still respected today.