

Mathew arnold – the study of poetry essay sample

Literature



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Matthew Arnold, Victorian poet and critic, often regarded as the father of modern literary criticism, was one of the foremost poets and critics of the 19th century. As a critic Arnold is essentially a moralist, and has very definite ideas about what poetry should and should not be. Arnold is frequently acknowledged as being one of the first poets to display a truly Modern perspective in his work. In “ The Study of Poetry”, which is one of his best known essays, he is fundamentally concerned with poetry’s “ high destiny”. His essay concerns itself with articulating a “ high standard” and “ strict judgement” in order to avoid the fallacy of valuing certain poems and poets too highly and lays out a method of discerning only the best and therefore “ classic” poets. Arnold’s classic poets include Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer; and the passages he presents from each are intended to show how their poetry is timeless and moving. According to Arnold, Homer is the best model of a simple grand style, while Milton is the best model of severe grand style.

Dante, however, is an example of both. An example of an indispensable poet who falls short of Arnold’s “ classic” designation is Geoffrey Chaucer, who, in Arnold’s view, in spite of his virtues such as benignity, largeness, spontaneity and his excellent style and manner, ultimately lacks the “ high seriousness” of classic poets. Burns too lacks sufficient seriousness, because he was hypocritical in that while he adopted a moral stance in some of his poems, in his private life he flouted morality. At the root of Arnold’s arguments is his desire to illuminate and preserve the poets he believes to be the touchstones of literature, and to ask questions about the moral value of poetry that does not champion truth, beauty, valor and clarity. Arnold’s

belief that poetry should both, uplift and console, drives the essay's logic and its conclusions.

Importance of poetry: Arnold had a very high conception of poetry. For Arnold there is no place for charlatanism in poetry. He was confident that poetry has immense future. He said poetry is capable of higher uses, interpreting life for us, consoling us, and sustaining us. Arnold believed that poetry does not present life as it is, rather the poet adds something to it from his own noble nature, and this something contributes to his criticism of life. Poetry makes men moral, better and nobler, but it does so not through direct teaching, or by appealing to reason, but by appealing to the soul of man.

Estimation of poetry: Arnold's touchstone method is a comparative method of criticism. According to this method, in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. If the other work moves us in the same way as these lines and expressions do, then it is really a great work, otherwise not. This method was recommended by Arnold to overcome the shortcomings of the personal and historical estimates of a poem. Both historical and personal estimate goes in vain. In personal estimate, we cannot wholly leave out the personal and subjective factors. In historical estimate, historical importance often makes us rate a work as higher than it really deserves. In order to form a real estimate, one should have the ability to distinguish a real classic. At this point, Arnold offers his theory of Touchstone Method. A real classic, says Arnold, is a work, which belongs to the class of the very best. It can be <https://assignbuster.com/mathew-arnold-the-study-of-poetry-essay-sample/>

recognized by placing it beside the known classics of the world. Those known classics can serve as the touchstone by which the merit of contemporary poetic work can be tested. This is the central idea of Arnold's Touchstone Method.

Historical Estimate: We regard anything of History with respect because it has survived the test of time. But we shall not estimate poetry this way. Critics say that we should discard historical estimate because whatever is ancient may not be true or worthy. Another point he gives is that every work of a great author may not be great. For instance, all of Shakespeare's dramas may not be as great as his four tragedies.

Personal Estimate: Arnold says Personal estimate is another fallacy in criticism. It generally happens with the contemporary writers. Suppose I am a writer and my friend is another writer or a critic, then he/she will give mild, soft, praising comments and he/she won't judge/criticize my poem honestly. According to Arnold, we should save ourselves from such dishonest judgements. We should be objective while criticizing our contemporaries.