

Learning Literature

The notes and thoughts of an English literature student

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Saturday, 27 August 2016

A Study of Poetry | Matthew Arnold | Summary and Analysis

'A Study of Poetry' is a critical essay by Matthew Arnold. In this essay Arnold criticizes the art of poetry as well as the art of criticism. Arnold believes that the art of poetry is capable of high destinies. It is the art in which the idea itself is the fact. He says that we should understand the worth of poetry as it is poetry that shows us a mirror of life. Science, according to Arnold, is incomplete without poetry, and, religion and philosophy will give away to poetry. Arnold terms poetry as a criticism of life thereby refuting the accusation of Plato and says that as time goes on man will continue to find comfort and solace in poetry.

Arnold says that when one reads poetry he tends to estimate whether it is of the best form or not. It happens in three ways- the real estimate, the historic estimate, and the personal estimate. The real estimate is an unbiased viewpoint that takes into account both the historical context and the creative faculty to judge the worth of poetry. But the real estimate is often surpassed by the historic and personal estimate. The historic estimate places the historical context above the value of the art itself. The personal estimate on the other hand depends on the personal taste, the likes and dislikes of the reader which affects his judgment of poetry. Arnold says that both these estimates tend to be fallacious.

The historic and personal estimate often overshadows the real estimate. But Arnold also says that it is natural. The study of the historical background of poetry and its development often leads to the critic skipping over the shortcomings because of its historical significance. Historic estimate raises poetry to a high pedestal and thus hinders one from noticing its weaknesses. It is the historic estimate that leads to the creation of classics and raises the poet to a nearly God like standard. Arnold says that if a poet is truly a classic his poetry will give the reader real pleasure and enable him to compare and contrast other poetry which are not of the same high standard. This according to Arnold is the real estimate of poetry. Thus Arnold appeals to his readers to read classics with an open eye and not be blind to its faults. This will enable one to rate poetry with its proper value.

Arnold here speaks about the idea of imitation. He says that whatever one reads or knows keeps on coming back to him. Thus if a poet wants to reach the high standards of the classics he might consciously or unconsciously imitate them. This is also true for critics who tend to revert to the historic and personal estimate instead of an unbiased real estimate. The historic estimate affects the study of ancient poets while the personal estimate affects the study of modern or contemporary poets.

Arnold proposes the 'touchstone' method of analyzing poetry in order to determine whether it is of a high standard or not. He borrows this method from Longinus who said in his idea of the sublime that if a certain example of sublimity can please anyone regardless of habits, tastes or age and can please at all times then it can be considered as a true example of the sublime. This method was first suggested in England by Addison who said that he would have a man read classical works which have stood the test of time and place and also those modern works which find high praise among contemporaries. If the man fails to find any delight in them then he would conclude that it is not the author who lacks quality but the reader who is incapable of discovering them. Arnold applies the touchstone method by taking examples from the time tested classics and comparing them with other poetry to determine whether they possess the high poetic standard of the classics. He says that the poems need not resemble or possess any similarity to the touchstones. Once the critic has lodged the touchstones in his mind in order to detect the possession of high poetic quality he will have the tact of finding it in other poetry that he compares to the touchstones. Arnold quotes Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton in an attempt to exemplify touchstone poetry. He says that the examples he has quoted are very dissimilar to one another but they all possess a high poetic quality. He says that a critic need not labour in vain trying to explain the greatness of poetry. He can do so by merely pointing at some specimens of the highest poetic quality. Arnold says that the high quality of poetry lies in its matter and its manner. He then goes by Aristotle's observation and says that the best form of poetry possesses high truth and seriousness that makes up its subject matter along with superior diction that marks its manner. However, Arnold mentions that the true force of this method lies in its application. He therefore urges critics to apply the touchstone method to analyse and rate poetry.

Arnold then speaks about French poetry which had a tremendous influence on the poetry of England. He differentiates between the poetry of northern France and the poetry of southern France. The poetry of southern France influenced Italian literature. But it is the poetry of northern France that was dominant in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth century. This poetry came to England with the Anglo- Normans and had a tremendous impact on English poetry. It was the romance- poems of France that was popular during that time. But Arnold says that it did not have any special characteristics and lacked the high truth, seriousness and diction of classic poetry and remain significant only from the historical point of view.

Next Arnold speaks about Chaucer who was much influenced by French and Italian poetry. Arnold says that Chaucer's poetic importance is a result of the real estimate and not the historic estimate. The superiority of Chaucer's verse lies both in his subject matter and his style. He writes about human life and nature as he sees it. Arnold speaks highly of Chaucer's diction and calls it 'liquid diction' to emphasise the fluidity in the manner of Chaucer's writing which he considers to be an irresistible virtue. Arnold however says that Chaucer is not a classic. He compares Chaucer to Dante and points out that Chaucer lacks the high seriousness of the classics thereby depriving him of the high honour.

Next Arnold mentions Milton and Shakespeare and credits them as classics and moves on to speak about Dryden and Pope. According to the historic estimate Dryden and Pope are no doubt great poets of the eighteenth century. Arnold observes that Dryden and Pope were better prose writers than poets. The restoration period faced the necessity of a fit prose with proper imaginative quality and this is what Dryden and Pope provided.

Arnold therefore concludes that they are classics not of poetry but of prose. After Dryden and Pope Arnold speaks about Gray. Gray did not write much but what he wrote has high poetic value. Arnold therefore considers Gray to be a classic.

Arnold now speaks about Robert Burns in the late eighteenth century and says that this is the period from which the personal estimate begins to affect the real estimate. Burns, according to Arnold, is a better poet in Scottish than in English. Like Chaucer Arnold does not consider Burns to be a classic. He says that Burns too lacks the high seriousness desired of poetry. He compares Burns to Chaucer and finds that Burns' manner of presentation is deeper than that of Chaucer. According to the real estimate Burns lacks the high seriousness of the classics but his poetry nevertheless has truthful substance and style.

Then Arnold moves on to speak about Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth but does not pass any judgement on their poetry. Arnold believes that his estimate of these poets will be influenced by his personal passion as they are closer to his age than the classics and also because their writings are of a more personal nature. Finally Arnold speaks about the self-preservation of the classics. Any amount of good literature will not be able to surpass the supremacy of the classics as they have already stood the test of time and people will continue to enjoy them for the ages to come. Arnold says that this is the result of the self preserving nature of humanity. Human nature will remain the same throughout the ages and those parts of the classics dealing with the subject will remain relevant at all times thus preserving themselves from being lost in time.

Posted by Unknown at 18:36



Labels: Arnold, Literary Criticism, touchstone method

58 comments:

Unknown 2 September 2017 at 23:12
Thank you for sharing your thoughts. It is helpful
Reply

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Bhaswati Nath 14 September 2017 at 22:04
Thanks

Unknown 1 February 2019 at 18:17
Thanks

Unknown 1 February 2019 at 18:18
Thanks

Unknown 1 February 2019 at 18:18
Thanks

prabhat meher 28 October 2017 at 23:58
Thank u. it was really informative
Reply

Ahtisham uUhaq 29 October 2017 at 22:22
Thanks a lot. it is really a good work.
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shweta singh 31 October 2017 at 13:10
A good assessment I must say
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thasleema 4 December 2017 at 06:58
A really good article. It's so simple n informative. Thank you so much.
Reply

Anshuman Black 7 December 2017 at 02:59
Thanks a lot ♥
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Manabiyoti Biswas 10 December 2017 at 11:18
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Manabiyoti Biswas 17 December 2018 at 11:37
This comment has been removed by the author.

Poulami Bhattacharjee 30 December 2017 at 09:33
thank you...
Reply

Unknown 8 January 2018 at 20:13
Can v we use article as critical analysis of the essay ?
Reply

▼ Replies

Sasmita sheena Mangraj 26 January 2018 at 15:53
Yes u can

gajendra singh 6 September 2018 at 20:54
Do you have any article as critical analysis on the study of poetry if yes can you please share with me on gajendras15@gmail.com

Mahesh Kumar 13 May 2018 at 18:38
Very helpful Thanks
Reply

Unknown 14 June 2018 at 18:56
well explained... thank you.
Reply

Unknown 9 July 2018 at 14:37
Wow, thanks a lot. its worth reading and helpful for my exam..
Reply

Unknown 23 August 2018 at 07:05
Thanks, it helps a lot. But one thing I want to clarify whether Thomas Gray is classic poet or not.
Reply

▼ Replies

Unknown 25 February 2019 at 01:08
No Thomas gray is the precursor of English romantic poetry

Bhagyashree 5 September 2018 at 13:02
You just helped me and saved me in my last minutes. ☺thanks.
Reply

Unknown 10 September 2018 at 22:43
It's very helpful for my exam. Thanks
Reply

Assamese boy 18 September 2018 at 13:59
Very much informative
Reply

Unknown 21 September 2018 at 15:05
Good and informative
Reply

Unknown 27 September 2018 at 09:09
Last few hours notes,helped a lot.
Reply

Unknown 30 September 2018 at 08:00
It is very important fact fr us
Reply

Nivedhaa Nivi 3 October 2018 at 22:47
quite good.. smart analysis
Reply

Unknown 16 October 2018 at 09:38
Thanks! This will help me for my exams!
Reply

Unknown 2 November 2018 at 20:09
Thanks ☺
Reply

Unknown 4 November 2018 at 20:31
Very informative
Reply

Tarek Aziz 5 November 2018 at 22:50
It is very helpf. Thanks a lot
Reply

satta matka 7 November 2018 at 13:14
Good Post, I am a big believer in posting comments on sites to let the blog writers know that they've added something advantageous to the world wide web satta matka and matka boss and satta matka guessing..
Reply

Christy Joseph 7 November 2018 at 15:36
Superb thanks
Reply

Unknown 1 December 2018 at 06:37
Very helpful
Reply

Darshan kumar das 6 December 2018 at 19:41
Good..really much appreciate..
Reply

Darshan kumar das 6 December 2018 at 19:48
The best article...

Unknown 12 December 2018 at 14:13
Thang, Its informative.
Reply

Unknown 26 December 2018 at 17:04
Simply superb and nice explanation TQ
Reply

Unknown 3 January 2019 at 01:37
Nice work...
Reply

Unknown 13 January 2019 at 16:25
Thanks a lot ..I am very grateful by finding this because it will be much more helpful in my examination.
Reply

Unknown 17 January 2019 at 13:15
Thank you
Reply

☺Re 19 January 2019 at 23:03
As a whole it's praiseworthy.
Reply

Unknown 19 February 2019 at 15:39
very nice summery
Reply

Unknown 6 April 2019 at 21:26
Thanks it's a very helpful for my exam
Reply

Unknown 24 April 2019 at 12:19
Thanks for the critical aspects. Today is my exam and it helped me a lot.
Reply

Unknown 3 May 2019 at 13:42
Thnk u so much...

Unknown 3 May 2019 at 13:42
Thnk u so much...

Unknown 6 May 2019 at 07:20
Really i appreciate... it's very helpful to know about the treatise The study of poetry
Reply

Higlo Raja 17 May 2019 at 01:37
please give the analysis of Coleridge's biographia literary chapter 14. it would be really appreciated.
Reply

Diwan Biswakarma 16 July 2019 at 17:53
Very helpful for tomorrow's exam ☺☺☺
Reply

Unknown 29 July 2019 at 08:44
Great job
Reply

learnenglish 20 August 2019 at 13:08
It was in simple diction so helpful, thanks a lot.
Reply

Unknown 26 August 2019 at 22:32
Thanks a lot, it is so informative
Reply


Unknown 9 November 2019 at 12:13
Love it, useful. Thanks for sharing it
Reply

Unknown 16 November 2019 at 08:17
Thank you so much for your kind information.
Reply

Unknown 17 November 2019 at 15:45
Thank you very much,you have helped me a lot. I would you to be my friend. niwamparehillary@gmail.com
Reply

Unknown 25 November 2019 at 20:41
Thanks a lot ☺☺
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