UNIT 15: MATTHEW ARNOLD: "DOVER BEACH"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss Matthew Arnold as one of the important poet critics in the history of English literature
- identify Arnold's "Dover Beach" as a representative poem of the late Victorian period
- explain the significance of the poem in the context of the Victorian loss of faith
- enlist the specific themes that assign the poem the status of a contextually very relevant poem
- assess the importance of Matthew Arnold as an important literary critic.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of this course. In this unit, you will read about the poem "Dover Beach" written by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and make a

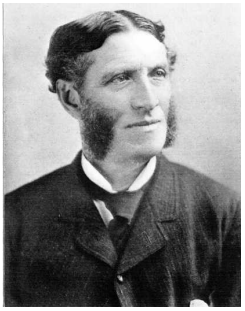
critical assessment of the poem highlighting the importance of Arnold as a poet critic. Perhaps, you already know that Matthew Arnold is one of the greatest poets of the late Victorian period. However, he was also one who represented his age in a most visible way by throwing his radical voice as a sensitive Victorian intellectual on a number of social and cultural issues of his times. The poem “Dover Beach” was written in the shore of the English ferry port of Dover, Kent, facing Calais, France, at the Strait of Dover, the narrowest part of the English Channel, where Arnold honeymooned in 1851.The poem, despite all its brevity, is perhaps one of the best known of all his poetic works. It was published in his anthology *New Poems* in 1867. In this poem, the poet contemplates the sea, finding in it the melancholy reminders of the confusions and uncertainties of belief brought about by modern life. After you finish reading this unit, you will find why the poet instead turns to faith in human relationship. You will finally find that in this poem the Victorian problem of loss of faith is given its most memorable utterance to describe the disappearance of public values, a context in which the only retreat for human beings remains to the world of private affection.

15.3 MATTHEW ARNOLD: THE POET

Matthew Arnold is considered one of the most significant writers of the late Victorian period. However, it was through his prose writing that Arnold asserted his greatest influence on literature. In the following subsections, you will get an opportunity to read about the life and works of this great writer.

15.3.1 His Life

Matthew Arnold was born near Staines on December 24, 1822. His father Dr. Thomas Arnold was the head master of the famous Rugby School. Arnold received his education at Winchester, Rugby and then entered Balliol College, Oxford, where he won several prizes in poetry. Arnold reflects the spirit of his university in works like “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Thyrsis”.



Source: https://www.mediawiki.org

After leaving the University Arnold first taught the classics at Rugby, and then in 1847, he became the private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, who appointed the young poet to the position of Inspector of Schools under his Government. In this position, Arnold worked patiently for the next thirty-five years and travelling the country and examining the teachers. For ten years, he was professor of poetry at Oxford, where his famous lecture “On Translating Homer” was given. He made numerous reports on English and foreign schools, and was three times sent abroad to study educational methods. Thus, Arnold led a busy and active life.

Arnold’s literary works are often divided into three periods, which are called as **the poetical**, **the critical** and **the practical**. He wrote poetry since his school days. In a letter to his sister he correctly assessed himself as a poet: “It might be fairly argued that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning: yet because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them; I am likely to have my turn as they have theirs.” In 1849, he published his first volume of poems, *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*, and three years later, he published *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* in 1852. In 1853-1855, he published *Poems* and twelve years later, in 1867, he published his *New Poems, which* is also his last volume of poetry. Arnold then abandoned poetry in favour of literary criticism.

The important works of his critical period are the lectures “On Translating Homer” (1861) and the two volumes of *Essays in Criticism* (1865-1888), which made Arnold one of the best-known literary men in England. Then, he turned to practical questions and his *Friendship’s Garland* (1871) was intended to satirise and reform the great middle class of England, whom he called the ‘**Philistines**’. His critical prose was collected in 1865 and published under the title of *Essays in Criticism*. This was followed by *Lectures on the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877), *Mixed Essays* (1879) and *Irish Essays* (1882).In 1857, he had been elected Professor of Poetry at

Oxford. He received a pension a year in 1883, and then died suddenly at Liverpool in April 1888. Matthew Arnold was the greatest poet after Tennyson and Browning. He was famous also as critic, educationist and lecturer. Though he appeared to be a man of lively and enthusiastic temper, there was in him a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism.

Arnold's poetry is reflective of the major concerns of his age and he is to be judged not so much by his 'natural magic' as by his moral profundity, the two qualities he set up for evaluation of poetry. Though he appeared to be a man of lively and enthusiastic temper, there was in him a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism. His age was an age of democracy, science and industrialism, with none of which he had any sympathy. What was the remedy for all this, Arnold's poetry does not make clear. He only advises us not to be caught in its meshes. His incapability to find a solution for the ills of his age could be cited as the cause of his deep-seated melancholy, which is the prevailing note of his poetry.

The American Academy of Arts and Science in its proceedings in between May 1887 and May, 1888, describes the importance of Matthew Arnold like this: "Among the eminent men of letters whose names have been borne on the roll of Foreign Honorary Members of the Academy during the past generation, not one has done more to affect the course of the deeper currents of thought in his time than Matthew Arnold. The writings of some others have, indeed, been more popular than his, and more widely read. However, he has specially addressed the minds capable of receiving and of propagating the highest influences. No other English writer has attained such distinction in prose and in poetry alike, or displayed such equality of power as poet and as critic. Alike in poetry and in prose his aim has been 'the moral interpretation, from an independent point of view, of man and of the world.' In fidelity to this aim is the unity of his work as poet and as critic; for such interpretation is the great business of both."



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Matthew Arnold's poetry possesses three characteristics, which make it unique in 19th century poetry. These three are fused; they are recurrent; and, although not everywhere apparent, they are his predominant characteristics as a Victorian poet. These characteristics are:

a) The mastery of mood-creating detail,
b) The sacrifice of narrative to philosophical ideas, and
c) A very special type of Hellenism.

For example, the poem "The Strayed Reveller", most illustrates Arnold's **Hellenism**. It indicates Arnold's independence of spirit in writing of a Greek theme in a Greek manner. That is to say, in this poem he wrote of a traditional Greek theme without a suspicion of what he himself called "Hebraism": the alteration of the story to achieve a moral lesson.

(Adapted from "Some Aspects of Matthew Arnold's Poetry" by Stanley T. Williams.)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State some of the important aspects of Arnold's life history.

Q 2: What are the three most obvious characteristics of Arnold as a poet?

Q 3: What does Arnold's poetry usually reflect?

15.3.2 His Poetic Works

Arnold's first volume of poetry *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems* was written when Arnold was only 26. However, it was published anonymously and was withdrawn from circulation. In 1852, Arnold published his second volume of poems *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems*. In 1853, he published *Poems: A New Edition*, a selection from the two earlier volumes famously excluding

"Empedocles of Etna", but adding new poems like "Sohrab and Rustam" and "Scholar Gipsy". He explained in the Preface to *Poems* of 1853 that situations "in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done," cannot be fit subjects for poetry. In the same Preface, addressing the eternal objects of poetry, among all nations and at all times, Arnold holds them to be the "actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the poet." You would notice in Arnold's works some conflict between his creative and critical faculties, along with the view that the main duty of a writer is to present as richly and broadly as possible, in whatever medium he can, his 'criticism of life'. In 1855, his *Poems, Second Series* appeared and in 1858, appeared *Merope*– an inferior attempt at a Greek tragedy. After these, in 1867, he published only one small volume of poetry *New Poems.* In between 1861 and 1888, he produced almost twenty volumes of prose.

"To Marguerite", "Grande Chartreuse", "Rugby Chapel", "Dover Beach" etc. are some of Arnold's most memorable poems as they reflect many of the concerns of Arnold both as a writer and as a critic. "To Marguerite" is a moving expression to a modern malaise like the isolation of the individual; "Grande Chartreuse" projects the fears, hopes and despairs of the thoughtful and sensitive man in a world of rapid change; "Rugby Chapel", based on Arnold's headmaster father Dr. Thomas Arnold, meditates on the sadness that lies at the heart of man; and "Dover Beach" deals with the loss of faith followed by a disappearance of public values. Of Arnold's narrative poems, the two best known are "Balder Dead" (1855), an incursion into the field of Norse mythology which is suggestive of Gray; and "Sohrab and Rustum" (1853), which takes us into the field of legendary Persian history. Using some interesting materials,

Arnold produced these poems, which have the rare combination of classic reserve and romantic feeling.

Two other best known poems of Matthew Arnold are "The Scholar Gypsy" and "Thyrsis". The first poem is the story of a 17th century Oxford scholar who disappeared among the gypsies. In one sense, it is an autobiographical poem as the poet describes his own position and his own state of problems. "Thyrsis", on the other hand, is written to commemorate Arnold's dead friend Arthur Hugh Clough. In both these poems, the influence of the Greek pastoral poets is clearly discernible. Arnold, who spent much of his time in train journey between one provincial town and the other as a School Inspector, saw in the English countryside a source of refreshment and regeneration. Perhaps, it was none other than Wordsworth who taught him the ways to get back to the countryside for relief and comfort. In one of his *Memorial Verses*, Arnold eloquently conveyed what Wordsworth meant to the Victorians. It is interesting to note that Arnold, who had been torn by the Victorian doubts and problems, was also illuminated by a vision of the ancient Athenian, and the Wordsworthian vision of the relation between men and nature.

The first place among Arnold's prose work must be given to the *Essays in Criticism* (1865). In this book, Arnold's views of criticism appeal to us strongly. In one of the essays, "Function of Criticism in Present Times" included in the volume, he views criticism as a disinterested and flexible mode of thought. Such a view also leads to the consideration of the dilemmas of the English society in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) where culture is recommended as 'the great help out of our present difficulties' and defined as 'the pursuit of total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world'. By 1870s, he joined hands with other Victorian thinkers who turned their attention to the theological controversies of the Victorian Age. *Literature and Dogma* (1873) is, in general, a plea for liberality in religion.



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Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) contains most of the familiar terms such as culture, sweetness and light, Barbarism, Philistine, Hebraism and many others which are now associated with Arnold's work and influence. The term, "Barbarian" refers to the Aristrocratic classes, whom Arnold thought to be essentially crude in soul, notwithstanding their good clothes and superficial graces. "Philistine" refers to the middle classes, narrow-minded and self-satisfied people. "Hebraism" is Arnold's term for moral education. Arnold undertook to preach the Hellenic or intellectual element, which welcomes new ideas, and delights in the arts that reflect the beauty of the world.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Name some of the important poetry collections written by Arnold.

Q 5: How does Arnold view the idea of Culture?

15.4 READING THE POEM

15.4.1 The Text of the Sonnets

Dover Beach

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair.
Upon the straits; —on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand.
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. 5
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long of line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-balanced land,
Listen! You hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves drawback, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin.
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegaean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.
The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

“Dover Beach” is often considered to be one of the best lyrics of Matthew Arnold. Written probably around June 1851, the poem deals with one of Arnold’s most important themes—the loss of Christian faith. In a sense, this poem stands on the crossroad between an age of faith and the emptiness of the modern world. The advances of science created a kind of spiritual vacuum but the

final affirmation was to be sought out in human love. Therefore, taking this theme as the starting point, "Dover Beach" best reflects Arnold's ideals and methods as a poet.

The **first** stanza opens with the description of a nightly scene at the seaside. The poet calls his beloved near the window to share the visual beauty of the seashore. Then he calls her attention to his own feelings of melancholy, which he relates to the seashore, which has caused an emotion of sadness inside him.

"Listen! You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves drawback, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin.
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in."

The **second** stanza introduces the Greek tragedian Sophocles' idea of "the ebb and flow of human misery." Sophocles also heard the similar sound at the 'Aegean' sea and thus developed his ideas on the miseries of humanity.

"Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegaean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery…"

Arnold then reconnects this idea to the present to show the universality of certain feelings that are not confined in time and space. You should note that the study of the classics has been constant throughout his life, as is clear from his Notebooks as well as from his own poems, essays, and letters. In "Dover Beach", which is one of the most philosophical and personal of his poems, he gives direct expression to his feeling of kinship with the Greeks. But in the mood of his "Dover Beach", as the reviewer John Robert Moore opines, Arnold is much nearer to William Lisle Bowles, one of the lesser known poets of the English Romantic Movement, or to

Coleridge of "Dejection: An Ode", than to his favourite Greek tragedian Sophocles.

In the **third** stanza, the sea turns into the sea of faith, which is a metaphor for a time in which religion could still be experienced without doubt in the modern days of change brought about through Darwinism, the Industrial revolution, Imperialism, and a crisis in religion. Arnold illustrates this issue by using an image of clothes, when religion was still intact, the world was dressed "like the folds of a bright girdled furled." Now that faith is gone, the world lies there stripped naked and bleak as the poet writes: "the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world." in the following lines:

"The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."

The **fourth** and final stanza begins with a dramatic statement. He asks his beloved to be true and faithful: "Ah, Love, let us be true/ To one another". However, the pleasant scenery turns into a "darkling plain, where only hostile, frightening sounds of fighting armies can be heard. The loss of religious faith made him aware of yet another and a vaster danger that the universe itself was without any direction. That prompts him to sing:

"And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

Therefore, you find that the poem starts like a dramatic monologue in which the poet urges his companion to "Come to the window" when "the night-air is sweet". It is that time of the night in which the chalk-mountain becomes whiter and the seashore

becomes mystically white because of the moonlight. The seawater is dashing against seashore; the pebbles are being thrown and drawn back by waves, thereby creating a sweet musical sound. However, these measured sounds, created by the movement of the pebbles, also bring a note of melancholy or sadness to the poet's mind. In this context, the poet refers to Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, who also heard this similar note of sadness long ago in Aegean, a sea between Mediterranean and Asia, and which brought into his mind the misery and unhappiness of human life. The poet then observes the sea forming a beautiful girdle around the land. However, you should note that through the sea of faith, Arnold expresses religious, metaphysical and romantic anguish, which he wanted to share with his preceding romantic poets. This also brings his mind back from the present stage to taking shelter in past. In the final lines of the poem, Arnold thinks that love between two persons is the only way to strengthen human existence. However, in the human world, there is no faith or conviction. Keeping these views, Arnold compares the world to a battlefield where it is tough to distinguish if one is a friend or a foe. This poem sincerely gives the memorable utterance of the Victorian problem of loss of faith. For a poet like Matthew Arnold, the search for some stability becomes a part of the agony he is undergoing. The agony is best reflected in the following lines of the poem:

"And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night"

The image of the ignorant armies significantly echoes Thucydides' descriptions of the last disastrous war between Athenians and Spartans in Sicily, fought at night between darkness and confusion that virtually crushed the Athenians, in Book VII of his *History of the Peloponnesian War.* Thus, this poem also echoes that Pariclean Athens remained Arnold's ideal of civilisation.

Thus, "Dover Beach" is undoubtedly a love poem, but, instead of love being idealised, Arnold only sees the problems that

stand on its way. The mood of Arnold’s poetry tends to be of plaintive reflection, and he is restrained in expressing emotion. He felt that poetry should be the ‘criticism of life’ and express a philosophy. Arnold’s philosophy is that true happiness comes from within, and that people should seek within themselves for good, while being resigned in acceptance of outward things and avoiding the pointless turmoil of the world. However, he argues that we should not live in the belief that we shall one day inherit eternal bliss. This philosophy is clearly expressed in such poems as “Dover Beach” and in these lines from “Stanzas from the “Grande Chartreuse”:

> “Wandering between two worlds, one dead
> The other powerless to be born,
> With nowhere yet to rest my head
> Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.”



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Try to capture briefly the changing mood of the poet in the different stanzas of the poem “Dover Beach”.

Q 7: What purpose does the allusion of Sophocles serve in the context of the poem?

Q 8: What, according to Arnold, is the role of poetry in his time?

15.4.2 Major Themes

The major themes of Arnold’s poetry can be explained under the following headings.

The Issue involving loss of faith:

In the world of English poetry, Arnold occupies an important position as a critic and a teacher. In his poetry, he reflects the doubt of an age, which witnessed the conflict between science and revealed religion. One important theme, which runs through the poetry of Matthew Arnold, is the issue of faith and the sense of loss that man can feel without faith. This theme is evident in poems such

as "Dover Beach". Though he appeared to be a man of lively and enthusiastic temper, there was in him a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism. Though religious by nature, he was sceptical of dogma; he was dismayed by the Oxford movement, the theological and liturgical disputes which afflicted the Christian churches in mid century. So, meditative and rhetorical, Arnold's poetry often depicts the problems of religious faith and psychological isolation. For example, in "To Marguerite–continued", Arnold reiterates Donne's assertion that "No-man is an island", suggesting that we 'mortals' are indeed "in the sea of life enisled". In several essays, Arnold tries to project the essential truth of Christianity. He also argues for a renewed religious faith and an adoption of classical aesthetics and morals, which should represent Victorian intellectual concerns. Arnold's new approach had attracted almost every major English critic including T.S Eliot, Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom. His poetry reflects the issue of faith and the sense of isolation that man can feel without faith.

The Theme of Love:

In "Dover Beach" the world invokes is that of the medieval Christendom when the sea of faith lay round 'earth's shore' like the folded garment of a mediaeval picture ("like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd). That was a secured world in contrast to the present world ("Where the ignorant armies clash by night"). Arnold wrote later on the possibility of a renewed Christianity in *St Paul and Protestantism* (1870) and *Literature and Dogma* (1873) and held that such a new world might be born. However, in "Dover Beach", his main alternative to loss of faith is 'love' at the personal level. In the beach at Dover the poet hears the noise of the waves that reminds him of Sophocles who wrote at the early days of Western civilisation about human misery. In addition, the poet also thinks of misery. By why, on this lovely night with his 'love' by his side should he feel miserable? 'A thought' destroys his peace of mind. Therefore, the poet's problem is 'intellectual' not emotional. Too much thinking

has destroyed his sense of serenity, which can be provided by only an authentic personal relationship. Therefore, love is also an important theme in the poem.



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In his essay “The Study of Poetry”, Arnold regarded poetry as “a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” According to Arnold, each poem should be a unit, and he protested against the tendency of English poets to use brilliant phrases and figures of speech, which only detract attention from the poem as whole. Arnold is more indebted than he thinks to English masters, especially to Wordsworth and Milton, whose influence is noticeable in a large part of his poetry.

Portrayal of Nature:

Portrayal of landscape was a feature of much of the English Romantic poetry beginning with James Thomson and culminating with Wordsworth. With the latter, Nature took a distinct place of her own as a subject and a particular landscape used to lend a particular significance to his treatment of Nature. Arnold’s treatment of a particular scene in Dover Beach, however, is not so much related to any larger philosophy of Nature as to creating a particular mood. As Ferris Lockwood observes Arnold seems to be very fond of furnishing a natural setting for the human element of his poem. His success here is largely due to what is known as pictorial art. The poem provides an imaginative insight to not only perceive clearly and feel intensely the beauty and the power of a scene, but also to discern upon what these qualities connote. This results from a process of selecting and arranging, of subordinating or rejecting, of heightening or emphasising that, which, while preserving its unity, shall also give a sharp, clear impression of the characteristics of a scene. “Dover Beach” thus briefly but clearly suggests the beauty of a scene by means of a few vigorous, telling touches. Some even

consider Arnold to be the bridge between Romanticism and Modernism. His use of the landscapes was typical of the Romantic era, and in “Dover Beach”, the seascape portrayed in faithful detail corresponds to the mood of despair and pessimism and becomes a symbol of modern man’s sense of alienation in the face of the Victorian ethos of progress. Therefore, depiction of Nature is one of the important aspects we find in the poem “Dover Beach”.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What does Arnold tell his readers about the loss of faith in the poem “Dover Beach”?

Q 10: Why, according to you, natural landscape is so central to the poem “Dover Beach”?

15.4.3 Arnold’s Poetic Style

The poem “Dover Beach” consists of four stanzas, each containing a variable number of verses. The first stanza has 14 lines, the second 6, the third 8 and the fourth 9. As for the metrical scheme, there is no apparent rhyme scheme, but rather a free handling of the basic iambic pattern. In stanza 3, there is a series of open vowels “Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar”. A generally falling syntactical rhythm can be detected and continues into stanza 4. In this last stanza, one can find seven lines of iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme of abbacddcc. According to Ruth Pitman, this poem can be seen as “a series of incomplete sonnets”. David G. Riede adds: The first two sections each consist of 14 lines that suggest but do not achieve strict sonnet form, and except for a short (three foot) opening line, the last section emulates the octave of a sonnet, but closes with a single, climactic line instead of a sestet– as though the final five lines had been eroded. The thoughts of the poet do not appear as obviously structured and organised. They are accentuated by the fact that run-on lines are mixed with end-stopped

lines. In the first stanza, the rhythm of the poem imitates the “movement of the tide.”

Along with the use of alliteration, Arnold, in this poem, makes varied use of Figures of Speech. The very first few lines of the poem “Dover Beach” are alliterative to a great extent:

> ‘‘The sea is calm tonight.
> The tide is full, the moon lies fair.
> Upon the straits; —on the French coast the light
> Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand.’’ (**Lines**, 1-4)

However, his use of other Figures of Speech can be seen in different expressions. For example, while comparing the human misery to ebb and flow of the sea, Arnold uses Metaphors *turbid ebb and flow of human misery*. Similarly, while comparing the sea to a griddle, he uses a Simile: *The Sea of Faith…lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled*. Other Figures of Speech includes the use of Anaphora and Hyperbole. He uses Hyperbole in *grating roar of pebbles* and Anaphora in *So various, so beautiful, so new* (repetition of *so*) and in *nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain* (repetition of *nor*).

15.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ARNOLD AS A VICTORIAN POET

Arnold’s work as a literary critic began with the 1853 “Preface to the Poems” in which Arnold put emphasis on the importance of the subject in poetry, on “clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, and simplicity of style”, which he learned from the Greeks, Goethe and Wordsworth. However, criticism began to take first place in Arnold’s writing with his appointment in 1857 as a Professor at Oxford. Arnold in his essay entitled “The Study of Poetry’, regarded poetry as “a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” He also said, “without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.” He considered the most important criteria used to judge

the value of a poem to be 'high truth' and 'high seriousness'. We can assess the significance of Arnoldian criticism in terms of three categories: Literary Criticism, Social Criticism and Religious Criticism.

Literary Criticism

With the emphasis on the subject in poetry as "clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, simplicity of style" which he learned from the Greeks, from Goethe and Wordsworth, Arnold embodies nearly all the essential elements in his critical theory. In 1861, his lectures *On Translating Homer* were published. This was followed by *Last Words on Translating Homer* in 1862. More than anything else Arnold is famous for introducing a methodology of literary criticism based on the historical and the personal approach. His *Essays in Criticism* (1865, 1888), remains a significant influence on critics till today. It is mentionable that in one of his most famous essays "The Study of Poetry", Arnold wrote that, "Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry". He considered the most important criteria used to judge the value of a poem were "high truth" and "high seriousness". By this standard, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* did not deserve Arnold's approval. He also sought for literary criticism to remain disinterested, and said that the appreciation should be of "the object as in itself it really is."

Social Criticism

Arnold is also famous for his Social criticism. In his book *Culture and Anarchy,* we find the word "Philistines", which he adapted and applied to denote anti-intellectualism. A philistine as conceived by Matthew Arnold is a person who is smugly narrow minded and of conventional morality, and whose materialistic views and tastes indicate a lack of and indifference to cultural and aesthetic values. In another way, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* reflects his intelligent criticism of modern social life.

Religious Criticism

Critics and scholars of Arnold's works disagree on the nature of Arnold's personal and religious beliefs. Under the influence of Baruch Spinoza and his father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, he rejected the supernatural elements in

religion, even while retaining a fascination for church rituals. Arnold seems to belong to a pragmatic middle ground that is more concerned with the poetry of religion and its virtues and values for society than with the existence of God. He wrote in the preface of *God and the Bible* in 1875— ''The personages of the Christian heaven and their conversations are no more matter of fact than the personages of the Greek Olympus and their conversations." He also wrote in *Literature and Dogma*: "The word 'God' is used in most cases as by no means a term of science or exact knowledge, but a term of poetry and eloquence." He defined religion as "morality touched with emotion."



LET US KNOW

You should note that Matthew Arnold is the first of English critics who seldom or never takes his eye off' the object. He is the first, moreover, to make a systematic attempt to appeal from what he felt were merely personal or insular literary verdicts, to "the great Amphictyonic Court of European opinion." He kept himself "at the centre" as he phrases it; he knew what the brightest and wisest people in Germany, France, Italy, were thinking and saying, and by constantly quoting them, he set going "a current of true and fresh ideas." In this way, he contributed largely to the task of making English judgments, whether literary or moral, less rigid and liberal.

You must however note that Arnold's conception of culture, for which some critics also tend to call him a conservative, has recently been revaluated as suggesting a model of contemporary critical and literary theory. In discussing Arnold's place in modern literature studies, Timothy Peltason notes that although Arnold's name has long been considered "shorthand … for … cultural conservatism," there is a misunderstanding among many scholars and critics regarding what Arnold actually wrote and said. According to Peltason, Arnold did not endorse "received cultural values," nor did he passively accept the value of accredited masterpieces. Arnold instead focused his writing and scholarship on an examination of how things "work for us here and now." This interest in maintaining the value of culture and

using criticism to stress that value to society was a central theme in Arnold's prose works. In an essay comparing Arnold's "The Function of Criticism" to T. S. Eliot's essay of the same name, critic Terence Hawkes notes that both writers considered criticism a seminal tool in helping society objectively examine its failures and successes. Hawkes related that the role of criticism, as described by Arnold and his contemporaries, is often haunted by the notion that it is secondary to the actual happening. Instead, says Hawkes, Arnold himself viewed criticism as a necessary and complementary act to the primary text or idea it was examining, often serving to illustrate uncanny and noteworthy aspects not inherent in the original text or incident. Recent scholarship on Arnold has acknowledged that Arnold's writing reflects the tensions of modern literature, particularly his remarks on aesthetic judgment, and his attempts to formulate a theory of the role of criticism in culture. His integration of social criticism and literary analysis, says Stefan Collini, is acknowledged as his most significant and lasting achievement. In Collini's words, Arnold "characterised in unforgettable ways the role that criticism—that kind of literary criticism that is also cultural criticism, and thus … a sort of informal political theory—can and must play in modern societies."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: What was Arnold's view on poetry as a literary critic?

Q 12: What are the three categories under which Arnold's criticism can be studied?

Q 13: How have the critics received Arnold's views on culture in subsequent times?



15.6 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you have learnt that "Dover Beach" depicts an occasion of a brief trip across the channel. Love is described as an anchorage in a chaotic world. The poem was published in *New Poems* (1867). Arnold is sometimes called the third great Victorian poet, along with Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. His early poetic works like

Empedocles on Etna (1852) and *Poems* (1853). These established his reputation as a poet. In 1857, he was appointed professor of poetry at Oxford University, which he continued for ten years. During his time as Professor of poetry at Oxford, Matthew Arnold produced many essays of literary criticism such as “On translating Homer” (1861 and 1862), “On the study of Celtic Literature” (1867) and *Essays in Celtic Literature*. You have read that Arnold’s poetic works are characterised by many of the Victorian beliefs with regard to religious faith and morality. However, one significant feature of the poem “Dover Beach” is that it is essentially a modern, or as one critic calls ‘the first modern poem’, not so much in diction and technique but in psychological orientation. The poem consists of four stanzas, each containing a variable number of verses. The first two sections each consist of 14 lines that also suggest the sonnet form.



15.7 FURTHER READING

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15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: He was famous as critic, educationist and lecturer… …his father Dr. Thomas Arnold was the Headmaster of the famous Public School of Rugby… …his poems began to be published in 1849… …his important poems were mostly written between 1843-53 and published between 1849-54… …Arnold was an inspector of schools and professor of poetry at Oxford for ten years(1857-1867)… …his election as Professor of poetry at oxford in may 1857 led to much of his well-known prose including *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869.

Ans to Q No 2: The mastery of mood-creating detail… …the sacrifice of narrative to philosophical ideas… …a very special type of Hellenism.

Ans to Q No 3: Arnold's poetry is reflective of the major concerns of his age… …his moral profundity… …a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism.

Ans to Q No 4: *New Poems… …Empedocles on Etna and Other poems… …Poems: A New Edition… …Poems… …Poems, Second Series… …The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems.*

Ans to Q No 5: In his book *Culture and Anarchy* Culture is 'the great help out of our present difficulties'… …it is also 'the pursuit of total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world'.

Ans to Q No 6: The **first** stanza opens with the description of the serene atmosphere of the night time sea shore… …the **second** stanza introduces the Greek tragedian Sophocles' idea of "the ebb and flow of human misery" a feeling that the poet is undergoing at the present times… …In the **third** stanza, the sea turns into the sea of faith, which is a metaphor for a time in which religion could still be experienced without doubt in the modern days of change… …The **fourth** and final stanza the poet tends to think that the only consolation is human love.

Ans to Q No 7: With the help of the allusion, the poet assigns universality to the note of melancholy or sadness in the mind of a poet… …Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, too heard this similar note of sadness long ago in Aegean, a sea between Meditarianian and Asia, and which brought into his mind the misery and unhappiness of human life.

Ans to Q No 8: Poetry is plaintive reflection of the tormented soul of the poet… …poetry is also the 'criticism of life'… …poetry expresses a philosophy that comes from within the poet.

Ans to Q No 9: This poem reflects the doubt of an age which witnessed the conflict between science and revealed religion… …in this poem, Arnold beautifully expresses the problems of religious faith and psychological isolation… …he also argues for a renewed religious faith and an adoption of classical aesthetics and morals which should represent Victorian intellectual concerns.

Ans to Q No 10: Through the poetry of James Thompson and William Wordsworth Nature took a distinct place of her own as a subject of poetry… …Arnold too portray nature… …but he portrays particular scenes rather than projecting any larger philosophy of nature… …Ferris Lockwood observes that Arnold is fond of furnishing a natural setting for the human element of his poem.

Ans to Q No 11: For Arnold the main subject in poetry was "clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, and simplicity of style", which he observed among the Greeks, Goethe and Wordsworth… …in his essay entitled "The Study of Poetry', he regarded poetry as "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic

truth and poetic beauty."… …he further considered 'high truth' and 'high seriousness' as the most important criteria to judge the value of a poem.

Ans to Q No 12: Literary Criticism mainly cantered on the subject of poetry… …Social Criticism based on his idea of philistinism… …Religious Criticism based on Arnold's rejection of the supernatural elements in religion.

Ans to Q No 13: Arnold's conception of culture has suggested a model for contemporary critical and literary theory… …against the allegation of conservatism, Timothy Peltason noted that Arnold never endorsed "received cultural values,"… …Terence Hawkes noted that Arnold considered criticism a seminal tool in helping society objectively examine its failures and successes… .. Recent scholarship on Arnold also discusses how Arnold's writing reflects the tensions of modern literature.



15.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What is the central message of the poem 'Dover Beach'? Illustrate with exact references taken from the poem.

Q 2: Do you think that Matthew Arnold is at his best in describing the Victorian Dilemma in the poem "Dover Beach"? How finally does the poet resolve issues of loss of faith?

Q 3: Trace the basic ideas underlying Arnold's criticism with special reference to the poem "Dover Beach".

Q 4: What, according to you, are the major allusions in the poem? How do they help in spreading certain universal human predicaments?

Q 5: Would you like to call "Dover Beach" a love poem? Elaborate.

Q 6: Landscape is an important element in the poem "Dover Beach". In what ways, does Matthew Arnold trace the melancholy underlying the serene atmosphere of the moonlit night?

Q 7: "Poetry is a criticism of life." Illustrate this point with specific references from the poem "Dover Beach".

* * *

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