UNIT 12: MATTHEW ARNOLD: "THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Arnold: The Critic

12.4 Reading the Text

12.5 Important Concepts

12.6 Arnold as a Victorian Critic

12.7 Let us Sum up

12.8 Further Reading

12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.10 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read about the life and works of Matthew Arnold as a critic
- understand the context of Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"
- explain the role of criticism which Arnold had tried to address in the essay
- discuss the importance of Matthew Arnold as a 19th century English critic

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will be introduced to Matthew Arnold and his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time". Arnold is a prominent poet critic of the 19th century. As a critic, he pondered over the role of literary criticism as a vehicle for bringing positive changes in society. He felt that against the Romantic criticism of the previous generation, criticism of his time must be drawn closer to life so that life could be made nobler and better. Arnold believed that literary criticism, to be

worthwhile, must serve the ends of life and promote a better understanding of cultural values so that social regeneration can be brought about. Defending literature against its enemies and critics, whose emphasis on science, moneymaking, and commercial prosperity had led them to regard poetry as merely a pleasant pastime, he argued that poetry prepared the people of the society to perceive authentic value in the workings of the society and culture around them. You will learn that Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism" seeks to redefine the central responsibilities of criticism. It is precisely the task of criticism to "establish an order of ideas" and "to make the best ideas prevail." These are some of the very relevant ideas that you are expected to understand and comprehend by the time you finish reading the unit.

12.3 ARNOLD: THE CRITIC

Matthew Arnold was born at Laleham in Middlesex in 1822. He was the son of Thomas Arnold, a noted Victorian man of letters, a religious leader, a historian, and the influential headmaster of Rugby from 1828 to 1841. Arnold received education from *Winchester*, *Rugby* and *Balliol College* and finally from *Oxford.* There he won the *Newdigate* Prize for poetry. In 1845, he became a fellow of *Oriel College*. However, soon he left the university and became the private secretary of Lord Lansdowne. In 1840, he travelled abroad and met Marguerite, a Swiss girl who features in most of his early lyrics. In 1851, he became an inspector of school. This post of honour gave him financial security. He married Frances Lucy Wightman in 1851. In 1858, Arnold became a professor of poetry at *Oxford*. Along with being famous for his poetry, prose and criticism, Arnold is also acclaimed for his advocacy of culture.

Educated at Rugby and Oxford University, Matthew Arnold seems to have concentrated more on his social life than on his studies. Soon he got dissatisfied with the kind of poetry that he had been writing. Still they eloquently express the self-doubt, intellectual unease, and emotional uncertainty typical of the contemporary intellectuals. After joining Oxford as a Professor of Poetry in 1858, he started writing literary criticism. He

sought to deal with the problems of his age through a series of literary, political, religious and educational writings. As an Inspector of the schools, Arnold expressed his views about the British and Continental pedagogical systems through a series of reports on differing educational problems. Most of his writings are marked by a strong sense of discipline. You should remember that Arnold's educational writings are related to what we may popularly call "the Rise of English". Arnold often suggested the establishment of an English Academy on the model of the French to regulate literary taste where education would be imparted in terms of the writings of the English writers. Arnold as the model used the great literary heritage of the English writers for 'Culture'. It was also the model with the help of which he could address the issue of 'Englishness'.

In 185I, when Arnold was appointed the inspector of schools, he continued his discussion with teachers and administrators for educational reforms. Subsequently, he also travelled extensively in England and abroad in between 1859 and 1865. The experiences gathered led to the publication of three books on European (particularly French) systems of education. Arnold viewed the schools as the crucial site for "civilising the next generation of the lower classes, who, as things are going, will have most of the political power of the country in their hands." In his duties as an inspector, he took pain at the deprivations that workers and their families suffered, and subsequently he dedicated his life to the task of social and cultural progress, identifying himself as a "Liberal of the future". Arnold was named Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in 1857, a position he held until 1867.

Arnold takes criticism as involving flexibility, openness to new experiences, and curiosity. He insisted on the "free play" of mind—a phrase that Jacques Derrida would define more radically and subversively in the 20th century. Arnold takes criticism to be a rigorous duty as he explains that it "tends to *establish* an order of ideas", and seeks to "make the best ideas prevail." Arnold firmly believed that some ideas are right and others wrong. A good literary critic was inevitably for

Arnold, a person of culture embarked on a steady, steadfast inquiry into self and society. Arnold excelled as a critic and polemicist, and he frequently took delight in the public controversies that his books and articles invited and in the charges raided against him. However, Arnold was also a poet, an educator, and an advocate for civility and moderation who followed the footsteps of his eminent father Thomas Arnold.
He died in 1888.

His Works:

Along with being a critic Arnold also gained popularity as a poet. You will note that Arnold's literary career had started with *The Strayed Reveller and other Poems* (1849) and ended with the publication of *New Poems* in 1867. Between these years, he published *Empedocles on Etna, and other Poems* (1852), *Poems* (1853), *Poems II Series* (1855) and *Merope*, a tragedy in verse (1858). In these volumes, he tried various poetic works like lyrics (*Dover Beach*), Poetic Drama (*Empedocles on Etna*), Narrative poem (*Sohrab and Rustum*), Elegy (*The Scholar Gipsy*) *etc*. Although Arnold derives much from classical literature, his poetry is also marked by the sense of alienation, stoicism, despair and spiritual emptiness.

However, Arnold made his debut as a critic in the *Preface to the Poems of 1853,* in which he follows Dryden's method of throwing light on his own performance and of making critical observations suitable to the occasion. His lectures as the Professor of poetry at Oxford were published in book form in two volumes–*On Translating Homer* and *The Study of Celtic Literature.* His works on Homer is famous for his unconvincing advocacy of English hexameters and his creation of a kind of literature in the "grand style". He also wrote for various literary journals. Of the miscellaneous writings he published, a selection called *Essays in Criticism* in two series (1865 and 1888). The essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" from the 1865 volume develops his views of criticism as a disinterested and flexible mode of thought.

His *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) is one of his significant critical texts in which he deliberates on the notion of "culture" in detail. Here he defines "culture" and affirms the need for "culture" in a modern industrial

society devoted to mechanism and profit. He calls culture "*a study of perfection"*. According to Arnold, culture has an intellectual and an ethical end to meet. The aims of culture are identical with those of religion. Arnold calls "culture" to be "the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself" while he conceives religion as the "voice of the deepest human experience". So, what they have in common is the cultivation of inwardness: religion preaches that "The Kingdom of God is within you," and culture "places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality" But culture advances beyond religion, because through a "disinterested study of human nature," it fosters a "harmonious expansion of *all* the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature." Because culture represents for Arnold an inward condition of the mind, and not outward circumstances, he considers its function to be crucial in our modern civilization which is "mechanical and external" as well as strongly individualistic, specialized, and inflexible.



LET US KNOW

Arnold sees "faith in machinery," as the "besetting danger" of modern civilization. The function of culture is to purge our minds of the effects of such material and narrow preoccupations, and to stem "the common tide of men's thoughts in a wealthy and industrial community". Without this purging, Arnold warns, the future as well as the present "would inevitably belong to the Philistines," those who are devoted to the pursuit of wealth. The task of both criticism and culture, then, is to place the pragmatic bourgeois vision of life in a broader historical and international context. You should try to understand why Matthew Arnold was so vehemently against the Philistines.

His *Essays in Criticism* remains a significant influence on critics till this day. In one of his most famous essays entitled "The Study of Poetry" (1880), Arnold wrote: "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 "high truth" and "high seriousness" to be the most important criteria to judge the value of a poem. By this standard, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* did not merit 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." In Arnold's essay "The Study of Poetry", we find an even greater insistence on the notion of 'seriousness'. This essay, which is also one of the most influential texts of literary humanism, insists on the social and cultural functions of literature, its ability to civilize and to cultivate morality, as well as its provision against the mechanistic excesses of modern civilization. According to Arnold, the status of religion has been increasingly threatened by science, by the ideology of the "fact." Philosophy, too has been rendered powerless since it is hopelessly engaged with unresolved questions and problems. It is, he claims, to poetry that we must turn, not merely for spiritual and emotional support and consolation, but to interpret life for us. Therefore, he defines poetry as a criticism of life. Poetry's high function is actually to replace religion and philosophy. Implicit in his essay is also the notions of the classic and tradition, which will be further developed by writers such as T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. Arnold suggests that, in the first place, we need to be sure that our estimate of poetry is "real" rather than historical or personal.

The emergence of the "Spasmodics", (a term coined by Charles Kingsley) the group of poets which included P. J. Bailey, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith resulted in the production of a kind of poetry which held poetry to be the expression of "the state of one's own mind in striking language. Leading to utter dissatisfaction on the part of Arnold this newly emergent type of poetry gave birth to an extravagance of thought and emotion on the one hand, and to an excess of ornamentations on the other. In other words, it could be said that they simply expressed the 'doubts, disputes, distractions (and) fears' of their age in a bombastic language. It was in the context of combating this Spasmodic tendency to which Arnold himself had fallen a victim, that he

had felt the necessity of writing his "Preface to the Poems of 1853". Although widely read, the poem *Empedocles on Aetna* (1852) was omitted from his next edition of poems in 1853. In addition, in the Preface Arnold informs his readers why he had done that. According to Arnold, the hero Empedocles in the poem, who ends his life by jumping into the volcano Aetna, "*does nothing but suffer; and suffering that finds no vent in action is not a fit subject for poetry: for all art is dedicated to joy*" and to Arnold, the joy that poetry imparts is dependent on its subject. The Spasmodics believed that the classical subjects had little validity in the modern age and they need to be replaced by modern subjects and concerns. However, Arnold thought otherwise. He believed that "*the business of the poets is not to praise their age, but to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure they are capable of feeling.*" Perhaps, that is why, he expresses his indebtedness to the classical writers including Shakespeare.

Thus, you will find that Arnold's main concerns in most of his important critical works are marked by his views on poetry, criticism and culture.



LET US KNOW

While acknowledging that the "critical faculty is lower than the inventive," and that the exercise of the "creative power…is the highest function of man," Arnold suggested that the conditions for a high creative genius can be realized in an atmosphere of appropriate criticism. The work of the literary genius, according to Arnold, is not like the philosopher whose job is to discover new ideas. A literary work needs to be inspired by "a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas." The aim of the literary work, according to Arnold, is to present these ideas "in the most effective and attractive combinations," in beautiful form.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is Matthew Arnold connected to the 'Rise of English'?

Q 2: Which are the major critical texts of Arnold?

Q 3: How does Arnold define the term culture in his *Culture and Anarchy*?

Q 4: Discuss what Arnold means by the term 'philistine'.

12.4 READING THE TEXT

In this section, we shall try to discuss the main aspects of Arnold's essay. This essay mainly deals with his ideas of Creative and Critical faculty, his notion of disinterestedness, his idea of criticism and the role of the critic.

Arnold starts the essay with a discussion of the Creative faculty vs Critical faculty. However, he begins with a reference to his own translation of Homer in which he tried to put a proposition about criticism. As he states:

"Many objections have been made to a proposition which, in some remarks of mine on translating Homer, I ventured to put forth; a proposition about criticism, and its importance at the present day. I said: 'Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.' I added, that owing to the operation in English literature of certain causes, 'almost the last thing for which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires,–criticism'; and that the power and value of English literature was thereby impaired. More than one rejoinder declared that the importance I here assigned to criticism was excessive, and asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort."

The beginning of Arnold's essay sets the tone of the essay as being one of advocating the idea of criticism and the role of the critic more than anything else. He then refers to one of Wordsworth's comments and accuses him of holding the critical power very low. Arnold states:

"Without wasting time over the exaggeration which Wordsworth's judgment on criticism clearly contains, or over an attempt to trace the causes, not difficult, I think, to be traced, which may have led Wordsworth to this exaggeration, a critic may with advantage seize an occasion for trying his own conscience, and for asking himself of what real service at any given moment the practice of criticism either is or may be made to his own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others."

Arnold seems to argue that the critical power may be of lower rank than the creative. However, it is also undeniable, that men may exercise their creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art. Another argument that Arnold holds is that "the exercise of the creative power in the production of great works of literature or art,...is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible; and that therefore labour may be vainly spent in attempting it, which might with more fruit be used in preparing for it, in rendering it possible." To speak of literature, Arnold believed that **the grand work of the creative literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery**. That is why, the great creative epochs in literature are so rare, and there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the productions of many men of real genius. Then, Arnold argues for the need for the critical power, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is. Thus, this essay tends to refer to the intellectual conditions in which the creative power can profitably sustain itself. It should establish an order of ideas, so that the best ideas prevail.

Arnold calls the poetic endeavours of the Romantic poets premature, and this prematurity is the result of not having sufficient

materials to work with. In other words, the English poets of the first part of the 19th century, with plenty of energy and creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth so wanting in completeness and variety. However, it was not the case with Greek Pinder and Sophocles or English Shakespeare. He states that Pindar and Sophocles had not read many books; or Shakespeare was not an avid reader. But, they lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree that animated and nourished the creative power. Their society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thoughts. Arnold cites this state of things to be the true basis for the creative power's exercise. He thus confirms that the creative power of poetry requires ideas and materials to provide it with inspiration for achieving success.

Then gradually, Arnold brings in his famous idea of **disinterestedness**. Arnold states that in order to produce fruit for the future, English literature ought to adopt disinterestedness. However, how is criticism to show disinterestedness? Arnold's view is that by keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things," a critic may maintain disinterestedness. Then, Arnold deals in greater detail about the business of criticism. According to him, the purpose of criticism is simply to know **"the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas."** However, it has to do it with inflexible honesty, with due ability. Otherwise, "criticism besides being really false to its own nature merely continues in the old rut which it has hitherto followed in England, and will certainly miss the chance now given to it." Arnold then questions the present status of criticism in England. Look at the lines quoted from the text:

"Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is

wanted…But we have the ***Edinburgh Review***, existing as an organ of the old Whigs, and for as much play of the mind as may suit its being that; we have the ***Quarterly Review***, existing as an organ of the Tories, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the ***British Quarterly Review***, existing as an organ of the political Dissenters, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the ***Times*****,** existing as an organ of the common, satisfied, well-to-do Englishman, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. And so on through all the various fractions, political and religious, of our society; every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism, but the notion of combining all fractions in the common pleasure of a free **disinterested** play of mind meets with no favour. Directly this play of mind wants to have more scope, and to forget the pressure of practical considerations a little, it is checked, it is made to feel the chain…The ***Dublin Review*** subordinates play of mind to the practical business of English and Irish Catholicism, and lives. It must needs be that men should act in sects and parties, that each of these sects and parties should have its organ, and should make this organ serve the interests of its action; but it would be well, too, **that there should be a criticism, not the minister of these interests, not their enemy, but absolutely and entirely independent of them**. No other criticism will ever attain any real authority or make any real way towards its end,–the creating a current of true and fresh ideas."

In this quotation, Arnold is perhaps trying to mean how intellectual pursuits of the writers cannot be free from the politics of the country. However, Arnold is also hinting at the actual role of criticism. According to him, criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished. It has failed to keep man from a self-satisfaction, which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in

itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things. A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack: and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them.



LET US KNOW

Thus, you will find that according to Arnold the business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world. Moreover, it should spread knowledge to create a flow of new and fresh ideas. Its business is to practise the function with strict honesty and sense of duty. He opposes the flexible honest in criticism. Arnold sees that practical considerations hinder faithful criticism and suffocates it. Criticism should be free of these considerations. It should firstly be a free play of mind. The free play of mind is much more important than any practical ends.

After deliberating on the role of criticism, Arnold goes on to discuss the role of the critic. By remaining 'detached' the critic should show the society the right path, to help them chose what is just. Then he urges his readers to start a social movement, start a new party unlike the Whigs and Tories to pursue truth and new thought. They should call it ***the liberal party***, it should let them stick to each other, and back each other up, it should let them have no nonsense about independent criticism, and intellectual delicacy. They should not be troubled by foreign thoughts; they should invent the whole thing for themselves. As he says: "If one of us speaks well, applaud him; if one of us speaks ill, applaud him too; we are all in the same movement, we are all liberals, we are all in pursuit of truth." In this way, the pursuit of truth in the hands of Arnold becomes really a social, practical, pleasurable affair.

Arnold then tries to discuss what he takes criticism to be as we find the following in the text:

"I am bound by my own definition of **criticism; *a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.*** How much of current English literature comes into this "best that is known and thought in the world"? Not very much I fear; certainly less, at this moment, than of the current literature of France or Germany. Well, then, am I to alter my definition of criticism, in order to meet the requirements of a number of practising English critics, who, after all, are free in their choice of a business? That would be making criticism lend itself just to one of those alien practical considerations, which, I have said, are so fatal to it. One may say, indeed, to those who have to deal with the mass–so much better disregarded–of current English literature, that they may at all events endeavour, in dealing with this, to try it, so far as they can, by the standard of the best that is known and thought in the world; one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better. But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with,–the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit,–is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another. Special, local, and temporary advantages being put out of account, that modern nation will in the intellectual and spiritual sphere make most progress, which most thoroughly carries out this program. And what is that but saying that we too, all of us, as individuals, the more thoroughly we carry it out, shall make the more progress?"

Arnold concludes the essay by stating that **"creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere,**

simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. In addition, at some epochs no other creation is possible. Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature, we must never forget that.

Therefore, according to Matthew Arnold, criticism has social function to play—that is to protect man from a self-satisfaction that holds him back. It lends him to perfection by introducing his mind to excellent ideas, beauty and fitness. Non-objective practical criticism makes man blind to shortcomings and faults in their practice. This will lead to narrow-mindedness. Hence, Arnold specifies certain activity for criticism which should refrain itself from the sphere of practical life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Mention the grounds on which Arnold criticise the Romantic poets.

Q 6: What, according to Arnold, is the true business of criticism?

Q 7: How does Matthew Arnold visualise the role of criticism?

12.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

The important concepts of the text are as follows:

Creative Faculty vs Critical Faculty:

According to Arnold, the creative power of poetry requires ideas and material for inspiration and success. Because, these ideas nourish the creative power. The critical faculties create cultural environment rich with ideas. He goes on to equate the experience of writing criticism with the experience of writing creative work to undermine typical opinion against criticism. He defends criticism against the opinion that it serves no purpose and that those who criticize cannot write something creative themselves. To illustrate this he compares

Goethe with Byron. Arnold opines that both of them had a great productive power, but Goethe was nourished by great critical effort that provided the required material for his work. Lord Byron possessed the same gift but was less productive because he found no rich cultural background and material to work with. Byron lacked critical efforts. Thus, he sees that the poet should understand the world about which he writes. Understanding the world needs critical effort and analysis. Arnold argues that real criticism is essentially the exercise of curiosity, which is the disinterested endeavour to know. It is an instinct that urges man to seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The creative activity must be preceded by criticism because it paves the way for creative activity.

Disinterestedness:

Arnold considers disinterestedness indispensable in English criticism. It also means independence of judgment. How can criticism show disinterestedness? Arnold opines that criticism should follow the law of its own nature, which is freedom. Criticism should be a free activity, which is not subject to any external influence. It should refuse to submit to political or practical consideration. Thus, according to Arnold, Criticism should serve nothing but itself. Arnold brings in his famous idea of **disinterestedness** by stating that in order to avail it of the field opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, English criticism ought to adopt disinterestedness. However, how is criticism to show disinterestedness? Arnold states three ways to maintain disinterestedness.

a. By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things",

b. By resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches,

c. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with.

The idea of Literary Criticism:

Arnold defines literary criticism as "**the idea of a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and**

thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas." However, Arnold feels that much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English origin and growth alone. By the nature of things, they must be foreign. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell on foreign thought. Again, judging is often spoken of as the critic's own business. However, the judgment, which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one. Thus knowledge, or fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern. In addition, it is by communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it that the critic will generally do most good to his readers. Sometimes for the sake of establishing an author's place in literature and his relation to a central standard, criticism may also have to deal with a subject matter so familiar that fresh knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. In that case, the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, and always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is saying. The moment this fails us, we must be sure that something is wrong.

The Role of the Critic:

According to Arnold, a critic should be detached. He states: "The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them. The rush and roar of practical life will always have an effect upon the most collected spectator. However, it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the so-called practical man, that the critic can render great service to the practical man, and it is only by the greatest sincerity in pursuing his own course, that he can escape misunderstandings, which perpetually threaten him. Then again he states that the "practical man is not apt for fine distinctions, and yet in these distinctions truth and the highest culture greatly find their account. However, it is not easy to lead a practical man. Then he calls the British Constitution itself, 'a magnificent organ of progress and virtue' is also a

'colossal machine' for the manufacture of philistines. Therefore, a critic will still remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings, and nowhere so much as in this country.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What do you mean by disinterestedness? State the ways through which disinterestedness can be understood.

Q 9: Mention the major aspects in the essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Times".

Q 10: State what Arnold has to say about the role of a critic in the essay.

12.6 ARNOLD AS A VICTORIAN CRITIC

Lionel Trilling opined that Matthew Arnold is "virtually the founding father of modern criticism in the English-speaking world." Citing "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865), Trilling quoted Arnold's famous injunction that the critic should strive to "see the object as in itself it really is" and his celebrated definition of criticism as the "disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." These statements, according to Trilling, gave later scholars and teachers their inspiration and interpretive mission. Arnold provided literary criticism with an important social function and paved the way for its "institutionalisation" in the academy. He regarded the pursuit of literature as urgent activities in the world, insisting "that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: How to live." Serious criticism, he believed, was responsible for generating and maintaining the proper context of ideas and high standards that the production of literature required. Furthermore, criticism for Arnold meant an engagement with history, education, politics, religion, philosophy and other subjects and concerns.

Rene Wellek views Arnold as a historical critic working with a historical scheme in his mind. Wellek is right when he states that Arnold "almost single handedly pulled English criticism out of the doldrums into which it had fallen after the great Romantic Age." While critics like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and their followers used Arnolds Hellenism, his plea for "disinterestedness", "antipathy" for "Philistinism" as the sanction to withdraw from the practical world to a world of aesthetic sensibility.

T.S. Eliot's biased view of Arnold and the views of I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling add to the critical receptions surrounding Arnold. The relationship with Arnold resulted in Leavis's great emphasis on the moral force of literature, and I.A. Richards also responded to Arnold's doctrines of psychological criticism. Lionel Trilling carried on Arnold's moral social concerns to the modern context. Arnold's desire to represent an ideal of cultural and literary humanism coupled with the 'institutionalisation' of literacy criticism in the academy make him "virtually the founding father of modern criticism in the English speaking world". (According to Lionel Trilling).

Arnold continues today to represent an ideal of literary and cultural humanism that many critics honour. However, this same ideal is one that radical critics and contemporary literary theorists have sought to complicate or undermine. As the scholar Joseph Carroll has noted, his key term "disinterestedness" is "now the most violently disputed word in the Arnoldian lexicon," and many theorists from the today have launched their proposals by taking issue with Arnold's and his followers' account of the critic's role and procedures. For example, Stanley Fish's Reader Response criticism denies the possibility of "disinterested" objective perception, and the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton emphasises Arnold's alignment with state power and the privileged classes in his stress on "timeless truths."

However, it is not so difficult to identify Arnold's limitations. Because, he is mainly interested in the personality and moral tone of the author, not, in the resources of language or the unfolding meanings of literary works themselves; he does not devote much attention to specific

texts. Lines that he does quote typically function for him as "touchstones" which are the "specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality" that "save us from fallacious estimates of value" and that seem to beg the very question of "greatness" that they are meant to answer. Arnold assumed that his readers would know these authors and texts and their contexts, and that the "touchstones" would be recognized by all as profound and memorable.



12.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have realised that central to Arnold's literary criticism is the problem of living adequately in late industrial society. Arnold is deeply humanist, and he writes in the tradition of humanism that can be stated to have started with figures such as F. R. Leavis. Arnold's central terms and phrases – "sweetness and light," "perfection," "inwardness," "the best that has been thought and said" – all derive ultimately from his analysis of the malaise of modern culture. He sees the human being in industrial society as mechanised, as wholly given to "external" pursuits, as stunted in his spiritual and moral sensibility. Arnold was somewhat obsessed with the narrow moralism and mercantilism of the bourgeoisie, whom he termed philistines. His essay "The Function of Criticism" is concerned to counteract the philistinism of the world as defined by the English bourgeoisie, enshrined in the restrictive obsession of this class with practicality, utility, and reason: in a phrase, with the imperatives of the immediate present.



12.8 FURTHER READING

Arnold, Matthew. "Function of Criticism at the Present Times" in Das & Mohanty. (eds). (1985). *Literary Criticism: A Reading.* Oxford University Press.

Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell.

Vincent B. Leitch. (ed). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

Wellek, Rene. (1983). *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950: Volume 1, The Later Eighteenth Century.* Cambridge University Press.



12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: As an Inspector of the schools, Arnold expressed his views about the English pedagogical systems… …his educational writings are marked by a strong sense of discipline and affected the "Rise of English"… …the great literary heritage of the English writers was used as the model for 'Culture' while Arnold addressed the issue of 'Englishness'.

Ans to Q No 2: *Preface to the Poems of 1853… … On Translating Homer… … The Study of Celtic Literature… …Essays in Criticism* in two series (1865 and 1888).. …*Culture and Anarchy* (1869).

Ans to Q No 3: In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Arnold views culture as "*a study of perfection"*. … …it has an intellectual and an ethical end to meet… …Arnold calls "culture" as "the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself"… …it advances beyond religion, because through a "disinterested study of human nature," it fosters a "harmonious expansion of *all* the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature."

Ans to Q No 4: Philistines are people devoted to the pursuit of wealth… …the function of culture is to purge the minds of the effects of such material and narrow preoccupations… …. the task of both criticism and culture, then, is to place the pragmatic vision of life in a broader historical and cultural context.

Ans to Q No 5: Arnold calls the poetic endeavours of the Romantics poets premature without sufficient materials to work with… …Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth so wanting

in completeness and variety… …but it was not the case with Greek Pinder and Sophocles or English Shakespeare… …Arnold cites the state of things to be the true basis for the creative power's exercise.

Ans to Q No 6: The business of criticism is to know the best that is known and thought in the world… …it should spread knowledge to create a flow of new and fresh ideas… …its business is to practise the function with honesty and sense of duty… …by remaining 'detached' the critic should show the society what is right and just… …thus, the pursuit of truth becomes the main business of criticism.

Ans to Q No 7: True criticism must maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims… …it must not hurry on to the goal because of its practical importance… …it must be patient, and flexible, and know how to attach itself to things and how to withdraw from them… …it must be apt to discern the spiritual shortcomings or illusions of powers that in the practical sphere may be beneficent.

Ans to Q No 8: Disinterestedness, is indispensable a rule of English criticism because it helps create objectivity… …It also means independence of judgment… …three ways to maintain disinterestedness… …a. By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things… …b. By resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches… …c. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas.

Ans to Q No 9: Creative Faculty vs Critical Faculty… …Disinterestedness… …The idea of Literary Criticism… …The Role of the Critic.

Ans to Q No 10: The critic has to remain collected and refuse to lend himself to the point of view of the so called practical man… …the critic should pursue his own course with greatest sincerity… … but he should remain exposed to frequent misunderstandings.



12.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Criticism is 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world'. Discuss with reference to Matthew Arnold's "Function of Criticism in Present Times".

Q 2: Discuss the concept of disinterestedness. Why does the idea of disinterestedness remain so prominent in Arnold's criticism?

Q 3: How does Arnold react to the changing Victorian ethos of art and morality? Elaborate.

Q 4: From the reading of Arnold's text, provide a detailed discussion of creative faculty vs critical faculty as the most dominant mode in Arnoldian criticism.

Q 5: **"**Creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge". Discuss with reference to Arnold's interpretation of the creative activity and criticism.

Q 6: Which are the four main issues taken up by Matthew Arnold in his essay? Illustrate with reference from the original text. (Hints: Arnold's ideas of Creative and Critical faculty, his notion of disinterestedness, the idea of criticism and the role of the critic)

Q 7: Provide a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Matthew Arnold as a critic. Do you think that he had succeeded in his effort to instruct his contemporaries regarding how to become a critic?

* * *