

## The Concept of Truth and High Seriousness A Study

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### ABSTRACT

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. If we are not happy on earth, we should moderate our desires rather than live in dreams of something that may never be attained. This philosophy is clearly expressed in such poems as "Dover Beach" and in these lines from "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse":

**Key Notes:** 1. Plaintive Reflection. 2. Criticism of life. 3. Eternal Bliss. 4. Splendid Prist.

Like Aristotle, Arnold also has an exalted concept of poetry in his mind. The great classics of Dante, Homer and Shakespeare are known for their truth and high seriousness, says Arnold. According to him, Chaucer seeks high seriousness which implies the application of ideas to life. Poetry is at bottom "a criticism of life" in the works of great masters who are rated very high by Arnold who uses the touchstone method of judgment. According to this eminent Victorian Poet critic, "Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our Prose" he does not accept them as masters of poetry because they do not give poetic criticism of life and no poetic application of ideas to life or to the issue of how to live.

Arnold becomes a debatable critic mainly because of the importance he gives to truth and high seriousness in poetry. It is very simple to see that this seriousness is achieved by a poet through poetic criticism of life and the application of ideas to life. This view of Arnold has been criticized by Saintsbury and T.S. Eliot. According to H.W. Garrod, "He thinks too much of uses of poetry and too little its pleasure. T.S. Eliot goes to the extent of describing Arnold as a propagandist, a salesman and not a critic. We may not accept this sharp criticism of Arnold but we can very easily see that he favours poetry used for the sake of life and not for the sake of pleasure. That is why, he is critical of all romantic poets except Wordsworth and Keats.

As we look deep into Arnold's concept of truth along with his views on high seriousness and criticism of life in poetry, we find him passing adverse judgment on poets like Chaucer,

Dryden and Pope. Wordsworth finds favour with Arnold because Wordsworth gives a rich criticism of life and also because high seriousness is the hall mark of his poetry. In his opinion on various poets, Arnold says that poetry gives us hope and consolation. Dryden and Pope have written prose in an age of reasoning but they do not stand very high as poets in the critical evaluation of Arnold because their poetry does not contain “the application of ideas to life”.

In a very plain manner Arnold recognizes Dryden and Pope as great masters of prose. The qualities of good prose are regularity, precision and balance. These qualities are very much there in the prose pieces written by Dryden and Pope. In the language of Arnold. Dryden has been described as the glorious founder of prose. He says that Pope is the “splendid high priest” of great prose. But their poetry does not contain the value of criticism of life and high seriousness. In a very blunt manner, Arnold says that the poetry of Pope and Dryden is certainly not good when we compare the poetry of Dryden and Pope to the poetry of Wordsworth and Shakespeare, we find neither criticism of life nor high seriousness in them. Arnold says that they are not the classics of our poetry because he does not find the poetic application of ideas to life in the poetry of these neo-classical poets.

As a matter of fact, Arnold is enamored of his touchstone method of criticism. Chaucer, Dryden and Pope are measured by the classics written by poets known for their high seriousness and criticism of life. Arnold is in the habit of making assertive statement on the basis of his admiration for these masters of poetry. That is why some modern critics dub him as a propagandist and a salesman more than a literary critic. In his concept of high seriousness, we hear an echo of Aristotle’s view that poetry is the most philosophical of all branches of human knowledge. His own poems like “Dover Beach” and “The Scholar Gypsy” give us a criticism of Victorian life. Through the metaphors of the sea and the islands, Arnold underlines the loss of religious faith and intellectual restlessness of his age.

However, his criticism of life is not perfectly free from personal fallacies. There seems to be a clash between his concept of disinterestedness of the critic and his touchstone method of criticism. George Watson feels that we have a slogan-like favour in the statements of Arnold on literary criticism. In the words of George Watson, we can also raise the question against Arnold, “when do we see the great critical effort at work upon any English text- upon a single play of Shakespeare or a poem of Milton or Wordsworth.”

Arnold’s concept of high seriousness in poetry has been strictly used to evaluate Chaucer, Dryden and Pope. We admire Chaucer for his tolerant view of the great human comedy. His characters are jolly rascals and we feel at home in the company of Chaucer. But Arnold accuses him of the lack of high seriousness in his poetry. In the evaluation of Dryden, Arnold, first proves that Dryden’s prose is superior to that of Milton and Chapman. He admires the translation of Virgil by Dryden in good English prose. In the restoration age, Pope appears as the great priest of prose. However, Arnold says that the poetry of Dryden and Pope lacks high seriousness and poetic criticism of life. Hence, he pronounces the judgment that Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry but classics of our prose.

Summing up our critical appreciation of Arnold’s criticism, we really cannot ignore him in our study of the long tradition of criticism. He is the most seductive of great Victorian writers.

However, we can not fully accept his opinion that all poets should be measured in terms of high seriousness and criticism of life. Arnold fascinates us and we feel like quoting Watson's opinion about him." In spite of his deep voids and gaping incongruity, Arnold is in most respects, the most seductive of the great Victorian Pandits, more variously and wittily intelligent than those great juggernauts, Ruskin and Carlye.

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