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Department of English
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Summary of Matthew Arnold's "The Study of Poetry"

Introduction:

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

Reading Poetry:

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

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

Idea of Imitation:

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

Touchstone Method for Evaluating Poetry:

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

French Poetry:

Arnold then speaks about French poetry which had a tremendous influence on the poetry of England. He differentiates between the poetry of northern France and the poetry of southern France. The poetry of southern France influenced Italian

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

Analysis of the English Classics:

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

Next Arnold mentions **Milton** and **Shakespeare** and credits them as classics and moves on to speak about Dryden and Pope. According to the historic estimate **Dryden** and **Pope** are no doubt great poets of the eighteenth century. Arnold observes that Dryden and Pope were better prose writers than poets. The restoration period faced the necessity of a fit prose with proper imaginative quality and this is what Dryden and Pope provided. Arnold therefore concludes that they are classics not of poetry but of prose.

After Dryden and Pope Arnold speaks about **Gray**. Gray did not write much but what he wrote has high poetic value. Arnold therefore considers Gray to be a classic.

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

Then Arnold moves on to speak about **Byron**, **Shelley** and **Wordsworth** but does not pass any judgement on their poetry. Arnold believes that his estimate of these poets will be influenced by his personal passion as they are closer to his age than the classics and also because their writings are of a more personal nature.

Continuity of the Classics:

Finally Arnold speaks about the self-preservation of the classics. Any amount of good literature will not be able to surpass the supremacy of the classics as they have already stood the test of time and people will continue to enjoy them for the ages to come. Arnold says that this is the result of the self-preserving nature of humanity. Human nature will remain the same throughout the ages and those parts of the classics dealing with the subject will remain relevant at all times thus preserving themselves from being lost in time.

Acknowledgement (Sources taken help of):

<http://learningliteratureoverhere.blogspot.com/2016/08/a-study-of-poetry-matthew-arnold.html>

<https://www.slideshare.net/MansurSaleem/a-study-of-poetry-a-critical-essay-by-matthew-arnold>

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