
Daudnagar College, Daudnagar

Subject: English Literature

Class: B.A. Part I (Honours)

Paper: II (Poetry)

Topic: *Matthew Arnold : A Brief Bio-Note*

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

Matthew Arnold received excellent education at Rugby where his father was the headmaster. He also went to Oxford later on. Arnold, chiefly famous as a poet and critic, taught classical literature for two years. He served as a private secretary to a liberal statesman for a while. Then he was appointed inspector of schools, a profession he continued to enjoy for 35 years. It is surprising to note that despite the busy nature of his job, he managed to publish as many as five volumes of poetry between 1849 and 1858. He was appointed as the Oxford professor of poetry in 1857 for a five year term. He continued to occupy the post for the second five year term but refused to extend it further. During this time he ventured into writing literary, theological and educational criticism and his poetic writing almost ceased.

His bent towards critical writing is exemplified by the two books published in 1861 : *On Translating Homer* (this is a lecture series delivered at Oxford) and *The Popular Education of France* (a report of his Educational Commission). Publications of his books show the interests of Arnold's remaining years. His first *Essays in Criticism* (1865), *New Poems* (1867) and the first collected edition of his poems (1869) represent literary insights. He also wrote two books on Celtic literature (1867-68). *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and *Friendship's Garland* (1871) are two of his salient works on social criticism. He also explored the domain of theology in critical works like *Literature and Dogma* (1873) and *God*

and the Bible (1875). Arnold also has to his credit *Mixed Essays* (1869), *Irish Essays and Others* (1882), *Essays in Criticism*, second series (1888). Arnold's critical thoughts and opinions about United States of America are expressed in two records of an American lecture tour : *Discourses in America* (1885) and *Civilization in the United States* (1889).

The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems (1849) and *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* (1852), the first two volumes of Arnold's poetic work were signed only by "A". These poems are remarkable for their questioning attitude and melancholic tone. On publication, these poems surprised his friends who knew Arnold to have exactly opposite disposition at Oxford. The fact that someone so deep in love with hoaxes can be able to write profoundly melancholic poems was staggering to his close friends. Just like many poet and critics who came before Arnold, his poetics and poetry did not commingle smoothly. His attempts to imitate classical writers did not achieve the expected success. His epic episode *Sohrab and Rustom* contains exquisite passages of poetic grandeur but in its entirety it falls short. Same is the shortcoming of *Tristram and Iseult*.

Elegies, especially *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* showcase the best of Arnold's poetry. Arnold's name is equally prominent as a capable literary critic.