The Study of Poetry

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MATTHEW ARNOLD

Matthew Arnold was a poet and literary critic whose reputation as a leading figure in the literary culture of Victorian-era England rests on his lyric poetry and, above all, his cultural criticism, which defended high culture from the growing materialism of Arnold's day and affirmed the vital importance of intellectual integrity to a healthy democratic society. Born into an intellectual family, Arnold was educated at Oxford and published his first book of poetry in 1849 before taking a position as an inspector of schools—a job that not only allowed him to support his family but enabled him to visit many far-flung areas of England and to develop his unconventional views on the direction English society was taking in the Victorian era. While Arnold's poetry was generally, if not universally, admired, his reputation as a leading critic grew with the publication of *Essays in Criticism* (1865) and *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which Arnold argued passionately for the importance of upholding the highest standards in art and society, respectively. It was in the latter work that Arnold offered his memorable definition of culture as "the best which has been thought and said." By the time of his death in 1888, Arnold was regarded as one of England's most important critics, and his views on the function of art in a democratic society continue to have significant influence among cultural critics and political philosophers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Matthew Arnold lived and wrote during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837 to 1901), a time of both dramatic transformation and remarkable stability in British society. Against the backdrop of widespread revolution across Europe in 1848, a steady rate of social reform and increased democratic participation in Great Britain provoked debates over what British culture should look like in an age of a rising middle class. New technologies such as the railroad and the telegraph supported the emergence of an industrial economy that spanned Europe and hastened urbanization, prompting romantic nostalgia for vanishing ways of life. Religion gradually retreated from its previous cultural importance, causing critics like Arnold to wonder what would replace it. New artistic movements (such as Realism in literature and Impressionism in painting) offered their own answers, suggesting that art could meet the human need for fundamental truths. The growth of literacy led to the emergence of a broader reading public and drove demand for newspapers and popular literature, but it also caused critics like Arnold to worry about the fate of high culture. All of these changes, which are recognized now as the features of modernity, caused anxiety about the future among thinkers like Arnold, who wrote "The Study of Poetry" to reaffirm poetry's preeminence in European culture.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Matthew Arnold's essays on poetry, of which "The Study of Poetry" is a quintessential example, carved out an important place in literary criticism of the Victorian era. Since Arnold was defending the primacy of what he calls "classic poetry"—represented by the works of Homer, Dante, and Milton—against other social and artistic movements, it is worth noting other critics who were taking part in this critical debate, which was ultimately about the duties and responsibilities of the poet to society, and vice versa. Forty years earlier, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" prepared the ground for Arnold's essay by making the case for poetry as an art form with a unique commitment to truth and beauty and for poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." John Ruskin, another important critic of the Victorian period, argued in *Modern Painters* (1843-1860) that the highest obligation of the artist (and, by implication, the poet) is to express fundamental truths, an idea that Arnold would develop in his own way in "The Study of Poetry." In contrast to Arnold, who sought a rigorous universal method for distinguishing truly classic poetry, the critic Walter Pater emphasized the importance of subjectivity and individuality in works like *The Renaissance* (1873). Thus, in writing "The Study of Poetry," Arnold was joining other Victorian-era thinkers who were preoccupied with one of the key questions of 19th-century aesthetics and the relationship between truth, beauty, and morality.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Study of Poetry
- **When Written:** 1879
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1880
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Essay, Literary Criticism
- **Climax:** Arnold concludes that despite the public's apparent retreat from reading classic poetry, poetry will never lose its status as the supreme consolation for thinking people, since human beings will aways return to poetry in moments of need.
- **Antagonist:** Charlatanism
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Memorable Introduction. Although it was republished in Arnold's *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* and is now often read as an anthologized essay, "The Study of Poetry" was originally written as an introduction to an anthology of English poets. The fact that the essay has outlived the book it was intended to introduce is a testament to the enduring fascination of the questions Arnold sets out to answer.

The Philistine. Arnold is credited with introducing the term "Philistine"—his derogatory term for a narrow-minded person who is hostile to culture—into English usage in his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold's attack on Philistinism can also be seen in "The Study of Poetry," in which he subtly berates readers who are unwilling to insist on the highest standards.

PLOT SUMMARY

Matthew Arnold wrote "The Study of Poetry" as an introduction to an 1880 anthology called *The English Poets*, and in it he refines his answers to what he considered the most important questions facing literary critics and readers: what function does poetry serve in modern society? What kind of poetry is best suited to serve these functions? What distinguishes truly excellent poetry from merely good poetry, and how can readers learn to recognize classic poetry when they see it? Behind Arnold's questions and the answers he gives to them, readers can discern the central principle that defines his views on culture and society: transcendent excellence does exist, poetry is where it can be found, and people should strive to honor it. In a nutshell, Arnold argues that poetry is a uniquely excellent art form and that, due to its virtues, it has a "high destiny" in human affairs; since this destiny touches on the highest aspirations of human beings, nothing but the highest standards will do, and readers must train themselves to uphold these standards. It is this task that Arnold offers to train readers to develop.

Arnold begins explaining this vital task—learning to discern the excellent qualities in poetry—by distinguishing the true estimate of a poem's worth (Arnold's argument assumes that a given poem has a single true worth that can be accurately discerned). The way to find this true estimate is from first identifying two *false* estimates. The true estimate is called the real estimate, and the false estimates are called the historic estimate and the personal estimate. According to Arnold, the real estimate is the only true determination of a poem's value; he also insists that the real estimate determines whether or not a poem belongs to the highest echelon of poetry, believing that the only reason to read poetry in the first place is to engage with the greatest works humanity can possibly offer.

The historic estimate of a poem, on the other hand, comes from its importance as a historical object: for example, this estimate is tied to the poem's place in the development of a language, a poetic movement, or various historical events. Arnold makes it clear that, whatever virtues attach to this historic estimate, it must be distinguished from the real estimate, which is timeless. Likewise, the personal estimate comes from individual tastes and preferences: this estimate is tied to the reader's likes and dislikes—considerations that Arnold thinks must, like the historic estimate, be divorced from the kind of considerations that go into arriving at the real estimate of a poem. Arnold gives the example of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, whose work tends to be dear to the Scottish but falls short of the highest echelon of greatness in a broader sense.

What, then, decides the real estimate of a poem's value, and how can a reader arrive at this estimate? In addition to typical poetic virtues such as beauty, rhythm, and inventiveness, Arnold describes an important element that characterizes poems of the highest worth and that readers must learn to recognize. He calls this element high seriousness. Arnold traces his concept of high seriousness to Aristotle, who valued poetry over history for its "higher truth and a higher seriousness." Arnold is somewhat vague about what this high seriousness consists of, but it is clear from an example he gives from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* that it involves treating the most important matters—such as fate and free will—with the gravity of a poet who really appreciates the significance of such themes.

Arnold's term for the way a poet approaches such things is criticism of life. The criticism of life in the work of a humorous poet like Chaucer or a prosaic poet like Dryden, Arnold argues, does not have the high seriousness that the work of Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, or Milton has. Indeed, the way to arrive at the real estimate of a poem, Arnold clarifies, is to constantly compare a given poem to the works of these poets, a procedure that Arnold demonstrates in his essay. If it matches the artistic greatness and high seriousness of poetry by Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton, then it is poetry of the first rank—if not, then it is probably not worth spending much time on, in Arnold's view.

Arnold closes his essay by returning to the prediction he made in the beginning: poetry's "high destiny" in human affairs will ensure that it never fades or perishes, and if it seems at times that society turns away from poetry, this is only temporary, since human beings will always return to poetry in times of great need.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Matthew Arnold – Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) was an English poet and literary critic. While his poems were generally

well regarded in his lifetime and are considered a leading example of Victorian-era lyric poetry, he is now best known for his social criticism, in which he attempted to reconcile the values of high culture with the modernizing forces of the 19th century. His career exemplified the tensions he tried to resolve in his creative works: as a school inspector, he worked to improve public education in England; as a poet and critic, he appealed to his compatriots to uphold the highest standards of classical culture. In "The Study of Poetry," written as the introduction to an anthology of English poetry published in 1880 and now frequently anthologized itself, Arnold argues that poetry offers all human beings a unique source of consolation in a changing world—but that readers must seek out the very best poetry in order to truly enjoy its benefits.

Homer – Homer (8th century B.C.E) was the ancient Greek figure credited with composing *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, epic poems that are considered foundational works in Western culture. For Matthew Arnold, Homer's works are poetry of the highest value and paragons of epic verse—works of high seriousness and timeless aesthetic merit. Arnold uses an example from *The Iliad* to demonstrate that the *Song of Roland* does not belong to the first rank of poetry.

Dante Alighieri – Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) was an Italian poet and the author of *The Divine Comedy*, a narrative poem that is considered the greatest poetic work in the Italian language. According to Matthew Arnold, Dante's work was "the first literature of modern Europe to strike the true and grand note" and is a paradigmatic example of Arnold's concept of high seriousness. What distinguishes Dante's work from that of lesser poets, in Arnold's view, is its capacity to give readers consolation and matter for contemplation in life's difficult moments.

William Shakespeare – William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was an English poet and playwright who is often considered the supreme poet and dramatist of the English language. Matthew Arnold produces extracts from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Hamlet* as examples of poetry that offers the high seriousness he considers characteristic of the greatest works of poetry.

John Milton – John Milton (1608–1674) was an English poet and the author of *Paradise Lost*, a foundational work of English poetry. Milton is held out by Matthew Arnold as an example of an undisputed classic poet—a poet whose work exhibits high seriousness and can serve as a point of comparison in order to arrive at the real estimate of other poems.

William Wordsworth – William Wordsworth (1770–1850) was an English poet of the Romantic period. Matthew Arnold is complimentary of Wordsworth's poetry but stops short of praising it outright. Arnold uses Wordsworth's definition of poetry—namely, that it is the "breath and finer spirit of all knowledge"—in order to introduce his idea that science cannot proceed without poetry's influence.

Geoffrey Chaucer – Geoffrey Chaucer (1340s–1400) was an English poet and the author of the *Canterbury Tales*. A highly regarded poet in the English canon, Chaucer is used by Matthew Arnold as a test case for arriving at the real estimate of a poem. According to Arnold, Chaucer's work lacks the high seriousness required of poetry of the very highest quality.

Robert Burns – Robert Burns (1759–1796) was a Scottish poet who is considered the national poet of Scotland. Matthew Arnold looks closely at Burns's verse, which he clearly admires, and explains why it falls short of the high seriousness required of poetry of the first rank. Arnold points to Burns's verse as an example of poetry that is especially likely to be subject to the personal estimate, since Scottish readers are likely to be especially fond of it and to overlook its flaws.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Saint Beuve – Saint Beuve (1804–1869) was a French literary critic. Matthew Arnold uses the example of Saint Beuve's conversation with Napoleon Bonaparte to introduce the idea that poetry is no place for charlatanism.

Napoleon Bonaparte – Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) was Emperor of the French. Matthew Arnold writes of Napoleon in connection with Saint Beuve to demonstrate that, in contrast to politics, the realm of poetry does not welcome charlatans.

Charles d'Héricault – Charles d'Héricault (1823–1899) was a French literary critic. Matthew Arnold rejects d'Héricault's idea that readers should strive to strip great poets of their deity-like status. On the contrary, Arnold argues, readers should appreciate the difference between the truly great poets and the others.

M. Vitet – Ludovic Vitet (1802–1873) was a French politician and literary critic. Matthew Arnold dismisses Vitet's praise of the *Song of Roland* as excessive, an example of the fallacy of the historic estimate supplanting the real estimate of a poem.

John Dryden – John Dryden (1631–1700) was an English poet and literary critic. Matthew Arnold professes admiration for Dryden's verse, which he praises as exemplary verse for the epoch of prose, before concluding that it falls short of the standard of classic poetry.

Alexander Pope – Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was an English poet. Like John Dryden, Pope is considered by Matthew Arnold to be an exemplary poet of the prose era, but not a truly great poet.

Thomas Gray – Thomas Gray (1716–1771) was an English poet. Matthew Arnold admits that Gray approaches the standard of the great poets, specifically because he models his verse so closely on theirs.

Percy Bysshe Shelley – Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was an English poet of the Romantic era. Matthew Arnold mentions Shelley as an example of a poet who, being so close in

time to Arnold's present, was likely to be read under the influence of the personal estimate instead of the real estimate.

Lord Byron – Lord Byron (1788–1824) was an English poet of the Romantic era. Like Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth, Lord Byron is considered too close to the present time (in Matthew Arnold's day) to safely arrive at a real estimate of his poetry.

TERMS

Criticism of Life – **Arnold** introduces the term "criticism of life" to describe a poet's fundamental attitude towards the most significant matters in life: love, death, fate, free will, etc. In Arnold's critical system, a poet's criticism of life is significant because it is in the criticism of life that a truly great poet exhibits high seriousness—the main criterion, in Arnold's view, for a poet's worth. Arnold's example of a poet whose criticism of life exemplifies high seriousness is **Dante**, whose *Divine Comedy* strikes "the true and grand note." **Chaucer**, on the other hand, offers a more earthbound criticism of life that, for all his virtues as a poet, falls short of the high seriousness of a poet like Dante.

High Seriousness – "High seriousness" is Arnold's term for the most important feature of truly great poetry. A work with high seriousness presents a criticism of life that is capable of reaching the highest aspirations human beings are capable of. While Arnold is somewhat vague about what high seriousness consists of, he is very clear about which poets possess it: **Homer**, **Dante**, **Shakespeare**, and **Milton**. The work of these poets, Arnold argues, is characterized by a "high and excellent seriousness" that "gives to our spirits what they can rest upon." Thus, high seriousness is connected to Arnold's conception of poetry's "high destiny" as the ultimate source of consolation for human beings.

Historic Estimate – The "historic estimate" is **Arnold**'s term for an evaluation of a poem that is based not on the poem's timeless features or its presence or lack of high seriousness, but instead on its place in linguistic, artistic, or cultural history. According to Arnold, readers who are dealing with texts of distant eras or places are especially prone to falling into the fallacy of relying on a historical estimate. Arnold concedes that the *Song of Roland* is important for historical reasons, for example, but denies that it is worthy of the status of epic poetry, a status reserved for a poet like **Homer**. Thus, it is important not to let the historic estimate of the *Song of Roland* overshadow the real estimate, which shows that it is not of the first rank.

Personal Estimate – The "personal estimate" of a poem, according to **Arnold**, is the evaluation of a poem that a reader might arrive at by relying on personal tastes and predilections rather than the criteria of truly great poetry (especially high seriousness). Arnold gives the example of **Robert Burns**: a Scottish reader might value the poetry of Robert Burns especially highly, since Burns writes of Scottish life so movingly—but it would be a fallacy, in Arnold's view, to classify Burns as a poet of the first rank as a result of this fondness. Arnold points out that the closer a poet is to the reader's own time and place, the more likely the personal estimate is to interfere with the real estimate.

Real Estimate – The "real estimate" is **Arnold**'s term for the true evaluation of a poem's worth, which is a product of its aesthetic features and the fact that its criticism of life is based on high seriousness. One of the central purposes of "The Study of Poetry" is to show readers how to arrive at the real estimate of a poem, a task of particular importance for Arnold, since readers must be able to distinguish between truly great poetry and merely good poetry—this ability to distinguish the great from the good is important if poetry is to fulfill the "high destiny" that Arnold thinks it should fulfill. Arnold's method for arriving at the real estimate of a poem is to compare a given poem to the poems of the classic poets **Homer**, **Dante**, **Shakespeare**, and **Milton**, whose works have the timeless features that enable them to be enduring sources of comfort for human beings.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POETRY AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

"The Study of Poetry" was first published as Arnold's introduction to an anthology of English poetry, and its primary purpose is to provide readers with a method for distinguishing what Arnold calls "classic" poetry from poetry that is merely good or—worse—inferior. Underlying Arnold's project in this essay is the idea that poetry has something special to offer readers and a special role in human affairs, which Arnold describes as poetry's high destiny.

Arnold's reverence for poetry and its virtues might seem extreme to modern readers: he asserts boldly that poetry is destined to be the supreme "consolation" for human beings, who will "turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." While Arnold is deliberately vague about what qualities "classic" poetry has that give it this unique power, as well as about *how*, exactly, poetry provides people with such rewarding "consolation," it is clear from his argument that he views poetry as fulfilling a vital function that science, religion,

and philosophy cannot perform.

To that end, Arnold notes that our world is increasingly governed by facts. Science advances with the gathering of facts and tends to expand into more and more areas of human life. According to Arnold, even religion and philosophy, which formerly nurtured "ideas," now offer little more than "reasonings" to people. Arnold argues that poetry will fill the gap formed by these receding institutions: "Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion will be replaced by poetry." In this way, Arnold makes it clear that there are strivings of the human spirit that only poetry can support and that, furthermore, this support is therapeutic. Arnold's essay is shot through with a nostalgia and melancholia, and readers will rightly note that Arnold seems to view poetry as a balm for his own misgivings about the modern world. This forlorn aspect produces the essay's final prediction that poetry will remain extremely important simply because human beings have "the instinct of self-preservation" and will inevitably need to turn to poetry for its invaluable and sustaining properties.

EXCELLENCE AND INFERIORITY

"The Study of Poetry" is an old-fashioned essay in many ways, and Arnold might seem especially old-fashioned in his unwavering insistence that readers not only *can* distinguish excellent works from inferior ones but that they *must* do so. Indeed, "The Study of Poetry" is constructed around this principle, since it is primarily a guide to distinguishing "poetry of a high order of excellence" from other kinds of poetry, such as the merely good and the poor.

Readers must cultivate this ability, Arnold argues, because of poetry's high destiny, which can only be fulfilled by poetry of the highest sort and which in turn demands that well-trained readers have the highest standards. In short, excellence requires excellence, and Arnold has no doubt that his standards are the only true standards. Of course, for some poets and poems to be excellent, others must be inferior, and Arnold spends a good portion of the essay explaining why certain highly regarded poets, such as John Dryden and Robert Burns, fall short of meeting the standard of the "truly classic" (it's worth noting here that when he says "classic," he isn't referring to a certain historical period). Arnold's method for demonstrating these poets' inferiority rests on juxtaposing their works with works that are truly excellent, such as verses by Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton. At times, Arnold seems to acknowledge the obvious objection that excellence depends to some extent on taste, but he brushes this aside by continuously returning to these "classic" poets, whose work contains "the true and grand note." Arnold returns to this distinction throughout the essay, suggesting that readers must be uncompromising when reading poetry. In his rebuttal to those who might object to his evaluation of Burns's poetry, he writes, "The compensation for admiring such passages less [...] will be that we shall admire more the poetry where that [perfect poetic] accent is found." Thus, Arnold is adamant that, if readers work hard enough to familiarize themselves with truly good poetry, excellence can be distinguished from inferiority and that readers must adhere to this standard to understand poetry properly.

REASON VS. EMOTION

Alongside his distinction between truly "classic" poetry and poetry of a lesser rank, Arnold's argument relies on another, subtler distinction between reason and emotion—which he equates in the essay with prose and poetry, respectively. Arnold begins his essay by declaring that, in a world increasingly devoted to "the fact," poetry is destined to be the supreme source of comfort and culture for modern people. In this way, Arnold implies a dichotomy between reason and emotional experience, which is the realm of poetry. This dichotomy runs throughout the essay, from Arnold's argument that "science will appear incomplete" without poetry to his final claim that people will return to poetry not by "deliberate and conscious choice" (reason) but "by something far deeper" (an emotional need). This distinction comes out most clearly in Arnold's discussion of John Dryden, whom he calls "the inaugurator of an age of prose and reason." Dryden, in Arnold's view, cannot be considered a "classic" poet because he emerged from a culture that valued prose's "regularity, uniformity, precision, balance" more than poetry's "largeness, freedom, insight, benignity"—qualities that, according to Arnold, are lacking from Dryden's verse. In this way, Dryden can be said to embody the dichotomy that Arnold relies on in "The Study of Poetry": though he "may in a certain sense be [a] master of the art of versification," which is to say of poetry's rational side, his poems lack the emotional scope that Arnold sees as integral to poetry of the highest rank.

ELITISM, DEMOCRACY, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Arnold's primary argument in "The Study of Poetry" is fundamentally an elitist one: reading poetry, he claims, is a better way of spending one's time than other, more popular pursuits, and within poetry itself there is a group of "classic" poets, such as Dante and Shakespeare, who are to be regarded as clearly superior to all others. What's more, Arnold makes it clear that it is not enough simply to read poetry in order to receive its benefits; one must hold oneself to the highest standards and constantly return to "poetry of a high order of excellence." Indeed, Arnold even implies that schooling itself is not the way to become a true reader of poetry, since it causes students to spend too much time learning the "groundwork" and not enough time enjoying "the best"—perhaps implying that one must somehow have a natural

proclivity toward understanding and appreciating poetry.

On the other hand, Arnold clearly views the spread of democratic values—and the "dissolution" of tradition that he sees as accompanying them—with apprehension. He takes a somewhat dim view of the masses and the popular culture that they enjoy, noting, "We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature," and that such readers are not likely to be readers of poetry. Still, Arnold does not have outright contempt for these masses and their popular culture; he merely reserves the right to enjoy poetry on his own terms and argues that eventually others will, by necessity, come around to his way of thinking. Thus, Arnold's juxtaposition of poetry as an elite pursuit with democratic culture is not necessarily a hostile pairing but can be seen as an expression of his aspiration for a nobler culture—an idea that requires the survival of an elite, noble ideal.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE RIVER OF POETRY

Matthew Arnold uses the "the world-river of poetry" to refer to the Western tradition of poetry, dating back to the time of Homer and spanning all national traditions. In Arnold's telling, this great tradition is the "mighty river" itself, and each national tradition—such as the English tradition Arnold focuses on in "The Study of Poetry"—is a tributary that feeds the "world-river." Arnold's use of this term emphasizes the universal, international character of poetry, as he sees it: all human beings can appreciate Homer, regardless of what countries they come from, and all human beings can write poetry that will flow into the great "world-river." In addition, the river flows as the tradition of poetry moves forward into the future in an unstoppable manner, an idea that symbolically resonates with Arnold's vision for poetry's "high destiny."

THE TOUCHSTONE

Matthew Arnold uses the term "touchstone" to symbolically represent lines of truly good poetry by poets like Homer or Dante Alighieri. Historically speaking, a "touchstone" was a piece of jasper that was used to test the purity of gold. In the context of this essay, then, Arnold uses it to embody the idea of comparison, proposing that great works of poetry can act as touchstones that will help readers test other works in order to arrive at the real estimate of the poems in question. If readers always have lines of classic poetry in their head, they can compare those lines with whatever they're reading and, in this way, determine whether or not what they're reading is genuinely good or not. Arnold's use of this term is related to his conviction that excellent poetry is different from inferior poetry (by virtue of its high seriousness), just as gold is different from other elements. Furthermore, the idea of the touchstone underscores just how valuable Arnold thinks great poetry is—so valuable, it seems, that it's comparable to a material that determines the quality of gold.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose* published in 2015.

The Study of Poetry Quotes

'The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.'

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

The quotation with which Matthew Arnold begins his essay—a quotation from one of his own earlier essays, the introduction to a series titled *The Hundred Greatest Men*—introduces two ideas that are central to Arnold's argument and purpose in "The Study of Poetry": that the modern age is one of shaken faith, discredited dogma, and weakened tradition, and that the remedy for the anguish caused by these conditions will be found in poetry.

Arnold's language in this quotation, which is characteristic of his self-assured, grandiloquent tone in general, also makes it clear that he sees these problems, along with poetry's role in remedying them, in categorical terms. Arnold does not write that *some* "creed[s]" are shaken; he writes that *all* "creed[s]" are shaken. He does not write that poetry has a bright future; he writes that its future is "immense." Arnold tends to take the grandest view of cultural conflict, which is consistent with his argument that only the most excellent poetry can fulfill poetry's destiny, which is the most excellent destiny. The ideas introduced in

this quotation and the language they are introduced with are intended to persuade the reader that the stakes being discussed in "The Study of Poetry" are very high indeed.

> In the present work it is the course of one great contributory stream to the world-river of poetry that we are invited to follow. We are here invited to study the stream of English poetry. But whether we set ourselves, as here, to follow only one of the several streams that make the mighty river of poetry, or whether we seek to know them all, our governing thought should be the same. We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more lightly that it has been the custom to conceive of it.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

After introducing the primary themes of "The Study of Poetry"—namely, poetry's "high destiny" and its unique capacity to be a consolation in difficult times—Arnold turns to the ostensible purpose of the essay, which is to introduce an anthology of English poetry. Here, Arnold seeks to define the place of English poetry in the history of poetry in general and to emphasize his conviction that, whether one is reading within a single national tradition or across world literature, one must take the same approach, since there is only one true approach to getting the full benefit from reading poetry. In this way, Arnold makes the case that poetry is a unified art form spanning the whole history of Western culture and that the method of reading he intends to share with readers will serve them equally well in all cases—it is a universal key.

Arnold's use of the image of the "world-river of poetry" is a subtle device to make these points clear. This symbol suggests that the tributaries of the national poetic traditions (such as the English tradition) are significant but that they are subordinate to the greater body of world literature, which belongs to all peoples; moreover, the "world-river of poetry" is not a small stream but a "mighty river" that rushes into the future—a future in which poetry will play a supreme role in supporting human flourishing. Finally, Arnold emphasizes that, no matter what aspect of the "world-river" one is studying, one must "conceive of poetry worthily"—a nod to the high standards of reading Arnold is preparing to set before readers.

> More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. For finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry 'the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.'

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker), William Wordsworth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 327-328

Explanation and Analysis

Having addressed the purpose of "The Study of Poetry" and defined the place of English poetry in the greater body of world poetry, Arnold returns to the ideas he began the essay with, noting that humanity will soon find that it "has to turn to poetry" for consolation and sustenance and that other important human institutions, including science, are incomplete without poetry. Thus, Arnold reiterates his view that poetry has a unique relationship to the human spirit. Furthermore, he implies that the poetic faculty in human beings is separate from—and necessary to—the faculty of reason.

It is clear from Arnold's description of the role poetry will fulfill for humanity that he sees it as a therapeutic one: poetry is not meant to entertain people, or to delight them; it is meant to "interpret life" for us and to "console" and "sustain us." It's worth noting that Arnold's conception implies a tragic, pessimistic view of the development of society. He seems certain that there is something about modern life that damages human beings and that it is only likely to get worse going forward. The only bright spot in this dark picture, for Arnold, is that poetry will be there for us and that people will finally realize this fact.

Poetry will not be restricted to a therapeutic role, however; Arnold's vision for poetry's role in human affairs touches on scientific progress as well. According to Arnold, science (which is to say *reason*) relies on the imaginative impulse and passion provided by poetry to move forward. Without these things, it is "incomplete." Thus, Arnold suggests poetry is not

simply an emotional support but a key ingredient in scientific progress.

> In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honour, that charlatanism shall find no entrance; that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable. Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true. It is charlatanism, conscious or unconscious, whenever we confuse or obliterate these.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

After establishing that poetry is destined to play a unique role in human affairs, Arnold turns to the threat posed to poetry by charlatanism, which can be defined as the use of tricks or deceit to gain undeserved advantage. Charlatanism might be tolerable in some spheres—Arnold introduces an anecdote involving Napoleon to show that it is common in politics—but it is not tolerated in poetry, to which, Arnold declares grandly, it "shall find no entrance."

Arnold's diatribe against charlatanism demonstrates the importance of high standards to his view of poetry's role in the world. If poetry is to fulfill its high destiny, then it must be excellent poetry; but we can only count on having excellent poetry if we are able to recognize it when we see it and to distinguish it from the inferior kinds. This distinction—the distinction between the excellent and the inferior—is at the core of "The Study of Poetry": all of the examples of poems Arnold includes in the essay are intended to show readers how to make it. Arnold's attack on charlatanism is thus the inverse side of his argument for high standards.

It is also worth noting that Arnold offers a definition of poetry here, almost as an aside: "poetry… is thought and art in one." This definition aligns with the superior role in cultural life that Arnold assigns to poetry, superior even to that of science. Poetry, according to this definition, might be said to unify both reason (thought) and emotion (art) and thus represent, for Arnold, an elevated mode of inhabiting the world.

> The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry, is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticizing it; in short, to over-rate it.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 329-330

Explanation and Analysis

Arnold discusses the fallacy he calls the "historic estimate" after his attack on charlatanism and his reiteration of the idea that, when it comes to poetry, only the best will do. This leads him to identify two fallacies that must be avoided. In particular, he identifies the "historic estimate" as a type of fallacy that is especially tempting to readers of anthologies, since anthologies often present the "course of development" of an art form. (Recall that "The Study of Poetry" was written as the introduction to an anthology of English poetry.)

Arnold is quick to acknowledge that this "course of development" is "profoundly interesting," but he is adamant that this interest can cause readers to "use a language of quite exaggerated praise" in speaking of a poem's virtues when it occupies an important place historically. Since Arnold has just warned readers against charlatanism—which he equated with the confusion or eradication of the distinction between the excellent and the inferior—it is clear that he views this tendency to "over-rate" historically important poems as a pitfall, the dangers of which he will demonstrate repeatedly in "The Study of Poetry." The main idea underlying Arnold's discussion of this fallacy is that the excellent must at all costs be distinguished from the inferior, and that the forces threatening to dissolve these distinctions must be resisted.

> Then, again, a poet or a poem may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance. Here also we over-rate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise which is quite exaggerated.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining how the "historic estimate" can lead to a false evaluation of a poem's value, Arnold turns to the "personal estimate," another fallacy that is to be avoided when reading poetry. This fallacy is based on the "personal affinities, likings, and circumstances" readers bring to the enjoyment of poetry: their language and dialect, their national origin, their favorite topics, their favorite landscapes, their hobbies, etc.

As with the "historic estimate," the problem with the "personal estimate"—and, for Arnold, it is a significant problem—is that it hinders the reader's ability to arrive at the "real estimate" (the genuine value) of a given poem. Thus, it is a relative of charlatanism. (There are few things that Arnold has more contempt for in "The Study of Poetry" than "a language of praise which is quite exaggerated.") Once again, Arnold's purpose in "The Study of Poetry" is to show readers how to distinguish between the excellent and the inferior, so the "personal estimate" must be avoided.

Like Arnold's conception of world literature, both the fallacy of the "historic estimate" and the fallacy of the "personal estimate" presuppose a universal approach to reading poetry that essentially eliminates individual characteristics. According to Arnold, two readers with opposite tastes will, if they are reading properly, arrive at the same judgment of a poem's worth. This idea aligns with Arnold's overall argument that excellent poetry must be distinguished from inferior poetry, and that what makes it excellent can be indisputably discerned.

> But if [the poet] is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best (for this is the true and right meaning of the word *classic*, *classical*), then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from the study of poetry.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 331

Explanation and Analysis

Arnold introduces his concept of the "real estimate," his term for the genuine value of a poem, after describing the fallacies of the "historic" and "personal" estimates, which refer to readers' tendency to overrate historically important and personally significant works, respectively. Arnold suggests that the "real estimate" is timeless and beyond individual preference. This is Arnold's principal goal for readers of "The Study of Poetry": namely, to be able to distinguish between excellent and inferior works.

In this quotation, Arnold also explicitly ties the ability to "enjoy [a] work as deeply as ever we can" with the full benefits he has described as belonging to poetry alone: "this is what is salutary, this is what is formative." Arnold views poetry as the artform destined to provide a unique consolation to humanity in an era of change and diminished hopes; but it can only do this if readers seek out the very best poetry, a task that requires them to arrive at the "real estimate." Here, Arnold makes it a bit clearer what this process involves: reading the truly great poets as if their work belonged to another, higher plane.

> Only one thing we may add to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle's profound observation that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness... Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker), Homer, Dante Alighieri , William Shakespeare , John Milton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

After describing the various mistakes that readers should try to avoid in evaluating poems—and after giving some examples of both excellent and inferior works—Arnold arrives at a key point in his exposition of what makes great poetry great: it "possesses a higher truth and a higher seriousness." Arnold borrows this concept from Aristotle, a Greek philosopher of the fourth century BC, and the allusion to history in his definition sheds light on what he

means by it. In contrast to history, which supposedly reveals the truth, poetry has allegiance to "higher truths"—the truths about the most serious questions facing human beings, such as those concerning love, death, fate, and the gods.

Arnold's analysis of "high seriousness" makes it clear that few poets are able to claim it: even Chaucer and Burns, whom Arnold claims to admire, do not meet the standard. In "The Study of Poetry," only Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton are said to possess it. Nevertheless, as Arnold emphasizes, it is this "high seriousness" and the excellence that emerges from it that offer human beings the spiritual sustenance that poetry is uniquely equipped to offer. If this means returning over and over again to the work of a handful of poets to the exclusion of others, Arnold does not object; the trade-off is worth it, in his view, for the unique support these poets offer to troubled souls.

> A fit prose was a necessity; but it was impossible that a fit prose should establish itself among us without some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul. The needful qualities for a fit prose are regularity, uniformity, precision, balance… But an almost exclusive attention to these qualities involves some repression and silencing of poetry.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker), John Dryden , Alexander Pope

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

In his analysis of the poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope, Arnold focuses on their fame as prose writers, and it is in this section that he articulates the differences between prose and poetry, as he sees them, most clearly. Arnold does not dismiss the utility of prose, which he notes is especially necessary in certain historical periods, such as eras when society is too agitated, but he makes it clear that prose isn't conducive to the creation of great poetry and that prose cannot provide the support for humanity that poetry can.

In Arnold's view, prose does not just provide an alternative mode of communication to that provided by poetry; it "represses" and "silences" poetry and conveys a "touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul." As Arnold's analysis of Dryden makes clear, poets who give themselves over to prose-writing risk compromising their poetic gift: they can put words together properly, but what results will lack the characteristics of truly great poetry. Thus, Arnold views prose as something to be wary of—a hostile force in a world that needs poetry.

In addition, Arnold's description emphasizes the harm an excessive reliance on prose can do to the "imaginative life of the soul." It is this soul—troubled by modern life, in need of sustenance—that it is poetry's "high destiny" to support. In Arnold's view, poetry nourishes the soul, while prose chills it.

> We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and could not relish anything better than such literature, and that to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry. Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world, it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself. But it never will lose currency with the world, in spite of momentary appearances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it… by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.

Related Characters: Matthew Arnold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 354

Explanation and Analysis

The closing lines of "The Study of Poetry" contain Matthew Arnold's most direct comment on the state of the world and poetry's place in it. In this comment, readers can discern the key features of Arnold's worldview: his dim view of modern, popular culture; his grand (if somewhat pessimistic) confidence, which informs him that even if he is the last person in the world who likes poetry, it will still be worth reading; and his absolute conviction that, since poetry represents the purest expression of certain fundamental human truths, "self-preservation" will ensure that humanity returns to it.

Arnold is clearly troubled by the direction of popular culture, as his description of it, with his emphasis on "multitudes" and "masses" and the "profitable industry" pumping out this "common sort of literature" makes clear. (Arnold was no fan of industry or the profit motive.) But it is telling, and an important feature of Arnold's view of the human spirit and of poetry's unique connection to it, that he does not let himself lose faith in the eventual triumph of

poetry. On the contrary, he assures readers that "currency and supremacy are insured to it": poetry will win the day. Arnold concludes "The Study of Poetry" on this optimistic, grand note, showing his desire to lend the reader the same certainty he feels about poetry's "high destiny" and the value of reading the classics.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE STUDY OF POETRY

Matthew Arnold quotes one of his own impassioned appeals, published a year prior, for society to give poetry a higher place in human affairs. While this quoted appeal is not specifically concerned with the primary topic of "The Study of Poetry"—what makes a poem good and why reading good poetry is necessary—it lays the foundation for Arnold's arguments by making the case that poetry can be a unique solace in times of uncertainty. Alluding to the diminishing role of religions, creeds, and traditions of all kinds in modern life, Arnold explains that people should look to poetry to fill the gap left by these fading institutions. Religion, especially, Arnold argues, has been weakened by the advances of science; poetry, in contrast, belongs to the realm of ideas, and is thus resistant to the growing influence of the sciences.

Matthew Arnold's long quotation from his own previous essay (another introduction, in this case to the book The Hundred Greatest Men) *reveals two important things about his worldview. First, Arnold is preoccupied with the idea that human beings today need a source of support and consolation in their lives, and he is absolutely certain that poetry can provide it. More than that, he is certain that it is inevitable that poetry will provide it. Second, Arnold considers his era one of declining faith and fading traditions—hence the need for poetry and, it follows, for more attention to the proper ways to read it and reap the benefits of it. Both of these assumptions reveal Arnold's underlying conviction that he was writing in a fallen era, a time of disillusionment and decreasing standards. Much of Arnold's argument and tone can be explained by his posture towards his time, the stance of a man who is determined to defend the idea of "the very best," which he sees in poetry, in a skeptical age. It is telling, also, that Arnold begins his essay with the rather bold decision to quote himself: since he embodies, to some extent, the standards he expects his readers to adopt, it would be false modesty to quote anyone else.*

Matthew Arnold explains that he had a good reason for quoting himself: this idea (that poetry can be a unique solace in a changing world) underlies everything he is going to write about in "The Study of Poetry." Since "The Study of Poetry" was originally published as an introduction to an anthology of English poets, he adds that his task in this essay is specifically to follow one "great contributory stream to the **world-river of poetry**." But whether readers are acquainting themselves with one type of poetry or with poetry of all types, Arnold contends, they should in all cases keep this idea in mind: that poetry has a unique role in modern life.

After acknowledging that it is a bit strange to begin an essay by quoting oneself, Matthew Arnold emphasizes that, in everything that follows, readers must remember the idea that poetry could play a vital role in the drastically changing landscape of society. Everything Arnold will write about in "The Study of Poetry" can be traced back to the supreme place poetry occupies in Arnold's worldview. Next, Arnold addresses the purpose of the anthology that "The Study of Poetry" is intended to introduce, which is to allow readers to study the development of English poetry. Arnold uses the image of a great river (a "world-river") fed by the tributaries of national poetic traditions to suggest to readers how he sees poetry: as a mighty, unstoppable force, always moving forward into the future, and the property of all humankind. This is significant, since some of the poets Arnold will use as touchstones for the highest standards of poetic art are not English but classics from other poetic traditions. Finally, Arnold makes it clear that, while this anthology is dedicated to English poetry, the same standards apply to all poetry regardless of national origin. Thus, Arnold's view of poetry is rooted in a thoroughly international (if Eurocentric) philosophy of art.

Next, Matthew Arnold makes it clear how highly he regards poetry as an art form. His contemporaries have not been thinking of poetry the right way, he argues. It has much more to offer than they give it credit for. In particular, it is "capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it." Arnold predicts that, in the turbulence of modern life, we will come to find that we will have to rely on poetry "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." Poetry will, in other words, become a necessity.

No critical argument like the one Matthew Arnold makes in "The Study of Poetry" occurs in a vacuum, and in this section readers can discern one of the reasons Arnold feels compelled to write the essay in the first place: to correct the prevailing view of poetry, which does not give it enough credit for its potential to elevate human life. Arnold's reply to those who underrate poetry's value reveals his rather utilitarian view of poetry (in other words, it is valuable because it is useful), as well as his fondness for spatial metaphors—in particular, equating the best with "the highest." Arnold's explanation of the specific "higher uses" that he foresees human beings turning to poetry for shows that, for him, poetry has a therapeutic function: it is destined to "console" and "sustain" readers for whom the modern world is a source of distress.

Matthew Arnold goes on to argue that even science, seemingly the opposite of poetry, will need poetry to continue developing. Without poetry, he writes, science will be incomplete. Arnold cites the English poet William Wordsworth, who asserted that poetry is "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science"—in other words, poetry embodies the spirit of discovery and the passion for knowledge. Going further still, Arnold writes that religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry, since they are also becoming more and more based on reasoning rather than faith or mysticism, though with less success than the hard sciences. Soon religion and philosophy will serve no real purpose, Arnold claims, and people will wonder why they trusted these two old disciplines before turning to poetry for what philosophy and religion used to supply.

This section helps readers understand more clearly how Arnold understands poetry's "higher destinies," which he sees as its unique and irreplaceable function in the world. While the idea that poetry plays a fundamental role in scientific progress might seem strange to many, Arnold makes it clear that poetry is what drives the sense of curiosity and passion that move science forward. His use of Wordsworth's metaphor illustrates the relationship between science and poetry in his conception: science provides the facts, while poetry provides the "impassioned expression" that science relies on to convey its advances to the world. Thus, Arnold clearly acknowledges the important role science plays in the modern world, but the same cannot be said for religion and philosophy, which, according to Arnold's argument, offer neither the usefulness of science nor the consolation of poetry. Underlying this discussion is the idea that reason (science) is necessary but ultimately incomplete without emotion (poetry), which is the more important member of the partnership. Religion and philosophy, meeting the needs of neither reason nor emotion, are essentially useless in Arnold's worldview.


Matthew Arnold goes on to explain that there is a corollary to the argument he has been making about poetry's "high destiny": if people are going to be turning to poetry to meet all these needs—to keep science moving forward and to replace religion and philosophy—it will have to be "poetry of a high order of excellence." The standard for what counts as true poetry will have to be very high. For this reason, he asserts, readers must learn to discern good poetry from bad poetry and hold themselves to a "high standard" of critical judgment.

In this section, Arnold refines his conception of poetry's "high destiny" by adding the condition that only poetry of the highest quality can fully live up to this potential. In this way, Arnold introduces another idea that will be key to the argument he makes in "The Study of Poetry": that excellent poetry is different from inferior poetry, and that it is the reader's duty to keep such distinctions in mind. As before, Arnold uses spatial terms to describe the very best—only poetry of a "high order of excellence," held to the highest standards, can fulfill poetry's "high destiny." Arnold's view of poetry and the human flourishing it enables is a lofty one, as he believes that great poetry takes place on a higher plane than that of normal life.

Matthew Arnold illustrates what he means by these rigorous standards with an anecdote about an exchange between the literary critic Sainte Beuve and Napoleon Bonaparte. When Napoleon hears someone spoken of as a charlatan, he accepts that the person might in fact be a charlatan, but counters that charlatanism (the use of tricks and deception to gain undeserved advantage) is everywhere. Sainte Beuve replies that this might be true in politics and government, but that charlatanism can have no place in the world of eternal art and thought, since the "noble portion of man's being" is "inviolable." Arnold adds that Sainte Beuve describes the situation well, and that readers should keep this idea in mind: that there are some things, such as poetry, that cannot tolerate charlatanism.

Arnold uses this anecdote about Napoleon and Sainte Beuve to illustrate his distinction between excellent and inferior poetry. While it might be impossible (or pointless) to distinguish between charlatanism and genuine greatness in the world of politics, it is necessary and inevitable to do so in the world of poetry. In other words, excellent poetry exists, and it is the reader's duty to distinguish between the work of charlatan poets and the work of truly great poets. Arnold's anecdote, which is based on the contrast between the wily cynicism of Napoleon and the lofty standards of the critic Sainte Beuve (who sounds much like Arnold himself), also implies that the critics Arnold is arguing against share Napoleon's cheerful tolerance for charlatanism.

Matthew Arnold specifies that charlatanism poses a specific threat to poetry: it causes people, whether willingly or not, to confuse good poetry with bad poetry. Charlatanism weakens or removes altogether the distinctions that matter in reading poetry: the distinctions between excellent qualities and poor qualities, between sound ideas and unsound ideas, and between truths and half-truths. This is especially impermissible with regard to poetry, since poetry will only be able to fulfill its high destiny if it is accompanied by a proper criticism of life, Arnold's term for the moral force and profound truths the greatest poetry offers. Poetry that lacks this "criticism of life" and that, due to charlatanism or inattention, advances half-truths or unsound ideas, will not fulfill poetry's destiny of providing the ultimate support in a complex world where other consolations have failed. Readers owe it to themselves to reject charlatanism and insist on poetry that offers a true "criticism of life" based on sound ideas.

By firmly rejecting charlatanism in poetry—an idea he defines as abolishing or undermining the difference between the excellent and the inferior, between the sound and the unsound—Arnold continues to develop the concept of the excellent and makes it clear that it is up to readers to defend the excellent from the inferior. Arnold explains that the difference between excellent and inferior poetry is the difference between a sound idea and an unsound idea, and he introduces the concept of "criticism of life," which is his way of articulating the profound moral wisdom poetry offers readers. Thus, the picture of what Arnold expects readers to take away from "The Study of Poetry" continues to become clearer: poetry offers the supreme consolation, in the form of a unique "criticism of life," but readers can only benefit from this if they reject charlatanism and insist on excellence.

Matthew Arnold returns to one of the purposes of this essay, which is to introduce an anthology of English poets. A collection of poems like the one this essay introduces, he writes, can offer a valuable service to readers, since it can give them a better sense of "the best in poetry." However, there is a problem with anthologies: instead of the real estimate of "the best in poetry," they can give readers false standards of judgment. The two false estimates readers must avoid, Arnold notes, are the historic estimate and the personal estimate.

After calling on readers to reject charlatanism, Arnold turns to two other dangers that could potentially deflect readers from their pursuit of the excellent. Thus, Arnold continues to make it clear that the pursuit of the excellent—the only path to full enjoyment of poetry's unique virtues—depends on the reader's vigilance. In addition, by pointing out that such dangers are inherent in anthologies—a type of book that many readers are likely to view as harmless—Arnold continues to position himself as a critic who goes against convention and stands alone against the erosion of standards he warns readers against.

The historic estimate may seem appealing because, as Matthew Arnold admits, the historical development of a language (such as English) and an art form (such as poetry) is indeed interesting. Anthologies covering large time spans allow readers to consider poems next to other poems from other eras and thus encourage readers to think of poets and their works as stages in the evolution of an art form. This, Arnold contends, often causes us to overrate poets from the past. Poems that play an important role in the development of poetry may seem more important, in retrospect, than they actually are, according to the standards of pure poetry.

While Arnold acknowledges that taking an interest in the historical value of a poem—as opposed to its genuine poetic value—is natural, he makes it clear that this tendency is an obstacle to the reader's task of distinguishing the excellent from the inferior. Indeed, the pursuit of the excellent is what the reader must constantly keep in mind; the temptation to place too much interest on historical matters ultimately leads to charlatanism by effectively elevating the inferior to the same level as the excellent—a grave mistake, according to Arnold.

The other fallacy Matthew Arnold warns readers about is the personal estimate. Readers naturally gravitate towards poets they are fond of, and this fondness can cause them to rate these poets and their works more highly than they actually merit. These poems might be of great importance to the reader, but that does not mean they are of great importance in themselves. Readers have a tendency to "apply [to such poems] a language of praise which is quite exaggerated," and Arnold seeks to warn them about this fallacy.

Not only must readers avoid placing too much importance on the historical estimate of a poem, but they must also resist the temptation to assume that works that appeal to them on a personal level automatically count as great poetry. Arnold warns that confusion in this area leads to "exaggerated" praise for certain works. Thus, the defense of the excellent from the inferior requires readers to set their personal inclinations aside and to recall at all times the true high standards of excellence Arnold lays out in "The Study of Poetry."

On the other hand, these fallacies are natural, Matthew Arnold reassures readers. Nothing is more natural, when reading an anthology, to pause over poems that one would not ordinarily spend any time on, or to think oneself an expert on obscure poets and then to chide the public for not taking an interest in them. Arnold points out that French critics of his era committed this error, in a way, by underrating an important genre of early French poetry, the court tragedy. While this genre is flawed, Arnold concedes, a French critic named Charles d'Héricault gets it wrong when he argues that the canonization of this early poetry has prevented critics from appraising it accurately. Arnold produces a long quote from d'Héricault's argument, noting that there is much truth to what d'Héricault writes but that he goes too far in rejecting the idea of poetic greatness.

While it might be natural for a reader to yield to the temptation of the historic estimate, it is still a mistake, since it hinders the reader's ability to distinguish the excellent from the inferior. Arnold uses the example of d'Héricault to illustrate all the forces that can push a reader towards the historic estimate and away from the real estimate. According to Arnold, the genre of court poetry was first underrated, then overrated, and then underrated again by d'Héricault, who rightfully argued against canonization but went too far in rejecting the possibility of true excellence. Arnold chooses this example because it makes it clear that avoiding the historic estimate is not always simply a matter of checking one's own interest in historical matters; one must be conscious of the larger critical trends that might impact the evaluation of a poem.

The reason Charles d'Héricault goes too far, Matthew Arnold argues, is because a truly great poet should indeed be treated differently from other, lesser poets. Greatness must be recognized; if a great poet seems distant and godlike, that's the way it should be. If a poet is weak, or falsely categorized with the great, then by all means, Arnold writes, readers can dispense with her or him. But if the poet belongs to the highest echelon, then the right thing to do, in Arnold's view, is to "feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character." Indeed, to do anything different is a hindrance to the task readers should set themselves, which is to understand the great poets' work as deeply as possible.

Arnold continues to develop the idea of the excellent and the inferior by explaining how the idea applies to poets. When it comes to truly great poets, he suggests, the danger is not in overestimating them, as d'Héricault argues, but in underestimating *them. Thus, Arnold implies that the difference between excellent and inferior poets is not one of degree but of kind. Excellent poets belong to one class, while inferior poets belong to a separate, lower class. Keeping this distinction clearly in mind will allow readers to enjoy great poets' work as "deeply" as possible and to appreciate the "wide difference" that separates it from inferior work. Anything tending to erase or diminish this "wide difference," as d'Héricault's argument does, is a hindrance to the reader's task.*

This is not to say, Arnold clarifies, that there is no room for negative criticism in appraising the work of great poets. If a poet's work falls below the highest standard, then this should be pointed out. However, this negative criticism, along with the work of exploring the minutiae of a writer's life, should be subordinated to the reader's primary task, which is "to have a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of what is truly excellent." Arnold acknowledges that some might argue that the more we know about a great poet's life, the better, but this is flawed reasoning, he replies: life is not long enough to get bogged down in details of secondary importance when there is great poetry to be read. Things would be different "if we lived as long as Methuselah," he writes, but in our limited time on earth we owe it to ourselves to enjoy the best. Instead of creating distractions for themselves and overrating inferior works as a result, people should focus their efforts on the truly great poets.

Arnold continues to explore the idea of the excellent and the inferior by addressing the functions of what he calls "negative criticism"—the focus on finding and evaluating flaws in great poets' work. Arnold clarifies that such work has its place, but that the goal should always be to see the differences between the excellent and the inferior more clearly—to cultivate the sense of "what is truly excellent." In other words, finding flaws for the sake of finding flaws is not a good use of the reader's time, which is limited, since no one lives "as long as Methuselah"—a biblical reference that humorously reinforces Arnold's message about the importance of knowing high culture. (The Old-Testament patriarch Methuselah is said to have lived to 969 years old.) This leads Arnold to make a comment on the structure of society and to introduce his position that a democratic society requires people to make choices about how to use their time. Society tends to encourage readers to get bogged down in trivial details, he argues, but readers must reject this impulse and keep their gaze fixed on the truly excellent.

Returning to a previous point, Matthew Arnold admits that the format of an anthology creates temptations for readers and critics to fall into the historic estimate and the personal estimate, since anthologies present poets in their historical context and the critics assigned to present certain poets are sure to be fond of those poets. That is why it is worth reiterating the primary concern of the anthology: to establish the real estimate of a poem, and thus to reap the real benefits of poetry. Arnold quotes the Christian philosopher Thomas Kempis to this effect: "When you have read and learned many things, you should always return to the one principle." No matter what an anthology presents us with, Arnold insists, we should keep the one principle—the real estimate of a poem—in mind.

Arnold circles back to the ideas he opened the essay with, returning to the assertion that poetry offers a unique source of spiritual sustenance for human beings but that the only way to enjoy this benefit fully is to immerse oneself in truly excellent poetry. He reiterates that an anthology like the one he is introducing presents readers with the temptation to over- or underrate poetry based on historical or personal inclinations, which is why readers must hold the "real estimate" of excellence and inferiority always in mind. Arnold cites Thomas Kempis on the importance of returning over and over to "the one principle," which is essentially an analogous term to Arnold's "the real estimate."

Adding to his previous explanation of the two fallacies (the historic estimate and the personal estimate), Arnold explains that the historical estimate is especially likely to be a problem when readers confront ancient works. Matthew Arnold acknowledges that there is not a great deal of harm in overrating ancient poets, but doing so degrades the language used to describe poetry and to make distinctions. For example, Arnold points out, a French critic (M. Vitet), in his determination to elevate the French epic poem *The Song of Roland* to the highest rank of poetry, uses language that is only appropriate for Homer. To show his readers the travesty of describing *The Song of Roland* in terms reserved for Homer, Arnold produces excerpts from the former and the latter. The difference in quality, he insists, is stark: "[With Homer] we are here in another world, another order of poetry altogether."

Arnold has spent a few pages describing how the historic and personal estimates can detract from a reader's ability to arrive at the real estimate of a poem, but he now gives concrete examples of a poem that he values as overrated (The Song of Roland) and a poem that he cites as worthy of the highest praise (The Iliad). Arnold is willing to acknowledge the virtues of The Song of Roland, which, according to his argument, certain trends in French criticism have elevated to the level of Homer, but he is adamant that The Iliad is "another order of poetry altogether." Thus, Arnold emphasizes again that the difference between the excellent and the inferior is not one of degree but of kind. The Iliad belongs to "another world."

The kind of distortion that M. Vitet engages in, Matthew Arnold argues, threatens to deprive words of their proper meaning and to weaken the solidity of readers' judgments. The antidote for readers is always to have in mind some lines written by the greatest poets so that they (readers) can use classic verses as a model for comparison. Such lines can be an "infallible **touchstone** for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality." All it takes is a line or two by a great poet, Arnold asserts, to help ascertain the quality of the poetry being compared.

In this section, Arnold introduces his method for dispensing with the fallacies of the "historic" and "personal estimates" and arriving at the "real estimate": this method involves keeping lines by the greatest poets close at hand so that they can always be used as a standard to which other works can be compared. Thus, Arnold does not just insist that there is a difference between the excellent and the inferior, but that there is a practical method to distinguish between them, which he proposes to teach to readers.

Matthew Arnold produces a number of examples to prove what kinds of lines he has in mind, including verses by Homer, Dante Alighieri, William Shakespeare, and John Milton. These examples, he insists, are enough in themselves to allow readers to produce "the real estimate" of a poem. This is because all of the examples Arnold has introduced possess "the highest poetical quality." Readers who truly understand their power will be able to sense whether a given work shares in that power or not. Arnold adds that this is a more useful tool than it might seem; instead of trying to describe high-quality poetry abstractly, critics should use concrete examples, such as the ones Arnold has given, and point out where the evaluated poem shares the qualities of the greatest poems. Arnold remarks acidly that it is far better to read examples of great poetry than to read about it in critics' prose.

Arnold expands upon his method for arriving at the "real estimate" here and offers an important and telling clarification: it is far better simply to read the best poetry oneself than to read about it in critical works. In this way, Arnold does not explicitly say that criticism is unable to articulate what features separate excellent poetry from inferior poetry, but he certainly implies it. This is consistent with his view that poetry of the highest excellence belongs to "another world"—since it belongs to "another world," it can't be fully explained by the critic.

Still, Matthew Arnold acknowledges that it might be necessary to define what the highest poetic qualities consist of. Arnold's answer is simple: they consist of "matter and substance," which is to say subject matter and "style and manner." In a great poem, both of these attributes will be of the highest worth and power. But Arnold rejects the idea that it is possible to define poetic greatness any further: to do so would only confuse matters, not clear them up.

It has already become quite clear that Arnold is skeptical—if not outright dismissive—of the idea that critics can productively describe what makes excellent poetry excellent (as opposed to what makes inferior poetry inferior, which he acknowledges is within the critic's ability). However, he seems to be conscious of the fact that his definitions are somewhat vague, so he offers readers some more specific criteria here: poetry of high excellence is excellent in its "manner and style." Of course, this is still rather vague, and Arnold seems to bristle at the idea that it can be clarified any further, claiming that such a clarification would only make it harder to arrive at the "real estimate."

However, there is one thing that Matthew Arnold notes should be added to the definition of the proper subject matter for great poetry: Aristotle's concept of high seriousness. It is this "high seriousness," along with high truthfulness, that gives the greatest poetry its special quality, Arnold explains. Likewise, the style of great poetry can be further defined as consisting of diction (word choice) and movement (rhythm) of the highest rank. These qualities—high seriousness, high truthfulness, diction, and movement—work in unison to make a poem great. Where high seriousness is lacking, diction will also be deficient; where movement is inferior, high truthfulness will also be absent.

After developing his concept of the "real estimate" and describing what it consists of and how to arrive at it, Arnold now connects it to the ideas he began the essay with. Excellent poetry is not simply poetry that has excellence in style and content; it is poetry that expresses profound truths about the universe and therefore offers the unique consolation that, as Arnold explains, is poetry's "high destiny" and that human beings require. Arnold's term for this profound truthfulness is "high seriousness," a term he borrows from Aristotle. Arnold thus reiterates that excellent poetry—in contrast to inferior poetry—is connected to the fundamental truths of the world and that it is this connection that makes poetry so valuable to the human spirit. Arnold's citation of Aristotle is another example of his mastery of the classics.

Matthew Arnold admits that these definitions might seem rather abstract to readers but insists that readers can verify the ideas by simply reading great poetry. In fact, Arnold adds, reading great poetry will allow readers to encounter the qualities of poetic greatness in a far more profound way than his explanations can. Still, it is worth the effort of looking at a few examples to confirm that, indeed, such definitions allow readers to arrive at the real estimate of a poem. For that reason, Arnold explains, he will run briefly through the course of English poetry as he sees it.

Arnold reiterates a point he made in a previous section: that, while there is some worth in critical explanations such as the one he is offering, the best (and only true) way to test the validity of the ideas he has been laying out is to read poetry of the highest excellence and judge it by its own standards. Thus, Arnold continues to emphasize the idea that excellent poetry differs in kind from inferior poetry and that this excellence is only partially explicable by critics like him.

Matthew Arnold begins by looking at two early varieties of French poetry, the *langue d'oil* and the *langue d'oc*, from which sprang troubadour poetry and romance poetry, respectively. Arnold focuses on the latter, showing that, while much of this early poetry has been forgotten, it had a direct influence on the poetry of the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer, Arnold notes, is a true poet: "a genuine source of joy and strength" who will be read more in the future than he is now, the difficulty of his archaic language notwithstanding. Chaucer's great virtue, in Arnold's view, is his "large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life." Unlike the romance poets that preceded him, Chaucer writes about the world from "a central, a truly human point of view." This gives his work the high truthfulness that Arnold is looking for in great works.

Arnold begins his exploration of the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, which will allow him to make a few subtle points about what poetry of the highest excellence consists of. Arnold's praise for Chaucer shows readers that the things Arnold values in great poetry are indeed connected to the idea that poetry is a source of consolation: it is not Chaucer's wit that he praises, nor his language, but the fact that Chaucer is a "source of joy and strength." Similarly, Arnold values Chaucer's "large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life," which is a "a truly human point of view"—in other words, Chaucer's poetry offers readers something that everyone can relate to. Thus, Arnold implies once more that excellence in poetry is connected to poetry's ability to be a source of emotional fortification and consolation for its readers.


Nor is that all: Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry also possesses a "divine liquidness of diction" and "divine fluidity of movement" that make him the founder of the tradition of English poetry. Matthew Arnold notes that Chaucer's diction and movement (which is to say, his use of meter) are irresistible and gives two examples of his verse to illustrate its high qualities. It is possible, he notes, that part of Chaucer's great liquidness is his ability to play with language in a way that is considered off limits to modern poets—by adding an "e" to the end of a word, for instance—but it would be a fallacy to say that this is entirely the cause. The cause of Chaucer's greatness, Arnold declares, is his talent.

Arnold's analysis of Chaucer's poetry introduces two new features of excellent poetry: "divine liquidness of diction" and "divine fluidity of movement" (which is to say meter or rhythm). Chaucer is admirable not only for being a source of joy and strength, as Arnold writes, but also for characteristics that readers are more likely to identify as purely poetic qualities: diction and meter. Arnold goes a step further and suggests that the ultimate reason Chaucer is a great poet is his talent, which implies that talent is yet another criterion for greatness in Arnold's view, though he doesn't return to this idea.

This might all be true, but Geoffrey Chaucer does not belong to the highest echelon, Matthew Arnold argues. What is missing in Chaucer, he writes, can be suggested by the mere mention of the name of the first great poet of the Christian world, Dante Alighieri. Dante's name is associated with the kind of "high and excellent seriousness" that, according to Arnold, is out of reach for Chaucer. Arnold reproduces a line from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to show that, indeed, Dante writes about lofty, grandiose subjects, such as God and fate. Chaucer—unlike Dante, William Shakespeare, and Homer— does not exhibit this high seriousness, for all the freedom and good humor with which he writes about life. Unfortunately for Chaucer, it is this high seriousness that "gives to our spirits what they can rest upon," so he does not belong in the highest rank of poets.

Readers now learn that, despite Arnold's praise for Chaucer, his analysis of Chaucer's works is actually intended to demonstrate its shortcomings and, in doing so, to show readers how to arrive at a "real estimate" of Chaucer's work. In this way Arnold demonstrates a principle of his criticism, which is to demonstrate what makes poetry excellent by explaining how the nearly excellent falls short. The shortcoming that Arnold identifies in Chaucer also illustrates his argument about poetry's high destiny, since Chaucer's poetry lacks the "high and excellent seriousness" that the "spirits [...] can rest upon," which is found in the poetry of Dante and Shakespeare.


After reiterating that Chaucer is nevertheless a poet of great stylistic and linguistic value, Matthew Arnold moves on to a discussion of the poetry of John Dryden. Arnold skips over the Elizabethan era, arguing that everyone agrees that Shakespeare and Milton are poets of the first rank. The case of Dryden is more difficult. For their part, Dryden and his contemporaries had no doubt that their poetry was as good as or even better than that of their predecessors, a judgment that had some currency even until Arnold's day. But, Arnold asks, is this historic estimate of Dryden's work in line with the real estimate? Arnold acknowledges that it takes a brave critic to deal with Dryden so categorically, since Dryden is clearly a powerful and highly respected poet. Nevertheless, Arnold argues that he must find the real estimate of a poet's value.

Arnold presents Dryden as another case in which the historic estimate tends to obscure the real estimate. This exploration of Dryden's work gives Arnold another occasion to analyze what separates the excellent from the inferior.

The first thing Matthew Arnold makes clear about John Dryden is that he is a great writer of prose. Arnold compares Dryden's prose to that of two other writers, Chapman and John Milton, and argues that Dryden's is superior to them all. One of the reasons for the greatness of Dryden's prose is the circumstances in which he wrote: after the age of Puritanism, English culture needed to free itself from religious preoccupations, a task which required strong prose writing, with its "regularity, uniformity, precision, balance." One downside of a strong prose, Arnold points out, is that it tends to undermine religious and spiritual feeling. More importantly, it cuts against the demands of poetry.

As with Chaucer, Arnold begins by praising Dryden. He points out that Dryden is an excellent writer of prose and adds that Dryden's prose is a product of the era he lived in (the period after the Restoration), when prose's "regularity, uniformity, precision, balance" met the needs of a society that had endured a turbulent period. On the other hand, prose's strengths are also its weaknesses where poetry is concerned, something Arnold is careful to point out. Thus, Arnold introduces the idea that prose and poetry represent diametrically opposed tendencies in human life and, by associating prose with the restoration of order and poetry with religious and spiritual feeling, ties poetry more closely to the function he has set out for it: as consolation for weary spirits. In this way, Arnold implies that prose, for all its value, is inferior to poetry, which, to be sure, has a uniquely "high destiny" in his view.

Thus, Matthew Arnold regards John Dryden, along with Alexander Pope, as the "splendid high priest of our age of prose and reason." But he does not regard him as a poet of the first rank. Dryden's poetry lacks the poetic criticism of life, the high seriousness, and the "powerful poetic application" that readers should expect from great poets. Arnold produces three lines from Shakespeare, Milton, and Chaucer as evidence that Dryden cannot match these classic poets. Dryden and Pope are respectable poets, but, belonging to the age of reason, they are first-rate prose writers, not poets.

Arnold's verdict on the "real estimate" of Dryden's and Pope's poetry—essentially, that their work was fine for a period of "prose and reason" but not of the first rank—reinforces the argument about prose and poetry he makes earlier. For, according to Arnold, Dryden and Pope put verse together admirably—that is, they mastered the part of writing poetry that can be mastered through reason and logic—but their works lack the "powerful poetic application" that is characteristic of poetry of the highest excellence. What is missing, essentially, is the profound truthfulness (accessed through imagination) that Arnold identifies as the hallmark of classic poetry. Arnold's analysis reinforces the diametric opposition between prose and poetry that he identified earlier.

Matthew Arnold takes a brief detour to discuss the poetry of Thomas Gray, an English poet of the 18th century. While Gray does not meet the highest standard that Arnold looks for in the greatest poets, he is a classic poet because he caught the spirit of the Greek poets and put it into his own works. This spirit is not a permanent feature of Gray's verse, but it is present, which is enough to make him a classic, even if he is "the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry."

Arnold's brief discussion of the work of Thomas Gray returns readers to his definition of the excellent and the inferior, and specifically to one aspect of it: namely, the idea that excellence can result from being in close touch with the classics and great works. While adopting the techniques of the classics is a good thing, in Arnold's view, it is not enough in itself to make a writer a poet of the first rank—on the contrary, Gray is "scanty" and "frail" next to the other classic poets.

At this point Matthew Arnold turns to Robert Burns, a Scottish poet of the 18th century. Arnold points out that the personal estimate applies particularly to Burns, since he wrote rather recently (at the end of the 18th century) and embodied Scottish culture, which leads some to value him for patriotic reasons. But, as with John Dryden, it is important to arrive at the real estimate of Burns's poetry. Arnold begins his discussion of Burns by dismissing his English-language poetry, which he describes as "not the real Burns," and insisting that readers study his Scotch poems if they want to get a real sense of Burns's value. Arnold acknowledges that Burns's Scottish subject matter will endear him to some readers, but that it is important to consider him independent of his world. "Let us look at him closely, he can bear it," Arnold writes.

Whereas Chaucer and Dryden present readers with the temptation to let the historic estimate sway their judgment, Burns presents readers with a different challenge: the appeal of the personal estimate, which tempts readers who are fond of his poems to overrate his value as a poet. Thus, Arnold's discussion of Burns's work is parallel to his earlier discussions of Chaucer's and Dryden's, only he approaches the matter from the opposite side. In this respect, Burns is another example provided by Arnold to show readers how to distinguish the excellent from the inferior—in this case after dismissing the personal inclinations associated with Burns's work.

Next, Matthew Arnold analyzes one of Robert Burns's poems about drinking alcohol, arguing that, while many admire poems such as this one, it lacks the sincerity required for truly great poetry. Arnold asserts that there is something insincere in Burns's poem and that, since the poet is not speaking to us in his true voice, there is something "poetically unsound" about the poem. Similarly, Arnold examines three other poems by Burns—all of them, he says, admired by readers—before declaring that these examples show Burns falling short of the most important of Arnold's standards, that of high seriousness. Pointing to Dante once more, Arnold claims that Burns's verse is not fully sincere but is more akin to preaching. Arnold has some words of consolation for Burns's admirers: if they admire Burns less now, their admiration for Dante and his peers will be greater.

Arnold's detailed analysis of Burns's work shows how the "personal estimate" can interfere with the "real estimate" and thus with the reader's ability to distinguish the excellent from the inferior. Since there is much to like about Burns's work—as Arnold readily acknowledges—it is especially important to hold his work up next to that of the greatest poets, such as Dante. Thus, Arnold puts his own method into practice, showing readers how referring back to lines by Dante, Shakespeare, or Milton can help them keep the distinctions between excellent and inferior poetry clear.

There are times, to be sure, when Robert Burns meets the threshold of high seriousness, but these, Matthew Arnold argues, are the exception that proves the rule. The accurate estimate of Burns is that he has "truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent or the poetic virtue of the highest masters." The real Burns is not the poet who talks about the most grandiose concerns, but the poet who writes about whistling. Comparing him to Geoffrey Chaucer, Arnold notes that both poets have a certain freedom and largeness, but Burns is fiercer and more energetic, while Chaucer is more profound and more charming.

Arnold's honest admiration for Burns's vigor and Chaucer's profundity reinforces part of his argument about the excellent and the inferior: there is no risk in praising inferior poetry, since its virtues also make the virtues of excellent poetry stand out more strongly. Similarly, Arnold's detailed analysis of the works of Chaucer and Burns shows once more that their poetry can have a great many virtues, including ones we value very highly, but if it lacks "high seriousness," then it falls short of the standard.

Matthew Arnold uses this real estimate of Robert Burns to address the case of more contemporary English poets, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and William Wordsworth. Arnold refers to this as "burning ground," since a reader's personal estimate is so likely to interfere with arriving at a real estimate of these poets. Arnold explains that he does not have space to discuss these poets at length, but that the same method he applied to Burns—comparing Burns's verse to that of classic poets such as Dante—should allow readers to arrive at a real estimate. Arnold points out once more that an anthology is little more than an opportunity for readers to practice properly estimating great poetry.

Arnold uses the examples of Shelley, Lord Byron, and Wordsworth—poets who in his time would have been considered writers from the recent past—to make another point about distinguishing the excellent from the inferior: namely, that it is always harder to arrive at the "real estimate" of a writer who is close to one's own time. Still, Arnold is confident in his method and confirms that, despite the challenges that accompany such a task, comparing modern poets to the classics will allow readers to arrive at the "real estimate." In this way, Arnold attempts to reassure readers that his method is as useful as promised.

Matthew Arnold closes his essay by returning to the purpose he outlined at its beginning and reflecting on the democratization of English culture in his day. Arnold reiterates that readers cannot get the full benefit of reading poetry—a benefit he describes loftily as the ultimate source of consolation in life—unless they are able to feel and enjoy the things that make classic poetry classic. The world is becoming a more common place, Arnold complains; while there are more readers than ever, the masses seem not to be interested in the work of the great poets. However, after sounding this note of pessimism, Arnold is defiant: whatever happens, poetry "never will lose supremacy," since humanity, whether it knows it or not, must rely on it for "self-preservation."

The word "supremacy" aligns with Arnold's view of poetry because he insists that poetry has a uniquely "high destiny"—which is related to its unique value as a source of consolation for people in the modern world—and, moreover, that the best poetry is the best thing humankind can produce. What Arnold is worried about is not that poetry will lose its unique excellence—he has no doubts about this whatsoever—but that readers will not be able to extract its full benefit because they can no longer distinguish the excellent from the inferior. But Arnold does not believe this skill will vanish. Arnold's holds the rather pessimistic yet defiant prediction that, no matter how far society drifts from the values of great poetry, it will return to the classic poets for "self-preservation." And this, in turn, encapsulates his view that democracy requires certain elite standards to survive.

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