

Function of Criticism – Matthew Arnold

Introduction

Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888) was a poet-critic and one of the most significant writers of the late Victorian period in England. He occupies a prominent place in the history of Literary Criticism. His essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” was published in his first collection of critical writings, “Essays in Criticism” in 1865. In his essay, Arnold states that criticism should be a ‘dissemination of ideas, an unprejudiced and impartial effort to study and spread the best that is known and thought of in the world’. Arnold defines the role of a critic as the one to view an object for what it really is, to bring best ideas to the masses, and to create an atmosphere that fuels the literary genius of the future. He states that the role of criticism is to make itself inherently valuable, and to rouse men from complacency to a state of achieving perfection. Arnold also likens criticism to creativity, citing how the writing of criticism gives rise to creative joy that comes from original writing. He argues that unlike Wordsworth’s opinion on criticism, it must be considered as a form of art for its vital contributions to the literary world and society in general. It is a form of exercising free creativity. He also states that criticism paves the way for creativity. Arnold believes that criticism is a way to understand life and the world, and can be linked to the satisfaction derived from creative writing.

Definition of criticism by Arnold

“The Function of Criticism in the Present Time is largely made of ideas that Arnold discusses in his Study of Poetry. He defines criticism as “A disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought of in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas.” The term ‘disinterest’ in the view of Arnold refers to being an impartial and just reader. A critic needs to be free from two prejudices: historical and personal.

Historical prejudice is when the critic resorts to view through the lens of past and neglects the present in the work. Personal prejudice refers to a personal liking that can cloud judgment.

Arnold also believes that for the production of great literary work, the 'power of man' and 'power of the moment' (climate of great ideas) must come together. If one of them is absent, the work will not become great. To illustrate this, he takes the example of Goethe and Byron. Both had great productive power, yet Goethe's work was more powerful because he had a rich cultural background. He also mentions how Shakespeare was not a deep reader, which affected his work. But his fame and glory were a result of his age and a climate of great ideas.

Three functions for the critic

By the definition of criticism provided by Arnold, the task of a critic is threefold.

The first task is the critic's duty to learn, and for that he must "see things as they really are".

The second task is to hand on this idea to others, to convert the world, to make "the best ideas prevail." The third task requires the critic to create a favourable atmosphere for the creative genius of the future, by promoting "a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power." Without the prevalence of best ideas, there will be a cultural anarchy.

Arnold also observes that to recognize the greatness of a literary work, one has to look beyond the social ideas and influences that cast shadows and opinions. Further, he indicates that two powers must converge to create a great piece of literature: the power of man and the power of moment. In the quest to be a critic, Arnold believed that one must not confine himself to the literature of his own country, but should draw substantially on foreign literature and ideas because the propagation of ideas should be an objective endeavor. Scott-James says that Arnold places the critic "in the position of John the Baptist, preparing the ways for one

whose shoe he is not worthy to unloose". Thus, Arnold has a high conception of the vocation of a critic.

Role of Criticism

Arnold suggests that the function of criticism at the present time is to make itself inherently valuable in itself. Whether the value springs from bringing joy to the writer or from making sure that the best ideas reach society are irrespective. In this regard, Arnold mirrors Aristotle's view of poetry while he explains that the highest function of human kind is exercising its creative power.

Criticism performs another important function as well. It rouses men out of their self-satisfaction and complacency. By shaking complacency off, criticism makes their mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and makes them contemplate the ideally perfect. Therefore, the critic must rise above practical considerations and have ideal perfection as his aim, in order to make others rise to it as well.

Defense on Significance of Criticism

Arnold argues that a lot of literature from European nations has been used for the purpose of criticism. But England has failed to produce and encourage significant amount of critical writing due to the attitudes of writers towards criticism. He takes the example of Wordsworth to illustrate this further. Wordsworth believed that critical writing was a waste of time for the author as well as the reader. He also states that great harm can be done through critical writing, but little harm occurs through means of creative writing. But Arnold defends these views by arguing that if a man has talent in one line of writing, he must not be forced to create original writing under the pretext that critical writing is of no value. To quote,

“It is almost too much to expect a poor human nature, that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature, should for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another.”

Arnold goes on to point out the paradox of Wordsworth’s beliefs on criticism as Wordsworth had indulged himself in being a critic by writing against literary criticism.

Literary Criticism and Creativity

Arnold believed creative capacity to be more important than critical faculty.

However, his definition of criticism as “the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is” makes it a necessary prerequisite for valuable creation. He asserts that creation of quality is not possible if people are not provided with a current of fresh ideas. This is achieved through honest criticism. If the best ideas do not prevail, it gives rise to a cultural anarchy. Only when the power of man and power of moment come together can a good piece of literature be created.

Arnold also states that writing criticism may produce in its practitioner a sense of creative joy. He compares the emotional state of writing criticism with the emotional state of creative writing. In this, he dispels the typical censure that criticism serves no purpose.

Arnold observes that great writing emerges from great ideas, and they are manifested when these ideas reach the masses. The critic performs the important task of identifying these ideas with disinterest and impart these ideas to people. He implies that the period of great creativity and dormant creativity can be traced to lack of objective criticism and public attention as much as to creators of great work. In this argument, Arnold establishes literary criticism as an art form as high and significant as any form of creativity.

Further, Arnold argues that critical writing is an important activity of exercising free creativity. “It is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art.” If some people were better equipped to write criticism, it would be frustrating to insist they channel their talent only for creating original writing.

Finally, criticism is necessary because Arnold thinks that creative power works with certain materials, and for the author these ideas, “the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time.” However authors do not discover these ideas, rather they synthesize them into their work of art. Therefore, if authors do not readily know these ideas, they have nothing to write about. Arnold talks about the power of man and power of the moment, in this context. The author needs to live in a society where true ideas are discussed and debated, where true thoughts are cherished and passed on, like in ancient Greece or Renaissance England. Thus he advocates that good criticism propagates good literature.

Conclusion

Matthew Arnold is hailed as the first ‘modern critic’ and is also called a ‘critic’s critic’ for his contribution to the meaningfulness of criticism in the realm of literature. In his work ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1865), Arnold makes an effort to demonstrate that criticism in itself has several functions and should be observed as an art form that is as high and important as any other creative art form. He offered an objective method in the field of criticism, through comparison and analysis. His methods were met with disapproval from his peers. However, Arnold’s method for literary criticism was widely accepted and went on to influence the first sixty years of the 20th century. Arnold has a high conception of the vocation of a critic and the function of criticism. His ideas are a result of the prevalence of cultural anarchy, leading him to take up the mission to bring about cultural regeneration in the literary

world through means of objective criticism. His critic is a critic of life, society, religion culture, national character and all aesthetic activities.

Champion of Objective Approach

Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888) was a poet-critic and one of the most significant writers of the late Victorian period in England. He occupies a prominent place in the history of Literary Criticism. His essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” was published in his first collection of critical writings, “Essays in Criticism” in 1865. He belongs to the Objective Approach that started in 1860s. He is hailed as the first ‘modern critic’ and is also called a ‘critic’s critic’ for his contribution to the meaningfulness of criticism in the realm of literature. He was the founder of the sociological school of criticism. Arnold defined the role of a criticism as “A disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought of in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas.” His Touchstone method offered scientific objectivity to literary criticism.

The Objective Approach

In the Objective Approach, the text or the artistic object is the only reality worth studying. Additionally, the text or poem has an internal structure of references that has nothing to do with the author, audience or universe. Arnold began as a romantic poet but changed in the middle of his career to become a critic of romanticism. His shift also changed the interest from feelings to that of the ideas. Arnold’s view came to be known through his work “The Function of Criticism at the present Time”.

In the Function of Criticism, Arnold states that criticism should be a dissemination of ideas, a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the

world. He implies that while evaluating a work, the objectivity of a critic is more important than psychological, historical and social background of the work.

Through his Touchstone method published in 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), Arnold introduced scientific objectivity to critical evaluation. He provided comparison and analysis as the two primary tools of criticism. In this, he employed short quotations from recognized poetic masterpieces as the benchmark to gauge the value of other works. According to this method, Chaucer, Dryden, Pope, Shelly fall short due to their lack of high seriousness. Shakespeare too falls short due to his emphasis on expression rather than concept. Arnold put works by Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Milton and Wordsworth in the forefront, and ranked Wordsworth as first for his "criticism of life".

He laid great stress on 'Disinterestedness', which he considered to be the most important quality of criticism. He also laid emphasis on knowledge as a tool for objective criticism. Arnold's criticism method has faced disapproval by some critics as lacking in logical and methodical aptitude. However, many critics agreed with Arnold and the first sixty years of the 20th century in literary criticism were greatly influenced by Arnold's work.

Difficulties Faced by Critics

Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888) was a poet-critic and one of the most significant writers of the late Victorian period in England. He occupies a prominent place in the history of Literary Criticism. In his essay, Matthew Arnold states that British critics face difficulties due to the culture being rooted in hegemonic values. Critics are unable to transcend these values in order to see the object as it really is. He also says that society questions the modern critics on their value in the contribution of literature as an art form. People claim that critics use criticism as a means to protect their own ingrained opinion.

Hegemonic Values in Britain: Cultural Anarchy

Arnold states that people are particularly indisposed even to comprehend that without this free disinterested treatment of things, truth and the highest culture are out of the questions. With the lack of these, great literary works are not created. Arnold observes that to recognize the greatness of a literary work, one has to look beyond the social ideas and influences that cast shadows and opinions. In the quest to be a critic, Arnold believed that one must not confine himself to the literature of his own country, but should draw substantially on foreign literature and ideas because the propagation of ideas should be an objective endeavor. The critic is required to create a favourable atmosphere for the creative genius of the future, by promoting “a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power.” Without the prevalence of best ideas, there will be a cultural anarchy.

Power of Man and Power of Moment

Arnold also believes that for the production of great literary work, the ‘power of man’ and ‘power of the moment’ (climate of great ideas) must come together. If one of them is absent, the work will not become great. To illustrate this, he takes the example of Goethe and Byron. Both had great productive power, yet Goethe’s work was more powerful because he had a rich cultural background. He also mentions how Shakespeare was not a deep reader, which affected his work. But his fame and glory were a result of his age and a climate of great ideas.

Writers’ attitudes towards Criticism

Arnold argues that a lot of literature from European nations has been used for the purpose of criticism. But England has failed to produce and encourage significant amount of critical writing due to the attitudes of writers towards criticism. He takes the example of Wordsworth to illustrate this further. Wordsworth believed that critical writing was a waste of time for the author as well as the reader. He also states that great harm can be done through critical

writing, but little harm occurs through means of creative writing. But Arnold defends these views by arguing that if a man has talent in one line of writing, he must not be forced to create original writing under the pretext that critical writing is of no value. To quote,

“It is almost too much to expect a poor human nature, that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature, should for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another.”

Arnold goes on to point out the paradox of Wordsworth’s beliefs on criticism as Wordsworth had indulged himself in being a critic by writing against literary criticism. Scott-James says that Arnold places the critic “is the position of John the Baptist, preparing the ways for one whose shoe he is not worthy to unloose”. Thus, Arnold has a high conception of the vocation of a critic.

Link Between Literary Criticism and Creativity

Arnold believed creative capacity to be more important than critical faculty.

However, his definition of criticism as “the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is” makes it a necessary prerequisite for valuable creation. He asserts that creation of quality is not possible if people are not provided with a current of fresh ideas. This is achieved through honest criticism. If the best ideas do not prevail, it gives rise to a cultural anarchy. Only when the power of man and power of moment come together can a good piece of literature be created.

Arnold also states that writing criticism may produce in its practitioner a sense of creative joy. He compares the emotional state of writing criticism with the emotional state of creative writing. In this, he dispels the typical censure that criticism serves no purpose.

Arnold observes that great writing emerges from great ideas, and they are manifested when these ideas reach the masses. The critic performs the important task of identifying these ideas

with disinterest and impart these ideas to people. He implies that the period of great creativity and dormant creativity can be traced to lack of objective criticism and public attention as much as to creators of great work. In this argument, Arnold establishes literary criticism as an art form as high and significant as any form of creativity.

Further, Arnold argues that critical writing is an important activity of exercising free creativity. "It is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art." If some people were better equipped to write criticism, it would be frustrating to insist they channel their talent only for creating original writing.

Finally, criticism is necessary because Arnold thinks that creative power works with certain materials, and for the author these ideas, "the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time." However authors do not discover these ideas, rather they synthesize them into their work of art. Therefore, if authors do not readily know these ideas, they have nothing to write about. Arnold talks about the power of man and power of the moment, in this context. The author needs to live in a society where true ideas are discussed and debated, where true thoughts are cherished and passed on, like in ancient Greece or Renaissance England. Thus he advocates that good criticism propagates good literature.