

Unrevealed Romanticism in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold

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Abstract

Mostly, Matthew Arnold is known as a Melancholy poet or classical poet. No doubt, there is a sense of classicism and melancholy in his poetry. But the critics of his age. Made him limited by expressing their views on his classicism and melancholy. It is injustice towards Matthew Arnold. It is said that Victorians are materialistic which is hated or protested by Matthew Arnold. Hence, they praise Tennyson and other materialistic poets. But Matthew Arnold was not popularized deliberately as a Romanticist. If his romanticism was exposed, he would have excelled even the poets of romantic age. Most of his poems are romantic and most of the events in some poems are romantic. Hence it needs his Romanticism to be revealed.

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Introduction

Born on 24 December 1822, Matthew Arnold was the eldest son of Dr. Thomas Arnold. He was taught Latin at the early age by his father. He was admitted to Winchester school at the early age of 13th but his emotion did not permit him to feel happy in the school. Consequentially, he was brought to the Rugby Chapel School where his father was the headmaster. Though frivolous in early age, Matthew Arnold became serious poet and critic with the passion for fishing, which he could not overcome even when he was at Oxford. When he was appointed private secretary to lord Lansdowne, he got mixed freely with big people but soon, he realized that they were barbarians and exploited the masses who were in deep slumber. After two years, Arnold began to write poetry and his first volume 'The Strayed Reveller and other poems' published in that year. After three years in 1852, his second volume 'Empedocles on Etna and other poems' was published. Passionate and emotional Arnold fell in love with a girl in Switzerland named Marguerite who was his inspiration while composing love poems. But the love with Marguerite could not continue and very soon, he fell in love with another girl named Frances Lucy Wightman who was a daughter of a Judge with whom he got married in 1851. Matthew Arnold could lead happy domestic life with this girl who delivered

four boys and two girls. But unfortunately, Arnold had to face sad demise of three sons but his poetic feelings did not run out and his new volume of thirty six poems appeared in 1867.

It is said that Arnold's poetic method was essentially classical. He sought to bring radical reforms instead of romantic vagaries. He put forward the manifesto of classicism in an age of subjectivism and individualism in poetry. He was influenced by Shelley and Keats whose poetries were full of exuberance of expression, the charm, the richness of images and the facility of the Elizabethan poet. Actually classic refers to Greek and Latin and Arnold was a classicist and not Neo classicist. Classicism simply means as embodying Greek spirit, It describes language, philosophy, mythology, art and architecture, we find this embodiment of Greek spirit in some of his poems. Arnold vindicates classicism, in 'austerity of Poetry'. The poem is philosophical with classical background in which Arnold is opposed to romantic exuberance and a warm advocate of classicism.

Fair was the bride and on her front did glow
Youth like a star and what d youth belong
Gay raiment, sparkling gauds, elation strong
A prop gave way crash fell a platform lo

Again. We observe vindication of classicism in his poem ‘to a Friend’ in which the poet turns to the past Greece. He writes,

Much he whose friendship I not log since won
That halting slave, who in Nicopolis
Taught Arrian when Vespasian’s brutal son
Cleared Rome of what most shamed him.

It was a philosophical ideas of Epictetus which were the strength of Matthew Arnold.

With all his classicism, Matthew Arnold had an unmistakable melancholy strain in his poetry. He was the most melancholy and elegiac poet in English Literature. In Arnold’s poem, there is the mournful Virgilian cry over vanished faith, beauty and values. In some poems, his personal elegies mourn the loss of his friends and relations. In Rugby Chapel, the poet grieves over his father’s burial.

Coldly sadly descends
The autumn evening. The field
Strewn with its dark yellow drifts
Of wither’s leaves and the elms
Fade into dimness apace
Silent hardly a shout
From a few bags late as their play
The lights come out in the street
In the school room windows but cold
Solemn, unlighted austere
Through the gathering darkness arise
The chapel walls in shoes bound
Thou my father! Art aid

Dr. Arnold passed away at the early age of forty four in 1842. He was very righteous person. He was educationist who brought drastic changes in public education in England. He took part in the political and religious controversies in his age but now this eminent person is lying buried in the Chapel. Hence evening in November is cold and charmless. The shade of darkness are falling on the earth. The wet dead leaves are lying scattered on the ground. Boys are silent while playing. The playground of Rugby is not visible except its austere walls.

Arnold Wrote ‘Memorial Verses’ after the death of William Shakespeare who died on 23rd April 1850 and was buried on 27t on the special request of Wordsworth’s sons in law. Arnold pays tribute to Wordsworth considering him as the blind prophet of ancient Greece.

And Wordsworth! An, pale ghosts, rejoices
For never has such soothing voice
Been to your shadowy world convey of
Since east at mourn, some wandering shade
Heard the clear song of Orpheus come
Through hades and the mournful gloom
Wordsworth has gone from us.

Arnold was full of the warmest praise about Wordsworth and his love for nature. He advises the pale ghosts to enjoy soothing voice of Wordsworth who was in their midst. He compares aptly Wordsworth with Orpheus whose music moved even the iron hearted Pluto, the god of death, who allowed Orpheus to take back his wife. Thus, Arnold was never tired of praising Wordsworth.

Then, the poet makes acquainted with shepherd in ‘Scholar Gipsy’. He writes,

For early didst thou leave the world with powers
Fresh un- diverted to the world without
Firm to their mark not spent on other things
Free from the sick fatigue the languid doubt
Which much to have tried in much been baffled brings
O life unlike to ours

Here, the poet compares life of scholar Gipsy with that of Victorians who suffer from all kinds of distractions, despair and frustration. They are always feeling diffident about the success of their quest where scholar Gipsy was cheerful and gay. But the poem is melancholic as the poet has brought distraction, despair and frustration of the Victorians.

Hidden Romanticism

It is said that Arnold is essentially classical and not romantic though he occasionally has expressed romantic sentiments. At the same time, it is also said that he is the most elegiac poet in English literature. Most of the critics found nothing in Arnold’s verse more arresting than its elegiac and classical elements. Some critics wrongly declared hastily that Matthew Arnold was a melancholy notes shade his poetry but at the same time, we must keep in our mind that his poetry is full of romanticism that are not revealed by critics. Even I would like to say that the beginning of his poetic career is from romantic events. His falling in love with a girl of Switzerland is an evidence of his romantic life. Let us first know what is romanticism? There are various definitions of romanticism. It can be defined as the renaissances of wonder, liberalism in literature, revival of medievalism, passion flower born out of the blood of Christ, the insistence withdrawal from the actualities of life and it can be defined as the awaking of the imaginative sensibility. Thus romanticism has various shades of meaning and vindicates the sovereignty of imagination. It means that imagination is one of the chief characteristics of romanticism. It explores the mystery and seeks truth within itself. Romantic poet is endowed with a large measure of sensibility, enthusiasm and tenderness. We find all these qualities in Arnold’s poetry. The romantic poet looks upon the exuberance of emotion as something supreme. He believes that the supreme truth of life lies within oneself. No man is trivial or petty to him. He is found every time lyrical in his expression and writes in profuse strains of unpremeditated art. ‘Man is unique despite the universality and generality’ is his belief. Arnold having some classical qualities is undoubtedly a professed Romanticist. His every poem which is declared as elegiac or classical, has deep sense of romanticism. One of his best elegiac poems is ‘Dover Beach’. It is ironical that the poem is declared as melancholic though its title suggests romanticism. Any person goes to beach or sea only in romantic mood. And not in sad mood. The poet looks at the sea and asks his wife to come to the window. He writes,

The sea is calm to night
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits, on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone the cliffs of England stand
Glimmering and vast out in the tranquil bay
Come to the window, sweet is the night air.

The lines ‘the moon lies fair’ ‘sweet is the night air’ are absolutely romantic. But some critics described the poem as an elegiac as there are some melancholic words. Otherwise, the scene and atmosphere and tone of the poem is romantic. Only words are not adequate enough to decide the form of any poem. By and large, the poem seems to be highly romantic in my vision but critic could not reach up to romance, the poet has presented. Consequently, the romance was left unrevealed. Even some critics opine that Dover Beach is a love poem but microscopic perusal of the poem announces that the poem is rather romantic. ‘To a Friend’ is another poem which appears melancholic but is romantic in actual. Arnold tells his friend about the sources of his strength in the crisis. Though, the poet mentions, Homer, Sophocles and Epictetus who are no more but their anecdotes are not melancholic rather they are interesting. None the less, the poet is thankful to them. He writes,

My special thanks whose even balanced soul
From first youth tested up to extreme old age
Business could not make dull, nor passion wild.

The poem is full of such anecdotes which cannot be come under the category of elegy. At the same time, Arnold is deeply indebted to Sophocles

Who saw life steadily and saw it whole
The mellow glory of the Attic stage
Singer of sweet Colons and its child

‘Scholar Gipsy’ is regarded as one of the best elegiac poems of Arnold. But Arnold seems remarkably romantic while describing the varied beauty of nature. The scholar Gipsy offers a store of flowers to the girls who have gathered together to dance around to Fyfield elm.

Maidens, who from the distant Hamlets came
To dance around the Fyfield have seen thee roam
Or cross a stile into the public way
Oft thou hast given them store
Of flowers -the frail deafed white anemone
Dark blue bells drenched with dews of summer eves
And purple orchises with spotted leaves.

Arnold, here presents pleasurable and salubrious perfumed morning. Every word used by the poet is romantic. The poem seems to be perfect blending of romantic and Pre-raphalite poet. The store of flowers, the lovely picture of the Hurst in spring, the green muffled Cummer hills, the murmur o summer’s day, the line of festal light in Christ church hall, the scythes flaming in sunshine, the nightingales singing in the dark dingles, the purple orchis, all are romantic, filling our hearts with romance. At the same time, the fragrance and the freedom as of wide wings of winds, the freshness of lucid air, the stream of flowing water create romance in nature. Just in the same manner ‘Thyrsis’ is regarded as an elegy in pastoral convention by most of the critics. But Poet’s description of the evening of the mellow afternoon, of the moon lit night, the perfumed garden, various flowers like Daffodils, the white and purple fritillaries, the primroses, the orchies and jasmines with-loving tenderness have the shade of romantic sense.

Consciously or unconsciously, Matthew Arnold has been exposed as a classicist and melancholy poet. But main stream of his poetry is romanticism which is hidden or unrevealed deliberately by the critics. The short perusal of his poems proves that Matthew Arnold excels all the poets of Romantic age though he belongs to Victorian age. As the Victorian age is age of distraction, despair, disillusionment and materialism, Matthew Arnold is dampaned and denigrated by critics of his age. Arnold is essentially a romantic poet and his romanticism is needed to be revealed.

Conclusion

Arnold is essentially a romantic poet and his romanticism is needed to be revealed.

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