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# UNIT 1: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS

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## Structure

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Summary of preface to lyrical ballads with important prose passages
- 1.4 Self-Assessment Questions
- 1.5 Let us Sum up
- 1.6 Bibliography

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## 1.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the Age of the writer and his concept of study.
- Know the characteristics of the writer's contemporary scene.
- Know about a literary prose.
- Develop a critical analysis about the theory and the prose.
- Use the word as referred to in its context.

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## 1.2 INTRODUCTION

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Various theories and concepts of the writer have been made simple to enhance your understanding. Also remember to make use of dictionary so as to understand the words and their meanings according to the context.

According to the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth principle object was to trace in the incidents of common life, the primary laws of human nature, the low and rustic life and also the language of rustic people.

The Preface of 1800 is most remembered by what may be regarded as a paradox, namely, that 'there neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.

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### 1.3 SUMMARY OF PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS WITH IMPORTANT PROSE PASSAGES

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#### (a) The Occasion and Limitations of his Critical Work:

Wordsworth was dragged into criticism in spite of himself. For neither by temperament nor by training was he qualified to be a critic. Nor was his upbringing in the beloved lap of Nature that bred an indifference to books, at all conducive to a critical frame of mind. Had his share of the *Lyrical Ballads*, published by him and his friend Coleridge in 1798, not been violently attacked by the neo-classical critics of the Edinburgh and the Quarterly Reviews, it is doubtful whether he would have penned a single line of criticism. As it is, he had to take the field in sheer self-defense where, however, he not only made the issue more confounded but, unwittingly, proved the opponents' point more than his own. The chief of his critical papers is the preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* dated 1800, which was revised and enlarged in the subsequent editions of 1802 and 1815. The revision and enlargement also included an

Appendix to the edition of 1802 and an Essay Supplementary to the Preface to the edition of 1815. In all of them Wordsworth's subject is poetic diction and his view of poetry, which from their original enunciation in the others. The work, it appears, was originally to have been eventually left to Wordsworth who incorporated some of those notes into its

#### (b) Neo-classical Poetic Diction

The question of poetic diction or the language fit for poetry, which chiefly compelled Wordsworth to write his *Preface*, had also engaged the attention of the neo-classical and earlier writers. Spenser, thus, had preferred the archaic language to that in vogue in his day. Milton had, similarly, a predilection for the uncommon in word and phrase in his great rule-loving critics of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to substitute this caprice or chance in the selection of poetic language by system. The great Roman orator, Cicero had divided style into three categories: the low, used to prove; the middle, used to please; and the high or lofty, used to move. Although the categorization originally applied to oratory, it proved no less useful in distinguishing the 'kinds' of poetry by their style. The elegiac, thus, used the low style, the pastoral the middle, and the epic the lofty. The eighteenth century reduced these three categories to only two: the low and the lofty. It summarily rejected low words and phrases as unfit for poetic use, those, that is to say, which being in everyday use became too familiar to the ear and so lost all their power to impress.

There was another variety of words not covered by any of these categories which also Dr. Johnson found unfit for poetic use- the technical ones which, though uncommon and therefore perhaps high, are too much so to be intelligible to any but the professions concerned. With these two exceptions therefore, the low and the technical, poets were free to use any language they liked. This, according to him and to the neo-classical critics in general, was the true poetic diction – a ‘system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular art’. Its difference from the diction of prose by its ‘happy combinations of words’ or ‘flowers of speech’, plucked from the bramble of current forms of expression. Employed judiciously by gifted writers, it served its purpose well enough, but falling into the hands, of mere versifiers, it soon degenerated into artifice. In their verses the devices employed to turn the commonplace into the grand-personification, periphrasis, inversion, antithesis, Latinisms – appear bereft of all the graces found in those of the former. To illustrate the use of periphrasis only, the device most commonly resorted to, they turned shepherds into ‘the rural race’, a bright expanse of flowers in the fields into ‘their’ flowery carpet’, singing birds into ‘gay songsters of the feather’s train’. In this way poetry drifted away from natural expression altogether.

### **(c) Wordsworth’s Concept of Poetic Diction**

It was rather this abuse of poetic diction than perhaps poetic diction itself which Wordsworth originally disapproved. For in the Advertisement of the Lyrical Ballads of 1798 he stated that his object in adopting a simpler diction for his poems was merely ‘to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society was adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure’. But when in spite of this modest apologia they were attacked mercilessly by conservative opinion, his tentative experiment turned into a definite concept. The publication of a second edition of the Lyrical Ballads in 1800 provided him with the occasion to explain it. His principal object in these poems, he says, ‘was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.’ Explaining why only low and rustic life was chosen for this purpose, he says that in that condition, free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience and ‘convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions’. Such a language, therefore, ‘is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the

sympathies of men and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.'

From this he is led to attach the diction of the day. 'The reader,' he says, 'will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language ....There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it....to bring my language near to the language of men.' In poetic diction, besides the use of personification, Wordsworth includes 'phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets' – periphrasis, inversion, antithesis, and other devices – and even those expressions, 'in themselves proper and beautiful', which were so frequently repeated by bad poets that they began to arouse disgust rather than pleasure.

Finally, Wordsworth points out that as a natural corollary to his concept of poetic style the language of poetry cannot differ materially from that of prose: 'that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the meter, in no respect differ from that of good prose; but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written.' As an instance, he cites some lines, the only ones he considers valuable, from Gray's sonnet. On the Death of Richard West which, in spite of that poet's insistence on the difference between the language of poetry and prose, are hardly different from what they would be in prose; such as the concluding two:

I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,  
And weep the more because I weep in vain.

The language of prose and metrical composition to the possible objection that meter itself constitutes a distinction between the two and that therefore there are other distinctions equally valid, such as those of diction, Wordsworth replies that he is only recommending 'a selection of the language really spoken by men' and 'that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feelings, will of itself form a distinction far greater than composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and if meter be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude (i.e. distinction) will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind.' It is as much as to admit that there is a distinction between the

language of poetry and that of prose or 'the very language of men', which was Wordsworth's original object, and that the distinction lies not only in meter but also in the choice of words and phrases, which in the case of poetry must be made 'with true taste and feeling'.

Not only this: Wordsworth even admits the possibility of what Johnson called 'flowers of speech' arising in the process: 'for, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures.' How, then, with the vulgarity of common speech refined by taste, and dignity and variety added to it by metaphors and figures, is Wordsworth's concept of protests? Is not the prodigal son back home, again after all his wanderings? 'Wordsworth,' as Rene Wellek says, 'actually ends in good neo-classicism.

His poetic practice 'doth the same tale repeat'. His greatest poems – Tintern Abbey, The Immortality Ode, The Solitary Reaper, and others too numerous to mention – are not written 'in a selection of language really used by men.' But this is to deny that a good part of Wordsworth's poetry, of 'incidents and situations from common life,' does succeed nobly in the language advocated in the Advertisement of 1798. Which all comes to this: that there is a class of poetry for which such language is certainly suited, and that neo-classical opinion only showed its inherent narrow mindedness in not judging it on its merits. And from this initial mistake on its part Wordsworth, as uncritical as his assailants, was led to overstate the possibilities of his own concept of poetic diction

#### **(d) His Concept of Poetry**

But here, too he is not quite clear in his assertions. To begin with, he defines good poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', in which case there is no difference between it and the song of Shelley's Skylark that also pours his full heart in profuse strains of an unpremeditated art.

But if it is only this, how is it that it comes to be clothed 'in selection of language really used by men', with meter superadded thereto, for no sudden rush of emotions can leave a poet any leisure for these? Wordsworth makes no attempt to explain the anomaly but modifies the statement later in the Preface in this way: 'I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected In tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappear and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does its actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on.' It will be noticed here that though 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and

‘emotion recollected tranquility’ are the very opposite of each other – the one coming on a sudden, the other deliberately recalled to memory –

Wordsworth makes no difference between the two and endeavors to explain the one by the other. Did he mean the same things by the two? If he did, as appears from this elucidation of the first statement by the second, his meaning in the first seems to have been that poetry ‘is the final product’ of the ‘unforced’ overflow of powerful feelings. For it is only by some such interpretation that these two opposed statements can be reconciled. That his second statement is the more considered one and explains his meaning more truly is plain enough. For his own greater poems were composed in the way therein set forth. A moving sight – say the solitary reaper or the daffodils – was seen during a walk, stored in the memory, and recalled in moments of calm contemplation to be bodied forth into a poem. In this process the emotion originally aroused by the sight was re-created in contemplation as nearly as possible till it overpowered the mind completely, driving contemplation thence. So this is how poetry originates in emotion recollected in tranquility and is therefore, ultimately, the product of the original free flow of that emotion. Had no emotion been aroused of itself in the beginning, there would have been no recollection of it in tranquility and so no expression of it in poetry. The first stage in the poetic process is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,’ the next their recollection in tranquility, and the last their expression in poetry. That by spontaneity in poetry Wordsworth did not simply a complete rejection of workmanship, or artlessness, is poems with the greatest care, not trusting his first expression which he often found detestable. ‘It is frequently true of second words as of second thoughts,’ he wrote to Gillis, ‘that they are best. Nor is the principle of spontaneity in poetic composition advocated anywhere else in the Preface except in that solitary phrase.

Here, too, therefore Wordsworth is not as revolutionary in his concept as he appears.

He also considered the function of poetry. It is not sheer self expression, as its ‘spontaneous overflow’ might suggest. It stands or falls by its effect on the reader. For the poet ‘is a man speaking to men’: apart from them his song is a mere voice in the wilderness. His over-all object is, no doubt, pleasure but it is pleasure in which the moral gain far outweighs the aesthetic. The latter chiefly arises from the poet’s way of saying things and from his use of meter or rhyme which with their pleasurable recurrence, make even pathetic situations and sentiments painless. The moral consists partly in the refinement of feelings which true poetry effects, partly in the knowledge of ‘Man, Nature, and Human Life’ which it conveys, and partly in its emphasis on whatever makes life richer and fuller: ‘Truth, Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope – And melancholy Fear subdued by

Faith', As the poet is possessed of a greater power to feel and to express his feelings than other men, he has a ready access to the reader's heart; and as his feelings are saner, purer, and more permanent than can be aroused by the same objects in other men, the reader is induced to feel the poet's way in the same situation and even in others. He emerges saner and purer than before.

Next, poetry is the pursuit of truth- of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. Science is engaged in the same pursuit, too, but while the truths it discovers benefits us only materially, the truths of poetry 'cleave to us as a necessary part of our existence', for they concern man's relation to man, on the one hand, and his relation to the external world of nature, on the other, both illustrated in 'incidents and situation from common life', as in the Lines Written in Early Spring where while man harms man, the world of Nature ,where everything is happy, caters for his hourly delight. It is an instance of unpleasant truth, no doubt, but in the context of its 'overbalance of pleasure' in Nature, its sum total is pleasure. While the pursuit of science please the scientist, there is nothing in its truths that can equally please the common man. They must remain the pleasure of the few who know science. Nor, being purely the product of the 'meddling intellect', are they 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart', as the truths of poetry are. 'Poetry (therefore) is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.'

Finally, poetry is a greater force for good. Wordsworth's own object in writing poetry was 'to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to each the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous.' From this he drew the general conclusion that every great poet is a teacher; I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing.' This is also what Plato, with whom Wordsworth has much in common, wanted poetry but as the latter everywhere insists on pleasure as being a necessary condition of poetic teaching, he may be said to follow Horace more than Plato. But so far as teaching alone is concerned, Wordsworth, in a famous passage concerning his own poems, seems to echo the very sentiments of Plato: they will cooperate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier.' In the preface these benign tendencies are defined as 'relationship and love 'which it is the great function of poetry to promote. But they are to be induced through a purgation of feelings rather than through a mere appeal to the intellect or good sense. This is what distinguishes Wordsworth's concept of teaching from that of his neo-classical predecessors.

### (e) The Value of his Criticism

Whether in his attack on poetic diction or in his judgment of poetry by its appeal to the emotions, Wordsworth Opposed the neo-classical practice of judging a work of art by the application of tests based on ancient models. These tests could at the most judge the external qualities of the work – its structure, diction, meter, and the like. A work might be flawless in all these and yet fail ‘to please always and please all’.

It may please the critic intent on looking for these niceties in its extent to which it moves him? Wordsworth applied himself to this great question – the ultimate test of literary excellence – and came to the conclusion that it lay neither in a particular diction nor in a particular mode writing. It lay rather in the hearty pleasure it afforded to the reader; and this may arise as much from the use of common language as from the customary language of poetry, and as much from the writer’s individual mode of writing as from that laid down by new classicism. What Wordsworth says in this connection of the style of his Lyrical Ballads applies equally to his generally poetic practice: ‘I am well aware that others who pursue different track may interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a difference claim of my own.’ This is actually all that he meant in the Preface and all that Romanticism means too. It is an application of the common principle of ‘live and let live’ in the sphere of letters.

Wordsworth also saw that neo-classicism made no provision for originality of genius and seldom judged it on its merit. It stood all for the beaten track. So consciously or unconsciously it often proved a hindrance to writers who followed their own path. From the attacks made on his own works therefore the conclusion was forced upon him ‘that every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed; so has it been, so will it continue to be.’ For what he has in common with his predecessors (i.e. with the older school) his path has already been smoothed by them, ‘but for what is peculiarly his own, he will be called upon to clear and often to shape his own road: he will be in the condition of Hannibal among the Alps.’ This, too, his Preface sought to do: to wean the reader away from the old mode of writing and to accustom him to his own. This, in spite of opposition, the succeeded in doing. His critical writings therefore mark the end of the old school and the beginning of a new or rather the revival of an older one – the Romantic school of the Elizabethans.

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## 1.4 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

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- Who were the main collaborators in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* and when was it published?



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- What is the subject of thought in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*?

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- Why did Wordsworth write his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*?

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- What was the principal object of Wordsworth in these poems?

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- What is the view of Wordsworth on the simplicity of the language?

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- What is the theory of poetic diction of Wordsworth?

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- What is the natural corollary to his concept of poetic diction?

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- What should be the effort of a poet or a prose writer according to Wordsworth?

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- Did Wordsworth himself adhere to his concept of poetic diction? Discuss

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- What is the concept of poetic art according to Wordsworth?

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- What according to Wordsworth is the function of poetry?

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- What is the difference between science and poetry?

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- Discuss Wordsworth's views on meter.

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- What does Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry and poetic diction represents?

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- What was the poetic diction according to the neo classical poets and writers?

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- What kind of "Nature" became the subject of Wordsworth's poetry and poetic creation?

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- What was the subject of ‘Nature’ for the neo-classic writers?

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- What are the main characteristics of Romantic Age?

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- What was the ‘Nature’s’ formative and educative influence on the growth of Wordsworth’s mind as a poet?

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- Comment on Wordsworth’s *Prefaces*

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- Comment on the Role of “Imagination” in Wordsworth’s concept of creativity?

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## **1.5 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit the following points call for comment:

- In search of themes Wordsworth goes straight to common life.
- Secondly, in the treatment of such themes, he sets out to employ the language “really used by man”; but it should be a selection of such language.
- He avoids “the gaudiness and inane phraseology of 18th century poets. It should be the language of men in a state of vivid sensation.
- It should have a certain coloring of imagination.
- Lastly, Wordsworth emphatically declares: “There neither is nor can be any essential distinction between the language of prose and metrical composition”.

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## **1.6 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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2. Essays in Criticism by Mathew Arnald
3. Oxford Lectures on Poetry by A.C. Bradley
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## UNIT 2: TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT

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### Structure

- 2.1 Objective
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Content of the Essay
- 2.4 Eliot and New Criticism
- 2.5 Criticism of Eliot
- 2.6 Check your Progress
- 2.7 Let us sum up

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### 2.1 OBJECTIVE

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Defending the role of tradition in helping new writers to be modern. This is one of the central paradoxes of Eliot's writing – indeed, of much modernism – that in order to move forward it often looks to the past, even more directly and more pointedly than previous poets had. This theory of tradition also highlights Eliot's anti-Romanticism. Unlike the Romantics' idea of original creation and inspiration, Eliot's concept of tradition foregrounds how important older writers are to contemporary writers: Homer and Dante are Eliot's contemporaries because they inform his work as much as those alive in the twentieth century do.

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) is an essay written by poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot. The essay was first published in *The Egoist* (1919) and later in Eliot's first book of criticism, *"The Sacred Wood"* (1920). The essay is also available in Eliot's *"Selected Prose"* and *"Selected Essays"*.

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### 2.2 INTRODUCTION

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While Eliot is most often known for his poetry, he also contributed to the field of literary criticism. In this dual role, he acted as poet-critic, comparable to Sir Philip Sidney and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is one of the more well known works that Eliot produced in his critic capacity. It formulates Eliot's influential conception of the relationship between the poet and preceding literary traditions. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It can't be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. it involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year ;and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence...



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## 2.3 CONTENT OF THE ESSAY

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This essay is divided into three parts: first the concept of "Tradition," then the Theory of Impersonal Poetry, and finally the conclusion.

Eliot presents his conception of tradition and the definition of the poet and poetry in relation to it. He wishes to correct the fact that, as he perceives it, "in English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence." Eliot posits that, though the English tradition generally upholds the belief that art progresses through change – a separation from tradition, literary advancements are instead recognized only when they conform to the tradition. Eliot, a classicist, felt that the true incorporation of tradition into literature was unrecognized, that tradition, a word that "seldom... appear[s] except in a phrase of censure," was actually a thus-far unrealized element of literary criticism.

For Eliot, the term "tradition" is imbued with a special and complex character. It represents a "simultaneous order," by which Eliot means a historical timelessness – a fusion of past and present – and, at the same time, a sense of present temporality. A poet must embody "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer," while, simultaneously, expressing their contemporary environment. Eliot challenges the common perception that a poet's greatness and individuality lie in their departure from their predecessors; he argues that "the most individual parts of his [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." Eliot claims that this "historical sense" is not only a resemblance to traditional works but an awareness and understanding of their relation to his poetry.

This fidelity to tradition, however, does not require the great poet to forfeit novelty in an act of surrender to repetition. Rather, Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: novelty is possible only through tapping into tradition. When a poet engages in the creation of new work, they realize an aesthetic "ideal order," as it has been established by the literary tradition that has come before them. As such, the act of artistic creation does not take place in a vacuum. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. The inclusion of the new work alters the way in which the past is seen; elements of the past that are noted and realized. In Eliot's own words, "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." Eliot refers to this organic tradition, this developing canon, as the "mind of Europe." The private mind is subsumed by this more massive one.

This leads to Eliot's so-called "Impersonal Theory" of poetry. Since the poet engages in a "continual surrender of himself" to the vast order of tradition, artistic creation is a

process of depersonalization. The mature poet is viewed as a medium, through which tradition is channeled and elaborated. They compare the poet to a catalyst in a chemical reaction, in which the reactants are feelings and emotions that are synthesized to create an artistic image that captures and relays these same feelings and emotions. While the mind of the poet is necessary for the production, it emerges unaffected by the process. The artist stores feelings and emotions and properly unites them into a specific combination, which is the artistic product. What lends greatness to a work of art are not the feelings and emotions themselves, but the nature of the artistic process by which they are synthesized. The artist is responsible for creating "the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place." And, it is the intensity of fusion that renders art great. In this view, Eliot rejects the theory that art expresses metaphysical unity in the soul of the poet. The poet is a depersonalized vessel, a mere medium.

Great works do not express the personal emotion of the poet. The poet does not reveal their own unique and novel emotions, but rather, by drawing on ordinary ones and channeling them through the intensity of poetry, they express feelings that surpass, altogether, experienced emotion. This is what Eliot intends when he discusses poetry as an "escape from emotion." Since successful poetry is impersonal and, therefore, exists independent of its poet, it outlives the poet and can incorporate into the timeless "ideal order" of the "living" literary tradition.

Another essay found in *Selected Essays* relates to this notion of the impersonal poet. In "Hamlet and His Problems" Eliot presents the phrase "objective correlative." The theory is that the expression of emotion in art can be achieved by a specific, and almost formulaic, prescription of a set of objects, including events and situations. A particular emotion is created by presenting its correlated objective sign. The author is depersonalized in this conception, since he is the mere effector of the sign. And, it is the sign, and not the poet, which creates emotion.

The implications here separate Eliot's idea of talent from the conventional definition (just as his idea of Tradition is separate from the conventional definition), one so far from it, perhaps, that he chooses never to directly label it as talent. Whereas the conventional definition of talent, especially in the arts, is a genius that one is born with. Not so for Eliot. Instead, talent is acquired through a careful study of poetry, claiming that Tradition, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labor." Eliot asserts that it is absolutely necessary for the poet to study, to have an understanding of the poets before them, and to be well versed enough that they can understand and incorporate the "mind of Europe" into their poetry. But the poet's study is unique – it is knowledge that "does not encroach," and that does not "deaden or pervert poetic sensibility." It is, to put it most simply, a poetic knowledge – knowledge observed through a poetic lens. This ideal implies that knowledge gleaned

by a poet is not knowledge of facts, but knowledge which leads to a greater understanding of the mind of Europe. As Eliot explains, "Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum."

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## **2.4 ELIOT AND NEW CRITICISM**

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Unwittingly, Eliot inspired and informed the movement of New Criticism. This is somewhat ironic, since he later criticized their intensely detailed analysis of texts as unnecessarily tedious. Yet, he does share with them the same focus on the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of poetry, rather than on its ideological content. The New Critics resemble Eliot in their close analysis of particular passages and poems.

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## **2.5 CRITICISM OF ELIOT**

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Eliot's theory of literary tradition has been criticized for its limited definition of what constitutes the canon of that tradition. He assumes the authority to choose what represents great poetry, and his choices have been criticized on several fronts. For example, Harold Bloom disagrees with Eliot's condescension towards Romantic poetry, which, in *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921) he criticizes for its "dissociation of sensibility." Moreover, many believe Eliot's discussion of the literary tradition as the "mind of Europe" reeks of Euro-centrism. However, it should be recognized that Eliot supported many Eastern and thus non-European works of literature such as the Mahabharata. Eliot was arguing the importance of a complete sensibility: he didn't particularly care what it was at the time of tradition and the individual talent. His own work is heavily influenced by non-Western traditions. In his broadcast talk "The Unity of European Culture," he said, "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility." His self-evaluation was confirmed by B. P. N. Sinha, who writes that Eliot went beyond Indian ideas to Indian form: "The West has preoccupied itself almost exclusively with the philosophy and thoughts of India. One consequence of this has been a total neglect of Indian forms of expression, i.e. of its literature."

T.S. Eliot is the one major poet whose work bears evidence of intercourse with this aspect of Indian culture" (qtd. in *The Composition of The Four Quartets*). He does not account for a non-white and non-masculine tradition. As such, his notion of tradition stands at odds with feminist, post-colonial and minority theories.

Harold Bloom presents a conception of tradition that differs from that of Eliot. Whereas Eliot believes that the great poet is faithful to his predecessors and evolves in a concordant manner, Bloom (according to his theory of "anxiety of influence")

envisioned the "strong poet" to engage in a much more aggressive and tumultuous rebellion against tradition.

In 1964, his last year, Eliot published in a reprint of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, a series of lectures he gave at Harvard University in 1932 and 1933, a new preface in which he called "Tradition and the Individual Talent" the most juvenile of his essays (although he also indicated that he did not repudiate it).

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## 2.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- What is T. S. Eliot's concept of traditional and the individual talent as put forth in his essay?

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- According to T. S. Eliot, what is the role of individual talent in the creative process of a poet as in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"?

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- Describe the "impersonal theory" of poetry by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

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- What is T. S. Eliot's View on Historical Sense in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."?

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## **2.7 LET US SUM UP**

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Eliot's essay goes on to champion impersonality over personality. That is, the poet's personality does not matter, as it's the poetry that s/he produces that is important. Famously, he observes: 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.'

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## UNIT 3: MATTHEW ARNOLD: STUDY OF POETRY

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### Structure

- 3.1 Objective
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Study of Poetry
  - 3.3.1 The Historic Estimate and the Personal Estimate
- 3.4 Poetry as Superior to All Knowledge
- 3.5 Charlatanism and the Fallacies
- 3.6 Poetry as the Criticism of Life
- 3.7 The Touchstone Method

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### 3.1 OBJECTIVE

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Matthew Arnold, one of foremost critic of 19th century, is often regarded as father of modern English criticism. Arnold's work as a literary critic started with Preface to Poems in 1853. It is a kind of manifesto of his critical creed. It reflects classicism as well his views on grand poetic style. His most famous piece of literary criticism is his essay The Study of Poetry. In this work he talks about poetry's "high destiny". He believes "mankind will discover that we have to turn poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us". Arnold lived in a materialistic world where advancement of science has had led society in a strange darkness. Importance of religion was submerged. People were becoming fact seekers. A gap was being developed and Arnold believed poetry could fill that gap. In his words:

"Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, and the fact is now failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything, the rest is world of illusion, of divine illusion."

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### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the greatest name among the Victorian critics, was a poet turned critic. He started his literary career by writing poetry. It was only at the age of thirty-one that he published his first piece of criticism, Preface to the Poems, and then for the rest of his life, for full thirty-five years, he hardly wrote anything but criticism.

His literary criticism may itself be divided into two categories:

- (a) Theoretical criticism or literary aesthetics

## (b) Practical criticism

His theoretical criticism is contained largely in his Preface to the Poems and The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, standing at the head of the first series of his Essays in Criticism, and The Study of Poetry with which opens the second series of his Essays in Criticism. His practical criticism largely consists of his estimates of English and Continental poets contained in both the series of Essays in Criticism.

A number of influences operated upon Arnold from the earliest days and determined his views and attitudes. First, Arnold owes much of his knowledge of Greek and Latin masters to his great father. His classicism was inspired by him, and it is to this fact that George Watson attributes the quality in his writing, the incongruity between the head and the heart.

The second powerful influence on him was that of the age in which he lived and created. Disgusted with the degenerate and decadent romanticism of the day, its mammon worship and false money-values, its cultural anarchy, its historicism, its provincialism, and its philistinism, he was critical of it and sought to bring about a cultural revolution.

Thirdly, Arnold was a man who read avidly, both the ancient and the moderns, and quite naturally, his reading influenced him profoundly. Love for the classics of ancient Greece and Rome was inculcated in him by his father, and he drank deep at the foundation of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Aristotle and many others. This passion of reading the Greek and Roman literature is reflected in all his works. Fourthly, it was the critical method of Sainte-Beuve which appealed to him and which in the main, he made his own and lastly, professorship of poetry at Oxford gave him power to present his ideas. All these factors mixed up and he formed his criticism in which the most important work is The Study of Poetry.

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the several myriad arguments of Arnold's critique. From Chaucer to Burns, this paper attempts to explain Arnold's views on many famous classics of English literature. Not only does Arnold present a commentary on different poets, but in doing so presents a way of critique and criticism which, according to him, is the most appropriate and effective one. The "touchstone method", for Arnold, was the only way of valorization and evaluation that is free from all fallacies and subjective prejudices. After presenting his conception of the best kind of poetry, he presents his case on how one can recognize this "best kind of poetry" and then goes on to give practical examples of such a system of criticism. All of this makes Arnold's work complete, comprehensive and exemplary, such that could be read from time to time as an instruction manual on recognizing great poetry and distinguishing it from the mediocre kind.



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### 3.3 THE STUDY OF POETRY

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He starts with asserting that the future of poetry is immense. All our creed and religion have been shaken. They have grown too much tied down to facts. But for poetry the idea is everything. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. We should study poetry more and more, for poetry is capable of higher uses. We have to turn to poetry “to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us.” Without poetry science will remain incomplete and much that passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

Poetry can fulfill its high function only if we keep a high standard for it. No charlatanism should be allowed to enter poetry. Arnold then defines poetry as: “A criticism of life under the conditions fixed for that criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.”

Only the best poetry is capable of performing this task. Only that poetry which is the criticism of life can be our support and stay, when other helps fail us. So, it is important that readers should learn to choose the best. In choosing the best, the readers are warned against two kinds of fallacious judgments:

#### 3.3.1 The Historic Estimate and the Personal Estimate.

The readers should learn to value poetry as it really is in itself. The historic estimate is likely to affect our judgment when we are dealing with ancient poets, the personal estimate when we are dealing with our contemporary poets. Readers should insist on the real estimate, which means a recognition and discovery of the highest qualities which produce the best poetry. It should be a real classic and not a false classic. A true classic is one which belongs to the class of the very best and such poetry we must feel and enjoy as deeply as we can.

It is not necessary to lay down what in the abstract constitute the features of high quality of poetry. It is much better to study concrete examples, to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest qualities, and to say, the features of highest poetry are what we find here. Short passages and single lines from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and others may be memorized and applied as touchstones to test the worth of the poems we want to read. This other poetry must not be required to resemble them; but if the touchstone-quotations are used with tact, they will enable the reader to detect the presence or absence of the highest poetic quality.

However, in order to satisfy those who insist that some criteria of excellence should be laid down, Arnold points out that excellence of poetry lies “both in its matter or its substance and in its manner or style.” But matter and style must have the accent of

high beauty, worth and power. But Arnold does not define what this mark or accent is. He says we would ourselves feel it, for it is the mark or accent of all high poetry. If the matter of a poet has truth and high seriousness, the manner and diction would also acquire the accent of superiority. The two are vitally connected together.

Arnold then undertakes a brief review of English poetry from Chaucer to Burns in order to apply practically the general principles laid down above and so to demonstrate their truth. The substance of Chaucer's poetry—his view of things and his criticism of life—has "largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity." He surveys the world from a truly human point of view. But his poetry is wanting in "high seriousness". His language, no doubt, causes difficulty, but this difficulty can be easily overcome. Chaucer will be read more and more with the passing of time. But he is not a classic; his poetry lacks the accent of a real classic. This can be easily verified through a comparison of a passage from Chaucer with one from Dante, the first poetic classic of Christendom. This is so because he has the truth of substance but not "high seriousness".

Shakespeare and Milton are our great poetical classics, but Dryden and Pope are not poetical classics.

"Dryden was the puissant and glorious founder; Pope was the splendid high priest of the age of reason and prose, of our excellent and indispensable 18th century."

But theirs is not the verse of men whose criticism of life has a serious seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity. Their application of ideas to life is not poetic application, they are not classics of English poetry; they are classics of English prose.

The most singular and unique poet of the age of Pope and Dryden is Gray. Gray is a poetic classic, but he is the scantiest of classics. He lived in the company of great classics of Greece, and he caught their manners, and their views of life. His work is slighter and less perfect than it would have been, had he lived in a congenial age. Elsewhere, Arnold tells us that the difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Pope, Dryden, and other poets of their school, is briefly this:

"Their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits; genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul." Gray's poetry was so composed.

Next coming to Burns, Arnold points out that his real merit is to be found in his Scottish poems. In his poetry, we do find the application of ideas to life, and also that his application is a powerful one, made by a man of vigorous understanding and

master of language. He also has truth of substance. Burns is by far the greater force than Chaucer, though he has less charm. But we do not find in Burns that accent of high seriousness which is born out of absolute sincerity, and which characterizes the poetry of the great classics. The poetry of Burns has truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent of the poetic virtue of the highest masters. Even in the case of Burns, one is likely to be misguided by the personal estimate. This danger is even greater in the case of Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth. Estimates of their poetry are likely not only to be personal, but also “personal with passion”. So Arnold does not take them up for consideration.

Having illustrated practically his touchstone method, Arnold expresses the view that good literature will never lose its currency. There might be some vulgarization and cheapening of literary values, as a result of the increase in numbers of the common sort of readers, but the currency of good literature is ensured by “the instinct of self-preservation in humanity”. So strong is Arnold’s faith in the value of poetry of the highest kind. Hence, he believes that only in the spirit of poetry our race will find its last source of consolation and stay.

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### **3.4 POETRY AS SUPERIOR TO ALL KNOWLEDGE**

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The Study of Poetry is Arnold’s most famous work of literary criticism as it is fundamentally concerned with poetry’s high destiny. He is of the view that poetry can be our sustenance and stay in an era where religious beliefs are fast losing their hold. As discussed above, Arnold lived in a materialistic world where advancement of science had led society in a strange darkness. Importance of religion was submerged. People were becoming fact seekers. A gap was being developed and he believed that poetry could fill that gap by noble and profound application of ideas to life which should be of moral nature. Therefore, he believes that with the passing of time mankind will discover that they have to turn to poetry in order to interpret life and to console and sustain themselves as science and philosophy will eventually prove flimsy and unstable. He demanded that poetry should serve a greater purpose instead of becoming a mere medium of gaining pleasure and appreciating beauty. He claims that poetry is superior to philosophy, science and religion because religion attaches its emotions to ideas and ideas are infallible and science in his view is incomplete without poetry.

One of the characteristic qualities of poetry mentioned by Arnold in this essay is a sound representation of life and ideas without any attempt to falsify the facts. He further points out that another characteristic of great poetry is the application of ideas to criticism of life. He endorses Wordsworth’s view that “poetry is the impassioned expression which is the countenance of all science” and calls poetry the breath and finer spirit of knowledge. According to Arnold, the greatness of Wordsworth lies in

his powerful application of the subject of ideas to man, nature and human life. Another quality attributed to great poetry by him is that of high seriousness. Aristotle was of the view that poetry was superior to history due to the former's qualities of higher truth and higher seriousness. What we judge from Arnold's essay is that "high seriousness" is concerned with sad reality and this quality is possessed by the poetry which deals with the tragic aspects of life. Arnold further illustrates this view by giving examples of Dante, Shakespeare and Milton's poetry.

Therefore we must know how to distinguish the best poetry from the inferior, the genuine from the counterfeit and to do this we must steep ourselves in the work of the acknowledged masters.

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### **3.5 CHARLATANISM AND THE FALLACIES**

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Arnold, after apotheosizing poetry in his essay, suggests that poetry must be of high order of excellence to fulfill its high destinies. The Study of Poetry clearly enunciates that the people must accustom themselves with "high standards" and "strict judgments", in order to avoid fallacies of highly regarding certain poems and poet. Poetry should not be valued on basis of the value of certain poets in history. It must not be evaluated on the basis of personal affinities or likings. It presents methods for discerning only the classical and the best poets and poetry.

Arnold analyses the role of the critic while judging any poetry. Before Mathew Arnold, the critics valued poetry based on the beauties and defects in it. While Mathew Arnold sees the critic as the social benefactor who strictly judges the poetry of higher order of excellence. Aristotle analyzes the work of art, but Mathew Arnold in study of poetry analyzes the role of critic. Aristotle gives us the principles which govern the making of the poem, the other gives principles by which poems should be selected as superior or inferior and made known to the world. Aristotle's critics own allegiance to the artist but Arnold's critic own allegiance to the art (poetry) and the society. Art should be given value which it possesses in itself. Arnold views poetry as the criticism of life.

According to Arnold, there is no place for charlatanism in poetry. A charlatan is defined as the flamboyant deceiver who attracts others with tricks or jokes. Charlatanism in poetry confuses or removes the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound, true and untrue or only half true. In this essay, Arnold clearly rejects charlatanism in poetry in following words:

"In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honor that charlatanism finds no entrance that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable."

Arnold supports his idea for the nobility in poetry by recalling the Saint Beuve's reply to Napoleon, Arnold states the Saint Beuve's reply to Napoleon when he said him that charlatanism is found in everything. Saint Beuve replied to this that charlatanism might be found in everything except poetry, because in poetry the distinction between the superior and inferior and noble and ignoble is of paramount importance. Arnold regards poetry as criticism of life in true sense. Poetry can reflect the true spirits of life when it will be free of any kind of corruption or ignobility. He regards poetry as "the criticism of life governed by poetic truth and poetic beauty". According to him the spirits of our age will find stay and consolation by this true criticism of life. The extent to which the consolation, comfort, solace in poetry is obtained is proportional to the power of poem's criticism of life. It means that the measure to which a poem is genuine and noble, and free from charlatanism.

Arnold then defines the true canons for the best poetry. The best poetry is that which is according to the reader's desire or wish. Arnold illustrates this in following words:

"The best poetry is what we want, the best poetry will be found to have power of forming, sustaining and delighting us and nothing else can."

Arnold states three different kinds of estimates that govern the reader's mind while evaluating any piece of literature, especially poetry. These are:

- Real estimate
- Historical estimate
- Personal estimate

According to him the most precious benefit to be collected from best poetry is "clearer and deeper sense of best" and "the strength and joy to be drawn from it". This sense must be present in every reader's mind while searching for the best in poetry, and to enjoy it. This sense should govern our estimate that what should we read. This estimate is called the real estimate of poetry.

Arnold contrasts the real estimate to "two other kinds of estimate", the historic estimate and the personal estimate. The real estimate of the poetry can be superseded by these two "fallacious" estimates. He says that these two estimates should be discarded while evaluating poetry; he cautions the critic that in forming a genuine and disinterested estimate of the poet under consideration, he should not be influenced by historical or personal judgments.

Historical estimate is regarded fallacious, because we regard ancient poet excessive veneration. It calculates the poet's merit on "historical grounds", that is, by regarding a poet's work as a stage in the course of development of nation's language, thought and

poetry. The historical estimate is likely to affect our judgments and language when we are analyzing ancient poets. Arnold states this in essay, in following words:

“The course of development of 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 to 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.”

Personal estimate is another fallacy while criticizing poetry. It calculates a poet’s merit on the basis of personal affinities, liking or circumstances, which may make us over-rate the object of personal interest because the work in question “is, or has been of high importance to us personally”. We may over-rate the object of our interest, and can praise it in quite exaggerated language and grant it more value or importance than it really possess. Personal estimate is regarded fallacious, because it makes people biased towards their contemporary poets.

As example of erroneous judgments, he says that the 17th century French court tragedies were spoken with exaggerated praise, until Pellison reproached them for want of free poetic stamp, and another critic Charles d’ Hericault, said that the 17th century French poetry had received excessive veneration. Arnold says that the critic seems to substitute, a halo for physiognomy, and a statue in place, where there was once a man.

Many people, Arnold argues, skip in obedience to mere tradition and habit , from one famous name or work in its national poetry to another, ignorant of what it misses, and of the reason for keeping what it keeps, and of the whole process of growth in poetry. All this misses, however the indispensability of recognizing the “reality of poet’s classical character” that is’ the test whether it belongs to the class of very best and that appreciation of the wide difference between it and all the works which has not the same character. Arnold points out that tracing historical origins in works of poetry is not totally unimportant and that to some degrees personal choice enters into any attempt to anthologize the works. However, the ‘real estimate’, from which derives the benefit of clearly feeling and deeply enjoying the very best, the true classic in poetry ought to be the literary historian’s objective.

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### **3.6 POETRY AS THE CRITICISM OF LIFE**

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In his essay, ‘The Study of Poetry’ Matthew Arnold has presented poetry as a criticism of life. In the beginning of his essay he states: “In poetry as criticism of life, under conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, as time goes by and as other helps fail, its consolation

and stay.” Thus, according to him poetry is governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.

Poetic truth is a characteristic quality of the matter and substance of poetry. It means a sound representation of life. In other words, it is a true depiction of life without any attempt to falsify the facts. Poetic beauty is contained in the manner and style. It is marked by excellence of diction and flow of verse. While talking of Chaucer, Arnold mentions fluidity of diction and verse. Poetic beauty springs from right words in the right order.

Poetic truth and poetic beauty are inter-related and cannot be separated from one another.” The superior character of truth and seriousness in the matter and substance of best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its manner and style”, says Arnold. If a poem is lacking in the qualities of poetic truth and high seriousness, it cannot possess the excellence of diction and movement, and vice-versa

In his estimate of Burns and Wordsworth, Arnold points out that another characteristic of great poetry is application of ideas to criticism of life. The greatness of Wordsworth lies in his powerful application of the subject of ideas to man, nature and human life. Ideas according to Arnold are moral ideas.

Another quality attributed to great poetry by Arnold is that of ‘high seriousness’. Although he does not fully explain the term, we gather quite a lot of information from his statement. Aristotle was of the view that poetry is superior to history due to the former’s qualities of higher truth and higher seriousness. What we judge from Arnold’s essay is that high-seriousness is concerned with the sad reality. This quality is possessed by poetry which deals with the tragic aspects of life. Even the examples given by Arnold from Dante, Shakespeare and Milton’s poetry illustrate this view. For instance, dying Hamlet’s request to Horatio:

“If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story...”

Regarding the concept of criticism of life, it needs to be understood what Arnold meant by the phrase – “criticism of life”. It does not mean carping at or unnecessarily finding faults with life. The suggestion itself is unsound that it means a criticism of society and its follies. Criticism of life means a healthy interpretation of life. It means an evaluation, sympathetic sharing in and feeling for. The theory of poetry given Arnold has been challenged on many accounts. Arnold does not consider Burns a

great poet because in his poetry Burns presents an ugly life. Arnold was of the view that a poet has the advantage of portraying a beautiful life in his poetry. Eliot attacked this opinion. He believed that the poet has not the advantage of describing a beautiful life but has rather an advantage of having the capacity to look beneath both ugliness and beauty. It is the power to look beyond boredom, horror and glory.

While teaching of the concept of poetic beauty, Arnold mentions excellence of diction but does not explain what it is. As regards the flow in verse or the fluidity in movement, Arnold probably does not realize that the use of coarseness is sometimes intentional to create a specific effect. Smoothness need not be the only one; harshness and ruggedness are equally great qualities, when used to create special effects.

Matthew Arnold does not fully explain the term ‘high seriousness’. It should also be remembered here that seriousness should not at all be considered synonymous with solemnity. The serious and humorous can exist together.

Another view put forward by Arnold that has been under the shadow of criticism is that of ‘ideas’. We might very well like to believe that what Arnold wants to say is that an author, while interpreting life for us, might also use a moral idea to convey a moral lesson. But what Arnold believes is that there is a pre-conceived idea on which the poet bases his evaluation.

Eliot also criticizes Arnold on the latter’s occupation with only great poetry. Adhering to this principle, we might end up dealing with only a small part of the total poetry.

Matthew Arnold talks of deriving pleasure from poetry. But according to critics he is actually biased towards morality – a fact that is evident from his view that poetry would replace religion. “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us”, he writes. Apart from all the negative criticism directed against Arnold we cannot deny that he has very beautifully related literature to life. As Douglas Bush rightly points out that literature is not an end in itself for Arnold. It only adds to the beauty of life and answers the question ‘How to live?’ Arnold is such a person, who does not live to read, but reads to live.

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### **3.7 THE TOUCHSTONE METHOD**

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“Poetry is interpretative by having natural magic in it, and moral profundity.”

Arnold’s touchstone method is a comparative method of criticism. According to this method, in order to judge a poet’s work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. Even a single line or selected quotation will



serve the purpose. If the other work moves us in the same way as these lines and expressions do, then it is really a great work, otherwise not. This method was recommended by Arnold to overcome the shortcomings of the personal and historical estimates of a poem. Both historical and personal estimate go in vain. In personal estimate, we cannot wholly leave out the personal and subjective factors. In historical estimate, historical importance often makes us rate a work as higher than it really deserves. In order to form a real estimate, one should have the ability to distinguish a real classic. At this point, Arnold offers his theory of Touchstone Method. A real classic, says Arnold, is a work, which belongs to the class of the very best. It can be recognized by placing it beside the known classics of the world. Those known classics can serve as the touchstone by which the merit of contemporary poetic work can be tested.

The best way to know the class, to which a work belongs in terms of the excellence of art, Arnold recommends, is:

“... to have always in one’s mind lines and expression of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to the poetry.” This is the central idea of Arnold’s Touchstone Method.

Matthew Arnold’s Touchstone Method of Criticism was really a comparative system of criticism. Arnold was basically a classicist. He admired the ancient Greek, Roman and French authors as the models to be followed by the modern English authors. The old English like Shakespeare, Spenser or Milton were also to be taken as models. Arnold took selected passages from the modern authors and compared them with selected passages from the ancient authors and thus decided their merits. This method was called Arnold’s Touchstone Method.

However, this system of judgment has its own limitations. The method of comparing passage with a passage is not a sufficient test for determining the value of a work as a whole. Arnold himself insisted that we must judge a poem by the ‘total impression’ and not by its fragments. But we can further extend this method of comparison from passages to the poems as whole units. The comparative method is an invaluable aid to appreciation of any kind of art. It is helpful not merely thus to compare the masterpiece and the lesser work, but the good with the not so good, the sincere with the not quite sincere, and so on.

Those who do not agree with this theory of comparative criticism say that Arnold is too austere, too exacting in comparing a simple modern poet with the ancient master poet. It is not fair to expect that all hills may be Alps. The mass of current literature is much better disregarded. By this method we can set apart the alive, the vital, the sincere from the shoddy, the showy and the insincere.

Arnold's view of greatness in poetry and what a literary critic should look for are summed up as follows:

“... it is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: how to live.”

On Chaucer:

Matthew Arnold is an admirer of Chaucer's poetry. He remarks that Chaucer's power of fascination is enduring.

“He will be read far more generally than he is read now.”

The only problem that we come across is the difficulty of following his language. Chaucer's superiority lies in the fact that “we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world”. His superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry.

“His view of life [weltanschauung] is large, free, simple, clear and kindly. He has shown the power to survey the world from a central, a human point of view.”

The best example is his Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Matthew Arnold quotes here the words of Dryden who remarked about it; “Here is God's plenty”. Arnold continues to remark that Chaucer is a perpetual fountain of good sense. Chaucer's poetry has truth of substance; “Chaucer is the father of our splendid English poetry.” By the lovely charm of his diction, the lovely charm of his movement, he makes an epoch and founds a tradition. We follow this tradition in Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and Keats. “In these poets we feel the virtue.” And the virtue is irresistible.

In spite of all these merits, Arnold says that Chaucer is not one of greatest classics. He has not their accent. To strengthen his argument Arnold compares Chaucer with the Italian classic Dante. Arnold says that Chaucer lacks not only the accent of Dante but also the high seriousness.

“Homer's criticism of life has it, Shakespeare's has it, Dante's has it. But Chaucer's has not.”

Thus in his critical essay *The Study of Poetry* Matthew Arnold comments not only on the merits of Chaucer's poetry, but also on the short-comings. He glorifies Chaucer with the remark, “With him is born our real poetry.” According to Matthew Arnold, Chaucer's criticism of life has “largeness, freedom, shrewdness and benignity”, but it lacks “high seriousness”. The term “high seriousness” which Arnold says marks the

works of Homer. Also, Dante and Milton and Wordsworth, apparently employed this “high seriousness” which entails a sustained magnificence of artistic conception and execution accompanied by deep morality and spiritual values.

It must be remembered that Arnold laid a great deal of importance on the “human actions” as the proper subjects of poetry. His contention of “high seriousness” is inevitably bound up with this. His concept of poetry being a “criticism of life” is quite satisfied by Chaucer. Chaucer’s poetry is steeped with life, and yet there is basic sanity and order in his vision which Arnold should not have missed.

The fun and comedy in Chaucer’s writing often blinds one to his basic greatness. His vision is truly Christian in its broad and forgiving tolerance. His vision of the earth ranges from one of amused delight to one of grave compassion. His fresh goodwill and kindly common sense, his sense of joy and warmth are communicated through his poetry especially in *The Canterbury Tales*. But behind the fun and tolerance there is a sane moral view. Chaucer’s tolerance is not born of moral leniency or from a desire to excuse or mitigate the worldliness of the characters as he saw them. The Monk’s travesty of the cloister in the name of gracious living finds no exoneration from Chaucer, nor is Chaucer appreciative of the wickedness of the Summoner and the Pardoner. His tolerance is based on deep conviction of human frailty, and his medium of looking at it is irony, not inventive.

When we read the pen portraits of the pilgrims, we can see how clearly Chaucer has suggested the values they live by and what they look for. In these values—the chivalry of the Knight, the Monk’s love for hunting, the Doctor’s love of gold, the poor Parson’s holy thought and work, the Clerk’s love for learning and teaching—lies Chaucer’s subtle moral judgment.

When Arnold quotes a line from Chaucer as truly classic, he chooses a line expressive of stoic resignation. “O martyr seeded to virginity” from the Prioress’s tale. Indeed, all the lines quoted by Arnold as “touchstones” have the ring of stoic resignation. Thus, Arnold’s own view seems biased in favor of the obviously solemn and didactic.

In fact, Arnold’s concept of poetry does not seem to include the genre of comedy. The term “high seriousness” has been interpreted to mean seriousness in the more obvious sense. The poet’s criticism of life is not only to be serious, but also seen to be serious. Arnold seems to demand solemn rhetoric. If we interpret “high seriousness” in this light, we can only say that Chaucer’s poetry lacks it, for Chaucer was anything but “solemn”. However, if we consider “high seriousness” in a broader light, Chaucer’s observation of life, his insight into its passions and weaknesses, its virtues and strength is truly great. If we strictly accept Matthew Arnold’s contention, then we will have to deny “high seriousness” to all comic writers, even to Moliere and Cervantes.

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### 3.8 ON THE AGE OF DRYDEN:

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“The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and all their school, is briefly this; their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul.” – Matthew Arnold

John Dryden (1631–1700) was an English poet, literary critic, translator and playwright who was made Poet Laureate in 1668. He is seen as dominating the literary life of Restoration England to such a point that the period came to be known in literary circles as the “Age of Dryden”. Walter Scott called him “Glorious John”. John Dryden was the greatest English poet of the seventeenth century. After William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, he was the greatest playwright. And he has no peer as a writer of prose, especially literary criticism, and as a translator. John Dryden was an English writer who was the dominant literary figure in Restoration England. Most of his contemporaries based their style of writing on innovations introduced by Dryden in poetry, drama, and literary criticism. The age of Dryden is regarded as superior to that of the others for “sweetness of poetry”. Arnold asks whether Dryden and Pope, poets of great merit, are truly the poetical classics of the 18th century. He says Dryden’s post-script to the readers in his translation of *The Aeneid* reveals the fact that in prose writing he is even better than Milton and Chapman. Just as the laxity in religious matters during the Restoration period was a direct outcome of the strict discipline of the Puritans, in the same way in order to control the dangerous sway of imagination found in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, to counteract “the dangerous prevalence of imagination”, the poets of the 18th century introduced certain regulations. The restrictions that were imposed on the poets were “uniformity, regularity, precision, and balance”. These restrictions curbed the growth of poetry, and encouraged the growth of prose.

Hence we can regard Dryden “as the glorious founder, and Pope as the splendid high priest, of the age of prose and reason, our indispensable 18th century.” Their poetry was that of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the “prose classics” of the 18th century.

#### 3.8.1 On Thomas Gray

“He is the scantiest and frailest of the classics in our poetry, but he is a classic.”  
– Matthew Arnold

Born in eighteenth-century London, Thomas Gray became one of those few names in English literature that despite a considerably short oeuvre are remembered and

celebrated to this date. Often said to have been born in the wrong age and time, Gray led a highly troubled and dissatisfied life, and suffered from frequent bouts of melancholia and depression. But troubled as he was and the little which he wrote, he wrote incredibly well. Mostly remembered for his magnum opus, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Gray wrote the kind of poetry where substance and form, thought and structure perfectly corroborate each other.

Often the subject of many critical evaluations, Arnold, in his *Study of Poetry* and in several other commentaries, argue that Thomas Gray, often misunderstood and wrongly judged, belonged to the rare species of writers who never “spoke out”.

““He never spoke out.” In these four words is contained the whole history of Gray, both as a man and as a poet.” — Matthew Arnold

For Arnold, Gray never “spoke out” rather words fell naturally and spontaneously from his pen. During his evaluation of the eighteenth-century, Arnold argues that it was not Dryden and Pope who were the poetical classics representative of their age, rather Gray who could be called the ultimate poetical classic of his century. In another commentary, Arnold enumerates different opinions that critics over time have had about Gray:

“Cowper writes: “I have been reading Gray’s works, and think him the only poet since Shakespeare entitled to the character of sublime. Perhaps you will remember that I once had a different opinion of him. I was prejudiced.”

Adam Smith says:

“Gray joins to the sublimity of Milton the elegance and harmony of Pope; and nothing is wanting to render him, perhaps, the first poet in the English language, but to have written a little more.” And, to come nearer to our own times, Sir James Mackintosh speaks of Gray thus: “Of all English poets he was the most finished artist. He attained the highest degree of splendor of which poetical style seemed to be capable.””

Another reason for Gray not “speaking out” or writing enough is often said to be due to his being born in the wrong age. Eighteenth-century literature was gradually discovering the genre of prose and its possibilities. The greatest writers that the century produced were prose writers, as Arnold states in his discussion on the age of Dryden. In such an age, Gray, who was a born poet, could not blossom or flower the way he deserved to. Thus, Arnold writes:

“Gray, a born poet, fell upon an age of prose. He fell upon an age whose task was such as to call forth in general men’s powers of understanding, wit and cleverness, rather than their deepest powers of mind and soul. As regards literary production, the task of the eighteenth century in England was not the poetic interpretation of the world; its task was to create a plain, clear, straightforward, efficient prose.”

And so: “Coming when he did and endowed as he was, he was a man born out of date, a man whose full spiritual flowering was impossible.”

But despite the fact that Gray did not enjoy a satisfying and long literary career, he managed to leave the coming generations with a small treasure of some of the finest verse ever written in the English language. For Arnold, Gray remains the most representative poet of the early eighteenth-century before the Romantics. Thomas Gray never “spoke out” because he never had to and because he couldn’t bring himself to. His poetry flowed from him naturally, expectantly and inevitably. Arnold comments:

“Compared, not with the work of the great masters of the golden ages of poetry, but with the poetry of his own contemporaries in general, Gray may be said to have reached, in his style, the excellence at which he aimed.”

Passed away at the age of 54, Gray’s *Elegy* is the poet’s most loved work, and a poem that could be safely attributed to the poet and to the man himself.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

### **3.8.2 On Burns**

Robert Burns, as Douglas Bush and R. H. Super observed, gets a surprising amount of attention in Arnold’s discussion of poets in *The Study of Poetry*. There are three explanations of the prominence of Burns in Arnold’s major essay on poetry. Firstly, Arnold is returning to the question that had interested him in exchanges with Clough, the connection between emotion and artistic form. In a letter in which Arnold touched on revolution and the relations between labor and capital, he breaks off abruptly to discuss Burns as an artist. Apparently in reply to Clough, Arnold says, “Burns is certainly an artist implicitly”. The “fiery, reckless energy” of Burns is noted in *The Study of Poetry* as well as his “sense of the pathos of things”.

Arnold's concern with the admirers of Burns, however, suggests a second explanation, that Arnold is responding to the work of his old friend John Campbell Shairp. Shairp, as the Oxford Professor of Poetry, had given an Oxford lecture on Burns, and in 1879 had published a monograph on Burns; in both, Shairp praised Burns as the Scottish national poet and the poet who celebrated the Scottish peasantry. Arnold's discussion of Burns in *The Study of Poetry* may be seen as a part of an argument connected with a larger question that had concerned Arnold in all of his criticism: the kind of poetry that was necessary for a democratic age. Shairp had indeed seen Burns as a poet sympathetic to the people and to the cause of democracy and equality. Arnold seizes the chance to talk about Burns because he wants to say, as he does at the end of the essay, that only the best poetry is adequate for a democratic age. Along with the names of Dryden and Pope, Matthew Arnold also mentions the name of Robert Burns. Burns' English poems are simple to read. But the real Burns is of course in his Scottish poems.

“By his English poetry Burns in general belongs to the 18th century, and has little importance for us. Evidently this is not the real Burns, or his name and fame would have disappeared long ago. Nor in *Clarinda's* love-poet, Sylvander, the real Burns either. The real Burns is of course in his Scottish poems. Let us boldly say that of much of this poetry, a poetry dealing perpetually with Scottish drink, Scottish religion and Scottish manners; he has a tenderness for it. Many of his admirers will tell us that we have Burns, convivial, genuine, delightful, here.”

Burns' “real poems”, according to Arnold, are those that deal with “Scottish way of life, Scottish drinks, Scottish religion and Scottish manners.” A Scottish man may be familiar with such things, but for an outsider these may sound personal. For supreme practical success more is required. In the opinion of Arnold, Burns comes short of the high seriousness of the great classics, and something remains wanting in his poetry.

According to Arnold, there is an element of bacchanalianism in Burns' poetry. He refers to many of Burns' stanzas, and comments:

“There is a great deal of that sort of thing in Burns, and it is unsatisfactory, not because it is bacchanalian poetry, but because it has not that accent of sincerity which bacchanalian poetry, to do it justice, very often has. There is something in it of bravado, something which makes us feel that we have not the man speaking to us with his real voice; as in the famous song *For a' that and a' that: A prince can make a belted knight, A marquis, duke, and a' that; But an honest man's a boon his might, Guid faith he mauna fa' that! For a' that, and a' that. Their dignities and a' that, Are higher rank than a' that.*

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**3.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- Arnold literary criticism may itself be divided into two categories. What are they?

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- Arnold then defines poetry as: “A criticism of life under the conditions fixed for that criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” Elucidate:

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- What are the two kinds of fallacious judgments?

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- Poetry as Superior to All Knowledge. Justify

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- What are the three different kinds of estimates that govern the reader's mind while evaluating any piece of literature, especially poetry?

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- Poetry as the Criticism of Life. Discuss

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- Explain the Touchstone Method?

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### 3.11 LET US SUM UP

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To sum up Arnold’s views on Burns, Arnold does not see Burns as belonging to the rank of the ultimate classics in English literature, as, once again, Burns’ poetry lacks “high seriousness”. Burn’s poetry is frivolous, bacchanalian and passionate and is devoid of all the merits that characterize classic poetry. But despite his flaws, Burns remains one of those poets in whose work intensity of passion and spirit merge splendidly and whose work astounds as well as please.