

B. A (English-Hons)

Part - III

Paper - V

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Arnold's The Touchstone Method

Matthew Arnold was the greatest and most influential critic of the Victorian age. In his theoretical writings he was concerned with social, educational, religious, cultural as well as literary improvements. He was not satisfied with the social values and literary principles prevailing in his own times. He saw the degenerated standards of art and literature, false social values and indifference to moral ideas around him and wanted to bring about a reform in all of them.

Matthew Arnold is not only a critic but also a poet in the history of English Literature. He introduces some methods of criticism in "The Study of Poetry". These are personal estimate, historical estimate and above all Arnold's touchstone method. Arnold is much influenced by Longinus who advocated touchstone method or the comparative method. His touchstone method has been praised by many critics though it has got some shortcomings.

For these limitations, Arnold is much condemned. His choice of quotations or passages is quite praiseworthy. He chooses the quotations or lines which are great in diction and style but only the lines from Milton. Critics find no important diction but only moral sentiment.

Touchstone is a word generally used to mean a standard for comparing and judging other things. It is used for measurement and verification. But the term conveys completely a different meaning in the world of literature. Matthew Arnold tries a lot to invent an ideal standard of ideal literary works in 'The Study of Poetry'. He invents a process by which the real worth or value of literary work can be judged. This process of judging a piece is called touchstone method.

Touchstone method can be applied to the writers of all ages. According to Arnold, a writer is a creative man. The creativity of a writer is basically an abstract quality. If the writer is new, it becomes very difficult to justify him and his works. This difficulty causes as we are not aware of him. We may not understand by nature of his writings. As a result, a critic and a reader are always in confusion to find out the success and the failure of a new kind of writing. But 'touchstone method' solves this problem. It can judge a new writer and his writings very clearly.

In order to judge a work of art and find out the presence of the qualities of great poetry in it, Arnold prescribes

his well-known Touchstone Method. He adopts in a modified form the method suggested by Longinus and Addison. They have told us that the greatest test of excellence is the test of time. If a work of art is read and admired by people of different tastes, countries and ages, then it is a great work. They have laid emphasis on the taste as test, and not any formal laws of composition. Arnold in the same way, does not suggest any external rules as the test of excellence. In his touchstone method, Arnold has chosen some quotations of passages from the great writers like Shakespeare, Dante and Milton. He introduces a comparative method of justification of poetry. This does not mean that the subject matter of the touchstone piece and that of the literary piece would be similar. But the poetic diction and high seriousness would be the same. Arnold suggests that we have to collect some lines of the great masters or writers at first. Then we have to apply them as a touchstone to other poems. It means that we have to make a comparative study between some extracts of world famous literary work and new literary work. If we see the images of the great writers in the works of the new writers, we will consider the new writers and their new writings with great value. If we do not find the shadows of great literary works, we will consider the new literary works and the new writers as worthless.

Arnold even applies this theory to the writings of Chaucer. He quotes some lines of Chaucer and compares

them with a line of Dante. Arnold decides Chaucer does not have the quality of a great writer. His comparative study shows that Chaucer does not have the quality of high seriousness like Dante, Homer, Shakespeare and Milton.

However, the touchstone method has its limitations too. Lines, even passages, when taken out of context are often misleading. Moreover, "the true worth of a work can be judged by its total impression", and not by single lines or brief passages. Earlier, Arnold himself had stressed the value of the total impression; here he contradicts his own earlier pronouncement. According to Prof. Garrod, this method consists in selling poetry by the pound. The conditions of the age in which writers write are different, and so are their motivations. Hence one work of art can not be judged on the basis of the excellence of the other. Then how should one select touchstone lines selected by Arnold as the best lines of a poet, may not be treated as the best lines by some other critic.

In spite of many limitations of Arnold's Touchstone method, it has its importance. Arnold has provided us with an excellent example of how to use the comparative method, and he has enabled us to see that it may be fruitful in the highest degree when employed by a critic of exceptional tact.