

## Arnold as an elegiac poet



The word 'elegy' is derived from Greek 'elegos' which means a mournful poem. Usually it is a reflective poem which laments the death of somebody. In literature 'dirge', 'threnody', 'monody' and 'lament' are almost variations on the same theme. They are generally shorter versions of the elegy. Matthew Arnold is the most elegiac poet in English literature. Garrod says about him - "If I had to define Matthew Arnold's place in the poetry, I should be disposed to say of him, quite simply, that he is the greatest elegiac poet of our language, not in virtue merely of *Thyrsis* but in virtue of the whole temper of his muse. His genius was essentially elegiac. His poetry, profoundly melancholic, runs from the world, runs from it as I think, hurt, hurt in some vital part. It believes itself unable to sustain life only in the shade." The elegiac temper is the ruling passion of his poetry. Other poets like Milton, Shelley and Tennyson had given expression to their sorrow in single elegies, but no one else had used the elegiac form so frequently as Arnold.

There are great elegies in English literature. Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* are undoubtedly great elegies. They are however, personal elegies lamenting the death of individuals. But in case of Matthew Arnold, the entire body of his poetry is elegiac - sometimes personal and sometimes impersonal. He found in the elegy.

Page \_\_\_\_\_

the outlet for his native melancholy, of the 'Virgilian cry' over the mournfulness of mortal destiny. It is the natural tone of an agnostic who is not jubilant, but regretful of the vanished faith - regretful of its beauty and regretful of the lost promise.

Arnold's melancholy and sadness sprang from a number of causes. The chief among them was "the contemplation of man's destiny from the hopeless tangle of his own age and from the course of the life of mortal men on the earth". Disappointment in love, deaths of friends and relatives, loss of faith in the age and all the melancholic cast of his mind were further responsible for his pessimistic and melancholic outlook on life. To the poet, the world was a vale of tears, a place to endure and to suffer. In Dover Beach, the world is represented as dreary as a desert:

" Ah love, let us be true

To one another, for the world which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new  
Hath really neither joy, nor light, nor love,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle, and flight  
Where ignorant armies clash by night!

Man's lot in the universe is one of helplessness, despondency and despair. Man is lonely and solitary in a populous world. In grief and despair man leads his life without ever experiencing the glow or joy of life. In Scholar Gipsy, the tragedy and pathos of man's lot in the universe is pathetically presented :-

" For whom each year we see  
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new  
who hesitate and falter life away  
And lose tomorrow the ground won to-day."

In Rugby Chapel, we get a glimpse into the general lot of human beings:

" most men eddy about  
Here and there eat and drink  
Are raised aloft, and hurli'd in the dust,  
striving blindly, achieving nothing  
And then they die perish ... "

Man is a puppet in the hands of Destiny or Fate. Thomas Hardy has very well expressed this idea in his tragic novels. Arnold also shows the overpowering force of human destiny in his famous poem Sohrab and Rostam, where under the power of fate, the father kills his own son:

" We are all like swimmers in the sea  
Poised on the top of a huge wave of fate  
which hangs uncertain to which side to fall

And whether it will leave us up to land,  
or whether it will roll us out to the sea,  
Back out to sea, to the deep waves of death  
we know not."

The futility of Love and Ambition in human life is represented in 'Tristram and Isolt' where through the life of Alexander, the great, who died at the age of thirty two the foolishness of conquering empires and extending one's kingdom is exposed. The poem exposes the vanity of material achievements.

Arnold also wrote some personal elegies some of which deserve mention. The greatest of them is undoubtedly his *Thyrsis*, in which he sought to commemorate the death of his friend Arthur Hugh Clough. The poem entitled 'Westminster Abbey' was on the death of his friend Arthur Penrhyn Stanley. 'A Southern Night' and Stanzas from *Carnac* are elegies that mourn the death of Arnold's younger brother, William Delafield Arnold, who died at Gibraltar on April 9, 1859 on his way home. Rugby Chapel commemorates Arnold's father.

Thus, Arnold's elegiac poems are among the finest of his works.