



## The Epical Worlds of Myth and Reality in Matthew Arnold's Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

The Victorian poet and critic, Matthew Arnold was a Christian humanist, strived to tackle with the ailments and aches of Modernity which had afflicted the Late Victorian Communities. His works which are tinted with romantic elements are modern works which communicate the unspeakable, i.e., and resonate his universal message in the most effective way. Arnold's poems represent two contrasted epical worlds; one mythological and a realistic one which are populated by heroic character. However, in spite of their different natures these two worlds always create a unified platform for its inhabitants. Due to this quality Arnold's stories become more universalized and this realm portrays heroes who take part in the epical struggle against evil in order to save the 'Humane Values'. This research sheds light on some of his poems which depict such themes and techniques.

**KEY WORDS:** Mythological, Modernist, Humanism, Universality, Hybrid, Apocalypse.

### 1. Introduction

Matthew Arnold was a social critic and scholar who started to take an effective role in social reforms in 1861. At this date he published one of his earliest works called, *The Popular Education of France* which reflected on educational reforms during his age. His poetry, in the same manner endeavored to convey the same commentaries on Victorian community's cultural, ethical and educational issues. For this reason many critics and historians ranked Arnold's works as the best model of a sophisticated and productive social criticism. Arnold summarized his view regarding the role of culture in societies in his Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, as follows: "the whole scope of this essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties, culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best that has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the

mischief of following them mechanically. This and this alone is the scope of the following essay." (Cited by Connell, 162 ) In this short statement as Connell argues, "There are three points worthy of particular notice. First, the aim of culture is total perfection; secondly, culture is an activity not a mere body of knowledge; and thirdly, culture is an instrument of social amelioration." (162) In this cultural treatise Arnold condemns his people's obsession with wealth and machinery and idolizing it as a "precious end in itself,". As a Christian Humanist he fought for perfecting the societies' spirit and return to the old age of spiritual values and he always endeavored to summarize and convey this message; "take from the past all that is good and beautiful and shape your ideal therewith and build your future in this ideal" (Connell, 157)

Arnold's major target of criticism was Liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham and the followers of utilitarianism and other reformist movements. Arnold who was disturbed by the chaotic sociopolitical situation, witnessed how weak the governmental and religious institutions were in the face

of the ever growing confusion and disorder. In this arena he tried to designate and describe an objective center of order and authority that could bring together and lead all people, regardless of any religious, ethnic or social background.

For achieving this dream Arnold employed his poetic and artistic talents and developed them as the best medium for representing such serious concerns. Arnold's poetic and artistic style, always is repetitive, effective and simple and always tinted with a romantic backdrop. His works reflect upon the vices, virtues and moral codes of the Late Victorian Era but unlike the former Romantic or Victorian masters, he did not try to present a poetic interpretation of the world, rather he embarked on embellishing his works for creating a "plain, clear, straightforward and efficient prose" which depicted his critical thoughts in the most efficient manner (Essays in Criticism: Second Series 65). Arnold's poetry thus vibrantly convey inexpressible themes that could not be dealt with in his delicate prose and through various poetic devices and techniques such as Imagery and the invocation of mythology, he creates a medium which pursues his agendas more efficiently. Many of Arnold's poems contain 'mythological' landscapes and mythological worlds which are populated by 'real world people'. In such an image the modern England and the modern world are juxtaposed and contrasted and they create an arena for a cosmic struggle upon which rests the destiny of human civilization. In Arnold's mythological realm and his sophisticated and artistic vision, there are many heroes who fight for saving humanity and humane virtues and values. In this war against the modern evil's triumph, only these heroic figures' leadership can eradicate the evil and save the far-seeing cultural icons.

One can easily interpret this sobering message as a product of an Arnoldian fatalism, or as some categorical

misanthropy that might pervade his thought. However, while he warns the audience about the possibility of world-collapse, and attributes such a disaster to modern man's moral failure, the solution, he offers is that of a return to a more human mode of existence, one less warped by corrupt, and industrialist ideologies. This worldview is expressed in his work *Culture and Anarchy*, when he compares and contrasts his present-day Britain with that of Queen Elizabeth.

Here he calls Queen Elizabeth's England as an era of "splendid spiritual effort" when Britain's industrial operations which depended on coal, were very little developed (64-65). Arnold's resentment and his frequent antagonism towards modern man's "faith in machinery," and his ever increasing concern with a return to the more romantic and pre-industrialized context, surface repeatedly in his verse as well. The speaker of "The Buried Life" for instance, using the first person inclusive to interesting effect, gives voice to an absence of social values and the anomy of city life:

*But often, in the world's most crowded streets,  
But often, in the din of strife,  
There rises an unspeakable desire  
After the knowledge of our buried life;  
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force  
In tracking out our true, original course (45-50).*

As the passage depicts "The Buried Life" is a lamentation of a humanity that has lost its way in the wasteland of the modern context. In this poem, similar to the aforementioned works, the speaker portrays an artistically crafted and realistic image of the Modern World which is imbued with a mythological rhetoric. The use of the first-person inclusive in "The Buried Life" appeals to what Roland Barthes, applying deconstructionist tools to 20th century culture, described as "that ambiguous myth of the human community," a collection of fundamentally equivalent persons who

share in the struggle "against the alienating forces of modernity (Barthes 196).

This technique is predominant in Arnold's other works where he follows various poetic methods to follow his strategy of mythmaking. He constructs a unified and universal arena for a uniform population which involves a universalized epical struggle between good and vice for saving Humanity. *Dover Beach* which starts with a Romantic backdrop and ends with the bitter reality of the modern age conveys the same sense of alienation and loss. The speaker of this poem who connects his experience with that of the Greek Philosopher Sophocles comes up with a nostalgic and pessimistic view which resembles the "turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery." Here Arnold recalls "The Sea of Faith," that "Was once, too, at the full," and protecting humanity like a bright and protective girdle. The Sea of Faith which is a symbol for Religion, now has become empty has retreated, to the "breath Of the night-wind," and the speaker only hears the melancholic and dismaying roar of the wind and the "...naked shingles of the world" (17-18, 63).

Here the naked shingles of the world represents an apocalyptic image of the modern world of the Culture and Anarchy which is populated by Barbarians.

The ebb and flow and imagery of the Nature recalls the Romantic and Wordsworthian anthropomorphism, which is a technique seen in the World Mythology where human features are attributed to natural elements. Wordsworth's affinity to nature is blended with a cadence and solemn melancholy which has a mystery that is unread. (Clodd, 259) The final stanza of the poem which still invokes a Romantic and Wordsworthian atmosphere, the poet's work transforms to a very special type of Arnoldian mythical drama where he sees mankind on, "a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night" (35-38). This Arnoldian technique is

noticeable in his anthropomorphism and portrayal of an atmosphere which is permeated with epical and mythological landscapes. These poetic representations of the mankind and human experience are strongly imbued with the imagery of Arnold's mythological landscapes where the speaker locates a generalized "we" upon an intriguing, cosmic battleground, whereon "clash" invisible, "ignorant armies" which possibly signifying the ideological dangers of the Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace described in *Culture and Anarchy*.

The shadowy forces which are represented at the end of "*Dover Beach*" are the product of Arnold's tendency for mythmaking. Here he transfers the forms and features of his chaotic modern world into a hybrid realm, which consists of both a mythic and reality-bound elements. Even in treating a subjects which traditionally belong only to the classical world of myths, Arnold inserts some aspects from his own poetic art into the narrative. Some of notable example of this strategy could be notices in his "*The Strayed Reveller*" in which Arnold arranges as an encounter and dialogue between Homeric characters. Here the setting of the exchange firmly is established on a Hellenistic stage. The personages' manner of speech is highly suggestive of an interactions with classical design "Leaned up against the column there, / Props thy soft cheek". Several archaic religious practices and gods surface in conversation ("In the town, round the temple, / Iacchus' white fane"), and many examples of a dated language ("Hast thou then lured hither, / Wonderful Goddess, by thy art") pervades the scene (9-10, 38, 76-77). The introductions that follow; "the Indian / Drifting, knife in hand," and "the Scythian / On the wide steppe, unharnessing / His wheeled house at noon," complicate a strictly classicalist reading of the text (151-152, 162-164). This juxtaposition and the coincidence of these ethnicities which are ostensibly

nonfictional with the "Centaur," "Nymphs," and "Gods" surrounding them, serves as a poetic device to frame these reality-bound and real life categories as of shared substance with mythological ones (81, 143, 200).

Thus Arnold's "The Strayed Reveller" juxtaposes representatives of mythology with others from the unwritten world which in result promotes his mythopoeic worldview. On the other hand there are different other samples of his poems which are equally concerned with the intermingling of myth with reality and they achieve similar results without any heavy adherence and allusion to specific myths. "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of `Obermann'" and "Resignation" are best examples which demonstrate techniques through which Arnold mythologizes his nonliterary figures and categories through casting them as entities which are the integral constituents of the world's historical records. From the very outset of the "Resignation," Arnold portrays and describes a number of actual ethnic groups who stand for the forces of nature. These ethnicities in this arena gain added significance through their coexistence with a Historic setting and Old World landmarks. Muslim pilgrims, who are described as being "bound for Mecca," have an orientation toward the city which is made concrete and concretized as if they are following an avian migration route. These groups are listed as : "warriors... / ...who watched the miles / Of dust which wreathed their struggling files / Down Lydian mountains"; "The Goth, bound Rome-wards"; and "the Hun, crouched on his saddle" (3, 4-7, 9, 9-10). In this manner Arnold treats them as entities which are beyond a concept or idea gives them a definite content and form. Through this technique he reifies each class of people via treating the totality of every individual member as participants in the same stereotypical activities which sound to be historical. In this way he inserts each character to the

background of a mosaic painting which sound like a mythological tableau.

In "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of `Obermann'" Arnold applies this method and attempts to identify his individual personae as mythical heroes and heroines. In this poem, he never names Obermann's author Etienne Pivert de Senacour, while contrarily he does name his intellectual idols and elevates them and gives them a picturesque description. Out of the great "swarms of men" who populate Arnold's Victorian world, only two "have reigned / In this our troubled day" (176, 45-46). Wordsworth and Goethe who are termed as "spirits," are treated grandiosely and described as the gods who claim a place at Olympus' court. They possess a mythic power which is beyond the grasp of physical beings and everyday mortals and they have the ability "to see their way" through the impenetrable ideological smog which has obscured the landscape (45, 48). Within this "turbid view of the human misery" and the context of this "troubled world," sobbing with the "ground-tone / Of human agony," and too confused with modern ideas to recognize Obermann's "strain," these few reliable cultural leaders are called as "Children of the Second Birth". Here the lofty treatment in the poem projects them as the only saviors of humanity and casts them as salvific figure who are modern man's ultimate hope of survival from the agony and aches of modernity (35-36, 40, 143). Here one may come up with such question; To what mystifying event can the speaker of the poem be referring with that enigmatic phrase? Joseph Campbell comments on the process of rebirth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and defines it as: "Within the soul, within the body social, there must be – if we are to experience a long survival – a continuous 'recurrence of birth' (Campbell 11-12). Arnold's thinkers and cultural saviors, thus, by going through a second, spiritual birth, take the role of restoring the world. "The World Navel,"

in Campbell's terms are described as sites, or persons, "through which the energies of eternity break into time" (Campbell 32). Here Senacour, Goethe, and Wordsworth are mentioned with the untold heroes from the virtuous past and the all together surpass the lesser men, no matter their status or station: "Christian and pagan, king and slave, / Soldier and anchorite, / Distinctions we esteem so grave, / Are nothing in their sight" (85, 149-152). Nevertheless, while they are treated as mythological and spiritual kings who have "reigned," they also seem to possess heroic flaws: But Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken / From half of human fate; / And Goethe's course few sons of men / May think to emulate (53-56)

The way Arnold portrays his hero in "The Scholar-Gipsy" is somehow different. In contrast to the aforementioned poems' cultural figures, the titular vagabond in "The Scholar-Gipsy" is basically represented as a flawless hero, who embodies all the strengths and virtues required for restoring a historical balance. In the poem, the speaker expends much effort for orchestrating and cataloguing various pastoral and countryside settings of different geographic regions of Britain, and then proceeds to mingle his scholar gipsy into this landscape. The wandering scholar is a character who is absent in two ways which is a quality that inserts in him in the category of mythology, i.e., he has been living in isolation and has disappeared from his classmates' view at Oxford, and he, as the poem's speaker declares, is merely an individual from an "oft-read tale" (32). And yet, after narrating his story where the lost Scholar was seen frequently to wander throughout the land, Arnold's speaker beseeches the Scholar to "Emerge, and resting on the moonlit pales / Freshen they flowers as in former years," and thus he evokes a landscape which is pressed between two different worlds (53, 217-218). The Scholar's nomadic life

and his perpetual wandering marks him as an integral part of nature, and he perfectly represents the major characteristics of the Arnoldian hero: "Thou hadst one aim, one business, one desire". In other words he is a person whose mind is pure and unsullied by the conflicting ideologies and the aftermaths of modernism in Arnold's time, which intrude into one's vision of the absolute truth(152).

## **2. Conclusion**

In much of his poetry, Arnold professes and hints at his incessant belief in ethical and moral absolutes. The speakers of many of his poems are set in a world which is a fundamentally simple place, but is complicated and tarnished by misguiding modernist notions about progress and morality. He was a thinker always labeled as the poet of 'cultural displacement' and at the same time was like a refugee escaping from infection of doubt and mental strife, but always "between the two worlds" so similar to Margaret or Senacour's Obermann. (Armstrong 202) Arnold as a cultural thinker was actively engaged in social reforms and his major goal was a project of restoring the historical balance through a national return to pre-Victorian and pastoral values. For achieving this goal, Arnold used his poetic medium of representation and through his poetic initiative, he praises the poet-seers such as Goethe, Wordsworth. He daringly recognizes them as the pioneers of the true values and he himself endeavors to play a significant role in the unfolding of the cultural drama. The aforementioned strategies and his construction of a hybrid world which contains both mythical and realistic elements, enables him to create poetic figures with superhuman powers. This technique gives Arnold's poems a quality which universalizes the poet's critical vision by mythologizing the contemporary and historical inhabitants of the real world. Arnold's

envisioning of his society's dilemma, along with the backtracking solution he postulates, are, in large part, optimistic in nature. E.D.H. Johnson explains Arnold's sensibility due to the reason that for inspiration he turned to "the great humanistic idea which asserts that man is the measure of all possibilities" (Johnson 147). Johnson's argument points out that the Arnoldian sensibility, while at a surface level despairing, actually puts forward a world filled with the potential for human greatness.

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