

History of English Language and Literature
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Lecture 19b
The Age of Tennyson - Victorian Poetry

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The slide features a title '+ Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)' in purple text. Below the title is a list of five bullet points, each preceded by a small purple square. The text is set against a light grey background with a dark purple vertical bar on the right side. At the bottom left of the slide, there are small navigation icons.

- A thorough classicist by sympathy and training – an admiration of the Greeks (it almost led him astray!) – believed that all really great poetry is impersonal
- 'the poet escapes from himself and from the conditions of his own world'
- *Sohrab and Rustum, Tristram and Iseult, Balder Dead, Empedocles on Etna* – academic, imitative and unreal?
- Never a popular poet
- 'His best work was done when, ignoring theory, he gave his mind free play'

Hello and welcome to today's session of the course, History of English Language and Literature. In continuation with the previous section, we continue to identify the various features of Victorian Poetry and try to situate the significance of Matthew Arnold's poetry in Victorian Era. Matthew Arnold, one of the significant poets of the Victorian period lived from 1822 till 1888. He unlike many other poets of the period was a thorough classicist by sympathy and training.

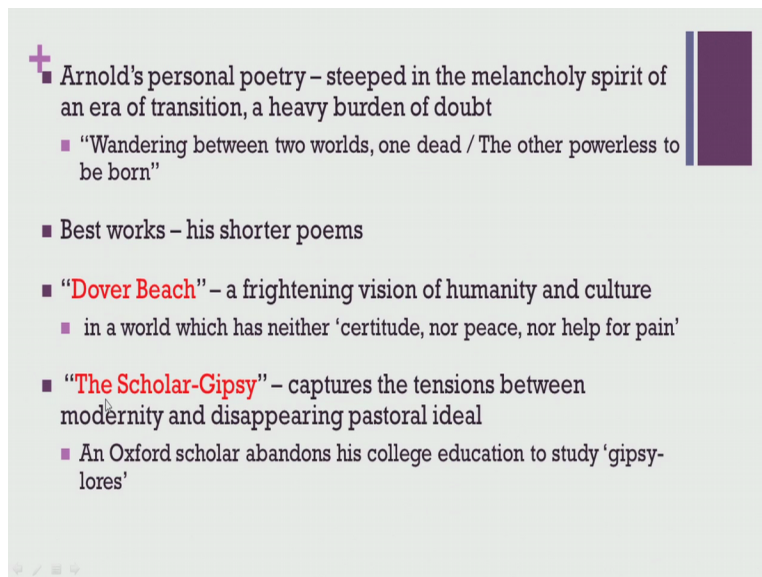
Accordingly he had an immense admiration for the Greeks. It said that it almost led his poetry astray. He also believed that all really great poetry is impersonal. Accordingly consciously he never sat to write any kind of personal poetry. His theory of poetry was quite different from that of the romantics and also from that of the other contemporary Victorian poets. He believed that the poet escapes from himself and from the conditions of his own world when he is composing poetry.

The result of this period and the result of this belief in such a theory of poetry led him to compose a series of works such as *Sohrab and Rustum, Tristram and Iseult, Balder Dead* and

Empedocles on Etna. And all these works as the title themselves suggest there is also a significant influence of the Greek ancient past. And we also note that in structure, in composition and in terms of themes, they are also heavily academic, imitative and bordering on certain unrealistic things.

So since this was more like an academic kind of composition and far removed from his personal elements, there is a tinch of unreality and tinch of impersonality that continues to come in most of his early works. Maybe for the same reason Arnold was never a popular poet during his lifetime. It was only a sustained academic interest that brought him back into the canon at later point of time. Many critics feel that at later point he unconsciously moved away from these principles of poetry and went on to write personal poetry. It is at this time that his best work was done when ignoring theory he gave his mind free play.

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- Arnold's personal poetry – steeped in the melancholy spirit of an era of transition, a heavy burden of doubt
 - “Wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born”
- Best works – his shorter poems
 - “Dover Beach” – a frightening vision of humanity and culture
 - in a world which has neither ‘certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain’
 - “The Scholar-Gipsy” – captures the tensions between modernity and disappearing pastoral ideal
 - An Oxford scholar abandons his college education to study ‘gipsy-lore’

So the result of this was an immense prolific production of Arnold’s personal poetry which was steeped in the melancholy spirit of the era of transition and also peppered by a lot of heavy burden of doubt. And this also made him quite characteristic and quite representative of the Victorian Era as well because as we have already noted in the poetry of most of the other Victorian poets there was a looming fear and an anxiety of tussle between faith and doubt.

And we find Arnold also echoing the same sentiments particularly when he writes about this. He notes, “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.” This line for

his poetry is oft-quoted when one is talking about transition from the Victorian period towards the modern period. And also these two lines are quite used often even when one is talking about the many difficulties which loomed over even the modernist period.

And keeping in tune with this tendency, it is also possible to say that Arnold's best works are his shorter poems. In fact he reached much fame and much popularity with some of his works such as the Dover Beach. Dover Beach continues to be seen as frightening vision of humanity and culture and even when it was published it did speak directly and engaged directly with the common people of those times. And they could relate with the kind of fear and anxiety that Arnold was trying to portray through this poem, Dover Beach.

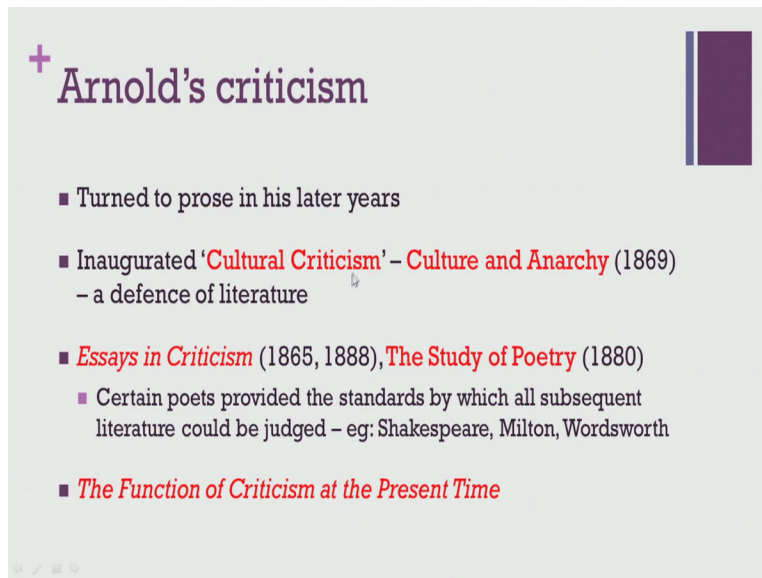
And in this poem he talks about world which is neither certitude nor peace, nor help for pain. And even in the modernist period Dover Beach became a symbol of all these sort of uncertainties and anxieties which were beginning to loom over the British people from the end of the romantic period onwards. Another significant shorter poem of Arnold is The Scholar-Gipsy in which he tries to capture the tensions between modernity and disappearing pastoral ideal.

So keeping in tune with the spirit of those times like Tennyson and like Browning, we notice that Arnold also is someone who is quite nostalgic about the past and he, and much of his poetry is rooted in the sense of disapproval of the modernity and his sense of anxiety about whatever is disappearing fast from the modern times. The Scholar-Gipsy has a very interesting plot structure. It talks about an Oxford scholar who abandons his college education to study gipsy-lore.

And eventually we find that his colleagues somehow lure him to come back to continue his education. And this scholar also finds much to his dismay that whatever he was looking for, the vision that he was looking for in terms of the pastoral has already been taken over by the fast paced industrialization which was happening in England. Towards the end of his career we find Arnold shifting towards more prose writings and moving away from poetry.

And this was also the foundational period in terms of literary criticism. We find Arnold contributing much to the growth of literary criticism and also becoming one of the foremost modern critics of English literature.

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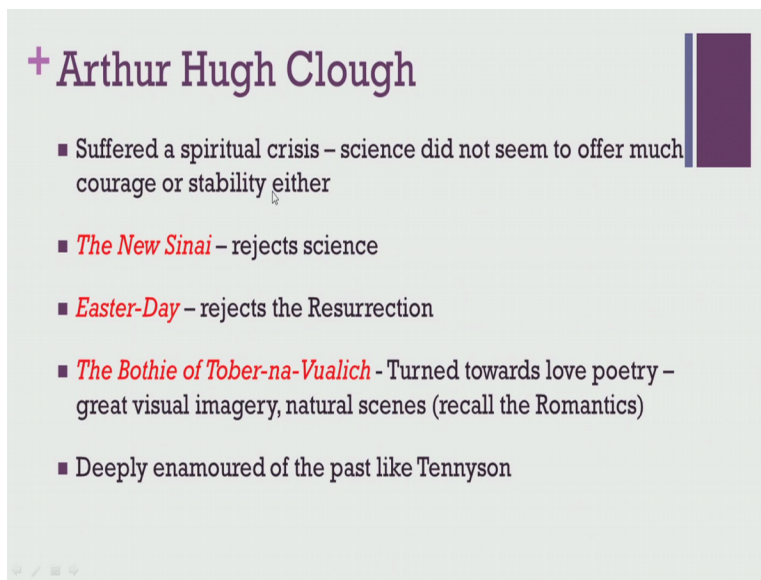
The slide features a title '+ Arnold's criticism' in a purple serif font. To the right of the title is a vertical purple bar. Below the title is a bulleted list of four items, each preceded by a small purple square. The text is in a dark purple serif font. At the bottom left of the slide, there are small navigation icons.

- Turned to prose in his later years
- Inaugurated 'Cultural Criticism' – *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)
– a defence of literature
- *Essays in Criticism* (1865, 1888), *The Study of Poetry* (1880)
 - Certain poets provided the standards by which all subsequent literature could be judged – eg: Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth
- *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*

He inaugurated what is now come to be known as cultural criticism, particularly significant in his contributions and his work, *Culture and Anarchy* published in 1869. This was considered as defense of literature. He also tried to define culture in the context of literature and the many other artistic products of those times. His *Essay in Criticism* had two editions in 1865 and in 1888. It was followed by *The Study of Poetry* in 1880. In both these works he spoke about what has later become quite significant in the literary critical methods.

He believed that certain poets provided the standards by which all subsequent literature could be judged. Though many later critics had differing opinions about this, Arnold continued to believe that writer such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth could be seen as touchstones against which the quality of other poetry and other poets could be judged. He also composed *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* and he is not considered as one of the most important literary critical figures who have laid the foundations of English literary criticism.

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+ Arthur Hugh Clough

- Suffered a spiritual crisis – science did not seem to offer much courage or stability either
- *The New Sinai* – rejects science
- *Easter-Day* – rejects the Resurrection
- *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vualich* - Turned towards love poetry – great visual imagery, natural scenes (recall the Romantics)
- Deeply enamoured of the past like Tennyson

Moving away from Arnold's poetry, we now take a look at Arthur Hugh Clough. He was one poet who suffered a major spiritual crisis. In fact science did not seem to offer much courage or stability either, so he was one of those rare poets who lost his faith both in religion and also in the scientific aspects of those times. So left with any kind of anchor to hold onto we find him composing two important works, *The New Sinai* in which he rejects science and *Easter-Day* in which he rejects the very event of resurrection itself.

So with this rejection of Christianity and rejection of science, he tries to look for other kinds of inspiration and other kinds of anchors which he finds a little bit in the love poetry that he composed, *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vualich*. We find him turning towards a more romantic kind of writing because much of his later poetry was dominated by great visual imagery and natural scenes. So we cannot really consider him as a true Victorian poet in that sense. But nevertheless it is possible to do so because this shift towards the early romantic period was also because of the dilemma and the confusion that he faced because of the tussle between science and faith.

And one thing that he shares with the other Victorian writers is that just like the writer such as Tennyson and Browning, he was also deeply influenced and deeply enamored by the events of the past. And he always longed to bring back and recreate the past England through his poetry.

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The slide features a purple plus sign icon to the left of the title 'Algernon Charles Swinburne'. To the right of the title is a vertical purple bar. Below the title is a bulleted list of five items, each preceded by a small purple square. The list includes his first appearance as a dramatist, his 1866 publication 'Poems and Ballads', his experimentation with various themes and forms, his 1867 work 'Ave atque Vale' in an elegiac mode, and his 1867 work 'A Song of Italy' and 1871 work 'Songs before Sunrise' which engaged with historical events and politics. At the bottom left of the slide, there are small navigation icons.

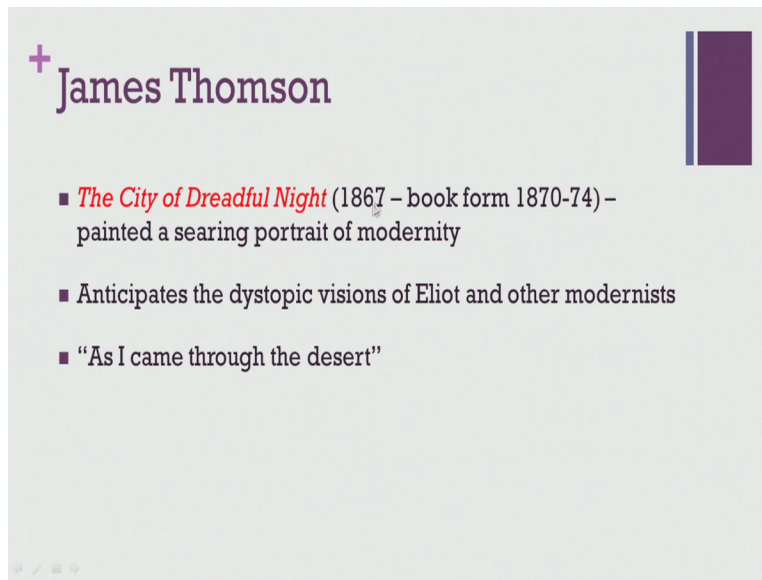
+ Algernon Charles Swinburne

- First appeared on the literary scene as a dramatist
- *Poems and Ballads* – 1866
- Tried several themes and forms
- *Ave atque Vale* (1867) - opted for the 'elegiac mode'
- *A Song of Italy* (1867), *Songs before Sunrise* (1871) – historical events and politics

Other significant writer alongside these other Victorian poets, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Swinburne in fact first appeared in the literary scene as a dramatist and it is important to note that during this time most of the writers considered it is important to experiment through different forms of writing before they really understood what exactly was their call. So finally we find Swinburne settling to poetry with his 1866 publication, *Poems and Ballads*. He also tried several themes and forms throughout his poetic writing.

And we find him opting the elegiac mode with the work, *Ave atque Vale* in 1867. And two of his works, *A Song of Italy* published in 1867 and *Songs before Sunrise* in 1871, they engaged with historical events and politics. So even when the age was torn apart through various crises of faith and various difficulties in terms of personal belief systems, we find some of the writers such as Swinburne focusing on the historical events and politics of those times as well. We shall also be coming back to take a detailed look at Swinburne when we look at Pre-Raphaelite poetry.

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+ James Thomson

- *The City of Dreadful Night* (1867 – book form 1870-74) – painted a searing portrait of modernity
- Anticipates the dystopic visions of Eliot and other modernists
- “As I came through the desert”

James Thomson was another writer who wrote a series of poems under the title *The City of Dreadful Night*. It was first published in 1867 and later a book form was released as a series during that time, 1870 and 1874. In this particular work we find him presenting a searing portrait of modernity. And we also notice that from the end of the 19th century onwards again kind of transition is being signaled towards the new phase, the modern phase or the modernist phase.

And we also find writer such as James Thomson anticipating the dystopic visions of Eliot and other modernists who were to start writing from the 20th century onwards. And one of the most significant opening lines of James Thomson's work is 'As I came through the desert' in which he talks about the contemporary period as a desert.

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+ Edward Fitzgerald

- Translation of **Omar Khaiyyam's Persian Rubaiyat** (1859)
- Enabled a revival of interest in the Oriental – loaded with images of Arab excesses, luxury and wealth
- Desire, merry-making, mortality and hedonism
- Exaggerated metaphor and image – recalls the English metaphysicals

1859 – also the year of publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*

Edward Fitzgerald's contribution to English literature is of immense importance. He is best known as a translator of Omar Khaiyyam's Persian work Rubaiyat in 1859. And this was work which enabled a revival of interest in the Oriental. And we noted even in the one of the previous sessions that there was growing interest in what is now understood as the oriental fiction. In this work we find him introducing to the English leaders, a world loaded with images of Arab excesses, luxury and wealth.

And Rubaiyat though it reached the English world through the translation, it also became hugely successful and immensely popular. And in this work there was also in stark contrast to the looming melancholy of the times, there were elements of desire, merry-making, mortality and hedonism. So it also came as a welcome relief to the other kinds of poetry which were talking about the tussle between faith and reason and also the various difficulties that people were facing in terms of their engagement with the belief systems that they had.

When one engages with the exaggerated metaphor and image of Rubaiyat which is also preserved in the translation of Fitzgerald, one is also forced to recall the English metaphysicals who lived in the earlier time. It is one more thing that markedly defines the translation of Rubaiyat. 1857 significantly also was the year of publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*.

And this work was to forever alter the ways in which thinkers and the writers and even the common man was to understand many things about their own selves. So with this note we begin to wind up today's session and we look forward to seeing in the next session. Thank you for listening.