

Human Life by Matthew Arnold

WHAT mortal, when he saw,
Life's voyage done, his heavenly Friend,
Could ever yet dare tell him fearlessly:
'I have kept uninfring'd my nature's law;
The inly-written chart thou gavest me
To guide me, I have steer'd by to the end'?

Ah! let us make no claim
On life's incognizable sea
To too exact a steering of our way!
Let us not fret and fear to miss our aim
If some fair coast has lured us to make stay,
Or some friend hail'd us to keep company!

Aye, we would each fain drive
At random, and not steer by rule!
Weakness! and worse, weakness bestow'd in vain!
Winds from our side the unsuiting consort rive,
We rush by coasts where we had lief remain;
Man cannot, though he would, live chance's fool.

No! as the foaming swathe
Of torn-up water, on the main,
Falls heavily away with long-drawn roar
On either side the black deep-furrow'd path
Cut by an onward-labouring vessel's prore,
And never touches the ship-side again;

Even so we leave behind,
As, charter'd by some unknown Powers,
We stem across the sea of life by night,
The joys which were not for our use design'd,
The friends to whom we had no natural right,
The homes that were not destined to be ours.

A Critical Analysis of the Poem

As a critic, Arnold considers poetry as a criticism of life in his famous critical work entitled "The Study of Poetry". He believes that poetry is an overall assessment of human life. According to him, poetry should be written to analyze life and make penetrating commentary on its aspects.

In this poem, the poet wants to say that human life is a journey. So man is not immortalized in this life and if he believes so, he will lose his faith. The poem embodies Arnold's vision as a Victorian poet and a critic. The major theme of the poem, as its title suggests, is to tackle the authenticity of human life during the Victorian age and to stimulate the readers' awareness that the loss of faith and the decline of the moral and spiritual values would result in the loss of the essence of the human existence. The poem can be considered as an embodiment of Arnold's concept of the poet and the poetic truth. According to him, the poetic truth and beauty administer the essence of poetry. These laws are based on the poet's treatment of life. High seriousness is a very important element of poetry.

Moreover, the poem communicates moral implications. In the first and second stanzas, the poet symbolizes human life as a "voyage" to inform that it needs to be guided by faith and in order to have an aim and purpose. In the third stanza, he warns the reader about the wretched state of life if it is done without aim and guide as "Weakness! and worse, weakness bestow'd in vain!". The last stanza portrays life as tentative and transient. It is further portrayed as a deep and dark as the sea:

We stem across the sea of life by night,
The joys which were not for our use design'd,
The friends to whom we had no natural right,
The homes that were not destined to be ours.

The essence of life is conjugated with the belief that it is mortal. It is symbolized as a sea to clarify that it is as much difficult and miserable as sailing to the sea at night. Man's safety lies in his commitment to his faith in religion and to the moral and spiritual values. The gradual loss of this commitment results in the spiritual deadness and meaninglessness of life. The poem reflects Arnold's philosophy of life. It tackles two fundamental points: Arnold as a critic of life and the nature of man, human life and the

inevitable death. Both are rendered by wielding the symbols of voyage and sea.

Some Critical Views

In this poem, the poet symbolizes the human life as a voyage through which man should be guided by his faith in God. He also asserts that poetry has something moral about it. The treatment of moral ideas in poetry does not mean the writing of moralistic poems. It means a deep and noble application of ideas to life. We can get a moral idea by answering the very question, "how to live?" He declares that 'moral' should not be interpreted in a narrow sense to mean a code of behavior. We do not read poetry to be conceived of the poet's idea. We should appreciate his way of thinking because it might stimulate us.

The Humanistic Values

Arnold gives much emphasis on the permanent position of poetry with regards to humanity. He declares that poetry will soon take the place of religion and philosophy to console and sustain distracted humanity. He believes that poetry has a lot of things to do. According to him, the best poetry actually supplies what we actually need. It is the source of ideal bliss.

The best poetry helps human beings in many ways. At first, the best poetry constructs our nature and it is closely related to the formation of our morality. It is an agent of moral perfection. The best poetry is helpful for mankind in another aspect. It actually maintains and continues the course of human life. The best poetry sustains us. It helps us lead carefree and secured life. On the other hand, the best poetry is the best source of enjoyment. It delights us because it fills our hearts with merriment. The best poetry is not a rigid thing. It is really pleasurable. So the best poetry is helpful for us in many ways. It has a great healing effect and it makes the course of our life easy and beautiful. It also produces the spirit of our soul. For this reason Arnold believes that the best poetry is the best friend of mankind.