

matthew arnold the function of criticism at the present time

matthew arnold the function of criticism at the present time is a seminal essay that explores the essential role of criticism in society and literature. Written by the Victorian poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold, this work addresses the purpose and value of criticism beyond mere fault-finding. Arnold emphasizes how criticism functions as a guiding force for culture, education, and intellectual development. This article delves into the key themes and ideas presented in the essay, examining the definition, objectives, and relevance of criticism according to Arnold. Additionally, it discusses how Arnold's perspectives on criticism continue to resonate in contemporary literary and cultural discourse. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of the essay's main arguments and their implications for modern criticism.

- Understanding Matthew Arnold's Concept of Criticism
- The Essential Functions of Criticism According to Arnold
- The Role of Criticism in Contemporary Society
- Criticism as a Moral and Intellectual Force
- Arnold's Influence on Modern Critical Theory

Understanding Matthew Arnold's Concept of Criticism

Matthew Arnold's essay, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, offers a profound insight into what criticism entails beyond its conventional understanding. Arnold defines criticism not simply as an evaluative or judgmental activity but as a systematic and disinterested endeavor aimed at discerning and promoting what is best in literature and culture. He distinguishes criticism from mere personal opinion or destructive fault-finding by asserting that true criticism seeks to uphold standards of excellence and truth. According to Arnold, criticism is an intellectual discipline that requires a deep knowledge of literature, culture, and history combined with an objective and fair-minded approach.

Arnold's concept of criticism is thus closely linked with his broader Victorian ideals of culture and moral seriousness. He insists that criticism's primary task is to elevate society by fostering an appreciation of the highest values reflected in great works of art and literature. This elevated understanding allows criticism to serve as a mediator between the creative artist and the wider public, helping to shape cultural tastes and intellectual life.

The Essential Functions of Criticism According to Arnold

In his essay, Arnold outlines several critical functions that criticism fulfills in any vibrant cultural context. These functions collectively demonstrate why criticism is indispensable to the health and progress of literature and society.

1. Discovery and Interpretation

One of the key roles of criticism is the discovery of the best that has been thought and said. Arnold argues that criticism must identify works of enduring value and interpret their significance for contemporary audiences. This involves a careful and knowledgeable analysis of literary and artistic works to reveal their deeper meanings and cultural importance.

2. Preservation of Standards

Criticism serves as a guardian of aesthetic and moral standards. Arnold emphasizes the need for criticism to maintain high standards of taste and intellectual rigor, preventing the dilution of cultural quality by transient trends or popular fads. By setting benchmarks for excellence, criticism fosters a culture that values depth, beauty, and truth.

3. Guidance and Education

Another vital function is criticism's educational role. Arnold views criticism as a tool to educate the public and cultivate refined cultural sensibilities. Through thoughtful critique and explanation, criticism helps readers and audiences develop discernment and a more profound appreciation for art and literature.

4. Mediation Between Creativity and Audience

Criticism acts as an intermediary between creators and the public. It interprets and contextualizes works of art, making them accessible and meaningful to a broader audience. This mediation helps bridge the gap between artistic innovation and popular understanding, ensuring that significant cultural contributions receive their due recognition.

- Discovery of cultural and literary excellence
- Preservation of intellectual and aesthetic standards
- Educational function in cultivating taste
- Mediation between artists and society

The Role of Criticism in Contemporary Society

The function of criticism in today's cultural landscape continues to reflect many of Arnold's foundational ideas, albeit within a more complex and diverse context. Contemporary criticism, while influenced by numerous schools of thought, still grapples with the challenge of balancing subjective interpretation with objective evaluation.

In an era marked by rapid technological change and the proliferation of media, the role of criticism as a discerning and educational force remains critical. Critics today are tasked not only with evaluating artistic merit but also with addressing broader social and cultural issues through their analyses. This expanded role aligns with Arnold's vision of criticism as an agent of cultural enrichment and intellectual progress.

Challenges in Modern Criticism

Modern literary and cultural criticism faces several challenges, including:

- The fragmentation of cultural authority due to digital media
- The rise of relativistic attitudes toward artistic value
- The tension between popular taste and critical standards
- The increasing politicization of criticism

Despite these challenges, the core function of criticism as defined by Arnold—to uphold and communicate enduring cultural values—remains relevant and necessary.

Criticism as a Moral and Intellectual Force

Matthew Arnold emphasized that criticism is not merely an aesthetic exercise but also a moral and intellectual endeavor. He believed that criticism plays a crucial role in shaping the ethical and spiritual dimensions of society by promoting truth, beauty, and goodness. Criticism, in Arnold's view, helps cultivate a well-rounded individual who is capable of appreciating nuanced cultural expressions and who strives toward personal and collective improvement.

By fostering critical thinking and moral discernment, criticism contributes to the cultivation of a more enlightened and harmonious society. Arnold's insistence on the disinterested nature of criticism underscores the importance of impartiality and sincerity in the critical process, which helps prevent criticism from degenerating into personal bias or ideological dogma.

Arnold's Influence on Modern Critical Theory

The legacy of Matthew Arnold's essay extends far beyond his Victorian context, influencing modern critical theory and literary studies. His definition of criticism as a disciplined and objective pursuit of truth and excellence continues to inform contemporary debates about

the purpose and methodology of criticism.

Arnold's ideas helped pave the way for the development of formalist and New Criticism approaches, which emphasize close reading and textual analysis. Moreover, his insistence on the educational and cultural functions of criticism resonates with current interdisciplinary and cultural studies perspectives that view criticism as a vital tool for social and intellectual engagement.

- Foundation for formalist and New Criticism methods
- Emphasis on criticism's educational role
- Influence on cultural and interdisciplinary studies
- Ongoing relevance in debates about critical objectivity

In summary, Matthew Arnold's *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* remains a pivotal work that articulates the enduring value and responsibilities of criticism in literature and society. Its insights continue to guide critical thought and practice in the modern era.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main argument of Matthew Arnold in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'?

In 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,' Matthew Arnold argues that criticism should serve as a disinterested and objective evaluation of literature and culture, helping society to pursue truth and moral improvement rather than merely personal or partisan interests.

How does Matthew Arnold define the role of the critic in his essay?

Matthew Arnold defines the role of the critic as a mediator between the best that is known and thought in the world and the general public, guiding and elevating public taste by providing informed, unbiased judgments.

Why does Matthew Arnold emphasize 'disinterestedness' in criticism?

Arnold emphasizes 'disinterestedness' to highlight that criticism should be free from personal bias, political influence, or commercial interests, so that it can objectively assess works based on their intrinsic merit and contribution to culture.

How is Matthew Arnold's view on criticism relevant to contemporary literary criticism?

Arnold's view remains relevant as it underscores the importance of critical standards and intellectual honesty in literary criticism today, encouraging critics to engage deeply and objectively with texts rather than succumbing to trends or ideological pressures.

What does Matthew Arnold mean by criticism being a 'disinterested endeavor for the disinterested'?

By describing criticism as a 'disinterested endeavor for the disinterested,' Arnold means that criticism should be conducted without personal gain or prejudice, aimed at serving those who seek truth and cultural refinement rather than catering to popular tastes or partisan agendas.

Additional Resources

1. *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* by Matthew Arnold

This seminal work by Matthew Arnold explores the role of criticism in society and its importance in guiding culture and literature. Arnold argues that criticism should serve to elevate society by providing objective analysis rather than mere opinion. The essay addresses the responsibilities of the critic and the potential impact of criticism on the intellectual climate of the time.

2. *Matthew Arnold and the Tradition of Cultural Criticism*

This book delves into Arnold's contributions to cultural criticism, highlighting his belief in the moral and social responsibilities of critics. It examines how Arnold's ideas influenced later thinkers and the development of literary criticism as a discipline. The text situates Arnold within the broader Victorian intellectual context.

3. *Criticism and Society: Matthew Arnold's Vision*

Focusing on Arnold's perspective, this book analyzes the interplay between criticism and societal progress. It discusses Arnold's notion that criticism should help society achieve a higher state of culture and ethical awareness. The work also compares Arnold's views with those of his contemporaries.

4. *Revisiting Arnold: The Function of Criticism in Modern Times*

This volume revisits Arnold's classic essay through the lens of contemporary literary theory and criticism. It assesses the relevance of Arnold's ideas in today's cultural environment, exploring how his principles can be applied or challenged in modern criticism. The book includes essays by various scholars.

5. *Matthew Arnold's Critical Legacy: Literature and Morality*

This book explores Arnold's intertwining of literary criticism and moral philosophy. It discusses how Arnold believed criticism should promote ethical development and cultural refinement. The analysis covers his major works and their lasting influence on literary studies.

6. *The Victorian Critic: Matthew Arnold and His Contemporaries*

Offering a comparative study, this book situates Arnold among other Victorian critics, highlighting similarities and differences in their critical approaches. It provides a broader understanding of the intellectual currents shaping criticism during Arnold's era. The book also considers Arnold's impact on later generations.

7. *Matthew Arnold and the Crisis of Culture*

This work investigates Arnold's response to the cultural anxieties of the 19th century, focusing on his efforts to define the purpose of criticism. It considers Arnold's diagnosis of cultural decline and his prescriptions for recovery through criticism and education. The book engages with both historical context and theoretical implications.

8. *Criticism at the Crossroads: From Arnold to Contemporary Thought*

Tracing the evolution of literary criticism from Arnold's foundational ideas to present-day theories, this book highlights continuities and ruptures. It examines how Arnold's concept of criticism as a moral and cultural guide has been adapted or contested over time. The text provides a critical overview for students and scholars.

9. *The Role of the Critic: Essays Inspired by Matthew Arnold*

A collection of essays inspired by Arnold's influential essay, this book brings together diverse perspectives on the critic's social and cultural functions. Contributors reflect on the challenges and responsibilities faced by critics in different historical and cultural contexts. The volume offers rich insights into the enduring significance of Arnold's thought.

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