

matthew arnold function of criticism

matthew arnold function of criticism is a significant concept in literary theory and criticism that emphasizes the essential role of criticism in society. Matthew Arnold, a renowned Victorian poet and critic, articulated his views on the purpose and nature of criticism, highlighting its role beyond mere judgment or evaluation. In his seminal essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Arnold proposed that criticism serves as a bridge between culture and society, promoting intellectual development and moral improvement. This article explores the core ideas behind Matthew Arnold's function of criticism, its impact on literary criticism, and its relevance in contemporary discourse. The article also delves into the principles Arnold established for effective criticism and its broader cultural implications. Understanding these elements provides valuable insights into how criticism shapes literature and society.

- Matthew Arnold's Concept of Criticism
- The Role of Criticism in Society
- Principles of Arnold's Critical Approach
- Criticism as a Means of Cultural Transmission
- Relevance of Arnold's Function of Criticism Today

Matthew Arnold's Concept of Criticism

Matthew Arnold's function of criticism is grounded in his belief that criticism is not merely about pointing out faults or praising literary works but serves a higher intellectual and cultural purpose. Arnold viewed criticism as a disciplined endeavor that seeks to discern the best that has been thought and said in the world, and to transmit these cultural values to society. According to him, criticism must be objective and impartial, avoiding personal biases and subjective preferences. This approach contrasts with criticism based solely on personal taste or partisan loyalty. Arnold's function of criticism emphasizes a balanced, thoughtful evaluation that helps society recognize and appreciate enduring artistic and intellectual achievements.

The Purpose of Criticism

Arnold argued that the purpose of criticism is to guide society towards a better understanding of culture and truth. Criticism acts as a mediator

between the creative arts and the public, ensuring that cultural standards are upheld and refined. It helps individuals cultivate taste and judgment, encouraging intellectual growth and moral sensibility. Through criticism, society gains access to the highest ideals and values embodied in literature and art, fostering a more enlightened and cohesive community.

Criticism as a Means of Education

For Arnold, criticism served an educational function by enlightening readers and audiences. It was a tool to educate the public about the standards of excellence and the significance of cultural works. This educational role of criticism promotes critical thinking and discernment, enabling people to appreciate literature in a deeper, more meaningful way. By educating the public, criticism enriches the cultural fabric of society.

The Role of Criticism in Society

Matthew Arnold's function of criticism extends beyond literary analysis to a broader societal role. Criticism, in his view, acts as a social force that supports progress and cultural cohesion. It helps maintain the standards of civilization by fostering intellectual and moral development. Arnold believed that criticism could protect society from the chaos of unchecked opinions and superficial judgments by providing a rational and informed evaluation of cultural works.

Criticism as a Social Discipline

Arnold positioned criticism as a social discipline that contributes to the collective well-being of society. By establishing standards of excellence and promoting cultural values, criticism nurtures social harmony and intellectual advancement. It encourages individuals to rise above narrow interests and embrace universal truths and ideals. This social function underscores the importance of criticism as a stabilizing and elevating force within culture.

The Relationship Between Criticism and Culture

Criticism plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of culture. Arnold emphasized that culture represents the best knowledge and highest wisdom of humanity. Criticism helps identify and safeguard these cultural treasures, ensuring their continuity across generations. Through criticism, culture is not only preserved but also developed, as new insights and interpretations emerge in response to changing societal needs.

Principles of Arnold's Critical Approach

Matthew Arnold's function of criticism is underpinned by several key principles that define how criticism should be conducted. These principles highlight the qualities of effective criticism and the responsibilities of the critic.

Objectivity and Impartiality

Arnold insisted that criticism must be free from personal bias and emotional influence. Critics should strive for objectivity, basing their judgments on reasoned analysis and evidence. This impartiality ensures that criticism remains credible and authoritative, providing a reliable guide for cultural evaluation.

Disinterestedness

Closely related to objectivity, disinterestedness means that critics should not be motivated by personal gain or allegiance to particular groups. Arnold believed that true criticism requires a detached perspective that prioritizes truth and cultural value above all else. This detachment allows critics to offer honest and constructive assessments.

High Standards and Intellectual Rigor

Arnold advocated for maintaining high standards in criticism, demanding intellectual rigor and careful thought. Critics should seek to understand the deeper significance of literary and artistic works, rather than focusing on superficial features. This rigorous approach helps elevate criticism as a serious intellectual discipline.

Promotion of Moral and Intellectual Growth

Arnold's critical function also involves fostering moral and intellectual improvement in society. Critics should aim to reveal the ethical and philosophical dimensions of cultural works, encouraging audiences to reflect on important human values. This dimension of criticism aligns with Arnold's broader vision of culture as a means of human betterment.

Criticism as a Means of Cultural Transmission

One of the central aspects of Matthew Arnold's function of criticism is its role in the transmission and preservation of culture. Criticism acts as a conduit through which cultural knowledge and artistic achievements are passed

from one generation to the next.

Identifying the Best That Has Been Thought and Said

Arnold famously described culture as "the best that has been thought and said." Criticism is tasked with identifying these exemplary works and ideas and ensuring they remain accessible and relevant. This involves discerning timeless qualities in literature and art that transcend historical and social contexts.

Encouraging Cultural Continuity and Innovation

While preserving tradition, criticism also encourages innovation by challenging complacency and promoting new interpretations. This dynamic process ensures that culture remains vibrant and responsive to contemporary issues, while maintaining continuity with the past.

List: Functions of Criticism in Cultural Transmission

- Preserving cultural heritage and classical works
- Educating new audiences about cultural values
- Providing context and interpretation for complex works
- Stimulating intellectual and artistic innovation
- Maintaining cultural standards and quality

Relevance of Arnold's Function of Criticism Today

Matthew Arnold's function of criticism continues to hold relevance in the modern era, despite changes in literary theory and cultural discourse. His emphasis on objectivity, intellectual rigor, and cultural education remains foundational to many critical practices today. The challenges posed by digital media, diverse artistic expressions, and evolving societal values require a critical approach that balances tradition with openness to new perspectives.

Criticism in the Digital Age

The proliferation of online content and democratization of opinion pose challenges to Arnold's ideal of disinterested, objective criticism. However, his principles encourage maintaining standards and thoughtful evaluation amid the abundance of information. Critics today can draw on Arnold's insights to navigate the complexities of digital culture and uphold meaningful discourse.

Continuing the Mission of Cultural Enrichment

The core mission of criticism as a vehicle for cultural enrichment and intellectual growth remains vital. In an increasingly fragmented world, criticism inspired by Arnold's function can help foster shared values and understanding. It provides a framework for engaging with literature and art in ways that promote reflection, education, and social cohesion.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary function of criticism according to Matthew Arnold?

According to Matthew Arnold, the primary function of criticism is to help us discern and appreciate the best that has been thought and said in the world, thereby guiding culture and society towards higher ideals.

How does Matthew Arnold differentiate criticism from other forms of judgment?

Matthew Arnold views criticism not as mere fault-finding but as a disinterested endeavor aimed at understanding and valuing the best works of literature and culture for the improvement of society.

Why does Matthew Arnold emphasize 'disinterestedness' in criticism?

Arnold emphasizes 'disinterestedness' to highlight that criticism should be impartial and objective, free from personal bias or emotional involvement, focusing instead on the inherent value of the work.

How does Matthew Arnold relate criticism to culture and society?

Arnold believes that criticism serves as a guiding force that elevates culture and society by promoting the appreciation of excellence and encouraging intellectual and moral growth.

What role does Matthew Arnold assign to the critic in society?

The critic, according to Arnold, acts as a mediator who interprets and assesses cultural works, helping the public recognize and value the best achievements in art and literature.

How does Matthew Arnold's function of criticism influence modern literary theory?

Arnold's concept of criticism as a pursuit of objective evaluation and cultural betterment has influenced modern literary theory by encouraging critics to balance subjective interpretation with universal standards of excellence.

Additional Resources

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

This foundational essay by Matthew Arnold explores the role of criticism in society, emphasizing its function to discern and uphold the best in literature and culture. Arnold argues that criticism should be a disinterested endeavor aimed at guiding society towards moral and intellectual improvement. The work remains a cornerstone in literary theory, particularly in the study of Victorian criticism.

2. *Matthew Arnold and the Ethics of Criticism* by Robert H. Ferdig

Ferdig's book delves into Arnold's ethical approach to literary criticism, illuminating how Arnold's ideas about culture and morality inform his critical practice. The author examines Arnold's belief in the critic's duty to serve the broader cultural good. This analysis situates Arnold's work within both Victorian and modern critical traditions.

3. *Culture and Anarchy* by Matthew Arnold

In this seminal work, Arnold discusses the cultural and societal conditions of Victorian England, linking the role of criticism to the improvement of society. He contrasts 'culture' with 'anarchy,' advocating for the civilizing influence of literature and art. The text complements Arnold's views on criticism by framing it within broader social concerns.

4. *The Victorian Critics: Matthew Arnold and His Contemporaries* by Mary A. Favret

Favret's book offers a comprehensive look at Arnold alongside other prominent Victorian critics, situating his ideas within the intellectual climate of the time. It explores Arnold's notion of criticism as a moral and cultural function, as well as his influence on later critical thought. Readers gain insight into the development of literary criticism during the Victorian era.

5. *Literary Criticism in the Victorian Age* by Harold Bloom

Bloom's volume includes critical essays on Arnold's theories, especially focusing on his concept of criticism's social function. The book contextualizes Arnold within the broader scope of Victorian literary criticism and examines his lasting impact on the discipline. It is useful for understanding Arnold's place in the literary canon.

6. *Matthew Arnold's Critical Ideals: An Interpretation by Lionel Trilling*
Trilling provides a detailed interpretation of Arnold's critical ideals, emphasizing the balance Arnold sought between aesthetic appreciation and moral seriousness. The work highlights Arnold's vision of criticism as a guiding force for cultural advancement. Trilling's analysis is influential in modern literary criticism.

7. *Criticism and Culture in Victorian England by John Kucich*
This book explores the intersection of literary criticism and cultural theory in Victorian England, with significant attention to Arnold's role. Kucich discusses how Arnold's function of criticism aimed to mediate between art and society. The text offers a nuanced perspective on the cultural responsibilities of critics in Arnold's time.

8. *Matthew Arnold and the Uses of Criticism by Barbara Hardy*
Hardy examines Arnold's critical methodology and its implications for understanding literature's social purpose. The book underscores Arnold's belief in criticism as a means of cultural education and moral guidance. It also considers Arnold's legacy in contemporary critical practice.

9. *Victorian Literary Criticism and the Function of Criticism by Derek Brewer*
Brewer's study situates Arnold's 'function of criticism' within the broader framework of Victorian literary criticism. He analyzes Arnold's arguments for criticism as a disciplined, objective pursuit that transcends personal bias. The book is valuable for readers interested in the historical development of literary criticism.

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