

# The Purging Effects of Culture- A Speculative Analysis of Matthew Arnold's "Sweetness and Light"

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**Abstract - Culture and Anarchy is a notable sociopolitical essay of Matthew Arnold. He was motivated by his desire to correct content provincialism and arrogance of the English society. In 1704 Jonathan Swift wrote of beauty and intelligence as two noblest of things, "sweetness and light." In 1869 Matthew Arnold made Swift's latter phrase- a touchstone of Victorian sensibility- as the title of the first chapter of his Culture and Anarchy. Arnold believes that culture should be sought out of curiosity- a liberal and intelligent eagerness about things of mind. According to him the place of curiosity is desire. It is desire that make somebody pursue. The work of desire is to see things as they are and if it is pursued by an intelligent person with an impartial understanding of mind, such curiosity leads us to real culture. Culture is worthwhile because it reminds us of what is important and renews our passion for "sweetness and light." When true culture is achieved, true greatness occurs, and social disparities will be destroyed.**

**Index Terms - Culture, Jacobinism, Light, Religion, Sweetness**

## INTRODUCTION

The Victorian period in history and literature was during the years of the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1900. It was one of the longest reigns in the history of England. The Queen took the title "Empress of the Indies." Historians categorize this era into early, middle, and late corresponding to periods of growing pains, of confidence (the 1830s) and of loss of consensus (the 1880s). Under Queen Victoria, a Britain transformed by the Industrial Revolution became the world's leading imperial power. It was an era of material affluence, political awakening, democratic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, social unrest, educational expansion, idealism, and pessimism: The literature of the period, wonderfully rich and varied, reflects the spirit of the age. English men believed that

Britain was leading the world into a new and better age. The Great Exhibition of England in 1851 was considered as an arrogant parade of English accomplishment. English who started colonizing to expand their territory faced unexpected technological and scientific progress, which resulted in Victorian complacency. There emerged several reform movements like 1832, Reform Bill, Factory Acts, Poor Law Amendment Act, the Corn Laws etc aimed at the betterment of laity and children. Strong moral and religious reasons were put forward in favor of legal changes to improve society. Perhaps the most important moral, the argument came in Jeremy Bentham's writing on the principle of Utilitarianism. This idea was a relatively new way of deciding what was politically right.

Matthew Arnold who was a distinguished poet and prose writer of the Victorian era was keenly aware of the conflict between religion and science. Arnold who had negated all kinds of utilitarian philosophy advocated for a spiritual replenishment among the Victorians. He wrote on varied topics such as literature, education, politics, religion, etc. But whatever topics he handled; his approach was always critical. As Iago said to himself, Arnold too is "nothing if not critical." Arnold's criticism of literature, society, politics, and religion all tend towards being a criticism of life. He himself defines criticism as "the endeavor in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science etc to see the object as in itself it really is." Arnold who felt the fret and fever of the Victorian period realised that he was breathing in a kind of spiritual vacuum. He was keenly aware of the conflict between advancing materialism and retreating Christianity.

## CONTENT

Among Arnold's works dealing with social and political questions, the pride of place must go with *Culture and Anarchy*. In his polemical *Culture and Anarchy*, he dismisses the aristocracy as Barbarians and ridicules the middle class as Philistines - a name offensive to Puritan belief in the English, as a chosen race. But his terms 'culture' and 'Philistine' gained lasting currency. He sometimes talked of culture almost as if it were a man or at least a church: so, we may suspect that culture was a man, whose name was Matthew Arnold. The Victorian age is generally known to us as an age of peace and prosperity and above all, of political stability. But behind the imposing facade of order Arnold perceived some anarchic forces at work. Anarchy according to him is essentially antonymous to culture. When everybody, is bent upon "doing as one likes, culture is in danger. What makes for culture according to Arnold is that "a view in which, the love of our neighbours, the impulses towards action, help and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it- motives eminently such as are called social- come in as parts of the ground of culture and the main and pre-eminent parts." Culture is thus a social passion for doing good and Anarchy is its very negation. Arnold was convinced of the progress of democracy. But he desired that the transition to democracy should not be allowed to destroy the social edifice. He was against unchartered freedom which allowed all to have their own ways.

"Sweetness and Light" is the first chapter of the book *Culture and Anarchy*. "Sweetness and Light" is an English idiom, that is used to describe insincere courtesy. Matthew Arnold picked this phrase from Jonathan Swift's work *The Battle of the Books*. "Sweetness and Light" here stands for the beauty and intelligence of an excellent culture.

In his treatise, Arnold's central focus and argument are on curiosity. It is defined as a liberal and intelligent eagerness about the things of mind or mental activities. According to him, the natal place of curiosity is desire. It is desire that makes somebody pursue. The work of desire is to see things as they are. If it is pursued by an intelligent person with an impartial understanding of the mind, it becomes praiseworthy. It bears a genuine

scientific passion ie the right key to curiosity. Such curiosity leads us to culture. So, beyond the man of culture is nonetheless but curiosity.

The Arnoldian concept of culture gives stress to the harmonious development of human nature. Culture is not just personal equipment, but a social force leading to social progress. Culture is described by Arnold in "Sweetness and light" as having to origin in the love of perfection. Culture in the final analyses is a study of perfection. In a well-regulated mind, two dominant impulses work in harmony - the scientific passion for pure knowledge and the moral and social passion for doing good. So, the final goal of culture is to render an intelligent being, more intelligent and secondly "to make reason and the will of God prevail." Thus, culture serves as the study and pursuit of perfection.

The inspiration for man to a desire for perfection comes from religion. Arnold calls religion "that voice of the deepest human experience." He identified this great aim of religion with a great aim towards perfection of culture. So, culture aim for total human perfection. The outward expression of culture will be manifest in the general harmonious expansion of thoughts and feelings rich in dignity, wealth, and happiness of human nature. Arnold defines the idea of culture in these words "It is in making endless, additions to itself, in the endless expansion of its powers, in endless growth in wisdom and beauty, that the spirit of the human race finds ideal. To reach this ideal, culture is an indispensable aid, and that is the true value of culture?"

Culture thus is a growing and becoming and a general expansion towards perfection and this is a sanction of religion as well. Religion lays an obligation to man to promote the kingdom of God: yet culture goes beyond religion in its pursuit of perfection, in its disinterested study of human nature and human experience. The ultimate aim of culture is to enrich our inner content of the mind and spirit. Moreover, the idea e perfection is an inward condition of the mind and spirit. That is culture is ultimately trying to make a noble person out from a raw person. That is why culture has a purging effect. It prepares individuals to face the future with goodwill and faith. It enables individual to see the ugliness and hideousness of fanatics.

Matthew Arnold attacks the automated existence of modern man. The besetting danger of modern

industrialisation, with machinery, railroads and coal is shifting our sense of values. Because of the material progress, England thinks that national greatness is due to them. But material prosperity is not greatness. For culture asserts that greatness is a spiritual condition worthy to excite love, interest, and admiration.

But greatness does not lie in outward manifestations of the material progress of a nation. It lies in the spiritual efforts of the nation and not in pursuit of wealth as a precious end in itself. Greatness is to be measured by a spiritual standard of perfection.

Population, bodily health, and vigour considered as machinery may have a real value but! they must be connected with a perfect spiritual condition. They must be connected with the formation of the spirit and character to evaluate properly their intrinsic worth.

Culture for Matthew Arnold is inextricably connected with the idea of sweetness and light. The ideal man of culture is what Greeks called- 'Euphues.' He is a man who tends towards sweetness and light. This is Arnold's happy idea of the essential character of human perfection.

The character of a man of culture is moulded both by religion and poetry. Religion aims at a human nature perfect on the moral side. That is religion aims at moral perfection. The dominant idea of poetry is the idea of beauty and of human nature perfect on all its sides. That is poetry aims at the aesthetic perfection of human beings. The best art and poetry of the Greeks tend towards becoming one with religion.

Culture brings inward peace and satisfaction by suppressing and subduing our animality and draws us nearer to complete spiritual perfection. Religion at times fails to lead us to this perfection. Thus, men of culture and poetry are failing to arrive at the first stage to harmonious perfection on to subduing faults of their animality.

Matthew Arnold observes that most of the religious institutions have been commercialized. They also have failed in the moral ministrations to man. Puritanism is based on the impulse of man towards moral development and self-conquest. Yet the Puritan ideal of perfection remains narrow and inadequate. Arnold is judging the religious organisations in terms of sweetness and light and finding them wanting. Arnold accuses all religious organisations of the actual inadequacy of the idea of perfections and wonders.

Arnold complains of the voluntariness of the state of life and society of his times of England. With all this unutterable external hideousness around him on all sides, Arnold thinks it is high time to carefully examine the idea of perfection.

Culture, again, is single-minded love of perfection. It is free from all sorts of fanaticism. Therefore, it stands against all the mischief men do themselves by their faith in machinery. England has blind faith in machinery and industrialisation. This is actually a misapprehension. They are laying a broad foundation of material well-being not only for themselves but also for the society of the future. The current generation sacrifices themselves by blindly involving in material progress. Besides that, culture points out that the harmonious perfection of generations of puritans and Non-conformists has also been sacrificed.

In praise of Oxford, Arnold proudly says that "We in Oxford brought up amidst the beauty and sweetness of that beautiful place, have not failed to seize upon one truth- the truth that beauty and sweetness are essential characters of a complete human perfection." Oxford movement formed by the members of Oxford, championed by Cardinal Newman, focused on strengthening the spiritual beliefs of people. Arnold was its ardent follower, but it fought for lost causes.

Middle-class liberalism broke the Oxford movement with its faith in the Reform Bill of 1832. Cardinal Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* fought against this Middle-class liberalism, which advocated greater freedom for people. Liberalism enabled people to question religion. It shook the very foundations of the Oxford movement.

The current feelings of Oxford Movement with its keen desire for beauty and sweetness may, in the long run, give a death-blow to this middle-class Liberalism and a new and more democratic force could prevail in the future in England. Leaders of the country in religions, in the social and political sphere, may gradually be converted to this culture; upholding this ideal of human perfection- that is "as inward spiritual activity having for its characters, increased sweetness, increased light, increased life increased empathy." They are the apostles of democracy. They cultivated the best knowledge. They set an example in their life. The new force and the new power arising in England with its revolutionary principle will strike at the very

root of the middle-class Philistinism. Arnold calls it Jacobinism. This new doctrine is cutting itself away from the past traditions in politics and is trying to establish a rational society for the future. But this Jacobinism is hostile to culture for the signal marks of this now force are its fierceness and its addiction to an abstract system. Culture will direct its attention to show how wrong it is to put faith in any man and his doings, pointing towards the limitations and narrowness involved in the individual act. In following this, we shall feel pleasure as well as a sense of increased freedom and look forward to a brighter future.

Arnold is happy to insist on the wakening of his contemporaries to all spheres of creative activities in art, literature, and life. Society must be rejuvenated with noble thoughts, a sense of beauty and a deeper significance to human life. Arnold insists that the light of culture must guide this national reawakening to sweetness and light. "Only it must be real thought, and real beauty; real sweetness and real light."

Religious and political organizations try to indoctrinate the masses with a peculiar set of ideas of their own creed. Sometimes even popular literature works in the same way on the masses. But this is not the way of culture. Culture works differently. It does not work with ready-made judgments and watchwords. Culture employs itself, "to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely, - nourished and not bound by them."

The great men of culture believe in equality and broadmindedness. They are possessed by a passion to spread culture from one end of society to the other. They carry the best knowledge and the best ideas of their times. It is the duty of these men to humanize knowledge. Therefore, it becomes the best knowledge and thought of the ages and becomes a true source of sweetness and light.

#### CONCLUSION

The great men of culture broaden the basis of life and intelligence and work powerfully to expand sweetness and light to make reason and the will of God to prevail. In short, a man of culture seeks knowledge from all departments and shares it with all. He is not narrow-

minded because such knowledge brings perfection. So, his pursuit of perfection is sweetness and light. Truly, the men of culture are children of light.

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