

## **Matthew Arnold: Poems Themes**

### **Anti-Modernization**

In much of his poetry, Arnold expresses strong feelings against the rapid modernization he saw during the Victorian period. He believed that the speed at which everything moves, and the intensity with which people are expected to work, is detrimental to society as a whole, especially as it leads people away from what was once important to them. He generally posits modernization against faith, the latter being less a specific religious sentiment and more a focus on the power of humans to find their true selves through nature. This theme resonates in almost every poem in the collection, with one example being "Bacchanalia," wherein he criticizes the New Age and how its volume and mania have disrupted an otherwise peaceful order.

### **Faith**

The idea of faith is very important in Arnold's work. Faith is the virtue that he believes humans have lost in the modern era, in which they are only focused on working themselves to death. It is notable that faith is not a specifically religious sentiment for Arnold - he often questioned religion - but is rather an essential part of the human spirit that is being wrongfully obscured by the prominence of scientific reasoning. In his famous poem "Dover Beach," he remarks on the disparity between what faith used to be and what faith is now. In "East London," it is the preacher who has managed to keep happiness in his life because of his faith. Overall, faith is an expression of the human spirit, which is naturally different than the demands of the body. Only through faith can humans transcend the world's limitations.

### **Nature**

In Arnold's poetry, nature symbolizes all that is pure, beautiful, and unchanging in the world. Nature, particularly wide open fields and sunny pastures, serve as Arnold's anchor in a constantly changing world full of constantly changing people. Further, humans are able to rise above the cluttered modern world by reflecting on the purity of nature. Sometimes, nature can cause consternation, because it reminds the speaker that he can never quite transcend or leave society to the extent that he desires. One good example of Arnold's use of nature is in "A Wish," in which the speaker's dying wish is to be placed by a window as he dies, so that he may look out at the beautiful landscape that will be there long after he is gone. Natural metaphors are woven all throughout Arnold's poetry, typically symbolizing beauty and purity, and the human ability to transcend.

### **Love**

Though it is sometimes used subtly, the theme of love appears in many of Arnold's poems. In general, he treats a beloved as he does nature, something which can help a human transcend his limitations but likewise can cause consternation when it does not work. He

emphasizes the difficulty of separation from a lover in "Absence" and the fleetingness of time with a lover in "Consolation." Often, Arnold refers to a woman he loves as "Marguerite"; it is unknown whether or not she actually existed, but she is the embodiment of love throughout many of his poems.

## **Time**

The theme of time surfaces in much of Arnold's work, usually as a tragic force of sorts, something that humans have no control over. And yet time can also bring consolation, reminding us that there are greater forces than the limitations of humanity, forces that we can reflect upon in hopes of reaching some greater state.

Time is most explicitly represented in the poem "Consolation." In this poem, Time is a physical entity who controls humans. Arnold makes the point that our desire to extend time in great moments might extend misery for others. We are incapable of understanding the greater perspective that Time has. In many ways, Time in this poem can be connected to the power of nature in other poems, something that we can understand in both wonderful and terrible ways.

## **Classical Mythology**

Arnold's fascination with classical mythology manifests in much of his poetry, especially to symbolize the recurring conflict of faith vs. modern life. He often uses mythology, typically Roman, to suggest that the struggles for human transcendence are timeless. Poems like "Bacchanalia" and "Cadmus and Harmonia" set mythological stories in a time more ideal than the present-day, a time when faith was an essential component of everyday life. And yet even in these idealized times, man had the ability to work against nature (as evidenced in part 1 of "Bacchanalia.") Myth allows us to relate to purer times, but also to realize the extent to which humans must always struggle against their own natures.

## **Labor**

Arnold frequently refers to the weariness of workers in the modern world, people who are forced to labor their lives away until there is absolutely nothing left. He deplores this kind of life, and has tried to break free of it through his poetry and other writings. The danger is that man loses his spirit - the spirit usually represented by nature - because of such labor. And yet Arnold also realizes that escaping this life of labor (as the Scholar-Gipsy did) presents new challenges, since it requires that person to eschew all connections to society. Living a life of labor is tiring, but escaping is itself a burden, requiring exceptional courage.