

Deconstructing Social Hierarchies in Arnold's Culture and Anarchy

Himanshu Sharma

Assistant Professor

Department of English

J.S. Hindu P.G. College, Amroha

Research Scholar of MJP Rohilkhand

University, Bareilly, U.P.

Email: sharmahimanshu3333@gmail.com

Prof. Charu Mehrotra

Principal

Gokul Das Hindu Girls College,

Moradabad (U.P.)

Research Supervisor of MJP Rohilkhand

University, Bareilly, U.P.

Email: charubareilly@gmail.com

Reference to this paper should be
made as follows:

Received: 25.11.2024
Accepted on: 18.03.2025

Himanshu Sharma
Prof. Charu Mehrotra

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Vol. XVI, Sp. Issue Mar. 2025
Article No.05, Pg. 039-047

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Online available at <https://anubooks.com/special-issues?url=jgv-si-gdhg-college-mdbd-mar-25>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2025.v16iSI03.005>

Abstract

This paper critically examines Arnold's deconstruction of social hierarchies of Victorian society into the Barbarians, the Philistines, and the Populace and their implications. It focuses on how these social constructs reflect Victorian anxieties and Arnold's vision of moral and cultural reform. By analyzing major excerpts from Culture and Anarchy, this paper explores Arnold's belief in the transformative power of culture and his disdain for materialism, class privilege, and mass ignorance. Additionally, the critique addresses the limitations of Arnold's vision, particularly his elitist tendencies and the feasibility of applying his biased ideas to a more democratic and socially equitable society. Arnold's social deconstructing critiques the cultural, moral, and intellectual failures of each group. He positions "culture" as the solution to societal unrest. The paper concludes by reflecting on the relevance of Arnold's social deconstruction in modern cultural and political discourse.

Keywords

Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, social deconstructing, barbarism, philistines, populace, Victorian society, class structure, cultural canon, etc.

Introduction

Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism is a series of periodical essays by Matthew Arnold, first published in *Cornhill Magazine* (1867–68) and collected as a book in 1869. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* is a cornerstone of Victorian societal criticism and attempts to diagnose the moral and cultural ailments of Nineteenth-century England. Central to Arnold's critique is his division of society into three broad classes: *Barbarians*, *Philistines*, and *Populace*. Each group represents a different set of values and shortcomings, which, Arnold believes, contribute to the erosion of true "culture." Through these classifications, Arnold advocates for a higher, more holistic notion of culture as a means of social improvement. This paper aims to critique Arnold's social stratification, assessing both its strengths and limitations within the context of Victorian thought and modern relevance.

Literature Review

- i. In his paper "*Culture and Anarchy: Arnold's Critique of Victorian Society*," Gerald Haight analyzes Matthew Arnold's views on the social and cultural fragmentation of Victorian England. The core argument is that Arnold critiques Victorian society for lacking cohesive moral and intellectual standards.
- ii. In her paper "*Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy: A Critical Reevaluation*" Emily Rutherford critically examines Arnold's definition of culture as a means to achieve societal harmony and moral improvement. She discusses its limitations and implications both in the Victorian era and contemporary society. She further explores how Arnold's ideals intersect with ongoing discussions on class, elitism, and the role of culture in addressing social divides, offering a nuanced view of his work's enduring impact on cultural theory.

Objective of the Study

To analyze how Arnold's categorization of society into *Barbarians*, *Philistines*, and *Populace* reflects the hierarchical structures of Victorian England.

Research Question

How does Matthew Arnold's categorization of society into *Barbarians*, *Philistines*, and *Populace* reflect and critique the social stratification of Victorian England?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach integrating *close textual analysis* and *historical contextualization*.

Content Analysis

Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* is a critical exploration of societal structures and values in Victorian England. Arnold defines *culture* as *the pursuit of human perfection through knowledge, moral development, and aesthetic appreciation*. He contrasts 'culture' with 'anarchy,' characterized by the absence of order and direction in society. He critiques various Victorian social classes—Aristocracy (Barbarians), Middle Class (Philistines), and Working Class (Populace)—for their shortcomings in contributing to a harmonious society. Arnold emphasizes the need for intellectual and moral development as a counterbalance to materialism and individualism, by advocating for "sweetness and light" to achieve social and cultural progress. Through this work, he presents a vision for reforming society by fostering a balanced and enlightened national character. The researcher will examine the entire article under the following subheadings:

Critical Opinions

Prof. S. P. Sen Gupta, Ph.D. (London), of North Bengal University, provides an insightful evaluation of the essence and character of Matthew Arnold's seminal critical essay, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). He remarks that *Culture and Anarchy* is a work of profound social and political criticism. In this text, Arnold transcends his identity as a poet, literary critic, and educationalist to emerge as a formidable social and political commentator. This aspect of his work solidified his reputation as a visionary and prophet. His critique was not confined to addressing social and political disorder alone. His intellectual and moral crusade extended beyond these realms. He targeted the pervasive intellectual and ethical disarray of his time. Prof. Gupta highlights the multifaceted scope of Arnold's critique and underscores his role as a reformer whose concerns encompassed society's broader cultural and moral fabric. This observation positions *Culture and Anarchy* as a timeless exploration of societal challenges that resonate beyond its immediate historical context. Let's see what Prof. Gupta thinks:

Culture and Anarchy is Arnold's social and political criticism.

The poet, literary critic, and educationalist became a political and social critic; and it was his social and political criticism that made him a prophet. Arnold's crusade was not merely against social and political anarchy. It was a crusade against intellectual and moral anarchy as well. (Preface Gupta)

N. K. Das Gupta in the capacity as an editor of Matthew Arnold observes about him that he was not a deeply profound thinker, nor did he possess Wordsworth's

ability to unveil the depths of human nature and the soul with a single, illuminating insight. Unlike Plato, he did not contemplate the entirety of time and existence as a grand observer. Instead, his goal, much like what he admired in Sophocles, was to approach life with steadiness and perceive it in its entirety. Let us now consider the perspective of Gupta as presented below:

He was not, indeed, a profound thinker. He did not illuminate, like Wordsworth, with a single flash, the abysses of man's nature, and the inmost recesses of the human soul. He was not, as Plato, a spectator of all time and all existence. His aim was, as he said of Sophocles, to see life steadily, and see it whole. (Gupta 1)

Gupta observes that education was the business of Arnold's life. All his scholarship, or his criticism is steeped in culture. His work is academic and whatever he has written, he addressed his works to scholars, and only scholars can fully appreciate him. As a scholar and critic, he turned to ancient Greek models. Enamoured of the classical writers, he asserted, "Whatever was not Greek was barbarian" (1). He is said to have been a child of his own age, both as a poet and as a critic, he was essentially a man of his time. Matthew Arnold has defined literature "as a criticism of life." *Culture and Anarchy* is a criticism of the socio-political life of contemporary Victorian England. Arnold's division of society into three distinct groups—*Barbarians*, *Philistines*, and *Populace*—demonstrates his concern with the cultural and moral integrity of Victorian society. According to Arnold, these groups possess certain defining traits that hinder the development of true culture.

Arnold's Approach to Social Reform

Matthew Arnold's profound social consciousness stemmed from his meticulous examination of society in its entirety and encompassed its complexities and consequences. As a keen observer, Arnold engaged with his contemporary world not from the detached heights of the "Athenaeum Club" or the spires of Oxford, but through direct interaction. His role as an Inspector of Schools brought him into close contact with people from all strata of society. This exposure revealed stark realities that deeply pained him: the Aristocracy's resistance to new ideas, the Philistines' superficial liberalism, and the Populace's pervasive ignorance" (qtd. in Gupta 26). His mission was to introduce a flow of transformative ideas to all segments of society, striving to bring "sweetness and light" to dispel the pervasive bitterness and gloom. Arnold was particularly interested in addressing the middle class, the social group from which he himself hailed. Dr. Gupta quotes G. Tillotson, "He set

himself the task of refining that class ‘the great representative of trade and dissent’ of arnoldifying it; of endowing it with ‘culture...by means of reading, observing and thinking’ (Tillotson 47).

The Aristocratic Class

Arnold equates the Aristocratic class, labelled as Barbarians, with the historical Barbarians who revitalized a decaying Europe through their individuality and dynamism. They exhibited admirable qualities, such as a love for personal liberty, passion for field sports, care for the body, vigorous exercise, good looks, distinguished bearing, high spirit, and self-confidence. However, Arnold critiques these virtues as being overshadowed by their lack of intellectual enlightenment and a deficiency in striving for ideal perfection. In essence, the Barbarians, according to Arnold, symbolize the aristocracy, marked by their admiration for “physical beauty, outward splendour, and personal prowess.” Their emphasis on appearances and adherence to social traditions, though influential, reflects a superficial perspective that, Arnold argues, is inadequate for steering society toward meaningful cultural progress. Gupta aptly quotes Arnold in this regard as under:

The Barbarians, to whom we owe so much, reinvigorated our worn-out Europe with strong individualism and a passion for personal liberty. They had a love for field sports, care for the body through many exercises, and possessed vigour, good looks, and fine complexion. Their chivalry embodied high spirit, choice manners, and distinguished bearing. However, their culture was mainly exterior, consisting principally of outward gifts, graces, looks, manners, accomplishments, and prowess. (Arnold 100-102)

Philistines

The term “Philistines,” applied to the middle class, denotes uncultured and unrefined people. Historically, it was used derogatively by medieval university students to describe townfolk who, unlike the students, were not considered “children of light.” Arnold adopted this term to critique the middle class. N. K. Das Gupta highlights the achievements of this class and describes them as worldly-wise individuals and captains of industry. They have driven industrialization, commerce, and economic prosperity in England. They have built cities, railroads, and a powerful industrial base. They have even created the greatest mercantile navy the world has ever seen. Together with the working class, they continue to fuel material progress (Gupta 271). Despite their contributions, Arnold directs some of his sharpest criticism

toward the Philistines. He condemns their obsession with material wealth and practicality, which he believes blinds them to the *value of art, culture, and intellectual growth*. Though they worship industrial progress, Arnold argues that they fail to uphold deeper cultural and moral ideals. Arnold views the Philistines as embodying the worst aspects of industrialization and capitalism, in which the pursuit of wealth eclipses the cultivation of a richer, intellectual life. Matthew Arnold observes about the Philistines:

The Philistines, well known as the enemy of the children of light or servants of idea, particularly suit our middle class. Philistine conveys a sense of stiffness and perversity in resisting light, fitting those who not only ignore sweetness and light but prefer the machinery of business, chapels, tea-meetings, and addresses from Mr. Murphy, forming a dismal, illiberal life. (Arnold 98-99)

The Populace

Finally, we approach the *working class*, nick-named by Matthew Arnold as *Populace*. The *working class* is comprised of raw and half-developed masses, living for the most part in squalor and poverty, or they are dominated by passion and ignorance. Arnold expresses concern that their lack of education and exposure to higher culture renders them vulnerable to social unrest and manipulation. But now there is a democratic awakening in this class and they look forward to the happy day when they will sit on thrones like commercial members of Parliament and other middle-class potentates. This part of the working class is one in spirit with the industrial middle class. This class is, says Arnold,

...raw and half-developed, has long lain half-hidden amidst its poverty and squalor, and is now issuing from its hiding place to assert an Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes, and is beginning to perplex us by marching where he likes, meeting where he likes, bawling what he likes, breaking what he likes. (Arnold 104-05)

Although Arnold sympathizes with their plight, he also views the Populace as largely incapable of contributing to cultural advancement without proper guidance. Arnold begins by acknowledging that the working class, like other social groups, is not without flaws. While he sympathizes with their struggles, he also critiques the tendencies he perceives as problematic. This sets the tone for a balanced yet critical examination of their role in society. Arnold critiques the working class's tendency to assert their immediate desires and interests without reflecting on higher ideals or

cultural aspirations. By “ordinary self,” Arnold refers to the instinctive and unrefined aspects of human nature, which he contrasts with the pursuit of “sweetness and light” (his ideal of intellectual and moral refinement). He points out that the Populace can act impulsively, driven by emotions like anger, frustration, or fear. He sees this lack of rational control as a hindrance to achieving a harmonious and cultured society. For example, mass protests or uprisings—though rooted in legitimate grievances—might sometimes be chaotic or destructive due to the absence of thoughtful leadership or intellectual guidance.

Arnold criticizes the working class for focusing narrowly on their own material and economic concerns, often at the expense of broader societal welfare. This self-interest, in his view, prevents them from contributing to a more unified and culturally enriched society. Arnold suggests that the Populace lacks an independent framework of intellectual or moral principles to guide their actions. Instead, they may rely on external influences, demagogues, or populist rhetoric, which can lead them astray. For Arnold, the absence of these standards highlights the need for cultural education and exposure to higher ideals. Gupta observes, “The Populace has its full share of faults; it is often bent on the self-assertion of its ordinary self, it is often blindly led by its passions, and by a view of its class interests, and it is without standards of its own for right reason” (qtd.in Gupta 197).

Arnold’s Vision of Culture as a Solution

For Arnold, culture represents the antithesis of the shortcomings of all three groups. Arnold’s concept of culture in *Culture and Anarchy* serves as an idealistic vision for personal and societal transformation. For Arnold, culture is the *remedy for the flaws of the Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace*. It transcends class divisions. Culture is rooted in altruism and social responsibility. It emphasises love for others, a commitment to reducing human suffering, and a desire to improve the world for future generations. It is a “study of perfection,” which involves the pursuit of truth, beauty, and the best ideas humanity has produced, as expressed through literature, philosophy, and art. *Culture unites individuals by fostering shared ideals of intellectual and moral growth, rather than dividing them by class-based prejudices or material pursuits.*

Ultimately, for Arnold, culture is the “pursuit of total perfection,” achieved through learning, critical thinking, and a dedication to improving oneself and society. It offers a pathway to overcome the shortcomings of societal groups by encouraging individuals to seek the highest standards of thought and action. He defines culture as under:

“...all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing 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 part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part...it is a study of perfection. Or in selective words, it is, “a pursuit of total perfection by knowing the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 11-13).

Arnold believes that true culture, cultivated through education and intellectual engagement, can unite the positive traits of each social group and bring about societal harmony. He finally defines culture, “... is a *harmonious expansion of all the powers* which make the beauty and worth of human nature... (Arnold 14)” He calls for an inward turn, a shift away from the materialistic and individualistic tendencies of the age, toward a focus on ethical and aesthetic development. Arnold’s ideal society is one where “sweetness and light”—the combination of beauty and intellectual illumination—prevails over the ignorance of the *Populace*, the materialism of the *Philistines*, and the superficiality of the *Barbarians*.

Critique of Arnold’s Social Stratification

While Arnold’s critique of Victorian society is insightful, it is not without its limitations. His *elitist* tendencies are evident in his dismissal of the *Populace* as *largely unfit for cultural leadership* and his overly simplistic categorization of societal groups. Moreover, his emphasis on *culture as a unifying force* appears somewhat naive, given the complex socio-economic realities of the time. Arnold fails to adequately address the structural inequalities that contributed to the social unrest he critiques. Additionally, Arnold’s vision of culture relies heavily on a *Eurocentric, classical canon*, which limits the inclusivity of his cultural ideal. While advocating for moral and intellectual development, Arnold does not fully consider the diversity of cultural contributions from other parts of the world or marginalized voices within his society.

Limitations

Arnold’s vision in *Culture and Anarchy* is constrained by its *elitist* undertones and limited by its narrow definition of culture. He offers a compelling yet flawed analysis of Victorian society, divided into the *Barbarians*, *Philistines*, and *Populace*.

Future Scope

Deconstructing Social Hierarchies in Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy opens

avenues for extensive research and interdisciplinary exploration. More research may be pursued on “Arnoldian Culture in Modern Contexts, Comparative Studies: Arnold and Other Social Critics, Arnold and Globalization, Arnold’s Educational Vision and Pedagogy, and Postmodern Readings of *Culture and Anarchy*,” etc.

Conclusion

Through deconstruction, Arnold’s categories of Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace are revealed as subjective constructs rather than objective truths. His vision of culture as a unifying force becomes paradoxical when viewed against the hierarchies he perpetuates. Deconstruction allows us to see *Culture and Anarchy* not just as a critique of Victorian society but as a complex, layered text with its internal tensions and contradictions. Despite these limitations, his call for the pursuit of “sweetness and light” continues to inspire reflections on the role of culture in social reform and intellectual development.

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