

Who order'd, that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cool'd ? 20
Who renders vain their deep desire ?—
A God, a God their severance ruled ! *separation*
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.

TO MARGUERITE—CONTINUED

Introduction

To Marguerite strikes the same note as *Isolation*, *To Marguerite*. It is a note of loneliness. It is no longer at a personal level. It is the generalisation of the bitter truth that mortal millions live alone. In *Isolation*, *To Marguerite* the heroine appears, and she is frequently mentioned. In *To Marguerite* she does not

appear at all, although her dark shadow hangs like a pall. In this poem also Arnold draws a universal conclusion from a single premise. 175

Paraphrase

Arnold compares the world to an ocean. Every human being is like a small island. All the islands are separated from one another by the echoing straits. Human beings are like so many islands in the ocean. But they are all separated, and cannot share the joys and sorrows of their fellow-beings. The islands are conscious that they are surrounded by unfathomable water. Human beings are also conscious that there are fellow-beings around them. Yet they do not have a feeling of consolation that they can be akin to each other. Man is, thus, doomed to a life of futility and isolation.

Human beings feel the presence of their fellow-beings when the moon shines in the sky and illumines the other islands. The moon shines as much on our island as on the other. The nightingale sings heavenly songs, which can be heard by all the inmates of the isolated islands.

An island, illuminated by the moon, feels the sweet wind of the spring, blowing over it, and is delighted to hear the enchanting notes of the nightingale. It is then that it feels a deep longing to be united with the other islands. All the islands have the same reaction, and are aware of the bitter truth that once upon a time they were parts of a single continent. Should their borders meet, they can once again unite.

Men, in much the same way, were once together mentally. They felt akin to each other, and their unity was forged by love. But now that unity, that fellow-feeling, that akinness are things of the past. They are cut off from the fellow-beings, although they have to live in the same society for mere convenience.

Human beings have a sort of nostalgia for the past. They cannot forget that once they used to partake of the blessed universal life. But now they have the misfortune to live a life of loneliness and isolation. They have still a deep longing for love and union. They can only complain that as soon as the fire of love is kindled, it is cooled down. A fatalist, Arnold holds God entirely responsible for this tragedy. It is God who isolates one human being from another. Here God is synonymous with Fate.

Critical Appreciation

Arnold's love-poems are elegies, and lament the death of love. In *Isolation*, *To Marguerite* he has narrated his own bitter experience in the sphere of love. He loved Marguerite deeply and passionately. But his love was not reciprocated, and Marguerite was cold and

indifferent to him. In *Marguerite* he shifts from personal experience to universal experience. He draws the axiomatic truth and declares with pontifical solemnity that love is a mere illusion, and earthly love is doomed to futility. Both the poems, however, strike the same note of loneliness and isolation. He is essentially modern here, and forestalls the Existentialists and Absurdists.

To Arnold, says Jones, the sea is one element in which he discovered the deepest reflection to his own melancholy and sense of isolation. In *Marguerite* the imagery of the sea is effectively introduced. It is the sea, which disunites islands, and never lets them have unity once again. Arnold loves nature in her quieter and subdued moods. Here also he shows his marked preference for moonlight to sunlight, for the moon-blanching land and the melancholy voice of the sea.

Marguerite is one of the loveliest lyrics of Arnold, and is remarkable for cadence and harmony, reticence in expression and felicitous phrases. Arnold's philosophical reflection on the futility and evanescence of love makes the poem deeply pessimistic. Unlike Shelley and Browning, he cannot sing of the triumphs of love.

Saintsbury regards the poem as the supreme expression of Arnold's lyrical genius: "The image—the islands in the sea is capably projected in the first stanza; it is exquisitely amplified in the second; the moral comes with due force in the third; and the whole winds up with one of the great poetic phrases of the century—one of the jewels five (literally five!) words long of English verse—a phrase complete and final, with epithets in unerring cumulation."

Annotations

Line 1. *Yes*—Arnold speaks about isolation as the common lot of mankind with a tone of finality.

2. *Enisled*—Every human being is like a lonely island, surrounded by the estranging sea.

Echoing straits—Each island is separated from another by a vast and unbridgable gulf of waters of the sea.

3. *Dotting the shoreless watery wild*—Every island is like a dot or a small spot in the vast ocean.

4. *Mortal millions live alone*—An example of epigram. Arnold suggests that there are millions of men and women on the earth, and yet no union is ever possible.

5. *Islands*—here human beings.

Enclasping flow—surrounded by the flow of the waters of the sea.

6. *And then their endless bounds they know*—the islands, cut off from one another, by the vast stretch of the waters of the sea, are conscious that they are detached by the sea.

Line 8. *Balms*—zephyr ; sweet breeze.

9. *Glens*—valleys.

12. *Across the sounds . . . pour*—The melodious notes of the nightingale are heard above the deafening sound of the waters of the sea.

13. *A longing like despair*—a deep desire that is not to be fulfilled ; love that is destined to failure.

cf. "One hope is too like despair."

—Shelley

15-16. Once lovers were united.

18. *Marges*—margins.

Oh might our marges meet again—The islands are like human beings. Once the islands were parts of a single continent. They are, however, separated now. They have a deep desire to be united again. Men and women, who were once united, also cast a longing lingering look behind and have a deep longing for reunion. Arnold, the elegiac poet, is fully revealed here.

19. *Longing's fire*—love.

19-20. *Who order'd . . . cool'd*—Who is to be held responsible for the cooling or extinction of the fire of love ?

22. *A God*—God or Fate is responsible for the isolation of men and women.

Leon Gottfried humorously suggests that the meddling deity always interferes with Arnold's personal affairs. According to F.W. Bateson, "there was a hard and worldly streak somewhere in Arnold that is perhaps his most serious limitation."

24. *Unplumb'd*—immeasurable ; unfathomable.

Salt—sea.

Estranging sea—The sea that separates or alienates man from a woman, or a man from a man.

It seems to be a literal translation of Horace's 'oceanis dissociabili'.

Explanations

1. *Yes ! in the sea of life . . . they know.* (Lines 1-6)

In these lines taken from *To Marguerite* Arnold compares the world to a vast ocean. Every human being is like an island. As there are innumerable islands in the ocean, so also there are millions of men and women on the earth. The islands are conscious that they are separated by the flowing waters of the sea. In much the same way human beings feel that they were once parts of universal life, but now separated from one another.

2. *But when the moon . . . channels pour.* (Lines 6-12)

In these lines taken from *Marguerite* Arnold draws an exquisite picture of nature. At night the moon shines in the sky

and illuminates the caves and hollows of different islands. The sweet breeze of the spring blows all around, and each island feels delighted. The stars twinkle in the sky. The songs of the nightingale can be heard above the sound of the waters of the sea. It is the moonlight, the sweet breeze, and the song of the nightingale that connect, at least for the time being, the separated islands. But that simply heightens the sense of isolation of the islands. To them, ignorance was bliss, while their knowledge, their excruciating awareness that they are isolated are a curse.

3. *Oh! then a longing . . . meet again.* (Lines 13-18)

In these lines taken from *Marguerite* Arnold says that when at night the moon shines in the sky, the sweet breeze of the spring blows, and the nightingale sings heavenly songs, each island feels a deep desire for reunion that cannot be fulfilled. The islands feel with nostalgia that once upon a time they were the integral parts of a single continent. But, for various reasons their unity was undermined, and they were divided into small fragments, set apart. It is then that they are very much conscious of their unbearable isolation. They feel a deep longing for reunion.

The islands are the symbols of men and women. Every human being feels acutely that he is alone in this wide earth. The sense of isolation causes his deep melancholy. He feels that once upon a time he partook of universal life. At that time men and women were intimate with one another. Their hearts used to beat in unison like a duet song. One heart felt for another. But those days are gone for ever, and men and women, with all their wishfulness, cannot think of reclaiming the irredeemable past. Of all sorts of nostalgia the keenest nostalgia is to send a tear after a day that is gone by.

4. *Who order'd . . . sea.* (Lines 19-24)

In these lines taken from *Marguerite* Arnold universalises his personal experience. The sense of isolation is the destiny of all human beings. They feel that once they were parts of a single continent, and they shared each other's joys and sorrows. They feel a deep and futile longing for reunion. Arnold asks who is responsible for this futility of love. He poses a question and gives an unequivocal answer. It is God or the relentless Fate that is entirely responsible for the isolation of human beings. Man is lonely and isolated and cannot share the joys and sorrows of the fellow-beings.

Arnold's God is not the benign, loving God of the New Testament. He is inexorable destiny and is indifferent to human happiness. His God reminds us of Thomas Hardy's "President of the Immortals", the Immanent Will.