

### Critical Appreciation

*Isolation. To Marguerite* is one of the memorable love-lyrics of Arnold. As love-poet, he has not been eminently successful. An elegiac poet that Arnold is, he does not sing of the triumph of love. His love-lyrics are mere dirges. They have not the note of ecstasy like the lyrics of Browning and Shelley, or even of Burns. Arnold was too puritanical and intellectual to be a good love-poet. The conflict between the head and the heart, between reason and romanticism was all the while raging within. H.C. Duffin observes: "Arnold's love-poetry is possibly the least important part of his writing: it is certainly the least regarded. 'Marguerite', the 'dark lady' of the poems, has received an almost embarrassing amount of attention, but the poems themselves have not been thought worthy of critical study."

Duffin does not consider Arnold to be an unsuccessful love poet: "For myself, his love-poetry was what first attracted me to Arnold, perhaps because it was so different from Browning's to me the ideal. It has a personal intimacy hardly found elsewhere; it is informed by an astringent emotion that touches the heart more poignantly than the sultrier passions of the greater love-poets. It is everywhere unhappy, like the complicated loves of the *Sonnets*, and indulges a brooding meditateness only paralleled in Donne. And partly, I suppose, because of the injunction on a biography—an atmosphere of mystery attaches to the situation. We do not know who was the object of the poems, what were Arnold's relations with her, or indeed if she existed at all. And yet this is genuine love-poetry."

*Isolation: To Marguerite* is an elegy of love. It is a poignant expression of the poet's sense of isolation. In a sense Arnold may be regarded as the pioneer of the literature of isolation or alienation. The poet may speak about himself and his own suffering, as Marguerite failed to reciprocate his love. But his personal suffering is the suffering of entire humanity. His tragedy becomes the tragedy of every man. Arnold is a stoic by temperament, and like a true stoic, he accepts, at least, tries to accept, the futility in love. Marguerite means so much to him. And Marguerite no longer responds to the lover's solicitation. Yet Arnold never complains, nor does he speak against her. He seeks philosophical consolation from his failure.

Arnold, fails as a lover. So does the lover of Browning's *Last Ride Together*. But Browning's lover resigns himself to his fate heroically. He indulges in the philosophical reflection that if everything is realised here, there shall be nothing in heaven to look forward to. The lover will die with the surest hope that what is unrealised here will be attained in the life beyond. Arnold, however, cannot draw such consolation from his failure. He stoically accepts his defeat.

**Lines 38-39.** *Have dreamed . . . one*—no complete union of two lovers is ever possible.

cf. "Infinite passion, and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn."

—Browning

*Dreamed—Imagined.*

### Explanations

1. *We were apart . . . more true.*

(Lines 1-6)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite*, Arnold speaks of the unbridgable gulf between him and his beloved Marguerite. He, however, remained steadfast, for he knew that 'Love is not love that alteration finds'. Marguerite was indifferent to him, but he built in his heart a sacred shrine for her. He did it, for he similarly hoped that Marguerite would also then love him with the same passionate intensity. His love would inspire her love, and she would be more devoted to her. His love was genuine, and, therefore, he was confident that his love would be amply reciprocated by Marguerite,

2. *The fault was grave . . . farewell !*

(Lines 7-12)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite* Arnold fondly hoped that his love would stimulate the love of Marguerite, and that the ties of love would be stronger with the passage of time. He was, however, very shortly disillusioned. Marguerite did not respond to his love. In fact, she was visibly cold and indifferent. Arnold thought that he had made a serious mistake about Marguerite. The grim truth dawned upon him that love was not always reciprocated. Even if a lover loves deeply and passionately he may not expect that his beloved should have the same measure and intensity of love. Arnold's love for Marguerite increased in the same measure as Marguerite's love for him decreased. His intensest love could not evoke any warm response from her. Man is absolutely alone in this wide world. He may make his plans and programmes about love; he may have his resolves that he will build a sweet home and live with his beloved. But all his plans fall through, because he learns very late that his love has been consistently one-sided. His heart rises and falls, but his beloved does not react in the same manner. Her heart may not be moved at all. Arnold appreciates this truth and bids farewell to Marguerite.

3. *Farewell? . . . solitude again !*

(Lines 13-18)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite* Arnold bids farewell to Marguerite, who has refused to reciprocate his sentiments. He has resigned himself to his fate and chosen to live a life of solitude and isolation. He is still steady in his love, but does not expect any return. His love has been consistently calm, and he does not like to have the fiery and passionate love of the

**Romantics.** His love should always move in a fixed course. If at an unguarded moment his heart deviated from the fixed course, he felt ashamed, and sincerely regretted it. A classicist with a stoical temperament, he cannot think of deviating from calm and steady love and entering into a world of fiery and unbridled passion.

4. *Back ! with the . . . Latmian steep.*

(Lines 19-24)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite*, Arnold says that he has never allowed his heart to deviate from the fixed course of calm and steady love. Nor has he strayed into the regions of unrestrained passion. But he does not feel proud. In fact, he is feeling shame and humiliation. He compares and contrasts himself with Luna, the goddess of the Moon, who reciprocated the love of the lovely shepherd boy, Endymion. Luna condescended to come down to Mount Latmos, where Endymion was tending his flock of sheep. She kissed him passionately as he was lying fast asleep. She would visit her lover every night, and they were locked in a passionate embrace. Arnold imagines that Luna must have been ashamed when she realised that she, an immortal goddess, had lost her heart to a mortal. She had another reason to feel ashamed. She was the goddess of chastity, and yet she had lost her chastity by loving Endymion. Arnold also has his sense of shame. But that is for another reason. He cannot forget that Luna's love has been reciprocated, while Marguerite has been cold and indifferent to him. He, therefore, feels lonely and isolated.

5. *Yet she, chaste . . . alone.*

(Lines 25-30)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite*, Arnold continues the comparison between his love and that of Luna, the goddess of the Moon. Luna, whose love has been reciprocated, cannot fully appreciate the futility of the erratic human love. Arnold has his bitter experience of the futility of earthly love. His love for Marguerite is deep and genuine. And yet his beloved did not reciprocate his love; and remained cold and indifferent. He once sought union with Marguerite. But now he has to resign himself to his fate and live a life of loneliness and isolation. Earthly life is doomed to futility. Man has his sweet dreams and fond hopes that his love will evoke warm and sympathetic response from his beloved. But he learns late that in all cases love is one-sided. Loneliness is the inevitable lot of man.

6. *Or, if not quite . . . happier men.*

(Lines 31-36)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite*, Arnold slightly shifts from his original stand that man is doomed to a life of loneliness and isolation. Man has his companions, which are the inanimate objects of Nature. He has his communion with the ocean and the clouds, night and day. He has also come in constant contact with his fellow-men, and share their joys and

sorrows, laughter and tears. Yet he cannot completely identify himself with them. Nor can he feel as akin to them as he could to Marguerite. He felt for Marguerite, and fondly hoped that she was also feeling for him. Happiness is possible only when two hearts beat in unison. That is, however, not the destiny of mortals, who have to live alone.

7. *Of happier men . . . their loneliness.* (Lines 37-42)

In these lines taken from *Isolation, To Marguerite*, Arnold draws a universal conclusion from his bitter experience in the sphere of love. He loved Marguerite deeply and sincerely. But Marguerite was cold and callous, and remained indifferent to him. Arnold concludes that mortal love is doomed to futility. There are happier men who imagine that they have attained complete union with their beloved. They are, therefore, not destined to live a life of loneliness and isolation. Arnold does not subscribe to this view. The so-called 'happier men' are in their fools' paradise. For complete union is utterly impossible. On a close scrutiny it will appear that even the so-called happy men are suffering from unrelieved loneliness and isolation. True, they are in the constant company of their beloved. Yet they cannot attain complete identification. They live together as a matter of convenience. Arnold's conviction is that 'mortal millions live alone'.

In *Dover Beach*, Arnold, of course, says that amidst uncertainty, despair and frustration, love alone is reliable. But he thinks at the same time that 'love' is a rarity, and cannot be purchased in the world's market. Love is an ideal in the darkling plain, and can never be translated into reality.

The tragedy of Arnold is the tragedy of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Hamlet jumped to the conclusion from a single premise that frailty is the other name of women. Arnold similarly makes a similar mistake here. Marguerite may have failed him, but Frances Lucy filled his life with ineffable joy, and his married life was a prolonged honey moon.