The essay, ‘The Study of Poetry’, was first published as an introduction to the edition of *The English Poets* brought out by T.H. Ward. The essay can be divided into two parts. In the first part Arnold puts forward his theoretical observations on poetry emphasizing on the nature and function of poetry. The second part gives a survey of English poets from Chaucer onwards. The essay is important as it shapes Arnold’s critical creed and has most of the ideas that he has regarding criticism.

**Main points of the essay and its critical evaluation.**

- Poetry has an immense future and it will soon replace the crumbling religion and philosophy as a resort for the spirit of mankind. Religion is based on supposed facts which are not infused with a spirit of enquiry. Philosophy, on the other hand, is too abstract. Compared to these, Poetry deals with ideas which are closely related to human nature and hence more appealing to mankind. Even science will be incomplete without poetry. Religion and philosophy are mere shadows of knowledge but Poetry is the very essence of knowledge. It is a criticism of life and its power of sustaining man will depend on the power of its criticism of life.

- The high function of poetry to sustain mankind demands that the standards of poetry should be high because only poetry of a high order of excellence can serve the high destiny of poetry. Charlatanism, by which Arnold means a confusion of distinctions between the excellent and the inferior, sound and unsound, true and untrue should not enter into the sphere of judging poetry. Arnold then makes one of his most famous pronouncements in the field of literary criticism, that, “poetry is a criticism of life
under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” The more powerful the criticism of life, the greater would be the consolations and spiritual strength it would offer to mankind.

The term “criticism of life” has invited greatest amount of comment and criticism. It has been interpreted variously by different critics. Professor Garrod interprets the term to mean that poetry, so far as it possesses organic unity, is a criticism of the chaos of life. Lionel Trilling says that Arnold is not giving us the definition of poetry but is telling us the function of poetry. Criticism is not what poetry is but what it does. J.D. Jump points out that by ‘criticism’, Arnold means a detached attempt to see things as they are. It implies the ideal attitude of the poet towards his experience of life. Oliver Elton points out that “criticism of life” means poetry clarifies while it delights. Poetry gives an insight into life and its problems and implied in this insight are certain value judgements which equip man to face life better.

➢ While judging the true standard of poetry, one should be careful to avoid the historical and personal estimates and cultivate only the ‘real’ estimate. The personal estimate means giving importance to a poet because of personal likings and affinities. Arnold says that the personal estimate should be eschewed because it will lead to wrong judgements. The historical estimate is judging a poet from the point of view of his importance in the course of literary history. According to Arnold this is also not a true judgement of poet. Its historical importance may make us rate the work as higher than it really deserves. Rather the reader should try to form a real estimate of a work. One should learn to distinguish a true classic from a dubious or false classic. A dubious classic must be sifted; a false classic must be exploded but a real classic must be enjoyed deeply. A classic, says Arnold, is that work which belongs to the class of the very best.
The best way to cultivate the real estimate is to keep in one’s mind lines and expressions of the great masters and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. The other poetry need not resemble the lines and expressions but with tact, these lines can be applied to other poetry to form a correct judgement. Arnold illustrates his point by giving short passages and even single lines from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. These specimens, he says, “are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgements about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate.” In other words, tactful application of these lines would act as an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of ‘high excellence’ and also determine the merit of a work.

The touchstone method is a comparative method and as such can be a useful mode of arriving at a sound judgement of a work. The ancient classical critic, Longinus, had also laid down similar tests by which the greatness of a literary work can be judged. Critics have however objected to Arnold’s choice of touchstone passages. In his selection, Arnold has let his personal estimate overcome the real estimate. Thus his choice suffers from the same fallacy that he wishes to surmount. Moreover, the critics point out that selective comparison is not sufficient to judge the merit of a work. Comparison may be used, but its use should extend to the work as a whole and not to particular parts. The whole impression of a work must be compared to the whole impression left on our minds by a great work.

Arnold points out that the two essential qualities of excellent poetry are truth and high seriousness, both of matter and manner. Greatness of matter is inseparable from greatness of manner. If the subject is grand, the grand style will automatically follow.
After this Arnold goes on a survey of English poetry from Chaucer onwards to early nineteenth century.

➢ According to Arnold, the substance of Chaucer’s poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, has a sound representation of things and a divine fluidity of movement and liquidness of diction. His power of fascination is enduring. His poetry is far superior to the French romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries but his greatness as a poet is not based on historical estimate; rather his poetical importance is genuine. The superiority of Chaucer’s poetry lies in the matter and manner of his poetry. The superiority of matter comes from the fact that Chaucer looks upon the world from a truly human point of view. As regards style and manner, Chaucer’s diction may be justifiably described as “gold dew-drops of speech”.

➢ After eulogising Chaucer’s poetry, Arnold comes to a rather surprising conclusion that Chaucer is not a classic because his poetry lacks ‘high seriousness’.

It comes as a surprise when Arnold makes this statement. After saying that Chaucer’s poetry is superior to French romances, better than contemporary English poetry and superior to poetry that followed till the Elizabethan times, Arnold says that Chaucer is not a classic. He uses the ‘touchstone method’ here and compares him to Dante and Shakespeare and comes to the conclusion that unlike them, Chaucer’s poetry lacks ‘high seriousness’. Arnold’s conclusion that Chaucer is not a classic has naturally provoked much criticism. Arnold’s conclusion might have been arrived at because he regarded poetry in the light of something religious, as Tillotson remarks, “True poetry for him could not but be as solemn as Church.”
The insistence on ‘high seriousness’ as an indispensable part of all classics shows a lack of breadth of vision on Arnold’s part. Further Arnold’s conception of ‘high seriousness’ does not take into account the comic point of view of life. Comedy does not mean non-seriousness. Even laughter can have a ‘high seriousness’. As Trilling remarks, “If Chaucer is not serious, then Mozart is not serious and Moliere is not serious.” To conclude, it is obvious that to Arnold, Chaucer was not a classicist because he was also a humorist. Chaucer’s breadth of vision is informed by a humane and tolerant laughter and comic point of view. His lucid imagination, fluent expression and genial humour reflect Chaucer’s keen perception of human life and nature. G.K. Chesterton points out that Chaucer is a humorist in the “grand style”. Even if we disregard the humour, there is much in Chaucer’s poetry that is solemn and austere and worthy of the grandest tragedy. Therefore to deny Chaucer the place of a classic is to essentially have a restricted and limited value of life and judgement.

Talking about the Elizabethan age, Arnold says that the age has already been recognised and distinguished for its poetic excellence. He mentions Shakespeare and Milton, who are already accepted as classics. However a significant omission is Donne whom Arnold does not even mention. This failure on Arnold’s part is seen as a limitation in Arnold as a critic.

Regarding the eighteenth century, Arnold does not consider Dryden and Pope to be classics of poetry. To Arnold, Dryden was the founder, the powerful and glorious founder, and Pope, the high priest, of the age of prose and reason, of the excellent, indispensable eighteenth century. By comparing the prose of Dryden and that of Milton, Arnold establishes Dryden’s superiority in the field. Arnold says that after the Restoration, there was an urgent need for prose. Reason and scientific inquiry were
gaining interest and communication had to be couched in easy, simple and cogent prose which could be understood by the public in general. The qualities of good prose, says Arnold, are regularity, uniformity, balance and precision. These qualities are found in the prose of the age but attention to these qualities deadened the poetic sensibility. Dryden and Pope paid attention to these qualities and as such do not have the ‘soul’ of poetry. Their criticism of life is not a ‘poetic criticism’. Arnold further points out that Dryden and Pope write in verse; they may be masters of art of versification; but they are not “classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.”

Arnold is of the opinion that poetry of Dryden and Pope is not ‘genuine’; being as it is, conceived and composed in their wits. Genuine poetry, according to Arnold, is conceived and composed in the ‘soul’. To Arnold, the difference between the two kinds of poetry is immense. The poetry of Eighteenth century England proceeds from ratiocination, antithesis and other intellectual devices. Arnold considers such poetry to be a deft example of craftsmanship but it is not true poetry as it lacks depth and profundity. The readers are again brought to a glaring drawback in Arnold’s concept of genuine poetry. He insists so much on ‘high seriousness that it reaches to a point of ‘solemnity’. Consequently, there is an inability to appreciate irony, wit and humour in poetry. We see in his idea of poetry a romantic prejudice for the lyric. Satiric writing on the other hand was not considered as poetry by him. Yet modern critics like F.R. Leavis have contended that satire can be and should be considered as one of the high forms of poetry. T.S. Eliot says that Dryden was more than a satirist and that the depreciation of Dryden is not due to the fact that his work is not poetry, but to a prejudice that the material, the feelings, out of which he built was not poetic. Similarly, modern critics have pointed out that Pope has not made any significant contribution towards English prose, and it would rather be wrong to call him a classic of
prose. But here it may be argued that Arnold did not mean that Pope actually wrote in prose, but that the qualities of prose are to be found in his poetry.

➢ The only poet to deserve the merit of a classic in the age of Dryden and Pope, according to Arnold, is Gray. However Gray is considered to be the scantiest of poetic classics. His work is slighter and not perfect because he lived in an age that was not congenial to his talent.

➢ Coming to Burns, Arnold points out that his true merit is to be found in his Scotch poems. In his Scotch poems, one finds a powerful application of ideas made by a man of vigorous understanding and a master of language. But for Arnold, Burn’s poetry, like that of Chaucer’s falls short of being a classic because it lacks the high seriousness. Truth of matter and style is present but there is no sustained note of high seriousness. His genuine criticism of life, when he is most himself, is ironic. The freedom of Chaucer is heightened in Burns by a fiery energy. The benignity of Chaucer is deepened in Burns into an overwhelming sense of pathos. If Chaucer has a fluidity of movement, there is in Burns, a bounding swiftness. But when Burn’s largeness and freedom of vision gets into full swing as it does in poems like Tam O’Shanter and The Jolly Beggars, his poetic genius triumphs over the sordidness of the world represented. At such moments, it breadth, truth and power are matched only by Shakespeare and Aristophanes. In such poems we find flawless matter and manner. The genuine Burns is to be found in poems like Duncan Gray, Tam Glen. Whistle and I’ll come to you my Lad and Auld Lang Syne. Arnold comes to the conclusion that Burns is not a classic but a poet with thorough truth of substance and a corresponding truth of style, producing poetry which is sound to the core.
Arnold concludes the essay by pointing out that one is on dangerous ground when one approaches the poetry of poets who are near to one in time because the personal estimate is bound to influence one’s clear judgement. But it is possible to overcome this danger by using the touchstone method. The real estimate would benefit the reader by helping him to feel clearly and enjoy deeply the best and the classic in poetry.