



Culture Pitted Against Anarchy in the Arnoldian School of Thought: Reading 'Culture and Anarchy' as the Genesis of Culture Studies

Amili Basak

PG Visiting Faculty, Department of English, Women's College, Agartala, Tripura - 799001,
India. NET JRF (December 2025)
Email: amilybasak0309@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.1.495](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.1.495)



Article info

Article Received: 03/03/2026
Article Accepted: 27/03/2026
Published online: 31/03/2026

Abstract

This research foregrounds Matthew Arnold's encyclopaedic theorizations centering 'culture' as a heavily loaded connotative term opposing its counterpart, 'anarchy'. Comprehension regarding both the terms is sought after and Arnold's tripartite stratification of the English society is taken into consideration. His *modus operandi* involving high-brow behavioural acculturation as the sole way for upgradation is stated with textual evidences and insights into his contributions as a torch-bearing progenitor to 'Culture Studies' as a discipline is emphasised.

Keywords: encyclopaedic, connotative, counterpart, tripartite, stratification, modus operandi, high-brow, acculturation, progenitor, Culture Studies.

Introduction

Raymond Williams, a British Cultural Critic and contributor to BCCCS (Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) in 1964 alongside Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall opined "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English Language" (Williams 87) and went on to provide a threefold definition of the term in his 'Keywords' (1976) listing its nuances:

- A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development;

- a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity;
- the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (Williams 90).

Preceding such connotations, Matthew Arnold as an anachronistic prototypical founder of 'Culture Studies' envisioned 'culture' as an idyllic utopian state of excellence and its antinomy 'anarchy' as an unruly chaotic state of confusion. While 'culture' incurred a high-brow response, 'anarchy' was looked down upon as the under-privileged. In the twenty-first century Arnold's notion of culture resonates with elitism while anarchy has gone on to become 'Popular

Culture'. He influenced twentieth century thinkers like F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot who wrote a number of tracts following the Arnoldian prophecy.

Etymologically culture is derived from the German 'kultur' and Latin 'cultura' signifying the act of tending, cultivating or nurturing. Syncing with this Matthew Arnold in his 'Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism'(1869) advocates a high-brow perception of culture inadvertently promoting a refinement of taste in superlative terms preventing dilution of standards. In the Arnoldian climate of thought, culture is "a pursuit of total perfection... the best which has been thought and said in the world"(Arnold, ch.I). Culture, therefore is a bourgeois signifier in Arnold's conception.

The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness and light, works to make reason and the will of God prevail. He who works for machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light(Arnold, ch.I).

It is an "inward condition of the mind and spirit"(Arnold, ch.I) that is contingent and not static. To substantiate this dynamic nature of culture striving towards excellence, Arnold states: "Not a having and a resting but a growing and a becoming is the character of perfection as culture conceives it"(ch.I). Arnold views culture as a process of nurturing human kind so as to upgrade him to a value system that might give sophistication and polish and confer upon him a sense of distinction in terms of a series of set norms and standards; "Culture is in making endless additions to itself, in the endless expansion of its powers, in endless growth, in wisdom and beauty, that the spirit of the human race find its ideal"(ch.I). 'Culture' to Arnold connotes:

- the pursuit of perfection.

- refinement of taste.
- the best of human words and thoughts.
- the study of excellence.
- the promotion of high-brow culture.
- a process of self-discipline.
- an inward condition of the mind and spirit.
- dynamic and contingent.
- a "harmonious union of sweetness and light"(Arnold, ch.I) signifying a blend of beauty and knowledge; the phraseology being borrowed from Jonathan Swift's 'The Battle of Books'.
- the general expansion of the human family; a collective movement.
- an emphasis on order and harmony.
- a bourgeois signifier.
- an ideal form of human life.
- a clinical cure to anarchy.

Anarchy fuelled by the "Doing as One Likes"(Arnold, ch.II)attitude, signified just the opposite; almost a synonym for popular culture. Anarchy refers to the state of utter unruleness and lack of order. It denotes the disruptive presence of the "raw, uncultivated masses"(Arnold, ch.II)who brought about defiance and lawlessness. To Arnold, the working class lived culture was the carrier of depravity, cultural infection and low culture. On account of the industrial economy, Arnold perceived the collective unity of the working class as a threat because they exhibited anarchic tendencies. Reasons for slipping into anarchy included restlessness of the mid-nineteenth century English society in the wake of rapid industrialization, rising empowerment of the working classes, economic depression resulting in widespread disenchantment and starvation, failing public education system, working class movements culminating in political activism, militant trade unions, rebellions, riots,

lawlessness etc. In the Structuralist denotation, 'culture' and 'anarchy' thus forms a binary pair wherein the former is privileged and the latter undermined.

Method and Methodology

This research relies on textual analysis of 'Culture and Anarchy' and archival method for collection of data. Culture Studies and Close reading following the New-Critical approach is applied as the methodological groundwork.

Discussion

Matthew Arnold stratified the English society into three classes:

1. BARBARIANS (the Old-World Aristocratic order)

Arnold's anger was directed more towards them than the populace because it is due to the degenerate nature of these aristocrats who frittered away their wealth that culture has collapsed. He rebukes the degeneration of moral standards of these aristocrats who bartered away their notion of culture.

2. PHILISTINES

From the German word "philister" meaning persons deficient in culture, arts and enlightenment, 'philistines' denoted the middle class who were infested with anti-intellectualism. Arnold displayed a pathological hatred towards them, almost dehumanizing them.

3. POPULACE (the working class)

Marching where it likes, meeting where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes – to this vast residuum we may with great propriety give the name of Populace (Arnold, ch.III).

From Arnold's end, there was a deep-seated bias against the disruptive instincts of this rising world order - the pedestrian class/populace on account of industrial economy because he knew this class was unable to live up to the standards of the haloed domain

of culture: "The sterner self of the Populace likes bawling, hustling, and smashing; the lighter self, beer" (Arnold, ch.III). To him this class posed a threat to culture. He wanted the higher academia and intelligentsia to resist this kind of devaluation by offering stiff resistance to it.

As per Arnold, Culture has two functions-

- Culture must carefully guide the aristocracy and middle class from degeneration and bring them back to culture.
- Culture must bring to the working class a much wanted principle of authority to counteract the anarchic tendency of the populace. Culture must be authoritative enough to control the working class else they might trigger chaos and lawlessness.

His purpose behind this composition unveils in the following excerpt:

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. This, and this alone, is the scope of the following essay (Preface).

Arnold faced a mental block on the rise of the illiterate middle class who, without having to go through the corridors of higher education could rise up the economic ladder. He believed that all the three classes were guilty of "myopic" (ch.II) subjectivity and hence collectively responsible for the anarchy. Arnold opined that all the three classes ought to be

given lessons on culture and mass culture must not destabilise the novel definitions of culture.

Conclusion

To adhere to the Arnoldian notion of culture is to realize that we are 'cultured' because we are bound by certain norms, else we would have descended into anarchy and moved beyond norms of decency. Just as during festivities, humans have the tendency to transgress, completely oblivious of the surroundings and display anarchic impulses, wherein non-culture for e.g. 'bishorjon' (immersion) exists in close proximity with culture for e.g. "pooja". However, we should not belittle or demean the 'non-culture' and condemn them for not being cultured enough because they too have a group ethos and are a by-product of the world order. Accordingly, the study of popular culture in the modern age can be traced back to Matthew Arnold as its mover and shaker. Although he had little to say about popular culture per se, he inaugurated a tradition of seeing culture through the coloured filter of class, upholding the bourgeoisie notions of culture and facilitating distinctions.

References

- Arnold, M. (2001). *Culture and anarchy*. Public Library UK. <https://public-library.uk/ebooks/25/79.pdf> (Original work published 1869)
- McCarthy, P. J. (1964). The social background of culture and anarchy. In *Matthew Arnold and the three classes* (pp. 10-35). Columbia University Press.
- Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (Rev. ed.). Oxford University Press. (pp. 87-90)