

Summary of the poem "Shakespeare" written by Matthew Arnold

The Sonnet refers to the unapproachability of Shakespeare's genius to other humans. His abode is among the stars and the Sunbeam. He spent some time on earth but remains "un-understood" and he remains beyond human comprehension. The poet gives the picture of a Majestic Mountain rising into starry heavens with the cloud obscuring the Summit from our view. The Summit declared its Majesty to the stars. Its base is in the sea but its dwelling is the "heaven of heavens". The search of mortal humans to understand the Summit is foiled by the clouds that obscure it. This comparison of Shakespeare's glory to the sublime Summit of a lofty mountain serves the poet's purpose of painting him Superhuman. Even as the Summit is not clear to us because of the presence of the clouds, the lofty imaginative quality of his poetry makes it possible for us to realize the personality of the man, Shakespeare. The last triplet hints at the tragic period of Shakespeare, when a group of tragedies came out of his pen. In addition to successfully indicating the tragic period in Shakespeare's life, those lines give a melancholy Arnoldian note. It is worth noticing that Arnold mentions only Shakespeare's genius in creating tragedies.

The diction of the poem appropriate to the content, is worthy of our admiration. Compound double words like, out-topping, dwelling-place and the repetitive, ably suggestive words self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honoured, self-cure, give a Homeric grandeur to the Sonnet. The lofty mountain uncrowns his majesty to the stars is pregnant with the suggestions that Shakespeare can be understood only by those who are in the heaven of heavens. Shakespeare's walking on the earth "unguessed" at also is abundantly suggestive of the mysterious nature of Shakespeare's genius. Professor Oliver Elton comments that this sonnet contains none of the critical reserves which always weaken poetry, and there is no cult in it—nothing above the value of poetry for the higher life or the equivalence of poetry and religion. The spirit of it is 'and therefore the less 'abide our questions'.

Arnold hints at the tragedies Shakespeare wrote when he himself had to undergo many personal griefs. There are critics who think that the tragedy-period of Shakespeare coincided with many tragic events in his personal life. However, his enduring spirit made him come out successful, out of the depths, and create a happy comedy of reconciliation—The Tempest. Arnold also hints at Shakespeare's picturing the unconquerable spirit of man coming victorious even in the darkest of his tragedies.