

Ambiguity and intrinsic structure in Matthew Arnold's *self-dependence*: a literary analysis

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ABSTRACT

Literary works function as expressive mediums through which human thoughts, emotions, and philosophical reflections are articulated, and poetry represents one of the most condensed forms of such expression. This study examines Matthew Arnold's poem *Self-Dependence* (1852) to investigate how intrinsic poetic elements construct meaning related to self-reliance and inner autonomy. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research analyzes the poem stanza by stanza, focusing on structural and stylistic features including theme, imagery, tone, repetition, rhyme, and formal pattern. The findings reveal that linguistic devices operate systematically to mirror the speaker's psychological transformation from existential uncertainty toward philosophical composure. In particular, repetition—most notably the phrase “forwards, forwards”—and symbolic natural imagery function as structural mechanisms that reinforce the poem's central message of self-mastery independent of external validation. The study demonstrates that poetic meaning emerges through the interaction of formal elements rather than isolated devices. Ultimately, *Self-Dependence* remains intellectually relevant because it presents self-regulation as a response to modern psychological instability, illustrating how intrinsic analysis can uncover philosophical dimensions embedded within poetic form.

Keyword: intrinsic analysis; ambiguity; poetry; self-reliance; Victorian literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a medium through which human beings express intellectual reflection, emotional experience, and philosophical inquiry. Among literary genres, poetry holds a distinctive position because it condenses complex ideas into symbolic language, sound patterns, and structural design. Victorian poetry, in particular, often reflects tensions between faith and doubt, individuality and society, as well as emotion and rational restraint. One poet who consistently explored these tensions is Matthew Arnold, whose works frequently portray psychological conflict and the search for inner stability.

One of Arnold's notable poems, *Self-Dependence* (1852), illustrates a speaker's internal struggle between emotional vulnerability and the desire for self-reliance. The poem portrays a movement from existential fatigue toward philosophical composure, using natural imagery such as stars, sea, and silence as symbolic models of autonomy. This transformation reflects a broader Victorian intellectual concern regarding the individual's place within an increasingly uncertain modern world. Because of this thematic depth, the poem offers a rich textual field for literary analysis, particularly through examination of intrinsic poetic elements.

Previous studies on Arnold's poetry often emphasize historical context or biographical interpretation; however, fewer analyses focus systematically on how meaning is constructed through internal textual mechanisms such as imagery, repetition, tone, sound patterns, and structural progression. A close reading approach grounded in intrinsic analysis therefore becomes important to demonstrate how poetic form itself conveys philosophical meaning. In addition, applying William Empson's theory of ambiguity enables deeper

interpretation of how Arnold's language produces layered meanings and psychological tension within a single expression.

Based on this perspective, this study aims to analyze *Self-Dependence* through a qualitative descriptive approach focusing on intrinsic literary elements and ambiguity structures. By examining the poem stanza by stanza, the research seeks to explain how linguistic devices, structural patterns, and symbolic imagery work together to represent the speaker's transition from doubt to autonomy. The findings are expected to contribute to literary studies by providing a clearer model of close textual analysis applicable to poetry interpretation in academic contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in stylistic and intrinsic literary analysis, particularly the theory of ambiguity proposed by William Empson in his seminal work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). Empson argues that poetic language derives its power from the coexistence of multiple meanings within single expressions, enabling a text to generate psychological complexity, emotional resonance, and interpretive depth simultaneously. Rather than viewing ambiguity as a flaw, he positions it as the central mechanism through which poetry produces intellectual and aesthetic richness.

This theoretical perspective is especially relevant to the works of Matthew Arnold, whose poetry frequently reflects tension between Romantic emotional expression and classical restraint. In *Self-Dependence* (1852), such tension is encoded linguistically through symbolic imagery, tonal shifts, and structural repetition. For example, the phrase "starlit sea" functions as a layered metaphor that simultaneously evokes natural serenity and existential isolation, demonstrating Empson's first type of ambiguity, where a single image conveys multiple meanings. Likewise, the plea "Calm me" reflects emotional contradiction, revealing dependence within a request for independence, corresponding to Empson's category of conflicting meanings within one statement.

Repetition in the poem further illustrates ambiguity as a structural device. The recurring phrase "forwards, forwards" suggests semantic movement and progress, yet emotionally conveys stagnation and psychological entrapment. This tension reflects Empson's highest level of ambiguity, in which opposing impulses coexist within the same linguistic unit. Through such techniques, Arnold constructs a poetic discourse where language becomes the medium of philosophical realization.

Scholars of intrinsic criticism emphasize that literary meaning is generated primarily through internal textual elements rather than external context. Accordingly, intrinsic analysis focuses on components such as theme, imagery, tone, sound patterns, repetition, structure, and symbolic contrast. Applying this framework to *Self-Dependence* allows for systematic examination of how formal features guide interpretation and shape the reader's understanding of the speaker's psychological transformation. Thus, ambiguity theory and intrinsic analysis together provide a complementary interpretive model: ambiguity explains semantic complexity, while intrinsic analysis reveals how poetic form organizes that complexity into coherent meaning.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the intrinsic elements of Matthew Arnold's poem *Self-Dependence*. A qualitative approach is selected because the data consist of textual units—words, phrases, and lines—whose meanings must be interpreted rather than measured numerically. Qualitative literary analysis is appropriate for examining how poetic language constructs meaning through stylistic and structural features.

The primary data source is the complete text of *Self-Dependence* (1852), while secondary data include scholarly references related to Arnold's poetry, intrinsic literary elements, and relevant theoretical frameworks. These frameworks primarily draw upon intrinsic criticism and William Empson's theory of ambiguity, which emphasize that literary meaning is generated through internal textual relations such as imagery, tone, repetition, rhythm, contrast, and structure.

The analytical procedure consists of several systematic stages. First, the poem was subjected to repeated close reading to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its thematic development and structural progression. Second, significant textual segments were identified and categorized according to intrinsic elements. For instance, the phrase "forwards, forwards" was examined as a case of repetition and rhythmic propulsion; "star-sown vault" as imagery and sensory representation; and "Calm me, ah, compose me" as indicators of tone and emotional expression.

Third, each stanza was analyzed individually to determine how specific stylistic devices contribute to localized meaning. Fourth, findings from all stanzas were synthesized to reveal the overall interpretive pattern of the poem. This part-to-whole analytical model enables identification of how linguistic devices interact structurally to produce philosophical significance. Through this systematic procedure, the method demonstrates how Arnold's poetic techniques function cohesively to articulate the central theme of self-dependence.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Thematic Structure*

The central theme of Matthew Arnold's *Self-Dependence* is the necessity of inner autonomy in contrast to emotional reliance on external forces. The poem opens with a speaker trapped in existential uncertainty, expressed through the lines "Weary of myself, and sick of asking / What I am, and what I ought to be," which depict psychological exhaustion and identity disorientation. This state reflects a Romantic tendency toward emotional dependence on external reassurance, symbolized by the speaker's appeal to nature as a source of comfort.

However, the poem's philosophical turning point occurs when nature responds with detached authority: "Wouldst thou be as these are? Live as they." Rather than offering sympathy, nature presents itself as a model of silent self-sufficiency. The stars and sea operate according to inherent purpose, "unaffrighted by the silence round them," demonstrating that stability emerges not from external validation but from internal composure. Through this shift, Arnold critiques emotional fragility and proposes self-reliance as a philosophical solution to existential anxiety. The thematic progression therefore traces a transformation from self-doubt to self-command, culminating in the imperative "Resolve to be thyself," which functions as the poem's ethical resolution.

B. *Tonal Development*

The tonal structure of the poem reveals a carefully controlled evolution from emotional vulnerability to philosophical clarity. At the outset, the tone is subdued yet intense, marked by phrases such as "sick of asking," which suggest quiet desperation rather than overt despair. This restrained expression of distress aligns with Arnold's characteristic balance between emotional depth and classical discipline.

As the poem progresses, the tone intensifies through supplicatory language, particularly in the plea "Calm me, ah, compose me," which exposes the speaker's longing for reassurance. This vulnerability is abruptly countered by nature's impersonal response, producing a tonal contrast that resembles a didactic confrontation. The steady iambic rhythm continues throughout this shift, modeling the composure that the poem advocates. Ultimately, the tone stabilizes into detached admiration for nature's functional harmony, guiding readers toward recognition that genuine serenity derives from disciplined self-possession rather than emotional dependence.

C. *Emotional Trajectory*

The poem constructs a structured emotional arc that moves from personal distress to philosophical acceptance. Initially, readers encounter the speaker's isolation and fatigue, conveyed through self-directed language that emphasizes introspective struggle. The repeated appeals for comfort generate a sense of vulnerability, inviting reader empathy.

This emotional alignment is disrupted when nature refuses to provide consolation, forcing both speaker and reader to confront the futility of seeking external emotional support. The resulting shift produces a moment of psychological awakening: rather than condemning human frailty, the poem redirects attention toward a model of existence defined by purposeful action rather than emotional reassurance. By the conclusion, the emotional register transitions from anxiety to contemplative calm, illustrating that acceptance of one's limitations can generate intellectual liberation. Thus, emotional transformation becomes the experiential pathway through which the poem's philosophical message is realized.

D. *Repetition as Structural Meaning*

Repetition functions as a central stylistic device that embodies the speaker's psychological condition. The phrase "forwards, forwards," appearing in the opening stanza, imitates mechanical motion through its rhythmic insistence, suggesting both physical propulsion and emotional entrapment. This dual effect exemplifies how linguistic patterning can convey tension between movement and paralysis.

Additional repetitions intensify the emotional atmosphere. Apostrophic invocations such as "Ye stars, ye waters" reveal the speaker's attempt to personalize indifferent natural forces, while phrases like "still, still" suggest desperate clinging to reassurance. These repetitions reach their peak prior to nature's intervention, after which the poem's language becomes more measured and declarative. The structural shift from frantic repetition

to controlled statement mirrors the speaker's psychological transition from agitation to composure. Consequently, repetition is not merely ornamental but functions as a formal representation of thematic development.

E. Rhyme and Formal Design

The poem's formal organization reinforces its philosophical content. Arnold employs a consistent ABAB rhyme scheme across six quatrains, producing rhythmic regularity that contrasts with the speaker's initial emotional instability. This structural consistency creates an impression of order and inevitability, reflecting the disciplined self-regulation that the poem ultimately endorses.

The alternating rhyme pattern also resembles dialogic exchange: the first and third lines introduce and echo an idea, while the second and fourth lines respond and conclude it. This pattern subtly mirrors the conceptual dialogue between the speaker and nature. In this sense, rhyme functions not only as an aesthetic device but also as a structural metaphor for philosophical interaction. The poem's formal stability thus anticipates the internal equilibrium that the speaker gradually achieves.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Matthew Arnold's poem *Self-Dependence* portrays a structured psychological and philosophical progression from existential exhaustion to inner autonomy. The speaker's initial condition, marked by expressions such as "Weary of myself," reflects a state of emotional disorientation and dependence on external reassurance. Through systematic analysis of intrinsic elements—including repetition, imagery, tone, and rhyme—the findings reveal that Arnold intentionally designs linguistic patterns to mirror this psychological movement. Devices such as repeated phrases ("forwards, forwards" and "still, still") function not merely as stylistic ornamentation but as structural indicators of emotional tension that gradually stabilize as the speaker attains composure.

The analysis further indicates that nature in the poem serves not as a source of consolation but as an impersonal model of disciplined existence. Rather than responding with sympathy, nature instructs the speaker through silent example, demonstrating that stability arises from self-regulation rather than external validation. This insight forms the poem's philosophical resolution and reinforces Arnold's broader intellectual position regarding self-mastery and emotional restraint.

Overall, the study confirms that meaning in *Self-Dependence* is generated through the interaction of intrinsic textual elements working cohesively to express a unified thematic message. By applying intrinsic analysis supported by ambiguity theory, the research contributes to literary studies by illustrating how close textual examination can reveal philosophical structures embedded within poetic form. The enduring relevance of the poem lies in its articulation of self-reliance as a response to modern psychological uncertainty, making it applicable beyond its Victorian context to contemporary readers seeking intellectual and emotional equilibrium.

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