

MA (Sem-1)
The Scholar Gypsy
By Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold was a writer of many activities, but it is chiefly as a poet and a critic that he now holds his place in English literature. He was the son of the famous head master of rugby, and was educated at Winchester, Rugby and at Balliol College, Oxford, where he gained the Newdigate prize for poetry. Subsequently he became a Fellow of Oriel College (1845). In 1851 he was appointed an inspector of schools, and proved to be a capable official. In 1857 he was elected professor of poetry at Oxford. His life was busily uneventful, and in 1883, he resigned, receiving a pension from the government. Less than five years afterwards he died suddenly of heart disease at Liverpool.

His poetical works are not very bulky. *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* (1849) appear under the nom de plume of 'A' as did *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* (1852). Then followed *Poems* (1853), with its famous critical preface, and *New Poems* (1863). None of these volumes is of large size, though much of the content is of a high quality. For subject, Arnold is very fond of classical themes, to which he gives a meditative and even melancholy cast common in modern compositions. The nature of his poetry is didactic.

His prose work is large in bulk and wide in range. Of them all his critical essays are probably of the highest value. *Essays in Criticism* (1865 and 1889) contains the best of his critical work, which is marked by wide reading and careful thought. His judgments, usually sane and measured, are sometimes distorted a little by his views on life and politics. Hence it can be said that Arnold is a more commanding figure and has exercised a wider influence as a prose writer. His earlier life is preoccupied with verse and his later life with prose.

A lot has been said and discussed about all sorts of 'conflicts', 'ambivalences', and 'dichotomies' in Arnold's mind and soul. His early letters to Arthur Hugh Clough, reveal his serious moral engrossment in his thinking about poetry. According to Gottfried, he was deeply troubled about the problems of the viability of the spirit and imagination in a world that was based on utilitarian standards of human behaviour. One of the most dominant faiths that he had was that man could find salvation, which according to Arnold meant wholeness and harmony, only through poetry. A very important remark about Arnold is that critical effort and moral passion was employed in writing even in the earliest of his poetry and one should be aware of this fact to understand it properly.

'The Scholar Gypsy' is based on a story about a scholar who abandoned academic life to join a band of gypsies. The various places and landmarks mentioned in the poem are all actual ones situated around Oxford. The Shepherd is summoned to the hills to untie the wattle cotes: sheepfolds built of wattles or interwoven twigs; neither to leave his wistful flock unfed nor let his bawling fellows neither rack their throats nor allow the cropped grasses shoot another head. However, when the fields are calm and still and tired men and dogs all gone to rest, one can see only the white sheep cross the strips of the moon blanched green, the Shepherd must again renew the quest; the search for the Scholar Gypsy who is believed to be still haunting the vicinity.

"The Scholar Gypsy" is often known as one of the best and most popular poems of Arnold. A poor Oxford university student constitutes the central character of "The Scholar Gypsy" who

abandoned his studies to learn about the supernatural powers of the Gypsy people. Arnold begins the poem in pastoral mode, invoking an unnamed shepherd and describing the beautiful rural scene, with Oxford in the distance. The very first stanza of the poem suggests that something is amiss because the speaker imagines the sheep at night on a “moon blanched green” and then persuades the shepherd to “again begin the quest.” The moon acts like a symbol for the power of imagination and the word ‘quest’ appears to be a very loaded term for the rustic job of a shepherd. The pastoralism of the poem leads immediately to several themes. Most generally it represents, as it does for many poets, an escape from the intolerable world of court or affairs. He then repeats the gist of Glanvill’s story, but extends it with an account of rumors that the scholar Gypsy was again seen from time to time by shepherds, country boys, young girls and reapers etc. around Oxford. Arnold thinks of him as a shadowy figure who can even now be seen from time to time in the Berkshire and Oxford shire countryside, “waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall”, and claims to have once seen him himself. Arnold certainly romanticizes the Oxford countryside, attributing to it his happiest days. Against this romantic background, then, Arnold places the quest for and of the scholar-Gypsy, which gives added significance to the background. This major English pastoral elegy has been written in a ten-line stanzaic pattern, constituting a total of 250 lines.

Arnold was not sure whether the scholar Gypsy was still alive after two centuries, but then ruled out the thought of his death. He cannot have died like a normal man. Having renounced such a life, he is hence free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt. The sick hurry and divided aims characterize modern life. The poet implores the scholar Gypsy to avoid all who suffer from it, in case he too should be infected and die. Arnold ends with an extended simile of a Tyrian merchant seaman who flees from the eruption of Greek competitors to seek a new world in Iberia. Since for Arnold Christianity was dead, and nothing seemed to occupy its place that could give meaning to life. This situation resulted in a constant search, loneliness and a void in life. In other words it can be said that it was the confrontation between the wisdom of the heart and the wisdom of head. The head is aware of the real condition of the modern world, but the heart is invariably drawn to the simpler life represented by the scholar and Oxford.

As a poet Arnold at times used to give a record of the sick society in his poems. “The Scholar Gypsy” is also one such poem. In this poem the attitude of Arnold towards the Gypsy is similar to the attitude of an adult towards a child. Arnold appreciates the innocence of the Gypsy and envies it at the same time but finally realises that he could not return to such a stage of innocence. Arnold believed that a child lost its innocence not due to some sin but simply by gaining experience and developing into an adult. The Gypsy similarly was the manifestation of a good that was lost. When Arnold juxtaposes the Gypsy’s composure with the problems of his own age, he is not lampooning the nineteenth century but is rather exploring its spiritual and emotional losses.

At the end it can be said that The Scholar Gypsy is a great modern melancholy poem, widened and spiritualized into a spirit of mystery and dreams.