

The Scholar Gypsy as a Pastoral Elegy

Matthew Arnold's *The Scholar Gypsy* (1853) is one of the most celebrated poems of the Victorian age, remarkable for its fusion of classical pastoral tradition with modern intellectual anxiety. Though not an elegy in the conventional sense mourning the death of a specific individual, the poem may be read as a pastoral elegy because it laments the loss of spiritual wholeness, intellectual sincerity, and moral purpose in modern life. Arnold employs the figure of the Scholar Gypsy as a symbolic presence through whom he elegizes the decay of faith, unity, and permanence in contemporary society, while idealizing a pastoral world of simplicity and continuity.

The Pastoral Setting and Tradition

Pastoral poetry traditionally idealizes rural life as a realm of peace, simplicity, and harmony, often contrasting it with the corruption and restlessness of urban or courtly existence. Arnold consciously situates *The Scholar Gypsy* within this tradition by setting the poem in the Oxford countryside, particularly the fields, woods, and riverbanks around the Thames.

The opening lines immediately establish a tranquil pastoral atmosphere:

“Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill;

Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes!”

The imagery of shepherds, flocks, hills, and evening calm evokes a timeless rural world. This setting functions not merely as a background but as a moral and emotional refuge from the turbulence of modern life. As in classical pastoral elegies such as Milton's *Lycidas*, nature becomes a space for meditation, memory, and lamentation.

The Scholar Gypsy as an Idealized Figure

At the heart of the poem lies the legendary figure of the Scholar Gypsy, drawn from Joseph Glanvill's seventeenth-century account of an Oxford student who abandoned academic life to wander with gypsies in search of hidden wisdom. Arnold transforms this historical anecdote into a mythic symbol of continuity and spiritual integrity.

The Scholar Gypsy is described as one who renounced the competitive and fragmented world of scholarship:

“He left the pale-faced students, and the tale

Of riddling life in Oxford courts.”

In pastoral elegy, the subject is often idealized and removed from ordinary time. Similarly, Arnold presents the Scholar Gypsy as untouched by decay or disillusionment.

He exists in a perpetual present, wandering through fields and villages, embodying a unity of purpose lost to modern humanity.

Elegiac Lament for the Modern World

The elegiac tone of the poem becomes explicit when Arnold contrasts the Scholar Gypsy's single-minded quest with the restless, divided consciousness of Victorian society. The poet mourns the loss of sustained faith and intellectual certainty:

“For what wears out the life of mortal men?

’Tis that from change to change their being rolls.”

This sense of exhaustion and fragmentation is the true subject of Arnold's elegy. Unlike traditional elegies that lament physical death, *The Scholar Gypsy* mourns the death of coherence and belief in the modern age. The pastoral figure becomes a lens through which Arnold critiques industrialization, scientific skepticism, and spiritual doubt.

Nature as Consolation and Witness

In keeping with the conventions of pastoral elegy, nature in the poem is both a comforter and a witness to loss. The natural landscape is depicted as enduring and harmonious, standing in contrast to human instability:

“The calm, cool face of Oxford, looking on

From the high tower, under the moon.”

Nature, unlike modern man, is not subject to spiritual weariness. The rivers, meadows, and stars seem to preserve the memory of the Scholar Gypsy, suggesting a timeless continuity absent from contemporary life. This aligns with the pastoral elegiac tradition, where nature often participates in mourning while offering solace.

The Poet's Personal Withdrawal

Another key feature of pastoral elegy is the poet's withdrawal from society into solitude and reflection. Arnold repeatedly urges himself—and the reader—to turn away from the modern world and seek refuge in contemplation of the Scholar Gypsy's example:

“Fly hence, our contact fear!

Still fly, plunge deeper in the bowering wood!”

This desire to escape “the sick fatigue, the languid doubt” of modern existence reinforces the elegiac mood. The pastoral retreat becomes a symbolic act of resistance against the corrosive forces of contemporary life.

Immortality Through Idealization

In traditional elegy, the subject is often granted symbolic immortality. Arnold similarly preserves the Scholar Gypsy by refusing to imagine him dead:

“He is not dead, but gone before.”

Though not a direct line from the poem, the sentiment is clearly implied. The Scholar Gypsy survives as an enduring presence, untouched by time, embodying a life of purpose and faith. His immortality contrasts sharply with the spiritual mortality of modern men who “are blown about by every wind of doctrine.”

Conclusion

The Scholar Gypsy functions as a pastoral elegy by combining an idealized rural setting, a symbolic central figure, and a sustained lament for the loss of unity and belief in modern life. Arnold transforms the elegiac mode from mourning an individual death to grieving a broader cultural and spiritual decline. The Scholar Gypsy stands as a pastoral ideal—free from doubt, committed to a single quest, and harmoniously aligned with nature—against which the fragmentation of Victorian society is measured and found wanting.

Ultimately, the poem expresses Arnold’s deep yearning for permanence, faith, and intellectual wholeness. By situating this yearning within the pastoral elegiac tradition, Arnold creates a poem that is both timeless and profoundly modern, mourning not what has died, but what modern humanity has lost.