THE SCHOLAR-GIPSY

- BY MATTHEW ARNOLD

Dr. Monika Bhatnagar
Dept. Of English
Arnold’s reputation as a poet is well established and beyond doubt, though his poetry has never had the popular appeal of his great contemporaries. His verse is less self-conscious and intricate but his poetry can be said to have stood the test of time well. Steeped in the Greek intellectual tradition he formed ideals of sober and pure simplicity. But with this purity he combined the serious note of deep reflection. To him the wild disorder of romanticism should be replace by a clear architecture, the design of which should be from the classical writers, those masters of a supreme sense of balance.

The Scholar-Gipsy is one of the best poems of Arnold and is ranked among one of the most famous English poems. The poem suggests the pastoral form imitated by the moderns from Virgil and Theocritus. ‘Pastoral’ has come from Latin word ‘pastor’ meaning ‘shepherd’. Pastoral poetry refers to a literary work dealing with shepherds and rustic life. It presents an idealistic, almost Utopian, view of rural life. In these poems the shepherds and shepherdesses are innocent, pure and free from the corruption of city life.

An elegy is a poem on the death or loss of someone. And pastoral suggests that the elegy is related to shepherd and rustic life. Generally, pastoral elegy are poems in which the poet speaks in the guise of a shepherd in a peaceful landscape and expresses his grief on the death of another shepherd. Milton’s Lycidas and Shelley’s Adonais are the beautiful examples of pastoral elegies.

Arnold’s Scholar-Gipsy is a pastoral elegy written in twenty-five stanzas of ten lines each, published in the year 1853. It was in Glanvil’s Vanity of Dogmatizing (1661) that Arnold found the story of an Oxford scholar who left studies to join himself to a company of vagabond gipsies and who hoped in time to learn from them the secret of hypnotism. Glanvil sets forth the idea that one man might be able to
determine the thoughts of another by power of imagination. The hero of the Scholar-Gipsy id modelled on Glanvil’s Oxford scholar.

The poem embodies and expresses Arnold’s intimate knowledge of and love for the countryside near Oxford which he had explored years earlier with his friend Clough and his own brother Tom.

Like us, Arnold felt profoundly dissatisfied with the conventional life of his time, the ‘multitudinousness’, the mechanical uniformity, the deadness of the everyday world: he was anxious to escape it’s influence. At the same time, he was convinced that to alienate the world by defines and eccentricity or to retire from it in order to cultivate one’s soul in private was self-indulgence and self-defeating. The Scholar-Gipsy is probably his most considerable expression of this feeling. The narrative admires the scholar-gipsy for being able to find release from the life of a scholar in Oxford. Instead, he escapes into nature with a band of gipsies. The gipsies represent a group that does not follow modern, industrial pattern but instead wanders and tries to make a life by reading people’s mind. The poet believes that the scholar-gipsy is able to receive divine inspiration. Thou waitest for the spark from heaven! In contrast the people in modern life are Light half-believers of our casual creeds.

One can’t conceive of a pastoral elegy without the involvement of nature. For Arnold nature’s secret is not only joy but also peace. In the poem the Oxford countryside has been minutely described by Arnold. He pointed flowers and plants, hills, dates, the spotted leaves, the dark blue bells, scarlet poppies etc. Birds are inseparably associated with nature.

The Scholar-Gipsy’s description of the Cumner country is so exact that one can use it as a guide book. The Scholar-Gipsy comes before us as an actual presence at Bab-lock-hithe, above Godstow Bridge or on the skirts of Bagley Wood. The Scholar-Gipsy was free from this world-the brazen prison. He could wander through the Cumner country with his soul intact, waiting for the spark from the heaven, the living
knowledge of the truth that would unite the divided consciousness and make it possible for men to live meaningful lives in the world.

Arnold’s style in Scholar-Gipsy is classical; because in it he shows his predilection for Homeric quality - simplicity - and adopts two classical devices of style – the epic simile and catalogue of place names. Here is an example of Homeric simile:

Averse, as Dido did with gesture stern  
From her false friend’s approach in Hades turn,  
Wave us away, and keep thy solitude!

Finally, the poem The Scholar-Gipsy expresses an awareness of some of the environmental problems threatening to our world today. Actually, Arnold’s description of the modern life as a disease is apt. After evaluating the poem, one is compelled to think about these issues to search a mid-way.

Also refer:

https://www.enotes.com/topics/matthew-arnold
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scholar_Gipsy
https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Scholar-Gipsy