

Matthew Arnold's Scholar Gypsy

Reference:<http://www.enotes.com>

Pastoral Elegy

An elegy is a poem reflecting on an important, often sombre theme, usually someone's death. In relation to poetry a pastoral is a piece evoking the blissful joys of a heavily romanticized rural life, a bucolic idyll populated by nymphs, shepherds, and cavorting wood sprites. A pastoral elegy, then, combines elements of both kinds of poem to create a work that movingly laments someone recently deceased, presented in the guise of a shepherd. One of the most popular examples of the sub-genre is Milton's "Lycidas," in which a late fellow student of his, one Edmund King, is portrayed as a shepherd inhabiting a dreamily lush Arcadian landscape.

Matthew Arnold, in writing "The Scholar Gypsy," utilizes the traditional elements of pastoral elegy, but at the same time develops them in a slightly different direction. The rural life which the wandering scholar is now thought to lead is presented favorably by comparison with the world he's left behind, a world in which the passage of clock time, the endless moments "exhaust the energy of strongest souls/And numb the elastic powers."

But having renounced his former life, the scholar gypsy has achieved immortality, no longer subject to the deadening hand of time and all it brings:

Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt, Which much to have tried, in much been baffled, brings. O life unlike to ours!

No less than in other examples of pastoral elegy, the countryside is presented by Arnold as a timeless haven from the cares of the mortal world, a place where free spirits such as the scholar can truly live, move and have their being. The simplicity of rural life with all its natural, diurnal rhythms is contrasted with the "sick hurry" of the modern urban world. The scholar gypsy is ageless because he cannot succumb to the "strange disease of modern life." He's left all that behind. Arnold breaks with the tradition of pastoral elegy by treating the scholar gypsy as if he were alive. Although he's been rumored to wander the countryside for the better part of 200 years, he's still portrayed in the poem as being very much alive in spirit, his rare appearances down the years glimpsed by shepherds and other country folk. It is the truthfulness of their testimony which gives the poem's speaker the confidence to assert the continued existence of this "truant boy."

"The Scholar-Gypsy" was a 1853 poem by Matthew Arnold (24 December 1822—15 April 1888), a major English poet, essayist, and educational administrator. It is based on a story Arnold encountered in Joseph Glanvil's *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661) about an impoverished Oxford student who joined a band of gypsies and assimilated to their culture. The narrator is a modern man who looks back nostalgically on the earlier scholar. This framework evokes a typical theme of Arnold in which people are "caught between two worlds" or cultures but are never truly at home in either.

The narrator is a contemporary, perhaps representing Arnold himself, who is walking near Oxford and reading Glanvil's account of the Scholar-Gipsy. The poem consists of 25 ten-line stanzas. The stanzas consist of nine lines of iambic pentameter and one (the sixth line of each stanza) of iambic trimeter. The rhyme scheme is ABCBCACDDC.

The setting is pastoral, and the narrator first contemplates the countryside in general and then Oxford in the distance. He remarks on the book he is carrying and then summarizes Glanvil's story. The poem ends with an extended meditation on whether the scholar found happiness in his life as a gypsy, the nature of the moments of illumination of gypsy wisdom, and the lessons they might hold for the problem of the modern thinker or poet.

"The Scholar-Gipsy" is a poem about a poor student at Oxford University who quits his studies to run off with a band of gypsies. The scholar is thoroughly disillusioned by life in the modern world, and wishes to proclaim his individuality in an increasingly conformist society. Joining with a band of gypsies means that the scholar remains in the world but is not fully a part of it. Physically, he's still located in the world he rejects, but his mind has completely transcended it.

The scholar wants to learn as much about the gypsy way of life as possible; and as a man of learning and great intellectual curiosity, he's particularly keen on getting acquainted with the secrets of gypsy wisdom, which he wants to share with the outside world, though without returning to live in that world. Although the scholar lived some two hundred years before the poem is set, regular sightings of him are claimed by the simple folk of the Berkshire countryside. This merely adds to the mystery of this strange, shadowy figure. In renouncing the everyday world and its values, the world in which we all live, and devoting himself to the timeless wisdom of the gypsies, the "scholar-gipsy" appears to have become immortal.