
Daudnagar College, Daudnagar

Subject: English Literature

Class: B.A. Part I (Honours)

Paper: II (Poetry)

Topic: Introduction to *The Scholar Gipsy*

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Most probably, the poem was composed in 1852-53 and it was published in the following year 1853. Matthew Arnold picked the story of *The Scholar Gipsy* from Glanvil's *Vaintry of Dogmatizing* which was published in 1601. The story is about an Oxford student who being forced to give up studies because of pressing poverty, joined the company of gipsies who 'discovered to him their mystery'. After a time gap a couple of scholars, former acquaintances, while riding out, come across him. He revealed to them that the people he went with were not such imposters as they were taken for, but they had a traditional kind of learning among them. They could do wonders by the power of imagination, their fancy binding that of others. He himself had learnt much of their art, and when he had fathomed the whole secret, he wished to leave their company and let the world know about what wisdom he had gained from them.

Much of the first half of *The Scholar Gipsy* carries descriptive details, followed by unforgettable string of authentic images of Oxford campus life through which the Scholar is imagined as wandering. Brilliant pictures of Hurst in spring, the lone ale-house in Berkshire moor, the boat moored by the cool river bank under Cumner hills, the Oxford riders crossing the ferry on a summer night, the maidens dancing round the Fyfield elm, hay-time about Godstow Bridge, the glittering river haunted by black-winged swallows, the children roaming

for cresses, the skirts of Bagley wood with the gipsy tent, the forest ground called Thessaly where the blackbird fearlessly picks his food, the wooden bridge leading to S. Hinksey, and the festal lights of Christ Church hall flash by. Fine artistry is evident everywhere and the spirit of the Gipsy fills all these places with an air of carefree meditative happiness. To vindicate why the Scholar Gipsy like Keats's nightingale is immortal, Arnold produces a bitter analysis of the life the Scholar escaped. The scholar was born i days when wits were fresh and clear and life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames. Perhaps Arnold here refers to the days when Glanvil's book *The Vanity of Dogmatising* was written in 1601, when the persecution of the dissenters in England and of the Covenanters in Scotland was beginning, so that life in those days did not run merrily for all. As far as Arnold's complaint against the society of the mid-nineteenth century is concerned, he gives us his personal reaction to the time by describing "this strange disease of modern life,/ With its sick hurry, its divided aim". Arnold said that he had Goethe in mind when he spoke of one who most had suffered and who "takes dejectedly his seat upon the intellectual throne". But most probably he had Lord Alfred Tennyson in his mind because for a poet the Laureateship is naturally the intellectual throne. In addition to this the rest of the stanza provides an account similar to the author of *In Memoriam*. The capacity to wait for the spark from the heaven marks the Scholar as distinct from others. Others wear away their time and energy in thousands of hurried projects but the Scholar waits for the divine spark to set him in motion. I order to nurture the unconquerable hope, the Scholar Gipsy must fly away from the feverish contact of the world just like the Tyrian escaped the Greeks. The elaborate simile developed in two whole stanzas has been regarded as great and glorious by some but has incurred the wrath of others. Critics who despise this simile indicate the difference in the motives of flying away. The motive of Scholar Gipsy behind flying away from the feverish contact of common people is quite different from trader's flight. But the defenders of the simile are willing to overlook the

details as irrelevant. They argue that all Arnold needed was a comparison with someone getting away in a hurry from someone he does not approve of, and this he gives us in mild colours, throwing in a piece of illustrated history. Duffin thinks that *The Scholar Gipsy*, which is one of the poetic masterpieces of the nineteenth century would be a lesser poem without the simile with which the poem concludes.

The Scholar Gipsy is a pastoral poem. Hence it begins with a direct to a shepherd. The shepherd is quite imaginary. But it has been conjectured that the poet is addressing Arthur Hugh Clough who is imagined as a shepherd in *Thyrsis*, another poem by Arnold “Here too, our shepherd-pipes we first assay’d. (l. 35)