
UNIT 18 MATTHEW ARNOLD

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Write about Matthew Arnold's life and work;
- Discuss Matthew Arnold's poetry in detail with special reference to:
 - i) The Strayed Reveller
 - ii) The Scholar-Gypsy

18.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we have discussed Arnold's life in brief as in case of any individual the experience of life certainly shapes the nature of his or her work at least to a certain extent. The two poems discussed here are two of Arnold's choicest creations.

The first poem, though it exhibits a good deal of poetical power, and occasionally depth of thought is often criticised for having either no subject, or being obscure in its subject. It sometimes reads in large part as a versified essay in criticism. It contains much commentary on poets and poetry.

The second poem, "The scholar Gypsy" is considered to be a poem that was based on Joseph Glanvill's recount of 'The Vanity of Dogmatizing'. It opens up on an afternoon in the month of August with the poet recounting his usual chores. It's a lovely poem that showcases the beauty of pastoral chores and life during this century.

18.2 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 behavior. 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.

18.3 THE STRAYED REVELLER

18.3.1 Background of the Poem

The Strayed Reveller is an unrhymed lyric poem written in irregular metre, was originally published in Matthew Arnold's first volume of verse, *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems*. This poem has received a very little attention, although it was very important for Arnold who gave it the place of honour in his first volume. It is often regarded as an investigation of the creative process of a poet. The poem is remarkable for its detailed descriptive passages. The poet hero of the Strayed Reveller chose the dangerous world of "natural magic" because he thinks that the god is indifferent and the human life is useless. The Strayed Reveller is an important document in the long argument between Arnold the romantic and Arnold the classicist. It also shows how Arnold's ideas about poetry interconnect with his ideas about God, nature and human life. At the core of the poem is a comparison between divine detachment and true poetic empathy as ways of seeing human life. The best recent critique of the poem finding in it

chiefly an analysis of the romantic mode of vision, disagree both about which part of the poem embody the romantic mode and about whether the poem rejects or celebrates it.

18.3.2 The Text

The Strayed Reveller

The Youth

Faster, faster,
O Circe, Goddess,
Let the wild, thronging train
The bright procession
Of eddying forms,
Sweep through my soul!
Thou standest, smiling
Down on me! thy right arm,
Lean'd up against the column there,
Props thy soft cheek;
Thy left holds, hanging loosely,
The deep cup, ivy-cinctured,
I held but now.
Is it, then, evening
So soon? I see, the night-dews,
Cluster'd in thick beads, dim
The agate brooch-stones
On thy white shoulder;
The cool night-wind, too,
Blows through the portico,
Stirs thy hair, Goddess,
Waves thy white robe!

Circe.

Whence art thou, sleeper?

The Youth.

When the white dawn first
Through the rough fir-planks
Of my hut, by the chestnuts,
Up at the valley-head,
Came breaking, Goddess!
I sprang up, I threw round me
My dappled fawn-skin;
Passing out, from the wet turf,
Where they lay, by the hut door,
I snatch'd up my vine-crown, my fir-staff,
All drench'd in dew-

Came swift down to join
 The rout early gather'd
 In the town, round the temple,
 Iacchus' white fane
 On yonder hill.
 Quick I pass'd, following
 The wood-cutters' cart-track
 Down the dark valley;-I saw
 On my left, through the beeches,
 Thy palace, Goddess,
 Smokeless, empty!
 Trembling, I enter'd; beheld
 The court all silent,
 The lions sleeping,
 On the altar this bowl.
 I drank, Goddess!
 And sank down here, sleeping,
 On the steps of thy portico.

Circe.

Foolish boy! Why tremblest thou?
 Thou lovest it, then, my wine?
 Wouldst more of it? See, how glows,
 Through the delicate, flush'd marble,
 The red, creaming liquor,
 Strown with dark seeds!
 Drink, thee! I chide thee not,
 Deny thee not my bowl.
 Come, stretch forth thy hand, thee-so!
 Drink-drink again!

The Youth.

Thanks, gracious one!
 Ah, the sweet fumes again!
 More soft, ah me,
 More subtle-winding
 Than Pan's flute-music!
 Faint-faint! Ah me,
 Again the sweet sleep!
 Circe.

Hist! Thou-within there!
 Come forth, Ulysses!
 Art tired with hunting?
 While we range the woodland,
 See what the day brings.

Ulysses.

Ever new magic!
Hast thou then lured hither,
Wonderful Goddess, by thy art,
The young, languid-eyed Ampelus,
Iacchus' darling-
Or some youth beloved of Pan,
Of Pan and the Nymphs?
That he sits, bending downward
His white, delicate neck
To the ivy-wreathed marge
Of thy cup; the bright, glancing vine-leaves
That crown his hair,
Falling forward, mingling
With the dark ivy-plants—
His fawn-skin, half untied,
Smear'd with red wine-stains? Who is he,
That he sits, overweigh'd
By fumes of wine and sleep,
So late, in thy portico?
What youth, Goddess,-what guest
Of Gods or mortals?

Circe.

Hist! he wakes!
I lured him not hither, Ulysses.
Nay, ask him!

The Youth.

Who speaks' Ah, who comes forth
To thy side, Goddess, from within?
How shall I name him?
This spare, dark-featured,
Quick-eyed stranger?
Ah, and I see too
His sailor's bonnet,
His short coat, travel-tarnish'd,
With one arm bare!—
Art thou not he, whom fame
This long time rumours
The favour'd guest of Circe, brought by the waves?
Art thou he, stranger?
The wise Ulysses,
Laertes' son?

Ulysses.
 I am Ulysses.
 And thou, too, sleeper?
 Thy voice is sweet.
 It may be thou hast follow'd
 Through the islands some divine bard,
 By age taught many things,
 Age and the Muses;
 And heard him delighting
 The chiefs and people
 In the banquet, and learn'd his songs.
 Of Gods and Heroes,
 Of war and arts,
 And peopled cities,
 Inland, or built
 By the gray sea.—If so, then hail!
 I honour and welcome thee.

The Youth.

The Gods are happy.
 They turn on all sides
 Their shining eyes,
 And see below them
 The earth and men.
 They see Tiresias
 Sitting, staff in hand,
 On the warm, grassy
 Asopus bank,
 His robe drawn over
 His old sightless head,
 Revolving inly
 The doom of Thebes.
 They see the Centaurs
 In the upper glens
 Of Pelion, in the streams,
 Where red-berried ashes fringe
 The clear-brown shallow pools,
 With streaming flanks, and heads
 Rear'd proudly, snuffing
 The mountain wind.
 They see the Indian
 Drifting, knife in hand,
 His frail boat moor'd to
 A floating isle thick-matted
 With large-leaved, low-creeping melon-plants
 And the dark cucumber.
 He reaps, and stows them,
 Drifting—drifting;—round him,
 Round his green harvest-plot,
 Flow the cool lake-waves,

The mountains ring them.
They see the Scythian
On the wide stepp, unharnessing
His wheel'd house at noon.
He tethers his beast down, and makes his meal—
Mares' milk, and bread
Baked on the embers;—all around
The boundless, waving grass-plains stretch, thick-starr'd
With saffron and the yellow hollyhock
And flag-leaved iris-flowers.
Sitting in his cart
He makes his meal; before him, for long miles,
Alive with bright green lizards,
And the springing bustard-fowl,
The track, a straight black line,
Furrows the rich soil; here and there
Cluster of lonely mounds
Topp'd with rough-hewn,
Gray, rain-blear'd statues, overpeer
The sunny waste.
They see the ferry
On the broad, clay-laden
Lone Chorasmian stream;—thereon,
With snort and strain,
Two horses, strongly swimming, tow
The ferry-boat, with woven ropes
To either bow
Firm harness'd by the mane; a chief
With shout and shaken spear,
Stands at the prow, and guides them; but astern
The cowering merchants, in long robes,
Sit pale beside their wealth
Of silk-bales and of balsam-drops,
Of gold and ivory,
Of turquoise-earth and amethyst,
Jasper and chalcedony,
And milk-barred onyx-stones.
The loaded boat swings groaning
In the yellow eddies;
The Gods behold him.
They see the Heroes
Sitting in the dark ship
On the foamless, long-heaving
Violet sea.
At sunset nearing
The Happy Islands.
These things, Ulysses,
The wise bards, also
Behold and sing.
But oh, what labour!
O prince, what pain!

They too can see
Tiresias;—but the Gods,
Who give them vision,
Added this law:
That they should bear too
His groping blindness,
His dark foreboding,
His scorn'd white hairs;
Bear Hera's anger
Through a life lengthen'd
To seven ages.
They see the Centaurs
On Pelion:—then they feel,
They too, the maddening wine
Swell their large veins to bursting; in wild pain
They feel the biting spears
Of the grim Lapithæ, and Theseus, drive,
Drive crashing through their bones; they feel
High on a jutting rock in the red stream
Alcmena's dreadful son
Ply his bow;—such a price
The Gods exact for song:
To become what we sing.
They see the Indian
On his mountain lake; but squalls
Make their skiff reel, and worms
In the unkind spring have gnawn
Their melon-harvest to the heart.—They see
The Scythian: but long frosts
Parch them in winter-time on the bare stepp,
Till they too fade like grass; they crawl
Like shadows forth in spring.
They see the merchants
On the Oxus stream;—but care
Must visit first them too, and make them pale.
Whether, through whirling sand,
A cloud of desert robber-horse have burst
Upon their caravan; or greedy kings,
In the wall'd cities the way passes through,
Crush'd them with tolls; or fever-airs,
On some great river's marge,
Mown them down, far from home.
They see the Heroes
Near harbour;—but they share
Their lives, and former violent toil in Thebes,
Seven-gated Thebes, or Troy;
Or where the echoing oars
Of Argo first
Startled the unknown sea.
The old Silenus
Came, lolling in the sunshine,

From the dewy forest-coverts,
This way at noon.
Sitting by me, while his Fauns
Down at the water-side
Sprinkled and smoothed
His drooping garland,
He told me these things.
But I, Ulysses,
Sitting on the warm steps,
Looking over the valley,
All day long, have seen,
Without pain, without labour,
Sometimes a wild-hair'd Mænad—
Sometimes a Faun with torches—
And sometimes, for a moment,
Passing through the dark stems
Flowing-robed, the beloved,
The desired, the divine,
Beloved Iacchus.
Ah, cool night-wind, tremulous stars!
Ah, glimmering water,
Fitful earth-murmur,
Dreaming woods!
Ah, golden-haired, strangely smiling Goddess,
And thou, proved, much enduring,
Wave-toss'd Wanderer!
Who can stand still?
Ye fade, ye swim, ye waver before me—
The cup again!
Faster, faster,
O Circe, Goddess.
Let the wild, thronging train,
The bright procession
Of eddying forms,
Sweep through my soul!

Matthew Arnold

Glossary

- Circe** : In Greek mythology Circe is a goddess who turned Odysseus's men temporarily into swine but later gave him directions for their journey home.
- Ulysses** : Ulysses is derived from *Ulixes*, the Latin name for Odysseus, a character in ancient Greek literature. He is known to be a legendary Greek king of Ithaca and a hero of Homer's *Odyssey* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_poetry
- The Youth** : The aspiring poet the transformation of whom forms the central part of the poem.

The transformation of a young man into a poet is the account that is at the core of this poem, though the story does not appear to dominate the whole poem at any point of its narrative flow. The poem is in form of a dialogue. It's a dialogue between a youth and Circe. The young man enters in the world of poetic creation and holds the cup of wine with a trembling hand. Goddess Circe welcomes him to take deep plunge in the sea of lyrical design.

The poem deals with the nature of the poet, incorporating two themes that were very common in nineteenth-century romanticism: the pinnacle of the artist and the agony of the artist. It is assumed that when Arnold wrote the speeches of the youth, he must have had a poet like Keats in mind. This is because Arnold at some point of time had observed to Clough in his letters that Keats was 'consumed' by the desire for 'movement and fullness', which was the same desire chanted by the intoxicated reveller.

The youth implores the Goddess to sweep his soul with the wild and bright procession of "eddying form". Arnold has also brought in the famous character of Ulysses in course of their dialogue. The subsequent stanza gives long colorful portrayal of the world of transition by the youth in course of his self-narrative. For Arnold the question how the poet sees is never separated from what he sees.

On the whole however the poem remains unclear. A major problem with the poem is the fact that it seems to violate the critical principles which Arnold was trying to develop at the time he was composing it. Although the poem has been written in dramatic form, it is marked with slight central action and is heavily overlaid with decoration. Similar is the case with the descriptive passages that are supposed to represent examples of the variety of human existence but become elements of digression because of their length and sensuous elaboration.

The reveller almost describes poetry as 'a true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history'. Arnold was himself against this view. According to him if a poet became what he sang, then he sang himself in allegorical representation.

All these factors force us to think as to why Arnold, who himself was considered to be a reformer as far as poetry was concerned chose a poem with evident flaws as the title poem of his first volume of poetry. However we can also think that he was very well aware of what he was doing and chose the indirect means of irony and allegory rather than 'thinking aloud' in verse to which he objected.

The use of his legend of Circe has also often been questioned. According to Gottfried, although this is modern Circe who is refined, she still remains the dangerous seducer. So the reveller who was a youthful poet earlier, driven by his naturally ardent nature, went astray and willingly submitted to the Circean influence. The accusing questions of Ulysses further in the poem make it clear that the effect of Circe on the young poet was evil. She even denies that she led him astray. Towards the end of the poem, the reveller, does nothing but cries for more wine.

18.4 THE SCHOLAR-GYPSY

18.4.1 Background of the poem

‘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 blanch’d green, the Shepherd must again renew the quest; the search for the Scholar Gypsy who is believed to be still haunting the vicinity.

18.4.2 The Text

The Scholar-Gypsy

Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill;
 Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes!
 No longer leave thy wistful flock unfed,
 Nor let thy bawling fellows rack their throats,
 Nor the cropp’d herbage shoot another head.
 But when the fields are still,
 And the tired men and dogs all gone to rest,
 And only the white sheep are sometimes seen
 Cross and recross the strips of moon-blanch’d green.
 Come, shepherd, and again begin the quest!

Here, where the reaper was at work of late—
 In this high field’s dark corner, where he leaves
 His coat, his basket, and his earthen cruse,
 And in the sun all morning binds the sheaves,
 Then here, at noon, comes back his stores to use—
 Here will I sit and wait,
 While to my ear from uplands far away
 The bleating of the folded flocks is borne,
 With distant cries of reapers in the corn—
 All the live murmur of a summer’s day.

Screen’d is this nook o’er the high, half-reap’d field,
 And here till sun-down, shepherd! will I be.
 Through the thick corn the scarlet poppies peep,
 And round green roots and yellowing stalks I see
 Pale pink convolvulus in tendrils creep;
 And air-swept lindens yield
 Their scent, and rustle down their perfumed showers
 Of bloom on the bent grass where I am laid,
 And bower me from the August sun with shade;
 And the eye travels down to Oxford’s towers.

And near me on the grass lies Glanvil's book—
 Come, let me read the oft-read tale again!
 The story of the Oxford scholar poor,
 Of pregnant parts and quick inventive brain,
 Who, tired of knocking at preferment's door,
 One summer-morn forsook
 His friends, and went to learn the Gypsy-lore,
 And roam'd the world with that wild brotherhood,
 And came, as most men deem'd, to little good,
 But came to Oxford and his friends no more.

But once, years after, in the country-lanes,
 Two scholars, whom at college erst he knew,
 Met him, and of his way of life enquired;
 Whereat he answer'd, that the Gypsy-crew,
 His mates, had arts to rule as they desired
 The workings of men's brains,
 And they can bind them to what thoughts they will.
 'And I,' he said, 'the secret of their art,
 When fully learn'd, will to the world impart;
 But it needs heaven-sent moments for this skill.'

This said, he left them, and return'd no more.—
 But rumours hung about the country-side,
 That the lost Scholar long was seen to stray,
 Seen by rare glimpses, pensive and tongue-tied,
 In hat of antique shape, and cloak of grey,
 The same the gipsies wore.
 Shepherds had met him on the Hurst in spring;
 At some lone alehouse in the Berkshire moors,
 On the warm ingle-bench, the smock-frock'd boors
 Had found him seated at their entering,

But, 'mid their drink and clatter, he would fly.
 And I myself seem half to know thy looks,
 And put the shepherds, wanderer! on thy trace;
 And boys who in lone wheatfields scare the rooks
 I ask if thou hast pass'd their quiet place;
 Or in my boat I lie
 Moor'd to the cool bank in the summer-heats,
 'Mid wide grass meadows which the sunshine fills,
 And watch the warm, green-muffled Cumner hills,
 And wonder if thou haunt'st their shy retreats.

For most, I know, thou lov'st retired ground!
 Thee at the ferry Oxford riders blithe,
 Returning home on summer-nights, have met
 Crossing the stripling Thames at Bab-lock-hithe,
 Trailing in the cool stream thy fingers wet,
 As the punt's rope chops round;
 And leaning backward in a pensive dream,

And fostering in thy lap a heap of flowers
Pluck'd in shy fields and distant Wychwood bowers,
And thine eyes resting on the moonlit stream.

And then they land, and thou art seen no more!—
Maidens, who from the distant hamlets come
To dance around the Fyfield elm in May,
Oft through the darkening fields have seen thee roam,
Or cross a stile into the public way.
Oft thou hast given them store
Of flowers—the frail-leaf'd, white anemony,
Dark bluebells drench'd with dew of summer eves,
And purple orchises with spotted leaves—
But none hath words she can report of thee.

And, above Godstow Bridge, when hay-time's here
In June, and many a scythe in sunshine flames,
Men who through those wide fields of breezy grass
Where black-wing'd swallows haunt the glittering Thames,
To bathe in the abandon'd lasher pass,
Have often pass'd thee near
Sitting upon the river bank o'ergrown;
Mark'd thine outlandish garb, thy figure spare,
Thy dark vague eyes, and soft abstracted air—
But, when they came from bathing, thou wast gone!

At some lone homestead in the Cumner hills,
Where at her open door the housewife darns,
Thou hast been seen, or hanging on a gate
To watch the threshers in the mossy barns.
Children, who early range these slopes and late
For cresses from the rills,
Have known thee eyeing, all an April-day,
The springing pasture and the feeding kine;
And mark'd thee, when the stars come out and shine,
Through the long dewy grass move slow away.

In autumn, on the skirts of Bagley Wood—
Where most the gipsies by the turf-edged way
Pitch their smoked tents, and every bush you see
With scarlet patches tagg'd and shreds of grey,
Above the forest-ground called Thessaly—
The blackbird, picking food,
Sees thee, nor stops his meal, nor fears at all;
So often has he known thee past him stray,
Rapt, twirling in thy hand a wither'd spray,
And waiting for the spark from heaven to fall.

And once, in winter, on the causeway chill
Where home through flooded fields foot-travellers go,
Have I not pass'd thee on the wooden bridge,

Wrapt in thy cloak and battling with the snow,
 Thy face tow'rd Hinksey and its wintry ridge?
 And thou has climb'd the hill,
 And gain'd the white brow of the Cumner range;
 Turn'd once to watch, while thick the snowflakes fall,
 The line of festal light in Christ-Church hall—
 Then sought thy straw in some sequester'd grange.

But what—I dream! Two hundred years are flown
 Since first thy story ran through Oxford halls,
 And the grave Glanvil did the tale inscribe
 That thou wert wander'd from the studious walls
 To learn strange arts, and join a Gypsy-tribe;
 And thou from earth art gone
 Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid—
 Some country-nook, where o'er thy unknown grave
 Tall grasses and white flowering nettles wave,
 Under a dark, red-fruited yew-tree's shade.

—No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours!
 For what wears out the life of mortal men?
 'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;
 'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,
 Exhaust the energy of strongest souls
 And numb the elastic powers.
 Till having used our nerves with bliss and teen,
 And tired upon a thousand schemes our wit,
 To the just-pausing Genius we remit
 Our worn-out life, and are—what we have been.

Thou hast not lived, why should'st thou perish, so?
 Thou hadst one aim, one business, one desire;
 Else wert thou long since number'd with the dead!
 Else hadst thou spent, like other men, thy fire!
 The generations of thy peers are fled,
 And we ourselves shall go;
 But thou possessest an immortal lot,
 And we imagine thee exempt from age
 And living as thou liv'st on Glanvil's page,
 Because thou hadst—what we, alas! have not.

For early didst thou leave the world, with powers
 Fresh, undiverted to the world without,
 Firm to their mark, not spent on other things;
 Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,
 Which much to have tried, in much been baffled, brings.
 O life unlike to ours!
 Who fluctuate idly without term or scope,
 Of whom each strives, nor knows for what he strives,
 And each half lives a hundred different lives;
 Who wait like thee, but not, like thee, in hope.

Thou waitest for the spark from heaven! and we,
Light half-believers of our casual creeds,
Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd,
Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,
Whose vague resolves never have been fulfill'd;
For whom each year we see
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
Who hesitate and falter life away,
And lose to-morrow the ground won to-day—
Ah! do not we, wanderer! await it too?

Yes, we await it!—but it still delays,
And then we suffer! and amongst us one,
Who most has suffer'd, takes dejectedly
His seat upon the intellectual throne;
And all his store of sad experience he
Lays bare of wretched days;
Tells us his misery's birth and growth and signs,
And how the dying spark of hope was fed,
And how the breast was soothed, and how the head,
And all his hourly varied anodynes.

This for our wisest! and we others pine,
And wish the long unhappy dream would end,
And waive all claim to bliss, and try to bear;
With close-lipp'd patience for our only friend,
Sad patience, too near neighbour to despair—
But none has hope like thine!
Thou through the fields and through the woods dost stray,
Roaming the country-side, a truant boy,
Nursing thy project in unclouded joy,
And every doubt long blown by time away.

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
Before this strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
Its heads o'ertax'd, its palsied hearts, was rife—
Fly hence, our contact fear!
Still fly, plunge deeper in the bowering wood!
Averse, as Dido did with gesture stern
From her false friend's approach in Hades turn,
Wave us away, and keep thy solitude!

Still nursing the unconquerable hope,
Still clutching the inviolable shade,
With a free, onward impulse brushing through,
By night, the silver'd branches of the glade—
Far on the forest-skirts, where none pursue,
On some mild pastoral slope
Emerge, and resting on the moonlit pales

Freshen thy flowers as in former years
 With dew, or listen with enchanted ears,
 From the dark dingles, to the nightingales!

But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!
 For strong the infection of our mental strife,
 Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest;
 And we should win thee from thy own fair life,
 Like us distracted, and like us unblest.
 Soon, soon thy cheer would die,
 Thy hopes grow timorous, and unfix'd thy powers,
 And thy clear aims be cross and shifting made;
 And then thy glad perennial youth would fade,
 Fade and grow old at last, and die like ours.

Then fly our greetings, fly our speech and smiles!
 —As some grave Tyrian trader, from the sea,
 Descried at sunrise an emerging prow
 Lifting the cool-hair'd creepers stealthily,
 The fringes of a southward-facing brow
 Among the Ægæan Isles;
 And saw the merry Grecian coaster come,
 Freighted with amber grapes, and Chian wine,
 Green, bursting figs, and tunniessteep'd in brine—
 And knew the intruders on his ancient home,

The young light-hearted masters of the waves—
 And snatch'd his rudder, and shook out more sail;
 And day and night held on indignantly
 O'er the blue Midland waters with the gale,
 Betwixt the Syrtes and soft Sicily,
 To where the Atlantic raves
 Outside the western straits; and unbent sails
 There, where down cloudy cliffs, through sheets of foam,
 Shy traffickers, the dark Iberians come;
 And on the beach undid his corded bales.

Matthew Arnold

Glossary

- Wattled cotes** : The poet here urges to free the flock of sheep from its shed and let be liberated. This symbolism of liberation from any sort of binding is there from the beginning in the poem.
- Glanvil's Book** : Ranulf de Glanvill (sometimes written Glanvil was Chief justice of England during the reign of King Henry II and reputed author of a book on English law
- Oxford Scholar poor** : *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* by Glanvil was a reaction to scholasticism, the rigid analytical methodology then in vogue in universities across Europe, and it features a poverty-stricken scholar.

Godstowbridge : Godstow Bridge is a road bridge across the river Thames in England at Godstow near Oxford. The poem is replete with such details about the landscape around the university. For example references to landmarks like **Cummer Hills** or **Bagley Wood**:

Spark from Heaven : Arnold imagines the scholar Gypsy as a shadowy figure who can even now be glimpsed in the Berkshire and Oxfordshire countryside, waiting for the spark from Heaven, or some theological piece of knowledge to be revealed to him by God, and claims to have once seen him himself.

Matthew Arnold

18.4.3 A discussion

“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 Oxfordshire 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 and widened and spiritualized into a spirit of mystery and dreams.

18.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the life and works of Matthew Arnold and examined two of his poems. You should now be able to examine appreciate and discuss Matthew Arnold’s poems in general and these two poems **The Strayed Reveller** and **The Scholar Gypsy** in particular effectively.

18.6 ANSWER TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Now that you have read the poems carefully, try to answer the following questions.

- a) Discuss the central idea of the poem “The Strayed Reveller”.

Ans: Refer to the paragraph in section 18.3.3.

- b) Briefly discuss Arnold’s usage of the legend of Circe in his poem “The Strayed Reveller”.

Ans: Refer to the paragraph in section 18.3.3.

- c) Elaborate upon the theme of the poem “The Scholar Gypsy”.

Ans: Refer to the paragraph in section 18.4.3.

- d) Do you think the Oxford countryside is romanticized in the poem The Scholar Gypsy?

Ans: Refer to the paragraph in section 18.4.3.

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