



Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar-Gypsy": An Exploration Of Victorian Anxiety And The Quest For Meaning

Dr. Sanjay Kumar¹

¹Assistant Professor, PG Dept of English, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya, Bihar.

ABSTRACT

Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar-Gypsy" (1853) serves as a poignant encapsulation of Victorian anxiety, weaving the narrative of an Oxford scholar who forsakes the rigid confines of modern society to embrace the free-spirited life of a gypsy. This departure symbolizes a desperate quest for meaning amidst the era's tumultuous upheavals—industrialization's relentless pace, the erosion of religious faith following Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and the fragmentation of social structures. The poem critiques modernity's frenetic energy through the evocative phrase "sick hurry" (Arnold, line 164), reflecting the exhaustion of a society grappling with scientific skepticism and cultural dislocation. Through close reading of *Poems by Matthew Arnold: A New Edition* (1853), cited by line numbers, and historical contextualization, this study examines the scholar's escape as a romantic ideal—a yearning for a pre-industrial harmony—while simultaneously portraying it as a futile dream, underscoring Arnold's ambivalence toward progress. The scholar's timeless wandering, set against the speaker's resigned envy, mirrors the Victorian struggle to reconcile tradition with innovation. The findings position the poem as a lament for lost unity, offering profound insights into Victorian identity and the perennial human search for purpose in an ever-evolving world, resonating with contemporary anxieties about meaning in modernity.

Keywords: Matthew Arnold, The Scholar-Gypsy, Victorian anxiety, quest for meaning, pastoral escape, modernity critique, determinism, faith crisis, Oxford legend, gypsy myth.

INTRODUCTION

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), a prominent Victorian poet and critic, wrote "The Scholar-Gypsy" in 1853, during a period of profound social and intellectual transformation. The poem draws on a 17th-century tale from Joseph Glanvill's *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661), recounting an Oxford scholar who leaves academia to join gypsies in pursuit of ancient knowledge. Arnold transforms this legend into a meditation on Victorian anxiety, portraying the scholar as an eternal wanderer who evades the "strange disease of

modern life” (Arnold, line 203). The poem's speaker, a modern observer, yearns for the scholar's freedom, symbolizing the era's quest for meaning amid religious doubt, industrialism, and scientific advancement.

Victorian anxiety stemmed from events like the 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which challenged biblical authority, and the Industrial Revolution's disruption of rural life. Arnold, in his role as Inspector of Schools and author of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), grappled with these issues, advocating culture as a remedy for chaos. “The Scholar-Gypsy” embodies this tension, celebrating the gypsy's timeless quest while subverting it with the speaker's resigned awareness of its impossibility. This paper examines how the poem explores these themes, using the scholar's myth to critique modernity and express a longing for spiritual wholeness. Quotations are from *Poems by Matthew Arnold: A New Edition* (1853), cited by line numbers to facilitate precise analysis.

RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The rationale for this study is the poem's enduring relevance to understanding Victorian anxiety, a period marked by the “sea of faith's” retreat (Arnold, “Dover Beach,” line 21). Scholarship has often focused on Arnold's criticism, but “The Scholar-Gypsy” offers a poetic lens into the era's existential crisis, blending romantic idealism with realist skepticism. The objective is to explore how the poem articulates the quest for meaning, analyzing the scholar's escape as a symbol of resistance to modern fragmentation. Key questions include: How does Arnold use the gypsy legend to express Victorian doubts? What does the speaker's envy reveal about the search for purpose? The study aims to illuminate the poem's contribution to Victorian literature, highlighting its themes of alienation and aspiration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on “The Scholar-Gypsy” emphasizes its role in Victorian literature as a response to modernity. Lionel Trilling's *Matthew Arnold* (1939) views the poem as a lament for lost certainty, with the scholar representing a pre-modern unity shattered by industrialism. Trilling notes Arnold's “elegiac” tone, reflecting the era's “spiritual hunger” (Trilling 145). Similarly, J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* (1963) interprets the scholar as a symbol of divine presence in a secular world, arguing the poem critiques the “disappearance of God” amid scientific rationalism (Miller 212).

Ecocritical readings, like Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2012), position the poem within pastoral traditions, where the gypsy's wandering subverts urban alienation, but Garrard cautions that it romanticizes nature as an escape, ignoring real social issues (Garrard 45). Feminist scholars, such as Isobel Armstrong in *Victorian Poetry* (1993), explore the poem's gendered dynamics, noting the male speaker's projection of quest onto the gypsy, marginalizing female voices in Victorian discourse (Armstrong 301).

Historical studies, like Philip Davis's *The Oxford English Literary History: 1830-1880* (2002), contextualize the poem within Oxford's intellectual milieu, linking it to Arnold's experiences with Tractarianism and the crisis of faith (Davis 456). Recent works, such as Stephanie Kuduk-Weiner's *Republican Politics and*

English Poetry, 1789-1874 (2005), examine the gypsy as a republican symbol of freedom, contrasting with Victorian conformity (Kuduk-Weiner 189).

This study builds on these, integrating historical, ecocritical, and existential perspectives to analyze the poem's dual celebration and subversion of the quest for meaning.

METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive approach, combining close reading with historical and theoretical analysis. The methodology involves:

1. **Close Reading:** Examining the poem's stanzas for imagery, structure, and language, focusing on key motifs like the gypsy's quest and the speaker's anxiety.
2. **Historical Contextualization:** Situating the poem within Victorian events, using primary sources like Arnold's letters and contemporary texts to illuminate anxiety from industrialization and Darwinism.
3. **Theoretical Framework:** Applying existential theory (e.g., Kierkegaard on anxiety) and ecocriticism (Garrard on pastoral) to explore the quest for meaning.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** Comparing the poem with Arnold's other works, like "Dover Beach," to trace thematic consistency.
5. **Textual Source:** Quotations from *Poems by Matthew Arnold: A New Edition* (1853), cited by line numbers for accuracy.

DISCUSSION

The discussion is structured around the poem's narrative arc: the speaker's invocation, the gypsy's legend, the critique of modernity, and the quest's resolution.

The Speaker's Invocation: Pastoral Escape and Modern Longing

The poem opens with a pastoral call to the shepherd, celebrating rural tranquility: "Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill; / Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes!" (Arnold, lines 1-2). This evokes a Virgilian idyll, where nature provides solace from urban strife. The speaker, weary of modern life, seeks the scholar-gypsy's trail: "Here will I sit and wait, / While to my ear from uplands far away / The bleating of the folded flocks is borne" (Arnold, lines 16-18). This pastoral setting sets the stage for the quest, reflecting Victorian nostalgia for pre-industrial harmony.

However, the invocation subtly reveals anxiety: the speaker's "wistful" tone (Arnold, line 3) hints at disconnection, subverting the pastoral by introducing modern alienation. The "high field's dark corner" (Arnold, line 12) suggests isolation, foreshadowing the era's spiritual void.

The Gypsy's Legend: Mythic Quest for Knowledge

The core legend celebrates the gypsy's quest: the scholar, “tired of knocking at preferment's door” (Arnold, line 35), joins the gypsies to learn their “arts to rule as they desired / The workings of men's brains” (Arnold, lines 45-46). This romanticizes the quest as a rejection of material ambition, aligning with Arnold's cultural ideal in “Culture and Anarchy.” The gypsy's immortality—“Thou waitest for the spark from heaven!” (Arnold, line 190)—symbolizes eternal search for meaning, offering hope amid Victorian doubt.

Yet, Hardy subverts this by emphasizing futility: the scholar's “unlit eye” (Arnold, line 129) and “pensive” demeanor (Arnold, line 53) suggest melancholy, mirroring the speaker's anxiety. The gypsy's elusiveness critiques the quest as illusory, reflecting the era's loss of faith.

Critique of Modernity: Anxiety and Fragmentation

The poem's central stanzas critique modern life, “This strange disease of modern life, / With its sick hurry, its divided aims” (Arnold, lines 203-204). This articulates Victorian anxiety, from industrial “hurry” to religious “divided aims” post-Newman. The speaker envies the gypsy's unity, “Thou hadst one aim, one business, one desire” (Arnold, line 152), contrasting with modern fragmentation.

Subversion lies in the speaker's resignation, “We ourselves to thee we cannot give” (Arnold, line 221), acknowledging the quest's inaccessibility in a rational age. This echoes Arnold's “Empedocles on Etna,” where suicide symbolizes despair.

The Quest's Resolution: Ambivalent Hope

The poem ends with a call to flee modernity, “Plunge deeper in the bowering wood!” (Arnold, line 221). This celebrates the quest as a spiritual ideal, offering meaning through nature.

However, the Tyrian trader metaphor subverts this, depicting civilization's triumph over the gypsy's primitivism, “The dark Iberians come; and on the beach / Undoes his corded bales” (Arnold, lines 249-250). This suggests the quest's defeat by progress, underscoring Victorian anxiety's inescapability.

ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND FINDINGS/SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The analysis reveals Arnold's poem as a dialectic between romantic quest and modern anxiety, using the gypsy as a symbol of lost meaning. The pastoral invocation and legend celebrate a pre-modern harmony, but the critique of modernity and ambivalent ending subvert this, highlighting fragmentation.

Interpretation: The poem reflects Victorian crises—Darwin's evolution challenging faith, industrialism eroding community—leading to a quest for cultural “sweetness and light” (Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 5). The speaker's envy represents Arnold's own ambivalence, as a critic advocating education amid doubt.

Findings: The poem's structure—narrative stanzas building to lyric outburst—mirrors the quest's rise and fall, emphasizing anxiety as a driver for meaning. It anticipates modernist themes in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Suggestions for Future Research:

1. Compare with Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" for romantic escape motifs.
2. Ecocritical reading of nature as refuge in Victorian poetry.
3. Gender dynamics in Arnold's quests, contrasting male wanderers with female roles.
4. Influence on 20th-century literature, like Forster's *Howards End*.

CONCLUSION

Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar-Gypsy" stands as a powerful expression of Victorian anxiety and the persistent human search for meaning in an increasingly disjointed world. By weaving the legend of the scholar-gypsy with vivid pastoral imagery, Arnold both celebrates and mourns the escape from modernity's pressures. The poem's protagonist, who forsakes the constraints of academic life for the promise of a more authentic existence among the gypsies, becomes a symbol of the longing for unity, purpose, and spiritual fulfillment. However, Arnold's nostalgic vision is tinged with a deep awareness of modernity's inevitability; the very escape the poem venerates is rendered impossible for most by the relentless advance of doubt, skepticism, and societal fragmentation characteristic of the Victorian era.

Ultimately, the enduring appeal of "The Scholar-Gypsy" lies in its nuanced exploration of alienation and aspiration. Arnold's meditation on the yearning for wholeness amid the complexities of modern life remains profoundly resonant. The poem invites readers to reflect on their own quests for meaning, reminding us that the desire to transcend the ordinary and reconnect with something eternal is both timeless and tragically elusive. In doing so, "The Scholar-Gypsy" offers a poignant and enduring commentary on the human condition.

REFERENCES

1. Arnold, Matthew. *Poems by Matthew Arnold: A New Edition*. Longman, 1853.
2. Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.
3. Davis, Philip. *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 8: 1830-1880*. Oxford UP, 2002.
4. Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2012.
5. Kuduk-Weiner, Stephanie. *Republican Politics and English Poetry, 1789-1874*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
6. Miller, J. Hillis. *The Disappearance of God*. Belknap Press, 1963.
7. Trilling, Lionel. *Matthew Arnold*. Columbia UP, 1939.