

The Scholar Gipsy as Pastoral Elegy

The term 'Pastoral' is derived from Latin 'pastor' which means a shepherd. Pastoral poetry, therefore, deals with the bucolic life of shepherds. Theocritus, Virgil, Bion and Moschus are usually associated with pastoral poetry. The poet and the deceased are shown as shepherds living in the midst of nature, which is personified and which joins in the mourning. The poem begins with an invocation to the muse and contains numerous classical allusions, continues by questioning the guardians of the deceased (usually natural beings - the flora and fauna of the pastoral scene) concerning their inability to protect the deceased effectively, moves to a procession or catalogue of mourners and a section in which the poet challenges human or divine justice, and concludes with a reconciliation in which the poet realizes that death is blessed reunion with God and nature. The elaborate form of the pastoral elegy is one of the most striking instances of the way poetry uses complex conventions to control and transcend raw emotion by ritualizing it.

Shipley has traced the history of pastoral poetry, which may be summarised here for our purpose. Theocritus, the father of pastoral poetry, perfected three forms of the pastoral: (1) Singing match between two shepherds in which the contestants settled their differences. A third shepherd sits in judgement upon the contests. The theme of the song is generally the joys and woes of lovers. (2) A single shepherd at times describes in songs the chance of his mistress and his own ill-fate.

(3) In the third type of elegy, the setting for the song is laid as a goat-herd. Theocritus's *The Lament for Daphnis* is a pastoral elegy of this kind.

In Virgil's hand pastoral elegy became an art of imitation. Virgil in his *Eclogues* sought to console his friend who has lost his mistress. The Greek poet Bion in his *Lament for Moschus* presented himself and his friend as shepherds. Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais* and Arnold's *Thyrsis* and *The Scholar Gipsy* are memorable pastoral elegies.

Arnold has two pastoral elegies *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* deeply steeped in classical lore. Arnold naturally turned to the Greek and Latin convention in this respect. And yet Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais* and Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* are not of the same pattern. Milton mourns his friend in the character of a shepherd. Shelley also mourns Keats in the character of a shepherd. In *Lycidas* the mourner wears a 'mantle blue' and the shepherd in *Adonais* has 'magic mantles rent'. In both the elegies Nature is lamenting. In both, the pagan mythology and rural conventions are artistically interwoven.

The Scholar Gipsy is not a carbon copy of the traditional pastoral poems. The poet is asking the shepherds to

" Go for they call you, Shepherd, from the hill,
Go, Shepherd and until the wattled cotes!
No longer leave thy wistful flock unfed,
Nor let thy bawling fellows sack their throats.

Here the poet does not represent himself as a shepherd. Moreover the Shepherd is dismissed by the poet as soon as the poem begins. The scenes described in the poem are not idyllic. They relate to urbanised Oxford, where one does not expect wild or rustic scenes, or even an idyllic atmosphere. Here Arnold has no scope to invest nature with the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration and the poet's dream. Any person who has been to Oxford can easily ascertain the topography of the city. In a truly pastoral poem the rural setting must be idealised. Moreover there is no lament here for the death of a shepherd. It is the Lament for Vanished Faith. Arnold "found in the elegy the outlet for his native melancholy of the Virgilian cry over the mournfulness of mortal destiny. It is the natural tone of an agnostic who is not Jubilant but regretful of the vanished faith - regretful of its beauty regretful of its lost promise." In 'Scholar Gipsy', Arnold presents the helplessness of man. In grief and despair man leads his life without ever experiencing the glow or joy of life. The tragedy and pathos of man's lot in the universe is pathetically presented:

"For whom each year we see
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new
Who hesitate and falter life away
And lose tomorrow the ground won to-day (T.S.G.)

The tone of the poem has a modern touch. In structure, the poem is no doubt, pastoral, but the spirit breathed in it is typically Victorian - the spirit of unrest seeking spiritual illumination.

