

Reclaiming Wilderness: Reading Nature in “Dover Beach” and “The Scholar-Gipsy” by Matthew Arnold through an Ecocritical Lens

Tanjina Binte Amin

Lecturer, Department of English Studies, State University of Bangladesh

Paper Received on 09-04-2026, Accepted on 11-05-2026

Published on 12-05-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.432

Abstract:

This paper examines the intersection of natural and moral crises in Matthew Arnold's poems, "Dover Beach" and "The Scholar Gipsy". In his poetry, Matthew Arnold vividly represents the moral decadence and spiritual emptiness of Victorian society. Applying an ecocritical lens, this study digs deeper into Arnold's poems to explore nature as a mirror of the moral collapse of anthropocentric society. The study also reflects the environmental degradation because of the industrial revolution and commercial growth in the Victorian period. This research aims to contend that nature not only works as a backdrop or mere symbol in Arnold's poems, but also actively resists anthropocentric systems. Environmental ethics is a philosophy that rejects human dominance and advocates ecocentrism. It asserts that protecting nature is crucial to human survival and well-being and thus urges a moral and ethical relationship between humans and natural agencies. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the interconnection between growing environmental injustice and social immorality in Arnold's poems, drawing on the theoretical framework of ecocriticism and environmental ethics.

Keywords: Wilderness, Ecocritical, Environmental ethics, Anthropocentric, Victorian.

Introduction:

Matthew Arnold is called the representative poet of the Victorian period because of his realistic representation of social life at that time. Through his writing, the impact of the Industrial Revolution, scientific inventions, and the moral decline of contemporary society come to life. His usage of pastoral settings in his poetry to reflect the loss of innocence and spirituality proves him to be a thinker of the human-

nature relationship. Arnold employs plenty of natural imagery, such as the sea, hills, and streams, in his poems. In the poems "Dover Beach" and "The Scholar Gipsy", Arnold portrays the loss of faith and spirituality through lively picturization of the countryside, landscapes, and sea. Nature becomes a powerful agent to show the crises and collapse. But this matter is somewhat ignored that nature in Arnold's poetry also protests against the human domination and exploitation of itself. Therefore, this paper delves deep into Arnold's representation of nature in these poems and aims to interpret them from an ecocritical point of view.

Theoretical Framework:

Ecocriticism is a critical mode of analyzing the representation of nature and landscapes in literary texts, paying keen attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the language used while speaking about it (Nayar 242). A prominent ecocritical thinker, Cheryll Glotfelty, summarizes that ecocriticism asks the critical question of how literacy affected humankind's relationship to the natural world (Nayar 243). Environmental ethics is the philosophical study of the human-nature relationship. It is an ethic that talks about the moral responsibilities of human beings to nature and non-humans. This is also an ideological belief that nature and its agencies have intrinsic values and rejects the superiority of humans. The idea of environmental ethics emerged in the mid-20th century and was popularized by thinkers like Aldo Leopold and others. According to Western ideology, man has the freedom to deal with nature as he wishes, and nature is under man's control. Richard Sylvan, in his 1973 essay, strongly argues for a new set of ethics that will deal with people's relation with the natural world (Sylvan 206). Ecocriticism and environmental ethics together provide theoretical grounds for this research. Using an ecocritical approach, this study argues that nature is not only used as a passive image in Arnold's poetry, but also as a reflective and critical medium through which both environmental and ethical degradations are revealed. In addition, drawing on environmental ethics, the study shows how Arnold's rhetoric reflects the interdependence between man and nature. It critically claims an ethical correlation between nature and humankind.

Ecocritical reading of "Dover Beach":

"Dover Beach" is Arnold's most celebrated poem, which reveals Arnold's pessimistic view of the modern world. By his poetic mastery, Arnold laments the loss of faith and spirituality through the image of the Sea. In this poem, the sea is the historical witness to the moral desolation of humankind. Arnold skillfully

incorporates all the natural imagery, including the sea, the beach, tides, and pebbles, to depict the loss of connection between nature and humankind.

Nature as an Expressive Persona:

Ecocriticism argues that nature does not function as a mere background or a passive setting; rather, it operates as an active reflector of crises of nature and humanity. Cheryll Glotfelty says, "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies", challenging the traditional portrayal of ecology as a backdrop (Glotfelty xviii). In the poem "Dover Beach", Arnold represents nature as a lively medium to talk about the Victorian moral decadence and personal as well as collective crises.

"With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in." (L. 13-14)

The waves of the sea here express the universal sadness of modern civilization. It reminds the sick modern world of its lost glory and faith. Arnold gives life to all the natural elements through phonological sounds like "calm", "tranquil", "fair", "roar", and visualizes the transformation of nature from the first to the second stanza (Xi and Tang 795).

"Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow" (L. 15-17)

In this stanza, the sea plays the role of a visual storyteller who brings the classical time back to this modern age. It makes the author realize the timeless connection between mankind and nature. When Arnold says, "But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar," (L. 25-26), he expresses how the melancholic sound of the ocean resonates with his own melancholy. Thus, nature becomes expressive, lively, and turns out to be an emotional character in the poem, aligning with Glotfelty's ecocritical approach in the literature.

Nature vs. Modernity:

Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a manifesto of Victorian conflicts and crises. Arnold wrote his poetry in a transition period, keeping modernity knocking at the door. The Victorian anxiety was the outcome of events such as the Industrial

Revolution, the discovery of evolutionary science, and the rise of capitalism. People lost their faith in religion, hope, humanity, and the meaning of life. Arnold finds the waves melancholic because they echo the crisis of faith, sense of alienation, and conflict of ideologies of the age (Haque, Islam and Tohfa 2).

“The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.” (L. 21-28)

In this stanza, Arnold's lament over the growing skepticism and faithlessness becomes clearly visible through his usage of the sea as a metaphor of religious faith. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, ecocritics ask the question, “How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?” (Glotfelty xix). The metaphor of the sea here not only symbolizes the loss of Christian faith, but also connotes the loss of the human-nature relationship. It indicates modern man's isolation from nature. Oceans and beaches in this era of industrialization underwent pollution and exploitation, and all these had negative impacts on the ecosystem. In this connection, the “withdrawing roar” and “retreating” of the waves might be interpreted as nature's denial and resistance to modernity.

Moreover, Arnold shows the lack of love and loyalty in personal relationships in the Modern era. He describes the modern world to his beloved as a place of uncertainty, pain, and fatigue.

“Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;” (L. 29-34)

In the quoted lines, Arnold simultaneously shows the problems and suggests resolutions to be free of all crises. Arnold summons his beloved to come to the window and observe the beauty of the sea. Later, he requests his beloved to be true to love, keeping the sea as witness. This brings to light Arnold's belief that nature can help the sickened, intoxicated souls heal and regain spiritual love, trust, and compassion. Hence, Arnold, through his rhetoric, critiques modernity and shapes his poetry as "criticism of life," as he said in *The Study of Poetry* (Arnold).

Arnold's Environmental Consciousness:

Arnold's approach to nature is not romantic; it is melancholic and pessimistic. He does not romanticize nature like Wordsworth; rather, he represents the harsh realities of the world through nature. Careful analysis of his poem provides his advocacy for environmental justice and the harmony between ecology and civilization. The meaning constituted by "tide of faith" shows a protest against Victorian Anthropocene and invokes planetary change (Parkins and Adkins 11). At the beginning of the poem, "Dover Beach", he simply admires the beauty of nature.

"Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land," (L. 6-8)

He requests his beloved to enjoy the beauty, which indicates man's integral connection with nature. His belief in nature's healing power comes clear through this scene. Secondly, in the middle of the poem, he expresses his inner pangs watching the turbulence in the sea.

"Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea." (L. 17-20)

It reminds him of the lost harmony between the human world and the natural world, and at the same time, reflects the current vulnerabilities and resistance of nature.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new, (L. 29-32)

In the latter part of the poem, Arnold and his beloved are going to promise loyalty to each other in the presence of nature, which can also be considered as regeneration and reunion through the power of nature.

Arnold's type of environmental criticism is different from that of many other critics. He is one of those environmental critics, who Glotfelty believes, "write environmentally conscious criticism without needing or wanting a specific name for it" (Glotfelty xx). Arnold's ecological consciousness is implicitly expressed in his poetry. For example, when he mentions "French coast" and "cliffs of England", it can provide an implied meaning of colonial and commercial growth of that time. The Victorian period saw a great advancement in British colonialism and coast-based trade. Therefore, these lines can be read as his anxiety regarding the destructive effects of rapid colonial and commercial growth on the ecosystem. To Arnold, the sea becomes an emblem of spirituality, and the retreating sea reflects spiritual emptiness and ethical crises of the society. Thus, Arnold's ecological consciousness is not expressed through environmental activism; rather, it is expressed through his awareness of imbalance, sensitivity to natural phenomena, and perception of interconnectedness between nature and morality.

Ecocritical Reading of "The Scholar Gipsy":

Arnold's "The Scholar Gipsy" is one of his masterpieces, depicting Victorian anxiety, inconsistency, and moral ambiguities. Being a great poet of nature, Arnold portrays a pastoral setting, including mountains, countryside, greenery, shepherds, and flocks of cattle, but in an unconventional elegiac tone (V. 129). Arnold's charming representation of nature to express the loss of tradition, spirituality, and fixity makes the poem a celebrated pastoral elegy in English literature. But the matter that remains to be unraveled is that Arnold can be seen as an environmental critic or a spokesman of nature in this poem. He represents nature as a central force, a harmonizer between humans and the ecosystem, a resistance to modernity, and a place to embrace purity.

Nature as a Central Reflective Force:

The poem expresses Arnold's love, knowledge, and intimate observation of the countryside around Oxford. Choosing a shepherd as his listener indicates the scholar's yearning to regain the lost connection with nature. Shepherd is a man who is pure at heart and distant from the corrupted modern life of the cities. Cities are

dominated by anthropocentric systems such as industries, institutions, and organizations. Amid an industrialized city life, scientific advancement, Arnold's choosing a shepherd determines his rejection of the dominant anthropocentric culture. Ecocritical scholar Lawrence Buell strongly says that nature is not a passive agent in literature, but it has an active presence, and it functions as a persona in artistic works (Buell 85). In the poem "The Scholar Gipsy", nature and non-humans become an active part of the narrative, and they provide the spiritual shelter to the scholar, rejecting fragmented industrialized society. "The white sheep", "scarlet poppies", and "the stripping Thames" do not just function as backdrop in the poem, but work as powerful sources to challenge man-made artificial town life.

"The blackbird, picking food,

Sees thee, nor stops his meal, nor fears at all;" (L. 116-117)

In these lines, the blackbird can be considered the embodiment of the natural world, which is self-sufficient and fearless of the modern world. The bird sees the Oxford scholar, yet undisturbed, and continues eating. It knew the scholar and knew his desire for receiving "the spark from heaven," and inspired him to continue his search for spirituality. Even after two hundred years, Arnold asks the scholar to inspire modern people through nature. As Arnold says-

"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 tingles, to the nightingales!" (L. 216-220)

Thus, Arnold gives a powerful presence to nature and non-human agents in his poem as observers, inspirers, a resort, and pure companions. His representation of nature is not simply limited to the appreciation of pastoral beauty; it provides strong grounds to examine how the poetic language constructs a complex relationship between the natural world and the modern human world.

Resistance to Modernity:

Through this poem, Arnold portrays a transition period characterized by scientific advancement, the Industrial Revolution, and commercial growth. The publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* challenged religious beliefs, industrial revolution from 1750 to 1900 brought destructive impacts on people's lives. Overall, modernity

caused disruptions in pure rural life and made the world a chaotic place to live. The Oxford scholar became exhausted of modern civilization.

“Of pregnant parts and quick inventive brain,
Who, tired of knocking at preferment’s door,” (L. 34-35)

Despite having an untroubled intellectual life with his peers at Oxford, the scholar grew utterly tired of his urban life. The modern world felt mechanical and meaningless to him. His departure from Oxford is for the quest for meaning amid chaos, disruptions, and fragmented social structures (Kumar 662). Through the scholar’s escape to nature, Arnold expresses the importance of connection with nature, ignoring the harsh realities of the modern world. The scholar perfectly represents modern man, undergoing an existential crisis in a meaningless world. Arnold’s craftsmanship presents nature as a shelter where man can be relieved of all crises, achieve spiritual upliftment, and become a true human being.

The Victorian period witnessed the rise of materialism, capitalism, and colonialism. Since it was the peak period of the Industrial Revolution, the economy underwent a major transformation from land-based to industrial production. The industrial capitalists or bourgeoisie became the power holders, and the working class or proletariat were disadvantaged. The growing class distinctions led many lower-class people to follow unfair means for financial gain. On the other hand, the power-hungry capitalists kept building industries by destroying forests and rural landscapes. 19th-century capitalism, supported by governing authorities, made the lives of working men, women, and children utterly miserable, which Friedrich Engels phrases as “social killing” (Govender, Medvedyuk and Raphael 1611). “The Scholar Gipsy” provides an implicit critique of this discriminating Victorian society by showing the scholar’s rejection of modern city life. Arnold calls it a “strange disease of modern life” and requests that the scholar fly from the contact of this sick society and to “plunge deeper in the bowing wood”. Thus, Arnold challenges the dominant man-led systems and echoes resistance to diseased modernity through the tale of the Oxford scholar.

The Scholar as an Ecological Figure:

To read the poem from an ecocritical perspective is impossible without understanding the scholar as an embodiment of nature. In his Oxford days, he was struggling with agitation and unrest, and felt incompatible with that harsh, intellectual world

(Hadaegh 1327). He left the institutional and urban life to come into close contact with the natural world.

“One summer-morn forsook
His friends, and went to learn the gipsy-lore,” (L. 36-37)

It can be said that the scholar used to live a hassle-free and risk-free life in Oxford from a traditional social perspective. But he is one of Emerson's transcendentalists who resists conformity to tradition (Emerson). He left everything behind to join gipsy who lives in nature and knows the secrecy of happiness. Being weary of toxic modernity, he chose to mingle with gipsy and thus with nature because he believes that nature can heal his tired soul, transcending all the chaos and confusion. He merges himself with nature and becomes a part of it. Most importantly, resisting a human-centered worldview, he transforms himself into a biocentric identity.

The scholar's journey from a chaotic, materialistic society to the lap of nature connotes a significant inner transformation (Hossain 25). Blending himself into the landscape, he becomes immortal or timeless.

“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.” (L. 137-140)

Arnold's pictorial quality in these lines shows how nature protects the scholar even after death. These lines reflect the scholar as a human integrated with the natural world and strengthen Arnold's role as an ecocritical thinker.

“-No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours! (L. 141-142)
For what wears out the life of mortal men?”

The scholar's refuge in nature sets him free and enlightens his soul with eternal spirituality. He embraces the inherent goodness of nature and humanity, which were completely absent in the physical world. Through the scholar's transformation, Arnold gives the message that nature is the ultimate place where humankind can regain humanity, spirituality, and purity. In essence, Arnold, through his iconic character, the scholar, promotes eco-centrism in his poem.

Conclusion:

In both of the poems, Arnold shows modern ecocritical concern by reflecting the interconnection between environmental harmony and the moral consciousness of humans. While "Dover Beach" presents nature as a mirror of spiritual emptiness and cultural imbalance, "The Scholar Gipsy" presents the fragility of the human-nature relationship. The poems demonstrate nature as both refuge and alarm. In these poems, Arnold vividly shows nature's powerful influence in human life and justifies that it has moral intrinsic values. Employing nature as an active participant in the critique of modern civilization, Arnold ultimately suggests that the degradation of moral and ethical values can lead humanity to a fractured relationship with the environment. Thus, Arnold reclaims the supremacy of nature and addresses humankind to restore their bonds with nature in these two seminal poems.

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RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.576 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 2 (April/May&June;2026)

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