

Thyrsis Summary

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"Thyrsis" is a poem written by Matthew Arnold in memory of his dear friend Arthur Hugh Clough, who passed away in 1861 at the young age of 42. His death brought deep sorrow to Arnold. The title Thyrsis is taken from a character in an ancient Roman pastoral poem by Virgil, where Thyrsis is portrayed as a shepherd.

Background and Setting of the Poem: After a long time following his friend's death, Arnold visits the countryside of Oxford, which was full of childhood memories shared with Clough. Upon reaching there, old memories come flooding back. But the poet feels disappointed because much has changed. The once-peaceful rural beauty is now lost. The pastoral charm—springs, fields, roads—has largely been destroyed. The countryside has turned into urban areas, which saddens the poet deeply.

Memory of the Elm Tree: The poet searches for something special—an elm tree. This tree was a symbol of their friendship. Arnold and Clough both loved the tree and believed that as long as the tree stood, their friendship and the quest for truth would live on. When Arnold fails to find it, he feels heartbroken. It seems like all hope and memories have faded with his friend's death.

The Story of Thyrsis and Corydon: In the poem, Arnold uses Thyrsis (Virgil's character) as a symbol of Clough. In Virgil's story, Thyrsis loses a singing contest to Corydon. At first, Arnold seems to blame his friend for his death, as if he gave up. But later, he realizes it wasn't Clough's fault—it was life and time that defeated him.

Memory of the Goddess Proserpine: According to Sicilian tradition, when a shepherd dies, a sad song is sung on a pipe so that Proserpine, the goddess of the underworld, might bring him back to life. Arnold wishes to sing such a song for his friend. But he soon realizes that Proserpine does not dwell in England, so his song would be in vain. This thought deepens his sorrow.

Memories of the Oxford Countryside: As the poem continues, Arnold wanders through the countryside, recalling the past. He remembers a girl who once helped him and his friend fix a boat. But now, even she is nowhere to be found. Through this memory, the poet expresses how everything has changed and how life is fleeting.

Finding the Elm Tree and Renewed Hope: Suddenly, Arnold catches sight of the elm tree. It is still standing. This eases his sorrow slightly. He feels that The Scholar Gipsy—the symbol of eternal search for truth—is still alive. In other words, truth and hope still survive.

Anger Toward the Friend and Poet's Resolution: Toward the end, Arnold expresses a slight anger toward his friend for leaving him behind. But at the same time, he makes a vow that he will never stop seeking truth, no matter how hard life becomes. He believes that the search for truth and love will never end.

LxNotes