
UNIT 17 THE LATE RENAISSANCE

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary intention of this unit will be to situate the writer in his literary, social and political context. It will be argued that:

- Milton does not belong strictly to the period conventionally identified as the Renaissance.
- Nevertheless, the diverse strains of thought and practice that are labelled as the Renaissance had a lasting impact on Milton, and may be seen in his work.
- Some of the main political and social transformations of the period, which will be identified in broad terms, also influenced Milton's work significantly.
- Milton's writings thus indicate a confluence of diverse factors, in which not just Renaissance elements but emergent trends in literature and culture are all woven together.

The unit will thus prepare the student for the more detailed examination of the life of Milton and the analyses of his poetry that follow in the remaining units.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will begin with a review of the key features of the Renaissance, which will help in identifying and locating the discursive context of Milton's writings. It will then briefly cover the period in which John Milton wrote, focusing specially on the literary, political and religious factors influencing his thought and work. We will explore some of the key issues relating Milton's poetry to the period, including the political and social context leading up to and running through the Civil War, literary and cultural developments of the period, and the role of religious upheavals in political and cultural transformations. A primary question that must be addressed is the question of periodisation, i.e., why we term the period when Milton was writing the Late Renaissance, and in what ways, if any at all, does that label aid our understanding of Milton's work.

17.2 A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RENAISSANCE

'The Renaissance' is the term commonly used by historians to refer to the period in European history dating from the late fourteenth century in Italy, spreading to other countries through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and probably reaching its

culmination in seventeenth century England with the work of John Milton, often referred to as the last great Renaissance poet. It is difficult to briefly encapsulate the many, sometimes contradictory, historical trends that constitute this period, and even more difficult to identify commonalities that would justify their inclusion under a single period label like 'the Renaissance'. But if we were to attempt a broad sketch, with our focus especially on the upper and learned classes of the different places and on their intellectual and cultural productions and developments, some running themes may be recognized. These suggest a porous but identifiably coherent period, that may be considered singular if only for the sake of convenience in arriving at an intellectual history of the period. Some of these themes are as follows:

17.2.1 Classical Learning

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Renaissance was the revival and popularization of classical learning. This began with the discovery of and a new interest in the writings of ancient Greece, producing scholarship that added to the widespread Latin scholarship of the Middle Ages. It was aided in its popularization to no small extent by the advent of the printing press (circa 1450?), which was to transform the range and reach of the intellectual and cultural world subsequently. This scholarship led to the development and centring of intellectual attention on human rather than divine objects, celebrating the virtues and potential of the human individual, or the discourse of Humanism and consequently of Individualism, both of which we shall return to later.

17.2.2 The Reformation

Another important factor in determining the course of the European Renaissance was the upheaval in Christianity that is referred to as the Reformation. This began as a series of attacks on the institution of the Roman Catholic Church and the proliferation of breakaway sects and cults. Martin Luther's (1483-1546) was probably the most influential in the efflorescence of such rejections of the Church during this period. The many ecclesiastical schools it generated within Christianity are together referred to as Protestantism. Most of these were premised on the fundamental observation that the path to salvation did not lie through the Church, which stood accused of substantial corruption in its beliefs and its institutional practices, but through the individual's acceptance of and adherence to the Holy Scriptures. Salvation was thus a matter of the individual's direct, unmediated relation to God. The Reformation and the consequent Counter Reformation within the Catholic Church led to several extended wars, political turmoil, and inter- and intra-state conflicts that lasted well into the seventeenth century, across Europe and Britain. While battled as religious wars, these conflicts were frequently about political power and control of the state, with Protestant ideologies finding special appeal with emerging bourgeoisies across Europe seeking a weightier political say, and greater autonomy in trade and usury, traditionally frowned upon by the Catholic Church.

17.2.3 The Emergence of Imperialism

The emergence of European, specifically British imperialism, though not often considered integral to understanding the Renaissance, may actually be seen as its economic underpinning. Commensurate with the expansion of intellectual discourses was the European discovery of various new continents and countries on the globe, one of the most significant of these being the Americas. Trade and the settling and exploitation of these places substantially enriched the European nations, besides opening out the horizons of the imagination to new geographies and peoples. Both these forms of enrichment – of the economy and of the imagination – provided the necessary prerequisites for the flourishing of arts and culture that is characteristic of the period in Europe.

17.2.4 The New Cosmology

The cosmology of the Middle Ages had been firmly Ptolemaic, envisioning the earth at the centre of several concentric celestial spheres. With the publication of the Copernican theory in 1543, proposing a heliocentric universe with the earth as one among many planets in orbit around the sun, this became deeply controversial. Though its real impact was felt only several decades later, it was sufficiently controversial for Milton to refer to it in his own work, and even at that time indicated the increasing inroads made by scientific discourses and methods into domains of knowledge traditionally held by religion.

Certainly all these factors are still evident at the time Milton was writing. However, his period is also marked by the simultaneous presence of several new historical trends that actually come to define the following age, the Age of Enlightenment, which spans the latter part of the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth century. Chief among these are the celebration of reason, of scientific method in the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of a discourse of civic rationality that attempted to explore and outline the relations of individual to society. The last was manifested largely through a relatively new popularization of the genre of political and cultural criticism, of which Milton was an early and powerful exponent. In his poetry too, these elements of an emerging age are engaged with, albeit circumspectly. The power of reason is explored for instance in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, in Satan's attempt to rationalise his fall from Heaven and the consequences for him. The engagement with science is evident in Milton's metaphors and similes more than through any actual employment of the new scientific discourses and methods. And while the whole of *Paradise Lost* may be read as an early attempt to grapple with the complexities of the relations between individual and state, individual and God and individual and society, the possibilities of a civic rationality are inevitably renounced in favour of the more Renaissance trait of the celebration of the human as divine being rather than as rational being. In the poems we will be examining, it is this theme that appears to preoccupy Milton more than rationality, as in poems like 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'.

Milton may thus be seen to occupy a transitional period in history between two ages, bearing in his work the defining intellectual and cultural traits of both. Nevertheless it appears to be more appropriate to associate him with the Renaissance – in fact to identify him as the last major Renaissance writer – than with the Enlightenment, because of his own leaning towards the intellectual preoccupations and positions of that earlier period. To speak of him as representative of the late Renaissance – which we can now identify as approximately the period from the early to the middle decades of the seventeenth century – would thus be reasonably accurate. The peculiar position he occupies nevertheless needs to be further understood in the light of the political and historical circumstances of his writing, which we will now explore.

17.3 THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Following the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the English throne passed from Tudor hands to the Stuarts of Scotland with the Scottish King James VI, who took the title James I of England as well. His reign, lasting till 1625 is referred to as the Jacobean period in English history. It was witness to several major transformations in English society, perhaps the most important being the gradual alienation of the court from its increasingly insistent and demanding subjects, and of the King from an increasingly Puritan Parliament. Population increased sharply, almost doubling in this period, an increase that was commensurate with steeply rising prices and rents and a concomitant fall in real wages. Poverty was widely evident and at a new high, leading to social unrest and the rapid dissolution of traditional forms of social relations between classes and ranks. English society even under Elizabeth had begun seeing

the emergence of a new trading middle class and a landed gentry that began to invest more and more in trade and commerce. These sections aggressively challenged existing orders of social rank and hierarchy with strong Puritan support. The nobility's increasing financial dependence on social sections outside their own ranks rendered the crown politically dominant but vulnerable. Charles I who followed James I in 1625 established a reign of decadent opulence and arbitrary power that was intended to reflect great power and glory but succeeded only in gradually eroding his moral and political authority, feeding accusations against him of Catholic sympathies and then demands for substantial curbs in royal power especially from the increasingly powerful Puritans who dominated the House of Commons in Parliament. By 1641, civil war had erupted between the Royalists and the forces owing allegiance to the leaders of the House of Commons who had challenged the King's power. Under Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, the New Model Army of the Commonwealth, successfully gained superiority, eventually leading to the capture and subsequent execution several years later of Charles in 1649, and to the declaration of England as a republic named 'the Commonwealth'. This did not end civil war in England, however; mistrust and antagonism amongst the members of the Parliament eventually led to Cromwell's use of his army to disband Parliament on charges of corruption. He then took over direct rule of England, Ireland and Scotland as Lord Protector of the realm in 1653, ruling till his death in 1658. The regicide of Charles I – an event that had shocked both Catholic and Protestant sentiments across Europe – however had had a lasting impact, resulting in repeated challenges to the legitimacy of Cromwell's government. The Commonwealth reign he established was eventually dissolved and Charles II, who had ceaselessly fought Cromwell from exile in France, was invited to re-assume power in England in 1660 by the remaining members of the Parliament. But it was only with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that it was finally established that Parliament would be the supreme political authority, to whose mandate even the king would have to submit.

This period of deep strife and civil unrest in England may be seen then as essentially a moment of political and social transition in which the power of the king became subject to examination and regulation by an increasingly powerful civil body, the Parliament. These changes were welcomed by the new trading and mercantile sections, who fought in the name of religion for greater political and economic autonomy. Alongside these changes at the level of the visible political structure, English society was also witnessing radical transformation. With the gradual colonisation of the Americas and the expansion of trade, towns and cities became major centres of concentration of finance and labour, permitting the quick popularisation of various strands of Puritanism like the Diggers and the Quakers espousing radically new proto-socialist ideas, and consequently fomenting civil unrest. In different ways, these religious ideologies challenged the existing orders and conventions of rank, ecclesiastical and political authority, attitudes to private property and very importantly, to the relations between the sexes. Women took an active part in the civil unrest, with several emerging as powerful Puritan preachers. Their presence in an until-now male dominated public space was a powerful challenge to patriarchal dispensations, even if this was not their specific intent. Much literature of the period stems from these diverse challenges to a still dominantly feudal-patriarchal worldview, often taking the form of pamphleteering and political treatises and tracts, like some of Milton's works, that sought to influence public opinion and thereby bring about political and social change. That these were set essentially in terms of a religious debate should not blind us to the deeply political intentions and implications of the debate itself. The dominant theme was the question of the autonomy and rights – political, religious, economic – of the individual in relation to existing forms of authority – whether state, church or social conventions – and in its formulations drew heavily on both Renaissance and Reformation discourses of humanism and individualism. In many ways, this question is at the heart of Milton's *Paradise Lost* too.

17.4 LITERARY AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON POETRY

We have already noted the emergence to prominence of the genre of the essay and the (usually political) tract. Much of this literature – and of other literary forms of the period – was focused on religious issues; nevertheless, the humanist influences, ideas and concerns of the High Renaissance left a lasting impact. Many of the genres that became prominent in this period – the verse satire, the epigram, the essay, the meditation, the masque, the tragicomedy, the pastoral play – were imports from Europe as part of the baggage of Renaissance influences in England. Another feature of the period with a bearing on the kind of literature it produced was the proliferation of schools and the promotion of education in the classical languages, literatures and disciplines like logic and rhetoric, with an emphasis on memorising. Writers could thus draw extensive allusions to earlier works knowing their readers would recognise them, indicating a highly restricted but homogeneous culture. Much of this writing was in Latin, and writing in English was either largely experimental or translations of Continental writers, at least in poetry. While Elizabethans like Spenser, Sydney and Raleigh did write very successful English verse, they remained substantially indebted to Continental, specifically Italian and French writing. It is in the verse of John Donne (1572-1631) that an entirely different, particularly English sensibility became evident: playful, even irreverent, sometimes deliberately shocking but always retaining a degree of seriousness and close attention to poetic craft. Later literary historians were to label the kind of writing practised by Donne and some of his contemporaries and successors – Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell – 'Metaphysical poetry', alluding to its often abstract and strikingly unlikely figures of speech. Milton too explored the short lyric in poems like 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', before he essayed the epic *Paradise Lost*, although his own style tended towards the classical forms and themes. The dominant poetry of the period was thus the short lyric.

In theatre, the Jacobean reign saw the peaking of popular theatre and its waning following repeated Puritan attacks on it as licentious and promoting vice. The tragedies and the masques of the Caroline court were the most common forms that were performed, and both employed metrical verse in dialogue. With the closure of the theatres and the growing strength of the Puritans, prose in the form of meditations, pamphlets, essays and tracts became a major literary vehicle by the mid-seventeenth century. Much of this as we have noted centred on issues of religion and the state. The literature of the period was also influenced by the new scientific method of inquiry propounded by Sir Francis Bacon, by the pursuit of scientific knowledge that it accelerated and by scientific discoveries like those of Copernicus and Galileo. It makes an often playful appearance in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, but its lasting influence was in the challenge it was to throw to religious perceptions of the world. Milton's famous lines in the invocation to *Paradise Lost* – asserting that his epic was to 'justify the ways of God to Men' – may thus be understood in terms of either the legalistic discourse of the conflict between the king and Parliament or that of answering the challenge of scientific inquiry, or both. The sentiments of Jacobean tragedy and its vehicle of metrical verse also had a lasting impact on poetry, judging from the prolific number of now little-known attempts to write the first English epic in metrical verse. While several poets attempted the long narrative or the epic forms – Patrick Hannay's *Sheretina and Mariana* (1622), D'Avenant's *Gondibert* (1650), W Chamberlayne's *Pharonnida* (1659), to name just a few – none really succeeded till Milton. It is reasonable to argue that one reason for Milton's success was his use of the epic form to represent the contemporary struggle between religion and the state as itself an epic struggle, rather than confining himself to simply reconstructing the form and its conventional classical themes in English, for its own sake. That is, Milton rendered the epic topical and contemporary, while retaining its

formal classical moorings. One dimension of the epic's contemporaneity is its negotiations with current debates on gender. A problem that was thrown up for Puritan patriarchy in its promotion of individualism was that it opens up the question of women's individuality and autonomy. The resolution of this demanded an engagement with Biblical notions of free-will and of the culpability of women in the Fall from Grace. Milton engaged in his poetry with these issues in some detail in the speeches between Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*.

17.5 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit we identified some of the main features of the phenomenon known as the Renaissance, and proceeded to examine their relevance to understanding Milton. Our aim was to try and locate Milton historically, as constituting a transitional moment between the Renaissance and the period that followed. We have also seen how the seventeenth century was a period riven by civil war, political and religious turmoil, and by large scale transformations in the composition of English society. Along with this, we noted how various changes took place in the literary climate of the period, and suggested that these changes owed partly to the spread of Renaissance ideas and to the consequences of the Reformation, in the form of the growing power of various kinds of Puritanism. We noted how these inflected the kind of literature that emerged as well as explored the debt that Milton's own writing owed to these changes.

17.6 REVISION QUESTIONS

1. From your readings in Milton's social and cultural context, do you agree with the view that Milton is the last of the great Renaissance writers? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Identify some of the main features of the English Renaissance that were to influence Milton's poetic work.
3. To what extent was the Reformation transformative of the Renaissance in England?
4. What were some of the cultural and political factors that led to the making of Milton as the first major English epic poet?

17.7 ADDITIONAL READING

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UNIT 18 MILTON: THE LIFE

Structure

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 - 18.2.1 Childhood and University Life
 - 18.2.2 Religion and Propaganda
 - 18.2.3 Public and Political Life
 - 18.2.4 The Restoration and its Impact
- 18.3 **An** Appraisal of Milton's Poetic Career
- 18.4 Let's Sum Up
- 18.5 Revision Questions
- 18.6 Additional Reading

18.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to

- Offer a brief but coinprehensive view of the main features and circumstances of Milton's life.
- Identify the various phases in his life when he wrote the different poems we will study.
- Suggest ways in which some of the main events of Milton's life impinge on his work.
- Present an overview of Milton's poetic career that will bring out some of the salient features of his work.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of examining a writer's life is sometimes forgotten in the necessary insistence on close textual interpretation. We forget that such an interpretation can often gain in richness from a knowledge of the writer's own life and times. This need not necessarily be through directly correlating the writer's life and his/her works; it may simply be a matter of bearing in the back of one's mind the circumstances and events of the writer's life as a sort of backdrop to the oeuvre. Such a backdrop would draw attention to some of the less easily evident significations of the oeuvre, and may sometimes serve explanatorily as well. To this end, this unit will explore the momentous events in Milton's life as the personal and political stage on which his ambitions toward a poetic career were enacted. It will also glance briefly at some personal issues from his life in relation to his work, as for instance his marital relations and his blindness.

From your reading of the previous unit you would already have an idea of the importance of the historical events that Milton was observer of and participant in. What is of further significance is that Milton's personality was such that he could not but be a key player in the events of his day. Even a cursory reading of the accounts of his life is sufficient to confirm that he was a passionate thinker, committed to the causes he chose to espouse, yet never determined by them to the extent of becoming rigid in his ideologies. His refusal to follow any single Protestant school, while maintaining a lifelong commitment to Protestantism is clear indication also of his

1182 AN ACCOUNT OF MILTON'S LIFE

18.2.1 Childhood and University Life

Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608. When his father, John Milton Sr. **was** disinherited by his Roman Catholic grandfather for turning Protestant, he moved to London and established himself successfully as a notary and moneylender who paid a great deal of attention to his son's education. Milton is supposed to have led a rather pampered life at home. He studied at St. Paul's School, London, **from** some time between 1615 and 1620 till 1625, when he joined Christ's College, Cambridge. At St. Paul's, he followed the regular **curriculum** of Latin, Greek and Hebrew; but he also learnt several modern languages from private tutors at home. Milton was known to have been an **avid** reader, to the extent that it probably caused the blindness of his later years, and to have decided early in his life that he would be a poet and a humanist scholar. He went on to Cambridge and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in March 1629 and subsequently his Master of Arts in July 1632. Here he was nicknamed 'the Lady' for his fineness of features; he was by all accounts a handsome youth who, by his own account, was throughout his younger days drawn to a life of sensuality, but forswore it in the pursuit of **the** higher **ambition** of becoming an epic poet. The chaste Lady of the masque *Comus* that he was soon to write, who **refuses** to succumb to the temptations offered by Comus, appears to embody these sentiments to some degree. There is **some suggestion** of conflict with his tutor at Cambridge, and of a degree of unpopularity which later gave way to respect and even reverence among both, his peers and his professors, indicative of a proud nature that was not given to bending to popular opinion.

His Cambridge years display little love for scholastic logic; he preferred and celebrated instead **the** ideas and literatures of Renaissance humanism, blending a **firmly** rooted Christianity with Platonism. According to **him** he was first taken up by the sensuality of Ovidian and other Roman poetry, but later took greater interest in the idealism of Dante, Petrarch, and Edmund Spenser. This was to lead to a fascination with Platonic philosophy and finally to the mysticism of the biblical 'Book of Revelations'. During these years he **also** honed his **poetic** craft in Latin, writing poetry that was highly sensuous in style. Two of his English poems survive from this period: 'On the Death of a Fair Infant' and 'At a Vacation Exercise', both **written** in 1628. His first great poem in **English**, 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' which we will shortly examine in detail, was written in the **Christmas** season of 1629-30. It reflects the maturation to fullness of his poetical craft **and** its innate tendencies, its religious theme and its hold over **form** as well as meter anticipating the work of his later days. '**L'Allegro**' and 'Il Penseroso' (both **written** in 1631?) though less ambitious than the 'Nativity' poem **and** more reflective, in a pastoral vein, continue to reflect this mastery, as we shall see,

18.2.2 Religion and Propaganda

On leaving Cambridge, it was assumed he would join the **Church**, given his scholarly and literary **gifts**; but he rejected this outright, staying by his intention to become a poet and scholar and deprecating the tyranny of the Church. This raised the problem of financial means, which he solved by staying with his parents, first at **Hammersmith** and then at Horton, for six years until 1638. 'Ad **Patrem**' ('To Father'), is his expression simultaneously of gratitude to his father and a defense of the career he had chosen: During these six years, alongside writing *Comus* (1634) and *Lycidas* (1637), he was to also study intensely the Greek and Latin **writers** and read extensively in diverse disciplines like religion, politics, philosophy, geography, history, astronomy, mathematics and music – a liberal **scholarship** that was unavailable to him in

Cambridge and that he was to later deploy even in his poetry with **subtlety** and power. *Comus* was a masque that first dramatized his favoured theme of the grand conflict between good and evil, while *Lycidas*, employing the form of the classical pastoral elegy, may be seen as his first attempt to justify God's **ways** to 'men'. Following his mother's death in 1637, a year later Milton travelled to Italy, winning some recognition for his early Latin poetry. He also visited the imprisoned astronomer **Galileo Galilei**, a meeting he considered significant enough to mention in the *Areopagitica*. News of growing civil and political strife at home forced him to cut **short** his tour and **return home** the next year, to settle in London and work as a tutor.

Between 1641 and 1645, he was also to write various trenchantly argued tracts on church **reform**, divorce and **ensorship** that participated directly **and** passionately in the debates of the day. The picture that emerges by this **time** is that of a poet deeply engaged with and participating in the major issues of his day with a weighty erudition. By 1660, the culmination of the civil wars in England, Milton had written at least eighteen major prose works defending the Puritan rebellion and attacking its enemies, including some supporting the regicide of Charles I. It was evidently a period when he suspended his poetic ambitions in order to serve through his prose the Puritan cause in the political upheavals of the time. The exceptions were the versification of a few psalms and the writing of seventeen sonnets, ranging in subject from the deeply personal to the political. All of Milton's prose works reflect a **stern** and ardent concern with the protection of individual **freedom** of speech and dignity, and condemned tyranny of any kind, whether by church or state. He repeatedly and insistently demanded the separation of religion **from** politics (in terms that, it may be noted, have high relevance to our own current Indian context), advocating a republicanism and an almost heretical view of the Bible that were **highly** controversial and brought both suspicion and notoriety. His *Areopagitica*, a speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing, to the parliament of England (1644) is a classic among his writings on these issues, as also his *Doctrine anti Discipline of Divorce* (1643) and *Of Education* (1644), an almost typically Renaissance **humanist** text on the ideal Christian education for young boys. The divorce tract was probably the result of his own disastrous marriage to Mary Powell in 1642. Mary, half his age, was the uneducated daughter of an Oxfordshire royalist squire who owed his father money. The incompatibility was evident, and six weeks after the marriage Mary went back to her family, refusing to return to Milton. For Milton the marriage was obviously a tragic mistake, and he argued in the *Doctrine* that the sole existing **justification** for divorce – adultery – was perhaps a lesser evil **than** a fundamental incompatibility that forced the maintenance of a loveless union. Mary and Milton were reunited in 1645 by friends. He went on to take in the entire Powell family of ten members for almost a year, **when** they **were** impoverished by the civil war. Before Mary died in 1652, Milton had three daughters by her. **What** is of consequence **for** us is that this strange union led to a **highly** controversial tract that developed on Milton's own personal crisis and presented it as a **fundamental** social issue, **framing** it in the discourse of the oppressive laws of the church. But in doing so, he also opened **the** question of women's role in marriage, proposing an equality of relation and even **the** (albeit theoretical) possibility of female **superiority**, even if he did not practise this in his **own** family, in relation to either his wife or his daughters. These opinions throw a great deal of **useful** light on the figuring of Eve in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*.

18.2.3 Public and Political Life

By 1649, Milton had been invited by Cromwell to be a secretary for foreign languages to the Council of State. Though it was not a policy making position but rather a public relations one, in which he was expected to defend and support the government, Milton accepted it, eager for a **more** hands on participation in the politics of his time. As part of this task, he wrote his first defence of regicide, *Eikonoklastes*, in October 1649 and was to follow it **with** several others. **The** success of these was tempered by the realisation of his failing eyesight, which turned to

complete blindness by the end of 1652, which was also the same year his wife Mary died. Despite the blindness, he continued to write the political tracts of defence he was employed to – several of them in Latin, addressing a European audience – although his duties were substantially reduced. In 1656 he married Katherine Woodcock and had a daughter by her, only to see them both die in 1658. He was also at this time working on the important *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, finished some time around 1659-60, that offers many of the theological arguments that were to form the core of the debate in *Paradise Lost*. Like most Anglicans of that time, Milton was raised in a Calvinist tradition, and considered himself one for a very long period. By the time of the writing of *Paradise Lost* however, he had begun to accept the Arminian doctrine which asserted the salvation of all believers, unlike popular Calvinism which pronounced the salvation of just a select few, and strove continuously to reconcile this theologically to the idea of the freedom of the individual to rational choice. The figuring of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is a brilliant embodiment of the ideological tensions of this position. Toward the end of his life he had renounced affiliations to all Christian sects, claiming a theological independence that was quite radical for the time.

18.2.4 The Restoration and After

The Restoration of 1660 was a deeply disillusioning moment for Milton, although his last political pamphlet written that year continued, very courageously, to argue for the Commonwealth form of government that he had so arduously supported, and condemned the English people for being slavish. With the return of monarchy, Milton's life was in danger, and he had to go into hiding for some months. The passage of the Act of Oblivion granting clemency to the supporters of the Commonwealth eventually made it safe for him to emerge, but even then only with the support and intervention of friends like the poet Andrew Marvell and the playwright William Davenant, and probably because his complete blindness suggested he was now completely harmless too. He lived the years from then till his death in straitened financial circumstances. From 1660 to 1665, Milton concentrated on further study with the aid of his third wife Elizabeth Munshell, whom he married in 1663, and his daughters, who also took the dictation of his magnum opus, *Paradise Lost*. It was published finally in 1667, to be followed in 1671 by the publication of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Milton did not survive long after this, and already severely ill, he died on 8 November 1674 of gout.

18.3 AN APPRAISAL OF MILTON'S POETIC CAREER

Milton is considered by many to be the most important and influential poet in the English language after William Shakespeare. He was to have a lasting impact on the work in particular of poets like William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and William Butler Yeats. From his early precocity in learning and interest in poetry it is evident that he was not only gifted but aware of his gifts, and willing to hone them through years of reading and writing. It is also clear that Milton's understanding of the poetic vocation was, from the very beginning, an exalted one. He saw himself as the true successor of Spenser, in that he wanted to fuse the classical heritage of the Renaissance with the Christian spirit of the Reformation, while remaining a quintessentially English poet. It is in this sense that Milton is also an intensely self-reflexive poet, whose poetry is suffused with the awareness of its own ambition and vocation. When we examine some of the shorter poems, this sense of self-awareness in the poetry will become clearer, but for immediate reference for the student, it may be worth looking at Milton's 'Lycidas', a poem in which the poet explicitly poses the question of the worth of poetry and of the poetic vocation. The important point to note is that the answer for Milton was always a religious one, in the sense that he saw his poetry as always at the service of Christianity. In this sense, poetry was a spiritual vocation, divinely inspired by a religious muse and therefore in continuation with his

religious interests, rather than a means of self aggrandizement. However, it is also clear that for Milton the religious was not divorced from the political. This political sensibility manifested in several ways: in his intense conviction in religious autonomy, in his belief that the only true rejoinder to classical literature and philosophy would have to be an elaborate **Christian** one, and in the **concomitant** need to espouse **contemporary** Protestant English culture as **the** true Christian one. The consequence was inevitably a strongly English-nationalistic sensibility which was worked out in both humanist and Protestant-religious **terms** in his **poetry**.

In addition to the strongly political dimension of his poetic work, almost all of Milton's poetry is **suffused** by a musicality that underscores his singular attention to enhancing the poetics of the English language specifically. That is, the rhymes and rhythms native to English are explored and exploited with lyrical **skill** in all his poems, whether in the lighter mode of the shorter poems or in the **more** weighty and sonorous tones of **Paradise Lost**. The following lines from '**L' Allegro**' illustrate this point:

While the Cock with lively din,
Scatters the rear of **darknes** thin,
And to the stack, or the Barn **dore**,
Stoutly struts his Dames before,
Oft list'ning how the Hounds and horn,
Chearly rouse the slumbring morn,
From the side of som Hoar Hill,
Through the high wood echoing shrill. (11.49-56)

This ear for sound and the consequent **enhancing** of the musical potential of the English language was one of the lasting legacies of Milton to succeeding poets, many of whom remained envious of him in these abilities. The musicality of his poetry was **sometimes** conjoined with a **striking** sensuality of imagery, as in the following lines from '**Lycidas**':

That on the green terf suck the honied showres,
And purple all the **ground** with vernal flowres.
Bring the **rathe** Primrose that forsaken dies.
The tufted Crow-toe, and pale **Gessamine**,
The white Pink, and the Pansie **freakt** with **jeat**,
The glowing Violet.
The Musk-rose, and the well attir'd Woodbine.
With Cowslips wan that hang the pensive hed,
And every flower that sad embroidery wears:
Bid Amaranthus all his beauty shed... [ll. 140-9]

What is interesting is that this was to grow into an important dimension of his poetry especially after his blindness set in, and is especially in evidence in the early parts of his epic **Paradise Lost**.

18.4 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit, we undertook to examine some of the key events and circumstances of the life of John Milton, beginning with his childhood years and the years as a student in Cambridge, in which he had an early inclination to a poetic career. We went on to explore in some detail Milton's involvement in **the** political and religious **turmoil** of his age, focussing especially on the importance of religious politics to his public and personal life. We noted how his poetic career was temporarily put on hold by his involvement in the civil war and the twenty year Commonwealth reign. We explored

the impact of his blindness and his fall from political favour on his life, and the subsequent return to his original vocation as a poet. We then had an overview of this vocation and poetic career, examining Milton's chief achievements and contributions as a poet. We shall now further elaborate on that overview, studying the matters that came to be of concern to him in both his poetic and prose work, while also exploring the factors that shaped them at the formal level.

18.5 REVISION QUESTIONS

1. Milton's life is largely a record of conflicts between diverse interests. Do you agree?
2. Through your readings here and in other sources, give an account of the nature and extent of the influence of Puritanism in Milton's life, To what extent is this enhanced or countermanded by his classical learning?

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UNIT 19 A SURVEY OF MILTON'S LESSER POEMS AND PROSE

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Early Works
 - 19.2.1 'On the Death of a Fair Infant'
 - 19.2.2 'At a Vacation Exercise'
- 19.3 Major Sources and Influences
- 19.4 Milton's Poetic Evolution and the Minor Poems
- 19.5 Milton's Prose
 - 19.5.1 The Old Prose and its Conditions
 - 19.5.2 Milton and the New Prose
- 19.6 Let's Sum Up
- 19.7 Revision Questions
- 19.8 Additional Reading

19.0 OBJECTIVES

- The unit is intended to familiarize the reader with the few extant early poems of John Milton. While no extended analysis is offered, the poems are examined in sufficient detail to enable the student to study them on his/her own.
- It will attempt to identify the main currents that influenced Milton's thought and work in the early part of his life. It will also identify the literary sources that he picked up and that were to remain central to all his work.
- It will then move on to examine the next phase, in which his writings were primarily political and consisted mainly of prose pamphlets. In this, it will explore the relations between his prose and poetry.
- The overarching intent of this unit is to provide the student with a base from which s/he can pursue further study of Milton's work, within and outside this block.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Any poetic career can show a wide variety of tendencies and inclinations. Milton's is no exception. In the course of this unit, it will become clear that Milton's poetic and literary life can be broadly divided into three phases: the early phase of idealistic and artistic concerns; the middle phase of deep involvement in politics and religion, marked in his work by a dominance of prose; and a late poetic phase, following his blindness, when he dissociated himself from politics and focused entirely on the writing of the two major epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Despite this wide range of literary activity, all of Milton's work can be seen to carry some recurrent themes, motifs and styles. In the course of this unit, we shall attempt to identify and analyze some of these commonalities. Our concern in doing so is not so much to relate Milton's life to his work in singular correspondences, as to locate and examine the continuities and discontinuities that mark his literary career, and the implications of these for our understanding of his work.

19.2 EARLY WORKS

The date of Milton's decision to become a poet cannot be determined with any accuracy, but the decision was probably taken early. The verse paraphrases of Psalms 114 and 136 are the earliest extant poetic pieces and they date from his final year at St Paul's School. They already show the poetic promise that Milton was to fulfill in later years. These two English paraphrases, and four epigrams (three Latin and one Greek) which have tentatively been dated to 1624, are the only surviving pieces from his pre-Cambridge verse. In the subsequent undergraduate years (February 1625-March 1629) at Cambridge Milton wrote a lot of Latin poetry, which is not of any immediate relevance to our study. Only two English poems (both belonging to 1628) remain from this period: *On the Death of a Fair Infant*, written after the death of his little niece in January 1628, and *At a Vacation Exercise*, written in July or August of the same year. Let us briefly examine these two poems, to get a sense of the kind of poetic temperament the early Milton displayed. We need not study them in any detail to note that both are already engaging in the lofty themes that characterize Milton's poetry.

19.2.1 'On the Death of a Fair Infant'

'On the Death of a Fair Infant', an Elizabethan-style elegy on the death of his baby niece Anne Phillips, is the first of Milton's own English poems (as opposed to the paraphrases of the psalms) still extant, written early in 1628. Addressed formally to the infant for the most part, the poem follows an already well-established tradition of the allegorizing and Christianizing of classical myth (Potter, 107). In the poem, Milton allegorises the child's death as being at the hands of Winter (personified here as a cold being seeking the warmth of love), who wishes to take her as bride and involuntarily kills her with his touch. The child herself is transformed into a quasi-divine being who, in her death and in her boundless innocence, will now serve as medium between a sinful humanity and a wrathful God:

But oh why didst thou not stay here below
To bless us with thy heav'n-lov'd innocence,
To slake his wrath whom sin has made our foe
To turn Swift-rushing black perdition hence,
Or drive away the slaughtering pestilence,
To stand 'twixt us and our deserved smart
But thou canst best perform that office where thou art, (ll. 64-70)

With that consolation, the poet then turns to address the mother in the last stanza, and consoles her with the thought that if she bore this loss in this spirit, she would be rewarded with another child, probably a son, who 'till the world's last-end shall make thy name to live'. Already in this poem Milton's lofty themes and style are evident, albeit in a somewhat immature manner (for evidently the original child being mourned disappears under the weight of the classicisms that Milton loads the poem with!) and this is true of his other surviving poem from this period.

19.2.2 'At a Vacation Exercise'

In 'At a Vacation Exercise', written in July 1628 he was to affirm his devotion to English, a style free from eccentricity, and exalted themes concerning nature and humanity. It was also the first instance when Milton was to make a public declaration of his poetic ambitions. The poem is part of a Latin prose speech that Milton delivered to the festive assembly marking the end of the college year. He interrupts the speech with the poem to 'hail [his] native Language', i.e. English, and goes on to declare how he would use it:

Yet I had rather, if I were to choose,
Thy service in some graver subject use,
Such as may make thee search thy coffers round
Before thou clothe my fancy in fit sound:
Such where the deep transported mind may soar
Above the wheeling poles, and at heaven's door
Look in, and see each blissful deity
How he before the thunderous throne doth lie,
Listening to what unshorn Apollo sings
To the touch of golden wires, while Hebe brings
Immortal nectar to her kingly sire:
Then passing through the spheres of watchful fire,
And misty regions of wide air next under,
And hills of snow and lofts of piled thunder,
May tell at length how green-eyed Neptune raves,
In heaven's defiance mustering all his waves;
Then sing of secret things that came to pass
When beldame Nature in her cradle was;
And last of kings and queens and heroes old,
Such as the wise Demodocus once told
In solemn songs at king Alcinous' feast,
While sad Ulysses' soul and all the rest
Are held with his melodious harmony
In willing chains and sweet captivity.

What is evident from this passage is the unique poetic vision that was to characterize Milton's work even in his later and more accomplished verse. He sets forth here the vocation of the poet that was to prove so highly influential. The unusual occasion which he chose to announce his decision indicates the importance he gave his intended poetic calling. Moreover, the patriotic announcement to write in English clearly rejects the humanist emphasis on Latin. It also marks an important change in Milton's poetic career, for in 1628 he had written only three English poems (the two Psalm paraphrases and 'On the Death of a Fair Infant'), with the majority of his poetry in Latin. In the following decade he wrote mainly in English, with only three Latin poems and some Italian sonnets. Clearly Milton had determined to become a serious English poet, electing to follow Spenser and Sidney rather than Virgil and Buchanan.

19.3 MAJOR SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

From what we have already read of Milton's life and times, it should be clear that, being a voracious reader, the sources that Milton drew on or alluded to in his work would be many. Yet what is equally clear is that one lasting source of material for – as well as influence on – Milton's thought was the Bible, and its imprint is evident directly or indirectly in almost all his work. In the introduction to this Block, we covered some of the basic narrative and mythic elements of the Bible that were to emerge in Milton's writings. But for Milton the Bible was obviously much more than just a storehouse of narratives, it was in fact the single most important explanation for the existence of humanity. Its presence in his work is thus as much for its theological as its mythological content. At times, Milton even evokes the style and tone of the Bible in his work, especially of the Old Testament with which he was particularly impressed. Biblical motifs and concerns are evident in his lesser poems as well as in the epic *Paradise Lost*, as for instance in his first major lyric, 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'.

Seventeenth century readers would have been intimately familiar with Biblical themes like the Genesis story of the Fall of Man, which Milton picks up in *Paradise Lost*. Besides being part of their religious education, it had already received much attention by earlier writers and poets. But we tend to forget that part of any school education in the seventeenth century was also readings in classical literature, including writers like Homer, Ovid, Virgil, Cicero, Longinus and Horace, allusions to whom would therefore be easily identifiable to Milton's contemporary readers. But Milton was also often deliberately erudite in his work, ostentatiously displaying his mastery of western learning and literature beyond that which would be familiar to the average seventeenth century reader. For, if we add to the usual education Milton's own voluminous studies in the classics, and in other disciplines like theology, philosophy, astronomy, history, etc., along with the Bible, we find a monumental corpus of writers and works that act as source material for Milton's own writings. Milton drew on these for themes and ideas as much as for models of style: Virgil for instance was the model for the epic as well as the pastoral, which Milton used in poems like 'Lycidas' and 'L'Allegro', and Cicero provided the model for almost all prose writers of the age. The Greek Aristotle and the Latin Longinus would have offered Milton strong theories of genre to negotiate in his work. Likewise, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided Milton with many allegorical situations and ideas that we will find sprinkled throughout his poetry. But Milton was also familiar with the work of the more recent sixteenth century poets like Bembo, Della Casa and Tasso, from whom he may have derived the idea of writing an epic in blank verse. Among English writers, Milton himself claimed Edmund Spenser as an important predecessor, while his sonnets suggest the influence of Shakespeare, whom he celebrated in his poetry. The influence of the former's *The Shepherd's Calendar* is especially evident in Milton's more pastoral poems, while that of the latter may be found in the kinship between Shakespearean figures like Macbeth and Milton's own Satan. He had however, as we have noted in the previous Unit, little in common with the poets and poetic fashions of his own age.

But while these sources and lines of influence are useful in understanding Milton's literary craft and its context, as well as in tracing points of continuity and originality in relation to a longer tradition, they cannot explain Milton's unique poetic individuality. What is unique to Milton's poetic style is more than the simple aggregate of these sources and influences on his writing. As we noted earlier, perhaps the most remarkable quality of Milton's poetry is the importance of sound, rhythm and music to the fulfillment of meaning in it, a quality that distinguishes his verse more than any other. Its intensification in his later poetry may be partially explained by the fact of his blindness, but its definitive presence even in his early work is indicative of an affinity to music that precedes this condition, and suggests that Milton attempted to fill his writing with the more ephemeral effect of music itself. This has led some critics to remark, rather unkindly, that while Shakespeare's voice is hardly ever evident in his own work, there is evidence of no other voice but his own in Milton's (Legouis and Cazamian, 1954: 575). At all events, one can identify music as a source and an influence on Milton's work that remains less easily detectable, yet perhaps more important than it appears.

19.4 MILTON'S POETIC EVOLUTION AND THE MINOR POEMS

We had noted in the previous unit that Milton started his poetic career and had decided to write an epic fairly early in his life. These ambitions took shape and were realised over a poetic career that was in fact suspended for many years, during the time of his (official and unofficial) service to the Commonwealth. We also noted that the first major work in his adult life as a poet was 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' (1629-30), when he was twenty-four years old. The poem is replete with

many of the themes and images to be found in *Paradise Lost*, written more than forty years later. This in itself is the strongest indication of the preoccupation with and the continuity of especially Biblical motifs and ideas in Milton's poetic work. It also initiated a lyricism that was developed and continued in the twin poems of 'L'allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'. These two poems were the last of the major long poems that Milton was to write for some time, and his poetic work after this period till the writing of *Paradise Lost* is confined to some hymns and sonnets, of which we shall study two, Sonnets 19 and 23. What is interesting is that in all the variety that Milton displays in his shorter poetic works, he remains aloof from the 'metaphysical' fashions of his age, with most of his shorter works serving as sketches toward that final magnum opus, *Paradise Lost*. But between the writing of the shorter poems and the two epics, Milton devoted himself to writing powerful, polemical and influential prose tracts that concerned themselves with the major political and social issues of his time.

19.5 MILTON'S PROSE

19.5.1 The Old Prose and its Conditions

The efflorescence of prose in the 17th century is a matter of some interest. While prose as a style of writing had been popular for some centuries, it received a tremendous boost in the invention of the mechanical press, the Gutenberg press, in the 15th century. In the succeeding centuries, this invention was to transform the world. But specifically with regard to prose, the press facilitated the quick and easy transmission of information, opinion and knowledge. Besides freeing writers from the patronage system and injecting them directly into a market system, by which readers buying their books directly supported the writers, by the same token the mechanical press also permitted writers greater freedom in what they wrote. Under the patronage system, writers had to submit to the surveillance of their patrons. With the wide-ranging discoveries and concerns of the Renaissance, a host of new knowledges entered the public domain through this freedom and efficiency offered by the mechanical press. Part of the new intellectualism was an individualism that was in harmony with the writer's need to break out of the patronage system; another part of it was a secular and inquiring vision that demanded a more objective examination of the world, unbounded by the subjective and highly emotive charges of religious or social affiliations. The quest for alternative political orders and systems of authority spawned a chaos of styles, and the new styles reflected the urgency of the quest itself. Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), a compendious mixture of learning, pseudoscience, and anecdote woven ostensibly into a study of human psychopathology, is one example of the kind of prose that marked the early seventeenth century. In the 1620s with the first corantos, or courants (news books), generated by interest in the Thirty Years' War, another style emerged, resulting from a dramatic shift from an elite to a mass readership, and an efflorescence of popular journalism that accompanied the political confusion of the 1640s. These two kinds of styles may be seen as counterpoints to each other: the one polite, decent even when highly intellectual and radical, maintaining the civilities of political debate; and the other, like the tracts of the Levellers, Ranters and Diggers, scurrilous, populist, breaching every convention of literary taste and often considered vulgar and obscene.

This dramatic emergence of the genre of prose was not unrelated to the poetry of the period. We must remember that the school of poetry subsequently referred to as the Metaphysicals emerged alongside this popularization of prose. It was markedly different from the courtier poetry of the previous century, characterized by wit, playfulness, erudite and often obscure allusions, and perhaps most importantly, a vision of the world that was broad, more inclusive and deeply contemporary. The language was terse, staccato in rhythm, often colloquial and conversational, and replete with unconventional and sometimes shocking imagery. The effects and

influence of the popularization of prose is thus evident in this poetry. Milton's poetic work, while distant from the Metaphysicals, is not without its own resonances of the new prose styles. While he remained deeply rooted in Renaissance and classical genres and styles, his poetry too often reflects the new inclusiveness and contemporaneity of the Metaphysicals. Further, Milton's vision is sweeping, striving to blend the historical with the mythic, and it is in this perhaps that the influence of the new prose is most evident: for the attention to contemporary themes is intertwined with a vast erudition of history, politics, mythology, geography and science, attempting to weave the whole into a total system – a hallmark of the new prose.

19.5.2 Milton and the New Prose

While this appears to be more in consonance with the work of the more intellectual and systematic thinkers like Burton and Thomas Hobbes, Milton's own prose work is closer to the other variety of prose writing – perhaps as much because he wanted to maintain poetry as a vehicle of the lofty and sublime, as because his concerns in his prose were explicitly political and polemical. Yet these too are not without bearing for his poetical work. In the years 1641–60 he was almost wholly devoted in his writings to pamphleteering in the cause of religious and civil liberty. As his work went on, he was sustained by the conviction that in his defenses of liberty he was, in another way, fulfilling his epic and patriotic aspirations. His early tracts were attacks on the Episcopal hierarchy of the church, which he found to be too close to the Roman Catholic Church. But it was in 1643, with the 'Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce' (which was followed by three more tracts in 1644 and 1645 on the same theme) that he emerged as a highly controversial yet influential voice in England. In these trenchantly argued tracts, Milton contended that adultery might be less valid than incompatibility as the only reason for divorce. He argued that the coercive bond of a loveless marriage was destructive of human dignity, and therefore as valid if not more valid a reason for divorce. Milton's stand on divorce may have been substantially influenced by his own unhappy marriage; whatever his personal reasons, his open espousal of this new reason for divorce invited censure and even abuse by royalists and Presbyterians equally, as a libertine stand. But what is significant for us is that the vision of the circumstance of marriage that Milton lays out in these tracts – as a union of love, a divinely gifted blessing, which is to be dutifully yet lovingly honored and maintained, but not if either of the partners find the union itself intolerable. For Milton, it then ceases to be a marriage, and is only a mutually destructive bond. This vision of marriage is what is carried into his poetry and reflected by Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*.

In subsequent tracts like his most famous pamphlets, 'Of Education' and 'Areopagitica', Milton was to explore other themes that were to reflect in his epic. The first tract was a treatise on humanist education in the line of Erasmus. It advocated the study of the ancient classics, but subordinated to the Bible and Christian teaching – a balance of emphases that is evident in all his poetry. The second was written in response to a Parliamentary decree demanding that all published work be licensed by the official licenser. Milton's argument in this work, characteristically published without a license, was that diverse and conflicting opinions ought to be allowed to debate freely in public space, without the mediation of a censoring authority. He argued that this was essential for moral and intellectual growth, and believed that truth would triumph over falsehood in such debates. It is now considered a classic work in defense of civil liberties, but probably had little impact in its own time. But the reasoning at the heart of this tract was to pose a serious ideological and theological problem for Milton in the creation of the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Along with the politics of rebellion against the king and the advocacy of a more egalitarian rule, Satan also almost comes to represent for Milton the suppressed and censored voice that he writes of in the 'Areopagitica'. In fact it is arguable that Milton never really manages to resolve completely the contradictions in the political and religious representations of Satan in this epic. Another tract that reflects these concerns but from different point of view was the 'Eikonoklastes',

written in defense of regicide, following the severe attacks on the Commonwealth from Catholic quarters, for the execution of King Charles I. It is perhaps only to be expected that the defense is based less on rational argument and more on scurrilously attacking critics like Claudius Salmasius, discrediting him through personal abuse as a monstrous enemy of a sacred cause.

In these years he had also busied himself with a monumental history of Britain and a *Defense of the People of England*. 'A Treatise on Christian Doctrine', finished by about 1658–60, indicated a certain centrality of themes in his work. In this work, he spelt out some of his central differences from orthodox Christianity, primarily in his rejection of the concept of the holy trinity and of the doctrine of predestination, and his manifest belief in the humanity, rather than the divinity, of Christ. He continued to write tracts espousing religious and civil freedom, like 'A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes' down to his last political tract, 'The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth', published in March 1660. It was a patently a defiant effort, considering that the tide was changing, and it was already clear that England was returning to monarchy under Charles II. Milton's prose work may thus be seen as an important bridge between his early poetic phase, when his concerns were primarily aesthetic and idealistic, and his later epic phase, when he set about to realize his ambitious project of creating a contemporary mythology.

19.6 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit we studied two phases of Milton's life, the early phase, when he began writing poetry in English, and the middle phase, when he concentrated his intellectual and creative energies in prose, in the cause of the Commonwealth. We examined some of the more important influences on his writing and the sources that he turned to. We noted his use of such sources and the significance in particular of their amalgamation into an entire system of thought and vision, blending the classical and the Christian in such a way that the former served the interests of the latter. We also noted that this fusion of diverse traditions, far from rendering Milton a plagiarist, serves to emphasise the uniqueness of his voice, in prose and in poetry. The unit also attempted to draw out the relations between Milton's prose concerns and his poetic oeuvre. In doing so, it sought to lay the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances and factors involved in Milton's poetry. As we noted in the Introduction, the longer epics are for reasons of space, outside our immediate attention; but the study of this block should help the student pursue an examination of the epics on his/her own. We may now continue to examine the more well-known of Milton's shorter poetic works in the following units.

19.7 REVISION QUESTIONS

1. In your considered opinion, does Milton's early work bear signs of the poetic ambitions that he later fulfils? Analyse any one poem to substantiate your answer.
2. From your study of this unit, and from other readings, identify the primary influences and the main literary sources that are to be found in Milton's early poetic work.
3. What in your opinion could be the reason(s) for Milton's emphasis on prose in the middle years of his life?
4. Examine and discuss the relations between Milton's poetic and prose oeuvre.

19.8 ADDITIONAL READING

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UNIT 20 'ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY' AND 'LYCIDAS'

Structure

- 20.0 Objectives
- 20.1 Introduction
- 20.2 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'
- 20.3 'Lycidas'
- 20.4 Let's Sum Up
- 20.5 Revision Questions
- 20.6 Additional Reading

20.0 OBJECTIVES

- This unit, along with the next, will discuss some of Milton's more well-known lyrics.
- This particular unit will focus on two poems, 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' and 'Lycidas'.
- In analyzing these two poems, it will examine the generic forms that Milton employs and reworks to his own specific ends.
- Among the many complex issues involved, the unit will focus on the relationship between classical and Christian traditions of thought in Milton's work.
- The unit will also examine in some detail the musicality of Milton's poetry.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

These poems reflect a diversity of concerns and poetical techniques, which complement each other, as well as reflect many of the concerns and styles that go into the making of Milton's magnum opus, *Paradise Lost*. The unit will therefore focus as much on the formal elements of the poems as on their explication. The first poem, 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', explicitly displays Milton's early passion for Christian lore as a source for poetic attention, as well as his persistent tendency to cast it as the overriding frame of signification and meaning in his poetry. While his erudition and intimate familiarity with classical texts and culture is evident in both the poems, both poems promote the Christian over the classical. The second of the two poems, 'Lycidas' may also be seen as a struggle within his poetic self between these two traditions for supremacy. While these issues will come up for discussion in the course of the unit, we will also examine some formal dimensions to both the poems.

20.2 'ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY'

The poem consists of four opening stanzas of seven lines each, followed by the main 'Hymn' of twenty-seven stanzas of eight lines each. The opening four stanzas follow a rhyme scheme different from the rest of the poem and the rhymes themselves are not very consistently accurate, nor the meter evenly maintained through the poem.

For the most part the foot remains iambic, swinging between the rather rare trimeter (line with six syllables alternately stressed) and the hexameter (line with twelve syllables alternately stressed). The iambic is probably the foot closest to human speech patterns. The inconsistency of the rhyme and meter, rather than reducing, add to a musicality that is already evident in this poem, and that emerges with greater clarity and power in the later poems. This musicality does not, as in Pope's verses for instance, derive from the strict adherence to rhyme and meter. Rather, the rhythms that Milton achieves have a more integral relation to the words themselves, as for instance in the following lines (64-8) from stanza V of the 'Hymn':

The Windes, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kist,
Whispering new joyes to the milde Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

The alliterative first line with its line-up of aspirative roundings – 'windes', 'wonder', 'whist' – followed by the sibilant 'smoothly' and 'kist', aspire to aurally and tonally connote the sense of quiet wonder that the lines themselves denote. It must be noted that the poem itself is substantially about sound and music, with stanzas IX through to XIV specifically about the rapturous celestial music that heralds Christ's birth. The swinging, varying lengths of the lines further serve to 'perform' this music in the reading of the poem itself.

Yet, Milton's thematic intent, it might be said, demanded a discursivity of tone approaching prose, in almost all his poetic works. Hence the struggle evident in his shorter poems to follow the dictates of rhyme and meter together. The rhyme scheme of the four introductory stanzas, with their longer lines, and alternating rhyme scheme, suggest the need to make extended statements that may not be contained by the same rhyme. The hymn that follows, because of its affinity to music and its more descriptive and narrative intent, attempts more successfully to perform a more complex rhyme scheme. Yet even here, the last alexandrine (iambic hexameter) of each stanza reverts to the discursive tone that Milton appears more comfortable with. The success of the 'Nativity' poem in embodying the music of its content was not to be recaptured in those later short poems which were weightier in their subject matter. It is only in the writing of the epic later that Milton hit upon the form of the blank verse as the ideal vehicle for a heavily musical and sonorous style that nevertheless remained discursive in its intent.

The Hymn that follows the introductory stanzas and takes up the remaining 23, differs marginally from them in its stanzaic structure. Where the introductory stanzas are composed of seven lines each, following an a-b-a-b-b-c-c rhyme scheme, the remaining stanzas are of eight lines each, using the rhyme scheme a-a-b-c-c-b-d-d. Further, while the foot (or the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables) remains more or less the iambic through the entire poem, the meterscheme in the first four stanzas differs from that in the hymn. The first four stanzas use the tetrameter (or four stresses) for the first six lines, with the concluding seventh line of each stanza using six stresses or the hexameter; in contrast, the meter scheme in the hymn is more complex. There the lines a-a and c-c use the terse trimeter, the b-b lines use the longer pentameter, while the last d-d lines move from the tetrameter in the first line to the even longer hexameter. The effect is remarkable. The first four stanzas being introductory and therefore more discursive, the terse but consistent tetrameter serves the purpose well, of projecting a solemn yet speech-like, almost oratorical effect – as if the voice were discoursing rather than singing. In contrast, the meter and rhyme scheme of the hymn achieves a more complex effect: that of the chant or the song. The lines swing between short, terse stresses and extended statements, with the concluding couplet in particular concentrating the almost pendulating effect of the preceding lines in its large swing from the tetrameter to the hexameter of the closing alexandrine. The final result is a lyrical, song-like quality that attempts to measure up

to both the poem's claim to be a hymn and to the celebratory nature of the subject of the poem. It is fairly safe to say, however, that the hymn in the poem is, for all its musicality, easier to read than to sing.

The first four stanzas introduce the poem's topic, the birth of Christ, and offer it as a song in celebration of this event. The third stanza characteristically invokes the 'Heav'nly Muse', in almost epic style, elevating the tone of the poem to suggest an event of epic proportions. The epic that Milton eventually wrote, *Paradise Lost*, discarded this event to focus on the prior event of 'Man's First Fall' from Divine Grace. Yet this earlier poem bears within it many of the elements of that monumental work. The sweep of the poem, covering the moment of Creation, leading on to and through the 'pagan' civilisations of the past and looking forward to the Day of Judgement, the invocation of the Heavenly Muse, the celebration of Christ as a hero of epic proportions who will defeat Satan, the classical and Biblical allusions and references – these are all important dimensions of *Paradise Lost* as well. III particular, the theme of the old, classical gods being displaced and routed by Christ, so extensively featured in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, is prefigured in this poem, as for instance in stanza 22:

Peor, and Baalim,
Forsake their Temples dim,
With that twice-batter'd god of Palestine

In this sense, one may see in the 'Nativity' poem a kind of preliminary sketch of the later epic. Certainly the poem bears the intent of announcing the superiority of Christianity to classical legends and beliefs – indeed, of condemning the latter – which is shared and extended by the later epic.

20.3 'LYCIDAS'

This poem first appeared in a 1638 collection of elegies entitled *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago*, commemorating the death of Edward King, a college-mate of Milton's at Cambridge who drowned in a shipwreck in 1637. Milton, who had not been very close to King, volunteered or was asked to make a contribution to the collection, and used the occasion to reflect on his own current emotional conflicts, specifically about poetry. King, who like Milton, had apparently devoted his short life to poetry, becomes the basis for Milton's searching questions on the worth of such a life, in the face of the unpredictability of death. The two poets are imagined as shepherds in the poem, following the conventions of the classical pastoral, tending the arts of poetry, and Milton's lament is that such a profession is futile if the muses of poetry cannot guard their shepherds.

What boots it with uncessant care
To tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade,
And strictly meditate the thankless Muse,
Were it not better don as others use,
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair? (ll. 64-9)

This lament goes on to line 76, when Phoebus interrupts the lament to console the poet, that fame achieved through poetry lingers beyond the mortal life of the poet.

Phoebus repli'd, and touch'd my trembling ears;
Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
Nor in the glistening foil
Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumour lies,
But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
And perfect witness of all judging Jove;

As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed. (ll. 77-84)

'On the Morning of
Christ's Nativity' and
'Lycidas'

This then becomes the basis for consolation, which ends with the poet's celebration of Lycidas' life and fame. What is significant about the consolation is that it shifts registers, from classical allusions to Christian mythology – as if Milton deliberately used the former in the preceding part of the poem to discuss the death and the sorrow that it brings, but finds life only in the latter:

Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watry floor,
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled Ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves... (ll. 165-73)

The last line here is of course an allusion to the Biblical story of the miracle of Jesus walking on water. The poem goes on to describe the heavenly bliss that is Lycidas' fortune after death. Again here we see how Milton is clearly turning to Christianity as the superior and more convincing form of belief, for the rewards of the after life. Yet even this turn to Christianity is tightly interwoven with classical elements and allusions. It is important that the moment of genuine consolation comes only when St. Peter ('The Pilot' of l. 109) speaks in wrath at the indulgent ways of those who live life without either religion or poetry. Milton is here drawing on two traditions of allegorisation of the shepherd: the classical, in which shepherds are poets, and the Christian, in which shepherds are spiritual and religious leaders. The shepherds in the poem thus represent both poets and religious guides, and it is in envisioning the poet as a combination of these roles that Milton is most comfortable. There is nevertheless a tension between the two allegorical frames, arising from their different discursive and cultural histories. Milton uses this tension between the two cultures very fruitfully, as an index of the tension between worldly, sensual life and a spiritual after-life in the poem, contrasting the values of a transient worldly existence with that of the immortality and fame achieved through poetry.

Milton's old preoccupation with fame and the rewards of a poetic vocation are evident here. This must be understood as a concern, even a struggle, with the possibilities of a poetic vocation itself, even as it signals Milton's intensifying ambitions. The poem thus weaves several themes together: mortality as inevitable, the futility of poetic ambitions and the transience of worldly pleasures in the face of immortality, the guarantee of spiritual immortality within Christianity, and the need to promote this as a superior form of immortality to that offered by classical thought and literature; and yet the persistent impulse in the poem is to marry the two traditions, as if Milton's struggle between the attractions of each was a perpetually unfinished one. This tension is manifest formally as well, and helps explain the layered and complex narrative style of the poem.

The complex themes and narrative movement of the poem render its structure somewhat mysterious. There are two ways of understanding the movements in the poem: one, as being comprised of two movements with six sections each that seem to mirror each other; and two, as composed of three movements that run parallel in pattern. We must remember however that in neither way do we see any clear separation of the Christian and classical. Their elements are too intertwined to be distinguished as individual structures or even structural movements in the poem. Yet, some discernible distinctiveness is evident. Each movement begins with an invocation, then explores the conventions of the classical pastoral, and ends with a more or less comprehensively Christian conclusion to the emotional problem that Milton negotiates in the poem.

Milton's epigram labels *Lycidas* a 'monody': a lyrical lament for one voice. But the poem has several voices or personae, including the 'uncouth swain' (the main narrator), who is 'interrupted' first by Phoebus (Apollo), then Camus (the river Cam, or Cambridge University personified), and the 'Pilot of the Galilean lake' (St. Peter). Finally, a second narrator appears for only the last eight lines to bring a conclusion in *ottava rima* (a sestet + a couplet). The poem till this point is almost in free verse: the lengths of the lines vary, the rhymes follow no fixed order, indeed the poem seems to rely heavily on internal rhymes within the same line or set of lines, as for instance in the repetition of the '-ier' (or '-ear') sound in the first few lines of the poem. Additionally, there are neither couplets nor stanzas. In other words, the poem contains the irregular rhyme and meter characteristic of the Italian *canzone* form. *Canzone* is essentially a polyphonic lyrical form, hence creating a serious conflict with the 'monody'. Yet, this formal conflict does not detract from the poem; rather, it enhances the complex elaboration of its equally complex themes. Further, the sense of sorrow and bewilderment is intensified by the lines' refusal to be confined to consistent lengths and specific rhyme patterns. By referring to the poem as monodic then, Milton may have meant that the poem should be regarded more as a story told completely by one person as opposed to a chorus. This person would presumably be the final narrator, who had apparently masked himself as the "uncouth swain" in the poem. This concept of story-telling ties *Lycidas* closer to the genre of pastoral elegy.

The pastoral elegy is a genre initiated by Theocritus, also put to famous use by Virgil and Spenser. It employs the irregular rhyme and meter of an Italian *canzone*. *Lycidas* also exhibits the influence of Pindaric odes, especially in its allusions to Orpheus, Alpheus, and Arethusa. The poem's arrangement in verse paragraphs and its introduction of various voices and personae are also features that anticipate epic structures. Like the form, structure, and voice of *Lycidas*, its genre is deeply complex.

20.4 LET'S SUM UP

A question that must occur after we have examined both the poems and their implications is, why is Milton so intent on maintaining the superiority of the Christian over the classical? The obvious answer is that he was a deeply Christian man, and living as he did in times of politico-religious controversy and conflict, perhaps it was inevitable that he would espouse his own vision of Christianity in his writings. However, this answer has to be supplemented by another set of factors. For Milton, it was not sufficient to just emphasize the Christian over the classical; paradoxically he wanted to also *celebrate* the classical heritage as a powerfully influential and attractive cultural discourse, extremely accomplished in its poetic and literary achievements. Milton negotiated these dual and divergent impulses by inventing a poetic style that was rich with classical allusions, tropes and formal and generic elements, yet fundamentally English and Christian in sensibility. He cast the language in a sonorous musicality that was appropriate to his weighty themes, deliberate and measured in its cadences, and rich with the imagery of rural England. The effect is poetry that measures itself against the classical greats, with an eye to transcending them in both quality of form and scale of content. Evidently Milton was writing, even in his shorter literary works, in the nationalistic shadow of Spenser.

20.5 REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 In the 'Nativity Ode', the effect of Milton's use of classical and pagan mythology is more distracting than enhancing of the poem's themes. Do you agree? Discuss with reference to the poem.

2. The 'Nativity Ode' is less about the celebration of Christ and more about the superiority of a Protestant English spirit. Analyse the poem in the light of this statement.
3. What in your opinion is explored in 'Lycidas', a psychological conflict about the vocation of poetry or a personal lament for a dead friend? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Analyse with reference to the poem some of the personifications the poet employs in 'Lycidas'. Do they add to the sense of lament or serve another purpose altogether?
5. Both the 'Nativity Ode' and 'Lycidas' are poems that struggle to reconcile themes that are posed as irreconcilable. Identify some of these in each. Which poem is more successful in its attempts to do so?

20.6 ADDITIONAL READING

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UNIT 21 'L'ALLEGRO', 'IL PENNEROSO' AND THE SONNETS

Structure

- 21.0 Objectives
- 21.1 Introduction
- 21.2 'L'Allegro'
- 21.3 'Il Penseroso'
- 21.4 Comparative Discussion
- 21.5 Sonnets 19 and 23
- 21.6 Some Additional Remarks
- 21.7 Let's Sum Up
- 21.8 Revision Questions
- 21.9 Additional Reading

21.0 OBJECTIVES

In this block, you will study some of the major poems and sonnets of Milton.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to fully understand and appreciate John Milton's 'L'Allegro' without also reading its companion piece, 'Il Penseroso'. 'L'Allegro' gives an account of 'the happy person', imagined in the poem as spending an idyllic day in the country, followed by a gay evening in the city. 'Il Penseroso' repeats this but for 'the meditative person' whose hours are passed in meditative, solipsistic walking in the woods and studying in a 'lonely Tower'. First published in 1645, the two poems are thus deliberately posed as dialectical opposites with a strong complementarity of structure and images. When reading them, the sense of dual impulses, of a poet being drawn in two opposing directions simultaneously, is very strong. We may even read them as explicitly posing the two attitudes to the vocation of poetry that so haunt Milton, and that we have seen him striving to reconcile in our studies of the preceding units. Here again, the poems do not individually embody any one strain alone, of either the classical or the Christian, but weave the two together from two different standpoints. Let us now examine the poems in some detail.

21.2 'L'ALLEGRO'

The poem opens with an address to Melancholy, rather than Mirth, which takes the first ten lines. Following this the poem changes rhythm. The first ten lines are of alternating length, switching from the iambic pentameter to the trimeter. The staccato effect of this reinforces the sense of anger and revulsion towards Melancholy that the poem wishes to communicate. The switch to the more relaxed and consistent measure of the tetrameter for the rest of the poem announces the poet's fixity of attention in dealing with the theme.

The poem essentially outlines the events of one day, spent for the most part in the countryside, where the pleasures of the country and the beauty of the rural landscape are explored. Like with many of Milton's poems, there is a strong yet subdued

element of sensuality in his descriptions of the rural scenes. In this particular poem, the sensuality is enhanced by the trope of the union or coupling that haunts the poem.

'L'Allegro', 'Il Penseroso' and the Sonnets

Mountains on whose barren breast
The labouring clouds do often rest;
Meadows trim with Daisies pied,
Shallow Brooks, and Rivers wide.
Towers, and Battlements it sees
Boosom'd high in tufted Trees,
Wher perhaps some beauty lies,
The Cynosure of neighbouring eyes. [ll. 73-80]

Here the mountains and clouds are a pair, while the battlements 'boosoin'd' with tufted trees lead easily onto the figure of the beauty lying in wait within – almost as if the battlements were the external manifestation of the beauty inside. This subtle emphasis on sensuality and sexual union is never elaborated into a full-fledged theme but remains a condition of the possibility of Mirth. We must also keep in mind that sensuality and sexuality were and are conventionally an integral part of celebrations of Mirth or gaiety, part of the discourse of the comic and ludic that Milton inherits from the classical. While Milton's own poem never itself becomes comic, it celebrates comedy as inherent to Mirth or the condition of joy. One of the most striking images in the poem is that of the companions of Mirth:

Haste thee nymph, and bring with thee
Jest and youthful Jollity,
Quips and Cranks, and wanton Wiles,
Nods, and Becks, and Wreathed Smiles,
Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,
And love to live in dimple sleek;
Sport that winckled Care derides.
And Laughter holding both his sides. [ll. 25-32]

The comic dimension to the poem, like its sensuality, is never allowed to grow into a full theme. Rather, along with the sensuality, it serves to dignify Mirth, to give it credibility and honour as an attitude fit for the vocation of poetry. It thus leads on to become part of Milton's favourite concern, that of poetry and its relation to the attitude of the poet. After the rural scenes, with the close of day, the poem shifts to the city, and dwells on the pleasures and joys of night in the city, focusing on the court, its masques and music, and the pleasures of the spectacular.

And ever against eating Cares,
Lap me in soft Lydian Aires,
Married to immortal verse
Such as the meeting soul may pierce
In notes, with many a winding bout
Of linked sweetness long drawn out,
With wanton heed, and giddy cunning... [ll. 135-141]

It is telling that the poem eventually locates the happening, the occurrence of poetry, only in the city. The countryside in this sense figures as an inchoate mass of sensuality that is given definition and substance in the more cultured practices of the artist in the city.

21.3 'IL PENSEROSO'

Like its companion poem, 'Il Penseroso' begins with a staccato derision of Mirth, and following the same metrical pattern, switches to the more consistent tetrameter couplet in the subsequent invocation of Melancholy.

But hail thou Goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose Saintly visage is too bright
To hit the Sense of human sight;
And therefore to our weaker view, [15]
Ore laid with black staid Wisdoms hue.

It may be immediately noticed that the poet rejects the sensuality of the earlier poem, at least thematically. Melancholy is perceived to be beyond the human senses, and therefore associated with the colour black. This denuding of the senses becomes the precondition for the development of wisdom. Again in contrast to the emphasis on coupling and union in the earlier poem, this poem dwells on the pleasures of solitude and renunciation of the world. Consequently, it is not surprising that Melancholy is hailed as a nun:

Com pensive Nun, devout and pure,
Sober, stedfast, and demure,
All in a robe of darkest grain,
Flowing with majestick train,
And sable stole of Cipres Lawn, [35]
Over thy decent shoulders drawn.

The last line above also indicates the asexuality that Milton wished to endow Melancholy with. Much of the early part of the poem takes place in the night, but the experience of the night is a solitary one, dominated by a sense of distance from humanity and by the presence of philosophy and literature. The pleasures of Melancholy are thus revealed to be essentially of the mind and soul rather than the body. The paradox is of course that much of the poem remains replete with the language of sensuality, even as that sensuality is rejected in favour of more cerebral and spiritual pleasures:

But, O sad Virgin, that thy power
Might raise Musæus from his bower,
Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing [105]
Such notes as warbled to the string,
Drew Iron tears down Pluto's cheek,
And made Hell grant what Love did seek. [ll.103-108]

We will return to comment on this paradox when we discuss the two poems comparatively in the next section; for now we must note that the affinity for Melancholy in the poem returns the poet to the themes of art and literature – to the ideal attitude for the vocation of poetry.

The dawn of day signals the time to retire and sleep, This inversion of routines is also an inversion of the temporal sequence of the companion poem, suggesting that 'L' Allegro' is a poem that addresses the everyday circumstances of life, while 'Il Penseroso' works on the principle of distance from these.

Hide me from Day's garish eie,
While the Bee with Honied thie,
That at her flowry work doth sing,
And the Waters murmuring
With such consort as they keep,
Entice the dewy-feather'd Sleep;
And let som strange mysterious dream,
Wave at his Wings in Airy stream,
Of lively portrature display'd,
Softly on my eye-lids laid. [ll. 141-150]

The contrast with the bee that works busily through the day is not accidental, but emphasizes the distance that the poet – or rather his persona in the poem – seeks from the activities of the day. Eventually, this persona turns to the cloister and 'the Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell' as the final site of solitude and peace, as the true location of Melancholy.

'L'Allegro', 'Il Penseroso' and the Sonnets

21.4 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The pair of poems we have examined could represent one or all of a series of tensions and oppositions: between Day and Night; between Mirth and Melancholy; or between opposing courses to follow (of sensuality and study) in the pursuit of transcendence and union with God; or yet, Milton's old personal struggle between the classical and the Christian traditions. Setting aside his practiced Latin poetic hand, Milton chose to write these mirrored poems in English, even as he retained Latinate titles for them. Further, as with the poems examined in the previous unit, here too the poems are a highly complex and subtle interweaving of classical and English folklore, as well as imagery. The poems should be read aloud in order fully to appreciate their complementary sounds; 'L'Allegro's' lilting pitch and images of crowing roosters and singing larks deeply contrasts with 'Il Penseroso's' somber tone and the 'Lamp at midnight hour'.

Many critics have speculated that Milton prefers the pensive melancholy celebrated in 'Il Penseroso' because it represents the ascetic life of study, as opposed to 'L'Allegro's' which emphasizes a Dionysian, pleasure-seeking lifestyle. Milton appears to make this preference explicit in his sixth Elegy, written to Charles Diodati, when he tells his friend that Apollo, 'Bacchus, Ceres, and Venus all approve' of 'light Elegy' and assist poets in such compositions, but poets whose ambitions reach higher to the epic and heroic modes must eschew the dionysiac lifestyle for a more ascetic practice:

But they who Demigods and Heroes praise
And feats perform'd in Jove's more youthful days,
Who now the counsels of high heav'n explore,
Now shades, that echo the Cerberian roar,
Simply let these, like him of Samos live
Let herbs to them a bloodless banquet give;
In beechen goblets let their bev'rage shine,
Cool from the chrystal spring, their sober wine!
Their youth should pass, in innocence, secure
From stain licentious, and in manners pure,
Pure as the priest's, when robed in white he stands
The fresh lustration ready in his hands. ('Elegy 6', 55-66)

The poet who seeks to attain the highest level of creative expression must embrace the divine, which can only be accomplished by following the path set out in 'Il Penseroso'.

Milton's invocation of the goddess Melancholy reminds one of his salutation to Mirth in 'L'Allegro', and sets up the parallel structure of the two poems. It also suggests a very specific body of sources, such as Robert Burton's comprehensive *Anatomy of Melancholy*, John Fletcher's song 'Melancholy', and Shakespeare's Hamlet Act 2. sc. 2. line 309. The concept of 'melancholia', however, has its origins in ancient Greece with Hippocrates and his 'humours theory' of the body, which was later revised by Aristotle and Galen. Milton's choice of 'Penseroso' in the title, over 'Melancolico' or 'Afflito', indicates his emphasis on the positive and spiritual aspects of Melancholy. While some critics argue that the two poems refer equally to Milton, others believe

that 'L'Allegro' was about his friend, Charles Diodati, while 'Il Penseroso' was autobiographical in nature.

Both the poems open with brief introductory stanzas of ten lines each, and in each case, the introduction is through the denouncement of the opposite emotion in the counterpart poem, locking the two poems into a necessarily dialectical reading. In both cases, the main bodies of the poems, after the introductory stanzas, follow the same fixed line and meter: rhyming couplets in the iambic tetrameter. The opening stanzas too, share an identical structure: a quatrain followed by a sestet. In both cases the rhyme scheme of the opening stanzas is a-b-b-a, followed by c-d-d-e-e-c. Again, the understanding we arrived at earlier for the 'Nativity' ode holds here too. The problem that Milton encounters in introductory passages, where he has to offer a somewhat discursive account of what will follow, is negotiated by alternating the rhyming lines to accommodate more complex sentences. This is abjured in the rest of the poem, for the terser rhyming couplet, sufficient to the demands of descriptive praise, as for instance in these lines from 'Il Penseroso':

Thee Chauntress oft the Woods among,
I woo to hear thy eeven-Song;
And missing thee, I walk unseen
On the dry smooth-shaven Green,
To behold the wandring Moon,
Riding neer her highest noon,
Like one that had bin led astray
Through the Heav'ns wide pathles way;
And oft, as if her head she bow'd,
Stooping through a fleecy cloud. (ll. 63-72)

As importantly, the rhyming couplet maintains the sense of discipline necessary to the themes of the two poems, even as it permits an energetic, staccato rhythm to flow through the lines. While this adds to the sense of their being companion poems, it also indicates to us Milton's strong sense that both sensibilities – gaiety and melancholia – possess the power to produce powerful, passionate, yet controlled poetry, and at least on this criterion, there is little to choose between the two. If, as critics have suggested, Milton finally favours Melancholia, it is more likely to be because of his own poetic and thematic inclinations than because the one sensibility is in some way innately superior to the other. In this light if we return to the paradox we noted earlier while discussing 'Il Penseroso', we see that it emerges because the two attitudes are posed as oppositional, when in reality they are not, they are merely extensions within a continuum of human attitudes.

In terms of the similarities between the two poems, it is worth noting here that this is one instance when Milton seems to have drawn as close as he possibly ever does to the poetic fashions of his age. The poets we refer to as the Metaphysicals, like Donne and Marvell, were particularly fond of writing poetry that used dialogic voices, as for instance in Marvell's poem, 'A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body'. Just as in that poem, the basic conflict expressed in Milton's twin poems is that between the pleasures of the flesh and the pleasures of the mind or the spirit. The difference of course lies in the fact that in Marvell's poem the schism between body and soul is expressed internally, in the poem, as part of the same speaking voice, while the schism in Milton's two poems is external to the poem itself, and is perceptible only when the poems are read jointly. It is here that we identify a central humanistic concern emerging, in the treatment of the human spirit as torn between two equal forces, the call of the sensual world and the seductions of the intellectual and spiritual one. The difference in this regard between Marvell and Milton is as important as the similarity: where Milton is still able to externalise the schism, and present the voice within the poem as an integrated whole, in Marvell's poem the schism is already internalised and negotiated within the same poem, and the poetic voice itself splits in

two to accommodate it. In this Milton evidently remains closer to the older renaissance humanism.

'L'Allegro', 'Il Penseroso' and the Sonnets

21.5 SONNETS 19 AND 23

Dates ranging from 1651 to 1655 have been suggested for both Sonnet 19 and 23, but 1652 appears to be the best estimate. Sonnet 19's second line has often led readers to assume an earlier date because no one in the seventeenth century would express confidence about living much past 70, if that. If he wrote this line in 1652, he would be counting on 86 years. Milton's own father lived to be at least 84. Milton often understated his age and predated several poems in the 1645 *Poems*. He was anxious about his age and his personal attractiveness. He was also anxious about vocational belatedness. By 1652 Milton was totally blind. He had spent years fulfilling his duties to the Council of State. Now he was under malicious attack for defending Cromwell's government to the world and for his own advocacy of divorce, and even ridiculed for his blindness. He had always meant to write a great English epic, and now it must have seemed impossible. This brilliant sonnet is proof enough that his talent has not been rendered 'useless' by age and blindness.

Both sonnets follow the iambic pentameter of conventional sonnet as well as the octave-sestet pattern, and the octave in both sonnets follows the same kind of rhyme scheme, which is a-b-b-a-a-b-b-a. The sestet in the two sonnets however, differ slightly: where Sonnet 19 follows the scheme c-d-e-c-d-e, Sonnet 23 goes c-d-c-d-c-d. We will discuss these patterns in a moment; for now it is important to note that both sonnets deal with Milton's blindness. But the way in which the sense of blindness is experienced is different in each poem. In Sonnet 19 the blindness comes to represent for the poet a blindness of purpose in life itself, since it suggests the inability to practise his craft without which he feels he has

...one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account... (ll. 3-6)

But having stated the lament, he is instructed by 'patience' to 'bear his milde yoke' patiently, for as the famous last line of the sonnet states, 'They also serve who only stand and waite.' The poet thus derives consolation from humility, the poem then serving as a reminder to the poet and re-focusing his attention on the purpose of his poetry, which is not just the exercise of the talent for its own sake, but in the service of God. The sonnet is in this sense finally a religious sonnet. To this end, the octave-sestet scheme is adhered to in the progression of the poem itself, for the lament of the poet takes up the octave, while the argument against the lament follows in the sestet, which thus serves as a counter-point to the octave.

In contrast Sonnet 23 is a more ambiguous, somewhat mysterious sonnet, the person who is the object of which is not very clear. Apart from (but consistent with) the thematic ambiguity, the imagery in the sonnet is striking in its employment of light and dark, visibility and invisibility. The lady is presented to us as

...vail'd, yet to my fancied sight,
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd
So clear, as in no face with more delight. (ll. 10-12)

This effect is furthered and intensified by the wraith-like quality of the figure which, Milton informs us, is like Alcestis, 'Rescu'd from death by force though pale and faint' (l. 4). Unlike the earlier sonnet which is fairly clear even in its articulation of an essentially religious doubt, this sonnet is seemingly simpler in its topic, yet far more

richly ambiguous in its treatment. It is further different from the previous sonnet in being closer to the metaphysical style that we have noted of the other poets of the age, especially in its brilliant yoking together of night and day in the last line. This is perhaps inevitable, given the poem's rather peculiarly metaphysical subject, which is the fundamental connection between vision and notions of reality – or in other words, the way in which transformations in perception can transform one's understanding of reality itself. A final difference between the two sonnets lies in the thematic refusal to adhere to the octave-sestet division, in Sonnet 23. The vision in the poem occupies 'almost all of it, and it is only in the final couplet that a reversal of perspective is effected, and we realise that the poet is talking about a fantastic vision rather than an actual one.

The difference in the rhyme schemes of the sestets between the two sonnets draws our attention yet again to the difference in theme and treatment. While Sonnet 19's c-d-e-c-d-e scheme serves well to articulate the longish argument which constitutes the consolation to the blind poet, since it permits the elaboration of extended sentences, Sonnet 23's c-d-c-d-c-d pattern works to limit the length of the sentences and statements, the pauses serving to enhance the sense of mystery. Further, in the latter scheme, the repetition of the same rhymes also serves to draw together and integrate the total experience of the poem as a singular one. In this sense at least, Milton's use of the sonnet form, while conventional, even classical, in Sonnet 19, becomes slightly unconventional with Sonnet 23.

21.6 SOME ADDITIONAL REMARKS

We have in this and the previous unit focused on Milton's evolution as a poet, through a brief study of some of his more important short poems. We have seen how he remains, in almost all his poetry, rooted in Biblical thought and imagery, which may therefore be understood to be the single most important influence on his work. In addition to this, however, we traced the influence of some earlier and classical poets, like Virgil and Ovid, and Spenser among his immediate predecessors. We noted how music plays an important role in Milton's poetry, both in theme and in form. We also noted how these early shorter works prefigure to a lesser or greater extent the themes, concerns and styles of his later epic, *Paradise Lost*. We focused primarily on understanding some of the stylistic and formal issues involved in the poems, in the course of the study. This is not to suggest that the poems are to be interpreted or studied only in this way. Milton's writing is no exception from the general rule-of-thumb that all literature has fundamental roots in its historical context, and may well be studied in these terms, alongside and integrating the more formal aspects of study.

This may appear a more difficult task with Milton than would normally be the case. We have seen the extent to which his writing is steeped in classical allusions and myths, and in the Bible. It can be deeply allegorical, as with the twin poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', or highly personal as with the sonnets. There seems little in his shorter poetry that alludes to the great social and political events of his age, at first glance, and they seem to constitute a universe of their own. This however, should not discourage the student from exploring the poems for their contextual affiliations. Some of these may be found as oblique presences, in descriptive passage in the poems, as for instance in these lines from 'L'Allegro':

Towred Cities please us then,
And the busie humm of men,
Where throngs of Knights and Barons bold,
In weeds of Peace high triumphs hold,
With store of Ladies, whose bright eies
Rain influence, and judge the prise

Of Wit, or Arms, while both contend
 To win her Grace, whom all commend.
 There let *Hymen* oft appear
 In Saffron robe, with Taper clear,
 And pomp, and feast, and revelry,
 With mask, and antique Pageantry,
 Such sights as youthful Poets dream
 On Summer eves by haunted stream. [ll. 117-130]

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 Penseroso' and the
 Sonnets

While at first glance these lines may appear to be no more than part of the idyllic setting that the poet paints for the gay speaker of the poem, a more thoughtful look will suggest that what Milton is describing here is the court of Charles I, in all its pomp and pageantry. Certainly through the description of the cities as 'towed' Milton is drawing up a host of associations for his seventeenth century readers: that the city is London, and is associated with the palace, the royalty and the nobility; this is further associated with a moral and spiritual degeneracy that has an almost pagan air to it; in implicit contrast is the country, and that invisible city of the commoners, where such riches and pomp do not exist; which in turn would be associated by the seventeenth century reader with a more clearly Puritan, and therefore Christian air. When we read this poem then, as we must, with its companion poem, which we might understand to emerge from precisely this latter social section, we realise that the two poems actually embody – albeit in a coded and broad way – the values of the two oppositional classes and political factions of the middle of the seventeenth century.

The other poems may be read in a similar vein. It is possible for instance, to read the repeated invocation of the Muses in the different poems as epitomising the relations between the sexes of the age – the masculine voice retaining control and presence, summoning the feminine voice to fulfil its aims, even as it projects the latter as quasi-divine. Even if Milton was among the first to argue for the equal status of women in society, his figuring of femininity remains deeply bound by the imagination of his age, which is, that the role of women is essentially as support, instrument and silent spectator (witness the figuring of Nature in the 'Nativity' ode) to the operations of men. These are of course, very sketchy analyses, intended more as directions for exploration than as complete statements. Closer analyses will reveal more complex relations between the poetry and its social world, and especially to the complex and multilayered processes of gender relations. Such analyses will first demand that one study the complexities of the age itself, socially, politically and culturally. In this sense, the above remarks are offered as no more than a very small window to a very large prospect.

21.7 LET'S SUM UP ____

In this unit we examined four of Milton's shorter poems. We studied the relation between the twin poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' as poems that deliberately adopt oppositional attitudes to the vocation of poetry. We studied the poems individually and in comparison. In the course of doing so, we noted that this led to certain paradoxes that were inherent to understanding the poems in this light. The two sonnets that we chose for study are from Milton's later literary phase, and revealed other dimensions to his writings like the preoccupation with blindness and its implications, and with death. These are in this sense more personal poems than the others we have studied so far. We then went on to discuss some aspects of the relation between formal elements and the historical context in which the poems were written. This we hope will serve as a preliminary guide to the analyses of poetry through the location of its formal qualities within, rather than separated from, its contexts of creation.

21.8 REVISION QUESTIONS

1. In the twin poems, 'L'allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', Milton seeks to offer not just a vision of two moods but the two extreme sentiments of an extreme age. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
2. Which of the two poems 'L'allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', in your considered opinion, would more accurately represent Milton's own personal view? Why?
3. In both the two sonnets in your course, Milton reflects on his blindness. Does that make them identical? Give a reasoned answer.
4. Analyse the similarities and distinctions between Sonnets 19 & 23. Which of the two, in your considered opinion, more effectively employs the sonnet form?
5. Milton's poetry is transcendent, in themes as well as style, rather than historically rooted. Would you agree? Why, or why not?

21.9 ADDITIONAL READING

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APPENDICES

I

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY COMPOS'D 1629

I

This is the Month, and this the happy mom
Wherein the Son of Heav'ns eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing, [5]
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav'ns high Councel-Table, [10]
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside; and here with us to be,
Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day,
And chose with us a darksome House of mortal Clay.

III

Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein [15]
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no vers, no hymn, or solemn strein,
To welcom him to this his new abode,
Now while the Heav'n by the Suns tear untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light, [20]
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

IV

See how from far upon the Eastern rode
The Star-led Wisards haste with odours sweet:
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet; [25]
Have thou the honour first, thy Lord to greet
And joyn thy voice unto the Angel Quire,
From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow'd fire.

The Hymn

I

It was the Winter wilde,
While the Heav'n-born-childe, [30]
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature in aw to him
Had doff't her gawdy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her [35]
To wanton with the Sun her lusty Paramour.

II

Onely with speeches fair
She woo's the gentle Air
To hide her guilty front with innocent Snow,
And on her naked shame, [40]
Pollute with sinfull blame,