

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Lycidas 1637 John Milton 1608-1674

Background

Brought up in a loving family among brothers and sisters, John Milton went on to acquire extensive fame for himself and his country, by his extraordinary imaginative power, his incisive political *writings*, and his firm moral code. It would be fair to say that Milton is the second to Shakespeare for brilliance in shaping and building the English language into the world energy gift it is today. Within the master achievements of English as a literary force, many would agree that *Paradise Lost*, 1667, reaches the summit of the British literary imagination. That epic has no parallel in any expression of the English language, British or other.

John Milton, with his feminine features and intensely bookish preoccupations, will have come across to youthful companions as off the mainstream of the male growth curve. The impression, however, was deceptive. Milton's growth was to pulse with an intensity masculine curve, which will take him across a series of lifetime causes--free speech, the right to divorce, rights of conscience, liberty of political speech--all asserted in the course of an intensely public life. By the time Milton completed his primary schooling at St Paul's in London, he had earned a good knowledge of the classical languages, plus Spanish and Portuguese, and the foundational Near Eastern languages--Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic; no small achievement on the masculine growth curve. He had become an adept at such exercises as translating a Greek text into Latin, then (the same text) back again into Greek. Bring on your barbells.

The intensity with which John projected himself into his early school tears at St. Paul's was a reliable harbinger of the high gravity he was destined to bring to the work of his mind in the following years. In 1629 Milton graduated from Christ College, Oxford, after which he spent six years living with his family, studying languages and cultures, and starting into his own lyrics--think of '*L'Allegro*' and '*Il Ponderoso*,' '*On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*,' or '*On Shakespeare*,' in which he recognized his worthiness to stand inside the vast tradition of his own nation's achievement. This before he reached the age of thirty.

Lycidas. 1637

At the age of twenty nine Milton wrote *Lycidas*, a pastoral elegy of 193 lines, written as a verbal tombstone for his Cambridge friend and age mate, Edward King, who drowned when his boat overturned in the Irish Sea. Seemingly, Milton considered no other form than the classical elegy to express the depth of his feeling of loss. We may in fact go farther, in characterizing the personal emotions Milton expresses here, and the language of his expression.

Language of the poem

As in the language of *Comus* Milton permits himself in this poem a stately blend of iambic pentamers, interspersed rhymes, and classical imageries.

From the outset Greco-Latin mythology and culture are there. es operative points of reference. The literary dirge, the honored lament, the call on some muse to pass along in gentle song of praise. All these classical components are there, as is Nature. the perfection of feeling, the matching of sweetness to healing, the admonition, as Wordsworth later put it, that nature 'hath ample power to chasten and subdue.' All the appurtenances of the classical tradition are on hand: the Muses are invoked over the poem at large, and Milton recalls the good old days at Cambridge with King, when the two of them delighted in walking the woods, imagining themselves as fauns and satyrs, and feeling the wholeness of time.

Peopling of the poem

As for the peopling of this poem of lament one will find the familiar actors--actors we have met in *Comus*. The Nymphs, the Shepherds, the Druids--but then also the primroses, the laurels, the amaryllis, in short the fragments of a distinct language. This is a language, as Milton gives birth to it, of romance, of reminiscences of the Arthurian, of the world of *The Faerie Queene*. That language enlarges itself into the vocabulary of myth: the sacred river Alpheus; dismembered Orpheus; sleek Panope. Milton gives us a new language of the Classical. (To repeat, one can translate plentifully within this as-if language. The storied sadness of fading laurels can speak eloquently in and out of the demise of Milton's friend. Nymphs can follow Lycidas to the bottom of the monstrous ocean, take us to where the ministering hand of Jesus Christ will walk us into the light. The Muses can stand in for the power of poetry. Many a smoothly flowing stream of place-names. or flowing springs from pre Christian cultural naming, gets into a place name in Milton's poem. Who will not in future read this poem in terms of the great lines it will itself generate. And which--

'to sport with amaryllis in the shade...'

'fame, that last infirmity of noble minds...'

'look homeward angel...'

echo for us into the literary future of Milton's text and reverberate back onto us. Pieces of language, such as these, will stick to us accordingly. from *Lycidas*, and even though their greatness may reverberate from a later date--'Look homeward Angel' is the title of a 1929 novel by Thomas Wolfe--the peopling of Milton's poem gathers richness to itself accordingly.