

**Paper: 02; Module No: 18: E Text**

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**(B) Description of Module:**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Description of Module</b>
<b>Subject Name:</b>	English
<b>Paper No &amp; Name:</b>	02; English Literature 1590-1798
<b>Module No &amp; Title:</b>	18; John Milton: Poems, Themes and Legacy
<b>Pre-requisites:</b>	Students should have the knowledge of English language and the background before the age of Milton
<b>Objectives:</b>	An attempt has been made to give a brief assessment of the literary genius of John Milton, taking into consideration his poetic, dramatic and prose works

**Key Words:**

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, religious individualism, elegy, dramatic poem

**About the Module:**

Here, in this module we are going to learn about famous English poet John Milton, his life, his political leanings, his poetical epic grandeur, religious individualism during English Renaissance. We, also, will can see a clear panoramic view of theme and structure of his famous epic poems, poetic drama, elegy on Edward King, sonnets, blank verse and his attraction to Arthurian legends and Biblical allusions. We will find his magical enchantment in his legacies further.

**Introduction:**

John Milton is one of the greatest English poets of all times. Miltonic poetry is characterized by its grandeur, sublimity, epical, lyrical and dramatic qualities. Here, in this module an attempt has been made to uphold in brief the background, ideas, contents, epic similes, Miltonic style, blank verse, Puritan spirit with that of the Renaissance and legacies of Milton. He is basically a poet of ideas- a man of total political convictions.

John Milton (1608-1674) was born on December 9, 1608, into a prosperous bourgeois family. He was educated at St. Paul's School in London and Christ's College, Cambridge. From 1641 he gave up poetry for prose polemics for the sake of Puritan causes. He was a Protestant and from his childhood he disliked the religious policy of King Charles. John Milton was a Roundhead. The Cavaliers, or Royalists, supported the king and tended toward Catholicism. They believed in an aristocracy that had the right to special privileges, both in politics and in religion. The Roundheads, or Puritans, believed in a wider distribution of political and economic power and the right of every man to enjoy direct access to God. Milton was so strongly committed to the Puritan cause that he accepted a government position under Oliver Cromwell, who ruled as Lord Protector from 1649 to 1658.

Milton was a radical Christian individualist who objected strongly and vocally to all kinds of organized religions which, he believed, put barriers between man and God. Milton was therefore a rebel because he identified himself with a revolutionary cause. His father was a scrivener, a sort of combined notary and banker, who was wealthy enough to afford private

tutors for his son, then schooling at St. Paul's and Christ's College, Cambridge University. Perhaps just as important for Milton's development was the fact that his father was a musician and composer.

One of the most attractive features of Milton's poetry is its marvelous musical qualities. Since Milton had a small private income, he did not seek a profession when he left Cambridge, but stayed at home writing poetry and increasing his already amazing stock of knowledge. Some people have said that Milton was one of the most learned men England has ever known. He wrote poetry in Latin, Greek, and Italian, and read almost all the literature surviving from the Greek and Roman periods. He even read the Bible in Hebrew. Just before the religious and political quarrels in England came to a head, Milton went abroad for fifteen months, meeting and talking with learned and famous men all over Europe.

He met Galileo and looked through his telescope, a fact Milton mentions more than once in *Paradise Lost*. When he returned, he put his learning and considerable rhetorical force at the service of the Puritan cause. He wrote a series of scorching political and religious pamphlets: he condemned bishops, not only the Catholic ones but those of the Protestant Church of England; defended the liberty of the press against censorship. The Civil War deeply affected his personal relations. His brother Christopher adhered to the Royalist side. Milton married into a Royalist family in 1642.

Milton's was the last great liberal intelligence of the English Renaissance. The values expressed in all his works are the values of tolerance, freedom and self-determination. Milton's early poems, from the 1620s and 1630s, include several which remain as models of their kind. *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are companion pieces advocating contrasting styles of life, the carefree and the studious. Of his sonnets, *On His Blindness* is perhaps the best known, with its last line: "They also serve who only stand and wait." *Lycidas* is one of the most-quoted elegies in English, moving from its commemoration of his Cambridge university friend, Edward King, to reflections on the writer's own mortality and ambitions; finishing in the remarkable optimism of a renewal, with the words: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, / For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead."

Like all Milton's works, *Lycidas* has been interpreted as specifically Christian. Such a reading can be supported by the poet's ambitions to join the church and by many explicitly Christian references in his writings. But his beliefs go beyond any single doctrine, as can be seen from the wide range of political and social pamphlets he wrote between 1640 and 1660

– a time when he wrote only a few poems. Milton’s prose can be related to the writings of Browne and Burton, with the major difference that Milton engages in polemic as well as touching upon philosophical concerns. It was a time when a great many of the issues which had arisen since the Reformation came to a head: religion, politics, power and freedom were questioned as never before.

It was no accident that Milton’s first polemic pamphlet was entitled *Of Reformation in England and the Causes that Hitherto Have Hindered It* (1641). He addressed such varied subjects as divorce, education, and, famously, the freedom of the press, in *Areopagitica* (1644). Milton continued to defend his ideals of freedom and republicanism. But at the Restoration, by which time he was blind, he was arrested. Various powerful contacts allowed him to be released after paying a fine, and his remaining years were devoted to the composition – orally, in the form of dictation to his third wife – of his epic poem on the fall of humanity, *Paradise Lost*, which was published in 1667.

Milton was attracted to the Arthurian legends as the subject for his great epic. But the theme of the Fall goes far beyond a national epic, and gave the poet scope to analyse the whole question of freedom, free will, and individual choice. He attempted to rationalise the spirit of the Renaissance in his epic: “The mind is its own place, and in itself /Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven./What matter where, if I be still the same, /And what I should be, all but less than he/ Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least /We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built/ Here for his envy, will not drive us hence: /Here we may reign secure, and in my choice/To reign is worth ambition, though in hell: /Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.”

*Paradise Lost* explains an entire theology. It is about the coming of sin into the world through the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan after his defeat in Heaven. If Milton has justified ‘the ways of God to man’, all our questions about our relationship to God should be answered by implication from the poem. The success of the explanation of course depends on whether you accept the Christian world view--even whether you accept Milton's special brand of Christian individualism. The task of explaining an entire physical and moral system is not one we attempt today. We divide our systems, believing that the world is too complex for a single theory to explain. *Paradise Lost* is the only epic to incorporate the celestial descent into a larger, and indeed a comprehensive pattern of imagery, a pattern which includes the poem’s two major events—the falls of Satan and of Adam.

Milton interweaves those events into a fabric of multitudinous references to height and depth, rising and falling, which appear on virtually every page and bind every incident of the narrative into a closer unity. Sometimes witty, sometimes ironic, sometimes simple and transparent, appearing now in an epithet, a phrase, a simile as well as in the sweeping lines of the action, the subtle workings of this pattern turn incessantly a moral or metaphysical mirror upon objective events, and conversely translate moral events into spatial terms. *Paradise Lost* plays continually with the paradoxical duality of lowness—the lowness of humility and of moral degradation or despair—and with the duality of height—of spiritual eminence or exaltation and of pride.

It plays also with the paradoxes of rising and falling, the abasement that exalts and the pride that abases. When Adam and Eve fall prostrate to the ground, confessing their sin with tears in humiliation meek, their prayers rise successfully to heaven. When the Son offers to descend to a mortal body, he is correspondingly elevated: "... because in thee /Love hath abounded more than Glory abounds,/ Therefore thy Humiliation shall exalt /With thee thy Manhood also to this Throne ..." (III.311–14)

*Paradise Lost* attempts to uphold the virtues of patience not passivity, of enlightened learning not submissive ignorance. It shows us not simply Adam un-Paradised, but Adam possessed of true humanity: mortal, suffering, and seeking for both grace and liberty. It also sustains the probity of inner certainty, in terms both of Adam's insight and of a reader's freedom of judgement. The consistency of Milton's achievement in *Paradise Lost* was not matched by what is ostensibly its successor, the four books of *Paradise Regained* of 1671. Despite its title, *Paradise Regained* does not assert the idea that the redemption of humankind hinges on Christ's resistance to temptation in the wilderness, though a Job-like patient submission to the will of God is clearly a dominant theme.

Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, a verse drama, and *Paradise Regained*, a sequel in four books to *Paradise Lost*, were both published in 1671, four years after *Paradise Lost*. Both works show a different conception of the hero from the ambiguous interplay between God, Man, and Satan, found in *Paradise Lost*. The fundamental difference between Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* and the heroes of the other two poems – the former probably written during the Commonwealth, the latter nearer the end of Milton's life – is humanity: both Samson and Christ are superhuman, indeed beyond the bounds of normal human beings. As such, their triumphs and conquests are less clearly explorations of human qualities.



As Samson destroys the Philistines and their temple, or as Jesus Christ repels the temptations of Satan, they lack the element of human identification. Milton returns to the theme of blindness in some of the darkest lines of English poetry, as Samson describes his being 'exiled from light': "Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves./ O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,/ Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse/Without all hope of day!/ The sun to me is dark/And silent as the moon, /When she deserts the night/ Hid in her vacant, interlunar cave / To live a life half-dead, a living death." The poem is a journey from darkness, as Samson moves from his prison to his final act of strength, pulling down the temple of his foes. The final note is, however, one of calm: "Of true experience from this great event / . . . And calm of mind, all passion spent."

The great bulk of Milton's poetry was written during two periods separated from each other by twenty years: (a) the period of his university career and his stay at Horton, from 1629 to 1640; and (b) the last years of his life, from about 1660 to 1674. The years between were filled by a few sonnets. (a) While still an undergraduate Milton began to compose poems of remarkable maturity and promise. They include the fine and stately *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (1629), and the poems *On Shakespeare* (1630) and *On Arriving at the Age of Twenty-three* (1631). While at Horton, he composed *L' Allegro and Il Penseroso*, two long poems in octosyllabic couplets dealing with the respective experiences of the gay and thoughtful man. The pieces are decorative rather than descriptive, artificial rather than natural, but they are full of scholarly fancy and adroit poetical phrasing. *Comus* (1634) belongs to this period, and is a masque containing some stiff but beautiful blank verse and some quite charming lyrical measures.

*Lycidas* (1637) is an elegy on his friend Edward King, who was drowned on a voyage to Ireland. The real subject of the poem, however, is the uncertainty and torment occasioned in Milton's mind by his realization that death might forestall the achievement of the fame which was his ambition. In its varying moods we see the interplay of doubt, fear, anger, and finally, a peaceful reliance on the belief: that true fame rests on God and is only to be found in heaven. It is his underlying subject which gives the poem its passionate sincerity. *Lycidas*, which is to be reckoned as among the highest of Milton's achievements, is something quite new in English poetry. In form it is pastoral, but this artificial medium serves only to show the power of Milton's grip and the essence of poetry.

The elegy has the colour and music of the best Spenserian verse; but it has a climbing majesty of epithet and a dignified intensity of passion that Spenser does not possess. Its metre and rhyme sequence are of peculiar haunting beauty: "For, so to interpose a little ease,/Let our Frail thoughts dally with false surmise/Ay me! whilst thee the shores and sounding seas/Wash far away,--where'er thy bones are hurled,/Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides/Where thou perhaps, under the whelming tide,/Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;/Or whether thou, to our moist vows denied,/Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old/Where the great Vision of the guarded mount/Looks towards Namancos and Bayona's hold...".

*Lycidas*, a monody bewailing the drowning of the pious scholar, Edward King, in 1637, is transfused with evocations of light and learning. The name 'Lycidas' is taken from the Greek bucolic poet, Theocritus, and distant but distinct echoes of classical pastoral poetry run through Milton's elegy. Its form, however, is that of an English adaptation of current Italian canzone, a form which gave Milton the freedom to vary both the structure of his verse paragraphs and the lengths of his lines. *Lycidas* blends elements of the pagan and the Christian, and intermixes Gods and saints, nymphs and angels. It mirrors the contemporary idea of revealed Christianity as an enlightened extension of aspects of pagan spirituality by moving from a grieving and almost stoic acceptance of loss to an assertion of a sure and certain hope of the Christian Resurrection.

The work of the middle years is composed of a few sonnets. These, with some others written at different times, sufficiently show Milton's command of the Italian form, which he uses throughout. He gives it a sweep and sonorous impressiveness that set him alone beside Wordsworth, who in this respect is his poetical successor. The best of Milton's sonnets are *On his Blindness and on the Late Massacre in Piedmont*. The great work of this time is *Paradise Lost*. At first it was divided into ten books or parts, but in the second edition it was re-divided into twelve. In form it follows the strict unity of the classical epic; in theme it deals with the fall of man; but by means of introduced narratives it covers the rebellion of Lucifer in heaven, the celestial warfare, and the expulsion of the rebels.

In conception the poem is spacious and commanding; it is sumptuously adorned with all the detail that Milton's rich imagination, fed with classical and Biblical lore, can suggest; the characters, especially that of Lucifer, are drawn on a gigantic scale, and do not lack a certain tragic immensity; and the blank verse in which the work is composed is new and wonderful.

This type of blank verse has founded a tradition in English; it has often been imitated and modified, but never paralleled. It lacks the suppleness of the Shakespearian measure, but it is instinct with beauty and scholarly care. Milton's tragedy *Samson Agonistes*' subject is essentially appropriate to both phases in Milton's career for *Samson Agonistes* seeks to adapt the form of Greek tragedy to the needs of a Christian society and to equate a Hebrew moral to the faith of a Protestant elect. The drama closely follows both classical models and the prescriptions of classical critics.

Unlike the English tragedies of Milton's immediate forebears and contemporaries, it adheres faithfully to the unities of time, place, and action, it places considerable weight on its Chorus of Danites, and it traces the growth in enlightenment of its protagonist. It differs from its models in that it is emphatical; optimistic in its internal insistence that Christian tragedy is a contradiction in terms. Samson's slow enlightenment drives him not to despair but to reconciliation to the benign purposes of God. His death is seen not as a purging but as a triumph in which the Chorus is finally brought to an awareness of the hero's 'dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious'. Samson's father Manoah proclaims the special nature of the sacrifice of his son: "Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail/Or knock the brest, no weakness, no contempt,/Dispraise or blame, nothing but well and fair,/And what may quiet us in a death so noble." Samson, as a type of Christ, prefigures the Messiah's redemptive death, mastering defeat through a submission to the will of God. True liberty, all of Milton's biblically based works imply, rests in a resolved and independent understanding of the nature of service.

The influence of an author on others can be direct or subtle, widespread or local, in many venues or few; but for John Milton it has long been demonstrated that he has been and still is one whose influence has been direct and subtle, widespread and also concentrated in specific eras and locales, in literature, art, and music, and in religious "knowledge," political theory, and social thinking. Current concerns of struggles between good and evil in the world have led to such a movie as *The Devil's Advocate* where the main character is called John Milton and the Satan-as-clever-fellow interpretation of his epic poem *Paradise Lost* pervades. Terroristic world action, particularly for religious reasons, has brought Milton's dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* before the public seeking understanding of "suicide bombers" with a reading of Samson's destruction of the Philistines as his condoning of jihad.

The great advances of science and space travel which a movie such as the first Matrix exploits have reminded viewers of Satan's voyage in *Paradise Lost* through Chaos and later



his circling the equinox three times, crossing the meridians of longitude four times, and returning to Earth on the eighth day. The Blind Neo has thus been seen as a counterpart of Milton. Wordsworth's fifty five poems written in blank verse show a direct influence of *Paradise Lost*. Another great Romantic poet who considered Milton as his master and pursued him in his literary career is Shelley. Shelley used Milton's style and verse in many of his poems. Milton was obviously a great model for him. In the opinion of Shelley, Milton is to be associated with the greatest names in poetry such as Homer, Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare. He places Milton as the greatest poet after Shakespeare in the English Language and Literature.

Shelley read Milton's works for many times so he got well acquainted with his art. As a result of this continuous reading eventually Shelley was more influenced by Milton than by any other English poet. Pope's *The Dunciad* frequently imitates and has allusions to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. There are lots of similarities between both works. For instance, Cibber in *The Dunciad* plays the roles of Christ and Adam. Satan is associated with several figures in *The Dunciad* such as Bentley, Lintot, the deist and the narrator. Nathaniel Evans is one of Milton's American admirers and imitators. Evans's small volume "Poems on Several Occasions" published in 1772 contains at least six poems which are definitely imitations of Milton's poems.

Summing up, we can say that Milton maintained a tension between decorum and right reason on one side and the radical revolutionaries of individual consciences on the other. He started with odes, passed on to lyrics, experimented with elegy and masque and then flourished in his full glory in one and only great English epic, and ended with a highly admirable poetic tragedy. His legacy acts like an incantation- they are words of enchantment and magical influence.

### **Conclusion:**

So, we have learnt how, Milton being a radical Christian individualist who objected strongly and vocally to all kinds of organized religions which, he believed, put barriers between man and God wrote a series of scorching political and religious epic poems, drama, sonnets, elegy only to put forward the idea that the redemption of humankind hinges on Christ's resistance to temptation in the wilderness. We also have learnt the various structures of his poems and numerous themes related to mankind.

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