

**Paper: 02; Module No: 16: E Text**

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<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>	16; John Milton; Life and Career
<b>Pre-requisites:</b>	Students are expected to know about Elizabethan Age and Elizabethan Literature
<b>Objectives:</b>	To acquaint the readers with the life and career of John Milton
<b>Key Words:</b>	John Milton, Life, career, Renaissance, Reformation

**A. A Quick Glance at the Age****B. Milton's Birth, Early Life, Education and Marriage****C. Milton's Career****C.1. Early Poetry**

C.1.a. The College Period

C.1.b The Horton Period

**C.2. Prose****C.3. Later Poetry****D. Milton as a child of Renaissance and Reformation****E. Glossary****F. References**

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**A. A Quick Glance at the Age**

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The entire age is marked by the Civil War which was the result of a power conflict between the King and the Parliament. The crisis became prominent when after receiving the right of royalty by an act of Parliament, James I started ignoring the Parliament itself. The Parliament was assumed by the common people as an agent working for the welfare of them. It had a strong hold over the King's exercise of power which could otherwise lead to autocracy any time. James I's refusal to comply with the demands of the Parliament came as a shock to the people who were already agitated because of losing their personal liberty. The common people were loyal to the King but they also inherited the Saxon love for personal liberty. Along with lacking the flexibility of Queen Elizabeth, James I and his son Charles I also lacked her farsightedness and remained unable to see the changing spirit of the age. The rise of commercial class demanded economic individualism and a strict Puritan morality was born out of common people's disgust over the Renaissance which, according to their interpretation, had given rise to profanity and licentiousness.

This conflict between the King and the Parliament led to a strife that later on took the form of Civil War which resulted in the execution of Charles I in 1649 and continued till 1660 when the final restoration of the monarchy took place by executing the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell. During this period from 1600-1660 the entire literary zeal of the Elizabethan

period was almost lost. Puritanism, by closing down theatres, definitely restricted the growth of literature but the same restriction put an end to the profanity and licentiousness of the Renaissance. But the spirit of humanism and Reformation zeal could still be found in John Milton's works. Because of the religious centered nature of this age, literature lost its liberty but regained its dignity and seriousness.

Puritanism aimed at making people free from the bondage of the tyrannical rulers and to introduce morality, honesty and sincerity which they found absent for long in politics. Combining individual righteousness and civil as well as religious liberty, they aimed to make people free from religious and political shackles. Puritanism started with these high ideals but it could hardly uphold the same for long. After the Restoration of the throne by Charles II, the Puritans were labeled as a group who opposed all sorts of entertainment and amusement. Drama, that flourished in the Elizabethan age started falling in the Puritan period and later on was restored under Charles II. The literature of the Age of Milton was dominated by a spirit of diversion from earlier period and this diversion was manifested prominently in the writings of John Milton.

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## **B. Milton's Birth, Early Life, Education and Marriage**

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John Milton was born on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1608 in Bread Street, Cheapside, London. As the age reflects the conflict between Roman Catholicism and Puritanism, the same can be found in Milton's family. As a staunch Roman Catholic, Milton's paternal grandfather disinherited his son and Milton's father, John Milton who became a Puritan while studying in Oxford. The elder John Milton started working as a scrivener or a notary and settled down in London. Besides being a successful businessman and a radical Puritan, Milton's father was a scholar, a musician and an admirer of literature. As a rebellious thinker the elder John Milton was not very happy with the contemporary education system. So, along with formal education elder John Milton arranged for tutor to guide his son the way he wanted him to acquire education. Thomas Young, an Essex Clergyman was Milton's first instructor and guide.

When John Milton was fifteen, Thomas Young faced religious persecution and went for voluntary exile. His father's efforts provided young John Milton with a unique understanding of things around him and fostered a boundless interest in art, music and literature. John

Milton's mother Sara Jeffery was devoted to religion. Milton's childhood and training affected Milton's personality a lot by providing a deep knowledge and critical understanding of not only the religious and political spheres but also of literature, art and music. This reflects in almost all Milton's works.

John Milton, as a child, had studied in St. Paul's School. In 1629, he graduated from Christ's College, Cambridge with a Bachelor of Arts degree and later in 1632 with a Master of Arts. He learnt several languages like Latin, Greek, Italian, French, Spanish and Hebrew. Milton spent seven years at Christ's college. At Christ's College, Cambridge he began composing most of his Latin poems. There he befriended Edward King whose untimely death he mourned in his elegy *Lycidas*. At St. Paul's School the curriculum was conforming to the Humanist ideals of Erasmus and Colet. The curriculum upheld many Renaissance Humanist ideals. After reading those Humanist ideals at St. Paul's School, Milton's rebellious spirit became evident at Christ's College. The critical and analytical mind developed by Milton's childhood instructors and teachers of St. Paul School, disapproved trivial scholastic disputation which was the tool of education at Christ's College.

Like Bacon, Milton often contradicted and opposed the authorities with his unique educational principles. His opposition to the authorities and his fight over Cambridge curriculum resulted in his brief rustication from the university. While staying at his father's house in London during his period of rustication, Milton wrote his first Latin *Elegies*. Milton's parents desired Milton to take orders in the Church of England. But as a person who believed that liberation of mind could be procured by education, Milton denied to enter into the Church and revealed his willingness to continue with his study. His father's free mind and financial position supported Milton in his decision. For the next six years he retired at his father's country home in Horton, a small village some seventeen miles away from London and started his deep study. As a child Milton used to stay awake till midnight just to study. Now as a grown up man in his uninterrupted seclusion Milton studied extensively and covered the wide fields of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian and English Literature. At the same time he also studied music (following his father's footsteps), science, mathematics and theology. These six years laid the foundation of Milton's being a great artist and scholar.

Milton believed in the overall growth of mind. For this holistic growth, he knew that reading was not enough. In May, 1638, therefore, he left London and went to Paris and Italy. After travelling for around fifteen months, he returned to London in August, 1639. Milton's poetic

creation was not only the result of his artistic mind, rather, his wide reading and scholarly approach nourished his poetic creation. His extensive study, scholarly approach and travelling experience along with his artistic mind gave his creation such excellence that it became sublime in nature. From 1640 onwards, he remained passionately dedicated to the Puritan cause against the Royalists.

In 1643 he married Mary Powell who was the young daughter of a Royalist and was much younger than Milton. Milton's opinion about marriage as a perfect spiritual, intellectual and physical companionship disillusioned him as immediately after their marriage Mary Powell left him owing to a disagreement and did not return to him for the next two years. During this period Milton wrote several pamphlets on divorce. However, a reconciliation between the two took place in 1645. After seven years Mary Powell died leaving three daughters behind. He married Katharine Woodcock for the second time in 1656. She also died in the following year. Long after her demise Milton got married to Elizabeth Mynshull for the third time in 1663. He had to struggle a lot during his later age because of blindness. But the darkness of his lonely life could not stop his creative faculty from working. He had produced some of his great works during this period. He died in 1674.

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### **C. Milton's Career**

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As Milton had a thorough knowledge of several languages, he explored literature of all those languages and that gave him an outlook which was classical, humanitarian and scholarly at the same time. Besides the English works, his Latin poems were also admired by several scholars. Milton's works can be divided into three categories: Early Poetry, Prose and Later Poetry.

#### **C.1. Early Poetry**

Milton's early poetry presents him as a true inheritor of Elizabethan literature. In Milton's early poetry we can often trace the influences of Spenser, Ben Jonson and the Metaphysical poets. Like the Elizabethans, Milton's early poetry showcases a deep sense of beauty. But unlike his predecessors, Milton's poetry reveals the poet's dedication to form and coherence. Like Johnson, Milton appreciated classical convention but at the same time he had shown a balance between his scholarship and creative imagination. Along with a sense of beauty and a spirit of sincerity, dignity as

well as seriousness, Milton's early poetry represents a stateliness of manner expressed thoroughly by the use of blank verse. If Marlowe and Shakespeare have explored and developed the prospect of blank verse, it is Milton who has added grace to this form and taken it to a new height through his early poetry and later on through his other poems. Milton's early poetry can again be categorized into two stages: The College Period and The Horton Period.

**C.1.a. The College Period:** Showcasing his knowledge of Latin and English language, Milton's college poems were the experiment of the creative mind of a young poet. He wrote several poems during this period but the most important one was the ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (1629). He started writing his poems as an undergraduate student at Cambridge. As the form of his poems, the poet used eight lines stanza closed by an alexandrine. The other remarkable poems of this period are *On Shakespeare* (1630) and *On Arriving at the Age of Twenty-three* (1631). These poems might lack perfection but they present his maturity, sense of understanding (literary as well as religious) and his command over diction. However, this period ended with his Cambridge career in 1632.

**C.1.b. The Horton Period:** After leaving Cambridge Milton denied to enter into the Church and spent almost six years in seclusion at his father's country home in Horton. There, along with reading extensively the literature of several languages, Milton also composed four famous poems.

*L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1633), the twin poems in octosyllabic couplets unfolded the poet's moving comfortably between the world of Renaissance and Reformation. *L'Allegro*, in describing a day in the life of a gay or happy man, used pastoral imagery while *Il Penseroso* represented the mood of contemplation of a thoughtful man. We are taken to the English countryside at sunrise, twilight and moonrise through these two companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* respectively. Through the contrasting images of these two men, Milton portrayed nature and art. The poet's romantic description of the rustic life blended with his religious sentiments provided his works a unique balance that can hardly be found in any other poet in English literature.

*Comus* (1634) was a bold step taken by Milton towards the further development of his literary career. The literary form was called 'Masque' and opted by Ben Jonson during the Elizabethan period. This form belonged to a type of drama taken from Italy. Milton's rebellious spirit was at work when he adapted this drama form. But he

used the dramatic form in this poem to express his religious understanding and sense of morality.

*Lycidas* (1637), an elegy, was written to mourn over the death of his college friend Edward King who was drowned on a voyage to Ireland. Amidst the expressions of doubt, fear, anger and pain caused by the death of his dear friend, this poem brings out Milton's firm belief in religion. He concludes the poem by showing a perfect reliance in God and mentioning that true fame can only be found in heaven with God. Like Spenser's *Astrophel* Milton in this poem has followed the style of the classic pastoral elegy.

The Horton period comes to an end when Milton departed for the Continent in 1638. Milton's early poetry along with revealing his Puritan mind equally brings out his Renaissance spirit.

## **C.2. His Prose**

After returning from the continent Milton became more involved in the political affairs of the time. As a Protestant he executed his right to stand against anything which he considered wrong. Most of his prose works were written during the middle period of Milton's life (1640-60). His prose works are marked by the author's directness of expression. In these works Milton was direct even when he was expressing his dissatisfaction or vehemence. As a true Puritan he was guided by a sense of righteousness which resulted into a merciless criticism of Milton's opponents. These writings lacked that coherence and unity which could be traced in his poetry. Because of this Milton himself has called his prose writings inferior. Milton's scholarship, political and religious sentiments along with his rich fancy made it difficult for the ordinary readers to understand, interpret and appreciate his prose works. In total Milton has written 25 pamphlets of which four are written in Latin and 21 pamphlets are written in English.

After a controversy with Bishop Hall over episcopacy, Milton started writing pamphlets. When his wife Mary Powell deserted him, that time he wrote two pamphlets on divorce (1643 and 44). Meanwhile when Milton was busy in writing these pamphlets, Parliament, which was then dominated by the Presbyterian party, passed an act by which it was required that all the books have to acquire a license by an official censor before being published. The Parliament's main motive was to keep a check over the views and the opinions of the opposition. Milton, who had expressed

the necessity of personal liberty again and again in his writing, became furious to find this act passed by the Parliament.

As a protest he wrote *Areopagitica* in 1644 defending the liberty of press. The term 'Areopagitica' originated from 'Areopagus' or 'Forum of Athens' which was a platform for public appeal. As a plea for intellectual freedom, freedom of thought and speech—*Areopagitica* has an important place even today. His other prose works were mostly based on the political issues or on the actions of the Commonwealth Government. Milton also completed a *History of Britain*. As most of Milton's prose works based on some burning issues of his time, Milton hardly got any time to reexamine his prose works before publishing. Because of that most of Milton's prose works are disordered and lacked both humour and self-restraint. Milton's opinions recorded in these works were mostly subjective. From a personal situation Milton could develop general principles and almost all his prose works reflected that.

### **C.3. Later Poetry**

Milton's efforts in scholarly endeavour put strain on his eyes from the very childhood. When he became completely blind, he used his pen more strongly to point out the vices around him and to serve the society this way. The works written in this period reflected Milton's maturity. Milton began writing his great work *Paradise Lost* in 1658 and it was issued in 1667. *Paradise Lost* was an intellectual masterpiece of the poet. At first Milton divided the work into ten books but later, he revised it in the second edition and published in twelve books. The inspiration of the poem was the *Bible* as it talks about the fall of Adam and Eve. But in spite of being inspired by his Puritan sense of morality and religiosity, Milton never ceased to display his Renaissance spirit. His strong sense of righteousness helped him to be a humanist.

*Paradise Lost* is one of the greatest epic poems of all time. Although he has dealt with a religious and Biblical theme, but Milton's rich imagination and unconscious dedication to humanist ideals have made Lucifer such a fascinating character that instead of scorning him, readers often fell in love with Satan. Milton's last volume of poetry, containing *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* was issued in 1671. *Paradise Regained*, which dealt with the temptation of Christ, was a sequel to *Paradise Lost*. But in front of the magnificence of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* lacked the standard of its predecessor even with its greatness of thought and splendid imagery. *Samson Agonistes*, a dramatic poem, was written with the aim of composing



a pure tragedy in English and it dealt with Samson, the wrestler of Israel. Critics often said that Milton chose Samson as he could identify with the blind, morbid and misunderstood existence of this Biblical hero.

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#### **D. Milton as a child of Renaissance and Reformation**

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Whereas Renaissance was an intellectual and aesthetic movement, Reformation was a religious movement. Milton's writings talk about the mental liberty but what is unique about Milton's writing is that along with displaying Milton's creative imagination, his writings manifest his religious beliefs. Most of his works either have Biblical origin or they are prophesying morality and righteousness. One really wonders to think about the imagination of a person who has written *Paradise Lost* based on the *Bible* and at the same time has portrayed Satan in such a way that Satan appears more like a hero than a villain. If Milton's Reformation spirit has revealed his Puritan mind, then his Renaissance mind has tried to beautify, uplift and add value to human existence. The combination of Reformation and Renaissance spirit is evident in almost all his later writings including few other elegies, odes and mask. As a dramatic poem, the form of *Comus* itself was an act of rebel shown by Milton in a time when drama was completely banned. The setting of his companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, the elegy *Lycidas* and few other odes is pastoral. Milton's careful record of the details of pastoral setting and his portrayal of nature display his Romantic spirit. As a Puritan, Milton has also promoted his views on morality and righteousness through the same works. Milton's deeply religious and profoundly artistic mind could never stay away from exploring the mysteries of life. This makes Milton unique in the entire history of English literature.

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#### **E. Glossary**

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- ❖ **Alexandrine:** A six feet iambic line poem used in France as heroic poems and adapted in English literature later on by several poets.
- ❖ **Blank Verse:** Unrhymed iambic pentameter lines are called blank verse. It was first introduced by the Earl of Surrey and after that it was used by several Elizabethan and later poets and dramatists.

- ❖ **Elegy:** Taken from the Greek, this term has been used variously in English literature. In Old English period the term referred to a group of poems which had change or loss as subject matter. In 16<sup>th</sup> century the term started being used for reflective poems. But later on elegy became widely popular for designating the poems of mourning. Some of the examples of elegies are John Milton's *Lycidas* (written for Edward King), P. B. Shelley's *Adonais* (for John Keats), Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memorium* (for his friend Arthur Henry Hallam) etc.
- ❖ **Epic:** A long, narrative poem centered on a heroic figure, whose actions are narrated in grand, elevated style and upon those actions depends the fate of a large number of human beings. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* are some of the examples of epic.
- ❖ **Lyric:** It is a short poem written in first person and expresses the state of mind and personal emotions of the poet.
- ❖ **Masque:** Masque or mask is a form of dramatic entertainments combining music, dance and disguise. It was a kind of court entertainment. Milton's *Comus* is an example of masque.
- ❖ **Ode:** A long lyric poem, having serious subject matter and elevated style is called an ode. Some of the examples of English odes are Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*, P. B. Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, and John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.

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## F. References

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