UNIT 18 MILTON: THE LIFE

Structure

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 circuinstances 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

individuality of thought and integrity of vision. We shall now examine some of these in greater detail.

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 I-Iebrew; but he also learnt several modem languages fiom 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 philosopliy 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 fiom 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 Moming 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 'I1 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 *Areopagilica.* 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 censorship that participated directly and passionately in tlie 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 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* d *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 tlie 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 lime 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 complele 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 lo be the ~~l oistportant 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 gifls, 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 fi-om **'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?

18.6 ADDITIONAL READING

- Brown, Cedric C. *John Milton: A Literary Life.* New York: St. Martin's, 1995.
- Campbell, Gordon. A *Milton Chronology.* New York: Macmillan St. Martin's, 1997.
- Danielson, Dennis, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Milton.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1989,
- Grose, Christopher. *Milton and the Sense of Tradition.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- Guillory, John. "Milton, Narcissism, Gender: On the Genealogy of Male Self-Esteem." *Critical Essays on John Milton,* Edited by Christopher Kendrick. New York: G.K. Hall, 1995, 165-193.
- Hill, Christopher. *Milton and the English Revolution.* New York, 1977
- Lewalski, Barbara K. *The Life of John Milton.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Loewenstein, David. *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Low, Lisa Elaine and Anthony John I-Inrding eds. *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Miller, David. *John Milton: Poetry.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978.
- Orgel, Stephen and Jonathan Goldberg, eds. *The Oxford Authors John Milton.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Shawcross, John T. *John Milton: The Self and the World.* Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993.
- Spaeth, Sigmund. *Milton's Knowledge of Music.* Ann ARbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1963.
- Zagorin, Perez. *Milton: Aristocrat & Rebel: The Poet and his Politics.* New York: D.S. Brewer, 1992.