

Lycidas as a pastoral elegy

(BA Part1 Eng Hons Paper2 2019-20)

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John Milton has contributed significantly to the re repertory of English literature by his monumental poetic works. His muse successfully finds expression in his epic work Paradise Lost. Milton is held in high esteem for giving a new dimension to English poetry.

Lycidas is a pastoral elegy written on the death of Milton's classmate Edward King who drowned in a shipwreck in the Iris Sea in which he has expressed his tribute to his friend using the elegiac form popularised by the Greek poet Theocritus and Virgil.

The poet describes himself spending their time in Solitude of Nature writing poetry. The poet is in a pensive mood. He is a little bit shocked as the nymphs failing to rescue his friend from the deadly waves of the sea. The poem ends with a note of joy and hope. It is based on the Christian belief that Lycidas has resurrected on the third day with the help of Christ who walked on the waves of the sea. Lycidas rose up to the heaven just as the sun rises up in the Eastern horizon. He is welcomed in the heaven with "nuptial songs sung by angels and Saints and his tears are wiped out by the angels". The poet therefore suggests the shepherds not to shade tears on the death of the departed soul because he has been resurrected like the Christ and become the guardian angel of the shore to protect anyone who falls in the sea.

Lycidas is a curious mixture of pagan loveliness and Christian theology in which Milton refers to woodland deities like Styrs and

Fauns, sea deities like Neptune, Panope and Triton. Rivers like Alpheus and Arethusa are personified.

Lycidas can be divided into six sections. Besides four main parts, the first and last parts are the prologue and epilogue respectively. In the prologue which continues up to 24 lines Milton explains the reason for writing the poem and told that bitter constraint and sad occasion are largely responsible for the poetic composition. In the second section which lasts up to 84 lines Milton recalls the days at Cambridge which he enjoyed in the company of his deceased friend. In the third section, Milton describes a procession of mourners lamenting the death of Lycidas. The fourth section describes the flowerets of a thousand hues cast on the hearts of Lycidas. Milton's belief in mortality finds expression in the fifth section. He says that "though Lycidas is in Heaven and therefore weep ye no more". The epilogue refers to the Greek Pastoral poets. The conclusion points to a new determination to face life hopefully and to rise up to greater poetic achievements. Though Lycidas has its origin in the loss of a friend, the poem becomes impersonal and timeless.

"Milton uses plants and flowers to express his grief over the loss of his friend. He says , "Live your life to the fullest because you never know if your going to wake up the next morning. He compares the unprecedented death of his friend with roses saying "as killing as the canker to the rose' and "frost to flowers". When flowers develop frost from the early cold spring night, they tend to die tragically and prematurely in the same manner as King did. Milton combines powerful images from Nature and Greek mythology along with Biblical references in order to ease the pain associated with the premature death of King. Dr. Johnson has recognized the poem as traditional pastoral because it depicted the idealized life of rural leisure. He also claims that Milton's poem is easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting, whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction in mind.