

Lycidas by John Milton: Summary and Critical Analysis

(B.A. English Hons. Part-1. Paper-2)

Milton's elegy '**Lycidas**' is also known as monody which is in the form of a pastoral elegy written in 1637 to lament the accidental death, by drowning of Milton's friend Edward King who was a promising young man of great intelligence. The elegy takes its name from the subject matter, not its form. No rules are laid down for the meter. The theme of the elegy is mournful or sadly reflective.

The poem has been created in a reflective mood. The rhyme scheme of the poem shows no regularity. Milton follows the ancient Greek tradition of remembering a loved one through a pastoral poem by creating this poem.

The very genre to which it belongs, i.e. 'elegy', is characterized by expression of sadness and feeling of loss. Despite having lyrical elements, an elegy is not a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. The 'powerful' feelings are expressed in a calculated and controlled manner. Lycidas seems to be even more calculated than elegies generally are.

Milton wrote *Lycidas* to mourn the death of his friend Edward King. As far as the structure of the poem is concerned, it could safely be divided into six identifiable sections.

The first section that serves as a prologue to the poem runs through the first twenty four lines. These lines mention the reason for which Milton has created this poem despite that he had decided to write only after having his poetical powers fully developed. He states that the sad occasion of *Lycidas*' death has forced him to write the elegy.

Lines 25-84, that constitute the second part of the poem describes the time *Lycidas* spent at Cambridge along with Milton himself. In the manner of pastoral, Milton describes how they both would study throughout the day beginning very early in the morning and continuing till late at night. He also points towards some innocent recreation they used to enjoy. However, he mourns the fact that *Lycidas*' death had changed everything significantly. Addressing the Muse, he says that the Muse did not response when *Lycidas* was dying but also states that her response too could not have made any difference. This section of the elegy also includes much philosophical discussion by Milton. He states that fame results from labour. However, the precariousness and irony of human life deprives human beings of the reward of his labour in the form of fame since he dies before he could enjoy the reward. However, he also states that the true reward for a human being is divine judgment and not earthly success.

The third section, i.e. lines 85-131, is even more concerned to pastoral style. He brings forth the imagery of a procession of mourners led by Triton expressing grief on *Lycidas*' death. Milton uses this occasion and extends this imagery to express his own views about the clergy and the Protestant Church. He mentions how St. Peter, the last one in the above mentioned procession, denounces the clergy and the church.

The fourth section runs through lines 132-164. Milton devotes this section to his feelings on Lycidas' death. He presents the flowerets cast on Lycidas' heart as a symbol of the latter's escape from 'intolerable reality' to a lovely world. In a way, the section expresses Milton's good wishes for Lycidas' journey after life.

Lines 132-164, the fifth section, presents Milton's belief in immortality. He states that Lycidas' death gives rise to the feeling of grief but actually he has reached heaven and there is no need to feel grief. He presents the imagery of saints entertaining Lycidas in 'sweet societies'.

Lines 185-193 form the epilogue of the poem. This section refers to the Greek pastoral poets and expresses a determination to make greater poetic achievements while facing life hopefully.

Lycidas Literary Elements:

Milton called "Lycidas" a monody—a poem written for one speaker. The poem should be a monologue, and it begins as one, but a parade of voices soon appear to interrupt the shepherd's narration.

The first is Apollo, who arrives to encourage the speaker with the promise of fame in Heaven. He is followed by a train of sea gods, including Triton and his winds. After they pass, St. Peter appears to deliver a tirade on the church. By the end of the poem, a second speaker has taken over entirely, displacing the shepherd from his elegy.

Though "Lycidas" begins as a monody, it ultimately expands to include a chorus of voices.

The poem is written in iambic pentameter. An iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (for example "And STRICT-ly MED-it-ATE"). A line of iambic pentameter has five feet of two-syllable iambs (a total of ten syllables). Most of the poem follows the irregular rhyme scheme of an Italian canzone. Though canzones generally

feature multiple voices, Milton calls "Lycidas" a monody. This creates some tension between the form Milton chooses and the way he categorizes his poem. By the end of "Lycidas," we have in fact heard from many voices. When the second speaker appears in the final stanza, the rhyme scheme switches to ottava rima (abababcc). The shift from one form to the other reflects the entrance of the new voice. Unlike the canzone, ottava rima is a regular rhyme scheme. It moves back and forth between two rhymes (ababab) then ends with a couplet in a third rhyme (cc). The arc of the rhyme scheme reflects the speaker's fluctuating emotions throughout "Lycidas," the way he flips back and forth between dejection and consolation. After the oscillating rhyme scheme, the closing couplet in ottava rima provides a sense of closure. The entrance of a new speaker and a new form at the end of "Lycidas" reinforce the effect of the rhyme scheme's final couplet, the sense that we are moving towards "pastures new."

a) Apostrophe: Line 1-5: the poet addresses "laurels" and "myrtles" with the word "o"; this is called apostrophe.

b) Metaphor: "line 1-5": The immature plant whose berries the poet is picking and is cutting their leaves is a metaphor for Lycidas's death.

Line 25-29: shepherds as a metaphor for their friendship.

Line 79-80: fame is described as a plant that does not grow on "mortal soil" hence the plant is acting as a metaphor for fame.

Lines 82-83: the plant which is a metaphor for fame once again is a metaphor as it "lives and spreads aloft".

Lines 139-141: "eyes" are the metaphor for the flowers of the valley.

Lines 143-151: "wear" is a metaphor to describe the way flowers manifest their appearance.

c) Symbol: Line 1-5: "laurels" are a symbol of poetic ability and fame.

d) Personification: Lines 39-41: woods and caves have been personified, who mourns.

Lines 42-44: willow and hazel leaves have been personified who used to dance to Lycidas's songs.

Lines 143-151: flowers have been personified by the use of the word "wear".

e) Simile: Line 45-49: the speaker compares the news of Lycidas' death to the infection that a rose suffers.

Line 106: the river Cam's "bonnet sedge" (104) is compared to the hyacinth using the word "like".

Lines 45-49: Lycidas' death has been compared to the effect on shepherds' ears as caterpillars eating roses.

The poem has an abundance of classical allusions, starting from "laurels" recalling the story of Apollo and Daphne to the "sacred sisters" hinting at the nine muses of Mount Helicon who are long believed to inspire poetry.

Lycidas does justice to the fact that it is an elegy written in order to express feelings that have developed in response to the death of a friend. Milton has mentioned his feeling of sadness on Lycidas' death, his hope for better afterlife for him and his belief that Lycidas' life would have earned him a place in heaven. However, he also uses his feelings about Lycidas' death to reflect on the philosophical aspects of human life. He suggests that Lycidas' death represents the irony of fate that causes futility of human efforts. This idea has been highlighted so seriously that it becomes a major theme in the poem.

The poet leaves no doubt in the reader's mind regarding the status he considers Lycidas to deserve. He considers the entire order of the world to be cruel for letting Lycidas die at such an early age before he could experience success he deserved.

He also includes the expression of his views about degeneration of religious institutions in this poem. This theme does not find a direct link

with Lycidas' death except that Lycidas himself belonged to the order. However, Milton has used the occasion to express his views due to the seriousness he attached to this theme.

Any elaborate and conscious mode of utterance might cause us to question the sincerity of the poet's emotion. Dr. Johnson, criticizing 'Lycidas' remarks, "where there is leisure for fiction, there is little grief." Neither is elegy a mere expression of a sense of loss. The elegiac poet engages himself in discursive reflections. Death, the primary theme of most elegies, is a vast evocative theme. It leads the poet to regions of reflections usually lying beyond the lyric imagination. Death can be, and is often, the starting point for the poet to deal with serious themes.

Milton, for example, gives us in 'Lycidas', speculations on the nature of death, tributes to friends, as also literary criticism. He comments on the degradation of poetry and religion in 'Lycidas'. And "Lycidas" would be a poor poem without its passage on fame, and the onslaught on the corrupt clergy of that day. Though grief is the dominant condition in the early parts of an elegy, many elegies end on a note of joyful resignation, and also on a note of affirmation. The pastoral elegy uses the mechanism of pastoral convention-shepherds and shepherdesses, incidents form bucolic life, and rustic speech. Originally developed among the Sicilian Greeks, it was later developed by Virgil and introduced into England during the Renaissance.

Thus though 'Lycidas' is a conventional pastoral elegy, which has its origin in the loss of a friend, the poem becomes impersonal and timeless. The elegiac mourning is twice interrupted to invest the personal sorrow with universal significance. This is achieved by making the tragic death of Lycidas as one example of the precariousness of existence, and the tragic irony of fate which renders all human effort

futile. A second theme of equally great concern is the degeneration of the Church, and the contemporary neglect of the things of the spirit..

Overall, despite qualifying very effectively as an elegy, Lycidas is inclusive of certain broader issues as well. The poem also discusses the concepts of social, religious, literary and philosophic interest like those of condition of church, degradation of poetry, futility of human efforts and more. 'Lycidas' is undoubtedly one of the greatest short poems in English language.

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