

JOHN MILTON

INTRODUCTION: LIFE AND POETIC CHARACTERISTICS

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

An Answer Key is provided at the end of this handout (p. 4).

I. LIFE: The life of John Milton (1608–1674) falls conveniently into three periods.

A. Early Life (1608–1639): This is a period of Milton’s youthful education and literary apprenticeship, which culminates in the writing of “Lycidas” and his foreign travels.

1. Born into a prosperous family, headed by a self-made businessman, Milton very early showed gifts as a student of language. He attended _____ University, receiving his M.A. in religion in 1632.

2. However, even before his graduation, he decided to become a _____, not a minister.

3. After graduating, he returned to his _____ country home and spent the next six years in intense reading and study of theology, philosophy, history, science, politics, and literature.

4. He became fluent in at least eight _____: Latin, Greek, Hebrew and the modern European tongues (French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese).

5. He also did some poetry writing, the major work being “_____” (1637).

6. In 1638–1639, he traveled around Europe, returning home after hearing rumors of the trouble between the English king and _____.

B. Middle Life (1640–1660)

1. The middle of Milton’s life is dominated by prose and political controversy. His major preoccupations were political and social, not _____.

2. By the outbreak of the Civil War between King _____ I and Parliament in 1642, through his political tracts against the king, Milton had established himself as the great voice of _____.

3. In 1643, he married _____ Powell, the daughter of a royalist (sympathizer of the king) and at seventeen half Milton's age. Within a few weeks she _____ him to return to her parents' house.

4. This event probably caused Milton to publish several pamphlets arguing that _____ should be granted on grounds of incompatibility of personalities.

5. Mary returned to him in 1645, probably because her royalist family saw that the _____ were winning the Civil War and hoped to protect themselves through a prominent Puritan son-in-law. Mary bore him three daughters before her death in 1652.

6. In 1646, Milton's first volume of _____ was published.

7. After the execution of Charles I in 1649, Milton wrote pamphlets defending the execution and justifying the Protectorate of Oliver _____, for which he was rewarded by being appointed as the government's Latin Secretary (similar to the U.S. Secretary of _____ or the European Foreign Minister).

8. His name was second only to Cromwell as champion of the Puritan government. Overwork probably aggravated his glaucoma and led to his _____ in 1652, although with the help of secretaries he continued his governmental duties. It was at this time that he wrote his great sonnet on his blindness, "When I _____ How My _____ is _____."

9. Milton married again in 1656, but his second wife Katherine _____ two years later.

C. Last Years (1660–1674)

1. During the last fourteen years of his life, Milton returned to literature and published his masterpiece Paradise Lost, one of the greatest works in literature.

2. With Cromwell's death in 1658 and the Restoration of _____ II in 1660, Milton was _____ for having served Cromwell.

3. However, his literary and social friends intervened. Instead of being executed as a _____, he received a heavy _____ fine and lost most of his property.

4. In 1663, Milton married a _____ time, apparently a happy marriage; his new wife Elizabeth principally served as the blind man's nurse.

5. In blindness, poverty, defeat and relative isolation, he set about completing his long-planned _____ poem, Paradise Lost on the fall of Adam and _____. It was published in 1667.

6. Unable to transcribe the poem himself, Milton would compose and memorize long sections of the poem and dictate these to his _____, who grudgingly served as his secretaries.

7. On its publication, it was recognized as a supreme _____ achievement although it earned Milton little _____.

8. Milton died in 1674 of complications from gout.

II. POETIC CHARACTERISTICS

1. Milton's literary work combines the two great intellectual and social movements of his time:

a. The Renaissance is responsible for the rich and complex texture of Milton's style and the many references to _____ Greek and Roman literature.

b. The Protestant Reformation is responsible for Milton's _____ subject matter, in which Adam and Eve become the epic heroes. Paradise Lost is regarded as the great Protestant _____ just as Dante's Divine Comedy is the great _____ epic poem.

2. Major characteristics of the Miltonic style of writing:

a. Highly _____ vocabulary.

b. Sonorous and exotic proper _____.

c. Inversion of the normal _____ order of Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). Milton often begins a sentence with the Object (OSV) or even the verb (VSO).

d. Long _____ with many dependent clauses and verbals (gerunds, participles, and infinitives). The first sentence of Paradise Lost has 83 words and runs from lines 1 to 12.

e. Many allusions to the Bible, _____ mythology, and Renaissance philosophy.

g. The Homeric _____ which extends a comparison for many lines. See bk. 1, lines 197 – 208 for the extended whale simile.

ANSWER KEY

I. A.

1. Cambridge.
2. poet.
3. father's.
4. languages.
5. "Lycidas."
6. Parliament.

B.

1. poetic.
2. Charles; Puritanism.
3. Mary; left.
4. divorce.
5. Puritans.
6. poems.
7. Cromwell; State.
8. blindness; Consider; Light; Spent.
9. died.

C.

2. Charles; imprisoned.
3. traitor; monetary.
4. third.
5. epic; Eve.
6. daughters.
7. epic; money.

II.

1. classical; Biblical; epic; Catholic.
2. Latinized; nouns; word; sentences; classical; simile.