

John milton essay sample

[Countries](#), [England](#)



John Milton (9 December 1608 – 8 November 1674) also known as 'The Renaissance poet' was born in London on December 9, 1608, as a son of the composer John Milton and his wife Sarah Jeffrey into a middle-class family. The senior John Milton moved to London around 1583 after being disinherited by his devout Catholic father, Richard Milton, for embracing Protestantism. In London, the senior John Milton married Sarah Jeffrey, the poet's mother, and found lasting financial success as a scrivener. Milton's father's prosperity provided his eldest son with a private tutor, Thomas Young, and then a place at St Paul's School in London. There he began the study of Latin and Greek, and the classical languages left an imprint on his poetry in English.

Study, poetry, and travel

An English poet, polemicist, a scholarly man of letters, and a civil servant for the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell was educated at St. Paul's School, then at Christ's College in 1625 and graduated with a B. A in 1629 ranking fourth of 24 honors graduates that year in the University of Cambridge, where he began to write poetry in Latin, Italian, and English, and prepared to enter the clergy. Milton was probably suspended for quarrelling in his first year with his tutor, William Chappell. He was certainly at home in the Lent term 1626; there he wrote his *Elegia Prima*, a first Latin elegy, to Charles Diodati, a friend from St Paul's. At Cambridge Milton was on good terms with Edward King, for whom he later wrote *Lycidas*. At Cambridge he developed a reputation for poetic skill and general erudition, but experienced alienation from his peers and university life as a whole. Watching his fellow students attempting comedy upon the college stage, he later observed 'they thought themselves gallant men, and I thought them fools'. Due to his long

hair and general delicacy of manner, Milton was known as the “Lady of Christ’s”.

After getting his Masters in Arts degree in 1632, Milton retired to Hammersmith, his father’s new home since the previous year. However After university, he abandoned his plans to join the priesthood and spent the next six years in his father’s country home in Buckinghamshire following a rigorous course of independent study to prepare for a career as a poet. His extensive reading included both classical and modern works of religion, science, philosophy, history, politics, and literature. In addition, Milton was proficient in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and Italian, and obtained a familiarity with Old English and Dutch as well. He read both ancient and modern works of theology, philosophy, history, politics, literature and science, in preparation for a prospective poetical career. Milton’s intellectual development can be charted via entries in his commonplace book now in the British Library. As a result of such intensive study, Milton is considered to be among the most learned of all English poets. In addition to his years of private study, Milton had command of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and Italian from his school and undergraduate days; he also added Old English to his linguistic repertoire in the 1650s while researching his History of Britain, and probably acquired proficiency in Dutch soon after.

Milton continued to write poetry during this period of study: his Arcades and Comus were both commissioned for masques composed for noble patrons, connections of the Egerton family, and performed in 1632 and 1634 respectively. Comus argue for the virtuousness of temperance and chastity.

He contributed his pastoral elegy *Lycidas* to a memorial collection for one of his Cambridge classmates. Drafts of these poems are preserved in Milton's poetry notebook, known as the Trinity Manuscript because it is now kept at Trinity College, Cambridge. During his period of private study, Milton composed a number of poems, including "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," "On Shakespeare," "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," and the pastoral elegy "Lycidas." In May of 1638, Milton began a 13-month tour of France and Italy, during which he met many important intellectuals and influential people, including the astronomer Galileo, who appears in Milton's tract against censorship, "Areopagitica."

In May 1638, Milton embarked upon a tour of France and Italy that lasted up to July or August 1639. His travels supplemented his study with new and direct experience of artistic and religious traditions, especially Roman Catholicism. He met famous theorists and intellectuals of the time, and was able to display his poetic skills. For specific details of what happened within Milton's "grand tour", there appears to be just one primary source: Milton's own *Defensio Secunda*. Although there are other records, including some letters and some references in his other prose tracts, the bulk of the information about the tour comes from a work that, according to Barbara Lewalski, "was not intended as autobiography but as rhetoric, designed to emphasize his sterling reputation with the learned of Europe. Originally Milton wanted to leave Naples in order to travel to Sicily, and then on to Greece, but he returned to England during the summer of 1639 because of what he claimed, in *Defensio Secunda*,^[22] were "sad tidings of civil war in England."^[23] Matters became more complicated when Milton received word

that Diodati, his childhood friend, had died. Milton in fact stayed another seven months on the continent, and spent time at Geneva with Diodati's uncle after he returned to Rome.

In *Defensio Secunda*, Milton proclaimed he was warned against a return to Rome because of his frankness about religion, but he stayed in the city for two months and was able to experience Carnival and meet Lukas Holste, a Vatican librarian, who guided Milton through its collection. He was introduced to Cardinal Francesco Barberini who invited Milton to an opera hosted by the Cardinal. Around March Milton travelled once again to Florence, staying there for two months, attending further meetings of the academies, and spent time with friends. After leaving Florence he travelled through Lucca, Bologna, and Ferrara before coming to Venice. In Venice Milton was exposed to a model of Republicanism, later important in his political writings, but he soon found another model when he travelled to Geneva. From Switzerland, Milton travelled to Paris and then to Calais before finally arriving back in England in either July or August 1639. On returning to England, where the Bishops' Wars presaged further armed conflict, Milton began to write prose tracts against episcopacy, in the service of the Puritan and Parliamentary cause.

Milton's first foray into polemics was *Of Reformation touching Church Discipline in England* (1641), followed by *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*, the two defences of Smectymnuus (a group of presbyterian divines named from their initials: the "TY" belonged to Milton's old tutor Thomas Young), and *The Reason of Church-Government Urged against Prelaty*. With frequent passages of real eloquence lighting up the rough controversial style of the

period, and deploying a wide knowledge of church history, he vigorously attacked the High-church party of the Church of England and their leader, William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury. Though supported by his father's investments, at this time Milton became a private schoolmaster, educating his nephews and other children of the well-to-do. This experience, and discussions with educational reformer Samuel Hartlib, led him to write in 1644 his short tract, *Of Education*, urging a reform of the national universities.

Civil war, prose tracts, and marriage

In June 1643 Milton paid a visit to the manor house at Forest Hill, Oxfordshire, and returned with a 16-year-old bride, Mary Powell.[25] A month later, finding life difficult with the severe 35-year-old schoolmaster and pamphleteer, Mary returned to her family. Because of the outbreak of the Civil War[citation needed], she did not return until 1645; in the meantime her desertion prompted Milton, over the next three years, to publish a series of pamphlets arguing for the legality and morality of divorce. (Anna Beer, one of Milton's most recent biographers, points to a lack of evidence and the dangers of cynicism in urging that it was not necessarily the case that the private life so animated the public polemicising.) In 1643 Milton had a brush with the authorities over these writings, in parallel with Hezekiah Woodward, who had more trouble.[26] It was the hostile response accorded the divorce tracts that spurred Milton to write *Areopagitica*, his celebrated attack on pre-printing censorship.

During the English Civil War, Milton championed the cause of the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell, and wrote a series of pamphlets advocating radical political topics including the morality of divorce, the freedom of the press, populism, and sanctioned regicide. Milton served as secretary for foreign languages in Cromwell's government, composing official statements defending the Commonwealth. During this time, Milton steadily lost his eyesight, and was completely blind by 1651. He continued his duties, however, with the aid of Andrew Marvell and other assistants. In 1642, Milton returned from a trip into the countryside with a 16-year-old bride, Mary Powell. Even though they were estranged for most of their marriage, she bore him three daughters and a son before her death in 1652. Milton later married twice more: Katherine Woodcock in 1656, who died giving birth in 1658 and Elizabeth Minshull in 1662. The Restoration

After the Restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, Milton was arrested as a defender of the Commonwealth, fined, and soon released. He lived the rest of his life in seclusion in the country, completing the blank-verse epic poem *Paradise Lost* in 1667, as well as its sequel *Paradise Regained* and the tragedy *Samson Agonistes* both in 1671. Milton oversaw the printing of a second edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1674, which included an explanation of "why the poem rhymes not," clarifying his use of blank verse, along with introductory notes by Marvell. He died shortly afterwards, on November 8, 1674, in Buckinghamshire, England. *A Letter to a Friend, Concerning the Ruptures of the Commonwealth*, written in October 1659, was a response to General Lambert's recent dissolution of the Rump Parliament * *Proposals of certain expedients for the preventing of a civil war now feared*, written in

November 1659 * *The Ready and Easy Way to Establishing a Free Commonwealth*, in two editions, responded to General Monck's march towards London to restore the Long Parliament (which led to the restoration of the monarchy).

The work is an impassioned, bitter, and futile jeremiad damning the English people for backsliding from the cause of liberty and advocating the establishment of an authoritarian rule by an oligarchy set up by unelected parliament. Upon the Restoration in May 1660, Milton went into hiding for his life, while a warrant was issued for his arrest and his writings burnt. He re-emerged after a general pardon was issued, but was nevertheless arrested and briefly imprisoned before influential friends, such as Marvell, now an MP, intervened. On 24 February 1663 Milton remarried, for a third and final time, a Wistaston, Cheshire-born woman Elizabeth (Betty) Minshull, then aged 24, and spent the remaining decade of his life living quietly in London, only retiring to a cottage - Milton's Cottage - in Chalfont St. Giles, his only extant home, during the Great Plague of London.

During this period Milton published several minor prose works, such as a grammar textbook, *Art of Logic*, and a *History of Britain*. His only explicitly political tracts were the 1672 *Of True Religion*, arguing for toleration (except for Catholics), and a translation of a Polish tract advocating an elective monarchy. Both these works were referred to in the Exclusion debate - the attempt to exclude the heir presumptive, James, Duke of York, from the throne of England because he was Roman Catholic - that would preoccupy politics in the 1670s and '80s and precipitate the formation of the Whig

party and the Glorious Revolution. Milton died of kidney failure on 8 November 1674 and was buried in the church of St Giles Cripplegate; according to an early biographer, his funeral was attended by "his learned and great Friends in London, not without a friendly concourse of the Vulgar."

Published poetry

Milton's poetry was slow to see the light of day, at least under his name. His first published poem was *On Shakespear* (1630), anonymously included in the Second Folio edition of Shakespeare. In the midst of the excitement attending the possibility of establishing a new English government, Milton collected his work in 1645 *Poems*. The anonymous edition of *Comus* was published in 1637, and the publication of *Lycidas* in 1638 in *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago* was signed J. M. Otherwise the 1645 collection was the only poetry of his to see print, until *Paradise Lost* appeared in 1667. *Paradise Lost*, which chronicles Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden, is widely regarded as his masterpiece and one of the greatest epic poems in world literature. Since its first publication, the work has continually elicited debate regarding its theological themes, political commentary, and its depiction of the fallen angel Satan who is often viewed as the protagonist of the work. The epic has had wide-reaching effect, inspiring other long poems, such as Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and John Keats's *Endymion*, as well as Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, and deeply influencing the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake, who illustrated an edition of the epic.

Early reception of the poetry

John Dryden, an early enthusiast, in 1677 began the trend of describing Milton as the poet of the sublime.[65] Dryden's *The State of Innocence and the Fall of Man: an Opera* (1677) is evidence of an immediate cultural influence. In 1695, Patrick Hume became the first editor of *Paradise Lost*, providing an extensive apparatus of annotation and commentary, particularly chasing down allusions.[66] In 1732 the classical scholar Richard Bentley offered a corrected version of *Paradise Lost*. [67] Bentley was considered presumptuous, and was attacked in the following year by Zachary Pearce. Christopher Ricks judges that, as critic, Bentley was both acute and wrong-headed, and "incorrigibly eccentric"; William Empson also finds Pearce to be more sympathetic to Bentley's underlying line of thought than is warranted.[68][69] There was an early, partial translation of *Paradise Lost* into German by Theodore Haak, and based on that a standard verse translation by Ernest Gottlieb von Berge. A subsequent prose translation by Johann Jakob Bodmer was very popular; it influenced Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock.

The German-language Milton tradition returned to England in the person of the artist Henry Fuseli. Many enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century revered and commented on Milton's poetry and non-poetical works. In addition to John Dryden, among them were Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Thomas Newton, and Samuel Johnson. For example in *The Spectator*[70] Joseph Addison wrote extensive notes, annotations, and interpretations of certain passages of *Paradise Lost*. Jonathan Richardson, senior, and Jonathan Richardson, the younger, co-wrote a book of criticism.

[71] In 1749, Thomas Newton published an extensive edition of Milton's poetical works with annotations provided by himself, Dryden, Pope, Addison, the Richardsons (father and son) and others. Newton's edition of Milton was a culmination of the honour bestowed upon Milton by early Enlightenment thinkers; it may also have been prompted by Richard Bentley's infamous edition, described above. Samuel Johnson wrote numerous essays on Paradise Lost, and Milton was included in his Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1779-1781).

A Selected Bibliography

Poetry

Lycidas (1638)

Poems (1645)

Paradise Lost (1667)

Paradise Regained (1671)

Samson Agonistes (1671)

Drama

Arcades (1632)

Comus (1634)

Non-Fiction

Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England (1641) The Reason of

Church Government Urged Against Prelaty (1642) The Doctrine and

Discipline

of Divorce (1643)

Areopagitica (1644)

Of Education (1644)

The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649)

A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes (1659)