

A critique on lycidas
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essay



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Lycidas is a popular, well-known poem, which was written in the early 1630s by John Milton.

The poem is written in the style of pastoral elegy and is dedicated to Edward King a friend of John Milton who drowned out at sea. About 100 years after the poem had already been well known, Samuel Johnson responded forcefully by writing a critique that has also become well renowned. Samuel Johnson, who wrote the English Dictionary, questions the worth of Lycidas. According to Johnson, poetry is an art form that should be praised when its qualities are beautiful, symmetrical and full of passion. John Milton's Lycidas does not meet any of these standards. Lycidas is a typical pastoral elegy that does not strike any chords of emotion.

Clearly Johnson is a fanatic about words. Readers see Lycidas, which has been added to the Canon of English Literature, as a miraculous poem but they fail to see past the fame and glam of the poem. They simply love it because Milton wrote it. Samuel Johnson's unforgiving opinion of Milton's Lycidas stems from the poem's inability to present an accurate experience of loss: Milton gets too involved in his own words, uses this poem as his own political manifesto and is concerned about life as a poet and his fame.

Milton destroys the elegy of Lycidas through his obsession with his own opinions and language. The poem's overuse of pastoral imagery distances the reader from Milton's loss. Johnson argues that the pastoral imagery is cliché: "Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting: whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted" (Johnson). Although the poem is unoriginal and according to Johnson, Milton's language lacks

substance, most readers would not find the poem as repulsive as Johnson makes it out to be.

An example of the characteristic pastoral imagery that Johnson finds disgusting in Lycidas is present in lines 22-23: " For we were nurst upon the self-same hill/Fed the same flock by the fountain, shade, and rill" (22-23). The imagery is too lush: sheep, flowers, green fields, and beautiful songs all day long. This section lacks a quality of reality. Not only is Milton reusing a typical picture of pastoral elegy but he also wants to give an elevated experience to his readers rather than show a real sense of grief or sadness.

Later on in the poem, Milton goes overboard with his pastoral imagery illustrating a patch of flowers: " Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,/the tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,/The white pink, and the pansy freakt with jet,/ the glowing violet,"(142-145). One would have to be a botanist in order to appreciate all the natural scenery. A reader who wants to understand Milton's loss and love for his friend wants to feel emotion from the poem without getting tangled in the " laurels, myrtles and ivy". Johnson clarifies this point: " .

. . there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. " (Johnson) The nature can be seen as the green hills and sheep in the poem; it has nothing to do with Milton's own nature but simply refers to the classical pictures he creates. Milton fails to write with ease or natural feelings. If Milton were truly moved by the loss of his friend, he would not be able to create such intricate imagery nor all the references to mythology.

Johnson states that “ Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief” (Johnson). Milton tells his story using nymphs: “ To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,/Or with the tangles of Neaera’s hair? ” (68-69) These lines occur right after Milton goes into a fit about life as a poet and if it is worth it or if it is better to mess around and untangle the knots from a nymph’s hair. Perhaps Milton is talking about himself but he covers it with his allegorical language. The surroundings filled with nymphs and gods does not relate back to anything real. There is something sneaky about the way Milton draws in his ideas about fame.

This is supposed to be an elegy, not a questioning about one’s chance for eminence. (MILTONS OBSESSION WITH HIMSELF AND HIS WORDS) Milton asks many pointless questions throughout his poem but the most obvious one is “ What hard mishap hath doom’d this gentle swain? (92) Although he does not personally ask it, Milton still knows the answer. Clearly Edward King drowned, in the sea, on a boat. Milton’s word choice of “ what hard mishap” “ doom’d” and “ gentle swain” is very dramatic and misrepresents King’s death.

Milton, himself is carried away by his own dramatic grandeur, to the point that he only seems to want to entertain his readers more than convey his sadness. Besides trying to captivate his readers through obnoxious opulence, Milton also uses Lycidas as his own political soapbox. In the middle of Lycidas, Milton goes on a tangent where the “ pilot of the Galilean sea”, Saint Peter, appears and gives a speech about the way the clergy treats the believers of the church. Among other things, Saint Peter says, “ The hungry

sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swollen with wind, and the rank mist
they draw, / Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread.

“(125-127) The sheep represent the people of the church; Milton is criticizing the clergy and argues that they do not take care of their “ flock”. This would shame Edward King; he was just about to enter the church right before he died. King would not want to be remembered in the same text as that of Milton’s malicious opinions of the church. Milton abuses the poem’s purpose by adding this harsh political section within it. What a wretched choice on Milton’s part to soil the purity that King supposedly possessed.

In the general sense the poem does not seem “ disgusting”, but Johnson’s opinion is spot on when it comes to Milton’s kneading his political judgments in. Making an elegy political is nauseating. Lycidas is seen by most readers as phenomenal, simply because they know of Milton and his reputation as a writer. He tends to get more wrapped up in his word choice, political opinions and reputation as a poet.

This poem seems to mirror Shakespeare’s sonnet #60 because both works of literature take on similar themes of fame and creation of a lasting mark on the world of literature. Also both Shakespeare and Milton have a passion for words. In Sonnet #60 Shakespeare says “ And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, /praising thy worth despite his cruel hand” on one hand he is praising this person he is speaking to but at the same time what stands out is the “ verse standing”. Perhaps Milton’s over excitement of words handicaps him from creating a piece of work filled to the rim with true grief.

Lycidas's lack of overt emotion causes one to feel incorrect feelings towards the poem, ultimately giving the style of elegy a false meaning.