



GAUHATI UNIVERSITY

Institute of Distance and Open Learning

Semester- I

MA in English

Paper - I (ENG-02-I-1016)
14th to 18th Century Literature

Website: www.idolgu.in

ENG-02-I-1016

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M.A. First Semester
(under CBCS)

ENGLISH

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14th to 18th CENTURY LITERATURE



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ISBN:

August, 2021

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Published on behalf of Institute of Distance and Open Learning, Gauhati University by the Director, and printed at Gauhati University Press, Guwahati-781014.

Objectives

This unit introduces the medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer and the prescribed text for study the Nun's Priest's Tale. The background of the poet, and details to his life and times are provided in order to familiarise the students to his works. The unit focuses on:

1. Chaucer and his life
2. Literary context of the poet's work
3. Look into the possible approaches to the text, and
4. Develop the critical faculties of students in order to enable them to form their own judgment of the text.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Summary

Chaucer's nun's priest's tale of a there is opinions on variety of topics, from economic status to moral behaviour, to dream analysis. Chaucer combines all these factors to create a story of great entertainment. The host of the journey to Canterbury calls upon the nun's priest to tell a story. The expectation upon the priest to entertain as high as the previous storyteller had not done a good job, leading the host to remark that he was " boring all of us to death". It was an opportunity for the priest to uplift everyone's spirits by providing and entertaining tale, which he does and the nun's priest tale receives praise.

The tale is about how the rooster is actually presented as the ruler of the roost. The woman who owns the farm, lives on a plot of land and leads a simple life; she does not eat much and appears to be on the edge of poverty, her ' *bed- and living room was thick with soot*'. But the rooster, Chauntecleer, lived the life of a king in the form, who had everything he needed and wanted. He is neat, clean, and has a voice of the highest quality. All the hens loved him, , but his heart belongs to the love of his life Pertelote.

In the initial descriptions we are provided hints about the disparity between classes (rich and poor). The old woman lives frugally in a home which is dirty and run down. The rooster, which is a bird, lives a much better life than her, he has shiny crown, beak, and nails. This disparity in quality of life is one of the most important aspects of this tale.

Stop to consider

1. The Priest's Tale is a beast fable with a moralistic purpose; but it becomes a mock-epic, which has been mingled with burlesque, romance, parody, tragedy, dream vision, debate, allegory, transcending the restrictions of fable

Chauntecleer's nightmare produces one of the most hilarious scene in the tale, the presence of the dream analysis and premonitions emphasize the fact that these animals have human characteristics; Chauntecleer tells Pertelote about the dream he has, where he sees a dog-like

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creature stalking him, and then sees his own lifeless body in the mouth of the creature. But Pertelote treats Chauntecleer's nightmare as nonsense, and looks down on him for being afraid of a dream. She brings in the reference of Cato, Roman historian and an orator, who did not believe in dreams, and ends up proclaiming that Chauntecleer was constipated. Chauntecleer disagrees with Pertelote, and brings in the writings of Cicero, a

notable Roman orator, to his defense. He also brings in several stories which agreed to dreams being able to foretell the future. These birds display intelligence and are anthropomorphic representations (the most common feature of fables, where animals behave like humans).

Chauntecleer's nightmare actually comes true when another creature, the fox, Don Russell, starts to silently stalk him. The fox approaches Chauntecleer and tell him not to be afraid; he was only there to honour his voice. Hearing this Chauntecleer closes his eyes and starts to sing.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' is an

Stop to consider

2. Chaucer, by introducing structural changes to the tale, takes away the focus from the bragging and foolish rooster, and turn it into life in the hen yard, the roosters dream, the chicken debate; all these are used to tell the readers/ audience is something about the human nature.

Unfortunately for Chauntecleer, the fox grabs him and runs off. Pertelote notices that Chauntecleer is missing and raises the alarm. The entire farmyard, the widow, her daughters, the hens, the dogs all give a chase behind the fox. Chanticleer tells the fox that he should stop and turn around and give the crowd a piece of his mind. The fox falls for Chauntecleer words and opens his mouth to do so. Taking his chance Chauntecleer escapes to a tree top. The fox tries once again to lure Chauntecleer down by flattering him, but Chauntecleer declines, as he had learned his lesson.

The Nun's Priest is praised by the Host at the end of the tale, thanking him for his fine tale and turns to another for the next tale

Chauntecleer as a Round character

The Nun's Priest Tale employs animals as characters that represent the various elements of human nature and the goal of the tale is to reveal the truth about the human nature. The main character of this fable is Chauntecleer, who is a rooster or a cock, characterized by his physical appearances. The physical characteristics attached to the rooster are that of egoistic, overconfident, and arrogant. We are informed by the narrative that Chauntecleer is a prized cock:

And in the yard a cock called Chanticleer.

In all the land, for crowing, he'd no peer.

His voice was merrier than the organ gay

On Mass days, which in church begins to play;

More regular was his crowing in his lodge

Than is a clock or abbey horologe.

He is also described as physically handsome

His bill was black and just like jet it shone;

Like azure were his legs and toes, each one;

His spurs were whiter than the lily flower;

And plumage of the burnished gold his dower

Check your Progress

1. In 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the name of the protagonist rooster, Chauntecleer, means what?
2. In 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Chauntecleer is comforted after a bad dream by his favorite wife, _____.

The praise that Chauntecleer receives leads him to ignore the signs that he receives in his dreams which foretell his demise. The narrator tells us that according to his view it was Chauntecleer's fault to have listened to his wife's advice; "*his wife advice, to his dismay*", which led him to the fox's mouth. Chauntecleer's fatal mistake of not believing in his dreams as well as his vanity is revealed when he sings for the fox, upon falling prey to the fox's flattery. The vain rooster is thus tricked into closing his eyes and crowing, only to be seized by the fox and carried off. :

*When Chanticleer the fox did then espy,
He would have fled but that the fox anon
Said: "Gentle sir, alas! Why be thus gone?
Are you afraid of me, who am your friend?
Now, surely, I were worse than any fiend
If I should do you harm or villainy.
I came not here upon your deeds to spy;
But, certainly, the cause of my coming
Was only just to listen to you sing.
For truly, you have quite as fine a voice
As angels have that Heaven's choirs rejoice;
Boethius to music could not bring
Such feeling, nor do others who can sing.*

As a result of being vain and not trusting his own instincts, Chauntecleer is easily captured by the fox. But as the fox runs away towards the forest, the farmyard erupts in mayhem, soon the widow, her two daughters, the dogs, the hens even the bees are chasing the fox. Chanticleer suggests to the fox that he should turn around and shout insults to his pursuers:

*In all his fear unto the fox did clack
And say: "Sir, were I you, as I should be,
Then would I say (as God may now help me!),
'Turn back again, presumptuous peasants all!
A very pestilence upon you fall!*

The fox turns around and brags about his good fortune, and as a result of his ego Chauntecleer is freed. The fox tries to entice Chauntecleer again, but Chauntecleer is not fooled for the second time. He learns his lesson and tells the fox:

Stop to consider

3. The Nun's Priest's Tale (middle English: The Noones Preestes Tale of the Cok and Hen, Chauntecleer and Pertelote) is one of the Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer composed in 1390's. It is a beast fable and mock Epic based on the Reynard cycle.

Check your progress

- The tale presents a great opportunity to see the life of the peasantry, mostly obscured in the Tales.
- What other aspects of this household tell you things about the economic realities of late 14th C. English peasant life?
- Why might the Nun's Priest pay such close attention to this setting before moving into the beast fable?

*You shall no more, with any flattery,
Cause me to sing and close up either eye.
For he who shuts his eyes when he should see,
And wilfully, God let him ne'er be free!*

Stop to consider

4. Beast fables are a form of allegorical writing, written with the intention of pointing out silliness of certain behavior. The main purpose of the Nun's Priest's Tale is to provide commentary on human behavior.

Chauntecleer learns from his mistakes and does not succumb to his ego a second time, therefore, develops as a character throughout the course of the tale; Chauntecleer therefore can be considered a round character in the Nun's Priest Tale.

Pertelote

Pertelote is Chanticleer's favorite who is depicted as if she were a noble lady at court. Chaucer's tale has a subtle satirical tone, which is displayed by Pertelote and Chanticleer's relationship that mirrors the relationship between a lord and lady at court. By giving us a story told from the perspective of farm animals, Chaucer layers the tale with humor.

By rendering these relationships from the perspective of farm animals, Chaucer underlies his fable with a layer of humor. Pertelote is presented as someone who is nice, and a good companion, and in love with Chauntecleer. But she soon loses interest when Chauntecleer is disturbed by a nightmare. She exclaims that she could never marry a coward, portraying her as someone who is easily swayed and is judgmental. We can also see that she has a very clear vision about what she wants from her husband; though later it is revealed that she loves Chauntecleer deeply.

Check your progress

1. At the conclusion of 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the priest receives quite a bit of praise for his tale. Why?
2. The old widow in 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* lives in near poverty. With whom does the priest contrast the widow to demonstrate economic disparity?
3. When Pertelote and Chanticleer discuss dream analysis in 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' as found in *The Canterbury Tales*, which two notable Roman orators do they use to support their claims?

Analysis

The Nun's Priest's Tale is an example of one of Chaucer's brilliant storytelling. The tale is an example of the literary style called bestiary or the beast fable. In beast fables, animals behave like human beings; and these types of fables are written usually to insult man or make a commentary on the flaws in the human nature. The tale makes a suggestion that while animals behave like men, humans often behave like animals.

The tale is of a trivial event, which is told using the mock heroic technique; this raises the importance of this simple story. When Don Russell, the fox, runs off with Chauntecleer between his jaws, the entire farmyard involves itself in the chase. The scene is narrated in the elevated language which is found in the epics to describe the deeds and Adventures of the heroes. Chaucer's tale of a fox abducting a rooster is hardly epic, yet, his use of elevated language makes the reader compare the chase with that of Achilles' chase of Hector around the battlements in the Iliad. Comparing the despair of Chauntecleer to that of Hector brings out the comic absurdity of the situation.

Other instances of the use of the mock heroic is reference to the other prominent traitors of history in relation to Don Russell: "a new Iscariot, a second Ganelon, and a false hypocrite, Greek Sinon"; and when the farmyard animals discuss foreknowledge and prophecies in terms of a highly intellectual nature. The elevated use of mock-heroic is also present in the discussion between Chauntecleer and Pertelote regarding Chauntecleer's nightmare.

The opening lines in the Nun's Priest's Tale set up the contrast between differences of the simple life of the widow and the rich life led by the

Stop to Consider

There are a succession of examples which of human flaws in the dream debates and pompous forays into philosophies, which make it easy to that we are in the animals' habitat. Both Chauntecleer and Pertelote behave unlike their avian natures as they take part in academic argument, citing authorities such as Macrobius (c. 399-422) to convince each other about the importance of dreams and medical cures.

Check your progress

What was the reaction in the farmyard when Chauntecleer was captured by the fox?

BLOCK-I : UNIT 4 : Geoffrey Chaucer: The Nun's Priest's Tale

rooster, Chauntecleer. The tale represents the difference between the classes, one of the most telling themes of this tale is that animals representing men and women. The widow is poor and lives a very sparse life of a humble Christian, while Chauntecleer is shown to have belonged to the rich class, who have many obligations and responsibilities, for example, the sun could not rise, if Chauntecleer does not crow at dawn, which can also be interpreted as per the middle English (as in modern) meaning of the word 'crowing', which is boasting or bragging. Other responsibilities are equally silly, like that of taking care of his wives.

There is a light hearted irony in the way Chauntecleer is represented as a noble; in the description of Chauntecleer many adjectives have been used, such as 'Castle wall', 'polished jet', 'azure', 'lilies', 'burnished gold', which reminds the reader of a warrior or a knight, instead of a rooster.

Stop to consider

One of Chaucer's central sources was the twelfth-century French "beast epic" known as the *Roman de Renart*, which details the exploits of Reynard the fox and his attempts to outwit a wolf and other animals.

Chauntecleer is superior in many ways, he is not only well informed but very handsome. He is described in words that in mediaeval period was associated with royalty. He is also successful in love, with his many wives, and Pertelote being the chief among them. The irony is also presented in the contrast between the barnyard and the real life, bring out the pretensions and aspirations shown by the nobility and humanity alike. Chauntecleer and Pertelote interact in the manner of married couples who use sayings and examples of philosophers to expound upon their arguments. In the event where Don Russell uses flattery to ensnare chanticleer and how Chauntecleer plays on Don Russell's ego to escape his clutches; is one of the examples of the aspect of beast fables which deals with the issues of morality that are presented to the readers. These are important literary tools used to tell powerful stories describing the flowers of mankind. The reader is given a moral through these characters about how flattery and pride go before a fall. In the last stanza, the narrative addressing everyone stresses on the point that the tale is not merely about a fox and a rooster, but more about a story of morality, a story about naivety and good character, rather than barnyard animals.

Check your Progress

When Chauntecleer first sees the fox in The Nun's Priest's Tale,
What does he do?

Critical thinking

1. Do you think this story relates to the nun's priest? Why/Why not?
2. What is the overall theme of the tale? Explain your answer.
3. Give two examples of anti-feminism in the tale. Explain each example.
4. Is Lady Pertelote a stereotype? Is Chanticleer a stereotype? Explain your answers.
5. By tricking Chanticleer, what does this reveal about the fox? Does this reveal the same thing about Chanticleer when he tricks the fox back?
6. "Vanity goeth before a fall" might be applied to Chauntecleer. Illustrate how his vanity almost leads to his death. Are there other characters to whom this might apply?

Glossary

azure a semi-precious stone, today called lapis lazuli. In the description of Chauntecleer, the use of azure reinforces his courtly appearance.

humors (humours) in Chaucer's time and well into the Renaissance, "humors" were the elemental fluids of the body — blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile — that regulated a person's physical health and mental disposition.

The Nun's Priest: The priest of the church who accompanies the nuns so that they may offer up their confessions.

Cato Dionysius Cato, the author of a book of maxims used in elementary education (not to be confused with the more famous Marcus Cato the Elder and Marcus Cato the Younger, who were famous statesmen of ancient Rome).

tertian occurring every third day.

lauriol, centaury, and fumitory herbs that were used as cathartics or laxatives.

Kenelm a young prince who, at seven years old, succeeded his father but was slain by an aunt.

Macrobius the author of a famous commentary on Cicero's account of *The Dream of Scipio*.

Crosus (Croesus) King of Lydia, noted for his great wealth.

Andromache wife of Hector, leader of the Trojan forces, who one night dreamed of Hector's death.

In principio / Mulier est hominis confusio a Latin phrase meaning "Woman is the ruin of man." Chaunticleer plays a trick on Lady Pertelote and translates the phrase as "Woman is man's joy and bliss."

Taurus, the bull the second sign of the zodiac.

Lancelot of the lake the popular knight of King Arthur's legendary Round Table.

Iscaiot, Judas the betrayer of Jesus to the Romans.

Ganelon, Geeniloun the betrayer of Roland, nephew of Charlemagne, to the Moors in the medieval French epic *The Song of Roland*.

Sinon a Greek who persuaded the Trojans to take the Greeks' wooden horse into their city, the result of which was the destruction of Troy.

Physiologus a collection of nature lore, describing both the natural and supernatural.

Don Brunel the Ass a twelfth-century work by the Englishman Nigel Wireker. The tale refers to a priest's son who breaks a rooster's leg by throwing a stone at it. In revenge, the bird declines to crow in the morning of the day when the priest is to be ordained and receive a benefice; the priest fails to wake up in time and, being late for the ceremony, loses his preferment.

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Geoffrey reference to Geoffrey de Vinsauf, an author on the use of rhetoric during the twelfth century.

Pyrrhus the Greek who slew Priam, the king of Troy.

Hasdrubal the king of Carthage when it was destroyed by the Romans. His wife screamed so loudly that all of Carthage heard her, and she died by throwing herself upon Hasdrubal's funeral pyre. The comparison to Lady Pertelote is apropos.

Nero A tyrant who, according to legend, sent many of the senators to death accompanied by the screams and wailing of their wives. Thus, Lady Pertelote will be similar to the Roman wives if she loses her husband, Chauntecleer.

Jack Straw a leader of the riots in London during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Source: "The Nun's Priest's Tale." *Cliffnotes*, [www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/c/the-canterbury-
tales/summary-and-analysis/the-nuns-priests-tale](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/c/the-canterbury-tales/summary-and-analysis/the-nuns-priests-tale).

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Necessary Links

- The Nun's Priest's Prologue (<http://www.librarius.com/cantales/nunprpro.htm>), Tale (<http://www.librarius.com/cantales/nunprt1.htm>), and Epilogue (<http://www.librarius.com/cantales/nunprepi.htm>) in Librarius, with clickable inline dictionary entries. See here (<http://www.librarius.com/canttran/nunprst/nunprst001-013.htm>) for side-by-side translation into modern English.

- Video explaining the Great Vowel Shift: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyhZ8NQOZe0>

- A performance of the Nun's Priest's Tale following the original pronunciation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEATYDV-GUE&t=394s6>.

John Donne: "The Canonization", "The Ecstasy", "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners", "Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God"

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4.1 Introduction

In the previous unit, we had discussed the sonnets of William Shakespeare also widely known as the Bard of Avon. In the present unit, we shall take up one of the most prominent 17th century metaphysical poets known as John Donne. As evident in the title of this unit itself, some of the representative works of the poet titled "The Canonization", "The Ecstasy", "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" and "Batter My Heart, Three Personed God" have been prescribed for

your study. Apart from being highly regarded as the most prominent metaphysical poet, Donne is also known as one of the greatest love poets of all time.

A thorough study of the unit shall familiarise you to the life and works of the poet while also providing explanation of the four prescribed poems. Therefore, we shall proceed with a systematic and a step-by-step approach in discussing the poet, the representative poems as well as the time and context in which these were written so that we may fully appreciate the same.

4.2 Objectives

The Unit is an attempt to analyse the poems of the Metaphysical poet, John Donne. After going through the unit you will be able to-

- *define* the term metaphysical poetry
- *discuss* the life and works of the poet John Donne
- *explain* the text of the prescribed poems
- *appreciate* the prescribed poems of John Donne

4.3. Introduction to Metaphysical Poetry

Let us quickly analyse the term 'metaphysical' which is derived from the words 'meta' meaning 'after' and 'physical' referring to the physical world. Thus, it refers to exploring the

Metaphysical poetry is characterised by elements of sharp wit and intellectual thought in terms of its characteristics that has a charm of its own. The concepts and ideas reflected in metaphysical poetry provides a reader much food-for-thought as it usually leaving him or her thinking seriously on various aspects. Some of the distinct features of metaphysical poetry are the use of wit and humour; use of conceits and paradoxes; ratiocination (logical reasoning) mixed together with emotions; abrupt openings and colloquial style. While poetical conceits reflect complex intellectual ideas, poetical paradoxes are contradictory or opposing statements that are common in metaphysical poetry.

For the ease of general reference, practitioners of metaphysical poetry are referred to as metaphysical poets. When these poets wrote in their time, they had no way of knowing that 'they' or 'their poetry' would be identified as 'metaphysical poets' or 'poetry'. It was the literary

critic, biographer and writer, Samuel Johnson who had first coined the term 'metaphysical poetry' which he had mentioned in his seminal work entitled *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*. You will do well to know that apart from its leading practitioner John Donne, some of the other important metaphysical poets who wrote during this period are namely, Andrew Marvell, John Cleveland, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw.

Stop to Consider

You may have read or come across the term 'metaphysical speculation'. Have you ever wondered what does it mean? To help you gain an idea regarding the same, you would be interested to know that it has to do with one's philosophical plane of thought where a person deeply reflects or examines the nature of reality and workings of the universe. Perhaps, such speculations or search for definite answers will always remain endless but the human mind is ever inquisitive or curious to explore the uncertain or the unknown. At some point in your life, you must have surely found yourself lost in such patterns of philosophical thought.

Check Your Progress

- Q1. What is the derived meaning of the term 'metaphysical'?
- Q2. Who had first coined the term 'metaphysical poetry'?
- Q3. Mention the names of some important practitioners of metaphysical poetry.

4.4 John Donne: The Poet

Before we explore the prescribed poems of John Donne, let us gain an insight into the life and works of the poet in the following subsections so that we may gain an idea of the time and context in which he lived and wrote.

4.4.1 His Life

John Donne (22 January 1572 – 31 March 1631) was born in a Roman Catholic family at a time when members of the denomination or faith were expected to conform or follow the practices of the newly established Church of England instead of their own. You can imagine the difficulty of being in such a situation where individuals or families had to be cautious and live in the fear of being persecuted owing to their faith. His father who worked as a merchant had passed away in 1576 when Donne was barely five years old. Donne was the third among his six siblings and his mother Elizabeth Heywood who worked as warden of the Ironmongers Company later married and settled down with a prosperous widower named John Syminges.

In terms of his early education, Donne was mostly home-schooled or tutored at home. Then, he went on to pursue his studies at Hart Hall, Oxford, followed by his higher studies at the University of Cambridge which he was unfortunately unable to complete. He could not obtain his degree from the University on the grounds of his faith and his refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy in order to graduate. The Oath of Supremacy was solely based on the necessity of affirming one's faith in the power, authority and supremacy of the ruling monarch. Thus, for a brief period, he travelled to Spain and Italy before he returned home to London.

Donne found a new opportunity to study at the Thavies Inn Legal School in London and later went on to work at the Inns of Court in the year 1592. His independent life in London saw him engaging himself in new social circles, interacting with elite women, widening his reading and also practicing his writings. Although, Donne worked as a private secretary to a prominent person in England known as Sir Thomas Egerton, his career prospects had suffered after he had secretly married his employer's niece named Anne More. Owing to their secret marriage, Donne's official career had suffered as his future prospects of such privilege or official employment was sealed. The couple had to rely on financial help from Anne More's cousin and the generous help of patrons. To add to it, their family kept growing with twelve children of which five had sadly passed away. However, while looking out for new work opportunities, Donne continued working on his writings and travelled to northwest Europe with his patron Sir Robert Drury. Later, Sir Drury had also provided the couple with a home at the Drury estate where Donne and his wife lived for a while.

Then came another turning point in his life, where Donne had finally made up his mind to take the Holy Orders and priesthood in the Church of England in the year 1615. He was made a royal chaplain and with the orders of King James I, he was conferred the degree of doctor of divinity by Cambridge. Donne also took up his religious duties as the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and he carried them out to the best of his abilities. However, Donne suffered a major setback in life when he lost his dear wife in the year 1617 after she had given birth to a stillborn child.

Donne took a vow that he would never marry again and dedicated the rest of his life in the service of the Church as a leading preacher in England. During this period, he travelled on diplomatic mission to Germany with Viscount Doncaster while continuing his preaching, writing and publishing his works. At the final stages of his life, he suffered from stomach cancer and breathed his last in March 1631. Donne was laid to rest at the St. Paul's Cathedral.

Check Your Progress

- Q4. What was the major problem that many like Donne had to face owing to their faith?
- Q5. Where did John Donne pursue his higher studies? Why was he unable to obtain his degree from the University of Cambridge?
- Q6. Why did Donne's career prospects suffer in his younger days?
- Q7. What was the major turning point in the life of John Donne?

4.4.2 His Works

During his time, John Donne did not prefer print publication like most of his contemporaries. Despite the advantages of the 'printing press' that could reach out to the larger masses, Donne considered publication of (handwritten) 'manuscript' i.e., original drafts or copies for select readership. However, it was only due to his friends, patrons and well-wishers that he had given his consent to print just a few of his works. In fact, you will be surprised to note that

he was also uncomfortable with the thought of being considered a professional writer and did not mind publishing his works anonymously i.e., without mentioning his own name.

Some of the important works by John Donne in the first phase of his writing journey which are namely, *Biathanos* (1608), *Pseudo Martyr* (1610), *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), *The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *The Second Anniversary: Of Progress of the Soul* (1612). Also, in the second phase of his writings following his turn to a religious life were namely, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), *Poems* (1633), *Juvenilia: or Certain Paradoxes and Problems* (1633), *LXXX Sermons* (1640), *Fifty Sermons* (1649), *Essays in Divinity* (1651), *Letters to Several Persons of Honour* (1651) and *XXVI Sermons* (1661).

Throughout his journey as a poet, Donne explored different strains of poetry such as religious or spiritual verses as well as the more secular kind of writings that represented worldly affairs including his love poetry. In this regard, it may be mentioned that although Donne suffered financial setbacks for a decade following his secret marriage with Anne More, yet several poems that were written during this period does reflect a sense of happiness and fulfilment in love. In this regard Achsah Guibbory mentions in his chapter in *English Poetry: Donne to Marvel* thus, "Love and salvation are not only the two great subjects of his poetry; they were also preoccupations that gave dramatic shape to his life" (125). You may also note that Donne wrote several holy sonnets and hymns or religious lyrics which we shall further discuss in the next unit.

The intellectual aspects of his writing simply sets his literary works apart from many of his contemporary poets and writers. In his time, young writers wrote and circulated their works within closed circles that often brought them new opportunities of employment i.e., in the service of influential people. However, Donne himself was aware of the nature of his writings that had every possibility of stirring unwanted controversy for he had deviated from the social and moral temperament of his age in his writings. Instead of conforming to literary traditions of the time, Donne poured his intellectual thoughts into his writing ranging from social or religious satires to political questioning, references to sexuality or moral propriety to a certain sense of dissent. However, he knew very well that publication of such writings without much thought or care would not be well received by his readers. Moreover, he was much conscious of his social privilege and position as a gentleman which he had a desire to maintain.

Donne also wrote several elegies or in simple words poems to mourn death, several of which were written in memory of his patrons and acquaintances. He also wrote letters to his friends and well-wishers that reflected his thoughts, intellectual stirrings, opinions and ideas on various aspects. In fact, Donne experimented with a new form of verse epistles which were poems written in the form of letters and addressed to some of his friends namely Rowland Woodward, Thomas Woodward, Christopher Brooke and Henry Wotton among a few others. Arthur F. Marotti in his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (2006) mentions, “We find some of Donne’s most reflective and philosophical pieces of writing not only in his prose letters, but also in his verse epistles” (42).

Check Your Progress

Q8. Did John Donne prefer printed publication? Mention his choice or preference.

Q9. Name some of the early works of John Donne.

Q10. Name the works of Donne following his turn to a religious life.

4.5. Explanation of Poems

After a thorough study of the concept of metaphysical poetry, the life and literary works of John Donne, let us now discuss the prescribed poems. A detailed reading of the ‘text’ of the poems will enhance your idea, interpretation, analysis, opinion and appreciation of the same. The following subsections in which the explanations of the poems are provided shall supplement and support your own reading and reference. It is important to note that the learner is free to interpret the poems in his/her own way as long as he/she can provide reasonable justification for his/her original interpretation. Let us then approach the poems with a new sense of curiosity regarding its content, ideas and reflections.

4.5.1 “The Canonization”

“The Canonization” was published in the year 1633 and is one of the widely anthologised poems of John Donne. To begin with, the term ‘canonization’ refers to the practice of the Roman

Catholic Church whereby a saint is 'canonized' following an official declaration of sainthood by the Papal authority or the Pope. Thus, the name of a holy saint enters into the official 'canon' or list of highly regarded saints following the demise of a saint.

If you read the text of the poem, you will find that the reference to 'canonization' is to indirectly represent or highlight the natural desire of lovers to be remembered forever, to immortalise their love and thereby to simply imagine their names in the canons of time. Thus, it tries to bring out the spiritual essence of love and the possibility of immortalising one's love through creative verses or expression. The poem opens with the line "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love" which indicates that the speaker wishes to be left alone.

In expressing his displeasure, he makes it clear that the lovers desire a little space or privacy for themselves. He does not wish to be bothered by worldly affairs and rather wishes to shut out the world from intruding his personal space. Here, he dismisses the person who disturbs his peace and states that there are plenty of things for others to be bothered about. They would rather be comfortable together in their "pretty room" than step out of their private world. They feel like their entire world is shrunken and reflected in their eyes that meet. Their eyes and eyebeams or the light in their eyes reflect each other's world and thereby becoming uniting to form one world that is filled with so much fulfilment, trust and contentment.

The speaker then declares that their mutual love and respect for each other is sincere and spontaneous as well as free from any form of superficiality. While the world is preoccupied with its own day-to-day activities, the lovers are lost in their cocoon of love. In fact, the poet notes that their souls are intertwined and that their love goes beyond physical intimacy as indicated in the following lines:

"By us; we two being one, are it.

So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.

We die and rise the same, and prove

Mysterious by this love"

(John Donne's Poetry pg. 78)

It is by virtue of their true love for each other that they wish to be immortal, honoured and revered for generations to come. If history fails to “chronicle” or record, to testify their extraordinary love, then poetry would prove its worth and narrate their legacy long after they depart from this world. To them their love stems from a deep sense of dedication, sincerity and spirituality that deserves validation and high regard.

For the same reason, they are inspired by the practice of religious canonization of saints and express their desire to be similarly canonized by the world for their everlasting love. Their legendary lives or story of love would be an inspiration for young lovers who seek the true essence of love that is fulfilling, soulful and enriching. The poem contains a total of five stanzas. There are elements of paradox, conceits and striking images that projects the immediacy of the lover's thought and expression. We shall highlight some of these aspects in the next unit while discussing aspects of style and language employed in each of the poems discussed in the unit.

Stop To Consider

Do you know that Mother Teresa was ‘canonized’ in 2016 and that she is referred to as St. Teresa of Calcutta? Mother Teresa who is also a recipient of Nobel Prize for Peace (1979) had dedicated her entire life in the service of the poor and the downtrodden in India. You could try and read more about her life and extraordinary service to humanity which is both inspiring and truly worth knowing.

Check Your Progress

Q11. What is the meaning of the term ‘canonization’? How is a saint canonized?

Q12. What do the two lover's wish in terms of immortalizing their true love?

4.5.2 “The Ecstasy”

The title of this metaphysical poem is sometimes spelled as “The Extasie”. The term ‘ecstasy’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ekstasis’ and refers to a person's extraordinary or

elevating feeling and experience. The poem contains a total of nineteen 'quatrains' i.e., four lines in each stanza. It is certainly worth a complete reading on your part.

You may note that the opening lines of the poem presents a couple seated beside the bank of a river with blooming violets, simply soaking in the beauty of the surroundings and peaceful moment of being together. It is a picturesque place and an ideal setting where the lovers spend time with each other and thus it reads:

"Where, like a pillow on a bed,
A pregnant bank swell'd up to rest
The violet's reclining head
Sat we two, one another's best"

(Donne's Poetry pg. 100)

The speaker shares his thought that the only intimacy that they had shared so far was regarding their "firmly cemented" hands and their glancing into each other's eyes. They spent their entire day comfortable in each other's silence, while their souls "negotiated" without them uttering a word to each other. Such was the intensity of their love and understanding.

The speaker compares their souls to two separate armies that did not necessarily require proving their worth or winning a victory over the other. The speaker then goes on to say that if a third person would be present in that moment he or she would witness what true love was and how rich it was in its purity. Although, such a person would have no way of knowing of the invisible exchange between the two souls, atleast he or she would be transformed into a pure soul in their presence. Such was the aura that surrounded the souls of the lovers and their inspiring love. The speaker thus tries to capture the soulful, radiating, transforming and magnetic quality of love in his poetical expressions.

However, the poet also addresses the inherent natural desires of two lovers to experience physical intimacy. Thus on one hand, the speaker glorifies the union of pure souls, which is 'platonic' in terms of its thought and on the other hand, he admits the desire to consummate their soulful love through physical union as well. Therefore, while Donne agrees with Plato's concept of spiritual or soulful love, he also seems to struggle with the thought that 'soul' and the 'body'

are two separate entities after all which find their final meeting ground in physical intimacy. This is evident in the following lines:

“But oh. Alas, so long, so far,
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They're ours, though they're not we; we are
Th'intelligences, they the sphere.”

(Donne's Poetry pg. 101)

The speaker notes that just like a violet transplanted into new soil would still grow beautiful and healthy, similarly when their united soul conceive a newborn, their love would grow all the more. It would also relieve any sense of loneliness and complete their sense of being in this world. Further, he states that there is nothing to be ashamed or to in admitting the importance of our bodily or physical desires. The body is likened to alloys which can be fused to form stronger and durable metals. Similarly, when the body fuses with the soul, it creates something ecstatic or extraordinary. Towards the tail end of the poem, it mentions that just like a great prince would find himself completely 'entrapped' in a prison, similarly the soul would find itself 'confined' without the freedom of physical union as highlighted in the following lines:

“So must pure lovers; souls descend
T'affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies”

(Donne's Poetry pg. 102)

Thus. the poem has elements of the both the spiritual and the sensuous, the soulful and the physical. If any lover like them would hear of this, he would also do well to note that their soulful love would remain unchanged despite their physical intimacy or even long after they depart from this world.

Check Your Progress

Q 13. What does the opening lines of the poem present?

Q 14. Mention the two different aspects of love that the speaker mentions towards the end of the poem.

Self-Asking Questions

Do you think that the two love poems “The Canonization” and “The Ecstasy” are philosophical, spiritual and even practical in terms of their reflections on love? In addition, you could ask yourself on what are the various aspects in which these two love poems are different from the usual romantic quality that we attribute to love poems.

As you may realize by now, “The Canonization” and “The Ecstasy” may also be considered Donne’s kind of love poetry. Now, the two poems or rather sonnets that follow are religious poems also referred to as Divine Poems or Holy Sonnets. Ideally, the ‘sonnet’ or a little poetical song is a structured poem of fourteen lines only. Poets like the Italian classical master, Petrarch and the English poet, William Shakespeare primarily practiced and popularised the sonnet form. Also as already mentioned, you may note that the fourteen lined poem is divided into first eight lines (octave) followed by a response in the next six lines (sestet) which is known as a Petrarchan styled sonnet.

Sir Thomas Wyatt had first brought the practice of Petrarchan sonnets to England. Thus, when Shakespeare adopted the sonnet form, he divided the fourteen lined poem into three quatrains or three stanzas of four lines each (3x4=12 lines) followed by a couplet (two more lines in response). This alteration within the prescribed structure of fourteen lines came to be referred to as the ‘Shakespearean sonnet’. Thus, the sonnet form gained new variations in the hands of other English poets that followed like John Milton and Edmund Spenser. John Donne combined elements of both the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean sonnet with a more divine or religious approach. Let us then explore more about the two Holy Sonnets in the following subsections.

4.5.3 “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners”

Among Donne’s nineteen Holy Sonnets, “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners” is numbered Holy Sonnet 4 and is rather written in a Petrarchan style. If we look at the opening lines of the poem, we are directed towards the Christian belief of the day of Judgement and Resurrection. The day of Judgement is supposedly to be the predestined day when all believers shall be accountable to God and His judgement. On this day, God shall hold all believers accountable.

Here, at the beginning of the poem we find the image of ‘angels’ who are called upon by the poet to blow their trumpets in order to be heard in every nook and corner of this earth. As the earth is spherical or rather round in shape, there is no corner as such but he symbolically refers to the four corners or directions i.e., north, east, west, south. The angels are called upon to rise up and also awaken the countless souls who had departed from their physical forms or existence following their demise. The trumpet call would enable the souls to return to the physical world and to search for their scattered, lifeless bodies as reflected in the following lines:

“At the round earth’s imagin’d corners blow

Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise

From death you numberless infinities

Of souls and to your scatter’d bodies go;”

(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 137)

Ultimately, the poet as a mortal being states that none shall be spared from God’s final Judgement. Also, the speaker makes a Biblical reference (as mentioned in the Old Testament) to the myth of the Great Flood that had swept away all sinners and living beings on earth according to God’s will. Also, in the future events that shall be revealed on the final Judgement day, ‘fire’ shall also reduce life and all living things from the face of this earth. This final event is also referred to as the ‘Reckoning Day of Judgement’ (commonly referred as ‘doomsday’) as revealed at the end of the Bible.

You may note that the lines point to how the natural elements are determined and are all under the control of Almighty God. Many have already perished down the ages in wars,

droughts, calamities, sufferings, diseases, degeneration, tortures, helpless circumstances and owing to verdicts of law as well. However, there is only the enlightened and 'chosen few' who by virtue of their service and dedication to God as well as the appropriate accountability of their deeds shall be pardoned from God's punishment. The difference is that they shall witness the coming of God's son with their own eyes unlike the rest of the world as reflected in the following lines:

"All whom the Flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe."

(Donne's Poetry, pg. 138)

Thus, the learner may note that Christians uphold the belief of Resurrection, which means that those who die shall be resurrected or brought to life by God's grace and their sins shall be forgiven when they finally meet their creator. Thus, the speaker makes a clear distinction between the fate of those who die for different reasons (as previously mentioned) and the fate of the enlightened who die but get to behold God in their eyes. Therefore, the latter receives the blessing of seeing God with his or her own eyes and thereby uniting with God's grace.

"But let them sleep, Lord, and me moum a space;
For if above all these my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace"

(Donne's Poetry, pg. 138)

The speaker then reflects on his own thoughts and requests God to let the dead remain in their sleep for a while. He confesses the sins that he has committed in his own life, admitting that he is like most other human beings who are inclined towards sin or other wrong-doing which is forbidden. Also, he realises that perhaps it is too late in life (especially when nearing Judgement Day) to ask for God's mercy and forgiveness as he writes:

When we are there: Here on this lowly ground,

Teach me how to repent, for that's as good

As if thou had'st sealed my pardon with thy blood.

(*Donne's Poetry*, pg. 138)

The closing lines of the sonnet reflect the speaker's thoughts as he considers the benevolence and generosity of God too. This is why he prays to God so that he may walk in the right path with repentance through the teachings of God. The "lowly ground" refers to earth where he wishes to atone for his sins instead of waiting until his dying day and his resurrection. Therefore, he wishes to reflect on the present and to live it well as an enlightened being with God's grace. Thus, he hopes in his heart that God would forgive and absolve him of all his sins imagining God writing a document granting His pardon sealed with God's own blood.

Check Your Progress

Q 15. What is a sonnet?

Q 16. Who had brought the practice of Petrarchan sonnets to England?

Q 17. Briefly explain the Christian belief of Resurrection in a few words.

Q 18. What does the speaker confess to God and realise in terms of his deeds?

4.5.6 "Batter My Heart, Three- Person'd God"

The following sonnet titled "Batter My Heart, Three- Person'd God" is numbered Holy Sonnet 10. If, you read the text of the poem, you will find that the sonnet is divided into octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The opening lines of the poem reflect the intensity of the speaker's desire where he wishes his heart to be symbolically battered meaning beaten or pounded with God's will. It again means that he wishes to be enlightened by God's grace, to both learn and unlearn the ways of this world. This he desires with utmost sincerity even if it means learning everything the hard way.

You may know that the Christians believe in the Holy Trinity i.e., God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the speaker refers to the “three-person’d God” in the poem. Further, he request the divine powers to make him undergo the toughest tests so that he may highly improve himself, be righteous and enlightened. This it refers to his complete transformation.

As precious metals are forcibly broken, burnt and beaten in order for it to turn malleable and gain a desired shape, similarly the speaker urges God to mould and transform him all over again. Thus, it expresses the speaker’s dissatisfaction with his ‘present self’ and his ‘inherent weaknesses’ which he wishes to change seeking God’s firm discipline. He compares himself to a ‘usurped’ town or a town taken over by evil forces which needs to be undone. Therefore, the emphasis is on rectifying himself, cleansing his soul and turning towards God’s blessings as reflected in the following lines:

“Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me; and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I like an usurp’d town due t’another due,”

(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 140)

In the next few lines, the speaker notes that he has decided to labour or work hard on himself but the journey is also much difficult. Just as a Viceroy has official responsibilities towards the welfare of the people or territory, similarly God’s gift of ‘reason’ is to ensure an individual’s welfare as also indicated in the following lines:

“Labor t’admit you, but oh, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain:”

(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 140)

However, moments of weakness and his misdeeds happens to capture and overthrow his gift of reasoning owing to which he is often defeated in his mind. Therefore, the speaker wishes to be greatly empowered for the love of God that he holds in his heart. His love for God is so true that he dedicates his entire life in God's service and to be simply worthy of His blessings. It is as though his 'commitment to God' could be compared to 'one's commitment towards marriage'. Thus, he wishes to be punished and to be divorced from 'God's grace' if necessary, so that he can pursue and work hard to receive heavenly blessings all over again. Also, his own distractions and wavering from the path of righteousness makes it seem as though he were married to God's enemy. Therefore, he takes into account his own promised fight against God's enemy, i.e., all kinds of sin and vices.

He wishes to surrender himself to the grace and mercy of God. The speaker pleads for God's intervention so that he may be "imprisoned" or taken captive by God's power. For he feels that without the same he may be constantly overpowered by sinful distractions. Unless God "enthralls" or takes him to new heights of enlightenment and self-contentment, he could never be 'free' or 'pure' in the true sense of the word. The only way he could turn 'chaste' or pure in thought, word or deeds is through God's enforcement of discipline and obedience. The closing lines thus reflect the thoughts of the speaker who wishes to be a transformed individual, a true believer and a better version of himself in the eyes of God, declaring thus:

"Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,

"But am bethroth'd unto your enemy:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,

Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,

Nor ever chaste except you ravish me."

(*Donne's Poetry*, pg. 140)

Check Your Progress

Q 19. Why does the speaker refer to "three-person'd God?"

Q 20. What is it that the speaker takes into account with regard to his own promises to God?

Self-Asking Questions

Do you agree that religious philosophy or philosophy in general as well as ethics is important for a more fulfilled and enriching life? You could reflect on the same to see how the poet in these Holy Sonnets poses for such thoughtful moments and reflections.

4.6 Summing up

After having gone through the unit, the learner will be familiar with the life and works of the poet. Also through the discussions of the prescribed poems, you will be able to provide detailed explanations of the poems and provide your own critical appreciation of the same. You will also gain a clear idea on the definition of the term and characteristics of metaphysical poetry as well as some of the important metaphysical poets. There is much scope to reflect on the various aspects of the unit in the form of questions and reflections so that you have a thorough idea of the unit.

4.7 References and Suggested Reading

- 1) Corns, Thomas N. (ed.) (1993). *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- 2) Dickson, Donald R. (ed.) (2007) *John Donne's Poetry*. New York: W.W Norton & Company
- 3) Guibbory, Achsah ed. (2006). *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- 4) Mathekial, Tomichan. (2007) *English Poetry: From John Donne to Ted Hughes*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.

4.8 Model Questions

- Q1. Write a note on the characteristics of metaphysical poetry.
- Q2. Discuss the life and works of the metaphysical poet John Donne in details.
- Q3. Explain the love poems "The Canonization" and "The Ecstasy" in your own words.

Q4. Discuss the Holy Sonnets “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners” and “Batter My Heart, Three Person’d God”.

Q5. Explain the poem “Three-Personed God” in your own words.

4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

Answer 1: The term ‘metaphysical’ which is derived from the words ‘meta’ meaning ‘after’ and ‘physical’ referring to the physical world.

Answer 2: It was the literary critic, biographer and writer, Samuel Johnson who had first coined the term ‘metaphysical poetry’ which he had mentioned in his seminal work entitled *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*.

Answer 3: Some of the important metaphysical poets are namely John Donne, Andrew Marvell, John Cleveland, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw.

Answer 4: John Donne was born in a Roman Catholic family at a time when members of the denomination or faith were expected to conform or follow the practices of the newly established Church of England instead of their own.

Answer 5: Donne pursued his studies at Hart Hall, Oxford followed by his higher studies at the University of Cambridge which he was unable to complete. He could not obtain his degree from the University on the grounds of his faith and his refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy in order to graduate.

Answer 6: Donne’s career prospects had suffered after he had secretly married his employer’s niece named Anne More. Owing to their marriage, Donne’s official career had suffered as his future prospects of such privilege or employment was sealed.

Answer 7: The turning point in his life was when Donne had finally made up his mind to take the Holy Orders and priesthood in the Church of England in the year 1615. He was made a royal chaplain and with the orders of King James I, he was conferred the degree of doctor of divinity by Cambridge.

Answer 8: Despite the advantages of the printing press that could reach out to the larger masses many like Donne considered publication of (handwritten) manuscript i.e., original drafts or

copies for select readership. It was only due to his friends, patrons and well-wishers that he had given his consent to print just a few of his works.

Answer 9: Some of the important works by John Donne in the first phase of his writing journey which are namely, *Biathanos* (1608), *Pseudo Martyr* (1610), *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), *The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *The Second Anniversary: Of Progress of the Soul* (1612).

Answer 10: Also, in the second phase of his writings following his turn to a religious life were namely, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), *Poems* (1633), *Juvenilia: or Certain Paradoxes and Problems* (1633), *LXXX Sermons* (1640), *Fifty Sermons* (1649), *Essays in Divinity* (1651), *Letters to Several Persons of Honour* (1651), and *XXVI Sermons* (1661).

Answer 11: The term 'canonization' refers to the practice of the Roman Catholic Church whereby a saint is 'canonized' following an official declaration of sainthood by the Papal authority or the Pope. Thus, the name of a holy saint enters into the official 'canon' or list of highly regarded saints especially following the demise of the saint.

Answer 12: It is by virtue of their true love for each other that they wish to be immortal, honoured and revered for generations to come. If history fails to "chronicle" or record, to testify their extraordinary love, then poetry would prove its worth and narrate their legacy long after they depart from this world.

Answer 13: The opening lines of the poems presents a couple seated beside the bank of a river with blooming violets, simply soaking in the beauty of the surroundings and peaceful moment of being together.

Answer 14: On one hand, the speaker glorifies union of pure souls, which is 'platonic' in terms of its thought and on the other hand, he admits the desire to consummate their soulful love through physical union as well.

Answer 15: A 'sonnet' or a little poetical song is a structured poem of fourteen lines only.

Answer 16: Sir Thomas Wyatt had brought the practice of Petrarchan sonnets to England.

Answer 17: Christians uphold the belief of Resurrection, which means that those who die shall be resurrected or brought to life by God's grace and their sins shall be forgiven by God.

Answer 18: He confesses the sins that he has committed in his own life, admitting that he is like most other human beings who are inclined towards sin which is forbidden. Also, he realises that perhaps it is too late in life (especially when nearing Judgement Day) to ask for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Answer 19: The Christians believe in the Holy Trinity i.e., God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit and therefore the speaker refers to the "three-person'd God".

Answer 20: The speaker takes into account his own promised fight against God's enemy, i.e., all kinds of sins and vices. He wishes to surrender himself to the grace and mercy of God. Also, he pleads for God's intervention so that he may be "imprisoned" or taken captive without which he may be continuously overpowered by the mind's enemy.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Bks 1)

1.1 Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 His Works

1.4 Critical Reception

1.5 Context of the Poem

1.6 Reading the poem

1.7 Summing Up

1.8 Glossary

1.9 References & Suggested Reading

1.1 Objectives :

The unit proposes to introduce you to John Milton, the seventeenth-century poet. After a brief survey of his life, times and works, we will proceed to take up in details the first two books of *Paradise Lost*. We shall also go through a survey of the critical reception of this English epic. At the end of this unit, you are expected to

- *be familiar* with John Milton, the poet and pamphleteer.
- *relate* Milton's life and contemporary events to the text prescribed.
- *place* the poet in the English literary tradition.
- *appreciate* the range of critical issues within the text.
- *weigh* the text vis-à-vis other similar texts, and
- *develop* your own critical perspective.

1.2 Introduction :

(A Brief biographical Sketch and the Various Influences)

John Milton was born on Dec 9, 1608 in London. Milton completed his formal education first, at St Paul's School (1620-25), and then at Christ's College, Cambridge (1625-32). After leaving Cambridge with an M.A. in 1632, he spent the next six years at his father's country-house in Horton, Buckinghamshire. He dedicated these years to an intense and rigorous study of European Literature to such an extent that English Literature has not seen a better scholar of European Classics.

In May 1638, Milton embarked on a grand tour of the Continent, but disturbances back home forced his return in July 1639. He joined the imminent Civil War and threw his weight behind the Presbyterians/Republicans by publication of prose pamphlets. In 1649, he was made the Secretary of Foreign Tongues, a reward for his fierce defense of the execution of Charles I. However, in later years, he saw his ideals of Republican polity and Puritan theocracy crumble

gradually. The Restoration of 1660 even saw Milton undergoing a brief period of imprisonment.

Touring the Continent

Till the first half of the nineteenth century, an average English Gentleman's formal education was incomplete without a trip to the Continent. Italy had been a favourite destination till the seventeenth century. Chaucer had toured Italy on numerous occasions and so did others like Thomas Wyatt, Earl of Surrey and Philip Sidney. Milton's tour to the Continent mostly centered around Italy. He toured extensively through Florence, Rome, Venice and Naples, and in the process, came across many personalities and landmarks. especially, Galileo Galili and the tomb of Virgil. This tour was also artistically gratifying as he found an eager and appreciative audience for his Latin verses. This is said to be the best period of his life. Interestingly, Milton's engagement with Italy may be viewed as paradoxical: while he was awed and charmed by its heritage, literature and art, he was antipathetic to its religion, Catholicism.

Post- Restoration, Milton led a solitary and reclusive life with his third wife and two daughters. After the publication of *Paradise Lost* in 1667, the aged and blind poet enjoyed the privilege of visits by peers and friends, most notably Dryden. John Milton died on Nov 8, 1674, and was buried in St. Giles' Church, Cripplegate, London.

This brief life-sketch of Milton should lead you to a better appreciation of the text. Now, let us very briefly view some of the seminal influences on his personality, thinking and poetry.

The curriculum of St. Paul's, which prescribed a study of early Christian writers, exerted tremendous influence on Milton's choice of subjects for his poems. Then, the literatures of Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Italian languages also influenced him a lot. Writers like Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Ovid, Cicero and Spenser shaped his writings at different stages. To be specific, Dante influenced the descriptions of Hell, Virgil the diction, and Cicero, the rhetoric of Satan's speeches in *Paradise Lost*.

Stop to Consider

Milton's Home

The small biographical sketch and the influences outlined above carve out a mammoth domain for Milton. But his home had acted as the initiator on many occasions. His father, also named John, had a progressive bent of mind and was instrumental in instilling in him, love and admiration for literature and learning. His conviction in religious faith was inherited at home. His grandfather, a devout Catholic, had disinherited his father for turning a protestant. The most significant fact, however, is that Milton's father was an accomplished musician and a noted writer of madrigals. Milton certainly owed to this fact his sharp and acute ear for music. Readers of *Paradise Lost* may do well to remember that he was totally blind when he wrote this epic.

At Cambridge, Milton gradually developed a bias towards Puritanism. His religious sympathies were strengthened very early by two gentleman, Richard Stock and Thomas Young. Moreover, he was moved by Calvinism as it opposed ritual and affirmed the

supremacy of Scriptures and individual faith. His sympathy for Puritans and Presbyterians also led him to support the Republican cause as the overwhelming majority of Republicans were either Puritans or Presbyterians.

SAQ

1. Is Milton's life fairly well-documented considering that he is only a seventeenth-century writer? (30 words)

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2. Were the foreign influences that mark Milton's personality and writing exceptions to him or were they generic? (50 words)

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3. Was Milton more involved in contemporary affairs than a writer normally is? Who were the contemporaries that influenced him? (60 words)

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4. What was the target audience for his writings? (30 words)

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1.3 His Works

In this section we aim to introduce to you some of the different works of John Milton, poet and pamphleteer.

Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity (1629) is commonly known as 'Nativity Ode', being a remarkable poem that celebrates the victory of Christ over evil. The broad doctrinal base of the ode is decidedly protestant. The opening is Pindaric and the poem adopts a heroic style that is celebratory. At Cambridge, Milton wrote a series of seven elegies in Latin based

on Ovid. He also wrote sonnets in both Italian and English. Some of his memorable sonnets in English are "On Shakespeare", "On His Blindness", "On the Massacres in Piedmont" etc. Milton's sonnets are important from a historical perspective although he had discarded the Shakespearean as well as the Spenserian models in favour of the Petrarchan. When sonneteering was revived by the Romantics, they followed the model adopted by Milton.

L'Allegro and Il Penseroso (1631/32) composed either at Cambridge or Horton, they are companion poems. While "L'Allegro" -meaning the 'cheerful man' in Italian- is an invocation to the goddess Mirth, "Il Penseroso" -the 'contemplative man'- is an invocation to the goddess Melancholy. Both the poems represent an ideal or specimen day in the poet's life. Written in rhyming octosyllabics, these poems abound in gaiety and mirth to such an extent that to a reader of *Paradise Lost*, they might seem to be characteristically unMiltonic.

Comus (1634): In this masque, Comus is a pagan god who tries to win over a young Christian lady by administering her a magic potion. The lady staunchly defends her virginity and chastity, and is finally rescued by her two brothers. For its effect, "Comus" relies on spectacle, song and dialogue, and therefore, it has been aptly called a 'pastoral drama'.

Lycidas (1637) is an elegy on the death of Milton's Cambridge companion, Edward King. It is in the pastoral tradition and both the mourner and the mourned are depicted as shepherds. It is significant as it contains a stinging outburst against the clergy whose 'hungry sheep look up and are not fed'.

Epitaphium Damonis (1639) is a Latin elegy written on the death of his friend, Charles Diodati. Like "Lycidas", it is also in the pastoral mode, but the emotions expressed are far more personal.

Paradise Lost (1667) is an epic poem in twelve books. It is about 'man's first disobedience' and 'loss of Eden'. However, in its mammoth sweep, it encompasses action beginning with Satan's revolt against God to the ouster of Adam and Eve from Paradise. The narrative also incorporates a vision of events till the Second Coming. The diction of the epic is characterized by the use of blank verse and innumerable epic similes, apart from some new coinages. **Paradise Regained** (1670) is a four-book sequel to *Paradise Lost*. In it, Satan tries to tempt Christ in the wilderness but Christ's resistance leads to the defeat of Satan's evil designs. Considered a short epic, *Paradise Regained* is markedly different from its predecessor in splendour, language, diction and the portraiture of Satan.

Compared often to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, **Samson Agonistes** (1670) is a tragedy modelled strictly on Greek tragedy. It is about the last phase of Samson's life when, old and blind, he was held a prisoner by the Philistines. It has been often read as an expression of the poet's own situation because Samson's old age, blindness and imprisonment resonate with the last part of Milton's life.

Stop to Consider

Milton's Contribution to Pastoralism

The extent of Milton's engagement with Italy meant that he would surely try his hand at the pastorals. It began with 'Arcades', an entertainment/performance presented to the Countess Dowager of Darby. It is marked by the appearance of nymphs and shepherds. The companion poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' are splashed lavishly with pastoral elements. In 'Comus', the setting is purely pastoral. Moreover, it has a Genius of the Woods disguised as a shepherd. Pastoralism in Milton culminated in 'Lycidas', an elegy on the death of Edward King. It firmly established the pastoral elegiac form in English with conventions drawn from

Theocritus onwards. It is also notable for a mix of the Pagan with the Christian, and the pastoral with the political.

You can also now observe John Milton, the prose pamphleteer. You might be surprised to know that during 1640s and 50s, he hardly composed poetry, but wrote many prose pamphlets. Milton began his pamphleteering career with "Of Reformation touching Church-Discipline in England" (1641). This was a response occasioned by Bishop Hall's pamphlet in support of episcopacy. He follows it up with "Of Prelatical Episcopacy", "Animadversions" and "The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelacy". "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce" is rare in the sense that it was occasioned by something intensely personal- desertion by his first wife. Expression of frank and liberal views on Marriage -a sacred institution- and Divorce -a taboo- had alienated his allies, the Presbyterians. "Areopagitica" (1644), an impassioned plea to Parliament for abolishing censorship and upholding the freedom of speech, is Milton's best-known prose work. The tone here is hortatory and the style rhetorical with a touch of the poignant. "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates" (1649), which defends the execution of Charles I, is the most radical political statement of Milton. Here, he refers to Kingship as a social contract thereby challenging the divine right theory of Kings championed by the Cavaliers.

There are other pamphlets also, but at this stage I would like to refer to two different works- *History of Britain* and *De Doctrina Christina*. The first one, in six books, covers British history only up to the Norman Conquest of 1066. The second is a theological work in Latin whose manuscript was discovered by Charles Summers in 1825. You would find it interesting to note that some beliefs held by Milton in *Doctrine* almost amount to heresy. For instance, he thinks that the Holy Trinity are not coequal, but hierarchical, and that God created Universe out of something, not out of nothing.

SAQ

1. What idea is to be gained from the knowledge of Milton's works ? How do we now understand his preoccupations ? (80 words)

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2. What does this tell us of his poetic abilities ? (50 words)

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1.4 Critical Reception :

Paradise lost has had a deservedly long tradition of critical reception. At different times, critics have deliberated upon diverse aspects of this English epic. This section will take you through some of the lively and engaging criticism and will endeavour to touch upon as many issues as possible. The idea is to show to you the possibilities so that you also develop a critical perspective of your own.

To begin chronologically, Dryden and John Dennis were among the first to comment upon Milton and *Paradise Lost*. Dryden had composed an epigram on Milton that ensured Milton's stature as second only to Shakespeare in English Literature. John Dennis, a critic, had praised *Paradise Lost* for its sublimity. In subsequent centuries, Voltaire, Dr. Johnson and Coleridge also sang the same tune. However, at such a nascent stage, Dennis found that the language of the epic had impurities and that the devils were invested with qualities "allied to Goodness". These two issues have been the sites of fierce critical contestation ever since.

Joseph Addison joined issue with Dennis when he remarked that the language (English) had sunk under Milton. Dr. Johnson opined that Milton was highly influenced by the Italians while Keats called *Paradise Lost* a "corruption of our language". He even went to the extent of proclaiming that "life to him (Milton) would be death to me". In the twentieth century, Eliot and Leavis have lambasted Milton for his language. In an article in the journal *Scrutiny*, Leavis announced that "Milton's dislodgement in the past decade after his two centuries of predominance, was effected with little fuss". In his celebrated essay "The Metaphysical Poets", Eliot held Milton's overriding preoccupation with language chiefly responsible for the onset of what he famously termed "dissociation of sensibility". Moreover, Eliot thought that in his epic, Milton had unusually favoured the auditory imagination over the visual and the tactile. However, Milton's language has had its share of admirers. Macaulay wrote encomiastically about it while the grand Victorian persona of Matthew Arnold had found virtue in it and termed it the 'Grand Style'. In the twentieth century, Mark Pattison has words of praise while Christopher Reeks, in his book *Milton's Grand Style*, wrote a subtle critique of it.

The second issue raised by Dennis largely dominated discussions of *Paradise Lost* through the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This was specially the case after William Blake's paradoxical comment:

"The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of
Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and
Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil's
party without knowing it."

(The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.)

The Romantics were quick to seize the initiative this comment had unleashed: Shelley found Milton's Devil far superior to his God morally while Hazlitt found "Satan the most heroic subject that ever was chosen for a poem". Walter Raleigh opined that Milton had intended Satan as the hero of the epic. This camp did not go unchallenged. The strongest defense of Milton came from C. S. Lewis, who read *Paradise Lost* on the terms that, according to him, Milton had laid down. His "A Preface to *Paradise Lost*" is, till date, the flag-bearer of Miltonism. Some others like Charles Williams had also viewed Satan as more a fool than a hero.

Stop to Consider

Paradise Lost has occasioned lively debates among poets and critics.

One can hardly think of another text in English that has elicited opinions as diverse as this epic has. Take, for instance, Stanley Fish's brilliant book *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. There are other such instances, but the most engaging debates were generated by E M W Tillyard and C S Lewis. Tillyard, in his *Milton*, set out to recover the true meaning of Milton's epic. And, according to him, what the poem is really about could be known by knowing "the true state of Milton's mind when he wrote it." This was nonetheless a blatant instance of expressionistic criticism, especially if one takes into account the fact that at nearly the same time, Eliot had formulated his 'Impersonality Theory of Poetry'. C S Lewis objected to this, and to many other premises on which Tillyard had based his thesis. A controversy raged for some time that finally resulted in *The Personal Heresy* (1939), a book by Tillyard on determining a writer's true state of mind through his works.

B. Rajan, in his influential study *Paradise Lost and the Seventeenth Century Reader*, has dealt with this issue differently. He finds preconceived notions useless in appreciating Satan. Rather, he calls for jettisoning the dichotomy of 'the hero' and 'the fool' (set up by Raleigh) as these terms carry the baggage of the ethical system that the reader judges from. Satan, for him, is first a poetic representation and hence, who or what he is in the poem is circumstantial and functional. In the same breath, Rajan disagrees with critics who see in Satan, a contradiction between his head and heart, between the Protestant and the Poet.

Discussions about Satan must be reassuring to you for he simply straddles the first two books. But you know that there is much to *Paradise Lost* and I shall touch upon some other important issues raised. When Blake made the above-mentioned comment, he was also pointing towards some sort of a 'slippage' between the poet's intention and the ultimate creation. This insight has been the source of some significant criticism, most notably the perspective on Narrative. Concerns have been raised as to the suitability of the Christian story to the epic form. A J A Waldock, in *Paradise Lost and its Critics*, has succinctly argued how the small fissures and the crevices in the Genesis story were inflated into unmanageable proportions once Milton chose it as the subject of his epic. He is of the opinion that while writing the epic, Milton had realized this. E M W Tillyard takes up the chronology of 'the fall' and through reference to specific instances in the text, concludes that Adam and Eve must be fallen even before they had eaten the apple. Difficulties allegedly encountered by Milton in the portraiture of God, the Angels, Adam and Eve, Heaven, etc. have also been raised by critics.

Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* is a classic instance of Reader-Response Criticism. Fish discusses Milton as a master-rhetorician engaged in playing games with reader. Taking this as central to the epic, Fish establishes how the reader, in reading *Paradise Lost*, is led on to an acceptance of his own guilty conscience. Fish's analysis was a response to the anti-Miltonism of some critics, especially William Empson's book *Milton's God*. In his book, Empson combines sharp critical insights with polemics to argue that Milton had laid bare the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in Christianity, and by extension, the Christian God. The portraiture of God has also generated lively criticism with Satanist critics rejoicing at the apparent tyranny of Milton's God. The portrait and dialogues of God in *Paradise Lost* are closely linked to Predestination and exercise of Free Will, a much-debated topic in Philosophy and one that brought out sharp contradictions within Milton.

Since the 1970s, contemporary critical trends have dominated discussions of *Paradise Lost*. Critical Theory also has had its fair share as Milton's epic has been subjected to Marxist, Historicist, Feminist and Postcolonial interrogations. Two classic historicist critiques of *Paradise Lost* were written by Christopher Hill and Andrew Milner. Both the critics discuss Milton's contemporary social position vis-à-vis sects and factions like the Levellers, Diggers and Independents. They also read into the epic contemporary events, developments and crises. Frederic Jameson takes a classic Marxist standpoint when he discusses Adam as the new bourgeois individual and Satan as a Feudal Baron in war with his liege, God the father. In *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power*, Catherine Belsey offers a deconstructive and feminist reading of the epic. Feminist readings of the epic have been particularly illuminating as Milton is alleged to be a misogynist. Sandra Gilbert discusses the response to *Paradise Lost* of nineteenth-century women readers. In her reading, she takes to task the grand masculinist bogey and offers two novel trinities- Eve, Satan and Sin against God, the Son and Adam. Mary Nyqvist, in a scintillating essay titled "The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity of *Paradise Lost*", demonstrates through Eve in *Paradise Lost*, the construction of a domesticated and feeble Femininity that is subservient to Patriarchy. Very recently, this epic has been read from a postcolonial perspective, and the best example is Martin Evans' *Milton's Imperial Epic: Paradise Lost and the Discourse of Colonialism*. The numerous pagan and non-Western references that Milton had employed while dealing with the fallen angels and Hell have opened up possibilities for postcolonial criticism.

Check Your Progress

1. Why, do you think, did *Paradise Lost* evoke so much critical debate?
(Hint: This answer will lead to the significance of the work.)
2. Which aspects of *Paradise Lost* have been the topics of such debate?
(Hint: Satan, the descriptions of Hell, Eve, among others.)
3. Write a brief note on the Romantic interpretation of Milton's Satan.
(Hint: Connect Romanticism with social revolution.)
4. What estimate of Milton's Christian beliefs emerges from contemporary criticism ?
(Hint: Recent critics have been willing to accept Milton's version of Christianity).

1.5 Context of the Poem:

From a very early age, Milton intuitively knew that he was destined for something great, something that the world "would not willingly let die". In the pamphlet "The Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelacy", Milton states his desire to write a poem that would be "doctrinal and exemplary for a nation" and one that would match the achievements of other European languages. In a way, this forms the basic context of the poem. Growing nationalism across Europe also provided Milton with the necessary impetus to take up the writing of an epic. The choice of 'the Fall' as the subject must have been influenced by his desire to attempt "things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme". Interestingly, Milton had pondered over legends like the Arthurian Legend as the possible subject of his would-be epic. It seems very likely that the failure of the Republican Government as well as Puritan Theocracy had forced Milton to search for a safe subject. He chose one that would have justified the ways of God to men and also to himself. Sadly, he failed to notice the hazards that his subject had in store for him.

Theology and *Paradise Lost*

Paradise Lost is a Christian epic and there can be no doubt that the fundamental argument of the poem is theological. Milton's inheritance of a religious stubbornness and the prevailing social and religious situation indeed proved prophetic. In fact, during Milton's time, young men looked upon the Church as a profession and a career. Milton was no different, but the rigidity and corruption of the Anglican Church forced a change of thinking. He gradually moved towards Puritanism, and we find that the theological base of his epic is decidedly Puritan. One can discern this streak as early as the 'Nativity Ode', and every composition of his till *Samson Agonistes* may be viewed as developing an argument. Milton's Christian faith is succinctly expressed in 'De Doctrina Christina', which many consider as a prose gloss on his epic. The arguments in these two texts sometimes run counter to the trends of conventional theology. For instance, Milton was much moved by Calvinism, but certainly he didn't go along with its doctrine of Predestination as it clashed with the exercise of Free Will. Readers of 'Areopagitica' and *Paradise Lost* will vouch for the fact that their writer vehemently stood for the exercise of Free Will.

1.6 Reading The Poem

When *Paradise Lost* was first published in 1667, it had ten books. In the next edition, two books were split and the number of books was raised to twelve. You have been prescribed only the first two books for your study. We may begin with a **brief summary** of the two books:

The setting for the first two books is Hell. When the narrative begins, Satan, the fallen archangel, is discovered lying prostrate with his companions in a burning lake. At Satan's exhortation, they rise and assemble on nearby "dry land". Through fiery speeches, he tries to uplift the morale of his followers, and to deliberate on the future course of action, he calls for a full council. Within moments, fallen angels led by Mammon, build a huge structure called "Pandemonium". At the end of the first book, "the great consul begins".

In the second book, Moloch, Belial, Mammon and Beelzebub take part in the great debate in Hell. Open war is discarded in favour of indirect revenge to be taken upon God's favoured creature, Man. Satan volunteers to journey through chaos in search of the new world, the dwelling place of mankind. He passes through the gates of Hell guarded by Sin and Death, and after journeying through the "wild abyss", he finally eyes Paradise hanging on a golden chain.

This brief summary should facilitate your entry into the text. There are other parameters also, knowledge of which would ensure a smooth sailing through the text. Let us take these up in different paragraphs:

The genre of a literary piece is significant for a better understanding of the text. *Paradise Lost* is an epic, --rather, it is the only epic in English. There are some epic conventions which have been transmitted from Homer through Virgil. Some of these that you would come across in the opening books of this epic are – statement of the subject; invocation of the Muse; beginnings of the action "in medias res"; catalogue of names, etc.

Moreover, you should bear in mind that an epic is essentially a narrative with a narrative/narratorial voice. The **narrative voice** in *Paradise Lost* can be safely taken to be that of John Milton. But you must be on your guard as the 'narrative voice' is intrusive and makes occasional comments and interventions. Waldo was almost livid at the constant

authorial intrusions in *Paradise Lost*. Stanley Fish, discussing "Milton's programme of reader harassment", takes up the instance cited by Waldock. It comes immediately after Satan's first speech (I, 84-124). When the authorial voice intrudes :

" So spake th' Apostate Angel, though in pain,
Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despair" (125-6)

Critics like Waldock opine that Milton does this deliberately to correct in excess while Fish considers it as an authorial device by which the reader is steadily brought face to face with his own guilty conscience. The amount of significance that you decide to attach to authorial intrusions like the one cited above will determine to a large extent your reading of *Paradise Lost*. In this connection, you may find Chaucer's *Prologue* interesting as it also has lots of narratorial intrusions.

Stop to Consider

Cosmology and *Paradise Lost*

Have you ever wondered how important knowledge of cosmology is for a proper understanding of *Paradise Lost*? Actually, cosmology is central to the whole design of this epic.

Milton's universe is medieval, and mostly drawn from the early Christian apocalyptic works. It contains Heaven (also called 'Empyream'), chaos, Earth or the world, and Hell. The relationship is hierarchical and vertical. Heaven in *Paradise Lost* is vast, but not infinite. It has battlements, long unbroken walls, and doors that open into chaos. Before Satan fell, there were only Heaven and chaos. Variouslly called as "the wasteful deep", "the hoary deep", and "the wild abyss"; chaos has been described as "a dark illimitable ocean, without bound". It is ruled by the God of Chaos alongwith his consort 'Night'. 'Orcus', 'Ades', 'Demogorgon', 'Runiour', 'Tumult' etc. are some of the inhabitants of "chaos".

Immediately before the fall of Satan, Hell was carved out of the nethermost region of chaos. It has a gate guarded by Sin and Death. The world, created after Satan's expulsion from Heaven is a globe that is suspended in chaos. It is linked to Heaven by a golden chain and a golden staircase.

Heaven is inhabited by God the Father, Messiah the son and Angels. God sits on the throne of Heaven which is on the Holy Mount. The angelic beings are divided into three hierarchies, each hierarchy subdivided into three orders or choies. Seraphin, Cherubin and Thrones comprised the first hierarchy; Dominations, Virtues and Powers, the second: Principalities, Archangels and Angels formed the third hierarchy.

Diction and language are two important parameters for appreciating *Paradise Lost*. You already know that both these have been the cause of some scathing criticism of Milton. His diction in his epic has often been pejoratively branded as 'Latinate', and it is not wide off the mark. Surely, some of his grammatical constructions like lines 44-47 of Book I, are based on Latin. Then, he shows a penchant for using words with their old or original meanings.

Like most other epics, Milton's epic is also characterized by countless allusions and epic similes. These help enlarge the scope and dimensions of an epic, and matches, in part, the immensity of the epic action. In Milton's epic, they also attest to the scholarship of Milton, mainly the six years at Horton that he had dedicated to a study of European classics.

One thing that you should never lose track of is that you have been prescribed only two books out of twelve. The first two books are, in a sense, quite different from the rest. The context for this statement is certainly Satan. In Books I & II, he steadily grows in stature, both in the eyes of his companions as well as Milton's readers. Therefore, caution is recommended with regard to opinions of Satan, his heroism, and his place in the epic. There is a danger of biased opinion being formed because of partial reading of *Paradise Lost*. Hence it is suggested that you read through the "Arguments" that precede each book. Now, we may begin with the text proper.

SAQ

1. Can Milton be called a nationalist ? Can we speculate on this question ?(70 words)

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2. Is the context of *Paradise Lost* biased towards the personal rather than the political and the religious ? (80 words)

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3. What kind of expectations are aroused by the use of the label "epic" for a literary work considering that *Paradise Lost* has also been seen as 'drama' ? (150 words)

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4. To what extent was Milton's conception of the Universe influenced by seventeenth-century science ? (100 words)

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The Verse

Added in 1668 at the insistence of the publishee, Milton here replies to popular opinion on "why the poem rhymes not." Via references to Homer and Virgil, he explicitly states that verse without rhymes is the true measure of heroic poetry. In the 'Preface' to *Tamburlaine the Great*, Marlowe had argued almost along the same lines. In fact, the similarities are interesting. However, far more interesting was the response of Dryden. Apparently peeved at Milton's low opinion of rhyme. Dryden explains the actual reason for Milton not using rhyme : " rhyme was not his (Milton's) talent".

Book I

The Argument

Also added in 1668, it serves as a brief summary of the action in Book I. Actually, every book is preceded by one 'Argument'.

Lines 1 - 26

Among the most important lines in the whole poem, they serve as the statement of the subject and invocation of the Muse. The first five lines state the subject. Notice that Milton includes within the ambit of his subject, getting back of "the blissful seat." But the poem proper has only Visions of it. You may also notice how the cumulative effect of words like 'disobedience' 'Forbidden', 'mortal', 'Death', 'Woe' and 'loss' is partly offset by 'Restore' and 'regain'.

In lines 6-26, Milton invokes the muse to his aid. This is a statement in epic convention, but he turns it upside down. Instead of choosing one of the nine Muses that reside on Mt. Helicon, he appeals to the creative Power (called 'Urania' in Book VII) that inspired Muses and other prophets. This break in convention was certainly a play to accommodate the Christian story/subject within an otherwise pagan form of the epic. This story, once accommodated, yields space to Puritanical theology by lines 17-18.

" And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure."

Finally, this section closes with the statement of the objective to "assert Eternal Providence/ And justify the ways of God to man."

Lines 27-83

These lines are significant as they employ another epic convention : beginning of the action in 'medias res'.

At the beginning of the action, Satan is bound in "adamantive chains", is seen lying along with companions in a "fiery Deluge". At the end of this section, Satan is ready to address his deputy Beelzebub. These lines are important for many reasons. Notice the Subject-verb-Object invention in lines 44-45. It is a good example of Milton's penchant for Latin construction. The oxymoron "darkness visible" is certainly one of the most cited example of rhetorical devices. Again, this section also contains a lot of objective information. For instance, line 50 informs that the fall of Satan and his companions lasted nine days. While line 75 informs that the distance between Hell and Heaven is thrice that between the centre of the Earth and the Pole.

Description of Hell

Hell is a very important site in *Paradise Lost*. Hence, it needed to be objectively as well as subjectively created for the readers. In Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Mephistopheles had described Hell, albeit very subjectively. But, that definitely would not have sufficed for Milton's epic. So, he describes Hell as a "fiery Gulf" or "fiery Deluge", that is surrounded on all sides by a wall of fire. The fire in Hell is fed by "ever burning Sulphur unconsumed." He locates Hell at the farthest possible point from Heaven, a distance that is thrice the distance that exists between the centre of the earth and the farthest pole. The

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on Milton's choice of matter for his epic.
2. Bring out the significance of Milton's description of Hell.
3. Explore the functions of the epic similes and allusions.
4. Outline the cosmology which underlies the poem.
5. Show the contestation between the 'epic' and 'Christian' elements in the poem.

Lines 84-124

Satan's first speech in *Paradise Lost* is addressed to his deputy, Beelzebub. Initially, he struggled to recognize his fallen colleague. This could have led Satan to express his own despair at the loss of Heaven. However, his pride intervenes, and the speech becomes symptomatic of the defiance that characterizes him throughout the first two books. For the readers of this epic, this speech sets the record straight on many counts: "sense of injured merit" (98) had led Satan to rebel against God when the Son was anointed the successor to the throne of Heaven; the rebellion was a "Glorious Enterprise" (89) joined by "innumerable force of spirits around" (101); and, the loss was due to "Thunder", a secret weapon unleashed by God, who "holds the Tyranny of Heaven" (124). All this is of course, Satan's version and you should be gingerly in accepting them. For instance, Satan's "Glorious Enterprise" is only an "impious war" (43) according to the narrator.

There are two things that Satan proclaims here, and they are to be hardly doubted. He talks of possessing an "unconquerable will" (106). Observe in later stages, how the element of 'quile' dictates the path of their revenge. This section would conclude with a remark on Heaven. Satan refers to Heaven as "the happy Realms of Light" (85), and his use of expressions like "transcendent brightness", "outshine", and "bright" help reinforce the impression. Throughout the epic, Heaven is portrayed in images of Light and brightness, a fact full of poignancy because Milton was blind when he wrote this epic.

Lines 125-127

Observe how the narrative voice tries to reverse or falsify the effect of Satan's speech by the use of the expression "but rack't with deep despair". Narrational intrusions like this are common in *Paradise Lost*.

Lines 128-191

Beelzebub begins his reply under the influence of his Chief's rhetoric by offering praises to his Chief for having "endangered Heaven's perpetual king". However, he soon slips into dependency as he considers their defeat to be ample proof of omnipotence of their conquerors, the "Almighty". This view, along with a tone of moderation, will be consistently preserved in Beelzebub's later speeches. This speech touches a core issue of the poem when Beelzebub ponders as to what - "strength, or chance, or Fate" - upholds God's supremacy.

Satan retorts swiftly to the apparent obsequy of his deputy's reply and declares that

"To be aught good never will be our task,
But ever to do ill our sole delight." (159-60)

He furthers this aim in lines 162-66, lines that state Milton's theme, Satan's project of eternal evil, and lines that look forward to the course of human history as an eternal tug-of-war

between good and evil. Mark the apparent democratic tone that is introduced with the use of the verb "consult" (187).

Stop to Consider

Satan's Democratic Ideals

As leader, Satan adopts a lot of democratic postures. He tries to give his revolt the tint of a popular uprising (I, 100-02); he calls for consultation to decide the future course of action (I, 185-87, 659-60); and he grounds his claims to leadership on popular consent (II, 19-24). The feather in the cap is of course his voluntary offer to undertake the journey in search of the 'new world'. These postures gain importance on two counts - Milton's republican antecedents, and the view held by many critics - mainly Satanists - that Milton's sympathies in *Paradise Lost* lie with Satan. Did Milton portray in Satan a true democratic leader that the English Revolution failed to produce?

I can understand the temptation to say 'yes'. However, close scrutiny of Satan's speeches resists such a view. In his first speech, he resolves to wage eternal war (I, 120-1), while in the second, he declares his project of evil (I, 159-60). Even in his address to his assembled followers, he charts out a course of action concerning the 'new world'. Thus Satan has already drawn the battlelines before consulting his council. However, narratorial interventions strengthen in the readers the impression that Satan is a despot, a charge that he and his followers level at God. You may, therefore, alternatively consider Satan's democratic postures as instances of ironic parody.

The choice is yours.

Lines 192-241

Milton introduces another epic convention here, the epic simile. An epic simile is an extended comparison where the 'vehicle' (the object introduced for the sake of comparison) is developed far beyond its original points of signification and likeness. The first epic simile of *Paradise Lost* gives an impression of the physical immensity of Satan (192-202). While the comparisons with Titans and Leviathan point to the immensity of Satan, the following anecdote of "the Pilot" (203-08) subtly hints at Satan's potential for deceit, and anticipates Eve's deception by Satan. This simile establishes a pattern within the epic: Milton does not literally describe personages and places, but gives impressions through comparisons and anecdotes. He follows up his first simile with another (230-37) where the contours of Hell are likened to a place devastated by earthquake or volcanic activity. The sense-pattern recurs in the descriptions of Heaven and chaos. T.S. Eliot - who took Milton to task for a defective visual imagination - thought that Milton excelled in the "imagery suggestive of vast size, limitless space, abysmal depth, and light and darkness", a quality that the theme and setting of *Paradise Lost* demanded.

In this section, Milton makes an intervention through the image of an omniscient God (210-20), who also has foreknowledge. This keeps recurring repeatedly (e.g., at the beginning of Book III), and it has been a favourite tool at the hands of Satanists and other critics like Empson who view God as a tyrant. The question, --"why such a God sanctioned the escape of Satan, the fall of mankind-etc?"----, rankles throughout the epic. A smarter narratorial intervention is, however, made in lines 238-41.

SAQ

1. Was Milton writing a Christian epic? (80 words)

.....
.....

2. To what extent does Milton address the norms of epic conventions? (70 words)

.....
.....

3. How much weightage is to be given to the narratorial interventions? (100 words)

.....
.....

3. Is the description of Hell more subjective than objective? (60 words)

.....
.....

4. Does the introduction of the figure of omniscient God hamper the natural progress of the narrative? (80 words)

.....
.....

Lines 242-521

Satan's third speech (242-70) is the most significant of all. He bids formal adieu to the abode of "celestial light", appeals to Hell to receive its "new possessor", and continues the argument which stresses that only Thunder had made God greater. In a sentence that smacks of political trickery, he tries to come to terms with the loss of Heaven :

"The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n." (254-5)

Of course, this reaffirms the old belief that Hell and Heaven are psychological states, a streak that runs through the descriptions of both. Satan also utters those words that have since become the manifesto of rebellion :

"To reign is worth ambition though in Hell :
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n." (262-3)

Beelzebub, in his reply (272-82), urges Satan to rouse their fallen mates by giving a clarion call. Satan does accordingly, and his exhortation (315-30) ends in a breathtaking crescendo :

"Awake, arise, or be for ever fallen." (330)

Meanwhile, Milton continues to employ similes to describe Satan's shield and spear. While the shield is compared to the moon as seen through Galileo's telescope (284-91), the spear is compared to the tallest pine :

"His Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the Mast

Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand," (292-4).

Notice specially the deliberate manner in which Milton delays the climax through a different arrangement of words. This is a characteristic feature of *Paradise Lost*'s syntax; he follows up this dual comparison with another simile where Satan's fallen 'Legions' are compared to the autumnal leaves on the brooks in Vollombrosa, near Florence. The comparison of a multitude of fallen leaves had precedents in Homer, Virgil, Dante, etc., but here it is loaded with the baggage of Milton's Italian journey, probably the happiest period of his life. Interestingly, Milton had also visited Galileo at Fesole.

Roused by their General's voice, the innumerable fallen angels arise, fly and assemble in front of their leader. Milton employs two rapid similes (338-55) to capture their flight and their subsequent assembly. Through a master stroke, Milton arranges the four similes relating to the fallen angels in such a way that they rise to a crescendo. The comparison begins with plant imagery (Vollombrosa and sedge on Red-Sea), moves through insect imagery (armies of Huns, etc.). This sort of heightened tempo is a characteristic of Milton's 'Grand Style'. Commentators from A.W. Verity onwards, have pointed to the implicit denigration and moral judgment that accompany these similes. In fact, one can observe a deliberate pattern whereby Milton employs oriental and pagan similes while dealing with Satan, his followers, and Hell.

Milton and Colonialism

By the time *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, England had grown into a major colonial power. Certainly, Milton could not have remained insulated from contemporary developments. Though there seems to be no direct connection between this epic and colonialism, it has been put under the scanner like some other texts. Most notable is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Even a text like Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* has been read from a postcolonial perspective by Edward Said.

Milton's text lends itself to a postcolonial critique mainly on account of the oriental references it contains. In Book I, 294, Milton uses the word 'Ammiral' while describing Satan's spear. Etymologically, this word is derived from 'amir', an Arabic word meaning ruler. Milton's propensity to portray Satan as an oriental despot is again observed in I, 348 when he refers to Satan as 'Sultan', when the angels reduce their size to enter Pandemonium, they are compared to pygmies beyond the Himalayas. Again, this propensity recurs at the beginning of Book II, when Satan is described seated on a royal throne. Apart from these, the first two books abound in numerous pagan and heathen references, the best instance being the catalogue of evils. It is disturbing to note that Milton has described Satan, his followers and Hell almost entirely in oriental and pagan terms. Needless to say, most of these references carry connotations of debasement, debauchery and denigration.

In Homer, there is a catalogue of ships and their captains who took part in the Trojan war; in Virgil, there is a catalogue of Warriors; and in Milton, there is a catalogue of Devils (356-522). This is an epic convention and so is the invocation of the Muse (376) at intervals. Milton encountered a problem because the names of the fallen angels were struck off from the "heavenly Records" (361-3). He adopts the prevalent view that the wandering Devils were absorbed into the heathen pantheon (364-75), and, accordingly, catalogues the names and respective genealogy of the Devil's leaders. The twelve names of Satan's generals are from the idolatry of Heathenism, an obvious continuation of the pattern already discussed.

The first, Moloch, an Ammonite Sun-God, whose worship required infant sacrifice. The second is Chemos, a moabite Sun-God, whose worship necessitated very crude and obscene rites. The catalogue is made up by Baalim and Ashtaroth, Thammuz, Dagon, Rimmon, the Egyptian gods - Orisis, Isis and Oras, and Ionian gods. The last was Belial, a lewd spirit who had no temples dedicated to him, but dwelt in courts, palaces and luxurious cities. You may do well to notice the debasement that accompanies each genealogy.

Roused by the clarion call of their leader, the fallen angels swiftly arrange themselves into a formidable army. To the sound of "Dorian music", they move silently "in perfect phalanx", a battle formation reminiscent of Milton's contemporary times. They brandish banners, spears and helmets, while Azazel, a Cherub, unfurls "Th' Imperial Ensigns". Through rapid comparisons to the great armies in human history (573-87). Milton gives his readers an impression of the size and strength of the army that stood on the plains of Hell in front of their towering leader, Satan. Association of such splendour with Satan's army is intriguing as Milton had ended the catalogue of Devils with the verb "flocking" (522). The animal connotations of this verb does not sit easily with the grandeur of Satan's army.

Check Your Progress

1. Do you think Milton's choice of blank verse for his epic was justified ?
2. Milton makes very intriguing use of a couple of epic conventions. Would you call them ironic ?
- 3 "The hallmark of Satan's speeches is their consistency". Comment on this remark.
4. What purpose do epic similes serve in an epic narrative?
5. Comment on the use of proper names by Milton.

Lines 588-667

The focus now shifts to the commander, Satan. Under close scrutiny of the narrator's lenses, Satan, for the first time, is shown to express remorse at having wrought the downfall of his followers. It is a very rare moment in the epic, and is perhaps matched only by his soliloquy on Mt. Niphates in Book IV. However, you may consider it as a narratorial intrusion into Satan's psyche. Satan prepares to speak, falters thrice, weeps, and, finally, holding back the surge of emotions, begins his long anticipated address to his followers.

He begins by expressing incredulity at the defeat of such a "united force of Gods", and ascribes the loss to a lack of knowledge on their part about God's secret weapon, 'Thunder'. Through a pun "tempted our attempts", (642), Satan hints that their ignorance about the secret weapon might be the best course of their rebellion, subsequent defeat, and ultimate expulsion from Hell (By pitting Satan's 'lack of knowledge' against God's 'foreknowledge', Milton might be playing a malicious trick on God's adversary). Chastened by their dire encounter with God's strength, Satan discards force in favour of "fraud or quile" (645-7), and again calls for war (661-2). To sound politically correct, he calls for a "Full counsel".

Satan's address has a singular importance within the epic : it introduces the human element into the story. In his speech, he alludes to an earlier prophecy made in Heaven concerning the creation of a new world to be inhabited by a favoured "generation". Satan hints that this world, if already created, may be the first target of their revenge. Notice how this determines the adversarial course of human history.

Lines 663-798

Satan's war cry is greeted with cheers and the sound of swords clashing against shields (663-9). Then, led on by Mammon, the fallen angels build a magnificent structure called "Pandemonium", which has since come to mean confusion and disorder, was a coinage of Milton. Designed by Mulciber (Hephaestus in Greece), the architecture of Pandemonium (710-17) has been speculated to bear striking resemblances to St. Peter's Basilica at Rome. The speculation is bolstered by the comparison of the fallen angels to 'bees' (768-75). 'Bee' was the emblem of Pope Urban VIII; the founder of St. Peter's and his followers were generally nicknamed 'bees'.

I would like to end Book I with a couple of questions. The first relates to the fact that the devils are transformed into dwarfs so as to facilitate their entry into Pandemonium (775-92). To say the least, it sounds mock-heroic, especially after the splendid fashion in which they erect the Pandemonium. Christopher Ricks thinks that Milton's play on the words "smallest" (989) and "large" (990) constitute 'a superbly contemptuous pun'. It is of interest to note that while the followers are reduced in size, Satan and other leaders retain their sizes. Was Milton subtly but deliberately falsifying the democratic postures of Satan? The second concerns Mammon, who, even in heaven, had his "looks and thoughts" "clownward bent" so as to admire the gold-trodden pavement. Now, this raises the question : was Mammon already fallen before his fall? You may refer back to Tillyard's criticism included in the section on critical reception.

Check Your Progress

1. Do you think Milton made adjustments to fit his Christian theme into an essentially pagan form, the epic? If yes, what were those adjustments?
2. Descriptions of the Devils and Hell have elicited opposite critical responses. What would be your response?
3. Make a critical estimate of Satan and Beelzebub vis-à-vis each other.
4. The use of proper names is a favourite device of Milton. What function, do you think, they perform?
5. Commenting on lines 619-20, Herbert Grierson had posed the question - "Is there even in Shakespeare a greater moment?" In the light of the above, critically estimate Satan's address (622-62) vis-à-vis his other speeches.
6. The erection of Pandemonium and the cataloguing of the Devils point to a possible contradiction within Milton. Do you agree?

Book II

The action shifts to the inside of Pandemonium where the "Full Counsel" is about to begin.

The Argument - It is the summary of Book II.

Lines 1-10

Milton continues with oriental and pagan analogies in describing Satan, who is seated on a royal throne.

Lines 11-42

In his opening address, Satan refers to Heaven as "our just inheritance of old" (38) which he has not yet given up for lost. Is this a carrot dangled to keep his army united and faithful? Satan discovers a virtue in Hell - since none shall envy them their possession, Hell is the best place to regroup their strength and forces. The most striking feature of this speech is Satan's attempt at justifying his claims to leadership.

Lines 43-429

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton has invested many things with ironic significance. The catalogue of Devils in Book I is a case in point. The debate in Hell, that strictly follows the norms of Parliamentary democracy, is loaded with contemporary significance. During the Civil War, a lot of such debates were witnessed specially, between the supporters of Cromwell and the Levellers. The failure of the republican government to live up to democratic ideas might have led Milton to depict the greater debate in Hell as an ironic parody of his contemporary debates.

The debate in Hell bears testimony to the sheer poetic genius of John Milton. Participated in by Moloch, Belial, Mammon, Beelzebub and Satan, it is one of the most important episode in the whole epic. Notice the way Milton mixes rhetoric with caution and reticence in every speech. They seem to perfectly match with the character of each speaker as outlined in Book I. Moloch, the "horrid king besmeared with blood/of human sacrifice" (I, 392-3), is the first speaker. Characterised as the 'General' by Empson in his book *Milton's God*, Moloch speaks the true militarist's language :

"My sentence is for open war : of wiles,
More unenpert, I boast not : " (51-2)

Favouring a showdown with God, he bases his argument on three points: ascent is their natural and proper motion (75-6); nothing can be worse than dwelling in Hell (84-6); and, they are made of immortal substance (99-100).

Moloch's last word 'revenge' is picked up by the smooth-tongued Belial. Characterised as the 'Lawyer' by Empson, Belial is lewd and vice personified (refer to I, 490-505). He offers a very suave argument for maintaining status quo. He begins by countering Moloch point by point, and argues that their revenge against the throne of Heaven might end in "flat despair". Then, he fires a volley of rhetorical questions (151-86) to drive home his point (187-8). He is for bidding time in the hope that chance might turn up something favourable. He, thus, counsels "ignoble ease, and peaceful sloth, Not peace." (227-8)

Mammon, characterized an 'Industrialist' by Erupson, advocates building up of a magnificent empire in Hell through "labour and endurance" (262). While Mammon straightway rejects

Moloch council, he partly agrees with Belial's. Let me reproduce here remarks of A.W. verity :

"The gist of what Belial said was - 'let us temporize, stay here and trust to chance - something may happen.' Mammon answer - 'let us indeed stay here, but not idly look to the future : rather straightway set about founding a realm to compensate for what we have lost there.' Belial, type for ease and sloth, stands, as it were, halfway between Moloch and Mammon."
(Verify, A.W. ed. *Paradise Lost* : Book I & II. Calculate : Radha Publishers, 1998. 111-2)

A degree of referential work is always necessary to understand the subtle undertones in a literary text. With our knowledge of Milton's close political involvement with his times, it is helpful to have this reference in our study. The list below is meant to give you relevant information -

The names of Milton's contemporaries

Stock, Richard - A graduate of Christ's college, Cambridge, he was the parish priest during Milton's childhood. Known for his bitter opposition to Rome and the Jesuits, he might have influenced the decision to send Milton to Cambridge.

Young, Thomas - A Scottish Presbyterian Minister, he was Milton's tutor before Milton went to St. Paul's. During the initial years of the Civil War, he led a group called SPECTYMNUUS - a title formed from the initials of five Presbyterian Ministers. Young played a large role in moulding Milton's early religious sensibility.

Gill, Alexander - Headmaster of St. Paul's, he was an eminent educationalist, and an expert on classical languages. At St. Paul's, he often used to quote examples from Spenser, Sidney and Daniel. His son, who bore the same name, was a poet and a friend of Milton.

Hall, Joseph - An alumnus of Cambridge, a satirist, and the Bishop of Norwich, Hall was known for his pro-episcopal stand. It was his pamphlet in support of episcopacy that heralded the onset of Milton's pamphleteering career.

Laud, William - Made the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, he, in league with Charles I, tried to force episcopacy and the Book of common Prayer on the Scots. Known for enforcing uniformity in the Church of England, Laud was executed in 1645 by zealous Puritans.

Lawes, Henry - Remembered as one of the most distinguished caroline song-writers, he entered Charles I's court in 1631. It is speculated that Milton wrote 'Arcades' and Comus at his suggestion, the music for both being composed by him.

Diodati, Charles - A close school friend of Milton, his ancestral home in Italy was visited by Milton during the Italian journey. They exchanged letters till Diodati's death in 1638, which Milton mourns in "Epitaphium Damonis".

I hope you have noted the consistency that exists between the speech and the individual speaker. The same is true of Beelzebub, who now prepares to speak. Disturbed at the apparent popularity of the peace initiative (284-98), Beelzebub rises to place his views. Mark the turnaround at the beginning of his address :

"Thrones and imperial Powers, Offspring of Heaven,
Eternal virtues! or those titles now

Must we renounce, and changing style,
be called Prince of Hell?" (310-13)

Beelzebub dismisses open war because Heaven's "high walls fear no assault or siege" (343) [Here, you may refer back to Beelzebub's first speech (I, 128-55) to conclude that he consistently believes in the omnipotence of God.]. He also brushes aside the idea of establishing a "growing empire" in Hell. Taking a cue from Satan, he advocates indirect revenge to be inflicted upon 'Man', a blessed generation. Through a narratorial intervention (379-85), Milton is quick to remind his readers that this "devilish counsel" originated from Satan. "The author of all ill".

The acceptance of Beelzebub's suggestion (386-89) threw up another hurdle:

"But first, whom shall we send in search of this new world?
Whom shall we find sufficient?"

This is a key moment in the entire narrative. Who would volunteer to wander through the "dark, unbottomed, infinite Abyss", and evade "the strict sentries and stations thick/of Angels watching around"? Suspense seizes the assembly as none volunteers to undertake "the perilous attempt".

Lines 430-485

The impending crisis is averted by Satan, who in the most democratic fashion, volunteers to undertake the journey (445-50), and that too, alone :

" this enterprise
none shall partake with me." (465-6)

Satan's demeanour forestalls any divergence of opinion, the narrative voice reminds us, because his followers dreaded "his voice/Forbidding" more than the adventure. Nevertheless, the fallen angel reveres their "matchless chief" and, "Extol him equal to the Highest in Heaven" (489). Perhaps, this marks the zenith in Satan's fortune. Even the narrative voice accepts that the devils possess virtues (480-3).

Lines 486-628

Virtue of the Devils is emphasized farther when the narrative voice (read Milton) makes an outburst against men who "live in hatred, enmity and strife", and "levy cruel wars" (496-505). (Remember Milton's stinging outburst against a corrupt clergy in 'Lycidas'). Here, Milton might be venting his anger and frustration at the failed Revolution, the cause of which he had staunchly supported. Passages like these help to establish the contemporaneity of this epic. Also critically observe the manner of Satan's exit and the subsequent announcement outside (506-20). Did Milton intend this as a parody of the English monarchs?

Meanwhile, the devils form different groups to pass "the irksome hours". One group, interestingly, speculates on "providence, foreknowledge absolute" (559-60). The stage was set perfectly for a big intervention by Milton, but he decides otherwise. Instead, through the agency of an adventurous group, he takes his readers through the topography of his imaginative Hell (570-628).

Lines 629-889

Satan's journey brings him to the gates of Hell which are guarded by two gruesome and detestable figures, Sin and Death. This allegory of Sin and Death has been faulted by earlier

critics like Voltaire and Dr. Johnson. Actually, it is a paradox to some readers of *Paradise Lost*- does this allegory form an integral part of the narrative, or is it an aberration? Whatever be the answer, this allegory throws light on Satan's part. Sin, who addresses Satan as 'Father', had sprung out of the left side of his head when he sat in a conclave in Heaven (Mark the stunning parallel to the story of Eve's creation). Death, born in Hell, is the product of Satan and Sin's incestuous relationship. They form a set of intriguing relationships, and, a 'trinity'!

Stop to Consider

At this stage, you may pause and ask yourself the following questions :

1. Are the grounds, on which Satan justifies his claims to leadership, valid?
2. William Empson has characterized Belial as a 'Lawyer'. Is his speech consistent with this characterization?
3. Does Moloch's speech give us any idea of Milton's cosmos?
4. After listening to Moloch, Belial and Mammon the 'Stygian Council' finally decides in favour of a proposal first floated by Satan. Was the debate in Hell stage-managed by Beelzebub on behalf of his chief?
5. How much contemporary significance can be read into Milton's outburst against men?

The confrontation between Death and Satan, that threatens to precipitate into a crisis, holds immense interest for the readers. The rhetoric and counter-rhetoric is ably matched by splendidly timed similes :

"and such a frown
Each east at the other, as when two black clouds,
with Heaven's artillery fraught, come rattling on
over the Caspian,
so frowned the mighty combatants, that Hell
Grew darker at their frown;" (713-20)

The similes in this section (636-43; 108-11; and the one quoted above), interestingly are related to clouds and the sky. A far more interesting aspect is introduced by Sin's warning to her father (810-14). Satan (I, 116-7) and Moloch (II, 99) had led us to believe that the fallen angels are immortal. Sin, however, states the opposite. This remains as one of the unresolved questions in the epic. By the end of this section, Satan succeeds in tempting Eve to open the gates of Hell with "the fatal key".

Lines 890-1055

In writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton faced a lot of daunting challenges. One of them was certainly the description of 'chaos', the space or region or realm out of which Heaven, Hell and the Universe have been created. There were precedents in religious literature (early Christian apocalyptic works) as well as in the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The description of 'chaos' is consistent with the other descriptions Milton offers. By heaping ideas, images and comparisons upon one another, he tries to convey an impression to his readers that 'chaos' is a dimensionless, limitless and bewildering expanse where space and

time melt. Ruled by the God of chaos and his consort, Night, it is guarded by Orcus, Ades, Demogorgon, Rumour, Chance, Tumult, Confusion and Discord (959-67). The allegorical strain is continued here by Milton.

Satan's journey through this "wasteful deep" is full of suspense. He ponders for sometime (917-9); is uplifted by a surging smoke (927-31); drops down some ten thousand fathom deep (932-5); and is again lifted miles by "the strong rebuff of some tumultuous cloud" (935-8). This chance intervention proves fatal as, directed by the god of chaos, Satan spots the "pendant world" "hanging in a golden chain". The world inhabited by mankind is, hence, physically introduced into the narrative by Satan.

Check Your Progress

1. The debate in Hell is often regarded as one of the finest achievements of Milton. Critically analyse the qualities that, in your opinion, help to support such a view.
2. According to B. Rajan, Satan is primarily a "poetic representation". Do you agree with Rajan, or, do you think that Milton portrayed Satan basically from an ethical stand-point?
3. Milton's 'Grand Style' has occasioned sharp critical reactions. What, according to you, are the features of this 'Grand Style'? How do you react to it?
4. Apart from the episode of Sin and Death, are there any other episodes (or figures) that may be read allegorically?
5. Make a study of the epic similes used in the first two books. Do you think Milton has used them for different purpose?
6. "Satan is the most heroic subject that was ever chosen for a poem" (William Hazlitt). Based on your reading of the first two books, make an objective assessment of this statement.

1.7 Summing up

Let me begin this section by posing to you a question - 'Do you feel that different ideas, opinions, ideology, concepts etc. are floating around in your head?' In this section, our energies would be channelised to recapitulate, and then, put in order, the information, critical opinions, analyses etc. that we have so far come across.

John Milton, the seventeenth century epic poet, shared one thing with his epic - a chequered history. At a relatively early age, Milton had intuitions of writing something great. To realize these intuitions, he chose the epic, a genre that is massive, grand, encyclopaedic and conventional. Since England and the English literary tradition had hardly anything to offer, he sought poetic inspiration on the first two books of his epic.

"*Paradise Lost* is great because it is objectionable. It spurs us to protest" (John Carey in Milton). In the vast body of critical literature on *Paradise Lost* that has accumulated over three and a half centuries, many critics have voiced their reservations about different aspects of the poem. On the other hand, appreciation has also flowed in equal measure. Language and Diction were the first to attract attention, but the focus gradually shifted to Satan and the Devils. Post William Blake, they dominated the nineteenth century critical sensibility. They even found favoured with nineteenth century critics, but the trend was partly reversed in the twentieth century. This century saw the introduction of new perspectives - narrative, reader-

response, Marxist, feminist etc. Vary recently, *Paradise Lost* has even been put under the colonial scanner.

The first two books of *Paradise Lost* serve as introductions Milton's epic in particular, and epic in general. The way Milton employs some epic conventions point to a problem in his subject. Epic demands a hero and a heroic action, but, what is heroic about the 'fall of Man' - the subject of Milton's epic. You already know that a sizeable number of critics and commentators see Satan as the hero of Milton's epic. The first two books might even lead you into believing this. But before jumping to hasty conclusions, remember that (i) *Paradise Lost* has ten more books that follow the first two, and (ii) the narrative voice constantly dissuades us against considering Satan a hero.

There are a lot of other features that characterize the first two books. One of them is the abundance of similes, allusions, references and proper names. They help create an impression of an encyclopaedic sweep, a quality integral to any epic narrative. Consistency is another standout feature of these two books. It is at work in the description of different locations, in the portraiture of the Devils, in the speeches of Satan, and over all, in the debate in Hell. Lastly, the first two books have a lot of contemporary significance, a fact that can be immensely helpful in placing the text in its context.

1.8 References & Suggested Reading

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