

Biography of John Milton

P.G. Semester 1

CC 1

John Milton was born in London in 1608 at the height of the Protestant Reformation in England. His father was a law writer who had achieved some success by the time Milton was born. This prosperity afforded Milton an excellent education, first with private tutoring, then a private school, and finally Cambridge. Milton, a studious boy, excelled in languages and classical studies.

His father had left Roman Catholicism and Milton was raised Protestant, with a heavy tendency toward Puritanism. As a student, he wanted to go into the ministry, but was disillusioned with the scholastic elements of the clergy at Cambridge. Cambridge, however, afforded him time to write poetry.

After Cambridge, he continued his studies for seven years in a leisurely life at his father's house. It was here that he wrote some of his first published poems, including "Comus" (1634) and "Lycidas" (1638), both of which he published in 1645.

Milton toured the European continent in 1638-1639 and met many of the great Renaissance minds, including Galileo and Grotius. The beginning of the Puritan Revolution found Milton back in England, fighting for a more humanist and reformed church.

For more than twenty years, Milton set aside poetry to write political and religious pamphlets for the cause of Puritanism. For a time, he served as Secretary for Foreign Tongues under Cromwell.

Milton was a mixed product of his time. On the one hand, as a humanist, he fought for religious tolerance and believed that there was something inherently valuable in man. As a Puritan, however, he believed that the Bible was the answer and the guide to all, even if it went against democracy itself. Where the Bible didn't afford an answer, Milton would turn to reason.

Milton himself was married three times, all of which were rather unhappy affairs. He defended divorce in "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce" in 1643. With this and other treatises, Milton often came in conflict with the Puritanism he advocated.

At the end of the war, Milton was imprisoned for a short time for his views. In 1660, he emerged blind and disillusioned with the England he saw around him.

Nevertheless, he was yet to write his greatest work. Paradise Lost was published in 1667, followed by Paradise Regained in 1671. Milton's ability to combine his poetry with his polemics in these and other works, was the key to his genius.

The classical influences in his work can be clearly delineated: Homer, Ovid, but especially Virgil. Shakespeare was the leading playwright of his day, and there are some references to his works in Milton's own poetry.

The style and structure of the Spenser's "The Faerie Queen," was another influence on Paradise Lost. It was one of only a few books that were owned by the Miltons during John's upbringing. Milton died from "gout" in 1674 and was buried in the Church of St. Giles in London.