

Class - U.G. Sem VI

Paper- MIC – 07

Topic – Milton’s Lycidas

## Lycidas

.....

### **About the Poem**

Milton wrote “Lycidas” a few months after his friend, Edward King, died in a shipwreck in 1637. The poem is a pastoral elegy—a form of poetry used to memorialize the dead—and has become one of the most famous reflections on loss in the English language. Though Milton wrote “Lycidas” to memorialize his dead friend, the poem is also doing much more. It is not so much an obituary for King as a poem written on the occasion of King’s death. By reimagining himself and King as two shepherds, Milton distances himself from King’s actual death and puts his poem in dialogue with the conventions of pastoral poetry. More than King, “Lycidas” is about the relationship between grief and the traditions available to a poet who wants to express grief.

By writing a pastoral elegy, Milton positions himself at the end of a tradition of great poets and suggests that he deserves a place among them. Pastoral poetry began with Theocritus, a classical Greek poet who wrote about shepherds having singing competitions in the fields. Theocritus’s shepherds often sing about the dead, and seem to lose themselves in emotion, but their elegies are also highly structured. Though they appear to speak from their hearts, they are always competing with others for the honor of composing the best poem. Milton never mentions a competition between shepherds in “Lycidas,” but Milton’s readers would have had these singing battles at the back of their mind as they read his elegy.

### **Summary of Lycidas**

The poem begins with the speaker collecting leaves for the funeral of Lycidas. He plucks berries and ivy that have not yet ripened, killing them before their season. Like Lycidas, the plants die too young. After collecting leaves for Lycidas, the speaker decides to write an elegy for him, the very elegy that we are reading. In stanza 2, he calls upon the muses to fill him with song, as pastoral poets like Theocritus and Virgil do at the beginning of their own poems when they ask the muses to inspire the creation of their poetry.

In stanza 3, the speaker recalls the days he spent with Lycidas, invoking rural imagery—images that veil Milton’s own memories of his days with Edward King at Cambridge, the “self-same hill” where they learned together. He recalls that those days are over at the beginning of stanza 4, and his description of the landscape twists to fit his new mood. In stanza 5, he asks the nymphs why they were not there to help Lycidas when he died, then realizes it makes no difference: there is no scenario in which Lycidas would have lived.

In stanza 6, the speaker reaches the first major crisis of the poem. He wonders whether poetry can accomplish anything, and reflects on the limitations of fame on Earth. The god Apollo (Phoebus) arrives to console him with the promise of fame in Heaven, an early version of the poem's final consolation in the Christian promise of resurrection.

In stanzas 7 through 9, the speaker imagines a slew of water gods arriving to mourn the death of Lycidas. They have come to answer the call the speaker made to the muses at the beginning of the poem, when he asked them to fill his urn with water and mourn Lycidas as they passed. Neptune's son, Triton, arrives first, with his winds following behind him. None of them accepts blame for Lycidas's death. They say the winds were good and the water was smooth. The ship sank because it was built during an eclipse and doomed to fail.

St. Peter ("Pilot of the Galilean lake") arrives last in the procession to mourn Lycidas. The speech he gives over Lycidas's body quickly turns into a sermon on the wrongs of church leaders, who he imagines as a group of shepherds singing broken songs while their sheep starve. The "two massy keys" represent the gates to Heaven and Hell, which St. Peter has the power to open for the saved and the damned, respectively.

In stanza 9, the speaker calls upon the flowers to mourn for Lycidas, then suddenly remembers that Lycidas's body is somewhere in the sea, where there can be no proper funeral.

In stanza 10, the speaker imagines the sun setting only to rise again. The image is a metaphor for Christian resurrection. Like the setting sun, Lycidas has died only to rise again in Heaven. Through the image of the rising sun, the poem arrives at its final consolation.

In the last stanza of the poem, the shepherd falls silent and a new speaker takes his place. The new speaker describes the shepherd rising to explore new pastures, leaving the place where he grieved for Lycidas.

Source : [gradesaver.com](http://gradesaver.com)