

Milton, "Lycidas": a summary of what "happens" in the poem

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- 1-5 'Yet once more': the speaker needs to sing (= write poetry), and so plucks emblems of poetic achievement before they are ripe (meaning, before speaker himself is ready?)
- 6-14 Why does he need to write? Because 'Lycidas' is dead (also before his time, like the unripe poem and the unripe poet). Because 'Lycidas' was also a poet: he must not go unmourned in song. Note that the first verse "paragraph" is 14 lines long: perhaps it invokes the sonnet with its form (rhyme scheme) but is 'broken' (like Lycidas' life)
- 15-24 Speaker invokes Muses. Begin! No excuses! And maybe another poet will in turn mourn the speaker when he is dead (cf Milton's poem 'Mansus'). Speaker reminds himself (and us) of his connections with 'Lycidas': they worked / shepherded (= studied) together
- 25-36 Speaker continues with connections, deploying fictions of the pastoral to describe their shared experiences: up early, at work early, working late, but also singing (= writing poetry); and their art (song = poetry) was enjoyed by their peers (the 'rough satyrs' = fellow undergraduates), under the approving eyes of their tutor Dametas (a teacher, referent debated)
- 37-49 But now he's gone. Nature mourns, nature that had enjoyed his presence and art. As various calamities are injurious to nature, this news of death hurts the shepherd-poet
- 50-63 Questions in the face of tragedy: where were the water nymphs, who might have saved him from drowning? Not in their usual places. But what could they have done anyway, when even the muse Calliope could not save her (much greater poet) son Orpheus, when he was killed?
- 64-69 Mention of Orpheus leads to a more generalized anxiety: why be a shepherd (= poet) when it involves such sacrifice and is so thankless a path? Why not have fun? (Note characteristically Miltonic link of poetic vocation to chastity; the option, if poetry abandoned, is sexualized)
- 70-76 Speaker partly answers own question: the motivation for the self-denial of a life devoted to art is the desire for fame (praise, glory), the 'last infirmity of noble mind'. However, even so are we thwarted: we think fame is in the offing, but then comes fate with the shears, and 'slits the thin-spun life' (pause and savor the disconcerting sound of this line)
- 76-84 First consolation, from first guest speaker: Apollo (god of poetry, but also the voice of traditional Christian response to the speaker's just-asked question) reminds the poet that true fame is found not on earth but in heaven: the praise (if deserved) does not end with the life. Does this response perhaps partly miss the speaker's point? Speaker's worry is not so much losing fame as losing *his* chance even to earn it: response doesn't answer sense of the futility of having made all those preparations and sacrifices? A false climax?
- 85-102 Another invocation signals return to classical pastoral after 'higher mood' of Apollo's speech of Christian consolation. Enter Triton (Neptune's spokesman) to defend sea god: was it the waves, weather, wind? No: wreck was fault of the ship itself: do we read allegorically (bark as body?), or as specific historical reference? Or simply a 'poetic' way of telling reader facts of the wreck?

- 103-07 Enter Camus, personification of Cambridge University, to mourn his 'dearest pledge'
- 108-31 Enter St Peter, with keys and mitre (headwear that emblemizes his role as bishop), mourning untimely loss of young minister (some argue that this figure is Christ, but the implicitly cited biblical passages fit Peter better. Furthermore, Triton speaks on behalf of Neptune as Peter himself is agent of a greater power). He bemoans current state of the ministry, using 'pastoral' imagery: greedy wolves (clerics) pretend to be pastors, are 'blind mouths' ('bishop' etymologically is 'one who sees'), write terrible poetry (note sound of verse); their sheep go unfed. And the big bad wolf (= Catholicism: the Jesuit order had wolves on its coat of arms) lurks unreprieved ('nothing said' here; 'little said' in Milton's manuscript). Milton foregrounds this passage in his headnote to the 1645 printing. The 'two-handed engine' is a famous crux: usually interpreted as a sword, as in Revelation (= word of God); or Michael's in PL.
- 132-53 Return to (Sicilian, Theocritan) pastoral after intrusion of a different poetic register: note how pastoral mode is a vehicle for political and religious commentary. Return brings affirmation of life and beauty: throw your flowers (= poetic tropes) on his grave. Read aloud the lovely list of flowers, and note the beautiful, solitary (poetically) 'glowing violet'. All this though is a pretense, because the body is gone, there is no hearer. (And also because flowers do not mourn: nature is neutral? Calls attention to poetic fiction?)
- 154-64 No body, because his body is washed north (Hebrides), or south (Cornwall); look homeward angel (Michael, on mount) and take pity; and dolphins, bring him home
- 165-85 Final, Christian consolation: weep no more, because 'Lycidas' is dead, but not dead: he will rise to heaven, his body washed; he will hear the nuptial song (in Christian devotional metaphor, we collectively are the 'bride' of Christ). Saints there sing to him, console him: 'Lycidas' is now a local deity, not mourned, but celebrated, will do good to others.
- 186-93 Back to frame narrative: the fate of 'Lycidas' is now settled: what about speaker? We pan back, hear him singing his pastoral song, all day. Sun is now setting; he twitches his mantle blue (the color of hope), tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new. What are these pastures? You might want to think about the implications of poetic form: the final eight lines are in 'ottava rima', the dominant form of epic narrative verse in the Renaissance, used by Ariosto in *Orlando Furioso*, Tasso in *Jerusalem Delivered*, Camoens in *Os Lusíads*, and in English translations of epic narrative poems (also, for that matter, by Byron in *Don Juan*, Shelley in 'Witch of Atlas', and Yeats in 'Among School Children' and 'Sailing to Byzantium'). What might this mean?

General questions to ponder:

- 1) "Lycidas" is probably the most famous "pastoral elegy" in English literature. What conventions or expectations come to mind when you hear the words "pastoral" and "elegy"?
- 2) Many people find the essential artifice of the pastoral mode insincere, irritating, hard to stomach (cf. Samuel Johnson). But do we still produce and in fact enjoy "pastoral" art? (You might want to find a definition of "pastoral" online, or in a book of literary terms). Think of possible examples.
- 3) As an elegy, "Lycidas" ostensibly is about a young man who drowned. But is that what the poem seems to be really about? What (e.g.) does the poem tell us about the speaker?