

Paper II – Understanding Poetry in English

Sonnet is a lyrical poem structured in a specific form which originated in Italy. Petrarch is credited with its invention. The term *sonnet* is actually derived from the Italian word *sonetto* (a little poem). It is a poem of strictly **fourteen lines** that follows a strict rhyme scheme and specific structure. It later evolved into two distinct forms – Petrarchan (Italian) and Shakespearean (English). These two are distinguished by the use of different stanza forms.

The structure of a typical Italian sonnet of the time contained two parts. First is called the octave (stanza of eight lines). It describes a "problem", or "question". It is followed by a sestet (stanza of six lines). It proposes a "resolution". Petrarch typically used an ABBA ABBA rhyme pattern for the octave, followed by either CDE CDE rhymes in the sestet. Example of this type of sonnet is John Milton's famous poem – *On His Blindness*.

English sonnets were introduced by Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) in the early 16th century. But Shakespeare popularized this form during the Elizabethan era. This form consists of fourteen lines structured as three quatrains (stanza of four lines) and a couplet (stanza of two lines). The couplet usually summarizes the theme of the poem or introduces a fresh new look at the theme. These sonnets were all essentially inspired by the Petrarchan tradition, and generally treat of the poet's love for some woman, with the exception of Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets.

In English, both the English or Shakespearean sonnet, and the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet are traditionally written in iambic pentameter.

On His Blindness by John Milton

About John Milton

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608 in London, England. He came from a middle-class family and went to school at Christ's College Cambridge where he originally intended to enter into the clergy. After leaving university he changed his plan and spent the next years of his life studying independently for a career as a poet.

During the years of the English Civil War, Milton worked under Oliver Cromwell to create pamphlets advocating for religious freedom, divorce and the freedom of the press. He also served in Cromwell's government as secretary for foreign languages. It was in 1651-52 that Milton became completely blind. Milton was arrested in 1660 after Charles II came to the throne and lived out the rest of his life in the country, secluded from the world, working on his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. This poem would serve as his legacy, and come to be considered among the greatest poems ever written.

Milton died in 1674 in Buckinghamshire, England, shortly after finishing the works, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

Milton's works would come to inspire many poets of the future, including Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, and William Wordsworth.

On His Blindness is a sonnet believed to have been written before 1654, after the poet, John Milton, had gone completely blind. The sonnet is in "Petrarchan" style, rhyming ABBA ABBA CDE CDE. This form is also called an Italian sonnet. It is written in iambic pentameter and is separated into one octave (first eight lines) and one sestet (remaining six lines).

The Setting of *On His Blindness*:

This poem is set entirely within the poet's mind. He expresses his doubts to himself and also finds his consolation within himself. He is afraid that going blind will prevent him from composing great poetry, but he also learns that we must accept God's will without questioning his intention.

Summary of *On His Blindness*:

When I consider how my light is spent (A)
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, (B)
 And that one talent which is death to hide, (B)
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent (A)
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present (A)
 My true account, lest he returning chide; (B)
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" (B)
 I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent (A)
 That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need (C)
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best (D)
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state (E)
 Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed (C)
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest; (D)
 They also serve who only stand and wait." (E)

This poem is a sonnet. As already mentioned, sonnet consists of fourteen lines divided into an eight-line unit known as an octave, and a six-line unit known as a sestet. The octave and sestet together form a single stanza, or appear as two separate stanzas. Since the fourteen lines of this sonnet are not divided into stanzas, they are divided into meaningful segments for the purposes of this summary in order to make the poem easier to follow. This poem is written in the first-person point of view hence we can assume that the speaker of the poem is the poet himself.

Lines 1 – 2:

*When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,*

In these lines, the poet says that the light has left his eyes even before half his life is over, that is, just when he is about to reach his middle age.

Lines 3 – 6:

*And that one talent which is death to hide
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest he returning chide,*

In these lines, the poet says that God has given him the talent of poetic composition, and if he is not able to produce something worthwhile using that talent, then he deserves to die. However, his talent has been rendered useless by the loss of his eyesight. Even so, he wishes to serve God by using his talent. He wants to be able to

tell the true story of his life in his poetry, and that is perhaps why he is writing this sonnet on his blindness. He is writing this poem so that God does not become angry with him and think that he is wasting the talent that has been given to him.

Lines 7 -11:

*“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state*

In these lines, the poet is prompted to directly ask God a question. He asks God whether he would be cruel enough to expect something productive from a blind man as the price for providing him with the talent that has helped him earn his bread and butter thus far. However, the poet is a patient man by nature, and this component of patience in his personality stops him from posing the above-mentioned question to God. His patience tells him that God does not ask for anything from a man. He does not ask for his gifts to be returned, nor does He expect every man to make use of those gifts. The ones who want to serve God in the best way possible only accept the hand they have been dealt gracefully and without any bitterness.

Lines 12 – 14:

*Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”*

In these lines, the element of patience within the poet offers him some advice to deal with the problem of his going blind. His patience tells him that God is akin to a king who has many kingdoms under his dominion. He has countless subjects to do as he asks. There are thousands of men on earth who follow God’s every instruction to the letter, and who hurry over lands and seas without a moment of rest in the fulfilment of the duties allotted to them. However, these are not the only people who serve God. There are also others who merely stand and wait for God to decide how their lives will go. Their only service to God is to accept whatever trial God puts on their path and to deal with such trials with courage and resilience. These people also serve God to the best of their ability, and God loves everyone equally.

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***On His Blindness* by John Milton**

Q. Critically analyse the poem, *On His Blindness*, by John Milton in your own words.

Answer:

The poem, “*On His Blindness*”, by John Milton is an autobiographical one. As we know, Milton did, in fact, go blind in the 1650s. Therefore, he is writing about his own experiences. However, if we go beyond the surface matter of this poem, we will see that it is less about his blindness and more about a philosophical exposition on the nature of **service to God**. Milton believed that each man serves God in his own way. This is the belief he expresses within this poem. This belief was based on his own study of the scriptures. The fact that he was familiar with the scriptures is amply proved by his reference to the Parable of the Talents in the 3rd line of this poem itself. This is one of the parables of Jesus, which appear in two of the canonical gospels of the New Testament. It tells the story of a master who was leaving his house to travel. Before leaving, he entrusted his property to his three servants. According to the abilities of each man, one servant received five talents, the second servant received two talents, and the third servant received one talent. A talent, in this case, was a significant amount of money in ancient time.

Upon returning home, the master asked his three servants for an accounting of the talents he had entrusted to them. The first and the second servants explain that they each put their talents to work, and doubled the value of the property with which they were entrusted. Both of these servants were rewarded. The third servant, however, had merely hidden his talent, had buried it in the ground, so he was punished by his master with death. For Milton, the word “talent” does not connote any amount of money in this poem, but is used in its more modern sense as a **unique ability** in a person.

Milton believes that God has given him the talent (unique ability) of poetic composition. In His absence, Milton ought to make use of that talent to produce great works of art. However, the prospect of blindness has shaken Milton’s confidence. He feels he shall never be able to write again. He feels guilty and believes that if he does not put his God-given talent to use, then he will be punished with death. However, God is merciful and He has a master plan for everyone on this earth. Whatever He does, He does it for a reason. Even though Milton does not understand why God has taken away his vision, he must be patient and he must learn to accept what is given him with dignity and grace. Instead of railing against our bad fortune, we ought to accept it with a smile on our faces. This is the best way to serve God and to have faith in his master plan. This is the lesson that Milton sets out to teach through this poem.

Central Idea and the Theme of *On His Blindness*:

Milton laments the fact that he is going blind. He fears he shall not be able to use his God-given gift of poetic composition anymore. He asks God whether God would be cruel enough to expect a blind man to use his talents to produce goods as a price for giving him the talent in the first place. However, Milton’s patience stops him from voicing this question and assures him instead that the best way to serve God is to accept whatever he places in our path with courage and dignity.

Talents and their uses:

Milton believes that God endows every man with some talent or the other. It is man’s duty to put that talent to use. Milton has been given the talent of poetic composition, and he takes his role as a poet very seriously. He feels he must go on producing great art throughout his life. However, his blindness may prevent him from doing

so. If such a thing happens, and he cannot write anymore, he will feel that he is wasting his talent. That is why the feeling of guilt overtakes Milton when he considers the ill effects his blindness could have on his life.

God's master plan:

God has a master plan for every man on earth. Whatever joys and sorrows a man faces are all planned in advance for him by God. Therefore, one must not cry against one's misfortune. One must bear every storm with a smile on his face and with courage in his heart. Milton had previously believed that putting his God-given talent to use is the only way in which he can serve God. But his blindness has taught him that there are other ways to serve God as well. One of those ways and the best one is "never to question God about his master plan". We must put our lives into His hand, and relinquish all control over it. If we have faith in God, then he will be by our side in our good times as well as our bad times.

The Tone of *On His Blindness*:

The tone of this poem undergoes a remarkable change from the beginning of the poem to its end. At the start of the poem, Milton is very depressed and anxious. He feels that his blindness will get in the way of his poetic composition. However, as the poem progresses, he finds consolation within himself. He learns to have faith in God. He learns to accept whatever obstacles God puts in his path with courage and dignity. He learns to fight against all odds without ever losing hope. Finally, at the end of the poem, he emerges as a stronger and surer person.

Poetic Devices in *On His Blindness*:

Rhyme scheme: "On His Blindness" is a Petrarchan sonnet as it follows ABBA ABBA CDE CDE rhyme scheme without any deviation of any sort from its fixed structure.

Rhetorical devices:

Allusion (Indirect Reference): This rhetorical device is designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly. It is thus an indirect or passing reference. In this poem, the poet uses the device of allusion in the 3rd line. He alludes to the Parable of the Talents.

Personification: This rhetorical device is used to give human qualities on something that is not human. In this poem, the poet uses the device of personification in the 8th line with respect to Patience. He capitalizes the 'P' in 'Patience' and also gives Patience the human ability to speak.

Conclusion:

"On his Blindness" is thus a poem of half religious half philosophical nature. During Milton's era, man began to explore his religious doubt. For Milton, he could he make his faith stronger only by confronting the doubt rather than running away from it. Therefore, Milton put it to good use in this poem by accepting the Fate of God about his blindness.