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Melancholy in the Moonlight: How Milton employs rhetorical techniques to grant merit to a particular lifestyle in his companion poems.

Which lifestyle is better for an individual to endeavor for: a joyous one or a melancholy one? John Milton tackles this question in his companion set, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. However, his usage of personification, setting, and diction enables readers to identify which side Milton would have chosen: the Melancholy lifestyle.

For readers of *L'Allegro*, Melancholy is originally introduced as the a goddess “of blackest Midnight born”, or a monstrous type, while the goddess of Joy being beautiful, “fair and free” surrounded by her companions of liberty and laughter. However, in the companion piece to this work, *Il Penseroso*, Milton establishes a different perspective on the goddess of Melancholy. It is with the goddesses that he is first establishes the differences between the two lifestyles, and the favorability of one over the other. Although the goddess of Joy is depicted as being the fair and beautiful one, this identity is superficial compared to the true nature of Melancholy, especially as the speaker begins *Il Penseroso* attributing idle thoughts occurring in an “idle brain” of those who are overly Joyous. As the poem continues, Milton delves deeper into the goddess of Melancholy and her true nature in the companion poem, *Il Penseroso*. Instead of the monstrous darkness that Melancholy is said to be in *L'Allegro*, Milton’s personification of it in the companion piece describes the goddess to be “too bright...to our weaker view”. This supports Milton’s subtle stance that Melancholy is the better lifestyle, as it takes a trained and educated eye to see the

beauty of such a thing. Initially, a life of joy is the enticing lifestyle to aspire to lead as it superficially beautiful, yet when Melancholy is given the time, it is the substantially more beautiful option as it is not immediately understood or appreciated. Additionally, the speaker's relationship with the goddess of Melancholy is an intimate, personal experience, whereas the relationship with Joy is established in an observational, detached way. The differentiation between perspectives lends itself to the variation between the lifestyles. Joy is a physical, external way of life oft felt when interacting with others; in some ways it is a projection of self unto others. Melancholy on the other hand is an individual introspection of self. In the state of melancholy, the individual is left without external distractions, similar to the lifestyle of a hermit, allowing for "old experience to attain...something like a prophetic strain". The choice stands between *via activa* and *via contemplativa*.

Milton continues to illuminate Melancholy over Joy in the companion poems through his usage of setting. *L'Allegro* takes place in the pastoral setting of the domesticated countryside during the day. Meanwhile, *Il Penseroso* is set at night in more of a wild landscape. This stark contrast highlights the differences in lifestyle even further. By associating melancholy with more wild settings, it establishes melancholy as a more organic, natural way of life versus domesticated joy, which seems to take the shape of a contained, staged lifestyle. The setting of night functions in a similar way to the melancholy lifestyle. Similarly to the burning of embers, introspection and knowledge illuminate the world in a different way. Various forms of light in *Il Penseroso*, such as the "wandering moon, take away the fear of the dark and show a different world. The melancholy lifestyle is so esteemed

in *Il Penseroso* because, similarly sources of light in the work, reflection and learning beat back the darkness of ignorance that not even joy can illuminate.

Perhaps the most telling portion of the companion poems is the final couplets of each. The final couplets mirror each other so closely that they bind the two companion poems together with both needing to be read to attain the full picture, but they, more than any other piece of the work, speak to which lifestyle is to be chosen by the reader. The diction that Milton employs in the final couplets furthermore establishes the more appealing way of life for Milton. Between the two poems, *L'Allegro* and the Joyous life is able to provide “delights” or charms that entertain versus *Il Penseroso* and the Melancholy life which provides “pleasures” or aspects of life that provide happiness and contentment. The comparison between the two once again comes between immediate satisfaction and long-lasting satisfaction for the individual. Milton continues with particular word choice with the verbiage of “choose” versus “mean”. By selecting the verb “choose”, Milton actively decides for the speaker that a Melancholy life is the way in which they would like to live out their lives because it is guaranteed to provide the pleasures stated. On the other hand, to “mean” to live in a certain way is to aspire to incorporate that lifestyle, but conditionally on whether or not the Joyous lifestyle is capable of producing the “delights”. Additionally, by stating the definite that Melancholy is able to “give” versus the more ambiguous “if thoust can give”, Milton once again builds the joyous life up to be more of a fantastical, dream lifestyle, whereas Melancholy is practical and attainable.

L'Allegro and *Il Penseroso* are one without the other, just as a life without a mix of joy and melancholy are incomplete. Milton in his companion poems highlight the best of both lifestyles, but is able to subtly establish the merits of the melancholy lifestyle of that of a simply joyous one through multiple rhetorical techniques.