

On His Blindness

John Milton

Lecture Notes

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John Milton

- John Milton (9 December 1608 – 8 November 1674) was an English poet and intellectual who served as a civil servant for the Commonwealth of England under its Council of State and later under Oliver Cromwell.
- He is best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667),
- By 1652, Milton had become totally blind; the cause of his blindness is debated but bilateral retinal detachment or glaucoma are most likely.

ON HIS BLINDNESS

Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44750/sonnet-19-when-i-consider-how-my-light-is-spent>

- When I consider how my light is spent,
- Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
- And that one Talent which is death to hide
- Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
- To serve therewith my Maker, and present
- My true account, lest he returning chide;
- “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
- Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
- And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:
- They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Lines 1-2

- In these lines, the poet says that the light(eyesight) has left him even before half of his life is over, i.e he is about to reach his middle age. The poet has gradually started losing his eyesight.

Lines 3-6

- In these lines, the poet says that God has given him the talent of composing poems, and if he is not able to create literary works of merit by using that talent, then he has no right to live. His talent of writing poems has been rendered useless by the loss of his eyesight. Still, he wishes to serve God by using his talent. He wants to tell the saga of his life through his poetry, and that is perhaps why he is writing this sonnet on his blindness. He comes up with this sonnet so that God does not become angry at him and think that he is wasting the talent that has been given to him.

Talent:

- This term alludes to the "Parable of the Talents" in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 14 to 30. In this famous parable, an employer who is going away for some work gives his three servants Talents(money)money in proportion to their ability to increase its value. He gives the first servant five talents, the second servant two talents, and the third servant one talent. After the employer returns and asks about the Talents, the first servant reports that he doubled his talents and the second that he also doubled his. Both men receive praises. The third servant then reports that he still has only one talent, for he did nothing to increase its value. Instead, he buried it. The employer scolds him for his laziness, gives his talent to the man with ten, and sends him outside into the darkness.

Lines 7-11

- In these lines, the poet asks God whether he would be cruel enough to expect something productive(creating literary compositions) from a blind man. However, 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(Talents). The one who copes well with the mild burden God has given them, serves God well. The poet's yoke is his blindness. If he accepts his blindness and copes with it, he serves God well.

Lines 12-14

- In these lines, his patience tells him that God is like a king who has many kingdoms under his control and numerous subjects to carry out His orders. There are thousands of men on earth who follow God's every instruction and who hurry over lands and seas without a moment of rest in the fulfillment 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. Their only service to God is to accept whatever trial God puts on their path and to deal with such trials with courage and patience. These people also serve God to the best of their ability, and God loves everyone equally.

Sonnet:

- The word sonnet is derived from the Italian word “sonetto,” which means a “little song” or small lyric. In poetry, a sonnet has 14 lines.
- The rhyme scheme in English is usually abab—cdcd—efef—gg, and in Italian abba—abba—cde—cde.

Figures of Speech

- Alliteration: In this dark world and wide
- Metaphor: Doth God exact day-labor (God is compared with an employer)
- Personification: But patience, to prevent/That murmur,
soon replies,
- Paradox: They also serve who only stand and wait.”

References

- <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44750/sonnet-19-when-i-consider-how-my-light-is-spent>
- <https://poemanalysis.com/john-milton/on-his-blindness>
- <https://englishsummary.com/summary-onhis-blindness-milton/>