

JOHN MILTON (1608-74)

1. Composition Topics.

- a. John Milton
- b. Paradise Lost
- c. English Puritans
- d. Charles I of England
- e. Oliver Cromwell
- f. Commonwealth of England
- g. Charles II of England



2. Life.

- a. The Young Poet (1608-40).
 - (1) He was raised in a Puritan but not puritanic home. The Renaissance love of the beautiful mingled with the Reformation passion for the good.
 - (2) As a boy, he learned Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and some Hebrew.
 - (3) He read Shakespeare but preferred Spenser.
 - (4) In 1629, aged twenty-one, he wrote “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.”
 - (5) He refused to take the oath of loyalty to the Anglican creed.
 - (6) In 1631-32, he wrote “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso.” In 1643, he published *Comus*.
 - (7) In 1637, he wrote “Lycidas,” in tribute to a poet friend who drowned in the Irish Sea.
 - (8) Supported by his father, he spent six years in retirement, studying the classic Greek and Latin authors.
 - (9) In 1638-39, he travelled the Continent, mostly in Italy, all expenses paid. He said he “never once deviated from the paths of integrity and virtue.” He visited the elderly Galileo during the trip.
- b. The Reformer (1640-42).
 - (1) In London, he established a school for students between ten and sixteen years of age. He dreamed of developing an academy like Plato and Aristotle.
 - (2) “In a ‘Letter to Mr. Hartlib’ (1644) he formulated his views on education. He gave the word a mighty definition: ‘I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.’ The first task of the teacher is to form moral character in the student, ‘to repair the ruins of our first parents’—i.e., to overcome the natural wickedness of man (‘original sin’). . . . This, Milton felt, can be done best by inculcating in the growing mind a strong faith in an all-seeing God, and inuring it to self-control by a stoic discipline. He set his pupils an example of ‘hard study and spare diet,’ seldom permitting himself a day of ‘festivity and enjoyment.’ Next to religion and morals should come the Greek and Latin classics, which Milton used not merely as models of literature but as vehicles of instruction in natural science, geography, history, law, morality, physiology, medicine, agriculture, architecture, oratory, poetry, philosophy, and theology. . . . Moreover, Milton proposed also to acquaint his students with some modern texts in science and history, and even some living exemplars in practical arts; he hoped to bring hunters, mariners, gardeners, anatomists, apothecaries, engineers,

architects to his classroom to convey the latest knowledge in their fields. He allotted considerable time to music and drama, and an hour and a half every day to athletic exercises and martial games. ‘In vernal seasons’ his pupils would ‘ride out in companies with prudent and staid guides to all quarters of the land, learning and observing’; they would ‘join the navy for a while to learn sailing and sea-fight’; and finally, after their twenty-third year, they might travel abroad. It was an arduous curriculum; we have no evidence that it was fully followed in Milton’s school; but if his students caught some of his enthusiasm and industry, it might have been realized.”¹

(3) He supported the elimination of bishops from the Anglican church.

(4) He saw in the rise and fall of discipline the key to the rise and fall of states.

(a) “There is not that thing in the world of more grave and urgent importance throughout the whole life of man than discipline. What need I instance? He that hath read with judgment of nations and commonwealths . . . will readily agree that the flourishing and decaying of all civil societies, all the movements and turnings of human occasions, are moved to and fro as upon the axle of Discipline. . . . Nor is there any sociable perfection in this life, civil or sacred, that can be above Discipline; but she is that which with her musical cords preserves and holds all the parts thereof together.”²

(5) From an early age, he determined to compose an epic through “select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs. . . .”³

c. Marriage and Divorce (1643-48).

(1) When he was 34, he married [], who was 17. It was an unhappy marriage.

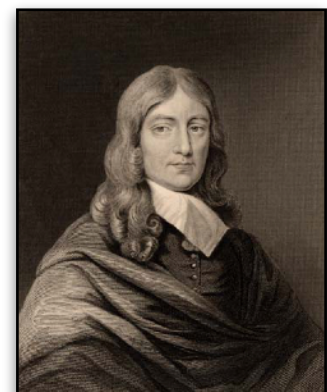
(2) He wrote *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), where he proposed to show “that indisposition, unfitness, or contrariety of mind, arising from a cause in nature unchangeable, hindering and ever likely to hinder the main benefits of conjugal society, which are solace and peace, is a greater reason of divorce than natural frigidity, especially if there be no children, and that there be mutual consent.”

d. Freedom of the Press (1643-49).

(1) In 1643, he wrote *Areopagitica*.

(a) “Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. ’Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no loss; and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse.”⁴

(b) He cited the intellectual vitality of ancient Athens,



¹ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Louis XIV*, 217-18.

² John Milton, *Reason of Church Government*, in Masson, 2:371.

³ John Milton, *Areopagitica*.

⁴ John Milton, *Areopagitica*.

where only atheistic and libellous writings were censored.

- (c) “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties. . . . Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?”⁵
- e. The Latin Secretary (1649-59).
- (1) He supported the execution of Charles I.
 - (2) He admired Cromwell and wrote “in the coalition of human society nothing is more pleasing to God, or more agreeable to reason, than that the highest mind should have the sovereign power.”⁶
 - (3) By 1652, he had become totally blind.
- f. The Old Poet (1660-74).
- (1) In writing *Paradise Lost* (1667), he viewed himself as the Homer and Isaiah of England.
 - (2) He personally only received 18 pounds from sales of *Paradise Lost*.
 - (3) He rejected orthodox Trinitarianism and preferred the Arian heresy. Some of his views on the oneness of matter and spirit resemble Hobbes (d. 1679) and Spinoza (d. 1677).
 - (4) He seems to have been a religious man, but he attended no church and practiced no religious rites in his home. According to Dr. Johnson, he never prayed.
 - (5) He published *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* on the same day in 1670.
 - (a) *Paradise Regained* is about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, not about his crucifixion and resurrection. Milton probably didn’t agree that Christ’s death reopened the gates of heaven.
 - (b) In effect, *Paradise Regained* is series of debates between Jesus and Satan. Jesus rebuts Satan’s arguments by using reason informed by faith. Jesus is determined to endure any trials visited upon him.
 - (c) It depicts the idea of Christian heroism as a state of mind. It dramatises the inner workings of Jesus’ mind, and the interplay of faith and reason in combatting Satan’s lies.
 - (d) *Samson Agonistes*, too, focuses on the inner workings of the Christian mind. It begins the story of Samson after his downfall—after he has yielded his secret to Delilah, suffered blindness, and become a captive of the Philistines. Samson exhibits the traits of Christian heroism that Milton always emphasised.



3. *Paradise Lost* (1667).

⁵ John Milton, *Areopagitica*.

⁶ John Milton, *Defensio Secunda*.

- a. *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem in blank verse.
- b. The first version, published in 1667, consists of ten books with over ten thousand lines of verse. A second edition followed in 1674, arranged into twelve books (in the manner of Virgil's *Aeneid*).
- c. It is considered Milton's masterpiece and solidified his reputation as one of the greatest English poets of all time.
- d. The themes are the biblical story of the fall of man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the garden of Eden.
- e. The poem's theme is God's ability to bring greater goodness out of evil.
- f. "God, in this poem, is not the indescribable effulgence felt in Dante's *Paradiso*; he is a Scholastic philosopher who gives long and unconvincing reasons why he, the omnipotent, allows Satan to exist, and allows him to tempt man, all the while foreseeing that man will succumb and bring all mankind to centuries of sin and misery. He argues that without freedom to sin there is no virtue, without trial there is no wisdom; he thinks it better that man should face temptation and resist it than not be tempted at all, quite unforeseeing that the Lord's Prayer would beg God not to lead man into temptation. Who can help sympathize with Satan's revolt against such an incredible sadist?"⁷

4. Legacy.

- a. *Paradise Lost* is regarded the greatest epic poem in English.
 - (1) John Dryden rated it as one of the greatest, noblest, and sublimest poems any nation has produced.
 - (2) Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* (1712) ranked *Paradise Lost* with the works of classical antiquity.
 - (3) Alexander Pope borrowed heavily from its imagery. In *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-14), he gently parodied *Paradise Lost*.
 - (4) Voltaire praised *Paradise Lost* in 1727 when writing about epic poetry.
 - (5) Milton's reputation suffered because of Samuel Johnson, whose critical biography in *The Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), disfavoured Milton's images from nature.
 - (6) Milton was popular among major Romantic poets, such as William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron, who perceived Milton's Satan as a heroic rebel opposing established traditions and God as a tyrant. Shelley's *Prometheus in Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is modelled after Milton's Satan.
 - (7) T. S. Eliot complained Milton's epic verse lacked real feeling, was "stiff and tortuous," and was inflexible so as to discouraged imitation.
- b. He influenced the American and French revolutions in his arguments for the liberty of conscience, the importance of Scripture in matters of faith, and religious toleration toward dissidents.

⁷ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Louis XIV*, 238.

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