

LECTURE 7

English literature during the Bourgeois Revolution.
English classicism. John Milton. **His life and work. "Paradise Lost".**

JOHN MILTON (1608—1674)

The great poet of the English Bourgeois Revolution John Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608. The family had descended from English yeomen, the class that was to be the motive force during the Revolution. Yet they were not poor, Milton's father had received an education and was a prosperous scrivener (a clerk who copied documents) in London. He was a great lover of music and also a composer of the time. The mother of the poet is said to have been "a woman of incomparable virtue and goodness".

Milton's childhood was very different from that of other children of his time. He was little interested in games and outdoor amusements. His father took care of his early education. John learned to love music and books; he read and studied so intensely that at the age of twelve he had already formed the habit of working until midnight.

At first Milton attended St. Paul's school. His progress in every department of knowledge was very rapid, and at the age of 16 he went to the University of Cambridge. He obtained his "Bachelor" degree in 1629, and his "Master of Arts" in 1632. On graduating Milton was asked to remain at the University as an instructor, but he refused because this meant he would have to take Holy Orders (to become a clergyman of the Church of England). He left the University and retired to his father's country place, Horton, in Buckinghamshire. There he gave himself up to study and poetry.

Many of Milton's poems were written at Horton. They form the **first period** in his creative work. Milton had long wished to complete his education by travelling, as was the custom of the time. He longed to visit Italy. The death of his mother in 1637 seems to have removed the strongest family tie he had. Having obtained his father's consent, Milton left England for a European tour. He visited Paris and the cities of Nice, Genoa ['Genouq] and Florence ['flOrqns]. The latter won his enthusiastic admiration; the city itself and the language fascinated him. The many interesting men of literature that he met there, gave him much opportunity to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. From Florence he went to Rome which produced a great impression upon him by its monuments of the past. Milton knew the Italian language to perfection. He spent much time in the library of the Vatican ['vxtlkqn]. In Italy, he visited and talked with the great Galileo ['gxll'lelou] who was no longer a prisoner in the Inquisition, but was still watched by Catholic churchmen. Milton succeeded in getting into the house where Galileo was kept. His meeting with the great Martyr of science is mentioned in "Paradise Lost" and in an article about the freedom of the press. After visiting Naples he wanted to go to Sicily ['sIsIII], but news of the state of affairs in England made him change his mind. Milton considered it wrong to be travelling abroad for personal enjoyment while his countrymen were fighting for freedom. He returned to England in 1639, just when the

struggle between the king and the Puritan bourgeoisie began. For some time Milton had to do educational work, and the result of his educational experience was a treatise¹ on education.

At the age of 34, Milton married Mary Powell ['pauql], the daughter of a wealthy royalist. The union proved unhappy. She was a young and frivolous girl, little fitted to be the companion of such a serious man. They had only been married a month, when the young bride sought permission to visit her parents and did not return. Her relatives had agreed to her marriage with the zealous republican when their party seemed to be losing power, and apparently repented it when a temporary success of the Royalists revived their hopes.

Milton did not see his wife for four years. During this time he reflected much on marriage and divorce. As a result, a treatise on divorce appeared, in which, with no mention of his personal drama, Milton regarded marriage and divorce as a social problem. An unexpected turn in the political situation of the country brought about the reconciliation of the couple and Mary returned.

Milton kept a keen eye on the public affairs of the time. The years between 1640 and 1660 were the period of his militant revolutionary journalism. His views on civil and religious liberty served the revolutionary party, and Milton became the most prominent publicist of the Independents.

When a Republican Government was established in the year 1649, Milton was appointed Latin Secretary of the Council of State. The work consisted chiefly of translating into Latin and from Latin diplomatic government papers. This was the time when many Royalists went abroad and hired writers to write against revolutionary England. Now came the trying times when the Puritan Government had to defend the Republic. The first men of the Puritan Revolution turned to Milton for help. Milton did not belong to any of the Puritan sects, but he agreed to write for the cause of the Revolution with heart and soul, because he hated tyranny. In his excellent pamphlets: "*The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*" ("tenure" means here "right"), "*Defence of the People of England*" and the "*Image Breaker*" (image=icon), — Milton made Europe understand that the Revolution was not just a great rebellion, as the Royalists insisted, but that it was the only force which could give the people rights and freedom. The execution of the king, he said, should not be regarded as the bloodshed of a cruel people, but as the only means by which the people could free themselves from the monarchy; and that the king was not a martyr but the worst of reactionaries in the cause of liberty.

Milton had had poor eyesight even as a child, and now his doctors warned him that unless he stopped reading and writing entirely, he would lose his sight. To this Milton replied that he had already sacrificed his poetry and was willing to sacrifice his eyes, too, for the liberty of his people. He lost his eyesight in 1652. In the same year Milton's wife died in child-birth. Milton was left with three young daughters. Four years

¹ treatise ['tri:tlz] — a literary work dealing carefully with a particular subject

later he married Catharine Woodcock, the daughter of a republican, but their happiness was not for long. She died within a year of their marriage.

During the years of his work as Latin Secretary and journalist, Milton wrote only a few sonnets. One of these sonnets was "*To the Lord General Cromwell*".

The death of Cromwell in 1660 was followed by the restoration of the monarchy. The son of the executed king, Charles II, was made King of England. With the restoration of the monarchy Milton was discharged from his office. The work of all his lifetime was destroyed. All his famous pamphlets were burnt by the common hangmen. But the poet's militant spirit was not crushed. He and his family moved to a small house not far from London, and Milton again began to write poetry.

The years of Milton's retirement became the third period in his literary work. During this period he created works that made him one of the greatest poets of England. These were "*Paradise Lost*" and "*Paradise Regained*". Milton's daughters could have been a comfort to him in his old age, but he found his greatest sorrow in that his two eldest daughters refused to help him in his work. Only his youngest daughter Deborah was willing to read Latin books to her blind father. With the help of a few loyal friends Milton completed "*Paradise Lost*" by 1663.

When Milton's fame reached the Court of Charles II, the brother of the king, Duke James, desired to see "Old Milton". James paid a visit to the blind poet. The duke asked Milton whether he did not regard the loss of his eyesight as a judgement sent to him by God for what he had written against the late king (Charles I)". Milton replied: "If your Highness thinks that the calamities which befall us here are indications of the wrath of Heaven, in what manner are we to account for the fate of the king, your father? The displeasure of Heaven must, upon this supposition, have been much greater against him than me, for I have only lost my eyes, but he lost his head."

Milton's third wife was Elizabeth Minshel. She was not very well educated but she willingly wrote for her blind husband, and he dictated his last great works to her. Milton died on November 8, 1674, and was buried in London. Many years afterwards a monument was erected to his memory in Westminster Abbey.

Milton's works form a bridge between the poetry of the Renaissance and the poetry of the classicists of a later period. Milton was attracted by the poetry of ancient mythology and drama because of the free thought there expressed. Although poetry and drama were prohibited by the Puritans because it was the amusement of the Court, he nevertheless was a champion on the side of the Puritans in so far as social and religious problems were concerned, because he thought that only a republican government could provide a foundation for freedom.

Milton's works are characterized by their duality (which means that two independent views go together). He chose his themes from the Bible, but in his epic poems they became revolutionary in spirit.

"PARADISE LOST"

"Paradise Lost" was written at the time when the bourgeois revolution had ended unsuccessfully, but the powerful voice of the poet declared that the spirit of the

revolution was not broken, that it still lived in the hearts of the people. In his "*Paradise Lost*" Milton shows revolt. Being a puritan, Milton wanted to portray God as an almighty embodiment of Justice, and Satan as the villain, yet Satan becomes the hero in this great work.

"*Paradise Lost*" is an epic poem written in 12 "books". The place of action is the universe. The characters are: Satan and his rebel-angels, God the Almighty, three guardian angels — Raphael, Gabriel and Michael, and the first man and woman — Adam and Eve. The revolutionary spirit is shown in Satan, who revolts against God, draws to his side many rebel-angels and is driven out of Heaven. Down into Hell they fall. But Satan is not to be overcome. He hates God who rules the universe autocratically:

*High on a throne of royal state,
Sole² reigning, holds the tyranny of Heaven.*

The very word "tyranny" makes God a despot and repulsive to the free mind. Though banished from Heaven, Satan is glad to have gained freedom. He possesses humane qualities. He pities the rebel-angels who have lost heavenly life for his sake. He is determined to go on with the war against God.

Adam and Eve are allowed by God to live in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden, as long as they do not eat the fruit that grows on the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil. Satan, who has been driven from the Garden of Eden by the guardian angels, comes back at night as a mist, and then assumes the form of a serpent. Next morning, while Adam and Eve work in different parts of the Garden, the serpent rolls towards Eve and persuades her to eat an apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Eve eats an apple from the forbidden tree and plucks another for Adam. As a punishment for the sin they have committed, God the Almighty banishes them from Paradise to the newly-created world, where they are to face a life of toil and woe. The angel Michael leads them out of Paradise, waving his fiery sword behind them. From a hill, before parting, Michael shows Adam a picture of the tyranny and lawlessness which are to befall mankind.

Milton's sympathies are with Adam and Eve, and this shows his faith in man. His Adam and Eve are full of energy. They love each other and are ready to meet whatever the earth has in store for them rather than part.

*Adam to Eve:
O, fairest of creation, last and best
Of all God's works, creature in whom excelled
Whatever can to sight or thought be formed³,
Holy, divine, amiable or sweet,
How can I live without thee, how forego⁴
Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joyed?
When they are driven out of Eden, Eve says to Adam:*

² sole — alone, autocratically

³ in whom everything that can be seen or imagined is better than in others (to excel — to surpass others in quality)

⁴ how (can I) forego — how (can I) do without, how (can I) go on without

..... *but now lead on;
In me is no delay; with thee to go
Is to stay here; without thee to stay
Is to go hence⁵ unwillingly; thou to me
Art all things under heaven, all place, thou
Who for my wilful crime art banished hence.*

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The revolutionary poets of the 19th century said that in "*Paradise Lost*" Milton refused to accept the conventional Bible-story. Adam and Eve are Man and Woman — the finest of all earthly-creatures.

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⁵ hence — from here