

DR. MD. NAUSHAD AHMAD KHAN
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DEPT. OF ENGLISH
SOGHRA COLLEGE
BIHARSHARIF (NALANDA)

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Q: John Milton's 'Lycidas' as a pastoral Elegy. Discuss.

B.A, Part-I.(Hons.)

Ans: John Milton is certainly one of the greatest of the poets in English Literature. His major poems are 'Paradise Lost' and 'Paradise Regained'. 'Lycidas' is one of the most remarkable poems written as a pastoral Elegy in 1637. It is a fine example for his classical spirit. It belongs to the tradition of pastoral poetry. 'Lycidas' is generally ranked with the other two great elegies of English, "Thyrsis" written by Matthew Arnold and 'Adonais' written by P.B. Shelley.

"Lycidas" is a pastoral elegy and like other poems of this tradition, it also mourns the death of a shepherd. The poem starts with an invocation to the Muses. He compares himself to a shepherd plucking berries, laurels and myrtles before their mellowing time. The poet describes Lycidas and himself spending their time in the solitude of Nature writing poetry and singing them. The poet is very sad on the accidental death of his classmate. He wonders what the nymphs were doing when the waves of the sea closed on Lycidas. As a shepherd, Lycidas lives and works in the countryside, putting him in close contact with the natural world. As a poet, he is undoubtedly talented but due to his life being tragically cut short, he will never get a chance to fulfill his promise. It has fallen to his friend, the infinitely more talented Milton, to use his superior poetic gifts to keep the flame of Lycidas's memory alive.

The description of the natural sights of the countryside

is again an important ingredient of a pastoral poem. Indeed, one might argue that the chief purpose of pastoral elegy in general is to ensure that the subject is never truly forgotten by posterity. In the second section of the poem various persons come to visit the body of Lycidas. This is perfectly in tune with the elegiac tradition. There are two long digressions in the poem where the poet almost forgets Lycidas whose death he professes to mourn. Firstly, he laments the unhappy lot of a poet and secondly, he criticises the faults of the church. The religious fervour of Milton inspires him to avail this opportunity and criticise the corrupt clergy of the church. Lycidas has also got the dignity and solemnity of an elegy. There is the invocation of the Muse in it. Even when the poet describes the variety of flowers, the gravity of the situation is not lost because Milton does not let us forget that these flowers are invited only to decorate the laureate hearse where Lycidas lies. The loss of Lycidas is really painful to the shepherds and towards the end of the poem the poet makes an appeal to them to stop bewailing;

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
For Lycidas, your sorrow, is dead,

Sunk though he be beneath the watry floor;

The poem is invested with a splendour of words and music that made Tennyson call the poem the touchstone of poetic taste. Lycidas is probably the most perfect piece of pure literature in existence because every word and every phrase and line is sonorous, ringing and echoing music. Though there may be divergent views about its merits as an elegy, all agree that Lycidas is among the most precious treasures of English poetry.

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LATIN BORROWINGS

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Contact with the Roman Empire during several centuries had introduced the Germanic tribes to a number of Latin words. When Angles, Saxons and Jutes invaded England they brought with them some of these words. Such words are: street, mill, cheese etc. The Latin words, of course, changed to some extent in Old English, and from Old English words the current words were formed.

The coming of Christian culture to England in a Latin form with the Roman missionaries and those from Ireland in the 7th century brought a few more Latin words, of which some have remained permanently part of the English language. Foreign ideas such as those of monastic living, bishops and priests, Christian symbolism etc, had no native equivalents. So a number of Latin words came to English in a changed form:

Bishop, [from Latin "episcopus"]

Priest, [from Latin "presbyter"]

Mass, [from Latin "missa"]

Minister, [from Latin "monasterium"]

Monk, [from Latin "monachus"]

Church, [from Latin "Cyriacum"] etc.

The largest number of Latin words, however, belong not to the direct influence of Latin Christianity, but Latin learning and science which came to England especially in the 18th century. Many scientific words were imported. Many names of herbs and trees came into English along with a number of technical terms.

Many Latin words were translated into new English words. Thus new words were formed. At times Compound Latin words were broken into its components and new English equivalents were coined accordingly.

There appeared in increasing qualities throughout the Middle English period a number of purely technical, scientific and religious terms taken directly from Latin. Such words are pauper, equivalent, legitimate, index, scribe, simile, collect, mediator etc. The vogue of translations from Latin in the 5th century greatly added to a number of direct Latin borrowings, and the common word tolerance, first appears direct from Latin at this time.

It is, however, the modern English period, from Henry VIII's reign onwards, that witnessed the main direct influences from Latin. During the Renaissance a large number of Latin words were taken by the great writers of the period. Later Milton took many words for his Paradise Lost. Scientific and philosophical words were written directly in Latin. As a matter of fact, English's debt to Latin is immense. Some of the common borrowings are as follows:

1. 16th century: exist, genius, area, fungus, miser, cirrus, vaccum, medium, species, ignoramus.

2. 17th century: torpor, specimen, arena, apparatus, focus, album, complex, minimum, status, lens, pendulum.

3. 18th century: bonus, via, deficit.

4. 19th century: opus, ego, referendum, bacillus,
moratorium.

These are Latin words which have been taken over unchanged. But the number that had been "Englished" by taking on native endings or reduction is legion.

