

Topics for Discussion:

1. Milton's *Lycidas* was condemned by Samuel Johnson as insincere. "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief. When Cowley [a poet contemporary with Milton] tells of Hervey that they studied together, it is easy to suppose how much he must miss the companion of his labors, and the partner of his discoveries; but what image of tenderness can be excited by these lines? [Johnson then quotes ll. 26-29.] We know that they never drove (sheep) a-field, and that they had no flocks to batten; and though it be allowed that the representation may be symbolic of something, the true meaning is so uncertain and remote that it is never sought because it cannot be known when found."

Right or wrong in his judgment, Johnson raises important points. The death of Edward King is the occasion of the poem, but is the loss of King to Milton its real subject? The poem is a form of pastoral elegy, in which, in ancient Greek and Roman examples poet-shepherds spent their time while watching over their sheep by singing about his loves and the landscape, and their songs also involved serious subjects—the nature of leadership, politics, the course of empire, as well as the seasonal character of life, the inevitability of death. In the early Italian renaissance and in much of the English poetry that took its works for models, the shepherds stuck to love and landscape, and whiling away time as the sheep browsed. (Perhaps you can see why such a form was congenial to courtiers, whose real trade—the fighting of wars—was an intermittent occupation.) What use does Milton make of the Shepherd metaphor? What is the relation of the apparently degressive passages (concerning Apollo and St Peter, ll 64-84 and ll. 103-131) to the theme? An important feature of pastoral was its commitment as a form of fiction to the idea that simple people, like shepherds, had a purer relationship to Nature than more complicated types and that Nature was a beneficial power. Note that in *Lycidas* the speaker acknowledges difficulty in maintaining the pastoral note, which is interrupted by verses about Apollo and St Peter; when the note is finally resumed (l. 132) it leads to a suggestion that the pastoral fiction of Nature in mourning for the dead shepherd as "false surmise." For all Johnson's criticism, then, Milton seems himself to be quarreling with his pastoral machinery. Again, what is the role of Nature in the poem? Some of the poem is about premature endings; a lot of it is about water. What can the image of "drowning" stand for, besides drowning? The poem is divided into something like paragraphs; how does this division function? Discuss the shifts in tone in this poem. How are they marked? What do the last eight lines do for the tone of the whole? Another difficulty—careful reading will show that it is not always clear who is speaking. Various mythological figures appear who speak of King in the third person, but one voice (e.g., ll 100-102: *It was that fatal and perfidious bark . . .*) addresses King directly. Whose voice is it? Note that we have a third-person ending, though the poem begins in the first person, with the shepherd speaking. How do you account for this lack of symmetry? Johnson also objected to the mixture of pagan and Christian materials in this poem. Is there evidence that the poet mixed them consciously and for a purpose?

2. *On his blindness*, if properly punctuated, turns out to be one sentence. Does this matter to the understanding of the poem? What is the parable of the talents to which it refers? How can Patience *prevent* a murmur that has already been murmured? Or has it? What is the force of the final word, *wait*? How does it fit in with the parable of the talents alluded to earlier in the poem?

3. The sonnet *Methought I saw* has the familiar ambiguity of dividing up into both quatrains/couplet and octet/sestet. What is the force of the division with regard to the content of the units in either case? What is the meaning of "fancied sight"? (We must recall that Milton was blind at the time.) Does "fancied" refer to the fact that in the dream, his wife is veiled and he cannot see her face or to the fact that he has been given sight in the dream and can see her face? Are there problems with either interpretation? What difference does the issue here make to the meaning of the poem?