On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three Study Guide

On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three by John Milton

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Introduction

"On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty- Three," which exists in manuscript and was printed twice during Milton's lifetime (in the *Poems* of 1645 and 1673), was most likely written in 1632 at a crucial time in Milton's life, just after his graduation from Cambridge. Milton here acknowledges that he may not seem as mature as some of his contemporaries but expresses a desire to use his talents well and his trust in God's will for him over time. One thing to understand about Milton's sonnets is their topical range. Not a writer of love sonnets in English (although the sonnets he wrote in Italian are love sonnets), Milton writes political sonnets, occasional sonnets, elegiac sonnets, and sonnets of personal meditation, like this one.

Author Biography

Milton was born in Cheapside, London, in 1608, the son of John Milton, Sr., a prosperous scrivener, notary, and composer, and Sara Jeffrey Milton. Because of the family's financial standing, Milton received an excellent education in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, and Italian. Music and literature were particular favorites with the boy, and Milton began composing his own poetry at a young age. From 1618 to 1620, he was privately tutored at the family home. He then attended St. Paul's School before moving on to Christ's College, Cambridge, at the age of sixteen. At first unpopular, Milton eventually made a name for himself as a rhetorician and public speaker. Upon leaving the university in 1632 with a master's degree, Milton retired to Hammersmith for three years and later to Horton, Buckinghamshire, where he devoted himself to intense study and writing. In May of 1638, Milton embarked on an Italian journey that was to last nearly fifteen months. The experience, which he described in *Pro populo anglicano defensio secunda* (*Second Defence of the People of England*, 1654), brought him into contact with the leading men of letters in Florence, Rome, and Naples, including Giovanni Battista Manso, Marquis of Villa, who had been an intimate of the epic poet Torquato Tasso. Scholars view the Italian tour as seminal in Milton's literary development; a new self-confidence emerged in the letters he wrote during his travels, and it was in Italy that Milton first proposed to write a great epic.

With the coming of the English Civil War and the Commonwealth, Milton's life changed completely as his attentions shifted from private to public concerns. Abruptly, Milton left off writing poetry for prose, pouring out pamphlets during the early 1640s in which he opposed what he considered rampant Episcopal tyranny. Milton declared his Puritan allegiance in tracts in which he argued the need to purge the Church of England of all vestiges of Roman Catholicism and restore the simplicity of the apostolic church. In 1642, he married his first wife, Mary Powell, who left him shortly after the wedding (but returned to him three years later; paradoxically, though Milton was to marry two more times, he was never divorced). With the execution of Charles I in 1649, Milton entered the political fray with *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, an assertion of the right of a people to depose or execute a ruling tyrant. This view constituted a complete about-face for Milton, who had written as a good monarchist in his early works. Henceforth, Milton was permanently on the political left. He accepted an invitation to become Cromwell's Latin secretary for foreign affairs and issued a number of tracts on church and state issues. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 left Milton disillusioned and hastened his departure from public life; as a former member of the Commonwealth, he lived for a time in peril, but for reasons not entirely clear, he was spared harsh punishment.

The remaining fourteen years of Milton's life were spent in relatively peaceful retirement in and around London. Completely blind since 1652, he increasingly devoted his time to poetry. Amanuenses, assisted sometimes by Milton's two nephews and his daughter Deborah, were employed to take dictation, correct copy, and read aloud, and Milton made rapid progress on projects he had put off many years before. During the writing of *Paradise Lost*, Milton spent mornings dictating passages he had composed in his head at night. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, followed in 1671 by *Paradise Regained*.

"Samson Agonistes," a verse tragedy, appeared in the same volume as *Paradise Regained*. He died in November 1674, apparently of complications arising from gout.

Poem Text

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stol'n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.

Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
That I to manhood am arrived so near;
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.

Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure even
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of
Heaven;
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

These lines introduce the poem's theme and create a metaphor of Time as a bird flying away with ("stol'n on his wing") Milton's youth.

Line 3

Here, the poet expresses his sense of how quickly time passes: "hasting days" and "full career."

Line 4

The poet here uses a seasonal metaphor to express that his time of life is a "late spring" but that so far, it has not shown any "bud or blossom," in other words any promise of fruit or achievements in his life.

Lines 5-6

The poet remarks that he does not seem as old as he is (his look "deceive[s]" the truth that he is practically a man).

Lines 7-8

"Inward ripeness" continues the natural metaphor of "bud" and "blossom" in line 4; the poet has more maturity or ripeness inside than he shows outside, and more than some other young people, the "more timely-happy spirits" have. But, note the various possibilities in the word "endur'th." The lines are grammatically inverted and could be paraphrased, "and inward ripeness, that imbues / clothes some others, appears less in me." The phrase "timely-happy spirits" can be understood to refer to those who are more comfortable with their age or whose age reflects more happily their inner being.

Lines 9-12

"It" may refer to the appearance of inward ripeness of line 7; whether ripeness appears less or more, now or later, it shall be just right according to his destiny, the "lot . . . / Toward which Time leads" him. Where the octave found dissonance between his inner and outward states of maturity, the sestet's answer is that time and the will of heaven will even things out according to plan. Note the multiple puns in this line: "measure" could mean a musical measure or a line of verse; "even" may be an adjective modifying

"measure" or may lead the reader into the next line, "even to that same lot." Milton often places adjectives both before and after nouns, and he likewise often lets the word at the end of a line work in two different ways in each line.

Lines 13-14

Critics have differed as to the precise interpretation of these lines, but, in general, they suggest that whatever the outcome of the speaker's life, it will be with God's knowledge and in accordance with His world. The "great Task-Master" is God.

Themes

Crisis of Faith

The crisis created by Milton's awareness of the passage of time is one that can be resolved by the poet's choice to put his future in God's hands. In the first eight lines of the poem, Milton worries that time has passed too quickly. He has been at Cambridge studying, but has had little time to fulfill what he sees as his destiny. Milton is aware he is a talented poet, but instead of writing poetry, he has been studying. This precipitates a crisis of faith for the poet, who worries he has wasted precious time. But maybe the poet's talent, which "be it less or more," will be less when he is mature. He worries, although he is still confident of his future. In the final six lines of the sonnet, Milton acknowledges that time, whether "soon or slow," will still inevitably lead him to God. This is the same future that all men will face, "however mean or high." Time will lead Milton to God, if he can accept the limitations of earthly time. In these final lines, Milton finds the answer to his problem in giving control over his life to God and, as a result, his crisis of faith is resolved.

Journey

Milton uses this sonnet to symbolize the poet's journey from doubt to self-discovery. He feels guilty about his time spent studying when he has not published anything. He is slow to mature, and by "late spring no bud or blossom shew'th." But, in line 9, the pronoun "it," whose antecedent is unclear, but which is usually thought to refer to the poet's maturity, might suggest that the poet's talents will ripen with maturity, that rather than having wasted his youth, the poet has been marking time until he is mature enough to create the kind of poetry he feels destined to create. As he nears age twenty-four, the poet feels he is at the border between youth and manhood, a time to which he has "arrived so near." He worries that when he reaches maturity his talent may be less, rather than more. Although worried, he is confident in his own abilities, and so the sonnet moves the poet from the hesitance and questioning of youth to the realization that perhaps he will achieve all he wishes. The sestet is filled with obscure references: it, more, less, soon, slow. There are contradictions and uncertainties, all of which indicate that the journey will not always be clear. Ultimately, the poet feels the journey will bring him success. His intent is to please God and use his abilities as best he can. The journey is to reaffirm the poet's faith in God and to find his place in the world.

Passage of Time

Milton's sonnet explores the idea of time as a guide to his destiny. Milton calls time "the subtle thief of youth" because time steals without awareness. This sonnet is written sometime after Milton's twenty-third birthday, and already the poet is thinking about the approach of his twenty-fourth birthday. He sees the ways in which time steals the days

away from him, and he is not even aware of each day passing. The poet notes how he has planned to accomplish so many things, yet instead feels he has spent too much time studying and learning. What he considers the promise of his youth has come to no fruition, "no bud or blossom shew'th." In lines 5 through 8, the poet suggests that time can deceive others, since he still appears to be young; but Milton knows the truth, that time has stolen his youth. In the final six lines of the poem, Milton changes direction and the sestet responds to the problem expressed in the octave: time which steals his youth is also bringing him closer to God. This religious interpretation of time expresses the Renaissance notion that the passage of time will bring mankind closer to a final meeting with God. Milton justifies his use of time because, regardless of how he spends it, in the end time is on his side, bringing him closer to his God.

Predestination and Free Will

This poem makes clear that Milton is incorporating both Calvinist ideas of predestination and the Anglican Church's emphasis on free will into his poem. The poem's octave, the first eight lines, focuses on the problem of free will. Milton has chosen his course of study, and as a result he has neglected his own talents, his poetry. This time spent on academics has flourished and flown, as he acknowledges in line 3: "My hasting days fly on." But now, as he readies himself to leave Cambridge, he must face the awareness of lost time. In the poem's sestet, Milton moves toward resolution, which he finds in embracing both the Calvinist idea of predestination and the Anglican promise of free will. He can reconcile his wasted youth if he gives the choice to God. His youth has not been wasted, since it moves him closer to God; this is "the will of Heaven." At the same time, the next line, "if I have grace to use it so," takes the poem back to free will. His talents will grow and develop if Milton chooses to do so. As a result of Milton's playing with this opposition, he creates a tension in his poem. Human effort and divine will are partners in Milton's future. The resolution to Milton's dilemma is in recognizing this fact.

Style

In its form, "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three" is an Italian sonnet (also known as a Petrarchan sonnet), written, like most sonnets, in iambic pentameter. Its thematic organization closely follows the structure of the form, with two well-developed movements corresponding to the eight-line octave and the six-line sestet. The octave follows the conventional Petrarchan rhyme scheme of *abbaabba*, while the sestet rhymes *cdcdee*, one of several conventional patterns. The octave breaks conventionally into two shorter movements, each consisting of a quatrain rhyming *abba*. The beginning of the sestet, where the rhyme scheme changes, is known as the turn of the sonnet because at this point an Italian sonnet's theme or tone usually shifts. In the case of "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three" the transitional "But" signals a change from the impatient arrogance of the octave into the humbler prayer of the sestet.

Historical Context

Seventeenth Century

The years between 1576 and 1642 are often described as the golden age of English poetry, drama, and theatre, although the period was not golden for those who lived through it. For one hundred years, farmers had been displaced by enclosure acts that fenced off agricultural land for pastures, resulting in inflation and unemployment in the countryside. Crop failures, the threat of war abroad, and the sometimes brutal religious strife that enveloped the country, had shaken English society by the time Elizabeth assumed the throne in 1558. The Elizabethan regimen produced relative stability, but the queen's failure to name a successor brought discontent and the threat of civil war even before her death. Initially, James I's rule was greeted with enthusiasm, but religious, class, and political divisions intensified with time. Rural unemployment drove many people to London, making it the largest city in Europe. Civil problems led to widespread disorder, while the establishment of a capitalistic economy took the place of the feudal agrarian social order. Disorder and conflict led writers to grapple with new ideas about science, philosophy, religion, and politics. There was a new emphasis on individual thought, action, and responsibility. In spite of this turmoil, or perhaps because of it, the most important drama in Western history was produced.

A Period of Change

The period in which John Milton was writing is one marked by enormous changes. After nearly fifty years as queen, Elizabeth I died in 1603. James IV of Scotland became the new English king, James I. While Elizabeth had encouraged a degree of individualism, James believed in absolute monarchy based on the divine right of kings. Although Elizabeth had reinstated the Protestant church, with herself as the official head of the Church of England, she was also more tolerant of religious choice than her predecessor Mary I had been. While the people still mistrusted and barely tolerated the Roman Catholic Church, which was associated with papal corruption and intolerance, Elizabeth managed to keep these religious issues subdued. With Elizabeth's death, the movement toward religious tolerance changed, and religion became a problem for public debate once again.

One issue was the marriage of James's son Charles, the new heir, to the French princess, a Roman Catholic. The debates about religion, however, involved more than just the opposition of Protestant and Catholic. The Anglicans, who argued for free will governing men's actions, opposed the Calvinists, who argued for predestination. There were debates about the use of prayer books and the designation of church officials. This controversy and debate heavily influenced the poetry of this period. Consider, for example, Milton's sonnet, "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," which creates tension in the opposition between predestination and free will.

Puritan Intolerance

Another religious group whose actions would have lasting impact were the Puritans. Both James and Charles encouraged Sunday festivals and sporting contests. The Puritans thought these activities were the work of the devil or, at the very least, an embracing of the pagan past. James and Charles were also big patrons of the theatre. Charles, in particular, supported huge theatrical productions called masques. These were often very elaborate and very expensive, a cost born by the public in the form of additional taxes. The Puritans opposed the burgeoning theatre and thought actors were sinful and displayed substandard morals. In part this view of the theatre was based on the social environment of the playhouse, which was libertine. Puritan opposition to theatre was based on a philosophical ar- gument: acting is lying, role-playing. Plays also brought large numbers of people together, thus increasing crime and disease, and they enticed people away from their jobs and so affected trade. As a result, city officials often sided with Puritans in wanting theatres closed or moved outside town. Eventually Puritan opposition led to revolution and the beheading of King Charles I. Milton later allied himself with the rebellion and Oliver Cromwell, and so religion emerged as an important focal point of Milton's life and of this period.

Critical Overview

Milton is regarded as one of the greatest and most influential English poets, ranking with Chaucer and Shakespeare. He wrote both poetry and prose, and in poetry wrote pastoral, elegy, epic, drama, sonnet, and other kinds of verse. His most famous and influential work is the epic *Paradise Lost*, which has been at the center of English literary criticism since Milton's day. His sonnets have received less critical attention. Lord Macaulay, in his essay "Milton" published in 1860, differed from most critics in that he valued the sonnets highly. He found that "traces . . . of the peculiar character of Milton may be found in all of his works; but it is most strongly displayed in the Sonnets. Those remarkable poems have been undervalued." Macaulay links the sonnets firmly to Milton's life and character, a view that seems especially true of

"On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three." "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty- Three" is fairly straightforward until the last three lines. Many explications of this section have been attempted. K. Svendsen, in *The Explicator,* offers three interpretations, but prefers the following: "All that matters is whether I have grace to use my ripeness in accordance with the will of God as one ever in his sight." D. C. Dorian, writing in another issue of *The Explicator*, differs, thinking that "ever" can mean "eternity" and paraphrases the section this way: "All time is, if I have grace to use it so, as eternity in God's sight."

Another way to interpret these lines is with recourse to the manuscript, which has no punctuation. Instead of reading line 12 as if it had two subjects (toward which Time and the will of heaven lead me) one can read "will of heaven" as the subject of "is" (the will of heaven is all). In that case, line 14 could variously take as antecedent "I" (the will of heaven is all, if I, being watched by God as always, have grace to treat it as if it is all) or more loosely the using of his lot (the will of heaven is all, if I have grace to act as if that is so, remaining in God's sight). Other interpretations are of course possible; several are noted in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* by A. S. P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature. She teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the English department and an adjunct professor in the university's honors program. In this essay, Metzger discusses Milton's reworking of the sonnet format in his poem and explores the influences of earlier and contemporary English poets on Milton and the development of the sonnet format.

In England, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were marked by a phenomenal outpouring of poetic talent. The poets of this era often took older established formulas and rewrote and revised the formulas to express new, often controversial, ideas about their world. These poems were not published until many years after their composition. Instead, the poems were copied and circulated among other poets. This circulation of poems led to a competitiveness between poets, with each successive poet "playing" with the formula and content to create a new kind of poem, one that he would then pass on to his friends. This was especially true of the poetic form known as the sonnet. For instance, in John Milton's sonnet "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," the poet uses the sonnet format to explore the passing of time and to question if he is fulfilling God's plan or if he is wasting precious time in study that might be better devoted to writing. In using the sonnet form for such questioning, Milton is only the most recent of the Renaissance poets to appropriate and revise the traditional sonnet to serve a purpose that is very different from its traditional intent. In a sense, Milton's use of the sonnet serves as the culmination of a creative period that saw the use of the sonnet transformed from a simple vehicle to express a lover's lament to an elaborate and complex formula that could be used to express religious fervor, personal anguish, and the poet's fears about life.

When Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced the Italian sonnet to England early in the sixteenth century, he was importing a well-defined poetic formula that illustrated certain carefully crafted ideas. The Italian sonnet probably developed in Italy in the thirteenth century but was adapted by Petrarch a century later to express a lover's lament. The formula is simple, and few poets deviated from either the Italian rhyme scheme or the Petrarchan content. The rhyme consists of fourteen lines, with the first eight lines forming an octave, *abbaabba*, that presents either a narrative or raises a question. The octave is followed by a sestet, *efgefg*, that either makes an abstract comment upon the narrative or offers a solution for the problem. The traditional devices included elaborate conceits and exaggerated comparisons that expressed a lover's beauty and charm and her cruelty to her lover. These sonnets always emphasized the suffering of the forlorn lover at the hands of his cruel mistress. Wyatt's "The Long Love That in My Thought Doth Harbor" (1540) is typical of this style. In this poem, love is compared to war, and the lover is cold and distant. In another Wyatt poem, "Whoso List to Hunt" (1540), the object of the hunt is a woman, thought to be Anne Boleyn, one of King Henry the VIII's wives. The woman is even more objectified than normal and is diminished in her role as prey. Of course, she is also unavailable and thus cold to his pleas, and so the poet is even more dejected and rejected than usual.

Initially, these Italian sonnets were used to express an abject suitor's desire or love for a reluctant woman. Love was often painful and explored through elaborate conceits. A favorite comparison was love as a battle or war, or as illness or pain. But, it did not take very long for English Renaissance poets to deviate from this formula. For example, William Shakespeare avoids the traditional Italian pattern in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595). In act I, scene v, lines 90 to 103, Shakespeare's conceit involves saints and the kissing of palms as lips. Instead of the typical Petrarchan declaration of how hopeless his love and how cold his lover, Shakespeare uses logic and reason in his argument. This sonnet also provides for two speakers. Romeo speaks the first four lines, Juliet the next four, and then the two lovers alternate the next six lines. This deviation from typical sonnet style and content was not unusual for Shakespeare. Many of his sonnets deal with topics other than love and desire. He also explores issues such as time and death, in which he presents solutions such as immortalizing oneself in verse or in the creation of children to outwit death. Of course, Shakespeare also wrote of the pain of love in sonnets, but he addressed many of his sonnets to a young man, a departure from sixteenth century norms in which a woman was typically both the subject and the audience for a sonnet. By the end of the sixteenth century, a new English sonnet had been created to join the more familiar Italian format. The English sonnet contained three quatrains, *abab cdcd efef*, and ended with a couplet, *gg*, instead of the octave and sestet found in the Italian sonnet. However, the end of the sixteenth century does not mark the end of the modification of the sonnet. It took the efforts of several other poets to complete the transformation of the sonnet from a vehicle to express lament for a mistress to a complex piece of poetry capable of using rhyme to enhance a theme that has little to do with a woman's love.

Early in the seventeenth century, the sonnet was transfigured into a way to worship God, and a whole new wave of poets, including John Donne, George Herbert, and John Milton, took this new format in a completely different direction. Donne uses the sonnet format to question God or, more correctly, demand of God the means to his salvation. As with Herbert, Donne is also concerned with his soul. In "Sonnet X," Donne demands that God "Batter my heart." The poet asks for God to ravish him and save him from Satan. This is a more violent poem than either Herbert or Milton write. The jaggedness and choppiness of the verse suggest the emotion of the content. For Donne, salvation is brought through a more violent questioning, rather than through praise. Donne implores God to defeat their common enemy, Satan. He foresees salvation only if God imprisons him within his grace. In his less angry poems, Donne substitutes images for demands, but he still holds back from simple praise. In "Sonnet IX," Donne calls forth an image of the crucifixion and uses a meditative format to find his way to God: Donne calls forth the image, analyzes the image, and then prays to God. This method, while different from the one that Herbert uses, is still focused on finding a way to salvation. Donne plays with the sonnet's rhyme scheme by blending the English and the Italian sonnet and creating his own format, one that Herbert also uses. The first two quatrains of the sonnet maintain the English formula, *abab cdcd*, but the final quatrain is changed from the English formula, *efef*, to the Italian formula, *effe*, and an English couplet, *gg*, is added to complete the sonnet. By modifying both content and rhyme, Donne alters the traditional formulas, moving his sonnets away from both the early incarnation by Wyatt and the later reincarnation by Shakespeare, and into a format by which the poet can

dialogue with God. Herbert's use of the sonnet differs slightly from that of Donne. Herbert also demands answers from God, although he is not as strident in his demands. In "Prayer (I)," Herbert uses the sonnet as a prayer to God, but one notable difference from Donne's format is that Herbert removes the division between octave and sestet. There is no posing of a question in the first two quatrains, nor is there a response in the sestet. Herbert does not use verbs in his sonnet/ prayer; instead, the poem is a series of noun phrases, which mirror the content: a demand for answers from God.

The changes that Shakespeare, Donne, and Herbert make in the sonnet establish the poets' authority to play with or to manipulate the traditional format of the sonnet. As Donne and Herbert did in their sonnets, Milton also sets up a dialogue with God in "When I Consider How My Light Is Spent," his poem on his blindness. Like Herbert, Milton is also wondering about his ability to serve God. Half his days are gone and he thinks he has not fulfilled all that his talent had predicted. Now he is blind, and in response, Milton questions how he can accomplish what he was sure God intended him to accomplish. The poet is discussing the most difficult moment of his life and wondering if he will be unable to reach his goals. The first part of the sonnet, the octave, is focused on Milton's questioning of how best to serve God if he is blind; the sestet is the voice of patience, of God, who provides the answer just as he did for Herbert. Milton is told that "They also serve who only stand and wait." By standing, of course, the poet has not fallen to sin/Satan. But, in patience, rather than in despair, God provides the answer and reassurance. Milton departs from Herbert's use of praise and instead seeks his salvation through questioning. Although he is chastised by patience to "prevent that murmur," the idea of questioning God is a tactic also used by Donne. Finally, the poem ends on a note of hope, as with Herbert's sonnet. Milton uses the form and the theme of the sonnet to suit his purpose. He uses the Italian format in the octave, *abbaabba*, but varies the sestet in composition. In this sonnet, the sestet's rhyme is the traditional Italian, *cdecde*, but in "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," Milton varies the sestet's rhyme to *cdedce*. In this case, the complicated rhyme of the sestet reflects the complicated theme, the problem of time. The resolution of the octave's problem is in the production of the sestet: the poet has produced his poem in spite of the restrictions of time. In another sonnet, "To The Lord General Cromwell," Milton responds to a political problem. The army wants to name Cromwell king, but Milton is asking Cromwell not to accept this offer. The octave flatters Cromwell, but the change in the sonnet's direction comes in the sestet and the more subtle movement to a request that is signified with the use of the word "yet." The rhyme of the sestet changes also. Instead of the traditional Italian form, the sestet *cddcee* ends in a couplet, which reflects the pairings also found in the poem: "war and detractions" in line 2, and "faith" and "fortitude" in line 3.

Although Milton is composing sonnets in the seventeenth century, his sonnets reflect both the style and content, though modified, of the typical sixteenth-century sonnet. Shakespeare altered the form and the content slightly to reflect his own needs and objectives, and Milton altered it again to reflect the needs of his poetry. Milton takes what he wishes from the Italian sonnet, largely the octave's rhyme, but he creates a sestet that reflects his own themes. Content, too, is open to modification. Where Shakespeare used the sonnet to explore a variety of secular ideas, the poets who

followed in the early seventeenth century turned to religion, especially as a dialogue with God. The pinnacle of this adaption of the traditional sonnet is reached with Milton, who finds the sonnet a useful vehicle for exploring time, politics, and his own personal pain, as well as to reaffirm his belief that God has not abandoned him.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Dell'Amico is a college instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Dell'Amico considers Milton's poem within the contexts of the poet's career, his influence on other poets, and the nature of his religious beliefs.

Poems that are not given titles by their writers, such as this one by Milton, tend to be identified by their first line ("How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth"). About fifty years after Milton's death, however, this poem was dubbed "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three." This title was immediately popular and has endured, even if some scholars of Milton wonder whether in saying that "Time" has "Stol'n" his "three-and-twentieth year" Milton is actually saying that he is commemorating in this poem his *twenty-fourth* and not his twenty-third birthday (in this case, what has been "Stol'n" is not really his twenty-third year of life, but rather that year which begins with the poet already at the age of twentythree).

While this matter of the precise date of this poem is interesting (1631 or 1632?), it is, nevertheless, a minor point in the criticism, as Milton does not change radically as a writer in between his twenty-third and twenty-fourth years. Rather, scholars tend to divide Milton's career into three phases: a first period that ends around 1640 (during which time he wrote "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three"), a second period during which he devoted himself to political, reformist writing (1640-1660), and a third period in which he returns to poetry and writes his greatest works, most notably the epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

More significant than the precise year of the poem's composition, then, are matters such as its sentiments and form, specifically the way in which the pious Christian sentiments of the poem presage the mood and concerns of Milton's later poetry and the way in which its form proved to be so influential. "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three" is a sonnet, which is a particular type of poem, and it is a sonnet organized in a manner that had yet to be tried in English literature. Following Milton's adoption of this different sonnet form, his poetic contemporaries began writing sonnets in the same way, and they emulated, as well, his writing of sonnets on subjects other than love (sonnets written in English before Milton were usually love poems).

Sonnets were first written in England in the sixteenth century and had fallen out of fashion by the time Milton began writing them. They were (and always are) written according to strict rules and conventions, and the sonnet form preferred by Milton's predecessors tended to be fourteen line sonnets divided up into three quatrains and one couplet (a quatrain is a set of four lines; a couplet is a set of two lines).

What readers and other poets particularly appreciated about Milton's different sonnets was his use of a wholly different line arrangement, namely an octave (a set of eight lines as two linked quatrains), followed by a sestet (a set of six lines as two tercets, or two groupings of three lines). Although Milton, as in this poem, occasionally added an extra

line or two to this major two-part arrangement, this different sonnet form is nevertheless characterized by its primary, central octave and sestet.

What this type of two-part sonnet encourages are poetic meditations that first introduce or set up a problem in the octave and then resolve or reflect upon the problem in the sestet. This problemresolution structure allowed Milton and the poets who emulated him to address more mundane topics than love in their sonnets, topics in politics, for example, or, as in this poem, topical subjects. What "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty- Three" considers, specifically, is the problem of the poet's belated creative maturity. Milton already knew by this time that he wished to be a great writer, and his problem is that he is growing older but still has not produced the sort and amount of work that might be expected of one with such ambitions: "My hasting days fly on with full career / But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th." In these lines, Milton complains that his years are advancing but he has little to show for them; no real "bud or blossom" is in evidence.

Milton's poem exemplifies the problemsolution organization of the octave-sestet sonnet form. The poet has no sooner stated that he sees "no bud or blossom" to show for his years than he states that he even looks younger than his age: "Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth / That I to manhood am arrived so near." Milton's "semblance" was deceptive in his early twenties, scholars say, because his delicate, feminine facial features made him appear much younger than he really was.

Moving on from the matter of his outward appearance, Milton returns in the octave's next lines to the problem of his professional belatedness. He points to some "more timely-happy spirits" who have achieved feats commensurate with their age, persons whose "ripeness" would seem to accord with their stage in life: "And inward ripeness doth much less appear, / That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th." Critics suggest that Milton had in mind close friends who, like himself, had chosen writing as their profession, but who, unlike Milton, had already published substantially by their early twenties.

The octave's focus is, therefore, quite clear. The poet is wondering whether his tardiness to mature might mean that he will never mature at all, whether his ambition to become a writer of renown may never come to be. This would be a catastrophe for Milton, for he had set himself by this time a strict course of reading and study, all to the end of becoming a master of English letters. Indeed, Milton is said to have gone blind in 1651 owing to his prodigious reading during these years of apprenticeship; he is said to have read, in his early manhood, everything of note written in English, Latin, Italian, and Greek.

The sestet and final, extra line of Milton's sonnet solves the problem put forth in the octave by re-conceiving time and ambition. Milton subordinates his own, individual ambitions to God's will in the sestet, and he substitutes God's eternal time for mortal, human time. Milton has thus decided by the end of this poem that his own ambitions are secondary to God's plans for him, that he will submit to God's will, and that in submitting to God's will in this way he no longer feels keenly the possibility of any personal

disappointment. Milton's regret over his advancing age (mortal time) and belated development pales in significance once the rule and time of Heaven and God is considered.

Thus, where time is that which is "hasting" or accumulating rapidly in the octave, "Time" is that which is meaningful only in terms of "the will of Heaven" in the sestet. As critic R. F. Hall noted in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, edited by Dennis Danielson, time in the poem seems to "slow down" in the sestet, so that by the

> end of the poem, it is as if movement has become an irrelevance under the divine eye which gazes in eternal stasis at the poet (and us), yet provides the grace which it is the poet's choice to use in order to transform his relation to time and ambition.

Milton in the octave is a worried, ambitious young man who is comparing himself to friends and wondering when he will produce the creative work he so desires to compose. In the sestet, to the contrary, youthful worry and ambition dissolves as God's will is embraced.

This change of mood and perspective is evident in the very first line of the sestet: "Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow." Instead of anxious concern over his development ("it"), this line expresses a sanguine acceptance of whatever the poet's personal pace and capabilities turn out to be. A creative output minor or major□"less" or "more"□is acceptable; a development "slow" or quick ("soon") is likewise acceptable:

> Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
> It shall be still in strictest measure even
> To that same lot, however mean or high,
> Toward which Time leads me, and the will of
> Heaven;

This attitude of acceptance comes about because Milton in the sestet is not conceiving of himself as an individual, but rather as a servant and subject of the Christian Almighty, God. What he as an individual wants, he realizes, might not be what God has in store for him. Regardless of his own wishes, his progress is determined, ultimately, in "strictest measure," by the Almighty. His "lot" will be that which God decides, and whether it is "mean" (low) or "high," he will embrace it as "the will of Heaven."

Yet, even as the sestet of the poem replaces worldly, mortal time and ambition with God's eternal time and will, there are, still, glimmerings of the youthful, hopeful Milton in the poem's last lines: "As ever in my great Task-Master's eye. / The "great Task-Master" is God." As critic E. A. J. Honigmann suggests in *Milton's Sonnets*, "Milton borrowed the word [Task-Master] not to complain of a harsh overseer but to suggest that he himself may have a special task, as a poet." Milton subordinates his life to God's will, but he is still hoping, at the poem's end, that God's "grace" portends what he especially longs for, namely greatness as a poet.

The mix of Christian humility and proud individualism in this poem is characteristic of much of Milton's writing, including his last works, and it says a great deal about both the nature of Milton's religiosity and of Christian belief in general at the time. What this period in Britain is known for are the many Christian reform movements that contested the hierarchical and elitist composition of the Church. Of particular importance to reformers was a new way of conceiving the status of the individual Christian in relation to priests, parsons, and other official church representatives. These reformers insisted that the individual Christian did not need an official church representative to be an intermediary in between him or herself and God. Rather, to the reformers, any Christian was, in God's eyes, as privileged as the next, and all Christians, regardless of their station in life, should consider themselves as godly as the next person, no matter that this person was a priest, bishop, and so on. What this teaching points to, on the one hand, is the deep piety of the reformers: they were propagating a version of Christianity that encouraged direct and constant communication with God. On the other hand, this teaching elevates the individual, as any person is deemed godly enough to commune with God directly. This suggests both the populism (a belief in the equality of persons) and individualism (the belief in the importance of the individual) of the movements, in that any and each individual on the planet was considered good enough to communicate directly with the greatest of beings himself, God Almighty. Milton and these other reformers were, then, pious populists and individualists of sorts.

The force of this Christian reform movement in England was immense, as its populism intersected with equally populist political movements, movements designed to replace England's monarchy with a republican (elected) form of government. These various reform movements led, in fact, to a Civil War, an upheaval in which Milton played an important role and whose major event was the deposing and execution, in 1649, of the King of England, Charles I. In 1660, however, monarchy was restored, and since Milton had been a vigorous and prolific writer in defense and support of the reformers, he was incarcerated at this time. Yet, thanks to the intervention of powerful friends, he was soon freed. He then settled into his final period of literary output, his greatest period in which he produced the poems for which he is most especially admired (*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and "Samson Agonistes.")

Source: Carol Dell'Amico, Critical Essay on "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Wallace is a freelance writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace explores Milton's use of biblical imagery in his youthful discussion of his own destiny.

When a young John Milton penned "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," he was still a student at Cambridge University, working towards a master of arts degree, which he would receive the next year, at the age of twenty-four. Milton had been writing poems since the age of fifteen, and by the time he left Cambridge, he had accumulated a significant body of poetry: Latin elegies, translations of biblical psalms, and many pages of English verse.

He would wait almost another ten years before he began to publish widely, and even then the works he put his name to would be political or theological arguments, not poetry. Not until fourteen years later, at the age of thirty-seven, would his first volume of poems appear. His literary reputation would not be solidified until just before his sixtieth birthday, with the publication of his epic masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*.

In the meantime, Milton would live through some of the greatest upheaval in Western history. The Renaissance, with its new emphasis on the dignity of humanity, and its amazing scientific and artistic accomplishments, was still a recent memory, which led, both directly and indirectly, to great political and social upheaval. During Milton's lifetime, an English king would be deposed by his own people and replaced by Oliver Cromwell's sociallyconservative Protectorate, which would itself be replaced by another member of the royal family.

Milton underwent enormous personal turmoil: a famously fragile first marriage, the deaths of two children, public censure for his liberal opinions on divorce, political reversals as the English government shifted beneath his feet□and, perhaps most significantly, his own blindness, which struck him at the age of forty-four, sixteen years before *Paradise Lost* was completed.

Modern readers approaching "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three" know something even Milton did not know about the poem at the time: the end of the story□both the events of Milton's life and eventual death and the place he has taken in history. Since, in the poem, Milton looks forward over his life and wonders what he might turn out to be, the details of his personal life, and secondarily of the history he lived through, take on a special meaning. For many modern readers attempting to make sense of this early sonnet, the most salient detail of all may be that it was written in 1631.

In 1631, Milton was writing in modern English, but just barely. In fact, that date places him closer on the historical timeline to Chaucer's Middle English than to the English spoken by today's modern readers. That means that, for the average reader, Milton's language may initially seem difficult. But, a close examination reveals a sonnet that is

actually quite beautiful in its simplicity□one in which a young man ponders on the universal theme of destiny and what he might turn out to be.

Milton opens the poem by describing time as a winged thief, one who has "stol'n" his "threeand- twentieth year"□playing with a theme that is still common today, the sense that time often passes too quickly, with milestones appearing far before people believe they are ready. Not only has his twenty-third birthday arrived too quickly for Milton, but winged time shows no signs of slowing down: his "hasting days fly on with full career." In this phrase, "career" takes an archaic meaning indicating high velocity.

Although the days of Milton's life speed by, young Milton tells the reader that he is not sure what he has to show for himself, with the line "But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th." Milton's mention of "late spring" is a reference to the season of life he considers himself to be in: still in early adulthood, he is not yet in the "summer" of his life, but there are not, for him, many more days of springtime. Although spring usually brings with it the signs of the summer to come in the form of buds and blossoms that will yield summer flowers and fruit, Milton says that his life, as yet, shows no such concrete potential□no buds or blossom from which to guess the shape of things to come or even prove that he may ever be fruitful.

There might be several reasons for this, Milton goes on to say. It could be simply that he does not look as old as he actually is: "Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth / That I to manhood am arrived so near." But, the lack of outward proof of his maturity is not just an illusion, Milton admits. In fact, he finds his entire character still not as mature as other people of his age, a fact that he describes by continuing his blossom metaphor and comparing himself to unripe fruit: "And inward ripeness doth much less appear, / That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th."

For Milton, as a student of the New Testament, this description of himself as a possibly barren plant must have had special resonance: it is highly unlikely that he could have chosen the metaphor without conscious awareness of its resemblance to a metaphor that Christ used during his famous encounter with a barren fig tree. In that story, Christ curses the tree for not bearing fruit in season and tells a parable that ends with Christ commanding that every tree that does not produce good fruit be cut down and thrown into the fire. For the young Milton, then, bearing fruit would not mean just a matter of personal success□it was a matter of spiritual life or death.

In the next lines, however, Milton softens his judgment of himself with hope for the future, in language that echoes St. Paul's well-known statement on the love of God, in which he affirms that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) Milton's next phrases, while not identical, are very similar to St. Paul's cadence, and take a similar stand of hope in God in spite of any circumstance: "Yet be it [inward ripeness] less or more, or soon or slow, / It shall be still in strictest measure even / To that same lot, however mean or high, / Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven." Milton even imitates St. Paul's slightly

asymmetrical listing, interrupting himself with the long phrase "It shall be still in strictest measure even / To that same lot," before continuing his list of circumstances with "however mean or high." In these lines, the archaic use of "even" roughly substitutes for the modern "equal." Whether he matures more or less, or quickly or slowly, Milton says, his maturity will exactly equal the life, however small or great, which God has planned for him.

Milton's closing lines paraphrase another statement of St. Paul, also in Romans 8, in perhaps the saint's most powerful teaching on the working of God in human destiny, when he says that "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Although Milton has yet to bud or flower, he remains certain of God's attention and care: "All is, if I have grace to use it so, / As ever in my great Task-Master's eye." As he makes this claim, even time, which Milton initially figured as a somewhat hostile winged thief, becomes part of the pattern of "all things" in which, Milton and St. Paul assert, God works. By the end of the sonnet, time is no longer working against Milton, stealing his youth, but a partner (and implicitly a servant) of the "Will of Heaven," leading Milton inexorably toward his destiny.

Throughout the poem, Milton achieves a delicate balance in the age-old tension between free will and predestination. His reference to Christ and the unproductive fig tree and his meditations on his own achievements reveal a deep sense of his own responsibility□but he is also aware that the forces that will shape his character, and his destiny, are finally in God's hands, not his own. Even as he finds a measure of peace through his argument for belief in the providence of God, he acknowledges that he must still act well within the circumstances time and Heaven give him, that he must "have the grace to use it so."

To modern readers looking back, Milton's poem may seem almost prophetic. Milton knew himself well when he wrote that he was not yet inwardly ripe at twenty-three. Even after graduation at twenty-four, he would return to his parents' home to continue his private studies for almost eight years before he began publishing in earnest. He would not solidly establish himself as one of the brightest stars in the English literary constellation for another forty years. But, his sense of destiny, of the finger of God on his life, proved to be no lie. No generation of readers since has been able to ignore Milton: his work has been widely reprinted, and read, in every century since his death, and many critics place him secondary only to Shakespeare among English poets. Even his prose works continued to affect the destinies of humanity long after his death: his writings against tyranny formed part of the framework for revolution in both America and France, and "Areopagitica," his 1644 defense of free speech, has even figured in modern United States court decisions.

Although "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three" is profoundly interesting given Milton's historical context, Milton's true genius is revealed in the fact that, even if he had never become the towering literary figure he did, the poem would stand alone as a universal document of human experience. In it, Milton captures the essence of the moment at which a young person stands on the cusp of adulthood, looking both forward and back, and asking themselves the same questions that every young person, at some

point, asks: What have I accomplished here, yet? What do I have to show for it? What should I do next? How do my plans intersect with a future I can barely see? Which way is my destiny? What is going to happen? What does Time hold, what does Heaven have planned?

In the midst of all these questions, Milton's poem offers comfort to the reader□not because Milton finally succeeded, but because, as he and St. Paul both assert, despite any circumstance, destiny lies finally in God's great hands.

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Milton's poem is really a journey from questioning to knowledge. Write an essay that explores a personal journey you have made from questioning a choice to the acknowledgement of understanding that your choice was a correct one for you.

William Blake used art to interpret many of Milton's poems. Use whatever artistic format that fits your talents to create an artistic interpretation of this poem on the passing of time.

Milton uses his poem to explore what he thinks is his destiny. Write a poem that explores your future.

Religion was an important part of early seventeenth- century English life. The idea of God's plan for mankind was especially important. Research the early seventeenth century and write an essay discussing the role of religious thought in how men and women in this period planned their futures.

Research the education system in place for both males and females in seventeenth-century England. What kinds of careers could boys plan to pursue? Compare these to the options available for girls.

Compare and Contrast

1630s: An epidemic of the plague killed more than 40,000 people in London only a few years earlier, and it continues to kill thousands more in the years that follow. As a result, government and much of London social life is suspended during the peak months of plague each summer. The wealthy move to summer houses, while the poor, with no place to go, remain in London to battle the plague on their own. This escape of the wealthy from the plague further establishes the privileges of the wealthy and helps lead to revolution.

Today: Society is not as clearly divided between the rich and poor as was the case during the seventeenth century, and the plague no longer decimates the population every year. However, in spite of some advances in equality now evident in England, English society is still somewhat stratified, with divisions based on social rank and income.

1630s: The new interest in science is very important to Englishmen. One of the newest discoveries is a published account by William Harvey, who posits that the heart is a muscle and it pushes blood throughout the body. Harvey cannot explain the creation of blood. While many of the new scientists endorse Harvey's viewpoints, others dispute this claim, believing instead that the liver is the organ of circulation. New scientific discoveries influence the poets of the period, who incorporate tension produced by scientific disovery into their poetry.

Today: Harvey's hypothesis has long since been proven true, and today, both heart transplants and artificial hearts are common. One thing has not changed, however, and that is the skepticism that often greets new ideas in medicine. New ideas about medicine often undergo laborious tests to prove their validity. It is predominantly journalists and not poets, however, who discuss new scientific ideas.

1630s: Puritan William Prynne attacks the London theatre as lewd and as a haven for prostitutes. Because the wife of King Charles I has participated in performances at court, Prynne's attack is viewed as a slander on the queen, and he is thrown into prison after being branded and having his ears cut off. By 1642, the Puritans succeed in having all the theatres in London closed.

Today: While film is often condemned for excessive violence and sexual content, theatres are rarely the object of protest.

1630s: Galileo is tried in Rome for endorsing an earlier scientific theory that the sun is the center of the universe and the earth only a rotating planet. Galileo's ideas violate Church teachings that God created mankind, and so the earth, on which man resides, must be more important than all other planets and it must be the center of the universe. Because he is threatened with torture, Galileo eventually retracts his proposition and is confined to his villa for the rest of his life.

Today: Galileo was eventually proven correct, and while it took the Church in Rome nearly 400 years to admit Galileo was right, eventually the Church cleared Galileo of heresy and retracted his excommunication.

1630s: Religion continues to divide the English. When the House of Commons petitions King James I to prevent a Catholic marriage for his son Charles, James I rebukes the Commons for meddling in foreign affairs. The Commons responds that the marriage, religion, and birthright of a king is a suitable subject for the Commons to debate. Eventually, Charles is deposed and beheaded, and Milton serves as Secretary of Letters for Cromwell's government.

Today: Rules governing marriage of the royal family are still an important topic in England. In the twentieth century, Edward VIII abdicated when he was not allowed to marry a divorced American woman, and heirs to the English throne are still not permitted to marry Roman Catholics. Because of a tumultuous past, with vicious attacks against both Catholics and Protestants, the English continue to govern the religious choices of the royal family.

What Do I Read Next?

John Milton, published in 1991 by Oxford University Press, is a complete edition of Milton's poetry and prose works, with extensive textual notes.

The Complete Poems, published in 1999 by Penguin Classics, contains all of Milton's poems in a fully annotated edition.

A Preface to Milton, by Lois Potter, with a revised edition published in 2000 by Longman, is a slim book that provides background information on Milton and the period in which he lived.

George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets (1990), edited by Mario A. Di Cesare and published by W. W. Norton & Company, contains poems by Milton's contemporaries. This text also includes critical essays on these poets.

John Donne, published in 1990 by Oxford University Press, is a complete edition of Donne's work. A contemporary of Milton, Donne composed both secular and religious poetry, also manipulating and occasionally inventing variations on the traditional forms of poetry.

Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings (1995) is edited by Claire Preston and published by Carcanet Press, Limited. Browne, one of Milton's contemporaries, is best known for his essays and treatises that explore religion and melancholy, important issues in seventeenth-century thought.

Further Study

Bradford, Richard, *The Complete Critical Guide to John Milton*, Routledge, 2001.

Bradford's work is a guide to Milton's work that provides a discussion of his life and the period in which he was writing, while making connections to the texts that Milton wrote. This book provides a context for the study of Milton's work.

Danielson, Dennis, *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

This book includes information on Milton's works and the period in which they were written, while also summarizing the critical approaches to Milton studies.

Fish, Stanley, *How Milton Works*, Harvard University Press, 2001.

Offering a comprehensive look at Milton's texts, Fish focuses on Milton's use of language and a close reading of the text, ignoring the more common cultural and historically based readings of the poet's work.

Lake, Peter, and Michael C. Questier, *The Anti-Christ's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post- Reformation England*, Yale University Press, 2002.

This book looks at the production of pamphlets in early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and how the competing religious communities used those pamphlets to further their agendas.

Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

Lewalski provides a thorough examination of Milton's life. The author uses Milton's works and a meticulous study of the period to create a comprehensive guide to Milton's life and works.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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