Samson Agonistes, and Shorter Poems Study Guide

Samson Agonistes, and Shorter Poems by John Milton

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Shorter Poems, First Three

Shorter Poems, First Three Summary

In Samson Agonistes and Shorter Poems, the editor, A.E. Barker, combines the early poems of the 17th century British writer, John Milton, with Samson Agonistes, which was published only three years before the poet's death. This volume reveals the development of Milton's conception of himself as a Christian writer, and his movement from a controlled yet liberal blend of pagan and Christian symbols to the more stripped-down, concentrated drama of his later work. The book begins with "On the Morning of Christs Nativity," which is among his most admired early poems. Written when Milton was just 21, it celebrates the Christian incarnation of God on earth in the form of the newborn Jesus. Its first four stanzas praise the sacred birth, and suggest that a hymn should be created as a present to the infant. The poem's next section, subtitled, "The Hymn," sets the story of the nativity in snowy winter, whose whiteness is compared to Mary's virginity. Weapons of war are set aside and peace reigns, as if kings and warriors know the Lord is nearby. Even the stars seem to pause and watch with wonderment, and the sun is reluctant to let its own, inferior glory appear. Only the shepherds seem blithely unaware of the great moment, until they hear unspeakably beautiful music, and see angels singing in a circle of light. It seems as if heaven itself will open its gates to humans, but this will not yet occur, the poet acknowledges. Even so, in hell, the devil writhes in helpless anger on this day. The power of pagan oracles and gods is forever stilled by Christ's birth, and Milton names many of these figures, chronicling their sorrows. As the poem ends, Mary lays her child to rest, while around the stable, angels in bright armor sit in attendance.

"On Shakespeare" begins with the question of whether William Shakespeare, who died when Milton was seven years old, needs a pyramid or monument to his fame, which would be weak compared to the greatness of the bard, whose work is a permanent monument to himself. Milton suggests that Shakespeare's writing was inspired by Apollo, the Greek god of music and poetry. Attempts to memorialize Shakespeare's lyricism will merely turn his admirers to marble, and no such tomb is appropriate for the kingly playwright. "L'Allegro," its Italian title meaning the cheerful man, is an unusual poem for Milton, since it casts aside melancholy to celebrate zest and joy. He uses Greek mythological figures such as Cerberus, the dog that guards the entrance to Hades, to symbolize melancholy, and drives them away in favor of the three Greek Graces, who were the daughters of Venus, the goddess of love, and Bacchus, the god of wine. He also calls forth the Greek goddesses of the spring west wind, the dawn, youth, and liberty, and asks if he may live with them. The setting he creates for such bliss is rural, with hearty crops and rustic farm people, dancing, ale, and merriment. Hearkening to the stage plays of Milton's contemporaries, Ben Jonson and Shakespeare, he writes that he wants to be surrounded by the sweet music of ancient Greece, which even could have prompted the god of the underground, Pluto, to release the ancient Greek musician Orpheus's dead wife, Eurydice. Milton concludes that this is why he means to live with mirth.

Shorter Poems, First Three Analysis

"On the Morning of Christs Nativity" introduces the reader to the young Milton's deep familiarity not only with biblical passages, but also with the mythology of the ancient Greeks, Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Semites. The poem emphatically puts to rest all the old gods and beliefs, yet it mentions so many mythical figures and their stories that it seems like a celebration of such lore, even as it insists that only Christianity will prevail following the birth of Christ. Another striking aspect of the poem is how vividly it pictures the heavenly choirs of angels descending around the stable that contains Mary and the newborn Jesus, and the peacefulness that envelops the land. The clarity of this vision contrasts with the mere mention of many early myths, which seem curious and pale in comparison to the powerful immediacy of Christ's birth. "On Shakespear" is an admiring tribute to the bard, who died when Milton was a young boy. To a large extent, Milton lived in the shadow of Shakespeare's greatness, which he acknowledges in the poem with the admission that no monument to the playwright could match that of the works he left to posterity. "Il Allegro" returns to Milton's fascination with Greek mythology, as he affirms that he would happily abide in the music and beauty summoned by these ancient tales. His intent is purely symbolic. The Greek myths certainly have their dark side, which Milton acknowledges at the poem's start, when he casts away melancholy as embodied in the three-headed dog, Cerberus, which guards the entrance to the underworld of Hades. Yet the ancient Greeks also celebrated the human form and the arts, and most of the poem is about the joys of life's music and beauty. Milton's strong Christianity does not play a role in this poem, which instead shows how thoroughly the poet was influenced by the ancient arts.

Shorter Poems, Last Four

Shorter Poems, Last Four Summary

"Il Pensoroso," whose title is Italian for a thoughtful or pensive person, is a kind of mirror image of "L'Allegro," in that it begins by casting away joyfulness as so much idleness and delusion. Instead, the poet hails melancholy, which he likens to wisdom. Milton invokes Saturn, the Roman father of gods, and Vesta, the goddess of purity, as progenitors of melancholy. He bids melancholy to bring along its companions: peace, quiet, and contemplation. He alludes to Plato, who used pagan demons as symbols of the soul's future, and he writes that tragedy is beautiful. The poem proceeds through summations of various myths, praising their solemnity, including the story of the Trojan war. He hopes melancholy will lead him to a secluded brook, where he can sleep and dream, waking to sweet music from woodland spirits. The poet wishes to spend his time in quiet study, and when he is old, he wants to sit in a cell in a hermitage and strive to attain the skills of prophecy. To pursue these goals, he chooses to live with melancholy. "Song: On May Morning" is a brief poem about the morning star that brings the flower-filled and fecund month of May, which inspires youth and desire. The poem praises the fertile forests, hills, and valleys in which May clothes herself, and offers a song of praise and a wish for the month's longevity.

"At a Solemn Musick" is a plea to two Sirens, or celestial beings of Greek mythology, Voice and Verse, to lead a song to God, which will be joined by the heavenly choir of angels, cherubim, and seraphim. The objective of this song would be to inspire humans to join in, as they had done in the beginning of the race, before the fall from grace that sent them out of Paradise and silenced their music. The poet prays that if humans rejoin the chorus of heaven in its song of praise, then God may decide to bring all the singers to heaven to live with Him. "Lycidas" begins with a short introduction that explains the poem is about the death at sea of Milton's friend in 1637, and that it also is about the ruin through corruption of England's clergy, which was then at the height of its power. He begins by addressing laurel, myrtle, and ivy, which symbolize art and immortality. His intention is to disturb them at the apex of their health, because his friend, Lycidas, is dead before he reached his prime. Milton says Lycidas was a poet, and deserves a song to commemorate his death. The two young friends tended the same flock, and watched the dances of mythical satyrs and fauns. Now the shepherds and woods mourn the passing of Lycidas. None of the gods and spirits of mythology were there for his death, but the poet asks what good would it have done if they were present. Fame is a better reward, and it is not to be found on earth, but in heaven. Even so, the poet wonders why his young friend had to die. The gods of mythology have no answer, and the poet's only recourse is to bring flowers to his friend's watery grave. Yet, he believes that just as the sun sinks into the ocean each night, only to rise again in the morning as each day is renewed, so Lycidas has sunk low but will rise high.

Shorter Poems, Last Four Analysis

"Il Pensoroso" seems to reflect a side of Milton that must have been prominent in his personality, based on his early poems. In tossing aside the notion of gaiety's attractiveness, which he had praised in "Il Allegro," to embrace the dark wisdom of melancholy, he uses Roman mythological figures, including Saturn, a king among gods, who was infamous for devouring his own children in an attempt to avoid being usurped by them. Saturn was also the god of agriculture and the harvest, and perhaps Milton invokes him as a way of showing the sacrifices demanded by productivity. Certainly, his chronicle of woeful Greek tales in this poem, including the long and bloody Trojan war, show that he is stirred by the fierce convictions of men and gods. His desire to retire to a hermitage can be interpreted as a wish to turn this fierceness into the quiet of contemplation. "Song: On May Morning" is a short, lyrical hymn to Nature's beauty. It contains no references to the Bible or mythology in praising the fecund month of May. "At a Solemn Musick" is interesting in its call to Greek goddesses to inspire song among humans that might return them to God's favor, which they lost after being cast out of Paradise in the Christian creation story. As such, the poem shows Milton's ability to seamlessly blend the ancient poetry with his Christian sensibilities. "Lycidas" is among Milton's most famous shorter poems, which he introduces with two lines of prose. The poem is about his friend's death, and the alternate theme Milton identifies of the corruption of England's clergy would not be apparent if he had not mentioned it in the introduction. Because Lycidas was also a poet, the two of them shared an involvement in the poetics of ancient Greece. This gives Milton the chance to create a world of mythological creatures that he says they perceived together in their imaginations, yet he remarks that no such characters attended the death of Lycidas. At the end, only the setting and rising sun was there to remind Milton that Lycidas, though fallen, would rise to heaven through Christianity.

Sonnets, First Seven

Sonnets, First Seven Summary

"O Nightingale" is about the melodious bird whose song as the evening falls is a predictor of love. The poet bids the nightingale to sing for him, before his fate is foretold by the bird of hate. He laments that the nightingale often has sung too late for him, even though he serves whichever is the bird's mate: the muse, or love. "How Soon Hath Time" begins with a complaint of how quickly time has stolen Milton's 23 years, and he has so little accomplishment to show for it. Yet, he suspects that his ripening as a man is an inward process, which will proceed in an even manner over time, as is the will of heaven. He must have the grace to use whatever talents he is given. "On the Detraction which Follow'd upon My Writing Certain Treatises" finds Milton protesting that he had written tracts advising a change in outmoded ways of thinking, but was attacked by idiots and beastly people. The situation reminds him of a Roman myth, in which the mother of Apollo and Diana was driven from Olympus by the jealous wife of Jove, the father of the gods. From this, he has learned that those who cry for freedom often want only license to behave foolishly. "On the Lord Gen. Fairfax at the Seige of Colchester" heaps praise on a British general, comparing him to Hercules who slayed the many-headed serpent called the Hydra. The poet suggests that a greater task awaits Gen. Fairfax, because war breeds war, and glory on the battlefield is in vain when greed and theft dominate a country.

"To the Lord Generall Cromwell: May, 1652" states at the outset that the poem is about ideas put forth by government ministers concerning the Gospel. General Cromwell is fulsomely praised for his feats in battle, several of which victories are named, and then the poet asserts that peace can have equally renowned triumphs. He asks that Cromwell oppose ministers bent on doing the bidding of those who would compromise the religious freedom of the people. "To Sr. Henry Vane the Younger" complements a senator who is young in years but old in wisdom. Milton compares Vane's capabilities to those of ancient Roman senators who withstood Hannibal's assaults on the empire. He asserts that Vane has rare, dual skills in the arts of both war and peace, which is why religion now relies, first and foremost, on the senator. "On the Late Massacher in Piemont" asks God to avenge his devotees whose bones now lie scattered on alpine mountainsides, because their faith went back to days when others worshipped pagan idols. The poet reminds the Lord of the groans of agony as these people were slaughtered by the Piedmontese, who rolled women and children down the Italian mountainsides to their deaths at the behest of the Catholic Pope, whom Milton calls a tyrant. He hopes the blood and ashes of the martyrs will bring forth followers a hundredfold.

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Sonnets, First Seven Analysis

"O Nightingale" is a short poem that simply asks the bird of song to sing for the poet before he succumbs to hateful emotions. As such, it is a call to poetic inspiration. "How Soon Hath Time" is notable mostly for Milton's awareness at age 23 that time passes swiftly, and he is left with the impression that little has been accomplished. These notions are familiar to older people but seem precocious in one so young. "On the Detraction which Follow'd upon My Writing Certain Treatises" is the first poem in the collection to abandon personal themes in favor of politics. Milton had written treatises on divorce that were not well-received, and in this poem, he rakes his detractors over the coals, calling them asses, apes, cuckoos, and dogs. His contempt is towering, and he appears to be utterly fearless. "On the Lord Gen. Fairfax at the Seige of Colchester" takes a rather diplomatic approach to encouraging a leader in war to apply his skills to redressing corruption in the peacetime British government. The poem is notable for Milton's skill in praise of a warrior, which he does by drawing on the heroic myth of Hercules. "To the Lord Generall Cromwell: May, 1652" takes a similar approach to that of the poem to Gen. Fairfax, in that it fulsomely praises his successor, Cromwell. The government had proposed that it should fund and supervise preachers, which alarmed Milton, whose poem asks Cromwell to turn his talents in war to the problems of peace. "To Sr. Henry Vane, the Younger" is another poem that attempts to influence an important politician through a combination of flattery that compares him to an ancient warrior, and an appeal to show that he can be a great peacetime leader. "On the Late Massacher in Piemont" again demonstrates Milton's combative approach to defending his religious stance. Catholics in the Italian town of Piedmont massacred Protestants as heretics in 1655, the year this poem was written. Describing these deaths in grisly and piteous detail, Milton rises at the end to a rage in hoping their ashes will sow hundreds of opponents to what he regards as the Catholic Pope's tyrannical rule.

Sonnets, Last Five

Sonnets, Last Five Summary

"When I Consider" finds Milton contemplating that although he is perhaps less than halfway through life, his "light is spent," meaning he is blind. His talent now seems useless, and he wonders, foolishly, if God will expect daytime labor from a person without light. The answer is that God needs nothing from humans except to serve Him by bearing their burdens. The poet reflects that thousands of angels speed across the lands and waters to do God's bidding, but the Lord is also served by those who merely wait. "Lawrence" is addressed to a good friend, who has a respected father. The poet asks where he and Lawrence might meet again during this winter to pass the time until spring returns. He wants to share a meal and wine with Lawrence, and listen to music, because anyone who appreciates such delights and makes time to enjoy them is wise. "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness" offers advice to Cyriack. The poet says that his own eyes seem unblemished to an observer, yet he has been blind for three years. He no longer can see either the starry heavens or other people, but he has not despaired, and Cyriack may wish to know why. His answer is he is supported by the realization that his sight was lost through over-application of it in defense of liberty, a debate that has consumed all of Europe. This thought alone would sustain him through life, he suggests, even if he did not have the "better guide," which alludes to his religious belief.

In "Methought I Saw," the poet thinks he had a vision of his late wife brought back from the grave, as Hercules returned Alcestis from the land of the dead in a Greek myth. Milton reflects that his wife's body was purified after childbirth, a ritual that saved her soul, and he believes he will see her again in heaven just as he saw her in his vision, coming to him dressed in white. Although she wore a veil, he perceived her goodness shining through. As she bent to embrace him, he awoke, and the new day brought back his darkness. "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament" condemns the British Parliament for having abolished the Church of England council of bishops, even as some ministers try to replace it with another form of Presbyterianism. Milton asks if the politicians dare to replace worship freed by Christ with the rule of ministers over religious matters. He laments that leaders of repute equal to that of the Apostle Paul may now be branded heretics by a Scottish contingent of Presbyterians. What they have done is worse than the Catholic Council of Trent, he argues, and he hopes that Parliament will prune back their ambitions. He wants everyone to realize that the new Presbyterians would simply be the old priests "writ large."

Sonnets, Last Five Analysis

In "When I Consider," Milton deals for the first time with his total blindness, which came upon him at age 43 in 1652, when this poem is thought to have been written. The metaphor he chooses, "my light is spent," makes perfect literal sense even while

implying that life itself, in a sense, has ended for him. Far from self-pitying, the poem affirms that God rewards who accept their burdens graciously. It ends with a now-famous line, which declares that amidst all the angels who speed to do God's duty, those who merely stand by His side in quiet contemplation also serve Him. "Lawrence" returns Milton to a favored theme of having a good time on Earth. As usual in such poems, his emphasis is on appreciating the beauty of Nature's gifts and the arts of man, including food and drink, which he hopes to share with his friend in some convivial place. His belief in the wisdom of this plan is also a reminder to love life itself. "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness," written three years after Milton's own total blindness began, makes the rather thin argument that Milton has accepted his fate largely because he knows he lost his vision in being over-zealous about defending liberty, which particularly means religious freedom. The poem advises Cyriack to keep up his courage, but it seems mostly to be an excuse to again criticize governmental policies toward religion. Even so, it ends with the admonition to be guided by the tenets of Christianity.

"Methought I Saw" is a beautiful poem about Milton's wife, who died in childbirth only 15 months after their marriage. His tender feelings toward her are palpable, and moving. In his customary fashion, he finds that his best praise is to compare his dreaming vision of her to an ancient Greek figure, Alcestis, who was brought back from Hades to her husband by Hercules. Like Milton's wife in the vision, Alcestis wore a veil, symbolizing the mysteries of life after death. Sadly, when Milton awakens, the darkness of his own blindness, and of his life without her, returns with the new day. "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament" demonstrates Milton's loyalty to the Church of England. He is outraged by the attempts of a Scottish Presbyterian faction to codify their religious beliefs under British law. To the modern reader, it might seem odd that Milton would be so angry about an effort to replace one nationalized religion with another, both of them Presbyterian, although the roots of our contemporary concerns about separation of church and state are seen in this poem. Milton ends the poem with, "New Presbyter is but Old Priest writ Large," which is a clever pun, in that "priest" is a shorter form of the word "presbyter."

Comus, Lines 1-494

Comus, Lines 1-494 Summary

The long poem, "Comus," also carries Milton's title, "The Mask," although it has commonly been called Comus for about three centuries. At the start, a spirit appears in a forest and explains that it has come to Earth from the court of Jove, who is the father of Roman gods. The spirit's mission is to help those who would gain eternity by living virtuously. In particular, young people of good reputation who pass through this wood are threatened by corruption at the hands of Comus, who is the son of the wine god, Bacchus, and of Circe, the daughter of the sun. Circe enchanted men with a magical potion, and Comus has an even more potent drink that turns human faces into those of animals. The spirit dons the disguise of a country lad, and hides himself as Comus approaches, surrounded by people who have the heads of wild beasts. Comus praises night as the time of revelry, and bids his companions to dance. But he hears someone coming, and tells the others to hide. He sprinkles magic dust upon himself to change his appearance to that of a commoner, and then a woman called the Lady appears, saying she heard riotous music. She says earlier, her two brothers went to find berries for her to eat, but they did not return, and night fell. She is worried about them, but for herself, feels confident of her chastity. She sings a song to the Greek nymph, Echo, asking if she can tell the Lady where her brothers are.

Seeing her, Comus is amazed by her beauty, and he thinks her singing exceeds even that of the Sirens who sang with his mother, and whose voices are famous in Greek mythology for their power to lure seafarers to their deaths. Comus decides that the Lady will be his queen. He appears to her as a shepherd, asks why she is upset, and learns about her missing brothers. Comus says he saw two magnificent young men earlier who must have been them, and he offers to guide her there. The scene shifts to the two brothers, who have lost their way in the dark woods. The younger brother is worried about the welfare of their sister, but the elder brother thinks she will not be upset by mere darkness or silence, and should be in no danger. They debate whether she might have come upon someone who would threaten her, but the elder brother believes that their sister's chastity would inspire legions of angels to protect her, and he strengthens his point with the examples of Diana, the Greek goddess of chastity, and Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. They hear someone coming, and brace themselves for either friend or foe.

Comus, Lines 1-494 Analysis

Although "Comus" has long been known as this poem's title, it is followed by the title Milton gave it, "The Mask," which summons the image of the poem's supporting characters, who drink from the magical cup, after which their human heads become those of wolves, bears, or other fierce creatures. The clear implication is that that the animal-like side of human nature takes over when people abandon themselves to

uninhibited revelry. Comus is the embodiment of the temptations of earthly delights, and of their capability of turning people away from the path of righteousness. The attending spirit in the forest represents the promise of Christianity to bring guidance to believers, especially when they are lost in the dark forest of their own isolation and doubts, and of the world's corrupting influences. The Lady, who is not named in the poem, symbolizes not only chastity but the pure soul. She accepts the proffered help of Comus to reunite her with her brothers, because her first instinct is not to think evil of others. The symbolic intent of her brothers losing her in the woods is to show that purity is easily misplaced and frequently in peril of corruption. On a literal level, the argument between the brothers is about their missing sister's welfare, but on another level, it is about whether the strength of chastity and unsullied goodness can prevail over the forces of evil. When they end this philosophical but worldly argument as they hear someone coming, they are appropriately ready to encounter either good or evil.

Comus, Lines 495-1033

Comus, Lines 495-1033 Summary

The spirit arrives, disguised as Thyrsis, a shepherd who works for the brothers' father. They ask if he came to this secluded forest looking for strays from the flock, but he says he came because he was worried about their sister. He says he knows that the sorcerer, Comus, frequents these woods, and has spied on him in his horrible revelry with the beast-people who drank his potion. He says he heard their sister's lovely singing, and was frightened that Comus must be nearby. He followed her singing, saw Comus offering to guide her to her brothers, and the shepherd came quickly in search of them himself. The younger brother is alarmed, but the elder one retains faith in the strength of their sister's virtue. The brothers are ready to go find her, but the spirit tells them they are no match for the magic of Comus. He says a shepherd boy skilled in herbalism once gave him a potion, which he now gives them for protection. The scene shifts to a palace, where Comus, surrounded by the beast-people, sits at a table beside the Lady, to whom he offers a potion that she sets aside. She is trapped in an enchanted chair, and when she tries to rise, he tells her to be seated or he will freeze her into a statue, but she is contemptuous. He wonders why she is angry, because this is a place of pleasure, but she responds that he lied in saying he would take her to her brothers, and she will not drink. Comus rails against abstinence, and tells her that beauty should not be hoarded, and she should not be coy.

This inspires the Lady to remark that she hates it when vice gives itself voice and virtue remains silent. She compares that situation to inequality of wealth, in which the rich cram themselves gluttonously. The problem, she says, is that Comus is incapable of understanding anything she might explain to him, and therefore is not fit to listen to it. Comus is taken aback at the power of her reason and purity. He realizes he will have to be more crafty. The brothers then rush in, smash the glass containing the potion, and drive off Comus and the revelers. The spirit enters, and warns them that should have taken Comus prisoner, because they cannot free the Lady from the chair. Then he remembers a water nymph known to the shepherds who can free their sister. He sings a song of supplication to the nymph, whose name is Sabrina. In response, Sabrina rises from the water and sings that she is near. The spirit asks for her help, and Sabrina comes to release the Lady from the chair. The spirit thanks her, and bids the Lady to escape while she can. The next scene is in a town near the President's Castle, where the two brothers, their sister, and the spirit are surrounded by country dancers. The spirit sings a dance song, followed by a song that presents the siblings to their parents. Afterwards, the spirit announces that it will now return to the gods, and leaves the mortals with the advice that they should love virtue, which is freedom, and which will guide them to heaven. Even if virtue were weak, the spirit says, the gods would stoop to aid it.

Comus, Lines 495-1033 Analysis

The spirit's disguise as a shepherd known to the brothers serves the practical purpose of allowing a heavenly creature to circulate among mortals, as often occurs in mythology, but it also symbolizes the goodness inherent in people. When he warns them of their sister's danger, it sparks again their debate concerning the strength of virtue, and it is significant in that context that the spirit offers them a magical herb to counteract the magic of Comus. The implication is they must carry something good and strong to protect them from evil. In the palace, Comus is taken aback by the power and fury of the Lady's contempt for him, now that she has discovered he is dissolute and a liar. His magic has trapped her physically, but her spirit remains triumphantly free, and seems much stronger than his corrupting influence. When the brothers arrive to free her, Comus escapes, which signifies that temptation and evil will always remain alive in the world. The Lady's physical entrapment is not redressed by a Christian angel, but by a mythological goddess, indicating that the beauty and heritage of the ancient arts, which has sustained Milton, can free the mind of earthly cares. Even so, man's spiritual needs must be attended by Christianity, as is evidence by the final advice of the spirit that humans must love virtue, which will guide them to heaven. In the end, the debate over the power of virtue appears to be moot, because the spirit says heaven will help the virtuous, regardless of the question of virtue's strength in the presence of evil.

Samson Agonistes, Lines 1-520

Samson Agonistes, Lines 1-520 Summary

Samson Agonistes, or the agony of Samson, begins with a prose introduction in which the author explains that it is a dramatic poem in the tragic style, whose effect is to purge the audience of such emotions as pity and fear, according to the ancient Greek thinker, Aristotle. Milton names many writers who have composed tragedies through the centuries, explaining that his intent in so doing is to vindicate tragedy from current charges of insignificance, which he thinks arose from a habit of mixing comedy and tragedy in drama. Discussing the poem's meter and structure, he points out that it is inspired by ancient Greek plays, even to the inclusion of a Chorus, but it is not intended for stage performance. A section titled "The Argument" summarizes the storyline of the poem, which begins with the blinded Samson in prison at Gaza, and ends with the news that he was brought before the Philistines on a festival day and died while killing many of them. "The Persons" are listed, which is the cast of the poem, including Samson and Dalila. The poem proper begins with a soliloquy by Samson as he sits in the prison yard. He notes that today the Philistines are celebrating the festival of their sea-god, Dagon, which is why they unwillingly must release Samson from hard labor for the day. Samson's mind is troubled by thoughts of the great warrior he once was, compared to the blind prisoner he has become. He laments having given the secret of his strength to a woman, who betrayed him. He feels hopeless, and half-dead in his blindness.

The Chorus, made up his friends and admirers, express disbelief that the heroic Samson could have come to this sad condition. Samson hears them, the Chorus comes closer, and he welcomes them. He admits his folly to them, and the Chorus consoles him, but they wonder why, before he ever met Dalila, he married a Philistine. He explains that he was called by God to defend the Israelites, and God told him an alliance by marriage with the Philistines would help him to do so. Samson criticizes the Israeli government for not supporting him in his battle against the Israelites' conquerors, the Philistines. If they had sent troops, the Israelites would have been freed, he says, and the Chorus agrees, suggesting that the governors should have exempted Samson from the law that required his marriage to another Israelite, especially because Samson is a Nazarite, who takes special vows of holiness and temperance. Samson's old father, Manoa, enters the prison yard. He is shocked by Samson's miserable condition, and can't understand why God would give him such a glorious son, only to bring him to this pitiful state. Samson says he brought these troubles upon himself by betraying the secret of his God-given strength to a woman, even though it took her four efforts to draw the information from him. Manoa remarks that he cannot praise Samson's choices in women, although his son has paid dearly for it. He mentions the festival honoring Dagon, and Samson says the special pomp of this year's festival is his fault, because Dagon is being celebrated as the reason for Samson's defeat. Manoa replies that the true God will soon avenge Himself, but Samson wants to expiate his crime of talking too much. His father agrees it is wise to be penitent, and hopes God will forgive Samson, allowing him to return home some day.

Samson Agonistes, Lines 1-520 Analysis

This poem presupposes that the reader is familiar through the Bible with the exploits of Samson, one of ancient Israelites' great heroes, to whom God gave supernatural strength. The source of this strength lay in his long hair. Single-handedly, he won amazing battles against the Israelites' arch enemy, the Philistines, including killing a thousand of them with only the jawbone of an ass as a weapon. After he falls in love with Dalila (commonly spelled "Delilah" nowadays), she is bribed by the Philistines to discover the secret of his strength, which she eventually does. After his locks are shorn as he sleeps, the Philistines capture him, stab out his eyes, and set him to grinding grain in prison at their city of Gaza. This is the point at which Milton's poem begins. In choosing to begin the work with a defense in prose of the value and purpose of tragedy, Milton not only places his poem in the company of great writers through the ages, but forewarns the reader that it will contain no lighthearted moments. This must be considered as a veiled rebuke of Shakespeare, given that Milton wrote in the years just after Shakespeare's death, and the great playwright's tragedies always contained scenes of comic relief. Milton aligns himself with the ancient Greek tragedians, who usually had a Chorus in their plays that commented on the action in the story.

In "The Argument," Milton outlines what will happen in the poem, which is also a well-known part of Samson's tale. In showing Samson's deep despair over his blindness and the mistake he made in giving the secret of his strength to Dalila, Milton is pointing out his main character's tragic flaw. In classical tragedy, a great figure is brought low by a weakness, and for Samson, it was his attraction to a treacherous woman. Samson's answer to the question from the Chorus about why Samson married a Philistine is also part of the biblical story, and by mentioning it, Milton is able to make his main character more sympathetic and less foolish-seeming. The greatness of Samson is further underlined when Manoa arrives and is shocked by the sad state of his famous son. Milton has Samson accept blame not only for his own decisions, but even for the triumphant celebrations of the Philistines in the wake of his defeat, which foreshadows that he will do something to atone for his mistake.

Samson Agonistes, Lines 521-1075

Samson Agonistes, Lines 521-1075 Summary

Samson hopes God will forgive him, but he has no desire for a long life. He thinks his great exploits swelled him with pride, which was why he succumbed to Dalila's charms, allowing her to shear him like a sheep as he slept, taking his strength. The Chorus notes that Samson never drank wine, and he acknowledges that he only drank from brooks, but such temperance was of no use to him, now that he has become good for nothing. Manoa argues that Samson should not wish to stay in prison, where he will be made to work for the enemy, especially because God might bring his sight back. He asks why God has let Samson's strength return, if not for him to do something significant with it. Samson believes his sight will never return, and he will die soon, because God has cast him off. Manoa says Samson's dark mood is controlling his thoughts, but he will go and try to secure his son's release, perhaps by bribing an official. The Chorus counsels Samson to be patient, because somehow his labors may still bring about peace.

The Chorus sees Dalila coming, and Samson asks them to keep her away, but it's too late: she stands weeping before him. Dalila expresses remorse and asks if she can help him in any way. He doesn't believe her, and tells her to leave. She pleads for him to understand that although she did wrong, it was he who gave her the secret. They were both weak, and she asks his forgiveness. Samson admits his guilt, but says he will no longer be duped by her cunning. She explains that the Philistines pestered her constantly, and warned that she dishonored Dagon by not helping them, but Samson sees her religious qualms as a sham. Dalila offers to nurse him to health but he rejects her. She asks to at least touch his hand, but he refuses. She realizes he will not relent, and says that even though the Israelites will condemn her name throughout history, in the land of the Philistines, which is where her true loyalties lie, she will be praised down the ages. After she leaves, Samson and the Chorus discuss the mystery of how such a beautiful woman could be so treacherous. The Chorus announces that a giant called Harapha of Gath is approaching.

Samson Agonistes, Lines 521-1075 Analysis

This part of the poem deals with the central question of why Samson told his secret to Dalila. His reason is that he became too prideful about his battle victories, but the Chorus points out that he was always clear-headed, never drinking wine, which is an allusion to his vows of temperance as a Nazarite. He agrees that he never drank, but the implication is that he had another vice, which was women of dubious character. Manoa brings up another important question, which is why God let Samson's strength return after his capture, if He had rejected Samson for breaking his Nazarite vows. This point not only brings logic to what is to occur later in the poem, but also foreshadows Samson's final triumph. Milton then introduces a plot development, in Manoa's resolve

to gain Samson's freedom by paying a ransom. Dalila's remorse over what she has done is Milton's own interpretation of the traditional story. He portrays her as weak in succumbing to the demands of the Philistines, while retaining feelings of loyalty and tenderness toward Samson, and wanting to make amends by taking care of him. Samson does not believe a word of it, which has the effect of making the reader wonder if, indeed, Dalila might be more cunning than truly sorrowful. When she realizes he will not forgive her, she states before leaving that although the Israelites will hate her forever, the Philistines will revere her name. This suggests that even if she is repentant about having betrayed Samson, her loyalties are, at best, divided between him and his enemies. Before the arrival of Samson's next visitor, he and the Chorus discuss Dalila's treachery, affirming that they have no faith whatsoever in her good intent.

Samson Agonistes, Lines 1076-1758

Samson Agonistes, Lines 1076-1758 Summary

Introducing himself, Harapha says he has not come for a friendly visit, but because he is curious to see the man who might have been his most worthy opponent if they had met in battle. Samson replies that seeing him will reveal nothing; only a fight would suffice. Harapha is surprised at Samson's brazenness, considering his condition, but Samson challenges him to a fight in a confined place, where eyesight will not be a major consideration. Harapha can use whatever weapons he wishes, and Samson will use merely an oak staff. Harapha says Samson's strength is from magic, but Samson insists it is from the Israelites' God, who is stronger than Dagon. The giant retorts that Samson's God has left him defeated and in the hands of his enemies. Besides, the Israelite God would not appoint a low-life like Samson to defend his name, and Harapha would not stoop to fight him. Samson calls him a coward, but Harapha leaves. Samson wishes the fight had taken place, because even if he lost, death would be a release. The Chorus says Harapha will probably go to the governors and cause yet more trouble for Samson. A Public Officer approaches, and tells Samson to come with him to the festival, where his presence will be proof of Dagon's greatness. Samson says he cannot attend on religious grounds, because of the rules of the Hebrew Bible, and the officer leaves, having failed to persuade Samson. The Chorus predicts that another messenger will come soon, and Samson says he won't go to the temple, but then changes his mind. He has a feeling that something momentous will happen, but does know what it is. When the second officer comes, Samson agrees to accompany him, and they leave.

Manoa arrives at the prison yard. He knows Samson has gone to the temple, but he has come to tell the Chorus that he has offered a ransom for Samson, and has hopes that he can attain his son's release. A great shout arises from the city, which the Chorus believes is the people's reaction to the appearance of Samson. Manoa says that he will spend his entire fortune, if necessary, to gain Samson's freedom, and he will nurse him at home, because he still believes God will restore his son's sight and give him great work to do again. Another shout is heard, this one far more terrible than the first. The Chorus says it must be something horrible happening to the Philistines, possibly at the hands of Samson, who eyesight might have been restored already by God. Manoa wonders if they should go to town, but they decide to wait, and a messenger appears. He says Gaza still stands, but many people have been killed by Samson, who has died in the process, by pulling down the temple where everyone was assembled. The messenger describes how Samson, clad in servants' dress, had performed feats of strength for the audience. He then asked to rest between two pillars that held up the arched roof, and he pulled them down on everyone except the peasants, who were standing outside the roof. The Chorus praises his "dearly-bought revenge." The Philistines, drunk on wine and idolatry, invited their own ruin through their internal blindness, the Chorus says, while Samson's inner gaze was lit by his virtue. Manoa promises a funeral befitting his son's valor, and the Chorus closes the poem with the

observation that humans often don't know God's will or intent, but this great victory is a consolation to His believers, and by dispelling their passion, it brings them peace.

Samson Agonistes, Lines 1076-1758 Analysis

Samson has two motives in challenging the giant, Harapha, to a duel. First, he displays the depth of his faith that his God is stronger than Dagon, even though he suspects God has forsaken him for his disobedience in giving away the secret of his strength. His boastfulness about how he will kill Harapha with no more than a piece of wood as his weapon seems at once vain and quite believable, given his past accomplishments, despite his blindness. Yet his other reason for issuing the challenge, as he later confides to the Chorus, is that his own death, should it occur, would not trouble him. In any case, Harapha's declaration that he would not stoop to fight a blind man is also tinged with his concern that Samson uses magic, and there is a strong hint in the exchange between them that the giant is afraid. Samson's change of mind about going to the Temple of Dagon is driven by a feeling he has, and given his close connection to God earlier in his life, this feeling cannot be underestimated.

Manoa's arrival to tell the Chorus that he might be able to secure Samson's release serves a plot purpose, in giving the Chorus someone to speak with as the events at the temple take place. These events are indicated by two shouts, the first one of excitement and the second one of horror. The appearance of the messenger is the author's method of relating the climax of this well-known tale. The comment at the end about the mystery of God's ways is reminiscent of Milton's own blindness, which struck when he was still a young man, and yet he went on to create timeless works of literature, including this poem late in life and the immortal Paradise Lost. Tragic drama, as Milton noted at the start of this work, purges bad feelings in an audience by their beautiful portrayal in fiction. The Israelites' bad feelings will be purged by the tragedy of Samson's final victory, he writes, and the implication is that the tragedy of Milton's own blindness will be purged by the art he creates.

Characters

Samsonappears in Samson Agonistes

Samson, the warrior hero of the ancient Israelites, is the protagonist of the longest poem in this volume, Samson Agonistes. He is a defeated and remorseful man at the start of the poem, even though he has recovered the stupendous physical strength given to him by God, which he had lost after Dalila cut his hair. His blindness from having his eyes gouged out by the Philistines has left him with the conviction that he is already half-dead, and that God intends for his life to end soon. The poem reveals that Samson was a Nazarite, which means he took special vows to avoid strong drink and to live in a holy manner, but his downfall came through his association with women. First, he married a woman unnamed in the poem who belonged to the Philistine people, the mortal enemies of the Israelites. Although Samson explains that he believed this marriage was God's intent, it nevertheless created trouble for him. Later, he took Dalila as his "concubine," a term in the poem that suggests the two did not marry. When Dalila turns out be a terrible choice for Samson, betraying him to the Philistines, Samson laments his foolishness, and is truly repentant. In the poem, he is characterized as a man who is extremely proud of his great feats in battle, even to the point of egotism, yet who also has unwavering faith in God, who he believes communicates with him in some unspecified, internal manner. Samson's weakness in succumbing to the manipulative charms of Dalila and giving away the secret of his strength is tragic, because it betrays his promise to God. The price he pays for this sin is his own death, but at the same time, his tragedy turns to triumph when he pulls down the temple full of Philistine leaders.

Dalilaappears in Samson Agonistes

Dalila, or Delilah in the contemporary spelling, is the woman who undoes Samson. Nowadays, her name has become almost synonymous with betrayal. Milton's poem does not describe her as either a Philistine or an Israelite, although in one scene she admits that her highest loyalty is to the Philistine people. In the poem, she is portrayed as a woman of great allure, who seemingly is distraught by her role in Samson's capture and blinding. Her pleas to be able to care for him in his debilitated condition seem genuine, as does her remorse at having been weak in succumbing to the demands of the Philistines. Even so, she rationalizes that Samson was also weak in telling her about his hair, and his downfall would not have been possible without his weakness, which means they were both at fault. This is clearly a self-serving argument, in that the problems began with her lack of loyalty to him. After Samson rejects her repeated offers to take care of him, she says the Israelites will hate her forever, but the Philistines will praise her. Rather than being made in an angry or vengeful way, this statement appears to be offered as a simple fact, but it also shows that Dalila is always on the lookout for her own best advantage. Her feelings for Samson might be genuine, but her self-

interest is paramount. Essentially, she might even be a good-hearted person, but her penchant to take whatever option is most rewarding for her has led to her corruption.

Manoaappears in Samson Agonistes

Manoa is Samson's father. A white-haired old man who is deeply proud of his son's triumphs on the battlefield on behalf of the Israelites, he is also immensely saddened and shocked by Samson's imprisonment and blinding at the hands of the Philistines. Manoa realizes that Samson made disastrous choices in his love life, but he has decided not to condemn or judge him. He also is well aware that Samson has been blessed by God with tremendous strength, and Manoa's own faith in God's plan for Samson makes him confident that this imprisonment is not the end of the story. Throughout the poem, he reminds Samson that God has restored his strength, which would not happen if it were not be used again. Manoa believes that God will restore Samson's eyesight and he tries hard to obtain his son's release by offering ransom payments to the Philistines, which demonstrate his unflagging faith in both God and Samson. At the end, when Manoa hears that Samson has died while destroying the Temple of Dagon, killing many Philistines in the process, his sorrow is lightened by the realization that God has given Samson a glorious ending. To Manoa, this unforeseeable occurrence is proof that his son, chosen by God, has suffered for his sin and has been forgiven. Manoa now can arrange an elaborate funeral for Samson, and put to rest the child whose deeds were the focus of his father's life.

The Chorusappears in Samson Agonistes

The Chorus is a group of Danites, the tribe of Israelites to whom Samson belongs. A collection of friends and neighbors of Samson, the members of the Chorus speak simultaneously, in the fashion of ancient Greek tragedy. They are not identified as individuals, and their roles are to comment on the action of the poem, and to carry on conversation with an individual character whenever another individual is not present.

Haraphaappears in Samson Agonistes

Harapha is a giant from the Philistines' town of Gath, who comes to visit Samson at the prison. A warrior of renown, Harapha says his intent is to look upon the man who would have been his greatest opponent, if the two ever had met in battle. Milton's portrayal of Harapha suggests that the giant might also be afraid of Samson, because he believes that his strength comes from magic. The real motives of his visit could be curiosity and the opportunity to brag in front of Samson, now that he is blind and imprisoned. As such, Harapha represents the false bravado of the pagan idolater.

Comusappears in Comus

Comus, the title character of Milton's poem, is a sorcerer who waylays innocent and virtuous people in a dark wood, plying them with a magical drink that makes them uninhibited, and causes their heads to transform into that of a wild beast, such as a bear or wolf. Comus is the son of the ancient Greek god of wine, Bacchus, and the goddess Circe, who also enchanted humans with a magical potion. Comus represents lack of restraint and sinful over-indulgence. He is temptation incarnate.

The Ladyappears in Comus

The Lady in the poem "Comus" is the unnamed sister of two brothers with whom she loses contact while walking in the woods. The Lady represents virtue. A virgin with a strong sense of what is good and true, she initially treats Comus with good will, but when he turns out to be a liar, she quickly rejects him, and will not drink the potion he offers. In the end, the Lady's virtue triumphs over the cajoling Comus.

The Two Brothersappears in Comus

The Two Brothers are the caretakers of their sister, the Lady. The younger brother is afraid for her safety but the elder believes that her virtuousness will protect her from evil. Neither brother is named, and no description is given of them. They are archetypes in the poem, whose main role is debate the ability of virtue to withstand temptation.

The Devilappears in On the Morning of Christs Nativity, Lycidas, Comus

The Devil makes regular appearances in Milton's poems and is given several names, including the Dragon, Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, and the grim wolf. The threat of the Devil leading humans astray and dragging sinners to hell seems to hover over these poems, which are dominated by the sensibility of retribution that prevailed in 17th century Christianity. The Devil is horrible and angry, but also cunning and powerful. Indeed, it often seems that his only superior in all of existence is God.

Joveappears in Il Pensoroso, Lycidas, O Nightengale, Methought I Saw

Jove, the king of the gods in Roman mythology, is frequently invoked in Milton's poems. Milton seems particularly interested in Jove's defeat of his father, Saturn, to take power over the heavens.

Apolloappears in On the Morning of Christs Nativity, On Shakespear, Lycidas,

Apollo, the ancient Greek god of poetry and music, is often invoked by Milton as a muse or inspiration to the creation of art.

Dagonappears in Samson Agonistes

Dagon is a sea god beloved by the Philistines. He represents the folly of idolatry.

Lycidasappears in Lycidas

Lycidas is the title character of a Milton poem to a friend who died at sea. Like Milton, Lycidas was a lover of poetry and other arts, which made his death particularly poignant.

Objects/Places

Ancient Greeceappears in On the Morning of Christs Nativity, On Shakespear, L'Allegro

Ancient Greece is mentioned frequently in Milton's poetry. To him, it is the cradle of art, thinking, and mythological stories that have continued to inspire creativity through the ages.

Heavenappears in Short Poems, Sonnets, Comus, Samson Agonistes

Heaven is place with more than one interpretation in Milton's world. It is the home of God and the angels in the traditional Christian sense, but it also figures prominently in the ancient Greek and Roman sense of the abode in the sky of those cultures' many gods.

Hellappears in On the Morning of Christs Nativity, L'Allegro, Il Pensoroso,

Hell often seems to be nearby in this volume. It is never visited in these poems, but its threat is ever-present.

British Parliamentappears in On the Detraction which Follow'd upon My Writing Crtain Trea

The British Parliament is an institution with which the poet often concerns himself. Sometimes his poems praise its leaders and sometimes he excoriates them, but he never seems indifferent to the workings of this governmental body.

Gazaappears in Sa,mson Agonistes

Gaza, where the action takes place in Samson Agnoistes, is one of five ancient cities along the Mediterranean coast that were occupied by the Philistines more than a millennium before Christ's birth. The cities were in the land of Canaan, which also was occupied by the Philistines' enemies, the Israelites.

Temple of Dagonappears in Samson Agonistes

The Temple of Dagon is a large, open-faced auditorium in Gaza with an arched roof upheld by two columns. This is where Samson is taken as a prisoner to be paraded before the Philistine people. He pulls down the columns, killing many of the audience and himself.

Englandappears in L'Allegro, Lycidas, On the Detraction which Follow'd upon My

England is almost as much a way of life as it is a specific place in Milton's poetry. Especially in his poems about government and religion, England is closely allied to Milton's sense of identity, although he does not bother to describe it as a place per se.

A Wild Woodappears in Comus

A Wild Wood is the principal setting of Milton's poem "Comus," the second-longest work in this volume. The wood is described as dark and quiet, except when it resounds with the frightening revelry of Comus and his followers. This wood represents the thicket of worldly temptations that can lead the unwary from the path or righteousness.

The Palace of Comusappears in Comus

The Palace of Comus is where the Lady is taken by Comus after he meets her in the woods. He attempts to ply her with his magical potion, but she refuses and her rescue by her brothers then occurs at the palace.

The Prisonappears in Samson Agonistes

The Prison is where Samson is held captive by the Philistines. It is not described, other than to say it has a prison yard, in which the characters gather and converse.

Themes

Sin, Retribution and Redemption

Throughout history, many organized religions have insisted that their particular set of beliefs is the true one and all others are false. Milton, a powerful proponent of this attitude, is arguably the most important Protestant poet of all time. This book gives ample evidence of the primacy of Christianity in his world view. Indeed, it is rare to find a page in the book that does not mention his Creator. Without God as its central theme, the substance of Milton's work would be unimaginable. Virtually every poem in this volume regards Nature, people, and events through the lens of the Christian sensibility. Nothing happens in Milton's world that is not God's doing, unless it is the work of the devil. Milton's 17th century Protestantism is retributive: those who sin must suffer and only through suffering is redemption gained. By the same token, the every-present consolation for trouble and loss in Milton's poetry is the reward of a blissful afterlife for believers. Much of the drama in his work derives from the struggle between earthly temptations proffered by the devil and the reward of eternal life after death presented to those who cleave to the path of righteousness. Accordingly, the devil in his many guises and names is the arch villain who gives the poetry much of its excitement. Without the threat of succumbing to the devil's wicked and cunning temptations, there would no disorder to overcome in search of order, no thrilling and dangerous sin in contrast to blissful grace. If redemption comes only after punishment, then its predecessor is wrongdoing, and this journey of flawed humankind in search of perfection is the central theme of Milton's quintessentially Christian poetry.

The Power of Virtue

If this volume's overriding impression is that humans must struggle against temptation and suffer on earth to achieve eternal salvation, another theme that provides a vital underpinning or subtext to the book concerns the beauty and strength of virtue. Good behavior or following the rules cannot alone protect the individual from wandering into sin. The power behind such obedience is the internal state of grace known as virtue. Yet, Milton does not suggest that virtue is always exempt from the allure of temptation. He demonstrates in this volume that virtue can be weak, and that the baser nature of humans can overcome good intent. For example, in "Comus," the strength of the Lady's virtue protects her from the corrupting influence of Comus, but in "Samson Agonistes," even the pious and God-chosen Samson succumbs to the wiles of Dalila and strays into sin. Another aspect of virtue that Milton portrays is the joy and love of life it brings. Several of the poems in this book celebrate the beauty of Nature and the pleasures of good food, drink, music, and company. Virtue is neither a painful duty nor a goal to be achieved through rejection of sensual delights. On the contrary, it is a state of well-being that can be reached through love of God, which enhances one's love of life on earth. The internal condition of virtue is as close as we can come in this world to heaven. If poetry is about regarding life with a consistently fresh view, the celebration of virtue in

Milton's poetry indicates that one's eyes are truly opened to the world's beauty, and to the joy this can bring, only through love of God.

The Wisdom of the Ancients

Despite the intensity of Milton's Christianity, he retains a deep connection in his writing to ancient stories, especially those from Greek and Roman mythology, which often overlap. Among the scores of names of characters and places from these myths that he mentions in his poems, he displays no discernable logic in choosing one culture's version over the other in any given instance. For example, he usually calls the father of the ancient gods Jove, also known as Jupiter, rather than using the Greek name for the same god, Zeus. Often, he includes rather glancing references in his poems to Greek or Roman stories, and to appreciate the full significance of such a reference in the context of the poem, the reader must be familiar with the entire myth. Milton is clear that he considers these ancient stories and gods to be nothing more than fabrications, just as he makes clear that his spiritual allegiance is entirely to the Christian God, but the artistic heritage of the myths is another question. He frames his 17th century world of letters around wide and deep readings not only in mythology but in drama and philosophy of the ancients. The Greek historians, playwrights, and thinkers all are invoked by name in his poetry. He occasionally pays tribute to ancient Egyptian and Phoenician gods, and, of course, he is steeped in the lore of the Bible. Milton obviously sees his contemporary situation as a cultural continuation or result of the artistic and intellectual achievements of the distant past in the Western world. He is simultaneously a man of his time and a product of the ancients.

Style

Point of View

Most of this volume is written in the third person, through which the poet assumes the role of an omniscient storyteller. Even when he writes about personal matters, such as his attraction to joyfulness in "L'Allegro" and to melancholy in "Il Pensoroso," he addresses these moods directly for the most part, rather than using first person to discuss their impact on him. In both those poems, he finally breaks from this declamatory tone into first person at the very end, achieving the dramatic impact of turning what seemed to be a philosophical rumination into a personal conviction. The most consistent use of first person in the book is in "Lycidas," when Milton writes about the death of a close friend. In this case, it seems he cannot avoid bringing himself into the poem, because the impact of the death of Lycidas was too personal to address in a storytelling or philosophical voice. Aside from the dramatic power of third person, which allows the reader to forget the poet in favor the storyline, Milton's use of that point of view has the advantage of lifting him above the fray, as it were. Given that his themes are lofty and religious, third person allows him to speak for goodness and propriety without seeming to preach. These fundamentally Christian poems regard God as an absolute, and their use of third person helps to emphasize the universality of God, which embraces the individual even while extending far beyond him.

Setting

Rarely does the setting play any role other than symbolic in this volume. Many places are named but usually the intent is only to evoke a sense of ancient history or mythology, as in the cases of the numerous cities and mythological sites of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle East that the author mentions. Among the few places that play specific roles in these poems, one is the dark wood in which most of the action of "Comus" takes place. It does have a role as a setting, because the Lady is separated from the Two Brothers in that forest, which is also where the threatening Comus comes upon the Lady. Even that setting, however, has critical symbolic meaning as the place where virtuous people are apt to lose their way, or, in other words, be corrupted by temptation. Another such setting is the prison yard in Samson Agonistes, which serves the practical purpose of a meeting place for the characters, but also represents the imprisonment of Samson's soul or good conscience by the sin of his disobedience to God. Similarly, the Temple of Dagon in that poem is the setting where Samson pulls down the pillars to destroy the Philistines and himself, but it also is symbolic of idolatrous monuments to pagan gods, which must be removed in favor of the true God. In this volume, Milton is not concerned with place description. It could be argued that the settings are largely interior, within the minds and souls of the poems' characters and of Milton himself.

Language and Meaning

Perhaps the most obvious differences between Milton's 17th century English and the language in its contemporary form are spelling and punctuation. Relatively simple words are spelled differently, making them look like typographical errors. The absence or presence of apostrophes often seems incorrect to the modern reader, and commas appear to be misplaced or missing. Also, strange words occasionally appear, such as "darksom," "unbeseeming," "glistering," and "wonted." Other words that today are used only rarely appear in profusion in Milton's poetry. The art of conversation was well-developed in his time, which preceded all electronic media, of course, and educated readers expected to encounter language that now might seem flamboyant or baroque. Milton's poetry demands the reader's attention, in that an idea often is introduced in the form of a questioning phrase or a proposition that is not immediately answered. Instead, the poet elaborates upon the idea, taking detours in thought and building up its complexity, before finally returning to a response to the original question. Readers who do not pay close attention will have to go back to remember where Milton began each of these thought-journeys. In Milton, numerous allusions to ancient Greek and Roman mythology and to the Bible presuppose that the reader is well-versed in classic literature, which is hardly a given nowadays. Fortunately, the editor of this book has added many footnotes that explain who mythological figures are that Milton often mentions only in passing, and why their stories are pertinent to the poem. Writing from this period of Early Modern English can be hard to do, although the rewards of understanding and appreciating it can be correspondingly high. John Milton's command of vocabulary, meter, and emotional impact is perhaps second only to that of Shakespeare.

Structure

The title of this book puts Samson Agonistes first, although it actually appears last in the volume, which indicates that the editor, A.E. Barker, wishes to stress the relative length and importance of the final poem. The Contents page is followed by an unsigned Introduction, presumably by Barker. This is followed by a chronology of principal dates in the life of John Milton, from his birth in 1608 to his death in 1674. A section titled, "Shorter Poems of John Milton" contains seven poems presented in a roughly chronological form, ending with one of the longest and best-known among them, "Lycidas." The next section, titled, "Sonnets," contains twelve poems, most of which were written after those of the first section. Again, they are in roughly chronological order, with some deference to pairing poems of similar themes. The long poem, "Comus," comes next, in its own section. Finally, the longest and most famous of these works, "Samson Agonistes," appears in its own section. It was written much later than the other works in the volume, and therefore seems to be appropriately placed at the end, for reasons of chronology, length, and artistic reputation. This was the main structural choice made by the editor. Given that Milton began his writing career with short poems, and then moved to sonnets, then to longer poetry and finally to his great epic poems, Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, which are not contained in this

volume, the decision to follow a chronological structure would not have been difficult to make.

Quotes

"What needs my Shakespear for his honour'd Bones,
The labour of an age in piled Stones" (On Shakespeare, p. 9).

"Com, and trip it as ye go,
On the light fantastick toe" (L'Allegro, p. 11).

"Sweet Bird, that shunn'st the noise of folly,
Most musicall, most melancholy" (Il Pensoroso, p. 16).

"How soon hath Time the suttle theef of youth,
Stoln on his wing my three and twentieth yeer" (How Soon Hath Time, p. 28).

Helpe us to save free Conscience from the paw
Of hireling wolves whose Gospell is their maw" (To the Lord Generall Cromwell, p. 30).

"They also serve who only stand and waite" (When I Consider, p. 32).

"What hath night to do with sleep" (Comus, p. 38).

"And that which is not good, is not delicious
To a wel-govern'd and wise appetite" (Comus, p. 55).

"Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves" (Samson Agonistes, p. 68).

"Just are the ways of God,
And justifiable to Men" (Samson Agonistes, p. 75).

"In argument with men a woman ever
Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause" (Samson Agonistes, p. 90).

All is best, though we oft doubt,
What th' unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about" (Samson Agonistes, p. 111).

Topics for Discussion

In this volume, Christianity is regarded as a constant struggle between God and the devil, with humankind often caught in the middle. Discuss how this traditional view of Christianity helps to lend drama to Milton's poetry.

It has been argued that the devil is one of the most fully developed characters in Milton's writing. Based on his frequent mentions of the devil in this book, how would you describe the character of Satan?

Milton's poetry rejects Roman Catholicism and a Scottish sect of Protestantism in favor of his own Church of England. Describe the relationship between church and state in his writing, compared to contemporary views in the United States on that subject.

How would you describe the overall mood of the poems in this volume? For example, would you say they are sad, joyful, frightening, uplifting, angry, or good-humored? Give reasons for your choices of descriptive adjectives, adverbs, and phrases and provide relevant examples.

Several of these poems deal with blindness and Milton became totally blind in his 43rd year of life. How does he deal in these poems with blindness as a physical challenge, and as metaphor?

Friends and loved ones are portrayed in this book. Based on these portrayals, what would you say Milton's attitude was toward people with whom he was close? Give examples.

Why do you think Milton puts so many mythological characters into these poems? At the time, many of those stories were already almost three thousand years old. Why is he so fascinated by them?