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Milton's "Lycidas": Elevating the Human Condition

Haylee Edwards

Abstract

John Milton's 1637 poem "Lycidas" is a pastoral elegy told from the point of view of a shepherd grieving the loss of his friend, Lycidas. Written in honor of Milton's late classmate, Edward King, "Lycidas" is a Christian allegory. This essay situates "Lycidas" within the history and characteristics of the pastoral elegy before analyzing how the poem at once inhabits and progressively deviates from the traditional form. Milton combines the traditional pastoral form with Elizabethan ideals and imagery to affirm his own religious, political, and existential views about death and the afterlife. The poem becomes increasingly complex, increasingly modern, increasingly focused on the present.

Often considered an exemplary instance of pastoral elegy, John Milton's "Lycidas" is lush with allegory, combining the imagery of classical Greco-Roman conventions with those of contemporary English poetics. Milton (1608-1674) utilizes the pastoral form to commemorate his recently departed school friend and bring attention to his political and religious concerns. In an endeavor to question concepts of divine justice, Milton applies mythological allegories and Christian sentiments to the genre, which develops the pastoral form beyond its traditional roots. In this way, "Lycidas," which Milton wrote in 1637, exemplifies the elevation of a poetic genre in addition to the spiritual elevation the poem describes. Throughout "Lycidas," spiritual ascension is enacted in three distinguishable stages to demonstrate a transformation from the classical paganistic pastoral to the contemporary biblical pastoral. Milton positions that biblical pastoral outcome as the ultimate conclusion of Lycidas's mortal journey, illustrating his transformation as the ideal shift of the human condition.

Milton approached the pastoral mode as a vessel for conveying his poetic skill and religiopolitical views.

In classical Greco-Roman literature, the pastoral mode offered poets an ideal means to explore the human condition in relation to nature, nature in relation to poetry, and poetry in relation to the world. The genre-typical shepherds of classical pastoral poems were committed to leisure, love, and song while tending to their flocks in idyllic sites such as Sicily and Arcadia; through these characters, in eclogues and pastoral songs, poets discussed revelries, myths, and their fellow poets (Lewalski, "Poetic Tradition" 78). In the 14th and 15th centuries, Italian and French poets took on the genre to create the new pastoral lyric, centering on the innocent beauty of the countryside and the seemingly ideal plainness of rural life. When English neoclassicists connected with the uncomplicated poetic mode in the late Renaissance, they did not value the simplicity of the genre. To them, the pastoral was of the lowest standing in terms of poetic complexity and content. This understanding made the pastoral mode an excellent foundation for poets to build upon and demonstrate their literary skills. The greatest English poets of the Renaissance participated in this tradition, from Edmund Spenser

to Philip Sidney to Christopher Marlowe. Milton, born years after Sidney, Spenser, Marlowe, and Elizabeth I had died, was late in taking up the pastoral form. In "Lycidas," which he wrote at the end of the English Renaissance, Milton approaches the pastoral mode as a vessel for conveying his poetic skill and religiopolitical views. In Milton's hands, the pastoral mode becomes something entirely new.

Milton dramatically Anglicizes the pastoral tradition by incorporating Elizabethan ideals and imagery in "Lycidas."

Milton dramatically Anglicizes the pastoral tradition by incorporating Elizabethan ideals and imagery in "Lycidas." In doing so, he allows the simple nature of the genre and its conventions to combine with these distinctly English components, effectively glorifying them. James Holly Hanford, a prominent Miltonian scholar, states that Milton does not owe this variation of the pastoral conventions to the Italian and French Renaissance poets so much as he owes it to "the pastoral tradition of his native land" (438), as seen in the works of his English predecessors. Naturally, Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* was a principal point of inspiration for Milton's interpretation of English pastoral convention.

Spenser's sermonizing principles in *The Shepheardes Calender* bolstered his poetic potency as he simultaneously manipulated and maintained "the pretty sentiment of the Arcadian pastoral" (Hanford 438). Spenser's blending of the delightful and the didactic was notably Elizabethan and English throughout the *Calender*. Spenser intended the short pastoral dialogues, or eclogues, to evoke the native elements of his English homeland rather than those of the classical poets, and his "introduction of artistic unity" made way for a more melancholic tone; Spenser's merging of the English and classical traditions made the *Calender* cohesive with the charming, graceful nature owed to classical pastoralism (Hanford 439—440). Spenser demonstrated his native language was sufficient to produce poetry comparable to the greatness of classical Greco-Roman works. Spenser's poetry,

particularly in the *Calender*, became a part of Milton's repertoire, motivating him to join—and even surpass—it in renown. According to Handford, since Milton was assured in his lyrical abilities, the only other pastoral poets with whom he “felt a kinship of genius” would be those who had eventually surpassed the form (445).

Milton assimilated the techniques of both his Greco-Roman and contemporary inspirations into his exploration of pastoral simplicity.

Renaissance humanism viewed poetic progression in two stages: the *poeta*, and the *vates*. The word *poeta*, the Latin word for a poet, was someone skilled enough to create art; the *vates*, the Latin word for prophet, received their visions of creation from a higher power (Spenser 67). The poet's journey had to be completed in these stages because “for the *vates*'s inspiration to occur, the *poeta*'s skill and effort must precede” (67). Both Virgil and Spenser followed this path of progression, advancing from simpler forms of poetry to their eventual epics. Inspired by the predecessors he regarded as creative role models, Milton aspired to elevate his work and transcend the pastoral genre. In Milton's later and most prominent work, *Paradise Lost*, he validated his poetic journey to *vates* and established himself as an epic poet. The *poeta* stage of his journey, as for Virgil and Spenser, was establishing a relationship with the pastoral and then outperforming the mode to achieve the level of the *vates*. Just as Virgil shifted from *The Eclogues* to *The Aeneid* and Spenser from *The Shepherdes Calender* to *The Faerie Queene*, Milton shifted from the pastoral form of “Lycidas” to the epic level of *Paradise Lost*. Milton assimilated the techniques of both his Greco-Roman and contemporary predecessors in his exploration of pastoral simplicity.

The peaceful pastoral setting of “Lycidas” may initially seem incompatible with the darker subject of grief; however, this incongruence emphasizes the function of the pastoral genre as a template for the *poeta*'s artistic expression. Milton delivers a rich and referential poem pleasing to

the eye and ear. The pastoral mode in “Lycidas” also gives Milton the power to confront some of his chief concerns in life—artistic, religious, and political alike—in a manner that follows the courses of the classically skilled poets who motivated him. He grapples with his concerns of life, death, poetic vocation, and potential while engaged in a mode that follows the Virgilian and Spenserian models of poetic progression (Revard 6). The plainness of the pastoral genre gives Milton the space to confront and explore the numerous complexities of being a human and a budding poet, all while allowing him to further progress his craft.

“Lycidas” was composed in 1637 and first appeared in a 1638 collection of elegies titled *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago*, which commemorated the death of Edward King, a schoolmate and friend of Milton's at Christ's College, Cambridge. King had intended to join the clergy, but he drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of Wales before he could secure his calling (Revard 74n1). Milton's pastoral elegy mourns the loss of King through the character of the shepherd Lycidas, who also passed in a shipwreck. The well-known and beloved figure is, lamentably, “dead, dead ere his prime” (line 8), and his potential as a shepherd and poet has been wasted. Since he died before he could achieve fame, all of the labors that Lycidas put into caring for the earth and his flock now seem worthless; however, this is not entirely true. As the poem concludes, the swain realizes that Lycidas is not gone. Rather, he continues in spirit because his virtue and talent on earth have allowed him to be reborn in Heaven, where saints and divine wonders will entertain and keep company with him for all eternity.

Milton's elegy serves as a poetic mechanism to tell more than one story at once, through multiple lyrical moods, ranging from idyllic to mournful to reflective. The pastoral form permits Milton to employ well-known traditions with established boundaries while providing a platform to reference thematic and generic matters of interest to him. He expresses his concerns regarding life and its worth, poetry as a calling, and the role morality plays in the lives of pastors and poets (Revard

6). The mode of "Lycidas" does not just affect the form in which Milton presents his theme; the mode also becomes a significant component of the theme. The pastoral form feeds the genre as much as it does the moralizing subject matter of the piece. R. L. Brett reasons that recognizing this duality is essential to understanding how Milton interprets and reimagines the confines of the pastoral genre (40). "Lycidas" stands alone as the only pastoral piece in *Justa Edouardo* and is one of few elegiac pastoral poems of this time (Revard 6). The narrative arc is a movement through the poet's mind and Milton's complex thinking makes "Lycidas" stand out from other pastorals of the time. Within this arc, there is a "triple progression" of distinct movements between the conventionally pastoral introduction and conclusion (Tayler 305). The first movement manifests the traditional mythology of antiquity, drawn from Virgilian inspiration. The second emphasizes the inspiration drawn from the Old Testament. The third and final movement elicits the New Testament Book of Revelation, bringing the poem to a Christian conclusion (Taylor 305). Each of these movements in "Lycidas" employs a pastoral organization for their delivery, first invoking the muses, including a refrain, a procession of mourners, and a closing return to the idyllic pastoral setting; yet Milton progressively distances the movements from the religious customs canonized in the pastoral tradition and the genre itself.

The fourteen opening lines of "Lycidas" are an introduction separate from the triple progression. This introduction establishes the poem's themes and tone: "For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime" (line 8). The use of the name Lycidas to represent Edward King establishes a mood in itself. In Theocritus's "Idyll VII" and Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, the poet-goatherd Lycidas is an artistically gifted singer or poet, lauded for his talented lyricism. By likening his late friend to Lycidas, Milton draws attention to the poetic or shepherd-like qualities of his schoolmate, who had creative and clerical aspirations while at Cambridge (Revard 5). This likeness also draws attention to Milton's status as a poet, signifying his belief that he considers himself on a

level similar to Theocritus and Virgil. In asking, "Who would not sing for Lycidas," Milton is further echoing Virgil. In "Eclogue X," the Roman poet inquires, "Who would not sing for Gallus?" (Revard 74n7). The introduction presents Lycidas, King, and Milton as crucial components in the author's intent to incorporate, elevate, and Anglicize the pastoral form.

The speaker informs the muses of his relationship with Lycidas, illustrating their time growing up in the same countryside and tending to the same flock of sheep.

The first movement of the triple progression consists of lines 15 through 84 and begins with an invocation of the muses and a reminder of the speaker's grief. The invocation of the muses positions the speaker squarely in the realm of inspiration and ideation and is typical of the classic pastoral form. The speaker informs the muses of his relationship with Lycidas, illustrating their time growing up in the same countryside and tending to the same flock of sheep. This personal connection to the subject is not a particularly remarkable departure for Milton, but it does allude to the eulogy's forthcoming complexity. The speaker refers to satyrs, fauns, and Damoetus, a shepherd figure seen in the pastoral works of Theocritus, Virgil, and Sidney. These inclusions all paint a lighthearted, mystical, and mythical picture before a "heavy change" (line 37) occurs in the mood of the poem: "Now thou art gon, and never must return!" (lines 37—38). With the announcement of Lycidas's death, the tone of the first movement shifts.

Within this initial stage, an established connection to the pastoral tradition acts as a point of departure for the transformation that both "Lycidas" and its title character will undergo.

The speaker now pivots to a mournful tone, lamenting the loss of Lycidas. He evokes images not just of the merry followers of Bacchus but also of the Bacchantes, known for their raving and the ruin of Orpheus, another renowned

poet. Stella P. Revard claims that this altercation causes all of nature to lament the loss of such a beloved poet-shepherd and creates a shift that “threatens the calling both of poet and pastor” (249). Next, the speaker brings an ineffectual appeal to the Nymphs and Calliope: “Ay me, I fondly dream! / Had ye bin there — for what could that have don?” (lines 56—57). This plea prompts a question about the practicality of depending on and “meditat[ing on] the thankles Muse” (line 66), and the speaker then goes on to find an answer in Phoebus when Phoebus scolds the speaker and insists that fame is more than mortal. Phoebus contends that Lycidas’s death is not the end of his poetic gift because, ultimately, the worth of one’s life is defined by the “perfet witnes of all-judging Jove” who “pronounces lastly on each deed” (lines 82–83). Jove functions as God’s classical substitute, and these lines foreshadow the ascension of Lycidas to heaven following his death. Within this initial stage, an established connection to the pastoral tradition acts as a point of departure for the transformation that both “Lycidas” and its title character will undergo.

In this allegory, a link forms between the role of Lycidas, the good shepherd, and the context of anti-Catholic Elizabethan England.

The second movement, containing lines 85 to 131, resumes the pastoral song and begins similarly to the first: an invocation of the muses, a reminder of the speaker’s grief, and the posing of ineffectual questions to mythological figures. In this case, Triton and Aeolus receive the inquiry. The “Herald of the Sea” (line 89) and the god of the winds interrogate their respective realms on behalf of the speaker to discover whether the seas or a storm ended Lycidas’s life. It would seem that neither is to blame, for “[i]t was that fatall and perfidious Bark / ...That sunk so low that sacred head of thine” (lines 100–102); the ship itself is at fault for the shepherd’s death. Here, the second movement departs from the pattern of the first movement in that it introduces a Christian figure and then an English one in place of what would traditionally be a procession of pastoral mourn-

ers: Saint Peter, depicted as the pilot to the Galilean Lake and the holder of the keys to heaven, and Camus, the river god intended to represent Cambridge, are the only two in the procession (Revard 253). These prominent English figures ground the poem geographically and religiously, setting it apart from the conventions of the form. While Milton’s speaker grieves the loss of the shepherd, the focus is on Peter’s indictment of “blind mouthes,” or neglectful shepherds who do not faithfully tend to their flocks. Lewalski argues that this anticlerical satire illuminates a “scornful paradox... [that] exposes the ignorance, ambition, and greediness” of these bad shepherds or bad pastors who leave their flocks starving and vulnerable to the devastation of the “grim Woolf,” the Roman Catholic Church (“Poetic Tradition” 87). The good shepherds are those who would protect their flocks from the wolves, feed them, and keep them happy—as Lycidas does in the pastoral tradition. Lewalski also points out that by aligning Lycidas with the good shepherds in this respect, the speaker is emphasizing how unfair it is for mortal existence to put an end to such a shepherd (Lewalski). In this allegory, a link forms between the role of Lycidas, the good shepherd, and the context of anti-Catholic Elizabethan England. Lycidas must protect his sheep from the “corrupted Clergy” of the Roman Catholic Church as mentioned in the poem’s headnote. “Lycidas” is precise in its location, religious belief, and political context.

The shepherd-pastor tradition also accentuates Milton’s poetic calling and the responsibility of authority that goes along with it. The poet has, at this point, incorporated his beliefs into the elegy. The denunciation of the bad shepherds and the clergy they represent ends with a promise of “imminent divine retribution,” which provides solace in the “apocalyptic prophecy that some formidable if ambiguous ‘two-handed engine’ stands ready ‘at the door’ to restore the church” (Lewalski “Poetic” 87). The reference to the New Testament’s Book of Revelation through the presence of Christian figures invokes biblical warnings to the church against corruption, elevating the purposes of “Lycidas” beyond a mere elegy to something loftier, more heavenly,

and increasingly Christian. This shifts “Lycidas” to the middle ground between the age of yore evoked by the poem’s setting and a biblical day of judgment that is yet to come.

The third movement, consisting of lines 132 through 185, initially invokes the pagan muses, digressing toward the pastoral once again. The sentiment is interrupted by a return to the more tangible state of Lycidas’s condition. In an imperative mood, the speaker calls back Alpheus, a river god in Arcadia, and the “Sicilian Muse,” who have been scared off by the scolding voice of Saint Peter. The speaker requests that they bring the bounties of nature to help honor Lycidas. Next, the speaker paints the image of Lycidas’s “Laureat Herse” (line 151) covered in myriad vernal flowers that reference various adaptations of classical figures. These classical allusions locate the possibility of transformation and immortality in the beauty of nature. The swain interrupts this pastoral consolation as he remembers that their honoring Lycidas is all a “false surmise” since the body of the shepherd is not with them (line 153). With this realization, the speaker finds reassurance Lycidas’s death has not been tragic, “for earthly life is continuous with [the] eternal” (Shumaker 486). The shepherd’s essence shall go on.

While he met his fate at the bottom of the ocean, Lycidas’s ultimate condition is that of a good pastor ascending to heaven as a reward for his benevolence on Earth.

In the third movement, classical figures endorse heavenly principles on behalf of Milton’s Christian beliefs. Revard emphasizes the correlation between Lycidas and several other classical figures in this section, namely Alpheus and Arion, both of whom look forward to the shepherd’s “second breath” and heavenly redemption: “The myths of resurrected Alpheus and the rescued Arion are stories of salvation that parallel, but do not replicate, the Christian story . . . the angel of the guarded mount may call Lycidas homeward, but it is only through Christ that he is saved” (257). The Archangel Michael, described as “the

great vision of the guarded Mount” (line 161), stands alongside these implications of resurrection and redemption; the mythological quality likens him to the fabled giant Bellerus. Michael “look[s] homeward” and pities the fallen Lycidas, whose body cannot be recovered until he is resurrected in heaven (line 163). Lewalski asserts that in these “intimations of resurrection... [p]astoral dissolves again, but now into the higher mode of prophetic vision. Although painfully inadequate to the fallen human condition, pastoral has its true locus in heaven” (“Poetic Tradition” 87–88). This final consolation within the third movement of the poem precedes the conclusion, yet brings the intentions of the elegy to fulfillment. The Revelation of the New Testament is now fully realized, and the conclusive Christian purpose of “Lycidas” is presented as Lycidas is “sunk low, but mounted high” (line 172). While he met his fate at the bottom of the ocean, Lycidas’s ultimate condition is that of a good pastor ascending to heaven as a reward for his benevolence on Earth.

The triple progression embodies the shift from the first world of ancient mythology to that of the Old Testament and finally to Revelation.

The culmination of “Lycidas” returns to the pastoral tradition, but it is now, as Jon S. Lawry says, “shot through with Christian illumination” (243). Before, “Lycidas” expressed traditional pastoral conventions, but at this point in the poem, the conventions are altered to reflect the union between a poet and Christ. The triple progression embodies the shift from the first world of ancient mythology to that of the Old Testament and finally to Revelation. The progression elevates the poem from the rustic traditions that the genre demands—the same genre that Milton writes in, inadequate for the *vates* stage—and may now move toward something sufficient to his skill. By the poem’s end, “the uncouth Swain” (line 186) is no longer the speaker and a new voice steps in for the final coda. The second speaker comments on the “Swain” and all his troubles: “Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th’Okes and rills; / While the still morn went out with Sandals gray,

/ He touch'd the tender stops of various Quills,
/ With eager thought warbling his Dorick lay..." (lines 186–189). The original speaker of the poem is no longer battling with the opposing forces of unrealistic ideals within the pastoral and the melancholy within reality. Instead, he has now pondered the patterns of separation and return in nature and found comfort within the realm of Christian consolations. The swain's final action evokes the image of Jesus rising again, for "At last he rose" (line 191) and recovered from his grief to move on to higher purposes. This relief and resolution lead the speaker to anticipate not the loss of more life and poetry but the potential of "To morrow... fresh Woods, and Pastures new" (line 193). The ability to trustingly look forward to such an elevated, heavenly future is awarded to the swain after he finds his confidence in Christ because "[t]he pastoral gains potency as Christian iconology is joined to it" (Lawry 244). Milton's poetic ascension to *vates* may also be connected here since the final line could also refer to Milton, who is "ready to move to another poetic landscape" (Lewalski, "Milton" 169). Serving as both a eulogy for a friend and an inward-looking poem, "Lycidas" captures the concerns of the rise, fall, and recovery of both the human and the poetic conditions in a form that allows Milton the freedom to ask and answer questions of both essential and existential significance.

Milton intends to simultaneously mourn a friend, ruminate on his religiopolitical perspectives, and confront his poetic aspirations, all while operating through a form supposedly insufficient for the task.

As a poet intent on presenting a distinctive and masterful interpretation of the pastoral genre, Milton initiates his Virgilian progression from *poeta* to *vates*, refining the form with native English components. He introduces his poetic voice as unique by participating in a canonical tradition and incorporating his particular religious, political, and existential causes into the narrative. "Lycidas" presents a mournful elegy in the classical mode, but consciously departs from convention

to refit the poem to the author's motives. Milton simultaneously mourns a friend, expounds his religiopolitical perspectives, and achieves his poetic aspirations, all while operating through a form supposedly insufficient for the task. To do this, he establishes a lyric through-line between the classical pastoral allegories and his moralistic and artistic convictions. He deliberates the complexity of the human condition via the simplicity of pastoralism, elevates the standard of the classical form, and invokes English poetic elements—all so that he may climactically elevate his art to meet his ambitions.



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Haylee Edwards ('22) from Stafford, Virginia, earned her B.A. in English with a minor in Medieval and Renaissance Studies. She is a Double Duke currently enrolled in JMU's English M.A. program. She plans

to pursue a Ph.D. in English and a career as a university professor. She hopes this publication serves as a personal gateway for her further research in Medieval and Early Modern literature with all of their historical and cultural contexts.

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