

## HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

### UNIT\_ IV

#### JOHN MILTON: BIOGRAPHY

**John Milton** (9 December 1608 – 8 November 1674) was an English poet, polemicist, man of letters, and a civil servant for the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell. He wrote at a time of religious flux and political upheaval, and is best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), written in blank verse.

Milton's poetry and prose reflect deep personal convictions, a passion for freedom and self-determination, and the urgent issues and political turbulence of his day. Writing in English, Latin, Greek, and Italian, he achieved international renown within his lifetime, and his celebrated *Areopagitica* (1644)—written in condemnation of pre-publication censorship—is among history's most influential and impassioned defences of free speech and freedom of the press.

William Hayley's 1796 biography called him the "greatest English author," and he remains generally regarded "as one of the preeminent writers in the English language," though critical reception has oscillated in the centuries since his death (often on account of his republicanism).

Milton's poetry was slow to see the light of day, at least under his name. His first published poem was *On Shakespear* (1630), anonymously included in the Second Folio edition of William Shakespeare. In the midst of the excitement attending the possibility of establishing a new English government, Milton collected his work in *1645 Poems*. The anonymous edition of *Comus* was

published in 1637, and the publication of *Lycidas* in 1638 in *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago* was signed J. M. Otherwise, the 1645 collection was the only poetry of his to see print, until *Paradise Lost* appeared in 1667.

## **The Age of Milton (1625 - 1660)**

**The Age of Milton.** The principal feature of the age of Milton is the growth of Puritanism as a moral and social force. The descendants of Wyclif and Lollards advocated very strict views concerning life and conduct and were called Puritans. During the reign of James I, Puritanism emerged as a great national power. After the civil war, it triumphed with the triumph of Oliver Cromwell. The Influence of Puritanism upon the English life and thought was profound. The moral and religious influences of Puritanism are combined with the spirit of Renaissance.

**Milton's Life:** John Milton was born in Bread Street, Cheapside, London, on 9th December, 1608. He was educated at St. Paul's School and at Christ's College, Cambridge. His books had kept him out of bed till midnight. He had shown untiring devotion to learning. Milton thus became a very great scholar. His "Paradise Lost" was published in 1667. *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in 1671. Milton died on 8th November 1674. Milton's works fall into 4 periods: (1) the College period, closing with the end of the Cambridge Career on 1632, (2) the Horton period, closing with his departure for the Continent in 1638, (3) the period of his prose writings, from 1640 to 1660 and 4) the late poetic period, or period of his greatest achievement. In 'Lycidas' Milton mourns the late death of his college friend Edward King. It is a pastoral Elegy.

**Milton's Poetry:** In "Paradise Lost", Milton produced the greatest English poem. In this masterpiece, he revealed his intellectual energy and creative power. The inspiration and the subject matter of the poem come from Milton's Puritanism insists on Eternal Providence and justify the ways of God to men. In "Paradise Lost", Milton set forth the revolt of Satan against God, the war in heaven, the fall of the rebel angels, the creation of the world and man, the temptation of Eve and Adam, and their expulsion from Eden. He introduces the divine work of redemption. The dramatic poem, "Samson Agonistes" crown the labours of his closing years. In "Paradise Lost", Milton applies the principles of Greek tragedy.

**Characteristics of Milton's Poetry:** After Shakespeare, Milton is the greatest English poet. In him, we have a wonderful union of intellectual power and creative power. He is the most sublime of English poets. In grand style, majesty of thought and diction, he is unrivalled. His descriptive power is excellent. In the opening books of "Paradise Lost", the debate in the council of the fallen angels shows Milton's extraordinary insight into motive and character. There is an intensity of individuality throughout the poem. In the technical side of his poetry, his great beauty of style and versification are noteworthy. Milton remains our greatest master.

## The Age of Milton

### Other poets and prose writers

**The Caroline Poets:** Under the term "Caroline Poets" we can include a number of verse writers in the reign of Charles I. Some of them were secular poets and some of them were religious.

**Robert Herrick:** The most important of Caroline Poets is Robert Herrick. He was deprived of this wealth during civil war hit later reinstated at the Restoration. His religious poetry was published under the title "Noble Numbers" and his secular poems under "Hesperides". His power of writing poetry was shown at their best in "Hesperides". It comprises fairy poems, occasional poems and love poems. They are delightful in their lyrical charm and grace. He detached himself from the political interests of the hour preferred to sing of the joys of life

**Thomas Carew,** his friend Sir John Suckling and Richard Lovelace are poets of the lighter vein. Carew's "He that Loves a Rosy Cheek", Suckling's "Why so pale and wan fond lover?" and Lovelace's "To Althea from Prison" show their skill in verse-composition. **Andrew Marvell's** works exhibit many of the characteristics of the Cavalier School. After the Restoration period, he changed his poetic note and wrote satire on Charles II. Of the Caroline Poets, the most widely

known poet was George Herbert. His lyrics are known as "The Temple". Henry Vaughan is deeper in thought and a mystic poet. Francis Quarles' "The Religious Emblems" had engravings and it had long-enduring popularity.

**Cowley and the Metaphysical Poets:** Abraham Cowley was considered the greatest of English poets. The name "metaphysical" was coined by Johnson. The metaphysical poets were men of learning. They neither copied nature nor life. Their thoughts are new. Their work is full of affectations, conceits, far-fetched similes etc. Johnson says that metaphysical poetry is a "voluntary deviation from nature in pursuit of something new and strange". Thomas Traherne was recognized as one of the greatest religious and metaphysical poets of the 17 century. His prose work "Centuries of Meditations" has profound thought and spiritual feeling.

**The Caroline Prose Writers:** In prose, literature of Milton age, Jeremy Taylor's 'Holy Living and Holy Dying' and Richard Baxter's "The Saints' Everlasting Rest" are important works. Thomas Fuller wrote "Worthies of England", Izaak Walton's "The Contemplative Man's Recreation" is an instruction for fisher men in a gossipy style. Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon wrote "History of the Great Rebellion". Thomas Hobbes wrote "Leviathan".