UNIT 5: JOHN MILTON: INVOCATION TO PARADISE LOST, BOOK I

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1. Learning Objectives

5.2. Introduction

5.3. John Milton: The Poet

5.3.1. His Life

5.3.2. His Works

5.4 Introduction to the Invocation

5.5 Invocation to Paradise Lost Book I

5.5.1 Explanation of the Text

5.6 Poetic Style

5.7 Let us Sum up

5.8 Further Reading

5.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

5.10 Model Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- gain an account of the life of John Milton
- discuss the literary works of John Milton
- appreciate John Milton as an Epic poet
- explain a small section of his epic poem Paradise Lost (which is a small section of the 'Invocation' to Paradise Lost, Book-I
- discuss the poetic style employed in the poem
- appreciate the poetic calibre of John Milton

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to the English poet John Milton by providing you with a detailed idea on the life and works of the great poet. Have you come across the term of 'epic'? An epic or a heroic poem is a long narrative

poem dealing with the exploits of one or more heroic individuals, historical or legendary, usually in an exalted style and involving a moral tone. The two major epic poems in the Western tradition are The Iliad and The Odyssey of the Greek Homer. Greek and later criticism, which considered the Homeric epic the highest form of poetry, produced the genre of Secondary epic - such as the *Aeneid* by Virgil, Tasso's *Jerusalem*, and Milton's *Paradise* Lost - which attempted to emulate Homer, often for a patron or a political cause. Thus, Milton is known to us as one of the greatest epic poets. The term "epic" is also applied to narrative poems of other traditions: the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, Indian Ramayana and Mahabharata.

5.3 JOHN MILTON: THE POET

With the exception of William Shakespeare has been, so highly and continuously, admired, and no other writings, except those of Milton, have been so devoutly revered by many generations. Let us know look into his eventual life and his works that have engendered such lasting popularity.

5.3.1. His Life

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608 in Cheapside, London. His father, John Milton, Sr. came from a Roman Catholic family that disinherited him because of his conversion to Protestantism. The intense religious fervour of the Miltons may be traced to their sense of sacrifice in renouncing the ancient faith. John Milton, Sr. became a wealthy scrivener and moneylender in London. He struck to his books, giving his eldest son the education of a scholar and a gentleman: St. Paul's School; Christ's College Cambridge; five years of private study; a grand tour of Italian Literary Patrons. Education moulded the life and work of England's most influential writer.

In 1641-42 Milton entered the realm of clamorous public controversy establishing himself by the anti-Episcopal pamphlets as a great voice of Puritanism. Shortly after the Civil War, he married Mary Powell, a girl half his age who soon went back to her Royalist

family. Milton wrote four tracts on divorce (because of estrangement from his wife); then on defence of regicide. He also wrote on education and freedom of speech. In 1645, reconciliation with his wife took place, and seven years later his wife died, leaving him with three small daughters

In 1649, after the execution of King Charles I, he was appointed Latin Secretary to the Council of State by the new Commonwealth Government under Oliver Cromwell. In that capacity he had to draft Latin documents for transmission to foreign Powers. In addition, he wrote numerous pamphlets in support of the republican cause. By 1652 his eye sight began to fail perhaps from glaucoma and he soon became blind.

In 1656 he married Katherine Woodcock, who died the following year. When in 1660 Restoration came, Milton was arrested, but was released with fine because of his blindness. He retired to an obscure village in Buckinghamshire and lived quietly and wrote poetry. In 1663 he again married Elizabeth Minshull who was more a nurse for the blind man than a wife. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* published in 1667 and 1671 respectively. Milton died on November 8, 1674.



LET US KNOW

In British history the conflict in the middle years of the 17th century between King Charles I and his supporters (Royalists or Cavaliers) and of Parliament (called Roundheads) is known as Civil War. This conflict was the culmination of Parliaments' attempt to limit Kings' power. The parliamentarians under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell dealt a series of defeats to Charles I, executing him in 1649 and established a protectorate which he ruled as Lord Protector until the re-establishment of monarchy (called Restoration) in 1660. The term Restoration applies to the entire period of the reign of Charles II.

5.3.2. His Works

John Milton's literary life can be divided into three distinct periods. His shorter poems are almost entirely (except for a few great sonnets) works of his early period (from 1625 to 1637). They display all the tendencies of a young, experimenting poet seeking his own voice. There are several, however, that are among the finest lyrics in the language, even the least of them manifest and individualistic expression and a remarkably high *caliber* of poetic achievement. They include "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity" and the poems "On Shakespeare" and "On Arriving at the Age of Twenty-three", “L Allegro and Il” “Penseroso” belong perhaps to the late University days. These two lyrics are a diptych, or, better perhaps, the two sides of a coin. “L’ Allegro” offers the life of gay sociability, bright and joyous, while “L’Penseroso” counters it with pensive thought. The pieces are decorative rather than descriptive, artificial rather than descriptive, artificial rather than natural, but they are full of scholarly fancy and adroit poetical phrasing.

Comus (1634) were Milton's first printed work except for the lines to Shakespeare in the Second Folio. It is a masque for a noble family. It owes something to Jonson's masque. "Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue" (1618), but Milton's virtuous Lady the Pleasure eloquently urged by Comus, the 'bouncing belly' of Jonson's masque. Virtue is Chastity (that is, obedience to divine Reason). The earnest argument of Camus shows its author's ambition.

Lycidas (1637) is an ambitious pastoral elegy for a Cambridge contemporary, a priest and poet who drowned in the Irish sea. Lycidas is the longest poem in a collection otherwise in Latin and Greek. Milton weaves into the design of the poem not only pastoral scenes but mythology, Christian belief and contemporary controversy within the Church of England. In style the poem follows no poetic rule, but Milton's own. As one critic has said: "The only rule is that of the poets' exquisite ear."

In the second period, from 1637 to 1659, Milton became involved in the burning topic of the day, the struggle between King and Parliament. Milton now turned from poetry to reforming prose, and toughened his argumentative power. In 1641-42, as has already been mentioned, he published five anti-episcopal tracts and shortly afterwards four tracts in favour of divorce. At Cromwell's death, Milton called again for a republic and liberty of conscience, publishing, The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth as Charles II returned.

But the best of all the tracts he wrote was *Areopagitica* (1644), called after Areopagus, the hill of Ares where the Athenian Parliament met. This "Speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England" is couched in the form of classical oration, beginning with a quotation from Euripides, Areopagitica, however, defends not free speech, but a free press.

Among his other prose, "Of Education" is still read. A Latin "On Christian Doctrine" found in censor's office in 1823, translated and published in 1825, makes his unorthodoxy, darkly visible in *Paradise Lost*, crystal clear.

More than in the verse, the prose of Milton reveals what Cromwell termed a 'Seeker'. Otherwise forgotten quarrels have been immortalised in Milton's pamphlets, each bearing the powerful stamp of a vigorous personality and a master of language. After the Restoration and amnesty, he turned again to poetry and devoted his whole mind and soul to the great work he had so long contemplated. It was an epic on the Biblical story of the 'Fall of Man'. He would retell the story of 'Man's first disobedience' so as to show the justice of Providence. The result is, in its art, power and scope, one of the greatest of English poems. Dr. Johnson, no lover of Milton's religion, politics or personality concluded his work on Milton on Life thus: "His great works were performed under discountenance, and in blindness, but difficulties vanished at his touch; he was born for whatever arduous,

and his work is not greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first." Paradise Lost is a work of grandeur and energy, and of intricate design. It includes in its sweep most of what was worth knowing of the universe and of history. The blind poet balanced details occurring six books apart.

Paradise Lost begins with the fall of the angels; Satan's plan to capture God's newly created species, and Heavenly foresight of the future. In Book IV we meet Adam and Eve in the Garden. Raphael tells Adam of Satan's Rebellion, the war in Heaven, the fall of the angels, the creation of the universe, and of Man and of his requested mate, and warns him of the temper. In Book IX Satan deceives Eve, and Adam resolves to die with her; the Son conveys God's doom and promises redemption.

In Book X, Satan boasts of his success, but he and his angels are transformed to serpents. In Book XI and XII Raphael shows the miseries of mankind until the Redemption, where after Adam will have 'a paradise within thee, happier far.'

In conception the poem is spacious and commanding; it is sumptuously adorned with all the details that Milton's rich imagination, fed with classical and Biblical lore, can suggest. The characters especially that of Lucifer is drawn on a gigantic scale, and do not lack a certain tragic immensity; and the blank verse in which the work is composed is new and wonderful. This type of blank verse has founded a tradition in English; it has often been imitated and modified, but never paralleled.

In 1671 Milton published his last volume of poetry which contained *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The former poem is not about the redemption but about the temptation in the desert. It lacks the exalted imagination, the adornment, and the ornate rhythms of Paradise Lost, Samson Agonistes is a tragedy to be read, not acted. Its form is Greek, with protagonist and chorus; its subject the fate of Israel's champion, 'eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves.' In Paradise

Lost and Samson Agonistes Milton left examples to English poets of dedication to his art, but also of passionate self-assertion.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is an epic or a heroic poem? Is *Paradise Lost* an epic?

Q2. When was John Milton imprisoned? How and why was he released?

Q3. Of all the prose-tracts Milton wrote, which one is regarded as his best?

Q4. John Milton's Lycidas is-

(Fill up with the correct choice: masque/epic/pastoral elegy)

5.4 INTRODUCTION TO THE INVOCATION

The 'Invocation' to Paradise Lost, Book-I of John Milton. It is the opening verse-paragraph of his great epic poem. Milton follows the classical epic convention in making a statement of his theme here, and invoking the Holy Spirit to inspire him to accomplish the task he has undertaken. He also uses these twenty-six lines to indicate the ambitious and comprehensive nature of his task and expresses his desire to establish his status as an epic poet on a higher moral plane than that of the Latin and Greek classics.

The "Vacation Exercise" written in 1628 contains Milton's first promise to write an epic poem; he sketches the whole scene of epic poetry without specifying and topic. In the Latin "Ode to Manso" (1640) he states his intention to write a British epic based on Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table. Shortly after his return from Italy, Milton listed in "The Cambridge Manuscript" (1640-42) a long series of possible subjects for an epic drama, selected from the Bible and from the history of England and Scotland. The fall of man chiefly engrossed his attention and the manuscript contains a draft for a five-act play *Adam Unparadised*. But he could not have worked appropriate form for a great poetic work *Paradise Lost* was at last published in 1667,

divided into ten books; a second revised edition, with the poem divided into twelve books in 1674, represents Milton's final text.

5.5 INVOCATION TO PARADISE LOST BOOK 1

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste Brought Death into the World, and all our woe, with loss of Eden, till one greater Man Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat, Sing Heavenly Muse, that on the secret top Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire. That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed. In the Beginning how the Heavens and Earth Rose out of Chaos: Of if Sion Hill Delight thee more; and Siloa's Brook that flow'd fast by the Oracle of God; I thence Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song, That with no middle flight intends to soar Above th' Aonian Mount, while it persues things un-attempted yet in Prose or Rime. And chiefly Thou or Spirit, that dost prefer Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure, Instruct me, for Thou knowst; Thou from the first Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark illumin, what is low raise and support; That to the highth of this great Argument I may assert Eternal Providence, And justifie the ways of God to men.

5.5.1 Explanation of the Text

Milton opens his *Paradise Lost* by formally declaring the poems theme - man's first act of disobedience towards God and consequences that followed from it. The act is Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, as told in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Milton assert that this original sin brought death to human beings for the first time causing us to lose our home in paradise until Jesus Christ comes to restore mankind to its former state of purity.

Milton then invokes the Muse to inspire him to accomplish the task he has undertaken. But the mouse is invokes is not one of the traditional Muses who reside on Mount Helicon, rather it is the Holy

Spirit that inspired Moses to tell the Israelites how in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. He says that this poem, like his Muse, will fully above those of the classical poets and accomplish things never attempted before, because his inspiration is greater than theirs. Then he invokes the Holy Spirit asking him to fill him with knowledge of the beginning of the world, for the Holy Spirit was the active force in creating the universe. Milton announces that he wants to be inspired with sacred knowledge for he wants to show his fellow men that the fall of mankind into sin and death was a part of God's greater plan, and that God's plan is justified.

It has already been mentioned that this poem is the opening verse-paragraph of John Milton's great epic poem *Paradise Lost*. In gravity and seriousness opening lines of the epic are similar to the book from which Milton takes much of his story: The Book of Genesis of the Bible. The Bible begins with the story of Creation, and Milton's epic also begins in a similar vein. This opening verse-paragraph of twenty-six lines (or two sentences) is extremely compressed, containing a great deal of information about Milton's reasons for writing this epic and his choice of the subject matter and his attitude towards his subject. Milton follows the classical poets in beginning his epic with an invocation to a Muse. But the Muse he invokes is not one of the nine classical Muses of Mount Helicon, but the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. In invoking a Muse, but differentiating from the classical Muses, Milton manages to tell us quite a lot about how he sees his project. In the first place, by following the classical precedent Milton confirms his awareness of Homer, Virgil and other epic poets and indicates that he has mastered their format and wants to be a part of their tradition.

But by identifying his Muse with the divine spirit that spoke to Muses on Mount Sinai and inspired him to write the story of the Creation, Milton indicates that his ambition is to go beyond joining the group of the classical poets. For the water which refreshes his Muse is not the spring of Aganippe on Mount Helicon, but 'Siola's brook' and he with

no middle flight, will soar above the 'Aonian Mount', that is, above Mount Helicon, he will excel the classical epic to achieve "things un-attempted yet in prose and rime." Yet Milton's invocation is extremely humble expressing utter dependence on God's grace in speaking through him. Milton thus begins his poem with a mixture of ambition and humility, simultaneously expressing his reverence for the classical forebears and promising to soar above them for God's glorification. Milton's approach to the invocation of the muse, in which he takes a classical literary convention and reinvents it from a Christian perspective, sets the pattern for all of *Paradise Lost*. For example, when he catalogues the prominent devils in Hell and explains the various names they are known by and which cults worshipped them, he makes devils of many gods whom the Greeks and other ancient people worshipped. In other words, the great gods of the classical world have become - according to Milton - the fallen angels.

His poem purports to tell these gods' original natures, before they infected humankind in the form of false gods. Through such comparisons with the classical epic poems, Milton is quick to demonstrate that the scope of his epic poem is much greater than those of the classical poets, and that his worldview is more fundamentally true and all-encompassing than theirs. Milton clearly indicates this when he says that his Muse will fly over the classical muses living in Mount Helicon. Thus, Milton both makes himself the authority on antiquity and subordinates it to his Christian worldview.

The Iliad and *Aeneid* are the great epic poems of Greek and Latin, respectively, and Milton emulate them because he intends *Paradise Lost* to be the first English epic. Milton wants to make glorious are out of the English language in the way the other epics had done for their languages. Not only must a great epic by long and poetically well-constructed, its subject must be significant and original, its form strict and serious, and its aims noble and heroic. In Milton's view, the story he will tell is the most original story known to man, as it is the story of the world and of the first human beings. Also, while Homer

and Virgil only chronicled the journey of heroic men, like Achilles or Aeneas, Milton chronicles the tragic journey of all men - the result of man's disobedience. Milton goes so far as to say that he hopes to "justify" or explain, God's mysterious plan for humankind. Homer and Virgil describe great wars between men, but Milton tells the story of the most epic battle possible: the battle between God and Satan, good and evil.

5.6 POETIC STYLE

Milton has used blank verse or English Heroic Verse without Rhyme", as he called it in his preliminary note, in composing his *Paradise Lost*. No poet has even employed blank verse so perfectly to suit a variety of emotional pictures, to effect continuity and integration in the weaving of the epic design and above all to sustain the poem as a poem and to keep it from disintegrating into isolated fragments of high rhetoric. Milton considered Rhyme as an interference in this kind of carefully woven poetic narrative and he rightly insisted that "true musical delight" consisted not in rhyme but in "apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another." Having established the fundamental rhythm of five beats to a line he plays upon it every melodic variation form the light to the heavy. Other variations are employed in enjambment position of pause, position of accent, and addition or reduction in number of syllables.

The devices which Milton uses for the flow of his great opening passage are north careful examination. It begins emphatically with simplicity and amplitude: "Of Man's First Disobedience". The sense is "then developed, extended, modified, qualified, reconsidered, in a great variety of ways, by subordination to clauses and adroit use of conjunctions, prepositions and relative pronouns - and, whose, and, with, till. The reversal of normal English word-order enables him to place the object of the opening sentence - and it is the object, the theme of the poem, which is important - at the beginning; the first main verb does not come until the sixth line, and when it does come it comes with a force, 'Sing Heav'nly Muse". But Milton does not pause here. Sustaining the flow in a similar vein he focuses on the Christian scheme of redemption that was to follow the Fall: "till one greater Man/Restore us, and

regain the blissful seat." Then he goes on to explain that the Muse he invokes is not the classical Muse but one who spoke to Muses on Mount Horeb or on Sinai and inspired him to write the story of the Creation. And he, with no middle flight, will soar 'above the Aonian Mount', that is, above Mount Helicon, and will excel the classical epic to achieve "things un-attempted in Prose or Rime." Ambition and humility are mingled in the sense and movement of the verse. The self-confidence expressed in the line "things un-attempted in Prose or Rime" is modified in the next line when he asks the Muse to "What is me in dark/illumin, what is low raise and support.

Then the lines move on without any internal pause to the grand final statement of the purpose of the narrative "And justifies the ways of God to men". As regards this verse-paragraph David Daiches aptly observes: "The placing of pauses, the rise and fall of the emotion, the high emotional charge in which the poets sense of dedication and of communion with great biblical figures of The Old Testament is communicated, the supplicatory cadence of appeal to have his darkness illumined and his mind elevated, and the final powerful simplicity of the concluding statement of his purpose - all this represent poetic art of high order."

Paradise Lost is a work of grandeur and energy, and of intricate design. Milton uses in his epic a highly ornate style and a stately 'organ-tone' language which T.S. Eliot labels "poetry at the farthest possible remove from prose." Milton often uses a highly Latinised vocabulary and employs familiar English words in their original Latin sense for example, 'success' in the sense of 'outcome'. Often his much accurate scholarship is distilled in one word or phrase. For example, "Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss" is Milton's rendering of the Hebrew word 'merachepheth' in Genesis 1, 2, translated by the Authorised Version as 'moved' - "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water" - but explained by both Jewish and Christian commentators as implying brooding and hatching. "This is that gentle heat that brooded on the waters and in six days hatched the world' wrote Thomas Browne in *Religio Medici*. Use of sonorous and exotic proper nouns, inversion of normal word-orders, omission of words not needed for the sense, rich allusiveness, enormous similes etc. are some of the characteristics of his poetry. The maintenance of the grand style, never slacking through twelve long books of *Paradise Lost* is one of the greatest stylistic feats of all literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Why does Milton invoke a Muse, but not the one of the classical line Muses?



5.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that Milton is one of the greatest English poets and his Paradise Lost is the greatest epic in English. His eventful life and literary works have been discussed in order to provide you a wider idea of the context and times in which the poet lived and wrote. After going through this unit, the learner have will be able to discuss the opening verse-paragraph, referred to as the 'Invocation' to *Paradise Lost*, Book-I, in which the poet John Milton states the theme and the philosophical purpose or the intent of his epic poem. You have also learnt about the poetic devices employed by the poet and also about Milton's highly ornate style and stately language.



5.8 FURTHER READING

1) Daiches, David. (1957) *Milton*. U.K.: Hutchinson University Library.
2) Fish, Stanley. (1967) *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost.* Harvard University Press.
3) Lewis, C.S. (1942) *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. London: O.U.P.
4) Shaw cross, John T. (1993) *John Milton: Self and the World*. Kentucky, Lexington: K.Y. University Press.
5) Waldock, A.J.A. (1964) *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*. Cambridge University Press.
6) Wheeler, Thomas. (1974) *Paradise Lost and the Modern Reader*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.



5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: An epic or a heroic poem is a long narrative poem dealing with the exploits of one or more heroic individuals historic or legendary, usually in an exalted style and involving a moral tone. Yes, Paradise lost is an epic poem.

Ans to Q 2: When in 1660 Restoration came, Milton was arrested, but was released with fine because of his blindness.

Ans to Q 3: The best of all the tracts that Milton wrote was Areopagitica (1644), called after Areopagus, the hill of Ares where the Athenian Parliament met.

Ans to 4: Pastoral Elegy

Ans to Q5: Milton follows the classical poets in beginning his epic but the Muse he invokes is not one of the nine classical Muses of Mount Helicon rather it is the inspiring Holy Spirit of the Trinity invoked.



5.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the life of the English poet John Milton.

Q2. Discuss the literary works of the poet John Milton

Q3. Write a short note on the following:

a. Epic

b. Milton as an Epic poet

Q4. Why does Milton invoke the Holy Spirit, not one of the traditional Muses?

Q5. How does John Milton use the opening lines of his *Paradise Lost* to make a statement about the theme and philosophical purpose of the epic poem?

Q6. Why does John Milton hope that his *Paradise Lost* will surpass all classical epics?

**** ****