

## An Approach to Teaching John Milton’s “Lycidas”

*Edward R. Raupp*

*(Gori State Teaching University, Gori, Georgia)*

**Abstract:** Along with Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, John Milton is considered to be one of the founders of the English language as it is spoken around the world today. Students for whom English is not a native language often find some familiarity with the characters and plotlines of *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer and the plays of Shakespeare. Milton is another matter. Teachers of Milton need to make choices about which of Milton’s works to teach beyond *Paradise Lost*, and how to teach it. This study is based on experience of teaching Milton to graduate students in post-Soviet Georgia and offers an approach that might be used in other locations, as well.

**Key words:** Milton, *Lycidas*, teaching, learning, English language and literature

### 1. Introduction: John Milton’s Poetry and Prose

At the graduate level, teaching and learning English literature to non-native English speakers is a challenge beyond that one might find at universities in the United States, Britain, or other places where English is the native language. Students at lower levels learn their English from workbooks, retelling the text, and mimic-and-memorize. The passive tasks of listening and reading, and the active tasks of speaking and writing are taught and learned at the highest level when students engage English literature. A degree of critical and creative thinking is demanded at the higher level. The apex of the critical thinking process is achieved when the student wrestle with the analysis of poetry, and nearly all of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton is poetry.

When John Milton is taught in university courses, it is typically *Paradise Lost* that enjoys most, if not all, of the time and attention of the students and those who teach. Often missing from the syllabi are Milton’s early poems. Milton wrote *Lycidas* in 1637 while still in his twenties. Students gain a greater understanding of the man and his art when they deal with *Lycidas*, Milton’s pastoral elegy (Hanford, 1919, than when they study his epics alone. As a young man lamenting the death of a friend (but see Gadaletto, 2018), the speaker is closely aligned with the author. While there is a school of literary criticism that holds that a work is to be understood and valued in itself, without reference to the author’s life and times, in *Lycidas* we see a persuasive refutation of that position. Milton could never have written such a moving elegy absent the death of a friend in whom he had high hopes of being the rare “Good Shepherd” among the clergy. We find an effective approach to have students identify with the speaker given the situation in which a young friend has died, to discuss the situation and to write about it.

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Edward R. Raupp, Ph.D. in English Language and Literature; Professor of English Philology, Gori State Teaching University; research areas: teaching English as a foreign language, English language and literature, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, just war theory. E-mail: [edraup@gmail.com](mailto:edraup@gmail.com).

## 2. Pastoral Elegy: "Lycidas"

We study Milton's "Lycidas", if for no other reason, because it has been called "the high-water mark of English Poesy" (Forsyth, 2009, p. 684). William Wordsworth, commenting on the passion of poetry, argued for "the substantiality of poetic language" (Sacks, 1987, p. xi). This great poet of the Romantic movement, saw words "not only as symbols of the passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion" (Sacks). In "Lycidas", there is passion, but it is not worn on the sleeve of the narrator but set lovingly into that form of the English elegy termed "pastoral", using the metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep. What we see in the poem when we compare and contrast the words with those of other poets in other forms is the quiet, reserved, peaceful meadow — until that underlying passion erupts in an unconcealed attack on a corrupt clergy.

John Milton's "Lycidas" is a pastoral elegy consisting of 193 lines and 1,477 words, longer than the traditional 14-line sonnet with its 140 syllables, but a fraction of his epic poems, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. The term "pastoral" puts the reader in the mind of one or more shepherds and one or more flocks of sheep. In this pastoral elegy, the poem evokes not only the sheep and the shepherds, but also "the wolves who intrude into the fold," a metaphor Milton uses to characterize the clergy of his day, men who were supposed to care for their flock but instead gild the lily of their raiment with opulence tainted with pride and lust for power at the expense of those who look to them as God's presence among them. The elegy, a memorial poem, "is characterized by an unusually powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration (Sacks, 1987, p. xii), and "Lycidas" evokes emotion both in sympathy with loss of a friend and disgust for the clergy that his friend was intent on joining with the promise of virtue.

Milton compares himself and Edward King to shepherds (Alpers, 1972, p. 352), but he will also refer derisively to the bad shepherds who comprise the clergy of the Church of England. As a Puritan, Milton held the priests and bishops to be antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. In the procession of mourners, St. Peter, "pilot of the Galilean lake" (Swaim, 1983), excoriates the clerics of the Church of England with "a passage famous for its dark allusion and final crux" (Baumlin, 1999, p. 66): "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed" (125). The pastoral elegy "tended to idealize and dignify the expression of [Milton's] sorrow" (Hanford, 1910, p. 404).

In order to grasp the meaning of the elegy, a student needs some preparation, including a knowledge of "the several mythological and religious systems from which its individual words and concepts derive their significance" (Adams, 1970, p. 294). Students invariably want to know why Milton refers to Edward King as Lycidas. "There are as many as thirty characters called Lycidas in Renaissance neo-Latin eclogues" (Forsyth, 2009, p. 685). Although the name appears in a variety of places at different times, we will likely never know which of these is the Lycidas of Milton. Herodotus in 5th century mentions a man named Lycidas who was stoned to death, as were his wife and children, because he dared to suggest there might be a compromise with Xerxes to end the Persian war (Marincola, 1996). Later, around the late 270s bce, Theocritus writes about another Lycidas, a goatherd who exchanges songs and pleasantries with a traveller (Brown, 1981, p. 59). Both Virgil and Ovid mention a Lycidas, one a shepherd and the other a centaur (Marincola). Which of these, or perhaps an amalgam, survives in Milton? Lacking any specific evidence, we shall never know.

Much has been written about the appropriateness — or lack of it, according to Samuel Johnson, one of Milton's most impassioned critics. In any event, whether the poem is a pastoral elegy or something entirely different, the poem "has remained a poem primarily about other things; about pastoral conventions, about the politics of Puritanism, about the literary vocation and Milton's career anxieties" (Boehrer, 2002, p. 222).

## 2.1 John Milton and Edward King at Cambridge

John Milton and Edward King were undergraduate students at Christ's College, Cambridge University. Traveling from Wales to join his family in Ireland, King was lost at sea. Milton and King were not the closest of friends, but Milton saw in King, preparing for a life of service in the church, as one of the best and brightest entry into a corrupt clergy, a breath of fresh air, a chance to make a difference. Milton saw the clergy as far from the right path, and King could help to reduce the corruption. But King is dead, and Milton is faced with a universal question: "How does man respond to loss and to his own mortality?" (Sacks, 1987, p. xiii).

## 3. Teaching Milton as a Foreign Language

English philology students, whether undergraduate or graduate, know about metaphors. Sometimes, but not always, they can recognize a metaphor in a text. The teacher has an obligation, and an opportunity, to point out the metaphor in the text and explain its meaning. Milton revels in metaphor. As early as line 8, the very name Lycidas is itself a metaphor for Milton's friend, Edward King, who drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of Wales.

Even at the graduate level, students will have difficulty with the language as well as the uses of metaphor, idioms, and vocabulary that may cause native English speakers to go to their dictionaries. Therefore, the teacher needs to pay close attention to each word, ascertaining whether students understand the language.

At a deeper level, students may observe a certain distance between the living—the narrator and the swain—and the dead, the drowned Edward King, now memorialized in this poem as Lycidas. Students may find clues in such comments as, "The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words [emphasis added]" (Sacks, 1987, p. 9). Or, "Indeed, few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living" Sacks, p. 19). Students, then may debate the merits of Samuel Johnson and others that "Lycidas" appears to lack the sturm und drang, the rending of clothing, and the tearing out of one's hair or the five stages of grief model, or the Kübler-Ross model (2019/1969), that might be expected at the death of a young friend before his time.

### 3.1 Biblical and Mythological References in "Lycidas"

In preparation for teaching and learning "Lycidas", students should be exposed to those references in the poem that are drawn from relevant elements of mythology, especially Hebrew mythology as it is presented in The Bible and Greek mythology from Hesiod. For example, without preparation, what is a student to make of line 164: "And, O ye Dolphins, waft the haples youth"? Three myths regarding dolphins might be shared with students. Two of the three myths involve dolphins rescuing people — the singer Arion, after winning prizes in a singing contest, is kidnapped by pirates, but then is rescued by a dolphin; and Apollo, in the form of a dolphin, rescues his son Icadius from drowning; the third is the of the drowned infant Melicertes, who becomes Palaemon, guardian of harbors (Creaser, 1985. p. 236). Students should be made aware of these stories in Greek mythology.

Because of the lack of exposure of students to Greek and Hebrew mythology, teachers of "Lycidas" might develop short PowerPoint presentations, of which there are many available on the Internet. As a minimum, students should know the Olympian gods, from Apollo to Zeus, as well as the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and the Fates, or Moirai, three weaving goddesses who assign individual destinies to mortals at birth: Clotho (the Spinner), Lachesis (the Alloter) and Atropos (the Inflexible) (GreekMythology.com, 2021).

Without preparation, there is, for example, no way students can experience what French (1953, p. 485) the "more powerful emotional effect" of such phrases as "Comes the blind Furie with th' abhorred shears" in line 75,

or to discuss the reason Milton replaces the Fate Atropos with a "Furie". Is this an error on Milton's part, or is there something else at play? The teacher should encourage a vigorous debate on this topic, but such a debate needs to be informed by at least a brief discussion of how the Greeks understood the Fates and the Furies.

In order to understand the reference in line 109 to "The Pilot of the Galilean lake", students will need to know the story of Jesus' gathering of his twelve disciples, as it is told in the four canonical gospels. They should know that Peter is considered the first of these, that he was crucified by the Romans, that he is considered the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope, and — most relevant in this case — a fisherman. There are, as might be expected, other views of "The Pilot", perhaps most common of all is that the Pilot is Jesus (Edwards, 2011, p. 605). Students may be given papers on both sides, and they can then debate whether the Pilot is Peter or Jesus.

Another metaphor that needs explanation, to include varying interpretations, is the "Two-Handed Engine" in lines 130–131 of "Lycidas" (Kelly & Bray, 2010; Tindol, 2019):

"But that two-handed engine at the door  
Stands ready to smite once and smite no more."

It would be useful at this point for the teacher to introduce the concept of pathetic fallacy, "A figure of speech in which the natural world or some part of it is treated as though it had human emotions (Raupp, 2020). Students may come to understand that the poet may intend the phrase to be ambiguous, as one commonly accepted interpretation is that the "Two-Handed Engine" as a sword large enough to require two hands to use. Another view, however, is that "it refers to Christ in his role as final judge, dividing those on his right hand from those on his left" (Felsen, 1975, p. 6). Kranidas (1979) suggests an allusion to the church, with its power to excommunicate. A one-page attack by one Milton scholar (Fleissner, 1975) on the paper of another Milton scholar (Felsen, 1975) may be used to emphasize the differences among equally well qualified academics, so students should feel free to offer their own analyses, evaluations, and commentaries — so long as they are supported by evidence.

### 3.2 An Approach to Teaching "Lycidas" to Non-English Speakers

An effective approach to teaching "Lycidas" to students for whom English is not a native language might consist of the following:

- Start by addressing the question, "Why teach Milton?" Duran (2007) suggests an answer. First, "...the simple, honest aesthetic and intellectual pleasure" (p. 47). Second, the student may transcend space and time, as Milton draws on multiple languages and locations (p. 48). This method is useful because students will already have been asking the question in their own language and should be able to discuss the matter in English. The teacher, however, must provide some introductory information, including placing Milton in the triad with Chaucer and Shakespeare. When the students are English philology upper division undergraduates or master's degree candidates, one may presume that they enjoy the English language and are eager to achieve fluency. Nevertheless, to be sure, a first class might include a short writing and speaking exercise to answer the question, "Why learn Milton?" Do students know that the "Big Three" of English language and literature — Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton — all wrote poetry, and that nearly all the poetry is in iambic pentameter? Students would then share their answers with their classmates.
- After a few sessions of analysis of "Lycidas," students should be able to associate themselves with different interpretations. Using Fish (1976, pp. 481–484), students could form "interpretive communities" to add depth to their evaluation of the poem and to distinguish their communities from others in the

class. These interpretive communities "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading...but for writing texts, for constituting their properties, and assigning their intentions." Over the course of a semester, they should be able by personal experience and involvement to address Fish's rhetorical question, "Why should two or more readers ever agree...?" (p. 483). They may also discover that "interpretive communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned (p. 484).

- Some students will have had little or no school or university experience with poetry, so the teacher needs to spend some time on the various aspects of poetry, including iambic pentameter, blank verse, metaphor, and other literary devices and figures of speech (Raupp, 2020).
- Teachers should be aware of their reactions to errors of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Experience shows that a positive response is more effective than one of harsh correction (Campos, 2020). A rule for teachers at any level might be, "Never embarrass a student." Students who are made to feel demeaned when they make a mistake will tend never to make another mistake.

#### **4. Formative Evaluation of Teaching and Learning of "Lycidas"**

We may evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process when dealing with "Lycidas" in a number of ways. Alternatives might include portfolios, containing every article, note, or bit of writing about "Lycidas" or John Milton; journals with contemporaneous notes from lectures and readings on "Lycidas"; online assessments; self-assessments; and others (Brown, 2013).

##### **4.1 Observation**

The most common method of evaluating students' progress in general, and with poetry, in particular, is to observe. How are the students expressing themselves? Are they following the class presentations? Are they asking questions and making informed contributions to the discussions? Is their affect positive, negative, engaged, distant?

##### **4.2 Oral Quizzes**

Short oral quizzes with immediate feedback can help to locate areas that need reinforcement. An option is to have each student ask a question of the class or another student. Quizzes can generally only assess a low level of thinking, at the level of recalling facts and defining terms.

##### **4.3 Written Quizzes**

Short written quizzes call for a bit of application of knowledge, e.g., "Where did Milton meet Edward King?" Or "How did Edward King die?"

##### **4.4 Weekly Analytical Papers**

Papers of 1–3 pages may be used to assess critical thinking and creative problem solving.

##### **4.5 Portfolio Review and Response**

At the beginning of the semester, students are instructed to initiate and maintain a portfolio of all their work.

#### **5. Summative Evaluation of Teaching and Learning of "Lycidas"**

At the end of the semester, we ask, "How did we do?" The question is appropriate for at least two reasons.

First, we need to assign grades in most schools and universities. Second, we can get some hints on how to improve the class for the next time it is offered. Of course, we need to assess the degree to which each student has mastered the material in order to enter grades for the course. Beyond the cognitive domain, however, we need to try to understand how the students feel toward Milton generally and "Lycidas in particular. Both may be evaluated in a number of ways.

### **5.1 Final Written Examination**

In designing effective examinations, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU, 2021) advises teachers to choose appropriate item types for their objectives, including closed items (True/False, multiple choice) or open (essay). The teacher should highlight how the exam aligns with course objectives and write instructions that are clear, explicit, and unambiguous. By writing instructions that preview the exam, the teacher helps students to prepare and reduces stress. Criterion-referenced testing selects important aspects of the course objectives, informs students what will be on the test, and assesses knowledges and skills that are consistent with the objectives.

Test items should be worded carefully to be clear and simple. If only one answer can be correct, the item should be unambiguous. CMU suggests enlisting a colleague or teaching assistant to preview the examination and to estimate how long it will take students to complete the exam. There is also the question as to the point value of different question types and how the students' work will be scored,

### **5.2 Final Oral Examination**

Oral examinations may not be practical with large classes. For small classes, however, they may serve a useful purpose in assessing accomplishment. The first step in a final oral examination is to relieve the stress on the students. This involves a period of warmup before the exam begins. Small talk helps. By the end of the semester, the teacher should know something of the background of each student. This may involve a file of facts about the students' interests, their likes, dislikes, and hobbies. The teacher must decide if the exam is to be done individually or in small groups. Of course, the teacher must consider privacy and protection, including an open door or an open space.

When the students are not native English speakers, they must be reminded of what is relevant and what is not, e.g., pronunciation and grammar. They should be provided with a rubric well in advance of the examination. It would also be useful to hold practice sessions involving oral give-and-take opportunities.

### **5.3 Presentation**

Even though advanced English speakers in undergraduate and graduate courses in Milton may be familiar with PowerPoint, it would not be amiss to spend a few minutes demonstrating good and bad presentations. As above, students should be provided with a rubric well in advance of their presentation.

### **5.4 Self- and Peer Evaluation**

In 2001, the United States Supreme Court, having heard the evidence, decided unanimously that students "grading each others' tests is valuable, saving teachers' time and augmenting student learning" (Sadler & Good 2006). Controlled experiments, however, show that, "Self-grading appears to result in increased learning; peer grading does not" (p. 1).

There are both theoretical and practical reasons for considering alternatives to grading. Logistical advantages: The work of a large number of students can be graded simultaneously, as students are assessing the work of other students or assessing their own work in the course. Pedagogical advantages: We all learn when we teach, whether

we are teaching our peers or ourselves. In this approach, students can see how their peers have responded to the examination requirements. Metacognitive advantages include the demystification of the evaluation system itself—an example of learning about learning. Affective advantages: We learn more effectively when we feel good about what we are learning (Sadler & Good, 2006).

In the study of Milton in general and "Lycidas," in particular, it would seem advisable to consider self-evaluation, in which students reflect on their own learning, but not peer-evaluation, as students will have different interpretations of the several important Miltonian metaphors in the poem and should not be vulnerable to lower marks by peers with other interpretations. Logistically, especially in large classes, the teacher can spend more time on essential issues, such as guiding research into Samuel Johnson's criticisms of "Lycidas", while distributing the grading tasks to the students. Pedagogically, students teach themselves, and when they encounter a problem, e.g., in interpretation of the "uncouth swain" (Sidey, 1908; Friedman, 1971), they have the means to solve the problem themselves. In the realm of the metacognitive, students may, with appropriate rubrics and guidance, perceive more deeply the process of evaluation, whether at the macro level of the English elegy or at the micro level of the words and images Milton uses in "Lycidas". In the affective domain, the hope is that students will come to feel empathy with both Edward King and the narrator.

### **5.5 Anonymous Survey**

SurveyMonkey.com offers teachers the opportunity to survey students anonymously for their opinions of the course. This will not bear on individual students' accomplishment of the course objectives, so it will have no effect on final grades. It does, however, provide an overall measure of the effectiveness of the course, especially in the affective domain. This could be done at the beginning of the course, as well, with a comparison of the two results.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The most important conclusion to be drawn regarding the teaching and learning of "Lycidas" is that students will become more engaged as they connect to the characters, especially to the "uncouth swain" (Friedman, 1971). Edward King died young. Our students are young, perhaps about the same age as King was when he was lost at sea. Equally if not important is to identify with the narrator, the "uncouth swain" who sings a song of lamentation at the loss of a friend, especially a friend of so much promise.

Another conclusion is that the university may be required to make up for some weaknesses in the school preparation, including its curriculum, methodology, materials, and teaching. School pupils learning English as a foreign language tend to be constrained both in hours and offerings. As to hours, school pupils are limited in class time for English. Moreover, the curriculum appears to be of the one-size-fits-all approach in which individual interests are subsumed in a common set of materials. Another problem in schools in terms of preparing for the kind of literature that would add depth and breadth to their study of English is the lack of exposure to the Bible, to Greek and Roman mythology, and even to English literature. That then demands that in teaching Milton, there must be some time given to these areas.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author acknowledges the support of the faculty and staff of Gori State Teaching University and the

opportunity to teach Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton at the graduate level and to lead the University's Center for Foreign Languages. Danna Vance Raupp edited the article for readability and conformance with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* and the requirements of the *Journal of Modern Education Review*. Finally, the author owes a deep debt of gratitude to the Peace Corps and all those who have supported the Peace Corps in Georgia for twenty years.

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