

## Milton's *On His Blindness*: Eye Sight or Heart Vision

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**Abstract:** John Milton, in his Sonnet 16 'On his Blindness,' meditates on the disturbing effect blindness has had on his whole life and literary works. He compares his lost vision with 'light spent' and grieves not the handicap in itself but the restrictions it carries out on his work as a literary figure, particularly a poet. His poetic skill is significant to him that he describes it as that one talent,' signifying it is the only talent that is of importance.

This study is an attempt to analyze the concepts of blindness, sight, light, vision, and obedience with particular reference to his poem, sonnet 18 or 'On his blindness.' It starts with an introduction to John Milton as a poet. After that, it shifts to discuss the concept of Vision or Sight. Then, the study goes on to deal with the concept of obedience. Next, it sheds light on the concepts of Blindness and Light. Afterward, the task moves to close with a conclusion. In this paper, the researcher applies the critical-analytical approach.

**Key Words:** blindness, light, Milton, obedience, poetry, seventeenth-century, sight, vision.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

The most constant and projecting literary achievement of the Seventeenth Century was in poetry. John Milton is undoubtedly the most extraordinary, remarkable, and astonishing poet of the century following Shakespeare. He worked as an official secretary. Milton got his master's graduation from Cambridge University in 1632. The family's monetary wealth got him to hit the books of classical and traditional languages. "He then retired to the family residences in London. He started writing poems when he was young such as *On Shakespeare*. Milton wrote several literary works during his life" (Dahami, 2017b, p. 45). A number of his notable works are *Paradise Lost* (1667), *Samson Agonistes* (1671), *Paradise Regained* (1671), sonnets, pamphlets, and several other literary works such as poems and prose.

Milton was born in 1608 in London, a son of a wealthy scrivener and composer. It is known that Milton is a pioneer in sonnets composing; he writes political sonnets, occasional sonnets, elegiac sonnets, and sonnets of personal meditation, like this one. He received an outstanding education in different languages such as Latin, French, Italian, and Greek owing to the financial standing of his family. Literature was a particular preferred with Milton, where he started writing his personal poetry when he was young and started to make a name for himself as a public speaker and orator. In 1632, Milton went back to Hammersmith for almost three years and then to Horton, in which he devoted his time to concentrated study and writing.

The poet Milton is recognized as one of the actual highest and most influential poets of England as an eminent as Chaucer, Lyly, Shakespeare, and many others. As a great literary figure, he could write together poetry and prose. Then in poetry, he had the ability to write different categories of poetry such as pastoral, epic, elegy, poetic play, sonnet, and several others. His supreme famous and significant piece of poetry is the startling epic *Paradise Lost* that has been at the focus of considerable literary criticism from the time Milton until nowadays. His sonnets did not receive significant critical consideration as other poems.

John Milton became at the age of 36 in 1644. He initially perceived difficulties with his sight during that year, problems that frequently barred him from reading. Conceivably, at that time, Milton wrote *Sonnet 16* that was given a new title *On His Blindness* later after his death as an *anticipation* of his subsequent blindness. Many critics may believe that the misery apparent in the poem might have been so intensely sensed soon after the complete onset of his loss of sight.

Milton fights in the sonnet *On His Blindness* with frustration at becoming blind and with his own sense of how significant it is to enjoy one's aptitudes well. *On His Blindness* was likely composed during an epoch in the early 1650s in which his sightlessness became thorough in 1652. "In 1652, he became utterly blind" (Dahami, 2020a). The poem records how he comes to appreciate a higher idea of service. Furthermore, the emotive baseline of *On His Blindness* – "its grounding in the poet's experience of marital love, desire, and loss - does not preclude its evoking another kind of desire: a longing to fulfill the spiritual vocation that would lead Milton to find divine inspiration in physical blindness" (DiPasquale, 2001). Besides, to a great extent, in this sonnet, "Milton places the emphasis, not on his suffering or disability, but rather on his fear of being punished" by God (Joshua, 2018).

## **2. VISION OR SIGHT:**

Milton in *On His Blindness* considers how his eyesight is used up in the world; for Milton, the profoundly devout poet eyesight may mean an inner light or even spiritual aptitude. The poet guesses that his life is not yet finished, but half of it remains nonetheless. The phrase "in this dark world and wide"<sup>1</sup> is a distinctive way of the different ways that the poet handles adjectives; he is skilled in putting an adjective in front of the noun and another after it. The line, according to Milton, tells us that the narrator speaks of a lousy help who ignores his master's aptitude instead of using it positively; he is 'cast into outer darkness.' There is a reference to a literal talent of Milton himself as a talented poet. In the poem, *On His Blindness*, Milton contemplates on the devastating consequence sightlessness has had on his work and life. He compares his vanished eyesight with 'light spent,' and laments not the handicap in and of itself, but the inadequacy it obliges on his production as a poet. Milton's poetic talent is so significant to him that he entitles it "that one talent" (p. 86) proposing and signifying it is the only aptitude that matters. Its communication has been solidified dreadful as a result of his blindness. Milton's inadequacy is principally distressing since he desires more than ever to write verse but appears to see no way to carry on. Blindness forced double incompetence on the poetic activity of Milton. In a broad sense, sightlessness made verse a problematic activity because it is challenging for a blind poet to put words to paper. Furthermore, Milton's idea of epic poetry assumed a high level of enlightenment. The damage of his eyesight meant he is no longer able to read, and as a result, he will not be able to learn either.

Eliot's vision bleached slowly over approximately a decade. Misfortune appeared to start in 1644, once he observed difficulties in reading. Milton, when defined his early indications as 'a sort of rainbow,' which obscured whatever he was searching. That was tracked by fog in the left eye that progressively blotted out all things on that side. When *On His Blindness* was inscribed, Milton obviously apologized for the lost time he had wasted not creating poetry as his ambition.

Milton's loss of sight was an anticipated disaster. The problem started in his family, in which his mother had terrible eyesight.

The terms 'vision', 'sight,' and 'seeing' ... mean the physical act of perceiving an image with the eyes. Other occasions call for the employment of the term "vision" as a sign of spiritual manifestation and further as a mental image, what Milton would have necessarily employed most often as a blind poet (Silverman Jr, 2011, p. 6).

Milton's life transformed totally as his care shifted from personal interests to public concerns because of the approaching of the Commonwealth movement and the English Civil War. "He was the spokesperson of his political party, which was the ruling party, in the late 1640s and early 1650s" (Flannagan, 2002, p. 12). During the early 1640s, he hastily left off composing of poetry for prose writing, shifting to write pamphlets where he contrasted what he considered widespread episcopal oppression. Milton "destroyed his sight writing pamphlets in support of the execution of the king by Parliament. Milton said that he lost his sight voluntarily, defending freedom; he spoke of that noble task and never complained of being blind" (Borges, 1999, p. 102). He declared his Puritan fidelity and loyalty in tracts that he claimed the need to restore the easiness of the religion and to wash out the English Church of all remnants of Roman Catholicism. Later with two years, he married Mary Powell, the first wife, who did not stay with him for a long time and left him to her family. Milton "got married to Mary, the daughter of Mr. Powel, a justice of the peace in Oxfordshire in his thirty-five years in 1642" (Dahami, 2020a). Milton then married again, and after three years, his first wife returned to him. Marriage was deemed a consecrated institution by the churches of England. Divorce was very seldom approved in Milton's time, only on the argument of disloyalty or impotence.

It is probable that Milton was present at the open execution of Charles I. When Charles I was put to death in 1649, Milton moved in the political argument by producing *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which was a declaration of the right of a people to remove a tyrant of the chair. Milton is known as a political left who accepted to become a secretary of Cromwell for foreign affairs, where he issued many tracts on different issues about church and state. He suspended a journey to the continent in 1639 once he has got to know of the religious arguments in England. Then returned home; Milton became an active protester in the movement that ultimately brought down Charles I. Milton was a severe believer in personal freedoms. He engraved numerous pamphlets, booklets, and different other literary works in support of the Puritan rebels and for Commonwealth headed by Cromwell. Milton, in his work *Of Reformation*, for instance, did not hesitate to criticize the Church, or the King himself, which is understood in his work *Eikonoklastes* to articulate values wherein he believed. His last fourteen years were spent in a comparatively peaceful retreat in London and its suburbs. Milton reached a complete loss of the sight approximately around 1652 since then he gradually devoted the majority of his time for writing poetry. He spent a good deal of mornings dictating passages which he had memorized at night; this sort of behavior took place during the time of writing of *Paradise Lost* which was published in 1667 then followed by *Paradise Regained* after four years with approximately the production of *Samson Agonistes*, a poetic play, enclosed in the volume of *Paradise Regained*. John Milton died in 1674 of gout.

<sup>1</sup> Milton, J. (2009). *The Complete Poems of John Milton*, New York: Cosimo, Inc. p. 86. [ all lines of the sonnet 'On His Blindness' are cited from this source unless stated otherwise; the number of the page is followed.]

### **3. OBEDIENCE :**

"Lodged with me useless" (p. 86) refers to the uselessness of his talent now because he is losing his vision.

Though my soul more bent

To serve therewith my Maker (p. 86)

might be approximately interpreted as even though his soul is even more motivated to work for God with such talent. The poet wishes eventually to 'present his true account,' or show a proper interpretation of himself and the service to God. The fifth line expresses the speaker's longing to serve God by means of poetry and to use such aptitudes for the magnificence of God. "When I consider how my light is spent" (p. 86). "This line captures the central argument of the sonnet—that blindness does not prevent one from serving God because God demands obedience rather than great deeds" (Cohen, 2017).

The line might also refer to the coming of Jesus. "Lest he returning chide" (p. 86) is interpreted as he will not reproach or rebuke any when he comes back. Milton resentfully enquires if God desires day-work, or smaller, lesser tasks, since Milton's sightlessness repudiates his sight and, therefore, the use of his aptitudes. Patience has often been understood as a personification instead of as another feature of Milton's internal self. Either way, in the internal discussion, patience speaks in the last six lines, fairly and meritoriously having the final expression. Patience declares, to inhibit that 'murmur,' Milton's enquiring of God's determination in the seventh line.

Patience's answer explains a feature of the nature of God and asserts a sort of service to God, which is not easy from the service backed in the legend of the aptitudes. Initially, God does not want man's service or God-given aptitudes. The nature of service to God is clarified succeeding. "Who best/bear his mild yoke" (p. 86) tells that the individuals who can be estimated as most submissive and docile to God's determination that is mild, not severe. These individuals are the ones who work and obey God best. The portrait of the yoke is also religious; a yoke was a sort of harness dressed in an ox that shows an image for God's determination. Another portrait shows that 'His state is kingly,' which explains God's magnitude where patience goes on to expand in the ensuing lines of the same importance.

It is a well-known fact that Milton had become blind because of his excessive devotion to studies and the labour he had put in while writing his prose pamphlets on controversial matters. The important light which Milton's blindness throws on his character is his firm faith in God (Chandra, 1993, p. 70).

By God's command, order or will, thousands of persons and by implication, innocent messengers such as those of angels 'speed and post' throughout the world continually. The line suggests a sort of perpetual, worldwide gesticulation of the service to God's orders that permits the final line to indicate a great restfulness through contrast and peace. Serving God, there are many ways. Patience articulates to the poet that even his staying with patience or the ostensible inaction resulted from his blindness is estimated as a sort of service if it goes in accordance with the criterion as suggested in lines 10-11, in order to bear the yoke or burden well. The last line is very significant and famous in which it is often quoted.

In a picture of a calamity like blindness, the single option of action open to a person and similarly all humankind, as suggested by the last six lines, is unassuming submission to the will of the Almighty. "Who best/bear his mild yoke, they serve him best" (p. 86) attentively listens to the passage in the gospel. Jesus speaks to his followers that a blind person did not become blind for the reason that he has committed turpitudes; however, the work of God must be made evident in him. Patience recommends and guides against putting an issue put to God. Man's obligation to God is not to offer Him whatever thing. God does not need anything from humans; anything people have is 'his own gifts.' Milton agrees to take his share in life as a portion of a larger plan.

### **4. BLINDNESS AND LIGHT :**

Quiet others guess that *On His Blindness* may possibly have been transcribed long before Milton's complete blindness. He did not look handicapped by his loss of sight, even proximately after it developed total. Milton converted progressively sightless after several years and would have had a chance to regulate and correct it. During the seventeenth century, a regular duration was measured as seventy years, comparatively a number cited in the Psalms.

The appearance of 'light' is significant to *On His Blindness*. "Light here has various denotations; it means sanguinity, hope, success, prospect, promise and aspiration" (Dahami, 2018). On the most artificial level, it denotes to natural light, that Milton is no longer able to experience. It brings to the mind a tale to which Milton mentioned in other manuscripts. The appearance of light echoes on many diverse levels of the religious stories. Here, he is soothed for the loss of corporal 'Day' and its delights by the illumination of the heavenly Light that responds to Milton's plea to shine from inward. "Light is the energy, the active force of the transparent" (Silverman Jr, 2011, p. 16). Daylight is an allegory for the life of all individuals, life is limited, and when the night comes, the day is gone incessantly. Milton believes that darkness is the blindness that brought about an end to his creative life. He suggested when he wrote, "talent which is

death to hide" (p. 86) that his blindness is going to prevent him from accomplishing longer life. In his perspective, the immortality which brings with it fame brings a poet who has composed a chef-d'oeuvre<sup>2</sup>.

Light indicates the internal light, the spiritual light that gleams in the poet.

Milton may be literally recording the loss of his eyesight at the time of the sonnet's composition. What becomes especially noticeable in the sonnet is the absence of imagery implying light. Light is defined as the agent by which vision becomes possible. However, light can also denote something spiritual emanating from the Heavens. The light in heaven which God creates is certainly different from candle light. Light can mean the illumination of the soul with divine truth or it can mean purity and holiness. Thus, light can be physical, spiritual, or both (Scher, 1992).

When Milton refers to his corporeal blindness, he eventually considers it a representation of spiritual blindness. "His blindness becomes both a painful human loss ... and a symbol of prophetic vision" (DiPasquale, 2001). Moreover, "Because Milton was clearly a monist when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, he could apply physical restoratives to the eye to prepare it for spiritual visions" (Silverman Jr, 2011, p. 14). The idea is supported by Bloom (2004), "It is what happens visually in *Paradise Lost*, where the poet's blindness to the external world yields a higher, inner vision" (p. 132). "Milton defines blindness spiritually, when the blind person, deprived of outer light, looks toward the inner light so sought after by various preachers or autobiography writers identified as Puritans." (Flannagan, 2002, p. 75). During composing *Paradise Lost* in 1652, "John Milton went blind. 'Why should I not submit with complacency to this loss of sight,' he later wrote, 'which seems only withdrawn from the body without to increase the sight of the mind within'" (Grann, 1997)? Additionally, "while considerable sight still remained, abundant light would dart from my closed eyes; then as sight daily diminished, colours proportionately darker would burst forth with violence and a sort of crash from within" (Meyers, 2009). The poet thought that poets were similarly providers of light; they were and will be illuminators; their productions brought a distinct kind of illumination to humanity. However, Milton's blindness has put out his poetic light. Milton presents two connotations of talent or aptitude as a God-given talent and skill in the normal sense and a form of money in the religious story. Owing to his blindness, Milton fears that he will not be able to use his aptitude for the service of God.

According to our poet Milton, the real service is responsibility goes in accordance with the will of God, even if it indicates that the person must 'stand and wait.' The idea is similar to Eliot's, who in his dramatic and poetic piece *The Rock*, states that "there is the consciousness that such a condition can be cured through involving people in the real choice to serve the will of God rather than their own" (Dahami, 2017a). Furthermore, God "gives human beings the authority of creation, and as a result, a man should employ his creation to serve God" (Dahami, 2020b). The expressions with double connotations are 'spent' in the first line, 'talent' in the third line, 'useless' in the fourth line, 'account' in the sixth line, and 'exact' in the seventh line. The subordinate meaning goes parallel in a coherent line of portraits; all are portraits of the monetary altercation. Milton is a poet who is considerably thoughtful to the various senses presented in language and to constellations of imagery of such type.

In *On His Blindness*, Milton takes benefit of the Petrarchan sonnet form, wherein an octave, or first eight lines, presents a difficulty, and the sestet, or last six lines, proposes the answer. Line nine is the apportioning point between challenge and response; this line is usually called volta or the 'turn.' In this poem or sonnet, Milton uses volta cleverly to highlight and accentuate his personal impatience. It is his own patience he exemplifies as talking out to 'prevent' his particular impatience. The sonnet uses encircled rhyme, which sometimes is composed as *abba abba*. It is conceived that the sestet's rhyme structure is *cde cde*, one of several recognized rhyme structures of a Petrarchan sestet. Milton, as a literary figure, is known for his metrical talent, and this sonnet's systematic iambic pentameter is naturally knowledgeable. However, it does not comprise the astonishing rhythmic and melodious effects for which he is very famous. It is stimulating instead for its several enjambments, the knocking down of one line into another that could be said to require the lines hurry along. The impatient enjambment makes the final line conspicuous by contrast; in some sense, an enjambment helps the final line achieve what does the theme implies in order to wait standing still.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

*On His Blindness* or what it is named *Sonnet 16* principally, has received a reasonable deal of critical argument and appreciation, much of it arguing the period of the structure. The poem has evident that all explanations identify that this sonnet begins from a mood of despair, frustration, and even impatience. Through this short sonnet, Milton has amazingly shown different notions and conceptions that deal with an artificial vision on the one hand and another profound vision, on the other side. This study might not be full, and it needs the contribution of critics to critically elaborate it to be sufficient, adequate, and satisfactory.

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<sup>2</sup> stunning success

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