

Exploring Genre Through the Pastoral Elegy: The “Lycidas” Project

We’ll spend a fair amount of time this semester exploring John Milton’s “Lycidas” from a variety of perspectives, primarily to gain an understanding of the many ways in which texts can be “contextualized” to better understand what and how they mean. This first project uses “Lycidas” to explore both the challenges inherent in genre as a concept and the role that literary precedents play in shaping a text’s meaning. It’s also meant to get you to begin familiarizing yourself with some useful research tools and strategies for filling gaps in your existing knowledge, using a variety of resources at your disposal through the HSU library and online. Our overall goal here is to learn what we can about the peculiar genre to which “Lycidas” belongs—the pastoral elegy—and how our ability to make sense of the poem depends on us “getting” the contexts and conventions of that genre.

The Procedure:

To make the assignment a little more manageable, I’ve assigned each of you a specific section of the text to work with more intensively—although you’ll still need to have a decent sense of the poem as a whole in order to understand how your piece fits into the big picture. People assigned to the same section are encouraged to share the results of their research efforts and their strategies for finding information; you’ll get some time during several class sessions to meet, discuss, and debate the elements of the project. What you hand in individually, however, will be a document of your own making, *not* a group project.

We’ve already begun by working individually and collectively to determine what makes “Lycidas” difficult or even inaccessible for the contemporary reader. I’ve compiled the preliminary results of your second informal writing assignment into a list of terms, concepts, and conceits that a modern general reader would find unfamiliar; use this list a starting point (but not the ending point) for your research. Some of you have done some casual Googling—maybe even more than that—in an effort to elucidate some of those obscurities. On Wednesday, February 12, we’ll hear from an instructional librarian, Garrett Purchio, to learn more about resources available in or via the library, both on-site and online, that can help you up the wattage on your searchlights.

The Components (Presenting Your Findings):

This *isn’t* the sort of project that culminates in an expository essay with a strong, focused thesis statement supported by a strenuously reasoned argument. I ask instead that you present your findings in the form of seven (7) sections, like so:

- 1) A single-spaced paraphrase of your passage that “translates” Milton’s lines of verse into a *prose paragraph* of plain, 21st-century English. (Aim for roughly 100-200 words here.) Don’t be “poetic” in style or diction. Rather, use colloquial language, and try to stick to the literal meaning of the words in your passage; that is, don’t translate the pastoral figures (shepherd = poet, etc.)...*yet*.
- 2) A double-spaced paragraph or two on the pastoral elegy and its conventions, and on your specific passage, in whole and/or in part (i.e., with respect to specific details), *as it relates to or exemplifies those conventions*. Here is where you can (among other things) translate from Pastoralalese into Everyday English, and where you can explain, for example (and this is a relatively *basic* example), why the speaker and Lycidas—a/k/a John Milton and Edward King—are depicted as shepherds, when we know damn well they were both students at Cambridge and probably didn’t know a shepherd’s crook from a fence post. How are pastoral conventions at work and/or on display in your passage?

- 3) Another double-spaced paragraph or two in which you ruminate on how your newly-researched understanding of the pastoral elegy has informed your thinking about the concept of genre more, uh, generally, and about how genre shapes (guides? directs? restricts?) meaning. (Feel free to reference other readings here—including any of those we will take up in Weeks 5 and 6—if they contributed to your understanding of genre.)
- 4) A single-spaced mini-glossary explaining *at least* five of the more significant terms or phrases or allusions in your passage that a modern reader wouldn't understand or might misinterpret (special emphasis should be placed on terms that are related to the pastoral tradition). You can think of this section as a kind of dictionary, with the items you've chosen listed by line number, each followed by a short explanatory entry. Some glosses will need to be longer than others, but in general, they should be *relatively* succinct, and in all instances they should focus on what you feel is the most salient information a reader would need in order to make sense of the thing's appearance in "Lycidas." In case I need to spell it out: this section works in tandem with Sections 1 and 2. And oh, yeah: it would be useful if you would note which of the items in Section 5 served as the source(s) for each gloss.
- 5) A bibliography, formatted according to MLA guidelines for "Works Cited" pages, of *all* the sources you used or consulted for this project. This should include more than just the selections you discuss in the next section. And while I'm not demanding a specific number here, I'm taking it for granted that even a moderately ambitious approach would lead you to consult more than just a couple. (Okay: since I know people will demand a number, then let's say...at least five, but no more than fifteen. Will I be impressed if your bibliography consists only of sources that a person could find via a simple Google search—or of ancient sources that you *might* find in a library database but that *also* turn up in a Google search because they're floating around freely on the web? *You gotta ask...?*)
- 6) A few—maybe three or four?—double-spaced paragraphs describing the two to four sources from the list above that you found most helpful in completing this project, how you found them, how you used them, and why you consider them the most helpful.
- 7) And finally (and this is challenging): another couple of paragraphs on the purpose(s) the pastoral elegy served, or might have served, for the literary community of 17th-century Britain. Why was this genre popular; what needs did it address and what sorts of cultural "work" did it do? And why, then, might it have fallen *out* of favor? Other scholars that you turn up in your research may give you some ways of thinking about such questions. But you can also do some speculating of your own: given what you yourself have learned about the pastoral elegy (and elegiac verse generally), and given what you now understand about the uses Milton made of pastoral conventions in "Lycidas," what ideological purposes do you think the genre might have served, and why did it cease to serve them?

In total, your project will be in the neighborhood of 2000 words in length, and it should conform to MLA format for research papers. That is: it should have a running header one-half inch from the top of the right-hand corner with your last name and a page number (please use the header function to add this—don't do it manually!), and your name, my name, the course number, and the date should appear in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. There should be one-inch margins throughout.

A few warnings, caveats, and reassurances:

- Because you have collectively chosen the preliminary list of terms and concepts in the poem that purportedly need clarification or explanation, there may be some items that prove to be dead-ends. In other words, someone may have identified something as cryptic and potentially significant that actually isn't; it may just be a matter of archaic vocabulary or spelling. (Case in point: what does "boots" mean?) Certainly part of the value of an exercise like this is learning what you don't know, but another benefit is learning to determine what is and isn't "significant."

(cont'd)

- Beware of terms that seem straightforward but aren't, or whose meaning may have changed since Milton's day. If a sentence in your paraphrase seems off-base or just batshit crazy on its face, then there's a good chance it hinges on a word that meant something different in 1630 than what it seems to mean for us. (For instance: what's a "lay"?)
- Vet your sources. Sure, there's some good stuff on the interwebs, but for the most part, print sources still beat web-based sources; for starters, they're more likely to have gone through a rigorous editorial process. Like Cliff's or Spark Notes, web sources can be useful as "bluffer's guides" (i.e., as starting points that give you some tentative working answers). Before you quote a site, find out who's responsible for it, what purpose and/or audience it's meant to serve, and how authoritative it is. Even then: be skeptical, and *don't* be satisfied with the first answer you find. (This is not a scavenger hunt!) Verify and cross-check. Corroborate that apparent answer—or better yet, complicate it—with a different, more nuanced, more convincing, or more complete answer from one or more additional sources.
- *Be careful about plucking individual words, terms, and allusions out of context.* Go back to the poem and make sure you've got the full grammatical context. For instance, line 16 refers to "the seat of Jove"; but as we saw, that's just part of a broader allusion to "the *sacred well* [that springs] from beneath the seat of Jove." "The seat of Jove," then, is perhaps not especially important in and of itself (basically, it's the throne of the principal Roman deity); rather, it's this *well* we're concerned with. And looking even more closely, we see that, in fact, the *full* allusion is actually to the "*Sisters* of [that] sacred well." So who the hell are *they*, and why does the speaker address them? That's what you're *really* trying to figure out. Identifying them is only Step 1 (or maybe 1a or 1b).
- A variation on that last theme: *beware of missing the forest for the trees.* One problem people sometimes have with this project is what I call the "cheese on a toothpick" approach: you carefully scrutinize an individual detail but overlook the bigger picture. Remember that your tiny cube of cheese was cut from a larger block—and that the provenance of that block may be important, too. Sometimes you will indeed need to examine a particular term closely, in isolation. But just because you've correctly identified Apollo as the Greek sun god (for example) doesn't mean your work is done. As with the previous bullet point, you'll want to remember, first of all, that the term is part of a larger rhetorical unit. But just as important: be mindful that Apollo is *functioning within the framework of pastoral and/or elegiac conventions*, which means that you may need to provide additional context that would help a reader understand what this allusion to the sun god is doing *here*. The question you're answering, in other words, isn't just "what is it?" but "how does it work in this passage, this section, and/or this poem?" How and why is Milton using it here?
- Because people will be exchanging information, I won't be surprised to see some overlap between your work and that of your fellow researchers; i.e., I won't consider the results of collaboration to be plagiarism. Still, it would be nice of you to acknowledge any assists that your peers might have given to your own efforts. Don't hesitate to say something like, "I didn't know Orpheus from Adam's housecat until Matilda put me on to this comprehensive glossary of mythical figures," or whatever, in your discussion of your most helpful sources.

Terms and Concepts Identified by You and Your Comperes as “In Need of Explanation”

(*N.B.*: you’re welcome—encouraged, in fact—to add to this list if you feel a significant term or phrase is missing. Remember: these are *starting* points.)

Lines 1-36 (we’ll try to get through this section as a class)

Title: Lycidas

1-2: Laurels, Myrtles, Ivy

3: Berries harsh and crude

11: sing, and build the lofty rhyme

12: [flote upon] his wat’ry bier

13: welter

14: meed [and/or “the meed of some melodious tear”]

15-16: Sisters of the sacred well, / That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring

17: loudly sweep the string

19-20: may som gentle Muse...favor my destin’d Urn

22: sable shroud

23: we...fed the same flock

25: ere the high Lawns appeared

28: Gray-fly

30-31: the Star that rose, at Ev’ning, bright / Toward Heav’ns descent had slop’d his westering wheel

32: Rural ditties

33: Oaten Flute

34: Satyrs...and Fauns

36: Damaetas

Lines 37-63 (Blake Anderson, Brittany Fuher, Ernie Iniguez, Kaitlyn O’Dell, Sabrina Shaw)

39: Shepherd

40: [the Woods, and...Caves, / with] wild Thyme and...gadding Vine o’ergrown

42: Willows, and...Hazle Copses

44: thy soft layes

45: As killing as the Canker to the Rose

46: Taint-worm

46: weanling Herds

50: Nymphs

53: your old Bards, the famous Druids

54-5: Mona[’s shaggy top] and Deva[’s wizard stream]

58-63: the Muse her self that Orpheus bore / ...[whose] goary visage...was sent / Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore

Lines 64-102 (Carley Blayney, Trent Glosser, Alice Jiang, Eliza Paczkowski, Michael Soto)

64-69: what boots it...[etc.]

65: tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade

66: meditate the thankless Muse

68-9: sport with Amaryllis [and] Neaera

73: Guerdon

75: the blind Fury with th’abhorred shears

77: Phoebus

82: Jove

85: fountain Arethuse

86: Mincius

88: my Oate

89-90: the Herald of the Sea / That came in Neptune’s plea

91: Fellon winds

94: beak’d Promontory

96: Hippotades

99: Panope

100: that fatall and perfiduous Bark

(cont’d)

Lines 103-131 (Chase Ervin, Jack Hallinan, Jaxon Leduc, Connie Pearson, Ana Vazquez)

103-4: Camus, reverend Sire [with his] Mantle hairy, and his Bonnet sedge, / Inwrought with figures dim

106: that sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe

108: dearest pledge

109-11: The Pilot of the Galilean lake [and his] Two massy Keyes...of metal twain

112: Miter'd locks

117: scramble at the shearers feast

118: worthy bidden guest

119: Blind mouthes

121: the...Herdmans art

123-4: their lean and flashy songs [that they] / Grate on their scrannel Pipes of wretched straw

128: the grim Woolf with privy paw

130: two-handed engine

Lines 132-164 (Fortunato, Ivory Hohenfeld, Noemi Maldonado, Kate Ramirez, Jayden Yarbrough)

132: Alpheus

133: Sicilian Muse

136-149: Bels, Flourets, Primrose, Crow-toe, Gessamine, Pink, Pansie freakt with jeat, etc.

139: the swart Star

150: Amaranthus

152: Laureat Herse

156: the stormy Hebrides

160: Bellerus

161: the guarded Mount

162: Namancos and Bayona

163: melt with ruth

Lines 165-end (Norma Francisco, Monica Huerta, Raul Mendoza, Sophie Reich)

168: the day-star

170: new spangled Ore

173: him that walked the waves

175: With Nectar pure his oozy Locks he laves

176: nuptial Song

177-8: the blest Kingdoms... / [W]here entertain him all the Saints above

183: the Genius of the shore

185: thy large recompense

186: the uncouth Swain

188: the tender stops of various Quils

189: Dorick lay

192: Mantle blew