

The “Lycidas” Project

We’ll spend a fair amount of time this semester exploring 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 how and what they mean. This first project uses “Lycidas” to explore both the challenges inherent in genre research and the role that literary precedents play in shaping a text’s meaning. I hope this exercise will also help familiarize you with a variety of research tools that are at your disposal, not just on the Web but (more particularly) in the HSU library. Think of this as a kind of intellectual scavenger hunt, then—the results of which will aid in your understanding of Milton’s poem.

The results of your work may be sloppy, sprawling, and difficult to manage! That’s to be expected, and I’m not necessarily looking for a tidy little package. Actually, I *am* looking for a neat package—in terms of presentation. That is, I expect whatever you hand in to be typed, grammatical, and wrangled into a specific structure (see below, “Presenting Your Findings”). What I don’t necessarily expect is *intellectual* tidiness. By the end of this process you should certainly know more about the generic conventions and the specific details of “Lycidas,” and I hope you’ll know more about resources for research in English Studies. But this isn’t the sort of project that results in an essay with a focused, water-tight thesis statement supported by a strenuously reasoned argument.

The Procedure:

Our primary goal here is to learn what we can about the peculiar genre to which “Lycidas” belongs—the pastoral elegy—and how the poem is depending on us to “get” the conventions of that genre. We’ve already begun by working individually and as a class to determine what, specifically, makes “Lycidas” a “difficult” or “inaccessible” text for the contemporary reader. I’ve compiled the results of your second informal writing assignment into a list of terms, concepts, and conceits that a modern general reader would find unfamiliar; you’ll use this list as one prompt for your research. I’ve divided the poem into roughly equal sections and sorted the class into informal research teams, each of which has been assigned a section of the poem (and a corresponding group of terms) to disentangle.

You’ll demonstrate this “disentangling” by giving me a 4 – 6 page report on Monday, February 22d, that includes the following:

1. a close *prose* paraphrase of your passage;
2. a brief discussion of how your passage functions within the poem, with special attention to how it exemplifies the generic conventions of the pastoral elegy;
3. a list of glosses on the specific terms/vocabulary/allusions in your passage that are most in need of explanation;
4. an annotated bibliography of the three or four resources you found most useful; and
5. a brief meditation on the project.

More detailed descriptions of these components below.

But first: you should feel free to use whatever resources you can find—print, web-based, or human—but your results *should not rely disproportionately on any one source*, especially not an internet source. You will probably work individually, for the most part, though you’ll have a chance to meet with the other folks working on your passage to compare and discuss information, insights, resources, and strategies. (As one of my profs in grad school used to say, “Cooperate and graduate.”) But first, on Wednesday, Feb. 12, we will visit with our subject-area librarian, Marissa Mourer, to learn more about some of the resources available in the library, both on site and online, that might help with this project.

(cont’d)

Presenting Your Findings:

- A prose paraphrase—*not a line-by-line paraphrase in verse, please!*—of your passage, in plain, 21st-century English (approximately ½-page, single-spaced). Remember that paraphrase involves, among other things, translating figurative language (including pastoral figures) into literal terms. So, for instance, “Hiya, plants—I’m here again with my inexperienced hands to pick your fruits before they’ve ripened” wouldn’t quite cut it. Your paraphrase will help me determine how well you understand the *literal* meaning of the passage, and I’ll assess it on the basis of accuracy and clarity.
- A paragraph or two on the pastoral elegy and its conventions, and on your specific passage *as it relates to or exemplifies those conventions*.
- Your list of assigned concepts/terms, each glossed with a definition and/or an explanation. 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 (look it up!) information a reader would need in order to make sense of this term’s appearance in “Lycidas.”

Imagine that you’re preparing footnotes for an annotated version of the poem. Some items might only require a phrase or a sentence by way of explanation, while others might call for a sentence or two or even a short paragraph. Your efforts to paraphrase the passage (above) should help you identify those terms that need to be glossed—including familiar words that are being used in unfamiliar ways (e.g., what does Milton mean by “lay”?). Remember, too, to consider *context*; a word might have multiple dictionary definitions, for instance, but only one of them might be relevant here. (And many instances will demand that you look well beyond a mere dictionary!) Altogether, this section should be *no more* than three typed pages.

- A one-page annotated bibliography of the three or four most useful resources you found. Each entry should provide a full bibliographic record of the resource, followed by a brief description of it, what made it useful, and how you found it. (You may—should[?]*—*list, without annotations, any other sources you used. Remember that a *variety* of sources, including a healthy selection of print resources and scholarly articles you found via library databases, will look more impressive than just a bunch of web sites.)
- A *short* (one- to two-paragraph) meditation on what you now know about “Lycidas” that you *didn’t* know before your research—and what, more generally, you learned about the research process through this exercise.

A few warnings and caveats:

- Because you have collectively chosen the terms and concepts in the poem that purportedly need clarification or explanation, there may well be items that prove to be dead-ends, research-wise. In other words, someone may have identified something as cryptic and potentially significant that actually isn’t; s/he may have imagined that a term had a highly specialized meaning when a trip to the dictionary was all that’s needed. If that’s the case, you need only indicate as much in your final report. Certainly part of the value of an exercise like this is learning what you don’t know, but another benefit is learning what is and isn’t “significant.”
- *Be careful about taking individual allusions and terms out of context.* Always go back to the poem and consider the role that a given term plays in its immediate grammatical and/or thematic context. For instance, line 16 refers to “the seat of Jove”; if you return to the passage, however, you’ll see that the entire allusion is really 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* that’s at issue. And looking even more closely, we see that, in fact, the *full* allusion is actually to the “Sisters of [that] sacred well.” Who the hell are *they*, and why does the speaker address them?
- A variation on that last theme: *beware of missing the forest for the trees.* A common problem I’ve seen in this project is what I call the “cheese on a toothpick” approach; remember that your tiny cube was cut from a larger block—and that the provenance of the cheese may be important, too.

Sometimes (many times?) you will indeed need to examine a particular term closely, in isolation. But just because you've correctly identified Apollo as the sun god doesn't mean your work is done. Remember, first of all, that this term, like the passage it's part of, belongs to one or more longer rhetorical units. Just as important: *be mindful that many of the terms that you've isolated are functioning within the framework of pastoral and/or elegiac conventions*. So 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?"

- Because you may share 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 made 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 online glossary of mythical figures," or whatever, in your final meditation.

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 is missing):

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 (Tony Abner, Meg Bezak, Georgia Darrah, David Nurick, Molly Reardon, Joel Segura)

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 and Deva

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 (Sarah Aldridge, Luis Cardenas, Atilano Gomez, Mireya Ortega, Csilla Richmond, Shannon Stubblefield)

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

65: tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade

(over)

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

Lines 103-131 (Lily Alfonso, Reyna Chavez, Eleanor Hill, Rachel Perry, Kat Robinson)

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 (Ashley Alvarez, Kory Dyszkewicz, Jane Mexicano, Hannah Politzer, Lissa Rodriguez)

132: Alpheus
133: Sicilian Muse
136-149: Bels, Flourets, Primrose, Crow-tow, 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 (Emma Best, Marina Fittinghof, Haley Miller, Becca Porter, Danny Segura)

168: the day-star
170: new spangled Ore
173: him that walked the waves
175: With Nectar pure his oozy Locks he laves
176: nuptiall 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