Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is

POEM TEXT

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

SUMMARY

When I think about how I went blind before I reached the mid-point of my life in this big, dark world; when I consider that my greatest talent—which it would kill me to hide—is now useless, even though I want more than ever to use it to serve God, to prove to him that I've made good use of my life, so that he doesn't rebuke me for the way I've spent my life; when I think about all this, I ask, foolishly, "Does God want me to do work that requires sight after denying me that sight?" But my internal sense of patience, in an effort to stop that bad thought, quickly replies: "God doesn't need man's work or his gifts. Whoever best obeys God's commands serves him best. He is like a king. Thousands of people rush around at his bidding, crossing land and sea without rest. And those who simply wait for his commands also serve him."

THEMES

FAITH AND WORK

In "When I consider how my light is spent," Milton reflects on blindness. This was an important topic for him, since he lost his own sight in the mid-1650s. Milton was a writer and translator—someone who relied on his eyes. Yet though blindness would have presented a number of practical problems, in this poem Milton focuses on the *spiritual* issues associated with blindness: the poem's speaker believes that he or she should use his or her talents as a writer to serve God, yet the speaker's blindness makes this impossible. This implicitly calls into question the demands that God places on human beings, yet any tension is resolved by the end of the sonnet: the speaker ultimately asserts that people best serve God through faith, rather than work.

In the first eight lines of the poem, the speaker mourns the loss of sight. Because of this blindness, the speaker feels unable to complete the work that the speaker had planned to do—and that God expects the speaker to perform. Alluding to the Parable of the Talents in the Book of Matthew, the speaker argues that if God gives someone a skill or ability, then God expects that they will use it profitably: if they fail to do so, they will incur God's wrath. But the speaker's blindness makes it impossible to continue with any literary work—even though the speaker had been undertaking that work specifically to glorify God. Seething under the poem's first eight lines, then, is a sense of deep frustration, a sense that God may be unfair.

For a devout Puritan like Milton, this is a potentially blasphemous position for several reasons. The speaker is in danger of thinking that he or she knows better than God—an all-knowing being. And the speaker imagines that the way to please God is through work—a position associated with Catholicism. It's important to note that Milton himself despised Catholicism and regularly attacked it throughout his career. As the speaker articulates frustration with God, the speaker strays into what the poem will ultimately deem a serious error—something the rest of the poem will be dedicated to correcting.

After the speaker articulates these frustrations with being blind—and lapses into a dangerous, almost blasphemous argument with God—a new voice enters the poem, which the speaker calls "patience." This allegorical figure makes two arguments. First, this figure notes that God doesn't require human work or human gifts. Instead, the best way to secure salvation is simply to obey God. The voice suggests that this obedience is "mild" and, perhaps more importantly, flexible. It means different things for different people: while some "speed … o'er Land and Ocean," others "stand and wait." Yet both are, or can be, forms of service.

Performing great works is thus perfectly acceptable to Milton's God, but it's not the *only* way to please him. It is just as effective to simply wait for God's commands, perhaps forever. The *action* doesn't matter. What matters the way that it is performed—and whether it is an expression of faith in God and God's will.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,

The first two lines of "When I consider how my light is spent" establish the poem's broad concern and its form. The speaker begins by complaining about losing "light," or going blind. The loss of eyesight can be thought of as a physical symbol of a spiritual problem—how to best serve God—and the rest of the poem will be dedicated to working through this spiritual crisis. The second line of the poem amplifies the stakes: the speaker has gone blind and fallen into spiritual crisis, before even reaching middle age! The speaker might feel differently if this blindness had come later in life, after the speaker had accomplished more. As it is, the first two lines of the poem suggest that the speaker feels unable to use his or her capacities and talents to their full potential—a suggestion the speaker will explore in more detail in the following lines of the poem.

Just as the speaker opens in the poem in spiritual crisis, the poem itself is marked by formal tension and confusion. "When I consider..." is a Petrarchan sonnet. Like all Petrarchan sonnets, it uses just two rhyme sounds in its first eight lines, giving those lines an obsessive, churning feel: the speaker seems unable to escape from this doubt and anxiety, just as the speaker is unable to escape from the same, repetitive rhyme sounds.

Also like most sonnets in English, "When I consider..." is written in iambic pentameter: a meter the speaker handles easily and smoothly here, though the speaker will run into difficulties later in the poem. Moreover, the speaker here uses traditional literary devices like assonance (the /i/ sound in the first line) and alliteration (the /w/ sound at the end of line 2)—though the speaker will later largely strip the poem of those devices, favoring an unadorned (and, indeed, a more Puritan) style.

On the surface, then, "When I consider..." begins as a properly executed Petrarchan sonnet: nothing is obviously strange or amiss. Its formal disturbances are buried a bit, under the surface of the poem. For instance, the first line of the poem inaugurates a long sentence, which stretches until the middle of line 8. The sentence is unusually punctuated, but if one breaks it into its pieces, it has a clear conditional structure: "When I think about this… then I ask the following question." Because of its conditional structure, and because the independent clause that completes the conditional clause is delayed for so long, virtually all of the poem's first eight lines are arguably enjambed. (The exception is line 7, which is technically grammatically complete on its own and therefore end-stopped, even though it feels enjambed).

The result is a proliferation of caesuras: the poem's phrases and clauses terminate in the middle of the line rather than the end. The speaker fails to calibrate the length of phrases to the length of the poem's lines, giving the poem a hectic, jerky feel. Though the poem may be a sonnet, its internal architecture reveals a speaker in crisis, unable to fully control his or her poem.

The initial reference to "light" may also be an allusion to the biblical Parable of the Foolish Virgins. This story is usually interpreted as a call to prepare for Judgment Day, i.e. to meet God. Like the Foolish Virgins, the speaker feels as though with the loss of sight he or she has lost the capacity to commune with God, to meet God as he offers salvation.

LINES 3-6

And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;

In the poem's opening lines, the speaker expresses frustration with his or her blindness. The speaker fears that it constitutes a physical *and* a spiritual loss of light: it marks a distance from God and the speaker's inability to be saved. In lines 3-6, the speaker explains *why* he or she worries that this physical blindness will result in this spiritual deprivation.

The speaker has "one Talent" which is "death to hide." This is an allusion to Milton's work as a poet and translator. It also refers to the Bible's Parable of the Talents, in which a wealthy master tells his servants to invest his wealth (collected in talents, a unit of biblical money) while he travels. Two of his servants do so and earn his praise; the third, buries (hides) his talent in the ground. He is severely punished for doing so: the master even suggests that he will go to Hell for his failure.

For Milton's speaker, the moral of the parable is clear: if God gives you talent, you must use it profitably or else face punishment. And God has given the speaker a "Talent" with which the speaker is "bent / To serve" God. As such, the speaker doesn't want to use this gift frivolously. The speaker want to use this talent to glorify God. The problem is, all of this work depends on eyesight. Now that the speaker is blind, the talent is "useless." The speaker thus fears that being "chide[d]"—punished—for failing to use God's gifts. And, the speaker implies, this is deeply unfair.

These lines build on the formal pattern established in the poem's opening lines: they continue to obsessively use the same rhyme sounds (and the same meter). And they continue the long sentence begun at the start of line 1. In fact, all of these lines are still part of a dependent clause: they don't stand on their own grammatically. The grammar of the sentence becomes a bit clearer if one thinks of it as listing a series of

circumstances: "When I consider my blindness, and when I think about how my only talent is now useless—even though I want more than ever to use it to serve God (and in that way escape his punishment)…" Thus, although line 6 ends with a semi-colon—usually a pretty sure sign that a line is end-stopped—it is in fact enjambed. Milton is using punctuation in unorthodox ways.

For many readers the syntax of the sentence is so confusing and the punctuation so divergent from modern standards that they will experience line 6 as an end-stop on first read and only later work out how all the pieces of the sentence relate to each other grammatically. This confusion and difficulty replicate the experience of blindness itself: as the speaker struggles to understand how to move through this newly dark and confused world, so too the reader struggles to comprehend how the pieces of the poem relate to each other grammatically. What's more, this extended run of enjambments creates even more caesura, with two particularly strong examples in lines 4 and 6. The speaker continues to be unable to calibrate the units of grammar to the lines of poetry; the speaker's spiritual crisis thus continues to be reflected in the underlying grammatical architecture of the speaker's poem.

LINES 7-8

"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask.

When I consider...Through the poem's first 6 lines, the speaker has hinted about the true source of his or her frustration and anxiety. In lines 7-8, the speaker spells it out explicitly: the speaker can't believe that God would take away the speaker's eyesight while expecting the speaker to continue using the speaker's "one Talent"—a talent that requires sight (and therefore is what the speaker calls, using a word he invented, "day-labour"). However, as the speaker specifies in line 8, the question itself is "fond"—which here means foolish or crazy. The anxiety that the speaker has articulated over the course of the poem's first 7 and a half lines is actually a symptom of a deep error in the speaker's spiritual judgment, a failure to understand the demands that God *actually* imposes on human beings.

The language of the question the speaker poses in line 7 is unusually ornate for the poem, which otherwise avoids such elaborate uses of sound. It contains a strong repeated /d/ sound, in both alliteration and consonance:

"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask.

This ornate language subtly seems perhaps an attempt to mimic the ornate decoration of Catholic churches, which Protestants like Milton despised. (And, as if to indicate the speaker's discomfort with the question, it is metrically marred by a mid-line spondee (stressed-stressed)—an awkward substitution in an otherwise metrically smooth iambic poem):

"Doth God | exact | day-la- | bour, light | denied?"
I fond- | ly ask.

It is unclear whether the speaker addresses the question to God (in which case it would be an instance of apostrophe) or to him- or herself (in which case it would not). Either way, for Milton, the speaker's error is fundamental, even blasphemous—and it reflects much broader conflicts over religious doctrine that divided Europe during the 17th century and led to a series of bloody religious wars, including the English Civil Wars.

In the first 7 and a half lines of the poem, the speaker argues that God grants salvation on the basis of the *works* that people perform during their lives—that is, based on the labor they do in direct service of God. This is a position that was (and is) broadly associated with Catholicism. By contrast, Protestants argue that *faith alone* secures salvation. Milton, a devout, hard-line Protestant, will spend the rest of the poem correcting the speaker's error. These lines thus bring to a close the first part of the poem. They articulate a coherent viewpoint on the relationship between salvation and human works, a viewpoint the rest of the poem will dismantle.

They also mark a close to the first *grammatical* unit of the poem: the sentence that begins in line 1. That sentence constitutes a series of dependent, conditional clauses, and only in line 8 does the reader find the independent clause that completes them. In other words, over the first six lines of the poem, the reader is left to wonder *what* exactly the speaker does "when" the speaker thinks about how the speaker's "light is spent." The answer finally comes in line 8: when the speaker considers his or her blindness, the speaker asks the complicated and potentially blasphemous question that appears in line 7.

Yet even as the speaker's sentence comes to a close, the syntax remains strange and confusing. In regular English, it would be more natural to reverse the order of lines 7-8 : "When I consider my blindness, I ask myself: 'Why would God do this?'" But the speaker inverts these clauses.

As a result, although line 7 is technically end-stopped, being a grammatically complete unit, most readers probably experience it as an enjambment. Once again, the speaker's spiritual crisis is reflected in the poem's grammar: like the speaker, the reader has to work hard to understand the relationships between things and to uncover their underlying structure.

LINES 8-11

But patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.

In lines 8-11 the speaker begins to correct the assumptions made in the first 7 and a half lines, which presented a more Catholic understanding of the relationship between faith and work. To do this, the speaker introduces a new character into the poem, "patience."

Patience is part of the speaker's conscience—not an external figure, but something that lives inside the speaker's mind. By personifying patience, giving it the power to argue with the speaker, the speaker reveals that he or she is internally divided: different parts of the speaker believe different things.

In the lines that follow, "patience" clearly has the upper hand. It gets the final six lines of the poem all to itself: the speaker does not speak again in the poem. Patience also interrupts the speaker in an unusually forceful way. Petrarchan sonnets are often divided up into two different arguments: poets will advance one idea in the poem's first eight lines and then refute it in the final six. (The switch between the two is called the "volta" or "turn). But the volta of "When I consider how my life is spent" comes half a line early, cutting short the time and space the speaker has to make his or her argument.

Furthermore, after the obsessive, restricted rhymes of the first eight lines, the final six lines of the poem introduce three new rhyme sounds. This comes as a relief, an expansion of freedom and possibility after the poem's rigid first half. And though the speaker continues to use alliteration (for example, the /p/ sound in line 8, "patience, to prevent"), the speaker pares down the reliance on those devices, creating the kind of unadorned verse that might please a strict and severe Puritan. Thus, though these lines continue to rely heavily on enjambment and caesura, they otherwise diverge formally from the poem's first 7 and a half lines—and their form suggests that "patience" has the better argument concerning how to best serve God.

Patience also makes a strong case conceptually over the course of the poem's final six lines. It begins by directly attacking the idea that people win salvation through the work they do on God's behalf: God does not need human labor or human gifts, it argues. Instead, the best way to serve God is to follow his commands. The speaker describes this as a "mild yoke": it is a burden, but not an onerous one. (This is another allusion to the Bible; in the Book of Matthew, Jesus notes, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light"). The speaker's implication is clear: God might ask for works or he might not. The important thing is to obey his commands, whatever they are.

LINES 11-14

His state
Is Kingly.
Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

In lines 8-11, "patience" begins to refute the speaker's spiritual errors. The final lines of the poem seal the deal. Patience makes a strong and passionate case for a Puritan understanding of salvation: it is secured by faith alone.

Patience has already argued that God does not need human works: the best way to serve God is to obey his commands, whatever they are. Extending this argument, Patience notes that God has an absolute power to issue commands: God is like a "King." Needless to say, this is an odd thing for a poet like Milton—who was deeply involved in the English Civil War, and publicly defended the execution of King Charles I—to say. Unlike Charles, God has legitimate authority, the just power to act as a King.

God exercises that power in a variety of ways. For example, He sends his servants scurrying across land and sea. This is another allusion to the Bible. Both Psalm 68:17 and Zechariah 1:10 describe the intense and ongoing activity of God's servants on Earth. (And though the speaker generally avoids ostentatious plays of sound in these lines, there is a strong consonance on a /d/ sound in line 12, which captures the rapid clip of God's servants as they hurry across the surface of the Earth). In other words, the speaker is not wrong to imagine that God might expect the speaker to do something important in God's service.

But, in the final line, "patience" advances a new and radical possibility. It's great to rush around the world serving God, but that's not the only kind of service God expects or desires. Indeed, it can be *just as good* to do nothing, to simply "stand and wait" for God's command. In other words, the action in itself doesn't matter to God: only the faith that underlies it.

After a poem full of enjambment and caesura, lines 13 and 14 are suddenly and shockingly end-stopped. Unlike lines 6 and 7, which are ambiguous, these lines are clearly and unequivocally end-stopped. If the poem's enjambments mark the speaker's anxiety and spiritual confusion, these end-stops indicate that the speaker (or, rather, "patience") has arrived at certainty and contentment. The closure of the lines marks the new resolution the speaker feels—and indicates to the reader that these lines contain the poem's real message, the lesson it has been building toward across its 14 lines.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT

When the speaker notes that his or her "light is spent" in the poem's first line, this means literally that the speaker has lost his or her eyesight. (Hence the poem's alternate title, "On His Blindness"). That literal meaning is probably the key one for the poem. But there is a secondary, symbolic meaning. In the Bible, God is often closely associated

with light. Light is the first thing he makes when he creates the world, for example. Pious and faithful Christians are thus often said to "walk with the light" or to "have seen the light," while people who live in sin or who have not been converted to Christianity are said to be in "darkness." The loss of light is thus not simply the loss of sight: it also stands, symbolically, for the loss of faith or intimacy with God. The literal and symbolic meanings attached to "light" are thus connected to each other: because the speaker has lost sight, the speaker fears that he or she has lost "light" itself, that is, a connection to God.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "light"

DARK

"Darkness" is the opposite of light. When the speaker mentions it in line 2, the speaker is thinking of the challenges he or she faces as a blind person: the world has literally become dark for the speaker, turning even the most familiar places and activities into dangerous challenges. In a world built for people who can see, the speaker must now somehow find a way to survive. But, like "light" in the previous line, the word also has a symbolic sense. It symbolizes sin and the absence of God—who is often closely associated with light in the Christian tradition. When the speaker invokes darkness in line 2, the speaker is thus expressing anxiety about his or her physical *and* spiritual safety. The world, for this speaker, is a dreary, sinful place: a place of temptation and challenge, which the speaker must carefully negotiate in order to make it to Heaven. The speaker's blindness has made it all the more difficult to do so.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dark"

YOKE

A yoke is a harness, used by farmers to attach oxen to carts and plows: once an ox is in a yoke, it pulls the cart or plow behind it as it walks forward. The yoke thus often serves as a symbol for bondage or imposition: someone powerful imposing his or her will on a less powerful person, forcing them to perform certain tasks or obey their commands. However, Milton uses the word in a more positive sense here: for the speaker of this poem, it is not an imposition or a burden to follow God's commands. Though God may be the master, and the speaker his ox, it is no trouble to do what God asks. The speaker thus transforms a symbol for the unjust exercise of power into just its opposite: here it describes a satisfying, "mild" relationship between servant and master.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "yoke"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Though "When I consider how my life is spent" begins with religious doubt, it ends up expressing with considerable confidence Puritan religious doctrine. The Puritans not only had strong feelings about questions like the relationship between faith and works; they also had strict standards for the way churches should look. They preferred a bare, plain space for their worship. During the English Civil War, they destroyed much of the stained glass and icons that survived from the middle ages. In other words, their position was as much aesthetic as religious. As a devout Puritan and a poet, Milton is thus in a tricky position. His art relies on ornamental literary devices, yet those same devices may seem overly ornamental, out-of-keeping with the plain aesthetic he favored in religious matters.

In keeping with this, the poem's use of alliteration is fairly sparse: the speaker is not interested in dressing up his or her anxieties. Instead, the speaker presents them plainly, directly. However, there are important moments of alliteration—for instance the repeated /d/ and /w/ sounds in line 2 with "**d**ays, in this **d**ark **w**orld and **w**ide," or the /p/ sound in line 8 with "**p**atience, to **p**revent."

In these cases, the alliteration links together two otherwise discrete ideas: patience, for instance, becomes associated with prevention. Because of the alliteration, it feels like the speaker is suggesting that prevention is patience's job, part of its identity. Similarly, the width of the world—its overwhelming size—becomes, thanks to the alliteration, closely linked to the world itself. For this newly blind speaker, the world is defined by its enormity, its huge expanse. Thus although though the speaker does not use alliteration heavily, the use of alliteration the poem does underline its argument and suggests connections between concepts that might otherwise seem distant from each other.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "d," "d," "w," "w"
- **Line 4:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 5:** "m," "M"
- **Line 7:** "d," "l," "l," "d"
- **Line 8:** "p," "p"
- **Line 10:** "b"
- **Line 11:** "B," "s," "b," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s"

- **Line 13:** “o,” “O”
- **Line 14:** “s,” “o,” “s”

ASSONANCE

In "When I consider how my life is spent," Milton writes with powerful simplicity, leaving to the side many of the more ornate poetic devices that his predecessors use. And in the case of devices like assonance—which he cannot avoid, because of the limited number of vowels in English—he is unusually restrained and careful in their deployment.

Compared to the poems being written by his contemporaries, "Sonnet 19" contains very little assonance. Indeed, some of its most confident pronouncements contain little to no assonance whatsoever, as in lines 11-12: "His state / Is Kingly." There is a repeated /i/ sound in "His" and "is," but because its second instance appears in a verb—indeed, in the most common verb in the English language, "to be"—it does not feel particularly marked or significant.

It is notable that a particularly strong moment of assonance occurs in line 7 and the first half of line 8, with the strong repetition of /o/, /i/ and /a/ sounds. This line is also highly alliterative and contains a great deal of consonance:

> “Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
> I fondly ask.

Altogether, it is a rather ornate intrusion into the poem, and importantly comes as the speaker points out the seeming unfairness of God. This unfairness is related to a Catholic conception of how to best serve God—that is, via works rather than faith—and as such lacks the more Puritan restraint of many of the other lines.

The speaker's sincerity and self-assurance can perhaps be best read by measuring how restrained and spare the speaker's verse is: in the moments of the poem where the speaker is anxious and unsure, the speaker lets assonance enter the lines, allowing the speaker to engage in a more ornate kind of poetry.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 2:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 3:** “A,” “a,” “a,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 6:** “e,” “e,” “i”
- **Line 7:** “o,” “o,” “a,” “a,” “ou,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 8:** “o,” “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 9:** “u,” “u,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 10:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 11:** “i”
- **Line 12:** “I,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 13:** “o,” “o,” “a,” “a,” “O”
- **Line 14:** “a,” “a,” “a”

CONSONANCE

Compared to the poem's sparing use of assonance and alliteration, the poem contains much more consonance, and it uses consonance much more flexibly. (For instance, the speaker does not radically reduce the use of the device in the second half of the poem as the speaker does with assonance). In part, this is inevitable: because of the restricted number of consonants in English, some consonance will appear in almost every line of any poem. But there are clear signs that the use of consonance in the poem is not simply incidental; rather, the speaker is using it in a controlled, conscious fashion.

For instance, in line 7, the speaker uses a heavy pattern of /d/ sounds, in a combination of alliteration and assonance: "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" There are three big concepts in the line: God, day-labour, and denial. All three are linked together by the /d/ sound. The use of consonance thus suggests the depths of the speaker's religious confusion: the speaker cannot separate God from the demands the speaker imagines that God has imposed on the speaker or from the loss of the speaker's sight.

The speaker thus uses consonance to underline arguments, to amplify the sense of confusion, and to mark potentially blasphemous thinking. It can also mark the strength of the speaker's religious conviction, as in the /d/ sound at the end of line 12, "Thousands at his bidding speed." Here the clipped /d/ sound mimics the rapid movement of God's servants as they "post" across the globe. Unlike alliteration and assonance, then, which serve relatively limited roles in the poem, the speaker uses consonance in a flexible fashion, which changes as the speaker's argument evolves.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “n,” “n,” “t,” “s,” “s,” “n”
- **Line 2:** “d,” “d,” “r,” “w,” “r,” “d,” “d,” “w,” “d”
- **Line 3:** “d,” “t,” “t,” “n,” “T,” “n,” “t,” “d,” “t,” “d”
- **Line 4:** “d,” “d,” “s,” “ss,” “S”
- **Line 5:** “s,” “r,” “r,” “m,” “M,” “t”
- **Line 6:** “t,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “d”
- **Line 7:** “D,” “G,” “d,” “t,” “d,” “l,” “l,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 8:** “d,” “l,” “t,” “p,” “t,” “p,” “t”
- **Line 9:** “t,” “m,” “r,” “m,” “d,” “d,” “n,” “n,” “d”
- **Line 10:** “ts,” “b,” “s,” “t”
- **Line 11:** “B,” “s,” “b,” “st,” “s,” “st,” “t”
- **Line 12:** “s,” “s,” “d,” “s,” “s,” “d,” “d,” “s,” “p,” “d”
- **Line 13:** “p,” “st,” “nd,” “nd,” “t,” “st”
- **Line 14:** “s,” “s,” “n,” “ st,” “nd,” “nd,” “t”

ENJAMBMENT

"When I consider how my life is spent" is a highly enjambed poem. It contains only three end-stops, in lines 7, 13, and 14 (and of those, only lines 13 and 14 are strongly, unambiguously end-stopped).

Although the poem contains sentences of varying lengths—some many lines long, some much shorter—the speaker consistently fails to calibrate the length of sentences to the length of these lines, so that clauses, phrases, and sentences almost always spill over from one line to the next (and then end in the middle of lines!). This gives the poem a herky-jerky, start-and-stop kind of feel: the poem seems haywire, out-of-sorts. In this way, the use of enjambment closely mimics the speaker's own sense of disorientation and despair: working through the poem, readers feel in the organization of the lines how lost the speaker is, how out of touch with the traditional boundaries and guides that organize poetry (and life).

The poem's use of enjambment is not, however, unambiguous or easy to parse. The speaker's sentences are often complex and the speaker's use of punctuation is not standard. For instance, line 6 looks a lot like an end-stop and it probably feels like one to most readers (especially on a first read). But if the reader carefully parses the grammar of the poem's first sentence, working through it from the start of the first line to the end of the sentence in the middle of line 8, one will see that the end of line 6 is not the end of a grammatically independent unit.

Instead, it closes out a long conditional clause—a clause which is only completed with "I fondly ask" in line 8. In other words, the first six lines list a series of conditions, "When I consider this and that…" And only in line 8 do readers learn *what*, exactly, the speaker does when the speaker "considers" these things. Thus line 6 is technically enjambed even though it might look or feel like an end-stop. (Something similar is true of line 7: it's technically end-stopped, but because the order of the sentence has been inverted, it feels like an enjambment).

Working through these difficult and ambiguous cases, the reader experiences some of the speaker's disorientation: like the newly blind speaker, the reader struggles to understand the world, to put the pieces together, to know how (and whether) things fit.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "spent, / Ere"
- **Lines 2-3:** "wide, / And"
- **Lines 3-4:** "hide / Lodged"
- **Lines 4-5:** "bent / To"
- **Lines 5-6:** "present / My"
- **Lines 6-7:** "chide; / "Doth"
- **Lines 8-9:** "prevent / That"
- **Lines 9-10:** "need / Either"
- **Lines 10-11:** "best / Bear"
- **Lines 11-12:** "state / Is"
- **Lines 12-13:** " speed / And"

END-STOPPED LINE

"When I consider how my life is spent" uses end-stop very sparingly. There are only two strong end-stops in the poem, in lines 13-14. These end-stops fall at a crucial point in the poem: after all the doubt and anxiety the speaker has experienced in the first twelve lines of the poem, the speaker finally reconciles him- or herself with God and with faith. With their certainty and closure, the lines mimic this reconciliation.

There are, potentially, two other end-stops in the poem. They fall in the poem's long, difficult first sentence, which starts in line 1 and continues into the middle of line 8. To make matters worse, Milton uses punctuation in unorthodox ways. The structure of the sentence becomes a bit clearer if one breaks it into smaller bits.

The sentence has two major parts, and the first part of the sentence is a conditional clause: "When this happens, when that happens…" etc. That conditional clause extends all the way to the semi-colon at the end of line 6. Then, the reader reaches the *main* clause of the sentence, which is, essentially, "…I ask the following stupid question." In other words, the sentence could be paraphrased: "When I think about my blindness, I ask myself a stupid question." Because the first six lines are part of a dependent clause they are all *technically* enjambed: they are grammatically incomplete until the reader reaches the main clause. So even though Milton uses a semi-colon in line 6, and even though a semi-colon is a usually a pretty sure mark of an end-stop, grammatically it functions here more like a comma.

Milton is not using punctuation in a standard way here and the results will likely be confusing for most readers. Again, even though line 6 is *technically* enjambed, most readers will experience the line as an end-stop on their first (or even their second) reading.

Something similar happens in line 7. It is technically speaking a grammatically complete phrase, and therefore it is an end-stop. However, the grammar of the sentence has been inverted here. Think about it this way: in normal English syntax, the first half of line 8 would come first, so that the sentence would read, "When I think about my blindness, I ask a dumb question: 'Does God exact day-labour…?'" Yet here, it's basically: "When I think about my blindness, 'Does God exact day-labour...?' is a dumb question I ask."

Thus although line 7 stands on its own grammatically, it interrupts the flow of the sentence, separating the dependent, conditional clause of lines 1-6 from its completion in line 8, the

sentence's long delayed independent clause. For this reason, the reader most likely *experiences* it as an enjambment, even though it is technically an end-stop.

These lines are deceptive, perhaps intentionally so. Indeed, in working through the poem's complicated and ambiguous deployment of enjambment and end-stop, the reader has an experience not unlike Milton's speaker: readers are thrown into uncertainty, unable to decide authoritatively how or even whether various lines are related to each other. The poem's ambiguous use of enjambment and end-stop thus mimics the anxiety and uncertainty that results from the speaker's blindness.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "denied?""
- **Line 13:** "rest:"
- **Line 14:** "wait.""

CAESURA

"When I consider how my life is spent is a heavily enjambed poem. As a result, even though the poem contains a number of short sentences and phrases, these phrases and sentences generally end in the middle of lines, rather than at their ends. For example, the first sentence of "patience's" reply to the speaker contains three caesuras, one in line 10 and two in line 11. Some of these caesuras *could* be end-stops, if they fell at the end of the line. But instead, they cut up the middle of the lines. As a result, the poem often feels jerky, uncoordinated, awkward. Working through the poem's many caesuras, the reader feels the speaker thinking things through, working it out in real time. The speaker's anxieties are pressing enough that the speaker does not have the time to find a way to present them in a more elegant, controlled fashion.

That's true until the final two lines of the poem, which are the only two strongly end-stopped lines in the poem. After so much enjambment and caesura, these lines feel almost unnaturally calm and composed. After churning and fighting through the previous twelve lines, the speaker has finally found a place to rest, something reassuring, calm, and controlled. The use of caesura in the poem thus serves as a register for the speaker's anxiety and distress: and when it suddenly disappears at the end of the poem, it marks the resolution and calm the speaker feels in his or her renewed faith.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 5:** ", "
- **Line 6:** ", "
- **Line 7:** ", "
- **Line 8:** ". ," ", "
- **Line 9:** ", ," ", "
- **Line 10:** "; "
- **Line 11:** ", ," ". "
- **Line 12:** ". "

ALLUSION

The poem is deeply concerned with religious doctrine: it is a poem about how to be a Christian and how to understand the demands that God places on Christians. Unsurprisingly, then, it contains a number of allusions to the Bible, some of which are more explicit than others.

For example, some scholars have taken the speaker's loss of "light" as an allusion to the Parable of the Ten Virgins, in the Book of Matthew, 25:1-12. In the Parable, Jesus compares the "Kingdom of Heaven … unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom." However, five of them, "foolish virgins," forget to take oil with them for their lamps; when the "bridegroom" comes in the middle of the night, they can't light their lamps and go out to meet him. The speaker worries about being like the foolish virgins: of being unable to meet the speaker's "bridegroom"—that is, Christ—because the speaker has lost his light (with the subtle implication being that this might be because of the speaker's own failings or errors).

Next, line 3, reveals that the speaker has "one Talent" and that it would be "death to hide" it. This is a reference to the Parable of the Talents, which follows immediately on the Parable of the Ten Virgins in the Book of Matthew, 25:14-30. In this parable, a rich man goes traveling. Before he leaves his home, he divides his property among his servants (using units of biblical money, called "talents"), instructing them to invest it wisely. Two of them do so, increasing the value of their master's property while he's gone. But the third simply buries his talent in the ground. The master punishes him severely for his failure. Significantly for the poem, with its tropes of light and darkness, he commands, "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Like the speaker, the servant who hides his talent ends in darkness—Hell itself.

These parables are key to understanding the poem and constitute its most important allusions. But there are also smaller allusions present. For instance, when the speaker describes God's "yoke" as "mild," the speaker is closely paraphrasing the Book of Matthew 11:30, where Jesus states, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Similarly in line 12, the speaker alludes to Psalm 68:17 and Zechariah 1:10, both of which describe the enormous energy of God's servants on Earth and the intensity of their activity. For example, Psalm 68 reads, "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place."

In each of these instances, the speaker extends the range of the poem. Although the poem may appear on its surface to be self-involved—its speaker having an internal debate about religious doctrine—it is also deeply invested in conversing with the Bible and Christian tradition.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When I consider how my light is spent"
- **Line 3:** "And that one Talent which is death to hide"
- **Line 11:** "his mild yoke"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Thousands at his bidding speed / And post o'er Land and Ocean"

PERSONIFICATION

After the speaker indulges in a potentially blasphemous question in line 7, a figure called "patience" appears in the poem. The rest of the poem constitutes patience's response to the speaker, a response designed to set the speaker straight on vital issues of religious doctrine. But patience is not a person, another character who enters the poem. Rather, patience is part of the speaker's conscience, an element of his mind. The speaker is thus internally divided: though the speaker is anxious and beset by blasphemous thoughts, some parts of the speaker remain committed to the Puritan faith—and these parts are capable of calming the speaker's whirling thoughts.

To dramatize this conflict within the speaker, the poem personifies patience, making it into a character with the capacity to speak, to argue its points, and to disagree with the speaker. Patience thus becomes an independent being, who is both part of the speaker and opposed to the speaker. The use of personification suggests that the speaker is basically at war with him- or herself. The poem documents this deep internal battle: personification reveals that this is not a poem overly concerned with the outside world, but rather with the speaker's particular mental state, struggles, and uncertainties.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-14:** "But / , to prevent / That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need / Either man's work or his own gifts; who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state / Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed / And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest: / They also serve who only stand and wait.""
- **Line 8:** "patience"

APOSTROPHE

"When I consider how my life is spent" arguably contains an instance of apostrophe in line 7, when the speaker asks "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" It is not entirely clear to whom the speaker addresses this question. It's plausible that the speaker is addressing him- her herself, asking a searching and difficult question about the speaker's own understanding of God. In this case, the question would not really constitute apostrophe—the speaker is present in the poem. But it is equally likely that the question is directly addressed to God: that the speaker is asking God to explain himself, to justify the demands that he makes of human beings. If this is true, then it *is* an instance of apostrophe, since God is not literally present in the poem.

Either case is plausible. That said, it's more likely that the speaker is addressing him- or herself, since "patience" replies to the speaker. "Patience" is part of the speaker's conscience; it is not God himself (though it may speak on behalf of God or at God's bidding). Nevertheless, the hesitation and ambiguity are important to the poem. It opens the possibility that the poem is not simply an obsessive self-interrogation, but that it may also depict the speaker as negotiating, pleading, and arguing with God.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** ""Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" / I fondly ask. "

VOCABULARY

Light (Line 1) - Vision, eyesight. Here the speaker is referring to the capacity to perceive light: in other words, the speaker can't see.

Ere (Line 2) - Before. In some contexts, the word also connotes "early."

Lodged (Line 4) - Living with, containing. In other words, the speaker's "Talent" is part of who the speaker is.

Bent (Line 4) - Hoping, desiring, wishing. The word suggests the shape of the speaker's soul, or the direction it tends to move in—as though the speaker's soul has been physically bent in its efforts to please God.

Chide (Line 6) - To scold or punish.

Day-labour (Line 7) - Most likely this refers to work done during the day—that is, work that requires light to complete. Milton coined this word, so its exact definition is a matter of interpretation.

Murmur (Line 9) - A low or quiet complaint. The word is one of Milton's favorites; he often uses it in his later poems to describe unholy, impious responses.

Yoke (Line 11) - A burden or obligation. The word literally describes a device that farmers would use to attach oxen to a cart or plow, so that as the oxen walked forward, they would pull that cart or plow behind them.

Post (Line 13) - To move swiftly; to travel with haste and

urgency.

O'er (Line 13) - A shortened form of the word "over." Milton makes the contraction for the sake of his meter, so it should be pronounced as a single syllable.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"When I consider how my life is spent" is a Petrarchan sonnet. Petrarchan sonnets are often argumentative poems; poets use the form to test ideas and to quarrel with themselves. This accounts for Milton's interest in the form: like so many Petrarchan sonnets, this poem focuses on the speaker's internal conflicts—though, unlike most Petrarchan sonnets, the conflicts here arise from religious faith rather than erotic love.

The Petrarchan sonnet is so well suited to doubt, argument, and conflict, because of its formal structure. A Petrarchan sonnet is always fourteen lines long; it is divided into two parts: the octave (the first 8 lines) and the sestet (the final six). Though each section shares the same meter, they have different rhyme schemes. Poets often propose an idea or explore a position in the first eight lines of the poem, and then in the final six lines, they turn around and critique that idea. The formal division of the poem lends itself to a conceptual division, a split in the speaker's ideas.

Milton follows this form closely. In the first eight lines of his poem, his speaker advances a potentially blasphemous anxiety: that the speaker will not be able to satisfy God's desire for great works because the speaker can't see. In the final six lines, the speaker corrects this idea by invoking a core tenant of the Protestant faith: God does not need human works and awards salvation on the basis of faith alone.

The poem does diverge from the standard Petrarchan scheme in one key respect. All Petrarchan sonnets have a "volta" or a "turn." This is the moment in the poem where the speaker changes his or her mind, begins to critique the argument he or she has made so far in the poem. Usually this moment comes between line 8 and 9, right on the border between the two parts of the poem. However, in Milton's poem, it comes a little early: midway through line eight with: "But patience, to prevent…" The speaker basically gets impatient and jumps the gun, refuting his or her own argument before it's time to do so. This suggests that the speaker does not need time to reflect on the position presented in the first eight lines of the poem. As soon as the speaker says this blasphemous idea—that God requires work, rather than faith—the speaker knows that something's gone wrong.

METER

Like most English sonnets, "When I consider how my life is spent" is written in iambic pentameter. The meter is one of the most prestigious and dignified in English: Shakespeare used it for tragedies like *Hamlet*; Milton will use it later in his career for his epic, *Paradise Lost*. The use of the meter thus indicates how seriously the poet takes the subject matter of this poem: these are not trifling questions, and they deserve the highest and most serious treatment he can give them.

However, the speaker's handling of the meter is not uniform in its confidence and skill. At points in the poem, the speaker achieves smooth and precise meter. Unsurprisingly, this precision comes when the speaker is most certain and confident about the poem's religious position. For example, look at the poem's final lines, which are perfectly iambic:

> And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait."

As clear and certain as the meter is here, the speaker struggles to maintain a strong iambic rhythm earlier in the poem. This happens as the speaker struggles to reconcile blindness with the speaker's obligations as a Christian. The poem is peppered substitutions, particularly in the first and third foot. For example, line 7 contains an awkward mid-line spondee (stressed-stressed):

> "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"

Notably, this is a question that even the speaker thinks is "fond"—foolish or crazy. The meter reflects this internal conflict: the speaker cannot pose the question in a smooth, confident way, and instead slips into a rough, ambiguous meter. The caesura that splits the fourth foot, "our, light," is also unusual and awkward. The speaker's meter thus reflects the speaker's confidence and certainty as the speaker wrestles with important religious questions. The smoother the meter, the more certain the speaker is about the best way to serve God.

RHYME SCHEME

"When I consider how my life is spent" is a Petrarchan sonnet and it follows a standard Petrarchan rhyme scheme. This scheme can be divided into two parts. In the first eight lines of the poem, the speaker uses only two rhyme sounds: /-ent/ and /-ide/. This gives these lines a churning feel, as they circle obsessively around these two sounds. In this way, they mimic the anxiety they describe: the speaker's fear of no longer satisfying God's expectations because the speaker has gone blind. Like anxiety, these lines fail to progress, to discover something new; instead, they always return to themselves. The final six lines of the poem thus come almost as a relief, introducing three new rhyme sounds in six lines: /-eed/, /-est/, and /-ate/. The full rhyme scheme for the poem is thus:

ABBAABBACDECDE

This is a standard rhyme scheme for a Petrarchan sonnet. The new rhymes that appear in the final lines of the poem mimic the expanded sense of possibility and the freedom from anxiety that the speaker describes in these lines: the sound of the poem gives the reader a taste of the freedom that characterizes Christian faith for Milton.

SPEAKER

The poem provides, at best, sparing information about its speaker. The reader learns that the speaker is a devout Protestant and has recently gone blind. The speaker has a great "Talent" and hoped to accomplish some magnificent work, but now can't. Besides these basic facts, there is not much information about the speaker's life. The poem does not tell its readers the speaker's profession, gender, political views, social status, level of education, etc. (The poem's subtitle, "On his blindness," suggests that the speaker is a man—though the subtitle was probably added after Milton wrote the poem).

However, most scholars assume that "When I consider how my life is spent" is an autobiographical poem because it so closely aligns with the facts of the poet John Milton's life. It was written in the mid-1650s, after Milton lost his eyesight, and it recounts the spiritual doubts and anxieties that his blindness occasioned. For this reason, most readers assume that the speaker of the poem is Milton himself, writing at a particularly sensitive moment in his life: just beginning to work on his epic poem *Paradise Lost* while also serving as the Latin Secretary for Oliver Cromwell's government, responsible for defending that government in Europe.

If this is true, it sheds some light on some of the poem's more ambiguous moments. For instance, the "one Talent which is death to hide" is most likely Milton's gift as a poet or a scholar. The work he wants to complete, his "true account," is likely *Paradise Lost*—or, perhaps, his political work defending Cromwell's government. The poem is thus intimately entangled not only with grand questions of faith, but with the circumstances of Milton's life.

SETTING

"When I consider how my life is spent" does not establish a specific setting. Indeed, much of the poem seems to take place within the speaker's mind, as the speaker considers questions of Christian faith. In the poem's final lines, the speaker adopts a global perspective, soaring above the earth to observe people crossing land and sea in service to God. In this moment, the speaker seems to observe the whole world at once. The speaker is freed from a particular position in space, from having a particular viewpoint; here, the speaker is capable of transcending all that to see the world as God himself does.

However, based on the poem's language, its literary form, its date of composition, and the particular religious debates it engages, it seems reasonable to assume that the broad setting of the poem is England in the 17th century, a time when religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were matters of life and death (and indeed, Catholicism was illegal in England). In the years immediately before the poem was written, England fought a bloody civil war over the issues of religious doctrine that the poem takes up. Though the speaker is capable of shedding a specific, personal viewpoint and adopting a kind of God's-eye view of the world, the speaker cannot shed the cultural and political circumstances that surround the poem's writing: the speaker remains bound to a specific moment of religious conflict.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"When I consider how my life is spent" is a Petrarchan sonnet, a form that developed in Italy during the Middle Ages. Originally a kind of popular song, the Italian poets Petrarch and Dante made it into an elevated, prestigious kind of formal verse in the 13th and 14th centuries, writing long sonnet sequences about their unrequited loves for beautiful, distant women. As the sonnet spread through Europe in the following centuries, it continued to be used for similar purposes. Most sonnets were written by men, about women; most described those women as beautiful, inaccessible, and cruel.

Despite the sonnet's traditional focus on love, its form is relatively flexible, suitable for a wide range of topics. Its structure, neatly divided into two halves, makes it particularly good for poetic arguments: the speaker can propose a position or idea in the first eight lines and then dispute in the final six. For these reasons, the subject matter of the sonnet gradually broadened. By the end of the 16th century, for instance, poets like John Donne were regularly using the sonnet to stage religious disputes. (Though these poems often contain erotic undertones, a kind of ghostly inheritance from the history of the form).

Puritan poets like George Herbert and, later, Milton, were especially interested in taking the form and reinventing it, separating it from the erotic—which they considered sinful. "When I consider how my life is spent" is thus a key document in the evolution of the sonnet: beginning as a popular song, transforming into a prestigious love poem, before becoming, finally, an elegant container for religious and philosophic disputes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was written in the 1650s, after the end of the English Civil War. The King, Charles I, had been deposed and

executed. In his place, a democratic government led by Oliver Cromwell governed England. The English Civil War was prompted in part by religious disagreements: Cromwell's government was much more sympathetic to the Puritans than the King's government had been. For a devout Puritan intellectual like Milton, Cromwell's revolution thus represented a magnificent opportunity to create a country that aligned with his religious beliefs.

Milton threw himself whole-heartedly into this project, writing pamphlets and tracts defending the revolution and Cromwell. He eventually became Cromwell's Latin Secretary, an important position, since Latin was the language of education and learning around Europe. Milton was tasked with defending Cromwell to the most important intellectual figures on the European continent. He was a passionate and powerful writer who made vital contributions to the cause.

However, Milton lost his eyesight in the mid-1650s, at the height of his political involvement (an event that his enemies interpreted as a punishment from God). He was forced to retire from public life and his daughters were largely tasked with his care. However, his blindness did not stifle his literary production and creativity. In the years after he went blind, Milton produced some of the most important poetry in the English language, including *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agonistes*, and *Paradise Regained*. His daughters would read aloud to him and transcribe his poems for him.

After the restoration of the monarchy at the end of the 1650s, Milton narrowly escaped execution for his political work in support of the Cromwell government—only the intervention of fellow poet and member of Parliament, Andrew Marvell, saved his life and allowed him to complete his great works.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Turbulent 17th Century — A brief history of the 17th century in England, focusing on the Civil War. (https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-turbulent-17th-century-civil-war-regicide-the-restoration-and-the-glorious-revolution)
- John Milton's Biography — A detailed biography of Milton, with links to additional resources, from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-milton)
- "When I consider how my life is spent" Out Loud — A reading of "When I consider how my life is spent" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMiaUOQSavk)
- Milton's "Cambridge" Manuscript — A digital copy of the so-called "Cambridge" manuscript, where the first known copy of "When I consider how my life is spent" appears. (http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/viewpage.php?index=1394)
- Milton's 1673 Poems — The complete text, along with an image of the title page, of Milton's 1673 Poem's, the book in which "When I consider how my life is spent" was first published. (https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/contents/text.shtml#poems1673)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN MILTON POEMS

- Sonnet 7: How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth

HOW TO CITE

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