

Page (01) B.A. Part I (English Honours)
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Question: Discuss 'Lycidas' as a pastoral poem.

Answer: 'Lycidas' belongs to the tradition of pastoral poetry. A pastoral poem portrays country life with the shepherds and shepherdesses as its characters and breathes the climate of unsophisticated countryside. No doubt, the theme of the poem is to bewail the loss of a friend of the poet, but the poet discusses it in a pastoral setting. The earliest examples of pastoral poetry are to be found in the writings of Theocritus, a Greek poet who lived in the first half of the third century, B.C. His pastoral poems represent herdsmen or shepherds singing in contests for such prizes as a fat lamb or a carved wooden drinking bowl, or pouring forth lays of love or lamenting for a dead friend or a maiden. The tradition of pastoral poetry did not early establish itself as a distinct literary form. Spenser's 'Sheph

'erds' calendar' which was written in 1579 was perhaps the earliest illustration of pastoral poetry in English literature. This tradition flourished in England during fifty years after 'Shepherds' calendar'. Shakespeare himself showed his inclination for this poetic form in his plays like - 'As you like it' and 'The Winter's Tale'. The pastoral remained a popular form with the Jacobian and Caroline poets. It is no wonder then that Milton should have cast his first out-pourings in his muse into the pastoral form. 'I Allegro' and 'II Penseroso' are pastoral odes, 'Arcades' and 'Comus' are pastoral dramas and 'Lycidas' is a pastoral elegy. 'Lycidas' is ranked with Shelley's 'Adonais', Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' and Arnold's 'Thyrsis'. 'In Memoriam' is different from the other two in the sense that though it is an elegy, yet it is

not pastoral. Both 'Lycidas' and 'Adonais' are pastoral elegies and mourn the death of a friend but in neither case does the intimacy between the mourner and mourned appear to be great. 'Thyrsis' has still got better intimacy with 'Lycidas' because both are a memorial of a friend who met at the university. The pastoral character of the poem can be studied under the following heads:

- (a) Subject-matter of a pastoral elegy - 'Lycidas' is a pastoral elegy and like other poems of this tradition, it also mourns the death of a shepherd. In other words, Milton, who imagines himself to be a shepherd, bewails the death of Edward King who is given the typical name of a shepherd, Lycidas. The loss of this shepherd is being painfully experienced not only by shepherd but all the objects of Nature.
- 'How thou art gone, and

never must return

Thence, Shepherd, thence the
Woods and desert caves,
With wild thyme and the
gadding vine o' ergrown,
And all their echoes mourn

(b) Pastoral poem only means to objectify emotions — Critics like Dr. Johnson have raised the point that the pastoral form is an artificial one and it is therefore not a favourable form for an elegiac poem giving vent to genuine sorrow. The argument may sound reasonable to some extent but studied in the light of spirit, the pastoral form is not a limitation but a means to objectify emotions and to prevent personal feelings from overpowering poetry.

(c) Shepherds or herdsmen are the characters of the poem — The very title of the poem suggests that Lycidas, a common name among shepherds is going to be an important character in the poem. Milton himself puts on

the masquerade of a Shepherd and claims to have led the same flock of sheep!

"For we were nursed on the
Self-same hill,
Fed the same flock, by
fountain, shade and rill,
Together both, ere the high
~~low~~ lawn appeared
Under the opening eye-
lids of the morn."

The loss of Lycidus is really painful to the shepherds and towards the end of the poem the poet makes an appeal to them to stop bewailing,

"Weep no more, woeful
Shepherds, weep no more,
For Lycidus, your sorrow,
is dead,

Sunk though he be beneath
the watery floor;

moreover there are references to the gods, goddesses, fairies and nymphs in whom the simple country folk have got their faith. Allusions have been made to the Seat of Jove, 'Sisters

of the 'Sacred Well' and 'rough Satyrs and Fauns'.

- (d) Description of Nature and the countryside — The description of the natural sights of the countryside is again an important ingredient of a pastoral poem. In the very beginning of 'Lycidas', Milton plucks ivy, myrtle and laurel, all of which are the symbols of poetry. It can also be said that he plucks them so as to place their wreaths on the corpse of Lycidas. When Milton invites numerous flowers to decorate the coffin of Lycidas, we have a rich feast of the beauties of Nature. Milton beautifully describes the glowing violets, the musk rose and the cowslips with drooping pensive heads. There are some never-fading images of Nature as in the lines' —

'The air was calm and on the level brine

Slack Panope with all

her sisters played,
 Thus, we find that Milton's
 elegy is a poem in the tradition
 of pastoral poetry. Even
 after Milton, the pastoral poetry
 continued to be written in Eng-
 land. But it was not until
 Shelley wrote 'Adonais' and
 Matthew Arnold wrote 'Thyrsis'
 that one could find an English
 pastoral elegy to be ranked
 with 'Lycidas'.

The end.

Munir Bhushan Sinha
 Deptt. of English
 S.S. College, Tehanabad