

# SONNET ON HIS BLINDNESS

by **John Milton** (1608-1674)

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-labor, light denied?”  
I fondly ask; but Patience, to prevent  
That murmer, 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.”

## *Annotation of On His Blindness:*

**Please note:** N=noun, V=verb, Adj=Adjective, Adv=Adverb, P=Preposition, C=Conjunction

**Consider (V):** Think carefully about (something), typically before making a decision

**Spent (Adj):** Having been used and unable to be used again

**’Ere (P):** An older form of the word “before”

**Talent (N):** (i) Natural aptitude or skill

(ii) A significant amount of money

**Lodg’d (V):** Short form of the word “lodged”, which is, in turn, the past participle form of the word “lodge”, that is, to leave money or a valuable item in (a place) or with (someone) for safe keeping

**Soul (N):** The spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, regarded as immortal

**Bent (Adj):** Determined to do or have

**Serve (V):** Perform duties or services for (another person or an organization)

**Therewith (Adv):** With or in the thing mentioned

**Maker (N):** God

**Account (N):** A report or description of an event or experience

**Lest (C):** Because of the possibility of something undesirable happening; in case

**Chide (V):** Scold or rebuke

**Doth (V):** An older form of the word “does”

**Exact (V):** Demand and obtain (something) from someone

**Day-labour (N):** Work done where the worker is hired and paid one day at a time, with no promise that more work will be available in the future

**Fondly (Adv):** In an affectionate manner

**Patience (N):** The capacity to accept or tolerate delay, problems, or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious

**Prevent (V):** Keep (something) from happening

**Murmur (N):** A softly spoken or almost inaudible utterance

**Bear (V):** Be able to accept or stand up to

**Mild (Adj):** Not severe, serious, or harsh

**Yoke (N):** Used to refer to something regarded as oppressive or restrictive

**State (N):** Pomp and ceremony associated with monarchy or high levels of government

**Kingly (Adj):** Associated with or typical of a king; regal

**Bidding (N):** The ordering or requesting of someone to do something

**Speed (V):** Move quickly

**Post (V):** Travel with haste; hurry

**O'er (P):** An older form of the word “over”

## Poem Summary

Many people are familiar with the story of Ludwig Van Beethoven. This man, in spite of being deaf, managed to become a world-renowned composer. What a terrible fate: to have the sense most integral to your art be taken away from you. Similar is the story of **John Milton**, an English poet, who, by 1655 at age 48, was blind. His ability to write was threatened and, as a result, his relationship with God became complicated.

In ***On His Blindness***, Milton is struggling to understand what God expects of him now that he is losing his sight. He's upset about wasting 'that one Talent which is death to hide' (line 3), which is a biblical reference to the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), in which two people invest their talents (in the story, 'talents' are money), while another just hides his talent in a hole and is punished. Milton feels that God expects him to use his talent for writing poetry in a way that honors Him.

Milton is frustrated that his lack of sight is preventing him from serving God when he wants to so badly:

*...Though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account... (lines 4-6)*

Milton's 'true account' refers to his religious poetry. Much of his poetry was concerned with God's relationship to mankind and he considered it a serious duty to write poetry that simultaneously made God's mysterious ways more clear to people and honored God with its craft.

At line 7, Milton wonders if God still expects him to keep writing without his sight, then decides that God is more forgiving than he was giving him credit for, Surely, knowing of his condition and strong desire to please Him, God wouldn't expect anything that he couldn't possibly accomplish, nor would he punish him.

The last half of the poem has a calmer tone. It's almost like Milton realizes that while he's writing that people can serve God in many different ways. It's the intent and the grace with which one deals with hardship that counts:

*Who best  
Bear his milde yoaak, they serve him best.*

Within 14 lines, Milton has depicted a wavering, then regaining of faith.

## Central Idea of On His Blindness:

Milton laments the fact that he is going blind. He fears he shall not be able to use his God-given gift of poetic composition anymore. He asks God whether God would be cruel enough to expect a blind man to use his talents to produce goods as a price for giving him the talent in the first place. However, Milton's patience stops him from voicing this question and assures him instead that the best way to serve God is to accept whatever he places in our path with courage and dignity.

## God's master plan:

God has a master plan for every man on earth. Whatever joys and sorrows a man faces are all planned in advance for him by God. Therefore, one must not rail against one's misfortune. One must bear every storm with a smile on his face and with courage in his heart. Milton had previously believed that putting his God-given talent to use is the only way in which he can serve God. But his blindness has taught him that there are other ways to serve God as well. One of those ways and the best one is never to question God about his master plan. We must put our lives into His hand, and relinquish all control over it. If we have faith in God, then he will be by our side in our good times as well as our bad times.

## *The Tone of On His Blindness:*

The tone of this poem undergoes a remarkable change from the beginning of the poem to its end. At the start of the poem, Milton is very depressed and anxious. He feels that his blindness will get in the way of his poetic composition. However, as the poem progresses, he finds consolation within himself. He learns to have faith in God. He

learns to accept whatever obstacles God puts in his path with courage and dignity. He learns to fight against all odds without ever losing hope. Finally, at the end of the poem, he emerges as a stronger and surer person.

## On Shakespeare. 1630

BY JOHN MILTON

### Introduction

"On Shakespear" was Milton's first published poem, appearing anonymously in the [second folio of plays by Shakespeare \(1632\)](#). There it bears the title, "An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet, W.SHAKESPEARE" but has no attribution. Gordon Campbell reckons that Milton's contribution was solicited for the second folio (1632) commendations because one from his father had appeared in [the first folio \(1623\)](#), and the request represented a significant show of gratitude towards the Milton family. John Milton senior had been a trustee of [Blackfriars Theatre](#), famed as the winter quarters (after 1608) of the King's Men, the company of actors for whom Shakespeare served as chief playwright and also as a performer (Campbell, ["Shakespeare and the Youth of Milton"](#) in *Milton Quarterly* 33.4 [1999]). The first-folio commendation appears as "[To the memorie of M. W. Shake-speare.](#)" on leaf A6. In 1632, the younger John Milton was just commencing M.A. and had a small but promising reputation as a versifier if not yet a poet.

Professor Campbell also believes that young John Milton wrote "On Shakespear" convinced that he was imitating an epitaph written by Shakespeare himself. "[An Epitaph on S<sup>r</sup> Edward Standly. Ingraven on his Toombe in Tong Church](#)" may or may not have been written by Shakespeare, but Campbell has located several contemporary attributions and local people in the Shropshire village of Tong still refer to the epitaph, and its accompanying, "On S<sup>r</sup> Thomas Standly," as written by Shakespeare. The

tomb on which the epitaphs appear is decorated with obelisks reminiscent of "Star-ypointing" pyramids.

"On Shakespear" from the 1632 folio exists in three states. The second state changes "starre-ypointed" to "starre-ypointing." The poem also appeared in *Poems: Written by Wil. Shake-speare, Gent.* of 1640 as the first of three elegies on Shakespeare and titled "[An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet, William Sheakespeare.](#)" The present edition takes the [1645](#) *Poems* version for its copytext. Only significant variants are noted.

## On Shakespeare. 1630

BY JOHN MILTON

What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones,  
The labor of an age in pilèd stones,  
Or that his hallowed relics should be hid  
Under a star-ypointing pyramid?  
Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame,  
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?  
Thou in our wonder and astonishment  
Hast built thyself a live-long monument.  
For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavouring art,  
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart  
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book  
Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,  
Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,  
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;  
And so sepúlchred in such pomp dost lie,

That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

## Analysis of *On Shakespeare. 1630*

### Lines 1-4

What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones,  
The labor of an age in pilèd stones,  
Or that his hallowed relics should be hid  
Under a star-y pointing pyramid?

In the first stanza of this piece the speaker begins by asking the reader a question. It takes up the first four lines, or [quatrain](#), of text. He asks whoever may be listening what Shakespeare, now that he is dead, needs with his “honoured bones.” It is important to note in the first line that Milton refers to Shakespeare as “my Shakespeare.” He feels a connection to the writer that he believes will be shared by those who eventually read the text, perhaps in tandem with the Second Folio. From the start it is clear Milton has a high opinion of Shakespeare. He is dead, but even his bones are honourable. Milton knows though that Shakespeare was above such things. His presence and his nature, which borders on divine, does not call for vast memorials and shrines to his memory.

In the following lines Milton expands on the meaning of the first line. He wants to make sure the reader understands that erecting monuments to Shakespeare’s name should be a questionable enterprise. He believes that there was, and is, no reason to hide his “hallowed relics” under a structure— such as a “stary- pointing pyramid.” Milton does not believe Shakespeare would want his earthly remains treated in such a way. His true monument is the work he left behind, in [comparison](#) to that his bones, (although hallowed to the speaker) are meaningless.

### Lines 5-8

Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame,  
What need’st thou such weak witness of thy name?

Thou in our wonder and astonishment  
Hast built thyself a live-long monument.

In the next four lines the speaker goes on to refer to Shakespeare as the “Dear son of Memory.” The leftovers from his vastly important existence are nothing but the offspring of true memory. They are the “heir” to his “fame,” not the fame and genius itself.

Milton poses another question to his readers and to Shakespeare himself. He asks what “need’st thou” with “such weak witness of thy name?” As stated previously he does not see the purpose in creating something physical for, or preserving the physical remnants of, someone as important as Shakespeare. Any “witness” of this kind would be “weak” in comparison to his overall legacy.

## Lines 9-12

For whilst to th’ shame of slow-endeavouring art,  
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart  
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book  
Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,

In the next quatrain the speaker refers to the other poets who strive to create work as powerful as Shakespeare’s. They are the creators of the “slow-endeavouring art.” This speaks to the nature of their poetry, (it is slow, uninspiring) and to the fact that it doesn’t quite reach to the level of art (or at least when compared to Shakespeare). In contrast to these poor writers who are no where near Shakespeare’s level, Milton brags on Shakespeare’s ability to make his words or “numbers flow” easily. They come to him without struggle, or at least so it seems to Milton. Next Milton turns to the audience who has engaged so profoundly with Shakespeare’s poetry and drama. They take from the “leaves of thy unvalued book,” someone akin to the poetry of the gods. He references



Shakespeare's "Delphic lines," an [allusion](#) to the Greek God of poetry, Apollo.

## Lines 13-16

Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,  
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;  
And so sepulchred in such pomp dost lie,  
That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

In the final four lines the speaker reveals what kind of tomb Shakespeare does have. It is the only one that is truly befitting for someone of his importance. His works, and his memory, have come to live within his readers and all those who saw his plays performed. As "we" grieve for his loss, "our" bodies turn into the marble sepulchre in which Shakespeare now rests.

Anyone, including a king, would envy this kind of resting place. It will never decay or die as it is passed on from reader to reader for the rest of conceivable human history.

## Theme

"On Shakespeare" develops the primary theme of immortality through artistic creation. A commonplace idea in Renaissance and seventeenth century poetry, it is pervasive in Shakespeare's sonnets, which celebrate a poet's power to endow the subject with immortality. The theme also commonly appears in the poems prefatory to various folio editions of Shakespeare's poetic works. Its widespread use, however, does not mean that it lacked special meaning for Milton. From his student days at Cambridge University, Milton made fame through art a motif in his lyric poetry, and he later introduced the theme into his prose works as well. As one who sought fame through poetic achievement, he found it congenial to proclaim that Shakespeare had already attained it. However, Milton surpasses the conventional treatment of the theme by adding another minor but pervasive motif in Renaissance poetry, that of

metamorphosis or transformation. Evidence of Shakespeare's genius is to be found in the bard's ability to transform readers, to take them out of themselves with wonder and admiration and, metaphorically, render them marble. Milton realized that the power of transformation traditionally represented a divine attribute and a source of inspiration.

A further significant theme emerges from Milton's [characterization](#) of Shakespeare's creative imagination. Though his references to Shakespeare are limited, Milton became an early proponent of the view that Shakespeare was a naturally gifted genius, more a product of nature than of art. At its extreme, it depicted the bard as a pure and unlearned genius surpassing all the dicta of art. As applied to Shakespeare, the point of view can be traced to the writings of Shakespeare's contemporary Ben Jonson, though Jonson, the consummate artist, suggests in *Timber: Or Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter* (1641) that Shakespeare's ignorance of the classics and canons of art is a flaw. With Milton, however, there is no hint of disapproval. Milton celebrates Shakespeare's "easy numbers" and, in "L'Allegro," refers to Shakespeare as "Fancy's child" who warbles "his native woodnotes wild." In the epitaph, Milton draws a sharp contrast between art and nature: "For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavoring art/ Thy easy numbers flow" (lines 9-10). Shakespeare thus achieves the effects of ease while ignoring the canons of art.

## Summary

This sonnet, Milton's first published poem, says that no monument or "relic" built to honor Shakespeare can ever rival Shakespeare's own work. His plays and poems *are* his monument. His words, flowing easily from his pen, are more magnificent and enviable than the tomb of any king: in fact, even kings would wish to be entombed (preserved) in the "marble" of Shakespeare's words.

In the first six lines of the sonnet, Milton questions what need there is to build a monument to Shakespeare. He finds the whole idea puzzling. Why erect such a "weak witness" to the writer's name?

In the last eight lines, Milton continues by stating the Shakespeare built his own monument through the body of work he produced. His words impress themselves on us deeply.

One imagines that Shakespeare, who wrote sonnets expressing the idea that he was immortalizing his loved ones in verse, would appreciate this sonnet.