Milton Essay, Research Paper

Religion was the most important part of Milton?s personal life, and exerted

the greatest influence on his literary endeavors. John Milton was born in London to

a prosperous merchant, who had been disowned by his family when he

converted from Catholicism to Protestantism. Thanks to his father’s wealth,

young Milton got the best education money could buy: a private tutor, St. Paul’s

Cathedral School, and then Christ’s College at Cambridge. At the latter, he made

quite a name for himself with his prodigious writing, publishing several essays and

poems to high acclaim. After graduating with his Master’s degree (in 1632), Milton

was once again accommodated by his father. He was allowed to take over the

family’s estate near Windsor and pursue a quiet life of study. He spent 1632 to 1638

reading the classics.

In 1638 Milton made a trip to Italy, studying in Florence, Siena, and Rome,

but felt obliged to return home upon the outbreak of civil war in England, in 1639. By

this time, he was well known to the literary world. Particularly notable works were

his eulogy on Shakespeare, and the magnificent pastoral poem “Lycidas.” Upon his

return from Italy, though, he began planning a work far beyond his others: an epic

poem, the first ever written in English. These plans were delayed by his marriage to

Mary Powell, and her subsequent desertion of him. In reaction to these events,

Milton wrote a series of pamphlets calling for more leniency in the church’s position

on divorce. This brought him both greater publicity and angry criticism from

throughout the religious establishment in England. When the Second Civil War

ended in 1648, with King Charles dethroned and executed, Milton welcomed the

new parliament and wrote pamphlets in its support. After serving for a few years in a

civil position, he retired briefly to his house in Westminster, for his eyesight was

failing. By 1652 he was completely blind.

Despite his disability, Milton reentered civil service under the Protectorate of

Oliver Cromwell, the military general who ruled the British Isles from 1653 to 1658.

Two years after Cromwell’s death, Milton’s worst fears were realized–the

Restoration brought Charles II back to the throne, and the poet had to go into hiding

to escape execution. However, he had already begun work on the great English

epic which he had planned so long before: Paradise Lost. Now he had the

opportunity to work on it in earnest. It was published in 1667, a year after the Great

Fire of London. The greatness of the epic was immediately recognized, and the

admiring comments of the respected poet Dryden helped restore Milton to favor. He

spent the ensuing years at his residence in Bunhill, still writing prolifically. In 1671,

he published Paradise Regained, the sequel to his great epic. Milton died on the

8th of November, 1674, at home.

Milton took public stances on a great number of issues, but most important

to the reading of Paradise Lost are his positions on religion. In Milton’s time, the

Anglican Church (or Church of England) had split into the high Anglican, moderate

Anglican, and Puritan (Presbyterian) sects. Milton was a Presbyterian. This

denomination called for the abolishment of bishops in the church (which existed

under the Anglican system). Milton, however, gradually took his views further–he

called for the removal of all priests, whom he referred to as “hirelings.” He had no

problem at all with the division of Protestants into more and smaller sects. Instead,

he thought it was a sign of healthy self-examination, and believed that each

individual Christian should be his own church, without any establishment to

encumber him. These beliefs (and his many pamphlets supporting them) prompted

his break with the Presbyterians before 1650. From then on Milton preached only for

the complete abolishment of all church establishments, and kept his own private

religion, close to Presbyterian Calvinism but differing in a few key ways. This

helped to make Paradise Lost both a righteous independent saga and a universal

epic.

313