



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and figurative language across literary time periods. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

How Soon Hath Time When I Consider How My Light Is Spent

Poetry by John Milton

Meet the Author

John Milton 1608–1674

John Milton decided early in life that he would become an important writer, a goal that he accomplished without question. Amid political upheavals and personal struggles, he produced work that places him in the company of England's most revered poets. His crowning achievement, *Paradise Lost*, is widely accepted as the finest epic poem in the English language.

Youthful Dreams As a youth, Milton applied himself eagerly to his studies, often reading by candlelight until the early hours of morning. In 1625, at the age of 16, he entered Christ's College at Cambridge University. Although he was critical of the school's rigid curriculum, he remained there for seven years, eventually earning a master's degree in 1632. After leaving Cambridge, he continued his education independently, reading history, literature, and philosophy and writing his first eight sonnets.

A Dedicated Puritan When civil war erupted in 1642, Milton, a critic of the monarchy, allied himself with the Puritan faction, the Roundheads, who supported Parliament over the king. During this time Milton produced very little poetry, instead writing various political tracts and pamphlets

in support of a republican government. Following the execution of Charles I in 1649, a republic was established under the Puritan leadership of Oliver Cromwell. Milton was appointed to a post as one of Cromwell's secretaries, with duties that included handling foreign correspondence and writing defenses of the actions of the Puritan leadership.

Blind Despair The year of 1652 was one of tragedy for Milton. His wife, Mary, died shortly after giving birth to their third daughter, Deborah. Weeks later, Milton suffered the death of his infant son, John. Compounding his misery, Milton's eyesight, weak since childhood, failed completely. It was a shattering year for a man who had dedicated his life to family, faith, and literature.

Crowning Achievement Around 1658, shortly before the restoration of the monarchy, Milton began work on a poem he had been planning since he was 19, a great Christian epic that would "justify the ways of God to men." Using the biblical account of the Fall of Man as his basic source, Milton dictated long sentences in rhythmic blank verse to his daughters and various assistants and friends. After five years, he completed his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, achieving what many had considered utterly impossible.

Author Online

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DID YOU KNOW?

John Milton ...

- coined the word *pandemonium*.
- loved the Arthurian legends and nearly based his great English epic on them.
- deeply influenced the writing of J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In “How Soon Hath Time” and “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” Milton offers readers powerful glimpses into his Puritan beliefs and practices. In each sonnet he experiences a profound crisis in which he strongly questions his ability to serve God. Milton conveys the intensity of his emotions through his use of **figurative language**—words that communicate ideas beyond their literal meanings. As you read these works of personal meditation, pay close attention to the following types of figurative language:

- **Personification**—an expression in which human qualities are attributed to an object, an animal, or an idea. For example, Milton gives human qualities to time: *How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth.* . . .
- **Metaphor**—an expression that makes a comparison between two seemingly unlike things. For example, Milton compares his youth to a delayed spring: *My hasting days fly on with full career, / But my late spring no bud or blossom show’th.*

READING STRATEGY: CLARIFY MEANING

When reading works by Milton, it is important to stop and **clarify meaning** by rereading and restating difficult sentences. Be aware of the following as you read the selections:

- **Archaic language**—words that were once in common use but that are now considered old-fashioned or out-of-date
- **Inverted syntax**—sentence structure in which the expected order of words is reversed

As you read each sonnet, use a chart like the one shown to record and restate examples of archaic language and inverted syntax.

“How Soon Hath Time”	
Archaic Language	Inverted Syntax
“hath” (has) line 1	“That I to manhood am arrived so near” (That I am arrived so near to manhood) line 6



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What are life’s major DISAPPOINTMENTS?

John Milton, one of England’s most distinguished poets, was a man of great ambition and talent, but he sometimes despaired of ever achieving his goals. Ironically, he composed some of his finest sonnets during such bouts of disappointment. “How Soon Hath Time” marks the occasion of his 23rd birthday and laments the meagerness of his creative output. “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent” is an exploration of his feelings about the loss of his eyesight at the age of 43.

QUICKWRITE Think of someone you know or have read about—such as a musician or an athlete—who has suffered disappointment in trying to reach a desired goal or to realize a dream. Describe how he or she reacted to disappointment.



HOW SOON HATH TIME

John Milton

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
 Stoln on his wing my three and twentieth year!
 My hasting days fly on with full career,
 But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th.
5 Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,
 That I to manhood am arrived so near,
 And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
 That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
10 It shall be still in strictest measure even
 To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven;
 All is, if I have grace to use it so,
 As ever in my great Taskmaster's eye. **A**

3 career: speed.

5 my semblance . . . truth: my youthful appearance might keep you from recognizing the truth.

8 that . . . endu'th: that endows some early achievers.

14 Taskmaster's eye: a reference to God as an authority that imposes and oversees work.

A FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE
Reread the poem. Examine Milton's use of **personification** in lines 1–2 and 9–12. How does personifying Time as a thief contribute to the poem's theme?

Literary Analysis

- 1. Clarify Sentence Meaning** Restate lines 1–4 using conventional word order and modern words. What is Milton's complaint?
- 2. Make Inferences** What conclusions does Milton reach by the poem's end?



Books of Account (1600s), Franco-Flemish School. Galerie Berko, Brussels. © Fine Art Photographic Library, London/Art Resource, New York.

WHEN I CONSIDER HOW MY LIGHT IS SPENT

John Milton

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
 5 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 murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
 10 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.” **B**

3 talent: a reference to the biblical parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14–30), in which a servant is reprimanded for not putting his talent to good use.

8 fondly: foolishly.

12 thousands: thousands of angels.

13 post: hasten; travel quickly.

B CLARIFY MEANING

Use modern words to paraphrase lines 1–6 of this sonnet. In what way has blindness affected Milton?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** According to “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” at what point in Milton’s life does blindness begin to affect him and his work?
2. **Clarify** In “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” what “talent” is Milton unable to use because of his loss of sight?
3. **Paraphrase** Restate lines 7–8 of “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent.” What does Milton ask about God?



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Literary Analysis

4. **Interpret Diction and Tone** Reread lines 1–8 of “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” reviewing Milton’s **diction**, or choice of words. On the basis of phrases such as “light is spent” and “dark world and wide,” describe Milton’s **tone**, or attitude, toward his blindness.
5. **Examine Symbol** Poets typically communicate their messages using little space and few words. One literary technique they often rely on is **symbolism**—using a person, a place, or an object to represent something beyond itself. What symbolic meaning might “light” have in the second poem?
6. **Analyze Figurative Language** Review Milton’s use of figurative language in both poems. Identify each of the following examples as either **personification** or **metaphor**. How does each help communicate Milton’s intense emotions?
 - the description of his talent (lines 5–8 of the first poem)
 - the reference to patience (lines 8–14 of the second poem)
7. **Understand Poetic Form** A **Petrarchan**, or **Italian, sonnet** is a 14-line lyric poem divided into an **octave** of 8 lines and a **sestet** of 6. The octave has a rhyme scheme of *abbaabba* and raises a question or problem. The sestet has a variable rhyme scheme and resolves or comments on the problem. Choose either poem and explain how well it fits this pattern.
8. **Clarify Meaning** Review the strategies for clarifying sentence meaning listed on page 489. Which reading strategy did you find most useful in helping you understand the poems? Offer examples to support your answer.

Literary Criticism

9. **Biographical Context** Compare Milton’s spiritual crisis in “How Soon Hath Time” with that in “When I Consider How My Life Is Spent.” What do these events reveal about Milton’s personality? Cite details to support your ideas.

What are life’s major **DISAPPOINTMENTS?**

Is it better to resist sadness caused by a major loss or to embrace it? Why?