

## Milton, “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso”: summaries

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Milton’s “companion poems” explore the pleasures associated with two competing (or perhaps complementary) lifestyles, and the attractions of two competing (or perhaps complementary) sources of artistic inspiration, with corresponding descriptions of their differing subjects and genres. Both are in a sense extended versions of Marlowe’s “Come live with me and be my love,” the paradigmatic seduction poem, though here it is the poet who is being seduced: which life, or which art, is more appealing? Graceful, urbane, evocatively descriptive, and technically virtuoso, these two poems have exerted an enormous influence on later English poetry.

### L’Allegro (“The happy or cheerful person”)

- 1-10 prelude: speaker ritually banishes melancholy and disease, assoc. with hell and darkness
- 11-24 welcomes Mirth (fair vs dark), free (vs cave): known in heaven and earth. She is described as the daughter of Venus (love) and Bacchus (wine, revelry), sister to brightness and bloom. *Or* (typically Miltonic alternative genealogy) she is daughter of Zephyr (west wind) and Aurora (dawn). Mirth embodies time of day the poem celebrates, and is connected with May rituals (fertility, community), and flowers. She is buxom (yielding) and gentle.
- 25-36 Come! And bring personified friends: Jest, Jollity, Hebe (youth), Sport, Laughter; followed by the mountain nymph Liberty (political resonance?) or Freedom (not license or luxury).
- 33-48 speaker (“I”) enters, asks to join this crew, in pleasure: Mirth and Liberty linked. Link to lark (dawn), which pushes back darkness, and bids him (sun) good morning.
- 49-56 crowing cock scatters darkness; while infinitive (speaker, not cock) hears hounds and horns
- 57-68 “sometime walking” (speaker, presumably): he’s listing all the things he’d do *if* he joined the crew. Walks by the ploughman, milkmaid, mower, shepherd, all about to, or actually at, work. Shepherds “tell” (either tallying sheep, or telling stories, or both). Note links to pastoral and georgic poetry.
- 69-80 Straightway speaker eyes new pleasures (in the imagination?): landscape, mountains, brooks, rivers, towers (country estate). Note links to these as subjects of poetry and fiction.
- 81-90 Hard by is a cottage; shepherds meet for lunch; Phyllis needs to haste (present emphatic) to work, a different job whatever the season (seasonal rounds and rural rituals)
- 91-117 Then to a local village, on a holiday: bells, dancing, all day; then indoors to nutbrown ale; and stories (note literary link) about English lore (Mab, Friar, Hobgoblin, Robin Goodfellow): Robin joins with others in unending toil of rural life; he leaves at dawn. The tales done, the villagers go to bed.
- 117-24 Then cities please us (= speaker): social life, people, ladies, beauty
- 125-30 And city marriages, feasts, revelry, masques (note links to romance): poem then signals this vision (entire poem?) as fantasy (the sights young poets dream “on summer’s eve by haunted stream”)
- 131-44 Art is part of this “ideal” day (implicitly throughout, explicitly here): theater of Jonson, Shakespeare (learned, and “native” comedy respectively); and music, married to verse (= song): “linked sweetness long drawn out” well describes technique of Milton’s own verse.
- 145-52 Invokes Orpheus (archetypal poet figure): we hear music that would make *him* notice: perhaps the

music, the verse, the poet hopes to create if he joins Mirth and her crew?

151-52 These are the delights, *if* Mirth can give them, that would make speaker join her.

## **II Pensive** (“The thoughtful or contemplative person”)

1-10 prelude: ritually banishes vain joys and folly (note dig at parentage)

11-30 enter Melancholy (link to holy, divine, saintly wisdom) garbed in devotional colors. Her parents were solitary Saturn and Vesta: link to secrecy, shades, twilight

31-44 Come! Key words: devout, nun, pensive, slow, sober, steadfast, black, even, holy

45-64 Her companions: Peace, Quiet, Fast (Milton had a thing about food), Leisure, Retirement: but main companion (equivalent to Liberty) is Contemplation; friend Silence, or Philomel (nightingale): melancholic person’s favorite bird (vs lark): sweet and sad

65-76 speaker walks in evening (‘unseen’ vs ‘not unseen’: solitary), under moon; hears curfew bell (8 o’clock), over sullen roar of distant waves on rocky beach

77-96 if weather (air) not permit, then move indoors, by a quiet fireside; bellman’s charm; or stay up late to read and study, as Milton did as a youth. Speaker reads philosophy, Hermes Trismegistus (ancient mystic text, popular in the Renaissance, of gnostic or hermetic writing; they thought it ancient Egyptian, but it was late Greek)

97-102 art associated with Melancholy includes tragedy: ancient, or (rarely!) contemporary

103-20 or other forms of art: Musaeus (father of priestly poetry); Orpheus in underworld; or Chaucerian Squire’s tale; or “sage and solemn” Spenser (note succinct definition of allegory)

121-130 speaker studies all night: morning arrives, but somber, raining, windy

131-154 speaker walks abroad: to (Tolkienesque) woods, quiet, ancient, dark and deep; pauses by a brook; sleeps; dreams; sweet music (Contemplation)

155-60 But let’s not forget studious cloister (either religious or academic); storied window (stained glass): dim religious light.

161-66 church service: organ music, devotional ecstasy (“High Anglican”?)

167-76 old age: hermitage; solitude, cell; prophet: these are all the pleasures Melancholy gives: and “I with thee do chose to live”: how much weight should we give the lack of conditional?

### **Questions to ponder or answer:**

- 1) Describe briefly what actually happens in each poem.
- 2) List a range of things, events, figures, activities associated with each day.
- 3) Is one presented as more attractive than the other? That is, if it’s a competition between two lifestyles, does one win? Why or why not?