How Soon Hath Time
When I Consider How My Light Is Spent
Poetry by John Milton

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.

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.

NOTABLE QUOTE
“Awake, arise, or be forever fall’n.”

FYI
Did you know that 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 trilogy?

Author Online
For more on John Milton, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.
**LITERARY ANALYSIS: ALLUSION**

An allusion is a brief reference to a fictional or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage. In ordinary conversation, we might allude to a literary character or historical figure by calling a miserly person a Scrooge or a treacherous person a Benedict Arnold. In literature, writers often use allusions as a type of shorthand language to add color and vigor to their works. Most of the allusions Milton includes in his great Christian epic come from biblical stories and classical literature, such as Greek and Roman mythology. For example, in line 34, Milton calls Satan “Th’ infernal serpent,” a reference to Satan’s temptation of Eve in the Bible. As you read *Paradise Lost*, refer to the sidenotes to help you interpret the poem’s many allusions.

**READING STRATEGY: READING DIFFICULT TEXTS**

In writing his masterpiece, Milton employed a dramatic writing style, one that most readers find challenging. Here are a few strategies you can use to confront common difficulties in reading *Paradise Lost*:

- Replace unclear pronouns with names.
- Simplify difficult syntax (word order) by paraphrasing. For a difficult sentence, first identify its subject and verb. Then sort out the meaning conveyed in extra phrases and clauses.
- Use sidenotes to interpret archaic expressions, words and phrases we no longer use.
- Avoid becoming overwhelmed by small details. Instead, focus on the thoughts, words, and actions of the main character.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to take notes about Satan, the main character in this portion of the poem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satan</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa’s brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th’ Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. A
And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th’ upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know’st; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast abyss,

4 one greater Man: Jesus Christ.

6 Heavenly Muse: the source of Milton’s inspiration—here identified with the Spirit of God that spoke to Moses.

7 Oreb . . . Sinai: Mounts Horeb and Sinai, on which Moses heard the voice of God.

8 shepherd: Moses; the chosen seed: the Jews.

10–11 Sion Hill . . . Siloa’s brook: places in Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews.

15 Aonian (ā-o’nē-ən) mount: Mount Helicon in Greece, sacred to Muses.

A ALLUSION
Reread lines 1–16, using the sidenotes to interpret the various allusions. What will be the subject of Milton’s poem?
And mad’st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine; what is low, raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

Say first (for Heaven hides nothing from thy view,
Nor the deep tract of Hell), say first what cause
Moved our grand parents, in that happy state,
Favored of Heaven so highly, to fall off
From their Creator, and transgress his will
For one restraint, lords of the world besides?
Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?
Th’ infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile,
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived
The mother of mankind, what time his pride
Had cast him out from Heaven, with all his host
Of rebel angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in glory above his peers,
He trusted to have equaled the Most High,
If he opposed; and with ambitious aim
Against the throne and monarchy of God
Raised impious war in Heaven and battle proud,
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
Hurled headlong flaming from th’ ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy th’ Omnipotent to arms.

Nine times the space that measures day and night
To mortal men, he with his horrid crew
Lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf
Confounded though immortal. But his doom
Reserved him to more wrath; for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes,
That witnessed huge affliction and dismay,
Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate.
At once, as far as angels ken, he views
The dismal situation waste and wild:
A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great furnace flamed; yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all, but torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed:
Such place Eternal Justice had prepared
For those rebellious; here their prison ordained
In utter darkness and their portion set
As far removed from God and light of Heaven
As from the center thrice to th’ utmost pole.
O how unlike the place from whence they fell!
There the companions of his fall, o’erwhelmed
With floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire,
He soon discerns; and, weltering by his side,
One next himself in power, and next in crime,
Long after known in Palestine, and named
Beëlzebub. To whom th’ arch-enemy,
And thence in Heaven called Satan, with bold words
Breaking the horrid silence thus began:
“If thou beest he—but O how fallen! how changed
From him who in the happy realms of light
Clothed with transcendent brightness didst outshine
Myriads, though bright! if he whom mutual league,
United thoughts and counsels, equal hope
And hazard in the glorious enterprise,
Joined with me once, now misery hath joined
In equal ruin; into what pit thou seest
From what height fallen, so much the stronger proved
He with his thunder: and till then who knew
The force of those dire arms? Yet not for those,
Nor what the potent Victor in his rage
Can else inflict, do I repent or change,
Though changed in outward luster, that fixed mind
And high disdain, from sense of injured merit,
That with the Mightiest raised me to contend,
And to the fierce contention brought along
Innumerable force of spirits armed,
That durst dislike his reign, and me preferring,
His utmost power with adverse power opposed
In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven,
And shook his throne. What though the field be lost?
All is not lost: the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?
That glory never shall his wrath or might
Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace
With suppliant knee, and deify his power
Who from the terror of this arm so late
Doubted his empire—that were low indeed;
That were an ignominy and shame beneath
This downfall; since, by fate, the strength of gods
And this empyreal substance cannot fail;
Since, through experience of this great event,
In arms not worse, in foresight much advanced,
We may with more successful hope resolve
To wage by force or guile eternal war,
Irreconcilable to our grand Foe,
Who now triumphs, and in th' excess of joy
Sole reigning holds the tyranny of Heaven.”

So spake th' apostate angel, though in pain,
Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair;
And him thus answered soon his bold compeer:
“O prince, O chief of many thronèd powers,
That led th' embattled seraphim to war
Under thy conduct, and in dreadful deeds
Fearless, endangered Heaven's perpetual King,
And put to proof his high supremacy,
Whether upheld by strength, or chance, or fate!
Too well I see and rue the dire event
That with sad overthrow and foul defeat
Hath lost us Heaven, and all this mighty host
In horrible destruction laid thus low,
As far as gods and heavenly essences
Can perish: for the mind and spirit remains
Invincible, and vigor soon returns,
Though all our glory extinct, and happy state
Here swallowed up in endless misery.
But what if he our Conqueror (whom I now
Of force believe almighty, since no less
Than such could have o'erpowered such force as ours)
Have left us this our spirit and strength entire,
Strongly to suffer and support our pains,
That we may so suffice his veneful ire,
Or do him mightier service as his thralls

DIFFICULT TEXTS

Using the sidenotes, interpret the various archaic expressions in lines 111–124. Does Satan regret rebelling against God? Support your response with details.

112 with suppliant (sūp'li-ənt) knee: pleading in a kneeling position.
114 doubted: feared for.
115 ignominy (iŋ'na-mi'nə): disgrace.
117 empyreal (i m-pîr'əl): heavenly.
By right of war, whate’rer his business be,
Here in the heart of Hell to work in fire,
Or do his errands in the gloomy deep?
What can it then avail though yet we feel
Strength undiminished, or eternal being
To undergo eternal punishment?”

Whereunto with speedy words th’ arch-fiend replied:
“Fallen cherub, to be weak is miserable,
Doing or suffering: but of this be sure,
To do aught good never will be our task,
But ever to do ill our sole delight,
As being the contrary to his high will
Whom we resist. If then his providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
Our labor must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil;
Which ofttimes may succeed, so as perhaps
Shall grieve him, if I fail not, and disturb
His inmost counsels from their destined aim.
But see! the angry Victor hath recalled
His ministers of vengeance and pursuit
Back to the gates of Heaven; the sulphurous hail,
Shot after us in storm, o’erblown hath laid
The fiery surge that from the precipice
Of Heaven received us falling; and the thunder,
Winged with red lightning and impetuous rage,
Perhaps hath spent his shafts, and ceases now
To bellow through the vast and boundless deep.
Let us not slip th’ occasion, whether scorn
Or satiate fury yield it from our Foe.
Seest thou yon dreary plain, forlorn and wild,
The seat of desolation, void of light,
Save what the glimmering of these livid flames
Casts pale and dreadful? Thither let us tend
From off the tossing of these fiery waves;
There rest, if any rest can harbor there;
And reassembling our afflicted powers,
Consult how we may henceforth most offend
Our enemy, our own loss how repair,
How overcome this dire calamity,
What reinforcement we may gain from hope,
If not, what resolution from despair.”

Thus Satan talking to his nearest mate
With head uplift above the wave, and eyes
That sparkling blazed; his other parts besides
Prone on the flood, extended long and large
Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge
As whom the fables name of monstrous size,
Titanian or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,
Briareos or Typhon, whom the den
By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works

159 aught: at all.

172 laid: calmed.

175 impetuous (ɪm-pɛtʃˈʊə-s): violently forceful.

178 slip th’ occasion: miss the chance.

179 satiate (səˈʃē-t): satisfied.

186 afflicted powers: stricken troops.

190 reinforcement: increase of strength.

196 rood: a unit of measure, between six and eight yards.

197–200 as whom . . . Tarsus held: In Greek mythology, both the huge Titans—of whom Briareos was one—and the earth-born giant Typhon battled unsuccessfully against Jove (Zeus), just as Satan rebelled against God. Zeus defeated Typhon in Asia Minor, near the town of Tarsus.

201 Leviathan (ləˈviθən): a huge sea beast mentioned in the Bible—here identified with the whale by Milton.
Created hugest that swim th’ ocean-stream.
Him, haply, slumbering on the Norway foam,
The pilot of some small night-foundered skiff,
Deeming some island, oft, as seamen tell,
With fixed anchor in his scaly rind
Moors by his side under the lee, while night
Invests the sea, and wishèd morn delays:
So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay,
Chained on the burning lake; nor ever thence
Had risen or heaved his head, but that the will
And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
Left him at large to his own dark designs,
That with reiterated crimes he might
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
Evil to others, and enraged might see
How all his malice served but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace, and mercy shown
On man by him seduced, but on himself
Treble confusion, wrath, and vengeance poured.

Forthwith upright he rears from off the pool
His mighty stature; on each hand the flames
Driven backward slope their pointing spires, and rolled
In billows, leave i’ th’ midst a horrid vale.
Then with expanded wings he steers his flight
Aloft, incumbent on the dusky air,
That felt unusual weight; till on dry land
He lights, if it were land that ever burned
With solid, as the lake with liquid fire,
And such appeared in hue; as when the force
Of subterranean wind transports a hill
Torn from Pelorus or the shattered side
Of thundering Etna, whose combustible
And fueled entrails thence conceiving fire,
Sublimed with mineral fury, aid the winds,
And leave a singèd bottom all involved
With stench and smoke; such resting found the sole
Of unblest feet. Him followed his next mate,
Both glorying to have ’scaped the Stygian flood
As gods, and by their own recovered strength,
Not by the sufferance of supernal power.

“Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,”
Said then the lost archangel, “this the seat
That we must change for Heaven? this mournful gloom

204 night-foundered: overtaken by the darkness of night.

208 invests: covers.

F ALLUSION
In lines 192–208, Milton compares Satan to several mythological and biblical figures. What do you learn about Satan from the allusions to Typhon and Leviathan?

G DIFFICULT TEXTS
Reread the sentence in lines 209–220, identifying its subject and verb. Which details suggest that Satan has limited control over his own future?

226 incumbent on: resting upon.

228 lights: rests after flight.

230–233 the force . . . Etna: an underground wind moves a hill torn from Cape Pelorus (pə-lôr’əs), on the coast of Sicily, or Mount Etna, a nearby volcano. It was formerly thought that earthquakes were caused by underground winds.

235 sublimed: vaporized.

236–237 involved with: wrapped in.

239 the Stygian (stî’-ə-an) flood: the river Styx—in Greek mythology, one of the rivers of the underworld.

241 sufferance of supernal (sûr’ə-nal) power: permission of heavenly power.
For that celestial light? Be it so, since he
Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid
What shall be right: farthest from him is best,
Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme
Above his equals. Farewell, happy fields,
Where joy forever dwells! Hail, horrors! hail,
Infernal world! and thou, profoundest Hell,
Receive thy new possessor, one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence.
Here we may reign secure; and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.
But wherefore let we then our faithful friends,
Th’ associates and copartners of our loss,
Lie thus astonished on th’ oblivious pool,
And call them not to share with us their part
In this unhappy mansion, or once more
With rallied arms to try what may be yet
Regained in Heaven, or what more lost in Hell?”
Comprehension

1. **Recall** Where do the fallen angels find themselves after their rebellion?

2. **Recall** Who is their leader?

3. **Summarize** In your own words, describe the connection between the rebellion of the fallen angels and “man’s first disobedience.”

Literary Analysis

4. **Draw Conclusions About the Speaker** Reread the opening invocation, lines 1–26. Do you view the speaker as humble, ambitious, or some combination of these? Support your answer with specific references.

5. **Understand Imagery** Generations of readers have been captivated by Milton’s description of hell in *Paradise Lost*. Reread lines 59–74, noting Milton’s use of imagery, or words and phrases that appeal to the senses. Which image is the most vivid? Explain your response.

6. **Interpret Difficult Texts** Review the character chart you created as you read the selection. Summarize Satan’s words, thoughts, and behavior in each of the following scenes. Why do you suppose Satan expresses despair in private but resolve in public?
   - his thoughts as he lies in the fiery water (lines 53–58)
   - his initial impression of Beëlzebub (lines 84–94)
   - his first speech to Beëlzebub (lines 106–124)
   - his final speech (lines 242–270)

7. **Compare and Contrast Characters** A **foil** is a character who provides a striking contrast to other characters. In what way does Beëlzebub serve as a foil to Satan? Cite details to support your response.

8. **Analyze Allusions** Review the mythological, biblical, and geographical allusions that Milton uses in lines 192–241. Why do you think Milton draws on so many different sources for his description of Satan?

9. **Evaluate Idea** The 14th-century poet Dante, whom Milton admired, defined **pride** as “love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one’s neighbor” and ranked it as the very worst of all sins. Do you think Milton agreed with Dante’s understanding of pride? Support your opinion with details from the selection.

Literary Criticism

10. **Critical Interpretations** In an essay on Milton, the 19th-century historian and literary critic Thomas Babington Macauley observed, “Poetry which relates to the beings of another world ought to be at once mysterious and picturesque. That of Milton is so.” Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Give evidence to support your view.