On His Blindness

John Milton

About Poet: John Milton (1608-1674)

He was the greatest English Poet of the Puritan Age. He is regarded as the most sublime and serious poet of the English language. He wrote almost all kinds of poetry with equal success. His works: ‘Paradise Lost’, and ‘Paradise Regained’. (Epics), ‘Samson Agonistes’, (A classical Greek tragedy), ‘Lycidas’ (A Pastoral Elegy), ‘Comus’ (Masque) and ‘On His Blindness’ (A Sonnet-a personal poetry-written in 1652)

About the Poem: It is one of the finest Sonnets. It reflects the personal sorrow and faith of the poet. In 1652, when the blindness overtook him, he felt great pain due to it. Thus it is a moving and heart-rending personal sonnet. It presents his anguish at the early blindness, his sense of mission in life and his unshakable faith in God and religion.

Summary of the Poem (Sonnet): The poet has become blind when he hardly crossed half span of his life. The whole world appeared to him dark and gloomy. His God given poetic power seems useless to him. Because of his blind state, he cannot write poem and becomes helpless. In this state, he asks himself...“whether God requires full work from a Man who had lost eye-sight?” In such moments of doubts, patience comes to console him. It consoles the poet that God did not require the return of his gifts. God’s heart is kind and merciful. Thousand of Angles are at his command. They rendered their service to God. Those persons, who bear patiently the sufferings and sorrows of life, could be good servants of Him. Those who pray silently and wait for His mercy are his real devotees. These feelings bring relief to his aggrieved heart. He calmly resigns himself to the will of God. Now, he wishes to make the best use of the poetic gift, by composing poems in praise of God. Thus he reflects his faith in God and resignation...“Who best bear His mild yoke, They serve him best...”

Q-1: Appreciate ‘On His Blindness’ as a personal Sonnet Or Critically appreciate Milton’s autobiographical note in this Sonnet.

Ans: John Milton was the second great poet of England. He stands next only to Shakespeare. He wrote many sublime and serious poems. He regarded the vocation of the poet, lofty and exalted. Almost all his works, epics, sonnets or tragedies, reflect his personal experiences of his life. In this sonnet, he presents his sorrow, pain, faith and will of God...

This Sonnet has pleasing thyme and words. Many words, which are used in this poem are of ‘oldusage.’ For example, the words like ‘Ere’, means ‘before’, ‘bidding’-‘command’, ‘Post’ means ‘haste’, ‘waite’ means ‘wait’...are old usage of words. Milton has also used the older forms of words and spellings like ‘doth’ (does) and yoak (yoke).

This is a sonnet, a poem of 14 lines, has a rhyme-scheme “abba, abba, cdecde.”
It is composed in 'patriarchal' form with two sections 'octave' and 'sestet'. In 'octave' – first 8 lines, the poet's problem of losing eye sight, blindness, pain, and complain-anger are presented. While in sestet, the anger and complain are resolved. Here the poet leaves the sorrow and accepts God's will.

The poem is composed in 'lambic Pentameter' with certain modulation of spondee eg... “When I/ consider how/ my light/ is spent (x /)...working its’ structure, the poet has used the 'structural-words' like ‘when’, ‘before’, ‘that’ etc... The poet has often used personal pronouns like ‘I’, my ‘my light’, ‘my days’, ‘my soul’, ‘I found’, ‘I consider’ etc... Milton has used fine figures of speech like assonance like...“when-spent my–light, half dark... In the line “but patience to prevent”, we find the use of personification as the spirit of patience is here personified (made alive). Thus through various phonological structural and grammatical devices, Milton sings about himself, his painful heart and lofty soul. The Sonnet thus, is full of pathos, pain-due to his blindness-misfortune and the poet’s regaining faith over suffering.

At semantic level, it is an autobiographical sonnet. It is Milton’s one of the finest lyrics. In beginning lines, the poet complains that he has become blind before...“half of his life has passed.” At such an early age of life, the blindness has made him bitter and angry. He says painfully that ‘the world appears to him, dark and gloomy.’ He feels sad when he thinks that his “one talent”- the gift of writing poetry is lying useless before him. In this painful state, he cannot serve God by the use of his talent. Thus, the Sonnet opens with the complaint as... his talent ‘lodg’d with’ him useless.

In such a grieved heart, he asks: whether God requires full work from a man who has been blind? In deep anguish, he asks...”Doth God exact day-labour light deny’d?” Does he expect him to write a noble poetry when he has made him blind? Such questions show poet’s feelings of despair. He feels pain for his misfortune, He doubts about God’s ways to man.

But the very next moment, he asserts his ‘firm faith; in God and religion. He consoles himself with the thought that ‘they also serve God who ‘stand’ and wait’ and suffer patiently. He can serve the God who bears the ‘mild punishment-given by God. God has no need of Man’s services. He has thousands of angels at ‘His command’. He thinks God does not require Man’s labour. The poet wishes that His comman should be carried out without murmuring any complaints. The poet thinks man must submit himself completely to the ‘will of God’. The best service to God is ‘to stand and wait.’ T God is also served by those who do not complain as the poet has done. A true-devoutee silently waits for his orders.

Thus, this Sonnet is moving and heart-rending personal document. It brings us close to the mind, heart and religious character of the blind poet. It brings his early anguish at his blindness. At the end, we find his unshakable faith in God and religion. It is, indeed the early reaction to total blindness. The poet’s faith in God is brought out clearly. We study ‘religious temperament and spiritual character of Milton- the poet. It also reflects his faith in the ‘greatness’ and ‘mercy’ of God. His noble soul reflects when he utters... “Who best bear His mild Yoke, They serve him best...”
In brief, it is a personal sonnet. It is sublime in tone. It is well-structured and deep meaningful for devoutee and his nature.