A Latent Complaint in Milton’s "On His Blindness"

陈玉伟

(School of English Language Department, Central South University, Changsha 410083, China)

Abstract: John Milton’s "On His Blindness" is one of his renowned sonnets, which takes on the unique characteristics in terms of style and theme. "On His Blindness" was always regarded as the one that reflected Milton’s life and illustrated the heavy influence of Puritanism, in which Milton presented his calm attitude toward the blindness and deep reverence for God. However, if it is read between lines, more ideas about Milton’s confusion and latent complaint will be felt. This paper will adopt the idea of close reading of New Criticism to analyze what has been missed and misread through years in John Milton’s "On His Blindness".

Key words: "On His Blindness"; New Criticism; close reading latent complaint

1 Introduction

"On His Blindness" is one of John Milton’s renowned sonnets, which takes on the unique characteristics in terms of style and theme. The standard subject matter of early sonnets was the torments of sexual love, usually within a courtly love convention, but Milton extended this sheer subject to the politics and personal life, of which "On His Blindness" was one of the products. Written after Milton became totally blind, "On His Blindness" was always read autobiographically, and regarded as the one that reflected Milton’s life and illustrated the heavy influence of Puritanism, in which Milton presented his deep reverence for God. Usually, it is concluded that Milton is a loyal puritan who accepted everything that God presented to him without any complaint. However, if it is read between lines, more ideas about Milton’s latent complaint will be felt. This paper will adopt the idea of close reading of New Criticism to analyze what has been missed and misread or ignored through years in John Milton’s "On His Blindness".

2 The Image of a Loyal Puritan Presented in the Sonnet

New Criticism was a movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. New Critics focused on the individual words and syntax of a text of a work and tried to exclude the reader’s response, the author’s intention, historical and cultural contexts from their analysis. New Critics emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, which became the main idea of New Criticism without the consideration of biographical and sociological matters. This paper tries to analyze the words and phrases of the structure of this poem, to get a different idea.

"On His Blindness" fully presents a puritan’s obedience and submission to the majesty God from the beginning to the end. The first eight lines, the speaker tells the situation that he now is experiencing, which is "dark world and wide" (2) with his blindness. He is trapped by the darkness, helpless and hopeless, since he cannot do anything that he intends to. As a puritan, self-reliance and industry are the important living principles, however, he cannot be self-reliant since his blindness keeps him from doing everything on his own, let alone industry, working for the liberty for the people of the world. He is annoyed and fondly asks God "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" (7) to release his hopelessness and dissatisfaction. This question that the speaker brings forward may be interpreted as his unsatisfaction of his present situation and complaint of the treatment that God imparts to him. However, he immediately realizes that his question of "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" (7) to God may challenge the authority of God. Then the following, he gives the answer on the instant when he put forward that question to himself "God doth not need/ Either man’s work or his own gifts" (9–10).

As the Puritanism presents, human beings are predestined by God before they are born. Therefore, the speaker accepts his destiny of being blindness. Since being blindness is one part of his life, he must accept this and try to adjust himself and to "best bear his mild yoke" (11) as well. God’s majesty and authority is fully presented in "Thousands at his bidding speed/ And post o’er land and ocean without rest" (12–13), which tells the reader that all the creatures must follow God’s bidding. As for those who have not got God’s bidding, should "stand and wait" (14), which is another way to serve God. The speaker, in the end of the sonnet, accepts his density that God preset for him and serves God with "stand and wait" (14). If this poem is stopped to read here, only a loyal puritan image is emerged from the literal lines, and some subtle feelings will be missed. The next part will mainly focus on a third voice of "Patience" to explore more ideas about this sonnet.

3 The Latent Complaint of the Speaker in the Sonnet

Superficially, the speaker in the poem accepts his destiny without complaint or seemed confusion. However, if it is read between lines, we may find that the "Patience" in line 8 as an intrusive voice tells something different, which may express the speaker’s latent complaint since "my soul more bent/To serve therewith my Maker/ and present /My true account"(4–6).

The intrusive voice is a strategy adopted by Milton here to offer a resolution different through which the author could provide "a
very different kind of solution to the problem if poetic inspiration:
forget about yourself, your poetic ambitions, and the worldly ambi-
tions that relate to your poetic ones." I

By adopting the third voice of "Patience" as the intrusive one
to come to the conclusion, but shifting the poem from past to pres-
ent tense, Milton here is able to present "Patience’s message with-
out pretending that it is palatable to accept this fact of being blind
in order to conceal his confusion and complaint. Milton the writer
must understand "Patience"’s doctrine, but Milton the speaker does
not acquiesce. In sonnet "On His Blindness", Milton presents a
speaker who has been unable to discipline himself into the "correct"
emotional state, unwilling to make the transition from rebel-
liousness to submission. Significantly, "When I consider" is not a
past-tense poem. This sonnet represents a habitual present, a recur-
ring condition, and a fact that the crucial situation that torments the
speaker in the first eight lines of this sonnet has not been van-
quished permanently. They may return often to plague him. The
speaker addresses all the time "when I consider how my light is
spent" (1), not the one time in the past when he considered, but ev-
ery time he gets into a self-pitying state, which he has done repeat-
edly and anticipates doing again. In this sonnet, the speaker has not
yet capitulated. He actually has a notional understanding that "God
doth not need". So in this poem, Milton makes use of the strategy of
closing a poem with an intrusive voice to articulate an understand-
ing of individual’s relationship to God’s sovereignty.

"Patience", as the intrusive voice, on the one hand, speaks for
the author to state what the he cannot speak directly; on the other
hand, it also could conceal the true feeling of the author. The speak-
er in this poem believes that he has something to offer. But because
his "Light is spent", "that one talent" that he possesses is "Lodg’d
with me useless": he has nothing to show, no way to demonstrate his
"true account", therefore, the "Patience" calls for the active wait-
ning. However, its just kind of consolation to the speaker who fears
that who will stay ‘in this dark world and wide’ forever. This implies
that this state of affairs is something over which he has no control,
since God may "chide". Although Milton does not use imperatives
or address God directly, the self-representation in the 8th line
strongly implies the need for response. The unjustness of the situa-
tion and the self-righteous rhetorical question insist on one re-
sponse from God and conceal the author’s latent complaint.

4 Conclusion

John Milton, as a faithful puritan, always lives up to the ideals
of self-reliance, frugality and industry to fulfill his mission. The
merit of Puritanism leads him to conduct a fruitful life. ‘On His
Blindness used to be a good example to illustrate his strong belief
on Puritanism. The piety on God helps him make through the disas-
ter of blindness that he comes across, and accept that this is another
way of serving God, although he at first gets frustrated and confused.

However, from the above analysis of close reading of this poem
through the words, phrases and structure, a new idea emerges from
the words. Literally, the words and phrases tell the reader of a loyal
puritan who accepts his destiny without any complaint. While the
intrusion of "Patience" seems to tell readers the speaker’s obedi-
ence, actually, it speaks out his murmured complaint in a hidden
way. According to the above study, we may conclude that the author
does not satisfy what he has achieved, and does not want to remain
in passive waiting as a way to serve God as well. He uses an intru-
sive voice to speak out his mild complaint which he dares not direct-
ly. So does in his real life. With his great ambition, blind as he is,
he continues to work hard for the public official and also complete
his three epics, especially Paradise Lost which is the great achieve-
ment in his life as well as the literary field.

Note:
1 Thuckstun, Margaret.Resisting Patience in Milton’s Sonnet 19.

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