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## **The Impact of English Civil War through the Interregnum on English Literature: A Contextual Study of John Milton and his Works**

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### **ABSTRACT**

John Milton, the English poet, is one of the most renowned poets in the history of English literature. But before he published his most epic poem *Paradise Lost* in 1667, the decorated English poet put out many works from 1640s to 1650s while serving as a civil servant for the Commonwealth during the English Civil War (1642-1651) and Interregnum (1649-1660) period. This period in British history is considered to be one of the most politically turbulent having far-reaching impact on the literature produced during this time. Taking this socio-cultural and political context of this period into consideration, this paper surveys two of Milton's writings, namely *Eikonoklastes* (1649) and *Areopagitica* (1644) to ascertain how they reflect his Puritanical outlook and are in turn shaped by the prevalent milieu of the time.

**Keywords:** English Civil War, Interregnum, Puritan,

### **Introduction**

John Milton (1608-1674), a man of letters was an English poet, and later, civil servant, who had an extraordinary impact on the history of English literature. However, before we begin talking about Milton, we must talk about the English Civil war first, which paved the way for the social and political situation that inspired Milton in his literary journey as a poet, prose writer, an essayist and pamphleteer.

Russell (1974), in his book *The Origins of the English Civil War* highlights how The English Civil War, a turning point in the history of England was a series of civil wars between the Parliament and King Charles I, that changed the way the power balance between the monarchy and the government was seen. The English Civil War is perhaps the

outstanding example of the need of each generation to re-write its own history (3). Noted by Ourimi (2022), the course of the arts in England from the start of the civil war (1642) to the restoration of Charles II (1660) was a period of dislocation, disruption and change which affected all forms of art during that time. The closure of the theaters in 1642, the collapse of royal court culture, and writing that was sullied by the political situations, all of these contributed to the illusion of a hiatus in the literary tradition, what Allsopp(2021) calls a “cavalier winter” (1). This period produced a vibrant and important body of writing such as the poetry and prose of John Milton, Andrew Marvell, the cavalier poets, Katherine Philips, Margaret Cavendish, Lucy Hutchinson, Gerrard Winstanley, Thomas Hobbes, the Earl of Clarendon, Marchamont Nedham. (Allsopp, 2021).

Nigel Smith (1997), in his book *Literature and Revolution in England 1640-1660*, talks about how the new political, social and religious upheaval during the period provided both the motive and opportunity for how we define literary expression as well as the transformations of its nature. He discusses how the increase in pamphleteering and journalism because of the political influence in the writings of the poets of the time brought about a new awareness of print; and with it the authority that people exercised over print media. Through literature, people revised their understanding of themselves and attempted to transform their predicaments. (n.p.)

### **Background of Study**

The English Civil War took place in three phases: first English civil war (1642-1646), the second English civil war (1648-1649) and finally the third English civil war (1649- 1651). These series of wars and political machinations proved to be a pivotal conflict in the British history. Following Charles I’s execution, the Interregnum began in 1649. Guimaraes (2013) in her paper on utopian impulses during the interregnum, thus defines the English Interregnum, as a period of history between the second civil war and the restoration opened unlimited possibilities for shaping the country’s future and witnessed a supreme surge of political imagination. (30)

It was around this time that Oliver Cromwell and the Parliament established a republican government. Oliver Cromwell was a member of parliament who had been the leader of the parliamentarian army who had defeated Charles I’s Royalist army by the second English civil war. He was a puritan and his politics showed strong influences of his religious beliefs. Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1653, leading to a period of republican rule with increasing autocratic tendencies. During the Interregnum, Cromwell’s government, initially intended as a republic, increasingly resembled a dictatorship due to his significant power and the enforcement of Puritan moral values. Cromwell’s regime, from 1653 to 1658, thus incorporated Puritan values into its policies, enforcing a strict moral code while maintaining a republican form of government. After Cromwell’s death in 1658 and the fall of the Commonwealth, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, marking the beginning of the Restoration era. Some of the notable prose and poetry writers of the time include John Milton, Thomas Brown, Aphra Behn and John Dryden. This paper, however, largely focuses on John Milton and his works during that time.

### **Literature review**

Ourimi (2022) points out that during the interregnum, poetry was a medium of expression that served both those who continued to show their loyalty to the former monarch King Charles I, daydreaming of the restoration of his heir, as well as the advocates of the Republican and Cromwellian protectorate. (498)

Roberts (2020) in a paper on Milton's political context, notes that it is important to recognize that just as his political writings attain an extraordinary forcefulness through the use of literary devices, his poetry often overflows with political fervor and antagonism. (4)

Banashankari (2012), in a paper on the influence of Milton's religious background on his poetry, focuses on themes, theological elements and stylistic choices that reflect his deep engagement with protestant Christianity and its broader implications. It further discusses how his personal life, which was marked by his struggle with blindness and his involvement in the political upheavals of the 17<sup>th</sup> century England, infuse his work with a sense of urgency and moral clarity (1645). In his work *Areopagitica*, he advocates for intellectual liberty, grounded in his belief that truth emerges from free exchange of ideas and censorship of content hinders intellectual growth.

### **Survey of Major Literary Texts of the English Civil War Period**

As mentioned earlier, this period spanning from the beginning of the English civil war to the restoration era, was marked by significant political influences on the literary works of the time. Several such examples can be seen; John Milton, a Puritan and Republican, supported the execution of Charles I in *Eikonoklastes* (1649). He further defended Cromwell's government and even wrote against censorship in *Areopagitica* (1644). In 1646, Milton wrote *Image Breaker* as a part of his effort to challenge and undermine royalist propaganda. This work reflects his commitment to Puritan and republican principles.

Similarly, John Dryden was aligned with the commonwealth and even wrote a poem to praise Cromwell. After Cromwell's death in 1658, Dryden published the poem *Heroic Stanzas* where he portrays Cromwell as a heroic figure and talks about his role in the military and political struggles of the period thus ennobling his legacy. Another such example is Thomas Hobbes. An advocate of absolutism, Hobbes published *Leviathan* in 1651, arguing for a strong, centralized authority. He countered the parliamentary movement and supported the absolutist nature of the monarchy. He argues in *Leviathan* people should follow someone who holds absolute power so that peace and security can be maintained. Aphra Behn, an avant-garde poet and novelist is regarded as one of the first female to earn her living by writing. Although not a proponent of absolutism, Behn worked as a spy for Charles II during the Restoration and her works, such as *Oroonoko* (1688), engaged with the political and social issues of the time.

Ourimi (2022) in a paper critically examines how, while King Charles I's loyal Royalists wept through elegies, the Republicans and defenders of Oliver Cromwell expressed joy and glorified their Protector through panegyrics (498). In his famous panegyric poem entitled *To the Lord General Cromwell*, John Milton portrayed Cromwell's character as an earthly force and an agent of a divine power whose inspiration illuminated Milton's heart (499), characterizing the image of Cromwell as the God of War. Following the end of the English Civil War, the country was rattled by the destruction of the monarchy and the

execution of a king. Many thought the murder of a monarch unjust. Others, like Milton, made the case for such actions.

### **Discussion of Milton's Key Texts**

#### ***Eikonoklastes* (1649)**

In his work, *Eikonoklastes*, Milton writes :

This however would be remember'd and wel noted, that while the K[ing] instead of that repentance which was in reason and in conscience to be expected from him, without which we could not lawfully re-admitt him, persists heer to maintain and justifie the most apparent of his evil doings, and washes over with a Court-fucus the worst and foulest of his actions, disables and uncreates the Parlament itself, with all our laws and Native Liberties that ask not his leave, dishonours and attaints all Protestant Churches, not Prelaticall [Church of England], and what they piously reform'd, with the slander of Rebellion, sacrilege, and hypocrisie; they, who seem'd of late to stand up hottest for the Cov'nant, can now sit mute and much pleas'd to hear all these opprobrious things utter'd against thir faith, thir freedom, and themselves in thir own doings made traitors to boot:" (n.p.)

Milton criticizes the king's refusal to show any repentance for his actions and how instead of accepting his mistakes, he further goes on to justify his actions and downplay his faults. He threatens the rights of the people and dishonors the church. Milton is extremely critical of the way in which the faith and freedom of common people are attacked.

#### ***Areopagitica* (1644)**

While Milton defends Cromwell's government because of his republican ideologies, when Cromwell passed the Licensing Order in 1643, a law which required every book, pamphlet and any other written material or any form of print media to be approved by the government before publication, Milton wrote *Areopagitica* (1644), criticizing Cromwell. He vociferously champions the freedom of press and free speech articulating it thus:

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how books demean themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors. For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye (n.p.)

In his works, he writes "Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye" (n.p.), highlighting how an attack on free speech and censorship of creativity is akin to killing a

human being, representing the demise of reason itself. Censoring, banning, or shunning of books eliminates the potential for knowledge, understanding, and the exploration of truth. Following Charles II ascend to the throne, Milton went into hiding, and two of his works were burned. He later went on to write *Paradise Lost* in 1667.

## Conclusion

English literature, a reflection of society, a mirror that shows the values, ideas, social context, and the political conditions of a time, benefits from the contribution of scholars like John Milton. His works from the English civil war all the way up to the restoration period, are especially important as they help us understand the period's ideologies as well as the way the actions of those in power affected those who were not. His staunch puritan and republican ideas give us the context for the vision that Milton held for a reformed England. Milton's writings typify how literature serves as a medium for personal expression as well as outspoken political engagement. Allsopp (2021), rightly states that the civil wars were fought on the page as intensely as on the battlefield, producing an outpouring of rich and diverse literature. It can thus be concluded that John Milton's contribution to the diverse perspectives that the prose and poetry brought at the time was influenced by his political and social as well as his personal beliefs and ideologies. Ourimi (2022) concludes by saying cultural life during the Interregnum could never have existed without a literature to articulate it. And literature could not have existed with an English civil war, as it ultimately led to a series of revolutions in not only the history of the parliamentary democracy but also both in form and genre(502). Milton's input into the literary field of the time, undoubtedly, gives a better understanding of both his unique literary style as well as the far-reaching social, political, cultural and literary impact of the civil war and interregnum period.

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