

## Light Denied: A Dark Miltonic Metaphor

Edward R. Raupp

Center for Foreign Languages, Gori State Teaching University

**Author Note** Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Edward R. Raupp, 33A Melikishvili Street, Gori, 1400, Georgia. Email: [edraupp@gmail.com](mailto:edraupp@gmail.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/edward.raupp/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/edwardraupp/>

<https://sites.google.com/site/edraupp/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Edward-Robert-Raupp-Ph.D./e/B06XDX51B>

<https://gu-ge.academia.edu/EdwardRaupp>

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5147-7835>



**Abstract** When he wrote perhaps his most famous sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent,” numbered 16 or 19 depending on the edition of his published works, John Milton was blind. The poem begins with a lament, a cry of pain by an artist who can no longer see the fruits of his labor, but resolves in favor of a pious Puritan, convinced that salvation lies not in works but in faith. Before the resolution, however, the speaker accuses someone – arguably, God! – of taking away his eyesight, of “light denied.” In this study, we mined the fourteen lines of the sonnet to discover in his metaphors deeper meaning beyond the literal surface. We draw on others of Milton’s work in that process and find connections that reinforce both the technique and the beauty of the sonnet, resolving, as Milton does, the twin questions of why the calamity was delivered and “then what”? That question is emphatically answered in the last line of the sonnet, the Puritan answer, “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

**Keywords:** John Milton, metaphor, English language, literature, light, blindness

### Light Denied: A Miltonic Metaphor

*Omne poema metaphorice dicta  
an poeta dat operam, vel non.*

— Every poem is metaphor  
whether the poet intends it, or not.

Poets and songwriters choose from among a hundred or more literary devices and figures of speech to express an idea, to conjure an image, to heighten an effect, or to evoke an emotion (Raupp, 2020b).

When country music singer/composer Hank Williams wrote the lyrics to his Gospel song in 1948, he was probably not thinking of headlights, traffic lights, or the neon lights of Las Vegas:

I saw the light, I saw the light  
No more darkness, no more night  
Now I'm so happy no sorrow in sight  
Praise the Lord, I saw the light (Ward, 2015)

Williams was using light, buttressed by night and sight, as a metaphor, one of those many literary devices, but one that is qualitatively different from most of the others. Ward describes the song as “a full-blooded take of Williams’s spiritual awakening.”

Metaphor is no mere trick of the tongue, like the alliteration of Shakespeare (“From forth the fatal loins of these two foes” in the Prologue to Act I of *Romeo and Juliet*). Nor is metaphor a pleonasm (as when Marc Antony calls the stabbing of Caesar by Brutus as “The most unkindest cut of all” (*Julius Caesar*, III.2, Cramer, 2014). Metaphor challenges the reader (or audience member) to think more

deeply, to ask, “What does this mean?” What does Romeo mean when he says to himself, “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!”? (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.2). Examples of metaphor are abundant in Shakespeare, and students of literature encounter them frequently. If one studies Shakespeare prior to taking on Milton, one is perhaps better prepared to recognize the metaphors in the epic poetry of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, as well as the pastoral elegy *Lycidas*, the masque of *Comus*, and the sonnets. In this study, we sharpen our focus to Milton’s use of metaphor in one well studied sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent.”

We who read Milton “have seen more deeply into the poet’s words than is usual” (Silver, 2001, p. ix). When we read *Paradise Lost*, for example, and witness the expulsion from the paradise of Eden, we are unable to avoid the reference to “the demise of Cromwell, Independency, and the promise of commonwealth” (p. 12).

While Milton, that “blind embattled republican” (Depledge, Garrison, & Nicosia, 2021, p. 2) may be known best as the author of epic poetry, he expresses much of himself in his sonnets. Hillier (2007) reminds us that, “Milton produced twenty-four sonnets over the space of twenty-eight years and in this period he stretched the genre to its full capacity” (p. 247). It is one of those sonnets alternately numbered 16 or 19, depending on the publication, that commands our attention in this study. Specifically, we ask, what does the speaker mean in line 7, “Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”

### Introduction

We introduce the investigation by using the structure of the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, formally, the “Taxonomy of Educational Objectives” (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 215). We consider this approach particularly appropriate in the context of the teaching and learning of the works of John Milton at schools and universities around the world. Coming to understand Milton’s poetry, if not so much his prose writings, is to find meaning in his metaphors. Milton draws on the Bible extensively and no less on Greek and Roman mythology. Indeed, one may think of the Bible as books of Hebrew Mythology, as Hesiod and Plutarch are

books of Greek and Roman mythology. Milton knew well the characters and their stories, and they are key to our understanding the breadth and depth of his works, his variety of genres.

### Metaphor Defined

To “define” is at the base of the Bloom’s Taxonomy pyramid (Krathwohl, 2002). It is foundational thinking, necessary but insufficient for understanding and applying the concept, much less engaging the critical thinking tasks, viz., analyzing, evaluating, and creating. It is to higher level thinking as sand, cement, aggregate, and water are to building a house. That said, we turn to defining the term, “metaphor.”

The word “metaphor” may be defined as “a common figure of speech that makes a comparison by directly relating one thing to another unrelated thing (though these things may share some similarities)” (Literary Terms, 2021). Alternatively, a metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money)” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). To define the term “metaphor,” then, is related to such verbs as list, memorize, repeat, and state, all at the foundational level of remembering.

### Metaphor Understood

To understand “metaphor” is to be able to explain the meaning of the concept or idea of what a metaphor is and what it does to our thinking. When we try to understand the meaning of “metaphor,” we connect the word to other terms by classifying, describing, and translating in ways that communicate what we mean when we use the term.

In her “Lakoffian Reading of the Vine-Elm Metaphor in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” Bare examines the metaphor’s “long history of pagan, Biblical, and classical authority” (p. 134). Her model uses the metaphor’s “target domain” and its “source domain” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In this study, the source domain is Milton’s reality, while the target domain is his metaphorical elaboration of that reality.

Hillier (2007) speaks to “the nineteenth sonnet’s overt reference to the failure of his sight” (p. 247), so there is no question as to the reality from which

the metaphor is drawn. It is plain in line 1, “When I consider how my light is spent.” At first reading, much the same may be said for line 7 and its last two words, “light denied.”

### Metaphor Applied In Context

Given that we can define the term and understand its meaning, we can then approach the challenge of applying the metaphor in some literal context. In this paper, we examine the implications of John Milton’s use of metaphor in his sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent,” numbered 19 in some collections and 16 in another. The reality is Milton’s blindness, and the metaphor is the “darkness” when the “light” is extinguished – or denied.

### Metaphor Analyzed

What do the words mean when they are embedded in a metaphor? To begin to answer that question, we engage in a process of analysis. We organize our thoughts about the words, we compare and contrast, and we question our assumptions. We test our conclusions in the objective world of reality.

### Metaphor Evaluated

When we evaluate the application of a metaphor in a poem, whether the epic of *Paradise Lost* or the sonnet, we become of two minds: One seeks the abstract reality, while the other ponders the concrete metaphor. Having done the analysis, we now appraise the metaphor in terms of a set of criteria: Does the metaphor have purpose? Does it add to the value of the work?

### Metaphor Created

Writers can create the most sublime metaphors, as Wordsworth does with “A host of golden daffodils;/Beside the lake, beneath the trees,/Fluttering and dancing in the breeze,” (Scholar Select, 2016,135, lines 4-6) and “They flash upon that inward eye” (line 21). Or consider Maxwell Anderson’s poignant *September Song*, “Oh, it’s a long, long while/From May to December/But the days grow short/When you reach September” (Zollo, 2020). Alternatively, one can refer to the process of eliminating corruption and inefficiency in government less romantically, and no less graphically, as “draining the swamp” (Gallo, 2016; Widmer, 2017). In each case, we are invited to engage the underlying reality (beauty, aging,

corruption) by means of a more tangible representation.

There is art in the creation of metaphor. Cope (1962) writes, “...if metaphor is the clay of poetry, poetry is the inspiration of metaphor” (p. 49). For our part, we believe, as we say at the top of this paper, *Omne poema metaphorice dicta an poeta dat operam, vel non.* —Every poem is metaphor whether the poet intends it, or not.

### Methods

The basic method of this study was to review the published literature to determine the extent of interest in the nexus of language and context. We found that Bloom’s Taxonomy offers promising perspectives (Krathwohl, 2002). As we examine Milton’s sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent,” we ascend the steps of Bloom’s Taxonomy from the plain literal to the more complex meaning, a process we engage through metaphor.

### Results

In the present study we examined the literature of metaphor and meaning in general and Milton’s use of light – and its denial – in the sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent.” More specifically, we focused on that part of the continuing metaphor as Milton employs it in line 7, “Doth God exact day-labour, light denied.”

Grose (1973) writes of “the articulation of metaphor as a ‘process of speech’” (p. 7). Adams (1983) admonishes us to “expect logical complexity, contradiction, and qualification” in reading a poem (p. 85). It is insufficient – and perhaps misleading – therefore, to characterize the analysis of line 7 as a linear connection between blindness and production, as we might be otherwise inclined to do. Where, then is the logical complexity? It must be deduced from what we know about Milton through his prose and his poetry. If the light of physical sight is our only reference, then we miss the entirety of Milton’s Puritan theology. Hardly a work may be found among Milton’s writings that does not draw on his piety or his adherence to the Lutheran theology of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone (Hill, 1979).

Pequigney (1967) speaks to the notion of Milton’s “day-labour”: “While Christ’s Parable of the Talents dominates the imagination and conscience

of the speaker, he metaphorically expresses the relationship between himself and God as that of domestic servant to the master of a household...”(p. 488).

### **The Reality**

A rational analysis of any metaphor must start with the reality on which the metaphor is based. We found a reality consisting of three parts: Milton’s total blindness when he wrote the sonnet, his enduring Puritan faith, and his concept of service.

### **Blindness**

Milton was completely blind when he wrote Sonnet 19, sometime between 1652 and 1655 (NYU, 2006). Belling (2006) describes the poem as, “a carefully reasoned argument, on the basis of Christian faith, for the acceptance of physical impairment. The speaker learns that, rather than being an obstacle to his fulfillment of God’s work for him, his blindness is a part of that work, and that his achievement lies in living patiently with it.” To stand and wait.

The sonnet is not the last instance of Milton’s use of the metaphor of light and dark. One may argue that the entirety of *Paradise Lost* is a metaphor when we learn of the fall of Lucifer, the light bearer, from the brightness of Heaven to the darkness of the burning lake of Hell. Similarly, one may discern in *Samson Agonistes* an avatar for the blind Milton.

### **Faith**

Although Milton did not take holy orders in the church, as his father had desired of him, he was early and firmly imbued with a strong Puritan faith. “He was raised in a bourgeois Puritan milieu that fostered in him qualities of self-discipline, diligent preparation for one’s intended vocation, and responsibility before God for the development and use of one’s talents, as well as a commitment to reformist, militant Protestantism” (Lewalski, 2003a. p. 1).

### **Service**

As Lewalski (2003b) sees it, Milton “voices a bitter complaint against a taskmaster God who seems to demand service from a blind poet, then moves towards resolving that problem by projecting a regal God who needs no service but whose kingdom has place for all” (p. 12).

### **The Metaphor**

In the opinion of Downie (2019), “metaphors are more like impressionist paintings” and describes two problems with metaphors. First, “...every metaphor hides as much as it reveals.” Second, “...there is always a danger that metaphors move from being useful descriptive tools to becoming markers of loyalty to an entire school of thought” (p. 1). We encounter both problems when we dig more deeply into Milton’s metaphors in service to revealing more of his reality. Instead of finding a linear narrative in the poetry, we find what Greteman (2009) describes as “the mixed and heterogeneous mode of Milton’s imagery [that] contributes to his works’ power, rather than simply to explain it away” (p. 399).

In reflecting metaphorically on his reality, Milton is not without antecedent, both in the Greek classics – Homer is said to have been blind; Sophocles has the king blind himself in Act III of *Oedipus Rex* – as well as in Shakespeare’s sonnets (e.g., 27 “Looking on darkness which the blind do see,” line 8 (Ledger, 2009) and plays (e.g., both figurative and literal in *King Lear* in Act III scene 7, with the blinding of Gloucester).

The contrast of sight and blindness, of light and dark, pervades Milton’s epic poems. In *Paradise Lost*, Raphael tells Adam of Lucifer, “brighter once amidst the Host Of Angels, than that Star the Stars among/Fell with his flaming Legions through the Deep” (VII,131). To Cope (1962), “Milton’s paradoxical symbolic, light carries the potentiality of darkness, as sight carries the potentiality of blindness” (p. 128). Milton understood the admonition of Deuteronomy 28:28-29 that for disobedience, “The Lord shall smite thee with madness, and blindness... And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness” and recalled in Job 5:14, “They meet with darkness in the day time, and grope in the noonday as in the night.” The metaphor of darkness at noon is found also in Isaiah 59:10, “We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noon day as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men.” Some three centuries after Milton, Arthur Koestler (1940) will draw on the same metaphor in his landmark novel *Darkness at Noon*.

### Blindness

“...my light is spent” introduces the blindness metaphor in the first line of Sonnet 16/19. There is no ambiguity here. Milton is blind, and he laments the loss of his eyesight. Metaphors on blindness and darkness abound in Milton’s work. Lucifer and his horde of rebellious angels are cast out of Heaven onto a lake of fire that emits no light (*Paradise Lost*, Book One). Indeed, *Samson Agonistes* may in its entirety be construed as a metaphor of epic proportions on Milton’s own blindness.

### Faith

In line 7 of Sonnet 16/19, there is blame to be fixed: “light denied” implies that someone has taken away Milton’s eyesight (EOD, 2021). From the beginning of his career as a poet – “The Nativity Ode, 1629 (Adams, 1983) to its end (*Samson Agonistes*, 1671) (Flannagan, 1998) – Milton credits and, in this case, blames, God for everything that happens on earth. It is a logical consequence of Milton’s faith that leads him to lay the denial at God’s doorstep. It is, however, the same faith that resolves the theodicy dilemma (Pecorino, 2000; Crabtree, 2017), also called the Epicurean Paradox (Fortunado & Eballo, 2018): how can an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent God permit – or, worse yet, cause – the evil of blindness? Milton has an answer. The blindness of eyesight is replaced by the spiritual light of his faith in the ultimate goodness of his God.

### Service

The resolution of the theodicy dilemma is articulated in line 14 of the sonnet: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Underlying this last line is Milton’s Puritan belief of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone (Raupp, 2020a). In this, Milton is “simultaneously true to reason and spiritual ideals” (Greteman, 2009, p. 399).

### Discussion

While Milton’s Sonnet 16/19 may be thought to be entirely about physical blindness, starting with line 1 (“my light is spent”) and moving to line 7 (“light denied”), we may reasonably infer that it is as much metaphor as it is reality. From Milton’s religious perspective, we come to understand that the physical blindness is itself both a reality and a metaphor. God denied the physical light, but

Patience takes command of the poem in line 8 and admonishes the speaker to see through the dark to the light of service to God as one’s true calling.

### Conclusion

A close reading of Milton’s sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent,” especially the phrase in line 7, “light denied,” we find sufficient evidence to support the contention that Milton is both lamenting his physical blindness and confirming his Puritan faith.

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### **Acknowledgements**

Danna Vance Raupp is the Editor in Chief of the *Caucasus Journal of Milton Studies* and provided invaluable editing of this paper.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### **Biographical Note**

Edward Robert Raupp was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, and attended public schools there, graduating as valedictorian from high school and earned his Bachelor of Science degree at Carnegie Mellon University in business management and economics. He earned his Master of Business Administration at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and Master of Arts in English Language and Literature at the University of Minnesota. He served in the United States Army for twenty years, retiring as a full colonel for a career as a business executive and then as a university professor. He served as a Peace Corps Volunteer at Gori State University in Georgia for 3½ years and co-founded The University of Georgia in Tbilisi. He and his wife, Danna, taught for a year at a college on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, East Africa, for a year. He is a full professor in the Faculty of Humanities at Gori State Teaching University, where he teaches, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, among others, and adjunct professor at Great Bay Community College in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He is author of many books and professional journal articles. Professor Raupp is founder of the Milton Society of Georgia.