

## Early Milton: A Study of “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” and its Biblical Counterparts

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### Abstract

This study analyzed John Milton’s early poem, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” through the lenses of poststructuralist and archetypal literature theories. Such an analysis demanded that we compare and contrast the text of the poem with the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus recorded in Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:18-2:23. We found that both the purpose and how the story is told differ, as we expected. Milton not only told a story but also painted a vivid word picture of the event and its consequences. We combined the methods of close reading with a robust comparative literature review of biblical texts to discern how the speaker leads us to various meanings. In the process, we reveal, at least in part, something of the young Milton’s theological and poetic concerns that will mature, as evidenced in his later works. Milton foreshadows a rich tone in the Nativity Ode that will become evident in his memorable sonnets and epic poems.

*Keywords:* Jesus, Luke, Matthew, Milton, Nativity, Poststructuralism

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### Introduction

John Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” represents a seminal early work in his corpus, marking the maturity and depth of his involvement with Christian theology and classic poetics; it was written in 1629 when he was only 21. This Nativity Ode, published in the 1645 collection *Poems of Mr. John Milton*, describes how the Incarnation of Christ and its cosmic significance find their consummation, overthrowing earthly and pagan powers. This study reflects on Milton’s poetic rendering compared with the biblical narratives of Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:18-2:23, regarding how Milton reinterprets these foundational texts through his unique theological and poetical vision.

The birth narratives of Christ in Luke and Matthew offer two different but complementary viewpoints regarding the birth of Jesus. Luke tells the story of the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth, focused on joy and divine revelation to lowly

shepherds. In sharp contrast, Matthew begins with a genealogical perspective, showing the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, telling of the visit of the Magi, Herod’s tyranny, and the flight into Egypt. We juxtapose these narratives with the poetic rendition of Milton and show the modes in which he synthesizes and reworks those biblical elements into a spiritually reverberating poem.

Much of Milton’s earlier exuberant idealistic poetry stands in clear contrast to the works of his later life, which come across in tones somber and reflective. “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” gives the best exposition of youthful ambition and depth in theology that creates the trajectory for his later works in tone. This study will trace how this early Nativity Ode sets the trajectory of Milton’s tone to increase in complexity and introspection through his later works. It is interesting to see such tonal development understood, as it provides an excellent context to the artistic and spiritual maturation throughout the lifetime of Milton.

The structure and imagery of “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” along with the theological themes, shall be attended to within this research through a close reading using poststructuralist and archetypal literary theories. Further, there shall be a comparative literature review about critical responses to Milton’s Nativity Ode and the biblical narratives. This approach to the methodology is practical in analyzing the poem by Milton within theological and literary contexts combined and aids further understanding of the poem and its place within Milton’s general body of work.

### Methods

This research used a combination of close reading and comparative literature review to be informed by poststructuralist and archetypal literary theories in analyzing Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” against the biblical narratives in Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:18-2:23. Only through such a multifaceted methodological approach is there a guarantee of sufficiently nuanced investigation into the themes, structure, and theological significance of the poem.

We used close reading to examine the text of Milton’s Nativity Ode for linguistic features, imagery, and structural elements. It is valuable to see how Milton framed his theological vision of the Incarnation and, more importantly, how he approached the poem intertextually regarding biblical narratives. It details how Milton uses language and poetic devices to express complex theological and cosmic themes.

We conducted a comparative literature review to situate Milton’s poem within the tradition of Nativity literature and compare it to biblical accounts regarding the birth of Christ. This review includes critical commentaries concerning Milton’s poem and the Nativity narratives in Luke and Matthew, in which the use of scholarly articles and books offers insights into the theological and literary parameters found in these texts. Using poststructuralist and archetypal literary theories to examine the poem’s deeper symbolic meanings and

engagement with mythic archetypes will add more depth to the analysis.

The research also considers the development of Milton’s poetic tone from the early twenties, when he wrote the Nativity Ode, to his later works. Our diachronic approach thus explains Milton’s growing literary manner and themes, exposing the growth of his artistic and spiritual expression. This study integrated close reading, comparative literature review, and literary theory to provide a holistic and in-depth analysis of John Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.”

### Results

#### Structure and Content of the Poem

Milton’s ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ broadly falls under four divisions: the introduction, the hymn, the interlude, and the conclusion. The introduction sets the scene for the hymn by invoking the muses and pointing to the importance of the Incarnation. The hymn itself, which constitutes the core of the whole poem, handles the scene at the Nativity and its implications regarding the cosmos. While the interlude is more an exploration of the impact of Christ’s birth on earthly and pagan powers, the conclusion returns to the deeper meaning of the Incarnation and its link to the Crucifixion.

#### Theological Themes and Imagery

The poem has theological themes but speaks to the Incarnation and its cosmic meaning. In his portrayal, Milton depicts Jesus Christ’s birth as a historical event that introduced humankind into a new dispensation of God’s grace and power. Light and darkness images show up throughout the poem, marking the triumph of divine light over the darkness of evil and paganism. The representations of the Incarnation further underscore that duality is a moment of divine revelation and, perhaps, more importantly, a forerunner to Christ’s eventual sacrifice on the cross.

### Comparison with Luke 2:1-20

Luke adds that the Nativity was in a trough and that shepherds were the first witnesses. These details vest an ordinary birth with a cosmic dimension. The humble livestock feed trough becomes a trope of divine humility. However, the revelation of the shepherds is taken and transferred into that cosmic moment of importance that underscores universal salvation in one singular act.

### Comparison with Matthew 1:18-2:23

The story of Matthew shows a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and contains such items as the visit of the Magi and Herod's massacre of the innocents. Milton intertwines these into his poem, stressing the prophetic nature of Christ's birth and opposition to it by earthly powers. The visit of the Magi is a kingly recognition of divine kingship in Christ, while the tyranny of Herod underlines their continuing struggle between divine and earthly powers.

### Critical Reception and Interpretations

Milton's Nativity Ode has gained prominence among scholars such as Barbara Lewalski (1985) and John Shawcross (1993) for its depth of theology and sophistication in literature. Lewalski concentrates on fusing the classical with the Christian in the poem; Shawcross emphasizes its theological dimensions. In both, there is an emphasis on the rich tapestry of meaning that Milton has created from interweaving biblical and poetic traditions.

### Poststructuralist and Archetypal Analysis

Using a poststructuralist lens, we can read the poem as a text disrupting traditional narratives of power and authority. In the same breath, Milton's representation of the Incarnation contests his era's religious and political orders by portraying the birth of Christ as a revolutionary act of divine intervention. An archetypal analysis shows how the poem engages in mythic themes such as the hero's journey and the cosmic battle between light and dark. These symbolic elements deepen both the theology and the literature of the poem.

### Evolution of Milton's Tone

Milton's early poetry, typified by "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," overflows with idealism and exuberance. In works like *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, Milton's tone evolves more diffusely as humanity suffers under divine justice and the complexities of faith. This tonal shift follows Milton's spiritual and artistic maturation from youthful idealism to mature reflection in his later works.

### The Incarnation and Crucifixion

The poem links the Incarnation with the Crucifixion, bringing forth an element of sacrifice in Christ's mission of vicarious atonement. While the birth was not only a place of divine revelation but also marked the beginning of his journey towards the cross, there is a prevailing element of dual focus that brings out in relief the depth of theology in the poem by strongly bonding the birth and death of Christ as twin events in the Christian narrative.

### Cosmic and Earthly Powers

Bryson (2004) dismisses the idea of God as a king. Indeed, based on Milton's antipathy to the monarchy, we can understand his position. The cosmic birth of Christ in the poem contrasts with earthly powers opposing it. For Milton, the Incarnation represents God's intervention, a disruption of the status quo, pitted against two kinds of adversary powers: the pagan and the political. In this context, one can trace the probable roots of his notions of the relation of divine authority to earthly power in his other theological and political theories.

### Light and Darkness Imagery

Milton maintains the imagery of light and darkness to symbolize the victory of divine light over sinful and ignorant darkness. It develops the motif of transformation through the Incarnation and interprets the birth of Christ as one of cosmic illumination. Light and dark in the poem hold deep meanings regarding revelation and concealment, thus reflecting this dual nature of Christ's mission.

### Prophetic Fulfillment

Milton's Nativity Ode concerns the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about Christ's birth, presenting the birth event as a manifestation of divine promise. The poem's theological structure unfolds in the dimension of the prophetic. Here, as much as anywhere else, we find one of the connections between the nativity and a more complete history of the theories of salvation.

### Humility and Majesty

The poem's contrast of humility and majesty corresponds to the dual nature of Christ's birth. Milton conceptualizes the Nativity scene as a moment of divine condescension and a revelation of divine glory. Much of the poem's theological vision lies in this tension between humility and majesty, underlining the paradox of the Incarnation.

### External Criticisms

Critics, most influentially Northrop Frye (1986) and Stanley Fish (1997; Wolfe, 2010), have addressed the symbolic and thematic depth of Milton's Nativity Ode. For Frye, it is the poem's archetypal imagery and mythic themes; Fish is interested in the rhetorical strategies and theological implications. What both critics underline, therefore, is its complexity and the way it conveys profound theological insight through poetic means.

### Discussion

#### Theological Significance

One sees, through analysis, that Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" is, before all else, a profound theological exploration of the Incarnation. In the poem, one finds emphasis on the cosmic meaning of Christ's birth and its relation to the Crucifixion, showing a position and place these events hold in Christian theology. Any comparison between this poem and the biblical record makes evident that Milton's poetic vision is at the same time rooted in and transformative of the biblical tradition. We should note, as Swanson and Mulryan (1989) remind us, that in addition to the Lucan and Matthean infancy narratives, there is a third account in Revelation 12:1-2:

1. A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.
2. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.

Much of this celestial imagery is reflected by Milton to place a greater emphasis on the cosmic significance of Christ's birth. He depicts the stillness of the universe in tune and the angelic chorus attending the Savior's birth, suggesting a fulfillment of the prophetic vision of Isaiah 7:14. By weaving together these stories, Milton gave the story of the Nativity all the amplitude of a divine event with universal consequences. In this fashion, he placed the humble birth in Bethlehem alongside the grand eschatological themes from Revelation. He underscored that good will triumph over evil and that a new epoch in the grace of God started.

### Poetic and Theological Synthesis

Milton's synthesizing of classical and Christian elements is undergirded by a more extensive, grandiose literary and theological vision. All techniques, from prophecy to light-dark imagery and low-high juxtaposition, give an exceptionally intricate and subtle view of theology. The synthesis becomes even deeper within the biblical narratives when Milton uses them to make a multilayered text symbolically huge in its import.

### Evolution of Milton's Tone

It has been possible to trace how Milton's poetic tone evolved from his early twenties to his later works. The idealism and exuberance that "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" exudes are dialed down to a more complex and introspective tone in his later poetry. Progression is related to Milton's spiritual and artistic coming of age, reflecting deeper engagement with themes of human suffering, divine justice, and the complexities of faith.

### Poststructuralist and Archetypal Insights

Applying poststructuralist and archetypal literary theories brings insight into the poem's symbolic and thematic dimensions. From a poststructuralist perspective, the poetry challenges conventional narratives of power and authority. An archetypal analysis views this work for its involvement with mythic themes. These theoretical perspectives have the potential to enrich an analysis that offers insight into the deep theological and literary complexity within the poem.

### Critical Reception

The favorable critical reception of Milton's Nativity Ode underlines its importance in the poet's entire body of work. Critics such as Lewalski (1985), Shawcross (1993), Frye (1986), and Fish (1997) have commented on the poem's depth of theology, literary sophistication, and symbolic richness. In this critical engagement, Milton's early poetry reverberates in topical relevance today, and its complexity and what it adds to his general literary legacy mark his genius.

### Conclusion

This study focuses on the continuing importance of Milton's Nativity Ode as a multifaceted, symbolically rich exploration of the Incarnation and its cosmic implications. The study finds that John Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," viewed through the lenses of poststructuralist and archetypal theories of literature, is a rich and multi-dimensional text. The poem exhibits a developing poetic tone in the young Milton. It fuses classical with Christian elements and his theological vision to present the poem more fully and to place it within the broader scheme of Milton's works.

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