

Temporal Frameworks in the Examination of Pastoral Elegy: Verb Tense Conventions in the Analysis of Milton's "Lycidas"

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Abstract

Using the correct verb tense in English literary analysis can be hard in any genre, and this is especially true for seventeenth-century pastoral elegies like John Milton's "Lycidas" (1645). This paper investigates the temporal conventions that regulate academic discourse on pastoral poetry, scrutinizing how scholars maneuver through the persistent present of literary texts and the historical contexts of their production and reception. This study establishes guidelines for tense selection via a systematic examination of Milton's esteemed elegy, "Lycidas," concentrating on three fundamental areas: textual analysis, biographical contextualization, and critical interpretation. Critics say that the speaker 'mourns' instead of 'mourned' in the literary present. This means that poetic works are understood to be more than their creation; they are continually renewed with each reading (Hanford, 1910). Conversely, historical facts about Milton's life and the circumstances surrounding the death of his Cambridge friend, Edward King, must be stated in the past tense to ensure temporal accuracy. This study examined Milton's employment of pastoral conventions, his reconfiguration of elegiac traditions, and his critique of religious authority, demonstrating how proper tense usage enhances analytical precision while acknowledging the dual temporal dimension of literary-historical analysis. Results indicate that students frequently encounter difficulties with three primary categories of errors: employing the past tense for all content, failing to distinguish between events in the text and facts regarding the author's life, and exhibiting inconsistent temporal shifts in analytical passages. The study proposes educational strategies that emphasize the philosophical foundations of temporal conventions, encompassing direct instruction in categorical distinctions and the exhibition of sophisticated tense management within complex analytical sentences. This study improves composition pedagogy by providing clear instructions for teaching verb tense conventions in seventeenth-century poetry classes. These instructions can also be used to teach other literary periods and genres where time is important for analysis.

Keywords: literary present, "Lycidas," Milton, pastoral elegy, verb tense

Introduction

John Milton's "Lycidas," which he wrote in 1637 and published in 1645, is one of the most famous pastoral elegies in English. The poem, which was written to honor Edward King, a fellow Cambridge student who drowned in the Irish Sea, goes beyond its immediate purpose to ask deep questions about poetry, death, religious authority, and the role of a poet. For students and emerging scholars studying this canonical text, the challenge of maintaining the correct verb tense goes beyond

mere mechanical accuracy; it involves deep questions about the temporal existence of literary works and the critical approach to both texts and their historical contexts.

The temporal conventions that govern literary analysis are based on ideas about what poetic texts are. When scholars say that the speaker in "Lycidas" starts by calling on the muses and 'ends' with a vision of resurrection, they use the present tense to show that the poem is always alive. Every new reader goes through the same things in

the text as if they were happening right now. Milton lived from 1608 to 1674, wrote “Lycidas” during a period of great political and religious conflict in England, and published it then. These biographical and historical facts require the past tense, creating a complex time frame that students need to understand to do advanced literary analysis.

This paper examines the regulations governing verb tense selection in academic writing about Milton’s “Lycidas,” while also exploring the applicability of these regulations to the analysis of early modern pastoral poetry more broadly. This study provides clear instructions for students on how to use the present tense for textual analysis, switch to the past tense for historical context, and address complex temporal relationships that arise when combining textual, biographical, and critical perspectives. It does this by examining established scholarly practices and analyzing exemplary critical essays. The methodology involves a detailed examination of existing critiques of “Lycidas,” an analysis of composition pedagogy literature, and the application of temporal principles to specific interpretive challenges posed by Milton’s poem.

Methods

This study used a qualitative, text-based methodology that combines traditional literary analysis with composition-pedagogy research to formulate explicit guidelines for verb tense usage in discussions of pastoral elegy, particularly concerning John Milton’s “Lycidas.” The methodology consists of three fundamental components: meticulous reading of the poem, systematic evaluation of pertinent critical scholarship on “Lycidas,” and analysis of pedagogical literature and student writings related to tense usage in literary criticism.

Corpus and Materials

This study’s main literary work is Milton’s “Lycidas,” which can be found in standard modern scholarly editions. These editions are the primary sources for determining the poem’s temporal logic and how it fits into the pastoral style. There is a carefully chosen group of criticism on “Lycidas”

around this primary text. This group has basic studies of the pastoral elegy tradition (like Hanford), biographical and contextual essays (like Brackett and Howard), and more recent works that try to explain the tradition (like Boehrer, Forsyth, Kelly and Bray, and Hale). A third group of materials focuses on composition-pedagogy and rhetoric, examining how tense is used in literary analysis. It also has essays by students from the 17th century who were in advanced literature classes and wrote about “Lycidas.” These materials collectively furnish evidence of established scholarly practices and persistent student challenges that the article aims to theorize and address.

Framework for Analysis

The analysis is divided into three main parts: (1) a textual analysis of the poem’s form and themes, (2) a historical and biographical context, and (3) a critical discussion of previous research. The study delineates the prevailing tense choices within each category (e.g., the literary present for textual analysis, the simple past for historical fact, and present versus past for critical assertions). It investigates how these choices reflect specific assumptions about the temporality of literary works and their reception. The framework uses standard definitions of English tense and aspect to group the conversation around the simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive forms in the past, present, and future. It talks about how the literary present, the simple past, and the present perfect are used in published criticism and student writing.

Process

The methodological procedure progressed through three phases. At first, the study carefully looked at “Lycidas,” breaking down the poem’s internal narrative sequence (invocation, lament, questioning, flower passage, St. Peter’s speech, consolation) and pointing out places where critics usually use the literary present to talk about the speaker’s actions and the poem’s structure. Second, a selection of significant critical essays and monographs is examined to illustrate how prominent scholars use tenses as they transition from textual analysis to discussions of Milton and

Edward King's lives, and subsequently to broader assertions about the poem's impact and reception. This part is about sentences and paragraphs that discuss different times, such as when they compare Milton's life in the 1600s to the poem's importance now.

The study examined a collection of student essays on "Lycidas" to discern persistent patterns of tense errors, including excessive reliance on the past tense for textual analysis, conflation of textual and historical events, and capricious transitions between tenses within and across paragraphs. This study categorizes instances from the student corpus based on error type and subsequently compares them with patterns identified in professional critique. This enables the research to identify the dimensions in which students accurately emulate scholarly practice and those in which they misinterpret or oversimplify their temporal logic. This method of comparison helps us come up with ideas for teaching students about the differences between textual, historical, and critical time.

Generalization and Educational Use Standards

Some of the most complex parts of "Lycidas," like the flower passage and the "two-handed engine" episode (Kelly & Bray, 2010), are used to test the proposed rules to make sure they still work when the text is difficult to understand. The study subsequently extrapolates from these case studies to broader conclusions concerning the instruction of tense in early modern poetry courses, emphasizing that the literary present for textual analysis, the past tense for historical and biographical facts, and flexible temporal placement for critical discourse collectively form a coherent system that can be explicitly taught and implemented in educational contexts. The emphasis is on pastoral elegy; however, the methodology is designed to be flexible for application across various genres and historical contexts where the interplay between textual timelessness and historical specificity is crucial for interpretation.

Results

The Literary Present in Pastoral Poetry

In pastoral poetry, the convention of the literary present is very strong. The shepherd-speaker's lament happens in what Milton scholars call the 'timeless landscape' of the pastoral mode. People who don't like the poem say things like 'the speaker mourns his friend's death,' 'Milton uses classical pastoral conventions,' and 'the poem asks questions about fame and poetic vocation.'

The present tense indicates that these statements remain valid after centuries of scrutiny. Hanford (1910) set the stage for studying pastoral elegy in depth, showing how the present tense lets you interact directly with the text's formal and thematic parts.

This time placement is essential to pastoral elegy because the genre is about things that last and those that do not. The shepherd-speaker's lament seems to be about a specific loss, but the pastoral tradition makes that grief into a general meditation on death (Zorro, 2024). Scholars write about these textual dynamics in the present tense to show that the poem can still draw readers in as it explores loss, fame, and comfort. In his study of same-sex dynamics in the poem, Boehrer (2002) builds on this idea by consistently using the present tense to examine how the text constructs relationships between the speaker and the subject.

Historical Context and Personal Details

The present tense is used when talking about the text itself. The past tense is used when talking about the events that led to "Lycidas." Edward King died in August 1637 when his ship sank in the Irish Sea off the coast of Wales. In late 1637, Milton was asked to write for the memorial book *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago*. He wrote "Lycidas" in November 1637, but it wasn't published until 1645. He wrote it when he was 29 years old, and he was not yet famous for his writing, which occurred later with *Paradise Lost*.

Because they discuss events that occurred at specific times in the seventeenth century, all these biographical and historical facts should be in the

past tense. Brackett (1867) demonstrates her acute awareness of this distinction in her preliminary notes on “Lycidas.” She uses the past tense to discuss Milton’s life and circumstances, but the present tense for the poem’s meaning and structure. When scholars talk about the original publication context, they mean that “Lycidas” was published at the same time as a lot of other elegies for King. Most of these were written by Anglican conservatives, while Milton’s religious views were becoming more radical. They use the past tense to show how specific these situations were in the past.

This difference is significant when talking about how people felt about the poem. People who read “Lycidas” in 1638 did so in a specific political and religious context that changed how they understood it. Samuel Johnson’s famous 18th-century criticism of the pastoral form as ‘easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting’ is an example of how people reacted to the poem at the time. Howard (1936) demonstrates effective time management in his study of Milton’s impact on colonial American poetry by carefully separating the historical importance of Milton’s works (in the past tense) from their lasting textual qualities (in the present tense).

Critical Discourse and Time Placement

When writing about how other scholars have interpreted “Lycidas,” writers must switch between the present and past tense depending on what they want to say. The present tense indicates that a notable contention endures in current academic discourse: ‘Forsyth asserts that the name “Lycidas” carries more sinister implications than previously recognized’ (Forsyth, 2009). This statement indicates that Forsyth’s interpretation remains an important part of ongoing discussions about the poem. On the other hand, the past tense makes the argument historical: Forsyth argued in 2009 that the name “Lycidas” carries darker connotations. This placement makes it clearer that the intervention is time specific.

The present perfect tense is a middle ground that shows how past research still affects how we understand things today: ‘Critics have debated

whether the consolation in “Lycidas” adequately resolves the poem’s theological tensions.’ Broadbent (1959) shows how to use advanced tense management by smoothly switching between the present tense for textual analysis and the past tense for historical context in his study of Milton’s rhetoric. The present perfect acknowledges the historical development of critical debates while affirming their ongoing relevance for contemporary interpretation.

Complicated Time Structures in Pastoral Analysis

A detailed analysis of “Lycidas” often requires the use of more than one time frame in each sentence. For example, this sentence says, ‘Milton, who studied at Cambridge with Edward King in the early 1630s, creates in “Lycidas” a speaker who mourns not only King’s death but also questions the value of poetic ambition in a world where virtue goes unrewarded.’ The first part is in the past tense (‘studied’) and the second part is in the present tense (‘creates,’ ‘mourns,’ ‘questions’). This shows that being open to different times can help you make more subtle comments about how life and art are related.

This type of time complexity is essential to consider when you want to understand how Milton’s life affected the poem’s themes. Kelly and Bray (2010) skillfully navigate these relationships in their analysis of the ‘two-handed engine’ passage, maintaining clear temporal boundaries while exploring the connections between Milton’s concerns about ecclesiastical corruption and the poem’s prophetic denunciations. The main point is to understand the difference between historical causation (past tense) and textual meaning (present tense). The present perfect tense should be used to show that these relationships are still being critically examined.

Application to “Lycidas”: Excerpts

Parts of “Lycidas” show how these ideas about time work in real life. Scholars say that the famous flower passage makes a richly detailed pastoral scene that contrasts with the grim reality of

the drowned body's absence. The present tense captures the passage's ongoing reality. But when you put this passage in historical context, you need to use the past tense: "Milton drew on classical examples from Theocritus and Virgil when writing the flower catalog, changing their rules to fit his Christian framework."

Likewise, looking at how St. Peter is described in the poem shows how important it is to be accurate in time. The poem has St. Peter use 'the two-handed engine at the door' to threaten divine judgment and speak out against corrupt clergy (Kelly & Bray, 2010). This analysis uses the present tense to talk about what happens in the text. Scholars agree that Milton wrote this passage in 1637, when Laudian church policies were at their height, and that readers at the time would have understood it as addressing specific church issues. This historical context requires using the past tense while acknowledging the passage's ongoing ability to critique religious hypocrisy.

Discussion

How to Teach Tense in Pastoral Poetry: Teaching Methods

Milton changes tenses to show how the speaker is mentally fighting death and slowly coming to terms with it. The poem "Lycidas" starts in the past tense with the phrase 'Yet once more,' which is a common way to start a pastoral poem. The speaker then switches to the present tense of deep grief as they deal with Lycidas's death. These choices aren't random; they show what the speaker is thinking in real time as he tries out different ways to deal with loss.

To teach students how to use the right verb tense in seventeenth-century poetry classes, you need to think about the philosophical ideas behind how we use time. Students benefit from understanding that the literary present is not merely a random convention; it also reflects how individuals perceive the temporal existence of literary texts. Pastoral poetry is a great way to teach these ideas because it talks about things that never change and things that everyone can relate to.

Students begin to comprehend the efficacy of the present tense in text analysis when they recognize that "Lycidas" consistently employs the present tense, signifying the speaker's enduring sadness and the poem's persistent solace.

Pierce (1927) emphasizes the significance of students distinguishing between events in a text and historical occurrences. This is especially hard to do when you read pastoral elegy. The usual setting for this kind of story—shepherds, meadows, flowers, and classical gods—can seem just as 'fictional' as the time it was written. This is why students often use the past tense without thinking. It is very important to make categorical distinctions clear when you teach. For instance, biographical facts, publication history, original reception, and historical influences should all be in the past tense. On the other hand, textual content, formal features, thematic developments, and symbolic meanings should all be in the present tense.

Common Errors Students Commit in Essays about the Pastoral Elegy

An examination of student essays regarding "Lycidas" reveals three prevalent errors pertaining to tense. A lot of students write in the past tense, saying things like, 'The speaker mourned his friend and questioned divine justice.' This is correct grammar, but it takes away the immediacy that makes literary analysis interesting and accurate. Teachers should tell their students to think of pastoral elegies as things that are always happening: 'The speaker mourns his friend and questions divine justice.' Changing the verb from past to present tense turns a passive historical report into an active critical engagement.

Second, students sometimes use the present tense when talking about someone's life, like when they say, "Milton is twenty-nine years old when he writes "Lycidas." This mistake shows that they don't know the difference between the text, which is always true, and the author, who lived in the past. Hale (1991) investigates relevant issues in his analysis of Milton's self-presentation, implicitly underscoring the importance of maintaining temporal distinctions between authorial biography

(past tense) and poetic voice (present tense). If students get clear feedback on their first drafts, they will be better able to tell the difference.

Third, using different tenses in the same paragraph makes it hard to see how the times are related. Milton published “Lycidas” in 1638 as part of a memorial volume. This is a confusing sentence. The speaker starts by calling on the muses. Milton was responding to Edward King’s death by drowning the year before. The unmotivated changes between past (“published”) and present (“begins”) and back to past (“was responding”) make it hard to tell what time it is.

Students need to learn how to plan how to use tense in each paragraph. This way, changes in tense will serve clear analytical purposes rather than just happening because they aren’t paying attention.

Advanced Considerations: The Function of Narrative Time in Pastoral Elegy

For advanced students, pastoral elegy adds more time-related problems to the poem’s ordering of the story. The poem “Lycidas” has many parts, including the opening invocation, the memory of pastoral friendship, the questioning of divine justice, the flower passage (primrose, crow-toe, jessamine, pink, pansy, violet, musk-rose, woodbine, cowslip, Amaranthus, and daffodils—brought to deck the ‘laureate hearse’), St. Peter’s denunciation, and the final consolation. The present perfect tense indicates that one event occurred prior to another in the narrative: ‘Before the speaker reaches the consolation, he has passed through deepening stages of grief and questioning.’

This use of the present perfect keeps the literary present while also showing the order of events. Hanford (1923) shows advanced temporal management in his study of Milton’s influence by showing how the present perfect tense can mean both textual sequence and historical causation, depending on the situation. The connections between time become more complicated when you think about how Milton’s pastoral elegy affected later writers. For instance, one could assert, ‘Milton’s innovations in “Lycidas” influenced

subsequent elegists; Tennyson draws upon Miltonic conventions in *In Memoriam*.’ Here, the past tense indicates historical influence, whereas the present tense preserves the timelessness of Tennyson’s text.

Conclusion

A key part of being a good scholar in early modern literary studies is knowing how to use verb tenses correctly. When talking about Milton’s “Lycidas” or any other pastoral elegy, scholars must move back and forth between the text’s continuous present and the past of biographical fact and cultural context. This dual temporal framework, rather than being an arbitrary convention, illustrates fundamental concepts regarding how literary works transcend their creation period while remaining linked to the specific historical events that prompted their inception.

The rules in this paper—using the present tense for formal characteristics and textual analysis, the past tense for historical and biographical facts, and flexible temporal positioning for critical discourse—are clear and valuable for students and new scholars. These rules help writers keep their analysis fresh while remaining true to history. This makes prose that keeps readers interested while also respecting how hard it is to study literature and history. Pastoral elegy is the best way to teach these rules because it deals with timeless themes and universal questions. The genre itself thinks about the link between short-lived life and long-lasting art.

Teachers of seventeenth-century poetry classes can help their students write more complex analytical prose by ensuring they pay attention to temporal conventions, providing clear examples, and offering regular feedback. Students can go beyond just following the rules and start thinking about how verb tense choices reveal deeper ideas about time and texts. This understanding is particularly beneficial when analyzing canonical texts like “Lycidas,” where the interplay between enduring pastoral traditions and specific historical contexts creates substantial opportunities for temporal complexity.

Subsequent research may investigate disparities in temporal conventions across national scholarly traditions, particularly in Romance languages, where tense systems differ significantly from English. Additionally, examining the treatment of temporal conventions across various literary periods may help determine the applicability of these concepts to all texts or the necessity of modifications specific to medieval, Romantic, or modernist works. Digital humanities methodologies may enable quantitative analysis of tense usage in published criticism, revealing patterns and variations that could improve pedagogical practice. These kinds of studies would help us learn more about how academic groups make and enforce rules that affect how people talk about literature.

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