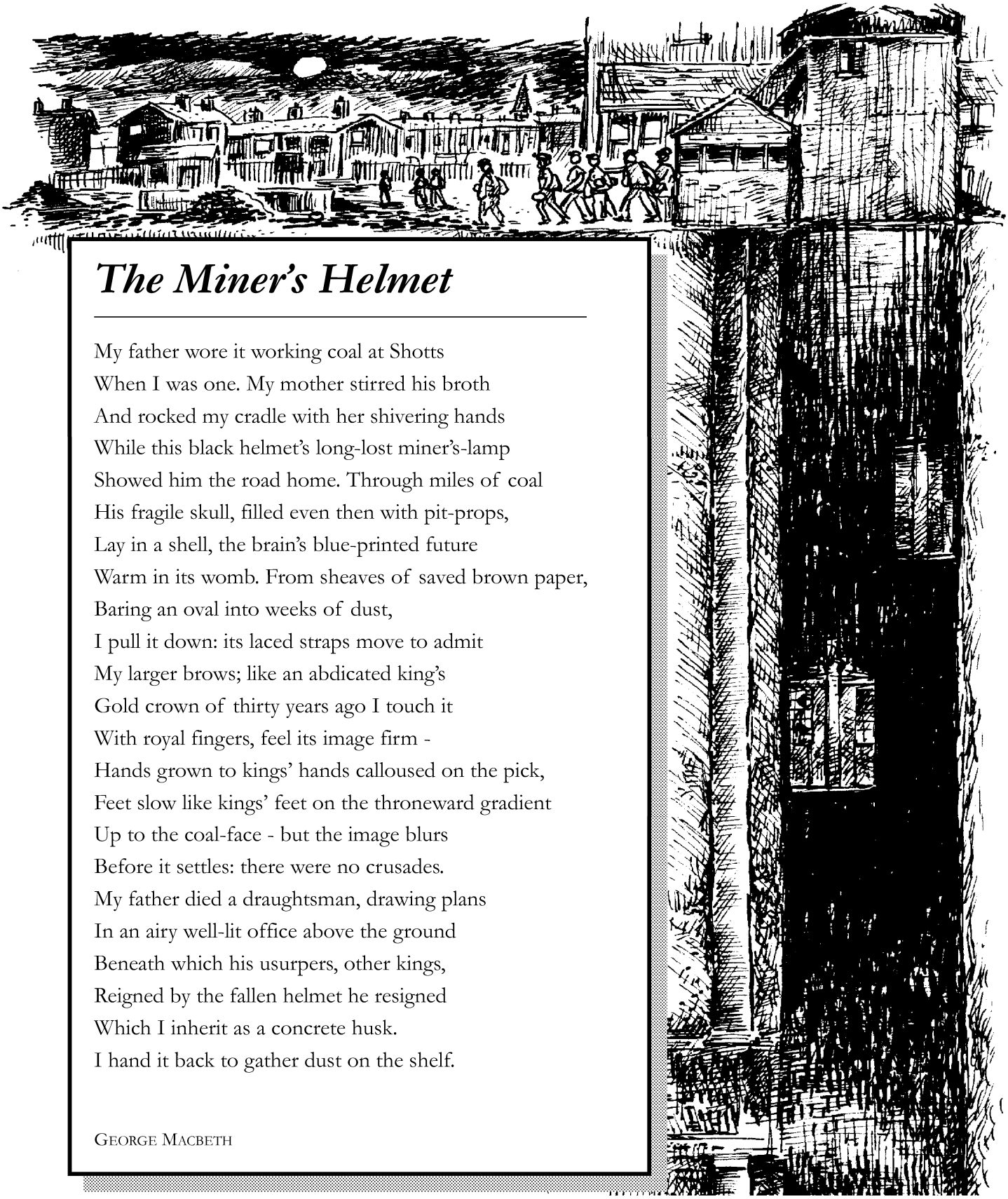
Work



The Miner's Helmet

My father wore it working coal at Shotts
When I was one. My mother stirred his broth
And rocked my cradle with her shivering hands
While this black helmet's long-lost miner's-lamp
Showed him the road home. Through miles of coal
His fragile skull, filled even then with pit-props,
Lay in a shell, the brain's blue-printed future
Warm in its womb. From sheaves of saved brown paper,
Baring an oval into weeks of dust,
I pull it down: its laced straps move to admit
My larger brows; like an abdicated king's
Gold crown of thirty years ago I touch it
With royal fingers, feel its image firm -
Hands grown to kings' hands calloused on the pick,
Feet slow like kings' feet on the throneward gradient
Up to the coal-face - but the image blurs
Before it settles: there were no crusades.
My father died a draughtsman, drawing plans
In an airy well-lit office above the ground
Beneath which his usurpers, other kings,
Reigned by the fallen helmet he resigned
Which I inherit as a concrete husk.
I hand it back to gather dust on the shelf.

GEORGE MACBETH

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Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the
flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

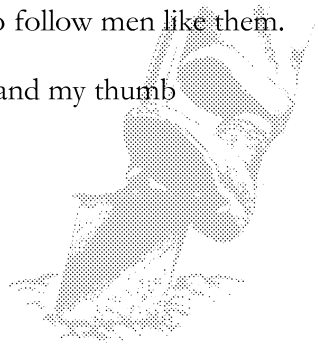
The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the
shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright
edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He
straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the
squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.



SEAMUS HEANEY

6.1

Comparing the two poems

•In each of these poems the poets speak of their fathers. Go through each one carefully noting down your answer to the following questions.
- What has prompted each poet to think about their fathers?
- How many years back are they remembering?
- What exactly did each father do?

Beyond giving the obvious answer that one was a miner and the other a digger, see how much detail you can gather from the poems about their occupation and way of life:
- *where did they work?*
- *what did the job involve?*
- *what examples are mentioned?*

What particular piece of equipment is mentioned in each case?
What is the significance of these,
a) as mementoes of the men who used them;
b) in the imagery of the poem?
In each poem there is a strong sense of admiration for the men they are remembering. How is this conveyed?
Have the poets followed in their fathers' footsteps? *Explain how you reach the conclusion you do.*

6.2

A critical comparison

•Which poem do you prefer? In answering compare carefully the language and imagery of the two poems.

The Miner's Helmet
- *Macbeth compares his father's helmet to two things in particular: a shell and a crown. How does he develop those comparisons in extended metaphors?*
- *How does the fact that he comes across the helmet by accident contribute to what he is saying?*
- *In his memories of his father he moves forward to consider how that life changed. How does that differ from the other poem?*

Digging
- *Throughout the poem Heaney implies comparison between his father's digging and his own writing.*
- *How is this comparison maintained?*
- *How do the words used to describe the spade and the action of digging contribute to the comparison?*
- *Why does Heaney refer to his grandfather's digging?*
- *How will the poet continue the family tradition?*

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6.3

My parent

•Write a description of the working life of one of your parents.
You may wish to write it as a poem.

Hints for getting started

Gathering your thoughts:
Remember to be specific: refer to significant places and events.

Think of pieces of equipment that you particularly associate with the job and which help to characterise what your father or mother does.

Try to convey not just what the work involves but also your attitude to it. •Would you consider following in your parent's footsteps?

Getting the opening right:
Both Macbeth and Heaney describe how their memories are jogged by a particular incident - the discovery of a long disused miner's helmet; being distracted by the sound of digging. These make excellent openings for their poems.

What are you going to begin with?
- *finding something belonging to your parent that sets you thinking about the work he or she does?*
- *watching a television programme involving a particular job and thinking "My dad does that!"?*
- *seeing a photograph / letterhead associated with the work?*
- *going on work experience?*

It is worth spending some time thinking of a striking introduction.

What to say next:
Try to think of definite examples of your parent at work:
- *the day you went too;*
- *a significant turning point;*
- *a routine event that typifies the work.*

Choose contrasting examples to write about.

You may wish to include some dialogue - a telephone call, perhaps.

Remember to include your comments and reactions - as they were at the time, as they are now as you reminisce.

Finishing off:
Both poems end with decisions
- *Macbeth returns the helmet to its shelf, consigning it and his thoughts "to gather dust"; while Heaney resolves to follow his father's example metaphorically with his pen, "I'll dig with it".*

What might you decide?
- *to go back to your Maths homework?*
- *to follow your parent's example, in the same work? in a different sphere of work?*

Try to find some concluding thought that summarises your reflections.

Heaney finishes as he began, at his writing desk. After the distraction he returns to get on with what he was doing. Endings that link with openings can be very effective.

You might like to try something similar, even repeating the wording, as Heaney does.

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Chicken Soup with Barley

CISSIE. How's Ada and Dave?

RONNIE. Struggling in a cottage in the country. Ada suckles a beautiful baby, Dave lays concrete floors in the day-time and makes furniture by hand in the evening.

CISSIE. Lunatics!

RONNIE. They're happy. Two Jews in the Fens. They had to get a Rabbi from King's Lynn to circumcise the baby. A Rabbi from King's Lynn. Who'd ever think there were Rabbis in King's Lynn?

CISSIE. And you?

RONNIE. A bookshop.

CISSIE. Same one?

RONNIE. Same one.

CISSIE. You're also crazy and mixed up, I suppose?

RONNIE *(highly indignant)* Don't call me that! God in heaven, don't call me that! I'm a poet.

CISSIE. Another one!

RONNIE. A socialist poet.

CISSIE. A socialist poet!

RONNIE. I have all the world at my fingertips. Nothing is mixed up. I have so much life that I don't know who to give it to first. I see beyond the coloured curtains of my eyes to a world - say, how do you like that line? Beyond the coloured curtains of my eyes, waiting for time and timing nothing but the slow hours, lay the thoughts in the mind. Past the pool of my smile . . .

CISSIE. What does that mean?

RONNIE. What, the pool of my smile? It's a metaphor - the pool of my smile - a very lovely metaphor. How's trade-union activity?

CISSIE. We've got a strike on. Dillingers are probably going to lock out its workers.

RONNIE. Ah, Dillingers! 'Dillingers styles gets all the men's smiles, this is the wear for everywhere!' No wonder the workers don't like poetry.

CISSIE. The old boy wants to reduce their wages because they're doing sale work.

RONNIE. What's that?

CISSIE. You know - sale work - specially made-up clothes for the big West End sales.

RONNIE. You mean a sale is not what is left over from the season before?

CISSIE. Oh, grow up, Ronnie. You should know that by now. It's cheaper stuff, inferior quality.

RONNIE. And the union doesn't protest? *(Jumping on a chair and waving his arms in the air)* Capitalist exploiters! The bastards - if you'll excuse the expression. I'll write a book about them. I ... I'll expose them in their true light. What a novel, Aunt - set in a clothing factory, the sweat shops, the -

CISSIE. Look, you want to hear about this strike or you don't want to hear about this strike? *RONNIE sits down.*
So because it's sale work Dillinger wants to cut the women's wages by ten per cent and the men's by twelve and a half per cent. So what does he plan to do? I'll tell you what he plans to do - he plans to pay all thirty of them for one full week, sack them, and then re-employ them, which would mean they were new employees and only entitled to Board of Trade rate, which is considerably less.

RONNIE. But can he do that?

Extract continued on page 89

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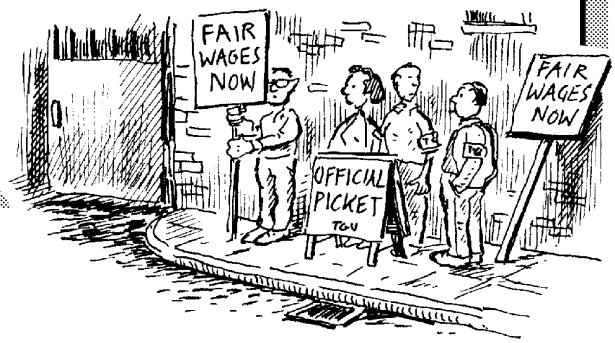
Chicken Soup with Barley: continued

CISSIE. He did it! He did it! The girls told me. But this year the shop stewards got together and asked me to go down and negotiate. They didn't all want it, mind you. One wagged his finger at me and cried: 'We're not taking your advice, we're not taking your advice!' I gave them - you know me. First I read the Riot Act to them and then I lashed out. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, I told them, after the union struggled hard, tooth and nail, for every penny you get and at the first sign of intimidation you want to give in. For shame! I yelled at them - for shame! I tell you, Ronnie - a boss you can always handle because he always wants to bribe you, and that gives you the upper hand - but the worker . . .

ARNOLD WESKER



6.4

Reading aloud

•In pairs practise reading the extract from *Chicken Soup with Barley.* (NB Cissie is Ronnie's Aunt).
Try to distinguish the two characters - what makes them different?
Consider the views they express and how they put them over.
•Discuss your opinion of Ronnie and Cissie's views.

6.5

Speech writing

Cissie gives us the briefest of outlines of her speech to the workers at Dillingers who were showing signs of weakening - see the speech that closes the extract.

•Write out what you think the full text of that speech would have contained.
Remember to include:
- *"the Riot Act" - what did she say about not strike breaking?*
- *details of why they are on strike - look at what she has told Ronnie about this;*
- *something of what the union has done for them in the past - it has "struggled hard, tooth and nail, for every penny you get";*
- *additional arguments about the workers' struggle against the bosses - you need to make this up: try to include some appropriate vocabulary ('Comrades', 'capitalists', 'scabs','blacklegs').*

6.6

A Research Project

Many have used literature to describe and protest about working conditions. See what examples you can find. Collect examples and make notes on your findings.

•Try looking up some of the following in the Library:

Mining:		
	D.H. Lawrence	*Sons and Lovers*
	R. Llewellyn	*How Green Was my Valley*
	George Orwell	*Down the Mine*
Agricultural Labour:		
	Thomas Hardy	*Far from the Madding Crowd*
(USA)	John Steinbeck	*Grapes of Wrath*
		Of Mice & Men

•In the nineteenth century in England a number of writers used fiction to highlight social problems, including poor working conditions. See what you can find out about this in the writing of such authors as:

Charles Dickens	*Hard Times,*
	David Copperfield
	Oliver Twist
Elizabeth Gaskell	*Mary Barton,*
	North & South
Charles Kingsley	*Alton Locke*
	The Water Babies

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Beyond work

Sowing

It was a perfect day
For sowing; just
As sweet and dry was the
ground
As tobacco-dust.

I tasted deep the hour
Between the far
Owl's chuckling first soft cry
And the first star.

A long stretched hour it was;
Nothing undone
Remained; the early seeds
All safely sown.

And now, hark at the rain,
Windless and light,
Half a kiss, half a tear,
Saying good-night.

EDWARD THOMAS

Sea-fever

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the
sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white
sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn
breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the
running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the
seagulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's
like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-
rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's
over.

JOHN MASEFIELD

6.7

Job satisfaction

•Edward Thomas describes his satisfaction with the job that he has done. What words and phrases in the poem help to convey his pleasure at something successfully completed?
Look carefully at his choice of words
- *to describe the soil,*
- *to convey the onset of evening,*
- *to describe his feelings as he surveys the finished sowing*
- *and as he listens to the rain.*

Explain the imagery he uses.

6.8

Enthusiasm

John Masefield joined the merchant navy as a young boy in the final years before sail gave way to steam on the high seas. In *Sea-fever* he remembers the sheer excitement of sailing and the sea.

•Make a list of all the things he mentions that he particularly enjoyed.

•Try to explain in your own words what each involves and what exactly it was that thrilled him.

6.9

Recorded pleasure

•Imagine that Masefield kept a diary of his sea-going (I am sure he did!) Using the information in his poem as a guide, write three contrasting entries for that diary.

You may like to choose:
- *an early morning when he has just come off duty;*
- *on deck on a windy day;*
- *in the cabin at the end of the day.*

•Discuss what attitudes you think lead to the behaviour shown.

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6.10

Job done

•How do you feel about work you have finished? Exhilarated? Calmly satisfied?
•Think of something you have done recently that really satisfied you. *Perhaps the actual task was difficult, demanding even. But you persevered and had the satisfaction of knowing that you had done it.*
•Try expressing your feelings in a poem.

6.11

Group Discussion

•Some jobs are more obviously rewarding than others. Discuss with your neighbour forms of employment that particularly appeal to you and those jobs that you would want to avoid if possible.
•See if you can agree a list of jobs that appeal.
•Discuss your findings with others around you.
Try to rise above discussing simply the obviously pleasurable - even the most glamorous and exciting jobs have their down side.
Many would testify that the most satisfying employment involves challenge and difficulty and that stress and disappointment are part of the package.
What about the jobs that came bottom of your list? Somebody has to do them. How can they be made more palatable?

Warning

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me,
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We will have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practise a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old and start to wear purple.

JENNY JOSEPH

6.12

In pairs

•Discuss what the poem is actually saying.
Is Jenny Joseph really talking about what it means to be old?
•Make a list of the restrictions the speaker feels apply to a 'normal' adult.
•Do you agree with her judgement?
•Where have these restrictions come from?

•Make a list of restrictions that you would abolish if and when you could.

6.13

Critical writing

•In September 1996 this was voted the most popular poem written since 1945. Why do you think it achieved such success?

•Write a letter to the BBC "Poetry Please" programme: ***either*** in support of *Warning*, saying why it gets your vote ***or*** expressing surprise that it has been successful and explaining why it would not have your support.

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On his Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he, returning, chide;
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
I fondly ask: but Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
Either man's work, or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.'

JOHN MILTON

6.14

Understanding the poem (1)

•Write out the meaning of the poem in your own words.

The title gives a vital clue to what Milton means by 'light' in line 1 and in line 7.

To what does the word 'spent' refer?

'one talent' is a reference to the parable of the talents that Jesus told
- see Matthew chapter 25 verses 14 - 30;
study of that parable will help you to understand what the whole poem is about.

'prevent' means 'to get there before' rather than simply 'to stop'.

How does Milton's understanding of the character of God help him to accept the frustration of his blindness?

What does the final line mean? It summarises Milton's feeling about his blindness.

6.15

Understanding the poem (2)

•What has been lost in the process of putting the poem into modern English prose?

*There are several things that need to be considered here. For example, the **language** that Milton used. In a poem, especially, **words** are chosen for their effect - their **sound**, their appearance even - rather than just their literal meaning. He himself preferred to write in Latin because he thought it a more beautiful language than English.*
*The **imagery** that the poet uses is important, too.*

•How important is the poem's structure?
Milton has chosen to write his thoughts in the form of a sonnet. The question that he poses in the first 8 lines (the octave) is answered in the remaining 6 lines (the sestet) and that conclusion is summed up in the epigram of the final line.

•As a Puritan, John Milton was steeped in the language and teaching of the Bible. What use does he make of Biblical references in this sonnet?

•See how many Bible references you can find.

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6.16

Take a letter

John Milton did in fact continue to work after he became blind in 1651. He remained Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth government until the monarchy was restored in 1660 and composed some of his most famous poems, including his epic, *Paradise Lost*, in the later years of his life. He had to rely on others to write at his dictation; many of his poems were written in this way, with his daughters acting as his scribes.

•Imagine that you have the task of writing at his dictation a letter to a family friend in which he explains how he feels about the fact that he has become blind.

•Compose the letter that John Milton might have dictated to you.
You may wish to try to copy the language and style of the seventeenth century or even to make your letter appear authentic by use of copperplate handwriting (or equivalent letter style).
Use the information and comment in the sonnet, adding thoughts of your own. Make sure that whatever you add in this way fits the overall style and content of the original sonnet.

You might begin something like this:

Westminster

1651

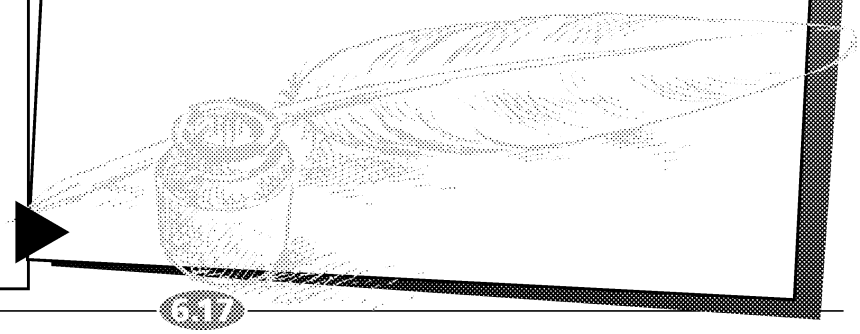
Esteemed Cousin,

This letter which I pen by the hand of my valued friend conveys the news I long have dreaded ...

... and conclude:

In the service of my Maker,

per pro *John Milton*



6.17

A debate

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."
•Either as a formal debate or as a class discussion, consider the value of work and the place of leisure in our society.

Points to cover include:
- *What is the right balance between work and play, for teenagers and for adults?*
- *Can leisure pursuits, such as hobbies or sport be regarded as work?*
- *What about voluntary work? Is it less valuable because it is unpaid?*
- *What about those who are unemployed? How should they be regarded in society?*
- *How should we regard those who cannot work?*

"and Jill a dull girl!"
- *Does our society treat men and women equally when it comes to questions of work and leisure? What changes would you advocate?*
- *How do these questions apply in the home and the family?*

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