

What Happens in “Lycidas”

- 1–5 The poet complains that he is unready (= “denial vain, and coy excuse”)
- 6–36 No matter, Lycidas was a poet and his death must not pass without song. I too shall die one day and want someone to sing for me. Moreover, Lycidas and I grew up and made poetry together, to the delight of many.
- 37–49 “But O the heavy change now, thou art gon”: nature languishes in Lycidas’s absence.
- 50–63 The nymphs were powerless to save him, as Calliope was powerless to save her son, the poet Orpheus.
- 64–76 Lycidas died young, before poetry could make him famous. Since life and fame are uncertain, why not devote oneself to the here and now, to the pleasures of love?
- 76–84 Phoebus answers that true fame is found in heaven, “not in broad rumour.”
- 85–87 “That strain I heard was of a higher mood.” The sudden appearance of the god Phoebus Apollo both initiates a series of such appearances and marks an abrupt departure from the low style (*sermo humilis*) and natural imagery of pastoral tradition (signified here by the Virgilian river Mincius and the Theocritan river Arethusa). This departure, however, is not without pastoral precedent: cf. the opening line of Virgil’s “Messianic” fourth eclogue: *Sicelides musæ, paulo maiora canamus* (“Sicilian [i.e., pastoral] muses, let us sing of somewhat loftier matters”); what follows is prophecy.
- 88–102 “[T]he Herald of the Sea” insists that Lycidas died because his boat was defective, not because of a storm.
- 103–7 The River Cam (standing in for Cambridge University) laments that the death of Lycidas was a great loss to scholarship.
- 108–31 St. Peter laments that the death of Lycidas was a great loss to the Church, which is at present guarded by negligent and greedy shepherds (who compound their wickedness by composing bad songs/sermons/poems). A day of judgement is coming, though.
- 132–33 [Now that Phoebus Apollo, the Herald of the Sea, the River Cam, and St. Peter are gone,] we return to the traditional imagery and subject-matter of pastoral poetry.
- 134–53 The poet relaxes his mind and imagines the flowers that would deck Lycidas’s body, were it to be recovered from the sea.
- 154–64 Where is the body? Is it still among the Hebrides? Or has it drifted south with the current, down to Land’s End and Mt. St. Michael? Bring him home, Michael, as dolphins brought the poet Arion.
- 165–85 In fact, grief is inappropriate for three reasons: because (a) Lycidas is not dead; on the contrary, (b) he enjoys the society of the saints at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb; and because (c) he now protects travellers in the region where he drowned.
- 186–93 We learn that the preceding verses were composed by an uncouth swain over the course of a day. “At last he rose... / To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new.”