



Satan Unbound: Reassessing Satan's Role in Paradise Lost

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Abstract

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a seminal work of art and has permeated in the most literary canons of the world. It is said that Satan is the true hero of Milton's *Paradise* which allowed the character develop exponentially during the Romantic Age when the struggle against all forms of authority reached its peak and gave rise to a pool of writers who expounded on the ideas of individual liberty and freedom. Satan abounds with characteristics which could be seen as positive and therefore attributed to the protagonist. While anti-Satanists like Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis underestimate Satan and think of him as a reincarnation of an undefiled evil spirit, pro-Satanists such as P.B. Shelly, William Hazlitt, and William Blake prepare Satan and scrutinize him as a noble hero. They emphasized Satan's dignity, heroism, and evil spirit. Satan, finally emanating with heroic qualities, as stated by P.B. Shelly and other prominent poets give us this exposure thus ensuring his stand as a tragic hero as well.

Keywords: Seminal, Romantic age, expound, liberty, evil spirit, tragic hero.

I. Introduction

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a seminal work of art that is an epic and has found its place in most literary canons of the world. This work of art spread through 12 volumes emphasizes "*justifying the ways of God to men*". This work dives deep into Christian theology and explores the fall of Adam and Eve (humanity) from the Garden of Eden due to Satan's deception and how Christ becomes the saviour of mankind. This work is also a symbolic commentary on the socio-political and cultural life of England during the Elizabethan Era.

By the nineteenth century, Milton had taken his place with Shakespeare, Homer, and Virgil. Matthew Arnold saw him as a master, in English, of the great epic style of the ancients. Milton was critiqued by T. S. Eliot as a poet whose visual imagery contained an inherent weakness. In comparing God to the classical Zeus, who is not a loving god, and Satan to Prometheus, who is a friend to man, Werblowsky suggests that Milton, unknowingly, transposed his main characters, leading the reader to empathize with Satan and to fear God. The reader finds Satan attractive and God distant and unloving, he is just as Adam was, still separated from God by his own sin.

It is said that Satan is the true hero of Milton's *Paradise* and he allowed him to develop far more than his theological presuppositions would have allowed. Milton was an icon of admiration to the coming generation of poets and writers who sought liberty from Religion and the Roman Catholic Church. This view developed exponentially during the Romantic Age when the struggle against all forms of authority reached its peak and gave rise to a pool of writers who expounded on the ideas of individual liberty and freedom. William Blake masterfully explains Milton for deciding to write such an appealing devil and says that "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and of liberty when of Devils and Hell is because he was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake qtd. in Ramm10) a sentiment echoed by P.B. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, "Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of Satan (Shelley) as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to assume that he was the personification of the evil. Milton's devil has a moral far superior to God". The versatility in Milton's characters of *Paradise Lost* and the unusual appeal which Satan brings are just some of the reasons to explore the



possibility of seeing this complex character as a hero of this outstanding epic thus this paper examines Satan as a hero, anti-hero, and tragic hero, exploring his complexity and evolution throughout the epic and the core value of this paper is to make the readers aware of the heroic dimensions of Satan.

Satan and the spirit of revolution

It has been suggested that Satan is the true "epic hero" of the piece, largely because of his epic language and heroic energy. The Romantic poets, following Dryden, saw Satan as the true hero of *Paradise Lost*. In this view, Milton projected his own revolutionary ideals onto Satan, presenting God (albeit unwittingly) in the image of the Stuart kings whom he so abhorred. This argument was picked up by twentieth-century critics such as A. J. A. Waldock and John Peter, but its greatest champion is William Empson, who sees Milton's epic as a heroic struggle with the inner contradictions of the Christian faith itself, exposing God, in the end, as a tyrant and it is Satan who displays the typical qualities of the classical hero, while Adam and other characters never really attains epic or heroic stature.

In 1674, Andrew Marvell wrote a poem as a preface to the second edition of *Paradise Lost* in which he praised Milton whose poetry sings with so much gravity and ease. Dryden, Milton's contemporary, was a poet who declared that Satan was Milton's hero in the epic poem. This idea surfaced again in the late eighteenth century when William Blake also wrote that Milton was a true poet, but was, unknown to himself, in sympathy with the rebellious Satan. But C. S. Lewis a modern critic, refuted his idea on the grounds that it is the reader, not Milton, who admires Satan.

When reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the reader is likely to perceive Satan as a character too charismatic not to be sympathized with. He abounds with characteristics usually given to protagonists and heroes such as determination, bravery and, if one was to compare him to ancient tragic heroes of Greek literature, such as Oedipus, he also has hamartia, a fatal flaw which ultimately causes hero's downfall. All of this causes controversy when analysing characters of *Paradise Lost*.

Even though Satan is quick witted, brave and an excellent leader, the question arises whether the devil can be an epic hero. It is explained in the UK Essay "*Satan As An Epic Hero In Paradise Lost*" that *Paradise Lost* starts, not with the expected potential heroes of the Genesis stories ("*Satan As An Epic Hero*"), God or man, but it begins instead with

Satan, therefore paying great attention to him, his actions and characteristics. Milton, introduce Satan by condemning him as the reason leader to the fall of man, "Who first seduced them to that foul revolt? (Milton 1:33-34) /the' infernal Serpent..." (1.33-34). in this sentence it implied that Satan had begun to be set up as the final rebel, not just of the epic, but of humanity. Milton easily represented Satan's pride that led to his ultimate failure. He tried to overthrow God; while unluckily he was cast into the Hell, but Milton also told us, "...for now the thought/both of lost happiness and lasting pain/Torments him..."(1.55-56). At once, the author tried to make Satan to be a pitied, more human and less evil role. He also described Satan's physical character to be "in bulk as huge/as whom the fables name of monstrous size, / Titanian..."(1.196-198). Satan's size growing extreme larger comparing with the others supports Satan as the hero. Satan is so physically impressive that Milton can't find anyone who can match him. Hence he is distinctive from the other angels and men. ("*Satan As An Epic Hero In Paradise Lost*") As one can see here, Satan abounds with characteristics which could be seen as positive and therefore attributed to the protagonist.

Satan is an impeccable leader with qualities that far outshine any other character in the poem. Edith Kaiter and Corina Sandiuc mentioned in their research paper titled 'Milton's Satan: Hero or Anti-Hero'? "None of the other characters of *Paradise Lost* exhibits such non-transparent nature (Kaiter and Sandiuc)". John Carey explains that Satan is an indecisive character. He stated that "a more reasonable reaction is to recognize that the poem is insolubly ambivalent (Carey 161), in so far as the reading of Satan's character is concerned, and that this ambivalence is a precondition of the poem's success- a major factor in the attention it has roused" (Carey, 2000; p.no.161). Hamilton confirms he earns our respect the more for being real, because the people of heaven are distant and strange.

Satan has many qualities like steadfast leadership, courage, unyielding will and more. These qualities are best highlighted in the first few books. In the later books Satan suffers through moral degeneration which gives him more diversity and turns him into a round character rather than letting him stay a flat character with no development.

Satan's leadership is showcased perfectly when he addresses his fellow fallen angels with their original names to instil courage and hope to not let the fire of fight die." Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers, if these magnificent Titles yet remain Not merely titular" (Milton 1:662-663).



This speech showcases Satan's ability to reframe their defeat as a stepping stone, instilling hope and determination in his followers. His leadership is characterized by his persuasive rhetoric which causes his audience to dance to his tune and this persuasion is followed by his quick wit to formulate plans. This shows that he doesn't want to lose face and make his subordinates feel disappointment; these are also the qualities of a great leader.

His leadership is followed by pride which was high enough to rebel against God. Satan is modelled after courage and foolishness. His courage is evident in his determination, even after facing such a crushing defeat he still has the will to fight and goes to the Garden of Eden knowing that he will be more severely punished if God finds out about his attempt to ruin God's latest creation. His pride is steadfast; he takes pride in his courage to defy God and being able to shake heaven with his army. Courage is an inseparable aspect of Satan's character. His pride fuels this firm courage to never be scared of anything. Though he has this hamartia Milton's portrayal of Satan in the first few books make us envy his courage and feel sad for his fate.

Satan is a character with endless courage which was fuelled by his pride. Satan is already planning new schemes against God instead of mourning the loss of heaven. He gives this vigour to his subordinates to not be disheartened by this loss but rather prepare for the next attack on God and heaven. He knows that his rebellion is futile but still, he refuses to give up and continues to wage rebellion against God from the depths of hell. He can be considered a rebel trying to face the entire system opposing the very power which caused his existence. Though defeated, he is not vanquished yet, his spirit to conquer heaven remains undaunted.

What is more courageous than rebelling against the very master of fate?

Heroism in Conflict

Although Satan is a demonic entity it is still not easy to talk about him as the antagonist since his qualities prevent him from becoming the anti-hero of the epic. While anti-Satanists like Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis underestimates Satan and thinks of him as a reincarnation of an undefiled evil spirit. They emphasize Satan's self-centeredness, stupidity or irrationality. As C.S. Lewis observed, throughout the poem, all his (Satan's) sufferings come at his own pace. And he claims that Satan's rebellion against God "is entangled in contradictions from the very outset" because "he only thought himself impaired" (C.S. Lewis 1942: p.96). As Hazlitt said he is "*the most heroic subject ever chosen in a poem*".

On the other hand, pro-Satanists such as P.B. Shelly, William Hazlitt, and William Blake prepare Satan and scrutinize him as a noble hero. They emphasized Satan's dignity, heroism, and evil spirit. According to Shelly, Satan is a devil, but "*very different from the popular personification of evil*" (Miller, 1997 p, 148).

Satan's qualities as the devil or rather the antagonist blossoms in the later stages of the poem where he developed qualities like deception, misanthropic nature which follows him along and increases with the increase in moral degeneration but his heroic brilliance far outshines his negative traits.

Satan reflects on the inescapability of his torment in Book IV, line 75-78 Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell; And, in the lowest deep, a lower deep, still threatening to devour me opens wide, To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven. "(Milton 4:75-78).

This is where his moral degeneration and regret seeps into his character gradually turning him from the heroic figure of book I to the devil he was portrayed in the bible. He acknowledges that no matter where he goes, he carries Hell within himself ("myself am Hell"), showing the depth of his internal moral decay. He is aware that he is falling more and more ("a lower deep... opens wide") highlights that he can never come back. Milton in Books 1 and 2 has glorified Satan to such an extent that people begin to question the way of God that Milton is trying to justify, but as the poem progresses Satan stoops lower and lower into his pride that he loses all his ethics and values. Satan from being the most cherished archangel of God becomes the prince of darkness and deception, from having the physique of a goliath, the monstrous size of a leviathan to disguising himself as a serpent to seduce a pure innocent woman the character of Satan has only gone through degeneration. He once was the commander of arch angels with heads held high and shining brighter than a star but now he reigns in hell amidst chaos and eternal suffering with flames of shining darkness which neither gives warmth nor light. He has such deep hatred for God that He takes the risk of entering the Garden of Eden knowing that the Son of God is there. When Eve took the bite of the forbidden fruit earth felt its wound. He is cunning to the bone and after falling from grace he has become the embodiment of deception.

He has not only deceived Eve but his comrades who shed their blood and sweat for his war. Satan is instilling false hope, and benchmarking their past glory with their present circumstances successfully deceiving them to continue with the rebellion that has no hope of fructification. Thus, we



can say that Satan has become deception itself, ready to deceive anyone for his cause.

Satan later becomes even more cunning and devilish towards the end of the poem and finally shows his true colour. Although his sadist or misanthropic nature comes as a by-product of his moral degeneration, he starts rejoicing in the suffering of anything that God creates and cherishes. When God casts away Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of knowledge Satan was celebrating the fulfilment of his plan. Satan has stooped so low that now the suffering of others brings him pleasure and happiness, he has lost sight of his true goal which was to overthrow God, Satan is now trying to disrupt God's work and is content with causing suffering to humanity rather than taking bold steps against God.

This quality he develops after his tragic downfall to hell is proof of how he longs to cause harm to God but can't so he has to stoop low to such heinous methods for pleasure and happiness, he does this because he knows that he can never win against God. This establishes a ground although not too prominent to doubt him as the antagonist of the epic.

Satan and the Tragic-Hero Paradigm

Perhaps the most famous quote related to *Paradise Lost* is Blake's statement that John Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790). Although William Blake may have meant something else than what is commonly understood from the line, the belief that Satan is the hero, or at the very least a hero type, is prevalent in *Paradise Lost*. However, the evolution, or, more specifically, degradation, of Satan's character from Book I to book X presents a contrasting and much apparent and a clear depiction of Milton's attitude towards Satan. This observation brings us a new exposure to our view of Satan: Milton might have intended Satan to be the evil entity from the Christian lore, but he paints Satan in such a way that puts Satan in the limelight and casts aside the greatness of God. Satan is an entity which is capable of becoming an archetypal tragic hero by fulfilling all the six basic conventions that Aristotle argues a tragic character must possess.

The first is having a noble stature before his fall. This criteria is fulfilled as Satan was the leader of archangels only next to God, he was the first being created by God and was dearest to God before he rebelled and fell from grace. He was once called Lucifer in heaven and regarded as the perfect being but now he was in the deep darkness of hell burning with black flames without any sight of light. This is confirmed in the first book when Satan says "*If thou beest he; But O how fall'n! how chang'd. From him,*

who in the happy Realms of Light. Cloth'd with transcendent brightness didst out-shine." (*Paradise Lost Book I, line 84-87*)

The second is having a hamartia or tragic flaw. Satan, although considered a perfect being, had his tragic flaw that led to his downfall: his pride. His pride led him to rebel against the supreme creator causing him and his comrades to suffer eternal damnation. He was the leader of all the angels, the dearest to God but he was not content with this he wanted to rule over the heavens. This is further solidified when Satan says "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven (Milton 1:263)"

Satan fulfils the third condition of being aware of his fall this realization is termed as anagnorisis. When he glances past his pride and revenge he is brought to the realization that his pride causes him and his comrades such humiliation and suffering that is eternal. In book IV he becomes aware of his fall and what he has lost in the process of trying to fulfil a foolish goal. He is no longer the glorious figure that he once was in heaven and is now trapped in hell with darkness all around O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams That bring to my remembrance from what state I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere, Till pride and worse ambition threw me down" (Milton 4:37-40), These lines underscore his awareness of his fall.

The fourth convention asserts the hero has free will. The hero's downfall must be because of his own decisions from his free will and not a pre-determined fate. Satan's decisions of trying to rebel and overthrow God was completely his own. Satan's rebellion or his fall was not pre-determined but rather his own will on which he acted and caused his downfall. When arguing that Satan acts on his own free will, it is essential to view what God says about his creation. In Book 3, God specifically states, "I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall (Milton 3:98-99)"

The fifth convention is although the fall of the hero is caused by his own free will but the punishment far exceeds the crime committed. In Satan's case this holds especially true cause he is punished twice once for rebelling against the master and second for tempting Eve to eat the fruit of knowledge. The second time he is punished is an offence which happened was completely avoidable since as mentioned in the poem the God is all seeing and all knowing "*For what can scape the Eye / Of God All-seeing, or deceive his Heart. Omniscient*" (*Paradise Lost Book X, line 1-2*) hence knowing very well that Satan would ardently try to seduce Eve to eat the forbidden fruit God decided not to intervene and rather let that atrocity occur and punish Satan



instead of preventing the fall of humanity. This makes us view and question the ways of God that Milton was keen to justify.

The final convention is that a tragic hero must produce catharsis meaning the reader or the audience must feel pity for the character producing a moment for the audience to release the emotion. Satan produces this effect for himself when he visits the Garden of Eden. Satan's statement, "*the more I see/ Pleasures about me, so much more I feel / Torment within me,*" is just one of the many lines where Satan acknowledges his anguish (*Paradise Lost IX, line 119- 121*). These lines allow us to relate to Satan's agony and feel emotionally invested in his situation. It is here we come to know that hiding behind that glorious facade of the ruler of Hell is an entity who is in deep agony, people can relate more to Satan and feel pity on him because Milton has given Satan very human like qualities which further enhances the effect of catharsis. This gives us a new view to how Satan begins the poem as a just-fallen angel of great stature, looks like a bolides or meteor as he leaves hell, and then changes himself into a humbler angel, then into a toad and finally a snake (Fish, 1967, p, 12). A more moderate perspective is in the right place for Tillyard who makes a direct distinction between the consciousness and unconsciousness associations in *Paradise Lost*. According to his estimation, Milton certainly intended Satan to be a bleak reminder of the unrestrained passions, inducing fear and hate rather than compassion. The narrator's best way to portray Satan as a hero is by epic similes, long and elaborates comparisons that show how big and mighty Satan is. To emphasize this point, Gen Ohinata says that Satan's request cultivates on one occasion with his misfortune. But at the same time as discussed before how Satan is emanating with heroic qualities by P.B Shelly and other prominent poets give us this exposure thus ensuring his stand as a tragic hero as well.

II. Conclusion

Due to all the pictures drawn by author, John Milton, readers are left with a dilemma about the character of Satan, hence whether Satan is the protagonist or the antagonist is a question that everyone has their views on and has been a matter of heated debate between the critics. Labelling Satan as a hero reflects humanity's tendency to romanticize rebels and fighters against established systems, making him a hero of the revolution. The author protects Satan's degeneration of character, beginning as a heavenly hero and ending as a snake in hell. He fights back to face his own fears as well as

limitations, and ends his desires by degrading the human race but even with these negative qualities one cannot cast him aside as the antagonist. He is definitely the hero of the epic. No other character in the entire epic has the diversity of characteristics as Satan. Satan is the only figure who keeps on evolving rather than getting stuck at a fixed character. One can even keep him in the high pedestal as the tragic hero as he has already fulfilled all the conditions based on Aristotle's poetics and heroism isn't pretty much physical prowess or outward charisma and it is also no longer constantly about being morally right. He is filled with qualities that make us put him on the high pedestal of the various warriors of our own history. His charisma and grand stature and his ambitions cannot be dismissed when discussing his character and no other character has the grandeur to step up into the high pedestal as the hero of this grand Epic *Paradise Lost*. Thus in conclusion Satan has usurped the position of the Hero of the epic poem "*Paradise Lost*".

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