

Social Context of the Paradise Lost

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Abstract: In the *Paradise Lost*, John Milton tried to explain how evil is seductive. It is one of the reasons why he portrayed Satan with ultra human dimensions in Book I and II. And what makes Satan so heroic is not the particular situation he is in or any facts about him: his magnificence comes from the inspired verse which Milton puts into his speeches. No one reading these speeches can miss their power and eloquence.

It is no accident that when Winston Churchill was looking for something to rally the British people after the military disaster of Dunkirk, he used these lines on the radio. There is nothing in English literature to match the heroic determination, power, courage, and energy manifested here and throughout Satan's early speeches. And his followers are appropriately energized.

At very end *Paradise Lost* was more than a work of art. Indeed, it was a moral and political treatise, a poetic explanation for the course that English history and Human kind had taken.

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Introduction

One of the greatest poets of the English language, best-known for his epic poem PARADISE LOST (1667). Milton's powerful, rhetoric prose and the eloquence of his poetry had an immense influence especially on the 18th-century verse. Besides poems, Milton published pamphlets defending civil and religious rights. The year 1649 marked a decisive change in Milton's life. Charles I was executed, with Milton probably in attendance. The murder of a king was shocking to the people of a country that had always lived under a monarchy and for whom the king had an aura of divinity. Milton attempted to justify the situation with his *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. This pamphlet, along with Milton's other work for the Puritans, resulted in his being offered the position of Secretary for the Foreign Tongues. The classical influences in his work can be clearly delineated: Homer, Ovid, but especially Virgil. Shakespeare was the leading playwright of his day, and there are some references to his works in Milton's own poetry. The style and structure of the Spenser's "The Faerie Queen," was another influence on *Paradise lost*. Following the invocation and prologue, Milton continues in the epic style by beginning in medias res, in the middle of things. Satan is first seen lying in the pit of Hell. That great religious epic focuses on Satan, presents him first, and in many ways makes him the hero of the poem is certainly surprising and something of a risk on Milton's part. Milton does not want his audience to empathize with Satan, yet Satan is an attractive character, struggling against great odds. Of course, Milton's original audience more than his modern one would have been cognizant of the ironies involved in Satan's struggles and his comments concerning power. The power that Satan asserts and thinks he has is illusory. His power to act derives only from God, and his struggle against God has already been lost. To the modern audience, Satan may seem heroic as he struggles to make a Heaven of Hell, but the original audience knew, and Milton's lines confirm, that Satan's war with God had been lost absolutely before the poem begins. God grants Satan and the other devils the power to act for God's purposes, not theirs.

In fact, unlike a classical epic which deals with a subject of national importance, with the war-like exploits of some hero of national stature, the theme of Milton's epic is vaster and of a more universal human interest. It concerns itself with the fortunes, not of a city or an empire, but of the whole human race, and with that particular

event in the history of the race which has module all its destinies. Around this event, the plucking of an apple, are rage, according to the strict rules of the ancient epic, the histories of Heaven and Earth and Hell.

The study

"The scene of action is Universal Space. The time represented is eternity. The characters are God and all his creatures."(Khan, 2006, p. 148). And all these are exhibited in the clearest and most inevitable relation with the man and his destiny.

John Milton was one of the great poets of England whose life spanned the most turbulent period of English history. His youth was spent in the dissolving reign of Charles I who desperately held on to his power by dissolving Parliament. "This foolishness could only last so long, and civil war broke out in 1642. This war would elevate an intensely religious and unboundedly ambitious, charismatic, and the man named Oliver Cromwell to the height of power; in 1649, after overthrowing the monarchy and taking over England, Cromwell executed Charles I and thus ushered in a new state which he called the Commonwealth and Protectorate that was, nominally, Puritan."(Morton, A.L 1955, p 211) He was such capable military officer that he became a high ranking general and great inspiration for his society. Cromwell nominally subscribed to Calvin's principles of civil government, in which the best form of government is either an aristocracy (rule by the best) or a combination of aristocracy and democracy (rule by the people) & emdash; the latter would become the basis of American government. Cromwell, however, wanted to be king and ruled harshly, calling himself "Protector of England" and setting up in effect a military government.

Milton meditated many subjects, from both British and biblical history, before he finally decided on the fall as the theme for his great epic.

In the beginning there existed according to Milton God and Chaos.

Milton's imagery draws a contrast which helps us in understanding the Satan in the Book I.

The Hell is portrayed as closely as possible to the nature of horror portrayed in Inferno. Lying on the lake, Satan is described as gigantic; he is compared to a Titan or the Leviathan. Next to Satan lies Beelzebub, Satan's second in command. Satan comments on how Beelzebub has been transformed for the worse by the punishment of God.

With effort, Satan is able to free himself from his chains and rise from the fire. He flies to a barren plain, followed by Beelzebub. From the plain, Satan calls the other fallen angels to join him, and one by one they rise from the lake and fly to their leader.

The theme of freedom and independence is perhaps the most controversial one in the poem because it portrays Satan as the very embodiment of heroic energy. This energy is constantly expressed in his opposition to the will of god despite heavy odds. In fact, Milton's own self esteem, pride and republicanism, are voiced by Satan. Milton believed in Cromwell and the civil war at first, but would later have second thoughts about Cromwell (in fact, Satan in *Paradise Lost* is clearly Oliver Cromwell). Milton would spend his later years during the reign of Charles II blind and distressed over the social problems of the seventeenth century, a distress which gave rise to his two great epic poems.

Milton's distaste for the monarchy led directly to his embracing the rule of Oliver Cromwell. From 1630 through 1658 Milton wrote at least 24 sonnets. Many of these celebrate the rise of "Lord General Cromwell" and "New Forcers of Conscience." When Cromwell's government collapsed and Charles II ascended the throne, Milton was imprisoned, fined, and his property confiscated. Yet Milton steadfastly accepted his decisions and the consequences.

Three years after the fall of Cromwell's government, Milton began writing *Paradise Lost*. Readers of the epic often find Satan the most compelling character, especially at the beginning of the poem, which he dominates. Satan has used his free will to choose his role in the universe. The famous statement by Satan that it is "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" is an endorsement of individual rights and responsibility, versus serving authority. Satan describes his enemy as "the tyranny of Heaven."

We can obviously see that Oliver Cromwell had influence on John Milton, because Cromwell proved most capable as a military leader and clothed conservatively, he possessed a Puritan fervor and a commanding voice,

he quickly made a name for himself by serving in both the Short Parliament (April 1640) and the Long Parliament (August 1640 through April 1660).

Oliver Cromwell was known by his passionate speeches in the Parliament. And it is the most obvious that Oliver Cromwell was Satan from *Paradise Lost*.

Conclusion

"Ideology of the *Paradise Lost* has deep root in social situation of England and with realistic view mirrors state and political standpoint of its writer and his class of that time." (Puhalo, 1966, p. 203)

"Satan's speeches bring out the salient traits of his character-his realism, resourcefulness and foresight. He is not coward; but his courage is not rash and unthinking. Like clever politician, he would like to think before he leaps"(Khan, 2006, p. 153)

We must admit how Satan is brilliant leader; he is telling his fallen angels that everything in our minds. Satan motivates them to continue their fight.

Milton portrays the Satan as a rebel and God as a tyrant. It's war between an autocrats and democrats. Seeing Milton's own literary career and the impact of the civil war on his writing, it would be far fetched to say that Milton did see a touch of glory in Satan.

"And Satan is introduced in this background- not as helpless victim, but as a character of ultra human dimensions". (Kapetanović, 1973, p. 84)

Milton devotes much of the poem's early books to devolving Satan's character. We can even see him as an innocent victim, overlooked for an important promotion. The first impression of the book I leaves us with clear picture of autocracy and democracy. God is autocrat. His whole world whirls around him. He is the center of his own world. On the other hand, Satan is democratic. Democratic elements among the devils: they had a council, the unique idea and army to fight to God. So Milton uses Satan to criticize the tyranny. In the context Satan's war is ear for independence. At the end of Chapter II, I would like say that the speeches of Satan and his followers in book I and II are magnificent in their way, Miltonic. To see Satan as a hero because Milton goes out of his way to show the superficial seductiveness of this kind of evil is to show extraordinary naiveté. Many readers and myself have argued that Milton deliberately makes Satan seem heroic and appealing early in the poem to draw us into sympathizing with him against our will, so that we may see how seductive evil is and learn to be more vigilant in resisting its appeal. And then at very end Milton changes Satan from great war-leader into smooth-tongued and specious politician.

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