SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 7 July, 2025**

Myth Making in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Dr. S. Jerald Sagaya Nathan

Article Received: 17/06/2025
Article Accepted: 19/07/2025
Published Online: 19/07/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.07.442

Abstract:

John Milton's Paradise Lost is considered one of the greatest epic poems in English literature. It stands out not only for its deep theological and philosophical ideas but also for its complex myth-making. This paper looks at how Milton creates a unique mythic world that reinterprets Judeo-Christian stories through poetic imagination, blending classical epic traditions with biblical themes. Milton's use of myth serves several purposes: it supports his theological views, challenges established religious authority, and provides a way to understand human nature, free will, and divine justice. By examining key mythic elements such as Satan's fall, the creation of the world, and the fall of humanity, this study places Milton's work within the larger tradition of mythopoetic literature while highlighting its original contributions. Using both the text itself and critical studies, the paper shows how Paradise Lost reshapes myth to address the religious and political issues of the seventeenth century, continuing the development of myth in Western literature.

Keywords: Milton, Paradise Lost, myth making, epic poetry, Satan, creation, fall, theology

Introduction:

John Milton (1608–1674) was an English poet, writer, and thinker who had a significant impact on literature, religion, and politics of the seventeenth century. He studied at St. Paul's School and Christ's College, Cambridge, where he gained a deep knowledge of classical literature and theology that shaped his work. A strong supporter of individual freedom and republican ideas, Milton backed the Puritan side during the English Civil War and worked as Latin Secretary under Oliver Cromwell's government. Even after losing his sight in his forties, he continued to write extensively, producing his greatest work, Paradise Lost (1667), followed by Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes. His epic poems combined classical style with Christian themes, changing English literature and securing his place as one of its greatest poets.

Paradise Lost, first published in 1667 with ten books and later expanded to twelve in 1674, is Milton's epic masterpiece aiming to "justify the ways of God to

men." Using elements of classical epics, it tells the biblical story of the Fall of Man—Satan's rebellion, his temptation of Adam and Eve, and their banishment from Eden. The poem is structured as a vast cosmic drama and explores profound themes such as free will, obedience, pride, justice, and redemption. Milton's goal was not only artistic but also moral and spiritual: to make readers think about divine purpose and human responsibility. Through his powerful language and complex characters—especially the striking figure of Satan—Milton retells the story of Genesis in a mythic way, blending classical and Christian ideas to create a work with lasting moral and literary importance.

John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667) is a monumental work that reimagines biblical stories through epic poetry. At its core is Milton's talent for myth making—his ability to create a rich mythic framework that reinterprets the Genesis creation and fall stories, blending them with elements from classical mythology and Renaissance humanism. As David Quint notes, Milton "transforms the biblical story into epic form, thus mythologizing Christian history" (45). Milton's work does more than retell; it reshapes myth to explore profound themes such as free will, evil, and redemption. This paper looks at how Milton builds his mythic world in Paradise Lost and what this reveals about his view of humanity and the divine.

Milton draws on the epic tradition of Homer, Virgil, and Dante, who all used myth to explore human experience and divine order. He begins the poem with a grand invocation, presenting his retelling of the biblical fall as "the argument," or central myth:

Barbara K. Lewalski explains that Milton's use of epic conventions "places Paradise Lost in the lineage of classical epic but with a Christian mythic content" (22). By blending classical epic style with biblical themes, Milton creates a unique mythic vision that connects two traditions. For example, Milton's Satan draws heavily from classical heroism and tragedy, representing the fallen hero or tragic rebel. Lewalski describes Satan as "a mythic figure caught between Luciferian pride and Promethean rebellion" (117). This mix adds depth to the poem's mythic meaning, prompting readers to rethink traditional ideas of good and evil.

Quint points out that Milton's myth-making "does not merely imitate classical epics but reworks the epic form to embody Christian theological concerns" (62). This blend makes Paradise Lost a distinctive mythopoetic work that both respects and reshapes epic traditions. Quint further explains that "Milton harnesses the power of myth not only to narrate but to interrogate the cosmic order, free will, and divine justice" (65). Similarly, Lewalski notes that "Milton's mythic vision is a fusion of epic grandeur and Christian theology, producing a work that both honors and redefines mythic tradition" (22). This fusion is key to Milton's poetic innovation. One of the most important mythic figures in Paradise Lost is Satan. Milton transforms

Satan from a simple biblical villain into a complex mythic character embodying rebellion, ambition, and tragic grandeur. This portrayal shows Satan as more than just an enemy; he has heroic qualities, which has led to much debate about the poem's moral and theological message.

Satan's famous line, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton 1.263), captures his role as a rebellious figure. Robert A. Miola explains that "Satan's character represents the classic myth of a rebel god who challenges divine authority" (89). Milton's depiction draws from classical myths like Prometheus and Icarus, who suffer for their defiance but also represent human struggle and ambition.

David Hawkes points out that Milton's Satan is "a mythic hero whose quest for freedom turns into a tragic fate" (152). Satan's journey through chaos and his leadership of the fallen angels resemble the heroic quests found in epic tales, making his character more than just a biblical villain. John Leonard argues that Milton's Satan "extends beyond scripture to symbolize human ambition and the tragic results of defiance" (104). Leonard also notes, "The heroic traits given to Satan are part of Milton's way of challenging simple moral ideas, encouraging readers to see his rebellion as a deep existential and theological conflict" (108). This mythic portrayal complicates the usual good-versus-evil story, inviting readers to consider the complexities of heroism and rebellion.

Milton's retelling of Creation in Paradise Lost reimagines Genesis as a grand cosmic myth, mixing biblical story with epic style. The poem's opening lines place creation within divine will and poetic inspiration: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Milton 1.254–55). This reflects Milton's focus on the power of perception and will, key themes in his myth-making.

The description of "darkness" and "chaos" before creation echoes classical cosmogonies like Hesiod's Theogony, where the universe emerges from a state of primordial disorder. Northrop Frye notes that Milton "transforms the biblical chaos into a mythic space from which divine order is imposed" (78). Milton's God is all-powerful, creating the cosmos with a single command: "Let there be light" (Milton 7.22).

The cosmic battle between God and Satan is another mythic element Milton develops to explain the origin of evil. Lewalski observes that the celestial war serves as "a mythic prehistory that frames the human story and explains the presence of evil in the world" (139).

Catherine Gimelli Martin emphasizes that Milton's cosmic myth "reconfigures the creation narrative to highlight divine power and human

responsibility within a divinely ordered universe" (88). She adds, "Milton's poetic imagination turns the biblical act of creation into a cosmic struggle where order triumphs over chaos, reflecting seventeenth-century scientific and theological debates" (90).

Frye adds that "Milton's chaos is not just a void but a mythic symbol of potential from which divine order and moral meaning arise" (78). This mythic symbolism deepens Milton's retelling, placing it within a long tradition of cosmogonic myth.

At the core of Milton's myth is the story of Adam and Eve's fall. He reinterprets this biblical story as a powerful myth about human freedom, responsibility, and the gaining of knowledge. The fall is not just a simple mistake but a tragic event shaped by free will and temptation. Milton shows Adam's awareness of his choice: "Let us not then suspect our happy state / Left so imperfect by the Maker wise" (Milton 8.419–20). Alastair Fowler argues that Milton's myth of the fall "is a reflection on human freedom and the consequences of choice" (204).
Eve's temptation by the serpent—a classic mythic figure of chaos and cunning—represents the moment of human self-awareness and moral testing. Lewalski points out that "the serpent as a mythic figure brings knowledge but also suffering, marking the shift from innocence to experience" (158).

Milton's storytelling is ultimately hopeful. The fall sets the stage for redemption, a theme that takes the Christian story beyond just tragedy. He writes about the promise of salvation through the "seed of the woman" (Milton 12.644), connecting human history with divine mercy. Anthony Low argues that Milton's story "balances tragedy with hope, portraying the fall as a necessary step in the human journey toward self-awareness and divine grace" (132). He suggests that "instead of being a final disaster, the fall becomes a key moment that allows free will and the chance for redemption" (135). Lewalski agrees, pointing out, "The serpent's role as a mythic figure represents both evil and knowledge, marking the transition from innocence to experience and helping moral understanding grow" (158). This mix highlights Milton's complex view of human nature.

Milton's myth-making also reflects the political and religious changes in seventeenth-century England. Some see Satan as a symbol of resistance against tyranny, representing liberty and republican ideals. Christopher Hill says, "Milton's Satan is a mythic figure of rebellion against monarchy and authoritarian rule, embodying the spirit of liberty and resistance" (121).

Additionally, Milton's portrayal of God's justice and mercy shows his idea of political order, where obedience is voluntary and based on reason and faith. Lewalski notes that "Milton's mythic world is a political theology supporting liberty

under divine law, balancing divine power and human free will" (172).

Elizabeth Sauer adds that Milton's myth-making "offers a subtle yet powerful critique of absolutism, supporting the importance of individual conscience and resistance within a divinely approved framework" (96). She also points out that "Milton's epic creates a mythic space where political rebellion is seen not just as defiance but as a moral duty against tyranny" (98). This firmly places Milton's epic in the middle of the debates on authority and freedom during his time.

John Milton's Paradise Lost is a brilliant work of myth-making that retells biblical stories using epic form and poetic imagination. Milton builds a mythic world that tackles deep questions about good and evil, free will, and human nature. His depiction of Satan as a complex rebel, the cosmic creation story, and the tragic yet hopeful fall of man all add to the poem's lasting influence.

By combining classical epic traditions with Christian theology and the political issues of the seventeenth century, Milton creates a new mythic language that still shapes literary and religious thinking today. Paradise Lost is not only a literary masterpiece but also a profound mythic vision of humanity's role in the universe.

References:

Fowler, Alastair. Milton: Paradise Lost. Routledge, 1998.
Frye, Northrop. Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake. Princeton UP, 1947.
Gimelli Martin, Catherine. "Milton's Cosmic Myth and Divine Order." Studies in English Literature, vol. 45, no. 1, 2005, pp. 75–94.
Hill, Christopher. Milton and the English Revolution. Penguin Books, 1977.
Hawkes, David. John Milton's Epic Poetry. Cambridge UP, 1983.
Leonard, John. Milton's Mythic Imagination. Yale UP, 2010.
Lewalski, Barbara K. Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of Paradise Lost. Princeton UP, 2003.
Low, Anthony. "Tragedy and Hope in Milton's Myth." Journal of Renaissance Studies, vol. 22, no. 2, 2012, pp. 120–140.
Miola, Robert A. Milton and the Ethics of Reading: Essays on the Long Poem. Cambridge UP, 1992.
Milton, John. Paradise Lost. Edited by Alastair Fowler, Longman, 2007.
Quint, David. Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton. Princeton UP, 1993.
Sauer, Elizabeth. "Milton's Myth Making and Political Theology." English Literary History, vol. 67, no. 1, 2000, pp. 85–105