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Satan Unbound: Reassessing Satan's Role in Paradise Lost

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Introduction

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a seminal work of art, an epic that has secured its place in most literary canons of the world. This work, spanning 12 books, emphasizes "justifying the ways of God to men." It dives deeply into Christian theology, exploring the fall of Adam and Eve (humanity) from the Garden of Eden due to Satan's deception and how Christ becomes the savior of mankind. The work also serves as 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 alongside Shakespeare, Homer, and Virgil. Matthew Arnold regarded him as a master, in English, of the great epic style of the ancients. T. S. Eliot critiqued Milton, suggesting his visual imagery contained an inherent weakness. Comparing God to the classical Zeus, who is not a loving god, and Satan to Prometheus, a friend to man, Werblowsky suggests that Milton, unknowingly, transposed his main characters, leading readers to empathize with Satan and fear God. Readers find Satan attractive and God distant and unloving, just as Adam remains separated from God by his own sin.

It is said that Satan is the true hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Milton allowed him to develop far beyond what his theological presuppositions would have permitted. Milton was an icon of admiration for 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, giving rise to a pool of writers who expounded on the ideas of individual liberty and freedom. William Blake masterfully explains Milton's decision to write such an appealing devil, stating, "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 Ramm 10). This sentiment is echoed by P. B. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*: "Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to assume that he was the personification of evil. Milton's devil has a moral far superior to God" (Shelley 360). The versatility in Milton's characters and the unusual appeal Satan brings are 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. The core value of this paper is to make readers aware of the heroic dimensions of Satan.

Satan as a Hero

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. It is Satan who displays the typical qualities of the classical hero, while Adam and other characters never truly attain 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 great gravity and ease. Dryden, Milton's contemporary, declared that Satan was Milton's hero in the epic poem. This idea resurfaced in the late eighteenth century when William Blake also wrote that Milton was a true poet but was, unbeknownst to himself, in sympathy with the rebellious Satan. However, C. S. Lewis, a modern critic, refuted this idea on the grounds that it is the reader, not Milton, who admires Satan.

When reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, readers are 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 compared to ancient tragic heroes of Greek literature, such as Oedipus, he also has *hamartia*, a fatal flaw that ultimately causes the hero's downfall. This causes controversy when analyzing the 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. The UK Essay "Satan As An Epic Hero In *Paradise Lost*" explains:

Paradise Lost starts, not with the expected potential heroes of the Genesis stories, God or man, but with Satan, therefore paying great attention to him, his actions, and characteristics. Milton introduces Satan by condemning him as the reason leader to the fall of man, "Who first seduced them to that foul revolt? / Th' infernal Serpent…" (1.33-34). In this sentence, it is 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 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 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 extremely larger compared 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, Satan abounds with characteristics that 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 mention in their research paper titled "Milton's Satan: Hero or Anti-Hero?": "None of the other characters of *Paradise Lost* exhibits such a non-transparent nature" (Kaiter and Sandiuc). John Carey explains that Satan is an indecisive character, stating, "a more reasonable reaction is to recognize that the poem is insolubly ambivalent, 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 aroused" (Carey 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, such as steadfast leadership, courage, and unyielding will. These qualities are best highlighted in the first few books. In the later books, Satan suffers moral degeneration, which gives him more diversity and turns him into a round character rather than letting him remain a flat character with no development.

Satan's leadership is showcased perfectly when he addresses his fellow fallen angels with their original names to instill courage and hope, ensuring the fire of fight does not die: "Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers, if these magnific 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 persuasive rhetoric, which causes his audience to follow his lead, and this persuasion is supported by his quick wit to formulate plans. This shows that he doesn't want to lose face and disappoint his subordinates; these are also the qualities of a great leader.

His leadership is followed by pride, which was great enough to rebel against God. Satan is modeled 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 he will be more severely punished if God discovers his attempt to ruin God's latest creation. His pride is steadfast; he takes pride in his courage to defy God and in his ability 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 makes readers envy his courage and feel

sympathy for his fate.

Satan is a character with endless courage, fueled by his pride. Instead of mourning the loss of heaven, Satan is already planning new schemes against God. He gives this vigor to his subordinates, encouraging them not to be disheartened by this loss but to prepare for the next attack on God and heaven. He knows his rebellion is futile but still refuses to give up, continuing to wage rebellion against God from the depths of hell. He can be considered a rebel facing the entire system, opposing the very power that caused his existence.

Though defeated, he is not vanquished; his spirit to conquer heaven remains undaunted. What is more courageous than rebelling against the master of fate?

Satan as the Anti-Hero

Although Satan is a demonic entity, it is not easy to label him as the antagonist since his qualities prevent him from becoming the anti-hero of the epic. Anti-Satanists like Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis underestimate Satan, viewing 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 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" (Lewis 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. Shelley, William Hazlitt, and William Blake praise Satan and scrutinize him as a noble hero. They emphasize Satan's dignity, heroism, and evil spirit. According to Shelley, Satan is a devil but "very different from the popular personification of evil" (Miller 148).

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

Satan reflects on the inescapability of his torment in Book IV, lines 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 seep into his character, gradually turning him from the heroic figure of Book I to the devil 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. His awareness that he is falling further ("a lower deep... opens wide") highlights that he can never return. Milton, in Books 1 and 2, has glorified Satan to such an extent that readers begin to question the ways of God that Milton is trying to justify, but as the poem progresses, Satan stoops lower into his pride, losing all his ethics and values. From being the most cherished archangel of God, Satan 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 undergoes degeneration. Once the commander of archangels with head held high, shining brighter than a star, he now reigns in hell amidst chaos and eternal suffering with flames of shining darkness that neither give warmth nor light.

He has such deep hatred for God that he risks entering the Garden of Eden, knowing the Son of God is there. When Eve takes a bite of the forbidden fruit, the earth feels its wound. He is cunning to the bone, and after falling from grace, he becomes the embodiment of deception.

He not only deceives Eve but also his comrades, who shed their blood and sweat for his war. Satan instills false hope, benchmarking their past glory with their present circumstances, successfully deceiving them to continue with a rebellion that has no hope of fruition. 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 toward the end of the poem, finally showing his true colors. Although his sadistic or misanthropic nature comes as a byproduct 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 celebrates the fulfillment of his plan. Satan has stooped so low that the suffering of others now brings him pleasure and happiness; he has lost sight of his true goal, which was to overthrow God. Satan is now content with causing suffering to humanity rather than taking bold steps against God.This quality, developed after his tragic downfall to hell, is proof of how he longs to cause harm to God but cannot, so he resorts to such heinous methods for pleasure and happiness, knowing he can never win against God. This establishes grounds, though not too prominent, to view him as the antagonist of the epic.

A Tragic Hero?

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 clear depiction of Milton's attitude toward Satan. This observation brings a new perspective to our view of Satan: Milton might have intended Satan to be the evil entity from 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 capable of becoming an archetypal tragic hero by fulfilling all six basic conventions that Aristotle argues a tragic character must possess.

The first is having a noble stature before his fall. This criterion is fulfilled as Satan was the leader of archangels, second only to God. He was the first being created by God and was dearest to God before he rebelled and fell from grace. Once called Lucifer in heaven and regarded as the perfect being, he now burns in the deep darkness of hell 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* 1.84-87).

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 fulfills the third condition of being aware of his fall, a realization termed *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 eternal suffering. In Book IV, he becomes aware of his fall and what he has lost in the process of trying to fulfill a foolish goal. He is no longer the glorious figure 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 that the hero has free will. The hero's downfall must result from his own decisions through free will, not a predetermined fate. Satan's decision to rebel and overthrow God was entirely his own. Satan's rebellion or fall was not predetermined but rather the result of 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 that, although the hero's fall is caused by his own free will, the punishment far exceeds the crime committed. In Satan's case, this holds especially true because he is punished twice: once for rebelling against the master and again for tempting Eve to eat the fruit of knowledge. The second punishment is for an offense that was entirely avoidable, since, as mentioned in the poem, God is all-seeing and all-knowing: "For what can scape the Eye / Of God All-seeing, or deceave his Heart / Omniscient" (*Paradise Lost* 10.1-2). Knowing full well that Satan would ardently try to seduce Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, God chose not to intervene

and instead let the atrocity occur, punishing Satan instead of preventing the fall of humanity. This makes readers 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 audience must feel pity for the character, producing a moment for the audience to release emotion. Satan produces this effect 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 many lines where Satan acknowledges his anguish (*Paradise Lost* 9.119-121). These lines allow readers to relate to Satan's agony and feel emotionally invested in his situation. It is here that we come to know that, hiding behind the glorious facade of the ruler of Hell, is an entity in deep agony. Readers can relate more to Satan and feel pity for him because Milton has given Satan very human-like qualities, which further enhance the effect of *catharsis*. This gives a new view of how Satan begins the poem as a just-fallen angel of great stature, looks like a bolide or meteor as he leaves hell, then changes into a humbler angel, a toad, and finally a snake (Fish 12). A more moderate perspective is provided by Tillyard, who makes a direct distinction between the conscious and unconscious associations in *Paradise Lost*. According to his estimation, Milton certainly intended Satan to be a bleak reminder of unrestrained passions, inducing fear and hate rather than compassion. The narrator's best way to portray Satan as a hero is through epic similes, long and elaborate comparisons that show how big and mighty Satan is. To emphasize this point, Gen Ohinata says that Satan's regret cultivates on one occasion with his misfortune. However, as discussed earlier, Satan's heroic qualities, as noted by P. B. Shelley and other prominent poets, ensure his stand as a tragic hero as well.

Conclusion

Due to the pictures drawn by the 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 on which everyone has their views and has been a matter of heated debate among critics. Labeling 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 portrays 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 undeniably the hero of the epic. No other character in the entire epic has the diversity of characteristics that Satan possesses. Satan is the only figure who keeps evolving rather than remaining a fixed character. One can even place him on a high pedestal as the tragic hero, as he fulfills all the conditions based on Aristotle's poetics. Heroism is not merely about physical prowess or outward charisma, nor is it always about being morally right. Satan is filled with qualities that place him on the high pedestal of the various warriors of our own history. His charisma, grand stature, and ambitions cannot be dismissed when discussing his character, and no other character

has the grandeur to step up to 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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