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PARADISE LOST – JOHN MILTON

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Milton's grand epic *Paradise Lost* is considered to be one of the immortal creations of English literature. Milton conceived the epic as a record of the spiritual evolution and journey of mankind from his creation to his fall. Book I of the epic is not the story of Adam and Eve, but rather that of Satan, one of the most important characters in the epic.

Short biography of Milton

Milton was born in the year 1608, in London, in an upper middle class family. His family was deeply religious with rigid Puritan beliefs. Milton went to study at St. Paul's school and later Christ's College, Cambridge. He acquired a sound knowledge of Latin and Greek. By the time he was seventeen years of age, he had read a wide range of ancient classical literature. His father took care to arrange for tutors to give him lessons in modern languages like French and Italian.

While still in college, Milton wrote Latin poetry and at the age of twenty one, he wrote his first English masterpiece, "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity". Milton's interest in expressing Christian themes in classical poetical forms is manifested from very early times. He uses this technique majorly in *Paradise Lost*. His next important works were "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" which he wrote after completing his M.A.

His parents wished him to enter priesthood in the Anglican Church, but Milton was not interested. His passion for literature continued to inspire him to create works like the masque, *Comus* and the funeral elegy, *Lycidas*. In the year 1638, Milton ventured on a fifteen month tour of the European Continent. He made intellectual and literary friends in Florence, Rome and Naples and met Galileo in Florence. The idea of writing an epic poem was the outcome of his exposure to the Italian poet Tasso's work, *Gerusalemme liberata*, 1581. Milton realized that an epic poem in the tradition of Homer and Vergil could be written on a Christian theme.

Paradise Lost, divided into ten books was first published in 1667. Later, in the second edition (1674) he included the "arguments" and without making the poem substantially longer, revised and redistributed the passages to publish the poem in the form that we now read it in, constituting of twelve books.

THE EPIC

An epic is a long narrative poem presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures, tracing the history of a nation or a race. It has a grand and elevated style. The written or Secondary epic as distinct from the oral or Primary epic used formal structures and literary and figurative devices to secure the desired effect.

Primary and secondary epic

C. S. Lewis distinguishes between primary and secondary epic.

Primary epics recount heroic deeds from history so that such deeds may not be forgotten. They deal with the real world, even though events may be exaggerated. The primary epic was composed for oral performance. The *Odyssey*, for instance, belongs to this class of epic poetry. Oral epic poetry differs from literary epic in certain ways like the method of composition, method of delivery to the audience and the role of the audience.

Secondary or literary epic poetry deals with heroic legend or abstract themes not composed as historical record of the past, but as an imaginative expression or interpretation of legend. They recorded important events, which would find an instant favour with the audience and reader of these epics, because of the affinities of culture and myth. The secondary epic deals with stories and legends from the distant past. Introduction of a dramatic style and detailed descriptions of places, men and women, and minor and major facts render the narration with an absorbing quality.

Long and dramatic speeches are spoken by important characters to lend grandeur and gravity to the subject matter. Milton employs this technique to superb effect especially in Book I of *Paradise Lost*. Since the epic deals with serious matters with grave consequences on human destiny, the style has to be appropriately elevated. Various literary devices like simile, allusions, repetition of passages and polysyllabic words are employed to embellish the style. The classical masters began their narration with the invocation to the Muses, to ensure the success of their efforts.

Such works include Vergil's *The Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*.

BOOK I

In the Argument to Book I, Milton lays out his plan and design of the epic. Adam and Eve enjoy complete bliss in Paradise, under the watchful eyes of God and the friendly Angels. However, disobedience spells their doom. Adam and Eve are banished from Paradise and the cause of their fall is revealed to be the serpent or Satan. Thus, the focus shifts to Satan and his rebellion against God. Satan believes himself to be equal to God in terms of glory and divinity. His fall is inevitable as he has violated the laws of hierarchy, which forms the structure of creation in the universe. Book I opens with Satan and the fallen angels waking up to the reality of their present state. They are stupefied and unable to comprehend the full implications of their past actions.

Satan shakes himself out of stupor and with supreme self confidence addresses the fallen angels, urging them to be courageous and avenge their loss. The rousing speeches delivered by Satan forms the crux of the action of Book I. Milton was aware of the contradiction he had led himself into in investing Satan with a larger than life persona, while maintaining the Christian position of dealing with sin and punishment. Satan has the deceptive appearance of a Romantic hero as well as the characteristics of a self deluded overreacher. Milton creates a memorable character embodying these irreconcilable differences.

The Invocation

The invocation is an essential part of the classical epic. The Muses were invoked by the classical poets to seek inspiration to write their verses. It was a convention that ensured the authenticity of the grand design to project through the written word the world of mortals and the immortal Gods.

Milton presents an invocation that combines the classical convention with a Christian element. After stating in the opening lines the desire to sing 'Of Man's first disobedience' that brought 'death' and

'all our woe' (PL, BkI, 1-3) into the world, he launches into a devotional prayer to the Heav'nly Muse. The shepherd Moses received the protection from the same Heav'nly source. Since the task he attempts has never been attempted before, the poet urgently requires the help of the heavenly powers. Milton's originality of approach is manifested here, when we find him invoking The Holy Spirit that "with mighty wings outspread/ Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss"(PL, BkI, 20-21). He intends to write a Christian epic and thus seeks the help of one of the Holy Trinity.

Milton was already blind, when he attempted to write the monumental epic. His blindness was not a deterrent but an awareness of the fact that he desperately needed the help of the Almighty to accomplish the awesome task. Divine light must shine upon his intellect so that he,

'... may assert Eternal Providence

And justify the ways of God to men" (PL BkI, 25-26).

Text

The first question that strikes him is about what made Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation of the infernal serpent. Satan's evil actions cause him to be "Hurled headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky..."(PL BkI, 25-26).

As Satan surveys the nature of his physical state of damnation, his hatred towards God intensifies and he contemplates revenge, with "obdurate pride and steadfast hate"(PL BkI, 58). Turning his gaze around, he sees the other fallen angels in a similar state of defeat. He addresses Beelzebub, his next in importance. Satan's technique of arousing the wrath of the fallen angels is ingenious. He reminds them of their former glory, compares it with their present condition and then asks them whether they would allow themselves to wallow in self pity or take up arms a second time against God and thereby do justice to their angelic powers.

Beelzebub is clueless about the future course of action and acknowledges the might of god that overpowered them. Satan in his successive speeches warns Beelzebub and the other angels against weak surrender. And then the firm resolution that,

"To do aught good will never be our task

But ever to do ill our sole delight..." (PL BkI, 159-160).

Alan Rudrum in his critical commentary on *Paradise Lost* suggests that the portrayal of Satan in the book is not merely that of an enemy of God, but rather more complex and intriguing. The word Satan in Hebrew means an adversary or a plotter. In the Bible, Satan is not endowed with any interesting facet. Milton uses his creative and imaginative skills to flesh out his character. Rudrum refers to the villain-heroes of Elizabethan drama created by Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster and others and believes that Milton may have had these characters in mind when he was creating Satan in *Paradise Lost*. "The villain-hero was evil on a grand scale, in speech as well as in action. He was not a mixture of good and bad characteristics, but wholly intent to exploit and overthrow his fellow-men and to gain great power for himself. He was ambitious, revengeful, boastful, deceitful, cunning, melancholic, and witty: all characteristics of Milton's Satan".

Milton successfully creates a dramatic character combining elements of boastful and loud heroism, an iron will and a deceitful, scheming brain. He wages a perpetual war against the forces of goodness as goodness is akin to godliness. He is contrary to the nature of God and takes pride in claiming his

identity as adverse to God. He welcomes the horrors of hell and the infernal world as their new abode, which no longer upsets him. He proudly claims it as his kingdom to lord over. The apparent magnificence of his new status is not meant to be taken seriously but to be marvelled at. The words Milton makes Satan speak are intended to raise his stature as a hero and at the same time remind the reader that he is deluding himself into believing that he can threaten the omnipotence of the Almighty.

“The mind is its own place and in itself

Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven”(PL Bk I 254-255).

Satan’s leadership qualities are on full display as Milton makes Satan rant and rave, using bombast, sarcasm and all his cunning to create the illusion of invincibility.

And what I should be: all but less than He

Whom thunder hath made greater? (PL Bk I 257-258)

The fallen angels are moved by Satan’s fiery speeches and begun to realize their forgotten powers. With their aid Pandemonium, the high capital of Satan and his peers is created. The council to be held in this majestic hall is the subject matter of Book II.

Epic simile

Milton’s epic stands out for the grandeur of its style. He has used most of the conventions of the epic style, like elaborate descriptions, ornate and archaic expressions, grand speeches, Latinisms and epic similes. Epic similes extend the meaning of particular words and ideas to encompass wide ranging implications. The wealth of detail suggested is extensive and beyond the context. Various examples of epic similes in *Paradise Lost* are

- a) Satan’s comparison to the sea-monster Leviathan- as he lies prone in Hell on the liquid fire, his huge body is comparable to that of the huge creature, the form that sailors often mistook to be a mass of land on which the vessel could be anchored.
- b) The shield of Satan is compared to the moon which Galileo often viewed through his telescope.
- c) The fallen angels are so many in numbers that they resemble the dead leaves fallen from trees in autumn. The reference to Vallambrosa lends a certain alien charm to the name and the impact is that of sheer awe at the magnitude of the description.
- d) The fallen angels are compared to swarms of locusts that are so thick that they shut out the light. The simile not only suggests numbers but also the poisonous and deadly nature of the insects to which the angels are comparable.