
Paradise Lost by John Milton: From the 21st century Perspective

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During Milton's tour of Italy in 1638–39, certain remarkable images representing aspects of the Genesis story in Renaissance tapestries may have stimulated his imagination. The subject of *Paradise Lost* had been outlined from a drama, *Adam Unprais'd*, in about 1642. He had begun to compose it, we are told, in 1658; he had been blind for over five years and the poem took shape as a process of mental formation. A major part of the epic was written during his refuge from the new parliament when the Commonwealth was overthrown and Charles II was declared King in the restoration of 1660. *Publication of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline (1641) in England* marked the beginning of a career of political prose writing which would last almost until his death in 1674. For nearly twenty years, until the restoration, Milton devoted himself to politics and his abilities were exhibited only through prose pamphlets.

Milton was aware of his poetic gifts from an early age. After completing seven years in Christ College he devoted himself to the independent study of Greek and Roman literature, ancient and medieval history, philosophy, both moral and political, and the natural sciences. With that he immersed himself in theology (with Hebrew), Italian, and English poetry and drama. All this effort of self-education was dominated by his ambition to rise higher than any English poet, which later materialized in *Paradise Lost*.

A national epic was considered as the greatest kind of poem in

contemporary times. *Paradise Lost* is akin to a theological treaty in verse form, getting its inspiration as much from the Bible for its content as from Virgil's (70 - 19 BC) twelve-book Latin epic poem *Aeneid* for its form. Originally published in ten parts, a second edition embellished with minor revisions would follow in 1674. Homer and Virgil did not use rhyme, and Milton scorned it in heroic poems as a "troublesome and modern bondage". The poem deals with the Christian view on the origin of man, and refer to the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan as well as their eventual expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The first book proposes in brief the whole subject, "*Man's disobedience and the loss thereupon of paradise wherein he was placed: then touches the prime cause of his fall, the Serpent or rather Satan in Serpent; who revolting from god, and drawing to his side many legions of angels, was by the command of God driven out of heaven with all his crew into the great Deep.*"

A long list of names of the fallen angels was preceded by an illustrious delineation of Hell and establishment of Satan as the aspiring protagonist through a series of epic similes. A prior knowledge of the blend of politics and religion in Milton's style, the importance of textual learning in his thought, and the unification of biblical and classical references, singularly, would reveal the Grand epic to its fullest expression to the reader's delight. The names mentioned were of Gods worshipped by various Pagan believers, largely Hebrew/ Judaic and oriental in origin. Furthermore, as the epic was inspired from great Italian and Greek epic writers, Milton has an extensive use of their ancient terminologies.

The names were-

Moloch: Sun God of the Ammonites (nomadic group)

Chemos or Peor : God of moabites

Ashtareth: God of phoenics

Thammuz: God of Lebanon

Dagon: Chief God of Philistines

Rimmon: God worshipped in Damascus

Osiris, Isis, Orus : central myth of the Egyptians

There were two primary reasons behind his pervasive use of this unconventional nomenclature. The first being, his attempt of making his epic style of higher stature than that of his past and contemporaneous writers and the second was to establish the supremacy and righteousness of the Christian religion over that of the other religions. It is needless to say, that his first motive was purely actualized as we still acknowledge and re-acknowledge his greatness and deduce theories from this theological as well as politically allegorical piece. However, the second purpose, according to me has lost its point to a certain level. The sacrilegious rendition of pagan religions wholly depended upon the manipulative alienation of the inhabitants of oriental countries and lifestyles. Thus, the usage of this typical phraseology acted as a weapon to degrade their faith and customs only to glorify orthodox Christianity among the people of England. Including great mythical stories that have inter-links with the events of the epic, addressing places by their legendary names, building a parallel universe dealing with Gods and daemons, led to the make believe authenticity of the demotion of Pagan Gods. This aided by the fact, that the general crowd wasn't thoroughly aware of the different cultures and its diversity around the globe nor had they developed an appreciating eye for things unknown to everyday life, contributed to the success of its basis. They were still stuck with their rigid believes until England plunged into worldly expeditions around the closing of the century.

This is totally unacceptable in today's time, to the audience of world-wide-web. Most novels are documented over the internet and they reach the pinnacle of popularity within a small span. If portrayal of a

belief system would be so blasphemous, the clan of people who hold allegiance to it would initiate a mass revolt across nations within hours. Perhaps, such violent uprisings have often muted authors and creators but it has even led to the formation of a ground where people have learnt to pay respect to other's faith and opinions. Although I vouch for this, I do not support the bounding of a creative mind – “as it would be wrong to throw out a style of literature that has tickled the human fancy for thousands of years for the trivial reason that it is not in accord with reality.”(Isaac Asimov, on science fiction). Since we are merely humans, for the majority, we live in a world of fanciful imagination. However, seldom do we witness such marvelous characters as Milton's Satan, who will be considered an epitome of rebelliousness by the subsequent Romantics and free thinkers - “rebellious self-idolatry...philosophically as well as sublimely embodied in Satan of his (Milton) *Paradise Lost*.” (S.T.Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual, or The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*)

Nonetheless, Milton's derogation of Pagan Gods can never mar the beauty and greatness of his work that is being praised over centuries and would be praised for many more to come. Classical elegy and satire, epigram, verse epistle, meditative religious lyric, and the country-house poem were the common genres of poetry at that time unlike this Avant-garde epic. If the epic is perceived as a political allegory then this is a riveting tale of an anarchist bringing a mass exodus by his sheer oratory and leadership skills and being punished as a sinner for being the nonconformist. The figure of Satan accommodates a wide variety of different allegorical interpretations. Modern day books that are written centering religious myths and legends would be *Da Vinci Code*, *Angels and Demons*, *Meluha Trilogy*, and *Satanic Verses* - their subject matter being debated all around the world.

As Isaac Asimov has argued “...*there must have been something that came before science fiction...filled the same emotional needs. There must have been tales of the strange and different, of lives not as we know it, of powers transcending our own... The goals of these ancient stories are the same as those of modern science- the depiction of life as we don't know it ... set in a pre-scientific universe*”

Thus *Paradise Lost* can also be considered as the story that satiated the needs of a science fiction in men of the mid-seventeenth century interwoven with religious and political allegories.