

# The construction of satan's tragic hero character

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The tragic hero is a popular archetype of classic literature, generally referring to a character that embodies the qualities of a classic hero as well as a fatal flaw that dooms him to failure. In his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton illustrates Satan specifically as a tragic hero, which is most evident during a scene in which he is surveying his defeated army of revolutionaries (lines 587-621). Milton is keen to emphasize the heroic aspects of the character by drawing Satan as a military commander and justifying Satan's revolt as one that was necessary against an unfeeling and punishing God. This scene also reveals a notable degree of pathos within the character, which pushes the audience to feel sympathetic towards him and his cause. Nonetheless, Satan is fatally flawed by his inflated sense of pride and because his actions are driven entirely by this attribute, Satan is kept from embodying true heroism and is thus a tragic figure in *Paradise Lost*.

An element of Satan's character that solidifies his persona is his role as a military commander, an occupation that oftentimes characterizes the protagonists and heroes of pre-Milton literature. The first line of this chosen passage states: " Thus far these beyond/Compare of mortal prowess, yet observed/Their dread Commander" (587-89). While Milton praises the efforts of the soldiers in this rebellion, he makes it clear that the true force to be reckoned with in this scene is Satan, who is here described with the telling word " dread". This choice of diction allows Satan to have the same formidable presence as other literary war commanders, such as Titus Andronicus or Achilles. Milton continues, saying " He, above the rest/In shape and gesture proudly eminent, /Stood like a tower"(589-91). Milton again emphasizes the fact that Satan is a natural leader due to his ability to

present himself as a force to be reckoned with. This allows Satan to be inherently intimidating in the same ways as that of a military commander, standing as a figure of fear and inspiration for his troops. The quote is also an example of how Milton uses language to illustrate the charisma with which he embeds in Satan's character. With this scene happening so early in the text of *Paradise Lost*, there is no other way to view Satan but as a dauntless hero who is a great match for the almighty powers of God.

Justifying Satan's actions to the reader is Milton's subtle depiction of God as a punishing force. The first example of this in this passage comes from the lines, " but his face/Deep scars of thunder had intrenched"(600), referring to injuries acquired from Satan's recent revolution against heaven. Although Satan retains a fair deal of the natural beauty he was created with, his scars blight his beauty and are evidence of God's role in Book 1 as a punisher. Punishment from God is alluded to once more when Satan observes that his men will " For ever now...have their lot in pain" due to their revolutionary actions against God. While Milton does not give a reason for Satan's desire to revolt against God, the permanent degree of punishment inflicted upon these figures is evidence of a fearsome and unforgiving God figure. Milton thus characterizes God as an antagonizing force, a figure of stark contrast to the heroic figure that Satan is described as. It is in this way that Milton justifies Satan's cause as a noble one, similar to that of a revolutionary who is rebelling against a tyrannical monarch. Milton's particular illustration of the war against God in Book 1 allows the reader to identify with Satan's " righteous" purpose, which reflects the noble intentions with which the reader is meant to identify with the typical tragic hero character.

The first of two defining elements of tragic heroism is the requirement that the hero arouse pathos within the reader, which Satan does quite often in this segment of Book 1. Milton writes this pathos as Satan surveys his defeated troops: "Cruel his eye, but cast/Signs of remorse and passion, to behold/The fellows of his crime, the followers rather/(Far other once beheld in bliss), condemned/For ever now to/have their lot in pain—/Millions of Spirits for his fault amerced/Of Heaven, and/from eternal splendours flung/For his revolt—yet faithful how they stood,/Their glory withered" (604-612). This passage conveys the sincere faithfulness of Satan's revolutionaries, which in itself arouses a sense of piteousness within the reader. Satan reveals himself to be genuinely remorseful for how his failed revolution has caused pain and suffering amongst his men, and this moment of true emotion separates him from a more conventional characterization of Lucifer as a figure of pure evil. Rather, Satan reveals a certain degree of humanity through this moment of emotion. The scene also reflects Satan's subconscious guilt for leading his men to what was always a certain defeat against the power of God. In another moment of pathos, Satan weeps as he tries to address his troops (620). The moment naturally evokes pity for Satan within the audience, as it is such an open and vulnerable statement of emotion. His comparison to an Angel works so that the reader will see Satan's weeping as a moment of beauty, and the cause he weeps for as one of justice. While he weeps because of the faithfulness of his army, it could be said that Satan's tears also come from his subconscious knowledge that their cause is fruitless and will only achieve more sorrow within his ranks.

What ultimately defines the tragic hero is a fatal characteristic that seals their fate, and like many tragic heroes, Satan suffers from pride. This quality is directly addressed in the passage, saying, "under brows/Of dauntless courage, and considerate Pride/Waiting revenge" (602-604). Although Satan displays pathos in his observations of his men and regret at the suffering he has caused, these lines prove that Satan is nonetheless determined to continue his revolution against God. The defeat Satan has already experienced at the hands of God does not undermine the deep satisfaction with which he clearly views his achievement in his nerve to challenge the almighty God. The use of the word "Pride" in this instance speaks to the great self-importance with which Satan views himself, and this quality threatens Satan's ability to redeem himself and thus prevent his fated downfall. The reader already knows from the Bible that Satan is never able to triumph over God, and while Satan may know that subconsciously as he surveys his troops, his pride keeps him from admitting this crucial fact. It is in this way that, like all tragic heroes, pride dooms Satan and keeps him from achieving "true heroism".

While Satan appears to follow the same characteristics and fates of other classical tragic heroes, Milton's characterization of Satan is indeed unique because of the purpose the character serves. While we sympathize with Satan as we would any other tragic hero, it cannot be denied that Satan is still an evil character and ultimately a villain who is working against the holy decrees of an almighty God. It can thus be argued that Milton writes Satan as a tragic hero in order to illuminate the conflict that comes with idolizing false qualities of heroism, such as pride in oneself and doubt in the power of God.

Milton thus establishes the definition of tragic heroism (or anti-heroism) for a post-Christian world: someone who doubts the almighty power of God and believes his worth is greater than that of God. Satan's characterization as an antihero of this kind is thus Milton's warning to mankind, here showing what can happen to the person who doubts the strength of an almighty God.