

Context of paradise lost by john milton

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



Poet and political activist John Milton after a period of radical political revolution, religious turmoil, and his near execution; published the twelve book edition of *Paradise Lost*, a poem describing the biblical text of Genesis filled with hidden political meaning. *Paradise Lost* enraged those who supported the restoration of Charles II, was praised by seekers of religious toleration, and attacked by the Anglican Church. Critics denounced *Paradise Lost* for its construction, subject, and political meaning.

England in the seventeenth century was a land of political instability and religious persecution.

Dissent among the British people began during the reign of the Stuart, Charles I (1629-1640). Charles I along with kings in France, Spain, and Germany created absolute monarchies (Cheyney 419). Charles I in 1629 dissolved Parliament, and ruled 11 years without Parliament. Charles I was a member of the Anglican Church, and didn't sympathize with various sects of Christianity that were persecuted by Anglicans (Cheyney 419).

These sects included Puritans, Quakers, Scottish Presbyterians, and Catholics.

In response to Charles' religious intolerance Scottish Presbyterians threatened the English border, Irish Catholics rebelled, and Oliver Cromwell's Calvary attacked the Royalist army. Cromwell and the Scotch defeated the Royalists at Marston Moor on July 2, 1644 (Cheyney 434-444). Parliament took control of the new English Commonwealth in 1649, resulting in the beheading of Charles I (Halliday 118).

The English Commonwealth however was short lived. In 1653 Oliver Cromwell, took control of the Commonwealth. Cromwell dissolved the Rump Parliament (Parliament that took over after Charles I), taxed Royalists, imprisoned mutineers, crushed Irish rebels, routed Scottish rebels at Dunbar and Worcester, secured colonies in the Caribbean such as Jamaica, and defeated the Dutch regaining British naval superiority (Halliday 120-122). Cromwell died in 1658 leaving the control of England to rival generals. During Cromwell's military rule however, religious toleration was achieved. In 1660 the Stuart's reign was restored, as Charles II assumed control (Cheyney 513).

Milton during the time of revolution against Charles I was an independent. Independents were a political party formed during mid seventeenth century. Independents were proponents of religious toleration and did not believe in rule under a state religion Anglican, Presbyterian, Episcopal, or Papist (Cheyney 448). Milton was proponent of religious toleration, an opponent of tyranny, and a believer in man's free will. Milton disagreed with the Calvinist theory of Predestination and believed that man should be free to will and will the good (Faggen 269-270).

Milton's belief of free will also was apparent in his political views. Milton was a republican and believed in a republican government for England. During Cromwell's reign, Milton served as his Latin Secretary, charged with translating diplomatic correspondence into Latin. In the years before the restoration of Charles II, Milton published a series of political pamphlets urging republicanism and refusing monarchial and despotic governments.

These pamphlets included *The Aeropagitica*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (Faggen 270-271).

Milton's political and religious views are fused into the text of *Paradise Lost*. One interpretation of *Paradise Lost* explains the text as a dramatization of the balance between liberty and obedience. Milton demonstrates using the fall of man and the angels as examples of disrupting the balance between freedom and servitude. Satan is the tragic hero of the poem and is considered by many as an allegory for the English Monarch, the Papacy, or extreme individualism. Early in the poem Satan is a revolutionary hero rebelling against a brutal tyrant. Later in the poem, Satan himself becomes a charismatic tyrant (Faggen 279-280). Satan praises rebellion and complete sovereignty meanwhile undermining the idea of servitude. Satan states,

...Here at least

We shall be free: th' Almighty hath not built

Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. (Book I: 258-263)

Satan's choice to rebel contradicts Calvin's theory of Predestination. Milton's exploration of original sin also transforms into an exploration of choice. God, according to Milton's explanation has given free will to man and the angels (Faggen 281). God does punish the dissenting angels. God is portrayed as a

monarch, so how could God create choice and freedom as a monarch? Milton has God explain,

I formed them free, and free they must remain,

Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change

Their nature, and revoke the high Decree

Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordained

Their freedom; they themselves ordained their fall. (Book III: 124-128)

Both Milton's critics and Satan are troubled by the futility of a God's rule over man and/or angels that are free to choose their own fate. Milton's God explains in Book III that the abiding principle of his justice is freedom, and without freedom servitude would be meaningless. In other words, service to God is working for your own freedom. Milton explains also later in the poem, after the fall of the angels that God created the Earth and man to repopulate heaven. Man's job was to serve God without ambition, to gain freedom in heaven (Faggen 281).

Paradise Lost can also be examined with respect to the larger social context of Post Interregnum/Restoration England. Satan is combined extensively with anti-papist images, suggesting a strong anti-Catholic sentiment throughout the poem. Taking a Royalist position, Satan can also be considered as an allegory for Oliver Cromwell. Royalists supported both Charles' and were firm believers in the Divine Right of Monarchs. Royalists believed that God himself put leaders into power and that both Charles' were Divinely guided. Only an act of Satan (Cromwell) would rebel against God. This battle

between God (Charles') and Satan (Cromwell) is similar to the rebellion in heaven (Achinstein 404). Milton however may have used this moderately obvious allegory to conceal a more meaningful sub-allegory.

One interpretation suggests that Satan and the angels are a metaphor for Cromwell and the revolution. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton never assumes the presence of evil in the absence of good. Satan has rebelled against a tyrant, God who has total control over heaven. Satan rebels due to hatred of tyranny not hatred of God. Satan's theoretical rebellion is justified according to Milton's republican views. The actual act of the rebellion however, begins a war in heaven that is intensely violent. After gaining leadership in Hell, Satan himself becomes a tyrant, similar to Cromwell dissolving the Rump Parliament (Achinstein 405). Milton damn's Satan's tyranny not because it is Satan's, because it is tyranny.

Milton believes that tyranny over the individual conscience is the sin that Satan commits. Satan forces conformity and conformity is sin. Milton seems to suggest that the politics in England during Charles I reign was same as heavenly politics, and Cromwell's reign is the same as Satan's. He parallels man to the angel, in that Cromwell and the rebellion was rebelling for the right cause, however was not ready morally to deal with the power. Similar to Satan, Cromwell and the rebellion's sin was ambition and tyranny over republicanism and self-government (Achinstein 405-407).

Due to Milton's involvement of Cromwell's Regime (1653-1658), Milton's books and political pamphlets were burned after the restoration of Charles II. Milton narrowly escaped death after being condemned in 1660 for " treasons and offenses" by the king (Achinstein 320). After the publication of the <https://assignbuster.com/context-of-paradise-lost-by-john-milton/>

twelve-book edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1674, Milton again found himself in political trouble. Royalists attacked the poem for its hidden political meaning, and the Anglican Church attacked it for its religious brazenness. Milton had chosen a daring topic, and had taken enormous ideological liberties. Milton had not damned Satan as evil, and had called God a tyrant (Achinstein 325).

Assuming that Satan was an allegory for King Charles I, Royalists called for Milton's execution. John Dryden, in *The State of Innocence* (1673-1674) rejects Milton's adaptation due to "self stylized liberty." However, Andrew Marvell, in a prefatory poem defended Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Using rhyme, Marvell defended Milton's choice to use blank verse instead of rhyme. Blank verse was associated with political allegory, synonymous with religious dissention.

Marvell keeps the defense at a literary form, in an attempt to hide a hidden political meaning in *Paradise Lost*. Dryden also chastised Milton for using individual inspiration. Dryden says inspiration is represented by "prophetic utterances were dangerous misapplications of individual intention" (Achinstein 326). Marvell claims that the solution to Dryden's problem with inspiration is up to the judgement of the reader. Marvell states that Milton may be "inspired" however the reader must judge if the "inspiration" is "false" (Achinstein 327).

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton parallels the Satan's rebellion and fall from heaven with the period of revolution in England after the reign of Charles I. Using the biblical text of Genesis Milton explores republican ideals of conscience and self-government, the balance between servitude and

freedom, and the problems of ambition and pride. Milton also analyzes what went wrong with the revolution lead by Oliver Cromwell in 1649.