

The positive and negative consequences of the original sin

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



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Milton's *Paradise Lost* deviates significantly from the unadorned version of man's fall from grace found in Genesis. This, however, was not a problem for Milton who (as a Puritan) believed that the embellishments he wrote were divinely inspired since God worked through the individual, not through organized religion. Because of this inventiveness, *Paradise Lost*, which traces heavenly events from the fall of Satan through the fall of man, has been interpreted in various ways. One such interpretation, discussed by Lovejoy in "Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," is that although the fall introduced man to evil, it also propagated good. Milton's text in many ways embodies this paradox, showing both the benefits and losses to Adam and Eve, as well as mankind, which resulted from original sin.

Milton is ambiguous whether knowledge, the most obvious acquisition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, is a benefit or a detriment to man. The tree is forbidden not because knowledge is injurious to man, but as "the only sign of our [their] obedience left/ Among so many signs of power and rule" (*Paradise Lost*, Book 4, lines 428-429). Knowledge is disallowed as a test of man's faith, not because it will hurt his loyalty. Satan, however, postulates that their lack of knowledge is what leads man to follow God: "do they only stand/ By ignorance? Is that their happy state,/ The proof of their obedience" (4, 518-520). His interpretation is necessarily false because certain knowledge was revealed to Adam and Eve. Their first gain, then, is the knowledge beyond the "lowly wis[dom]" which Raphael provided them (8, 173). Milton complicates this gain, however, because it is questionable whether man ever needed more than the knowledge of "daily life," except

to satiate curiosity and add “anxious cares” (8, 193; 185). In this way Milton allows for a certain amount of fortune from their fall, but it is a trivial gain.

Another murky acquisition that Adam and Eve receive from their disobedience is the “Knowledge of good and ill” (8, 324). Although this allows them to see the difference between good and evil, it is superfluous since they were already “sufficient to have stood” against evil (3, 99). In his work *Aeropageta*, Milton explains how man eventually benefitted from this wisdom, even though Adam and Eve did not. He argues, “He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian.” In this piece Milton shows that with the knowledge of evil man is more tempted, and so his resistance is a greater good. Through this ambiguity Milton degrades the most obvious of Adam and Eve’s gain, knowledge, showing that if any good resulted it was not enjoyed by Adam and Eve.

Although the acquisition of knowledge is intentionally vague, Milton is clear on many of man’s losses from the fall. These losses are plainly listed in Book Ten when God enumerates man’s punishment. Eve is condemned to painful childbirth and submission to her husband while Adam must toil against the barren ground for food. Although these punishments contrast the paradise Adam and Eve were living in, they are not particularly harsh. The most severe punishment is not directly spoken of by God during this exchange, but is the fulfillment of his original threat. Adam and Eve are both assigned to mortality: “for dust thou art, and shalt to dust return” (10, 208). This final

punishment was necessary to restore the universal hierarchy (God, the angels, man, beasts, the fallen angels). As knowledge was equated with godliness, “ in the day/ Ye eat thereof your eyes... shall perfectly be then/Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as Gods” (9, 705-710), man had become too close to Heaven by gaining knowledge.

To put them back in their correct hierarchical order, their immortality had to be taken so that they were less similar to the angels and God. In this way the fall necessitated man's mortality and created more hardships for him. Man's fall from innocence also paralleled him with his corruptor, Satan. As is shown in Book 4, Satan is tormented by the “ remembrance from what state/ I [he] fell” so that Hell is always with him (4, 38-39). Similarly, Adam and Eve mourn the paradise they have lost making the corrupted world appear harsher. Although this contrast is more poignant for Adam and Eve, it is a long-term loss as well since the Bible reminds their descendants of what they could have had. Through this parallel, as well as the direct punishments for original sin, Milton shows the many negatives of man's fall from grace.

Milton does not cast the fall as narrowly deplorable, but also reveals many positives that result from it. This is most clearly seen in Adam's response to Michael's prophesy in Book 12. He is awed “ that all this good of evil shall produce,/ And evil turn to good, more wonderful/ Than that by which creation first brought forth/ Light out of darkness” (12, 469-472). Through this quote Milton reveals that good will result from man's fall by establishing the supremacy of good over evil and Heaven over Hell. This reaction also shows the good that God's glory will be increased because of man's sin in giving

man more reason to praise God besides out of gratitude for creation.

Although Michael describes much bad preceding any good, in the long-term man will benefit through salvation from the Son. This coveted redemption “mak[es] the earlier and unhappy episodes in the story appear as instrument to that [happy] consummation, and, indeed, as its necessary condition,” showing that without falling man could not have earned such lofty salvation (Lovejoy, 179). Through this “God with Man unites,” bringing man into a closer relationship with God than he had in Eden (12, 382). Through the salvation and the increased glory of God Milton shows how good resulted from the fall of man from innocence.

Milton is distinctly unclear on whether man’s fall was fortunate or not. By vividly showing both the positives and negatives that resulted from original sin, Milton reveals that the evil of sin came from the goodness of Eden, but that the goodness of salvation came from evil as well. It is impossible to accuse *Paradise Lost* of supporting the theological *felix culpa* (fortunate fall); to do so would be ignoring significant portions of the work. However, it is also inadequate to conclude that Milton was blind to the pros of man’s fall. As Lovejoy says, “the fall could never be sufficiently condemned and lamented; and likewise, when all its consequences were considered, it could never be sufficiently rejoiced over” (Lovejoy, 162). Because of this, it must be believed that Milton’s purpose was not to decide whether the fall was ultimately tragic or beneficial, but to attempt to “justify the ways of God to men” (1, 26).

Bibliography

<https://assignbuster.com/the-positive-and-negative-consequences-of-the-original-sin/>

Milton, John. *Paradise lost and other poems*. New York: Signet Classic, 2003.
Print.