Satan as an advocate of free will

Literature, Poem

When Satan says “ Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav’n,” he becomes a true advocate for freewill. He has gone against what he considered a tyrannical leader, lost, and reemerges as a classical tragic hero reminiscent of the likes of Ulysses. Sir Walter Raleigh compares Satan to Prometheus, yet adding that his “ fearless antagonism of Omnipotence makes him either a fool or a hero.” With the proliferation of copies of Paradise Lost throughout the centuries, Satan emerges as the star character of the Epic. The fascination lies in his charming oratory skills, and beauty, juxtaposed with an uncanny ability to awaken pathos in the reader. The place of Satan as character in Paradise Lost is the great ongoing debate. Is he a tragic hero? Is he an irredeemable villain? Is he a farce of political power? Book I seems to set him up as a tragic hero, with the beginning in media res, invocation of the Muse, and following the conventions of an Epic poem. Book II however, starts off with a decidedly political setting, possibly highlighting Milton’s own political stance, as he went into hiding for supporting a republican revolution even after the Restoration. Through a series of carefully crafted devices, Milton writes a sophisticate Machiavellian political speech, hinting at the flaws of the Monarchy. One should note however, that Milton as the narrator, skillfully dismantles his charisma, leaving the reader somewhat confused over their overall feelings.

The rhythm of the passage is weaved into a powerful political opening by playing with alliteration, assonance, or enjambment, resulting into a movement of pushing and pulling the listeners. Milton alternating of assonance and alliteration create a wave movement, alternating the levels of energy in the passage. His use of the “ O” sounds for instance, have an

elongating and soothing, almost hypnotic effect.“ For since no deep within her gulf can hold/ Immortal vigor, though oppressed and fall’n,” (II. 11-12), showcases this legato and brings out an eerie quality in the text. This juxtaposition to staccato alliterations are a stark contrast. When Milton writes “ Satan exalted sat, by merit raised,” (II. 5), it is the first severe break in rhythm of the passage, have a slightly more jovial tone, possibly suggesting a childish disposition. The narrative and blank verse form are particularly appropriate for speech patterns, as they translate to oral recitation naturally. Enjambments accelerate the tempo, overflowing the iambic pentameter into the next line. “[…] From this descent/ Celestial Virtues rising will appear,” (II. 14-15) don’t pause after the first line, but go from the depth to with these angels have fallen directly into a message of hope.

The use of repetition is centered around the idea of “ rising” from the depths to which they have fallen, emphasizing Satan as a more of a demagogue, motivating his troupes, rather than the previously established tragic hero. The narrator repeats certain words in close groups, emphasizing their thematic importance in the narrative. Before Satan’s speech, the narrator employs the word “ high” three times in ten lines of opening. It is interesting to note that as he speaks “ Thus high uplifted beyond hope aspires/ Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue,” (II. 12-13), it seems impossible not to register a tone of deep irony. He is reminding the reader of the reality of the situation, by drawing attention to the fact that Satan seems unshaken by his colossal defeat. He is mocking Lucifer’s infantile attitude right as he is about to give an eloquently motivating address. This debilitates the impact that the

rest of the passage would have had. Satan also draws attention to specific words in order to inspire the council. “ Will” is used in the sense of “ to be going to”,(“[…] For none sure will claim Hell/ Precedence, none whose portion is so small/ Of present pain that with ambitious mind/ Will covet more!” II. 32-35), however, considering it can also denote the expression of a promise, or the power to act of one’s own volition, seems an unlikely coincidence. God gave mankind freewill, and this theme is explored throughout Paradise Lost. Another repeated motifs is this sense of increasing stakes by employing “ more”, “ and”, or inflectional suffixed words (“ happier” II. 24/ “ greatest” II. 29). Much like his poem “ L’Allegro”, Milton does this to “ add” this element of epic, however, unlike his invocation of Mirth, here, his purpose seems to make of Satan’s demagogic speech border on the outlandish.

The speaker undermines Satan as a leader, in his conflicting imagery of Pandemonium, alluding to his self-glorification tendencies, causing the speech to lose its’ credibility. Firstly, he has Pandemonium compared to Earthly places (“ Outshone the wealth of of Ormus and of Ind/ Or where the gorgeous East with the richest hand,” II. 2-3). Even though it is said to be much greater than the most beautiful sights on Earth, Satan’s ego would dictate that the grand tower and throne room of the Devil could surely not be remotely comparable. Also, Satan’s self-apotheosis is recurrently alluded to in hindsight of the speaker’s ironic passage. “ Me though just right and the fixed laws of Heav’n/ Did first create your leader,” (II. 18-19) stands out as a significantly braggadocios statement. If one were to start Book II at the tenth line, the speech could easily be seen as a fallen hero ready to stand back up

and fight again. The result however, is of gloating condescension rather than truly heroic (“ Established in a safe unenvied throne/ Yielded with full consent.” II. 23-24).

The passage is rich in style that highlights all aspects of Satan as a character. The verse is purposely rhythmic in the way it emphasizes certain themes by repetition of words, poignant punctuation and shifting tones. The beginning of Book II is without a doubt an allegory of Monarchy, which Milton is heavily critical of. It removes actual freewill and is never in the service of the greater good. Milton is in favor of a more Aristotelian democracy. The truly tragic aspect, is that this seemingly inspirational leader, is completely apathetic or delusional about their situation, as he assumes that his throne is safe from prying eyes. This deeply flawed premise may be the reason readers have been so drawn to the character of Satan over the centuries: He is a broken man. He is all of us.

Bibliography

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