

Milton paradise lost commentary

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



The Renaissance era represents a complete break with the Middle Ages on a political, philosophical, scientific and theological scale. Indeed, the discovery of new territories and the expeditions of explorers such as Francis Drake, the resurgence of classic writings, the new scientific outbreaks of Copernicus, Newton and Galilei as well as the Protestant reformation led by Luther and his 95 Theses, triggered a will for knowledge and a quest for truth, thus putting an end to the intellectual hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe.

Intellectuals of this era began to think on mankind, looking for answers outside of the Religious constraints. Written during this context of political and religious upheaval, *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem published in 1667 in ten books, reflects in a way the great changes of the Renaissance. This poem, written by John Milton (December 1608 - November 1674), an English poet, polemicist and civil servant, tell the Christian story of the creation of the Earth, the fall of Satan and the Fall of Man.

As a puritan, Milton, who had already attacked the Church for its corruption in *Lycidas* (1637), give this classical Christian tale puritan traits (such as the portrayal of Eve as a dedicated worker). The passage under study is taken from Book 9 of *Paradise lost*. In this book, the narrator focuses on the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Satan returns to the Garden of Eden eight days after his banishment by Gabriel to avenge himself. Adam and Eve , preparing for their labors, decide to work separately , even if Adam is anxious that eve would be an easy prey to Satan's temptation .

In this passage we can see the approach of the Satan , (the snake) and the beginning of his temptation that will lead Eve to eat the prohibited fruit. We can clearly see that Milton here uses a mix of Classical and Judeo-Christian mythology to tell this tale. We can thus wonder In which way he uses these influences, and why he uses them ? In a first part we will see that the Serpent is a symbol of temptation, and in a second part we will analyse Milton's uses of Classical mythology. First, Milton depicts the snake which Satan is possessing, as an incredibly beautiful animal.

The main strategy of Satan to try to corrupt the naive mind of Eve is to appear as a magnificent snake. According to the narrator, his physical appearance is so pleasing that never a snake will be as beautiful (on verse 504 "pleasing was his shape, and lovely, never since a serpent lovelier"). To describe the snake, the narrator uses the lexical field of precious material: "carbuncle his eyes" on verse 500, "neck of verdent gold" on verse 501. Here Satan seems to have chosen a snake whose appearance can attract Eve only because of his similitude with precious material.

In a kind of materialist temptation, he tries to appeal to Eve's inner sin of cupidity to seduce her. But there is something paradoxical in the way the snake is depicted as a beautiful creature. Indeed, the snake is often assimilated with death, the venom of some species of snakes such as the cobra can kill a man in less than one hour. It is also an animal that generates instinctive fear in most humans (and occurrence of Ophidiophobia can be found everywhere). Here death and beauty become assimilated in one animal.

It can thus be perceived as personification of the treachery of Satan: behind the beauty of his rhetoric, of his discourse hides a terrible fate, the banishment of Man from Heaven. This can also underline the interest of humans for macabre, dark topics. We can see since the dawn of age examples of this morbid attraction of the Human race: public executions had always (and still do) gathered a lot of people around the death of a single man as well as we can see every day the impact (and also its capacity of generating profits) of a news involving the mysterious death of a movie star, or the murder of a whole family by its patriarch.

As we know, Satan has chosen this animal, maybe he relies on this fascination to attract Eve's attention. We can also notice that the serpent can be interpreted as a phallic symbol. On verse 498 to 502 the snake is described as a "circular base that towered above folds a surprising maze [...] with burnished neck [...] erect amidst his circling spires". Thus the snake appears as a symbol of virility, a phallic form erecting from the ground and can be understood as another strategy of Satan to cajole Eve into trusting him.

On the other hand this link made by Milton between sensuality and religion can be seen as a hint of the influence of the metaphysical poetry on his writing: this link being one of the interests of the metaphysical poets who were contemporary with Milton. Then the snake can be analysed as a symbol of corruption and of perfidy. Satan uses a disguise, a snake to talk to Eve. He uses his beauty, his eloquence to seduce her. His wave movements, looking like a dance, and his attitude ("Fawning, and licking the ground whereon she

strode" on verse 526) can be interpreted as a nuptial parade with the snake laying on the primal instinct (which are restricted by religion) of Man to attract Eve in his trap. It is also interesting to note that the occurrence of the word Satan is, as Satan himself, disguised in this passage. Here Satan is referred to as "the snake" or "the enemy of mankind" on verse 494. The word Satan can only be seen if the reader looks closely at the poem: an acrostic is hidden from verse 510 to 515. This clever technic reflects the vicious strategy of the Devil in the passage. Satan's main strategy to talk Eve into believing that she has the right to eat the apple is flattery.

The Devil choose to tempt Eve because he was afraid of Adam's intelligence which could have be an obstacle to his scheme. Thus he constantly celebrate eve beauty and superiority of others God's creature to put her in a position where she can feel free to act as she wants. From verse 532 to the end of the passage the snake states that eve is "sole wonder", that she is a "universally admired" "celestial beauty" that should be "a goddess among gods, adored and served by angels numberless". The snake thus seems to contradict Gods Hierarchy of creation, The Great Chain of Being.

According to him, Eve is higher than all the other creations of god, and should be sitting just next to god, just as the Holy Spirit and Jesus. In this passage the snake is the voices that question god authority and urges Eve to more freedom which appears, in the eyes of God as an Heresy. Hence a parallel can be drawn betwen the questioning of God's Hierarchy by the snakes and the questioning of God's Hierarchy by the new theories about

cosmos expressed by scientists such as Copernic who were at the time seen as Heretics, devilish prophets and treated as such.

Now that we have seen in which way the snakes represents a symbol of temptation embodying as well as the Biblical symbol of sin, the Renaissance questioning of God's Hierarchy, we are going to see and analyse Milton's use of Classic Mythology in this passage. First Milton's use of Classic reference in his text can be interpreted as a perversions of those myths. In this passage he uses three myth to illustrate the action. He first refers to the tale of Hermione and Cadmus taken from *Metamorphoses* written by Ovid in AD 8.

According to this classic of Latin literature they were both transformed into snakes in an act of vengence from the Gods. Then he refers to transformation of "Amonian Jove" and "Capitoline" into snakes to seduce and "mate" with Olympias and the mother of Scipio to give birth of two of the most famous and glorious war chief of both hellenistic and Roman era: Alexander the Great and Scipio Africanus. We can notice that Milton cleverly used myth in which the snakes as a role close to the one it has in the Bible.

Concerning Ovid, the snakes is an object of temptation for which Hermione yields and is thus punished by being transformed in a snake. Concerning the myth of the birth of Alexender and Scipio, the snakes, just as in the Bible, is in fact a deity in disguise, seducing a woman. But if we look closely, these myth appeared to be perverted. In the classical myth, the deity or characters who are transformed into a snake are great and nobles characters: Cadmus is the founder of Thebes, and Amonian Jove and Capitoline are Jupiter.

In paradise lost, the snake is Satan, the personification of rebellion against God's will and of all the Human Sins. In this antithetic linking of diverse mythology, Milton wants to contrast Satan perfidy with classical characters nobility while underlining common themes. He thus appeals to a particular knowledge of his readers. On the other hand, the author's use of classical mythology in this text can be seen as another influence of the metaphysical poetry on the Milton. Mixing diverse sources of knowledge to build his imagery is a technic used by metaphysical poets such as John Donne.

But when others metaphysical poets mixed scientific, geographical, astronomical discoveries with theology and philosophy, Milton just mixed Judeo-Christian religious myths with classical myths. Even if this influence is small, it is sufficient to guess that Milton, contemporaneous with Donne, Herbert, Henry or Crashaw, has drawn some inspiration from the work of these poets. Moreover, Milton use of Classical mythology is representative of the Renaissance. Indeed, it clearly illustrates the resurgence of classical works during this era.

Every arts had been affected by this tendency, in paintings, the classical style was a new fashion, the subjects taken from greek mythology began to be more and more numerous, Michaelangelo being a good exemple in both the sculpture and painting field. This resurgence has also an impact on architecture (with the building of houses, mansions, official buildings following the principle of the straight line), on philosophy (the "raison" and the re-reading of the platonian and socratic philosophy) as well as on literature.

Thus Milton appears as an example of this new interest of the classical literature, and his work, *Paradise lost*, embodies this feature of the Renaissance. Finally, as we have seen, Milton uses his main influence, the Bible, to depict the snake as a symbol of temptation and perfidy and uses his other influence, the classical mythology, in a perversion of the myths to develop his imagery. Furthermore, analysing this text, we can see that Milton was also influenced by the Metaphysical Poets in his uses of mixed sources as well as the use of the theme of the link between sensuality and religion.

This book, which is now one of the most famous pieces of English poetry, had a great influence on following artists such as Blake who considered Milton as the major English Poet and Edmond Burke and the Romantic theory, asserting " No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity than Milton. " , valuing his exploration of blank verse. Milton also had a great impact on the English language by creating neologisms that are still used today such as pandemic, enslaved, satanic and self-esteem.