

Milton s epic poem a
paradise lost theology
religion essay



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Paradise Lost could possibly be regarded as one of the most controversial and dangerously convincing piece of literary works of all time. Although, ironically English Scholars and English teachings tend to ignore Milton's masterpiece as an exquisitely elegant form of written work, along with the dismissal of the English Commonwealth from 1649 to 1660. The English Commonwealth was a significantly major part of the British Monarch effecting both religious and political ways of life. There are many early modern literature works that were created during this catastrophic event who attempted to influence the British Public through their subtle underlying Propaganda, yet still sticking to strict authorities. Milton was among these writers that were appointed to specifically use his ability to base transcripts, poems and books on maybe the reflection of how leaders of Britain wanted its citizens to think and live. Milton was an influential part of the literary movement of the time that encompassed a move away from free expression and instead became a voice for the government's agenda of the period. Milton had many creative works but one particular text over the years has stirred up debates across the minds of many critics. Even by today's standards Paradise Lost has caused controversy, leading into accusations of denying Christianity to the sympathising of the devil. After researching critics that have based their works on studying Milton's epic poem, along with looking closely at his involvement with powerful figures of 17th century government, will assist in determining if Paradise Lost was specifically used for political propoganda or if it was purely written from Milton's own beliefs and experiences.

On the surface Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one could say, is a biblical reconstruction of the globally famous story that basis its context for the doctrine of the original sin. There are many critics that have revolved their analysis of Milton's epic poem solely on the theme of religion, which are the major factors that lead to the disapproval of Milton's work. Religion during Seventeenth Century Britain was compulsory; it was indeed part of the law to attend to church. Milton himself was a devote Christian which oppose the views of the likes of Blake and C. S Lewis as they accused him of sympathising with the devil. Both insisted Milton was part of the 'the devil party.' Both observations from these key early critics are a contradiction upon Milton's actual religious beliefs and practices he took part in. They accuse Milton of creating him as a sort of sub hero and provide him with humanised characteristics thus making him to be a dangerously likeable character - [quote from a critic that supports this]. Realistically, the content of *Paradise Lost* does in fact have particular parts that reflect upon these early critical responses to the poem. Specifically in books [-] the devil seems to become the most humanised character of them all, the speeches he presents to the reader are so simply rhetorically persuasive and some of the most beautiful words come from the mouth of Satan, thus the reader being human can relate more so than that of God...[quote]. The reader relates through jealousy, seduction and the tempting mind, these being only a few of the attributes humans possess that make up who they are.

Therefore these human abilities such as failure, temptations and desire are being regarded to be atrocious because they are being presented through the most famously sinful figure in religion, Satan. Consequently leading to the conclusion that Milton could quite possibly be criticising Christianity

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suggesting the religion denies a humans downfalls, these downfalls being what make a human, human.

However, in retrospect to this argument and the question I ask myself, if Milton was a devote Christian himself why would he deny the religion? There were many figures in the literary world that were against the idea that Milton was portraying Christianity as a corrupt religion and believed Paradise Last was actually strongly supporting his own belief [read keel]. Paradise Lost was written after the Restoration of the monarchy of Charles II in sixteen sixty, when he returned the Church of England back to how it was when his father ruled the country. This brought back the restoration of the Catholic Church and the Puritan faith had failed to subdue and the religion was made illegal. It is a very subjective text and the answers are not all in black and white it is extremely hard to pin point what Milton's exact beliefs were but readers must be aware that he was a very religious man. We can see through many parts of the collection of poems some of his beliefs and can interoperate to an extent what he was actually trying to say through his words. Therefore from my own research and opinions I have come to accept it is not plausible to claim that Milton is directly attacking the Christian faith. Milton often changed his views of the corrupt religion and government of the time of Britain in the sixteen hundreds, but he wasn't afraid to express his belief as a Puritan. Puritanism was associated on the Parliamentary side during the English Civil War against the Laudianism Church on the Monarchist side. The puritan faith focused on the importance of preaching from the Bible and the idea that God is the only leader of the Church and Milton evidently believed in God, being noticeable through the portrayal of God being the creator and

the King of the heavens [Quote from PL]. Paradise Lost is a reconstruction of a well known biblical story of the original sin; therefore this is defiant evidence that Milton pin pointed the importance of unambiguous preaching. Of course many of Milton's masterpieces were a form of preaching; Lares (2001, pg. 1) states in Milton and the preaching arts: "Milton's poetic programme in terms of genres in which he may choose to write and on this sense of vocation to serve as a poet-priest." The angels in Paradise Lost can be seen as figures of preachers, a subtle way for Milton to put his message across to his readers. As seen through the angel Raphael Milton applies his preaching words through the mouth of the angel, one specific example that shows a message being advocated across is where Raphael is sent forth to Adam to warn him not to eat from the forbidden tree:

in the day thou eat'st, thou diest;

Death is the penalty imposed; beware

And govern well thy appetite; lest Sin

Surprise thee, and her black attendant Death. (VII 544-547)

Raphael here is warning Adam the extent of his punishment if he is to eat the forbidden fruit having an aim to encourage the obedience of Adam towards God. However as Lares (2001, pg. 152), again, quotes that in fact "Milton favours correction, and in fact has his angel warn against sin rather than encourage virtue" Due to background reading it is known that Milton was in favour of the Independents (see further on for more information about Independents) therefore this particular part of his epic poem communicates

Milton's own religious views that everyone is entitled to choose what they believe in and not what institutions tell them to believe in.

There is also evidence that Milton agreed with this idea that religion should be accessible to the ordinary person, he took part in writing poems for productions in theatres to allow anybody from all walks of life to be educated about God. Milton, like any other Puritan believed in joyfully practicing the faith and some focused on the value of nature and arts and the natural world. Here the Romantic Writers of the sixteenth century can be linked in to Milton's epic poem where throughout beautiful descriptions of the paradise plays an important part of imagery to the readers. WRITE ABOUT Romantics

Another factor that contributes to this idea that Milton believed in an equal society is the humanising of Satan. Milton believed in an Independent Church, "The independents wanted each specific congregation to be able to decide for itself its beliefs and practices." (Christ's College at Cambridge University). Here I think, personally, that he believed very passionately in God but he did not believe in the institutions that claimed to be doing God's will. In other words he warned people against believing everything you hear in church and believed instead in following your own personal beliefs so you have a relationship with God instead of with the church. This is conveyed by allowing both Adam and Eve and the devil to be accessible to their freewill. Thus portraying the devil just as human as anyone else; this could also relate to freewill and the Devil's own choices to revolt against God. These ideas surrounding free will are explored in chapter one. However some say that Milton retracts the reader away from the dehumanising of the devil by indeed making him relatable to us in order for us to feel guilty that we feel

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sympathetic towards him after realising he is in fact evil, by the use of reverse psychology. Milton emphasises how dangerously tempting Satan is therefore attending church and believing in what you believe in will protect from the evil hands of the devil. [Critics quote]

Although on the surface Paradise Lost is indeed a biblical piece of literary work, however under the surface there are many hidden messages through Milton's work that can be determined as Political Propaganda of its time. During the Civil war and the Commonwealth Milton was involved heavily with the Government and especially worked closely with Oliver Cromwell. He was appointed the Secretary of Foreign Tongues under the Cromwellian Government and played an important role of being the voice for the English Revolution to the rest of the country. Unlike many he believed in the Republic and was in favour of freedom the Commonwealth have provided for the Puritan faith. Milton's first piece of major Political Propaganda was The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth where he emphasised the importance and benefits of a British Republic. Paradise Lost is possibly a less obvious form of political regime than the less subtle works he created, however it is achievable to regard certain characters and events as parallel to that of what is happening in the real world. Starting with the Devil:

He is constantly fighting for his own dignity and freedom which causes the sympathy – most people fight for a democracy especially in 17th century Britain

Devil is a symbolic of the failure of the discourse of politics and the corrupt religion - should be free and not illegal.

The devil could actually be a portrayal of Cromwell or maybe even Milton himself - constant battle with lord and rules - god/king

However when PL was written it was known that Milton actually changed his views on Cromwell and saw flaws in him - son couldn't follow him, false leadership is the devil, wrong..

God can be seen obviously as God...omniscient/ powerful/ leader - highly regarded in paradise lost, so should he be in society and not the king - the devil could also be see

Many

Throughout Milton's work there is a fine line between his political and religious beliefs