

Blindness of beauty



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What Do We Learn Of The Characters Of Samson And Dalila And What Is The Significance Of This Episode ? The character of Dalila is first described by Samson, in his opening dialogue with the Chorus, as “ that specious Monster, my accomplish’d snare.” He also later describes her as “ fallacious, unclean, unchaste”. Thus when she finally appears in person, the reader is perhaps surprised to hear the Chorus uses a simile of a pulchritudinous ship to describe Dalila, “ so bedeck’d, ornate and gay”. It is the first mention of her physical beauty. Neither does the Chorus merely mention it in passing; the chorus takes a total of eleven lines to describe the full extent of Dalila’s beauty. The Chorus continues this extended simile, admiring her “ tackle trim . . . and streamers waving”. She even smells sweet, being followed by a damsel train and “ amber scent of odorous perfume”. It seems as if the Chorus has fallen under Dalila’s spell as Samson had. Samson, however, is under no such illusions. Perhaps his blindness prevents him from capitulating to her beauty, in the same way that in Greek mythology, sailors, having blocked up their ears, saw the Sirens for the evil creatures that they were, rather than be charmed to their deaths by their beautiful singing. His blindness is perhaps the reason that he has made no reference to Dalila’s beauty – her seemingly only asset he is no longer able to appreciate. Unlike the Chorus, Samson is not so welcoming. He calls her a “ Traitress” and bids the Chorus not to let her go near him. The Chorus, however, seems powerless to act against Dalila, as “ yet on she moves”. They appear to still be under the spell of Dalila’s captivating beauty, this time assimilating her beauty with that of “ a fair flower”. At this point Dalila is weeping, “ wetting the borders of her silken veil”. She appears to take pity on Samson’s sorry state, and she stands with her “ eyes [on Samson] fix’d”. Her first words in

Milton's poem takes the form of a transferred epithet, claiming that she has come with "doubtful feet and wavering resolution", the reason behind this being her fear of Samson's "displeasure". She acknowledges that this would be fairly warranted, and that she can offer no excuse, "I came . . . without excuse". This gives the reader the impression of a meek Dalila, seeking to expiate her treachery against Samson, and humbly accepting the blame. She insists that "her penance hath not slackened" and her pardon is "no way assured". She claims that "conjugal affection" is her motive for visiting Samson, and her love is so great that she was prepared to risk his wrath. This effusive display of humility and repentance gives the impression that maybe Samson has misjudged her, and that she is not the "monster" that had initially been thought. Yet it is only a short matter of time before we discover that Dalila, however, is lying. She has not come "without excuse", but with many excuses, and this show of humility is just the first of her many ploys. Samson, unlike the Chorus, and perhaps the reader, is not so easily taken in. He tells her to leave in the manner that one would a dog, "Out, out", and calls her a "Hyaena". This is a reference to Ecclesiasticus, where the hyena is described as a beast which "counterfaiteth the voyce of men, and so entiseth them . . . and devoureth them". Samson bitterly feels that he has been treated and tricked in the same way by Dalila. He is not likely to fall for such hypocritical trickery again. He recognises her deception, describing it as "thy wonted arts". He then mocks her tactic of "breaking all faith, all vows" then repenting "with feign'd remorse" before once again transgressing. Samson reveals that he has learned his lesson, stating that the penitent are likely to "wear out miserable days" if they do not remove themselves from "pois'nous bosom snakes", like Dalila. From this incident

we learn that, although Samson may have initially seemed foolish, for going against Manoa's wishes and for giving in to Dalila's importunity, he now appears wiser for it. He is no longer blinded by Dalila's beauty, and, in this respect, his actual blindness appears to have opened his eyes. Dalila realises that Samson will not be won over as easily as before, and is thus forced to change tack. Dalila then, despite her previous words, attempts to make excuses for her actions. She explains that she is not trying to "extenuate [her] offence" but by presenting her case, Samson will find it easier to forgive her and hate her less. She claims that she acted through moral feebleness, "it was a weakness", alleging that the "importune of secrets", and then the publishing of them, was "incident to all our sex" and thus naturally it was not her fault. She also claims that Samson, too, was weak for "making known for importunity, that wherein consisted all thy strength", and thus he is also to blame. Had he not been weak in revealing his secret, then she wouldn't have been able to betray him. She believes that because they have both been weak, he should forgive her: "let weakness then, with weakness come to parle . . . thine forgive mine". However, Samson's weakness did not cause Dalila to be captured by her enemies, constantly mocked, forced into hard labour, be chained up like a slave, held captive and blinded. In the same speech, Dalila also claims to have been motivated by love, she wanted to keep him by her. She says that she knew "liberty would draw [Samson] forth to perilous enterprises". Dalila insists that all she ever wanted was for Samson to be her and "Love's pris'ner, not the Philistines". This long speech does not create the same impression as Dalila's first speech, as it merely demonstrates her cunning and wiliness. No longer does either Samson or the reader fall for Dalila's effusive calls for forgiveness, and

the more that she tries to expiate herself, the more that the reader, along with Samson, turns against her. This is significant in that it helps the reader to associate with Samson and form a common bond with him that lasts until the end of the poem. Samson counters Dalila's arguments, echoing the reader's own feelings. He calls her a "sorceress" and mockingly admires her cunning for turning her own transgressions into criticisms of him. He argues that it was "malice" that has brought her back to see him. He also refuses to accept her argument that they were both weak – he sees her only weakness as greed, "a weakness for Philistian gold". He argues that "all wickedness is weakness" and therefore it is no excuse. He refuses to condone his own weakness, and thus why should he condone hers? Samson also asks what sort of love would seek fulfilment through treachery, "love seeks to have love". He accuses Dalila of "striving to cover shame with shame", that is, such arguments only reveal the wickedness that they try to hide. Dalila is once again forced to shift her ground and change her arguments and excuses. She refutes the charges of lust for money, "it was not gold, as to my charge thou lay'st". Instead she attempts to blame the Philistine rulers and priests, by whom, she insists, she was pressurised into betraying Samson. She claims that "the Priest was . . . ever at my ear, preaching how meritorious . . . it would be to ensnare [Samson]". She describes her battle with her conscience as being like a "siege" before she consented, as even "the best-resolved of men" would have. She insists that she had nothing with which to counter "such powerful arguments", and it was only her "great love" which prevented her from betraying Samson sooner. Samson refutes these claims, saying that if Dalila's love for him had "been, as it ought, sincere" then she should have put him before her tribe and people. After all,

he did the same for her, forsaking all the Jewish women of his tribe for her, and ignoring the wishes of his people, including his own father. This shows the love that Samson must have initially felt for Dalila in the beginning, and shows how far from grace she has fallen in his eyes. This is thus a secondary tragic strand in the poem. He asks her why she initially received him as a husband, as he was “thy country’s foe professed” then, as he is now. Finally he questions her religion, asking what sort of gods are “unable to acquit themselves and prosecute their foes but by ungodly deeds”. There is something of an anomaly in this argument, however, as Samson had previously slaughtered “a thousand fore-skins” (Philistines) on behalf of the Lord for the people of Israel. Despite this fact, however, Samson’s arguments show that he is, at heart, a religious man, whose faith is important to him. He ends his speech asking Dalila, now that he has countered all of her arguments and excuses, dismissing them all, “how foul must [she] appear?”. At this point, Dalila seems to have run out of excuses, and takes refuge in querulousness, pleading that “in argument with men a woman ever goes by the worse”. Samson sarcastically replies, “for want of words, no doubt, or lack of breath”. This is the first perceptible nuance of humour from Samson, and signifies a lightening of his spirits, brought about from his meeting with Dalila. It is almost as though he has released an enormous quantity of pent-up anger and bitterness, and is beginning to feel a little like his former self. Dalila, having realised that there is no excuse or reasoning that Samson will find acceptable, resorts to material inducements and even sexual innuendo. She pleads with him not to “afflict [himself] in vain” and allow him to enjoy other solaces, “where other sense want not their delights”. She asks him to return home to “leisure and domestic ease”,

exempt from “ many a care and chance”. She requests that she may nurse him diligently, “ to old age”. Samson resists Dalila’s offers and is shown to be no longer susceptible to such temptations, especially as he could now expect Dalila to be even less faithful than before, as his blindness would put him at her mercy. “ I must live uxoriously to thy will in perfect thralldom”. If she can trick him when he has his strength and sight, what hope will he have now ? Instead he orders her to heed not his condition, and he tells her simply, “ thou and I long since are twain”. In fact, he seems to despise her so much that he prefers his captivity alone, to freedom with her, “ this Gaol I count the house of Liberty to thine”. Dalila makes one final effort, pleading to be able to touch his hand and impress upon one of his other senses. In continuing this obviously lost cause, the reader increasingly sympathises with Samson, understanding the haranguing and importunity that he must have suffered before divulging his secret to Dalila. It gives even more credence to his descriptions and feelings towards Dalila. On this occasion, however, he resists her temptation. Not only that, but he warns her that should she approach him, he is liable to “ tear [her] joint by joint”. This gives us an indication to the extent of Samson’s hatred for her. He finally bids her farewell. The ferocity of Samson’s reaction finally convinces Dalila as to the hopelessness of her cause and she finally reveals her true nature: why should she humble herself any further ? Although she will be vilified in Israel, she will be recompensed by the gratitude and esteem of the Philistines, “ fame, if not double-faced is double-mouthed”. She believes that she will be treated as a national heroine and henceforth will accept their homage. This is a clear demonstration of Dalila’s shallowness, and this is fully understood by the Chorus and Samson, who puts Dalila’s offences into context by saying

that although “ love-quarrels oft in pleasing concord end, not wedlock treachery endangering life”. Thus the encounter between Samson and Dalila ends. Such a meeting is the greatest dramatic opportunity which Milton’s poem offers, and is the turning point in the poem. It is a confirmation that Samson has learnt his lesson and is able to resist her. The effect that this meeting has on Samson is significant. His rejections of Dalila’s temptations rouse him from his previous depressed lethargy. The moral strength with which he resists her is the basis on which he builds the will to find the great physical strength on which he relies in the finale of the poem. Another great significance of this episode is that Samson no longer places the entirety of the blame on his own shoulders “ I myself have brought them [these evils] on”. Seeing the deceitful Dalila allows him to alleviate some of the guilt that he feels. It is as if through sparring with Dalila, he has regained some of his strength, optimism and old assurances. Dalila’s appearance provides a welcome change from the misery and depression that enshrouds Samson Agonistes up until that point. Her femininity, beauty and elegance provide a stark contrast. Her deviousness and cunning are also effective contrasts with the emphatic morality of most of the other characters. It is, however, difficult to get a great insight into the true persona of Dalila, as her character is largely based on image and appearance, and any character aspects masquerade behind an array of deception, lies and mendacity.