

Paradise lost – what
do we learn about
satan’s character
from line 84 to line
191...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Milton's portrait of Satan has fascinated critics since Paradise Lost's first publication, leading some in the romantic period to claim that Satan is, in fact, the heroic protagonist of the whole work. Certainly Milton's description of Satan has greatly influenced the devil's image in western art and literature since the book's publication. From lines 84 to 191 in Paradise Lost Book 1, we are introduced to the character of Satan, who has just been hurled from heaven, 'because he trusted to have equalled the Most High'.

As a reader, one first meets a stunned Satan, chained down to the fiery lake of hell, surrounded by his co-conspirators. From lines 84 to 127, where Satan is speaking to his good friend, 'Beelzebub', Milton presents him as being nostalgic about heaven, 'Myriads, though bright... ' - something one sees significantly for the first and last time throughout the poem. Satan's great yearning for heaven is brief, and when finally suppressed, Milton offers a fine and revealing example of Satan's rhetoric and quick-moving contradictions, as he instantly expresses excuses for his failure.

Firstly, he declares that 'Till then who knew, the force of those dire arms? ' explaining how they were unaware of God's powers before testing him. This is supportive evidence, backing up the suggestion that Satan is the supposed 'Father Of Lies', as he is seen to be directly manipulating the truth. He manages to make 'He with his thunder' sound as though God had taken unfair advantage by using an illegal weapon. Moreover, he never refers to God by his name, but as 'He', 'The potent victor', or 'Our grand foe'.

He makes a virtue out of his unwillingness to 'Repent or change' - the very unwillingness which imprisons him eternally in the hell of himself. Much of

what Satan says makes him sound grand and admirable because of the rhetorical force with which it is expressed, however when studied more closely it is seen to be more hollow, and even absurd. Satan claims that in the war against God, 'He shook his throne', and that the battle was 'dubious' - that it could have gone either way. This is obviously untrue, and again contributes to the image of him being a rather desperate liar.

Satan's remarkably obvious sense of optimism becomes greatly evident towards the end of his speech, where he describes all the positive things that have been the outcome of their war. Firstly he boasts of how they have now gained experience of Gods power - 'through experience of this great event', and then he persuades himself they have learnt a lesson from defeat, and 'in foresight much advanced', will do better next time in the 'eternal war'. In my opinion however, Satan's brave face is merely superficial.

Beneath, he is racked with 'deep despair', his essential spiritual condition. His 'public face', is that of supreme dissembler, and it is impossible to know the extent to which he is deceived by his own rhetoric. This idea, creates effects of sympathy towards Satan's character as it almost suggests that he is hopeless and possibly even doomed. Throughout this particular speech, Milton in my opinion, indirectly forces juxtaposing emotions upon his readers in relation to the character of Satan - being that of sympathy Vs admiration.

The feeling of sympathy, as he seems so determined to be a successful leader, however it is clear that he does not really know himself where he is leading to. Even though one might feel this pity, the admiration of his great courage to rebel against authority makes Satan more appealing and likable

as a rebel. From lines 128 - 55, Beelzebub, the born second-in-command replies to Satan beginning by being sycophantic towards him, and then continuing the myth that their rebellion had 'endangered' god.

In contrast to Milton's confident and optimistic portrayal of Satan, he presents Beelzebub in a much dimmer light - portraying him as being heavily depressed through the repetitive use of emotive language, using words such as 'destruction', 'misery', 'pain' and 'fire'. This key difference in character highlights the extent of Satan's sheer optimism in their situation, making him appear plausible for his determination and great courage, of which he appears to possess over the other rebel angel.

Following Beelzebub's pessimistic and sorrowful reply, Satan forcefully attacks him with a powerful and persuasive speech, desperately hoping to uplift his despair. From comments such as, 'to be weak is miserable', one learns that Satan is determined to scotch such defeatist talk and to abolish any sense of weakness. Although Satan shows signs of great commitment in his ambition to 'pervert' God's providence, I think that he knows in his heart that he is on a hiding to nothing and the worst he can do is cause God temporary inconvenience.

Words such as 'disturb' and 'perhaps grieve' illustrate Satan's rather poor plans to merely 'irritate' God, with his language generally lacking the vigour one would expect from Satan. Although Satan lacks in the quality of his plans, he does successfully manage to in-force a sense of time and place - as well as a feeling of unity, for example through 'Our enemy', 'Our Own loss'.

The effect of this is that it brings the rebels closer together reminding them that they have each-other, and therefore have a side.

This shows us that Satan has great leadership skills, in that he holds the situation together and persuades his friends to follow his plans. Overall, I believe that from lines 84 to 191, Milton offers his readers an extremely complex and diverse view of Satan's character, indicating rather important aspects that his personality appears to dominate. As the image created is rather dependable, my personal attitude towards him so far is greatly ambiguous, feeling both attraction, and repulsion - many people, it is relevant to add feel the same about snakes.

The most notable aspects that have so far had effect shaping my view of his personality are his sheer courage and energy - that he appears to have on such an enormous scale. However, when analysing the value of these qualities in themselves one is forced to question their significance. In actual fact, when studying all major aspects of Satan's character so far - the discussion of him rapidly turns into a series of endless questions, which I hope will soon be answered as the poem develops.