

# Adam: the ultimate epic hero essay



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In the infamous blank verse poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton employs many epic similes, or extended comparisons that span several lines and are used to intensify the heroic stature or nature of the subject being described. In particular, Satan's army is made analogous to glorious armies of the past, its soldiers likened to prominent warriors of myth and legend. Milton uses these epic similes to reveal his attitude towards heroic values, while seeming to primarily portray Satan as the obvious protagonist, and thus the epic hero.

Yet, using these extended comparisons in the end allows Milton to make known his true views on heroic values, and actually glorify Adam through his religious commitments to God as the ultimate epic hero of *Paradise Lost*, instead of Satan. One example of Milton using an epic simile to portray his attitude towards heroic values is introduced in Book I. Satan's raising of his army is surprisingly described in positive heroic terms: "Anon they move/In perfect phalanx to the Dorian mood" (l. 50). First of all, the phalanx was the formation of the foot soldiers of ancient Greece, while the Dorian mood is parallel to the valor and calm with which the Spartans went into battle with the sounds of flutes, impervious to fear or rage. Here it seems as if the satanic army is being made to resemble a celebrated gathering of strong, well-trained, and brave soldiers, when it would seem to many that there is nothing heroic or brave about demons and creatures of hell.

Of Flutes and soft Recorders; such as raised/To heighth of noblest temper  
Heroes old/Armin to Battle, and instead of rage/Deliberate valor breathed,  
firm and unmoved... Moved on in silence to soft Pipes that charmed/Their  
painful steps o'er the burnt soil (l.

562). To highth of noblest temper Heroes old” is a description that would be characteristic of any great military force. However, this is Satan’s army that Milton is talking about in elevated terms, proclaiming that the evil power is actually magnificent and comparable to the highest of all armed forces throughout history. Immediately, it seems that Satan is the hero of the story and that he is even admirable in battle, despite that fact that he is fighting angels of heaven, trying to kill them. Values of bravery and principle seem to be very significant to Milton early on. This description of the gathering of Satan’s army follows up the explanation of Satan’s effort to hearten his army.

“ With high words that bore/Semblance of worth, not substance, gently raised/Their fainting courage and dispelled their fears” (l. 30). We see that the surface of the army is actually superficial, plain “ Semblance of worth, not substance. ” There is the appearance of greatness and bravery, yet it is only a facade covering the true cowardice underneath. The heroic terms used to describe the soldiers thus become a somewhat mocking irony caused by Milton. The values they share with the armies of old really come to nothing of true importance.

There are about as valuable and functional as deflated balloons at a birthday party. Again, it is obvious to see that in Book I Milton presents Satan primarily as a courageous champion of battle. In doing so, he makes Paradise Lost comparable with prior epics, which tend to focus on military conquerors and their conquests or exploits at war. At the same time though, Milton seems to question the ideals of a civilization that worships warfare and its warriors.

Milton definitely creates Satan in a way that exhibits all of the qualities of celebrated soldiers like Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus. He is audacious, unworried, apparently completely carefree, and has the gift of spurring his followers into horrific situations on a whim. In this way, Satan is almost admirable in the early sections of the poem and we come to wonder if we could ever root against him seeing as he displays all of the heroic values and characteristics that we find appealing in other characters, whether of literature, history, or modern society. Everyone likes to have a brave warrior to look up to and be in awe of. Milton continues on to compare the satanic army to heroic armies of mythology and history (l.

574-587). If all of the names armies, such as the Greeks that fought against Thebes and Troy, the Giants who warred Olympus, and Arthur's or Charlemagne's armies were united, they still would not compare to Satan's mass. Consequently, it seems that heroic values are weakened for the mere fact that they are being applied to the satanic army. Why would anything applied or compared to an army from hell be seen as a value in any sense? The ideals of history and myth are made less by the pure fact that Satan effectively replicates them.

However, Satan cannot successfully act out any heavenly acts or empower heavenly ideals. He never quite succeeds at destroying or breaking into even a portion of heaven, and his attempted imitation of those Holy only highlight the deceit and treachery of his self-imposed world. He always fails when it comes to imitating God for hell is inside him. Furthermore, when Satan's forces fight the angels, as frightening and vividly presented as his creatures are, they are unable to kill any angels at all. In this way, Milton expresses

that power, bravery, and force are not the uppermost of heroic values, if true values at all.

Rather, the values which are essentially Christian and unnamed in classical legend, are truly significant, for they cannot be replicated by the satanic army in the least. In Book IX Milton states that man's atonement, reconciliation, and resolution with God is more brave and noble than the fury "Of stern Achilles on his Foe pursued/Thrice Fugitive about Troy Wall (IX. 14). It can be implied that Hector is the party described under Achilles' fury after the death of his cousin. Yet, Milton comes to show that Adam's recognition of God's judgment is more heroic than the actions of even such an epic hero as Achilles. The perfect embodiment of the ideal, as far as heroic values are concerned, can be recognized in Christ Himself, through His compliance to God motivated by undying love for all mankind.

Throughout the poem, Milton never related Christ, God, or Adam with the classical ideals of heroism. Not once does he connect them with the heroic values of society or history. Obviously for Milton, Christian belief and action overshadows all of the traditional epic values. Through his epic similes, then, Milton eventually denounces Satan as the overall hero. He goes beyond the traditional epic values to the fundamental Christian values of patience and love. In conclusion, Milton uses the traditional epic form through simile to discard conventional epic values.

It is in relationship with Satan and his actions, behaviors, and tricks that he employs the epic simile. Yet, he does no such thing for the true epic hero in Adam or Christ. God's ways are justified to the patient Adam, representing

mankind's acceptance to its punishment, its doom. By accepting God's judgment and punishment, man is able to grow and mature, accept further responsibilities, and continue life in the imperfectness of the world outside Eden. Milton makes it seem that man is able to flourish beyond Paradise because of Adam and his actions caused by his growing Christianity.

Adam's complete acceptance to God's ways completes the break from conventional heroic values, in favor of surrendering to a greater entity. Ultimately Milton shows that the Christian qualities of self-control, respect, and patience, as well as an overall loving attitude in faith are more significant than the violent and manipulating abilities of Satan, thus making Adam the ultimate hero of the poem.