

# Satan as an epic hero in paradise lost religion essay



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The greatest writer after Shakespeare in 17 century is John Milton. John Milton (1608 -1674) was the most prominent English poet, thinker, and civil servant for the Commonwealth of England. His masterpiece Paradise Lost arouses hot debates among scholars since it appeared. In that era, England is a religious unsteady and political shake-up nation. Concerning about the fate of his country, John Milton's poetry and prose all reflect deep confirmations and deal with contemporary issues. After his death, Milton's critical reception on a state of affairs continued to make great influence towards the masses through the centuries. He is still generally regarded as one of the remarkable writers and thinkers in English. Although he was born in a puritan family, John Milton boldly chose God and the devil Satan as the main roles in his work. What's more, he endowed the latter one with heroic spirit which may risk everyone's condemnation. Satan's resistance to God mirrors the revolutionary and heroic spirit of the bourgeoisie. While he finally loses the joyful heaven and Adam and Eve lose the Eden. All these consequences are the hints of the capitalist class's failure and the feudalistic class's restoration.

Can the devil be an epic hero? In John Milton's Paradise Lost- the great epic from the English Renaissance, this topic was discussed time and again.

Numbers of scholars believe that Paradise lost should be one of the most outstanding products of the Renaissance, especially when talking about the question can the devil be an epic hero? For Milton's part, Satan is dauntless, quick-witted and powerful and he is also an excellent leader. He is quite distinctive from the traditional heroes in many famous works. In Paradise Lost, the Genesis story upon the corruption of man was recreated by the

author, as a matter of fact, caused by Satan. For the sake of Satan's deadly shortcomings of arrogance and ambition, he decided to fight with Heaven. In the end, even though he was defeated, he refused to give up his war against God, always betting to do wrong against the heaven and the human beings succeeding with man's fall from grace. Paradise Lost starts, not with the expected potential heroes of the Genesis stories, God or man, but it begins instead with Satan, therefore paying great attention to him, his actions and characteristics. Milton, introduce Satan by condemning him as the reason leader to the fall of man, " Who first seduced them to that foul revolt? /the' infernal Serpent..." (l. 33-34). in this sentence it implied that Satan had begun to be set up as the final rebel, not just of the epic, but of humanity. Milton easily represented Satan's pride that led to his ultimate failure. He tried to overthrow God; while unluckily he was cast into the Hell, but Milton also told us, "...for now the thought/both of lost happiness and lasting pain/Torments him..."(l. 55-56). At once, the author tried to make Satan to be a pitied, more human and less evil role. He also described Satan's physical character to be " in bulk as huge/as whom the fables name of monstrous size, / Titanian..."(l. 196-198), and then " Deeming some island," (l. 205), which means that Satan has a vast figure and even a sailor would make a mistake. He may think that Satan is an island on which he can moor his boat. Satan's size growing extreme larger comparing with the others supports Satan as the hero. Satan is so physically impressive that Milton can't find anyone who can match him. Hence he is distinctive from the other angels and men.

In the English Renaissance, there's no doubt that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* was generally regarded as the main work. The Renaissance is believed to have originated in Florence in the fourteenth century, in which there was a revival of interest in the classical antiquity. Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, but also painters like Giotto were the important figures of that age. From the end of the fifteenth century on, it has become known as the High Renaissance, when some Italian cities started to compete with Florence upon the leading position. Therefore, the thought of Renaissance spread out from the early sixteenth century onwards. This revival and influence of classical culture, art and literature was typically represented in both *Paradise Lost* and *La Divine Commedia*, especially describing the setting of the underworld. This is a general literary motivation of the classical epic works. Inspired by all the literatures at that era, Milton decided to write his epic poem. Milton had a purpose of writing an epic poem upon a noble subject decades before he started writing *Paradise Lost* in 1658. In his famous work *At a Vacation Exercise in the College* (1628), he already mentioned that he would like to devote himself to "singing in the manner of Homer" and at the same time, he envisioned writing a poem concerning "wars and heaven under Jupiter". Notes and drafts from around 1640 include four drafts of projections of the fall of man, one of them called *Paradise Lost* and another *Adam unparadiz'd*. It took Milton almost twenty years writing controversial prose and political pamphlets and he was a strong supporter of liberty of conscience, free will and human choice. The story itself shows that the fall from heaven of Satan and the other angels who betrayed against God. As a matter of fact, the Renaissance humanism can be easily found in this work. It quickly developed during the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century, and was

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also a resounding response to the challenge of medieval scholastic education. It emphasized the practical, scientific and pre-professional studies. On the contrary, [sHYPERLINK " http://en. wikipedia.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholasticism)

[org/wiki/Scholasticism"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholasticism) cholasticism pay much attention to cultivating the preparing men to be doctors, lawyers or professional theologians, and their subjects contain logic, natural philosophy, medicine, law and theology, etc.. Opposite from the training professionals in jargon and serious drill, humanists did all they could to create a citizenry who was able to speak and write with eloquence and clearness. For this reason, they would be capable of persuading others to engage the civic life of their communities virtuously and do some cautious actions.

Because Milton's work was deeply influenced by the Classics, Paradise Lost can be classified as an epic. Thanks to this masterpiece, the poet Milton is still famous until now. Many scholars believe that this work is one of the most prominent products of the Renaissance and particularly as to the topic can the devil be an epic hero? Satan in Milton's eyes was bold, resourceful and formidable and as well an excellent leader. When reading the work, after a few pages, the reader may indeed get the impression that Satan is a great epic hero of that age. Milton did not deny the truth of the bible so as to establish the freedom of the individual. He built on the great Christian paradox which asserted that true freedom depended on the service for God. This pull the traditional thought into a new setting, even a revolutionary setting, is Milton's great power.

When talked about the aim of the poet to write this poem, it was to find the root of the human's unfortunateness. For his part, he believed the reason <https://assignbuster.com/satan-as-an-epic-hero-in-paradise-lost-religion-essay/>

that human beings were easy to be swayed by their emotions, chose the wrong way and finally lose their joyful paradise was for the sake of their weak reason and nerves. The fall of Eve was due to her aimlessness for finding new knowledge. The fall of Adam was due to his indulgence to Eve. The fall of Satan was due to his great ambitions and self-satisfaction. Through their bitter experience, Milton wanted to imply that the English capitalist class's bitter loss was due to their moral corruption and voluptuousness. He inherited the humanism in 16 century and at the same time, accepted the new scientific achievement in 17 century. However, he held a critical attitude towards them. He confirmed life trick but he denied the unlimited pleasure. He confirmed enterprise and sense of proud while he denied the ambitions and proud which evolve from them. He confirmed science while he also thought that science didn't mean all. If people only had science but no ideal and justice, they would never get peace and happy. Such kind of thinking was the reflection of his Puritanism. Milton criticized the proud Satan inwardly, while emotionally he sympathized Satan's status, because the punishment of Satan looks so much like the pressure of the capital class. When described the hell, although Milton kept on saying that Satan was proud, ambitious, from the dialogues, Satan was just a vivid oppressed revolutionary. This image was so splendid, and his fighting determination stood out brightly against the extreme dangerous hell. This was the indelible memory of English bourgeoisie, also a prominent art achievement.

Satan was a role who had significant obstacles to overcome in order to realize his goals. In the historical long river, epic heroes in epic poetry shared

some similar characteristics, thus it seems like Milton felt his own duty to make Satan to be the epic hero in Paradise Lost. His characteristics in the poem shared some similarities with those of previous epic heroes such as Odysseus. Epic heroes have some likeness. They are quite powerful, brave, and convincing; no matter what odds are against them, they will get rid of the difficulties and achieve their goals, and most important of all, they are leaders. Actually, Satan possesses of such kind of the qualities in Paradise Lost. First of all, in the first beginning, Satan had lost the war he fight against God and the angels in heaven and was “ chained on the burning lake”. Satan and his fellow rebel angels were banished to live in horrid dwellings. Milton described the discomfort of hell mentioned by Satan “ Oh how unlike the place from whence they fell! There the companions of his fall, overwhelmed with floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire” (1. 97). This shows that Satan met with important obstacles as most epic heroes encounter. Satan was powerful and large in size which usually personifies epic heroes. “ Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge as whom the fables name of monstrous size, Titanian or Earth-born, which warred on Jove” (1. 95).

Milton shows that Satan was also the reflection of bravery and leadership because Satan, although currently in censure, still upholds his principles that enlisted him in hell in the first place. He says “ all is not lost the unconquerable will, and study of revenge, immortal hate, and courage never to submit or yield: And what is else not to be overcome? That glory never shall his wrath or might extort from me” (1. 106-111). The core of Satan’s heroism in this poem is that though that he would fight against all the odds, he was still in favor of his own beliefs and fought till the end to preserve his

beliefs. He says " We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built Here for his envy, will not drive us hence: Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice, to reign is worth ambition, though in Hell: Better to reign in the Hell than serve in Heaven" (1. 259-263). Satan and his rebel angels achieve the ideology which was " As being the contrary to His high with whom we resist. If then His providence, Out of our evil seek to bring forth good, Our labor must be to pervert that end, And out of good still to find means of evil"(1. 161-165). Satan inspired the openly opposition to God and uprooted the passion of his followers to continue their fury of damaging God. All he his followers were persuaded during his speech " Can make a Heaven of Hell, and a Hell of Heaven" (1. 255). Satan and his adherents wanted no parts of Heaven any more because they couldn't bear to service for God any longer. Thus they were adamant about creating their own Kingdom in hell where they would call God's precious mankind up. All in all, the characteristics of Satan and his actions corporately made him the competitor of the epic hero role in Paradise Lost.

Milton portrayed Satan as a vengeful, manipulative, trickish, lying, and vicious individual. Nevertheless, Milton also showed Satan's loyalty to the objective that he and the rebellious angels were pursuing. But first of all, let's begin with Satan's vengeful ways. To begin with, Satan was seen as vengeful because even though he'd already been punished and thrown to the pits of hell from heaven, he still remains firm in his rebellion of the Almighty and seeks to damage heaven. Satan and his constituents' s malevolence was so obvious in their decision that they wouldn't attack Heaven through war, but attack the newest creation of God, Man. Satan



volunteered his services to “ seduce them to our party, that their God May prove their foe, and with repenting hand Abolish his own works. This would surpass Common revenge, and interrupt his joy” (2.-371). Besides, Satan was manipulative and trickish because to further his mission of seducing and corrupting man on earth, he had to design a perfect method to enter the gate of earth, and thus “ he casts to change his proper shape which else might work him danger or delay: and now a stripling Cherub he appears”(634-636). In an attempt to cheat and manipulate the guard Uriel, Satan transformed into a cherub which is a humbly ranked angel in heaven. From this we can find that he is quite a scheming individual. What’s more, Satan demonstrated the acts of lying and deceit when he corrupted Eve’s mind in the Garden of Eden and persuaded her to pick the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge. He transformed himself once again into a snake, and instigated Eve that she could eat from the tree of knowledge. “ So glistened the dire Snake, and into fraud Led Eve, our credulous mother, to the tree of prohibition, root of all our woe” (10. 643-645). All of these actions- lying, manipulation, deceit, and the risks committed by Satan show his loyalty to the purpose. For the sake of destroying mankind just to annoy God immensely shows his loyalty and contribution. Milton clearly emphasizes the character of Satan through his high detailed recounts of Satan’s mischief. Satan had become a “ by any means” type of attitude when it came to pleading his honor and upholding his beliefs which led to the deception, manipulation, and lying that he was notorious for throughout Paradise Lost. He was the epic hero in the story because in this story he was the underdog. No one expected for him to be fully victorious in his displays,

and while he might not fully accomplished all goals. It was proved that he was firm in his plot against God.

In the summary part, Milton expressed the differences between human beings and Satan. Different from Satan and his followers, Adam and Eve didn't choose a destructive gamble. Adversely, they kept a hopeful and humble behavior. Adam even assimilated himself to the corruptive archangel saying that his pain was never before and never again. Nevertheless, the biggest difference was when they faced with the possible choices, human beings chose hope while Satan chose a gambling revenge. An essential conception here was that previous life was doomed. John Milton quite opposed this idea. He was strongly in favor of the free willingness. As the plot spread, the distinctions between human and Satan gradually expressed. Adam and Eve denied the opinion of Satan that all people should sink with ignorance, and they decided to be submissive to God under his arrangement. Different from Satan's determination to revenge on all the violated deities, people chose to be peaceful to the omnipotent God. Satan couldn't absolutely repent and mend his ways or pray for forgiveness in such a desperate condition. Although he was firm, he was defeated by the holy son who was bestowed the spirit and power by God. No matter whether we were in favor of Satan and his troops' sacrifice or human beings' final submission, Milton insisted on the terminal decision of the inner heart throughout. In spite of failure, Satan was fully confident that he couldn't help facing with such condition. And that Adam and Eve knew their happy heaven had been lost, so they hope to regard it as a realm which their soul could arrive. They hoped that their spirit could live here. Though won the war and be called the

“ winner”, the holy son didn’t experience the conversion or adventure like other characters.

Although the revolution was a failure, the revolutionaries were bloodily suppressed; Milton’s revolutionary fighting would never be deducted. To convey this topic, the devout believer Milton described God as a cruel feudal monarchy and a blinkered tyrant at all cost so that he could allude to the cruel repression to the puritans of Charlie â...; at that black age. The greatest opponent and the most vicious devil Satan was fashioned into a handsome, tall and smart revolutionary leader for the sake of singing the praises of revolutionaries. Satan’s rebellion was put down by God, and the devil party was thrown into the fire lake for sufferings; however, Satan never loses his fighting will, he was adversely active to organize his own force and waited for rising from the ashes. He built his own palace as a new kingdom in the hell and openly content against God. He preferred being the king in the hell to submitting to God as an official in the heaven. From this we can find his tireless fighting spirit towards the God, the authority and the highest dictator. The author borrowed the image of Satan to express his own anger and contempt towards the feudal tyrant Charlie â...; and his firm confidence towards the revolutionary success. Thanks to his revolutionary passion, his Satan was full of sound and color and surpassed his god morally. The hero of this poem is a man named Satan who is banished for challenging the leadership of the clan. This man Satan makes a vow to destroy or corrupt anything created by the clan. This Satan was resourceful, making the best of what he had, very little, and accomplishing his goal. Satan may just be the nonconformist who couldn’t abide by what was considered normal. In any

case one must show their admiration for Satan in his unwillingness to serve in Heaven, and then in the way he accepted his resulting role in Hell.

Although it was quite hard to prove who the real hero was in Paradise Lost, as a whole, spirit-internal perfect, intelligent independence and individual power in this masterpiece give people the comprehensive “ epic virtue”. Fundamentally, Milton abandoned the whole epic conception in this work and changed it into an experience of immediate concern to himself. This experience wasn't his flattery to his culture and beliefs, but a real chance for readers' spiritual practice. No matter how painful a person is, John Milton's Paradise Lost will awake him up after experiencing such a spiritual trip and convert the intangible blackness into wholesome consciousness and bright mind. People may say that Milton fight for republic form of government and exposed Satan. While from his condemnation to Satan's audaciousness and infidelity, more than once display the false faces and insincere attitude of English bourgeoisie activists. Yet Satan's fearless lofty quality, to a large extent, eulogized his coteremporaries' heroic dauntless spirit.