



## **A Critical Analysis of John Milton's Paradise Lost: Is Satan a Hero or a Villain?**

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### **Introduction**

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton likens Satan to a Leviathan (I. 201) while describing Chaos as a "illimitable ocean without bound" (II. 892; emphasis mine). This combines the idea of Chaos and Satan as God's adversaries, both of which have their roots in the Middle East's old epic tradition.

The separation of light from darkness, of seas from skies, and of dry land from sea are all described in the Book of Genesis. According to Jewish Bible commentator Ibn Ezra, the Hebrew word for creation, *bara*, comes from the verb "to cut" (Fletcher 1930, 83). Milton appears to adhere to the same custom. Once more, the most crucial analysis should be given to Raphael's dialogue with Adam. Raphael cites the Father's instruction to the Son in his account of the Creation: "ride forth, and bid the Deep / Within appointed bounds be Heav'n and Earth" (VII. 166–167).

Milton's portrayal of Satan, particularly in the first two books of the epic, is a remarkable literary achievement. He has captivated readers of the work ever since its publication. It seems that to address the questions of God's creation and the presence of evil, we must consider the concept of Creation and its connection to another significant and prominent character in John Milton's epic, namely Chaos. The role of Chaos, its artistic depiction, its interactions with Satan, and the divine perspective on it are topics that have not been effectively clarified by either Milton's contemporaries or current scholars of Milton. The ontological nature of Chaos differs based on the specific version of the creation myth being examined.

There are three primary options available for our examination: a) creation seen as a struggle against pre-existing Chaos, which represents forces of nothingness, void, and destruction; b) creation ex



nihilo; c) a materialistic perspective that asserts all matter (including that of Chaos itself) originates from God. Naturally, as one delves into the topics of creation, the first matter, and the nature of evil in the Universe, one encounters intense discussions surrounding dualism and Manichaeism that preoccupied the thinkers of the seventeenth century. The traces of these debates resonate within the narrative of *Paradise Lost*. Coleridge and Hazlitt regarded him as a significant rebel, a remarkable freedom fighter akin to Prometheus. Abercrombie believes that the main importance of the epic lies in the character of Satan, similar to how the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* focus on their respective heroes.

A variety of explanations can be offered for the peculiar allure that Satan has held over generations of readers. Firstly, it is important to note that Milton had been contemplating the potential theme for his epic for many years. This prolonged period of reflection allowed for a significant amount of creative energy to build up. When he finally began writing, this accumulated energy manifested itself in the character of Satan, who appears at the beginning of the epic. Secondly, regarding the depiction of Hell and its ruler, Milton had the freedom to explore his creativity and fully unleash his imagination. When describing God and Heaven, he lacked the same creative freedom because he had to adhere closely to scripture. As a result, he could not invent as freely, which made Books I and II stronger than the later books. Consequently, Satan emerges as a more vivid and engaging character than those in the subsequent books.

In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, five dialogues involving Satan demonstrate his possession of qualities essential for effective leadership and command. As Waldock observes, these dialogues reveal Satan's fortitude in adversity, significant endurance, notable recklessness, exceptional ability to rise to challenges, outstanding leadership skills, and quick thinking when confronted with novel and seemingly insurmountable difficulties.

In his first dialogue addressed to Beelzebub, Satan asserts that although they have lost the initial battle against Heaven, they are not completely vanquished. He speaks with unyielding pride and conviction, suggesting that their defeat is merely the first round in a much larger conflict. Satan draws strength from the fact that they still possess crucial internal qualities—undaunted will, a fierce thirst for revenge, eternal hatred toward God, and a courage that refuses to yield. These, he argues, are signs that they are not truly defeated. As long as such qualities endure, he believes victory is still attainable.

In his second dialogue, Satan responds to Beelzebub's call for caution. Here, Satan's self-revelatory tone deepens. He asserts that weakness is synonymous with misery, and that they must not



allow themselves to be used as instruments in God's grand design. Even if God seeks to exploit them for His ends, Satan is determined to frustrate those plans. Seizing on a temporary pause in their torment, Satan urges action—emphasizing that this lull is a strategic opportunity to regroup and rise again.

Satan's third dialogue reveals his indomitable spirit and his ability to reframe his fall as a kind of victory. With the grandeur typical of epic heroes, he greets their new domain—Hell—not with despair, but with defiance. He contrasts it with the lost glory of Heaven, and in one of the poem's most famous lines, declares: "*Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.*" This powerful assertion highlights his determination to maintain authority and agency, even in damnation.

Although, in his fourth dialogue, Satan turns to rally his fallen followers. With rhetorical skill, he addresses them as "princes, potentates, [and] powers," evoking their former glory and appealing to their pride. This calculated oratory is meant to inspire unity, courage, and a renewed sense of purpose, laying the foundation for their continued resistance against Heaven.

In Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*, Satan emerges as the central and most dynamic character. After he and his followers awaken from their stupor in Hell, Satan delivers his longest and most stirring speech, rallying his troops and reminding them of the "glorious war" they fought in Heaven. Despite their defeat and fall into the infernal abyss, he appeals to their celestial pride and urges them not to resign to passive suffering, but to wage "eternal war"—whether open or covert—against God. While he declares that decisions will be made through counsel, Satan's dominance is clear, and he ends with a powerful call to arms: "War, then, war, open or understood, must be resolved."

From the outset, Satan is portrayed with grandeur and heroic magnitude. His immense physical form, compared to the leviathan, and his shield, likened in size to the full moon seen through a telescope, evoke awe. His spear is described as towering like the mast of an admiral's ship. Though defeated, his charisma and leadership remain intact. He bears the highest rank among the fallen angels, and his fall is seen as a tragic loss of glory rather than a complete disgrace. Notably, Milton hints that Satan's defeat was due more to God's secret weapon—thunder—than to any lack of valor or strength.

Critics like Monami argue that Satan is indeed depicted as a "magnificent, heroic figure" in these early books. He is the first to awaken, the first to speak, and the first to act. During the council in Book II, he continues to dominate. The idea of corrupting the newly created race of man is his, though he allows Beelzebub to present it—an act that illustrates both his political cunning and leadership. When the



dangerous mission through Chaos is proposed, Satan alone volunteers, embracing the peril with bravery that wins thunderous applause from his followers. To emphasize his heroism, Milton creates a parallel in Heaven, where God seeks a volunteer to redeem mankind, and none steps forward except the Son. This parallelism underscores Satan's courage, intelligence, and strategic mind.

However, while Satan may be seen as the “hero” of Books I and II, he cannot be considered the hero of the epic as a whole. From the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, Milton makes it clear that his true subject is not Satan, but “man’s first disobedience” and the path to redemption through the Son of God. Satan’s role, though pivotal, is ultimately that of a tempter, an agent of destruction rather than salvation.

The evolution—or more accurately, the *devolution*—of Satan’s character throughout the poem supports this view. As C.S. Lewis and other critics have pointed out, Satan undergoes a gradual but irreversible moral and spiritual degradation. From the awe-inspiring rebel prince, he declines into increasingly base and deceitful forms: a toad, a serpent, and finally a degraded being ruling over a realm of damnation. His methods are not noble or heroic but manipulative and deceitful. He uses guile, not glory; seduction, not strength. His passion is not for justice but for revenge. His motives are ignoble, driven by pride and ambition, and his fall is a result of these tragic flaws.

A true hero, as Milton and classical traditions suggest, must possess moral integrity, fight for a noble cause, and act with honor—even if flawed. Satan fails this standard. Therefore, though his early portrayal evokes admiration, he is more accurately the *villain* of the piece.

Some might argue that neither God nor the Son can be considered the hero either, as they are perfect and beyond human flaw. According to Aristotelian principles, a tragic hero must possess a *hamartia*—a flaw that leads to a fall. God and Christ, being omniscient and omnipotent, are incapable of error. It is Adam, then, who most closely fits the mold of a classical epic hero.

While some critics dismiss Adam as too passive, this interpretation overlooks Milton’s redefinition of heroism. In *Paradise Lost*, the epic is not centered on warlike exploits, but on the moral and spiritual drama of obedience, temptation, fall, and redemption. Milton celebrates the Christian virtues of patience, self-sacrifice, and moral responsibility. Adam embodies these virtues. He chooses to fall alongside Eve—not out of weakness, but from love and loyalty. He knowingly accepts the consequences, and in doing so, displays agency and nobility.



Adam is not entirely passive; his inner conflict and moral choice represent the true battle of the poem—the eternal war between good and evil for the soul of man. In contrast to Satan’s decline into deception and degradation, Adam's journey ultimately leads toward repentance and hope. The final image of Adam and Eve leaving Paradise, hand in hand, symbolizing the beginning of human history and redemption, stands in stark contrast to Satan and his followers, who are reduced to hissing serpents, suffering eternal damnation. Werkmeister mentions all the heroic deeds that Satan does in the beginning of *Paradise Lost*: he awakens from a stunning defeat, rallies his followers plot a conspiracy and proves himself as a man of action.” When the pandemonium had been built, the fallen angels thronged into the council hall. There, they had been summoned by their chief Satan

Of faery elves,  
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side  
Or fountain, some belated peasant sees.  
Or dreams he sees, while over head the moon  
Sits, arbitrating and nearer to the Earth  
Wheels her pale course they on their mirth and dance  
Intent, with jocund music charm his ear;  
At once, with joy and fear, his heart rebounds. (781-788)

Milton’s description of the fallen angels shrinking themselves to fit into the council hall of Pandemonium (Book I) is layered with irony and symbolism. Originally beings of immense, even cosmic, stature, they contract themselves to the size of “faery elves” to enter the “high Capital / Of Satan and his Peers.”

Milton writes:

"Thick swarmed, both on the ground and in the air, / Brushed with the hiss of rustling wings. As bees / In spring-time, when the Sun with Taurus rides, / Pour forth their populous youth about the hive / In clusters..." (*Paradise Lost*, Book I)

He compares them to bees, elves, pygmies — drawing from natural observation, classical mythology, and medieval legend. This reduction of scale serves as a metaphor for their fall — once grand and noble, now reduced, petty, even grotesque. Despite this, they still scheme to challenge Heaven, showing that pride and ambition remain undiminished even when their forms are.



This use of well-known references (mythological and natural) helps Milton ground the reader's imagination in familiar terms — but it also mocks the fallen angels' delusions of grandeur.

When Satan explains to Chaos his dark designs, this is how he phrases them:

[...] direct my course;  
Directed no mean recompence it brings  
To your behoof, if I that Region lost,  
All usurpation thence expell'd, reduce  
To her original darkness and your sway  
(Which is my present journey) and once more  
Direct the Standard there of ancient Night;  
Yours be th' advantage all, mine the revenge. (II. 980–987)

Scholar Lewis observed that “Satan speaks of his fixed mind him rebellious when God appointed the Son in the position which Satan trusted should have been entrusted to him.”<sup>5</sup> This moment reflects Satan's pride and perceived injustice, which fuels his rebellion. If approached from an optimistic viewpoint, Satan's role in *Paradise Lost* becomes essential, even indispensable. He is the driving force of the plot and the embodiment of defiance, ambition, and tragic fall.

Milton's narration reinforces Satan's dramatic fall: “From their Creator and transgress His will / With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power / Hurl'd headlong flaming from the ethereal sky. Despite this, Satan remains resilient. He encourages Beelzebub, saying, “If thou beest he—but oh, how fallen! / Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable.” These words reveal his inner conflict: the awareness of his lost glory, yet a refusal to accept weakness. His physical form is described in grand and imposing terms—he rises above the fiery waves, with eyes burning with wrath—emphasizing his indomitable will.

Satan's famous claim, “We know no time when we were not as now” (Book V, l. 853), can be interpreted as an assertion of his reclaimed identity. He positions himself not as a creation of God but as a force from the “primeval darkness,” representing the uncreated chaos that predates divine order. To Satan, the established heavenly hierarchy is a form of usurpation—an artificial imposition that he seeks to overturn. His rejection of divine “order” is thus a rejection of what he sees as an alien imposition on original freedom.



Furthermore, this realization brings forth not only Satan's true nature but also resonates with his followers, who, like him, find affinity with the darkness and disorder. While Satan is undeniably a negative figure—a rebel against divine will—he remains one of the most compelling characters in the poem. His charisma, eloquence, and psychological complexity mark him as a towering presence.

Though Milton does not present Satan as a hero in the traditional sense, he transforms the conventional devil figure into a dynamic leader, an ambitious politician, and a speaker of profound rhetorical power. His speeches occasionally reflect universal human emotions—pride, ambition, despair—which blur the line between villain and tragic hero. In this way, Satan becomes a subject of endless debate: a symbol of both rebellion and resilience, damnation and defiance.

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