



The epic traditions and John Milton: An analytical reading of paradise lost

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Abstract

John Milton is a highly regarded poet, translator, and multilingual scholar who has written both poetry and prose. Best recognised for his epic, one of the greatest works of English literature *Paradise Lost*, he provides insightful analysis of secular and political texts and is well-versed in mythical allusions. Milton is considered as one of the finest authors of English literature, surpassed only by Shakespeare, and he has received many honours. In addition to enduring for more than three centuries, his reputation as a poet and prose writer has garnered newfound prominence in the twenty-first century. Milton's writings are still being critically analysed and researched, guaranteeing that his contributions will always be an essential component of English literature courses taught in colleges all over the world.

Keywords: Milton, Paradise Lost, Puritanism, epic poetry

Introduction

Before delving into a detailed analysis of *Paradise Lost*, the cornerstone of Milton's greatness, we must explore the unique context in which he wrote. Born during a period of significant political upheaval and religious change in England (1608-1674), Milton spent his life as a radical poet and served as an official writer for Cromwell. However, he faced hardships and a tarnished reputation in his later years. The most active years of Milton's life, from 1625 to 1660, were marked by intense religious and political controversies, particularly the dominance of Puritanism in England. The change in regime in England with Charles I ascending it, and the reign was characterised by conflict with Parliament over financial demands and unjust taxation, which sparked violent opposition. This tension culminated in a brutal Civil War that led to the king's defeat and execution in 1649. Amid this turmoil, Milton wrote prose pamphlets to justify the regicide.

Simultaneously, England was engulfed in religious strife. Religion played a crucial role in both personal and national life during the early seventeenth century. People from all walks of life were deeply engaged with devotional literature and religious debates. Churches and sermons held significant influence, and attendance at church was mandated by law. The socio-political context influenced Milton's development as an exceptionally brilliant writer. Milton's life can be conveniently divided into three distinct periods: the formative years leading to his travels in Europe; the interlude marked by religious and political turmoil, ending with the Restoration; and the final phase from 1660 to 1674, during which he faced blindness and poverty, yet continued to speak on themes of righteousness, temperance, and judgment in solitude before a fallen world.

Paradise Lost is considered a magnum opus of English literature and one of the most impressive theological poems on Christianity- a monumental work he had been preparing for since his young age, guided by divine inspiration. As a biblical epic, *Paradise Lost* interprets the Scripture, selecting and integrating biblical events around central spiritual themes: the concepts of downfall and redemption, reemphasising the Christ's teachings in his own magnificent way.

Milton as a Writer of an Epic

The epic genre encompasses specific features, structure, themes, and subjects, with examples from both ancient Indian and Western literature. The term "epic" derives from the Greek word for poem or story and refers to a narrative form that recounts grand tales of civilisations and historical events. Epic poetry is marked by several distinctive features that set it apart as a unique genre. Epics are characterised by their elevated themes, tones, and styles. Grand subject matters with exalted hero, have a formal and elevated style. The composition is mostly lengthy and in third person narrative. Epics celebrate heroic deeds and significant historical occurrences. Typically, the protagonist is a hero or legendary figure from a nation's past who faces numerous challenges. The narrative style must be grand and dignified, described by Garnett as "perspicuous and sublime," to appropriately reflect the character's grandeur. One key aspect is its vast scope, often focusing on heroic exploits, epic journeys, or major historical events, frequently involving gods, warriors, or legendary heroes. Epic poems are written in a lofty style, using formal language, vivid descriptions, and a structured meter like dactylic hexameter, commonly seen in classical works. Another hallmark of epic poetry is the invocation of a muse at the beginning, seeking inspiration for the grand story to be told. The genre also features extensive lists of characters, elaborate battle scenes, and the influence of supernatural forces on the narrative's progression. Themes such as honour, destiny, and the battle between good and evil are often central to these works. A moral or philosophical lesson is also provided in epics.

According to Aristotle, an epic has four essential components: plot, character, thought, and action. The plot should be dramatically structured, focusing on a single action that is whole and complete. While an epic encompasses all the elements of a tragedy, not all tragic elements are present in an epic. It is a genre of writing that has its roots in ancient storytelling traditions and has continued to evolve and captivate audiences throughout history. Epics typically revolve around a heroic protagonist who embarks on a grand quest or journey. The hero is often larger than life, possessing exceptional strength, courage,

and noble virtues. The protagonist's actions and deeds serve as a model for the idealised values of the society in which the epic is written.

Epics are often set in expansive and mythic worlds that span continents, realms, or even the entire cosmos. The epic setting can include various landscapes, such as lush forests, treacherous mountains, or vast oceans. These settings serve as a backdrop for the hero's adventures and encounters with supernatural beings or mythical creatures. They often incorporate supernatural or divine elements into their narratives. Gods, goddesses, demigods, and other supernatural beings frequently interact with the mortal characters, influencing their fates and actions. These divine interventions add depth and symbolism to the story, reflecting the belief systems and cosmologies of the culture in which the epic is set.

Epics are typically lengthy works, often spanning multiple books or volumes. They encompass a broad scope of time, covering significant events and often delving into the history and mythology of the world in which they are set. The extensive length allows for detailed characterization, complex plot developments, and exploration of various themes. The use of formal and grandiose language, often in verse form, contributes to the epic's epicness and adds a sense of grandeur and timelessness to the narrative. Epics may employ poetic devices such as epic similes, metaphors, and repetition to enhance the imagery and emotional impact of the story.

They often explore universal themes and enduring moral values. Themes of heroism, honor, loyalty, destiny, and the struggle between good and evil are commonly found in epic narratives. Epics provide moral guidance and reinforce societal values by depicting the hero's triumph over adversity and the consequences of moral choices. Many early epics were initially composed and transmitted orally, passed down through generations before being written down. These epics played a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, traditions, and historical events. Epics continue to be written in various forms and have expanded to include modern interpretations that incorporate contemporary themes and contexts.

The epic genre is characterised by its heroic protagonists, vast settings, supernatural elements, epic scale and length, elevated language and style, and exploration of themes such as heroism, fate, and moral values. Epics serve as important cultural artifacts, reflecting the values and beliefs of societies throughout history, and continue to capture the imagination of readers with their timeless stories of adventure, heroism, and human struggle. Epic features can be seen prominently in *Paradise Lost*, beginning from the Prologue of the Book.

The subject of the poem is "Man's Disobedience" and "the loss thereupon of Paradise". The cause of the Fall is Satan, who had revolted against God and was thrown out of Heaven. Milton was inspired by the Greek poet Virgil in making the structure of *Paradise Lost* but "he had also chosen to write an eternal epic on a sacred theme- not an epic

The poem is divided into twelve books, mirroring the structure of ancient epic poems such as Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Each book contains a significant portion of the story and focuses on different aspects of the narrative, including the fall of Satan, the creation of the world, and the disobedience of Adam and Eve. This division into books

creates a sense of progression and allows the reader to navigate through the extensive scope of the poem.

Within each book, Milton further organises the text into sections and subsections, utilising a hierarchical structure. This division aids in the organisation of the narrative and helps guide the reader through the complex plot and diverse cast of characters. It allows for a sense of pacing and builds anticipation as the story unfolds. Moreover, this hierarchical structure reflects Milton's intention to emulate the grandeur and orderliness of classical epics.

In addition to its form and structure, *Paradise Lost* employs various literary devices to enhance its impact. Milton employs extensive imagery, metaphor, and allusion throughout the poem. These devices serve to enrich the narrative, deepen the reader's understanding, and evoke vivid mental images. For example, Satan's journey through Chaos is described using striking visual imagery, evoking a sense of vastness and chaos.

Milton's use of elevated language and a sophisticated vocabulary have contributed to the poem's form. He employs a wide range of rhetorical techniques, such as apostrophe, simile, and antithesis, to emphasize key ideas and heighten the dramatic impact of the narrative. These rhetorical flourishes add depth and complexity to the poem, capturing the attention of the reader and underscoring the gravity of the themes being explored.

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton makes extensive use of epic similes, also known as Homeric similes, to enhance the richness and imagery of his epic poem. Epic similes are extended and elaborate comparisons that draw upon various sources to create vivid and imaginative descriptions. Here are a few examples of epic similes found in *Paradise Lost*:

"Shorn of his beams, or from behind the Moon,

In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds

On half the nations, and with fear of change" (l.596-598)

In this simile Milton has compared the fear and confusion caused by Satan's approach to the dimness and unease experienced during an eclipse, creating a sense of foreboding and uncertainty.

The same way, there are epic similes in the other books of *Paradise Lost*. In Book III, in one simile, comparison has been made the fallen angels gathering around Satan to the fallen leaves scattered in Vallombrosa or the wind-tossed sedge, emphasizing their vast numbers and chaotic presence. These examples demonstrate how Milton employs epic similes to create vivid and imaginative descriptions, drawing upon various natural and mythological images. These similes contribute to the richness and epic quality of the poem, heightening its impact and immersing the reader in the imaginative world Milton creates.

Conclusion

Paradise Lost has provided the world with numerous philosophical insights, such as "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven," "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven," and "Arise, awake, or be forever fall'n. And many more" These expressions resonate just as strongly today as they did in 17th-century England. Unlike national epics like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost* explores "things unattempted yet in prose and rhyme," highlighting the ongoing struggle between virtue and vice, as well as the divine and the ordinary. Thus, we can assert that *Paradise Lost* stands as one of the great epics of English literature, on par with the

works of ancient Greek and Roman masters, continuing to inspire generations of writers and being taught in universities worldwide. Overall, *Paradise Lost* encompasses the defining features of an epic poem. It presents a heroic figure, explores grand themes, employs an elevated style of language, follows a structured narrative, incorporates invocations and epic similes, includes supernatural elements, and reflects the cultural values of its time. Through these elements, Milton's work stands as a masterpiece of the epic genre, captivating readers with its profound exploration of the human experience.

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