

Gaining Enlightenment through Sympathy for the Devil:

***Paradise Lost* by John Milton**

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Humanity influences religion and religion inspires humanity. Centuries worth of art and music and literature have been devoted to god and are evocative of humankind's drive to understand its own religions. In all these years of creativity, it is almost inevitable for works to inextricably link these concepts of humanity and religion, rendering the reader unable to view one without reconciling it with the other. Of course, in this relationship between people and gods, it's only natural that humans tend to focus on the positives in religion, perhaps fearing the implication of associating with its darker elements.

Before coming to Boston College, I'd had little to no exposure to religious teachings or conversations, and my perception of Christianity was that it was largely based on dichotomies: God versus Satan, good versus evil, heaven versus hell. After taking the one-year theology core and being asked to read the Bible, in addition to Christian scholars like Augustine and Aquinas, my baseline knowledge of religion and Catholicism expanded considerably, but it was still easy for me to view Christianity simply as a grand spiritual battle between good and evil.

Paradise Lost, John Milton's biblical epic, forced me to reconsider this rather simplistic notion of religion. Through verse and prose, Milton added complexity and depth to Genesis and through his reimagining of this most fundamental biblical story, Milton offers an opportunity view religion as a whole through a more nuanced lens. During my initial readings of the Bible, one of the hardest parts of the text for me to understand was the notion of God's omnipotence, particularly when viewed in the context of original sin. Complicated questions of free will and predestination seemed to be at odds, and it was hard to find texts that directly addressed these questions. Upon reading even the first book of *Paradise Lost*, I was surprised to find these issues raised by none other than the Devil himself. Milton's treatment of Satan as a nuanced figure forces the reader to empathize with him on some level; after all, the Devil's fall from Heaven is inextricably linked to humans' own fall from grace.

In Book I, Satan and the other demons explicitly state their intention to pervert God's will and make evil out of good, using the Garden of Eden and God's newly created humans as their medium. Unbeknownst to them, God (being omniscient) is fully aware of the Devil's intentions, and allows the evil to occur as part of a plan for the greater good. From the onset, Satan's character raises two questions. The first is whether the capacity to do evil can truly exist in God's universe, and the second is whether Satan can ultimately be to blame for his own actions. In terms of the first question, if the evil acts of Satan himself are necessary for a greater good to arise, then do those actions become inherently good themselves? There is no real answer to be found in *Paradise Lost*, and I doubt that Milton, a devout Christian himself, intended the reader to conclude that evil was not possible under God. However, Milton is able to add

nuance into the question of good and evil by expressing the notion that the universe requires the actions of both the Devil and God in order to progress. In a similar sense, Milton also complicates the figure of Satan through the Devil's own musings, as he reflects that God had banished him from Heaven because of his pride. The Devil postulates that, as God Himself had created him, that pride had been God's creation, and did not arise from Satan himself. In this case, Satan questions, are the events that occurred because of his pride (namely, leading a rebellion against God, being banished to Hell, and seeking to cause the fall of man) not the fault of God (4.43)?

In creating a nuanced narrative, Milton does not allow the reader to simply accept the story of Genesis as it has always been presented. Every element of creation, from the very concepts of good and evil, are called into question, and there are no simple answers to be found. As the story progresses and Satan eventually makes it into the Garden of Eden, ready to turn Adam and Eve away from the path of God, there is a moment of hesitation, which is so profound that it resonates throughout the entire text. Upon initially viewing Adam and Eve and the paradise in which they reside, Satan is filled with immense pain and envy, and feels the full brunt of his banishment, in an environment where proof of God's grace is all around him. Satan is caught by the angels and a battle between the angels and devils subsequently ensues, after which the angel Raphael warns Adam to be vigilant against any attempt made by the Devil to sway him from God's instructions (8.640).

Of course, Satan returns to find Eve alone, but once again, he is struck by the beauty of Eden, and Eve herself. The reader can no longer view the figure of the Devil without also being made to confront the immense pain and envy that he is capable of

feeling. Satan is no longer a one-dimensional figure of evil; rather, his character becomes imbued with grief and loss and tremendous sense of regret (9.455). The moment passes for the Devil, and he ultimately accomplishes the goal with which he set out, but those brief moments of hesitation made it impossible for me to view Christianity as a simple battle between good and evil ever again.

Attending Boston College, a Jesuit institution, meant that there was no end to opportunities and spaces in which these theological questions could be raised and explored. By forcing the reader to understand a concept like original sin as something that could not be diluted into a simple dichotomy, Milton had inspired me to find the nuances in religion. As I quickly learned after my first theology elective, *Perspectives on War and Aggression*, there is no end to nuance in Christianity. An entire academic discipline became exciting to me, and after completing the requirements for a theology minor, I have had the opportunity to explore the questions of religion in the context of war, gender, sexuality, law, medicine, and even had a chance to spend a month exploring religion and racial justice in South Africa. While it may be too simplistic to assert that reading *Paradise Lost* was the only reason that my academic career was affected in such a profound way, I have found no other text that evokes the subtleties of religion which drew me to theology. In almost all cases of reconciliation after periods of violence that I have studied, the element most critical to future progress is the foregrounding of the humanity of all people involved, of oppressors and victims alike. Humanity is not such a simple concept after all, but my reading of *Paradise Lost* gave me the context to articulate that at its core, humanity is firmly rooted in empathy, and it is no longer possible to divide the world into “us” and “them” when empathy exists.

Of course, if nuance exists in religion, it is only because humans, the most nuanced and complicated of beings, are responsible for the creation and interpretation in the first place. It has been my experience that everybody tends to think of themselves as “the good guy,” but if my interpretation of *Paradise Lost* is to be at all significant, I can no longer view the world in terms of good and bad. The Devil is not one-dimensional and neither are we. If Milton could create a universe where even Satan can be empathized with, who am I not to exercise empathy in our mortal world? *Paradise Lost* gave me the chance to reimagine Christianity, and through this reimagining, I found myself capable of sympathy for the devil, and everyone else.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost* Ed. Gordon Teskey. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.