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## MILTON'S SATAN: HERO OR ANTI-HERO?

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**Abstract:** *Satan is the most controversial and appealing figure of Paradise Lost. No convincing single source for Milton's Satan has been found, not even the Bible, which contains very little evidence referring to Satan. Satan is, according to some theories, a vital part of a Manichaeian universe, the "infinum malum" necessitated by a "summum bonum" which is God. Milton's attempts to concentrate evil in Satan, however, were not very successful. There have even been claims that Satan is superior in character to Milton's God. The critics are divided on the question whether Satan is a hero or an anti-hero: the anti-Satanist movement emphasises Satan's selfishness or folly while Satanists highly praise his courage and determination. The present paper aims at demonstrating that Milton's Satan is a multifaceted presence, often contradictory, both a hero and a villain, a character revolted against tyranny and a tyrant, a preacher of freedom and a prisoner of his own egocentrism.*

**Keywords:** *epic, hero, anti-hero, ambivalence*

The source of inspiration for Milton's puzzling character remains unknown. The Bible contains very little evidence referring to Satan. According to Biblical records, he is the author of all evil, the master of disguise and man's worse enemy. Satan is, according to some theories, a vital part of a Manichaeian universe, the "infinum malum" necessitated by a "summum bonum" which is God. To combat this theory came the doctrine of the early Church which sustained that evil had no real being but was merely "privatio boni", a privation of good. Milton, on the other hand, presents evil as real and isolated in a single being, and therefore punishable.

Milton's attempts to concentrate evil in Satan were not very successful. The critical reactions have seldom been able to regard Satan as the depiction of pure evil. There have

even been claims that Satan is superior in character to Milton's God. Unfortunately, sometimes the critical approaches tend to take their argument to extremes in their endeavour to strengthen their cause. For instance, the anti-Satanist movement emphasises Satan's selfishness or folly while Satanists highly praise his courage. Either of these perspectives risks to ignore the elements which do not fit into their theories, much to the detriment of the work's itself. The dispute remains unsettled, and it should remain so or else we would be destroying much of the poem's value and significance. A more appropriate solution would be to recognize the "character's ambivalence"<sup>[1]</sup>, a precondition

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[1] John Carey, "Milton's Satan". *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 132.

of the poem's success and a major factor in the attention it has aroused. This controversial aspect of the poem has the advantage of validating individual reinterpretation and renders the modernity and appeal of the work.

The character of Satan cannot be understood only one way, he has a plurality of meanings and therefore to limit him to only one specific definition would ruin its singularity. A multifaceted presence, often contradicting himself, Satan is both hero and villain, revolted against tyranny and tyrant, preacher of freedom and prisoner of his own egocentrism. Milton seems to be deliberately portraying several different and sometimes incompatible Satans.

As John Carey observes, the term most suitable to express this ambivalence of character is "depth". Depth in a fictional character, Carey argues "depends on a degree of ignorance being sustained in the reader," the illusion, he continues "must be created that the character has levels hidden from us the observers."<sup>[2]</sup> None of the other characters of *Paradise Lost* exhibits such non-transparent nature. Adam, Eve and God, all lead simpler existence, at least at the level of words they speak. Unlike them, Satan seems to adopt dissimulation as an "art de vivre".

It has been argued that *Paradise Lost's* Satan deserves the tragic hero status. He has not only the stature of a tragic hero, but also his attributes. In the Greek tradition, the tragic hero was supposed to stir up admiration, fear and pity and had to display a tragic weakness or flaw in his character which was to lead to his downfall. Satan may be said to inspire these emotions. Moreover, critics have often compared him with great tragic figures such as Prometheus, Faustus and Macbeth. He is admirable in his indomitable pride and his unyielding ambition, just as he inspires fear and pity for his forecast doom and his determination to fight against something he apprehends as undefeatable. Paradoxically, his main qualities are also his tragic flaws: envy, pride, ambition, self-glorification give the character his singularity and magnificence but also pass the rigorous sentence on him.

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<sup>[2]</sup> Carey: 133.

A good Christian, Milton theoretically condemns the devil's master, but, in the same time, he feels attracted, against his will, to this character, proud and revolted like he himself was. In spite of Milton's attempts to make Satan an incarnation of evil, he is still a fascinating figure which gains our admiration and sympathy. As William Hazlitt remarked, he is "the most heroic subject ever chosen in a poem."<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed this protagonist meant to be the most dissenting of the poem, is by far the most interesting and convincing through his complexity and authenticity. This can be easily understood when Satan's description is compared to God's. God is described monochromatically; He is the omniscient and omnipotent God of Righteousness. To stress this idea, Gen Ohinata says that Satan's appeal grows once with his misery.<sup>[4]</sup> He appears very human because he is drawn as a complete character and thus, the reader who pities his misfortunes can have familiarity and sympathy with him. Throughout much of the early part of poem, Satan retains his hold on the imagination of the reader, he is a powerful and complex character seeking to assert his identity against invincible odds, refusing to bow in submission to someone he perceives as a tyrant.

Milton's presentation of Satan makes it difficult for the reader not to respond to him with some admiration and sympathy. Hamilton states: "he wins our admiration the more firmly because he is ultimately real, while the inhabitants of Heaven are remote and strange."<sup>[5]</sup> He is the most real and tangible of the spiritual hosts. He is easy to identify and sympathise with because the weaknesses he exhibits – although on a much larger scale – are predominantly human. Satan is the first of the created beings and the most disdainful; his ambition is the greatest: he

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<sup>[3]</sup> William Hazlitt, "On Shakespeare and Milton". *Milton Criticism. Selections from Four Centuries* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd, 1965): 107.

<sup>[4]</sup> Gen Ohinata, *Hesitation and Retrogression in Paradise Lost* (Hishinomiya: Kwansey Gakuin University Press, 1981): 50.

<sup>[5]</sup> Rostrevor G. Hamilton, *Hero or Fool: A study of Milton's Satan* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1944): 39.



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aspires to conquer the empire of Heaven and take up the throne of the universe. The greatness of the character resides in the fact that although lying in a fiery gulf surrounded by "darkness visible", tortured by fire, Satan rises above his predicament and adapts to the circumstances. Hell becomes the abode of his palace Pandemonium and the residence of all evil. Not only does he survive the greatest battle in the history of the universe, he also finds the strength to rally himself and establish a new empire in Hell from which to conquer a new world.

In all the councils, surrounded by legions of rebel angels, he distinguishes himself as the sovereign leader. As a true leader he argues persuasively that there is still hope for battle and installs in his followers the determination to regain their former state. He bestows into their beaten spirits some of his own ferocious courage.

Nothing can match the heroic determination, power, courage and energy manifested throughout Satan's early speeches. The convincing eloquence with which the debate is carried on stresses Satan's self-glorification. He is, as ever, the predominant voice of the assembly, allowing, it is true, the voicing of individual opinions, but seeing to it that his views and his will prevail.

Conscious of the fact that he was in danger of portraying Satan as too much of a heroic figure, Milton made efforts to belittle him through the use of less favourable imagery, and by highlighting his flaws. Satan's courage diminishes, and his character deteriorates greatly through the epic as he gradually becomes an egotist who is only looking for personal glory. Coleridge recognises in him the "alcohol of egotism"<sup>[6]</sup>,

a self-absorbed, self-obsessed creature. His attractiveness is only initial, his original charisma, courage and confidence diminishing with Book IV when he reveals much about his torment and despair. The reader thus becomes aware of his weaknesses and his ability to fall.

Milton shows skilful tact in his treatment of Satan, the personage degenerates and gradually loses our sympathy. What seems clear is that the poet is continually trying to control the reader's response to Satan in order to make sure that he doesn't respond to the magnificence of the poetry in a manner inappropriate to the willed intention in the doctrine. He introduces revelatory commentaries during Satan's speeches as if the poet were afraid that his fiction will not subject itself to the orthodox meaning he wants to assign to the story.

Satan's consciousness is also problematic. Like no other character of *Paradise Lost* there is a discrepancy between his inner state and the outward profession of appearance. At times he becomes torn with conflicting passions. The inner debates and self-criticism reveal him as a creature of dynamic tensions.

Therefore, at some points in the story, it is difficult to label Satan as essentially evil. His malignity is to a great extent attenuated since he speaks the truth and curses himself as God cursed him: "Me miserable! which way shall I flie

Infinite wrath, and infinite despair? Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell;" (IV, 71-5). The natural reaction is to show

compassion to this being trapped within his own inevitability. He is the titanic character who in spite of his resolution and fortitude is not able to rise above his doomed condition. No matter how hard he tries he cannot escape himself.

<sup>[6]</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Milton". *Milton Criticism. Selections from Four Centuries* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd, 1965): 95.

Satan also has a tendency towards love and beauty; he is not irrevocably hardened or incapable of gentle emotion. William Hazlitt observes that Satan “is not the principle of malignity, or of the abstract love of evil, but of the abstract love of power, of pride, of self-will personified, to which last principle all other: good and evil, and even his own are subordinate.”<sup>[7]</sup> Satan has a capacity for a different role from the one the fiction assigns him.

As he surveys the new world and approaches the couple in Paradise, he says he feels an inclination to love them, thus surprising the reader with a revelation of desire for love in a figure which was believed to be wholly committed to wickedness. According to Hamilton, Satan in imagination defers from Satan in idea: “In the abstract we may conceive him, whether actual or symbolic, as wholly evil, the negation of all good, but, when we try to imagine, it will not be surprising if all kinds of elements – foolish, virtuous, heroic, human – begin to enter in.”<sup>[8]</sup> The ambivalent character of Satan is emphasized by these unexpected and contradictory features he seems to manifest. Whenever we may think we’ve begun to understand him, we are stopped by his own inconsistencies.

Thus, in spite of his momentary tenderness, he recollects his hatred and falls more and more a prey to envy and hatred. Why Satan should not learn from his fall remains an issue of ambivalence.

John Carey makes a very pertinent affirmation when he argues that Satan is “the victim of a breakdown of fictional logic inherent in the terms of the myth Milton is transcribing.”<sup>[9]</sup> This would explain the contradictory aspects of Milton’s Satan, like the fact that he undertakes a journey to Earth although he knows his mission is bound to make things worse for him. He is cast in a poem with an omniscient and omnipotent God, and this means that every move he makes against this God must be self-defeating.

His fictional function is precisely to make hostile moves he is the fiend, the enemy.

The question regarding the relationship between Satan and Milton’s intentions, whether he consciously or unconsciously sided with the devil, whether Satan is the hero of the poem or not is clearly an unanswerable one since we cannot have access to Milton’s mind or to his subconscious at the time of writing.

Many theories have been launched. Among them, the psychoanalytical approach which adopts Freud’s analysis of the psyche and applies it to Satan’s disputable nature. According to this theory, Satan is the expression of the id ostracized by the superego (God) and exercising his influence upon the ego (Adam and Eve). In *Civilisation and its Discontents* Freud speaks of the great influence of the superego and the ethical demands it imposes on the individual in modern culture.<sup>[10]</sup> The superego demands of the individual to restrain his aggressiveness and his hunger for self-satisfaction. This would explain why Satan cannot cope with his inner struggle and why he cannot submit to the regulations of God.

Following this idea, the battle between Satan and God may be viewed as a psychological one. The sovereignty of the Spirit is highly praised by Milton throughout the poem. Satan himself speaks about the “unconquerable will” (I, 104), that is, his psychological power.

Satan perpetuates his heroic fantasy, allowing himself to be the hero of his own tale just as he is the anti-hero of the Miltonic epic. He refuses to acknowledge his failure as a leader of the rebellion and still sees himself as a glorious war hero. Like all heroes, he brings his boon, the corruption of mankind, in triumph back to his community, the rebel hosts, but it turns out that instead of bringing order it produces chaos. All the angels are turned into serpents and their applause turns to scornful hisses.

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<sup>[7]</sup> Hazlitt: 118.

<sup>[8]</sup> Hamilton: 8.

<sup>[9]</sup> Carey: 136.

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<sup>[10]</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, translated by Joan Riviere (London: edited by James Strachery, 1979): 80-1.



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Merritt Hughes believes that Satan is created as "an example of the self deception and the deception of others which are incident to the surrender of reason to passion."<sup>[11]</sup> He wants to maintain his glorious image of heroic conqueror and in doing this not only does he lie to the others but he also deceives himself.

The romantic criticism perceived Satan as the quintessential hero. Shelley for example considered that Milton was engaged in a heroic conflict with the principle of evil on its earthly manifestation of tyranny and injustice.<sup>[12]</sup> In contrast, for Shelley the principle of evil is incarnated in tradition and comes dangerously near to being identical with law itself, against government itself and not necessarily against government which is tyrannical and corrupt.

It is in Satan that Shelley finds the true embodiment of Milton's personality and of his moral ideal. For him and many other critics Satan has remained the real, if not the technical hero. There is one very important objection to all purely Satanic explanations and that is that the earlier books have been admired at the expense of the whole poem. The grandeur of Satan is, however, confined to the first part of the poem. The romantic appreciation, in exalting and generalizing the grandeur of Satan has distracted attention from important aspects of the poem, and has altered the professed moral of the poem.

A more temperate perspective belongs to Tillyard who makes a clear cut distinction between the conscious and unconscious meanings in *Paradise Lost*. In his opinion Milton certainly intended Satan to be "a terrible warning embodiment of the

unrestrained passions, inspiring horror and detestation rather than sympathy."<sup>[13]</sup> He is meant to incarnate those bad passions that entered man at the Fall, expression of man's unappeasable dissatisfaction with what he has.

Other critics believe that Satan expresses something in which Milton believed strongly: heroic energy. Satan is the one figure in *Paradise Lost* whose strength is shown through conflict and endurance. It is through him that Milton's own heroic energy is most powerfully shown. But he cannot be the hero of the poem because his energies are evil. He is the most powerful figure of *Paradise Lost*, more fascinating than the Son himself. The odds are against him but he still struggles, he is energy and passion incarnated. Christ, on the other hand, is energy as well as reason; He is the creator while Satan is the destroyer. Milton means to express as much energy in his description of the world's creation as in Satan's exploits, but Christ seems to be connected with reason above all.

Milton does not accept the standard interpretation of the heroic figure, he reinvents it. He creates a character who is at once someone we tend to appreciate as heroic, and someone we want to see defeated. Challenging the heroic stereotypes, Milton considers that the most heroic qualities are humility and submission to God. Adam in choosing to be with his wife may be said, from a traditional heroic point of view, to be acting as heroic as Satan ever had. But he didn't escape punishment; he was instead reminded that his duty to God came first. Likewise, if Satan was to be the Miltonic hero, he would have followed God irrespective of all other heroic inclinations; instead he is

<sup>[11]</sup>Merritt Hughes, *Ten Perspectives on Milton* (New Haven: New Haven Press, 1965): 177.

<sup>[12]</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry." *Milton Criticism. Selections from Four Centuries* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd, 1965): 358.

<sup>[13]</sup>E. M.W. Tillyard, "*Paradise Lost: Conscious and Unconscious Meanings.*" *Milton Criticism. Selections from Four Centuries* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd, 1965): 193.

acting constantly in opposition to the divine will. This is when the difference between Satan and Man emerges more clearly. Adam and Eve decide to take a submissive place in God's plan and remain hopeful and humble. Diametrically opposed, Satan could never be capable of repentance and supplication and embraces "desperate revenge" (II, 107) as his life's purpose.

In conclusion, Milton's definition of heroism is not physical bravery or military adventure, and therefore Satan is not the hero, but rather an expression of the theological heroic ideal by opposition. He is however one of the heroes, and a very significant and appealing one. He is the antagonist who drives the plot with his machinations, the great

adversary who we are to loath for his rebellious nature and a character with a great vital force of his own even if it lies in the direction of evil. There is a terrific drive and adventurous daring in Satan that fascinate the reader, and if he is finally overthrown, this is because he is not only God's enemy but also the enemy of Man's happiness. As he pursues his vile purpose, he degenerates from the proud rebel of the first books to the liar, cruel and spiteful seducer of the following books. His superior endowments decline until, at last, he becomes the lowly serpent, he fades away and Adam emerges as the hero during the later course of the poem.

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