

CHRISTIAN GUIDES
TO THE CLASSICS



MILTON'S
PARADISE LOST

LELAND RYKEN

MILTON'S
PARADISE LOST

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Milton's "Paradise Lost"

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover illustration: Howell Golson

Cover design: Simplicated Studio

First printing 2013

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2620-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2621-3

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2622-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2623-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryken, Leland.

Milton's Paradise Lost / Leland Ryken.

 p. cm.— (Christian guides to the classics)

 ISBN 978-1-4335-2620-6 (tp)

1. Milton, John, 1608-1674. *Paradise lost.* 2. Christianity and literature. I. Title.

PR3562.R94 2013

821'.4—dc23

2012025868

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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The Nature and Function of Literature

We need to approach any piece of writing with the right expectations, based on the kind of writing that it is. The expectations that we should bring to any work of literature are the following.

The subject of literature. The subject of literature is human experience, rendered as concretely as possible. Literature should thus be contrasted to expository writing of the type we use to conduct the ordinary business of life. Literature does not aim to impart facts and information. It exists to make us share a series of experiences. Literature appeals to our image-making and image-perceiving capacity. A famous novelist said that his purpose was to make his readers *see*, by which he meant to see life.

The universality of literature. To take that one step further, the subject of literature is *universal* human experience—what is true for all people at all times in all places. This does not contradict the fact that literature is first of all filled with concrete particulars. The particulars of literature are a net whereby the author captures and expresses the universal. History and the daily news tell us what *happened*; literature tells us what *happens*. The task that this imposes on us is to recognize and name the familiar experiences that we vicariously live as we read a work of literature. The truth that literature imparts is truthfulness to life—knowledge in the form of seeing things accurately. As readers we not only look at the world of the text but *through* it to everyday life.

An interpretation of life. In addition to portraying human experiences, authors give us their interpretation of those experiences. There is a persuasive aspect to literature, as authors attempt to get us to share their views of life. These interpretations of life can be phrased as ideas or themes. An important part of assimilating imaginative literature is thus determining and evaluating an author's angle of vision and belief system.

The importance of literary form. A further aspect of literature arises from the fact that authors are artists. They write in distinctly literary genres such as narrative and poetry. Additionally, literary authors want us to share their love of technique and beauty, all the way from skill with words to an ability to structure a work carefully and artistically.

Summary. A work of imaginative literature aims to make us see life accurately, to get us to think about important ideas, and to enjoy an artistic performance.

Why the Classics Matter

This book belongs to a series of guides to the literary classics of Western literature. We live at a time when the concept of a literary classic is often misunderstood and when the classics themselves are often undervalued or even attacked. The very concept of a classic will rise in our estimation if we simply understand what it is.

What is a classic? To begin, the term *classic* implies the best in its class. The first hurdle that a classic needs to pass is excellence. Excellent according to whom? This brings us to a second part of our definition: classics have stood the test of time through the centuries. The human race itself determines what works rise to the status of classics. That needs to be qualified slightly: the classics are especially known and valued by people who have received a formal education, alerting us that the classics form an important part of the education that takes place within a culture.

This leads us to yet another aspect of classics: classics are known to us not only in themselves but also in terms of their interpretation and reinterpretation through the ages. We know a classic partly in terms of the attitudes and interpretations that have become attached to it through the centuries.

Why read the classics? The first good reason to read the classics is that they represent the best. The fact that they are difficult to read is a mark in their favor; within certain limits, of course, works of literature that demand a lot from us will always yield more than works that demand little of us. If we have a taste for what is excellent, we will automatically want some contact with classics. They offer more enjoyment, more understanding about human experience, and more richness of ideas and thought than lesser works (which we can also legitimately read). We finish reading or rereading a classic with a sense of having risen higher than we would otherwise have risen.

Additionally, to know the classics is to know the past, and with that knowledge comes a type of power and mastery. If we know the past, we are in some measure protected from the limitations that come when all we know is the contemporary. Finally, to know the classics is to be an educated person. Not to know them is, intellectually and culturally speaking, like walking around without an arm or leg.

Summary. Here are four definitions of a literary classic from literary experts; each one provides an angle on why the classics matter. (1) The best that has been thought and said (Matthew Arnold). (2) “A literary classic ranks with the best of its kind that have been produced” (*Harper Handbook to Literature*). (3) A classic “lays its images permanently on the mind [and] is entirely irreplaceable in the sense that no other book whatever comes anywhere near reminding you of it or being even a momentary substitute for it” (C. S. Lewis). (4) Classics are works to which “we return time and again in our minds, even if we do not reread them frequently, as touchstones by which we interpret the world around us” (Nina Baym).

How to Read a Story

Paradise Lost, like the other classics discussed in this series, is a narrative or story. To read it with enjoyment and understanding, we need to know how stories work and why people write and read them.

Why do people tell and read stories? To tell a story is to (a) entertain and (b) make a statement. As for the entertainment value of stories, it is a fact that one of the most universal human impulses can be summed up in the four words *tell me a story*. The appeal of stories is universal, and all of us are incessant storytellers during the course of a typical day. As for *making a statement*, a novelist hit the nail on the head when he said that in order for storytellers to tell a story they must have some picture of the world and of what is right and wrong in that world.

The things that make up a story. All stories are comprised of three things that claim our attention—setting, character, and plot. A good story is a balance among these three. In one sense, storytellers tell us *about* these things, but in another sense, as fiction writer Flannery O'Connor put it, storytellers don't speak *about* plot, setting, and character but *with* them. *About what* does the storyteller tell us by means of these things? About life, human experience, and the ideas that the storyteller believes to be true.

World making as part of storytelling. To read a story is to enter a whole world of the imagination. Storytellers construct their narrative world carefully. World making is a central part of the storyteller's enterprise. On the one hand, this is part of what makes stories entertaining. We love to be transported from mundane reality to faraway places with strange-sounding names. But storytellers also intend their imagined worlds as accurate pictures of reality. In other words, it is an important part of the truth claims that they intend to make. Accordingly, we need to pay attention to the details of the world that a storyteller creates, viewing that world as a picture of what the author believes to exist.

The need to be discerning. The first demand that a story makes on us is surrender—surrender to the delights of being transported, of encountering experiences, characters, and settings, of considering the truth claims that an author makes by means of his or her story. But we must not be morally and intellectually passive in the face of what an author puts before us. We need to be true to our own convictions as we weigh the morality and truth claims of a story. A story's greatness does not guarantee that it tells the truth in every way.

Paradise Lost.
A
POEM
IN
TWELVE BOOKS.

The Author
JOHN MILTON.

The Second Edition
Revised and Augmented by the
same Author.

LONDON,
Printed by S. Simmons next door to the
Golden Lion in Aldersgate-street, 1674.

Original title page

Paradise Lost: The Book at a Glance

Author. John Milton (1608–1674)

Nationality. English

Date of first publication. 1667; second edition 1674

Approximate number of pages. 250 (varies widely from one edition to the next, depending on size of page and quantity of notes)

Available editions. Numerous, including Modern Library Classics, Penguin, Barnes and Noble, Oxford World's Classics, Dover Thrift, Macmillan, Norton

Genre. Epic poetry

Setting for the story. Four main stages of action: Hell, Heaven, Paradise before the fall, earth in its fallen state

Main characters. Adam and Eve are the human protagonists; God the Father and God the Son; Satan, the epic antagonist; the angel Raphael, who visits Adam and Eve to tell them about war in Heaven, the fall of Satan, and God's creation of the earth; the angel Michael, who after the fall narrates an extended vision of fallen human history (an epic convention)

Plot summary. In prehistorical heavenly existence, Satan is seized with envy of the exaltation of the Son, so he instigates a rebellion against the Father that is joined by one-third of the angelic host. Satan loses the war in Heaven and is cast down into Hell. God compensates for this loss by creating the world, including Adam and Eve. The story highlights the state of innocence of the first couple in the perfect garden of Eden. Both Eve and Adam succumb to temptation to eat the forbidden fruit in Paradise, and the result of this act of disobedience is the fall of the entire cosmos and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. A preview of fallen human history gradually moves toward the atonement of the Son for human sinners, and Adam and Eve leave the garden as a redeemed pair.

Structure. (1) This is a story of crime and punishment, so the plot unfolds in three phases—the antecedents of the crime (what led up to it), its occurrence, and its consequences. (2) With a little streamlining, we can view the poem as proceeding by pairs of books: 1–2, Satan and the fallen angels in hell; 3–4, Adam and Eve in Paradise; 5–6, war in Heaven; 7–8, creation of the world; 9–10, the fall of the human race into sin; 11–12, vision of future history. (3) A vast system of contrasts organizes the entire work: good vs. evil, Satan vs. God, obedience to God vs. disobedience to him, light vs. darkness, high vs. low, before the fall vs. after the fall.

Cultural context. Two great cultural streams combine in the work of Milton. One is the Renaissance, a rebirth of classical culture and of the

intellectual outlook known as humanism (the striving to perfect all human possibilities in this life). The Renaissance valued beauty and the arts very highly, and its ethical outlook stressed the importance of reason and order. In England the Protestant Reformation went hand-in-hand with the Renaissance. Leading traits of the Reformation included acceptance of the Bible as the final authority for belief and conduct, and living by the premise of the primacy of the spiritual. The English branch of the Reformation is known as Puritanism, which got its name chiefly from the desire of its adherents to purify the Church of England of its remaining vestiges of Catholicism. All Renaissance writers assumed that there were three main topics about which to write: God, people, and nature.

Cosmology and world picture. *Paradise Lost* is an epic, and an important feature of epic is that it portrays the whole cosmos as the author and his culture conceived it. The cosmology of *Paradise Lost* is the same as in the Bible. It assumes a three-tier universe consisting of Heaven, Earth, and Hell. These are both physical places and spiritual realities. Combining with this view of the cosmos was something called the great chain of being, which was an obsession for the Renaissance and for Milton. The great chain of being was a metaphor that expressed the following beliefs about the universe: (1) its unity; (2) its orderliness; (3) its hierarchy of value. Hierarchy depends on every link in the chain ruling over subordinates and submitting to superiors. Applied at a moral and psychological level, hierarchy depends on reason controlling one's emotions and appetites.

Place in English literature. *Paradise Lost* is the greatest epic in the English language and one of the central texts of English literature. If readers of English literature know just one epic, it is this one. Milton wrote it after he became totally blind.

Tips for reading. (1) Settle down for a slow and leisurely read. For one thing, this is a story told in poetic form. Not until the rise of the novel in the middle of the eighteenth century did the human race prefer its long stories to be told in prose. Poetry is a meditative form in which we need to ponder the details. You cannot read *Paradise Lost* as quickly as you read a novel. (2) Placing a second layer of demands on you is the fact that *Paradise Lost* is an epic. Epic is the grandest and most exalted form of story. It requires you to relish *how* the writer expresses the content and not pay attention only to *what* is said. (3) *Paradise Lost* is both *poetry* and *story*; it is important not to allow the poetry to obscure the ordinary narrative elements of plot, characterization, and setting. (4) Whenever you find the reading hard to follow, start to read the lines aloud. (5) If you want an in-depth experience of Milton's masterpiece but choose not read the entire poem, here are the must-read sections of the poem: Book 1; Book 2, lines 1–505; Book 3, lines 1–415; Book 4, lines 1–775; Book 9; Book 12, lines 552–649.

The Author and His Faith

John Milton (1608–1674) was born into a prosperous middle-class family in London. He was a child prodigy whose father gave him the best education imaginable: St. Paul's School (one of the famous grammar schools of the Renaissance, located right in Milton's neighborhood), private tutors, Cambridge University, and five years after college for self-education. As a result, Milton is the most learned of English writers. In addition to being a famous author, Milton spent a twenty-year interval in the prime of his life as a famous public and political figure. Near the beginning of this time, Milton became totally blind. He wrote his three major works—*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*—after his public career had ended.

The Protestant Reformation. The religious context into which Milton and his writings fit is the Protestant Reformation, which was a century old by the time Milton wrote. The central tenet of Protestantism is that the Bible alone is the final authority for religious belief and conduct. From this flow the main doctrines of the movement: God's creation of the world and providence over it, the sinful state into which all people are born, and faith in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus as the means of salvation. These doctrines and more form the intellectual foundation of Milton's writings, including *Paradise Lost*.

Puritanism. The English branch of the Protestant Reformation is known as Puritanism, which began as a church movement intended to purify (hence the name *Puritan*) the Church of England of its remaining Catholic vestiges. Milton is "a Puritan of Puritans." Some specific emphases of English Puritanism within the broader context of European Protestantism include an extraordinary immersion in the Bible, an obsession with vocation and work, affirmation of marriage and of sex within it, and the primacy of the spiritual (even though the physical is regarded as good in principle). These traits are conspicuous in *Paradise Lost*.

Paradise Lost as a religious poem. While readers with Christian sensibilities and biblical knowledge can find an abundance of Christian elements in the writings of authors such as Shakespeare and Hawthorne, non-Christian readers find it possible to read them with minimal attention to the Christian aspects. Milton stands in contrast to this. As C. S. Lewis put it, Milton's poetry does not exist apart from his theology. Milton himself said that in writing the great English and Christian epic he intended to write a poem "doctrinal and exemplary to a nation." *Paradise Lost* is a complete repository of biblical truth and Christian doctrine. As for the claims of revisionist scholars that Milton was heretical in his thinking, any ordinary reader will be hard pressed to find any hint of heresy in *Paradise Lost*. Most of what the debunkers claim as heresy is taken straight from the Bible, such as the title "only begotten Son" for Christ.

Paradise Lost as Epic and Anti-Epic

Paradise Lost belongs to a small, elite category of stories known as epics. The Greek poet Homer started the Western epic tradition, and Milton brought it to a close with *Paradise Lost*. Epics are long narrative poems. They are the most exalted kind of story and poem, and they are accordingly written in what is called the “high style.” Starting with Homer, moreover, all epics incorporate a set of conventional patterns or motifs. For example, epic poets invoke the muses or (if the poet is a Christian) God to aid them as they compose. They begin their story *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”) and later in the story fill in earlier events in their overall story. Supernatural beings are prominent in the cast of characters; epics do not employ realism the way a novel does, so we should not be looking for it.

We should open the pages of *Paradise Lost* looking for grand themes in the grand style (as with Handel’s *Messiah*). Milton’s epic style is so exalted that it reads like a language all its own. Some features of Milton’s high style that we can relish include the following:

- long, flowing sentences that are best understood and enjoyed when read aloud
- inversion of normal word order (e.g., “Him the Almighty hurled flaming from the ethereal sky.”)
- exalted vocabulary (“big words,” often derived from the Latin language)
- epithets (titles for persons or things, such as “the Almighty” for God)
- epic similes (extended comparisons between something in the poem and something from nature, history, mythology, or human experience)
- allusions (references to past history or literature)
- pleonasm or periphrasis (taking more words than necessary to state something, with a view toward doing justice to the exaltation of the situation and epic form)

As we read *Paradise Lost*, we are aware at every turn that we are reading an epic in the mode of Homer’s *Odyssey* or Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The epic exaltation and features of style are all present. But at the level of content and system of values, Milton revolutionized the classical epic so completely that *Paradise Lost* is also an anti-epic that refutes the earlier tradition. Classical epic is humanistic in its values. More specifically, it elevates the conquering warrior, physical strength, and earthly success to supremacy. Milton substitutes the Christian saint for the warrior hero as his ideal, and he makes obedience to God the highest value. For the praise of humans, Milton substitutes the praise of God. He also elevates domestic values (marriage and family) and pastoral values (living simply in harmony with nature) over what had always been called heroic values (the success of the military hero and the splendors of earthly kingdoms).

Preliminary Considerations

Format. *Paradise Lost* is sufficiently different from other classics covered in this series that it has required modifications in format. Milton's epic is divided into twelve books, but these are not accompanied by titles the way chapters in a novel are usually given a title at the beginning of each chapter. In keeping with Milton's design, this guide does not supply titles for the books of *Paradise Lost*.

Second, the twelve books of *Paradise Lost* are longer and more complex than (for example) the twenty-four books of *The Odyssey* or the twenty-four chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*. As a result, there is too much material in the individual books of *Paradise Lost* to allow for the simple format of plot summary, commentary, and reflection/discussion applied to an entire book of *Paradise Lost*. This guide retains the standard format of an opening unit of plot summary for the entire book that follows, but after that the material is divided into a series of individual units, arranged sequentially according to how the book unfolds from beginning to end. Each of these units has the customary section of commentary followed by a section of reflection and discussion.

Christian vs. non-Christian readers. Readers always respond to works of literature in terms of who they are and what they bring to the text in terms of their own values and worldview. But *Paradise Lost* is in a category by itself in this regard. There is a long tradition, still dominant in the secular classroom, that claims that Satan is the sympathetic hero of *Paradise Lost* and God the unsympathetic villain. Secondary claims then accompany this major premise, because Milton portrays Adam as the head of the family, Milton is a misogynist (hater of women).

Christian readers of this guide should turn a deaf ear to these claims. The claims come from readers who are hostile to Christianity. Milton took his materials from the Bible, and Christian readers surely operate from the same premise. Non-Christian readers misread the Bible in the same ways that they misread *Paradise Lost*. There is so much good and edifying material in *Paradise Lost* that Christian readers should concentrate on it in a spirit of celebration. They should refuse to allow themselves to be diverted from relishing a Christian poem by the claims of readers who operate from a non-Christian orientation.

BOOK 1

Plot Summary

Milton launches his epic venture with an exalted opening invocation in which he (1) prays to God for assistance, and (2) announces his epic subject (the fall of humankind into sin), along with the interpretive slant that he will take toward this story material (to assert God's providence in human affairs despite the presence of evil in the world). The main action in Book 1 is Satan and his fallen legion rousing themselves from the burning lake after having fallen from Heaven for nine days and nights after their unsuccessful rebellion against God. This central action begins with an exchange of speeches between Satan (the first to revive after the physical fall into Hell) and Beelzebub.

After this dramatic exchange, Satan calls to his followers to move from the burning lake to land. Just as Homer has a roll call of warriors who participated in the Trojan War, Milton gives us a roll call of the fallen angels who exited the burning lake and came to attention before their commander Satan. Satan appears at his very grandest in the entire story as he addresses his followers. The fallen angels respond by hurling defiance against God and by building the demonic city of Pandemonium.

This brief plot summary might convey the impression that not much happens in Book 1. But this is untrue. An epic places no premium on keeping us in suspense about what is going to happen (in fact, epic poets usually let us know beforehand what is going to happen). We need to concentrate on *how* the poet tells his story. Milton pulls out all the stops in the first book of *Paradise Lost*.

Book 1 is the best-known book of *Paradise Lost*. Therein lies a problem: just as many readers are familiar with Dante's *Inferno* but know nothing about his portrayal of heaven, the only part of *Paradise Lost* that many readers know is the portrayal of Satan and hell. This is a lopsided view of Milton's epic. Milton's skill in portraying Satan and hell is magnificent, and we should relish that triumph of the imagination. But we need to be aware from the outset that the strategy of all good storytellers is to begin a story at the opposite point from where it will end.

Milton's grand style, fully evident from the opening line, is worthy of attention and enjoyment all by itself. Primary epic (as scholars call it) was oral in nature, and the whole occasion of nobles listening to a poet chant his story in the great hall of a palace helped to create an atmosphere of grandeur. Secondary epic, read by an individual reader in solitude, requires an even grander style to compensate for the informality of the occasion. Now the style itself, claimed C. S. Lewis, must do what the whole occasion helped Homer to do. Lewis speaks of "the true epic exhilaration" that Milton's style produces, and he claims that the opening lines of *Paradise Lost* give him a physical sensation that "some great thing is now about to begin."

The Opening Invocation (lines 1–26)

The first thing we need to grasp about Milton's epic is that virtually everything in it is bigger and better than it had been in previous epics. Homer and Virgil gave a nod to the muses, but their invocations are over nearly as soon as they begin. By contrast, Milton pours so much into his opening invocation (the first of four in *Paradise Lost*) that it takes on a life of its own.

Milton follows all the rules of the epic genre in this invocation. Epics begin with ritual, and so does *Paradise Lost*. An epic poet begins by announcing his epic theme or subject; Milton declares that he will tell the story of the fall of the human race through disobedience (lines 1–3). Within the broadly stated epic subject, the epic poet then hints at how he will treat his story material; Milton lets us know that in his story Christ will restore what Adam and Eve lost (lines 4–5) and that he will show how, despite the fact of evil and suffering in the world, God is not to blame for that suffering and in fact is exerting a benevolent providence over events on earth (lines 24–26). An epic poet also signals his dependence on supernatural beings (the "muses") to guide him in the task of composition; Milton amplifies this into a threefold prayer to (1) the God who inspired Moses to write primeval history (lines 6–10), (2) the God of the temple on Mount Zion (lines 10–16), and (3) God the Spirit who created the world (lines 17–23).

But even though Milton's opening lines unfold as an epic is supposed to unfold, other things are going on that make Milton's story the opposite of a conventional epic. Traditional epic is a success story; Milton's story is a story of human

failure ("of man's first disobedience"). Second, the frame of reference in the Western epic tradition is that of classical mythology, and the classical epic poets accordingly invoke a pagan muse; Milton loads his threefold prayer with references to the Christian God. Third, traditional epic focuses on a conquering hero; Milton's epic protagonist is the archetypal sinner.

Also revolutionary is the theological purpose that Milton sets forth at the end of the invocation. The story of the fall being Milton's subject, his interpretive slant toward that story material is to "justify the ways of God to men." The technical name for this is *theodicy*—the attempt to reconcile the goodness and omnipotence of God with the fact of evil and suffering in the world. The Old Testament book of Job is a theodicy; *Paradise Lost* is like the book of Job in its greatness of literary form and its theological substance.

For Reflection or Discussion

The function of the opening invocation is to provide a preview of things that will characterize the poem to follow. The opening invocation gives us the equivalent of a series of billboards along an interstate. The best way to approach Milton's opening invocation is to treat it as an entry into *Paradise Lost*. We can proceed sequentially and piecemeal through the invocation, spinning out a series of generalizations about *things we now know about the poem that is to follow*. For example, it is obvious that Milton will give us a biblical and Christian version of what epic poets in the classical tradition gave us. If we look carefully, we can identify a dozen or more things that we know about the poem to follow (e.g., it will be a partly tragic

In this invocation Milton claims that he will "soar above the Aonian mount," by which he means that he will surpass what the epic poets in the classical tradition had done. In other words, the classical epic tradition is not only a model to be emulated but a rival to be surpassed and ultimately refuted. The opening phrase—"Of man's first disobedience"—already announces a revolution: Milton will not write about a victory but about a defeat.

It is not necessary to deny *everything* that secular readers claim about Milton's Satan; all that is required is that we do not mistake partial truth for the whole truth. At one level, Milton's Satan is grand; that does not make him good or sympathetic. A literary critic named Stanley Fish claims that Milton uses the technique of the guilty reader. This means that he carefully contrives to get readers to be swayed by Satan and then inserts data into the text that gets them to see that these responses are shoddy and evil. We are "surprised by sin" (a phrase in *Paradise Lost* and the title of Fish's book) as we read, confronted with evidence of our own fallen condition. In fact, with these wrong responses we reenact the fall ourselves.

A good organizing strategy that will unify our experience of Book 1 is to complete the formula "images of . . ."—images of defeat, of evil, of pain, of confusion, of irrevocable loss, and so forth. Having completed the list, it will be evident that we do not admire these

epic; it will not, however, be an ultimately depressing story; it will be loaded with biblical allusions).

Milton's Satan: First Acquaintance (lines 27–375)

The quickness with which Milton moves from his invocation to the plot is breathtaking: he asks two epic questions (lines 27–33) and answers them by identifying Satan as the correct answer, and by that simple maneuver propels us into the action. That action consists of our getting to know Satan as a leading player in the story.

The key to understanding Milton's strategy is the framework known as hidden and apparent plots. An apparent plot is the foreground action that we cannot help but see. In Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, the apparent plot can be summarized under the formula *heroic energy, purpose, and impressiveness*. Satan *appears to be* a grand figure. He is eloquent and talks big. As readers we can easily be misled into thinking that he is a grand and even sympathetic figure.

The hidden plot in Book 1 can be summarized under the formula *heroic evil and futility*. This is not a story of grandeur but of Satan's evil nature and actions and his ultimate defeat. We need to read more closely and at a more interpretive level to decipher this hidden story. But Milton manages the story in such a way that he becomes our ally against any possible misreading of his story. He includes many devices of disclosure—interpretive clues—in his story. These clues are embedded in the text and are easy to find if we orient ourselves in that direction.

Chief among the devices of disclosure is the presence of the epic narrator. The narrator is not

the same as the storyteller. The storyteller is the source of everything that is in the story. The epic narrator is the presence of the storyteller—a persona—within the text, guiding our responses, making assessments, and calling our attention to certain things. For example, Satan's first speech (lines 84–124) *sounds* impressive, but the narrator follows it up with two lines of commentary (125–26) that tell us that Satan is actually in pain and despair. The epic narrator is our travel guide through the poem. We need to accept him as our ally.

The narrator is not the only device of disclosure by which Milton undermines the apparent grandeur of Satan. If we look closely at the text, we see many evidences of Satan's heroic evil and the futility of his battle against God. C. S. Lewis speaks of how Satan is always sawing off the branch on which he is sitting. The more formal term in use today is to say that Satan *deconstructs* the very claims that he himself makes. For example, after using big terms such as *mutual league*, *united thoughts*, and *glorious enterprise* to describe the war in Heaven, Satan admits that he and his followers have ended up in *misery* and *ruin*. Again, when Beelzebub replies to Satan's first, boastful speech, he takes a much more defeatist attitude toward the plight of the fallen angels (lines 128–55).

It is crucial that we see that Milton first alerts us at length to the hidden plot of demonic evil and the futility of Satan's attack on God. In lines 33–83, if we take time to highlight every detail that adds to the picture of heroic evil and futility, there is scarcely a line that is not highlighted. The practice among secular readers (known in Milton circles as

things in real life, so we should not admire them in regard to Satan and the fallen demons.

Another good organizing strategy for Book 1 is to ponder what things make up the *Satanic predicament*. For example, Satan (claims a scholar) is “the quintessential loser.” Much of Satan’s predicament can be phrased in psychological terms; for example, he represents the aspiring mind forced to confront its own crushing failure.

The first thing that we just naturally do as we read Book 1 is to look at Satan and Hell. We are whisked away to a world of the imagination that is highly captivating to our attention. Having looked at Satan and Hell, we then need to look *through* them to life as we know it. In Book 1, Milton portrays more than a spiritual region known as Hell; he also gives us *metaphors of the human condition* as we know it day by day.

Milton's epic similes are more complex than those of any other poet. They need to be pondered individually, by themselves. This is actually great fun. For example, in lines 196–98 the fallen demons are compared to the Titans and giants of classical mythology who rebelled against Jove (the chief deity) and were punished by being cast into the volcanic region of Italy known in mythology as Tartarus (an obvious parallel to the Christian hell). Just on the basis of this simile, we know five things about the fallen demons: they are huge, they are repulsive ("of monstrous size"), they are rebels against God, they are defeated, and they are being punished.

"the Satanists," meaning that they admire Milton's Satan) is to act as though this passage—this introduction to the hidden plot—does not even exist.

The prevailing style in Book 1 is part of the case that Milton builds against Satan. Milton loads Book 1 with allusions to classical mythology, and also with exalted epic similes that link characters and events in the story to phenomena in history and nature. This is part of building up Satan as a heroic figure in the classical mode. But Milton disapproves of the military hero of classical mythology and epic. Milton's mythological allusions and epic similes, far from exalting Satan and his followers, are actually part of the disparagement of them that Milton builds into his poem. The mythological allusions and extended epic similes cluster in contexts of evil in *Paradise Lost*, leading scholars to speak of the demonic or infernal style in *Paradise Lost*. Nonetheless, we need to unpack the meanings of Milton's allusions and similes in order to understand his characterization of Satan, and also to relish Milton's skill in composing them.

For Reflection or Discussion

The first half of Book 1 is a balancing act that takes our breath away when we see the skill with which Milton manages it. Milton juxtaposes apparent and hidden plots—Satan's seeming greatness and his actual evil and ultimate weakness. This is the grand design that we can trace in this part of the poem. What specific details build Satan up in our imaginations and perhaps momentarily sway our emotions? What details undercut that apparent grandeur and produce dramatic irony on an epic scale?

Roll Call of Demons (lines 376–521)

Milton and his original readers knew both the Bible and classical mythology better than most people today know them. As a result, they relished the excursion into the history of Old Testament idols represented by this passage. Readers today are free to decide how much attention they wish to give to this passage. Even if we are unfamiliar with the specific gods that Milton names, we can read the passage to get a general impression of the repulsive evil represented by the fallen demons.

A very important principle underlies Milton's portrayal of Satan and the fallen angels (and equally of Dante's portrayal of Hell in the *Inferno*), namely, that as human history unfolded, the fallen angels who were cast out of Heaven became the pagan deities and idols of Old Testament history and classical mythology.

For Reflection or Discussion

What is the function of the roll call of demons in the overall design of Book 1? What feelings are evoked as we progress through the passage? How does the passage fit into the pattern of apparent vs. hidden plots?

Satan's Speech to His Demonic Army (lines 522–669)

Whereas the roll call of demons is one of the flats and shallows in the poem, the description of Satan and his rousing speech to his followers is one of the high points of *Paradise Lost*. First Milton evokes a picture of the tremendous stature of Satan as a fallen angel (lines 522–621). There can be no doubt that Milton creates an impressive Satan in this passage. Nonetheless, we can credit Satan with being impressive at this early point in the epic without falling into the fallacy of thinking that he is sympathetic or ultimately grand.

After the tremendous buildup represented by the description of Satan, Milton presents his speech to Satan's followers. It, too, is grand and impressive-sounding, filled with boasting and

The list of reasons why Milton created an initially impressive Satan is long. (1) Evil is the perversion of goodness, so naturally the leader of all evil forces must have possessed qualities that in their original form were great. (2) In the world as we know it, Satan is powerful and alluring [1 John 5:19 claims that "the whole world is in the power of the evil one"]. (3) Milton's design is to trace the self-destruction of evil, so he first shows Satan at his height and then traces his degeneration. (4) Stories require conflict; as epic hero, God requires an antagonist worthy of him.

Milton's "Paradise Lost"

- (5) It is also part of storytelling that a story begins with things in one position and concludes with them in the opposite position.
- (6) The initially impressive Satan is part of Milton's technique of the guilty reader.

buzz words that might mislead us if we did not subject them to analysis. The effect of the speech is to rouse the demons to a frenzy of defiance hurled against God and Heaven (lines 663–69).

For Reflection or Discussion

The first thing to do is absorb and relish the brilliance of the writing. Then we need to get a grip on our responses. The framework of apparent and hidden plots continues in full force. The apparent grandeur of Satan is countered by other data that uncovers his evil and the ultimate futility of his battle against God. For example, we read that “his form had yet not lost / All her original brightness” (591–92); the word “yet” lets us know that eventually Satan loses all his brightness, and the word “all” implies that he has already lost some of his brightness. The right analytic framework is thus to ask what details contribute to the apparent plot of seeming grandeur and to the hidden plot of Satan’s evil and futility.

It is essential to our understanding of Milton's Satan to see that Milton models Satan on the old epic heroes. Milton had to find a place for the “martial theme” (battlefield action) because that was the established subject for an epic. Milton deliberately attached all the usual traits of the warrior hero to Satan because he regarded the whole value structure of ancient epic as wrong. Milton is explicit about this strategy: at lines 553–54 he links the

The Building of Pandemonium (lines 670–798)

The apparent plot reaches its climax when the fallen demons concentrate their energy and ability to build the grand city of Hell for whose title Milton invented the word *Pandemonium* (“all demon assembly”). In keeping with Milton’s design of making *Paradise Lost* a huge structure of contrasts and opposites, Pandemonium is the antithesis of both the city of Heaven and the garden of Eden. Lest we be misled in regard to the grand appearances of Pandemonium, Milton ends Book 1 with a series of shrinking similes in which the demons are cut down to size in our imaginations: they

are compared to bees before a beekeeper, dwarfs, and pygmies, and their grand city is called “their straw-built citadel” (like the house of one of the three little pigs in the children’s fable!). This is a climactic hint that Satan and the fallen demons are not as grand as they superficially seem to be.

fallen demons with
“heroes old/ Arming
to battle,” and later
he speaks of how the
demons appear “in
guise / Of warriors
old” (lines 564–65).

For Reflection or Discussion

How does the framework of apparent and hidden plots continue to explain the dynamics at work in this passage? The discrepancy between appearance and reality is known as dramatic irony; how does it operate in this passage?

BOOK 2

Plot Summary

The primary action in Book 2, occupying the first half of the book, is the demonic counsel in Hell. The purpose of the counsel, which turns out to be a debate on a grand scale, is to determine what the fallen demons can do to get back at God for having defeated them in the war in Heaven. Four principal speakers attempt to sway the demons. Moloch proposes a military attack on Heaven. Belial suggests that the demons “sit tight,” maintain a low profile, and hope that God will eventually ignore them. Mammon believes that the resources of Hell can be turned into a magnificent dwelling place for eternity.

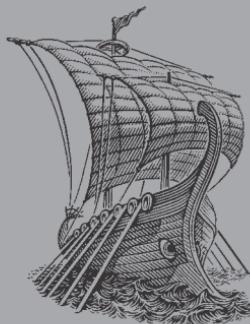
But none of those proposals is what Satan wants, so his second-in-command, Beelzebub, proposes what Satan the dictator wants. The new proposal is to send someone to journey from Hell

Three things claim our primary attention in Book 2. One of these is the continuing characterization of Satan. He remains powerful and eloquent, but his appeal is beginning to erode. Tracing this decline is a prime task as we assimilate Book 2. Secondly, equal attention flows to Satan’s demonic followers, sometimes represented by individual figures, sometimes by nameless groups. Third, the descriptions of Hell and Chaos as places are a major poetic triumph.

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