

Crow Renager

Professor Mark Edmundson

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Is there anything to learn now from John Milton and *Paradise Lost*?

After reading *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, it is apparent that there are many revelations and lessons pertaining to how one should conduct themselves. However, Milton makes his ideas unique due to the relationship between the actors of a hierarchical structure. Contrary to poets such as Walt Whitman who believe every being exists on an equal plane, Milton's world is one who's security and stability depends greatly upon kneeling to others and understanding one's boundaries. Throughout all twelve of the books in *Paradise Lost*, loyalty is rewarded while insubordination is punished. This essay hinges on the characters of Satan and Eve for the consequences of their selfish actions. The essay shall also discuss Abdiel in contrast to Satan and Eve. He represents one's ability to discipline themselves after such a fall to selfish ways. According to the epic by Milton, too much self love is a direct path to tragedy, but it does not mean that actions cannot be redeemed.

Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, orchestrates the first example of a prideful decision that led to tragedy. Satan, who was already one of the more prestigious archangels, had a great hierarchical standing to begin with. It was only when God manifested the Son that he allowed jealousy and self-love to take over. Book V shows Raphael communicating this story to Adam, and it gives the reader the first lesson about having too much self-love. Just because one thinks something may be unfair does not mean they should

strive to overthrow it. Unfairness is an inherent part of life, and if every person's idea of unfairness was met with an equal or greater amount of rebuttal, the very systems that hold communities together begin to fracture. Satan revolts and severs harmony and peace throughout the entire poem. This causes later trouble with Adam and Eve too.

"Melodious hymns about the sov'reign throne / Alternate all night long: but not so waked / Satan, so call him now, his former name / Is heard no more in Heav'n... / ...fraught / with envy against the Son of God, that day / Honored by his great Father" (Milton 186).

This quote strikes me as important regarding Satan's fall because it explores his consequences for trying to erect a throne of his own in God's kingdom. God tears away Satan's name and agency as an archangel along with the legion of angels he recruited. Milton strongly uses the word "envy" to present Satan's inability to control himself. In doing so, Satan and his followers would be excommunicated from Heaven. The tragedy is not that Satan brought his own demise. The tragedy resides in the reputations and lives of those he brought down with him. His followers inherited his name and therefore his doom.

Eve's character is slightly more complicated than that of Satan, but her actions have similar results. She is not motivated by the envy of whom she detests as Satan is, yet she tears down herself and her fellowship much the same. Though previously a modest person, Eve gives in to a narcissistic complex fed to her by Satan through a dream she recounted to Adam in Book V.

"Here, happy creature, fair angelic Eve, / Partake thou also; happy though thou art, / Happier thou may'st be, worthier canst not be: / Taste this, and be

henceforth among the gods / Thyself a goddess, not to Earth confined... /  
 ...Ascend to Heav'n, by merit thine, and see / What life the gods live there, and  
 such live thou" (165).

As previously mentioned, Milton presents words from Satan in the dream to play on humanity's narcissistic tendencies and speaks to Eve about how she could reign as a goddess. He calls her angelic, worthy, and full of merit. Other instances throughout the poem show Satan continually speaking to her in such a manner. He even refers to her as "Empress" in Book IX (304). Readers of *Paradise Lost* often refer to Eve's fall as a temptation or a seduction, and the blame is placed on the Devil. However, Eve has enough blame and is no different from when Satan fell from heaven. Adam and Eve are well aware that they are not to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree and remain content with the beauty and paradise they live in. Only after Eve gains a superiority complex does she fear that there is more to life than what is being given.

Looking forward to Book IX, Eve corrupts Adam in the same way in which Satan corrupted his followers. Adam converses with Eve and realizes that without her, he cannot go on happily and joins her in tragedy.

"How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost, / Defaced, deflow'ed, and now to death devote? ... / ... And me with thee hath ruined, for with thee / Certain my resolution is to die; / How can I live without thee...' / ...some sad drops / Wept at completing of the mortal sin / Original; while Adam took no thought, / Eating his fill" (313-316).

Milton is teaching the readers of these passages that self-love can be a toxic quality. Putting oneself on a pedestal is a gateway to destroying the lives of loved ones.

In this case, Adam loves what he has in Eve and selfishly goes along with her and disobeys God. The poet uses a contrast between the evil Satan and the seemingly pure, innocent Eve to show that one's standing does not matter when engaging in prideful acts. Milton's universal truth is that having greed for power, unending knowledge, and self-love is a suicide mission.

Although it is clear that Milton believes this excess of self-love is intolerable, he does not believe it to be the end. In my initial thoughts of this paper, I believed the character of Abdiel to be an antithesis to the actions of Satan and Eve. I see it a bit differently now. Unlike Satan and Eve, Abdiel was not the first to act on self love. He is more comparable to Adam. Abdiel follows Satan, and Adam follows Eve. Abdiel represents how Adam should have acted according to Milton's view of a hierarchy. By defecting against Satan's desire to take over the kingdom of Heaven, Abdiel is a redeemed follower of Satan. He is welcomed with open arms into God's subordinates rather than falling to hell with Satan's legions.

“ ‘O argument blasphemous, false and proud! / Words which no ear ever to hear in Heav'n / Expected, least of all from thee, ingrate, / In place thyself so high above thy peers... / ...Shalt thou give law to God, shalt thou dispute / With him the points of liberty, who made / Thee what thou art, and formed the pow'rs of Heav'n / ...and circumscribed their being?’ “ (191-192).

Both Abdiel and Adam had their decrees to kneel to their creator, but Abdiel acted on his. When faced with the imminent loss of those he was equal to, he displays discipline and resolve.

Although he remains loyal and active in hierarchy, a question comes up that doesn't quite seem like it is answered by the text. If Adam had acted differently and not eaten the fruit as Abdiel remained loyal to God, would they still not both be acting out of self-love? God rewards loyalty in *Paradise Lost* by allowing one to keep what one has been given and therefore prolongs personal standing and enjoyment. If he continues without eating the fruit, Adam discards his love, selfishly throwing Eve under the bus. God would create for him a new partner from his rib and Adam benefits nonetheless. His promises to his creator are kept, and there would be a cold-hearted shadow to leaving Eve. That basically happened with Abdiel, and Satan's resolve to destroy God's kingdom only grows larger. It is almost paradoxical in the sense that yes, Milton believes under most circumstances, too much self love is bad, but under which circumstances can it be acceptable? He answers this question, implying that self love is acceptable as long as the orders of a hierarchy are obeyed.

All this talk of self-love and obedience leads me to a general conclusion about the messages from *Paradise Lost*. The conclusion is that in order to succeed in one sphere or another, one must pick sides. However, this essay's initial thesis statement still rings true. Too much self-love is a direct path to tragedy. Regardless of whether Adam decided to eat the fruit or not, he would be choosing between two different circumstances of self-love and tragedy. He either joins Eve out of selfish desire to stay with her and be damned by the forbidden fruit, or he leaves her with her mistakes to perpetuate his own well being in paradise. However terrible the different options are, Milton projects that there is a difference between some tragedies and others. He seems to value the tragedies which promote kneeling to that higher power while detesting

those that arise out of a desire to gain power or overthrow something. By the end of the stories of the fall of Satan and the fall of man, the poet knows that all of the tragedies stem from Satan's own. Had it not been for his initial pride and envy of the Son, man may remain uncorrupted and at peace in the garden.