**Milton's Paradise Lost: Summary, Theme, and Quotes**

*John Milton's 1667 epic poem 'Paradise Lost' is often considered one of the greatest works in the English language. Watch this lesson to learn about the text and its complicated themes.*

**Introduction**

Of all the work that English poet John Milton - he's also other things, not just a poet - has done, ***Paradise Lost*** is kind of the big kahuna of his work. It really towers above everything else he wrote, and also everything else, pretty much, in the English language. He and Shakespeare are kind of even for most important dude in English. It was published in 1667, and *Paradise Lost* basically recreates the Biblical story of the 'Fall of Man,' mostly taken from the Book of Genesis, and it's through the lens of Greco-Roman epics like *The Odyssey* or *The Illiad* - these stories of heroism and war and things like that.

Centuries after its initial publication (so, like, now), critics are still arguing about the most basic aspects of the work, which is fitting - all of his writing inspired controversy. Probably not as much as *Paradise Lost,* but that's the kind of dude he was. He made people think, and he's going to make us think. So get ready.

As we mentioned, *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667. It's 10,000 lines long, so it's an undertaking if you want to read the whole thing. It's blank-verse, so it doesn't rhyme, and it's broken up into ten books. Actually, later editions of it broke it into 12 to try to mimic *The Aeneid*, which is the Latin poet Virgil's major work.

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| Paradise Lost |
| Published in 1667, Paradise Lost is 10,000 lines long and is broken up into ten books. |

It's worth noting that *Paradise Lost* saw release near the end of Milton's life, and it was pretty much all written when Milton was totally blind and also totally out of political favor. He was actually even kind of a wanted criminal during part of this time. He wrote it by basically dictating it to his daughters because he couldn't see. The effect that his political situation and his physical state at the time play on the poem is up for debate - it's something that people and critics fight about, too - but whatever effect it might have had, it's definitely impressive that he was able to do that in that condition, essentially.

*Paradise Lost* follows two strands of narrative. We've got Satan who's the rebellious angel, originally called Lucifer, outcast from Heaven and thrown into Hell. It also features the Garden of Eden's familiar resident couple, Adam and Eve, as Satan switches from Greek-tinged anti-hero to antagonist and tricks them into committing Original Sin. It bears repeating that the plot outline of *Paradise Lost* is basically in the Book of Genesis. It's nothing new.

But where Milton really excels - and why he's such a big deal - is that he's able to use language so skillfully as to dramatize this in a whole new and compelling way. Actually in such a compelling way, in such a long-lasting way, that a lot of our understanding of Genesis is actually influenced by *Paradise Lost*. So they kind of become synonymous in the way that we think about the creation story.

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| rebellious angel |
| The rebellious angel was cast out of heaven. |

**Plot Summary**

But, in case (as would be totally understandable and was for me when I read *Paradise Lost*) you need a little brushing up on your Western religious traditions, we're going to give a little brief outline of what actually goes down in *Paradise Lost*. The poem begins shortly after Satan and his allies have rebelled against their creator, and they have been cast out of Heaven. Now they're hanging out down in Hell. Milton spends a lot of time giving these wonderful, long descriptions of Hell and Satan hanging out in it. One of my favorites goes a little something like this:

*So stretched out huge in length the Arch-Fiend lay,*

*Chained on the burning lake; nor ever thence*

*Had risen, or heaved his head, but that the will*

*And high permission of all-ruling Heaven*

*Left him at large to his own dark designs,*

The burning lake, stretched out, his dark designs... it's beautiful language. It gets confusing because it's kind of all garbled up - Milton's syntax is all over the place - but it's worth reading.

So Satan, having been dealt a huge, massive blow to his pride, rallies his forces down in their dark little Hell-home and convinces them that they're going to strike back at the being that damned them to suffering, which would be God. Satan braves the Abyss and Chaos outside of Hell. He comes up to Earth, and he enters the Garden of Eden, turning himself into a serpent (which might be familiar from the Adam and Eve story).

In the Garden, God's favorite new creations - mankind, the husband and wife duo of Adam and Eve - are hanging out, being innocent, toiling around in the Garden. God has basically promised them that everything's going to be hunky-dory unless they try to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Satan, who's really good with his words - he's really good at talking and convincing people what to do, uses his rhetorical skills to tempt Eve into doing just that, into eating from that fruit. Adam sees that his wife has fallen from God's grace, and he does the same thing; he eats from the tree, too. Then they have sex, and then they feel really guilty about it.

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| Adam and Eve |
| Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent. |

They confess to God what they have done and, as punishment for their own rebellion, God throws them out of the Garden, though not before the angel Michael shows Adam a redemptive vision of humanity through the arrival of the King Messiah, who we know is Jesus Christ. So that's how it ends. That's the basic plot, which you might wonder, 'Oh my God, how does he stretch that into 10,000 lines?' Well, you saw what he did with just a little tiny bit of Satan in Hell - he does that all over the place. This thing is so long. Good! But long.

**Examination of Themes**

And it's heavy stuff, right? Milton's tackling Western culture's most influential story, and there's a lot to unpack and deal with. Central to Milton's interests in this story seems to be the idea of **obedience** and **free will**. Why does Satan rebel and cause others to do that, too? What's the controversy wrapped up in that?

We can take a look at Satan's motivations, which we have ample evidence of in the poem. He's a rebellious angel, and though he has proof otherwise, he rejects the idea that all of creation comes from God. He doesn't like that because he wants to be his own creator. He rebels basically to get independence. He doesn't want to be enthralled to God anymore. For this - for disobeying God and, more importantly, for his pride and arrogance - he's thrown out of Heaven, along with everyone else who agreed with him, that maybe they should be their own creators instead of just bowing down to God's will.

This drama essentially plays out again with Adam and Eve because they can have anything they want on Earth as long as they don't eat this tree - as long as they obey God and they don't seek knowledge on their own. It's important that it's the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil - it's not just like, the Tree of Sex or the Tree of Whatever. Knowledge is what they're after. It's kind of analogous to Satan's pursuit of his own independence - it's kind of another form of that. Satan tricks Eve into disobeying, and she also - and Adam and everyone else - is punished for their pride in wanting to be like God, essentially - wanting to have God's knowledge.

In theory, right, Milton's lesson here is pretty simple. You 'obey your creator' and you don't think that you're greater than you are. You know your place, and everything will be hunky-dory. If you don't, you'll end up in Hell or thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Seems simple.

**A Major Contradiction**

But the problem is that this doesn't really align with what critics know about Milton. It's something that's also not especially resonant with people in general because so many of our heroes, especially in Greek epics, are rebels. Think of how we think of America's founding fathers or even how Milton himself was really into Oliver Cromwell who was kind of a rebel against the Crown. That's who we idolize, and so it doesn't totally sit right that he's just saying, 'Be obedient.' That creates dissonance and that leads a lot of critics to look deeper at what's going on here.

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| obey your Creator |
| The message that John Milton wanted to get across. |

Ostensibly, *Paradise Lost* is a religious text. Milton was famously Protestant. He was rebellious because he was in a divorce and things like that. But in theory, he's not going to try to create an epic poem that is full of heresy. Book I of *Paradise Lost* even says that its point is to 'justify the ways of God to man' - that's what the poem is trying to do. But many critics - especially Romantic poets, like William Blake, see that Milton's methods were at odd with his plot. For several reasons:

First reason: His characterization of Satan is actually pretty compelling. Satan's part of *Paradise Lost* is structured like a Homeric struggle against powerful forces - first God, then the Abyss and Chaos - and he eventually loses, valiantly maybe. Milton emphasizes this by comparing Satan to various people from Greek myth, like Mulciber who's the Greek god Hephaestus in this passage:

*In ancient Greece; and in Ausonian land*

*Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell*

*From Heaven they fabled, thrown by angry Jove*

*Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn*

*To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,*

Milton's using this in the context of telling how Satan fell for a day from Heaven - just like Hephaestus, he's basically saying. The problem here is that Hephaestus is not an evil guy - he just had a fight with Zeus, or Jove as Milton says in this. The Greek gods weren't 'good' and 'bad' in the same way that God is 'good' and Satan is 'bad.' Like I said, Hephaestus and Zeus just had a fight, and Zeus threw him off the mountain top and then he fell for a day.

But, by throwing in this Greek stuff, by making Satan a little bit of a Greek person and tinging it with all of this, he kind of muddies the waters in how we think of Satan - because Hephaestus is a sympathetic figure. Zeus is clearly being the jerk in this situation. It kind of serves to make Satan a bit of a sympathetic figure, which is starting to sound awfully radical and awfully heretical when you think about the context. We're not supposed to root for Satan.

There's also the unfortunate fact that the parts with Adam and Eve in it are regarded by many (including me) to be boring! They're not as good as the parts with Satan. They have much more domestic focus. They're all wrapped up in troubling gender politics and whatnot. So who would we rather read about? Exciting Greek-tinged anti-hero Satan or morally-correct humans? I think you know the answer...

Second reason why the whole, 'What does Milton really think of Satan?' question gets asked. Satan is really good at talking - he's a skilled rhetorician. This is a trait that a writer like Milton might like because Milton is also good with words. There's two major times in which Satan uses impassioned speeches to get what he wants. He convinces his fellow Hell castaways that the fight isn't over - the speech is straight out of a fantasy war movie: 'There are brave men out there! Let's go kill them!' (Yes, I watch *Game of Thrones*.) And he also uses his skilled rhetoric to tempt Eve into defying God. It should be noted, right, that Satan doesn't really have the stuff to back up his words because he gets schooled by God in the end. Milton maybe would have admired his attempts - or, it's hard to imagine Milton not admiring his attempts, I guess is what I should say.

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| puzzle |
| Paradise Lost is like a puzzle that you have to figure out. |

Third reason is that beyond simply being good with words, there are some hard-to-deny similarities between Satan and Milton. You might recall in our lesson on Milton we said that politically he was rabidly anti-monarchy; he sided with the Parliamentarians who were trying to rebel against the king, and he advocated the execution of bad rulers. To Satan, God is a wicked tyrant much the same as Charles I was to Milton. There's obviously differences - Charles I was not God (that should be pretty obvious), although he did claim to have divine right to the throne.

That might be all you need to know to really figure out what the difference is here between Satan and Milton. Some critics think so - they don't think it's worth diving into this anymore. Others don't find it that easy to write off because Milton obviously possesses sympathy for rebellious people, and the text surrounding Satan seems to indicate as such because of the other things we said - how good he is with words, how 'Greek hero' he is.

There are certainly explanations for why Satan comes off positively in Milton's poem. The most obvious is Milton just wanted to craft an epic that was kind of about the Biblical story but was imbued with human emotions. So Satan gets kind of humanified and that makes it easier to write the story. But William Blake has a different explanation in mind; he says that Milton is 'of the Devil's party' without knowing it. Others felt the same - that Satan really was the tragic hero of *Paradise Lost* and that the book is basically hypocritical and highlights hypocrisy that is the foundation of Western religion. Blake kind of thinks that it's heretical maybe by accident.

But other critics think (and this is kind of my favorite interpretation of this, but take this with a grain of salt) that the reader's sympathy for Satan might be Milton's point in the sense that we understand Satan's motivations because we're the descendants of fallen Adam and Eve. God isn't sympathetic - we don't understand Him. But maybe that's the point of religion and believing and all of that - we don't understand God, but we trust Him anyway. Even though He might seem tyrannical, even though it doesn't make sense, we trust it anyway. We don't rebel, but of course we feel sympathy for the one that does because we understand what he's feeling.

And this is how we come back to the issue of **free will**, which we mentioned briefly at the beginning. Satan's really compelling personal drama is set in relief by, as pointed out by a critic William Empson, that 'however wicked Satan's plan may be, it is God's plan too.' God requires that Satan and Man fall so that they may be redeemed by Jesus, by his Son. So even in his rebellion, Satan doesn't have any agency, and Adam and Eve don't really have any agency - this was all in God's plan. Again, this is kind of sympathetic. Satan's a little bit sympathetic because he thinks that he's rebelling, but he's not - he's just following the plan. And we're kind of moved I think by the irony of his classic line 'better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.' And I think we sympathize with that.

There's no easy answers here - there really aren't. There's no critical consensus on these big questions about *Paradise Lost*, and debates go on still about what this all means. But this conflict really gets to the heart of why *Paradise Lost* is so good and why it has resonated with so many readers and why we still think about it - it's like a puzzle, which you have to figure out, but it's really worth figuring out because its heart is kind of the basis of Western literary and cultural traditions - this work that has all these contradictions in it and we want to work it out. But if you sit down to read *Paradise Lost*, be prepared for the ultimate anti-hero you're supposed to think is the worst, but you might end up liking. If you do, it will set you up to think about some really cool stuff and work out some serious issues.