



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

ENGLISH

Paradise Overcome

A Secular Interpretation of *Paradise Lost*

Pauliina Arvidsson

BA thesis
Fall 2013

Supervisor:
Ronald Paul
Examiner:
Zlatan Filipovic

Title: Paradise Overcome: A Secular Interpretation of *Paradise Lost*

Author: Pauliina Arvidsson

Supervisor: Ronald Paul

Abstract: P.B. Shelley wrote that John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* "contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support" (394). This essay aims to continue this train of thought by showing that *Paradise Lost* can be viewed as a secular story, in which Satan represents a mankind that wishes to break free of the shackles of religion. This is done by applying concepts from liberal humanism, secular humanism and secularization to a close reading of the poem. First, three aspects are analyzed – God's rule, God's values and life on Earth after the Fall – to show that they can be interpreted in a secular way. Then, a fourth section builds upon these secular interpretations to show that the narrative can be interpreted secularly as well, starting with Satan as a representation of humanity and then explaining how other characters and events can be viewed as symbols of more abstract concepts and values relating to the process of secularization.

Keywords: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, epic poetry, secularization, secular humanism, liberal humanism

Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Theory | 5 |
| Method | 6 |
| Sources | 7 |
| Structure | 10 |
| His Wrath, Which He Calls Justice – On God’s tyranny | 11 |
| Can It Be Sin to Know? – On God’s values | 14 |
| The World Was All Before Them – On living in a godless world | 16 |
| So Spake th’ Apostate Angel – <i>Paradise Lost</i> as a secular story | 19 |
| Conclusion | 24 |
| Works Cited | 26 |

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning"

Introduction

Paradise Lost is an epic poem by the 17th century English writer John Milton. First published in 1667, *Paradise Lost* retells the story of Original Sin and the Fall of Man. At the beginning of the poem, Satan and his army have been cast down into Hell after losing a war with God, and the poem goes on to tell how Satan takes revenge by convincing Adam and Eve, God's new creation, to eat an apple from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. In this conventional reading of *Paradise Lost*, the story is about a proud angel who defies his maker and is harshly punished.

This essay holds, however, that the poem can be interpreted as a secular story. If Satan is seen not as the Devil but as a symbol of postlapsarian mankind – sinful mankind – then suddenly the entire narrative is turned on its head and the story becomes one of liberation instead of punishment. In this interpretation, Satan tires of submitting to God and of being told that he is a sinner, and sets out to destroy Adam and Eve, the embodiment of God's values, to show that these ideals are unjust and not even desirable for him. In doing so, Satan sheds his snakeskin of sin and transforms into the secular man, banished from Eden but looking towards a future on Earth where he lives only for himself.

Theory

This essay uses concepts from liberal humanism, secular humanism and secularization as a theoretical framework. Liberal humanism as a literary theory is used to explain the way that *Paradise Lost* is analyzed. As laid out in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*, liberal humanism can be considered the traditional form of English literary criticism, born around the time when English literature was first taught as a degree subject in the 1800s. Generally speaking, liberal humanism holds an essentialist view of human nature, believing that there are aspects of it that remain unchanged throughout time. Good literature is believed to also be timeless in this sense, and to speak to that essential human nature. To get at this essence, works of literature should be analyzed on their own, outside of their socio-political, literary-historical and autobiographical contexts (Barry 17-18).

Secular humanism is used to analyze the content of the poem itself. Humanism, in its most basic sense, is a belief in the essential value of humanity, but the most enduring aspect of it is its adherence to the scientific method of acquiring knowledge through reason and experience. By staying true to the scientific method, humanism has been able to accommodate its ideals to fit contemporary society: earlier forms of humanism, for example, were strongly marked by religion, whereas contemporary humanism by contrast is associated with a decline in religious observance and an increased faith in science. Accordingly, modern humanism is often referred to as secular humanism. Although scientific developments have resulted in the understanding that mankind is a part of the world rather than the center of it, the basic belief in humanity has remained essentially constant: secular humanism still holds that values like the promotion of well-being and equality are worth striving for (Prono and Cooke 2-10). The fact that humanism has evolved over the years but has held onto core values like happiness, liberty and equality seems to speak to the notion that those values truly are unchanging aspects of human nature, just like liberal humanism suggests.

Besides attempting to use the methods of liberal humanism to uncover secular humanist values in *Paradise Lost*, this essay also aims to compare the secular interpretation of the poem to the process of secularization. This process is defined as “a systematic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs” (Norris and Inglehart 5) – essentially a decline of God’s value in the public consciousness.

Method

With this theoretical framework in mind, the primary evidence in support of the thesis comes from a close reading of *Paradise Lost*. For the purposes of this essay, close reading means reading the poem in a detailed way, looking for examples relevant to the claim. In alignment with liberal humanism, the process largely disregards socio-political, literary-historical and autobiographical contexts in favor of a focus on *Paradise Lost* as a self-contained work.

The thesis of the essay is, as mentioned, that *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted as a secular story. It can be useful, however, to crystallize two types of narratives to illustrate the thesis. The first is the conventional narrative, which is the story of *Paradise Lost* as it is usually read. The second is the interpreted narrative, which is the

story seen in a secular way – in other words, the interpreted narrative is a more concrete manifestation of the thesis. Of course, any reading is by default an interpretation, but the term is used here to refer to this essay’s particular interpretation. This is to distinguish it from the way that the poem has traditionally been read, but, also, to distinguish the concepts addressed in the first three sections of the essay from the interpreted narrative dealt with in the last section. In other words, the concepts are general while the ‘narrative’ refers specifically to the way the story unfolds as a chain of events.

Sources¹

The critical trend regarding Satan has fluctuated quite heavily. Contemporaries of Milton were generally of the opinion that Satan was, indeed, evil; Joseph Addison, for example, remarked in 1712 that “[h]is Sentiments are every way answerable to his Character, and suitable to a created Being of the most exalted and most depraved Nature” (381). Much of the focus was on Milton’s intentions; Addison again claimed of Satan’s words that Milton “has taken care to introduce none that is not big with absurdity, and incapable of shocking a Religious Reader; his Words, as the Poet describes them, bearing only a *Semblance of Worth, not Substance*. He is likewise with great Art described as owning his Adversary to be Almighty” (381). Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted that “[t]he character of Satan is pride and sensual indulgence, finding in self the sole motive of action” and that “Milton has carefully marked in Satan the intense selfishness, the alcohol of egotism, which would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven” (391).

These statements are likely a product of the strong religious culture of the time: as Balachandra Rajan writes, readers of *Paradise Lost* around the time it was published generally had such a strong image of the Devil in their minds that evil was all that they saw in Satan as a character (408-9). But more recent criticism has also often been very focused on Milton’s intentions; speaking of Satan’s trajectory from tenacious to despicable, A.J.A Waldock introduces the idea that Milton systematically degrades Satan throughout the poem to mitigate the force of his own poetry (417). This essay, however, is not concerned with what Milton intended and tries instead to

¹ The edition used for reading *Paradise Lost* is the Norton Anthology edition; all line citations refer to this volume.

do an objective reading of the poem, insofar as that is possible. It seems that such a reading supports Satan: Rajan notes that today, when the religious threat of Satan is perhaps not so large, the poetic force appears to be on Satan's side, not Heaven's or God's (409). Rajan's claim that the reader's conception of Satan depends on the reader's own context (408) applies equally to a modern secular context and a past religious one; nonetheless, there are a number of critics who agree on the distribution of poetic force that it seems reasonable to conclude that, within its own world, *Paradise Lost* makes a stronger case for Satan than it does for God, regardless of the reader's bias.

During the Romantic era, some readers of *Paradise Lost* took this notion to its most positive extreme, starting with William Blake who famously proclaimed in 1793 that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (389). P.B. Shelley claimed in 1829 that "[i]t is a mistake to suppose that [Satan] could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil" and that Satan "as a moral being is... far superior to his God" in his tenacity than God "who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy" (394). Of course, Shelley also recognizes in Satan "taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement" that "interfere with the interest" (393), so his opinion is actually quite similar to those of, for example, Addison and Coleridge, except his emphasis is on the positive rather than the negative qualities.

Although the sympathies of this essay similarly lie with Satan, it does not quite go so far as to proclaim him a hero. Rather, the focus is to emphasize the contradictions of Satan, something that more recent criticism has done. Modern critics have especially tended to examine Satan's psyche and the general trend of opinion seems to be, in the words of Rajan, that Satan is "someone in whom evil is mixed with good but who is doomed to destruction by the flaw of self-love" (408). Earlier critical trends have of course recognized this ambiguity as well, but have not focused so intensely on Satan's psychology. Kenneth Gross claims that Satan becomes a fascination because he is the most clearly sketched out character, and specifically because Satan's thinking is so emphasized and relatable to human beings (422). Gross also says that it is precisely Satan's faults that make him so compelling (423). Although C.S. Lewis claims that readers only sympathize with Satan because they recognize in him the evil that they fear within themselves ("From Satan" 405), he also

notes that “[a] fallen man *is* very like a fallen angel” (“From Satan” 405), which is precisely what this essay tries to argue. Disregarding Milton’s unknowable intentions, borrowing from the Romantics’ fascination with Satan, and using modern critics’ comparison of Satan to the human condition, this essay attempts to argue that Satan not only is like a man but that he represents mankind, and that his story in *Paradise Lost* can be seen to represent the journey of mankind from religious to secular.

For this reason, Satan is in many ways the focal point of the essay, just like he has tended to be the primary focus for critics. On the topic of other aspects of the poem, there is generally a consensus: concerning God, for example, most agree that he comes across badly in the poem (see Shelley 394, Lewis “From the conclusion” 437, Empson 440, Pullman 77), and, as for Adam and Eve, it is generally held that they are more interesting the more separated from God they become (see Tillyard 491, Pullman 319). These observations agree perfectly with the claim of this essay.

On the topic of secularization, the argument of this essay is that the interpreted narrative of *Paradise Lost* parallels that of the process of secularization, defined as “a systematic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs” (Norris and Inglehart 5). This is meant as a general comparison of a historical process to that which Satan goes through in the interpreted narrative, which is precisely that he undermines the religious institution represented by God and Adam and Eve. Interestingly, however, there are parallels also between the critical trend regarding secularization and the critical trend regarding *Paradise Lost*. Leading thinkers of the 1800s believed that secularization was inevitable (3), which is roughly around the same time that the Romantics had such a high opinion of Satan. This belief continued to dominate until quite recently, when it has been shown that religion is even on the rise in many parts of the world (4). It has been found, however, that “the experience of existential security drives the process of secularization” (xiii), meaning that it is “the most prosperous social sectors living in affluent and secure post-industrial nations” (5) that are, indeed, becoming increasingly secular. It should perhaps also be mentioned that secularization has little to do with whether or not God exists or whether or not people believe in him – it has mostly to do with the importance of the institution of religion and how much it affects people’s lives (5). Accordingly, this essay does not attempt to argue for or against the existence of God or of the validity of personal religious belief, but rather for skepticism towards

religious institutions when they infringe on happiness, liberty and equality, both personal and collective.

Structure

The body of the essay is divided into four parts, each dealing with a theme in *Paradise Lost* relevant to the thesis. The first and second parts question the legitimacy of God's rule and his values, respectively, while the third part explores whether the poem presents Paradise as superior to life on Earth. Together these three parts argue for a secular interpretation of the characterization and concepts in *Paradise Lost*, as they are presented in the poem. The fourth part attempts to consolidate these arguments and use them as a basis to show that a theoretical secular approach can support the interpretation of the narrative itself as one about secularization.

His Wrath, Which He Calls Justice On God's tyranny

Paradise Lost famously begins *in medias res*, with Satan and his crew waking up in Hell after having been punished by God for their transgressions against him. The poem tells us that Satan rebels against God “[t]o set himself in glory above his peers” (1.39), that “Satan’s revolt is not against tyranny” but “against a tyrant whose place he wishes to usurp” (Flesch 427). Satan himself, meanwhile, claims that he is fighting a God “[w]hom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme” (1.248), only “upheld by old repute, / Consent or custom” (1.639-40). Whether or not Satan’s motives are ultimately self-serving, however, it cannot be denied that his call for liberty is justified when the God in *Paradise Lost* does, in fact, seem to “[s]ole reigning [hold] the tyranny of Heav’n” (1.124).

This tyranny is shown most clearly in God’s own justification of his autocracy, explained to Satan by the angel Michael on the battlefield:

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 /
Such as he pleased, and circumscribed their being?
(5.821-5)

What this amounts to is that God is above reason and logic because he is the creator of all things. This ultimately makes the question of God’s rule a theological one, where this argument is a convenient trump card to be played whenever a question has no reasonable answer. Because God is personified in *Paradise Lost*, however, he is treated in this essay as a character rather than an abstract entity, which makes it possible to directly question his motives. Northrop Frye makes a similar distinction between “the conceptual and the dramatic aspects” of the poem, writing that “[t]heologically, nothing could be more correct: dramatically, nothing is better calculated to give the impression of a smirking hypocrite” (446). He refers to the difference between the actual God and the character of God in the poem, but this essay conflates these two within the world of *Paradise Lost* to claim that God may, indeed, have created the universe, but, through gross misuse of his powers, he forfeits his right to wield those powers.

Frye's comments also indicate that the poetic force of *Paradise Lost* does not appear to lie with God; most would argue, in fact, that this poetic force lies with Satan. Certainly it is clear that Satan's logic is often questionable at best and that he frequently seems to offer up false arguments just to legitimize his own pursuit of power; indeed, Joseph Addison claimed that all of Satan's words are "big with absurdity" (381) to underscore the fact that Satan's is a cautionary tale. In Book 5, for example, Satan argues that he and his crew should submit to no one on the faulty reasoning that they did not witness their creation, and thus there is no proof that God created them (5.853-71). Another example of this kind of unsound logic is the "tyrant's plea" (4.360-93), where Satan blames his corruption of Adam and Eve on God and tries to justify his actions with irrational political reasons. Regardless of these lapses in logic, however, it seems that Satan is driven more by emotion rather than rationality: his arguments may fall apart under close scrutiny, but the flawed logic is thrown into shadow by Satan's obvious distress. It is the underlying emotions that make the argument, not how well the rhetorical puzzle pieces fit together. Kenneth Gross even suggests that "[i]t may in fact be the compulsiveness, the unbending error of Satan's words which makes them feel like so proper an emblem of the mind's life" (423) – in other words, the fact that Satan is a confused character makes him all the more sympathetic. Pair this pathos with his clear-eyed observation of the unfairness of God's rule, and Satan seems to in fact be quite justified in his rebellion.

The power of Satan's emotional appeal and the strong reasoning of his battle cry for equality are only strengthened in comparison with the weakness of God's arguments and of his character. When he first appears in Book 3, for example, he speaks, in the words of Philip Pullman, "in that unattractive whine we hear from children who, caught at a scene of mischief, seek at once to put the blame on someone else" (77). From "his prospect high [...] past, present and future he beholds" (3.77-8), meaning that he in fact knows what is going to happen to mankind. He shows spiteful anger toward Satan, saying "[i]ngrate, he had of me / All he could have; I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (3.97-9), and claims that he gave all beings free will so that he could be sure of the sincerity of their obedience but goes on to excuse himself by saying that the fallen angels cannot "justly accuse / Their Maker, or their making, or their fate" (3.112-3). If Satan's is a "tyrant's plea," then so is this – in the words of Northrop Frye, "the Father seems equally caught in the

trap of his own pseudo-logic” (447). At the end of his speech, God declares that “[Satan and company] by their own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived / By the other first: man therefore shall find grace, / The other none” (3.129-32), but this so-called grace seems quite egotistical as he goes on to say that man will be redeemed “not of will in him, but grace in me” (3.174) and will “to me owe / All his deliv’rance, and to none but me” (3.181-2). To further excuse himself, God sends the angel Raphael to “advise [Adam] of his happy state, / Happiness in his power left free to will” (5.234-5), “[I]est wilfully transgressing he pretend / Surprisal, unadmonished, unforewarned” (5.244-5). God comes across as very arrogant, and for all his claims that mankind is his most beloved creation, he does not seem to trust Adam very much or indeed think particularly highly of him at all.

According to C.S. Lewis, those who criticize the God of *Paradise Lost* tend to criticize God in general and should therefore not be trusted to evaluate his character (“From the conclusion” 437); furthermore, he claims that the reader is not meant to feel as much as think when reading the poem, and so should look elsewhere to feel moved by God’s love (438). It seems obvious, however, that Lewis fits in neatly with those referred to by William Empson when he writes that “[t]he opinions of both attackers and defenders of the poem have evidently corresponded to their various theologies or world-views” (439). As exemplified by Lewis, attempts to absolve the God of *Paradise Lost* seem to inevitably resort to appealing to Milton’s intentions and his faults or virtues as a writer, or else to the nature of Christianity as a whole. Of course, the argument applies equally to those who blindly condemn God, but nevertheless the consensus seems to be that as he appears in *Paradise Lost*, God comes across as a less than credible character. Lewis writes himself that “Milton’s presentation of God the Father has always been felt to be unsatisfactory” (“From the conclusion” 437) and seems to grudgingly agree, and Empson writes that though Milton “is struggling to make his God appear less wicked [...] his modern critics still feel [...] that there is something badly wrong about it all” (440). Using the liberal humanist idea of analyzing the poem severed from its contexts appears, again, to suggest that, standing on its own, *Paradise Lost* supports Satan rather than God.

The conclusion to be drawn is that *Paradise Lost* as a poem seems to disprove Voltaire’s claim that “the God of Milton is always a creator, a father, and a judge; nor is his vengeance jarring with his mercy, nor his predeterminations repugnant to the

liberty of man” (383). If, as Samuel Johnson wrote in 1779, what Milton meant by “justify[ing] the ways of God to men” (1.26) was “to shew the reasonableness of religion, and the necessity of obedience to the Divine Law” (384), it seems he failed. Satan, though flawed, presents a persuasive argument in favor of liberty and equality, an argument that is only strengthened by his pathos. Satan is also only one among many: he is the particularly flawed figurehead of an entire movement, individual members of which have different opinions but are united by a common desire to free themselves from God’s rule – which, as shown, seems like nothing so much as a theological dictatorship.

Can It Be Sin to Know? On God’s values

In Book 1, Satan proclaims that “[t]o do aught good will never be our task, / But to ever do ill our sole delight” (1.159-60). In the face of a statement like this, it is difficult to defend him. This essay suggests, however, that God’s values of good and evil are simply arbitrary, and that Satan’s ‘evil’ is, in fact, not evil at all, but rather the expression of a desire to tear down God’s own value of goodness. There seems to be, in other words, a disjunction between God’s terms and the concepts he applies them to, meaning that what God terms universally good only benefits him within the context of the poem. In this essay, it is, instead, Satan who fights for true good, including happiness, liberty and equality, which, as the long tradition of secular humanism proves, are universal values that are worth striving for.

The first point in undermining God’s idea of good and evil comes in fact from Satan; for all his questionable logic, Satan makes sense not only in his call for equality but also in his observations about God’s demands on Adam and Eve. After eavesdropping on their conversation in Book 4, Satan ponders the Tree of Knowledge:

One fatal tree there stands of Knowledge called, / Forbidden them to taste:
knowledge forbidden? / Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord /
Envy them that? Can it be sin to know, / Can it be death? And do they only
stand / By ignorance, is that their happy state, / The proof of their obedience
and their faith? (4.514-20)

What Satan encapsulates here is that in God's mind, good equals obedience and evil equals disobedience. In fact, the angel Raphael tells Adam and Eve "that thou art happy, owe to God; / That thou continu'st such, owe to thyself, / That is, to thy obedience; therein stand" (5.520-2). God seems to want to suggest that sin is evil in action while virtue is goodness in action, and the former leads to eternal misery while the other leads to happiness – and God's subjects are to blindly trust him to lead them towards this path of happiness.

If, however, Adam and Eve are to take God at his word, it must be shown that God's idea of goodness and virtue really does lead to happiness. The quote above already refutes this by showing quite clearly that when God says 'be virtuous,' he means 'obey me,' and, as demonstrated in the previous section, there is little if any indication that following God's orders benefits anyone other than God. Another line in the poem, "[k]nowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill" (4.222), shows that it is clearly true even within the world of *Paradise Lost* that knowledge of evil brings with it a more intimate understanding of good – in fact, the line implies that good was not known at all before the Fall. All of this suggests that Eden is nothing more than a holding pen or fishbowl in which God can keep a close eye on his playthings. In fact, it has been suggested that Adam and Eve's purpose in Eden "is to prune what is unruly in their own natures as they prune the vegetation in their garden, for both have the capacity to grow wild" (Greenblatt 1944). In light of this, God's idea of Paradise and of mankind's life in it becomes more than simply a limbo state: it becomes actively sinister, nothing but an elaborate test of mankind's obedience to a self-serving deity. God admits to knowing what is going to happen but claims that he cannot change it (7.114-19), which clashes with the assertion that God is also omnipotent. What can God's purpose be other than to soothe his own wounded ego? Of course, Book 12 makes it clear that life after the Redemption will be better than life in Eden, but this does not improve the situation much: in the first case, the Tree of Knowledge is a test of their obedience, and in the second, life on Earth is simply a longer and much more grueling test. Certainly, the argument can be made that love need be tested and that God is particularly harsh towards Adam and Eve because he was hurt by Satan's betrayal. This is suggested, for example, by lines 150-61 in Book 7, where God says that he can repair the damage done by Satan by creating a new race that will have to

thoroughly prove itself to earn God's trust. However, one moment of seemingly sincere hurt does not absolve God of his cruel methods.

Not only do God's motives seem objectionable, but E.M.W. Tillyard observes that Milton "does not convince us, as he means to do, that a state of innocence is better than an unregenerate state of sin" (451). This "unregenerate state of sin," of course, is mankind's life in between the Fall and the Redemption, when Jesus will return to absolve mankind and God will unite Heaven and Earth in ultimate happiness. Tillyard believes that Milton describes beautifully the wonders of Paradise in Book 4, but that "he can be no more successful than any other human being in an attempt to imagine a state of existence at variance with the primal requirements of the human mind" (451). These lines can be interpreted as referring to the limitations of the human mind, but they also seem to signify that people simply need more than what Eden has to offer, as Tillyard further writes that Milton "can find no adequate scope [in Eden] for [Adam and Eve's] active natures" (451). This would be true even if God attempted to create a utopia, but it seems that his intentions are much less altruistic, reducing, as he does, Adam and Eve "to the ridiculous task of working in a garden which produces of its own accord more than they will never need" (Tillyard 451).

Shelley's observation that God "in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy" (394) seems very apt; although the enemy here is meant to be Satan, it seems equally applicable to Adam and Eve. Not only does Satan seem to be justified in rebelling against God, but it seems also in Adam and Eve's best interest to sever their ties with him as well.

The World Was All Before Them On living in a godless world

Although it may be best for Satan and Adam and Eve to leave God behind them, what kind of life do they have to look forward to in a godless world? In the absence of a religious safety net, there are certain realities humans must face. In the conventional narrative of *Paradise Lost*, these realities are the products of a depraved and corrupt humanity, as exemplified by the flash-forward that God offers Adam in Books 11 and 12. In secular humanism, however, the basic tenet is "concern for the lot of humanity" (Prono and Cooke 3), and that means that secular humanists must try to separate the

innate value of mankind from the contemptible deeds that humans sometimes commit. It is an ongoing struggle, but the underlying idea is that the terrible actions of individuals do not automatically condemn all of humanity to sin.

In Book 1, Satan outlines the idea that people have the ability to find a reason for their existence within themselves, saying that “[t]he mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (1.254-5). This train of thought is continued in Book 2, where members of Satan’s army discuss what they should do going forward in ways that reflect secular humanist values. Belial points out how sad it would be if they were dead, saying “[t]o be no more; sad cure; for who would lose / Though full of pain, this intellectual being, / Those thoughts that wander through eternity” (2.146-8) and echoing the secular humanist belief that people “should seek salvation in this life through work and thought” (Prono and Cooke 3) instead of mindlessly accepting a moral code handed down by God. Mammon further urges the army to “seek / Our own good from ourselves, and from our own / Live to ourselves” (2.252-4) and everybody likes the idea of founding “this nether empire, which might rise / By policy, and long process of time, / In emulation opposite to Heav’n” (2.295-8). Each argument is eventually rejected in favor of a plan to corrupt Adam and Eve, because Beëlzebub believes that God will “with his iron scepter rule / Us here, as with his golden those in Heav’n” (2.327-8). Since God’s mode of government is demonstrably tyrannical, it makes sense for the fallen angels to want to completely eliminate the threat instead of having it as a constant shadow. Only then can they become truly free to live their lives in the ways that they discuss.

Even though secular humanism holds these strong beliefs, however, there must still be some kind of reconciliation with the fact that there are true horrors in the world. In the poem, this is illustrated by Satan’s encounters with the personifications of Sin and Death. In Book 2, it is revealed that Sin is Satan’s daughter and Death is their son, meaning that sin was born in Satan’s mind and then caused death and destruction to come into being. As much as good and evil are subjective in this essay, however, so are sin and death: they are offspring of Satan’s only in the sense that they are inevitable parts of life – as discussed previously, sin is identified in *Paradise Lost* as nothing more than disobedience towards a selfish God. By definition, every secular person disobeys God, which would make each one a sinner. A lot of what falls under the religious interpretation of sin, however, are natural human characteristics and

urges; what most secular humanists would consider to be sin are senseless acts of cruelty and violence. These acts are not representative of humanity as a whole. Therefore, in the interpreted narrative, Satan's relationship to Sin and Death is more about accepting the difficulty of life than it is about embracing willful acts of violence and destruction. Satan did not literally create sin and death, but rather his cooperation with them in Books 2 and 10 represents Satan-as-mankind's attempt to find a way to live alongside them. Just like "Death from Sin no power can separate" (10.251), no power can separate death and sin from life – as long as 'sin' is simply the religious word for human nature.

It is not only Satan who is involved in this struggle for a good life without God, however: Adam and Eve are as well. Book 11 and 12 of the poem contain some comments that by all appearances seem to indicate that Adam and Eve can achieve a happier life on Earth than they could in Eden. Over this looms, of course, the promise of the Redemption: the understanding is that life on Earth will be tolerable because the Redemption will eventually bring such bliss, and this is what the poem is meant to refer to. Nevertheless, when the angel Michael says to Eve that "[w]here [Adam] abides, think there thy native soil" (11.292) and that "the earth / Shall all be paradise, far happier place / Than this of Eden, and far happier days" (12.463-5), one can imagine that now secular Adam and Eve can use these words as inspiration, happily living out their lives on Earth after having left God behind.

The poem even gives the strong impression that the Fall and the self-doubt that precedes it are good for Adam and Eve, because they appear to be the most sympathetic from Book 9 and onwards. In this book, "Adam and Eve have turned into recognizable human beings, even before the Fall: we instinctively associate their characters with life as we know it, not with the conditions of life that prevailed in the Garden of Eden" (Tillyard 451). The simple answer to this – and the answer that the poem seems to want to give – is that readers recognize in Adam and Eve the sin within themselves, as C.S Lewis suggests they do in Satan. But if that is true then sin takes a very strange form. As Philip Pullman writes, what is most moving in Book 11 "is the growing humanity of Adam and Eve, and the subtle play of emotions – fear leavened by hope, sorrow tempered by resolution – that characterizes their new and fallen state" (319). These emotions ring much more true than, for example, Adam's speech in Book 12 where he supposedly truly understands God's magnificence for the first time,

exclaiming that “[h]enceforth I learn, that to obey is best, / And love with fear the only God” (12.561-2).

The Fall, then – both the fall of the angels and the fall of man – is on closer scrutiny not an ending so much as it is a beginning. Those beautiful lines that close the poem invoke such a strong melancholy sense of hope:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; / The world was all
before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and Providence their
guide: / They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow, / Through Eden
took their solitary way. (12.644-9)

Although these words are generally taken to indicate how Adam and Eve will do their best in life on Earth in order to eventually reach Redemption, they can also be read as mankind leaving religion behind, abandoning its comfort but hoping to gain more freedom and, ultimately, greater meaning in the new secular world. In this context, the tone of these lines seems very much in harmony with that bittersweet belief of secular humanism that mankind is not the center of any universe, whether scientific or religious, but nonetheless has the power to create a meaningful existence for itself, by itself.

So Spake th’ Apostate Angel *Paradise Lost* as a secular story

The first three sections of this essay have put forth arguments that certain key ideas and concepts in *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted to support a secular reading of the poem. The essay has argued that firstly, God’s rule comes across as tyrannical; secondly, that God’s values really only disguise his ego; and, thirdly, that life on Earth might even be better than life in Eden. It seems, then, that the liberal humanist practice of simply analyzing “the words on the page” (Barry 15) reveals a certain truth about *Paradise Lost*, that it in fact appears to argue against its own supposed message and gives the impression of siding with the struggles of Satan. This essay takes this observation even further, however, and argues that the sequence of events can be interpreted so that the story itself becomes one about secularization.

Corroborating this claim inevitably starts with Satan. The core of this interpreted narrative is that Satan represents mankind, and the support for this is, firstly, that Satan's characterization is very human, and, secondly, that this characterization lends itself to the interpretation of Satan as a more concrete metaphor for humanity, with his story mirroring mankind's process of secularization. To take the first point, it has always been felt that in *Paradise Lost*, Satan positively leaps off the page; P.B. Shelley wrote in 1821 that "[n]othing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*" (394). Satan is more than mere theatricality, however: he possesses an incredible moral, psychological and emotional complexity that is difficult to reconcile with the common image of him as evil incarnate. Examples of his complexity of emotion come already in the first Book, where he proudly exclaims that for nothing "do I repent or change" (1.96) but is soon after revealed to speak "in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair" (1.125-6). The reader is never able to pin Satan down; in Book 4, for example, where the examination of his psyche is perhaps most striking and complex, he comes to Paradise "[t]o wreak on innocent frail man his loss" (4.11) but begins to doubt himself and realizes that he "from Hell / One step no more than from himself can fly" (4.21-2). He ends up recommitting himself to his mission not out of malice but with a dejected acceptance of his own nature. This is quite a long way from the arrogance of Book 1, and just like in that first appearance, Satan's more unsavory aspects are tempered by genuine and affecting emotional distress. Attempts have been made to use this contradictory categorization to place Satan somewhere along the binary of good and evil; Joseph Addison, for example, remarked as early as 1712 that "[Satan's] Sentiments are every way answerable to his Character, and suitable to a created Being of the most exalted and most depraved Nature" (381), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted that "[t]he character of Satan is pride and sensual indulgence, finding in self the sole motive of action" and that "Milton has carefully marked in Satan the intense selfishness, the alcohol of egotism, which would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven" (391) – meaning, in other words, that Satan is a dramatic but not a moral accomplishment. At the other end of the spectrum, P.B. Shelley remarked, in line with the trend of the Romantic era, that "[i]t is a mistake to suppose that [Satan] could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil" and that "as a moral being [he] is [...] far superior to his God" in his tenacity – although, it should be

noted, he also recognized in Satan “taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement” (393). In either case, it is clear that attempts to classify Satan as good or bad never quite succeed and simply reinforce the notion that he is neither. Instead, this essay suggests that what this multifaceted characterization most strongly invokes is Satan’s humanity. And indeed, modern criticism has embraced this contradiction in Satan and focused in particular on the similarities between his psyche and that of mankind. Kenneth Gross claims that Satan becomes such a fascination to readers precisely because his thought processes are so relatable to human beings in their complexity (422); C.S. Lewis also recognizes this relatability, although he suggests that readers are only moved by Satan because they see in him the evil that they fear within themselves. In the same context, however, he observes that “[a] fallen man *is* very like a fallen angel” (“From Satan“ 405). Whether or not this relatability stems from people’s positive or negative self-conception, the consensus seems to be that Satan is, indeed, very human.

If Satan thus represents the desires of humanity, then what implications does this have for his character development in the poem? To start from the beginning, the correlation between the fall of the angels and the fall of man is perhaps obvious: both parties go against God’s wishes and both events result in severe punishment that marks the angels and humans as sinners. In the interpreted narrative, the fall of angels, therefore, corresponds to the fall of man, and so the story begins right where Satan-as-mankind has been branded a sinner because he defied God. This correlates neatly with the shift in contemporary society where “traditional religious rituals are losing their centrality” as a result of “the declining power of religion to coerce belief” (Prono and Cooke 9, 6) – in other words, the point at which mankind tires of being subjected to a religious doctrine that the scientific method has dismantled. It is important here to note that the interpreted narrative requires most characters in the poem to be seen as symbols of the values that they represent. So, while in the conventional narrative Satan declares war against God for seemingly selfish reasons, in the interpreted narrative he represents the desire of mankind to tear down the values that God more broadly stands for, which, earlier in this essay, are shown to benefit only God.

These values are, in the interpreted narrative, embodied by Adam and Eve. The war between Satan and God can then be seen as the first rumblings of secular rebellion, whereas the corruption of Adam and Eve represents the more focused and

systematic destruction of religion. It makes sense for Satan-as-mankind to want to utterly destroy the unattainable icons of perfection that God has set up for him. Though Satan lies and schemes his way through much of it, his core argument about knowledge holds up, which again parallels the secular humanist belief in acquiring knowledge using the scientific method instead of accepting it from a deity.

Satan, of course, succeeds in corrupting Adam and Eve, but in the conventional narrative he is punished beyond redemption, forced to live in Hell as a snake. In the interpreted narrative, however, Satan succeeds in destroying God's icons of virtue, abandons the image of himself as a sinner, and steps into the much more hopeful role of the secular man. One can, in other words, view Satan and Adam and Eve as merging into one at this point: Satan's success in corrupting Adam and Eve initiates the process of secularization, manifested by the postlapsarian Adam and Eve who go on to live a secular life on Earth. Such an interpretation is in many aspects supported by the poem. For one thing, on the surface Satan as a character seems to become more evil as the story goes along, culminating in his literally being turned into a snake. In fact, it is a popular opinion among critics that Satan "does not degenerate: he is degraded" (Waldock 417). This "gradual calculated degradation" (Empson 419) is often attributed to Milton's self-consciousness at making Satan too sympathetic (Waldock 414-15), but as Kenneth Gross writes, it can be dangerous to "ground our reading of the poetry on a hypothetical commitment to the polarized terms of the poet's belief" (421). This is especially true of this essay since it makes a deliberate point by analyzing the poem as it is; nonetheless, it is clear that Satan commits himself more and more strongly to the poem's concept of sin, to such a point that the downfall becomes a parody, a sort of caricature of God's extreme and unsubstantiated opinion of evil. Satan-as-mankind is unable to support this any longer, and so banishes it into Hell forever to perform its grotesque play on the consequences of sinful behavior, just as he destroys the equally untenable demands of virtue that Adam and Eve represent. Adam and Eve, in fact, seem the most human after the Fall, before which Adam's words often sound "oddly like something learned by rote, or like a bit of preacherly ventriloquism" (Gross 423), especially compared to Satan's poignancy. In other words, the version of Adam and Eve that exists before Satan and Adam and Eve merge is as much a caricature of virtue as Satan's degenerative journey is one of sin.

In short, what the conventional narrative suggests to be the fate of Satan on the one hand and the Fall on the other can instead be seen as mankind's rejection of the binaries of sin and virtue that God tries to impose. This is the first step on mankind's journey to transform itself into a secular race, after having been stigmatized as sinful by a God who claims to preach love when he instead seems to see more to his own interests than to his supposed children's. In this interpreted narrative, therefore, Satan's journey throughout *Paradise Lost* is a microcosm of secular liberation at large.

Conclusion

This aim of this essay has been to show that *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted in a secular way, both in the message it contains and in the unfolding of events of the narrative. This has been done by showing that the poem devalues God's rule and his values and is unsuccessful in unequivocally proving the value of Paradise over that of life on Earth without God. These arguments have then been used to support the interpreted narrative, showing, in other words, that the story itself can be interpreted as a story about secularization. The essence of this interpreted narrative is that Satan, as a symbol of mankind, succeeds in overthrowing the icons of God's virtue, and, in shedding his self-image as a sinner, transforms himself instead into a secular man. This interpreted narrative mirrors that of humanity deciding to live life with hope in its own abilities, as opposed to living under God's rule – in other words, it is reminiscent of the process of secularization and the secular humanist values that run through it. As in Wallace Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning," when the Earth is "all of paradise that we shall know / The sky will be much friendlier" than God's "dividing and indifferent blue."

This interpretation is valuable because it offers an alternative insight into the peculiar distribution of poetic force in the poem, meaning that it gives a possible explanation to why Satan is so prominent when, ostensibly, *Paradise Lost* wants to warn against the evil that he represents. It also shows that works that were written hundreds of years ago can still be relevant today: not only can they still provide problems to analyze, but they may even offer an insight into contemporary processes such as secularization even if those processes directly contradict the message of the work. Not surprisingly, this corroborates the claim that has been central to this essay: the fact that there are certain aspects of human nature that, as liberal humanism suggests, truly do seem to be constant and unchanging.

The essay has attempted to balance the ethos, pathos and logos of *Paradise Lost*, specifically trying to ascertain how much emphasis should be put on Milton's authority, the strength of Satan's emotional appeal and the validity of the various arguments presented. More focused prospective study of the poem, as it relates to these three modes of persuasion, could yield interesting results and perhaps shed more

light on the poem and its message. As mentioned, this essay has not tried to argue that the poem contains a deliberate secular or atheist message, but it is, nonetheless, quite poetic to think that *Paradise Lost* can be read in such a way as to suggest that it contains within itself a prophecy of the future decline and death of its own core values.

Works Cited

- Addison, Joseph. "From Spectator 303." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 381-2. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (3rd ed.). Manchester/New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2009. Print.
- Blake, William. "From The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: p. 389. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Unassigned Lecture Notes." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 391-2. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Flesch, William. "From The Majesty of Darkness: Idol and Image in Milton." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 425-7. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. "From The Garden Within." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 445-9 Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen (Ed.). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume B* (9th ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012. Print.
- Gross, Kenneth. "From Satan and the Romantic Satan: A Notebook." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 420-4. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Johnson, Samuel. "From Lives of the English Poets." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 384-7. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Lewis, C.S. "From Satan." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 401-7. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Lewis, C.S. "From the conclusion to A Preface to Paradise Lost." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 437-9. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume B* (9th ed.): 1945-2175. Stephen Greenblatt (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012. Print.

- Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Prono, Luca and Bill Cooke. "Humanism, Secular." *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Ed. H. James Birx. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006. 1249-53. *SAGE knowledge*. Web. 22 Nov 2013.
- Pullman, Philip. "Introduction" and comments on the Books. In *Paradise Lost*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- Rajan, Balachandra. "From The Problem of Satan." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 401-13. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "From the preface to Prometheus Unbound." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 393-5. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Tillyard, E.M.W. "From Paradise Lost: The Conscious Meaning and The Unconscious Meaning." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 449-52. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Voltaire. "From Essay upon the Civil Wars of France...". In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 383. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.
- Waldock, A.J.A. "From Satan and the Technique of Degradation." In *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*: 413-17. Gordon Teskey (Ed.). New York, NY/London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005. Print.