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## Paradise Lost As an Epic

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### Abstract

*Without any shadow of doubts, Paradise Lost can be included among the classical epics as written by Homer and Virgil. The poem concerns the biblical story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Milton's purpose, stated in Book I, is to "justify the ways of God to men. Paradise Lost has been written in ten books. Because of the use of grand style, the theme of the poem attains universal applicability. Moreover, Milton's use of epic similes enrich the thematic unity of the poem.*

**Key-words:** Grand Style, Biblical, Satan, Fall of Man

Albeit, *Paradise Lost* is a poetic rendering of the Biblical theme of fall of man cast within the epic framework of Homer and Virgil, but the treatment of this theme in a grand style lifts this epic to the level of universal applicability where the poet also justifies the ways of god to men. John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, announces this theme clearly and ambiguously in the very opening lines of the poem (lines 1-26, and 27-49), where the poet proposes to deal

with man's first disobedience and the woeful consequences of his tasting the fruit of the forbidden tree, and by his treatment of this subject, Milton wishes to assert eternal providence and justify the ways of god to men.

The motive prompting the poet to deal with this theme is very exalted as he wants to establish the essential justice of god's dealing with human beings, to dispel the doubts people often entertain regarding the moral order in this universe as S.T Coleridge asserts while commenting on the theme of *Paradise Lost*:

"It represents the origin of evil, and the combat of good and evil, it contains matter of deep interest to all mankind, as forming the base of all philosophy what so ever."

However, there is large heated controversy regarding the hero of the epic because of the role of Adams is conspicuously important in the middle and later parts of the epic, and that of god is so scant and sporadic that he cannot be described as the hero of the epic. But, there is no doubt in denying the fact that it is Satan who carries the central thrust of the epic, especially in the first two books of *paradise lost*, and moreover, the gigantic stature and

domineering personality of Satan is a thematic necessity as he, too, functions as an adversary of god who is supreme, almighty, and omnipotent which, in turns, also highlights the significance and indispensability of the positive qualities like virtue, kind, pity, honesty, justice in life.

So, whatever the case it may be, it is beyond doubt that the role and personality of Satan is central to the illustration of the central theme of *paradise lost* as an epic where Milton also successfully employs the epic features of Homer and Virgil to illustrate the external conflict between good and evil as it also affects the life of man on the earth. The opening of the epic takes place in the meadows where the poet expounds the central theme of the epic when he says:

Of man's first disobedience, and the  
fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal  
taste  
Brought death in to the world, and all  
our woe  
With loss of Eden; till one greater man  
Like his ancient epic masters, Milton  
also invokes heavenly muses to  
illustrate, illumine, raise and support  
him, so as to enable the poet to write  
an adventurous song when he says:

Assert eternal providence  
And justify the ways of god to men  
So, like an epic of Homer, in *paradise lost* also, we are directly launched in to the middle of the epic, where the poet

after announcing the central theme of the epic, expresses it in an equally lofty and majestic style. According to Macaulay, Milton, as a poet as well as a man, is to be found in every square inch of *paradise lost*, who is not only known for his theme, but for his grand style also. That is why, Milton has been called as the organ voice of England.

In this way, after announcing the central theme of the epic, the poet explores and traces the various causes responsible for the fall of man, and says that it was infernal serpent stirred up with an envy and revenge who, in his ambition to equal the most high raised impious war in heaven with vain attempts, and then deceived the mother of mankind, and resultant defiance on the part of man against the will of god. As a result of that foul revolt, Satan and his rebel hosts were:

Hurled headlong flaming  
from the ethereal sky,  
With hideous ruin and  
combustion, down  
To bottomless perdition;  
there to dwell  
In adamant chains and  
penal fire

Albeit, Adams and eve are repeatedly warned against this fell by Raphael and Gabriel, as is shown in the later books of *Paradise Lost*; eve fall prey to persuasive machinations of Adam along with the immortal state of happiness. Since, our discussion of the epic theme is confined to book-1 of *Paradise Lost*

only, so what we find here is a scene of sorrows and miseries as the poet puts it as:

That dismal situation, waste  
and wild

A dungeon horrible, on all  
sides round

As one great furnance  
flamed.....

And this situation is without any rest  
and hope. Despite this miserable  
plight, the valour and will of Satan  
makes him to rue with high distains  
and a sense of injured merit as he  
thunders out:

What though the field be lost  
All is not lost: the  
unconquerable will

And study of revenge,  
immortal hate,

And courage never to  
submit or yield.

Thematically, the unflinching  
determination and undeterred boldness  
of Satan illustrates that even in the  
adverse and unfavourable  
circumstances, the spirit and  
confidence of man can turn the table,  
and one can extract the best of the  
worst. Milton makes use of Pagan,  
renaissance, Biblical, and Classical  
world in their myriad usages and  
manifestations to illustrate his poetic  
vision in the epic, *Paradise Lost*.

Milton also makes use of a number of  
poetic devices like epic similes taken  
from these above mentioned divergent  
sources which contributes a lot to the

grand style of the epic, *paradise lost*.  
For instance, the epic comparison of  
the fallen angels with the autumnal  
leaves, and that of huge size of Satan  
with sea-monster, typhoon and  
leviathan, is highly meaningful and  
relevant in more than one sense. As the  
autumnal leaves symbolizes the  
extraneous and useless outgrowth  
separated from their source of  
substance, so are the fallen angels who  
are waste and wild divorced from their  
source of life- that is god. In the same  
way, the mythical sea- monster who  
deceives the innocent passengers of a  
night foundered skiff, so is Satan who  
is an evil incarnate and also deceives  
innocent Adams and eves on the earth.  
There is a beautiful comparison of  
Satan with the tower and arch-angles,  
and the sun under eclipse in book-1 of  
*Paradise Lost* as the poet also remarks:

In shape and gesture proudly  
eminent

Stood like a tower. His form has  
yet not changed

Less than archangels, ruined  
and excess

In this way, we can safely and rightly  
aver that both in theme and purpose,  
*Paradise Lost* is a product of  
reformation spirit or it may be alleged  
that the form of *Paradise Lost* reflects  
the renaissance spirit, and its theme  
the reformation spirit.

So, like *Iliad* of Homer, and *Aeneid* of  
Virgil, *Paradise Lost* is also a superb  
epic illustration of theme of fall of man,



redemption after sufferings, and the birth of Jesus Christ who guided mankind in to future salvation where Milton also succeeds in highlighting the inevitable indispensability of divine justice and mercy of god in human life. So, Hazlitt is right when he says:

“*Paradise Lost* is a superb poetic expression of the cosmic themes of heaven, hell, god, Satan, and mankind conveyed in an equally stupendous and grand style whose execution is as perfect as its design is lofty.”

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