



Milton

Paradise Lost

John Milton was born December 9, 1608 in London, the son of a successful scrivener. His father's money provided him with an excellent education, and he graduated with a Master's degree from Cambridge in 1632. Critical of the clergy, he gave up his original plans to enter the Anglican Church and instead returned to his father's home where he embarked on an intensive personal course of study in the classics and added to his already impressive fluency in languages (he was eventually fluent in Italian, French, Spanish, Hebrew, and Aramaic in addition to his Latin and Greek). At the age of thirty-five, he married seventeen year old Mary Powell, who left him to return to her family within only a few weeks. They were reconciled two years later and she gave birth to three daughters before she died in 1654 giving birth to a son who survived only a few months. A strong supporter of Parliament, he entered civil service in 1649 after the execution of Charles I. He retired briefly because of his failing eyesight—he was totally blind by 1652—but returned to serve under Cromwell until the Restoration. He was married for a second time in 1656 to Katherine Woodcock, who also died in childbirth. When Charles II returned to the throne in 1660, Milton initially went into hiding and eventually served a short prison term. On being released, he retired to his family home and turned from civil service and the political rhetoric of his pamphlets to the literature and poetry of his earlier years, dictating to his daughters. In 1663, he married Elizabeth Minshull, who cared for him until his death in 1674.

Milton's life was marked by the struggles of his age: his father was disowned by his own family on his conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism; his famous tract on divorce was born of the pain of his own failed first marriage; and his strident partisanship in the civil war that wracked England brought him civil service under Oliver Cromwell and forced him into hiding to escape prosecution when Charles II took the throne and ushered in the period called the Restoration. Milton's writings were born out of these personal struggles. His first poems, published while he was still at Cambridge, established his reputation as a lyric poet. But as tensions between religious reformers and the royalist supporters of the crown

increased—tensions which eventually led to civil war—Milton turned to politically motivated writing. He composed pamphlets against the monarchy in defense of Parliament and wrote religious tracts attacking the Catholic Church and those Protestants he perceived to be interfering with the Reformation. When his marriage to Mary Powell seemed to have failed, he wrote tracts defining marriage as a joining of two people into one—sexually, intellectually, and spiritually—and calling for greater leniency in the divorce laws, claiming that incompatibility in any of those areas was grounds for nullifying the marriage. Prosecuted and fined for publishing his tracts on divorce without the newly required license, he promptly wrote his most famous prose piece, *Areopagitica*, a lengthy essay on freedom of the press, and published it without a license! When the Restoration ended his hopes for an English puritan republic, he gave up his political writing and returned to his long contemplated epic, publishing *Paradise Lost* in 1667 and both *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in 1671.

CONTEXT

John Milton was what today we would call—perhaps too glibly and without complete justice—an activist, a man who constantly put his life at risk for the sake of principles he believed in. Those principles grew directly out of his broodings over the major political and religious upheavals of his time. The Protestant Reformation was spreading and developing political power as it grew; the Scientific Revolution had forever changed man's understanding of his place in the physical universe; and the English Civil War would rock England to her foundations and set in motion cataclysms that would be felt throughout the rest of Europe. Milton considered himself a passionate Christian, but his rejection of orthodox teaching on the Trinity marked him as an early Unitarian. He loathed the Catholic Church and put aside his long planned entry into the Anglican priesthood because he was sickened by the corruption he saw there.

Nearly a hundred years of Calvinist theology had established passionate Protestant sects that gained in political power as they grew and spread. In 1640, the Scottish Presbyterians openly rebelled against the English King Charles I when he sought to impose on them the Anglican form of church organization in the authority of bishops. Seizing the opportunity thus handed to them, the Presbyterian majority of the English Parliament moved to curb the power of the king and in 1642 the ensuing power struggle between the Parliamentarians and the Royalists, who were loyal to the king, deteriorated into civil war. Toward the end of the war, Oliver Cromwell, a strict Puritan who had led the Parliamentary troops, forced the more moderate Presbyterians out of Parliament, and brought an end to the monarchy. In early 1649 Charles I was beheaded and the English Commonwealth was established. It lasted only until 1653 when Cromwell, who had retained command of the military, marched into Parliament and forcibly disbanded it. This began the period of "the Protectorate" under which Cromwell was named Lord Protector and given extensive powers. Although by this time the majority of Englishmen were deeply committed Protestants, the strict austerity of the Puritans was more than they were willing to live with, and soon after the death of Cromwell, Parliament restored the monarchy under the exiled Charles II.

The Puritans, who were such a strong force during the turbulent years between 1642 and the Restoration in 1660, had begun as a reform movement within the Church of England. Earning its name from its attempts to "purify" the state religion, Puritanism was committed to the doctrines of the fundamental sinfulness of man and the salvation of the elect. It advocated a civil society that adhered strictly to the teachings of scripture and its insistence

on legislating and enforcing rigorous moral standards—e.g. singing and dancing of any kind were prohibited as activities of the devil—has made the modern word *puritan* (with a lower case p) a pejorative term synonymous with rigid moralism.

With the restoration of the monarchy, the Puritans lost their grip on power in both the civil government and in the Church of England. It is worth noting here for future reference that Puritanism had been exported to the New World in 1620, long before it began to fade in England, and it contributed its morality, its belief in independence, and its commitment to a republican form of rule to the shaping of the American character.

Milton, himself a committed Puritan, had great hopes for the Protectorate and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. He was a vigorous supporter of Parliament and of Cromwell. Although he publicly opposed the Restoration, a position that cost him a brief period of imprisonment, his disappointment with Cromwell's dictatorship had left him utterly disillusioned. When he was released from prison, he gave up his public life and his political writing, returning to his family home where he spent the last fourteen years of his life in seclusion writing his greatest work. Milton's activism often made him unpopular, but he was widely recognized during his lifetime, and today he is considered one of the great poets of the English language.

Paradise Lost occupies a special place in Milton's canon. In that epic Milton was doing something poets had always done. He was drawing upon his personal experiences of some of the more troubling problems of his time and weaving them into a story that is at once personal and timeless. But he was also trying to do something no one had ever done before, at least not on so grand a scale. He attempted to reconcile the classical epic with Scripture.

The fact that Milton made Scripture the primary source of his epic creates special problems for the reader. It will force us to deal with Milton's predecessors, Homer and Virgil, as precursors of the epic form; but it also forces us to deal with Milton's predecessors, such as the Apostolic Fathers, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, as practitioners of Biblical theology. To what extent is *Paradise Lost* true to the form of the epic; and to what extent is it true to traditional interpretations of Scripture? Every reader will have to read with a parallel vision: he will have to read a Biblical story in terms appropriate to a secular epic; and at the same time and even more importantly, he will have to test his readings of this story against an exegetically sound understanding of Scripture. The problem is not a small one: misreadings not only risk taking something away from a great epic, they risk doing an injustice to a work of revelation, that is, the work of the Holy Spirit. No epic has ever put us on such sensitive ground before.

SUMMARY

Book I: *Paradise Lost* is the epic of early modern literature, and Milton opens it with the classic invocation of the heavenly Muses—in this case, the Holy Spirit—so that he may “justify the ways of God to men.” He then turns his attention to Satan who is just coming to consciousness following his fall from Heaven and finds himself and his fallen angel legions lying in a lake of fire. He rouses himself and his chief lieutenant, Beelzebub, and they talk of their recent defeat. Satan announces his unrelenting defiance of God. Vowing that doing evil will be their sole delight, and rousing their fallen army, they come out of the lake of fire onto the burning ground above. Milton catalogues the chiefs of the rebels as they make their way to the assembly before Satan and Beelzebub. Satan then addresses the crowd. He tells them that they could not have known the concealed strength of their enemy; that it is

impossible to believe they will not prevail in the end; and that at this point it is better to do battle by fraud and guile than by force. He speaks of a rumor in Heaven that God intends to create a new world with new creatures who will rival the angels and suggests that may be the place to begin their new assault. The rebel angels shout their approval and disperse to build Pandemonium, the palace of Hell. Once it is complete, those who are to be the great lords of Hell meet in conclave.

Book II: The high lords of Hell meet in council to consider their next step. Satan opens the meeting with an assertion that he will not give up Heaven, and a debate begins. Moloch proposes a return to open war, declaring that even if they are unable to win they can wreak vengeance by continually harassing Heaven. Belial disagrees. He acknowledges that seeking to overthrow or deceive God is a vain hope and argues that if they accept their just punishment, God may in time relent a little of the pains they must endure for eternity. Mammon agrees with Belial that force is of no use but is contemptuous of the thought of regaining God's favor and being forced to worship the God they hate. He counsels establishing an organized state in Hell that may one day rival that in Heaven. Beelzebub rises to put to rest the notion that God will ever be defeated or that they will ever be reconciled with Him. He mentions the rumor again about a new creation and asserts that while God himself can never be conquered, perhaps with force and deceit they can get this new race called Man to call God its enemy and thus cause the borders of God's realm to fall to the forces of Hell. Beelzebub's proposal is enthusiastically accepted. The question of who should be sent to learn about this new world and how to corrupt it is met with silence. Finally Satan himself steps forward and volunteers to go. The council adjourns to announce its decision to the rest of the devils, who receive it with loud approval. The legions then disperse to seek what diversions they can, some to sport, some to song, and some to philosophy. Satan flies off to the far gates of Hell where he confronts Sin and Death who guard the gates. Sin opens the gates to reveal the realm of Chaos and ancient Night. Struggling through it, Satan is buffeted about but he eventually hears a confusion of voices, and making his way toward them, he comes upon Chaos sitting on his throne with Night beside him and surrounded by Rumor, Chance, Tumult, Confusion, and Discord. Satan explains his presence and asks for directions to the new World, which Chaos gives him. Following his directions, Satan goes on until he sees a glimmering of light from the borders of Heaven and finally sees the Earth, hung from Heaven by a golden chain.

Book III: The third book opens with a second Invocation, this time to the Son of God. In the Invocation, Milton refers directly to his own blindness, comparing himself to blind prophets of old. Turning back to his subject, Milton describes God the Father who, sitting on his throne and observing His works, sees Adam and Eve in the garden and Satan winging his way to Earth. He foresees the fall, and when the Son asks if God will allow Satan the victory of destroying man utterly, God responds by saying that when man sins, man must die or justice be done away with unless someone worthy pays the price of man's sin. The hosts of Heaven are silent when the question of sacrifice is raised. Then the Son speaks, offering Himself. God accepts the Son's offer of love and blesses Him, and the angels sing songs of praise and adoration. Meanwhile Satan lands on the edge of the World (the universe) and begins to explore what will one day be Limbo. He sees the stairs that lead upward from Earth to the gates of Heaven and from the lowest step looks down and sees the beauty of Earth for the first time. He is attracted by the splendor of the Sun and seeing Uriel there, disguises himself as a young cherub longing to see the new creation that is man. Uriel does not see through the seeming goodness to the evil beneath and directs him to Paradise.

Book IV: Satan sees Eden in all of its fresh unspoiled innocence, and for the first time the memory of what he has been and what he has lost rolls over him. He is assailed with doubts and speaks his regrets, his longing for pardon and his final despair, to the Sun. The moment confirms his decision to do evil, and leaping over the walls of Eden, Satan takes the form of a large bird and perches in the top of the tallest and most central tree to survey the garden. He observes the lush beauty and the teeming life of Eden, and when he sees Adam and Eve, he knows them immediately by their resemblance to God. He takes on the shapes of a variety of animals to observe and eavesdrop on the couple. From their conversation, he learns that the only commandment given to them is not to taste of the Tree of Knowledge and so immediately sees the way to accomplish their ruin. Meanwhile, having seen from afar the visible play of emotions that accompanied Satan's despair and recognizing them as alien to any Heavenly creature, Uriel descends to warn Gabriel that an evil spirit has entered Eden. Charged with guarding Eden, Gabriel sends his angels to search for the intruder while Adam and Eve prepare for sleep. Two of the angels find Satan bending over the sleeping Eve and take him to Gabriel. When Gabriel questions him, Satan is insulted that his original beauty and authority aren't recognized. He is unaware that his fall has utterly altered his appearance and responds to their questioning with scorn. He threatens to do battle with them until he suddenly sees God's scales in the sky balancing his diminished power against that of the faithful angels. Realizing that it is not his appearance only that has been altered, he flees Paradise.

Book V: Adam and Eve awaken and Eve tells Adam of a frightening dream she had in which an angel had given her the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, telling her it would make her a goddess. He comforts her, saying that what she found so fearful in her dream she will never consent to awake, and they begin their day with prayers of praise and thanksgiving. God sends Raphael to remind Adam of his happy state and of the will he owns that makes him both free and vulnerable, and to warn him of the enemy who seeks to ruin him. Raphael then descends to Eden. Adam sees him coming through the garden, and sending Eve to prepare a meal worthy of him, he invites Raphael to join them in their meal. Their conversation ranges over such topics as food and the differences between angels and men; finally Raphael comes to the purpose of his visit. He reminds Adam that his happiness is a gift from God but his continuing in that happiness is a function of his obedience. Adam questions him on this and Raphael tells him that free will belongs to angels as well as to man, that some angels had freely chosen to disobey, and as a result of their disobedience they fell from the perfect happiness of Heaven to the eternal woe of Hell. Adam asks to hear more, and in response Raphael recalls the history of the war in Heaven. He tells of the day God announced his only begotten Son and commanded all Heaven to adore Him; of the envy and sense of injury that was felt by Satan, then one of the highest of the Archangels; of Satan's decision to take the legions of angels he was in charge of off to the north and his subtle arguments to engender in them the envy and disobedience of his own heart; and of Abdiel, the only faithful angel from Satan's legion to oppose his ingratitude and lies.

Book VI: Rafael continues with his story of the revolt of the rebel angels and the war in Heaven. Abdiel returns to find his news of treacherous revolt already known and prepared for and is joyfully welcomed by the legions of faithful angels. When the two forces face each other, Abdiel confronts Satan and strikes the first blow, sending Satan staggering back. Michael sounds the trumpets and the battle is joined. Satan sees Michael in the fray causing havoc with his sword and challenges him. The two look equally matched in power but Michael's sword is invincible and he severs Satan's sword and deals him a terrible blow that gives Satan his first taste of pain. Everywhere over the field of battle, the Heavenly angels

overthrow the rebel leaders who experience fear and pain for the first time. Night brings an end to the day's battle. Michael and his angels camp while Satan and his host withdraw to counsel. Satan encourages his leaders with the realization that they have not been vanquished in one day and that they are immortal, able to be wounded but quickly self-healed. He urges his rebels to search out a weapon that will shift the odds in their favor and the angels respond quickly with the invention of gunpowder.

The second day of battle dawns and the faithful angels see their foes return. The rebel angels keep their canons hidden until they reach the line of battle and then pull back to reveal their new engines of war, firing them into the lines of opposing angels. The Heavenly angels are thrown into confusion and Satan's forces deride them for the ease with which they have been defeated. The angelic host recovers and flying off to the mountains tears them up. Returning to the field of battle they drop the mountains first on the canons and then on the rebels themselves. The rebels are initially dismayed but quickly copy their enemy and soon "hills amid the air encountered hills hurled to and fro...."

God sends the Son on the morning of the third day to end the war. He arrives in power and glory, and thanking the angels for their faithful fight, He claims the victory over the rebels who declared war to try their strength against His. At His word, the Angelic legions pull back and the uprooted hills return to their places. He drives the terrified rebels before Him like a herd of goats. When they reach the boundary of Heaven, the crystalline wall opens and they plunge into the abyss. Raphael concludes his story with the warning that Satan now envies Adam and Eve and is seeking to seduce them away from God as well.

Book VII: Here, at the mid-point of his epic, Milton offers his third Invocation, this time to Urania. Adam asks Raphael to describe how the universe was made. Raphael relates how after the battle on the third day, God told the Son of His plan to create another World, sending Him to speak the words that would accomplish the creation. He goes and begins by circumscribing the boundaries of the universe which the Spirit infuses with "vital virtue ...and vital warmth." The first day ends with the creation of light. The second day the firmament is created to divide the waters. On the third day, the Earth is brought forth from the womb of the waters and the dry land is formed in the shapes of mountains and valleys. Grass is created along with fruit trees and every sort of flowering plant. When the Son speaks again, the lights of the Heavens are created to divide the day from night and mark the "seasons and days and circling years;" and so ends the fourth day. On the fifth day, the birds of the air and the creatures of the sea are spoken into being. And on the sixth and last day, the beasts of the fields and woods first come to be. The greatest of the creatures is reserved for last: God makes man in His own image, breathing life into him and setting him to rule over all the other creatures. Raphael ends his account of creation with a description of the Son returning to the Father, who sanctifies the last day as a day of rest and solemn praise, and then repeats his warning that Adam must safeguard his happiness by observing obedience in all he does.

Book VIII: Adam still has questions of Raphael and asks that he explain the workings of the Heavens. Eve withdraws to her garden, preferring to hear the answers from Adam. But this time, Raphael answers only with questions and tells Adam these things exceed his grasp and that he should focus on what has been revealed to him already. Desiring to keep Raphael in conversation, Adam offers to tell him about his own experience of creation as he woke to life. He tells him of the wonder he felt at waking to his surroundings and calling out to know who had made him. On receiving no answer, he fell asleep, dreaming of being taken to the

Garden of Eden, and then awoke to find it was not a dream and that the one who brought him there was the One Who made him. He relates his conversation with God—the edict forbidding the Tree of Knowledge, the naming of the animals, his own loneliness, and God's promise to him that he would have a suitable mate. He tells of Eve's creation, his love for her and his passion. Raphael offers an admonishment to love Eve in proper measure. After his confession of passion for Eve, Adam has one last question: he wants to know if and how the angels in Heaven love each other. Raphael answers him, and with one final warning that he not allow his passions to sway his judgment to do anything against reason, he takes his leave.

Book IX: This book opens with the fourth Invocation. Having arrived at man's fall, Milton now turns from the heroic to a tragic mode. Satan has hidden himself in Night for seven circumferences of the Earth. He returns to Eden to look for the serpent, the subtlest of all the animals, and when he finds it, he enters it to carry out his malignant designs. Adam and Eve complete their morning worship, and for the first time Eve suggests that they work separately. Adam is disturbed by her suggestion because of Raphael's warning of the enemy, who will seek to turn them from God, but eventually he gives his consent and they separate. Satan searches over the garden for Adam and Eve and to his surprised delight finds Eve by herself. He approaches and speaks to her in flattering words. She expresses her amazement that an animal could have human speech and reason. He tells her that he was like the other beasts, thoughtless and mute, until he chanced to eat the fruit of a particular tree. She asks to be taken to the tree, and he leads her to the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. When she tells him that she may not eat of that tree, he assures her that God has forbidden the fruit because He knows that if they eat it they will become gods like Him. She succumbs to his temptation and eats the fruit of the tree. After eating the fruit, Eve debates with herself whether to keep her new knowledge to herself or share it with Adam, but faced with the thought that she might die without him, she determines to give him the fruit to eat also. When Adam discovers what happened, he is stunned and dismayed. But he is also unable to imagine a solitary existence again, and so accepting disobedience and death with her rather than a life without her, he too eats the fruit. They now look at each other in a new way and come together not in love but in lust. When they waken, they know shame for the first time and sew together fig leaves to cover their nakedness. Then, sitting together in shame and misery, they each accuse the other of being at fault.

Book X: Man's disobedience is known in Heaven immediately. God addresses the Heavenly assembly, acknowledging that He had known the fall would happen and that the Guardian Angels could not have prevented Satan's entrance or his successful temptation. He sends the Son, who is already Man's Redeemer, to pass judgment. He descends to the garden and calls Adam and Eve. When He questions them, they confess and He passes sentence on them and the serpent. Meanwhile, in Hell Sin and Death have sensed Satan's success and decided to follow him. Together they build a bridge from Hell to Earth and as they travel the completed bridge toward Earth, they meet Satan on his return. He tells them that the Earth is now theirs to rule and sends them on while he returns to give news of his victory. Speaking from his throne in Pandemonium, he tells the assembled devils that his mission has succeeded and that Sin and Death have created a highway linking Earth with Hell. Satan expects his news will be received with shouts of praise and acclamation. Instead, he is surprised to find he is greeted with hissing. He looks around and sees that all the angels have been transformed into serpents and suddenly feels himself being transformed into one as well.

Sin and Death arrive on Earth and set about establishing their reign. God observes them from Heaven and declares their final doom. He orders the various changes that must take place in the universe now that Adam and Eve have fallen. Adam laments the loss of his happiness and the perpetuation of his curse in all the generations to come. Eve approaches him but he rejects her with harsh words. She pleads with him not to desert her and wishes she could take all the punishment on herself. Adam is moved by her contrition, and he forgives her. Together they go to the place of judgment to confess their faults and beg pardon and mercy.

Book XI: The prayers and supplications of Adam and Eve reach Heaven and the Son presents them to the Father, interceding for them. The Father accepts His pleas on their behalf, but upholding the judgment that they may no longer live in Paradise, He sends the Archangel Michael to expel them from the garden. Adam tells Eve that after they sent their prayers to Heaven, he felt peace return to his heart and has hope that God has relented. But as they go to their work in the garden, he sees omens in nature that suggest changes. As he gazes upward, he sees Michael and the angels descending. Adam goes out to meet Michael, who delivers his doom: they must leave Paradise. Eve laments the loss of the garden, the only world she has known and loved, but Adam accepts God's judgment. Michael casts a sleep over Eve and then takes Adam up to the top of the highest mountain in Eden to show him the consequences of his sin. There, Michael shows Adam visions of Cain and Able, of sicknesses so bad that men would gladly prefer death to them; of men tempted and corrupted by the pleasures of women; and of the slaughters of war. Michael singles out Enoch as an example of righteousness and then directs Adam's gaze back to the progress of his curse over the course of ages. He shows him the destruction of mankind in the flood, and Adam weeps to see it, overwhelmed not only by his own grief but by his foreknowledge of the grief of generations to come, the pain and suffering that others will have to bear because of his sin. Michael tells him that not all are destroyed in the flood and shows him Noah descending from the Ark and the rainbow marking God's covenant.

Book XII: Michael pauses and then resumes his preview of the history of man. He tells of the Tower of Babel and relates the calling out of Abraham, the rise of Moses and the departure of the Chosen people from Egypt, the giving of the Law from Mt. Sinai, and the prophets' foretelling of the one to come, the Messiah, the Son of Man who will bruise the head of the serpent. Michael speaks in detail of the birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Anointed one, the Messiah, who will destroy death and reopen the gates of Paradise to men. Adam asks a question about the fate of His followers left on Earth after His ascension into Heaven, to which Michael responds with news of the Holy Spirit sent to guide them. He speaks of those who will pervert the words of God and the sacred mysteries to their own advantage and the struggles that the faithful will endure until the second coming of the Son ends the world and Satan's victory and reestablishes Paradise on Earth. Adam confesses that all he has seen has taught him to walk in the presence of God always. Michael reassures him that if he will act virtuously and in accord with all he has learned, he will possess Paradise within him. They descend the mountain and waken Eve who has been comforted by gentle dreams. She acknowledges her place with Adam, wherever he may go, and is reassured by the promise that in spite of her guilt, it will be through her that the Promised Seed "shall all restore." Michael takes the two by their hands and leads them out into the world as the Cherubim with flaming swords descend to block the gates of Eden. Turning to look back, they see the Eastern side of Paradise "waved over by that flaming Brand, the Gate with dreadful Faces thronged and fiery Arms." The world is all before them; they wipe away their tears, and together, hand in hand, they take "their solitary way."



Questions on Language and Form

1. Think about the epics that have preceded *Paradise Lost*. For Homer, the reference point for his images and similes and metaphors is nature; for Virgil, the reference point is more complex: it is the special condition that is realized when nature and art or craft come together. Recall, for instance, the image of the golden bough, the branch that Aeneas needs in order to enter the Underworld: it is "twin-natured," both natural and artificial, an image of the city itself, something that depends upon and grows out of nature while going beyond it by virtue of transcendent qualities that man and the gods bring to it. Dante deepens these references points in a Christian world in which the common ordinary things that make up our everyday existence are reconciled with the transforming power of grace. Each builds upon his predecessors—Homer draws upon his predecessors; Virgil upon Homer, and Dante upon him. Milton consciously works within this same tradition, keenly aware of it, wanting to be guided by it and still deepen it by what he brings to it. The influence of Scripture is not small. Be aware of the difficulties he faces in using Scripture as a major ingredient or as a departure or reference point.
2. Reflect on the importance of a work of art that makes concrete and visible to our imaginations an aspect of the Bible that the Bible itself is virtually silent on. A whole spiritual world involving God's interaction with the Heavenly Host, the angels' interaction with man, Satan's temptation, the help that Rafael and Michael offer Adam and Eve is fleshed out, "brought down," as it were, and made real on a human plane.
3. Milton was a Protestant whose faith rested partly on a conviction that man came to a deep, abiding relationship with God from his personal reading of the Bible. The sanctity or authority of the Teaching Church carried little weight for him; he believed that its mediations simply interfered with man's efforts to reach God. What was primary or paramount in his own thinking was the personal struggles of each individual with his own conscience. Keep in mind the implications of this spirit in Milton's treatment of Scripture: by taking the fall as his subject, he was required to re-present events from what the historic Church has always under-stood as "revelation," the workings of the Holy Spirit over time. Be attentive to scenes that "rewrite" Scripture, presenting it in ways that may or may not be in accord with its literal surface—i.e., Raphael's warning of Adam, Christ's being begotten after the angels are created, etc. For example, consider Milton's relegation of Christ to the status of being a mere creature, who is created by the Father after the creation of Satan, in such a way that Satan can see Christ as a usurper. Does Milton's (mis)reading of Scripture disqualify his epic from being called a Christian work?



Study Questions

1. Book I: Why, according to Milton, is Satan able to free himself from the lake of fire and what is God's plan (I, ll. 210-220)?
2. Lines 331-520 briefly recount the long history of Israel's infidelities. They require a close reading of the Hebrew Scriptures to fully apprehend, but at least on the surface, what is their function? How do they relate to the story at hand? Why has Milton introduced them here?
3. Consider Satan's qualities as a leader. What are they and how does he account for having lost his battle with God? And can you find any Puritan qualities in his character?
4. Book II: Summarize the positions of the high lords of Hell when they meet in council, Satan's, Belial's, Mammon's, Moloch's, and Beelzebub's. What do we learn about the nature of Hell from their various stances, and what is the drama implied in lines 402ff. when Beelzebub asks whom shall they send, who shall risk traveling the "unbottomed infinite abyss," to subvert man and carry on their vengeance against God?
5. By line 445ff., Satan seems to have emerged as the hero of this epic. Set him against the other heroes you've read, Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas. Does he fit the image of a hero given in the earlier epics or not? Notice the approval given him by his supporters and the poet's comment on this occasion (l. 482). How is this moment alike/different from similar moments in other epics?
6. Who guards the gates of Hell? Describe the genealogy of the guards at the gates of Hell (II, ll. 650-814). What is the family relationship between Satan and Death and what does their relationship reveal about the family of man, and the nature of sin? And why doesn't Satan destroy Sin?
7. Describe Satan's conversation with Chaos (II, ll. 968-1009). How does Satan present his request for directions? Do you think they will be allies?
8. Book III: In Book I Milton introduced Satan to us in the Lake of Fire; here in Book III we meet God in uncreated light. Consider the differences between the two scenes, their implications. Early in Book III, the Father and Son engage in a dialogue. Lines 96ff. raise a serious question going to the heart of the epic: who is at fault for man's fault and why (ll. 96-128)? What is the Father's answer to this question? How would you characterize His tone? Do you find God endearing Himself to you or distancing Himself? What are the implications of this section first presenting God to us for the rest of the poem?
9. Lines 217-265 of Book III are parallel to what scene in Book I, and how are they different?

10. In the middle of Book III Satan is in the midst of his heroic journey—recall the mythic journeys of Aeneas, and Dante. He comes across the Limbo of Vanities, a place that resembles the various underworlds encountered in the epics. At this point it is empty but eventually it will be filled. Notice its occupants. What is Milton doing with this place? What light is he throwing on contemporary religions, especially with his references to "white, black, and gray" (ll. 475) and "indulgences" (l. 492)?
11. Late in Book III when Satan encounters Uriel, the great Archangel is described as "a stripling cherub" (l. 634). Does this choice of disguise say anything about Satan? What is happening to the "epic hero"?
12. Why does the Archangel Uriel allow Satan to pass? And why do you suppose Milton has Uriel be deceived by Satan?



Questions on Language and Form

1. Book IV: Notice the opening sentence of Book IV, ll. 1-26, and the great number of ideas expressed there. Identify the various ideas or concepts covered. How many can you find?
2. Following the opening sentence of Book IV, Milton presents one of the great soliloquies of literature. What do we learn of Satan from this moment, his inner conflicts, his feelings, his way of looking at God and His creation, his intentions?
3. In describing Adam and Eve, Milton notes a number of distinctions (IV, ll. 295-310). What is the fundamental difference between the two?
4. Consider Satan when he first meets Adam. What are his emotions? What is the meaning of ll. 375ff?
5. What is the first thing Eve falls in love with, and why does she run from Adam when she first sees him?
6. How do the angels know a fallen angel has entered Paradise?
7. A dialogue between Uriel and Gabriel serves as background to Milton's treatment of Adam and Eve and their original, unfallen love. The scene allows Milton to enter into and set forth the various aspects of masculine and feminine adult sexual love (561ff.). How does Eve see her nature or "role" according to lines 636—638?
8. Notice the perfect amity or unanimity between the couple (l. 736). In lines 736-770, Milton contrasts proper conjugal love with its perverted forms and includes in those things he denounces celibacy and "mixed dancing." What do these denunciations say about Milton's beliefs? How do they differ from earlier epics?