

## The Paradise Lost = The Character of Satan

John Milton is certainly one of the greatest English poets. His 'Paradise Lost' is a classical epic poem. It deals with the fall of Man and the justification of God's ways to men. The Character of Satan, as depicted in the poem, has generated a great deal of controversy. Dryden has remarked that Milton would have been the greatest of the epic poets, after Homer and Virgil, if the devil had not been his hero. William Blake calls Milton of Devil Party. In fact, the critics have charged that nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the Character of Satan. Satan is Milton's greatest creation. No doubt, the character of Satan is one of the greatest poetical achievements in any language. But the greatness consists not so much in the depiction of his majestic character, as in the slow and steady degeneration of an angel who once stood next God. It is Milton's art that makes the character of Satan gradually diminish <sup>1st</sup> from grandeur to baseness and final degradation.

Satan appears to be almost a heroic figure, admirable in ~~stead~~ strength and steadfast purpose. Defeated, he hides his despair, reorganises his forces, plans new strategy and volunteers for a dangerous mission. Few poems can claim equality with the tremendous scenes, when Satan and Beelzebub converse in Hell while the fallen angels lie scattered around and Satan rallying his host. <sup>2nd</sup> One of the sublime strokes of the poem is seen:—

He now prepared

To speak, whereat their double ranks they bend  
From wing to wing, and half enclose him around  
With all his peers, assist on hold them mute  
Thrice he essayed, and thrice, in spite of scorn



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Tears such as angels weep burst forth. A last word interwove with sighs found out their way:

Whenever Satan appears, he rears above ~~his~~ every rival, whether he encounters Death or invokes the Sun or addresses his host Milton has given him many of the quotable lines in the book. He utters the following words, while beckoning his followers to act on:-

"Awake, arise, or be for ever fall'n"  
and again--

To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell  
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven"  
In order to bring home the unspeakable power and strength of Satan, Milton gives us a glimpse of his tremendous physical size. He is

"... in bulk as huge

As when the fable name of monstrous size  
Briareo or Typhon, whom the den  
By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea-beast  
Leviathan, which God of all his works  
Created largest that swim the ocean stream"

But, along with all his might and power, Satan carries, within himself, the seed of self destruction. Milton repeatedly emphasizes his 'obdurate pride' that proves his besetting sin. It is sin in the classical mythology that never goes unfurnished. It is a dangerous quality of which Milton says-

"In pride, in reasoning pride our error lies  
All quit their spheres, and rush into the street"

Satan proudly claims that 'the terror of his arm' has put God in 'doubt of his empire'. He speaks as if he is an autonomous being,



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not a creature. Throughout the poem, he is engaged in sawing off the branch he is sitting on. Because a creature revolting against a creator, he revolts against the source of his own powers. Satan's obduracy leads him to the deliberate choice of evil and refusal to choose right. He tells his followers -

' of this be sure,

To aught good never will be our task,  
But ever to do ill our sole delight."

Again, apostrophising evil, he says: -

"Evil, be thou my good, by thee at least  
Derided empire with Heaven's King I hold."

From the very outset, Milton makes it clear that Satan is under the grip of a dangerous state of mind - 'a sense of injured merit.' The cause of this sense is that he thought himself impaired because the Son of God had been pronounced Mead and Angels. Amidst the joys of Heaven, he could think of nothing but his own prestige. But the superior prestige of Messiah was an obstacle. This situation, caused by his 'obdurate pride' leads him to damnation.

This doom he has brought upon himself, his torments come at his own bidding. At first, he fights for his 'Honour and Dominion'. When ~~dr~~ defeated he takes on the disguise of ruining two creatures that have harmed him. This brings him as a spy to the universe. From hero to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret agent, then a thief to peer through bathroom windows, then a load and finally a snake - this is the progress of Satan. Can he be a hero?

In all his actions and speeches, Satan is mainly concerned with himself. He thinks of

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nothing but his own merit, honour and position. He is buried within himself. He is an egoist to the extreme. The Hell that he carries with him is the Hell of infinite boredom. He rightly observes:-

"The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

Thus, we see that Satan is an important character in the Paradise Lost. But, he is not glorified to the status of a hero.