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A Close Reading on the Character of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

*Paradise Lost* is an epic poem with blank verse written by John Milton. It retells the biblical story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. Although it tells a purely Christian story, it uses a lot of techniques inspired by classical, ancient Greek mythologies. For example, Milton starts telling the story in medias res, a technique commonly practiced by most ancient epic poems, involving beginning the story in the middle of it and then telling the beginning of it using flashbacks. Milton also uses a huge amount of extended similes as well as allusions to the Bible and ancient Greek mythology. These similes and allusions draw comparisons between Milton’s work and stories from the ancient classics, connect them, and make his poem seem more scriptural and authoritative.

At the same time, these similes and allusions also differentiate Milton’s own characters from the characters of his ancient Greek predecessors, deepening the audience’s understanding of his characters. For example, in Book I, John Milton introduces his first use of epic simile in line 196, emphasizing the huge size of Satan. In line 209, Milton also alludes to Leviathan, a giant monster from the Bible. It is gradually evident that, through practices of similes and allusions, Milton not only explicitly presents what is happening around Satan and his fellow fallen angels but also implicitly exhibits the characteristic of Satan. The characters that Milton alludes to not only possess the colossal size, but they also share the same rebellious soul like Satan does. Soon after Satan and his fellow defeated angels awake and find themselves in the lake of fire, Satan claims that “[t]he mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven”(I.254)[[1]](#footnote-0) and that “Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition though in hell; better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven”(I.261). As the leader among them, Satan attempts to unite his fellow fallen angels through his speech. He does not repent their revolt against God. He would rather rule them in hell, though with suffering, than to serve God without true justice and independence. He argues that, with the righteous mind, one can make himself a heaven in a hell.

To me, Satan is a model antihero, fighting for what he believes to be the just and seeking the truth. I find Satan more empathizing than a typical villain. Arguably, many, including God himself, may denounce acts of Satan as evil deed, such as his backstabbing against God. However, on the other hand, Satan also demonstrates plenty of positive characteristics through such an evil deed. He shows great courage in his decision to rebel against God. He is extremely persistent in his firm belief that God is hypocritical and false. He questions the God and, through so much tenacity in him, Stan is able to constantly provoke some fellow angels to also question God and instigate rebellion with the fallen angels. No hardship of any kind is able to turn down his will of resistance. His resilience allows him to assemble his fallen angels and build the Pandemonium, the capital of hell. Although he finds himself defeated in the lake of fire, Satan’s inner sense of pride does not make him regret his decision and submit to God for the re-entrance to heaven. He believes that the mind can make its own heaven out of hell, and his own free intellect is as great as God’s power. All of my understandings of Satan are supported and validated just slightly later in Book I: Between lines 283 to 313 lies the most obvious and seemingly significant examples of Milton’s use of epic similes and allusions to depict and comment on the character of Satan simultaneously. These similes and allusions perfectly verify my assertions on Satan’s characters.

“He scarce had ceased when the superior fiend was moving toward the shore; his ponderous shield etheral temper, massy, large and round, behind him cast; the broad circumference hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb through optic glass the Tuscan artist views at evening from the top of Fesole, or in valdarno, to descry new lands, rivers or mountains in her spotty globe”(I. 283).

In my opinion, John Milton describes Satan’s “ponderous shield” as a representation of the burden of leading the fallen angels to fight against God. The larger the shield is, the more courageous Satan appears to be. The “Tuscan artist” refers to Milton’s contemporary Galileo Galilei, and this is the only time that Milton makes a straight allusion. “Artist” means someone who masters science, not actual art. Milton uses “the broad circumference hung on his shoulders” as an analogy to the moon. It is such a subtle simile because Galileo has been in a closely similar and almost symmetric position as Satan. His theory was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church, which resembles God, as well as his fellow physicists, who resemble Satan’s fellow angels who stay loyal as servants of God. Milton makes an analogy between Galileo’s spirit of seeking the truth of science to Satan’s spirit of seeking independence and true justice. The circumference is Galileo’s tool for scientific discoveries. In this analogy, it refers to Galileo’s shield and weapons for his war. The moon is the ultimate goal of the journey. Not only is Galileo finally able to make his telescope and observe the moon, but he is also able to make it possible for everyone to do the same thing at ease. By this allusion, John Milton implies that Satan will eventually achieve what he has in his mind, making Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit so that humans are also able to seek truth and gain true intellect. Similarly, the rivers and mountains that Galileo sees on the moon represent what true knowledge humans gain and describe how beautiful such knowledge is.

“His spear, to equal which the tallest pine hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast of some great ammiral, were but a wand”(I.292). Here, John Milton makes another allusion to the ancient Greeks. In Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Polyphemus, one of the one-eyed giants, the Cyclops, is said to be “as large as is the mast of a black ship of twenty oars”(*Odyssey* 9.322). Similarly, the “pine” is also an analogy used to emphasize the gigantic size of the giant, or Satan’s spear, in the context of *Paradise Lost*. This simile between the giant and the spear obviously implies the equally large size of the spear. It also represents Satan’s iron will to rebel against God. Similar to Satan’s shield, the stronger his morale to fight for his heart, the larger the spear.

“Nathless he so endured, till on the beach of that inflamed sea, he stood and called his legions, angel forms, who lay entranced thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vllombrosa, where th’ Etrurian shades high overarched embow’r”(I. 299). The autumnal leaves are a simile to the dead, implying that his fallen angels had died from their past as angels and were reborn as his followers. It highlights Satan’s capability of persuading and rallying through speech as the leader of hell.

“When with fierce winds Orion armed hath vexed the Red sea coast, whose waves o’erthrew Busiris and his Memphian chivalry, while with perfidious hatred they pursued the sojourners of Goshen, who beheld from the safe shore their floating carcasses and broken chariot wheels”(I. 305). Milton makes another allusion to the ancient classics. This time he alludes to Mose’s *Exodus*. Busiris was the Pharoah of Egypt, often seen as the oppressor of the Hebrew people, and Memphis was the ancient capital of Egypt. In *Exodus*, the Hebrew people follow God’s guidance and attempt to flee Egypt. Busiris sends an army to stop them. However, upon crossing the Red Sea, God helps them by allowing the Hebrew people to pass through and engulfing all Pharoah’s “Memphian chivalry.” In this allusion, Busiris is God, and the Hebrew people are Satan and his fellow fallen angels who follow their intellect as guidance and attempt to flee God’s oppression. I suspect Milton implies that Satan and his fallen angels will indeed successfully flee God’s control in the end. And Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit later would serve as Milton’s equivalent to the engulfment of “Memphian chivalry.”

Although Satan clearly understands his practically non-existent odds against God and the resulting penalty for such an act of sin, he never repents his decision to fight. I admire him and therefore empathize with him. After reading Milton’s subtle uses of similes and allusions, I feel as if Satan is depicted as a hero rather than an antihero in some aspects. God is usually described as philanthropic and loves all beings. However, when Satan comes into play, God appears to be not as benevolent.

Overall, John Milton uses both the epic simile and allusion in *Paradise Lost* to depict and comment on his characters simultaneously. Through these similes and allusions, Milton is able to better highlight Satan’s courage and resilience in his attempt to rebel against God, even though he knew the potential outcome of failure. Milton also comments on Satan’s artful speech that rallies his fellow fallen angels and persuades them to follow what Satan claims to be the righteous truth.

1. All quotations from Paradise Lost are from *Paradise Lost* edited by William Kerrigan, John Rumich, and Stephen M. Fallon, Modern Library Classics, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)