

The Hero of "Paradise Lost" Book-I

Introduction

Much controversy has clustered round the question as to who is the hero of *Paradise Lost*. There are very sensible persons, who advocate the claim of Satan, and others, that of Adam. One critic suggests God, and another the Messiah (Christ). A French critic (Denis Saurat) puts forward the strange thesis that Milton himself is the hero of *Paradise Lost*.

(A) SATAN: THE HERO OF "*PARADISE LOST*"

Satan as A most Powerfully Drawn Character

Let us see some of the points of his character which are definitely indicated. In the beginning, it is Satan who, first of all the angels, arouses himself up from the lake of fire. He has the power of recovery in the face of defeat. Not one word, which he utters, expresses despair, when he discovers the terrible nature of the place to which God has banished them. Immediately his active mind begins to scheme, and he proceeds to reassemble his shattered forces. We are often told that adversity reveals the best qualities in a man; adversity certainly reveals the vigorous intellect and driving personality of Satan. He shows the highest degree of fortitude and "courage never to submit or yield." His personal example soon communicates itself to the other angels, and they gather round their great leader. In the plays of Shakespeare, we have often seen that the great dramatist contrives to create his finest characters by letting us hear what other people think of them, and say about them, so it is with Milton. All the angels welcome with joy their mighty leader. It matters not that they have been defeated and expelled from Heaven, because of their share in his rebellion. They gather round him with absolute confidence such as earthly men feel instinctively at times when they realize the worth of a great leader. The mighty qualities of Satan's mind, and the indomitable resolution which animates him, are displayed when he exclaims:

... and thou, profoundest Hell
Receive thy new possessor, one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

There are sentiments which might well be uttered by the most spiritual of characters. The spirit of self-reliance, of mental courage, which rises independent of environment, is a quality possessed only by the greatest characters. This might well have been spoken by some saint in exile, or languishing in dungeons of a cruel tyrant. A few lines later, there blazes a burst of strong, over-mastering ambition, the expression of a nature that must, be first in all things:

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell;
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

It is no ordinary ambition which we see here; there is something colossal in this bold challenge to the Almighty for supreme power. We have seen instances in the history of the human race where two great natures clashed, and neither would give way: Caesar and Hannibal, Wellington and Napoleon, and we have been impressed by the greatness on either side. It may be a wicked thing to defy God, but, in this case, God is far-removed and unreal, and it is the greatness of the challenge, rather than the wickedness, which is the prominent impression.

Beelzebub bears witness to the great worth of Satan as a leader:

If once they hear that voice, their liveliest pledge
Of hope in fears and dangers, heard so oft
.... they will soon resume

New courage and revive, though now they lie
Groveling and prostrate on yon lake of fire.

If this was said of the noblest general who ever led mortal armies, he would be acclaimed by all as a leader of men. The effect here is similar; we must judge Satan according to earthly and human standards since we have no other. We respect him because of the confidence with which he inspires the forces. When the downfallen angels reach the shore, their dejected spirits are cheered, and their look show:

Obscure some glimpse of joy, to have found their chief
Not in despair...

Milton then makes Satan console them, raise their sinking courage, and dispel their fears. The poet seems to feel here that he is ennobling the Archfiend unduly, for he reminds the reader that Satan achieves this by:

high words that bore
Semblance of worth, not substance.

A Great Figure of Epic Dimension

But Milton has endowed Satan with all those qualities which make a hero. In fact, it is the grandeur of Satan's character that makes *Paradise Lost* an epic. Milton has imparted something of himself to Satan, and so Satan arouses our admiration by the strength of his character and individuality. He asserts himself against the autocracy of God, and is able to win over to his side the third part of the angelic host in Heaven. He is no doubt defeated by the Messiah (Christ) but his defeat and his expulsion from Heaven cannot curb his indomitable spirit. He would urge eternal war against God; he remains as bold in spirit and as defiant as he was before his defeat; and the change of his surroundings cannot in any way dampen his unconquerable spirit. He will make Heaven of Hell, and undertakes all kind of risks and dangers in order to take revenge on God. This figure is heroic in every way. He is a perfect leader, and all the fallen angels submit unquestioningly to his authority. "It is surely the simple fact" says Abercrombie, "that *Paradise Lost* exists for one figure that is Satan, just as the *Iliad* exists for Achilles and the *Odyssey* for Odysseus. It is in the figure of Satan that the imperishable significance of *Paradise Lost* is centered; his vast unyielding agony symbolises the profound antimony of modern consciousness." Satan is indeed a great figure of epic dimension. He is a true hero, but he is so only in Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*.

Robert Burns strongly upheld Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*, in these words: "give me a spirit like my favourite hero, Milton's Satan", W. Hazlitt was of the same view, "the interest of the poem arises from the daring ambition and fierce passions of Satan, and from the account of the paradisaical happiness and the loss of it by our first parents, Satan is the indubitable hero - in fact, the most heroic subject that ever was chosen for a poem".

Arguments against Satan being the Hero of the Poem

As the poem proceeds, this heroic figure gradually loses its splendour, though he retains his original greatness even when he comes to the earth and sees the joy; but pride prevails over him, for he must have his revenge on God who is his eternal enemy.

Ah gentle pair, ye little think how nigh
Your change approaches, when all these delights
Will vanish, and deliver ye to woe-
* * * *

Yet no purposed foe
to you, whom I could pity thus forlorn,
Though I unpitied

From now onward, the deterioration of Satan starts. In fact when he enters into a serpent to tempt Eve, he has turned from a great hero into a despicable spy and cunning trickster. So when we take the whole of *Paradise Lost* into consideration, we cannot agree with the view that Satan is the hero of *Paradise Lost*.

Admiration and Sympathy of Satan Misunderstood

According to some critics, Satan is the hero of the poem. In the preceding chapter, we have expressed the view of these critics of the Romantic age and the twentieth century. Now let us interpret the views of these critics. In fact, Satan is not the hero of the poem. Even Dryden was misled by the epic current in his day. The Romantics misunderstood Blake. It is a pity that even a great critic like Tillyard misunderstood him. As Rudrum Alan remarks in his book *Milton: Modern judgements*: "It is only in the context of his own highly complex system of thought that Blake's remarks on Milton's Satan can be properly understood. But of course they have been abstracted from that context..." Blake never means that Milton identifies himself with Satan. According to him, poetry is emotional rather than rational. In other words, evil inspires a poet more than the good; a poet finds it easier to depict evil than good, as stated by Blake. It is in this sense that Milton is of the Devil's party. So, the Romantics misunderstood Blake. A poet has 'as much delight in depicting an Iago as an Imogen' (an evil and good character). Milton took pleasure in the exercise of his power.

Secondly, those who think that Satan is the hero of the poem, confine their criticism to the first two books. As A. Stopford Brooke remarks: "The interest of the story collect at first round the character of Satan, but he grows meaner as the poem develops, and his second degradation after he has destroyed innocence is one of the finest and most consistent motives in the poem. This at once disposes the view that Milton meant Satan to be the hero of his epic." Thus in the first two books he is made a heroic figure. Subsequently, his character degenerates.

Thirdly, Milton's identification with Satan is misunderstood. Tillyard says that the character of Satan expresses something in which Milton believed very strongly. But Tillyard forgets that the identification of Milton with Satan, is only partial. Milton is also Adam. Milton thought himself a sincere Christian. Milton has Satan in him and wants to drive him out. "He was of the devil's party without knowing it; but he was also of God's party, and what is more important, he knew it." (*Denis Saurat Milton: Man, and Thinker*). Further Denis Saurat remarks: "And yet Satan is not the hero of the poem: he is intellectually condemned, in spite of all the poet's and the reader's sympathy."

We should not be taken in by Satan's impressive speeches. For what indeed does his fine sounding phrase sense of "injured merit" mean but simply "not fair" which is far from being a heroic cry. Stylistic reasons enforce superficially the heroism of Satan-his utterances are always couched in language of unrivalled poetic splendour. But this should not mislead us, for in the end Satan himself realized his impotence and inner helplessness.

Finally, the splendour of Satan is misunderstood. The magnificence and splendour of Satan must be exalted in order to indicate the epic greatness of the coming conflict. In other words, in order to rouse the reader's fears for himself, human sympathy with his first parents and gratitude for his redemption, Milton has shown the magnificence of Satan's character. George Sampson remarks: "Those who maintain that Satan the rebel is the real hero of the poem fail to understand that the adversary of God and Man must be presented in majesty and magnitude if he is to be worthy of his place in the story that he must have, in fact all the fascination of evil. "We should not be swept away by the sheer grandeur of Satan's speeches, or by the splendour of his personality. Heroism exerted in the bad cause, ceases to be virtue. And, therefore, it is not enough to say that Satan is the hero of the poem because he is brave and bold.

Many of the twentieth century critics do not hold the view of the Romantics i.e. Satan is the hero of *Paradise Lost*. John Peter is of the opinion that "the loss of poetic energy or resonance in the heroic similes applied to Satan shows an important aspect of the deterioration in Milton's treatment of the Devil". According to David Daiches, the whole poem is the story of Satan's inevitable degeneration.

(B) MILTON: THE HERO OF "PARADISE LOST"

This theory has been formulated by Denis Saurat, a French critic. He says in his book *Milton: Man and Thinker* that Adam is not the fitting counterpart for Satan. According to him, the hero of the poem is Milton himself. As stated by him: "Though Satan is Milton's own creation, and he has displayed a greater

force of poetry in him than in any other character in *Paradise Lost* as he represents a part of his own mind and character, yet it seems that Milton throws himself personally into the struggle against Satan". Further Saurat feels that Milton has exalted Satan because he himself wanted to drive out malignant and militant Satan from his own heart. In this connection, he says: "Milton had Satan in him and wanted to drive him out. He had felt passion, pride and sensuality. The displeasure he takes in the creation of Satan is the joy of liberating, purging himself of the evil in himself by concentrating it outside himself into a work of art. A joy peculiar to the artist.....a joy that, perhaps was God's ultimate aim in creating the world, as we have seen.

The argument is not plausible that Milton himself is the hero. No doubt, Milton's personality is revealed in *Paradise Lost*: and he never conceals where his sympathy lies. There is again some similarity between the position of Satan and that of Milton. Satan had defied the authority of God the autocrat, just as Milton had defied the autocracy of the King. Hence, Satan is endowed with all the force and fire of Milton's own spirit. But Milton's object was to justify the ways of God to man. He therefore, expresses himself here and there to execute his avowed aim. The epic, it must be remembered, is a piece of objective art. He calls Satan's "infernal serpent" 'Arch-fiend' and uses abusive epithets to expose Satan's real character. But Milton himself cannot and does not take part in the action of the poem. The lyrical qualities of Milton's genius inevitably enter into *Paradise Lost*. But to say that he is the hero of *Paradise Lost*, is nothing short of preposterous.

(C) ADAM: THE HERO OF "*PARADISE LOST*"

To put forward the claim either of God or of the Messiah (Christ) is absurd, for they do not take part in the central action of *Paradise Lost*. However, the whole epic, turns round what Milton indicates even in the first line of the poem 'Man's first disobedience.' Adam disobeyed God, and by this act of disobedience, he not only lost Paradise but brought about the fall of the whole human race. No action can be more tremendous in its import and significance than that which brought the fall of the whole of humanity. And Adam, being responsible for it, is obviously meant by the poet to fill the role of the hero of the great poem.

Difficulty arises because Adam does not act. He is merely a passive figure, who is acted upon by others. But it is his fate that engages the attention of God and the Angels in Heaven, and of Satan and the devils in Hell. His fate again causes a terrible upheaval on the Earth. When Eve plucks the fruit, "Nature sighs that all is lost." Adam may not be a heroic figure in the same sense as Achilles is. But *Paradise Lost* is a different kind of epic from Homer's *Iliad*. Milton himself says,

... Yet argument

Not less but more heroic than the wrath of stern Achilles.

In creating Adam, Milton attempted a very peculiar task. Adam, the father of mankind is almost without human experience and so cannot have much personality. Milton has to present a figure who appeals imaginatively and poetically and this he does. Adam has a natural magnificence that fits him to be the hero of an epic. However, Adam is not a hero like Achilles and Ulysses, etc. capable of incredibly heroic deeds. Adam is a hero of a nobler kind.

Adam's role is not that of a warrior but that of a God-fearing man, faced with a temptation and defeated in the conflict between himself and Satan. In studying the question of the hero of *Paradise Lost*, we need not be obsessed with the classical conception of the epic hero. Adam is defeated no doubt but through the Messiah (Christ) he regains the Paradise 'happier far'. Thus the ultimate victory which is of a spiritual nature goes to Adam. Adam is the real hero of *Paradise Lost*.

Conclusion

"One supposed defect in the story of *Paradise Lost* has been frequently dwelt on, and the fact is that Satan, and not Adam, is the hero of the epic. We think that only those, who reading of Milton has been confined to the first two books, can be misled by this nonsensical paradox. *In the first two books Satan is*

*naturally made a heroic figure; he is still an Arch-angel (though fallen) one of the chief Arch-angels and king over his fellows. "His character has power. His capacity for evil must be exalted in order to show the epic greatness of the coming conflict and in order to arouse the reader's fears for himself, human sympathy with his first parents and gratitude for his redemption. But we have not to wait for *Paradise Regained* to see the steady deterioration in Satan's character. Surely, to take one instance alone there is little of the heroic in Satan when he takes the form of a toad to whisper in Eve's ear and is stirred up by the spear of Ithuriel. At the close of the poem Satan's degradation is complete."* (Wyatt and Low).

"Satan is, of course, a character in an epic, but he is in no sense the hero of the epic as a whole; he is only a figure of heroic magnitude and heroic energy, and he is developed by Milton with dramatic emphasis and dramatic intensity" Helen Grandner.

Although Adam is a passive and not an active agent in the poem and although he suffers more than he acts, his claim to the title of the hero seems to be better than anybody else's. As Landor points out, and as everybody at once notices, Adam is the central figure in the poem, round whom the others act. *It is his fall that is the subject matter of the poem. Our interest centres round him; our sympathy goes to him. He may reasonably be called the hero of 'Paradise Lost'.* Adam does not have a romantic character and obvious bravery of a noble; he is Every man as he recognizes his own weakness: accepts his responsibility, and faces life with true courage. His battles are within him, as is fitting for the hero of a great religious epic.