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Good versus evil in paradise lost

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Abstract

Good and evil are central themes in Paradise Lost. Classic symbols of both extremes are in the book: God and Satan, good and evil personified, respectively. In spite of the seeming dichotomy of either pure evil or total goodness, for much of Paradise Lost the distinction between good and evil is not very clear. The goodness of Man overcome by sin and the fall of God's holy angels to hell are examples of the overlap of both good and evil within characters.

Keywords: Evil, goodness, sin and free will

Introductions

In John Milton's Paradise Lost, God chooses to create everything good in the world which includes free-will for his creation. They now have the same ability to decide whether to do good or evil. Satan quickly demonstrates this ability by doing evil when he rallies some angels to fight with him against God. Satan vows revenge when God kicks him and the traitor angels out of Heaven. Satan's sedition tempts God's creation into mutiny against God. Both male and female do what is wrong. They put the forbidden fruit into their mouth and swallow it. In Paradise Lost by John Milton, the four main characters make a decision, to create, to destroy, or to rebel, and each are subject to the consequences of that choice.

John Milton divided the characters in his epic poem Paradise Lost into two sides, one side under God representing good, and the other side under Satan representing evil and sin. Milton deals with the problems of both evil and temptation within Paradise Lost, 'it focuses on God as a sign for authority and the status quo to Satan as a sign for the Other.'^[1] Milton first introduced the reader to the character Satan, the representative of all evil, and his allegiance of fallen angels that aided in his revolt against God. Only later did Milton introduce the reader to all powerful God, leader and creator of all mankind (John). This introduction of Satan first led the reader to believe acts of sin were good, just like Eve felt in the Garden of Eden when she was enticed by Satan to eat the fruit off of the Tree of Knowledge. The later introduction of The Almighty had the reader's change their feelings towards sin, as the ways of God were introduced to them and these ways were shown to be the way to feel and believe. This levy of good vs. evil carried on throughout the poem with the interaction of Satan and his fallen angels with God and his son in Heaven.

The common representation of sin and evil came from the lead character in the battle against God, Satan. His name means "enemy of God." He was a former high angel from Heaven named Lucifer, meaning, "light bearer" (John). Satan became jealous in Heaven of God's son and formed an allegiance of angels to battle against God, only for God to cast them out of Heaven into Hell. This did not bother Satan at first since he became the leader in Hell rather than a servant in Heaven. Satan believed that it was, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven". Much of Satan's reliance on getting things accomplished came from his ability to lie and deceive. He lied to the fallen angels about the Son and his "vice-regency" in Heaven in order for them to follow him instead of The Son. He also concealed his true self by hiding in the body of a serpent when presenting himself to Eve in the Garden of Eden. She would not have been as easily tempted into sin had he not concealed his true form. In addition, Satan showed the reader a large amount of anger and destructiveness when he planned his revenge on God (Milton 62). Satan even found pleasure in the pain and destruction of other people and things, "To do aught good never will be our task, / But ever to do ill our soul delight". It is clear the feelings and views of Satan represented evil. Milton's uses imagery of light and darkness to express all of these opposites.

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Angels are physically described in terms of light, whereas devils are generally described by their shadowy darkness. Milton also uses light to symbolize God and God's grace. In his invocation in Book III, Milton asks that he be filled with this light so he can tell his divine story accurately and persuasively. While the absence of light in Hell and in Satan himself represents the absence of God and his grace.

Milton divides the universe into four major regions: glorious Heaven, dreadful Hell, confusing Chaos, and a young and vulnerable Earth in between. The opening scenes that take place in Hell give the reader immediate context as to Satan's plot against God and humankind. The intermediate scenes in Heaven, in which God tells the angels of "his plans, provide a philosophical and theological context for the story."^[2] Then, with these established settings of good and evil, light and dark, much of the action occurs in between on Earth. The powers of good and evil work against each other on this new battlefield of Earth. Satan fights God by tempting Adam and Eve, while God shows his love and mercy through the Son's punishment of Adam and Eve.

The crucial moment in the poem results from disobedience and a breakdown of hierarchy. Eve argues with Adam about whether they should work together or apart, and Adam gives in to her. The problem here lies with both humans. Eve should not argue with her superior, Adam, but likewise, Adam, should not yield his authority to his inferior, Eve. When Eve eats the fruit, one of her first thoughts is that the fruit "may render me more equal" (IX, 823) to which she quickly adds, "for inferior who is free?" (IX, 826). Her reasoning, from Milton's point of view, is incorrect. Freedom comes precisely from recognizing one's place in the grand scheme and obeying the dictates of that position. By disobeying God, Eve has "gained neither equality nor freedom; she has instead lost Paradise and brought sin and death into the world."^[3] Finally, in the last two books of the epic, Milton shows example after example of people who ignore the responsibilities they have and try to either raise themselves above God or disobey God's commands. The result is always the same — destruction. Heaven is the complete opposite of Hell. The major difference between Heaven and Hell is that of light and darkness. Hell is always dark and gloomy, whereas Heaven is perpetually light and radiant. Book III is full of light, so Milton invokes its aid as God's first creation. Milton himself went blind later in his forties which way be why he envisioned Heaven as such magnificently bright place.

The first words of Paradise Lost state that the poem's main theme will be "Man's first Disobedience." Milton narrates the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience, explains how and why it happens, and places the story within the larger context of Satan's rebellion and Jesus' resurrection. Raphael tells Adam about Satan's disobedience in an effort to give him a firm grasp of the threat that Satan and humankind's disobedience poses. In essence, Paradise Lost presents two "moral paths that one can take after disobedience: the downward spiral of increasing sin and degradation, represented by Satan, and the road to redemption, represented by Adam and Eve."^[4] While Adam and Eve are the first humans to disobey God, Satan is the first of all God's creation to disobey. His decision to rebel comes only from himself—he was not persuaded or provoked by others. Also, his decision to continue to disobey God after his fall into Hell ensures that God will not forgive him. Adam and Eve, on the other hand, decide to repent for their sins and

seek forgiveness. Unlike Satan, Adam and Eve understand that their disobedience to God will be corrected through generations of toil on Earth. This path is obviously the correct one to take: the visions in Books XI and XII demonstrate that obedience to God, even after repeated falls, can lead to humankind's salvation.

Conclusion

In John Milton's Paradise Lost the forces of good vs. evil are major factors throughout the epic. From the beginning of the poem, good vs. evil, or more specifically Heaven vs. Hell and God vs. Satan, become Milton's focal point and the basis of the story. Milton sets up an opposition between his characters. Satan has accomplices such as Moloch and Belial and God has archangels such as Michael and Raphael. Milton, when talking about the differences between Heaven and Hell, makes the theme of Good vs. Evil evident. The views of God and his angels contrast with the views of Satan and his devils.

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