Paradise Lost: The Greatest Epic Poem In English

As a young poet John Milton promised a grand epic about the military feats of king Author, a national hero devoted to the glory of England. At the end of his career, he published an epic about the fall of Satan and humankind, set in the cosmic realms of hell and heaven in which England is not mentioned. In between, he experienced devastating personal losses and great political crises. Paradise lost shows the evolution and culmination of a long career deeply engaged with the historical events of his lifetime. The poem revolutionizes the conventions of epic poetry and raises fundamental questions about marriage, monarchy, free will, and national heroes.

As a product of a religiously protestant family in London, England, Milton began writing poetry as an adolescent and preparing to one day become an Anglican priest. Although his interest in religion prevailed throughout his life, he gave up his pursuit of the priesthood to devote his time to writing poetry and to study ancient and modern languages, literature, science, politics, and philosophy.

Paradise Lost became published in 1667 and 1674. Comprising nearly 7,000 lines of blank verse, the poem was immediately famous. Today it is regarded as the greatest epic poem in English.

Milton considered himself a radical protestant Christian. He was deeply opposed to England's ruling Anglican church, believing that the separation of the Anglican church into other protestant groups was a good thing. Milton eventually abandoned presbyterianism because all organized religions blocked people's access to spirituality. He supported the revolution that led to the regicides of Charles the first in 1649, and he served as an appointed official in the commonwealth government and the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell.

He believed strongly in an individual's right to freedom, seen in his stance in supportive divorce. For Milton, God was the only true king, and any human monarch was tyrannical.

Contemporary readers tend to find Milton's' view of women problematic. His interpretation of the bible in Paradise Lost is quite literal. SOURCE HERE. The poem kept hinting that women were inferior to men and must submit to them and yet Adam chooses his companion Eve over his obedience to God, offering a vision of companionship marriage that was progressive in Milton's day and age. Moreover, Eve is not merely a sexual temptress; she is a complex being with a strong desire to acquire knowledge and be independent.

Paradise Lost radically reconceives the genre of epic poetry, casting Satan and his army in magnificent, heroic men and elevating a married couple to the status of epic heroes. Epic action is revolutionized as well, moving from marshal exploits to moral battles, elevating the heavy burden of human free will. Stylistically, Milton rejects heroic couplets, tying the constraints of rhyme to the political sensor of his day.

The rising action of the poem begins when God has cast satan and his rebel army of angels out of heaven. Led by satan, these fallen angels decide to continue their resistance to God by

corrupting man, God's creation. Satan's children, sin and death, help him escape the gates of hell. It is displayed that God already knows that Satan will succeed in the tempting and corruption of humankind. He announces that man will be punished for such disobedience because he created humans strong enough to withstand such temptations. He claims that his new creations will be punished by death unless someone in heaven is willing to die on their behalf. God's only son volunteered.

Satan landed in the new world and snuck into the garden of Eden disguised as a cherub. Once inside the garden, he watches Adam and eve and is envious of their beauty and happiness that indicates God's favor. Though he has a moment of doubt, satan stays resolved in his plan to corrupt them. He overhears Adam and eve discussing the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, and Satan decides to seduce them with this fruit. Satan is discovered whispering into eves dreams, and he flees. God sends his archangel Rafael to warn Adam about satan's plotting. As a warning of disobedience, Rafael tells Adam the story of satan's rebellion in heaven and the ultimate defeat of his army, and his expulsion to hell. After Rafael finishes telling Adam the story, Satan returns to the garden of Eden, taking on the form of a serpent. In the climax of the poem, Satan finds eve alone and tempts her with knowledge and status if she eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Eve contemplates and chooses to eat the forbidden fruit, then offering it to Adam, he eats it so they will share the same fate.

In the falling action of the poem, God is angry with his creations and sends the son to the garden of Eden to deliver his judgment. Eve and all women will experience pain in childbirth, and they must submit to their husband's will. Adam and all men will labor to grow food from the cursed ground. Satan was delighted by his success, and his children, sin, and death, built a bridge that linked hell and earth. Satan returned to hell triumphantly, but the sun transforms him and all of his followers into serpents, doomed to eternal hunger, a fruit that turns to ashes when they take a bite.

God then ordered the angels to change the world to reflect Adam and eve's fall, and they alter the weather and create discord between humans and animals. Adam and eve argue and blame each other for their condition, but ultimately they confessed to God, asked his pardon, and repented. God is merciful, promising to reward their obedience with an afterlife in heaven. God sends the archangel Michael to show Adam visions of their future. Cane will murder abel; tyrants will rule, and God's flood will wipe out all that Noah's family and their animals. The vision of Noah's survival will give Adam hope, in addition to depicting the suffering that humans will endure. In the resolution, Adam and Eve finally leave paradise accepting their fate.

While God rarely intercedes personally with his creatures, choosing instead to send intermediaries such as angels or the son, he sends satan a great sign of his justice. The symbol of God's justice represents his ultimate power and knowledge, making satans resistance pointless.

Throughout the entirety of the poem, the fruit from the tree of knowledge represents seductive temptation to gain knowledge that only God should know. God forbids Adam and Eve from eating it, which makes them want it even more. Eating it causes both of them to fall from their innocent and ignorant state.

The garden of Eden symbolizes God's favor and his direct connection to Adam and Eve. Once Adam and Eve disobey God, they are banished from the garden, making it the symbol of the fall

and the material separation between earth and heaven.

In regards to the theme of the poem, Milton uses obedience and disobedience to portray such. Satan's disobedience to God is political rebellion, but not so, the fall of Adam and Eve, which is seen to be more of a domestic dispute. With both stories of fallen creatures, Milton suggests that the order of the world depends on obedience to God.

Another strong theme throughout the poem is sin and innocence. Innocence for Adam and Eve is closely connected to their ignorance. When they lose their innocence, it is because they blatantly disobey God's instructions, thus bringing sin into the world. Once they have sinned, they can never be innocent again.

It has been said of John Milton that no other major English poet has been so deeply involved in the great questions and political crises of the time. Paradise Lost offers an epic version of Milton's often radical and political-religious views. Perhaps most memorable is Milton's decidedly heroic and human satan, proud and ambitious, but brave and courageous with all of the best lines. His resistance to submission is more satisfying than Adams' lesson of obedience and fear. Milton compiled his great epic under the extreme conditions of blindness and age, and he leaves us contemplating severe but heroic burns of choice and free will.