

Alexander Pratt

Voss

ENGL 2120

13 April 2015

Satan: Perversion of the Hero

Milton's *Paradise Lost* contains within its story a compelling and long debated subject. While Milton was a Christian, the first two books of his epic poem pose an odd quandary for its readers: who is the hero of this epic, and more specifically, is this hero Satan? Much of the first two books follow Satan's endeavors, placing him as the focus of the story. While Satan demonstrates a number of markings that could label him a hero, based on the definitions of the "Hellenic hero" and the "Biblical hero," Satan's actions demonstrate that he plays the role of an antihero rather than a hero or a non-hero.

This argument hinges on how one defines the word hero. While some sources claim that a main character or protagonist will suffice when labeling a "hero," this is only the broadest of definitions. In "Heroism and Paradise Lost," William R. Herman writes about the disparities between two types of heroic archetypes: the Hellenic hero, and the Biblical hero. Herman's Hellenic hero touts "individuality, self-determination, and physical courage." He also insists upon the Hellenic hero possessing great physical strength, and that the success of his peers hinges on his abilities (Herman 13). We see these qualities illustrated in Satan's character throughout the first two books.

Satan demonstrates his individuality at the beginning of Book 2the second book, when the narrator tells the reader:

High on a throne of royal state, which far
Outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,

Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
 Show'rs on her kings barbaric pearl and gold,
 Satan exalted sat, by merit raised
 To that bad eminence [. . .] (2.1-6)

Satan distinguishes himself from the other fallen angels by sitting a-top a throne more glorious than any treasures known to man. He takes this throne not only on his own volition, but upon the decision of the demons of Hell as well. This The throne sets him apart from the rest of Hell, raising him up as their ruler, and points towards the Hellenic conceptualization of a heroic character.

Book 1 introduces the reader to Satan, an angel that rebelled against God instead of serving in heaven. After leading an army against God, Satan and his cohorts are defeated and exiled to Hell as punishment. Satan, along with his renegade angels, falls from heaven with a great strike of thunder from God, demonstrating his all-mighty and incomparable power. The story opens on Satan and his compatriot, Beelzebub, in Hell—chained to a lake of fire. In this state of torture, Satan demonstrates one of the many examples of his self-determination. Beelzebub asks his “Prince” what to do in this situation—wondering what benefit could come from their “eternal punishment.” Satan replies:

Fall'n Cherub, to be weak is miserable
 Doing or suffering: but of this be sure,
 To do aught good never will be our task,
 But ever to do ill our sole delight,
 As being the contrary to his high will
 Whom we resist. If then his providence
 Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
 Our labor must be to pervert that end,
 And out of good still to find means of evil [. . .] (1.157-65)

This response shows the ultimate form of self-determination: to be. Satan is defeated by that which cannot be defeated, suffering ing in literally the lowest pit of all that exists, and is beyond any evidence of hope, and y. Yet, he to remains resolute in his one's decision. Additionally, Satan

has already begun plotting his next move against God. There is no greater example of self-determination than to be faced with that which is literally impossible, and to still make a plan. Satan does not believe himself capable of failing, or at the very least, he does not consider concession **as** an option. While this **refusal** can be defined as stupidity, it can also be written as **courageous**; they seem to be two sides of the same coin.

This courage manifests itself in physical form at the very beginning of the epic. Though the extent of God's powers had yet to be challenged, his renown preceded him as a force to be reckoned with. Regardless of this fact, Satan pursued his selfish goal:

He trusted to have equaled the Most High,
If he opposed; and with ambitious aim
Against the throne and monarchy of God
Raised impious war in Heav'n and battle proud
With vain attempt [. . .] (1.40-44)

Through his **own** hubris, Satan leads his army against God **and is smote who smites him** from Heaven. This act, while undeniably foolish, reaffirms Satan's self-determination and individuality through physical courage—**as** the one being that dared to enter into combat with God.

As for **his** great physical strength, **Satan is described Milton describes Satan** as far beyond the Herculean standard for Hellenic heroes. He is **described as** monstrous in size, “titanian” even, though, as an angel, Satan possesses the power to shrink himself down to whatever size he prefers. He demonstrates this strength in his escape from the fiery lake:

Forthwith upright he rears from off the pool
His Might stature; on each **hand** the flames
Driv'n backward slope their pointing spires, and rolled
In billows, leave I' th' midst a horrid vale. (1.221-4)

Through strength and size, Satan rends himself from the chains that shackled him. There is a parallel here between the biblical narrative of Samson and the character of Satan; both

characters- wield immense strength, both characters lose this strength when they fall from God's grace (figuratively in the case of Samson and literally in Satan's case), and both characters use this brute strength to free themselves from the binds of their oppressors and seek a revenge that ends in a self-destructive manner. While these stories share some commonalities, their relation does not seem intentional. If it were intentional, the comparison would serve not to pose the two as analogous, but merely as an allusion to heroism, perhaps to further tease out this notion of Satan as the story's potential protagonist.

The final description of Herman's Hellenic hero says that the success of the hero and his peers need rest on the shoulders of said hero. This quality could be no better evidenced than in Book 2 during the meeting between the fallen angels. After other propositions have been aired, Beelzebub offers up the plan that Satan had proposed to him earlier while chained to the lake of fire. After Beelzebub finishes speaking, Satan chimes in, giving his endorsement to the (his own) plan, and says:

[. . .] Here he had need
 All circumspection, and we now no less
 Choice in our suffrage; for on whom we send,
 The weight of all and our last hope relies. (2.413-416)

Here is where Herman's distinction between the two archetypes plays its essential role. While Satan succeeds in being considered a Hellenic hero, [Herman](#) defines a Biblical hero as something very different: "His main characteristic is not physical strength but moral strength, permitting him to be obedient to God when all others reject God or the need to be obedient. The Hellene obtains glory through defiance; the Biblical hero obtains glory through submission" (Herman 13). By this definition, Satan's character is the antithesis of a Biblical hero. Not only does Satan disobey God, but he is the first to do it. Satan's refusal to submit to God is what began this epic in the first place. Additionally, Satan bestows this penchant for disobedience upon man.

In his text “The Theme of Paradise Lost,” Elebert N. S. Thompson points out that such a trivial requirement as prohibition from eating fruit from a certain tree serves as a marker for divine obedience (Thompson 106). To put it plainly, a law that seemed obviously important to follow would likely be easier to stick to than one that seems simple and harmless to break.

The question of morality tarnishes the reputation of Satan as a hero. While Satan offers up the position of Savior to all of Pandemonium, unbeknownst to his fellow fallen angels, he wants all the glory for himself. The room is silent, with no demon willing to take up the task at hand:

[. . .] Till at last
 Satan, whom now transcendent glory raised
 Above his fellow, with monarchal pride
 Conscious of highest worth, unmoved thus spake.
 [. . .]
 “But I should ill become this throne, O Peers,
 And this imperial sov'reignty, adorned
 With splendor, armed with power, if aught proposed
 And judged of public moment, in the shape
 Of difficulty or danger could deter
 Me from attempting. (2.426-50)

Satan does not offer his service as an act of selflessness. Rather, he wishes to attempt the endeavor alone so as to gain all the glory from the challenge himself. He does not wish to share credit with anyone. In fact, after he concludes his speech, Satan rises and essentially begins to grandstand, accepting the praises of his minions while preventing anyone else from volunteering to join him.

Satan's immorality is a repeated theme in the first two books of the poem. This is first witnessed in his rebellion against god, which he undertook out of pride—the worst of the seven deadly sins. His quest stems not from a virtuous pursuit, but as an act of revenge out of envy of God's power. Satan's immortality bleeds into his backstory, as the reader learns in the tail-end of

Book 2, upon meeting Sin. Satan's mind gave birth to Sin while he still resided in Heaven, before the rebellion. After birthing her, Satan then raped Sin, giving birth to Death. In “The Alimentary Structures of Incest in Paradise Lost,” Minaz Jooma explains how this incestuous relationship is an intentional contrast to the “ideal heterosexual marital state” of Adam and Eve. Where Adam and Eve's intercourse is viewed as appropriate in the eyes of God, Satan and Sin's intercourse is unholy, perverted, and erotic (Jooma 25).

These perverted parallels of Satan to the righteous make him an antihero. The epic does not merely focus on him for a time before moving on to another protagonist—it establishes Satan as the opposite of a hero in the eyes of God by giving him falsely heroic traits, but reiterating his sinfulness. Throughout the poem, the speaker reminds us of his unholiness as we follow his malicious quest—an inversion of the traditional hero's quest: Satan begins in Hell and leaves to venture into the over-world, his selfish goals oppose the selfless. Even his saying “be it so” acts as an inversion of “so be it” or “amen.” To some, Satan may appear heroic, to others he may seem far from a hero at all. Both of these cases prove seem right in their own regard, but together they show that Satan is neither hero nor non-hero, but anthe true antihero.

Works Cited

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The Heroes is Joe Abercrombie's fifth novel. It was first published in January 2011 by Gollancz in the UK, with an American edition following from Orbit Books. They say Black Dowâ€™s killed more men than winter, and clawed his way to the throne of the North up a hill of skulls. The King of the Union, ever a jealous neighbour, is not about to stand smiling by while he claws his way any higher. The orders have been given and the armies are toiling through the northern mud. Thousands of men are converging