

Narrating With a Devilish Edge:
Justifying God in *Paradise Lost* Through Satan and the Narrator

Although slightly blasphemous in his ambition, John Milton intends to justify God in his epic *Paradise Lost*. A retelling of the book of Genesis, *Paradise Lost* is Milton's intriguing expansion of the Christian origin story. The most striking alteration, however, is the character Satan. In *Paradise Lost*, the Devil renders support in his new portrayal. This is established through Milton's narration. The narrator and Satan adopt similar mannerisms throughout the epic. A comparison to Satan would come as an insult to most anyone, yet I argue that the parallel between the narrator and this revamped Satan exposes the devil-like qualities within humanity. Overall, this comparison serves as a prominent mode to justify God to man.

Paradise Lost causes quite the ruckus for a reason: the Devil. Satan is a valiant, persevering leader of the rebel angels. Milton describes Satan as a "proudly eminent" being who "Stood like a tow'r" and still maintained his "original brightness" despite his falling (1.590-592). Even after losing the battle over Heaven and being cast into the depths of Hell, Satan maintains his proud, resilient demeanor and embodies the image of a war general or a hero. When describing Satan, Milton makes a direct comparison to Greek heroes such as Odysseus and Achilles. This diction and these analogies make Satan seem more reliable and heroic than a devout Christian would like to believe. Often this sturdy, prideful, and shining description is reserved for heroes. Yet, Milton applies it to Satan, describing the recent transformation of the exalted Lucifer to the ostracized rebel Satan, the direct opposition to God and Heaven.

Milton is no stranger to revolution — and as a firm Puritan, he never rejected God — but he does rebel in his condemnations of the English monarchy. The king is said to be divine in his ways and the closest to God, so, in not supporting the monarchy, Milton disobeyed God. Even so, this mutiny did not make Milton an atheist while Satan's actions turned him into God's

opposition. Nonetheless, the two are paralleled, and Milton's own rebellious ways do not explain why the narrator describes Satan in a flattering manner and makes him more complex as character. Satan becomes more human-like in his vengeful ways: "ever to do ill" (1.160) his "sole delight, / As being contrary to [God's] high will / Whom [the rebels] resist" (1.160-162). Satan's words here are spiteful, vengeful, and more regarding ill will that is seen throughout the world, especially in politics. In reducing Satan's actions to political opposition, the Devil becomes a political martyr rather than a contradictory force to *the* Creator. In this depiction, Satan's evil qualities are reduced and dismissed to be made more humane. Thus, as a more relatable character than the Almighty, Satan's newfound favorability has the capacity to increase greatly. With this, a parallel between the narrator and Milton's interpretation of the Devil becomes less appalling.

The narrator and Satan are puppeteers in the amount of information they possess, and the two establish their authority by doling out this information at their own pace. The narrator asserts his argument in Book I, saying "That to the heighth of this great argument / I may assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men" (1.24-26). In making this bold claim, the narrator captures the reader's interest and sets up for a book-by-book layout of this argument. The layout is pertinent in making such a bold argument, still, this is similar to Satan during the debate amongst the Stygian Council at Pandemonium. During this debate, "Satan exalted sat, by merit raised" (2.5). "Merit" refers to Satan's intellectual capabilities, and, from his previous position as God's right-hand-Archangel, he possesses the proper information to lead these rebels. Like the narrator's preparation for a book-by-book layout, Satan is 'raised' by his 'merit' and doles out information on a need-to-know-basis. Satan gives his input and reveals "some new race

called *Man*” (2.348) after multiple proposals as to what the fallen Archangels should do moving forward are laid out. In this manipulation of caliber, Satan and the narrator maintain control.

Before maintaining control, it is necessary to establish authority. In both of the previously cited situations, Milton and Satan are literally and figuratively raised in height. The “height” (1.24) of his argument shows its greatness, and, in Pandemonium, “none higher sat” than Satan (2. 300). The height of Milton’s argument and of Satan’s position asserts their dominance and power. This position also emphasizes the proximity to God and Heaven. For some time, Satan, as Lucifer, was the closest to God. Later, in Hell, Satan is the closest amongst all the devils to Heaven. In Satan’s proximity to Heaven, he possesses the most knowledge. In Milton’s closeness to Heaven, he implies that his justification is more divine. In either versatile use of elevation, God is further established as the utmost power.

Although control and authority are necessary for both Satan and the narrator, freedom drives Satan’s rebellion and Milton’s argument, as seen in the imagery around flight. Milton introduces his argument and purpose “That with no middle flight intends to soar / Above th’ Aonian mount” (1. 14-15). This in itself is a bold statement: Milton intends to surpass any expectations, to go above and beyond, and exceed any other epic with his own. Milton is thus on his own divine level. In his rather ambitious claim, the narrator intends to ‘soar’ above our heads with his argument and in attempts to justify God. Similar to the narrator, once Sin and Death unlock the gates of Hell, Satan “spreads for flight, and in the surging smoke / Uplifted spurns the ground, thence many a league / As in a cloudy chair ascending rides” (2. 928-930). In yet another ambitious trek for someone who was supposed to be locked in Hell, Satan takes flight to destroy God’s new creation: Man. Through the parallel in ascension, once again, there are clear similarities between the narrator and Satan. Satan is able to ascend out of Hell, escaping his

punishment. He is momentarily free as he flies out of Hell. Much like these emotions, in an act to express himself, his opinions, and his justification of God, this epic is Milton's freedom of speech.

However, the parallelism with Satan passes doubt on whether Milton is on God's side or Satan's. This disparity in Milton's views is only *heightened* in the opening lines of Book I. Milton asks the Holy Spirit to instruct him as if "from the first / Wast present" (1.19-20). Further, Milton states his work "pursues / Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1.15-16) and that his argument is 'great' even before he receives illumination from the Holy Spirit (1.24). Milton's pride that Milton possesses resembles that of Satan, whose "pride / Had cast him out from Heav'n" (1. 36-37). However, this shows the direct connection between pride and the rebellious actions of Satan and Milton. Therefore, although it appears that Milton is lost to the Devil, pride is just another way that this parallel surfaces.

This pride is the most humane quality that both Satan and the narrator possess. In stressing this trait, Milton describes the Satan that lingers amongst humanity after Eve's first bite of the forbidden fruit. Milton's confidence in Book I shows his progression from asking for help from God to being assertive in his own thoughts, specifically in his attempt to justify God. It is this shift — from asking God for help to succumbing to one's own pride — that is also evident in Satan, who caused Adam and Eve "in that happy state, / Favoured in Heav'n so highly, to fall off / From their Creator" (1. 29-31). Although manipulated partially by Satan, this change is also a part of Adam and Eve. In their lack of attentivity towards Raphael's warning from God, the pair, specifically Eve, disregards their knowledge of their own creation: God gave *Man* the double-edged sword of free-will. This disregard reflects Adam and Eve succumbing to their pride and

eating the fruit. In eating this forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve stoop to Satan's level in their disobedience — the very first traces of Satan in humanity.

These traces are present due to Satan's own interference. Satan's disobedience spurs out of his own vengeance. God acknowledges that Satan tricked humanity, and by His grace gives *Man* the capacity to repent, unlike Satan. Adam and Eve's disobedience is a result of pride, and this pride reflects Satan's imprint on humanity. Therefore, it is impossible to justify God without the explanation of human disobedience which all connects back to Satan. The narrator is paralleled with Satan in order to further justify God to man. In God's divinity, no creation of His can be godlike. Rather, his creations resemble each other, and this is apparent in the aspects of Satan within all of humankind. God allows us, humans and descendants of Adam and Eve, to repent because of this influence of Satan, thus supporting his justification of God to his readers.

Considering imagery and diction, it is hard not to see the similarities between Satan and Milton. However, the way Milton refers to himself is extremely prideful and self-serving. Milton's attempts to make up for his pride by writing this epic about God and God's greatness begs the question of whether the epic was created out of genuine piety or the desire to leave a legacy. Nonetheless, Milton's parallel between the narrator and Satan justifies God and depicts His grace. In the end, with the narrator highlighting Satan in this manner, God maintains the right and just throne as the Creator in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2003.