

# Paradise Lost: John Milton

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## John Milton (1608-1674)

English poet, known for his radical republican views and unconventional religious views.

Milton was known in some circles as the Protestant Poet, and his writings (both in prose and poetry) reflect his deeply held religious views.

Milton's legacy took interesting twists after his death. For a time, he was considered to be one of the greatest English poets, surpassing even Shakespeare. He had a profound influence on the Romantics, though some, like Keats were uncertain about *Paradise Lost*. Keats wrote, "Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour."

- In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his reputation suffered, under the criticism of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

## Paradise Lost, Structure and Writing

- Written in 1667, though revised in 1674.
- Is divided into twelve books, as Virgil's *Aeneid*.
- Opens *in media res*, in the middle of the action.
- Borrows heavily from the convention of heroic epics.
- Written in **heroic verse**

## Contrast with Dante's Depiction of Satan and Hell

### Dante's Conception

#### **The Nature of Hell**

Cold, icy as one nears Satan

#### **Satan's Humanity**

Satan is inhuman; powerless  
Almost an object of pity

#### **Satan's Role**

Satan is God's tool, trapped by his justice

#### **Satan's Role in Sin**

Satan is the embodiment of treachery and punishment, but has no power to tempt others

#### **Purpose of Hell**

Hell existed for punishment, the contrapasso that suggests humans be punished symbolically for their misdeeds.

### Milton's Conception

fiery, burning plains of Hell

Satan is human, charismatic,  
his sins are human sins of arrogance and pride

Satan *appears* to be in control, an antagonist fighting against God

Satan is the archetypal tempter, tempting not only his brethren to rebel against God, but Adam and Eve

Hell is not a place for humans, but a home for the angels who have rebelled against God.

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## Milton's Relevant Religious Views

- Milton believed in **mortalism**, the idea that the soul dies with the body rather than ascending to Heaven or Hell. Only upon Resurrection do the souls ascend to Heaven.
- He also believed in a variation of **arianism**, a rejection of the traditional Christian belief in the trinity. He believed that God was distinct from and more powerful than Jesus, his son.

## Themes of Paradise Lost

### Sin as Self-Deception

- Once in Hell, Satan is forced to lie to himself to reconcile his new position with his reality. While he defiantly asserts that it is "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven," this rejection of God's authority is undercut by his observation that "The mind can make a heaven out of hell or a hell out of heaven." From the outset, Satan realizes that his claim of lordship over Hell is an illusion, but he chooses the deception that he has power over the realization that he is powerless over God.
- His disobedience and his pride extend from his unwillingness to see and accept his subordinate position.
- Where Dante saw reason as the path to overcome sin, Milton seems to suggest honesty.
- Satan's self-deception is the same lie that humans use to justify sin.

### Obedience

- The poem opens with Milton addressing "Man's first obedience," suggesting the centrality of this theme. Satan's disobedience of God is later mirrored by Eve's disobedience of Adam and their joint disobedience of God.
- Derived from the medieval belief in the **Great Chain of Being**, the hierarchal arrangement of the universe from top to bottom. God is at the top of the universe, with angels, men, demons, and Satan all arranged in a hierarchy below.
- This focus moves the central concern about Adam and Eve consuming the fruit of the tree from knowledge to their disobedience.

### Free Will and Freedom

- Milton stresses the idea that true **freedom** comes from obedience and accepting one's place. Eve consumes the fruit because she wants to become equal to Adam, morally equivalent to Satan's disobedience. For both, in Milton's world, freedom would come best from making the choice to follow God's path.
- Not giving humans free will, despite the knowledge that it will lead them to temptation and ruin, would have made humans thralls rather than people who chose freely.
- Theologically, Milton explores one of the trickiest elements of Christian thought: God's omniscience and his decision to allow Adam and Eve to be tempted. Over and over in Paradise Lost, God says that Man has free will, that God knows Man will yield to Satan's temptation, but that he (God) is not the cause of that yielding; He simply knows that it will occur. This knowledge, and the concordant decision, provide the basis for Milton's argument that God wants humans to exercise free will despite the consequences.
- The subsequent fall of Man
  - Allows God to show his love and compassion for humans, and
  - Demonstrates that Satan, in his self-delusion, is not independent of God's will.