Milton, *Samson Agonistes*: summary and study guide
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Preface: “Of that sort of dramatic poem which is called Tragedy”
– What does Milton want you to keep in mind as you read his text?
– What kind of literary work is *Samson*?

The Argument
– Milton tells you what will happen. What’s the situation?
– How does the text appear to be structured? Does Milton provide any hints about how to interpret the story, or is this argument simply a plot summary?

1-115 Samson
– Who is he talking to? What’s on his mind?
– What issues does his current situation seem to raise?

116-75 Chorus
– What do they contribute to the self-portrait Samson has just painted? What does their role appear to be? Can we identify them with a narrator? Why, or why not?

176-329 Samson and Chorus
– What do they talk about? What do we learn about Samson’s past? About Israel? What does the chorus’s role appear to be in this conversation?

330-471 Enter Manoa
– What’s Manoa’s take on the situation? Does Samson agree with him?

472-606 Samson and Manoa debate the offer of ransom
– What is the debate? Note that this possibility is not in the Biblical version: why might Milton have added it? What issues might he be exploring here?

607-709 Samson and Chorus: the problem of despair
– What is the issue here? Does either have a remedy?

710-1060 Dalila
– How is she described? What do you make of her? What does the text seem to make of her? How confident can we be about her real nature, her motives for coming, her reasons for betraying him, her claims to repentance? What, eventually, does she offer Samson?
– In what ways does she resemble or differ from Eve? With what effect?
– Are we encouraged to agree completely with the Chorus’s opinion? Why, or why not?

1061-1307 Harapha
– What do we make of Harapha? What does he seem to offer or represent? Is he in any way a comic figure? What issues does this scene appear to address?
– Are we encouraged to agree completely with the Chorus’s reading of this encounter?
Public officer; Chorus and Samson debate; Samson goes
– What’s the situation? What does Samson debate? What do we make of his decision to go?

Chorus, and Manoa
– What has Manoa done? What do they hear? What do they think has happened?

Messenger
– Pay careful attention to the scene the messenger describes. What happened? Focus on the details the messenger provides. How does the messenger read these events? Does the poem encourage us to agree with that reading? If there’s a gap between the messenger’s reading and ours, how exactly is it created, and what’s the effect?

Chorus, and Manoa
– How does the Chorus interpret these events? How does Manoa? Are we encouraged to agree completely with either?

Some general questions:

1. Read the Biblical version of this story, in Judges 12-16. What differences do you notice in Milton’s version?

2. Samson Agonistes was almost certainly written later than Paradise Lost (probably around 1667-70; some critics dispute this, but they’re probably wrong). In what ways does Samson appear to differ from PL, stylistically or thematically?

3. What general issues does this poem appear to be about? What, ultimately, does it seem to say about these issues?

4. Is Samson justified in the violence he uses? Is he, for example, a vehicle for divinely sanctioned revenge, or is he a ‘terrorist’? Cite some evidence from the text that could support or refute either side of this debate. Are there ways to read his actions other than these two polarized interpretations?