

Reading Guide: *Paradise Lost*

Genre. *PL* is usually thought of as the first great English **epic** poem. It is filled with speeches and resembles a **drama**. In fact, it is a series of dramas arranged in epic scope—or, as Merritt Hughes writes, "an epic built out of dramas."¹ The dramas correspond to one another, as Hughes points out:

As Satan has established his right to rule the devils by monopolizing the glory of undertaking man's destruction, so the Son of God proves his right to reign in heaven by undertaking man's redemption.

Milton knew and was influenced by ancient Greek drama and the Medieval Christian drama. He seems to have been influenced by Dutch and Italian dramas of his time, including Hugo Grotius, *Adamus Exul*, and Giambattista Andreini, *L'Adamo*. The theme of Adam and Eve's exile from Paradise was in the air. Milton saw in contemporary works and in works from the past similar epic treatments of the cosmic order and of creation. Torquato Tasso, *The Creation of the World*; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*; Hesiod, *Theogony*; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*—these were some of his influences, as were Dante, Spenser, Virgil, and Homer. When he was 21, the year he returned from travelling in Europe, especially in Italy, he decided he wanted to write an epic poem. He thought about a number of subjects he might want to use, and we have a list of them which he made c.1640. His early notebooks (one is called the Trinity manuscript) describe some dramas about the Fall of man he was contemplating in his 20's. Years of contemplation and experimentation led him to decide on verse and epic as the vehicle for his greatest work.

Style. Milton was a great fan of Latin, and incredibly proficient in the language. He was employed as Oliver Cromwell's Latin Secretary, and so was responsible not only for composing government communications in Latin, but in advancing and maintaining the rhetorical dignity of England in his prose style. It is a very complex style, mixing the **baroque** with generic and dramatic **appropriateness** (this means that the style often changes depending on who is speaking or what is being described—this is also called **decorum**). The baroque is explained by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

To counter the inroads made by the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent (1545–63) adopted a propagandistic stance in which art was to serve as a means of extending and stimulating the public's faith in the church. To this end the church adopted a conscious artistic program whose art products would make an overtly emotional and sensory appeal to the faithful. The Baroque style that evolved from this program was paradoxically both sensuous and spiritual; while a naturalistic treatment rendered the religious image more accessible to the average churchgoer, dramatic and illusory effects were used to stimulate his piety and devotion and convey to him an impression of the splendour of the divine.²

It continues, "Some of the qualities most frequently associated with the Baroque are grandeur, sensuous richness, drama, vitality, movement, tension, emotional exuberance, and a tendency to blur distinctions between the various arts." For

¹ "Introduction" in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Prose* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 173

² "Baroque Period," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available at <
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=13605&tocid=0>>

Milton, we might say that he blurs the distinction between epic and drama. In terms of his style, he is the epitome of grandeur: his voice has been compared to the heft and majesty of a church organ.

Milton's style relies on **rhetoric**, its tropes and schemes. He is a highly conscious artisan, crafting his prose according to ancient Greek and Roman traditions. He uses apposition, alliteration, parallelism, assonance, ellipsis, antithesis, anaphora, anastrophe, simile, metaphor, and so on to subtly change the emphasis and effect of his prose and poetry. He is very fond of puns (which aren't always humorous), and employs antanaclexis, syllepsis, anthimeria, and oxymoron.³ Like many of his contemporaries, Milton would have been intimately familiar with the 200 or so tropes and schemes of rhetoric. Milton often uses anastrophe, which is the inversion of natural word order, and employs Latinate structures such as extending a thought through the use of conjunctions rather than periods. For example:

O Myriads of immortal Spirits, O Powers
Matchless, but with th'Almighty, and that strife
Was not inglorious, though th'event was dire,
As tis place testifies, and this dire change
Hateful to utter ... (*PL*, I, ll. 622-26)

Note the inversion of the adjective in lines 622-23 above, the opposition in line 624 between "was not" and "was" counteracted by the double negative construction of "not *inglorious*," and so forth.

Questions to consider.

1. Who are the major players in *Paradise Lost*? How would you characterize them? Do they grow as characters, do they change, or are they 2-dimensional? (And what does this mean in a cosmos where change implies imperfection?) How do they relate to one another—who is opposed to whom, and who allied with whom?
2. What is the plot of each book? Why start where he starts, and why focus on these particular elements?
3. Consider the cosmology Milton is proposing: where is Heaven, where is Hell, and how does Earth fit in?
4. Consider Milton's theology: What are the aims of the demonic powers? Why do they do what they do? What is the aim of the divine powers? How do they interact with each other? How does earth and humanity fit in?
5. Is there a larger philosophy to this story? What are his thoughts on fate, desire, honor, duty, obedience, and so forth? Are there particular themes he stresses—does he keep returning to the same set of ideas?
6. Stylistically, are there any passages that really stick out. Why? What is Milton doing with language to make these passages affect the reader?

³ For more information on these, see <
<http://www.uky.edu/ArtsSciences/Classics/Harris/rhetform.html>>