
When Good, Bad, and Evil Don't Matter: An Analysis of the Characterization of Satan in Paradise Lost

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Abstract

John Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost*, has long been equally regarded as one of the most brilliant and most complicated works in the history of literature. While Milton himself claims to write in the poem in order to "justify the ways of God to men," he sometimes appears to depict God in an unfavorable light while also giving Satan various qualities that can be said to make him a sympathetic or even heroic character, rather than simply portraying him as villainous and objectively evil (Black 1018). While scholars of Biblical literature tend to balk at the notion of a heroic Satan, precedents set by Grecian heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus in Homeric epics suggest that Lucifer would be considered worthy of emulation and praise in the ancient Hellenic hero cult. Ultimately, the characterization of Milton's Satan as hero, villain, or something in-between depends on the cultural lens through which the poem is viewed.

Along with works such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Dante's *Inferno*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* exists in the Pantheon of epic poetry. Milton's work depicts in vivid detail the Biblical story of the Fall of Man and focuses much of its attention on the intentions of the fallen angel, Satan. Perhaps surprisingly, Satan—the universal symbol for evil incarnate and the embodiment of sin—has many admirable qualities about him that not only make it difficult for the reader to detest him, but actually make him frighteningly relatable. Most of the poem is centered around the character Satan, bringing him directly into the role of the epic's protagonist. But what has been debated since *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667 is Satan's potential characterization as a hero. Throughout the poem, Satan shows that he possesses no shortage of attributes that are outright admirable and are shared with literary heroes across history. Milton's Satan is charismatic, courageous, witty, convincing, a brilliant speaker, and has an indomitable will. Satan claims that God is a tyrant and that his rebellion against his creator was spurred by his unwillingness to be subjugated, and in this sense he once again proves to be relatable or admirable to the reader. But is this enough for Satan to truly be considered a hero? Ultimately, the answer to that question will depend on the cultural lens through which Satan is viewed.

Before one can attempt to categorize the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, he or she must first examine the various cultural definitions of what it means to be a hero. The word "hero" is often thrown around rather liberally in literature and has become something of a layman's term for the "good guy" in any

particular story. This definition of a hero is completely subjective and holds little weight as a literary term. Instead, the category of a "hero" is culturally variable and exists in many forms across different times and societies, often as a simple matter of perspective. For example, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus has been hailed as a hero for centuries and is honored with a federal holiday in the United States, but is seen as a ruthless conquistador and the leader of a genocide by the Native Americans who were already living on the land that he "discovered". Likewise, the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost* may or may not be considered a hero depending upon the cultural lens through which he is viewed.

One of the earliest and most influential definitions of a hero in all of literature was the Greek hero-cult largely defined by ancient Homeric literature. By far the greatest models of the hero-cult in Greek literature are Homer's immortalized epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These epic poems tell the tales of brave men who take up arms to fight for country, honor, family, glory, and plunder. But in the Greek hero-cult, the motivations of a warrior are of far less importance than his fortitude and feats of strength and courage. In *The Iliad*, Homer writes *aristeias*—dramatic scenes depicting a hero's dominance in battle—for warriors on both sides of the war. Hector, the Trojan's greatest warrior, is a brilliant leader, a brave fighter, and a morally good man with a loving mother and father, a devoted wife, and an infant son. But Hector's good morals do nothing to protect him from the rage of the famed Greek warrior Achilles, whose godlike fighting ability is unmatched by any mortal as he cuts Hector down with ease in single

combat. While Hector is certainly more sympathetic and admirable for his humanity, *The Iliad* is a merciless illustration of the Greek hero-cult's emphasis on strength, fortitude, and ability over morality.

But perhaps the most well-known hero in all of Greek literature is Odysseus, the cunning and wayward warrior who must find a way home after the Trojan War. While Odysseus is far from the most skilled swordsman among the Greek ranks, he is the most deceitful. If Achilles is the archetypal figure for strength and brawn in Greek literature, then Odysseus is certainly the brains. Odysseus is a natural leader, a brilliant speaker and skilled rhetorician, a brave fighter, and a renowned—or infamous among the Trojans—tactician. While his skill and usefulness in battle is of a very different nature than that of Achilles, Odysseus's legendary intuition thrusts him among the ranks of the greatest of heroes in Greek literature. Thus, cleverness, wits, and trickery are on par with strength, bravery, and physical dominance as heroic virtues in the Greek hero-cult. But despite his intellect, Odysseus is brash, vain, at times driven by rage and selfishness, and fails to do the morally correct thing in several difficult situations, which shows that one does not necessarily have to be “good” to be a hero through the lens of the Greek hero-cult. However, according to Vanessa Nikolovska's “The Natures of Monsters and Heroes,” there are a few virtues that are shared across all Greek heroes, and these are “pride, glory, and bravery” (Nikolovska 2). As will be seen later in this essay, these qualities are favorable for Satan's characterization as a hero in *Paradise Lost*. It will also be crucial to examine the definition of “hero” through a Biblical lens in order to

comment on Satan's characterization in *Paradise Lost*. While a Biblical hero is usually concerned with doing what is right, the determiner of “what is right” is typically not the hero, but rather God himself. Take Noah of Biblical fame, for example. According to the Book of Genesis, God had become dissatisfied with the sinful nature of humanity and his creation. Thus, the Lord bade Noah to construct a massive ark and to take his family along with one male and one female of each species of animal upon the vessel. When this had been done, God sent down a great flood that destroyed all life on earth save for those on the ark. From a moral standpoint, Noah's actions—namely his decision not to allow anyone other than his family to board the ark and thus be spared from a very unpleasant death—certainly raise some eyebrows. But according to the Bible, Noah was doing the most heroic thing possible, and that was to be faithful to and follow the will of God. So while the doctrines of Christianity and Judaism do usually consider it to be of utmost importance to be morally just, the Bible itself makes it clear that obedience to God is the greatest heroic virtue. Obviously, one does not exactly need to be a literary scholar to anticipate that this will not bode well for Satan's potential characterization as a hero in *Paradise Lost*.

The final cultural lens through which Satan will be examined for the purposes of this analysis is that of the contemporary United States of America. While American value systems differ greatly from demographic to demographic within the nation, there are certain heroic virtues that are agreed upon by the vast majority of the country. Though it shares some of its heroic values with the Greek hero-cult

such as bravery, strength, and intelligence, the greatest heroic virtue valued by the American people is individualism. American culture rarely celebrates the collective mind, but rather focuses in on the singular contributions of one individual's part to the whole. This is precisely why when people hear the phrase "Father of Electricity," their minds immediately leap to the simple, sensationalized, and over-publicized story of Thomas Edison's "invention" of the light bulb and overlook the contributions of Benjamin Franklin, Michael Faraday, Nikola Tesla, Thomas Murray, Charles Steinmetz, and others. American culture also rarely celebrates the ordinary or mundane, so a "hero" must be individualistic and easily set apart from a crowd. But there is more to a hero in contemporary American culture than greatness and individuality. In "Making Heroes: The Construction of Courage, Competence, and Virtue," George Goethals and Scott Allison assert that in the United States, heroes are "thought to be competent enough to achieve at a high level" but also "moral enough to do the right thing in difficult situations" (Goethals 184). So while the Greek hero-cult de-emphasizes morality and focuses on feats of strength and shows of wit, heroes according to contemporary American culture must be accomplish great feats while also doing the right thing for the right reasons. This will prove to be something of a grey area as far as the characterization of Milton's Satan is concerned.

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan can be considered a Hellenic hero because he perfectly embodies the virtues of the Greek hero-cult and even compares favorably to other epic Grecian heroes. According to William Herman's "Heroism and *Paradise Lost*" the

Hellenic hero is associated with "qualities of individuality, self-determination, and physical courage that endure alone against what seems to be ineluctable odds. The Hellenic hero is of immense physical strength, superior to all compeers, and it is upon his shoulders that victory or defeat must eventually rest" (Herman 13). Based on Herman's definition, Satan in *Paradise Lost* could be the poster boy for the Hellenic hero. Satan rises from the ashes of defeat and cements his status as leader among the fallen angels, proudly proclaiming it "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n" and igniting the passionate fires of hatred in their hearts, telling them not to submit to God in defeat but to continue in their defiance of the Creator (Milton 1021). This is an excellent display of Satan's immense pride, a quality that he shares with others in the Greek hero-cult as mentioned previously by Nikolovska. And just as a Hellenic hero should, Satan refuses to yield even having suffered an eternal defeat against an impossibly powerful and literally unbeatable foe, once even calling out "Who can think of submission?" to the hoard of demons in Pandæmonium after a passionate rant about his hatred for God (Milton 1028). Regardless of one's opinion of Satan, his sheer determination to persevere in the face of the insurmountable is admirable. But what really solidifies Satan's identity as a Hellenic hero is what Herman calls his "unrivaled courage." Satan has fought bravely against the Son and the other angels in heaven, faced Sin, Death, and Chaos on his way to Eden, and is literally going up against God himself. To this end, Herman claims that through the lens of the Greek hero-cult, Satan "is defiant rather than disobedient" and certainly deserves to be con-

sidered a Hellenic hero (Herman, 15). If *Paradise Lost* were to have been published in Ancient Greece, it is safe to say that Satan would have been praised as a hero without any equal. Perhaps the best illustration of Satan's status as a Hellenic hero is the fact that he is strikingly similar to Odysseus. Like Odysseus, Satan is a natural leader and a brilliant speaker, as he is able to convince his companions to build Pandæmonium and to continue their defiance of God with ease. If one is to consider the events that transpired before the opening of Book One of *Paradise Lost*, it quickly becomes apparent that the fallen angels have no reason to follow or even respect Satan. Prior to Satan's rebellion these demons were all glorious angels living in heavenly perfection with God, and it was through choosing to follow Satan that they were cast out of heaven and into a life of damnation in the first place. Because of this, it would make more sense for the fallen angels to loath Satan than to continue to be led by him. But Satan is able to use his rhetoric to enlist the continued support of the demons and to make the most out of his unfortunate situation. And, like Odysseus, Satan is also deceitful and cunning. After his rebellion against God, Satan knows that he will never be able to defeat his foe in battle. Therefore, he undertakes a different form of defiance against the Lord and undertakes the corruption of God's newest creation: mankind. Satan's craftiness is on full display in the Garden of Eden, where he casts doubt into the minds of the naïve first man and woman, Adam and Eve, before tricking them into the sin that would result in the Fall of Man. Thus, Satan in *Paradise Lost* is a perfect character for analysis in the Greek hero-cult, and he embodies nearly every quality

that a proper Hellenic hero should. But while he may be the perfect example of a Hellenic hero, Satan is undoubtedly the absolute embodiment of everything that a Biblical hero is not. While William Herman claimed that Satan "is defiant rather than disobedient" through the lens of a Hellenic hero, the exact opposite is true through the lens of a Biblical one. Since Biblical heroes are worth their weight in gold only to the extent to which they are obedient and subservient to the will of God, "it is obvious that within the Biblical tradition Satan can lay no claims to heroism" (Herman 15). While Biblical heroes humble themselves and worship the Lord, Satan does the exact opposite, monologuing that "lifted up so high/ [he] 'sdained subjection, and thought one step higher/ Would set [him] highest" (Milton 1051). In other words, Satan actually strove to be greater than God himself, an act of pride and defiance that would absolutely mortify a true Biblical hero. In "Heroic Virtue and the Divine Image in *Paradise Lost*," John Steadman points out the fault of Satan's motivations and the fraudulent nature of his seemingly heroic traits:

"Satan's seemingly heroic qualities—his superhuman courage, ingenuity, and strength—are all exercised in direct opposition to God... Satan's eminence is ultimately robbed of the quality of true virtue—and ultimately true heroism—because it is manifested in disobedience to divine will, violation of divine law, and disregard of the supreme good" (Steadman 94).

Clearly, this is enough to completely and utterly disqualify Satan from consideration as a Biblical hero. In fact, it is more than enough to allow for Satan to be characterized as the

greatest antagonist in all of Biblical tradition, as he ultimately takes it upon himself to not only disobey God's will, but to corrupt the perfection of God's creation and cause the Fall of Man.

Determining Satan's character in light of contemporary U.S. culture is certainly much trickier and far less clear-cut than the Hellenic and Biblical lenses, but ultimately Satan's selfish motivations and willingness to corrupt innocents in pursuit of revenge make him unfit to wear the title "hero". While Satan definitely embodies virtues that Americans would find to be admirable and even heroic in another context, such as strength, courage, leadership, intelligence, and to a certain extent pride, John Shawcross makes a brilliant point in *With Mortal Voice* when he asserts that "Satan is hero only if one believes that God has been and is wrong in his treatment of the angels and particularly Satan, and perhaps in His ways toward man" (Shawcross, 33). Because of the focus on doing the right thing for the right reasons, Satan must be justified, not only in his rebellion against God, but also his role in bringing about the Fall of Man. At first, it seems as this is the case, as Satan depicts his struggle with his Creator as a fight for freedom rather than a power-grab. In his speeches to the other fallen angels in hell, Satan characterizes God as a powerful tyrant, proclaiming that "glory never shall His wrath or might/ Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace/ With suppliant knee, and deify His power/ Who, from the terror of this arm, so late/ Doubted His empire" (Milton, 1019). Thus, in this excerpt, God is depicted as a vicious tyrant king who struck down Satan and the rebelling angels out of fear that his empire and reign were in

jeopardy. If this is truly the reason why Satan made his daring rebellion against God, then it is safe to say that he would be seen as a hero by the American people who by the virtue of the creation of their own nation do glorify efforts to overthrow the rule of tyrannical monarchical figures. However, upon arriving in Eden to undertake the corruption of mankind Satan admits that "Pride and worse Ambition threw me down" and that "lifted up so high/ I 'sdained subjection, and thought one step higher/ Would set me highest" (Milton, 1051). Thus, whether or not God was justified in his treatment of Satan and the other angels, Satan has made his rebellion for the wrong reasons. And even if God has been wrong in his treatment of Satan and the other angels, how is one to justify Satan's role in the Fall of Man? Adam and Eve have no role in the conflict that took place before Book One of *Paradise Lost* and are living a peaceful—albeit occasionally boring and mundane—existence in the Garden of Eden, when Satan appears to tempt them to sin. Regardless of whether or not God is good or just in the epic, this is where Satan crosses the line according to the contemporary American definition of a hero. Whatever is happening between God and Satan should remain between God and Satan, as when Satan enters Eden and causes the Fall of Man, he causes great harm to what are essentially innocent and otherwise uninvolved individuals. If Adam and Eve were to become disillusioned with Eden and resentful of God as Satan was, it should have been by their own accord. But Satan essentially makes this decision for them in his pursuit of revenge against his Creator, and by introducing death and sin to humanity Satan has committed a morally reprehensible

act against a third party to his war against God. This willingness to harm innocents—along with the fact that Satan is truly rebelling against God in an effort to seize more power for himself—is enough to disqualify Satan from consideration as a hero in contemporary American culture.

So how should Satan be defined as a character in *Paradise Lost*? Well, the definition or literary archetypal role played by the Lord of Hell largely depends on the cultural lens through which he is viewed, but in any case his complexity as a character is undeniable.

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