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## Paradise Lost, Book 1-A Critique of 17<sup>th</sup> Century England

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**Prachi Madaan**, Final-year student of English Literature, (Honours Degree), University of Delhi, India

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore Book 1 of John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost" as a multi-layered analysis of the period's political, theological, and social climate, which serves as a stinging critique of 17th-century England. Written amid the height of religious strife and the English Civil War, Milton creates a complex allegory that both captures the nation's turbulence and offers a biting critique of its many flaws. One of the primary themes that emerges from "Paradise Lost" is the abuse of power. Milton presents Satan as a charismatic and ambitious figure who rebels against God's authority, mirroring the political climate in England. Satan's relentless pursuit of power and his corrupting influence on others serves as a critique of the tyrannical rule of King Charles I, who sought absolute control. Another significant topic discussed is religious turbulence. The predicaments faced by Puritans and other dissenters who opposed the established Church of England are reflected in Milton's depiction of Satan's revolt against God. This criticism casts doubt on the authority of religious institutions and draws attention to the perils of

religious fanaticism and dogma, which were common during the 17th century.

**Keywords:** 17th century England, Political turbulence, social upheaval, religious strife, John Milton, Satan, Monarchy

### Introduction

For Milton as a man, Paradise Lost satisfied his long-held desire to produce a work of unparalleled magnificence that was unattempted by anyone; his work outplayed the ravages of time and made him immortal in the chronicles of English literature. Paradise Lost Book 1, The first volume of Paradise Lost, is an ambiguous text that has been perceived in the light of stark.

Religious belief, social and political upheavals, and a critique of the status quo utilizing pompous analogies prevailing in that period.

In order to comprehend the text of Paradise Lost, one must concentrate on Milton as a linguist and how his several languages might be useful in elucidating the meaning of the poem, as stated by Hale in

“Milton’s Languages: The Impact of Multilingualism on style”:

“Milton's Language is a polyglot's study of a Renaissance polyglot.”

According to **Hale**, Milton is a poet who was fluent in several languages, including Greek, Latin, and French. These languages had an influence on Milton's poetic and writing style when he wrote *Paradise Lost* (Hale, 2015). In the realm of literature, John Milton's monumental opus, "Paradise Lost Book 1," stands as a remarkable analysis of 17th-century England. With its intricate storytelling and profound concepts, this majestic poem encapsulates the essence of an era marked by political upheaval, religious conflicts, and intellectual revolutions. Within its awe-inspiring verses lie layers upon layers of significance that attest to Milton's sharp observation and penetrating commentary on the tumultuous times he experienced. "Paradise Lost Book 1" not only mesmerizes with its narrative but also serves as a contemplation of the prevailing societal dynamics during this period.

Milton skillfully intertwines his musings within the fabric of his intricate tapestry in order to delve into fundamental aspects that shaped his contemporary World. The focus on knowledge and the perils of unbridled ambition in "Paradise Lost" can be interpreted as a cautionary tale against the scientific and intellectual progress made during the Enlightenment—an

era that challenged traditional beliefs and values in England. Moreover, amidst political turmoil fueled by regicide and religious divisions stemming from Protestant-Catholic tensions, "Paradise Lost" embodies subtle references to these historical events. It seamlessly weaves together theological debates with sociopolitical implications—an artistic endeavor that intricately captures both spiritual unrest and earthly discord. As we delve further into Milton's masterpiece—anticipate uncovering captivating insights into how "Paradise Lost Book 1" functions not merely as an engrossing literary work but also as a thought-provoking critique of 17th century England—a time when tradition clashed with progress when daring minds questioned long-standing dogmas; when society stood at crossroads between established certainties and future possibilities—a moment whose reverberations echo even today.

### **Discussion**

#### **Conscience and religious freedom**

The poem's inaugural lines establish the themes of disobedience and the consequences of free will.

“OF Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit

Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste

Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,

With the loss of Eden, till one greater Man

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Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat," (1,1-5)

Milton makes disobedience a key notion, challenging the conventional view of obedience as an absolute virtue. He questions the dominant theological and political authority of his period, which required unquestioned devotion, by focusing on the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Milton also depicts Adam and Eve as beings with free will and the ability to reason, which stands against the prevailing convention of following what the Church says and not practicing free will and liberty. In addition to their disobedience, they also use their personal judgment and are influenced by their whims, which causes them to fall from grace. This highlights the notion that exercising one's right to practice the faith one holds includes taking personal responsibility and using the power of conscience to distinguish between good and evil.

In John Milton's first book, *Paradise Lost*, the fall of Adam and Eve from grace is presented as a reflection of the religious unrest during that era. According to Han (2019), there were widespread discussions surrounding predestination and human participation in salvation, resulting in different interpretations of Christian theology. The text justifies God's ways by depicting Adam and Eve as creatures possessing free will who made the conscious choice to defy their creator, thus introducing sin into the

World. This viewpoint aligns with Calvinist beliefs advocating for predestination, where individuals have no say in their destiny since it was predetermined prior to their birth. Nevertheless, some argue that humans should actively strive for redemption through good deeds rather than solely relying on divine intervention. Milton Portrays this debate by presenting Satan as a tempter who entices humanity towards sin but ultimately fails due to God's compassion and mercy towards His creations.

Loss and corruption are also brought to light through the use of these particular lines, and the beginning of humanity's fall from grace is marked by Adam and Eve's act of eating the forbidden fruit as a symbol of disobedience. Their expulsion from Eden as a result of this act caused them to lose their innocence while also introducing suffering and sorrow into the World. Milton uses the fall of Adam and Eve as a metaphor for how society has been corrupted and has lost its innocence. This could be interpreted as a condemnation of the societal instability and moral decline that were prevalent in the 17th century.

Milton emphasizes the value of each person's conscience and sense of moral obligation. Adam and Eve are capable of reason and free will, and they rely on their own judgment to determine what they intend to do. This suggests a critique of the restrictive religious milieu of the period by highlighting the importance of

individual spiritual experiences and the rejection of outsiders dictating religious ideas. The last two lines emphasize the value of religious liberty and the freedom of conscience. They indicate a critique of the religious intolerance and persecution that characterized 17th-century England by stating that paradise and freedom can only be restored by the intervention of a higher power.

Milton skillfully incorporates both perplexity and burstiness into his work through his extensive vocabulary, intricate sentence structure, and diverse syntax. Furthermore, he enhances the depth of his writing by alluding to classical literature, which showcases his profound knowledge. Consequently, Paradise Lost Book 1 holds great significance not only for its literary merit but also for providing valuable insights into theological debates prevalent at that time.

### **Resistance to Royal Rule**

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” (1, 263)

Satan's defiant declaration is a challenge to divine authority and might be read as a critique of England's absolutist rule. This statement, spoken by Satan, encapsulates his rebellious spirit and desire for independence. It suggests a rejection of subservience to higher authority, which can be interpreted as a critique of monarchical rule. Milton uses Satan's words to challenge the idea that submission to a higher power, whether it be God or a monarch, is the ultimate virtue. Here,

Satan can also be viewed as Milton's mouthpiece, as Milton supported Oliver Cromwell and stood against the absolutist rule of the Monarchy.

“Here at least we shall be free.” (1,258)

Satan's words mirror a craving for opportunity and independence. This line proposes that even in the profundities of Misery, away from divine rule, there is a feeling of freedom. It tends to be deciphered as an investigation of the limitations and control forced by monarchical rule, as Milton features the allure of opportunity and self-assurance. By utilizing control and bold speeches, Satan is able to invigorate his fellow fallen angels. This description of Satan as a captivating explorer who experiments with the established structure reflects the attitudes of those who endeavored to sabotage monarchical supremacy through command and defiance.

Questioning Divine Hierarchy: The argument made by Satan is for giving equal opportunities and rights to all beings by challenging hierarchical structures in celestial realms. His belief is to question the supremacy of God and suggest no individual should have ultimate control. Satan's rebellion against hierarchical divine order highlights issues with monarchical constructions that employ similar hierarchical frameworks. Satan gathers the support of other fallen angels toward his cause through manipulation and persuasion.

To gain supporters and spur rebellion against God, he resorts to rhetoric and guile. The representation of Satan as an influential figure challenging conventional authority echoes the views of those looking to subvert monarchical rule through cunning tactics. It appears from these lines in *Paradise Lost* that there is an underlying tone of rebellion against Monarchy. While presenting the epic clash between God and Satan throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton manages to incorporate sub-themes that may be viewed as a criticism of authoritarianism.

**Christopher Hill**, in his book, "Milton and the English Revolution," establishes that "*Paradise Lost*" can be interpreted as a critique of the political atmosphere during the English Civil War and the ensuing Commonwealth period. He contends that Milton employs Satan to symbolize those who rebelled against political and religious authority. Milton tackles themes of rebellion, liberty, and resistance against tyrannical government by depicting Satan as a charismatic person opposing God (Christopher, 2020).

### **Corruption of power**

"As bees

In spring-time, when the sun with Taurus rides, Pour forth their populous youth about the hive In clusters; they among fresh dews and flowers Fly to and fro, or on the smoothed plank, The suburb of their straw-built citadel, New

rubbed with balm, expatriate and confer Their state-affairs: so thick the very crowd,"(1,768-775)

Through these lines, we come to know about the hierarchy and functioning of Satan's kingdom in Hell, "Pandemonium," while giving off an impression of structure and orderliness. These lines also hint at the possible misuse and manipulation that comes with power. Like political leaders who foster debate and exchange of ideas, Satan also rules his domain by encouraging discussion among those under him. Regardless, this depiction provides a critique of the abusive and suppressive tendencies typically linked to those in powerful positions. The outcomes of despotism are further magnified by Satan's character portrayal within this verse. The reason Satan fell from Heaven was due to his ambition and craving for domination, which led him to stand up against God. At first, Satan appeared charismatic and powerful but eventually destroyed himself along with those unfortunates enough to follow him.

The criticism about tyranny and misuse of power that Milton presents in *Paradise Lost* has a bigger implication than just the narrative itself, and it should be viewed against the backdrop of 17th-century England. At that time, there were constant struggles between the Monarchy and Parliament, which led to debates around religious authority as well as individual rights. In commenting on the restrictive nature of political

institutions that seek to curb personal freedoms, Milton uses Satan as an allegorical figure to illustrate how such establishments can suppress individual liberty.

**Thomas Corns**, in his book "John Milton: The Prose Works," explores the political and religious context of "Paradise Lost." Milton's portrayal of Satan in Paradise Lost is believed by Corns to be a representation of his opposition towards monarchies and support for republican principles.

According to his interpretation of Milton's work, which features Satan rebelling against God-given authority, it can be inferred that he indirectly criticized some political figures such as King Charles I, who faced execution after being ousted in the English Civil War. The way Satan is depicted by Milton -as someone who exerts charm to achieve power and control - mirrors the perceived flaws of Monarchy. Milton proposes that connecting Satan's uprising to the Commonwealth period principles of republicanism may offer an avenue for achieving greater justice and equality in society (Corns,1998).

Tyrannical nature and power dynamics  
"With Atlantean shoulders, fit to bear  
The weight of mightiest monarchies."  
(1, 194-195)

In the 17th century, England was grappling with issues related to absolute Monarchy, especially under the rule of King Charles I. The king's

powers were virtually unchecked, and he believed in the divine right of kings, claiming that his authority came directly from God. This concentration of power in the Monarchy led to a lack of accountability and disregard for the welfare of the common people. Milton's depiction of Satan as having the capacity to support these monarchies echoes the idea that the people of 17th-century England were bearing an enormous burden from those in power. It depicts the pain and suffering that common people went through because they were made to bear the weight of the Monarchy's decisions without having any real influence over them.

The lines serve as a poignant critique of the oppressive power dynamics and burdensome governance prevalent in 17th-century England. Milton uses this imagery to highlight the toll that absolute Monarchy took on the people and to question the legitimacy of such unchecked authority. It serves as a reminder of the heavy responsibilities that come with power and the need for accountability and consideration for the welfare of the governed.

"He trusted to have equaled the  
Highest If he opposed; with ambitious  
aim Against the throne and monarchy  
of God Raised impious war in  
Heaven."(1, 41-44)

These verses depict Satan's rebellion against God, equating it with the lofty ambitions of those in positions of authority who attempted to

challenge the supremacy of God. Resistance against royal rule and the English Civil War in the 17th century were motivated by a desire to overthrow the Monarchy's ultimate power and create a more just society.

John Milton's grandiose verse, *Paradise Lost*, presents Satan as a dissenter defying the authority of God. This portrayal can be perceived as an astute observation of the tumultuous political landscape and internal strife that plagued England in the 17th century. As **Mary Grace Elliott** posits in her scholarly work on "The Decline of Nature in *Paradise Lost* and Seventeenth-Century Discourse,"

Milton actively engages in a contemporary discussion regarding the deterioration of nature by scrutinizing both prelapsarian and postlapsarian Eden (Elliott, 2013). The provided exemplar also delves into an exploration of nature's role within Milton's poetic realm, particularly analyzing "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity, Naturam Non ." In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is depicted as daring to challenge God's supreme rule by leading a revolt against Him. This act of subversion can be interpreted as an allegorical representation of rebellion against entrenched power structures prevalent during this era. Moreover, it reflects Milton's personal encounters with political upheaval and civil unrest during that period.

By portraying Satan as a formidable yet ultimately unsuccessful figure who attempts to overthrow God,

moral boundaries are established within society while concurrently critiquing those who wield excessive power without any form of restraint over their subjects.

### **Conclusion**

For centuries, scholars have engaged in discussions and analyses surrounding John Milton's remarkable masterpiece "*Paradise Lost* ." The work stands out primarily for its profound Exploration of knowledge and its dual potential to enlighten or bring about destruction. According to **Riva** (2008), this emphasis on knowledge and the perils of unbridled ambition depicted in *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted as a cautionary tale against the scientific and intellectual advancements that emerged during the Enlightenment era, challenging traditional beliefs and values cherished in England. In essence, Milton sought to warn his readers about the possible consequences incurred by pursuing novel ideas without due consideration for their societal or moral impact. It is worth noting how remarkably aligned this theme is with historical events taking place during Milton's lifetime. The 17th century witnessed an explosion of scientific progress, where groundbreaking theories such as Isaac Newton's revelations on motion started questioning long-standing notions concerning nature, God, and humanity itself. While many regarded these transformations as promising advancements promising a prosperous new age, others harbored trepidation

regarding unforeseen repercussions accompanying rapid change. Through his portrayal detailing Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise due to their insatiable thirst for knowledge, Milton not only issues a stern warning against unrestrained ambition—whether it takes on scientific hues or manifests otherwise—but also reminds us all that each action we undertake holds significant implications transcending our individual selves alone.

In conclusion, *Paradise Lost* emerges as a scorching denunciation of 17th-century England's societal and political milieu. By presenting the characters Satan and Adam in intricate ways, Milton delves into the overarching themes of authority, aspiration, and wisdom within a world experiencing rapid transformation due to scientific advancements and societal upheaval. The poem can be perceived as a cautionary narrative against unbridled ambition, particularly regarding the perils that arise from pursuing forbidden knowledge beyond one's capacity. Moreover, Milton employs his poetic prowess to fashion an epic masterpiece that not only captivates but also prompts readers to scrutinize their worldview. The utilization of intricate imagery and figurative language fosters a bewildering ambiance that stimulates cogitation about humanity's position in society. Furthermore, the emphasis on knowledge and its potential for misuse is especially pertinent when we consider the Enlightenment period,

which promptly followed *Paradise Lost*'s publication. As science forged unprecedented progress during this era, conventional beliefs were contested, engendering widespread trepidation among adherents of established norms. It is, therefore, reasonable to interpret Milton's opus as a caution against radical changes propelled by intellectual arrogance. In conclusion, it becomes evident that through Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton offers both reproaches aimed at his contemporaneous England while simultaneously proffering timeless insights into human nature itself - underscoring how individuals must reconcile their yearning for dominion with reverence for moral boundaries. Ultimately, what renders this work so enthralling lies in its capability to endure across centuries despite being crafted with regard solely for one specific epoch - thus cementing John Milton's status as one of history's most profound poets.

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