

Context - Milton

Milton's Life

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608, in London. He excelled in school and became fluent in many foreign and classical languages, including Italian, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Anglo-Saxon, and some Dutch. He wrote sonnets in Italian as a teenager. While a second-year student at Cambridge, he was invited to address the first-year students in a speech written entirely in Latin.

In 1639, the outbreak of civil war in England compelled him to cut short his studies in Italy. After working for the Commonwealth, he retired to his estate and by 1652 he was completely blind. In 1660, he had to go into hiding to escape execution at the hands of the restored monarchy. His exile brought him the opportunity to work on *Paradise Lost* in earnest. Published in 1667, Milton's epic was immediately recognized by critics and the admiring comments of the respected poets John Dryden and Andrew Marvell helped restore Milton to favor. Milton spent the ensuing years writing prolifically at his residence in Bunhill. He died at home on November 8, 1674.

Early Works

In his twenties, Milton wrote five masterful long poems, each of them influential and important in its own way. These poems are “On the Morning of Christ's Nativity,” “Comus,” “Lycidas,” “Il Penseroso,” and “L'Allegro.” In these poems Milton honed his skills at writing narrative, dramatic, elegiac, philosophical, and lyrical poetry. He had built a firm poetic foundation through his intense study of languages, philosophy, and politics, and he infused it with his uncanny sense of tone and diction. Even in these early poems, Milton's literary output was guided by his faith in God. Milton believed that all poetry serves a social, philosophical, and religious purpose. He thought that poetry should glorify God, enlighten readers, and help people to become better Christians. Aside from his poetic successes, Milton was also a prolific writer of essays and pamphlets.

The Epic

At the age of sixteen, Milton already aspired to write the great English epic. As he read the classical epics in school—Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*—he began to fantasize about bringing such artistic brilliance to the English language.

Milton considered many topics for his epic. He initially warmed to the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and later hoped to write an epic about Oliver Cromwell, who took control of England in 1653 after helping to dethrone and execute King Charles. These two topics suggest Milton's desire to write his epic on a distinctly British topic and thereby inspire nationalist pride. These early possible topics, like Homer's and Virgil's nationalist epics, feature strong, virtuous warriors and noble battles. Eventually Milton abandoned both of these ideas and for a time gave up the notion of writing an epic.

In the mid-1650s, Milton returned to the story of Adam and Eve, a topic he had initially envisioned dramatizing as a verse play. Now he concluded that the story might succeed as an epic. In 1656 Milton, now blind, began work on his epic. He recited verse each morning to one of his two daughters, who transcribed the words he dictated. Milton finished *Paradise Lost* in 1667. It was published that same year in ten books. Milton soon revised his epic, reorganizing it to form twelve books in the style of the classical epics. In 1674 he published the authoritative second edition of *Paradise Lost*. In 1671 Milton published *Paradise Regained*, his final work and the sequel to his great epic. The religious beliefs expressed in *Paradise Regained* pleased Milton, who thought this work surpassed *Paradise Lost* in both artistry and content. Most modern readers consider *Paradise Lost* the greater epic.

Plot Overview

The narrator begins *Paradise Lost* by stating that his subject will be Adam and Eve's disobedience and fall from grace. He calls on a heavenly muse and asks for help in relating his ambitious story. The narrator begins his story with Satan and his fellow rebel angels, now devils, who wake to find themselves chained to a lake of fire in Hell. They free themselves and fly to Hell's land. Inside Pandemonium, the rebel angels determine to corrupt humankind. As Satan prepares to leave Hell, his children, Sin and Death, meet him at the gates and follow him, building a bridge between Hell and Earth.

In Heaven, God tells the angels of Satan's intentions, and the Son volunteers to sacrifice himself for humankind. Meanwhile, Satan travels through Night and Chaos and finds Earth. Disguised as a cherub to get past the Archangel Uriel, Satan leaps over Paradise's wall, taking the form of a cormorant and perches atop the Tree of Life. Looking down at Satan from his post, Uriel warns the other angels that an impostor is in their midst. The other angels agree to search the Garden for intruders.

Meanwhile, Adam and Eve tend the Garden, carefully obeying God's order to refrain from eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Gabriel, the angel set to guard Paradise, finds Satan tempting Eve and orders him to leave. Satan prepares to battle Gabriel, but God makes the golden scales of justice appear in the sky as a sign, and Satan scurries away. Worried about the safety of the humans he created, God sends Raphael down to Earth to teach Adam and Eve of the danger Satan poses.

Raphael arrives on Earth and tells Adam the story of Satan's downfall. Satan grew envious after God appointed his Son as second-in-command. The angels began to fight. The battle ended after two days when God commanded the Son to end the war and send Satan and his rebel angels to Hell. Raphael warns Adam about Satan's evil plan to corrupt Adam and Eve. Adam asks Raphael to tell him the story of creation. Raphael bristles at Adam's seemingly unquenchable search for knowledge and tells Adam that he must love Eve less carnally.

Eight days after his banishment, Satan searches for Eve. In serpent form, says that God knows the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge will give Adam and Eve godlike powers, and he banned it because he wanted to keep them in ignorance. Eve hesitates but then reaches for a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and eats. Adam is horrified to find that Eve has eaten from the forbidden tree but he decides he would rather fall with her than remain pure and lose her. He eats from the fruit. Adam looks at Eve in a new way, and they have sex lustfully.

God immediately knows of their disobedience. He sends the Son to punish them. The Son first punishes the serpent whose body Satan took, condemning it to slither on its belly forever. Then the Son tells Adam and Eve they must suffer pain and death because of their sin. Women and men will lose their idyllic partnership and work in separate spheres. Eve and all women will endure the pain of childbirth and submit to their husbands, and Adam and all men will hunt and grow their own food on a depleted Earth. Satan returns to Hell where cheers greet him. He speaks to the devils in Pandemonium, and everyone believes that he has beaten God. Sin and Death travel the bridge they built on their way to Earth. Despite the devils' confidence in their own victory, soon they find themselves turning into snakes.

God tells the angels to transform Earth. Humankind must now suffer hot and cold seasons instead of the consistent temperatures they enjoyed before sinning. In a fit of rage, Adam wonders why God ever created Eve. Eve begs Adam not to abandon her. She ponders suicide. Adam, moved by her speech, forbids her from taking her own life. He believes that they can enact revenge on Satan by remaining obedient to God.

God hears their prayers, and sends Michael down to Earth. Before they leave, Michael puts Eve to sleep and takes Adam up to the highest hill. Adam sees the sins of his children, and his children's children, and his first vision of death. He sees generations of humans sinning by lust, greed, envy, and pride. Then Michael shows him Enoch, who is saved by God as his warring peers attempt to kill him. Adam also sees Noah and his family, whose virtue makes God choose them to survive the flood that kills all other humans. Next is the vision of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel. Adam sees the triumph of Moses and the Israelites and then glimpses the Son sacrificing his life to save humankind. After this vision, Adam and Eve must leave Paradise. Led by Michael, Adam and Eve woefully leave Paradise, going hand in hand into a new world.