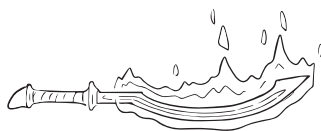


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

PARADISE LOST



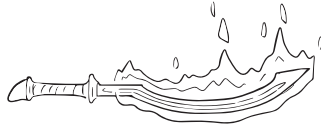
Grant Horner

canonpress
Moscow, Idaho



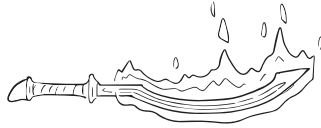
*Dedicated to my manly firstborn son Seth, who hunts bear
with his bow in the Canadian Rockies, and his wonderful
wife Carmen, our daughter, who deftly runs a joyful home
filled with lovely children, like a virtuous character out of a
19th century novel.*

*And of course to their four precious little ones:
Liam, the twins Gisele and Chantal, and little Natalia.
'quid tum?'*



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INTRODUCTION

“Henceforth I learne, that to obey is best”

~Adam, Book XII

John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is widely considered one of the greatest artistic achievements in all of human history.

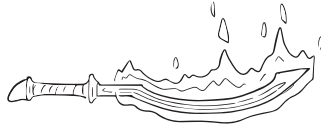
I would place it squarely in the constellation of what the British call ‘The Greats’ of literature, alongside Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Dante’s *Commedia*, and also on par with other great cultural artifacts such as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling and his incomparable marble David; the cathedrals of Milan and Chartres and Notre Dame de Paris and Florence and the Basilica of Saint Peter’s in Rome; and to Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies and comedies, the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Dickens and Eliot; Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Mozart’s two or three best operas; and the great tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. It is massive,

beautiful, terrifying. For that great eighteenth-century theorist of the Sublime, Edmund Burke, Milton's epic was the ultimate literary example of the Sublime. Centuries before, the ancient Greek philosopher Longinus called such works of nature or art *that which transports us out of ourselves* with beauty, terror, and awe.

What many people may quite naturally think is the best marker of true artistic greatness is 'universal acclamation'. When everyone loves something, it must be excellent, right? I would counter that one of the surest evidences of a work's greatness is that *the work divides those who experience it*. It inspires very strong reactions, often of love or hate. Milton himself desires a "fit audience ... though few" (VII.31). I would argue that it is a serious error to call something great simply because everyone likes it. Readers have responded to the massive epic with everything from astonishment to confusion to pronouncements of intense boredom.

Because *Paradise Lost* does things to the reader. Very strange things.

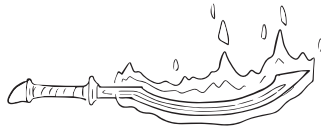
I like to say to my students, "You don't read *Paradise Lost*—*Paradise Lost* reads you." In many ways, it is an indication not just of your learnedness, your aesthetic sensibilities, or your poetic imagination. It seems also to function as a test of one's spiritual discernment and sensitivity. It is no ordinary book—it stands alone, even as Milton intended (I.16).



THE WORLD AROUND

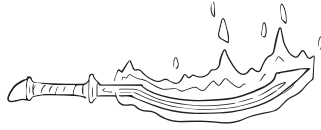
Milton is one of the genuinely titanic figures of the Renaissance, a period of major cultural renewal lasting from about 1390 to 1670 in Europe. Despite centuries of deep poverty, political instability and war, hunger, disease, and plague—imagine a world with no anesthesia but alcohol, no germ theory or modern medicine—late 14th century Europe was about to experience a cultural revolution. It begins in Italy with the poet and scholar Petrarch, who started rediscovering long-lost ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts. He and others began envisioning a renewal of the great Republics of Greece and Rome: a revival of their philosophy, political theory, aesthetics, engineering, literature, and visual arts. In some ways it was the inception of the modern idea of being in a particular moment of history, and looking back at the past in order to develop a vision for the future.

As the medieval period began to wane, a new curiosity and optimism began to invigorate scholars, artists,



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

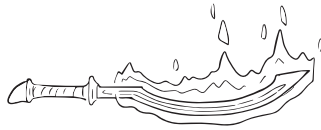
John Milton was considered by his contemporaries to be perhaps the greatest intellectual of his age—and the Renaissance was an age of artistic and intellectual giants hardly surpassed before or after. He was born (1608) into a middle-class family, and his father provided him with an excellent education through private tutors and study at Saint Paul's School in London. Milton studied Latin and Greek and the classical authors at an early age and entered Cambridge in 1625. He found the curriculum and the teaching style of long lectures boring. In fact he had already read all of the usually studied works; his prodigious ability of recall was legendary—he could recite long passages from ancient Greek and Latin texts from memory. He earned his Baccalaureate and Master of Arts degrees and then spent five years at his family's country home reading through virtually everything available in print in the seventeenth century—thousands of works across several languages. In 1638-9 he did what all



WHAT OTHER NOTABLES SAID

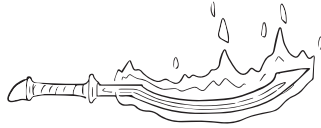
To the completeness or integrity of the design nothing can be objected: it has distinctly and clearly what Aristotle requires—a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is perhaps no poem of the same length from which so little can be taken without apparent mutilation. Here are no funeral games, nor is there any long description of a shield. The short digressions at the beginning of the third, seventh, and ninth books might doubtless be spared; but superfluities so beautiful who would take away? or who does not wish that the author of the *Iliad* had gratified succeeding ages with a little knowledge of himself? Perhaps no passages are more attentively read than those extrinsic paragraphs; and since the end of poetry is pleasure, that cannot be unpoetical with which all are pleased.

~Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* (1779)



PLOT SUMMARY, SETTING, & CHARACTERS

Paradise Lost is simple in plot but massive and daunting in scope. It is an imaginative retelling of the Fall of Man, and also the Fall of Satan. The poem's opening expresses its purpose—to show how God is providentially sovereign over all things, yet is still justifiable in his absolute goodness despite the existence of evil. The setting is the eternal judgment throne of God, who lays out his plan for all events before they occur. The unnamed narrator asks the question of who is at fault for the Fall—Man or God? The narrative then features an extensive parliamentary-style debate among the devils on what to do about God and Man. Their strategy is that Satan will go to Eden and spy on Adam and Eve, searching out their weaknesses, and then decide whether they should be destroyed outright in order to make God grieve—or perhaps, better yet, to seduce them to rebel against their Father. In heaven God



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

The most obvious feature of Milton's great epic is its explicitly Christian framework. While the great pagan epics of Homer and Virgil feature mythical and religious allusions and references throughout, and heroes who encounter (and sometimes fight against) their own gods, *Paradise Lost* has as its entire narrative engine the question of the relationship between the biblical God and his creation, Man. When Man Falls, the question is then raised whether or not God is as good, all-powerful, and all-knowing as he claims to be.

The source of this narrative framework is of course the Old and New Testaments. Beyond this, the massive literary output of both Christian and pagan authors, philosophers, and theologians all contribute something to Milton's encyclopedic poem. The poet deploys his almost inconceivable learning across the huge epic, dazzling us not just with his breadth of knowledge but using it to show the beautiful and infinite variety of the world made

by a good God. He takes the pagan genre known as ‘epic’ and reimagines it as an extensive theological treatise in narrative form, inviting the readers to find themselves implicated in the story of the Fall. It is clear to any well-read person who begins working through the dense opening of Book I that Milton takes as his primary source the Bible itself; it is equally apparent that the great pagan epic poems of the past are also present as structural influences and content-sources. Virgil, Ovid, and Homer would see in Milton’s opening lines (and elsewhere) clear and resounding echoes of their own magisterial poetic voices. The pagan classics are everywhere in *Paradise Lost*. But the first step in reading the epic well is to grasp its nature as a specifically Christian work of art.

As a Puritan, Anglican, Protestant Christian in the Reformed tradition, Milton’s own faith and understanding of his world provide the basis for the narrative. Milton, first and foremost, *believes the tale he is telling*. While his poem is a massively expanded and imaginative ‘retelling’ of the events told in scripture, his ‘fiction’ is neither a ‘lie’ nor somehow ‘untrue.’ The biblical narrative of the Creation and Fall is quite brief and spare of details; even less is given about Satan and the demons—a mere handful of lines in the whole of scripture. Milton’s goal is to draw the reader in with his imaginative amplification of the Fall narrative, parallel it to the degradation of Lucifer, and then reframe the entire story as viewed by God in eternity past while also looking forward to eternity future.