

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO JOHN MILTON'S



PARADISE
LOST

"I think this is a wonderful and useful series
and I highly recommend it."

CLAIRE TOMALIN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
POEM IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Caroline Moore

*The
Connell Guide
to
Milton's*

Paradise Lost

*by
Caroline Moore*

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Introduction

Dr Johnson sums up the case against Milton: “the want of human interest is always felt.” It is the apparent distance of *Paradise Lost* from ordinary humanity that has thrilled or repelled critics throughout the ages. While many readers are carried away by Milton’s sublimity, others are daunted by his grandeur, scope and learning.

Milton himself declared that he would not begin to write until he had “completed the full circle of my private studies”. The Greek word for a circle of learning is the root of “encyclopaedia”; and Milton’s erudition is encyclopaedic. *Paradise Lost* draws on both ancient learning and the scholarship of his day, displaying not only his deep knowledge of the Bible and Biblical scholarship, and his passionate assimilation of the classics, but also his absorption in astronomy, cosmology, geography, numerology and science.

Yet many critics of *Paradise Lost* argue that all this circling lacks a human centre. Who, after all, is the hero? Adam and Eve in their unfallen state are too remote from us; Christ is not yet incarnate; God cannot be a character. Which leaves us with the magnificently problematic figure of Satan.

This book will suggest that, contrary to what these critics argue, the core of *Paradise Lost* is extraordinarily human. Milton himself believed that poetry excelled at describing “the wily

subtleties and reflexes of man’s thought from within”. This is precisely what *Paradise Lost* does. If, to a generation raised on the novel, Milton’s methods of psychological exploration seem strange, this only intensifies the effect: *Paradise Lost* is a poem that explores the dark byways and infinite strangeness of the human heart.



The Garden of Eden - An Old Blind Man Sits Thinking, by John Millar Watt (1895-1975). Illustration of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, based on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. "About them frisking play'd All beasts of th' Earth."

A summary of the plot

BOOK I

Begins with an invocation [*invocatio*: a prayer to the Muse], combined with a setting out of the scope of the poem (“the whole subject”).

The first scene opens in hell, with Satan and his angels still dazed, “confounded”, by their fall from heaven. Satan rouses himself and his troops, whose names are paraded; and the devils construct the place of Pandaemonium as their council hall.

BOOK II

The Council in Hell: the devils debate whether and how to wage war on God. Satan volunteers for the mission of finding and ruining God’s latest creation, man. He journeys to the gates of hell, where he meets his self-begotten daughter, Sin, and his incestuously- conceived son/grandson, Death.

Sin opens the gate, and Satan plunges into the realm of Chaos and Old Night. At the end of the book, he glimpses the tiny “pendant world” of the newly-created universe.

BOOK III

The scene shifts to heaven. God points out Satan to his Son, and foretells his success in perverting mankind. The dialogue between God and his Son that follows is a *theodicy*: it explains the doctrines

of free-will and grace, to affirm God’s justice and mercy in allowing this to happen. Christ volunteers for the divine mission to ransom mankind; God ordains his incarnation; and angels celebrate Father and Son.

Meanwhile, Satan penetrates the outermost hollow orbs of the universe, arrives at the orb of the sun, and deceives the angel on watch there, Uriel, by disguising himself as a cherub to gain directions to earth.

BOOK IV

Satan alights on Mount Niphates and “falls into many doubts with himself.” Confirmed in his evil, he trespasses into Paradise. “The garden described; Satan’s first sight of Adam and Eve; his wonder at their happy form and state”. Eve describes to Adam her first awakening.

Eavesdropping on their conversation, Satan learns of the existence of a forbidden tree, and hatches his plot. Satan’s disfiguring passions allow Uriel to see through his disguise; and Uriel descends to warn Gabriel.

Adam and Eve, marvelling at the stars, go hand in hand to their “blissful bower”, where they enjoy uninhibited and perfect sex, and fall asleep.

Gabriel on patrol discovers Satan in the form of a toad, squatting by the ear of sleeping Eve and infecting her dreams. Satan defies the angelic guard, but then flees.

BOOK V

Eve tells Adam of her dream-temptation; he comforts her. They hymn the morning, and begin work. God sends the archangel Raphael down to instruct and “admonish” Adam. He tells the story of Satan’s original rebellion against God, and of the good angel Abdiel who stood firm against apostasy.

BOOK VI

Raphael continues his narrative, telling of the war in heaven. By the second day, the battle reached stalemate; on the third day, God sent his Son in a triumphal war-chariot, and the devils were driven into the abyss.

BOOK VII

Invocation to heavenly muse. Raphael recounts the creation of the world.

BOOK VIII

Adam questions Raphael about astronomy, but is “doubtfully answered.” Eve leaves to tend her flowers, and Adam relates his memories of his own creation and first meeting with Eve. Raphael and Adam discuss human and angelic love and sex.

BOOK IX

Satan returns at midnight in the form of a mist, and enters into the sleeping serpent. In the morning, Eve proposes that she and Adam should work separately;

Adam disagrees, but yields. Satan finds Eve working alone, and tempts her. She eats the forbidden fruit; and Adam resolves “through vehemence of love to perish with her.” He too eats, and the couple are overcome by quasi-drunken lust, and fall sleep. They awake to bitter mutual recriminations.

BOOK X

God sends his Son to judge the transgressors. Sin and Death break out of hell and build a bridge to earth. Satan enters hell in triumph, but is greeted only by a “general hiss”, as he and all his devils are transformed into snakes. Sin and Death begin their ravages; God foretells the final victory over them. Adam and Eve move from despair to repentance, and the book ends with their prayers to God.

BOOK XI

Christ intercedes for Adam and Eve. God sends Michael to expel them from Paradise; but first he reveals and explains to Adam the future history of mankind.

BOOK XII

Michael continues his history lesson, up to the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and the subsequent corruption of the Church before his Second Coming. Adam and Eve (who has been asleep, but was instructed in her dreams) are expelled from Paradise.

What is *Paradise Lost* about?

Paradise Lost is about the act of choice – and, above all, about the deeply peculiar psychology involved in the act of knowingly choosing wrong.

Milton placed the act of choice not just at the centre of his poem but at the heart of all morality. It was, for him, at the centre of what it is to be human, and what it means to be free. Man is god-like in his reason, and “Reason also is choice”. [III. 108] When God gave Adam reason – Milton wrote in his pamphlet against censorship, *Areopagitica* – “he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions”. Without free will, in other words, Adam would be a mere puppet.

Milton’s passionate belief in free will was unusual for the period, and deeply unorthodox for a radical Puritan. In Milton’s day, indeed, the belief that fallen human beings were free to choose – and by their choices determine whether they were saved or damned – was controversial enough to attract its own theological label, Arminianism.

Most Civil War Puritans were, unlike Milton, broadly Calvinist in outlook. They believed that human choice, even human morality, is irrelevant, that salvation depends solely upon God’s will, and that the elect are so secure in their election that it

is impossible for them to sin. (It is one of the paradoxes of Calvinism that a creed which apparently undermines the need for human striving should nevertheless have spawned the Protestant work ethic.)

In fact, Calvin’s doctrine threatens to deny the individual any role at all in salvation – and this Milton did not accept. Yet to modern ears, the alternative, Arminianism, sounds equally harsh. For Milton, life was one long series of tests – a rigorous divine exam system, in which, if a sinner failed, it was his fault alone. He might, through strenuous repentance, be allowed to sit a retake, but he could never know that he had passed until death. Most individuals, in Milton’s stern view, would be likely to fail.

Coleridge summed up the paradoxes of Arminianism and Calvinism:

Arminianism is cruel to individuals, for fear of damaging the race by false hopes and improper confidences, while Calvinism is horrible for the race, but full of consolation for the suffering individual...

One should never forget that when Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, he was writing in the shadow of failure, fallen “on evil days... and evil tongues”. [VII. 26] His political hopes had been overthrown; the Royalists had returned in triumph. He was