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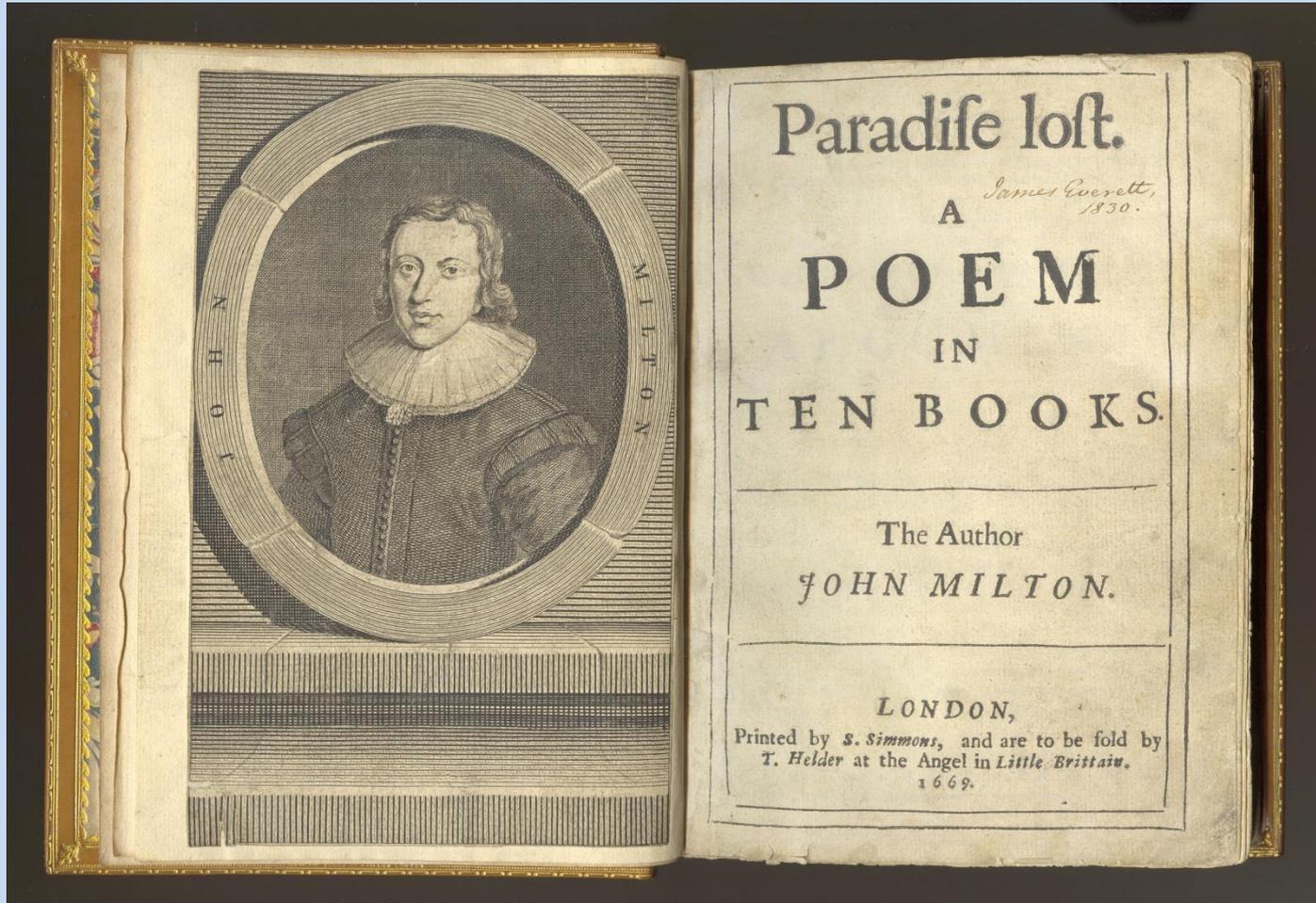
***3rd Annual International Forum on Ethics***

# *Paradise Lost*: Milton's Portrayal of Satan and the Ethics of Moral and Readerly Choices



Gustave Doré – an engraving for *Paradise Lost* (1866)

John Milton (1608-1674) – *Paradise Lost* (1667)



‘Him the almighty power  
hurled headlong flaming  
from ethereal sky’

John Milton,  
*Paradise Lost, Book I,*  
lines 44-45



Gustave Doré – an engraving for *Paradise Lost* (1866)



‘Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. It is a study of what are good and bad ends to pursue in life and what it is right and wrong to do in the conduct of life. (...) Its primary aim is to determine how one ought to live and what actions one ought to do in the conduct of one’s life’ (John Deigh, *An Introduction to Ethics*, 7).



## **The aim of anthropology, sociology and empirical psychology:**

- examination of ‘human pursuits and social norms’
- they ‘describe, analyze, and explain certain phenomena of human life’

## **The aim of ethics:**

- it ‘seeks to establish conclusions about what a person ought to do’  
(= **moral choices**)

(John Deigh, *An Introduction to Ethics*, 7).

**What is morality?** (Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, 1998)

‘morality’/’moral system’ vs. ‘moral theory’:



**Morality (or: ‘the moral system’):**

- ‘the system people use, often unconsciously, when they are trying to make a morally acceptable choice among several alternative actions or when they make moral judgments about their own actions or those of others’ (3)
- ‘morality is universal and that what seems to be different moral systems are simply specifications and variations of a universal morality or moral system (4)

**Moral theory:**

- ‘a moral theory should explain not only why agreement in moral judgments is co common in most situations but also why some unresolvable moral disagreements are an unavoidable feature of morality’ (4)

**What is morality?** (Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, 1998)

‘morality’/’moral system’ vs. ‘moral theory’:



**Moral theory:**

- ‘the descriptive part of moral theory is simply an attempt to provide an explicit, precise, and coherent description of the considered moral decisions and judgments of all moral agents. That part of moral theory (...) is an attempt to justify common morality’ (Gert, 380)
- ‘reflective equilibrium not only mistakenly seems to presuppose that there is a unique right answer to all moral questions, it also mistakenly seems to regard a moral theory as generating that answer’ (Gert, 380)
- ‘the view that morality always provides unique answers is not only mistaken, it is also dangerous’ (Gert, 380)

**The above-presented statements concerning the nature of morality are applicable to the example of Milton's Satan as a literary character in *Paradise Lost*:**

*Paradise Lost* – '[a]n endless moral maze, introducing literature's first Romantic, Satan' (John Carey)

'Readers must finally decide for themselves whether Milton satanizes the epic or measures Satan against an epic standard and finds him wanting' (Christopher Ricks in the *Introduction to Paradise Lost* – Penguin Classics)

'Whatever we make of Satan's project ethically, we can now at least understand why he makes evil his aim. He remains intelligible as an agent and pursuer of value. Satan sees the pursuit of evil as good in so far as it preserves an unsubmitive will' (Robert Dunn, *Values and the Reflective Point of View*, google books)



## Milton's literary character of Satan and his morality:

- 'Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell, receive thy new possessor: one who brings a mind not to be changed by place or time. **The mind is its own place, and itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven**' (*Paradise Lost*, lines 251-255).
- 'Here at least **we shall be free (...). Better to reign in hell, then serve in heaven**' (*Paradise Lost*, 259-263).



Percy Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry: An Essay* (1840) on Milton's  
*Paradise Lost*:



‘Milton stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him’ (31).

‘Nothing can exceed the the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*: It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil’ (49).

Suzuna Jimbo in

‘What Shelley Found in Milton’s Satan and God’( 2007):

‘The cause of this glorious and perfect angel’s rebellion against the Supreme Power in heaven is God’s sudden appointment of his Son and heir to be the head of all the angels in heaven (...). Thus far we have seen how Satan fought with the despotic rule of God, who forced the heavenly inhabitants to pay knee-tribute to his newly anointed Son, and how cruelly he and his fellow angels were driven into hell. Shelley may well have thought that the glorious Lucifer (Satan was so called in heaven), fighter for liberty, was beaten by the infinite power of arms of the omnipotent and merciless ruler.

The horrible sight of the dungeon and the miserable state of the fallen angels are fully described in the First Book of the poem (i.59-74). But the more horrible the dungeon is and the more miserable Satan feels, the greater his wrath and desire for revenge grow, it seems’ (146-147).

My Students (April 2020) on Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

The Question: The Romantics considered Milton's Satan to be the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.

Is such a perception justified?



1. 'Satan can share such qualities with earlier epic heroes as courage and confidence. [Milton's] Satan is like a human and (...) everyone can see his own image in him- or herself—we all make mistakes and without them it is difficult to learn something new.'

(Opinion: Milton's Satan – an ambiguous, human-like character similar to the reader)

My Students (April 2020) on Milton's *Paradise Lost*:



The Question: The Romantics considered Milton's Satan to be the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.  
Is such a perception justified?

2. 'On the one hand, Satan can be a hero because he has some heroic features: he is courageous, intelligent, ambitious, quick-witted and fearless. But on the other hand, he is portrayed as revengeful, manipulative, trickish, lying, and vicious individual, and an opponent to the despotic power of God. [Milton's Satan] can be admired for his struggle but is supposed to finally lose because of his deeds. So, I may conclude that Satan is an ambiguous hero with a divided self that makes him turn to evil, but Satan's powerful speeches, courage and direct opposition to the power of God reveal his heroism.'

(Opinion: readers experience a moral tension on reading *Paradise Lost*)

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3. 'Satan has a quest in front of him to survive in the situation of being exiled to Hell. Well, in some way, he is presented to the readers as a protagonist, as he is trying to cope with the problems he has and it may seem to the readers that he is worthy of being praised for that.'

(Opinion: Milton's Satan has some qualities which deserve a praise.)

## My Students (April 2020) on Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

The Question: The Romantics considered Milton's Satan to be the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.  
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4. 'Romantics used to write about characters rebelling against things with which their hearts and minds could not agree with. I think Satan in *Paradise Lost* was determined and brave. Pride made Lucifer do what he did. I would say that he was not evil: he was ambitious, self-confident, he was looking for power like sometimes people do. His desires took control over him and caused his fall. Maybe there is a justification for his deeds: God wanted Lucifer to be dependent on him, and it made me perceive Him as a cruel, harsh ruler – as a tyrant. Maybe I am getting ahead of myself, but when the stream of consciousness takes me over, this is what happens.'

(Opinion: Milton's Satan shall be forgiven and justified? – a readerly conflict.)

My Students (April 2020) on Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

The Question: The Romantics considered Milton's Satan to be the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.

Is such a perception justified?



5. 'Perceiving Satan as the true hero of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is entirely justified. Satan is faced with obstacles which he has to overcome in order to succeed and achieve his goal. The comparison that immediately comes to mind is Odysseus and his ten-year long journey back home. What is more, we may even perceive Satan's actions as justified, sympathize with his fate and understand his frustration. His rebellion is motivated by the strength of his beliefs which he fights to preserve. Satan seeks freedom and rejects servitude. Unfortunately, these beliefs stand in opposition to those of a God.'

(Opinion: the readerly moral conflict reintroduced.)



My Students (April 2020) on Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

The Question: The Romantics considered Milton's Satan to be the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.

Is such a perception justified?

6. 'The title *Paradise Lost* suggests that Satan is the dominant character of the epic.'

(Opinion: general moral framework in conflict with the literary world?)

(Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, 1998)



## ‘Conceptual foundations’ of morality:

### Milton’s *Paradise Lost* – a ‘moral ‘or ‘religious’ reading?

- ‘[o]ne of the major points of difference between morality and religion is that every feature of morality must be known to, and could be chosen by, all rational persons. Seriously mistaken moral judgments have arisen from incorrectly identifying morality and religion. *There are many religions but one morality.* It is now universally recognised that morality must be known to everyone who is judged by it.’ (6)



**Milton’s *Paradise Lost* decoded differently when treated as a religious or a moral text? Is morality known to Milton’s Satan and can he be judged by it?**

(John Deigh, *An Introduction to Ethics*, 2010)

## ‘Conceptual foundations’ of morality:



**Milton’s *Paradise Lost* –**

**- a ‘conventional’ morality vs. morality ‘as a universal ideal’?**

- ‘a **conventional morality** is a set of norms of a particular society that are generally accepted and followed by the society’s members. These norms reflect the members’ shared beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil (...).’

**[it is] a morality [of] an existing institution of a particular society.’ (8)**

- ‘morality as a universal ideal [is] grounded in reason’ (8), ‘**a norm being generally accepted and enforced in one’s society is not a sufficient reason to follow it.**’ (10)



**Milton’s heaven as a society/hierarchy based on conventional morality vs. Satan’s morality as a ‘universal ideal’?**

(Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction*, 2002)



## ‘Conceptual foundations’ of morality:

### **Milton’s Satan: a moral, immoral or changing literary character?**

- ‘the effects or consequences of actions upon human beings and other sentient creatures are important considerations in determining the morality of actions’  
(103)



**Is Milton’s Satan losing his morality when purposefully ‘ruining’ God’s creation?**

- **Divine Command Theory:** ‘the thought (...) that morality itself – what is right and wrong, good and bad – depends on God’s commands (23).

## **The Conclusion: Milton's Satan undergoes a moral change**

- **The conditions:**

- *Paradise Lost* as a moral reading
- Milton's Satan essentially perceived as a literary character

- **Stage 1: Rebellion in Heaven**

Milton's Satan opposes the 'conventional morality' of the hierarchy in Heaven and preserves his morality as a 'universal idea'.

- **Stage 2: Ruining Adam and Eve**

The consequences of Satan's actions are deliberately negative and at this point Milton's Satan eventually loses his morality as a 'universal idea'.



## A Final ‘Word’ from *Paradise Lost*:

Satan’s ‘works’ as a ‘necessary’ counterbalance to the notion of goodness?

*‘(...) he, who comes thy Saviour, shall recure,  
Not by destroying Satan but his works (...)’*

*Paradise Lost*, lines 393-394



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*Thank you for your attention!*



Gustave Doré –  
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Lost* (1866)