

Paradise Lost is an epic poem in 12 books based on the biblical story of Satan's fall from heaven and Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. Milton's strong Puritan faith is evident in all his work and comes to its greatest height in the epic poems. The opening lines of *Paradise Lost* give the "argument" for the piece in which Milton invokes the heavenly muse to help him write:

*"Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man [Christ],
Restore us and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, O heavenly Muse..."*

Like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* "fills in" details of what takes place in the spiritual realm. Milton presents interactions between God and Satan, Satan and Adam and Eve, Satan and his demons, etc., using poetic license and lyrical expression. Nothing in *Paradise Lost* directly contradicts the Bible. But Milton's work should not be understood as biblical fact. Perhaps the most famous line from the poem is Satan's rebellious declaration, "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven." So often has that line been repeated that it is often mistaken for a quote from the Bible.

It should be noted that Milton's poetry can be difficult for the modern reader. *Paradise Lost* is full of the rhythms and idioms of 17th-century English, and Milton often alludes to Greek mythology and Renaissance Italian, French, and English writers, many of whom are unfamiliar to the modern reader. But, from a theological and literary standpoint, his work is first-rate. Amazingly, Milton wrote his epic poem while completely blind, having to dictate the lines to his secretary.

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Paradise-Lost.html>

Why you should re-read *Paradise Lost*

By Benjamin Ramm 19th April 2017

The greatest epic poem in the English language, John Milton's Paradise Lost, has divided critics – but its influence on English literature is second only to Shakespeare's, writes Benjamin Ramm.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is rarely read today. But this epic poem, 350 years old this month, remains a work of unparalleled imaginative genius that shapes English literature even now.

In more than 10,000 lines of blank verse, it tells the story of the war for heaven and of man's expulsion from Eden. Its dozen sections are an ambitious attempt to comprehend the loss of paradise – from the perspectives of the fallen angel Satan and of man, fallen from grace. Even to readers in a secular age, the poem is a powerful meditation on rebellion, longing and the desire for redemption.

Despite being born into prosperity, Milton's worldview was forged by personal and political struggle. A committed republican, he rose to public prominence in the ferment of England's bloody civil war: two months after the execution of King Charles I in 1649, Milton became a diplomat for the new republic, with the title of Secretary for Foreign Tongues. (He wrote poetry in English, Greek, Latin and Italian, prose in Dutch, German, French and Spanish, and read Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac).

Milton gained a reputation in Europe for his erudition and rhetorical prowess in defence of England's radical new regime; at home he came to be regarded as a

prolific advocate for the Commonwealth cause. But his deteriorating eyesight limited his diplomatic travels. By 1654, Milton was completely blind. For the final 20 years of his life, he would dictate his poetry, letters and polemical tracts to a series of amanuenses – his daughters, friends and fellow poets.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton draws on the classical Greek tradition to conjure the spirits of blind prophets. He invokes Homer, author of the first great epics in Western literature, and Tiresias, the oracle of Thebes who sees in his mind's eye what the physical eye cannot. As the philosopher Descartes wrote during Milton's lifetime, "it is the soul which sees, and not the eye". William Blake, the most brilliant interpreter of Milton, later wrote of how "the Eye of Imagination" saw beyond the narrow confines of "Single vision", creating works that outlasted "mortal vegetated Eyes".

Clever devil

When Milton began *Paradise Lost* in 1658, he was in mourning. It was a year of public and private grief, marked by the deaths of his second wife, memorialised in his beautiful Sonnet 23, and of England's Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, which precipitated the gradual disintegration of the republic. *Paradise Lost* is an attempt to make sense of a fallen world: to "justify the ways of God to men", and no doubt to Milton himself.

Milton's religious lexicon – which sought to explain a 'fallen' world – itself has fallen from use.

But these biographical aspects should not downplay the centrality of theology to the poem. As the critic Christopher Ricks wrote of *Paradise Lost*, "Art for art's sake? Art for God's sake". One reason why Milton is read less now is that his

religious lexicon – which sought to explain a ‘fallen’ world – itself has fallen from use. Milton the Puritan spent his life engaged in theological disputation on subjects as diverse as toleration, divorce and salvation.

The poem begins with Satan, the “Traitor Angel”, cast into hell after rebelling against his creator, God. Refusing to submit to what he calls “the Tyranny of Heaven”, Satan seeks revenge by tempting into sin God’s precious creation: man. Milton gives a vivid account of “Man’s First Disobedience” before offering a guide to salvation.

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven – Milton’s Satan

Ricks notes that *Paradise Lost* is “a fierce argument about God’s justice” and that Milton’s God has been deemed inflexible and cruel. By contrast, Satan has a dark charisma (“he pleased the ear”) and a revolutionary demand for self-determination. His speech is peppered with the language of democratic governance (“free choice”, “full consent”, “the popular vote”) – and he famously declares, “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven”. Satan rejects God’s “splendid vassalage”, seeking to live:

Free, and to none accountable, preferring
Hard liberty before the easy yoke
Of servile Pomp.

Nonconformist, anti-establishment writers such as Percy Shelley found a kindred spirit in this depiction of Satan (“Milton’s Devil as a moral being is... far superior to his God”, he wrote). Famously, William Blake, who contested the very idea of the Fall, remarked that “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet

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and of the Devil's party without knowing it".

Milton was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it – William Blake

Like Cromwell, Milton believed his mission was to usher in the kingdom of God on earth. While he loathed the concept of the 'divine right of kings', Milton was willing to submit himself to God in the belief, in Benjamin Franklin's words, that "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God".

Although discussion of *Paradise Lost* often is dominated by political and theological arguments, the poem also contains a tender celebration of love. In Milton's version, Eve surrenders to temptation in part to be closer to Adam, "the more to draw his love". She wishes for the freedom to err ("What is faith, love, virtue unassayed?"). When she does succumb, Adam chooses to join her: "to lose thee were to lose myself", he says:

How can I live without you, how forgo
Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined,
To live again in these wild woods forlorn?
Should God create another Eve, and I
Another rib afford, yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart.

Canon fodder

When *Paradise Lost* was published in London in 1667, Milton had fallen out of favour. Just months before the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in May 1660, he had published a pamphlet denouncing kingship. Now Milton was scorned, his writings were burned, and he was imprisoned in the Tower of London – only narrowly escaping execution after the intercession of a fellow poet, Andrew Marvell.

Yet *Paradise Lost* gained immediate acclaim even among royalists. The poet laureate John Dryden reworked Milton's epic, casting Cromwell – a regicide with dictatorial tendencies – in the role of Satan. Samuel Johnson ranked *Paradise Lost* among the highest “productions of the human mind”.

Milton's style was suggestive and free from what he called 'the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming'

Romantic writers celebrated Milton both for his stance against censorship (“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience”, Milton wrote in the pamphlet *Areopagitica*), and for his innovative poetic form, which was suggestive, allusive and free from what he called “the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming”. *Paradise Lost* inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, while Wordsworth began his famous sonnet *London*, 1802 with a plea: “Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour: England hath need of thee”.

But not all critics were so favourable. The 20th Century brought us the ‘Milton Controversy’, during which his legacy was fiercely contested. His detractors included poets TS Eliot and Ezra Pound (who wrote that “Milton is the worst sort of poison”), while support came from both devout Christians (like CS Lewis) and atheists (including William Empson, for whom “The reason why the poem is so good is that it makes God so bad”).

[https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170419-why-paradise-lost-is-one-of-t
he-worlds-most-important-poems](https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170419-why-paradise-lost-is-one-of-the-worlds-most-important-poems)

Original Text

OF MAN'S first disobedience,
and the fruit

Of that forbidden tree whose
mortal taste

Brought death into the World,
and all our woe,

With loss of Eden, till one
greater Man

Restore us, and regain the
blissful Seat,

Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on
the secret top

Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst
inspire

That Shepherd who first taught
the chosen seed

In the beginning how the
heavens and earth

Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion
hill

Delight thee more, and Siloa's
brook that flowed

Fast by the oracle of God, I
thence

Invoke thy aid to my
adventrous song,

Modern Translation

Hey Muse, can you tell me about
Man's first Sin? It had something to
do with that fruit, right?

I know it was forbidden, but in
Adam and Eve's case it was
for-biting.

It brought the possibility of sin and
death to our world, it was a rotten
apple!

It made our *Paradise Lost*
(Hey...that's the title of this thing!),
until Jesus Christ came to the rescue

5 To help us get better.

So Muse, let me have some
inspiration, like you gave

Moses inspiration. Give me
whatever you gave him.

Moses was a pretty cool guy, he
taught a lot of people

And I want to do the same.

10

I need your help in creating this epic

That with no middle flight
intends to soar

Above the Aonian mount, while 15
it pursues

Things unattempted yet in prose
or rhyme.

I want to create something that has
never been done before

And chiefly Thou, O Spirit, that
dost prefer

And I want to learn from you

Before all temples the upright
heart and pure,

Instruct me, for Thou know'st;
Thou from the first

You were there in the beginning

Wast present, and, with mighty 20
wings outspread,

Your wings were spread and

Dove-like sat'st brooding on the
vast Abyss,

You were like a dove who turned

And mad'st it pregnant: what in
me is dark

the darkness into light. And you can
do the same for me.

Illumine, what is low raise and
support;

I want to be enlightened where I am
ignorant and I want to reinforce and
strengthen my writing abilities

That, to the highth of this great
argument,

So I can properly explain what has
happened

I may assert Eternal Providence, 25

And justify the ways of God to
men.

I want to explain God's great plan
and purpose

Say first—for Heaven hides
nothing from thy view,

Since you probably know
everything about Heaven

Nor the deep tract of Hell—say
first what cause

as well as what happens in Hell, I
want to know...

Moved our grand Parents, in
that happy state,

Why and how did Adam and Eve
screw things up? I mean they must
have been so happy in Eden

Favoured of Heaven so highly,
to fall off

30 Heaven was really into them and
gave them everything they needed

From their Creator, and
transgress his will

from God, but they couldn't do ONE
SMALL THING

For one restraint, lords of the
World besides.

They only had one rule that they just
had to follow

Who first seduced them to that
foul revolt?

Who made them drop the ball? Of
course I can't blame them, they just
didn't know what they were doing!

The infernal Serpent; he it was
whose guile,

It was that snake! He's quite the
trickster

Stirred up with envy and
revenge, deceived

35 He was driven by jealousy and
revenge, and went after

The mother of mankind, what
time his pride

our beloved Eve. That snake's blind
pride

Had cast him out from Heaven,
with all his host

got him kicked out of Heaven along
with his entourage

Of rebel Angels, by whose aid,
aspiring

of rebel Angels. Those Angels
followed Satan

To set himself in glory above
his peers,

and his blind ambition. Satan was
able to convince them to support
him in his quest to glorify himself
above everyone,

He trusted to have equalled the
Most High,

40 and even to the extent of waging
war against Heaven

If he opposed, and, with
ambitious aim

Against the throne and
monarchy of God,

Raised impious war in Heaven
and battle proud,

With vain attempt. Him the
Almighty Power

Hurled headlong flaming from
the ethereal sky,

With hideous ruin and
combustion, down

To bottomless perdition, there
to dwell

In adamant chains and penal
fire,

Who durst defy the Omnipotent
to arms.

Nine times the space that
measures day and night

To mortal men, he, with his
horrid crew,

Lay vanquished, rowling in the
fiery gulf,

Confounded, though immortal.
But his doom

Reserved him to more wrath;
for now the thought

The inevitable result was war

But Satan's quest for victory was
already decided, and he was doomed
to fail.

45 He falls from grace

Ruined and on fire

Down to his prison in Hell

Imprisoned in fire

Why bother fighting someone who
already knows the outcome? Get
better, Satan! Sit down and have a
beer and stop complaining!

50 Satan and his homies were lying
defeated in Hell.

They were sore losers

Confused, angry, and a multitude of
other bad feels. Even though they
can't really die, just living with these
feelings sucked.

This just made Satan even madder
and bitter

Both of lost happiness and
lasting pain

55 as he thought of all the pleasures he
may never have and the
never-ending pain

Torments him: round he throws
his baleful eyes,

He looked at the Hell around him
and he saw

That witnessed huge affliction
and dismay,

All the suffering that his gang was
going through,

Mixed with obdurate pride and
steadfast hate.

But he was feeling even more
hatred.

At once, as far as Angel's ken,
he views

Everywhere he looked

The dismal situation waste and
wild.

60

A dungeon horrible, on all sides
round,

As one great furnace flamed;
yet from those flames

was fire and the fire didn't burn like
ordinary flame does

No light; but rather darkness
visible

it burned with a dark fire instead of
light

Served only to discover sights
of woe,

and they only revealed more

Regions of sorrow, doleful
shades, where peace

65 suffering

And rest can never dwell, hope
never comes

and hopelessness

That comes to all, but torture
without end

and unending torture

Still urges, and a fiery deluge,
fed

It's like a roaring fire

With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed.		that doesn't seem like it will ever go out
Such place Eternal Justice had prepared	70	This place was made for people like Satan and anyone
For those rebellious; here their prison ordained		else who decides they want to try to fight Heaven.
In utter darkness, and their portion set,		They are sent to this fiery darkness
As far removed from God and light of Heaven		Which is the furthest away from Heaven and the light of Heaven
As from the centre thrice to the utmost pole.		
Oh how unlike the place from whence they fell!	75	This place is the complete opposite of where they fell. No kidding!
There the companions of his fall, o'erwhelmed		This is where he and his defeated followers have to
With floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire,		live, they have to live with fire.
He soon discerns; and, weltering by his side,		Satan finds a familiar face next to him
One next himself in power, and next in crime,		His "2nd in command/assistant"
Long after known in Palestine, and named	80	
Beëlzebub. To whom the Arch-Enemy,		His main man: Beëlzebub.
And thence in Heaven called Satan, with bold words		Satan finally spoke
Breaking the horrid silence, thus began:—		You can call it an ice-breaker

“If thou beest he—but Oh how
fallen! how changed

From him!—who, in the happy
realms of light,

Clothed with transcendent
brightness, didst outshine

Myriads, though bright—if he
whom mutual league,

United thoughts and counsels,
equal hope

And hazard in the glorious
enterprise,

Joined with me once, now
misery hath joined

In equal ruin; into what pit thou
seest

From what highth fallen: so
much the stronger proved

He with his thunder: and till
then who knew

The force of those dire arms?
Yet not for those,

Nor what the potent Victor in
his rage

Can else inflict, do I repent, or
change,

Though changed in outward
lustre, that fixed mind,

"Hey! Is that you? Oh man, you've
changed a lot!

85 You lost your shine, that 'Heavenly
shine,'

You were brighter than

everyone else!

You joined me and helped me plan

in my attempt to overthrow Heaven,

90 But now we're here, together again
in misery

and defeat

We fell pretty far though, and I
guess we were a little over our
heads

Who would have known how strong
they could be?

But it's whatever to me,

95 I don't care that we lost.

Heaven can throw everything at me,
but I'm not going to change

I may look different now, but my
mind is still the same.

And high disdain from sense of
injured merit,

That with the Mightiest raised
me to contend,

And to the fierce contention
brought along 100

Innumerable force of Spirits
armed,

That durst dislike his reign, and,
me preferring,

His utmost power with adverse
power opposed

I still have fight in me

I still have the same confidence

that stirred up everyone to join me

to fight the unfair Heaven