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Eve's Defective Character

Abstract: *"Eve's Defective Character"* analyzes and examines the between-the-lines defense provided by John Milton for the character of Eve in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. The paper argues that, "[Eve] is imbued with a strong female curiosity and a drive to reach a level of equality with Adam, but [that] she lacks the makeup to fulfill these lofty aspirations-- inherently she is nothing outside of a companion for Adam, and it's this faulty composition that dooms her." Outside of analyzing *Paradise Lost* itself, the paper considers Jeff Davis' "On Bending," and Kori Hensell's "The Shifting Concept of Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*" as concurring and supporting opinions.

It's one of the most common theological and literary topics of discussion: the contrast between good and evil. Some of the best examples lie in the sacred texts of the Hebrew Bible, but no one, aside from Satan, has caught more negative publicity than Eve herself. After tempting Adam to eat the fated apple, Eve becomes the sole reason for the entire human race's fall from grace. She is seen as the original "devil's advocate," but stepping outside of the realm of biblical scholasticism, Milton's *Paradise Lost* paints quite a different picture. Milton assigns Eve a character, a personality, and in doing so, quite the defense plea. Famed in the Bible as the mother of mankind, Milton attends more closely to her being the original *female*: desperate for attention, acknowledgment, and self-value, yet contradicting herself by arguing

simultaneously for unrestrained independence. Milton portrays Eve as faultily made from the start, being overwrought with naivete and lacking the judgement to withstand Satan's temptations. By looking at the innately insufficient makeup of her character, examining her social behavior and maturity level in the events leading up to the fall, and recognizing the specific tricks Satan employs, we are able to see the root of Eve's weakness. She is imbued with a strong female curiosity and a drive to reach a level of equality with Adam, but she lacks the makeup to fulfill these lofty aspirations-- inherently she is nothing outside of a companion for Adam, and it's this faulty composition that dooms her.

Looking first at Eve's character, we hear from Adam that she has been made "inward less exact" than he (*Paradise Lost* 8: 539). Even Adam, who has gained all knowledge through Raphael, recognizes that Eve is not made as perfect internally as she is splendid externally. He goes on to describe her, saying, "For well I understood in the prime end / Of nature her th' inferior, in the mind / And inward faculties, which most excel, / In outward also her resembling less / His Image who made both..." (*Paradise Lost* 8: 540-543). Eve, however doesn't ever express her own acknowledgment of this inadequacy. If she had known that her power was more concentrated in her external charms (*Paradise Lost* 8: 533), it can be assumed that she would be less defensive later when Adam worries about her wandering around alone. Her strengths are appropriate for the purposes of captivating and seducing her more cerebral partner, but her aspirations to attain equality don't coordinate. The result is a deeply conflicted Eve. It is not so much to say that she was doomed as a result of her lofty aspirations, or doomed because of her superficial makeup, but it is her innate character, composed of both

these characteristics functioning at odds with one another, that sets her up to fall under Satan's temptations.

The necessary question to ask when examining Eve's makeup and her flawed persona is whether it was nature or nurture that failed her. Milton presents both aspects of her character as being broken: nature having failed to coordinate her aspirations with the qualities necessary for attaining them, and nurture for casting her aside as an idle playmate for Adam, and neglecting to prepare her. Eve is never addressed by either God or Raphael, nor is she adequately taught about the temptations awaiting her. In her paper, "The Shifting Concept of Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*," Kori Hensell points out how Raphael's warning to Adam and Eve neglected to focus on the evil lurking all around them, which resulted in their fatal naiveté. As Hensell states, "[Raphael] never establishes the extreme danger of the serpent that will lead [Adam and Eve] to damnation" (Kori Hensell 4). She expands, proposing that. "Without knowledge of evil, goodness cannot thrive on its own, and this is why Adam and Eve fell at all" (Kori Hensell 4-5). Here, Raphael is put to blame for Adam and Eve's failure, and an interesting concept of evil being necessary to uphold good, in the sense of knowledge, penetrating, as an antidote, the deep roots of evil, is introduced.

Later, referring again to Eve's limited importance compared to himself, Adam says, "And [Eve is] less expressing / The character of that Dominion giv'n / O'er the Creatures" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 544-546). One should recall that Eve didn't name the animals, she wasn't there with Adam, and therefore she isn't prepared when the snake approaches her with conversation. More importantly, if we trust the narrator, being either Milton or some other omniscient source, we must also trust that his description of Eve is not so much one of evil

nature, intended in wrongdoing, but more a flawed, sympathetic one. She is described as being unwary (*Paradise Lost* 9: 614), credulous (*Paradise Lost* 9: 644), guiltless (*Paradise Lost* 9: 393), and most importantly, hapless (*Paradise Lost* 9: 404). We are not led to believe that Eve was given copious amounts of strength and fortitude and that she pushed her better knowledge to the side, but quite the opposite. All these descriptions paint her as being defective by design and incomplete outside of Adam's shadow.

Eve was always a liability to the Garden of Eden due to her vulnerable character weaknesses, but her displeasure at being perceived as inferior to Adam is what sets her downfall in motion. Looking at the conversation between Adam and Eve just before they separate helps to understand her willingness to succumb to the devil's temptation and eat the apple. It is not so much that Adam did not want to let her go off alone that upsets her, but that he doubted her resolve (*Paradise Lost* 9: 279-281). Adam initially agrees that some distance might benefit them, saying, "For solitude sometimes is best society, / And short retirement urges sweet return" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 249-250). He expresses worry, however, that Eve may fall into trouble alone, saying, "But other doubt possesses me, lest harm / Befall thee sever'd from me" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 251-252). Without knowing that she is inherently more susceptible to danger than Adam is, being less "exact" than he, Eve is offended. She expresses her displeasure at the mention of her "Faith and Love" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 286) being seduceable, but if she had known that her internal makeup was less complete than Adam's, she may have understood his thinking to be rightly so. Though Adam's intentions may have been good, they result in her being further driven to assert her own value, separate from Adam. Eve comments on the Devil's tempting her saying, "Rather double honour gain / From his surmise prov'd

false, find peace within, / Favour from heav'n, our witness from th'event" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 332-334). Her drive to impress God and rebuild Adam's confidence in her blinds her to the consequences of a mismatched battle with Satan.

The actual manipulating of Eve by Satan was successful because he exploited her inherent flaws, weakening her psychologically. He didn't just attack her with reason for eating the fruit, he narrowed it down and focused his attack on the specific holes in her character. First, Satan drove at Eve's yearning to be valued. When she commands him to answer her, he responds saying, "Easy to mee it is to tell thee all / What thou command'st, and right thou shouldst be / obey'd" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 568-570). As mentioned earlier, Eve has been largely ignored by both God and Raphael, and she has very little power or authority over the animals, so when this serpent comes pleading to her ego and demanding that she be obeyed, she is flattered. This aspiration to attain her own validation and respect, would presumably be further exacerbated by her having to literally look down below her to get it from such an unworthy source, as she hasn't been able to find it elsewhere.

Next, Satan appeals to Eve's need to be equated with Adam. Describing the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the snake says that reaching its fruit would require either her or Adam's reach, as all the other animals are too short (*Paradise Lost* 9: 590-593). Comparing her competence with Adam's, even signifying her first, would have meant a lot to an individual who has been seconded her entire existence. In her paper, Hensell adds that, "Satan exploits Eve's feelings of inadequacy and inequality with Adam, and resolves her dilemma then by guaranteeing mental equality with Adam once she eats the forbidden fruit" (Kori Hensell 5). This is an a deep scar, or vulnerable point, in Eve's character-- an out-of-check aspiration to

prove her equality with Adam-- that Satan guilefully manipulates. Later, after Eve has tasted the fruit and fallen into sin, she expresses what may have been subconsciously unsettled all along, a desire to be “render[ed]... more equal, and perhaps, / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superior” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 823-825). She wants to know as much, if not more than Adam, so as to be equal with his intelligence, and Satan strategically targets this.

This leads to Satan’s manipulating of Eve by taking advantage of her intellectual inadequacy. Before departing from Adam, Eve is advised that her skill of reasoning was bestowed them from God (*Paradise Lost* 9: 352). We later see how she parrots Adam’s warning saying to Satan, “Our Reason is our Law” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 654). Knowing that she is far less pensive than Adam, we see her employ the only real defense she has against temptation, her reasoning. Satan in turn uses it against her, reasoning that the fruit will give her knowledge, and God himself will not harm her, as the snake has eaten the fruit and he is fine (*Paradise Lost* 9: 684-690). Satan sums up his argument saying, “God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just; / Not just, not God; not fear’d then, nor obey’d” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 700-701). His reason confounds Eve. In his paper, “On Bending,” Jeff Davis goes even further, concluding that Eve was not only incapable of withstanding Satan’s temptation, but that he manipulates her own desire to do so. Davis writes:

[Satan] makes [Eve] believe she has logically come to the point where to disobey would not be sin, which signals the distortion of the good within her. It really seems like Eve fails to see anything immoral about her meal of apple, as it is written that Satan’s words seemed to her ‘persuasive,’ ‘impregn’d / With

Reason, to her seeming, and Truth' (*Paradise Lost* 9.737, 737-738)." (Jeff Davis 5)

Going back to the narrator's description of Eve as being "credulous," we know Davis' assertion to be true. She was told that her reason was a guide given to her by God, but once Satan corrupts it she does not know who to trust. Had God, or Raphael, or even Adam more fully explained to Eve God's majesty, taught to her all that Adam knows about his creator, she might have better withstood Satan's assault. As a result, her "Faith and Love" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 286) for God are shallow spectacles on parade in the shadow of her admiration for Adam and her yearning to be appreciated. As a final nail in the coffin of sorts, Satan comments on Eve's ignorance, knowing well how Adam's insult on her inferiority left its scar. "Why," he questions, "but to keep ye low and ignorant" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 704). Satan's attacking of Eve was malicious and well planned, but he only had to dig deeper into the holes that her creator had left. She was flawed before Satan got to her. Nature appears to have provided the canvas, flawed and lacking in its conception, and nurture in turn exploited those shortcomings to create an attitude in complete opposition with itself.

Milton's Eve, much more personified and enlivened than the Hebrew Bible's Eve, becomes more a tragic figure than a villain. We see her flaws as being related to a passion and drive that doesn't coordinate with the inherent skills given her by God in her creation. She didn't have a chance resisting such powerful temptation, as she wasn't adequately prepared. She exhibits a drive to be acknowledged and valued intrinsically, as passionate curiosity and a shortsighted overestimate of her own independence. It's no surprise that after the fall, these flaws that Satan himself exploits to her detriment become the very flaws that negatively define

our female stereotypes.

Works Cited

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