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Abstract: In this essay, I analyze Eve's character and argue that her independence, coupled with the lack of recognition from those around her, lead her to eat the fruit. I argue that her curiosity and individuality lead her to grow and become increasingly more independent throughout the text; however, Adam and those around her fail to acknowledge her independence, providing Satan an opportunity to offer her this independence at the cost of falling.

The Consequence of Independence

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* expands the biblical story surrounding the fall of Adam and Eve. Milton's version of the story adds depth to the settings and characters to reveal more complicated issues surrounding hierarchy, gender, and free will. Specifically with gender, Eve herself is often blamed for the fall of man, as she is the first to eat from the tree of knowledge. Eve's downfall stems from her independence and the failure of those around her to acknowledge her independence. Her own curiosity, individuality, and perception from others against these traits ultimately leads to the culmination of her eating the fruit and the fall of man.

Curiosity is the first trait to appear alongside Eve. The characteristic of curiosity is what will ultimately provide a foundation in which the rest of her character will be built upon. For example, we first see her curiosity in the discovery of her own reflection, for she is entranced as "[i]t started back, but pleas'd I soon return'd, / Pleas'd it return'd as soon with answering looks / Of sympathy and love'" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 463-465). Eve's fixation on her reflection reveals a natural tendency to seek discovery about herself. The scene illustrates a point to highlight Eve as

a character acknowledging her own existence. In doing so, Eve also struggles with following God's orders as she finds her reflection more interesting and important at the time. It would appear she has, at least in her beginning, placed her own self above that of serving and loving God as "Less winning soft, less amiably milde, / Then that smooth wat'ry image; back I turn'd" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 479-480). The scene takes place as Eve appears to struggle with the roles placed on her by God. She understands that she is meant to become "Mother of human Race;" however, she appears to question the motherhood role as she looks back to her own reflection, almost as if examining herself to find her own identity, not placed on her by some other being (*Paradise Lost* 4: 475). Overall, she appears more focused on the discovery of herself through her own curiosity rather than simply living up to the roles expected of her from God and the others.

Eve's own individuality ultimately leads to a more confident and aware sense of self. This confidence leads her to more decision making and a need to be taken more seriously from the likes of Adam and the angels. As Eve grows more confident in her own self, she begins taking on actions that appear more purposefully independent. For example, Eve stakes her own argument and back it up with reason before Adam as they go forth to their labours, which Eve proposes to divide in several places, each laboring apart, "but till more hands / Aid us, the work under our labor grows, / Luxurious by restraint; (*Paradise Lost* 9: 207-209). The argument scene reveals a different side of Eve than we are used to seeing. Eve is illustrated as not only making a proposal but also providing supporting evidence for why it is the better choice. Eve is generally more passive up to this point, but the change in her behavior reveals a shift in her perception of her own identity. She takes a more active stance in this scene, and this stance is demonstrative of a more confident and purposefully moving character. Throughout the text, Eve is often referred

to as less than Adam with phrases like “thy weaker;” however, Eve was created in response to Adam’s longing for an equal. Even while others and Adam seem to think of Eve as a lesser version of Adam, she states that she is Adam’s equal and that he “fear[s] that [her] firm Faith and Love / Can by [Satan’s] fraud be shak’n or seduc’t” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 286-287). The fact that Eve is compelled to state that she is Adam’s equal reveals that she feels as though Adam does not see her as an equal. The argument between them begs to illustrate that Eve feels that she needs to prove her own strength. Eve’s own view of herself motivates her to this argument and to claim independent labor as a means to cement herself as just as independent as Adam is. She seeks to be treated as more than just a weaker, more susceptible, version of Adam. She seeks to be seen as equal to Adam in both independence and strength.

The treatment from others completely disregards Eve’s identity. In doing so, the lack of recognition leads to her own need to acquire it from the tree of knowledge. God himself even finds it troubling for Eve to have such an interest in her own being as “a voice thus warn’d me, What thou seest, / What there thou seest fair Creature is thy self” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 467-468). It’s interesting to see the usage of the word “warn” used in this particular scene. To warn someone is to make them aware of impending danger. Considering its usage here, it would appear that God makes it a point to warn Eve against having such a focus on her own self. Eve’s role as “credulous Mother” is often placed on her by others (*Paradise Lost* 9: 644). To begin, the role of mother has been a central theme surrounding Eve throughout the text, so much so that she never really has a choice in the matter. Secondly, the role of mother is inherently selfless. Motherhood can be viewed as giving up one’s self for the betterment of her children. Eve was destined to serve God, Adam, and her children since her creation. Due to the overwhelming focus on serving others imposed upon Eve, there is no room left for Eve to serve herself. Serving

herself and her identity then becomes a matter that goes against everything and every role that has been laid before her. Eve as her own individual is then more susceptible to the words of the Serpent as he speaks to her. Satan's speech is "impregn'd / With Reason, to her seeming, and with Truth" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 737–738). Satan's conversation is different than the conversations she is normally having or simply overhearing. This conversion leads to the use of "reason." Instead of simply being told what to do and what to think, Satan provides ideas and beliefs about the fruit. She is then asked to reason for herself on the evidence provided whether or not to believe it. The scene reveals Eve actually being challenged to think for herself and make decisions for herself; however, her inexperience with this, due to others not treating her as such, leads to her and Adam's downfall though eating the fruit.

A counter argument that is often raised in regard to Eve's independence is rooted in the purpose of her creation: She was created for the purpose of serving and following Adam. Boyd characterizes Eve as docile, claiming "that she is meant to be the inferior of the two, the obedient. She follows Adam's word because she believes that it is what she was created for: to be his graceful, sweet companion" (Boyd 3). Eve characterized as such a weak submissive character does her character an injustice and robs her of any intrinsic motivation for her own actions. Eve grows between the time of her creation and her eventual fall, and her character does not remain stagnant. Instead we see her character grow and become more confident in her own wants and choices, specifically in the argument between Eve and Adam. Satan's proposal would not have been successful if she was as submissive as Boyd characterizes her. The very proposal and allure to Eve strengthens the argument of her need to be independent. Satan's proposal to eat the fruit boasts the ability to put one "higher than my Lot" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 690). Satan's argument promises the fruit's ability to raise one above where one whence came, for Eve, who

was made from Adam, can become greater than Adam. Satan's invitation "to the Taste, / Of vertue to make wise: what hinders then /To reach, and feed at once both Body and Mind" is quickly accepted by Eve as "her rash hand in evil hour / Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck'd, she eat" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 777-782). Eve does not seek the fruit for anyone else's sake. Eve takes the fruit for herself "Greedily [and] she ingorg'd without restraint" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 791). Had Eve truly been docile and submissive in her nature, these proposal and incentives would not have affected her as such. Instead, she reveals her true wants. Her want for independence is imbedded as she succumbs to the proposal that offers to raise her above her lot.

Free will itself offers Eve the foundations of her independence. Free will provides Adam and Eve the ability to make their own choices of independence; however, free will is consequential as it allows them to make the "wrong" choices in the eyes of God. Nonetheless, free will itself is crucial to Eve's independence; moreover, free will offers Eve the ability to be independent of God's own wishes, a state of true independence, detached from the maker himself. During the proposal by Satan, Caven claims that "Eve clearly shows that she knows she is not supposed to eat the fruit. She does not have a predestined flaw; she clearly knows what not to do, yet chooses to do it anyway" as she echoes the warnings about eating the fruit (Caven 5). Further her ability to push aside her own internal warnings that stem from God himself reveal a drive of independence. Her independence seeks to detach her dependency from the maker himself in these scenes. God himself impedes on Eve's independence as he creates a reality of corrupted free will. Caven describes this as the "'middle ground' position [which] means that Adam and Eve are fated to be put in certain situations and face certain people, but the way they handle those people and situations is completely under their own control" (Caven 1). Unfortunately, this means that Eve's independence is limited to the reality that God fabricates. In

an attempt to break free of her dependence on God, a structure that allows her to make choices with free will but only the “right” choices, she must turn against God himself through eating the fruit. Within her fantasies of the fruit’s ability, she

flew, and underneath beheld

The Earth outstretcht immense, a prospect wide

And various: wond’ring at my flight and change

To this high exaltation (*Paradise Lost* 5: 87-90).

The dream reveals her own capacity of wonder and “exaltation” at the sight of it. This dream offers her the most power she has ever held and makes her the most free she has ever been. It is obvious that once Satan proposes the power of the fruit that she would not be able to resist after having a taste in her own dreams. In the proposal, she believes she has the opportunity to be just as free in reality as her dream, so she chooses independence in true free will over the faux free will of God.

Milton portrays Eve as this being that grows throughout the story in response to various factors. Her own curiosity first appears in the realization of herself through her reflection in the water. She continues to grow and find confidence in her own independence as she makes the argument for labor and their equality to one another. Although how others treat Eve clashes with her view and idea of herself, leaving her vulnerable to Satan’s persuasive reasoning strengthened by her own ignorance of the exact nature of this evil, Eve continues to push back against the status of the “weaker” and pushes forth to attempt to gain true independence in true free will. All in all, Eve’s independence leads her to eat the forbidden fruit due to the inability or refusal of those around her to perceive this independence.