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Composite Heroism and Satan

Abstract: This paper considers Satan of Paradise Lost and his actions in contrast to traditional epic hero characteristics and tragic hero characteristics, finding concordance within both.

Defining the unity found therein, dubbed “composite heroism”, the effect is outlined in terms of audience reaction and Satan’s character development.

Paradise Lost is, among other things, a complication of characters and information established not only in the Bible, but within its own canonical events. Though the primary target of this epic poem remains clear –to recount the original sin and justify the ways of God– the audience finds itself lost in shades of grey morality, decisions, and implications. Not the least of these issues stems from the arguable protagonist himself, Satan. Though debatable that Milton did not begin with placing the first devil as his protagonist, considering the theme centers around humanity and God’s choices, far too many instances exist in which the audience is allowed, and even encouraged, to sympathize with his tragedy, become awestricken from his might, and empathize with his humanity. Through these actions, Milton has surpassed the idea of tragic or epic heroism, using key conventions from each to create a new form of hero greater than the sum of its parts in Satan: a composite hero.

Depending on the source, standard epic hero characteristics can number from five general points to over a dozen. For the purposes of this paper, I chose three conventions that repeated the most across various sources, judging them as most intrinsic to this title: some form of

preeminence and glory, superhuman mettle or prowess, and succeeding in their quest (*Notes on Heroic Poetry*). To address the first tenant, Satan began as Lucifer, the one regarded as second only to God. Even Raphael during his retelling of the war in Heaven made it a point to mention how “high [...] his degree in Heav’n; His count’nance, as the Morning Star that guides/The starry flock” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 707-709) was, despite slandering him as false and sacrilegious before. The amount of power and status any one being would need to receive accolades from an enemy is staggering, and from this admission, Lucifer’s title stood, for the most part, undeniable. This ideal of the epic hero solidifies itself further once he and his army fell to Hell after their rebellion. Though wounded in pride, he stands again and does so first, unwilling to rest on his laurels. In addition, even though he failed to overthrow God, Satan still kept the honor of initiating said coup. Thus, once he roused his army, he remained their “dread commander: he above the rest/In shape and gesture proudly eminent” (*Paradise Lost* 1, 589-591). For a literary point of comparison, the eponymous protagonist of *Macbeth* follows the same road. He and Satan both initially *received* a title –thane of Glamis and Lucifer, respectively– prior to shown canon. Through noteworthy violence on a battlefield, each *earned* an additional title –thane of Cawdor and Satan– which ultimately means more to the canon directly, as they change the protagonist enough to spur future events.

If nothing else was apparent, Satan has a knack for never dying and never giving up. Though once or twice, he lucked out simply due to God simply not annihilating him, the fallen angel’s tenacity remains apparent to a fault. While more minor feats include launching an attack for the throne of Heaven, surviving being split nearly in half, and crossing the whole of Chaos to find Eden, his greatest and most meaningful event is simply standing again. Though soundly thrashed and forced into endless suffering by God, the first thing Satan does is look around with

“his baleful eyes/That witness’d huge affliction and dismay/Mixt with obdurate pride and steadfast hate” (*Paradise Lost* 1, 56-58). That stands as the first image the audience sees: unflinching rage and menace from a being that had not triumphed, but still fought his hardest. Neither infinitesimally small odds, nor absolute darkness and brimstone, quieted his will. Submissive cowards do not show this level of willpower by any stretch of the imagination, and though we celebrate it in soldiers, we receive this picture in reference to the first fallen angel. This betrays what one expects from someone frequently denoted as an underhanded serpent and a turncoat; he might come across as slimy and deluded for fighting someone called “the Almighty”, agreeing with biblical recounting, but he is not vacant of dedication and fortitude, which ties in to his heroism. The fact remains that attacking such a being could simply be an exercise in blind hatred or pride, though I would argue that even hatred to the magnitude it would take to be so bold would break after such a sound beating in Heaven by the Son. Furthermore, Satan’s soliloquy in Book IV where he considers turning back to God shows too much clarity of thought to be rampant rage. Pride is another issue, which I will detail in a bit. While not the ones spoken about, a fallacy does still exist in the traditional ideal, and it comes from the fact that Satan had already been defeated when this tale began. It goes without saying that heroes do not traditionally begin here: there is a reasonable expectation of shown or described victory to convince the audience on how strong the hero in question is. By comparison, for those who fail as soon as the story begins, little success is anticipated, due to a certain stock characterization that such a character would fall into. Satan defies these genre conventions wholeheartedly. He did fail his first step, but knowing this does not weaken him, simply due to his unwavering devotion to his own cause and how good he is at subversion and temptation. Satan is savvy to how things work, and does not bumble around, which allows executions of the vast majority of

his plans without a hitch. He had fallen further than anyone else, once standing as the ostensible second-in-command, to nearly collapsing under the weight of his own sin, only to persevere.

Ultimately, his fallacy comes from this same power. Satan knows that his abilities to manipulate, slither his way out of negative situations and survive, and he revels in it –until that pride drives him away from epic heroism, to tragedy.

Building a tragic hero ultimately comes down to how their emotional state is constructed –or, rather, where in said construction exists an exploitable flaw. This is hamartia, the fatal flaw on which the tragedy depends to prepare its arrival. Though not exclusively true, for the tragic hero, his flaw is hubris, or excessive pride in themselves or their abilities. This “hero” is no exception; his pride and self-importance runs rampant throughout the poem, especially notable in the second book. Satan, using his title as chief devil, sits as head during the discussion in Pandemonium, outwardly unobtrusive as Moloch, Mammon, Beelzebub, and Belial discuss their next step to thwart God. Beelzebub offers the idea of someone going to tarnish the Almighty’s newest pet project, mankind. What happens in short order of that is appalling in terms of pride; through narration, the audience learns that the idea was planted by Satan himself who, once the easily-swayed crowd cheers for this decision, closes all discussion and asks for a volunteer. When no one would, he “now transcendent glory rais’d/Above his fellows, with Monarchal pride/Conscious of highest worth” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 427-429). He planned, with no little effort, an entire charade in order to glorify himself in front of his masses, and receive a massive ego stroke in the same breath, and did it all without any remorse or second thought. This is not something unexpected from Satan as we know him. He never lost his status as the great deceiver, after all, and because of that, the audience expects nothing less from him, even while considering that he has epic heroic qualities; it simply serves as a counterpart to those traits, fleshing out his

character that much more. Pride this rampant, a flaw so human and so commonplace that the audience understands it without contingencies, sits opposite very real desire and drive, and an indomitable spirit. Compare this to the likes of pure epic heroes, such as Beowulf or Odysseus: carefully crafted supermen designed as little more than wish fulfillment, standing as legends and larger than life, with shallow or fleeting humanism. They inherently limit any possible emotional feedback because of how they were made: at best, awe, excitement, and idolization can be felt upon finishing their journey, which will ultimately become hollow. Like when the eponymous Beowulf thrashes Grendel's mother, we, the audience, cannot be surprised when the traditional epic hero wins. What little personality they have destroys all suspicions of failure, due to focusing on positive traits and awesome strength, rather than flaws like hubris that a reader could associate with. Considering a pure tragic hero, such as Hamlet, creates a similar problem. The anguish of tragic heroes means to cause sympathy and empathy within the reader, to the point of catharsis, but not much else. Hamlet's "to be, or not to be" soliloquy at the start of Act III, while revealing additional character for the protagonist, consists largely of whining about life in general –not even his own life. Without the awe-striking shows of power and truly admirable traits, the audience reasonably questions whether a character like Hamlet justifies the title of "hero". Satan is different. By going through such a plan to gain praise, this becomes the first event in which we receive each world: pride and applause garnering to the point of discomfort like that of tragic heroes, *and* a superhuman existence satiates the need for wish fulfillment. Such a unity allows for character reception in more than one way by the audience; instead of mutually excluding one another, contempt for his brash pride and appreciation for his power and preeminence coexist.

Further blurring the lines, upon entering Eden in the guise of a cherub, Satan simultaneously pulls from and reconfigures one convention from each hero: the temptation and the enlightenment. To begin, the definition of temptation is simply “a strong urge or desire to have or do something” (“*Temptation*”), understood to be by an outside source. Likewise, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines enlightenment as “the state of having knowledge or understanding” (“*Enlightenment*”). Looking out over the heavenly landscape and soaking in what he could have had, Satan muses over the possibility of asking for forgiveness, and whether rebelling was the correct idea in the first place, eventually coming to this:

O then at last relent: is there no place
 Left for Repentance, none for Pardon left?
 None left but my submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me (*Paradise Lost* 4: 79-82)

Satan teeters on the edge, contemplating asking for forgiveness from the one who banished him from Heaven, and instantly backs off, which acts a microcosm of his composite nature. As stated, the definition of temptation does not explicitly require a tempting force to sway the tempted towards something bad, and in this case, that lack of specificity undercuts normalcy; the Garden of Eden itself, a then-holy construct with no sentience, seduces Satan, the fallen angel and Hell’s greatest double-talker, into changing his ways. Epic heroic convention has its hero tempted, that much is true –however, that seduction is generally done through the direct counterpoint to the hero, in order to sway the hero switch sides for whatever is offered. Further complicating matters, heroes of tragedy has a moment wherein they become enlightened to their ultimate goal, changing to reach a new plateau in solace, awareness, and determination. Satan firmly encounters both in the oddest amalgamation. Here, an objectively good construct,

but not the dramatic foil to Satan, picks at his psyche passively, appearing less like a beckoning temptation and more akin to subliminal suggestion. Satan then narrowly avoids faltering, immediately to understand that such a submission brings him disdain, reaching “enlightenment” within himself. Further thought renders said “enlightenment” immediately falsified, as he loses awareness of the fact that he is blindly following a path that makes no sense, despite mentioning multiple times that God is almighty and able to thwart him at any point, much like in Heaven’s war.

The end of Satan’s adventure comes with his return to Hell, successful in swaying Eve, and by proxy, Adam, to sin. He arrives, hubristic and ready to receive applause for his accolades, which presents the expectation of his praise, such as epic principle dictate. On the opposing side, a pending punishment lingers, between the Son’s word earlier in the tenth book, and the Father’s ingratitude towards Satan’s meddling. Surely, all of the sin he heaped onto himself by then would cause his death, triggering the tragedy of the tragic hero trope. Instead of being smote like he rightfully deserved, Satan instead gets hissed at by all of his followers, prostrated and turned into snakes. Not long after, “he [also] fell/[becoming] A monstrous Serpent on his Belly prone” (*Paradise Lost* 10: 513-514). This is the last thing we see of him directly: disgraced, defeated in a sense, but still victorious and not perished. A fitting punishment indeed, but he skirts the lines again, simultaneously escaping standard naming conventions, and creating a new anomaly to name.

Still, the question remains: how does a so-called “hero” exist when, fundamentally, he goes against the ultimate good, God? One assumes that, in the course of heroism, the hero must work for good: especially necessary for those under the “epic hero” banner. Why Satan eschews that standard comes down to the fact that his composite nature strikes again. In Jeff Davis’ “On

Bending”, he argues that Satan, and his legion of fallen angels, began entirely holy, even in terms of personality values, assuming that said values “must have been created as good” (Davis 3), perverted into evil ones upon falling. Assuming that the angels did begin as completely holy beings, once they fell, who says that their qualities stopped being good? They stopped being aligned with God’s will, that much is certain, but to satiate pride remained just as “good” as serving God had been, due to the change in situation. Goodness does not instantly mean an alignment to God, but it does mean desirable. Once the angels had fallen, desirable personality variables changed; chaste demeanor and meek innocence switched with hubris and sloth. Once that happened, Satan’s actions receive absolution, since for him, all his actions were good. Satan became the hero of his own story because he acted in the, right relative to his situation, even after he understood his actions were wrong in relation to God’s will. In simplest terms, he stayed his course –which sits as an admirable, heroic quality–, whether “right” or “wrong” –a philosophic uncertainty, not unlike those heroes of tragedies encounter. A belief in oneself to this magnitude, choosing one’s own code of conduct and definition of goodness, would inspire any considerate person, pushing them to find their own definition, largely because the struggle feels attainably superhuman: less than godhood, more than humanity. This form did not just happened to imprint on Satan.

To both succeed and fail, to have a fatal flaw exploited non-fatally, to keep this depth and complexity of character and motives: all of these conventions, previously unheard of in terms of standard expectations from a work of this magnitude, as they fail again and again to commit to one standard type, come together here. The audience cannot help but to ponder Satan’s nature and attempt to pull back his layers. Upon doing so, as done above, fractured pieces of the individual standards create an entirely new picture to comprehend: a hero that fails to be

completely heroic, completely epic, and completely tragic, but succeeds at all three concurrently.

This concurrence forms a character that can be loved, hated, inspiring, and deterring which is more human and understandable on a primal level than any of the individual parts.

Sources

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