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Final Paper

Son and Satan: Hero and Epic Hero Compared

Abstract: This paper deals with the characterization of both Satan and the Son as heroes.

Looking into both of their actions and characteristics, it is shown that Satan is an epic hero while the Son is a true hero. Milton exemplifies these heroes as foils of one another.

John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is used to illustrate the beginning of the fall of mankind. It is also used by Milton to establish a connection between the Son and Satan as characters. He gives the reader different instances in which the Son and Satan go through similar events and a comparison of the two can be drawn. While Satan might be seen as the hero of his own story, Milton chooses to portray the Son as the protagonist in *Paradise Lost*. In his story, Milton portrays both Satan and the Son as heroes and uses Satan's heroic depiction to convey the idea that the Son is a true hero.

While Satan and the Son are both presented as heroes, the type of heroes they represent are very different. Satan is depicted by Milton as an epic hero, even giving him the characteristics of one. A few of the epic hero characteristics Satan owns are superhuman capabilities and that he is a vast traveler and an unmatched warrior. Also like an epic hero, those that have a lack of humility, boast about their selves, or are shown to exhibit hubris will be punished. Satan's hubris, his pride, is readily shown throughout *Paradise Lost*. One such time was during his fight in Heaven when he talks about his army. After Satan and his army have

been defeated and cast into Hell, Satan still holds excessive pride for his act of rebellion. He states "How such united force of gods, how such / As stood like these, could ever know repulse? / For who can yet believe, though after loss, / That all these puissant legions whose exile / Hath emptied Heav'n shall fail to re-ascend, / Self-raised, and repossess their native seat?" (*Paradise Lost* 6: 629-634). Even after he was overpowered, he still believed that they should have won and is at a loss at how they were defeated. He even exaggerates how many now-fallen angels he turned to his side in order to make himself look better. This hubris still continues to persist later on in *Paradise Lost* when Satan thinks over his past actions and decides to continue on his path of sin. He made the decision that even if he was wrong in trying to go against God that he would never admit to it and go back to working under God. He then states that it is "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 258-263), showing that his pride is something that will always block him from becoming more than an epic hero and that he will most likely never become a true hero. Satan has shown through his thoughts and actions that he is not someone who does good things for others and chooses to do what he wants to do despite if it hurts others because it benefits him.

On the other hand, you have the Son, who Milton characterizes as a true hero with his actions and deeds. Now, the definition of a true hero can be changed based off the circumstances in the hero's life because each situation for each character is different. For *Paradise Lost*, I would argue that a true hero is someone who chooses to take up a difficult challenge of their own free will for the good of others, not for anything that they would possibly be rewarded with. Milton, I feel, is using this definition of a true hero when he characterizes the Son and Satan. He does this by comparing Satan and his actions against the Son's deeds and the reasons for why they chose to take action when and how they do. While Satan rebels against authority and God

because of his want for power and authority, the Son is faithful to God and does what God wills. During the War in Heaven, Jesus did not wish to fight but did so anyway because the Father commanded him to end the war. In his reply to God's command, the Son says "...this I my Glory account, / My exaltation, and my whole delight, / That thou in me well pleas'd, declar'st thy will / Fulfill'd, which to fulfil is all my bliss" (*Paradise Lost* 6: 726-729). This is representative of how the Son only wants to give obedience to God and will gladly give back the power he accepted after his mission is complete. Characterization of the Son as someone who acts with violence only because his Father ordered him to is fitting as you never see the Son act this way in any other part of *Paradise Lost*. This is because to the Son, his task at the time was given by the Father to only use his power for the purpose of stopping the war in Heaven. A character such as Satan would have wanted to keep the power after, as a reward. The Son, however, gave the power back and did not expect to gain anything more than peace in Heaven for everyone. This is a nod to the nature of the Son and how he operates with God and his commands.

When volunteering for their individual tasks, there are a few differences in how the Son and Satan go about it, further developing their characters as different types of heroes and leading them to mirror each other. When Satan is granted the chance to offer himself as the one to go out and find out more about humanity, he does it immediately. He does not hesitate in his volunteering but that is not because he is being selfless. Many of the other fallen angels think he is offering to go because the journey is dangerous. While it is dangerous, Satan ultimately wants to go because he does not want anyone else to get the glory from offering to go in his place. In fact, this whole thing was set up by Satan in the first place in order to make himself look better to the other devils. He was the one to come up with the plan to go mess with humanity and got his close friend Beelzebub to tell the others this idea for him. This way he could make himself look

better without making it seem like he is the one orchestrating everything and having others try to act against him, just as he did to God. Satan makes these choices for selfish reasons, not because he has a notable cause.

The Son's choice to volunteer is much different from the way that Satan chose to volunteer in that he did not do so immediately. When it was first announced that someone would have to die for mankind's sins no one spoke up. Then, after a small silence, the Son finally said that he would be the one to take up this task. Even though he did not want to die, he still offered to sacrifice himself because God wished it and he was loyal to God. The Son proclaimed, "Behold me then, me for him, life for life / I offer, on me let thine anger fall; / Account me man" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 236-238) and "on me let Death wreck all his rage" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 241). Even though he knew it would mean his death, he still offered himself up to die because it would allow the sins of all of mankind to be forgiven. By taking this task up for a notable cause, the Son has proven to be selfless in a way that Satan would never bring himself to be. The Son has shown that he is willing to undertake this harrowing journey to become a part of humanity, suffer as a human, and die at their hands in order to give them salvation. He does not do this so that he will be rewarded or be given something in return. He chooses to take on this task because it is God's will that he is the one to accept this challenge. In this way, the Son has shown himself to be a true hero by freely accepting his task with no want of anything in return.

Although both the Son and Satan were given the gift of free will and chose their paths that lead them to leave Heaven, they both did so for vastly different reasons. Satan chose to fall because he tried to create a rebellion against God. His pride and vanity lead him to think that he was better than God and he tried to take over. This caused him to be forced out of Heaven although it was his choices that lead to his fate. God had said that Satan was made "...just and

right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 98-99). This specifies that Satan was not made to be evil but chose to go down that path on his own. In this way, his hubris is what lead Satan to become more than just an epic hero and lead him down the path of a tragic hero. That might explain why the reader feels more closely connected to Satan than to the other characters. He is full of faults and attempts to portray himself as better than he actually is. Milton wants Satan to be relatable and for the reader to be on his side because that is just another part of the temptation that Satan uses. The reader is drawn to Satan and has an easier time finding themselves reflected in an epic hero than they would with a true hero as they are human and sinful, just as Satan was.

In comparison, it would be harder for the reader to compare themselves to a true hero, like the Son. While the Son’s act of leaving Heaven is not in *Paradise Lost*, his agreement to the act is there and is still comparable to Satan’s way of leaving Heaven. The son did not leave Heaven because of a personal failure but because he had taken upon himself to compete a mission that God had given him. He had free will, just as Satan did, but used it to choose to follow the Father, even at the cost of sacrificing his life. In this sense, the Son’s “fall” from Heaven is not tragic like Satan’s fall because he is doing this for a notable cause. Also, unlike Satan, the Son will return to Heaven to be with the Father once again after his time on earth is over. The Son “fell” from Heaven in order to save others because it was the will of God.

In Jacquavious James’ paper, “Composite Heroism and Satan,” he argues that Satan is more than an epic hero or tragic hero and is created into a new form of hero. Although he has a slight change in view of how Satan is portrayed, he does agree that Satan is an epic hero in most aspects. James argues that Satan’s pride and the qualities he gets from his epic hero status only helps to flesh out his character and to make him more relatable to the reader. Satan’s first

appearance to the reader is someone who is portrayed as having “unflinching rage and menace” (James 3) and let us know that “neither infinitesimally small odds, nor absolute darkness and brimstone, quieted his will” (James 3). His unstoppable fury in the face of getting what he wants is something that is prominent in an epic hero. Since one of the qualities of an epic hero is to succeed in their quest, it only makes sense that Satan is someone who would do anything in their power in order to finish what he has started and to continue down his path of darkness, even if he had the choice to go back. Satan says so in *Paradise Lost* when he proclaims, “What matter where, if I be still the same, / And what I should be, all but less than he / Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least / We shall be free” (*Paradise Lost* 1: 256-259). If Satan was ever able to retain forgiveness, he still would not take it because it is not in his character to do so. He would never wish to be ruled over and especially would not want to go back to God and beg to be let back into Heaven.

James also agrees that Satan’s want for glory and fatal flaw of pride are also parts of his characterization of an epic hero. James describes as Satan “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” (James 4). This image of Satan is a huge part of his character as his pride is the main reason he rebelled against God in the first place. Satan is a character who wants to be powerful and in control. He wants to be in charge, to take leadership, and was unable to do so in Heaven as God was the one who took command of all of the angels. His fatal flaw, pride, was what led him to fall in the first place but it was also what kept him in hell. Satan holds the ability to choose for himself what is right or wrong and can know if what he chooses is correct. However, Satan has an inability to state to others when he is wrong or to ask for forgiveness. In this way, he will never be able to become a

true hero like the Son. The Son can see what the morally right and wrong decision is and if he fails in his tasks, can and will ask for forgiveness from God.

By comparing the Son to Satan, Milton is clearly showing that it is the Son that is the true hero while Satan is only an epic hero. This is important because it is vital to know who the hero of the story is and not just who the characters believe it to be. Satan sees himself as the true hero of the story and is even portrayed as Milton as a type of hero to enhance that idea. It is only when the reader looks at why the characters are making the choices they are and how the characters view themselves that the reader will be able to see who the true hero is. Milton makes it hard on the reader when he makes Satan very relatable and likable. The reader has to be able look past that charismatic façade and see the true reasoning for why Satan does what he does. In the same way, the reader must look at the Son and see that he makes the choices he does because of his loyalty to God and his willingness to sacrifice himself is not for his sake, but for the sake of all of the people who he will save by offering himself up for all of mankind's sins.