

Keerthana Manoj

Professor David Ainsworth

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A Comparative Analysis of Satan and the Son as Justification of God's Character

*Abstract: This paper examines parallel moments between Satan and the Son in Paradise Lost, and how subtle differences in those moments highlight the Son's nobility and divinity. It argues that the Son serves as an intermediary in understanding God, so understanding the Son through Satan ultimately justifies the ways of the Father.*

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton parallels key scenes between the Son and Satan, such as their decisions to journey to Earth, their interactions with Adam and Eve, and their interactions with family. However, within these parallel moments, there are slight differences between the two characters' actions that point to the true nature of the Son. Comparing the minor differences in Satan and the Son's interactions and relationships with other characters point to how noble and powerful the Son is. Additionally, the Son acts as a liaison between the divine and the fallen, so understanding His actions through Satan ultimately serves to justify the character of the Father.

There exists a hierarchy of divinity in *Paradise Lost*, with Satan at the lowest end of the hierarchy, God at the very top, and the Son as an intermediary between the fallen and the divine. Milton essentially uses the Son's role in this hierarchy as a tool for his ultimate goal to "justify the ways of God to men" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 26). The Son represents the truest reflection of God that humans could possibly understand because of a few reasons, the first being the nature of His composition and status in heaven. The Son was begotten from God and is essentially the active agent for God's will, "a filial Godhead" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 175). However, the Son is also not at

the same level of divinity as God. He is one step lower as the right hand to God's throne, both reflecting the values of God, but being closer to the status of humanity than God is. In fact, the Son is referred to as "one greater Man" at the very beginning of the epic, illustrating His ties to humanity (*Paradise Lost* 1: 4). The second reason is that the Son has a deeper connection to humanity because He acts the Lord of Earth, so He interacts more with humanity and carries out God's will among them (*Paradise Lost* 7: 232). Consequently, we can use our established connection to Him and understanding of His character to better understand God. God is supposed to even more divine and perfect than the Son, so in validating the Son, we also validate God. This hierarchy of divinity, and the steps one must take to understand God also emphasizes how far removed God is from humanity, how He is on whole other scale of perfection.

Moreover, without the Son as a point of comparison between God and Satan, God's actions seem arbitrary and cruel. In general, what is considered "wrong" is anything that goes against God's will; for example, Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit was not wrong because she ate the fruit, but because she actively disobeyed God (*Paradise Lost* 9: 902-904). But without the Son, we have little idea of what God's will actually looks like, making God seem despotic and arrogant. For example, Mariah Lawrence argues in "An Argument Against God and His Conniving Ways" that God is not benevolent because He aimed to "create a path for humanity that would end in his ultimate glory" (2). Lawrence's argument, however, is completely built upon the relationships between God and fallen beings, without the intermediary Son. God seems to have orchestrated everything to give Himself glory, clearly painting Him in a power-hungry light. However, adding the Son into our understanding of God can greatly change our perception of the Father. The Son is the embodiment of God's will, evidenced by how God imbues Him with his "overshadowing Spirit and might" when sending Him to Earth (*Paradise*

*Lost* 7: 165). Seeing the Son embody the will of God and act in a benevolent manner provides justification for why God's will is right and noble and how aiming for God's glory is right because His glory is representative of good as a whole. Through the Son, we have a clearer picture for why disobeying God's will is wrong. The comparisons between the characters also provide an extra layer of moral security to God's more questionable decisions, like allowing Satan to bring Sin and Death into the world. Although Milton provides some justification for His actions in the name of free will (*Paradise Lost* 3: 111-116), the comparison between the benevolence of the Son and the morality of the Father's will solidifies that reasoning. Because the Son exemplifies God's will and serves as an agent of that will to the fallen, He is an effective way to understand God. However, understanding the Son is still in itself quite a task, so first and foremost, we must rely on comparisons between the Son and Satan to understand the Son. The process of justifying God's actions is a two-step process, comparing Satan to the Son, and then using the differences between the two characters as justification for the ways of God.

The primary reason for the need to thoroughly compare the Son and Satan first is because though the Son is closer to humans than God, His divinity still obscures the reader's understanding of Him. Milton is able to clearly communicate the thoughts of the fallen characters, including Satan and the humans; however, he does not do the same for the divine characters, possibly because he cannot properly communicate divine thoughts as a fallen being himself. For example, Satan has an entire soliloquy to himself in the epic, where readers can observe his true thoughts and emotions (*Paradise Lost* 4: 1-113). However, when Adam asks Raphael to explain heavenly matters, Raphael replies "how last unfold / The secrets of another World, perhaps / Not lawful to reveal?" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 568-570). Essentially, humans have no way of perfectly understanding divine beings like the Son because the inner workings of heaven

are beyond human comprehension. The divine characters are ultimately understood through their interactions with each other and the fallen beings. Because both Satan and humanity are fallen creatures and lower on the hierarchy of divinity, readers can better understand the true nature of the Son through parallel scenes between the two characters.

For example, the heavenly council scene mirrors the council scene in Hell, and the differences between how the two characters act in their respective councils illuminates the goodness of the Son. Satan immediately volunteers himself to travel to Earth to complete his mission (*Paradise Lost* 2: 464-466), but when God asks for a heavenly representative to go to Earth, a “silence was in Heav’n” before the Son volunteers Himself (*Paradise Lost* 3: 218). The fact that the Son pauses before sacrificing Himself points to how difficult of an undertaking He is facing as compared to Satan. Satan is already a fallen being and has nothing to lose by volunteering himself, so he has fewer concerns to consider in undertaking this mission. However, the Son has to degrade Himself and sacrifice His divinity for His mission. The pause difference could also point to a certain sensibility of the Son, that the Son is so rational, He would take a moment to ponder a direct request from God Himself. On the other hand, by comparison, Satan appears rash and impulsive in his quick decision, possibly because of his anger and resentment toward God. There is also a difference in Satan and the Son’s countenances after they give speeches announcing their individual missions. Satan has to put on an act because his words are intended to fuel the council with “false presumptuous hope” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 522). He acts “with pomp Supreme, / and God-like imitated State” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 510-511). Satan has to feign confidence and power to win over his audience, because he is not as sincere about his motives as the Son is. Satan’s motivations behind corrupting mankind are selfish, to fulfill his own vengeance; he has to overcompensate for his insincerity with his prideful demeanor. On the

other hand, the Son has a “meek aspect / Silent yet spake, and breath’d immortal love” after His speech (*Paradise Lost* 3: 266-267). Unlike with Satan, one can clearly observe that the Son’s message is not surface-level or deceitful, because His mere presence and demeanor match the nobility of his words. Because the Son does not have to put on a show in order to win over the angels, He seems more genuine and sincere than Satan. Whereas Satan’s motives are representative of greed and vengeance, the Son’s mission represents the purity and goodness of heaven.

Additionally, both Satan and the Son are heavily invested in humanity, but the differences in their relationships to Adam and Eve illuminate the role of the Son as a savior. For example, Satan sees Adam and Eve merely as a part of his grand plan to hurt God. He dehumanizes them by describing them as prey, and himself “a Tiger, who by chance hath spi’d / In some Purlieu two gentle Fawns at play” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 403-404). Satan’s attachment to Adam and Eve stems solely from vengeance. Conversely, because the Son Himself created Adam and Eve, His attachment stems from love. The Son’s love for humanity is especially evident when He cares for them after the Fall. He covers “Thir nakedness with the Skins of Beasts,” likening Himself to the “Father of his Family” (*Paradise Lost* 10: 216-217). The Son clearly cares for His creation as a sort of father figure and pities their fallen state. Contrasted with how Satan is only using Adam and Eve for his own selfish motives, the Son seems much more noble. Also, Satan is constantly a figure of deceit, having to present himself as a lowly serpent to Adam and Eve because he is afraid of getting caught by angels. By contrast, whenever the Son changes His form, it is entirely of His own volition, and Adam and Eve are well aware of His true identity. Nonetheless, the Son most often shows his divine form in all its glory, descending from the heavens as “Prince of the Air” (*Paradise Lost* 10: 185). The contrast

between Satan's cowardly disguise as a serpent and the Son's awe-inspiring divine form further illustrates how powerful of a hero figure the Son is. Moreover, when Satan first sees mankind, he admits "such grace / The hand that form'd them on thir shape hath pour'd" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 365). The fact that even Satan, the antithesis of everything the Son stands for, acknowledges the beauty of mankind, illustrates how amazing the works of the Son are. Ultimately, the differences in the way Satan and the Son approach mankind emphasizes the virtue and grace of the Son.

In addition, the parallel between the Son's family in Heaven and Satan's family in Hell affirms the Son's nobility. While the Holy Trinity is made up of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (*Paradise Lost* 12: 487-490), the trinity in hell is composed of Satan, his son Death, and his daughter Sin (*Paradise Lost* 2: 817-822). Within their respective trinities, both Satan and Jesus act as agents: Satan brings Death and Sin into the world (*Paradise Lost* 2: 840-841), while the Son's sacrifice enables God to instill the Holy Spirit in humanity (*Paradise Lost* 12: 487-490). However, Satan's trinity is fundamentally flawed and grotesque, founded on incest and rape (*Paradise Lost* 2: 794-795). The trinity is also based on deceit, since Satan feigns affection toward Sin and Death in order to bypass the gates of Hell. Satan is described as a "subtle Fiend" right after he hears about his history with Sin, illustrating his sly and devious nature. His history is also described as "his lore," which indicates a detachment from his past and with Sin and Death (*Paradise Lost* 2: 815). Satan regards Sin's recount as a tall tale, rather than his own background. Compared to Satan's interactions with the trinity in Hell, the Son is far more transparent and unified with his holy counterparts. In fact, His sacrifice is described as a "God-like act" (*Paradise Lost* 12: 427), emphasizing how in touch the Son is with the will of the Father. Because of the unity in the Holy Trinity, the Son is able to "bruise the head of Satan" and "crush his strength / Defeating Sin and Death, his two main arms" (*Paradise Lost* 12: 430-431).

The Holy Trinity is clearly dominant over the trinity of Hell, so juxtaposing them further showcases the power and greatness of the Son.

After having used the Son-Satan comparison to validate the Son, we can now justify the will of God. The Son is often described as a direct reflection of God and His will, as Milton emphasizes several moments throughout the epic in which the Son acts in both a God-willed and God-like manner. For example, there is a clear parallel between Him and the Father in how He acts as the Father or Lord of Earth; in fact, the Son is always referred to as God or Almighty during the process of creating Earth (*Paradise Lost* 7: 232-590). Additionally, when the Son first volunteers to sacrifice Himself for humanity, God tells all the angels to “Adore the Son, and honor him as mee” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 343). God clearly wants the Son to be acknowledged as His counterpart, to be honored because He is carrying out God’s will. As established through the comparisons to Satan, the fact that a being as benevolent, noble, and righteous as the Son comes directly from God and His will, boosts God’s credibility as a whole. Moreover, in “Blindsided: Finding the Good in Paradise Lost,” Johnathan Speer argues that part of the main reason Satan is considered evil is because he “uses his reason and choice to promote himself, not God” (Speer 5). Contrasting Satan’s selfish motivations with the Son, who acts in solely the name of God, shows that perpetuating God’s will is good. By acting with altruism and as an agent of God’s will, the Son is directly justifying God’s overall character. We come to trust the Son through comparing him with Satan, and we trust God through our trust of the Son.

Ultimately, throughout *Paradise Lost*, the parallel scenes between the Son and Satan serve as a stepping stone to understanding the Father. The differences in the way they interact with other divine and fallen beings illustrates how Satan is essentially the antithesis of the Son. Therefore, because Satan’s actions represent evil at its most deplorable, juxtaposing Satan with

the Son brings to light how virtuous and honorable the Son truly is. Because the Son is God's most faithful servant and actively tries to perpetuate His will, we get a clearer picture of God's goodwill. The Son is arguably the most crucial character and asset in Milton's goal of justifying the ways of God to humanity.



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