

The Shifting Concept of Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton constantly fidgets with the notions of good and evil. Because of this perpetual play, Milton establishes good and evil as constantly shifting forces that both God and Satan seem to utilize in opposition to each other. The conflicting discourse between the two forces redefines Heaven's God as a being capable of evil, and Hell's Satan as a creature seemingly capable of good. At every moment, good and evil find the occasion to switch heroes, leaving them as forces in a continuously reconceived state. It seems though that good becomes capable of what seems to be evil, more than evil is capable of what seems to be good. More often in the story, God performs actions that place him in a position that makes us question his goodness, and Satan's almost comedic presentation of evil seems more pitiful than capable of being viewed as good. However, by the end of *Paradise Lost*, both conventional ideologies regarding good and evil are re-established and all paradox is lost once salvation is guaranteed for Adam and Eve who have exercised the power of free will, which is essentially what the entire conflict between good and evil comes down to.

In Book Two, Satan holds council with his legions of fallen angels, now demons. In his speech, Satan acknowledges God's manipulation of evil to construct something good when he speaks of his new bleak home, "a Universe of death, which God by curse/ Created evil, for evil only good" (*Paradise Lost* 2: 622-3). By inferring that God uses evil to construct good, it is deduced that God must have evil in him, much like in

Genesis when he creates light out of darkness. This completely destroys any previous notions that God is only made of goodness, and that anything that isn't of God is evil. To create Hell, God must have materialized evil from his own omnipotence. Also in Book Two, Satan is a character for whom Milton has created sympathy—a sort of antihero. God created Lucifer, knowing he was going to rebel, yet he never did anything to prevent it. Lucifer's free will is supposedly to blame, but perhaps God is *allowing* it to happen this way. Or perhaps God himself has no free will and simply has the burden of knowing everything that will ever happen, and he will never be able to change the course.

Regardless, Milton draws condolences from readers when Lucifer, now Satan, is cast out of Heaven with a third of the angels into the abysses of Hell. Satan then has only one option: acceptance. There is no grace left for him, even if he chooses to repent. He even expresses that he knows he would rebel again if given the chance to be back in Heaven, second in line, in a position of subordination. So, Satan chooses to be evil, if God is good—"Evil, be thou my Good!" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 110). By addressing evil, by even knowing the word "evil", Satan acknowledges the pre-existent construct that God has utilized against him. By this equation, good and God/evil and Satan, Milton establishes the concepts of good and evil as an impermanent construct that is nothing more than an arbitrary byproduct of events and choices.

Even the creation of Lucifer in Book Five is a paradox. God essentially speaks creation into existence, and at the very moment God speaks the Son and happiness into existence, he speaks his new enemy Lucifer into opposition to good:

And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow

All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord;...

For ever Happie: him who disobeyes,
Mee disobeyes, breaks union, and that day
Cast out from God and blessed vision, Falls
Into utter darkness...

...without redemption, without end. (*Paradise Lost* 5: 607-15)

God immediately creates an enemy at the very moment he creates happiness for all.

God's omniscience allows him to know that there will be trouble, and Satan walks right into the trap God willed for him. It is impossible to feel no sympathy for Satan at this point. It seems cruel that God would willingly create someone so able to fail and fated to suffer in eternal damnation without considering a way for him to redeem himself, or to choose otherwise for goodness. Is God's choice to provide no way out for Satan the mark of a bully? It seems more reasonable that God cannot change the course of events for Satan, because Satan's free will sent him on this path of destruction, and because of his unbending rejection of goodness and acceptance of evil, he perpetuates his own, self-induced misery. However, Milton seems to find a sick pleasure in playing with emotions by setting up a diabolical figure as a pitiful reject worthy of compassion, and portraying God as a scheming manipulator of free will. But he then backs down from such a thought and repeatedly insists that readers remember that Satan is the evil, deceptive one and to remember that God is the good, just one.

Jumping later to Adam and Eve in the garden, they have been warned, quite ineffectively, by God's angel Raphael to beware of Satan who is plotting to deceive them. He tells them the entire story of the war in Heaven that drove out the rebel angels, and Adam is incredibly curious at the notion of "something so unimaginable as hate in

Heav'n, / And Warr so near the seat of God in bliss" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 54-5). The idea of hate (evil) in Heaven (good) perplexes Adam, and he is so distracted by it that the point of the war narrative is lost, and the warning of Satan in Eden is not received. This paradox flirts with Milton's language of evil: hate in Heaven; Hell and Heaven; Sin, Satan, Son, Serpent. By toying with alliteration, Milton's construct of evil has taken on an entirely new demeanor, something playful and inoffensive, and extremely attractive to Eve. But hate is not a force that Satan alone subscribes to, for God and the Son are also capable of hate; the Son says to the Father at one point " Whom thou hat'st, I hate" (*Paradise Lost* 6: 734). Adam responds to Raphael's story like a child would to a fairytale. He is more concerned with how it all began, rather than heeding Raphael's warning of the same enemy of God that will become a danger to them. Cleverly, at the beginning lines of Book Seven, Milton addresses his audience like Raphael addresses Adam, trying to warn readers of the dangers of intrusive evil while they are distracted with Satan's misfortunes.

The difference in speech between Satan and Raphael serves as a point of interest for this good/evil debate. Raphael is an angel, who has never experienced evil, lest he should be kicked out of Heaven. Because of this ignorance, Raphael is unable to give an effective warning that can draw a distinctive line between good and evil, and thus he never establishes the extreme danger of the serpent that will lead them to damnation. The notion of damnation is a foreign concept to Raphael and so the only sort of conversation he can effectively have with Adam and Eve is one about something he is more accustomed to and knowledgeable of—God in Heaven and his goodness. This proves that without knowledge of evil, goodness cannot thrive on its own, and this is why Adam and

Eve fell at all. Unlike Raphael, Satan's language is much more innovative, and intentionally blurs the boundary between good and evil for Eve, and thus tricks her into mistaking evil for good, and she commits sin for the sake of being something better than what she is, something that seems more like what she (and the reader) imagines as good, something equal.

The biggest shift, of course, occurs when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and paradise is lost. The act of speaking, again, is what drives evil into action in Book Nine. Eve is astounded by a talking serpent that flatters her ego and appeals to her vanity (both qualities with which God created her), but the focus on her beauty is shifted to a focus on her unintelligence. 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. By this point, Adam has been holding intelligent conversations with Raphael, while Eve has it watered down and translated by Adam. It's no wonder Eve did not get an effective warning of danger. Before, Raphael had been the source of such odd, wondrous conversation, but now the Satan-serpent has shanghaied this higher language into his personal goal to drive her into the fallen state that he has been suffering through. Satan has such an attractive way with words that it is less unimaginable than before that he convinced his co-workers to go on strike. Eve then eats the fruit in an attempt to be equal to Adam. Any person in the modern world would applaud Eve's action to make life better for herself and to establish herself as a marital equal. Being beautiful was not enough to make her happy, and it doesn't seem that Milton meant to give Eve so much room for sympathy. Also, it is no accident that Eve and evil sound alike, a linguistic similarity likely to have been

created before Milton's time. He establishes Eve so closely to the serpent (evil) by portraying the fall as the result of an illicit meeting that flirts with the notion of sexual infidelity, and the line between good and evil is once again blurred.

Another terrific example of the skewed boundary between good and evil occurs when Adam eats the fruit. Adam has two choices once he has discovered Eve's transgression: he can eat the fruit, fall from God's grace, and suffer God's punishment together with his wife, or he can resist the fruit, abandon his wife, get a new wife, and live in Eden. Adam chooses the former, because he truly is in love with Eve, despite her infatuation with herself, and by eating the fruit, he made a grand chivalric gesture of love. However, after they have both eaten the fruit, they have sex and it is revealed that the intimate love they once shared has been transformed by sin into a carnal act devoid of any true, spiritual connection. Adam's gesture (good) has been reduced to a one-night stand (evil). Despite any attempt to be good during the fall, all that was once held sacred is now turned into the profane.

By the end of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are given a new option that offers paradise once again, but only through death. It does not seem just, however, that Adam and Eve who have fallen are offered grace, but the demons who have fallen are not. This is an unbalanced regard for his creation that is never resolved, leaving God in a questionable light yet again. If sin is sin, regardless of degree, then wouldn't a just God provide a road to salvation for all who have sinned? Has he? If so, then the only option for answering this question lies in the notion of free will. The answer to God's method of free will endowment in every creature can be recalled in Book Five:

This was that caution giv'n thee; be advised.

God made thee perfect, not immutable;

And good he made thee, but to persevere

He left it in thy power, ordained thy will

By Nature free, not overruled by Fate... (*Paradise Lost* 5: 523-7)

But two books later, God takes ownership of the fate of his creations when he says

Though I uncircumscrib'd myself retire,

And put not forth my goodness, which is free

To act or not, Necessity and Chance

Approach not mee, and what I will is Fate. (*Paradise Lost* 7: 170-4)

Both of these explanations show that God believes he has the free will to impart goodness in his creations, but by calling his plan to do such goodness "Fate" in Book Seven, God contradicts the free will that he supposedly granted to Man in Book Five. A person's decisions cannot be unaffected by Fate and willed by Fate at the same time. This incongruence with the notion of free will only serves to support the incongruence in the fundamental concepts of good and evil. Men are capable of both good and evil now that the fall has occurred, and the decision to choose one or the other is based upon a discrepancy between what freedom is and what destiny is. However, God does show mercy on Adam and Eve once they make the decision, based on their own free will, to repent, which proves his goodness and makes evil the byproduct of the free will given to Man and Angel. By returning back to the conventional notion of God as the source of goodness, Milton's original purpose "to justify the ways of God to men" is restored at the conclusion of this epic.

In conclusion, Milton's portrayal of good and evil is unfocused and constantly shifting throughout *Paradise Lost*. Despite his return to inevitable religious propriety at the end, Milton's atypical use of the two opposing forces scattered throughout important scenes of the poem lends itself to its ever-shifting meaning and implication in Milton's imagined universe. For example, Milton uses the imagery of light and darkness in Book Six to parallel the ideas of good and evil:

Where light and Darkness in perpetual round
Lodge and dislodge by turns, which makes through Heav'n
Grateful vicissitude, like Day and Night;
To veil the Heav'n, though darkness there might well
Seem twilight here; (*Paradise Lost* 6: 6-12)

This is a small example of how Milton acknowledges the shifting forces that surround and drive the epic. Despite their opposition to each other, they seem to work together, unable to function without the other, even in Heaven, as this passage illustrates.

The language of evil is more interesting, and conceals any of his motives to trick readers into feeling sympathy for Satan and his demons. Perhaps Milton purposely entraps his audience into such feelings only to make them see the error of their ways by the end of the poem when religious norms are returned and the good/God, evil/Satan equation is re-instated into his complex system. However, because of how often good and evil shift, diverge, and overlap in this poem, it seems most reasonable that the ultimate overarching force driving, or not driving, human decision is free will. Free will allows good and evil to be reactions to choice instead of tangible forces that lead people into particular directions they are unaware of. It would make sense that God believes he has

the free will to do good, but because of his prescience, a knowledge that preceded the very Creation of everything, he does not truly have such freedom, and thus he must go with the flow of his foresight; that would take care of the question of why God didn't change things for the better of everyone, including Satan; he knew it would be pointless (and so did Satan). Every decision has a consequence, and for Satan, Adam, and Eve, those decisions had to be acted out before consequence was realized. Warnings never suffice, because curiosity is too overwhelming for these characters to ignore.