

Ryan McHale

5/7/10

Ainsworth

EN 335

The Roles of Teacher and Student Expressed in *Paradise Lost*

Abstract: "The Roles of Teacher and Student Expressed in *Paradise Lost*" takes the stance of Adam and Eve's relationship as one of a student-teacher relationship by focusing on Eve's piety as dependent on her role as a student and the authority she chooses to submit to as a student. The argument takes into account textual evidence from Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as supporting evidence from Kori Hensell's essay "The Shifting Concept of Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*."

In his epic poem, John Milton traces the history of the human race according to Christian doctrine to the first couple, Adam and Eve, focusing largely on their relationship and how it contributed to the fall of man. The tension in the relationship between these two characters at the center of the plot is one in a student-teacher relationship; the student's constant thirst for knowledge coupled with the will of the teacher to remain in a position of authority, yet still give knowledge to the student. Milton describes the relationship between Adam and Eve as a teacher and student relationship, Adam being the teacher and Eve his student; Eve's nature throughout the poem is one of submission and inferiority, while Adam's nature is one of superiority and authority. In this sense, Eve can be considered an inherently flawed character, but it is the realization of this flaw that ultimately strengthens her faith. Eve's piety is dependent on her role as a student and the authority she chooses to submit to as a student.

Keeping in mind God's omnipotence in the poem, the fall of Adam and Eve is inevitable. Milton explicitly states his purpose in writing the poem early in Book I, "I may assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men." (*Paradise Lost*, 1:25-26). The easy answer to the justification of the

ways of God would be to accept the belief that man is defective by design, that he is inherently flawed. Yet, the omnipotent God could have easily fixed this problem with a simple solution – eliminate free will. But this gift of free will is how Adam and Eve gain knowledge of evil and ultimately learn their roles as man and woman, or teacher and student, in a relationship. For this reason, God's gift of free will is his "Eternal Providence". Milton's use of this term serves to take the focus away from the questioning of God's seeming mistake in creating an inherently flawed being and moves it towards the ways in which Adam and Eve use and misuse their free will, and the effect it has on their relationship and their faith.

The consequences for Adam and Eve's use and the misuse of free will become realized once the focus is directed at the sometimes overlapping instance of good and evil. This is a notion that Kori Hensell describes in her essay, "The Shifting Concept of Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*":

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 choices instead of tangible forces that lead people into particular directions they are unaware of. (Hensell 8).

Hensell recognizes that good and evil do not exist outside of free will; they are "reactions to choices instead of tangible forces" that have to be acted out in order for their good or evil nature to be realized. This leaves the possibility open for an ambiguity between a choice as good or evil, as Hensell points out the two as occasionally diverging or overlapping. This is especially true for Eve, as her fall from grace is caused from her sin and her path of piety simultaneously. Eve is acting in her role as student when she submits to Satan of her own free will and falls from grace, yet it is through her fall that she ultimately realizes her power as mother of mankind to drive evil out of the world. In this sense, Eve's reaction, or her exercise of free will, can be considered both good and evil.

Eve's use of her free will throughout much of the poem is one of submission to Adam. This is God's decree outlined in Book IV, "Not equal, as thir sex not equal seem'd; / For contemplation hee and valor form'd, / For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace, / Hee for God only, shee for God in him;" (*Paradise Lost*, 4: 296-299). Eve's subjection is inherent in her nature and is part of God's will, making her a pious being so long as she is willing to submit to Adam's authority. In this sense, Eve is one step below Adam, making her two steps below God. Eve's path to God is through Adam, as quite literally outlined by God's commandment in line 299, "Hee for God only, shee for God in him;" This makes Eve's role of subjection apparent while at the same time relegating her under Adam's control as teacher. This draws the reader's attention to times within the poem where Eve's subjection is in question.

An important instance in which Eve's subjection is questionable comes with the story of her creation in Book IV, "A shape within the wat'ry gleam appear'd / Bending to look on me, I started back, / It started back, but pleas'd I soon return'd, " (*Paradise Lost*, 4:461-463). Eve's infatuation with her own image gives her God-made nature an ironic twist; she was made beautiful, yet so beautiful that she loses all interest for Adam once she sees him and becomes obsessed with herself. This lack of interest in Adam obviously makes it hard, if not impossible, for him to submit his authority over her. Eve has essentially become subjective to herself, also known as narcissistic. It is at this point that God intervenes and steers her in the direction of Adam, telling her that she was created to be with him:

What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself,
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,
And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
Thy soft coming, and thy soft imbraces, hee
Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy
Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear
Multitudes like thyself (*Paradise Lost*, 4: 468-474)

God intervenes to teach Eve the right path, which she accepts, after her lack of subjection before Adam becomes realized. By accepting this path of submission to Adam, she is at the same time acting according to God's will – as mother of the human race. In this case, the conflicting forces of human nature created by God act as a vehicle through which her piety is strengthened; Eve's free will is in conflict with her subjection which at once weakens her piety and eventually strengthens it as she submits to the authority of God acting as teacher and realizes her place as student in her relationship with Adam. This creates an ambiguity of the good or evil nature of her consequences in her exercise of free will.

The cause of Eve's strengthening of piety doesn't come from her insight, but from outside forces. This confirms Eve's innocence and cements her role as student. However, these two factors of Eve's nature are a dangerous combination, as seemingly any good or evil entity can hold authority, or the role of teacher, over her. This is in fact exactly what happens in Book IX that causes Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge; Satan takes authority over her as a serpent who has gained what Eve is ever in search of from the Tree of Knowledge. The fact that the serpent is described as a labyrinth furthers the power of it as a symbol of something logically complex, a state of being that Eve desires as a student. Eve is promised everything she hopes to learn from being Adam's subordinate by eating the apple while at the same time acting according to her nature, submitting to the authority of the serpent in the way of a knowledge hungry student. Her sentiments are expressed in the few lines before she eats the apple: "Here grows the Cure of all, this Fruit Divine, / Fair to the Eye, inviting to the Taste, / Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then / To reach, and feed at once both Body and Mind?" (*Paradise Lost* 9:776-779). Eve's innocence blocks her from ever considering the serpent as an evil authority, so she submits to it just as she has submitted to other forms of authority with the hope of gaining knowledge. Eve sees a quick way out of the tension between her as a student to Adam by gaining as much or more knowledge than him and thus destroying her role as student. The "Cure"

expressed in her sentiments moments before eating the fruit is the resolution she is seeking as student from her relationship with Adam.

Hensell is in agreement with the notion that the tension inherent in the student teacher relationship is the driving factor in the fall. "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." (Hensell 5). Hensell understands the fundamental structure of the relationship between Adam and Eve is heavily skewed in favor of Adam, and that Eve's natural instincts coupled with her free will to choose who she submits to have pushed her towards evil in disguise as good. Hensell goes on to point out that the success of Satan's argument in tempting Eve lays in the issue of unintelligence, the very thing that is keeping her as a subordinate not worthy to converse with God or Angels directly; "...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 fruit." (Hensell 5). The dilemma Hensell sees in the relationship between Adam and Eve is the tension of the student-teacher relationship. Eve's motivation is her want to resolve her dilemma, or destroy the tension, in her relationship with Adam.

It appears that the tension between the student and teacher relationship has pushed Eve down the ultimate path of impiety, thus causing the fall of man. The tension present in the student teacher relationship is the constant thirst for knowledge present in the student coupled with the will of teacher to remain as a figure of authority and still imparting knowledge to the student. This tension ultimately causes Eve to accept her role as student and inferior to Adam, thus restoring her piety and place in God's will as mother of the human race. In Book XI, Michael descends to Eden to converse with Adam

and give him visions of the future for mankind. Before doing so, he puts Eve asleep: "Ascend / This Hill; let Eve (For I have drencht her eyes) / Here sleep below while thou to foresight wak'st, / As once thou slep'st, while Shee to life was form'd." (*Paradise Lost*, 11:366-369). Eve is seen here as submissive to a figure of authority, in this case the Angel Michael. Through Eve's submission she is granted the same message:

Whence thou return'st, and whither went'st, I know;
For God is also in sleep, and Dreams advise,
Which he hath sent propitious, some great good
Presaging, since with sorrow and heart's distress
Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;
In mee is no delay; with thee to go,
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
Is to go hence unwilling (*Paradise Lost*, 12: 610-617)

Eve's dream has the same end that the knowledge given to Adam has accomplished; whatever God related to Eve in her dream serves to put her back on her path of piety as the mother of all humans. She realizes that her place beside Adam as his subordinate student is her seat of piety. This parallels her creation story with another ambiguity of the consequences of her free will as good or evil; her nature and exercise of her free will at once makes her fall from grace, but an authority figure is there to push her back on her path of piety.

Adam is seen as attempting to retain his authority as teacher over Eve at various points throughout *Paradise Lost*. The first instance comes shortly after Adam and Eve are introduced in Book IV. Eve, with her thirst for knowledge as a student, asks Adam about the stars at night; "But wherefore all night long shine these, for whom / This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?" (*Paradise Lost*, 4: 657-658). Adam answers to the best of his ability, demonstrating that he does not know what

happens to the stars after they go to sleep. He tells Eve that the stars move around the Earth, travelling to new lands and shedding light to keep darkness in check; “Lest total darkness should by Night regain / Her old possession, and extinguish life / In nature and in all things, which these soft fires / Not only enlighten, but with kindly heat / Of various influence foment and warm, / Temper or nourish, or in part shed down / Their stellar virtue on all kinds that grow” (*Paradise Lost*, 4:665-670). Adam’s information is centered on his own limited experiences within Eden and so he accounts for the stars as orbiting earth with the sole purpose of defending against darkness. This portrays Adam as a questionable teacher, yet his motive is clear – he wants to remain in authority as teacher even if it entails giving false information. His intentions are not malevolent, actually quite the opposite; Adam’s place of piety is at his role of teacher over Eve, which would be hard, if not impossible, to assert himself as should he be viewed as unknowledgeable. It is this same need to occupy his role that leads him to eat the fruit; Adam could not take his place of authority over Eve if she wasn’t there with him. By eating the fruit, Adam remains at his role of teacher over Eve. Moreover, letting Eve be expelled from the garden alone would presume that Adam had failed as a teacher, but by staying with her he is attempting to become a better teacher for the sake of both of them.

Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden as the poem draws to a close, but leave on a note of hopefulness. This note comes from the realization of their roles that must be taken to defeat evil; Adam as authoritative teacher and Eve as subordinate student. In the relation of humans to God, Eve is one step below Adam, which makes her two steps below God. This doesn’t make Eve defective by design or any less pious. God created Eve in such a manner that her piety and potential to defeat evil stems from her ability to act as Adam’s student and Adam’s student only; her impiety stems from her acting as student to other figures of authority, such as Satan or herself. This is a matter of her free will and who she chooses to submit to as student. As Hensell points out, it is the consequences of the choices made through free will that are given the definition of good or evil, yet this definition often

proves ambiguous. For this reason, Eve's subjection coexists with her free will because, ultimately, it is Eve's subordination that has led her down the path of piety and given her the potential to drive out evil from the world as mother of the human race.

Works Cited

Hensell, Kori. "The Shifting Concept of Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*." 2009. The Edifice Project.
April 2010 <www.edificeproject.ua.edu>.

Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." Hughes, Merritt Y. John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose.
New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957. 211-469.