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### Better to Reign: Satan as a Tragic Hero

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a rather tragic poem that allows its readers to sympathize with the many characters involved. One such character is the adversary, Satan. Although Satan is still the evil entity from Christian lore, Milton writes Satan's character in such a way that he appeals to most readers based on his conformity to tragic ideals. Therefore, Satan becomes an archetypal tragic hero by fulfilling six basic conventions that every tragic character must adhere to.

The first of these six conventions pertains to noble stature. This idea advocates that for a character to be a true tragic hero, he or she must hold an exalted position within society and represent honorable qualities (Thompson). This convention is then followed by hamartia, or the tragic flaw. The hamartia convention states that it is necessary in tragedy that the hero falls due to some innate error in his or her own character (Thompson).

The third convention then declares that the hero must gain an increase in awareness after the fall. In essence, the tragic hero must understand the truth about his hamartia, as well as how his actions brought about the fall (Thompson). Therefore, the fourth convention asserts that the hero must be given free choice. The hero's downfall must be, at least partly, his or her own fault. As a result, the fall is consequently the

outcome of free will, and not due to any external agent or predetermined fate (Thompson).

The fifth convention then declares that although the hero's fall is brought upon by his or her own actions, the punishment rendered must exceed the crime. This means that the reader must feel that the tragic hero was overly punished with an outcome that he or she did not truly deserve (Thompson). What then remains is the final convention declaring that the tragic hero must produce catharsis, or "emotional purgation," in the audience. In the end, the reader must be emotionally invested in the hero's situation, and as a result, should come to pity and fear the character (Thompson).

With these six elements in mind, it can be formally argued that Satan is indeed the tragic hero of *Paradise Lost*. In the case of Satan and noble stature, Satan adheres to the first convention on the basis that he was originally an angel, and later the ruler of Hell. Not only was Satan an angel, but he is referenced as having been closer to God than any other angel before him. Satan acknowledges this where he states, "lifted up so high / I sdein'd subjection, and thought one step higher / Would set me highest" (*Paradise Lost* 4:49-51). Therefore, Satan held one of the highest positions in Heaven before the Son's introduction. Likewise, once he falls to Hell, he holds the highest position among the fallen. One line that establishes Satan's nobility reads, "he above the rest / In shape and gesture proudly eminent / Stood like a tow'r" (*Paradise Lost* 1:589-591). This line reiterates the position that Satan obtains once he is in Hell. Even after the fall, he holds the higher position among his peers. Thus, when Satan is cast out of Heaven, the reader is more affected by the tragedy as Satan undoubtedly had much to lose. However, it is

actually Satan's exalted place in society that pushes him to fall. His ideal of higher nobility is what ultimately fills him with hubris: his tragic flaw.

In essence, a hero who strives to obtain a position, or object, that is not meant for him or her to possess, is a character instilled with hubris (Thompson). Therefore, Satan's pride, along with ambition, is the root of his tragedy. This is directly stated where it says, "how glorious once above thy sphere, / Till pride and worse ambition threw me down / Warring in heaven against heaven's matchless king," (*Paradise Lost* 4:39-41). Satan's pride is further asserted where it reads, "what time his Pride / Had cast him out from heav'n," (*Paradise Lost* 1:36-37). Since Satan feels that he is above his fellow angels, and even God, he makes the mistake of expressing hubris. One of Satan's most famous lines directly points to his excessive pride over God where he says, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1:163). This line shows his vanity in comparison to God.

Here, Satan felt that victory could still be achieved even after his banishment to Hell. Satan still believed that God could be defeated in some way. Thus, despite the omnipotence of God, Satan still addresses himself as a powerful individual and does not see his fall as defeat. This can be seen in the poem where Satan declares, "Divided empire with Heav'n's King I hold, / By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign; / As man ere long, and this new World shall know" (*Paradise Lost* 4:111-113). These lines prove that Satan still feels ambition and power even after the fall. He becomes aware of his wrongdoing, but remains determined to continue his rebellion against God. This instance fulfills another of the tragic conventions, which is an increase in awareness. Although Satan does choose to continue his rebellion and attack God's creations on

Earth, he does comprehend that he is an immoral being. It is at this moment where Satan recognizes that his actions were indeed flawed.

This tragic element is best observed during Satan's visit to the Garden where he acknowledges that his defiance to God was not justified. This is Satan's point of self-awareness where he finally realizes that he is inherently given this flaw, and, for a brief moment, rebukes his actions. This point of reprimanding himself can be shown in the poem where Satan asks, "is there no place/left for repentance? None for pardon left?" (*Paradise Lost* 4:70-80). Satan then declares that although his flaw is innate, he still made the choice to fall and therefore accepts that his disobedience to God was an action that he would ultimately commit again, even if God were to forgive him:

But say I could repent and could obtain  
 By Act of Grace my former state; how soon  
 Would highth recall high thoughts, how soon unsay  
 What feign'd submission swore: ease would recant  
 Vows made in pain, as violent and void.  
 For never can true reconciliation grow  
 Where wounds of deadly hate have pierc'd so deep:  
 Which would but lead me to a worse relapse,  
 And heavier fall. (*Paradise Lost* 4:93-101)

Furthermore, Satan states, "So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear, / Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good" (*Paradise Lost* 4:108-110). This demonstrates Satan's comprehension that he is offender in this situation. Satan becomes self-aware of his action being corrupt. Even though he wishes to continue his

rebellion against God, he does seem to understand here that his intentions were not justified. Thus, Satan has a brief moment of relapse, where he feels that maybe God could forgive him. What this also points to, accordingly, is that Satan does have free will.

When arguing that Satan acts on his own free will, it is essential to view what God says about his creation. In Book 3, God specifically states, “I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (*Paradise Lost* 3:98-99). This line shows that God gave his angels free will, and thus Satan bears the responsibility for his choice to rebel. God then goes on to say that:

they themselves decreed  
 Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,  
 Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,  
 Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.  
 So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,  
 Or aught by me immutable foreseen,  
 They trespass, Authors to themselves in all  
 Both what they judge and what they choose; for so  
 I form'd them free, and free they must remain,  
 Till they enthrall themselves. (*Paradise Lost* 3:116-125)

Therefore, despite having an innate flaw, Satan does indeed make the free choice to rebel and ultimately fall. Both he and God acknowledge that angels are given free will. Lauren Alexander also argues this point in her paper, “The Actions of Good and Evil.”

In Alexander’s essay, she focuses on the extent of free will that God gives his creations, despite his foreknowledge of the events. She goes on to explain that free will

does exist in *Paradise Lost*. This can be seen where she writes, “God’s lack of action illustrates his reliance on the free will of his creations as the means to set forth actions” (Alexander 1). She supports this argument by quoting lines 115-118 of “Book 3:”

Thir will, dispos’d by absolute Decree  
 Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed  
 Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,  
 Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault. (*Paradise Lost*)

What this quote means, and what Alexander argues, is that “God would not interfere with the actions of his creation, though He has foreknowledge of their actions, even if the actions are not good” (Alexander 2). I extend this point further with my assessment of Satan as it directly ties into the next convention.

Here, despite Satan’s free choice to fall, if the adversary is indeed a tragic hero then his punishment must ultimately be excessive in relation to the crime. It is important to note, for this argument, that Satan is punished twice for his roles in both the rebellion and the fall of mankind. Satan’s first punishment comes when he is exiled to Hell, which is described as being, “A dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great Furnace flam’d, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible” (*Paradise Lost* 1:61-63). God then punishes Satan once more when he is turned into a serpent, referenced as a “huge python” (*Paradise Lost* 10:531). This latter punishment is given to Satan due to his tempting of Eve. However, this temptation is an act that God allows, as shown where it reads:

for what can scape the Eye  
 of God All-seeing, or deceive his Heart

Omniscient, who in all things wise and just,  
Hinder'd not Satan to attempt the mind  
of Man. (*Paradise Lost* 10:5-9)

This is a rather excessive punishment for Satan's offense when God decrees that he has given free will to all of his creations. Consequently, it seems unfair for God to immediately punish any character when God himself spends much of the poem arguing the importance of never interfering with humanity. Thus, the details of Satan's punishment seem unwarranted when you take into account that he is punished on multiple occasions for actions that God intentionally allowed to happen.

Alexander's point is crucial in this argument as she addresses that God knowingly permits these events to unfold. Therefore, Satan's extreme punishment cannot be wholly deserved when God could have easily prevented the crime from occurring beforehand. Essentially, God condemns Satan for crimes that he himself allows to transpire. It could therefore be argued that God plays a role in the crime as well by not halting Satan's actions. However, Satan and his fellow fallen angels are the only characters who endure this punishment.

With that said, all of these points lead into the sixth convention which states that the tragedy must produce catharsis within the audience. Although this is relatively left up to the reader's interpretation of the character, Satan does seem to embody this convention for a majority of scholars. As a tragic hero, this is perhaps the most important convention for Satan to possess as it allows us, as readers, to have an emotional tie to his character. We must pity him as a fallen individual and see the injustice of his punishment (Thompson). For me, it is often through Satan's speeches, such as when he visits the

Garden, where I feel pity for him as a tragic character. Satan's statement, "the more I see / Pleasures about me, so much more I feel / Torment within me," is just one of the many lines where Satan acknowledges his anguish (*Paradise Lost* 9:119-121). These lines allow me to relate to Satan's agony and feel emotionally invested in his situation.

Furthermore, for the catharsis to truly be established in the reader, we should ultimately relate to the hero and view the hero as someone that is the same as us, even if the tragic hero is raised to a superior position within society (Thompson). In the case of Satan, his previous fall to Hell allows his character to become more identifiable with humanity. In other words, his fall from Heaven is relatable to the fall of man, and therefore shows a similarity between Satan and ourselves. He becomes easier to sympathize with as his flaw is a very human emotion. Satan as a tragic character represents pride, envy, and ambition. However, he also demonstrates compassion as he is able to find beauty in God's creations, such as Eve:

Such Pleasure took the Serpent to behold  
 This Flow'ry Plat, the sweet recess of Eve  
 Thus early, thus alone; her Heav'nly form  
 Angelic, but more soft and Feminine. (*Paradise Lost* 9:455-458)

As a result, I find Satan to be a tragic character due to the fact that he is closer to humanity than any other supreme being of the epic. Compared to the other characters, Satan is the most sympathetic to me for the sole reason that I can associate with his emotions. I pity and fear for Satan because I am able to connect with his character as the tragedy befalls him. Therefore, when Satan pities himself, such as in the concluding lines of the previous quote:



Though in mid Heav'n, soon ended his delight,  
And tortures him now more, the more he sees  
Of pleasure not for him ordained; then soon  
Fierce hate he recollects and all his thoughts  
Of mischief, gratulating, thus excites. (*Paradise Lost* 9:468-472)

I also feel pity for him because of this very human connection that we share. This is the element which allows Satan to be a tragic hero for most readers of *Paradise Lost*. It is through these hints of Satan's inner feelings that actually allow catharsis to be produced in all of us.

Thus, given these points, Milton's Satan is indeed a tragic hero on the basis that he conforms to these six rudimentary conventions. As a character, Satan seems to break the mold from his Christian contemporary background, and actually comes to represent the most sympathetic character within the poem. Although *Paradise Lost* is a complex and ambiguous work of literature, it is clear that we, as readers, are attracted to Satan and his tragic fall. In the end, it is hard not to agree- it is "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1:163).

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