

Epical Qualities in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Manisha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, GCW Karnal, Haryana (India)

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt in denying the fact that John Milton occupies a prominent and towering place among the poets who elevated and uplifted poetry to epical scales. Paradise Lost, by John Milton, no doubt, and excellent and superb example of epic poetry in which the poet has employed all the epic qualities in the tradition of classical poets, Homer and Virgil. Without any shadow of doubt, epic is generally hailed as the highest kind of poetry. The invocation of muses in the beginning of the epic seems to be the most vital requirement of an epic which is used by the poet. Moreover, the theme of the poem, 'Fall of Man' is also magnanimously grand taken from The Bible. The use of epic similes coupled with classical allusions as well as the names of various place and battles also lift the poem to the level of epical scales. Last, but not the least, the epic conventions used by the poet raises the epic to an elevated style that is known as Grand Style.

Albeit, *Paradise Lost* is a poetic rendering of the Biblical theme 'Fall of Man' cast within the epic framework of Homer and Virgil, but the treatment of this theme in a grand style lifts this epic to the level of universal applicability where the poet also justifies the ways of God to men. John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, announces this theme clearly and ambiguously in the very opening lines of the poem (lines 1-26, and 27-49), where the poet proposes to deal with man's first disobedience and the woeful consequences of his tasting the fruit of the forbidden tree, and by his treatment of this subject, Milton wishes to

Assert eternal providence

And justify the ways of god to men

The motive prompting the poet to deal with this theme is very exalted as he wants to establish the essential justice of God's dealing with human beings, to dispel the doubts people often entertain regarding the moral order in this universe as S.T Coleridge asserts while commenting on the theme of *Paradise Lost*:

"It represents the origin of evil, and the combat of good and evil. It contains matter of deep interest to all mankind, as forming the base of all philosophy what so ever."

However, there is large heated controversy regarding the hero of the epic because of the role of Adams is conspicuously important in the middle and later parts of the epic, and that of God is so scant and sporadic that he cannot be described as the hero of the epic. But, without any shadow of doubt, it is Satan who carries the central thrust of the epic, especially in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, and moreover, the gigantic stature and domineering personality of Satan is a thematic necessity as he, too, functions as an adversary of god who is supreme, almighty, and omnipotent which, in turns, also highlights the significance and indispensability of the positive qualities like virtue, kind, pity, honesty and justice in life.

So, whatever the case it may be, it is beyond doubt that the role and personality of Satan is central to the illustration of

the central theme of *paradise lost* as an epic where Milton also successfully employs the epic features of Homer and Virgil to illustrate the external conflict between good and evil as it also affects the life of man on the earth. The opening of the epic takes place in the meadows where the poet expounds the central theme of the epic when he says:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death in to the world, and all our woe
With loss of Eden; till one greater man

Like his ancient epic masters, Milton also invokes heavenly muses to illustrate, illumine, raise and support him, so as to enable the poet to write an adventurous song when he says:

Assert eternal providence
And justify the ways of god to men

So, like an epic of Homer, in *Paradise Lost* also, we are directly launched in to the middle of the epic, where the poet after announcing the central theme of the epic, expresses it in an equally lofty and majestic style. According to Macaulay, Milton, as a poet as well as a man, is to be found in every square inch of *Paradise Lost*, who is not only known for his theme, but also for his grand style. That is why, Milton has been called as the organ voice of England.

In this way, after announcing the central theme of the epic, the poet explores and traces the various causes responsible for the 'Fall of Man,' and says that it was infernal serpent stirred up with an envy and revenge who, in his ambition to equal the most high raised impious war in heaven with vain attempts, and then deceived the mother of mankind, and resultant defiance on the part of man against the will of God. As a result of that foul revolt, Satan and his rebel hosts were:

Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky,
With hideous ruin and combustion, down

To bottomless perdition; there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire

Albeit, Adam and Eve are repeatedly warned against this fall by Raphael and Gabriel, as is shown in the later books of *Paradise Lost*, Eve falls prey to persuasive machinations of Adam along with the immortal state of happiness. Since, our discussion of the epic theme is confined to Book-1 of *Paradise Lost* only, so what we find here is a scene of sorrows and miseries as the poet puts it as:

That dismal situation, waste and wild
A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great furnace flamed.....

And, this situation is without any rest and hope. Despite this miserable plight, the valour and will of Satan makes him to rue with high distains and a sense of injured merit as he thunders out:

What though the field be lost
All is not lost: the unconquerable will
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield.

Thematically, the unflinching determination and undeterred boldness of Satan illustrates that even in the adverse and unfavourable circumstances, the spirit and confidence of man can turn the table, and one can extract the best of the worst. Milton makes use of Pagan, Renaissance, Biblical, and Classical world in their myriad usages and manifestations to illustrate his poetic vision in the epic, *Paradise Lost*.

Milton also makes use of a number of poetic devices like epic similes taken from these above mentioned divergent sources which contributes a lot to the grand style of the epic,

Paradise Lost. For instance, the epic comparison of the fallen angels with the autumnal leaves, and that of huge size of Satan with sea-monsters, Typhoon and Leviathan, is highly meaningful and relevant in more than one sense. As the autumnal leaves symbolizes the extraneous and useless outgrowth separated from their source of substance, so are the fallen angels who are waste and wild divorced from their source of life-that is God. In the same way, the mythical sea-monster who deceives the innocent passengers of a night foundered skiff, so is Satan who is an evil incarnate and also deceives innocent Adam and Eve on the earth. There is a beautiful comparison of Satan with the tower and arch-angles, and the sun under eclipse in Book-1 of *Paradise Lost* as the poet also remarks:

In shape and gesture proudly eminent
Stood like a tower. His form has yet not changed
Less than archangels, ruined and excess

In this way, we can safely and rightly aver that both in theme and purpose, *Paradise Lost* is a product of Reformation spirit or it may be alleged that the form of *Paradise Lost* reflects the Renaissance spirit, and its theme the Reformation spirit.

So, like *Iliad* of Homer, and *Aeneid* of Virgil, *Paradise Lost* is also a superb epic illustration of theme of 'Fall of Man', redemption after sufferings, and the birth of Jesus Christ who guided mankind into future salvation where Milton also succeeds in highlighting the inevitable indispensability of divine justice and mercy of god in human life. So, Hazlitt is right when he says:

"*Paradise Lost* is a superb poetic expression of the cosmic themes of heaven, hell, god, Satan, and mankind conveyed in an equally stupendous and grand style whose execution is as perfect as its design is lofty."

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