

NOTES FROM: *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton

SUMMARY: What I'll never, *ever* forget about this *masterpiece* is that John Milton dictated the entire thing - more than 10,000 lines - after he became *completely blind*. It would be a breathtaking, astonishing, and awe-inspiring epic poem *anyway*, but knowing that makes it all the more incredible. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since I read it.

Paradise Lost has been profoundly influential on Western culture for centuries, and it tells the story of the Fall of Man across three different worlds: Heaven, Hell, and Earth. It begins with the expulsion of Satan from Heaven, and what's striking about Milton's characterization is that Satan comes across as...sympathetic almost. And honestly? God's kind of a jerk in this one! Very *Old Testament* for sure.

Right out of the gate, Satan and his band of rebellious, fallen angels are kicked out of Heaven and plunged forever into Hell, a place Milton describes as "darkness visible." And again, you start seeing references to *Paradise Lost* everywhere, as William Styron's memoir (he wrote *Sophie's Choice*) about his deep depression is titled *Darkness Visible*. To my knowledge, no reference is made to *Paradise Lost* in Styron's book, but it's a direct reference and, what I imagine to be extremely accurate.

You might expect Milton to make Satan a completely vile, evil creature with no redeeming qualities whatsoever, but he shocked the literary world by making people empathize with his feelings of anger at being shunned by God and forced into exile. God himself is shown to be petty, envious, and wrathful, and Satan wonders why God would jealously guard his Knowledge of Life from Adam and Eve by forbidding them to eat the infamous apple.

The stated purpose of *Paradise Lost* is to justify the ways of God to man, defending divine justice, while explaining why God allows evil and suffering, and why He would allow Adam and Eve to make their own choices - "free to fall," even though transgressing against the will of God. It also makes one wonder whether instead of creation being an act of divine favor, it's more of a curse, due to the awareness of man's mortality.

Another theme of the poem is the redemption of humanity via divine grace, Milton saying through the angel Raphael in Book VII (in one interpretation) how humans were created in order to fill the vacancy in Heaven after the expulsion of Satan's co-conspirators. Ascension into Heaven isn't guaranteed, but rather a cosmic reward for living according to the Will of God.

That's to say very little about Adam and Eve in all this! Obviously, they're major players in this universal drama as well. Eve is made out to be the main human villain in the story, fairly or unfairly, but really, she's all of us. The first humans are subject to the temptations and attractions felt by all humans, and what helps make *Paradise Lost* so perfectly relevant is how relatable their actions are.

As Satan and his rebels plot their revenge against God, the loyalist angels attempt to defend the Garden of Eden and prevent the Fall, but even they can't override human nature and

free will. Between educating humans and battling rebels, the angels play a major role in the poem, though in the end, the fight for control of mankind's destiny rages on.

In 1667, John Milton changed the future of humanity with *Paradise Lost*, and in 2016, my life was changed by reading it. The poem completely awed me with its power and force, and I have a feeling that I'll keep noticing connections between it and other literary works long into the future. Even the poem itself is an extension of other extremely influential and enduring ideas from the past. Just as Adam and Eve's ultimate downfall is unyielding love, Dante discovered in 1320 that love is the power that moves the sun and the other stars.

"What in me is dark illumine; what is low raise and support."

"One great furnace flam'd, yet from those flames no light, but rather darkness visible."

"The mind is its own place, and in it Self can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n."

"That must be our cure, to be no more; sad cure; for who would lose, though full of pain, this intellectual being, those thoughts that wander through eternity, to perish rather, swallowed up and lost in the wide womb of uncreated night, devoid of sense and motion?"

"O Shame to men! Devil with devil damned firm concord holds, men onely disagree of creatures rational, though under hope of heavenly grace: and God proclaiming peace, yet live in hatred, enmitie, and strife among themselves, and levie cruel wars, wasting the earth, each other to destroy: As if (which might induce us to accord) Man had not hellish foes anow besides, that day and night for his destruction wait."

"He had of me all he could have; I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."

"Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell."

"Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

"Awake, arise or be forever fall'n."

"Long is the way and hard, that out of hell leads up to light."

"So little knows any, but God alone, to value right the good before him, but perverts best things to worst abuse, or to their meanest use."

"The Tree of Knowledge grew fast by, knowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill."

"So spake the fiend, and with necessitie, the tyrants' plea, excused his devilish deeds."

“One fatal Tree there stands of Knowledge called, Forbidden them to taste: Knowledge forbidden? Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their lord envy them that? Can it be sin to know, can it be death? And do they onely stand by ignorance, is that their happy state, the proof of their obedience and their faith? O fair foundation laid whereon to build their ruin! Hence I will excite their minds with more desire to know and to reject envious commands, invented with design to keep them low whom knowledge might exalt equal with Gods.”

“What cause moved the creator in his holy rest through all eternity so late to build in chaos, and the work begun, how soon absolved.”

“To recount almighty works what words or tongue of Seraph can suffice, or heart of man suffice to comprehend?”

“That earth now seemed like to heaven, a seat where gods might dwell, or wander with delight, and love to haunt her sacred shades.”

“Love, thou saist, leads up to heaven, is both the way and guide.”

“For what God, after better worse would build?”

“But what will not Ambition and Revenge descend to?”

“For solitude is sometimes best society, and short retirement urges sweet return.”

Death: “‘Til I in Man residing through the race, his thoughts, his looks, words, actions all infect, and season him thy last and sweetest prey.”

“To the loss of that, sufficient penalty, why hast thou added the sense of endless woes?”

“Justice divine mends not her slowest pace for prayers or cries.”

“Why is life given to be thus wrested from us?”

“Nor love thy life, nor hate; but what thou livest live well, how long or short permit to heaven.”

“Then wilt thou not be loath to leave this paradise, but shalt possess a paradise within thee.”