

## EPIC CONVENTIONS IN PARADISE LOST, BOOK I

Paradise Lost can properly be classed among epic poems. It is undoubtedly one of the highest efforts of poetical genius and, in one great characteristic, majesty and sublimity, it is fully equal to any known epic poem, ancient or modern. It has the Graeco-Roman form of the epic which follows ancient models. Its aspect, its divisions, and its style are those of the Iliad or the Aeneid. It depicts a unique event, which is the fall of man. The subject is derived from the Old Testament and it is astonishing how, from the few hints given in the scripture, Milton was able to raise so complete and regular a structure. The subject is one for which Milton alone was fitted and, in the conduct of it, he has shown a stretch both of imagination and invention, which is perfectly wonderful. Besides, the nature of this theme is such as to give the poem a universal character.

Milton opens *Paradise Lost* by asking a muse to inspire his writing. In ancient Greece and Rome, poets had always requested "the muse" to fire them with creative genius when they began long narrative poems, called epics, about godlike heroes and villains. In Greek mythology, there were nine muses, all sisters, who were believed to inspire poets, historians, flutists, dancers, singers, astronomers, philosophers, and other thinkers and artists. In Milton's time, writers no longer believed in muses, of course. Nevertheless, since they symbolized inspiration, writers continued to invoke them. So it was that when Milton began *Paradise Lost*, he addressed the muse in the telling of his tale, writing, "I thence invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song." Thus, by invoking the Muse, Milton was following a precedent set by earlier epic poets and aligning his poem to a hallowed epic tradition.

Milton starts his poem *in media res*. Most of the epic poets used this device to induce tension and immediate involvement of readers. For example, Homer commences his narrative at the very end of the Trojan War. Similarly, Milton described the Satanic fall later, in Book VI, but starts with its consequences in Book I. By using this device, Milton was hence following an established epic convention.

Homer had stated at the beginning of *The Iliad* that his theme was the 'wrath of Achilles'. Similarly, Virgil stated his theme as 'Arms and the man' at the onset of *The Aeneid*. Following the classical precedent of Homer and Virgil, Milton indicates the theme of his poem at the very outset:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden,.....

The subject thus is the transgression committed by Adam and Eve in eating the fruit of the forbidden tree and their subsequent expulsion from Paradise. Curiously enough, Milton makes no mention in his opening statement of Satan's first disobedience, of the generation of Sin and Death, or of Hell's infernal plot, all of which occupy the first three Books.

The characters in a classical or traditional epic are generally portrayed as men of heroic proportions, because only such characters can stir our imagination and rouse our sympathies. Not only the hero, but also his associates, are expected to show heroic powers and capacities. In Book I Satan is undoubtedly cast in a heroic mould. His vast Leviathan-like dimensions, his huge shield and spear, his supreme self-confidence and the courage never to yield or submit, his unwavering resolve, his sympathy for his fallen comrades are all heroic qualities. However, though Milton casts Satan in the heroic mould, his intention is to subvert the idea of a classical epic hero.

Then there are the epic or Homeric similes of which we have quite a number in Book I. Milton follows the practice of Homer, Virgil, Statius, Lucan, Spenser, Tasso, and others in introducing similes of this kind, and even borrows in some cases similes already employed by his epic predecessors. Where he is original in employing a simile, the materials of his comparison may be derived from a simple observation of Nature, from myth and legend, from history or from travel. Superficially the essence of the long-tailed or epic simile is that it develops a comparison at such a length that it seems to become ultimately almost independent of its point of departure. If this impression of an independent, self-contained picture were not given, the device would be pointless. At the same time, at the heart or centre of the simile there must be some point of exact resemblance to the first term of the comparison. The first epic simile employed by Milton in Book I is the comparison of Satan's huge bulk with the sea-beast, Leviathan. This comparison, elaborated in seven lines, while dominantly concerned with size, produces also other impressions such as trickery, the falseness of appearances, the lack of caution on the part of man when close to danger, all of which are associated with Satan and will be amplified later in *Paradise Lost*.

In epics, long catalogues of heroes are enlisted which generally bring together the diverse cultural and demographic features of a nation. Milton has a list of rebel angels in Book I, which integrates various pagan traditions of demi-gods, whom Milton projects as fallen beings. Epic narratives often depict a multilayered world, consisting of heavenly realms and infernal regions which amplify human action. Milton also adopts this device in his poem. For example, in Book I, he depicts the birth of Christian Hell. The fall of the angels amplify the later fall of man, and hence a multilayered significance of human action is established.

Finally, Milton followed the epic convention of writing his poem in a style that is truly elevated. In speaking of the style of *Paradise Lost*, it is difficult to use temperate language. *Paradise Lost* is a "divine" epic. Accordingly Milton strove for the untrammelled expression of the imaginative development of his inspiration, and therefore rejected "the troublesome and modern bondage of riming". And Milton used blank verse in a manner that lent distinction to this form of writing. "No one," says a critic, "has ever attuned our language to such mighty harmonies as Milton." The chief characteristic of *Paradise Lost* may be summed up in the word "sublimity". The poet's imagination is lofty, and his style grand, majestic, and sonorous. The meaning of the words, the syntax, the division of sentences, and the use of ablative absolute, constantly remind the scholarly reader of classical authors. The periodic style and the unrhymed line with its beauty dependent only on its cadence and its inversions, have a severe solemnity, an unbending energy. As examples of Milton's grand style, one may refer to the following passages in Book I: (1) the opening sentence which is an example of a "suspended" passage; (2) the first sentence of Satan's first speech to Beelzebub, also an example of "suspension"; (3) Satan's speech on surveying the infernal regions; and (4) the description of Satan's shield and spear.

Dryden, in spite of his sense of Milton's greatness, declared that *Paradise Lost* was no "true epic". He said that the poem did not have war as its chief subject and was therefore not heroic enough, that it ended unhappily while a true epic had a happy ending, and that, unlike the traditional epics, it had only two human characters, the others being "heavenly machines". However, the adherence to various epic conventions in his epic shows that Milton consciously tries to align his poem to a long established tradition. Though he tries to modify a heathen tradition to a Christian purpose, he eventually succeeds in integrating these divergent traditions and engender an epic poem.