

Milton's Hell

Of all the narrative passages in *Paradise Lost*, Book-I, John Milton's description of Hell stands out unique by virtue of its graphic pictorial quality and its evocation of a sense of gloomy terror. Milton was aware of the Renaissance concept that heaven and hell constituted of no specific topographical locale, but represented Hell as solely a mental state of damnation. Yet, he clings to the medieval concept of Hell of having topographical entity. Milton presents Hell as a place designed for the eternal punishment of the fallen angels. Hell is a place for removed from the celestial seat of bliss. It is situated in the nethermost depth of abyss, and it takes nine days and nights to fall into this dreadful pit from heaven. Hell is an assemblage of all the arbitration human emotions – pains, despair, envy, restlessness, heartlessness, heartburn etc. This scene of barren desolation is thus described by Milton –

“A Dungeon horrible on all rides round,

Serves only to discover sights of woe”

Here is sinister wilderness, ‘a dismal situation waste and wild’. While Satan surveys Hell as far as he can see and observe, He finds it a vast, gloomy and dreary region. It is like a huge underground prison house terrible to behold. This description is brief but vivid and effective. We are to visualize a region which is sinister, barren and wild. All around him Satan discerns sights of misery and unhappy dark spaces, where peace and rest can never dwell. It is a place where even hope which comes to all beings, is never felt. This region is far away from God. The contrast between this place and the Heaven conveyed to us is

Oh how unlike the place from whence they fell!

Hell is a burning region, a place of sultriness, a burning oven, a place where one is trapped and gaoled forever. From the burning furnace of Hell the constantly flickering flames issue no light. They only provides phantasmagoria of dim visibility. The medieval notion that the flame of Hell bears no luminosity is adhered to, as Milton insinuates that the damned and the doomed are deprived of the sight of God, who is the essence of light. Milton seems to be influenced by Job 10:22: “the light is as darkness.” The paradoxes Milton alludes to would be familiar to his contemporaries, for they were subject to much theological speculation. This is reflected in the classic statement in St. Basil's Homily on Psalm xxviii, where we are told that God separates the brightness of fire from its burning power, in such a way that the brightness works to the joy of the blessed, the burning to the torture of the damned. It is a place where fire exists without light and darkness is almost tangible and this darkness itself reveals the sight of misery. Thus Milton's Hell is a place of darkness where flickering light of fire serves only to make darker. Geologically it is a volcanic region, “fed with ever-burning sulphur” in inexhaustible quantities. Satan and his followers have fallen into a “fiery gulf”, a lake that burns constantly with liquid fire. The shore of this lake marks the beginning of a plain to which Satan flies after raising himself from the lake.

Hell is a region of sorrow and misery, helplessness and eternal torment. A look at Hell reveals:

“Regions of sorrow, doleful shades where peace

And rest can never dwell, hopes never comes

That comes to all, but fortune without end”.

Hope being totally non-existent, there is only never-ending torture. And there is no release from here for the fallen angels. This is a reference to Dante’s *Inferno* iii, 9, where it is described that on the gates of Hell are inscribed the words: “All hope abandon, you who enter here.” Euripides, in his *Troades*, also reflects a similar lament: “to me even hope, that remains to all mortals, never comes.”

Hell is a lake of ever burning sulphur, a flood of fire, which constantly overwhelms and engulfs the victims imprisoned in this dreadful gloom. Such a place, encapsulated by utter darkness has been designed by God for the fallen angels as a mark of punishment for their foul revolt. The ‘floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire’ make it most torrid clime. It is all wrapped up in smoke and foul smell. Like a volcano it blasts vapour and blown off rocks.

On another half of this terrible dungeon lays an open space, a vast tract of solid ground of ‘burning marl’. Peace, rest hope and calm, that which make life enjoyable and worth living, one completely absent in Hell. This is a place of perfect perdition where to exist is to experience the worst death in a deathless world.

Satan walks uncomfortably over the boiling soil. Heat is everywhere. In the background, we are later told, is a volcanic mountain:

There stood a hill not far, whose grisly top
Belched fire and rolling smoke, the rest entire
Shone with a glossy scurf—undoubted sign
That in his womb was hid metallic ore,
The work of sulphur.

All these description are certainly terrifying. Milton’s object in describing Hell is two-fold; firstly, to indicate the torments which the fallen angels have to endure in contrast to the bliss and joy of Heaven which they have lost for ever; and, secondly, to infuse a feeling of horror in the readers. The modern reader, with his scientific background and scientific notions, may not feel as awed or horrified by these descriptions as readers of Milton’s time might have felt. But even the modern reader has to recognize, not only the graphic quality of the description, but its oppressive and overwhelming effect.

Whereas Homer simply places Hades as far below earth as Heaven is above (*Iliad*. VIII.16) and Virgil places Tartarus twice as far below (*Aeneid*. VI, 577), Milton gives a more intricate

formulation, a typically geometrical statement of relationships. By doing so, he draws attention to the numerical proportion, heaven – earth: earth – hell: : 1:2 i.e., earth divides the interval between heaven and hell in the proportion that Neoplatonists believed should be maintained between rationality and desire. By doing this, Milton was amalgamating ideas of Renaissance Neoplatonists like Pico della Mirandola.

Milton's Hell is described partly as the readers might see it and partly through Satan's eye. The objective and subjective torments of Hell are thus mingled where from we can experience ours' as well as Satan's mind.

Towards the end of the Book-I Milton has another view to show of Hell. On the near side of the burning ground stands a massive structure of architectonic excellence, the capital and place of Satan, Pandemonium, amidst the bowels of precious curse, gold. It is a miracle of architecture. Milton describes how this army of builders prepares many calls from which beauty gilded forth in every form.

C. S. Lewis observes that Milton's description of Hell is never concrete, there being no definition of such things as the size of Hell, the exact nature of its tortures or the degree of heat that Satan feels. The size of Hell, the nature of its tortures or the degree of heat that Satan feels, such thing can be felt to the reader's imagination, simulated by words which carry frightening associations for all of us. Hell is a place of absolute darkness, fierce heat, hostile elements and most terrible sight of all, the entire space is "valued with fire". Its all-enclosing dreadfulness typifies the dwarfing awareness of remorse, distance from God and pain from which its inhabitants cannot escape. Though terrible it is not formless; sea and land exist and from its soil the precious metals are refined which go into the construction of Pandemonium. Renowned critic Prof. Hellen Gardiner has rightly observed – "It's all enclosing dreadfulness typifying dwarfing awareness of remorse, distance from God, pain from which its inhabitants can never escape... from its soil issue forth destruction unavoidable". One should also remember that Milton's graphic description of Hell intensifies the tragic intensity and overwhelming effect. Here is the concrete world for the abstract idea. Here is the antithesis of Heaven. Though Satan would challenge this notion of Hell as a topographic spot and claims that 'mind is its own place' and is even ready to brave the Hell, Milton makes sure that the readers envision it as a real place for torment and eternal perdition. Hence, Satan's stance is counterbalanced by his own suffering, by the gradual loss of luminosity and the state of stupor that the fallen angels suffer from. Hence, the Renaissance ideas about Hell is not ignored by Milton, rather they are imbibed and ultimately subsumed by the overwhelming terror conveyed by his description of hell as a tangible locale.