



John Milton

(1608-1674)

Life and works

John Milton was a **committed Protestant** and Humanist scholar who felt his poetic inspiration was a gift from God. He was born in London into a wealthy **Puritan family** in 1608. He studied for a Master's Degree at Cambridge, and also learnt Latin, Greek and Italian. During the period 1631-37 he published the **poems** *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1631); the **pastoral elegy** *Lycidas* (1637), and a number of **sonnets**. In 1638 Milton began a **European tour** and he visited Galileo in Fiesole, near Florence. When back in England, his sympathies were with Cromwell (→ 2.5); his **support for the new Commonwealth** was such that in 1649 he was appointed secretary for foreign tongues in Cromwell's Council of State. In 1642 he had married the daughter of a Royalist, Mary Powell, who found the Puritan austerity and intellectual stature of her husband unbearable and promptly

returned home. This bitter personal experience caused the poet to **justify divorce** in a series of pamphlets, like *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), and *Areopagitica* (1644) about the freedom of the press. In 1652 Milton became blind, but **blindness** helped to stimulate his verbal richness.

After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, his republican writings were condemned to be burnt and the author was sent to **prison**. He was later pardoned and released. His **three long poems** were written during these years: *Paradise Lost* (1667), his masterpiece, *Paradise Regained* (1671), a much less grandiose poem on Satan's temptation of Christ, and *Samson Agonistes* (1671), a tragedy in verse on the final days of the biblical Samson, his moral recovery and self-sacrifice. Milton died in London in 1674.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ about Milton's life and works and complete the table below.

Origin	
Education	
Beginning of literary career	
Political activity	
Masterpiece	
Other works	

Paradise Lost

John Milton
(1667)

STORY

Paradise Lost tells the **biblical story of Adam and Eve**, with **God** and **Lucifer (Satan)**, who is thrown out of Heaven and later tries to corrupt humankind. Satan, the most beautiful of the angels, is thrown into Hell with his stunned followers, as a consequence of his defeat in the war in Heaven.

SETTING

Although Milton was familiar with the Copernican cosmology, which establishes the sun and not the earth as the centre of the universe (→ 2.3), he based his universe on the more traditional **Ptolemaic system**. In Milton's Heaven, God sits on his throne surrounded by the nine orders of angels; the tenth one, who revolted under Satan, has been hurled down into a dreadful realm, Hell, which is below chaos and which is in antithesis with God's world. Out of chaos, God created the earth, fixed in the centre of the universe, and around it the spheres.

A RELIGIOUS EPIC POEM

Milton chose the **epic genre** for his masterpiece because of the greatness of his subject and he followed the **typical epic conventions**. *Paradise Lost* opens with a precise statement of the theme of the epic – 'Of Man's First Disobedience' –, as do all traditional epics.

This epic takes place in the universe. There God, Satan, Christ, man and many fallen angels are met and they echo the several warriors and heroes created by Homer. The typical character of the epic hero was altered by Milton to suit the **changing spirit of the age**: no longer a warrior like Achilles, seeking glory on the battlefield, but a more **philosophical hero** who must learn to control himself before he is judged fit to found an empire.



THEMES AND CHARACTERS

The main **themes** are: the **certainty of evil hanging over mankind**, the **hope for redemption** and the **belief in Divine Providence**. Although it is absurd to suggest that Milton intended Satan to be the hero of his masterpiece, nevertheless at the beginning of the poem Satan has many of the characteristics of the **epic hero** (→ *Satan's speech*): **leadership**, **initiative**, a **courage** which refuses to accept defeat, a willingness to undertake the desperate enterprise to **escape from Hell** and **attack God's creation, man**. Milton put a great deal of his own soul into this character.

As he was a rebel against the political authority of the king and the religious authority of the Church of England, his sympathy was for Satan, the rebel.

STYLE

The **style** of this poem is **elevated** and matches the seriousness of the universal subject of the fall of man; the poet used a **new kind of blank verse** of sonorous magnificence. The **poetic diction** he employed is very far from common speech: it abounds with polysyllabic Latinisms, inversions and circumlocutions.

Key idea

Satan in Dante and Milton

John Milton's version of Hell in *Paradise Lost* appeared about three hundred years after Dante's image of pain in his *Inferno*. Not only were the two works inspired by different artistic visions, but also by divergences in culture and religion. Both authors were religious, however, and claimed divine inspiration was rooted in their works. They had contrasting ideas as regards Satan's physical appearance and dwelling, but the most notable difference is that Dante's Satan becomes a means of punishment, while Milton's is a twofold symbol of God's eternal justice, being cast out of Heaven himself and, later, forcing Adam and Eve out of Eden. Dante's Satan (Lucifer) dwells in the very

lowest circle of Hell, the City of Dis in the centre of the earth, where he is bound in ice forever.

Milton's Satan takes several forms: he is first presented as a fallen angel who finds himself in a newly created Hell (→ *Satan's speech*); later in the poem, he takes the classic form of a snake. Though the physically monstrous aspect of Dante's Satan is absent, replaced by a slimy creature, Dante shares this serpentine interpretation of evil, describing Satan in the *Inferno* as 'the ill Worm'. Milton also takes Dante's significant colours for his Satan, making the serpent's eyes red and his neck yellow.

2 READ about *Paradise Lost* and answer the following questions.

- 1 What is described in *Paradise Lost*?
- 2 Where does *Paradise Lost* take place?
- 3 Why did Milton choose the epic form for his masterpiece?
- 4 How does *Paradise Lost* start?
- 5 What features does Satan share with the epic hero?
- 6 How did Satan mirror Milton's character?
- 7 What are the most important characteristics of Milton's style?
- 8 What are the most important differences between Dante's Satan and Milton's?



Satan's speech

The passage you are going to read deals with Satan's arrival in his new kingdom, Hell.

John Milton
Paradise Lost
(1667)

Book I

'Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime,'
Said then the lost Arch Angel¹, 'this the seat²
That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom³
For that celestial light? Be it so, since he
5 Who now is Sovran can dispose and bid
What shall be right: farthest from him is best
Whom reason hath equall'd, force hath made supreme
Above his equals. Farewell happy Fields
Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail⁴ horrors, hail
10 Infernal world, and thou⁵ profoundest Hell
Receive thy⁶ new Possessor: One who brings
A mind⁷ not to be chang'd by Place or Time.
The mind is its own place⁸, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
15 What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he⁹
Whom Thunder hath made¹⁰ greater? Here at least
We shall be free; th'^{Almighty} hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence¹¹:
20 Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n.
But wherefore¹² let we then our faithful friends,
Th'associates¹³ and co-partners of our loss
25 Lie thus astonisht¹⁴ on th'oblivious Pool¹⁵,
And call them not to share with us their part
In this unhappy Mansion¹⁶, or once more
With rallied Arms¹⁷ to try what may be yet
Regain'd in Heav'n, or what more lost in Hell?

- 1 Arch Angel. Lett.: arcangelo; qui: Satana.
- 2 seat. Dimora.
- 3 mournful gloom. Triste oscurità.
- 4 Hail. Salve.
- 5 thou. You. Tu.
- 6 thy. Your. Tuo.
- 7 One who brings / A mind. Uno che reca uno spirito.
- 8 The mind is its own place. La mente è la sua dimora.
- 9 all but less than he. Tutto tranne che meno di colui (Dio).
- 10 hath made. Ha reso.
- 11 hence. Di qui.
- 12 wherefore. Perché.
- 13 Th'associates. I compagni.
- 14 astonisht. Attoniti.
- 15 oblivious Pool. Stagno dell'oblio.
- 16 Mansion. Sede, dimora.
- 17 rallied Arms. Armi raccolte.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1 got back | 5 land, region |
| 2 owner | 6 has made equal |
| 3 climate | 7 command |
| 4 Omnipotent | 8 lives |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and answer the following questions.

- 1 Who is speaking? Is he alone?
- 2 What does he hail?
- 3 How does he react to the fall from Heaven?
- 4 Does he feel equal to God? Why is the power of reason so important?



➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

3 HELL is described in contrast with Heaven.

- 1 List any reference to the features of Hell and Heaven.
- 2 State which semantic area all the antitheses belong to. Then try to recognise the message they convey.

4 FOCUS on the hero Satan.

- 1 Underline any words or phrases in which Satan refers to God. How does Satan see God?
- 2 What are Satan's feelings about his new situation?
- 3 Can you consider Satan an epic hero? Why?

5 CONCENTRATE on the style of *Paradise Lost*.

- 1 This poem is written in blank verse, that is, unrhymed verse, usually in lines of 5 iambic feet. However, Milton varies: the number of syllables in a line; the number of stresses; the succession of unstressed-stressed syllables. Find examples of these variations.
- 2 Find examples of run-on lines, that is, when a line ends in the middle of a phrase and the meaning break comes in the next line, and end-stopped lines. How would you interpret the prevalence of run-on lines in this extract? Tick as appropriate.
 - ☐ It creates an effect of monotony.
 - ☐ It creates a feeling of expectation.
 - ☐ The reader is urged to go on reading.
 - ☐ The long verse paragraph gives a sense of majestic movement.
- 3 Milton was a great Latin scholar. This can be inferred from the use of long sentences, deviation from the normal English word order and Latinised words. Find examples. Then state the effect achieved by the use of this Latinate syntax.

➤ **COMPETENCE: FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

6 REFER to 2.5 and to the introduction to *Paradise Lost* and explain if there are any reasons why Milton might have intentionally made Satan attractive.

7 STATE the differences between Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's Hell as regards location, main features and inhabitants.