

Study Guide on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Books I – VI)

What does Milton give as his purpose in the opening lines of the poem? What kind of project is *Paradise Lost*?

- Who is the “Heav’nly Muse” (I.6) whose aid Milton invokes? How does she relate to his poetry? What kind of existence does she have—true, fictional, allegorical?
- What does Milton think has been “unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (I.16)? Is he right that it has never been attempted, either by pagan writers or Christian ones? Can we tell why Milton thinks that he will be able to accomplish it?
- What Spirit is Milton calling to at line 17? Why does Milton need to invoke a second being? How does the Spirit seem to stand to the Muse, and how to God?
- How will Milton go about his project, to “justify the ways of God to men” (I.26)? From this proem, does it seem this will be a work of theology, or of poetry?

What motivates Satan to make war against God? Consider Book I: 94 ff., 159–162, 254–263. What does Satan mean in saying that “Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme / Above his equals” (I.248–9)? What does this show us about Satan’s perception of God?

Is Satan the hero of *Paradise Lost*? Does he exhibit admirable traits, or manifest nobility (See, for example, I.590–606, and II.1010 ff.)? How does Milton’s portrayal of Satan assist the purpose of the poem?

What motivates Satan to seek the fall of Adam and Eve? Consider Book I: 157–168, 187–91, 660–62, and Book II 380–85. Is this war against God and man “necessary,” or the result of resentment? Do the demons see it as futile or not?

Compare the three accounts of why the angels fell. What possible bias does each teller bring to his perspective? Do the accounts describe the same event without contradiction, or are there discrepancies? What is Milton trying to convey as the true account of why Satan revolted?

- Raphael’s account: consider V.657–665, 679–682, 689–693. What does Raphael see as Satan’s fault? Was there a catalyst to Satan’s turn away from God?
- The account of God the Father: “they themselves ordained their fall. / The first sort by their own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-depraved” (III.128–130). Is this compatible with Raphael’s account? What, if anything, does God the Father’s explanation add to what we already knew?
- Satan’s account:
 - Consider Satan’s knowledge of the strength of God: I.92–94. Why does Satan blame God for “still his strength concealed, / Which tempted our



attempt, and wrought our fall" (I.641–2)? How might God defend himself against this claim?

- What does Satan mean in saying "Who can in reason then or right assume / Monarchy over such as live by right / His equals, if in power and splendor less, / In freedom equal?" (V.794–797). In what sense does he think the angels and God are equal in freedom? Is he correct?
- "'That we were formed then, say'st thou? And the work / Of secondary hands, by task transferred / From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!'" (V.853–855).
 - Does Satan question his own creation earnestly, or only for the sake of deception?
 - How might Satan's view of his own creation affect his view of hierarchy and duty?

Why does Satan not repent after seeing Eden (IV.79 ff.)? What does this reveal about his character? What is the "public reason just" that overrules the effect of innocence (IV.389)?

What is Satan's moral trajectory over the course of the poem—does he commit more or less to his project and position as time goes on?

How does Milton portray God the Father in this poem? Who is the Son of God, and how does he stand to God and all other creatures? How does this portrayal of God serve Milton's purpose?

What is the political structure of Hell? How does Satan rule in it?

- Is there a true common good in Hell (II.480–85)? Does Satan see it as such, and strive for it? Does Satan care for the other demons with sincere friendship or affection (I.604–608)?
- Is there peace and harmony of wills among the demons (cf. II.486–499)? If so, what makes this possible? Why did they not have such a harmony with God in Heaven?
- Do the demons revere and obey Satan by merit, or because his strength subdues them? (Consider I.611–620, II.477–79.) With what kind of esteem do they regard Satan?

Raphael tells Adam that it is a difficult task to describe the wars of spirits to man (V.563–66, 573). Does Milton as a poet face this same problem? How does he attempt to portray spiritual warfare? Is he successful in "measuring things in heav'n by things on earth" (VI.893)?

How does Milton conceive of Paradise? How does it compare with Heaven? How are Adam and Eve ordained to live in Paradise, and how do the non-fallen angels live in Heaven?



- What is Heaven like? What is the nature of the angels, and how do they live? Consider V.409 ff., V.535 ff., V.618–657. Is this existence the same or different in kind from the happiness of Adam and Eve before the Fall?
- What is earthly Paradise like? (IV.131 ff., 205 ff.)
 - How do Adam and Eve seem? (IV.288 ff., V.153 ff.) How do they spend their lives in Eden? (IV.411 ff., 623 ff.)
 - How does each relate to the other? (IV.295–311, 440–48, 497–502)
 - How does Milton portray the relation of Adam and Eve, respectively, to God (IV.299, 635 ff.)?
- What does Raphael express in stating that “perhaps / Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit . . . and winged ascend / Ethereal, as we, or may at choice / Here or in heav’nly paradises dwell . . . ” (V.496 ff.)? What view does this express about the relation of earthly Paradise to Heaven, and the threshold between them?



Study Guide on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Books VII – XII)

How does Satan tempt man to eat from the Tree? Does he tempt Eve only or Adam also? Does Satan know that Adam will follow after Eve?

Why does Eve eat from the Tree?

- Does she exhibit any faults before the Fall? Do any of these partially explain her choice?
 - Is she vain, or prone to self-obsession? Is she vulnerable to flattery? What about Eve makes her so? Consider IV.460 ff., IV.799–809, V.74–81, and IX.532 ff.
 - To what extent does she have ambition, or an inordinate desire for superiority? How does she reason? Consider IX.285–289, 785–792. How does Satan take advantage of this trait?
- Is she too simple, intellectually speaking, to see around Satan's deceit?

Why does Adam fall?

- What is the nature of Adam's love and affection for Eve before the Fall? How does it affect his judgment in daily matters? (Consider VIII.554–5, 567–94, 635–7.)
- Consider the nature and degree of Adam's love for Eve, as it influences him in his decision to eat the fruit. What impact does she have, and to what degree is Adam free to oppose her? See IX.952–59, 997–999, X.137–156.
- What does Adam submit to that "seemed remediless" (IX.919)? Why does it seem so? Consider IX.906–916.

Is Adam or Eve more responsible for the Fall—or do they bear equal responsibility?

Review the following passages:

- Adam's words to Eve, before they go to separate parts of the garden: "Seek not temptation then, which to avoid / Were better, and most likely if from me / Thou sever not; trial will come unsought" (IX.364–66). How much truth is there in Adam's instruction here? How does Eve respond?
- Consider God's rebuke to Adam at X.145–156. What does God scold Adam for? Was this truly Adam's mistake?
- Michael's correction of Adam, who had claimed that man's woe begins from woman: "From man's effeminate slackness it begins . . . / who should better hold his place / By wisdom, and superior gifts received" (XI.634–636). Is this to blame man himself (not woman) for man's woe? Does this assessment apply equally to the Fall itself?

How do Adam and Eve change once they have eaten the fruit? Do they become better or worse off? Have they become like gods? For Eve, see especially: IX.817–825, 827–31,



834–8, 977–83. For changes in their mutual interaction, see: IX.1011–16, 1056–9, 1080–4, 1121–33, 1134 ff., X.999 ff.

What do Adam and Eve themselves take to be the most serious consequences of their sin? How do they view their lot, as they leave Eden? Consider X.725–31, XII.469–78, 561–73, 581–7. Are they better off for having experienced the effects of disobedience, and now knowing that it is best to obey?

What is the difference between Satan’s fall and the Fall of Man? Does Satan fall further or sin in a more serious way?

What “ways of God” specifically has Milton tried to justify to man, and how? Is he successful?

- Does Milton try to justify God’s permitting the Fall of Man? Is mankind better off because of the Fall?
- Would there have been freedom in the way Adam and Eve served God without Satan’s entrance into Eden, and the following Fall and reconciliation? Is Milton using this as part of his justification?

Does Milton intend *Paradise Lost* to be religious poetry, in the sense that it increases devotion in the readers? Does he care more about promoting piety, instructing in doctrine, or pleasing?

Recall the beginning of Book IX: “I now must change / Those notes to tragic . . .” (IX.5–6).

Is *Paradise Lost* as a whole a tragedy? Is part of it tragic? If so, who is the tragic hero? If not, does the poem fit in the category of comedy, or into some other genre? Explain your answer.

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

