

Devils, Demons and Witches, Oh My!

Read and consider two concise and modern statements on the greatest Renaissance epic poems: Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1391) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Notice that both poems are focused upon devils and hell.

Statement 1:

The Divine Comedy begins on the night before Good Friday in the year 1300, "halfway along our life's path" (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*). Dante is thirty-five years old, half of the biblical life expectancy of 70 (Psalms 89:10, Vulgate), lost in a dark wood (understood as sin), assailed by beasts (a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf) he cannot evade, and unable to find the "straight way" (*diritta via*) – also translatable as "right way" – to salvation (symbolized by the sun behind the mountain). Conscious that he is ruining himself and that he is falling into a "low place" (*basso loco*) where the sun is silent (*l sol tace*), Dante is at last rescued by Virgil, and the two of them begin their journey to the underworld. Each sin's punishment in *Inferno* is *acontrapasso*, a symbolic instance of poetic justice; for example, fortune-tellers have to walk with their heads on backwards, unable to see what is ahead, because that was what they had tried to do in life:

Allegorically, the *Inferno* represents the Christian soul seeing sin for what it really is, and the three beasts represent three types of sin: the self-indulgent, the violent, and the malicious. These three types of sin also provide the three main divisions of Dante's Hell: Upper Hell, beyond the city of Dis, containing four indulgent sins (Lust, gluttony, avarice, anger); Circle 7 for the sins of violence, and Circles 8 and 9 for the sins of malice (fraud and treachery). Added onto these are two unlike categories that are specifically spiritual: Limbo, within Circle 1, contains the virtuous pagans who were not sinful but were ignorant of Christ; and Circle 6, containing the heretics who contradicted the doctrine and confused the spirit of Christ. The circles are put to 9, with the addition of the Satan completing the structure of $9 + 1 = 10$.

Statement 2:

Paradise Lost has two narrative arcs: one is of Satan (Lucifer) and the other is of Adam and Eve. It begins after Satan and the other rebel angels have been defeated and banished to Hell, or, as it is also called in the poem, Tartarus.

In Pandæmonium, Satan employs his rhetorical skill to organise his followers; he is aided by Mammon and Beelzebub. Belial and Moloch are also present. At the end of the debate, Satan volunteers to poison the newly-created Earth and God's new and most favoured creation, Mankind. He braves the dangers of the Abyss alone in a manner reminiscent of Odysseus or Aeneas. After an arduous traverse of the Chaos outside Hell, he enters God's new material World, and later the Garden of Eden.

At several points in the poem, an Angelic War over Heaven is recounted from different perspectives. Satan's rebellion follows the epic convention of large-scale warfare. The battles between the faithful angels and Satan's forces take place over three days. The final battle involves the Son of God single-handedly defeating the entire legion of angelic rebels and banishing them from Heaven. Following the purging of Heaven, God creates the World, culminating in his creation of Adam and Eve. While God gave Adam and Eve total freedom and power to rule over all creation, He gave them one explicit command: not to eat from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil on penalty of death.

Final Bonus Work: *De praestigiis daemonum* is a book by demonologist Johann Weyer, also known as Wierus, first published in Basel in 1563.

The book also contains a famous appendix also circulated independently as the *Pseudomonarchia daemonum*, a listing of the names and titles of infernal spirits, and the powers alleged to be wielded by each of them. Weyer's reason for presenting this material was not to instruct his readers in diabolism, but rather to "expose to all men" the pretensions of those who claimed to be able to work magic, men who "are not embarrassed to boast that they are mages, and their oddness, deceptions, vanity, folly, fakery, madness, absence of mind, and obvious lies, to put their hallucinations into the bright light of day."^[4] Weyer's source alleged there were estimated to be 7,451,926 devils, divided into 1111 legions and obeying 72 infernal princes. Weyer's source claimed that Hell arranged itself hierarchically in an infernal court which is divided into princes, ministries and ambassadors.

Discussion Directions. Consider how at least two of the following readings reflect differing depictions of Satan.

How frozen and how faint I then became,
Ask me not, reader! for I write it not;
Since words would fail to tell thee of my state.
I was not dead nor living. Think thyself,
If quick conception work in thee at all,
How I did feel. That emperor, who sways
The realm of sorrow, at mid breast from the ice
Stood forth; and I in stature am more like
A giant, than the giants are his arms.
Mark now how great that whole must be, which suits
With such a part. If he were beautiful
As he is hideous now, and yet did dare
To scowl upon his Maker, well from him
May all our misery flow. Oh what a sight!
How passing strange it seem'd, when I did spy
Upon his head three faces: one in front
Of hue vermilion, the other two with this
Midway each shoulder join'd and at the crest;
The right 'twixt wan and yellow seem'd; the left
To look on, such as come from whence old Nile
Stoops to the lowlands. Under each shot forth
Two mighty wings, enormous as became
A bird so vast. Sails never such I saw
Outstretch'd on the wide sea. No plumes had they,
But were in texture like a bat; and these
He flapp'd i' th' air, that from him issued still
Three winds, wherewith Cocytus to its depth
Was frozen. At six eyes he wept: the tears
Adown three chins distill'd with bloody foam.
At every mouth his teeth a sinner champ'd,
Bruised as with ponderous engine; so that three
Were in this guise tormented. But far more
Than from that gnawing, was the foremost pang'd
By the fierce rending, whence oft - times the back
Was stript of all its skin. "That upper spirit,
Who hath worst punishment," so spake my guide,
"Is Judas, he that hath his head within
And plies the feet without. Of th' other two,
Whose heads are under, from the murky jaw
Who hangs, is Brutus: lo! how he doth writhe
And speaks not. The other, Cassius, that appears
So large of limb. But night now reascends;
And it is time for parting. All is seen."

--from "Canto 34" of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,
Said then the lost archangel, this the seat
That we must change for heaven, this mournful gloom
For that celestial light? Be it so, since he
Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid
What shall be right: furthest from him is best
Whom reason hath equalled, force hath made supreme
Above his equals. Farewel happy fields
Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail
Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; the almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
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 heaven.
But wherefore let we then our faithful friends,
The associates and copartners of our loss
Lie thus astonished on the oblivious Pool,
And call them not to share with us their part
In this unhappy mansion, or once more
With rallied arms to try what may be yet
Regained in heaven, or what more lost in hell?

--from "Book 1" of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton