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Darkness and Blindness in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Critics of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* often grapple with the idiosyncrasy of Satan as a sympathetic character written by a Christian author. Satan employs powerfully convincing rhetoric, and some readers may be shocked that Milton made the devil sound so appealing. Satan is often portrayed as a pitiable creature, losing against a tyrannical monarch and then lamenting loss of light and his ill fortune. Some critics agree with Percy Shelley and William Blake that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it," as Blake expounded. Others believe that Milton intentionally made Satan a tempting character to accurately represent Satan's role as a temptor in reality. In other words, if readers find themselves siding with Satan, they might realize their inherent sinful nature and work harder towards resisting Satan's influence. However, this agenda was not just for Milton's readers, but Milton himself. Milton reveals his struggle with temptation through his admission of inner darkness, and highlights the way to salvation through his discussion of appropriate knowledge through light.

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton included an enduring theme of light as good and dark as evil, which is connected to themes of sight and blindness. The comparison of light and dark as good and evil is most definitely not unique to Milton, as it is a common trope throughout literature, but Milton seems preoccupied by this visual connection to good vs evil. Heaven and Hell are almost solely categorized by their characteristic lightness and darkness, respectively. Milton makes this juxtaposition fairly clear when speaking of the fallen angels' plight: "here

their prison ordained / In utter darkness, and their portion set / As far removed from God and light of Heav'n" (1.71-3). The light in Heaven is brilliant, and the dark in Hell is so incredible it can be felt: "The dark unbuttoned infinite abyss / And through the palpable obscure" (2.405-6). Rather than associating these opposing places with emotions (i.e. pain versus happiness), Milton chose to emphasize the visual aspects, presumably because of his own experience as a blind person, which made light and darkness particularly meaningful to him compared to someone with the privilege of sight.

Although darkness is strongest in Hell, and lightness is strongest in Heaven, these are external representations of internal goodness and are portable; however, darkness seems to be more portable than light. There is an evident hierarchy of light: supreme light seems to stay in Heaven, lesser light in Paradise, and no light in Hell. Even the flames in Hell do not give off light: "No light, but rather darkness visible" (1.63). This darkness is portable and can be taken into Paradise, as Hell (and thus darkness) is not a place, but a state of being: "The Hell within him, for within him Hell / He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell / One step no more than from himself can fly / By change of place" (4.20-3). However, lightness does not seem to be as portable, since Satan, once one of the brightest up in Heaven, has darkened since fallen: "but O how fall'n! how changed / From him, who in the happy realms of light / Clothed with transcendent brightness didst outshine myriads through bright" (1.84-7). And he seems to be growing even dimmer in Paradise (4.114). Unlike darkness in light, light cannot dwell in darkness. When the angel Raphael visits Adam, he has to leave once the sun goes down: "But I can now no more; the parting sun [...] my signal to depart" (8.630-2). God, who dwells in light, can bring darkness during storms, so the fallen angels ask themselves if they can adapt to Hell by bringing in light: "As he [God] our darkness, cannot we his light imitate when we please?"

(2.269-70). However, this seems to be a vain wish, as they “found / No rest” (2.617-8) in the place God created for them to be miserable. Instead, they must all dwell in darkness, since Hell resides inside of them.

At the very beginning of the epic, Milton clarifies why he is writing *Paradise Lost*, and confronts his own darkness. When invoking the Heavenly Muse, Milton implored her to “what in me is dark / Illumine” (1.22-3). This darkness inside of him is a double entendre; referencing both Milton’s physical and internal blindness. In this line, Milton recognizes his own darkness, and since darkness is connected to sin, Milton recognizes his own inherently sinful nature, and is asking the Heavenly powers to eradicate his internal—if not his physical—blindness. Furthermore, Milton expounds his self-defined purpose in writing this epic, which is to “justify the ways of God to men” (1.26). Following this theme of blindness, Milton could perhaps want to discover why God rendered him blind.

Milton also links sight to mercy, suggesting that Milton’s blindness could be a lack of mercy from God. When God is speaking in Book 3 of man finding grace through Him, He says “But mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (3.134). Milton connects mercy to light, and since light is connected to sight, mercy is therefore connected to Milton’s sight. Later on, God continues to speak of grace for the good and punishment for “They who neglect and scorn” (3.199), and says, “hard be hardened, blind be blinded more, / That they may stumble on, and deeper fall; / And none but such from mercy I exclude” (200-2). Blindness here most likely refers to willful ignorance, but since the connection between darkness, blindness, and sin has already been made, a closer inspection intimates that blindness is a sin that is exempt from mercy. Furthermore, darkness is also portrayed as the wrath of God: “So spake the Sovereign Voice, and clouds began / to darken all the hill [...] the sign of wrath awaked” (6.56-9). Perhaps

Milton viewed his physical blindness as a punishment inflicted by the wrath of God for his sins (his internal blindness), which he admits to in the very beginning of the epic.

God Himself is also portrayed as Light, and Milton emphasizes God's ability to see, strengthening the connection between light and sight, and blindness and sin. At the beginning of Book 3, Milton praises light, and reveals light as God Himself: "Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n firstborn [...] Since God is light" (3.1, 3.3). It makes sense that God is light, since He is supposed to represent all that is good. Later in Book 3, directly after speaking of his blindness, Milton writes: "the Almighty Father [...] bent down his eye [...] and from his sight received / Beatitude past utterance" (56-62). These references to God's sight stands out, especially after Milton speaks directly of his own blindness, emphasizing the contrast between God's ability to see and Milton's inability to see. Milton again emphasizes this contrast when he writes God as saying "mine eye not shut" only six lines before he writes the punishment of "blind be blinded more" (3.193, 3.200). The short distance stresses the connection between sight as goodness exemplified by God, and blindness as sin exemplified by Milton as a representation of both physical and internal blindness.

As previously mentioned, blindness can be interpreted as ignorance, and thus sight can be a euphemism for knowledge; however, Milton emphasizes that there is an appropriate knowledge, and there is an appropriate *amount* of knowledge. Raphael reveals that knowledge is best in moderation: "knowledge within bounds; beyond abstain / To ask [...] knowledge is as food, and needs no less / Her temperance over appetite" (7.120-1, 7.126-7). Knowledge as food foreshadows Satan tempting Eve with the apple. When Satan tempts Eve with the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, he is offering both inappropriate and too much knowledge, and using the imagery of sight as a selling point: "Ye eat thereof, your eyes that seen so clear, / Yet are but dim,

shall perfectly be then / Opened and clared, and ye shall be as gods” (9.706-8). Eve accepts the offer, not realizing that although light leads to knowledge, knowledge without light leads to darkness. It may not have mattered, since Eve was already shown to be in the dark when eavesdropping on Raphael warning Adam about temptation: “As in a shady nook I stood” (9.277), which could intimate a predisposition towards sin, or a darkness already lurking within her.

However, when gaining knowledge is followed in the correct sequence in which it is an enlightenment derived from God as Light Himself, it can bring salvation, which might have given Milton hope. Perhaps the most telling passage occurs in Book 3, in which Milton laments his blindness, but then ends in hope of internal sight:

“ever-during dark
 Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
 Cut off [...] And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
 So much the rather thou celestial Light
 Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
 Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
 Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
 Of things invisible to mortal sight (3.45-7, 3.50-5).

Out of his darkness and inherent sinfulness, Milton finds light through internal sight and knowledge, and realizes that he can find internal beauty.

If indeed *Paradise Lost* was written to reveal the reader’s fallibility towards temptation, it implies the necessity of temptation for true salvation. If a Christian did not experience temptation from the devil, the effort towards salvation would not be as meaningful. If Eve and Adam had

not been offered a choice between grace and sin, their resulting disgrace or salvation would not have any value. Milton's blindness is his darkness, which was either a result of his sin or was his temptor towards sin, but Milton realized an inner light. If Milton had not experienced his internal darkness, his discovery of light would not have been as meaningful. Whether or not Milton realized this light while writing the epic itself, as he intimates when he asks the Muse to illumine what was dark within him in order to write the epic in the right manner (1.22-3), Milton certainly meant for his readers to experience temptation through the compelling Satan, but wanted them to realize their internal light through the journey.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Stephen Greenblatt, editor. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*. 10th ed. Vol. B. W. W. Norton. 2018. Books 1-9. pp. 1495-1668.