

5-4-2018

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### Recommended Citation

White, Alyssa V. (2018) "Humanity's unlikely Heroine: Examining Eve in John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and "Paradise Regained"," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2018 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2018/iss1/9>

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Humanity's Unlikely Heroine  
*Examining Eve in John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and 'Paradise Regained'*

Alyssa White

Eve has been at the center of controversy both inside and outside the religious sphere for centuries. She is most well known for her role in the fall of man, disobeying God by eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The story has been passed down through generations, shifting and evolving as time and people progress; but in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, the firm belief was that Eve was a temptress and the sole transgressor and thus, women inherently sit at Satan's side. John Milton could have resorted to this common depiction, but instead he gives his readers a complicated character with a distinct voice and presence in his infamous epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. The conversation about Milton's perspective on the fall of man and Adam and Eve continues to this day. In this essay, I will be examining Eve as a fully fleshed out character in Milton's epic, and how, in a way, he justifies her actions. Also, while most would debate Eve's position in *Paradise Lost* as either victim or villain, I argue that Eve is the poem's—and humanity's—unlikely heroine.

John Milton lived during a time where Eve was characterized in a rather straightforward and unkind way. Due to her actions, Eve has been subject to blatant narrowmindedness and misogyny. Though Milton is no third-wave feminist, he actively explored Eve's character in *Paradise Lost*, giving her far more depth than was normally accepted. At first, Eve is written as the epitome of submission, saying things like, "God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" (Book IV, Lines 637-8) and constantly alluding to her place beneath Adam. However, as the poem progresses, so does Eve. Rather than being a stagnant character, Eve's storyline comes with a full arch that gives credit to her personal

growth. Milton's language and choice of words elevate her to high status, especially when he calls her a "[...] queen / [with] A pomp of winning graces" (Book VIII, Lines 60-1). Milton is purposeful in not reducing Eve's importance and her role as mother of all mankind.

Later in the poem, her independence, ambition, and curiosity become more apparent to the point where Adam notices it as well: "[...] yet when I approach / Her loveliness, so absolute she seems / And in her self-complete, so well to know / Her own, that what she wills to do or say, / Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best" (Book VIII, Lines 546-50). Regardless of the role she was designed to fill, Eve often transcends feminine expectations and is far more secure and confident with herself in comparison to Adam. In Abdullah F. Al-Badarneh's article "Milton's Pro-Feminist Presentation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*", he talks about the way the couple is written by Milton. Eve "[...] is depicted to be more commanding and leading" (Al-Badarneh, 2014), and it is Adam who trails behind her, praising her divine beauty, whether to her or to others.

Eve's greatest and most unique asset is her independence. It is this trait that leads her to making the decision she does, as well as her unquenchable curiosity. Eve is constantly making inquiries, looking outward into the world and asking deep, philosophical questions. This is especially obvious in the conversation she has with Adam when she recommends that they "divide [their] labours" (Book IX, Line 214). Adam protests this at first, but Eve persists and says,

"And what is faith, love, virtue unassayed  
Alone, without exterior help sustained?  
Let us not then suspect our happy state  
Left so imperfect by the maker wise,

As not secure to single or combined.

Frail is our happiness, if this be so,

And Eden were no Eden thus exposed.” (Book IX, Lines 335-41)

Milton puts his own words into Eve’s mouth, echoing his beliefs that he made clear in his earlier work, *Areopagitica*, where he talked about free will. Milton argued that in order to determine if someone was a good person, they had to be given the ability to choose without the constant threat of punishment influencing their decisions. Similarly, Eve challenges Adam’s fears, asking him, “How are we happy, still in fear of harm?” (Book IX, Line 326). Eve muses on how paradise could truly be paradise if she and Adam were to live in constant fear, and that faith and loyalty to God must be tested to be proven true. Eve is bold and intelligent, and she doesn’t solely rely on Adam’s opinion to know what she wants to do. She stands her ground and argues her point, and this is also seen when Eve is speaking with Satan.

In my research, when scholars have dismissed Eve and written her off as a temptress, part of the poem that they seem to conveniently skip over is Eve’s intellectual conversation with Satan as the serpent and her long monologue before she chooses to eat the fruit. Though the actual moment of eating the fruit lasts for a single line in the epic, there are pages of back and forth between Eve and the serpent, as well as Eve wrestling with her thoughts to make her choice:

“What fear I then, rather what know to fear

Under this ignorance of good and evil,

Of God or death, of law or penalty?

Here grows the cure of all, this fruit divine,

Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste,

Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then

To reach, and feed at once both body and mind?" (Book IX, Lines 773-779)

In this dialogue that Eve has with herself, she comes to the realization that she does not want to live in ignorance. Eve's actions thus are not depicted as simplistic and that of a weak-minded female. Instead, the choice was made by a rational woman who was within her full right to choose in the first place. In her pursuit of knowledge and understanding, Eve believes "she is pursuing [...] good" (Green, 1938), but unfortunately, she was manipulated by Satan.

For a moment, Eve becomes emboldened by her decision. She relishes shedding her ignorant state, declaring how she "grow[s] mature in knowledge" and that she has gained "experience [...] which] open'st wisdom's way, / And giv'st access" (Book IX, Lines 803-810). Rightfully so, this newfound knowledge excites Eve and her hopes for gaining said knowledge are anything but evil intentioned. When contemplating the immensity of her actions and wondering if she should share the deed with Adam, Eve says that the fruit had "*render[ed her] more equal*" (Book IX, Line 821; my emphasis). Though this may have sounded like the words of a hysterical woman to seventeenth century audiences, the endeavor for equality for women is nothing new to the modern world. In that moment, Eve speaks the minds of generations of women who have pursued knowledge in order to compete in a male-dominated world.

In his article "The Paradox of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*", Clarence G. Green justifies Eve's actions as "intellectualistic" and that "her *reason* is primary" (Green, 1938; my emphasis).

He also goes on to say,

"One's sympathy for Eve, in particular, is deepened; for though one must confess that she violates God's "easie Prohibition," one must like-wise confess that she does so in good

faith as a Humanist, whose proper business is to search out knowledge, the prerequisite of true virtue” (Green, 1938).

As I said before, Green’s argument is based on the premise that Eve’s search for knowledge is both rational and well-intentioned. Milton was a major supporter of seeking knowledge, so it would be hard to believe that he did not to some extent believe that Eve was doing right by humanity. Green says, “As a Humanist believer in the value of knowledge and the efficacy of reason, nevertheless, [Milton] must have felt a kinship with patristic intellectualism” (Green, 1938). Eve, like Milton, is an intellect who strives for full knowledgeable capacity and questions and challenges the status quo.

Though, in my opinion, Eve is cruelly, and I will even go so far as to say unjustly punished for her actions, she maintains a sense of rationality and honesty. This is especially evident when she is placed in stark contrast with a rage-filled and misogynistic Adam. When asked what had occurred by the Son of God, Adam fills the poem with nineteen lines of full blown anger, directed primarily at Eve. When the Son of God turns to Eve, she simply says, “The serpent me beguiled and I did eat” (Book X, Line 162). At this point, Eve recognizes the weight of her actions and instead of pointing fingers the way Adam does, she owns her decision whilst remaining honest to what happened, summing it up in just one line of dialogue. Green would say that Adam’s rants do not align himself with the proper blame he deserves for his part in the fall. Though his intentions of love for his fallen bride were noble, Adam willingly chose to do wrong as opposed to Eve being manipulated into thinking she was doing good.

Eve’s pursuit of knowledge in itself is heroic, but the moment when she becomes a hero is when she becomes humanity’s only hope for redemption. The Son of God declares that, “Between [Satan] and the woman I will put / Enmity, and between thine and her seed; / Her seed

shall bruise thy head, thou bruise his heel” (Book X, Lines 179-81). By the end of the epic, there is a lot of emphasis placed on Eve’s ability to bear children. This gives her a certain level of power in that she will bear the promise of new generations who will right her and their father’s wrongs. Thus through “woman’s seed”, mankind becomes “renewed” (Book XI, Line 116). Eve recognizes this responsibility and graciously accepts it, concluding the entire epic with her ability to look beyond and be hopeful about the future: “This further consolation yet secure / I carry hence; though all by me is lost, / Not such favour I unworthy am vouchsafed, / *By me the promised seed shall all restore*” (Book XII, Lines 620-3; my emphasis).

The reader is given a sneak peek into the impact of Eve’s promise in Milton’s *Paradise Regained*. We are once again introduced to Satan, whose anger and bitterness has been awakened by the baptism of Jesus Christ. As he recalls being able to manipulate Adam and Eve into temptation, he becomes aware of the fact that Jesus was birthed by a woman: “For this ill news I bring, the woman’s seed / Destined to this, is late of woman born, / His birth to our just fear gave no small cause [...]” (Book I, Lines 64-8). This idea of the “woman’s seed” being a powerful influence is important and it carries so much weight that even Satan is fearful of it. Though Eve is no longer part of the narrative itself, her impact still ripples forward and brings humanity one step closer to salvation.

With every story, old or new, comes multiple narratives and perspectives to consider—this includes Eve’s narrative in Genesis. The biblical story continues to shape the way society views women. Regardless of relevancy or time, certain parts of society still use it against women, staking their claim in the belief that to be female is to be inferior. However, it is our responsibility as readers to look beyond what is the norm. Though *Paradise Lost* was not written during our history’s most liberal time, it is still important to recognize even the smallest

moments of progress and not paint a broad brush over history and literature. John Milton was an author who was deliberate in his writing choices, which is evident in the way he writes Eve and the story of Genesis. Milton complicates Eve's character and allows readers like myself to see her in a positive light, without immediately dismissing her. As Milton says in his poem *Samson Agonistes*, "Fame, if not double fac'd, is double mouth'd [...] on both his wings, one black, the other white" (Milton, 971-5). In this line, Milton states that those who are remembered in history for their bold actions are often seen in two contrasting narratives: one in which they are considered a hero and another where they are considered a villain. To some, Eve will forever remain the face of temptation, but to others she is a hero who stood for what she believed in and then bore the responsibility of promising a better future for the rest. On that note, I leave you with a simple definition: According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "eve" is defined as "The time immediately preceding some event". Eve represents far more than the fall of humanity; instead, her name implies that after her lies a hopeful promise that there is more to come.

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