

# The Criterion

---

Volume 2024 *The Criterion*

Article 2

---

5-31-2024

## Milton's Exploration of the Demonic Consciousness

Niall McKenna

*College of the Holy Cross*, npmcke25@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McKenna, Niall (2024) "Milton's Exploration of the Demonic Consciousness," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2024, Article 2.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2024/iss1/2>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Criterion by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

## **Milton's Exploration of the Demonic Consciousness**

**Niall McKenna '25**

*College of the Holy Cross*

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* challenged issues of modernity in his time, exploring matters of theodicy, human origin, and centrality of consciousness. Milton's hell and its accompanying capital, Pandaeonium, contain demonic entities capable of action and in search of redemption through retaliation. The anti-hero of "Paradise Lost" and the ruler of Hell, Satan, leads the other fallen angels in directing humanity astray while establishing their kingdom in defiance of Heaven. Milton's portrayal of his characters' cognition and behavior through a captious lens allows for an unprecedented analysis of the demonic consciousness. Milton's journey into hell and subsequent exit grasp the inner workings of the demonic. This journey illuminates the ways of God to man and how the demonic consciousness interacts with both the divine and the human, conveying Milton's profound understanding of human consciousness. Milton's navigation of Satan's manipulative charisma and malevolence towards divinity reveals the irreconcilable nature of demonic consciousness. In examining the deficiencies ingrained within demonic nature, Milton creates a parallel between human and Satanic thought.

Satan's charismatic revival of a defeated army highlights the demonic belief that defiance against God's will is inherent to their nature. When addressing the apostate angel, Satan reminds his fallen army that "to be weak is miserable, doing or suffering: but of this be sure, to do augh good never will be or task: but ever to do ill our sole delight: As being contrary to his high will whom we resist" (I.158-62). Satan recognizes the dejected state of his army after their eternal damnation but knows he and the other fallen angels have taken a path of rebellion that possesses

no absolution from God. Although weakness is a miserable state, to Satan the act of complying with or doing anything “good” will eternally be worse. Satan reminds the army of their “sole delight”: acts of defiance. This delight only benefits Satan, allowing him to maintain his leadership position eternally. Deceived into believing their only source of contentment will come from acts of ill will, Satan’s army continues to serve him. Satan galvanizes a collective group sharing the identity of rejecting the “his high will whom we resist,” affirming his leadership with “his.” “His” refers to God’s high will that the army rejects, leaving them with Satan’s will to accept. Once Satan convinces his army that their nature is inherently against the desire of God, they reject the truth that their rebellion stems from the free will granted to them by God. Both the charismatic deception by Satan and the army’s acceptance of rebellion are conscious decisions by the demonic.

Satan employs a comparable method of manipulative rhetoric in his enticement of Eve, appealing to her desire for autonomy and authority that both the demonic and human share. Satan’s temptation of Eve stems from his perverse perception of the relation between God and all other creation: God desires to suppress creation to remain the sole superior being. In an appeal to Eve’s ego, Satan equates her with Adam, mirroring Satan’s desire to attain the level of the son. Eve’s critique of Adam’s authority allows Satan to challenge God’s authority over mankind, asking Eve “Why then was this forbid? Why... but to keep ye low and ignorant... he knows that in the day ye eat therof, your eyes, that seem so clear, yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then opened and cleared” (IX.702-04,705-08). Satan’s manipulation stems from a distortion of God’s intention he has created in his mind. In answering a question that he poses, Satan subconsciously justifies his rebellion against God. Satan believes the forbidden nature of the fruit keeps Adam and Eve “low and ignorant,” failing to recognize that is his condition. Satan is kept “low” in the

depths of hell and continuously “ignorant” of God’s true intention, capable only of misguiding those he tempts. Satan dictates to Eve that God’s control and suppression of knowledge represent true evil, disobedience being the sole remedy. This resembles Satan’s message to his fallen army, that “ever to do ill is our sole delight.” Eve’s susceptibility to believe Satan stems from a subconscious desire to increase her being, which Satan affirms to her as legitimate. Eve’s fall parallels Satan’s as “pride and worse ambition” (IV. 40) threw her down from Eden, mirroring the way Satan was expelled from Heaven. Milton's understanding of faith maintains that no being or entity can parallel the divinity of God, demonstrated in these shortcomings of consciousness.

Both Satan and Milton seek to achieve an unprecedented status within their domains, a deficiency of the demonic consciousness rooted in arrogance. Milton creates “Paradise Lost” as a literary work that seeks to transcend literary excellence: “with no middle flight intends to soar above the Aonian mount while it pursues things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (I.14-16). Milton attempts to pursue such excellence analogously to Satan’s attempt to battle and achieve victory “against the throne and monarchy of God” (I.42). Milton’s reference to the “Aonian mount” invites comparison to the unimaginable heights of Heaven that Satan seeks to “soar above,” extending an invitation to compare Milton’s work to his literary predecessors. The “Aonian mount” references the mountain on which the classical muses lived; Milton invokes a superior Muse in that of the Holy Spirit which was present at the beginning of creation. Milton intends to have a more profound source of inspiration, allowing him to create a biblical epic in English that “soars” above the literary excellence of those before. Milton’s ambition propels him on a quest to surpass all others in “prose or rhyme,” redefining the literary benchmark for mastery. Just as Satan fails to understand the Father who remains the supreme sovereign,

Milton's critique of those before him is blind to the praise classical poets deserve and retain.

Milton's desire for autonomy is parallel to that of the demonic consciousness, the only difference being unprecedented greatness in a different domain. Milton's desire to separate himself from the work of celebrated poets emphasizes humanity's tendency to favor a self-serving nature in place of collective celebration, parallel to that of Satan's.

Milton's narration grants the reader access to the inner workings of Satan's consciousness, creating a character that is for a time morally ambiguous. Satan's eternal struggle with God invites the reader to view Satan sympathetically, but his intention ultimately reveals a superficial consciousness. Book four of "Paradise Lost" contains Satan's confession, where Satan reveals to himself the "fear, envy, and despair" (IV. Prologue) that rot his consciousness. Satan confesses "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell; and in the lowest deep a lower deep still threatening to devour me opens wide. To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven" (IV. 75-78). Satan sees himself as embodying torment while spreading torment. "The lowest deep" Satan experiences parallels a human state of depression, where one believes despair to be expanding until it eventually "opens wide" and devours them. The existence of a "lower deep" beyond the misery of Hell creates a perpetual cycle of misery and loathing within Satan's mind. Satan's psychoanalysis of the self presents his condition as irreversible. However, Satan's paradoxical condition arises not from condemnation but from the conscious choice to reject God's will and forfeit the privilege of Heaven. Viewing himself as an anti-hero, Satan's introspection reveals his suffering is concurrently his strength. The power and status of Hell and its capital of Pandaemonium allow Satan, or so he thinks, to view eternal suffering as "a Heaven," revealing Satan's true desire. Pride drives Satan's decision to experience a cycle of torment, showcasing an insubstantial emotion devoid of remorse for past wrongs.

Milton examines familial strife within the demonic consciousness, exiting from Satan the self to Satan the father. Satan's fatherly imperfections are contrary to the love and dominion God provides for all creation. Satan's prideful blindness to the inherent responsibilities of fatherhood and guardianship leaves him with no substantial relationship to his perverted "family." When attempting to exit hell and journey towards Earth, Satan encounters Sin: his daughter and the mother of their incestuous child, Death. Sin addresses Satan, "O, father, what intends thy hand," she cried, "Against thy only son? What fury, O son, possesses thee to bend that mortal dart against thy father's head." (II.727-30). Sin addresses Satan as "father" and Death as his "only son," an allusion to the relationship between God and the Son. Satan is ignorant of the relationship the three hold between each other, telling Sin "I know thee not." (II.744). Satan's inclination to harm his creation is antithetical to that of God, demonstrating the ignorance of a father who cannot recognize his son and a son who does not recognize his father. Upon the revelation that Death is his son, Satan demonstrates no restraint in his desire to harm him. Even the unconditional love of family is unable to amend Satan's Hellish state, as the demonic conscience rejects growth in morality. Satan's futile quest to undermine his father distorts a potential father-child relationship, tainted by the perverse rape of Sin.

Milton advances upon his exploration of intimacy within the demonic consciousness through a juxtaposition of Satan and Adam's impressions of Eve. Their distinctive responses illustrate Eve's beauty and divinity, invoking momentary disarmament rooted in Satan's lust while prompting Adam to recognize their shared connection as intimate companions. Milton's narration of Satan's reaction demonstrates an erotic shock towards Eve's "graceful innocence, her every air of gesture, or least action, overawed his malice... that space the evil one abstracted stood from his evil, and for the time remained stupidly good, of enmity disarm, but the hot hell

that always in him burns” (IX.459-61,464-67). Although Satan experiences a moment of reflection, his malicious intention remains unchanged. Satan’s disarmament roots itself in a moment of awe defined by the phrase “stupidly good.” Milton’s choice of “stupidly” places Satan in a state of stupor towards Eve, making Eve’s inherent goodness unintelligible to the demonic. This goodness does not serve Satan’s purposes, which have only been questioned by his mind until now. In his stupor, Satan fails to appreciate the divine, instead experiencing a hollow moment of erotic attraction. Once Satan regains his natural state, the envious Hell inside him “burns” once again, as lust is only temporary. Adam’s account of his first impression of Eve to the angel Raphael reveals the purity of Adam’s perception. Describing Eve, Adam notes “with what all earth or Heaven could bestow to make her amiable... grace was all in her steps, Heaven in her eyes, in every gesture of dignity and love” (VIII.483-84, 488-89). Although Adam admits an erotic attraction towards the “amiable” appearance of Eve, he accompanies this with an appreciation of their unity rooted in admiration of God’s creation. Adam’s depiction of the “Heaven in her eyes” represents a pure and divine connection between them. Adam elevates Eve to the position of an intimate, eternal companion while simultaneously appreciating the “grace all in her steps.” Adam recognizes Eve shares similar sentiments, demonstrating “dignity and love” in her actions, a part of her empathetic nature. Divine love permeates the desire within Adam’s mind, while the repulsion of lust metastasizes the demonic perception of attraction.

Milton reveals the demonic consciousness’s ultimate deficiency is the pursuit of decimation, constrained by the incapacity for humility. Satan previously maintained that “the mind is its place and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven,” (I.254-55) a shallow justification for his fallen state. Satan’s return to Pandaemonium after the successful temptation of Eve culminates into a “a crowd of ugly serpents” (X.583-39), the shape Satan took when

tempting Eve. Satan's climatic transformation represents a projection of his inner turmoil upon humanity, causing him to descend deeper into perpetual degradation for his rebellion against God. The demonic consciousness finally takes physical form, determining the demonic consciousness to be irreconcilable with divinity. Milton differentiates between the demonic consciousness and humans in Eve's climatic statement to Adam in which she demonstrates humility in the face of her sin, "witness Heaven what love sincere and reverence in my heart I bear thee... both have sinned, but thou against God only, I against God and thee" (X. 914-16, 930-31). Eve's desire to repent roots itself out of love for Adam and God's grace, allowing her to confess her sin in search of penance. Adam and Eve's willingness to admit wrongdoing in their temptation permits the chance for redemption. This redemption is found in living in an obedient relationship with God, which has the possibility of being better than Eden: "Then wilt thou not be loth to leave this Paradise, but shalt possess a Paradise within thee, happier far" (XII.585-87). Through future expression of virtue, Adam and Eve will rejoice in the fruits of obedience. However, the conscious mind retains the choice to sin, with punishment demonstrated in Satan's eternal condemnation.

Milton's exploration of the demonic consciousness through Satan discloses human likeness to the demonic but confirms we contain the means to mitigate temptation. Satan's perpetual defiance against the supreme sovereign contrasts with the human journey to redemption, which requires obedience to God. While the personal struggle with faith may resemble Satan's defiant temptation of Eve, Milton's redemption of humanity's fall places the decision to repent or rebel within our consciousness.



Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Hackett Publishing, 15 Sept. 2005.