

THE TRANSFOR- MATION OF THE EPIC FORM THROUGH MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

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The paper presents research examining the epic poem format of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and illustrates how Milton's use of the form influences or relates to contemporary epics. This topic involves research on the structure of traditional epics, Milton's use of the form in *Paradise Lost*, and examples of how contemporary epics continue to make adjustments to the form. Considering the influence of classic epics, such as the *Iliad*, *Divine Comedy*, and *Aeneid*, in modern culture, there is a lack of modern examples of the epic form with similar impact. I researched the criteria for epic poems and the existence of modern examples. This paper examines the connections between Milton's epics and its predecessors as well as Milton's influence on modern epics. By exploring what constitutes an epic and how Milton's *Paradise Lost* has transformed the genre and influenced contemporary epics, readers can better understand the importance of *Paradise Lost* and its format.

Some of the most recognizable works of classic literature fall within the genre of epic poetry, but what defines this genre and gives these works their importance? John Milton's use of the epic poetry form in *Paradise Lost* exposes the work's influences and the meaning of the narrative as an origin story. As a prominent seventeenth century intellectual, Milton commented on religious and political issues of the time, such as free will and censorship. These works influenced societal change and his most famous work, *Paradise Lost*, is no exception. The influence of classic epics, including *Paradise Lost*, is undeniable, but what can be said of the existence and impact of modern epics? Classic epics, such as Homer's *Iliad*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Virgil's *Aeneid* are staples of literature studies, yet few examples of modern epics come to mind. The structure of traditional epics, Milton's use of the form in *Paradise Lost*, and comparisons to contemporary epics each assist readers in better understanding why Milton chose this format and how it is still in use today. *Paradise Lost* and other classics tend to be considered the end-all-be-alls of epic poetry, but modern epics can hold just as much, if not more, influence on a culture. By examining Milton's use of the epic form in *Paradise Lost* alongside past and contemporary epics, readers can better understand the work and recognize Milton's transformation of the epic form as well as how modern epics continue to do so.

The Purpose and Structure of Epics

Epics can serve many purposes and are categorized as origin stories that often have themes of nationalism and essentialism. These traits help to define the values of the society or culture in which the epic was written.

Traditional epics would often embody the beliefs of a nation and represent it through its message. As such, epics are meant to explain a society's culture or beliefs wherein the hero of the epic represents nationalistic values through their actions. The journeys within epics "function as re-statements of known and widely held attitudes about the culture and/or the state" (Wacker 126). Epics have the power to set apart and define cultures, but "[i]t was not just cultural difference that made a national epic such a pressing necessity: it was also national pride" or an epic's ability to convey that pride to a larger audience (Crawford 428). The epic form's relation to cultural origins and values accounts for why many epics are highly regarded in the cultures from which they emerge. *Cilappathikaaram*, a second century AD epic by Illangovadigal, follows the epic structure and "is also an important source of information on the arts of music and dance of the ancient Tamil country," reflecting the values of the Tamil language and culture through its epic form (Bagavandas and Begum 222). Regardless of the culture employing it, the epic transcends time by its continued use as cultural expression. Like *Cilappathikaaram*, *Paradise Lost* represents the cultural beliefs of Milton's Christian society through the retelling of a biblical story. Through their representative heroes and journeys, epics convey the values of a culture, as seen from classic epics and *Paradise Lost* itself.

An epic can be immediately identified by its length, lack of rhyme scheme, distinct chapters, and narrative contents. The first epics were performed orally, and this oral format would later shape how classical epics were written. The form's oral origin accounts for its lyricism and use of poetics. The oldest known epic poem is believed

to be the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which solidified many of the rules set for epics. Formatting characteristics of classical epics include the poem's substantial length and use of rhythmic patterns such as dactylic hexameter. Milton himself discusses the epic format at the start of *Paradise Lost*, defining the verse style as a way of contextualizing the work and its influences. In *The Major Works*, an anthology of Milton's pieces, Book I of *Paradise Lost* is preceded by a passage concerning the verse style of the poem, a section that was added to the work's second edition. This explains Milton's influences and purpose for writing in the epic format. The section then prefaces that "the measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek and of Virgil in Latin" to connect his work with other influential epics (Milton 355). Addressing the work's lack of rhyme scheme, Milton also argues that "rhyme [is] no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially" (355). He then refers to the "modern bondage of rhyming" and expresses his disdain for the convention of rhyme schemes in long works (Milton 355). In the verse section, Milton credits *Paradise Lost*'s form to the classical epic poem, and further evidence of the genre is seen throughout the work.

Considering the structural ways an epic can be identified, a story can also become an epic in terms of content by following a heroic tale featuring journeys and battles, all meant to tell a civilization or society's origin story. Epics also incorporate religious or supernatural

elements that interact with the hero. This narrative style incorporates the use of heroic figures to tell the tale of an entire people. The journeys of these heroes, whether physically taken or through psychological means, as seen in Homer's *Iliad*, give insight on a culture's values and belief systems (Homer). There is a clear narrative structure featuring character interaction, conflict, and resolutions, although not necessarily of the happy sort. These patterns, including the use of long speeches, invocations of muses, and divine intervention in human affairs, are seen throughout *Paradise Lost* (Milton). These plot devices move the story along and engage the reader in the epic hero's adventurous journey.

Other characteristics of epic poetry include the hero and epic voice of the author. The hero is equally important as the journey itself, and epics such as the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* prove their focus on the hero through their well-known main characters. Considering the purpose of an epic is to establish an origin story for a culture's values, a representative hero is important. The hero is essential in that "the epic status of a poem [depends] even more on the poet's choice of subject than on his adherence to aesthetic principles," and an epic's hero must represent the origins and values of a culture in order to be relatable to that culture (Halmi 590). A strong representative hero ensures the reader's connection to the story, Adam and Eve being the representatives for all humankind in *Paradise Lost*. Not only does the hero of an epic act as a cultural representative, but also as a universally relatable figure for later generations.

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While Adam and Eve's journey to wisdom relates more to the traditional epic hero, many Romantics viewed Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost* for Milton's subversion of the character as complex and integral to the story. Milton writes Satan as a multidimensional character, one that faces self-doubt and pride. By examining the flaws of Satan through the character's own thoughts and voice, Milton portrays Satan as relatable, unlike many previous accounts of the biblical adversary. This subversion of the Satan character as relatable and oddly appealing has since inspired many similar writings of Satan. It is now a modern trope in popular media that Satan is clever, complicated, and charming, giving him more human traits and relatability than traditional depictions. This unique characterization of Satan also relates to Milton's use of epic voice. Lacey Conley examines how Milton's epic voice is involved in the narrative, specifically in its interaction and integration with Satan's character. The connection between the epic voice and Satan is Milton's way of portraying Satan as appealing as even the narrator sympathizes with him and this "distinction between Satan and the Epic Voice is blurred as the poem progresses" (Conley 17). Milton's subversion of the Satan character reveals his own views on the biblical story.

Similar to the epic hero, the author's voice itself, known as the epic voice, is also key for establishing the narrative of the epic. Milton's voice is clear in many sections of *Paradise Lost*, especially in the four invocations. These introductions before major sections of the work outline the plot of the section and expose Milton's presence in the narrative, giving readers an idea of his views concerning the work itself and topics such as church rule and free will (Milton). While this voice is not explicitly identified as Milton, it can

be argued that Milton's personality and literary style show themselves through the poem's epic voice. Overall, Milton's epic voice shows his intentions in the narrative and alludes to his purpose for the work.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* Compared to Classical Epics

Without the popularity of past epics, *Paradise Lost* would not be the work it is. Because of renowned epics like Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, many authors chose to incorporate the epic form into their work. Milton drew inspiration for *Paradise Lost* from classical epics such as these. Considering their influence on the work, literary scholar Michael McKeon argues that "Milton's epic poem is read with and against epic poems of the previous century" (9). But despite groundbreaking work predating *Paradise Lost*, Milton subverted the genre and reimagined certain qualities of the classic epic. At the time of its release, *Paradise Lost* was widely accepted into the heroic poem genre, but looking at the work critically compared to earlier epics leads readers to second guess what makes an epic and how strict these genre regulations are. There is possible harm in strictly categorizing *Paradise Lost* as an epic: "when we situate these texts in the broad generic category 'epic poem,' we attribute to them a formal identity whose integral coherence is misleading" (McKeon 9). *Paradise Lost* encompasses much more than the traditional ideas of an epic, transforming the genre and "complicating perspective on the idea of the epic poem, evoking the genre by parodying it" (McKeon 9). Traditions of the epic poem are seen throughout *Paradise Lost*; through this, "Milton means to equal or surpass the great ancient epic poets," but he also differs from them in many ways (Lewalski 153).

While the work was not necessarily

controversial in the seventeenth century, different generations of readers have reinterpreted the work's messages. The comparison of *Paradise Lost* to even earlier epics shows how revolutionary Milton's work was, especially considering the content. By retelling a highly regarded biblical story, Milton opens the work up to criticism from religious perspectives, especially with his sympathetic characterization of Satan and emphasis on free will. Milton also subverted the militaristic beliefs of England at the time by "[criticizing] Homer, Virgil and medieval epics for making war the only heroic deemed," yet still including the War in Heaven "because epics require battles" (Rawson 434). By including a battle scene in which no actual deaths occur, due to the immortality of those fighting, "Milton preserves epic appearances, while protecting his poem from the epic taint" (Rawson 434). Known to play off of literary standards, "Milton's aggressive approach to inherited literary traditions" is not shocking (Weller 143). Milton's "Book IX of *Paradise Lost* [begins] with a critique of epic presuppositions" leading readers to reevaluate *Paradise Lost* not as an origin story, but as "an immediate and renewable present of spiritual experience" (Weller 153). In this way, Milton preserves and transforms the epic format while also participating in the genre's popularity at the time and leading to the practices of modern epics.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* Compared to Modern Epics

Modern epics continue to transform traditional ideas of the epic form, just as

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Milton once did. Part of this change may be due to the difficulty in meeting the requirements of an epic. As ideologies and cultural ideals splinter across nations, epics become more difficult to encounter and define. Considering the rarity of agreement on many topics, how can a modern, all-encompassing, nation-representing epic exist? Simply put, most modern epics now cover smaller cultures, groups of people, or fictional societies. Modern epics also "[use] the genre quite consciously to reconstruct the relationship between modernity and tradition" instead of simply relying on tradition to tell an impactful epic (Wacker 133). Instead of classical epics that tell the origins and values of humankind or an entire nation, there

are now epics on the origins of ideologies and fictional universes. Feminist epics explain the origins of feminist ideologies often through a particular feminist icon or fictional woman as the epic's hero. Feminist works and the epic form go hand-in-hand because "[m]any of the traits critics ascribe to a feminine aesthetic characterize the modern long poem," such as defining feminist values (Keller 305). For example, Sharon Doubiago's *Hard Country* is a feminist long poem that follows the traditions of epic poetry by discussing "[a] nation's cultural heritage and her quest for a balanced female-male love relationship within the field of patriarchal power relations" (Keller 306). The poem is separated into sections and follows the heroic themes of traditional epics. By employing the epic form, feminist works such as Doubiago's express the values of the feminist community, just as a

traditional epic would for a society.

Second, modern media such as the *Game of Thrones* series or *The Lord of the Rings* franchise are similar to traditional epics because of their fantasy genre and depictions of heroic journeys. Tolkien recreates the epic by “recycling distinctly medieval stylistic elements,” including “historical linguistics, to create a medieval epic for the 20th century” (Tober 253). However, the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo “does not do what he does merely to attain glory and fame,” subverting traditional epic stereotypes of the hero as prideful and greedy (Mantovani 18). These modern works turn the genre on its head through reimagining heroes and journeys and going beyond the poem format. Filmmakers tackle the challenge of integrating the epic form onto the silver screen by “[employing] a spectacular breadth of space, time, and characters to amplify their effects” in a story of epic proportions (Bryant 71). The “pairing of epic films with long poems bridges popular and literary forms, lyric and narrative modes, feminine and masculine inflections” and results in engaging works of cinema that combine genres (Bryant 71). Movies that feature the identifying qualities of an epic — a hero, journey, and origin story — reflect the integration and transformation of the epic form into contemporary mediums, even if these shifts from the traditional long poem form are not always considered true epics.

Many contemporary epics fall within the mock epic genre as modern versions are often considered satires of classical epics. The term *mock epic* proves that the epic genre is malleable and able to parody itself. Works often use the title of mock epic to their advantage, as a way of reinventing the form. Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* “calls itself an epic or calls attention to its use of epic conventions on more

than a dozen occasions, and thus positively invites readers to assess it in these terms,” and Byron himself referred to the work as a satire of the epic form (Halmi 589).

Many critics argue that *Paradise Lost* itself is a parody of its predecessors; it is not a parody in an insulting sense, but rather in that it expands upon the forms of past epics. In fact, *Paradise Lost* modernized the epic form for the time. Parody is used not to make a mockery of the traditional epic form, but to grow from it. Milton himself parodies the biblical conception of characters such as Satan by writing him as dynamic and oddly likable at the start of the poem. *Paradise Lost* “is mock epic, because it derives from the poet’s ambition to write an imitation of classical epic that can provide a parodic basis for a Christian epic that will far surpass the classical” in which Milton aims to reimagine the biblical creation story (McKeon 11). *Paradise Lost* is referred to as a mock epic for its radical retelling of a biblical story, and contemporary epics are referred to as mock epics for their imitations of classic epics such as Milton’s. By classifying contemporary epics as parodies instead of epics, modern authors are alerting readers to their use and transformation of the form. The use of this term shows the similarities between *Paradise Lost* and contemporary epics and demonstrates how the epic genre builds upon itself and transforms throughout time.

Conclusion

The adjustments made to the epic form by Milton and his contemporaries show how the guidelines of a genre are merely a starting point for innovative writing. These works, including *Paradise Lost*, employ the epic form in order to transform it into something new and relevant for their culture. In examining the epic form of *Paradise Lost*, through both its predecessors and contemporaries, readers can understand Milton’s purpose in choosing this narrative style to

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tell the origin story of humankind. Analyzing the structure, characteristics, and common uses of the epic form allows for better understanding of Milton's intention for *Paradise Lost*. While Milton incorporates traditional features of the epic form, he also transforms the epic genre from its predecessors by redefining the standards of the epic hero and incorporating his own epic voice into the work, thus allowing future works to alter the epic as well. Milton's integration of revolutionary ideas into the epic poem form paved the way for contemporary epics to blend the genre with new mediums and ideologies, thus modernizing the genre of epic poetry.

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