CULTURE

What's So 'American' About John Milton's Lucifer?

The fallen archangel and antagonist of the epic poem *Paradise Lost* was a self-made, individualistic iconoclast.

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William Blake's *Satan Exulting Over Eve*. John Milton's Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* was a different kind of Devil—a conflicted and brooding self-mythologizer. (WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Three hundred and fifty years ago, the poet John Milton wrote one of the greatest characters in all of British literature: Lucifer, the antagonist of the epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Feared by Puritans, fêted by Romantics, and reinvented by everybody else, Milton's fallen archangel has worn many different masks over the centuries, from *Moby-Dick*'s Captain Ahab to television's Tony Soprano and Walter White. Curiously, the deeply modern Lucifer could also be considered one of the greatest characters in American literature, even though he was created more than a century before the United States was founded.

That's in part because literary critics have decked Lucifer's creator himself in red, white, and blue bunting since the 19th century. In 1845, Rufus Griswold wrote that Milton was "more emphatically American than any author who has lived in the United States." More recently, the author Nigel Smith claimed in his cheekily titled 2008 book *Is*

Milton Better Than Shakespeare? that "Milton is an author for all Americans … because his visionary writing is a literary embodiment of so many of the aspirations that have guided Americans." Indeed, America seemed prefigured in Milton's pamphlets, from *Eikonoklastes*, which celebrated regicide, to *Areopagitica*, which advocated for freedom of speech.

In light of this, it's little surprise Milton's Lucifer can be read as a kind of modern, American antihero, invented before such a concept really existed. Many of the values the archangel advocates in *Paradise Lost*—the self-reliance, the rugged individualism, and even manifest destiny—are regarded as quintessentially American in the cultural imagination. Milton may be a poet of individual liberty and conscience, but he was also one of the most brilliant theological explorers of the darker subjects of sin, depravity, and the inclination toward evil. Nothing demonstrates that inclination more than the long-standing appeal the charismatic Lucifer has had for audiences, an appeal mirrored by the flawed but alluring protagonists of some of TV's greatest American dramas. What Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the first version of which was published in 1667, also demonstrates is what can be so dangerous about mistaking an antihero for a hero.

But first, a reminder on the poem's narrative: Across some ten thousand lines, Milton writes "[t]hings unattempted yet in prose or rhyme," by retelling the Genesis story of "Man's disobedience, and the loss thereupon of Paradise." The poet recounts the aftermath of the war in Heaven, Lucifer's fall to Hell, and his ultimate tempting of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And though the epic's length may have inspired Samuel Johnson to quip "None ever wished it longer," part of the maximalist brilliance of the poem is the universe it contains, which reflects Milton's immense erudition, ranging from the astronomy of Galileo to the subject of Lapland witches.

Paradise Lost expands on the Bible's minimalist account, while altering received cultural representations of the devil. Milton's Lucifer is neither bestial, a reptilian Other, nor the goofy incompetent of a medieval morality play; rather, he's a conflicted, brooding, alienated, narcissistic self-mythologizer. In other words, he's a thoroughly modern man, and in a country as preoccupied with modernity as the United States is, he's arguably an honorary "American" as a result. Milton's fellow countryman, the novelist D.H. Lawrence, remarked in his under-read 1923 *Studies in Classic American Literature* that, "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted." The novelist had in mind not just the pioneer clearing lands that do not belong to him, but also the honey-worded con man who can justify his crimes in the sweetest language.

Lawrence's pessimistic appraisal of the American character doubles as an apt description of *Paradise Lost's* central antagonist. Much as Lucifer invades Eden like the frontiersman who moved ever further west, he is also capable of justifying his actions with the most exalted of language. Milton writes, "But all was false and hollow; though his tongue /

Dropp'd manna, and could make the worse appear / The better reason." Lucifer is a confidence man, rebel, and supposed advocate of liberty. He's also a self-made individualist setting out into the wilderness to make his own world anew.

The spirit of the *Paradise Lost* author has persisted in the United States in large part because of Herman Melville, who once claimed that "we want no American Miltons" while ultimately becoming an American Milton himself. Melville's 1851 opus *Moby-Dick* set the Miltonic template for subsequent U.S. literary history, fully internalizing *Paradise Lost* and repackaging it as an American tale. The scholar William Spengemann wrote in 1994 that Melville "turned instinctively to Milton for one of his models; and there is no reason to suppose that Melville's Miltonism has played no part in the virtual identification of American literature with *Moby-Dick*." As Melville turned instinctively to Milton, many subsequent writers—whether of literature or television—turned to Melville, who helped establish the conception of the Luciferian antihero as an American type who invents his own rules.

The influence of *Paradise Lost*, by way of Melville, is apparent in many acclaimed TV dramas of the 2000s, most notably *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*—all shows that critics have identified as offering some grand statement on the American Dream. In *Mad Men*'s very first episode, Don Draper memorably remarks, "What you call love was invented by guys like me… to sell nylons," which recalls Lucifer's famous assertion that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n." Lucifer is not just a rebel, but also a character who has tricked himself (and many of his post-Romantic readers) into believing his very words can generate reality. Lucifer's line is a pithy and dark summation of the American credo of self-invention. His mercurial nature and his rhetorical chicanery recall the verbal dexterity of Draper, who, like Lucifer, shed his original name.

Or consider Walter White, who also adopts an alter ego, becoming the fearsome Heisenberg whose very name alludes to the devilry implicit in uncertainty. It's a renaming process similar to that which Milton's demons in *Paradise Lost* undergo; as the scholar Regina Schwartz observes in her 1988 study *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theology and Poetics*, "Having lost their positive identity, they have lost their names." But as Lucifer discovered in his rebellion against heaven, extreme self-invention inevitably leads to the ultimate form of alienation: a radical distance from God and from fellow humans.

Think of the charismatic Tony Soprano, a Mafia Lucifer conspiring with his consigliere and his lieutenants just as the archangel does with the infernal parliament of Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost's* first book. Tony channels Lucifer's profound solitariness, telling his therapist, "All due respect, you got no fucking idea what it's like to be number one … And in the end you're completely alone with it all." Instead of

Asmodeus, Moloch, and Belial, Tony's counselors have names like Big Pussy, Paulie Walnuts, and Silvio Dante, but the ultimate result of acquiring such impotent power, even when surrounded by ostensible compatriots, is the same—profound aloneness. The rage that results from such pride sums up both the Miltonic Lucifer and a version of the American tragic character.

Lucifer, the rebel who thought it "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven," has an independent streak that appeals to the iconoclasm of some Americans. And not just Americans of course: It was the British Romantic poet William Blake who claimed Milton himself was "of the Devil's party without knowing it." Blake's assertion is the most famous example of one critical school that emerged around the so-called "Milton Controversy." This question asks why Milton, a fervent (if unconventional) Protestant, would ultimately give the devil all the poem's best lines? Why make Lucifer the most attractive character in *Paradise Lost* if you're supposedly trying to "justify the ways of God to man?" Many in the Romantic tradition thus argued that Lucifer should be read as a revolutionary, a Promethean figure who tears at unfair strictures.

On the other side of the debate are the 18th-century essayist Joseph Addison and the modern Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, both of whom read *Paradise Lost* as an uncomplicatedly orthodox account of conventional belief. This central tension in the epic—why is such an ostensibly evil character so attractive?—wasn't reconciled until the scholar Stanley Fish's seminal 1968 book *Surprised by Sin.* Fish, known today for his pugilistic punditry, remains one of the greatest Miltonists of the past century for squaring the critical circle regarding the "Milton Controversy." Fish interpreted Milton's epic as "a poem about how its readers came to be the way they are … to provoke in its readers wayward fallen responses." In other words, Lucifer is *supposed* to be intriguing, because in forcing the reader of *Paradise Lost* to be drawn to evil, Milton demonstrates the original sin that he believed marked everyone's soul. That Lucifer gets the best lines isn't incidental to his evil, but central to it.

American prestige television dramas have also cleverly convinced audiences to empathize with charismatic-sinner types. Brett Martin in his 2013 book *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution* wrote that the "third golden age of TV" in the 2000s took as its central theme the anger felt by men who feel entitled to a respect and power that they are being denied, which then makes them dangerous. Think of how many viewers continued to love Tony Soprano, even after he strangled to death a Witness Protection Program informant in between taking his daughter on a tour of bucolic New England colleges. Or Walter White, the mild-mannered chemistry teacher turned meth kingpin executing a prisoner and dissolving his body in acid (and later dropping any pretense of misguided altruism when he tells his wife "I did it for me. I

liked it. I was good at it"). Or even the charming, handsome Don Draper with his serial adultery.

All these characters share a rage generated from feeling that they are owed something, which also describes Lucifer. If one has to identify a "difficult man," whom would be more fitting than the fallen archangel? Just as identifying with Lucifer's grand speeches can tell readers something ugly about their own state, so too does rooting for Walter White, a man who allowed his assistant's unconscious girlfriend to choke to death on her own vomit. These shows reveal to their audience not just what is debased about certain values, but indeed what is debased in the audience when they thrill to evil.

Milton, of course, believed that intrinsic depravity marked every soul. Sin may be universal, but there is something revealing in how the triumphalist values of American individualism are also the values held dear by Lucifer. Like Walter or Don, Milton's character is ruthless, innovative, creative, and dangerous—and also in many ways as American as apple pie. Envision Lucifer, "High on a throne of royal state," where he "exalted sat… To that bad eminence… insatiate to pursue / Vain war with heav'n." In his pettiness, decadence, narcissism, and privilege, Lucifer embodies the worst of a certain strain of American exceptionalism that celebrates power for power's sake. The best of prestige television has often done what Milton did, reminding audiences of what is pernicious and poisonous in their attraction to evil. Ultimately, Milton's genius isn't that he's "of the devil's party"; it's that he proved, deep down, so are his readers.

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