



# Analysis of the View of Freedom in Paradise Lost

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**Abstract.** Freedom is a long-standing topic. Although the wheel of history is always rolling forward, people have never lost even the slightest enthusiasm for this topic. For people in modern times, their personal consciousness has been fully awakened. Compared with other dimensions of freedom, it is obvious that people care more about their personal freedom. Nonetheless, in the world hundreds of years ago, this was not a matter of course. Without any focus on individuals, the freedom of a collective may be more important. At the beginning of the 17th century, although Britain showed the trend that the capitalist tide was coming, the whole country was still restricted by the feudal system. John Milton grew up in such an era of oppression of human nature, but in his literary works and social theories, the thought of focusing on individual freedom has never stopped. Based on Milton's background and personal experience, this thesis will analyze Milton's concept of freedom expressed in the epic *Paradise Lost*. In addition, by connecting the ideas of several other philosophers and writers in the European region to future generations, it can be summarized that the great influence and limitations of Milton's view of freedom and finally summarize some inspiration for this time today.

**Keywords:** *Paradise Lost* · Freedom · Calvinism · Milton

## 1 Introduction

Milton was born into an ordinary family in 17th century England. His father was a Puritan, but he was not rigid, which had a profound impact on Milton's religious ideas after he grew up. Milton loved books and poems all his life and always cared about the fate of the country. He always participated in the revolutionary struggle while writing literary works. However, his life in the later years was bleak; he became blind early. Nonetheless, even in this case, he still insisted on spending seven years creating the epic of *Paradise Lost*, which is one of the most successful literary works in modern times.

Milton repeatedly emphasizes the word "freedom" in many parts of his book *paradise lost*, and his expression of freedom in the poem is quite progressive. However, in Britain in the 17th century, the feudal autocracy still existed, which seriously hindered the development of British capitalism. It is in this period of social transformation that Milton creates his works on the theme of freedom. This thesis will mainly study the concept of freedom embodied in the epic *paradise lost*. Before this, many scholars in related fields have published papers on this topic, most of which are used to analyze the images of

the characters in the poems from the perspective of literature and religion or to compare them with the literary images in other works. There have been many rich interpretations of the characters in the epic in the academic enclosure.

This article will try to start with the historical background of his works and Milton's own experience and then combine the religious idea of his "Puritan" identity to deeply understand the freedom concept expressed in his works and analyze the progressiveness of the ideological trend compared with that before the 17th century. At the same time, *Paradise Lost* is also very pioneering in its poetic style. The non-rhythmic heroic poetic style adopted by it also reflects Milton's own initiative in thinking and freedom from the shackles of previous rhymes. The combination of poetry content and poetry genre reflects the progressiveness of his view of freedom. Furthermore, this paper will take Milton's influence on later European philosophy as an entry point and link his concept of freedom with the philosophical propositions of Nietzsche and Sartre on the topic of freedom. In contrast, there can be seen another connotation of Milton's cognition of freedom. However, any writer or thinker will be restricted by the times. Milton is also limited by his time and his Puritan status. His view of freedom is limited. We can also understand their differences by comparing with Sartre's concept of "absolute freedom" and summarizing several shortcomings. This paper tries to study the progressive concept of freedom embodied in *Paradise Lost* through a series of methods such as background investigation and vertical comparison and tries to summarize the similarities and differences between it and the concept of freedom in modern philosophy. The main purpose of this thesis is to provide a new perspective to examine Milton's view of freedom and try to summarize its inspiration to people today.

## 2 Milton's Growth Experience

*Paradise Lost* was born at a time when classicism swept across Europe when the trend of thought of the Renaissance still had a certain impact in Britain. The creation of *Paradise Lost* was affected by various literary trends, and the society was undergoing a transition period from the feudal centralized system to the capitalist system. This provided historical background and theoretical basis for the researchers to put forward complicated viewpoints.

The author of *Paradise Lost* is a poet born in 17th century England, and his name is John Milton. His father was a law clerk, and his family was relatively rich. Although his father was a Puritan, he was not as rigid as other Puritans at that time. He liked music and led Milton to love music. He also loved books, and young Milton loved books as much as his father when he was young. When Milton was just ten years old, he could write some good poems. All these foreshadowed Milton's future literary creation and his reflection on the Puritan rules and regulations. After finishing college, Milton chose to devote himself to poetry creation immediately, and he spent about five years staying on a country estate. After all, he was still young at that time and began to yearn for the wonderful world outside, so he began to travel to European countries. In Italy, he heard that the conflict between the British king and the people was imminent and that war might soon break out. So he immediately gave up his plans to travel and write poems and hurried back to England. After returning to London, Milton began to participate in

the political movement actively. He devoted all his energy to writing a large number of political pamphlets supporting people's freedom and strongly opposed the royalist party. However, it was in such a turbulent wave of social change that Milton worked so hard that he became blind. To make matters worse, not long after he lost his sight, his wife died of illness. Milton had to work while raising children. However, his miserable old age has just begun. The royalists recaptured power, so Milton confiscated all his property and burned a large number of books. After he came out of prison with the king's pardon, he strengthened his determination to create and then spent seven years writing the epic *Paradise Lost*. It really is a legendary and bumpy life [1].

### 3 Analysis of Poetic Style

Because of Milton's own preference and the inconvenience in his poetry creation in his later years, he abandoned the gorgeous and complicated style and chose a more simple and natural style. This makes his *Paradise Lost* very different and unique. The metrical of this poem is an English heroic poem without rhyme, which is the same as Homer's heroic epic written in Greek and Virgil's in Latin. The words he used are simple, just like the basic monosyllabic words commonly used in the Bible. The sentence structure is a series of independent short sentences, often connected by *and*. The words are characterized by simplicity and strength. To sum up, the reference of *Paradise Lost* to the genre of Greek epic is mainly shown in the following aspects.

Firstly, epic has a very broad spatial background. Its scope can be the whole world or even the whole universe. *Paradise Lost* has more than ten thousand lines. In terms of time, it ranges from the birth of the new universe to the decline of the old world and the future of mankind. In terms of space, it includes the three realms of the universe: the supreme kingdom of heaven, the paradise of mankind and the abyss of hell. The epic covers all aspects of the universe, showing endless, colorful and looming aspects, and the scene is extremely spectacular. This grand idea can only come from the vigorous strokes of great poets. After Homer, Virgil and Dante, many people tried, but few succeeded.

Secondly, epics often describe the war achievements beyond mortals, such as Achilles' great feat in the Trojan War, and also describe the long journey experienced by heroes, such as Odysseus' breaking through the siege of gods and going through all kinds of difficulties. *Paradise Lost* begins with the scene of hell and the magnificent appearance of Satan. Until Volume IV, Satan is the protagonist who dominates the centre of the stage. He is tall and strong, courageous, and leads a third of the angels to revolt against God's command and authority. In his struggle all the way, although his future was always blocked, he persevered in circling the earth for seven days and nights, finally waiting for an opportunity to sneak into paradise, complete his mission, and achieve revenge against God by luring the ancestors of mankind to fall [2].

Thirdly, the protagonist is a great and decisive figure in the nation and even the universe. The hero of the *Iliad* is Achilles, the Greek hero and son of the sea goddess Thetis. The hero of the book of Isaiah is the son of the goddess Aphrodite. As for the protagonist of *Paradise Lost*, critics have been arguing endlessly for a long time. Satanism, represented by Shelley and Belinsky, thinks that Satan has a rebellious spirit. It places its hopes on Milton's revolutionary ideal, while God is a negative image. Orthodox critics

focus on the theme of the religious story of *paradise lost*, the poet's declaration of the theme at the beginning of the volume, and the conformity of the work with the teachings of the Bible. They emphasize the religious nature of the epic, claiming that the hero of the son of God is Jesus, who represents the justice of God and his salvation for the whole human race. Other critics, starting from Milton's Christian humanism, believe that *paradise lost* shows the theme of "human degradation", and the protagonists are Adam and Eve, the ancestors of mankind [2].

Fourthly, epic is a form of expression of etiquette. It narrates the plot in a ceremonial style. It not only displays magnificent spirits but also strictly observes specific forms in the performance of hero themes and the use of grand chapter structures. Thus Milton's magnificent style, Latin rhetoric, unique syntax, resounding and moving character names and all-encompassing allusions are produced, and the simulation of Homer's "epic similes" and "epithets" Milton learned this poetic style from Homer, Virgil's epics and Shakespeare's plays and developed it creatively. He is good at using some specific rhetorical skills to create gorgeous pompous effects and serve his lofty style, such as using a large number of parallelism sentences; Sandwiching a noun between two adjectives makes people notice the relevance or relativity; Invert adjectives and nouns in the same line. He also likes to use nouns that can arouse resonance and color sense and scatter them in poems to create an almost dazzling effect and deepen the impression of readers. Milton has a profound musical culture and pays special attention to the musicality of poetry [3]. His blank verse has a sonorous tone and cadence. Although it has no rhymes, it has a strong sense of rhythm and musical beauty; At the same time, Milton uses a wide range of metaphors, from Italy to Egypt and from today's Red Sea to the Red Sea in Exodus, which makes readers form a broad association with the lake of fire in hell and provides profound activity scenes for the angels on the lake of fire.

#### 4 Differences with Calvinism

After finishing the analysis of poetic style, It is necessary to start discussing the ideological core of the poem. Take the third part of the poem as an example; it is obvious that the word "freedom" appears many times in this paragraph. The main contents here are about a speech from god to his only son. Milton mainly talks about the relationship between freedom and many precious qualities such as allegiance, faith and love in the role of God. It is not hard to see that the concept of freedom in *paradise lost* is very progressive. Compared with the Bible, Milton emphasizes rationality. God is the symbol of truth in *paradise lost*, and God allows personal free will within a certain range. He fully emphasized that human beings enjoy the right to freedom.

The time that Milton was born was when the restoration of the feudal dynasty and the bourgeois revolution were intertwined, and the society was in turmoil. Therefore, his thoughts also have great complexity with the development of the times. As a Puritan, Milton strongly opposed the feudal dictatorship. He pursued freedom and sang about freedom. He became the pioneer of the British Enlightenment in the 17th century. In order to better spread his thoughts and awaken the freedom consciousness of the masses, he created *paradise lost* under the cloak of religion. However, Milton has always been a Puritan. Being a traditional Puritan, Calvinism is an extremely important creed to

embrace. As a theory born in the 16th century, whether Calvinism can well endorse Milton's creation is worth investigating.

In Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his five Calvinistic propositions have been further developed, including the discussion of free will. Firstly, Calvin believed that God not only anticipated the depravity of people and arranged its occurrence. He said, "No one can deny the fact that God not only foresees the fall of the first man and the destruction of his descendants but also arranges everything according to his pleasure". Secondly, Calvinism advocates that the will of man is subject to the will of God. Therefore, Calvin and his supporters believed that God had promised something to happen long before people were willing to do it. God arranged the depravity of people according to his delight, including God's will to redeem. Thus, Calvin's creed becomes the best excuse for the original sin committed by mankind. The theological basis of this predestination theory lies in the absolute sovereignty of God, and it is impossible for human beings to make free choices [4].

Now the question is whether Milton has inherited Calvinism. It can be seen the obvious difference from this paragraph in the third chapter of *Paradise Lost*.

"So will fall,

Hee and his faithless Progenie: whose fault?

Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee [5]."

Milton's understanding of freedom is fundamentally different from Calvin's theory of absolute depravity, which is God joyfully arranged the following of the first man and the destruction of his descendants. In his *Paradise Lost*, especially the description of Adam and Eve before and after their fall, it can be seen that Milton is not a Calvinist. The reason why he said this is because, in his view, grace is given to all people by God. Moreover, people should be responsible for their own fall, not God's predestination and cause and effect. The source of human fall and the generation of original sin is the misuse of people's will in white. It is precise because Adam and Eve misused God's bestowed Son's free will to listen to the temptation of the snake and have the will to separate from God and follow the finite. Milton's answer is: God foresaw but not predetermined. In other words, God gives people the right to choose freely. Although God knows everything, Adam and Eve must also be responsible for their own crimes against God. In this way, people still have the freedom of choice. Man seeks a life of choice, and his depravity is voluntary. God is not satisfied with people's blind obedience. Therefore, man's degeneration is not due to fate but to Satan's temptation and man's own free will. When God gives man reason, he gives man freedom of choice because reason is the only choice. Otherwise, man is just a false Adam. Milton has already understood the "original sin" of Christianity as the act of human free will. Milton's thought is broad and profound in the theological context. It is not difficult to see that the arguments of Milton's thought are interrelated and mutually corroborated through the above discussion of will choice [6].

## 5 Analysis of Freedom View

To explore the concept of freedom in *paradise lost*, it is necessary to analyze several characters. First of all, the image of Satan in Milton's novel has gone through a transformation from hero to the devil. *Paradise Lost* begins with the fall of Lucifer. Satan

tries to have the same status as God and calls on angels to revolt, but he fails and is shot down in the lake of fire. At this time, Satan still has a glorious heroic image and calls on all ghosts and demons to revolt. Although he lost paradise in heaven, he still fully enjoyed the right of personal freedom, expressing his idea that he would rather be king in hell than an enslaved person in heaven. It can be concluded from this that Satan is more inclined to be a heroic rebel at the beginning. When Satan turned into a snake and seduced Eve, its essence changed. The word “thief” appeared in the author’s description of its appearance. It can be seen that the image of Satan began to change from a hero to a devil. Then he even seduced the son Jesus to commit a crime in the trilogy paradise restoration, and the image was completely transformed into the devil in essence. From the transformation from hero to the devil, it can be seen that Satan’s complete degeneracy, in essence, originates from the temptation of human beings, that is, interference with the free will of others [7]. Milton expresses his full affirmation of individual freedom through his reshaping of Satan.

On the other hand, the very important characters are the ancestors of mankind, Adam and Eve. As a link, they connect the God in the Bible with the real life of mankind, which makes this poem have much practical significance. In the fourth volume of *Paradise Lost*, Adam is witty and brave, Eve is gentle and charming, and Satan sees their happy life scenes. His twisted heart becomes jealous and turns into a snake to tempt Eve to steal the forbidden fruit. God knows this in advance, but he does not interfere with human choices in advance. He allows human beings to decide whether to eat forbidden fruits. The fruit of the wisdom tree is a symbol and a rule. Human beings choose to steal forbidden fruits, symbolizing that they have chosen to be condemned. Therefore, Milton speaks his full affirmation of human freedom through God’s mouth. They fully enjoy freedom, and even after being tempted to sin, they can still have the opportunity to atone for their sins [8].

The concept of freedom in *Paradise Lost* is very progressive. In Milton’s other work called *Areopagitica*, he also wrote: “There are many people who complain that God should not let Adam go against his will. This is stupid! God gives him reason; that is, he has the freedom of choice because reason is choice. Otherwise, he will become a fake Adam, Adam, in the puppet show. We ourselves do not admire obedience and love under compulsion and passive talents. So God set him free [9].” Compared with the Bible, Milton’s idea is more rational, God is the symbol of truth, and God allows individual free will within a certain range. Compared with the Middle Ages, it emphasizes freedom more. Neutral age overemphasizes the rule of divine power over human beings, while *Paradise Lost* emphasizes the freedom rights fully enjoyed by human beings. This epic is not a simple story from the Bible. He expressed his thoughts in a creative and pioneering way while respecting the original works of the Bible and objectively opposing the religious and theological rule in the Middle Ages. *Paradise Lost* takes religion as the theoretical basis to oppose religion and objectively opposes the confinement of religious theology to human beings by reshaping various tasks in his own works. Whether as an archangel or a devil, Satan’s resistance to God and his temptation to mankind are all completely selected by free will, and so are Adam and Eve. Freedom here is vivid and concrete, which is embodied in every chapter. Free will is also an idea that the author emphasizes very much in the whole book. This kind of reshaping can better guide people

to live and work with their own will than illusory divine power, instead of paying priests to cleanse themselves of their sins.

At last, there are some other things that can be discussed. One thing that is obviously different from the Bible in *Paradise Lost* is “will and reason” [5]. These two words often appeared in phenomenology and existentialism later. It objectively had a profound impact on the literature and philosophy of Britain and Europe. Take Nietzsche and Sartre for examples. Nietzsche maintains the idea that God is dead, and all human actions will no longer be supervised by God and will no longer be based on the rules made by God. Although this idea is obviously much more radical than Milton’s, it can be detected that many ideas are similar to Milton’s critical thinking about the religious situation at that time. As for Sartre, it is even more obvious. This is what Milton says in parentheses in chapter three; the reason also is choice. Sartre regards man’s free choice as the essence of man’s absolute freedom. He said, “It is possible to choose, but it is impossible not to choose. I can always choose, but I must understand that if I do not choose, it is still a choice [10].” Their thoughts had a wonderful meeting here.

## 6 Conclusion

However, it can not be denied that there are still some limitations. Numerous careful studies of *Paradise Lost* showed that it has strong religious overtones and is deeply influenced by Christianity. In this epic, Satan openly betrayed God and rebelled against God. Although this is a powerful description of freedom and rebellious spirit, God’s punishment of Satan, Adam and Eve in the end also reflects Milton’s pursuit of “justice”. It can be seen that Milton’s spirit of freedom and rebellious consciousness are constrained by Christian thought. This is also the product of his era.

All in all, Milton shows his superb art in *paradise lost*. His revolutionary enthusiasm and lofty imagination enabled him to sculpt very magnificent figures and depict a magnificent background. His poetic style is passionate. The poem uses brilliant and lyrical metaphors, unique Latin syntax and sonorous tones, which make it an outstanding epic in English literature. The epic of *Paradise Lost*, in an interesting way, shows a concept of freedom that is both similar and different from the current era. People should never give up their freedom, which is always handled by themselves. Even when people suffer some damage due to their free will, they should not blame freedom itself. Freedom has given people many possibilities, perhaps to move towards a better side, or to degenerate, which is the price that people should pay in order to keep freedom.

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