

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF JOHN MILTON'S WORK WITH THE PREDECESSORS

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Abstract:

John Milton is one of the most important and influential poets in English Literature. *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem and considered master piece of John Milton. In the first twenty-six lines of the poem, Milton has tried to make his relationship to his predecessors like Homer, Virgil, and Hesiod. He openly acknowledges that he was aware of the muses from which his predecessors were inspired and by providing an epic poem to the English language, he intends to become the part of this club. But, the purpose of Milton seems to be much broader than this intention. His muse is the Holy Spirit rather than the nine Muses. The nature of the study is descriptive and purpose of this article is to find out the similarities between John Milton, Homer and Hesiod's work because *Paradise Lost* is the imitation of Homer and Hesiod's work but the Biblical allusions and the portrayal of the antagonist as the hero make Milton a unique figure in the long literary traditions.

Keywords: John Milton, Homer, Hesiod, God, Achilles, Zeus, Satan, English Literature, Latinism

Introduction:

Iliad, *Theogony*, and *Paradise Lost* are the epic poems of equal prestige in their respective literary context. *Paradise Lost* is comprised of a number of themes that are shared by the other two epic poems. This work provides a profound analysis of the themes shared by them and analyzes the unique features of author's work that makes them a distinct figure in English literature. The research argues that *Paradise Lost* is the

imitation of Homer and Hesiod's work but the Biblical allusions and the portrayal of the antagonist as the hero make Milton a unique figure in the long literary traditions.

Comparison of prologs:

In the prolog to his epic poem, Hesiod expresses the way Muses have taught him to sing when he was driving the flock of sheep at the Mount Helikon. He expresses how they granted him the laurel

stuff. He discusses the 'idea of singing' which is frequently repeated in the poem and he connects it with the Muses' dancing. Also, the poet presents the idea of the fragility of the Muses. He initially discusses them without reference to God and then presents them as his teachers and finally presents their relation to the immortal gods like Zeus.

In the first lines of the *Iliad*, Homer discusses the birth of Paris and his judgment. He also mentions the marriage of Helen along with the preparation and departure for war. The poet introduces Achilles as the son of Peleus and mentions the pains of Achaeans. The Achilles is presented as the protagonist who accomplished the will of Zeus.

Milton was a religious poet his attacks on the religious figures attracted a great deal of attention at that time and most of the poets imitated his work. Not only "Paradise Lost" was the reason to make Milton such prominent poet and bring him a status but also his minor poems like "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" played an important role in Milton's influence. His sonnets were also considered as a model especially for their subject matter. When Milton died an epoch of sublime poetry vanished from the horizon of English Literature.

"We owe Milton to the progress and development of the same spirit [of awakening to the tyranny of the Catholic religion]: the sacred Milton was, let it ever be remembered, a republican and abold inquirer into morals and religion" (Jones 490)

On the other hand, in the first twenty-six lines of the poem, Milton has tried to make his relationship to his predecessors like Homer, Virgil, and Hesiod. He openly acknowledges that he was aware of the muses from which his predecessors were inspired and by providing an epic poem to the English language, he intends to become the part of this club (Milton & Himes, p.p 221). But, the purpose of Milton seems to be much broader than this intention. His muse is the Holy Spirit rather than the nine Muses.

Influence of Homer and Hesiod on Milton's work:

The *Theogony* and *Iliad* are the famous epic poems of Greek. It would be fair to state that Milton imitates them because he wanted to provide a poem to the English language of the same level. Milton wants to portray the magnificent art out of his mother tongue the way the poems of Homer and Hesiod have done to the Greek language. Like *Theogony* and *Iliad*, *The Paradise Lost* is equally well-crafted, coherent, original and long. The aim of these poems is noble, serious and strict. *Paradise Lost* contains quite similar themes like *Iliad* and *Theogony*. The basic structure and plot of these works are based on the fight of the good and the evil (Fish, p.p 34). However, Milton's work goes beyond the traditional epic poems. Following are discussed some of the mutual and distinct themes and features of the *Paradise Lost*.

Milton following Homer and Hesiod:

The *Paradise Lost* continuously resonates with the earlier poems. The devil in Milton's work is identical to the great warriors presented by Homer and Hesiod. Almost a quarter of the entire poem defines

the traits and personality of the Satan. All of these warriors are lost. The stories revolve around these warriors. Moreover, their success is not like the one we find in traditional stories. Milton's Satan acts like a military hero. Also, the council of devils is identical to the council of war. Satan displays all the traits that one expects to find in a great warrior like Achilles. Satan turns out to be undaunted and courageous. He has the guts to stand against one's stance present his perceptive. Like the protagonists of the *Theogony* and *Iliad*, Satan is violent and brave. He is much aware of what he is doing. The reader feels sympathizing for these warriors. The virtues of humility, obedience and forbearance are common in all the three epics. The pride, mortality, competition, compassion, forgiveness, love, hate, and religion are some of the common theme found in these epic poems "*Theogony, Iliad, and Paradise Lost*".

Distinct features of *Paradise Lost*:

There are a number of aspects in which *Paradise Lost* is different from *Theogony, Iliad*. Homer and Hesiod have presented a human to be the protagonist while Milton has used an angel. Moreover, he has presented the most epic battle possible which was the Satan and the God or, in other words, the battle between the evil and good. In *Paradise Lost*, the poet seems to be against the literary culture that often adores and glorifies the warriors and wars. Rather elaborating the stories from the history, Milton presented the very first story of this world. *Paradise Lost* is not the story of some certain heroic man but of all men. The poet goes much beyond the scope as he further demonstrates and elaborates the

mysterious plan crafted by God for the mankind. Idolatry and marriage are the two distinct themes that are found in Milton's work.

Uniqueness of Milton's work:

A unique feature of Milton's work is that the major source of the stories presented in the *Paradise Lost* is the Holy Bible. There are considerable numbers of Biblical allusions found in his work. Moreover, there are numbers of classical and mythological allusions. A few junctures can also be located in this epic poem where references to historical people and places can be seen. There are hundreds of such allusions in the poem. Probably, the most significant feature of Milton's work is the way he glorifies the character of Satan. The major focus of the poet is the antagonist (Lewis, p.p 112). Rather focusing on the character of Adam or Eve, the Devil is the central character of his work. The Satan is more like a tragic hero. He saw the "roots of his own downfall". His action led him to destruction. He is wise yet erroneous character. The reversal of fortune and self-actualization makes him even more unique.

Standing in the literary tradition:

Focusing again on the prolog, Milton seems to be much aware of what he was about to present to coming generation. Moreover, he was much aware of the fact that his work was about to be compared with the work of Virgil, Hesiod, and Homer. One can see the invocation of the muse at the very inception of the poem. It is a point towards the fact that Milton had mastered this particular form of the poem. Milton has managed to get the much fame and prestige through *Paradise Lost* in the literary

context. He is now compared with the legendary figures like John Bunyan, Robert Herrick, and Marry Shelly. The passion for the freedom and deep personal conviction are some of the unique features of his work that makes him worthy to be considered among the poets like Homer, Hesiod, and Virgil. He got the international recognition in his lifetime as he presented the most influential piece of English epic poetry as a defense of free speech.

Conclusion:

The prologs of the *Theogony*, *Iliad*, and *Paradise Lost* have a few shared features. They discuss the Muses. However, Milton acknowledges the existence of the previous epic poems and intends to craft a similar stuff for the English language also. One can see the influence of these writers on the work of Milton. The *Paradise Lost* is an improve imitation of the work crafted by Homer and Hesiod. The structures of these poems are the same. They are all showing the fight of the bad against the evil. There are a number of common themes in these epic poems. They are equally long and influential. The devil in the *Paradise Lost* is presented as the military warrior like Achilles. There are the traits of gallantry and bravery in all these warriors. The themes of hate, love, forgiveness are common. The distinct features of Milton's work are the themes of marriage and idolatry are a few distinct themes found in Milton's poem. What makes his work unique are the character of the antagonist and the portrayal of the devil. Almost a quarter of the poem is comprised of his action and traits. This comprehensive piece of work makes Milton worth to be compared with legendary figures

in the English literature. Thus, we conclude that *Paradise Lost* is the imitation of Homer and Hesiod's work but the Biblical allusions and the portrayal of the antagonist as the hero makes Milton a unique figure in the long literary traditions.

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