Paradise Lost, Books 1 and 2 - study guide

### Introduction

I have written this study guide for students taking GCE Advanced level (AS and A2) courses in English literature, and other comparable literature courses. It is suitable for undergraduates and the general reader who is interested in the study of poetry. It can be used as a way in to the study of the first two books of Paradise Lost generally.

#### Books 1 and 2 - structure

Book 1 breaks down naturally into six sections:

* Invocation and introduction of poem's theme
* An account of Satan's revolt and expulsion from Heaven
* Dialogue between Satan and Beelzebub
* The other devils' rallying around Satan - the demonic host listed
* Satan's speech to the legions (about the creation of man)
* The building of Pandemonium (inspired by Mammon)

Book 2 breaks down into three principal sections, the first of which can be considered in seven sub-sections:

* The debate in Pandemonium:
  + Introduction, account of Satan's presiding over the debate
  + Moloch's speech
  + Belial's speech
  + Mammon's speech
  + Reaction to above
  + Beelzebub's speeches
  + Satan's volunteering to undertake expedition to Earth, and the other devils' reaction
* An account of fallen angels' pastimes, in Satan's absence
* Satan's journey out of Hell - meetings with Sin, Death and Chaos

#### Book 1

##### Invocation and introduction of theme (1-26)

It is characteristic of a classical epic that the poet invokes the aid of his patron muse. Milton marries his Christian theme and neo-classical method by invoking, as his muse, the Holy Spirit, third Person of the Trinity. This section is a prayer, in which Milton states his subject, and asks for divine assistance in giving voice to it. Milton states that his purpose is to:

“Assert eternal providence and justify the ways of God to men.”

Note that this section contains only two sentences. The main verb, in the first, is the thirty-ninth word in the sentence. The various indirect objects of the verb “sing” reflect the magnitude of the poem's subject and its author's task: “disobedience...Death…woe...loss of Eden...one greater Man.”

##### Satan's revolt (27-83)

Note how easily Milton moves from prayer into an account of Satan's fall, by asking who or what caused man to fall. According to Milton, Satan's motive was to be above his peers. The expulsion of Satan from Heaven is depicted more fully in Book 6 (his revolt, partly, in Book 5) of Paradise Lost.

Satan is cast out of Heaven, together with his “horrid crew”. Nine days they lie on a lake of fire, then regain consciousness to find themselves in Hell.

##### Satan's speech to Beelzebub (84-127)

Satan acknowledges how utterly his confederate, Beelzebub, has been changed, for the worse, by the devils' defeat, but stresses fact that they are still united in their fall. He recognises God's superior strength, but points out that he now knows the extent of God's power, previously unknown because untried. Despite the change they have outwardly undergone, Satan stresses the unchanged nature of his attitude to God's Son, “the potent Victor”. “All is not lost” because Satan will never submit freely to God's authority. Satan suggests that God's rule was endangered by his revolt, that he will never sink to the indignity of asking forgiveness, and outlines his intention of conducting further warfare against God. Satan's speech smacks of wishful thinking; he speaks boastfully, but at the same time tortured by pain and profound despair.

##### Beelzebub's reply and Satan's second speech (128-191)

Beelzebub acknowledges Satan's trial of God's might, bewails loss of Heaven, and the punishment the fallen angels are suffering, though this will not be alleviated by death. He suggests that God has deliberately left devils their strength, to be His slaves, carrying out “his errands in the gloomy deep” of Hell.

Satan replies that the devils' task must be never to do anything good, but always to strive to pervert to evil ends whatever God does, turning to evil His good actions. Satan suggests leaving the lake of fire in which they lie, and reassembling their forces.

Note Satan's resolution and his taking the initiative. As the poem continues we also note Beelzebub's support of Satan, his ready agreement with all he says - Beelzebub is very shrewd: he makes sure he defers to his superior. Milton gives some account here of the topography of Hell.

##### Satan's and Beelzebub's quitting the lake of fire (192-282)

Satan and Beelzebub leave the lake of fire and fly to land. Milton compares Satan with the sea-monster, Leviathan, and stresses the fact that it is only with God's permission that the devils quit the lake. Satan acknowledges the horrible nature of Hell, but argues that, for him, to be in Heaven would be Hell (being subservient to God) and it is better to reign where he is than serve in Heaven. Beelzebub repeats Satan's suggestion, advising him to call to other angels, who will be revived by sound of their leader's voice.

##### Satan rallies his subjects (283-621)

Satan, “the superior fiend”, goes to the edge of the burning lake and calls to his legions who are lying inert on its surface. Note his sarcastic humour: he asks, in effect, “Are you having a rest? Have you chosen to lie in the lake as a way of adoring God (by readily bowing to His will)?”

The devils, waking, stir themselves, fly up into air, and assemble around Satan The chief devils are named and described:

* Moloch (crude, warlike, blustering);
* Chemos (associated with sensual, orgiastic demon worship, idolatry);
* Astarte (a female equivalent of Chemos);
* Thammuz (a fertility god, believed to die and rise to life every year; associated with rebirth of vegetation);
* Dagon (god of the Philistines, referred to in the Biblical books of Judges and 1 Samuel);
* Rimmon (referred to in the Biblical book of 2 Kings);
* Osiris, Isis, Orus (gods of Egyptian mythology), and
* Belial (a deceitful, lustful and lewd god).

The devil host assembles in military fashion. The devils move forward, and come to a halt ready for inspection by Satan. Milton describes the martial prowess and glory they retain despite their fall, and notes how moved Satan is by this display of loyalty.

Note that Moloch and Belial reappear in Book 2, where they are more interestingly portrayed as speakers in the great debate.

##### Satan's speech to the devils (622-669)

Satan opens his address to his followers by praising them, claiming that none save the Almighty could have matched their strength. He claims that it is hard to believe the fallen angels will not re-ascend to Heaven, and regain their rightful position. Satan blames God for apparently holding His position by “repute” and the ready submission of the angels, while concealing His true strength, and thereby tempting the followers of Satan to rebel.

Satan mentions the rumour, heard in Heaven, of the creation of a new world, and suggests the idea of exploring it, as “celestial spirits” will never be held in bondage by the “infernal pit” of Hell. Satan finishes by insisting that war of some kind “must be resolved”. As he concludes his speech, the devils affirm their loyalty, striking their shields with their swords, “hurling defiance” at Heaven.

Note how Satan flatters his legions - he persuades them they can still thwart God's designs and that Hell cannot hold them. He hints at war, but leaves it till later to determine what kind of conflict this will be. This prepares us for the great debate of Book 2.

##### The building of Pandemonium (670-798)

Utilising the natural mineral wealth of Hell, the devils, under the guidance of the materialist Mammon, construct a great council chamber. This is Pandemonium (“All devil place” or “place of all devils” ). Satan's heralds proclaim a solemn assembly to be held in Pandemonium, and the devils scale themselves down in size, till they are small enough to be “at large” in the hall. (“At large” means having enough space in which to move freely - but Milton puns on the expression) The chief devils, however, retain their full dimensions, and the “great consult” begins.

Note the pictorial and vividly realistic description of building operations (mining, founding and so on), which gives a sense of Hell as a real place.

#### Book 2

##### The debate in Pandemonium (1-505)

###### Introduction (1-42)

Milton describes Satan's exalted state as president of proceedings. Satan explains how, as none wishes to take on his suffering, none will wish to dispute his leadership, and calls for speakers.

###### Moloch's speech (43-105)

Moloch argues the case for immediate open warfare. He has no fear of death, as it is preferable to serving as inferior (to God). Moloch has no wish to remain in the “opprobrious den” of Hell, but describes graphically the glorious martial deeds in which he will attempt to regain Heaven. Moloch argues from the notion that the natural motion of angels is upward, that re-ascent will be easier than fall. As the devils have nothing to lose, they should not fear battle:

* If God destroys them, this will be better than miserable existence in Hell;
* If they cannot be destroyed, their state presumably cannot be made worse.
* Even if they fail to defeat God, the achievement of threatening Heaven's peace will be a kind of revenge.

###### Belial's speech (106-228)

Belial (motivated, Milton tells us, by sloth - that is, extreme laziness - rather than reason) subtly demolishes Moloch's argument, showing how Moloch's main reason for making war is a better reason for avoiding it. Belial argues that a second attempted revolt could lead to far harsher punishment from God, and describes some of the awful torments the devils might bring on themselves by open war. His speech is far more persuasive than Moloch's and he makes use of the words of the earlier speaker, twisting them to serve his own arguments.

###### Mammon's speech and reaction to it (229-309)

Mammon points out that the devils cannot hope to dethrone God until Chaos regains the rule of things (when order collapses). He points out, further, that, even if God should excuse the devils on condition they return to their former allegiance, this would not be tolerable. He argues, that it is better, therefore, to enjoy the freedom of Hell, being “to none accountable”. Mammon suggests that they can copy features of Heaven using the natural resources of Hell. Like Belial before him, he argues that in time the fallen angels will become accustomed to the hostile environment of Hell, and, wholly dismissing the idea of war, concludes:

“... All things invite to peaceful counsels and the settled state of order... ”

His speech is met with a sound described by Milton as being like that of wind in hollow rocks, lulling tired mariners to sleep. The devils are pleased by the argument for peace as most still fear another battle like the first, and because many are keen to “found this nether empire” - to rival Heaven. Beelzebub now rises to address the throng.

###### Beelzebub's speeches (310-429)

Beelzebub begins by addressing himself to “thrones” and “powers”. Sarcastically, he suggests a new title, “princes of Hell”, as the other speakers have, he claims, as good as decided to stay in Hell and found a new empire there. He points out that if they stay in Hell it may prove merely their dungeon, and God will reign “first and last”. He therefore concludes that mere war or peace is unacceptable, and begins to outline (what Satan has earlier told him) the story of God's creation of a new world and man.

He suggests the investigation of this world and its inhabitants, in the hope of finding some weakness and spoiling this creation. In doing so they will thwart God, and in making man God's foe, may even force God to destroy His new creation. Beelezebub ends his speech by asking the rhetorical question whether or not such a plan is preferable to sitting in Hell, “hatching vain empires.” Milton reminds the reader that Satan is the true author of this plan, and then describes the devils' enthusiastic approval of it.

Having gained general assent for his proposal, endorsed by their vote, Beelzebub approves their decision, and refers to the great deeds which will either restore them to somewhere in sight, at least, of Heaven, or “some mild zone ... not unvisited of Heaven's fair light”. But, he asks, who will undertake this perilous exploit? Having so far presented his plan in a favourable light, he now lists the hazards which will confront whoever undertakes the venture, knowing that this will ensure none will dare challenge Satan for the honour.

###### Satan's speech (430-505)

After Beelzebub's request for a volunteer has met with initial silence, Satan begins by saying how reasonable it is that devils should fear so perilous a venture, but claims he would not deserve to be their leader if he were to shrink from the task. He insists that none need share this danger with him (nor, of course, he thinks, its attendant glory) and the devils (with mixed feelings of reverence for, and fear of, their leader) do him homage. Milton, in an aside, laments how while devils, even, work in harmony. Only man fights his fellow.

##### The devils' pastimes (506-628)

While Satan prepares to begin his great adventure, the devils are free to occupy their time how they wish. Milton describes first how some play at war-games, on a colossal scale; how some amuse themselves with music; how others indulge in vain abstract philosophical speculation, while yet others explore their “dismal world”, but find in it nothing for their comfort.

##### Satan's expedition (629-1055)

Satan flies to the gates of Hell where he finds his way barred by the monster, Death, who challenges and provokes him. But another hideous creature, Sin, intervenes, and informs Satan that the first of the monsters is his son. Satan is amazed but Sin tells him of how, when Satan first contemplated revolt in Heaven, she had sprung fully-formed from his head, “ shining heavenly fair”. Satan had then taken her as his mate and fathered Death, who subsequently vented his lust on her, begetting further foul creatures. This caused her form to become hideously distorted - her giving birth to Death having already transformed her “nether shape” into that of a serpent.

Following the devils' expulsion from Heaven, Sin has been charged with keeping locked the gates of Hell. She further tells Satan the impossibility of defeating Death, and he quickly adopts a diplomatic approach. Now Satan talks pleasantly to his “dear daughter” and “fair son”, persuading them to open the gates of Hell for him, pointing out that if they reach the new world they will be able to prey on the newly-created race living there.

Sin unlocks the gates, but is unable ever again to close them. Satan attempts to fly from Hell but drops straight down, and is only rescued by being buffeted upwards by a hot blast from a natural explosion. Next he enters a region where the air is so thick, he can only negotiate it “half on foot, half-flying”. In this undignified fashion, Satan eventually arrives at the court of Chaos, whom he persuades to let him pass on his journey. The “anarch old”, hoping that Satan's activities may restore some of his empire (which has been limited by the creation first of Hell and then of Heaven and earth) speeds him on his way, and at length he comes within sight of Heaven, and:

“... fast by hanging in a golden chain this pendent world, in bigness as a star of smallest magnitude...”

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#### Questions from past papers

##### Questions on both books

“So remote is Milton's world-picture from our own that we cannot easily enter into the spirit of his poem.” Discuss some of the special difficulties in subject-matter and treatment that a modern reader of Paradise Lost 1 and 2 is likely to encounter.

“Milton contrives to make his devils sympathetic and arresting figures, even when utterly condemning them.” Examine his treatment of Satan and his followers with this remark in mind.

Discuss one or more scenes in Paradise Lost, 1 and 2, which illustrate Milton's dramatic powers.

Consider some of the means by which Milton in Paradise Lost, Books 1 and 2, enables us to imagine events and scenes that lie outside any possible human experience.

“The essential theme of epic poetry is heroism.” Consider Paradise Lost, Books 1 and 2, in the light of this statement.

“In Paradise Lost Milton's imagination is at odds with his convictions.” How far do you think this true of Books 1 and 2?

Examine the character of Satan as displayed in the first two books of Paradise Lost.

“Milton's delight was to sport in the wide regions of possibility; reality was a scene too narrow for his mind.” Consider this view with reference to Paradise Lost, 1 and 2.

Discuss the speakers in the debate in Hell as examples of dramatic characterization.

“In Books 1 and 2 we tend to give Satan credit for his courage and forget the unworthiness of his motive for revenge.” Discuss.

By what means does Milton create a vivid impression of Hell?

Examine Milton's treatment of Satan's confrontation of Sin and Death?

“The picture of the devils, their own minds enslaved by unruly and tormenting passions, weaving their abstract philosophical theories, is one of an almost tragic irony.” Discuss

Which is more successful, in your opinion, Book 1 or Book 2, and why?

“It is because he appears human that Satan stirs our feelings so strongly.” Discuss.

“Milton describes the might, intellect and eloquence of the fallen angels with such power that the defiance which they hurl towards the vault of Heaven seems for the moment something more than an empty boast.” How far do you agree?

Consider Milton's range of poetic description in Books 1 and 2 of Paradise Lost.

Show, with appropriate illustration, how and why Milton constantly reminds us of Satan's flaws.

What do you find most interesting in language and in thinking in Milton's presentation of the devils' debate?

Show in what ways Milton at the same time presents the strengths and the weaknesses of the devils.

What difficulties do Books 1 and 2 of Paradise Lost pose for the modern reader, and what are the rewards?

Paradise Lost is said to display “epic features”. From your study of Books 1 and 2 what do you think these are?

“Milton avoids over-precise description of Hell, knowing that it is more dreadful if kept vague.” Referring closely to the poetry, comment on this remark.

##### Questions on Book 1 only

“Late angels, new devils” : does Milton succeed in describing the fallen angels thus in Book 1 of Paradise Lost?

Write an essay on the pictorial element in Book 1 of Paradise Lost.

Is Satan, as he appears in Book 1 of Paradise Lost, too great and attractive for his functional role as villain?

“Milton's scene demands in general the opposite of realistic minuteness: he needs to give the idea of Hell, not a road map.” Discuss, with reference to Book 1 of Paradise Lost.

“An unconquered will in conflict with irresistible destiny.” In the light of this remark, discuss the position and character of Satan in Book 1 of Paradise Lost.

Discuss the grandeur of the presentation of the scenes, events and characters in Book 1 of Paradise Lost.

How powerful do you find Milton's presentation of the series of events in Paradise Lost, Book l? Give reasons.

What effects does Milton achieve in Paradise Lost, Book 1, by giving Satan and his fallen host superhuman forms but the minds of men?