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# Creation, Identity, and Relationships in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Marissa Compton

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is rife with creation; even in sections such as Satan's fall to hell or Adam and Eve's fall from grace, mentions of God's creation are easily found. According to Kent Lehnhof, "Scholars have long recognized that the process of creation is crucial to Milton's poetry" (15). Such an assertion is not difficult to make, given that so much of Milton's most famous poem is spent discussing or referring to the creation process. The seventh book is almost entirely composed of a variation on the Genesis account, with odes to light and lengthy passages on fish. Perhaps even more interesting are Satan's, Adam's, and Eve's speeches on creation. These speeches and other mentions of God's creative power lead scholars such as W. B. C. Watkins to claim that creation is "the substance and the structure of [Milton's] epic" (qtd. in Lehnhof 15), and C. Gilliland to acknowledge that creation is one of "many devices in the poem that convey to the reader the necessity of acknowledging man's subordination to God" (42). These scholars largely concentrate on the "Human-Divine relationship" (Coffin 2) or Milton's method of asserting that "creation constitutes the very essence of deity" (Lehnhof 15). While this is an interesting and integral part of creation's power in the poem, focusing

primarily on the way in which creation defines the creator obscures a thorough examination of the way in which creation shapes the created. It is evident in the epic that the way in which Satan, Adam, and Eve perceive creation affects not only their relationship with their maker, but also their identity and interpersonal relationships, ultimately influencing their choices and eternal roles.

It is the assertion of *Paradise Lost* that all creations owe their creator an unending debt of gratitude. From Milton's God we learn that He wishes from his creations "true allegiance, constant faith or love" (*Milton Lost* 363). Satan understands this and, though unwilling to give it, admits that such love and gratitude is "the easiest recompense . . . how due" (387). In *Paradise Regained*, Christ agrees, saying "since his word all things produced . . . Then glory and benediction, that is thanks, / The slightest, easiest, readiest recompense / From them who could return him nothing else" is indeed required (667). As God the Father, Jesus the Son, and Satan the deceiver all agree that gratitude is a warranted payment and God's desire, the obligation of creations to offer thanks to their maker is a consistent theme and even an eternal law in Milton's poetry. *Paradise Lost* operates on "the idea that every creature is indebted to its author for bestowing upon it the gift of life or being" (Lehnhof 16). Morally and naturally, all beings within *Paradise Lost* are obligated to acknowledge the Lord's creation and, in doing so, to offer obedience and gratitude as recompense.

Whether or not and to what degree characters choose to follow this eternal mandate shapes their identity and interpersonal relations. Identity will simply be discussed as the way in which characters view themselves; the analysis of interpersonal relationships is slightly more complex, as it requires two points of view. For example, Eve's view of her creation affects the way that she interacts with those around her. Simultaneously, those who interact with Eve are affected by *their* perception of her creation. These two facets of interpersonal relationships relate to and influence each other, just as identity and interpersonal relationships overlap and constantly alter each other. As numerous psychological studies have argued, "one's definition of self might be influenced by interpersonal relationships" (Sluss & Ashforth 1). The ways in which the characters of *Paradise Lost* view themselves are manifest in their interactions with others, and the ways in which others interact with them impact the ways in which they view themselves. Partially because of this overlap, both identity and interpersonal relationships directly relate to a character's understanding of creation and, thus, that character's relationship to God.

Throughout the poem, Satan's defining characteristic—willful and proud independence—is manifested in his refusal to acknowledge God as Creator. This refusal shapes both his identity and his eternal role. Satan becomes the devil through his argument that God is not creator. As he attempts to seduce the hosts of heaven to rebel against God, the angel Abdiel rebukes Satan for this betrayal, asking what greater knowledge he has than “him . . . who made / Thee what thou art, and formed the pow'rs of Heav'n” (*Lost* 442). Abdiel's argument is that Satan is inherently less worthy of leadership than those God chooses and is ungrateful in seeking it because in doing so he violates the laws of his creator. In Milton's universe, Abdiel's assertion that Satan was created by God “is sufficient to establish the Father's pre-eminence” (Lehnhof 23). In response, Satan orates,

. . . Strange point and new!  
 Doctrine which we would know whence learnt: who saw  
 When this creation was? Remember'st thou  
 Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?  
 We know no time when we were not as now;  
 Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised  
 By our own quick'ning power (*Lost* 443).

Satan's independence does not allow him to admit his debt to God, that debt which is so obvious to Abdiel and to Milton. Rather, Satan insists that because angels do not remember their creation they are “self-begot, self-raised” (443).

This absurd logic flows against the explicit claim of the poem that the Lord is creator and that his creations owe him gratitude. Satan's rebellion, the center of his identity, is fully yoked to the claim of self-creation—rebellion without a denial of creation is inconceivable, and a denial of creation without rebellion is unthinkable. In fact, it is “after hearing Satan's blasphemous declaration of being ‘self-begot, self-raised’ (V, 86o), [that Abdiel] foretells the irrevocable doom of Satan and his cohorts” (Tung 6o1). From that point forward, Satan is necessarily damned, because he will not serve under God nor acknowledge the Lord's hand in his being.

In order to retain an identity of independence after the fall, Satan continues to deny his creation by God and claims that power as his own. As Charles Coffin explains, “No creature in Milton's world has [self-sufficiency], although Satan strives with Faustian vigor to get the illusion of it” (Coffin 14). This “Faustian vigor” is evident in one of his most famous lines in the poem. Cast out of heaven, Satan relates to Beelzebub that “The mind is its own place, and in

itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. / What matter where, if I still be the same . . . ?" (*Lost* 303). Satan's concept of creation both necessitates and is necessitated by an inflated sense of self. He not only claims the power of original self-creation, but seems intent on believing in ongoing self-creation, a creation so powerful that it reshapes the world around him. Satan sets himself up to be a god, one who creates himself and, in the process, the world around him. If, as Lehnhof explains, Milton's "God is god by virtue of his singular role in the Genesis of the universe," then Satan's attempt to claim the creation not only of himself but of his surrounding is a literal attempt at deification of self and a rebellion against God (16).

Ironically, within the logic of the poem, there is nothing that Satan could have done to distance himself from godly power more than denying God's hand in his creation. Milton believed that "the Father is not only he *by* whom, but also he *from* whom, in whom, *through* whom, and *on account of* whom all things are" (*Milton Doctrine* 199). This concept is *ex Deo* creation, "the idea that God created the world from Himself rather than from 'nothing' or from some eternal coexistent matter" (Adamson 756). Within this concept of creation, "everything is to some degree a part of the Father" and thus "everything is to some degree divine" (Lehnhof 15). By acknowledging authentic creation, Satan could draw closer to God, not only in terms of his relationship to him, but also because he would be embracing the parts of himself that were most Godlike. It is both ironic and interesting, then, that by asserting that he is not made by God (in an attempt to reign like God) Satan neglects and refuses the divinity in himself.

Satan's concept of self-creation is also evident in his interpersonal relationships, especially those with Adam and Eve and the hosts of heaven. Clearly, his relationship with the host of heaven (both those who follow him and those who wage war against him) is based on his claim that they owe nothing to the Father. A study of creation also sheds light on Satan's desire to plague Adam and Eve. Since God is god because of his creative power, and since he shares his divinity with his creations, then Satan's plan (articulated by Beelzebub) to "waste [God's] whole creation, or possess / All as our own . . . [or] seduce them to our party, that their God / May . . . with repenting hand / Abolish his own works" is not just a matter of revenge (*Lost* 334–335). Rather, it is an attempt to minimize the divinity of God by debasing his creations. Thus Satan frames his interactions with Adam and Eve by his obsession with creation; his desire to

bring about The Fall is directly related to his understanding of creative power and what it means to be divine.

And yet Satan's perception of creation—his driving motivation—is not stable; he is consistently faced with evidence that conflicts with his version of creation, and yet he continues to choose rebellion. At times, even he cannot deny the overpowering truth of the Lord's power. These moments of self-doubt consistently occur when he is confronted by one of God's new creations, new evidence of the Lord's divinity. Upon first seeing Eden and the sun, "conscience wakes despair that slumbered" (385), and Satan admits that God "deserved no such return / From me, whom he created . . . What could be less than to afford him praise, / The easiest recompense" (386). This echo of the Son's assertion in *Paradise Regained* creates a moment of deep identity crisis for Satan—his concept of himself begins to unravel as the belief that he is self-made is challenged. This moment of "quasi-penitence reveal[s] the way in which his adversarial stance is sustained by this claim to self-creation" (Lehnhof). Rather than claiming that he is self-made and that in his self-making he can define the world around him, Satan admits "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (*Lost* 387). Satan sees his own weakness in God's creations. And yet, though such moments of self-reflection and near repentance occur several times in the poem, each time he reverts back to ideas of self-making and thus to a person who is unrepentant to God, and who continually torments those around him. Still, Satan's occasional wandering into a correct understanding of creation emphasizes one of Milton's primary themes—liberty. Satan is not trapped in one way of thinking and thus one way of being. Rather, he is free to choose and to choose repeatedly how to view creation and, consequentially, is free to choose his identity, eternal role, and relationship with others.

In many ways, Adam is the antithesis of Satan as he naturally and gladly extends the worship that God requires; in doing so, he defines himself and his role in the narrative. There are two accounts of Adam's creation in *Paradise Lost*—Raphael's telling and Adam's. In Raphael's version, God made "a creature who [would] . . . Govern the rest, self-knowing, and from thence / Magnanimous to correspond with Heav'n, / But grateful to acknowledge whence his good" (Milton *Lost* 492). Here, once again, the poem asserts that creations are meant—even made—to pay homage to their maker, and that Adam has a responsibility in terms of worship. Unlike Satan, however, Adam does so willingly, as is demonstrated in his account of his creation. Raphael's

account lays out Adam's responsibilities; Adam's account shows him fulfilling them as part of his identity.

Adam's telling of his creation demonstrates that he instinctively acknowledges his maker, fulfilling his obligation towards God. This instinctual obedience affects his actions, relationships, and identity. Almost immediately upon waking to find himself made, Adam wonders, "how came I thus, how here? / Not of myself; by some great Maker then, / In goodness and in power pre-eminent" (505). Many critics note that this excerpt indicates a natural inclination and intuition to worship God. This is a moment of self-reflexivity, as Adam demonstrates "the Self's complex awareness that being implies the Other than itself as a condition of existence and that its complete identity somehow requires at least the acknowledgement of the fact" (Coffin 7). Adam's entrance into the world is marked by an immediate wish to acknowledge God and thus become more whole. His "first action is to raise his eyes to Heaven . . . How came he there? Clearly not by his own means . . . He must, therefore, be the product of some great Maker, preeminent in goodness and power. How may he know this creator so that he can adore him?" (Bowers 266). Adam fulfills his responsibility naturally and without any inclination to do otherwise. In doing so, he establishes his identity and his relationship with his creator as an obedient follower of God. So great is his devotion that when Raphael warns against disobedience, Adam does not understand the concept. He says, "What meant that caution joined, 'If ye be found / Obedient'? Can we want obedience then / To him, or possibly his love desert / Who formed us from the dust . . .?" (*Lost* 433). Adam cannot fathom disobeying his maker, because his concept of creation defines their relationship.

Unlike Satan, Adam sees his lack of memory before creation as a sign that he must have been created, rather than a sign that he created himself. In the context of Milton's concept of creation *ex Deo*, Adam's logical leap indicates a far greater understanding of the world around him than Satan's does. Not only is Adam's assumption correct where Satan's is not, Adam's assumption also leads to a more complete and holy sense of self. Satan feels that admitting his relationship to God would make him somehow less, while Adam feels intuitively that in order to be whole and have a "complete identity" he must acknowledge and thank his creator (Coffin 7). In giving thanks, Adam draws closer to divinity, both by strengthening his relationship with God and by acknowledging the associated divinity in himself as a creation of God.

Adam's identity is thus stamped by his understanding of both the creation of the world and the creation of himself. He tells Eve, "best are all things as the will / Of God ordained them, his creating hand / Nothing imperfect or deficient left / Of all he created, much less man" (*Lost* 527). Adam acknowledges not only that the things around him are of God, but also that his own worth stems from the fact that he was created by God. He, God's crowning creation, is without defect. Adam cannot be "imperfect" or "deficient" because of the divine hand that formed him.

In yet another definitive difference between the devil and the first man, Adam understands that God created the world, and that it remains under the Lord's power, which understanding further shapes his identity and narrative role. Adam's first questions "aim to define the structures of authority that shape his world," demonstrating from the beginning that he recognizes that the world around him exists outside of him and is not subject to his creation (Lehnhof 21). Adam addresses the sun and enquires "Thou sun . . . Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here?" (*Lost* 505). Adam speaks with humility to the sun as a fellow creation. This is notable because of Satan's speech to the sun, in which he says "to thee I call / But with no friendly voice, and add thy name / O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams" (386). While Adam models humility and seeks to know from whence he came, Satan models hatred for the Lord's creations, as they are evidence of his own debt. Satan cannot abide the sign of his enemy's power, nor the beauty that he has deprived himself of; Adam accepts his place in the world with gratitude. He does not seek to remake the world in his image but rather to understand it as it was created.

Adam's understanding of creation also permeates his relationship with Eve. Throughout the poem, Adam instructs Eve on their maker's ways, at one point inviting her to bed, pointing out that "God hath set / Labor and rest, as day and night to men / Successive" (403). Adam's knowledge of creation gives him a measure of authority, shaping his understanding of himself and his relationship with Eve. We see, too, that he values her partially because he recognizes her as God's creation. Adam calls Eve "fairest of creation, last and best / of all God's works" (543) and frequently references her with titles such as "Daughter of God and man" (526). Adam's great love for Eve, then, at least partially stems from recognizing that she is one of God's creations, and his authority over her stems partially from a greater understanding of that creation.

It becomes clear how much Adam's understanding of creation shapes his concept of himself and his relationships only after The Fall. Like Satan, Adam's

perception of creation is in flux, and it changes after he has sinned. After The Fall, Adam's relationship with God is drastically changed. On the cusp of the promised punishment, Adam complains, "Did I request thee, Maker from my clay / to mold me man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me, or here place / In this delicious garden?" (574). This is a sharp turnaround from the grateful inclination to worship that woke him from his first sleep. The obedience he once found so easy has changed as well, and he now describes the terms of his obedience as "terms too hard, by which I was to hold / The good I sought not" (574). The version of creation that Adam promotes after The Fall represents a separation between Adam's will and the Lord's and a diminishing of the gratitude that once came to him so naturally.

Adam's ingratitude is a dismissal of his own worth as well. Whereas he was once in no way "imperfect or deficient" but "best . . . as God ordained him," Adam now seems to feel his own imperfections strongly (527). Though he complains bitterly at first about the unjustness of God, he eventually acknowledges the fairness of the Lord's punishments and says, "That dust I am, and shall to dust return: O welcome hour whenever!" (575). Adam's new vision of creation—as an act of God without his will, which brings misery—makes him view himself as less than dust, and a vessel not worthy of the life that fills it. Because of defying God's creative process, first by disobeying God and second by refusing to feel gratitude, Adam no longer feels worthy of the divine gift of life. Indeed, he seems to feel it more as an unwelcome burden.

However, while Adam's understanding of creation shifts drastically and negatively after he partakes of the fruit, there remains an important distinction between him and Satan: Adam misinterprets and is ungrateful for God's creation, but he never denies it. Adam never claims to be self-made, or capable of creating the world around him. This, according to Lehnhof, is a vital distinction: "the difference between redemption and damnation, the distance between Satan's perpetual imprisonment and Adam's eventual exultation, is in many ways reducible to the beliefs each espouses concerning God's role in creation" (39). While Satan was forever damned because he denied creation entirely and thus refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty, Adam's shift in perception still allows him room to return. Adam has not denied the reality of creation. He is still capable of feeling gratitude for it and the opportunities it gives him to be exalted. This is yet another significant way that Adam's understanding of creation contributes to his overall identity—not only who he is in the poem, but who he is capable of being after its end.

Perhaps less obviously, but even more completely, Eve's creation defines her in her own eyes and in the eyes of others. Unlike Satan and Adam, Eve's creation is somewhat mediated by the presence of a third party—her husband. Adam is not just Eve's spouse but also "her formal and material cause. She is his idea, and he supplies the rib" (Coffin 14). Unsurprisingly, this connection to Adam and mediated connection to God becomes a vital part of her identity.

Unlike Adam, who intuitively acknowledges another outside of himself and addresses God's creations immediately (*Lost* 505), Eve's origin story is much more focused on herself. Upon waking from creation Eve "with unexperienced thought" saw her reflection, recognizing it only as "a shape within the wat'ry gleam," noticing it with "sympathy," "love," and "vain desire" (399). It is perhaps unsurprising that Eve, more removed from her divine creator than Adam, does not immediately seek her Lord out. As Coffin notes, Eve "feels no such large connection with the creatures of the world or with 'some great Maker'" (15). Indeed, she has to be led away from her reflection and towards Adam in "whoes image [she] is" by a voice (*Lost* 399). It is significant that Eve is described as being in Adam's image, because it again defines her as partially his creation. Only a few pages earlier, Milton introduces the couple as splendid, "for in their looks divine / The image of their glorious Maker shone" (394), and yet we learn that the reflection of God's image in Eve is passed down through Adam, whose image she is also in. It is clear in her creation story that Eve's image, as well as her connection to God, is experienced second-hand.

If it is not completely evident in Eve's introduction that her mediated creation has affected her relationship with God, it becomes so as the poem progresses. Eve recognizes a greater divinity in Adam, who she admits to originally thinking was "less fair, / Less winning soft" than her "own reflection" (399), but from whom she learns "How beauty is excelled by manly grace / And wisdom, which alone is truly fair" (400). In recognizing herself as a creation of Adam, she recognizes that he is closer to divinity than she is. When Adam tells Eve that it is time to go to bed, she responds, "Unargued I obey; so God ordains, God is thy Law, thou mine" (404). Eve's identity, then, very much operates around the concept of subjugation to Adam, the only intelligent being she is in direct contact with.

Eve's view of her own creation also affects the way in which she interacts with those around her. While Adam interacts with deity and the otherwise divine with some frequency, Eve is often one step removed. Adam is greeted by God after his creation while Eve is met with "a voice" and Adam (399). When

Raphael visits and converses with Adam, Eve is directly addressed in only four lines, and she does not directly participate, except in providing food (429). In fact, she is noted as being “retir’d” and eventually she wanders off to tend her garden, knowing that Adam would tell her of their conversation later and “Her Husband the Relater she preferr’d / Before the Angel” (498). Eve not only is not involved in the semi-divine council, she does not particularly wish to be, marking both identity and interpersonal relations. This pattern repeats itself throughout the poem. Near the end of the epic, Gabriel comes to prophesy to Adam concerning the rest of the world and the affects of The Fall. Unlike Adam, Eve has little direct contact with Gabriel but tells Adam “whither wet’st, I know; For God is in sleep, and dreams advise” (628). It is not that Eve does not interact with the divine, but only that her interactions are often mediated, much like her creation.

Like Adam’s, Eve’s concept of creation and relationship with God shift after her sin. Eve’s change in creational thinking is directly related to her interaction with Satan, who recognizes “that Eve obeys the Father out of respect for his authority as her author” and as such “impugns the Father’s role as creator. . .” (Lehnof 37). Satan questions Godhood by questioning him as creator, saying “God therefore, cannot hurt ye, and be just; / Not just, not God” (*Lost* 537). Eve, in turn, comes to believe the serpent and changes her concept of creation to match his. It is clear that Satan’s arguments of self-making have an effect on Eve because, as they speak, she changes “the way in which she refers to God. Throughout the epic Eve has customarily called the Father ‘Creator’ or ‘Maker.’ As the Temptation proceeds, however, she foregoes that form of nominalization.” Instead, Eve’s understanding of her relationship with deity has clearly changed when she calls “God as ‘Our great Forbidder’ . . .” (Lehnhof 38). Eve’s change in her creational thinking enables her to disobey her creator, for, while understanding him as her beloved maker, she could not go against his will.

Eve’s misunderstanding of creation continues after she partakes of the fruit, affecting her relationships and concept of self. She seems to recognize The Fall as a new creation and therefore seeks a new creator—Eve’s first action after eating of the fruit is to worship the tree. She prays, “henceforth my early care, / Not without song, each morning, and due praise / Shall tend thee” (*Lost* 540). This morning devotion used to be paid to the Father, but Eve recognizes the tree as the creator of her new self. This problematic concept of creation continues as Eve considers not sharing her newfound knowledge with Adam and contemplates using it to “rend [her] more equal, and perhaps, / A thing

not undesirable, sometime, / Superior” (541). This is an inversion of the power structure the poem has previously employed and goes against its implicit argument that “every creature is indebted to its author” (Lehnhof 16). Eve no longer recognizes her creators, God and Adam, as beings to whom she owes gratitude, and consequently, her relationships with them and her concept of herself changes.

However, like Adam, Eve’s shifting perception of The Fall is not permanent. Rather, Eve quickly realizes her error and pleads for mercy from her two creators—God and Adam. Eve goes first to Adam and admits her fault saying, “both have sinned, but thou / Against God only, I against God and thee” (*Lost* 579). Eve has regained her understanding of creation, and rather than worshipping the tree and desiring to be superior to Adam, she recognizes her sin against her creators. It is Eve who proposes the idea of “importun[ing] Heaven” for mercy, and it is through this speech that Adam is once again reminded of the truth of creation. Their joint admission of guilt allows them to reconcile and, eventually, allows for the reconciliation of man and woman to God, as their prayer of repentance operates as a renewed recognition of creation. Eve retains her identity as a dutiful creation of the Father and her peaceful relationship with Adam by returning to a correct understanding of creation.

Many of the major characters of the poem, Satan, Adam, and Eve, are twice-shaped by creation, first in the creative act itself, and second in their perception of it and the way in which that affects their identity and interpersonal relationships. For these characters, the way in which characters view creation is a decision, because the truth of God’s creations is unquestionable in Milton’s writing. In his *Christian Doctrine*, Milton argues that “It is indisputable that all things which exist in the world, created in perfection of beauty and order for some definitive purpose . . . provide proof that a supreme creative being existed before the world” (1145). When faced with an unquestionable truth, his characters must accept or deny, rejoice or mourn. Since it is “indisputable” that God created the world, to deny it, or to not offer the gratitude that is the creator’s due is the first choice. From this decision stems all others, and from it springs an identity and relationships. Milton’s God is insistent that he built humanity “just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to Fall” (Milton *Lost* 363). It becomes evident throughout the poem that God’s creations’ choice to stand or to fall depends largely on how they see the world and who they attribute it to.

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