A Bounded Satan vs. A Satan Unbound: a comparative study on Satanism between William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract
John Milton and William Blake are excellent poets of their time who have keen insight about humanities. Under their portrays, Satan image came alive and carries multiple connotations more than an evil incarnation. Satan, originated from Bible, is not just an allegorical figure, but also a carrier of ideology that reflects the status of the author as well as the society of the time. Milton’s Satan is an adapted Biblical Satan while Blake’s Satan is a Dionysian Satan, yet they are both the agent of free will. In this essay, the image of Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the Devil in William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* will be closely examined and their similarities and differences will be explored. Through probing into the characterization of the two figures of Satan, this essay will dig into the background of such differences and try to find the reasons behind.

Keywords
William Blake, John Milton, Satan image

1. Introduction
John Milton and William Blake both are great poets of their time. Both *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Paradise Lost* are famous for their depictions of Satan which have influenced plenty of writers. Milton and Blake took the myth of Satan as the archetype of creation and created their own Satan. In Romantic era, Satan became an ideological symbol with wide functions: expressing rebellious or unconventional, political, moral, and religious values, and producing correspondent literary effects like irony and satire (Schock, 1993). As the authors were living in different times and in vastly different milieus, their versions of Satan have both similarities and distinctions.

2. Satan as the freedom incarnation
The Miltonic Satan is the most original creation of Satan, and there was no Satan like this prior to his (Altizer, 2009). And after the Miltonic Satan, different versions of Satan began to emerge, for example, the Blakean Satan. What the Miltonic Satan and Blakean Satan have in common, firstly, is that both are the representation of freedom and freewill. “Energy is Eternal Delight” and “Energy is the only life” (Blake, 1994) indicate Blake’s view towards indulgence and freedom. “The strife which thou call’st evil, but we style The strife of Glory: which we mean to win, Or turn this Heav’n itself into the Hell Thou fabl’st, here however to dwell free,” (Milton, 2005). This verse, seen in the context of Milton’s background and of the story, presents Satan’s view of God as a tyrant, and his desire to usurp the power of God in order to be a self-created, free agent. Satan, being the God’s most-beloved son, the
morning star, the one power that’s above the all except for God, is now forced to fall and degraded to an abomination because of his disobedience. In face of such fate, Satan didn’t compromise, instead, he planned, and gathered an army to conduct his vengeance, to fight for the freedom.

Besides, both Miltonic and Blakean Satan are carriers of specific political and religious agendas of the author. Milton’s allegoric adaptation of the myth of Satan has changed Satan’s cultural and political connotation to some extent, and Satan was no longer seen as a taboo for literary creations. The Miltonic Satan can be seen as a metaphor for Puritans at that time since Puritans were seen as pagan. Besides, the revolutions initiated by Cromwell in contention with the king, and the tragic ending of it is allegorized into the fights initiated by Satan which ends tragically. For the Blakean Satan, he is actually a figure challenging the claim of the New Church’s claim as divinely ordained (Mee, 2003). The Devil expressed the Dionysian belief that “Energy is Eternal Delight”, and monism that “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul,” which are statements clearly against the doxy of the church.

3. Characterization of Satans

Despite these similarities, vast differences exist between the two Satans. In terms of characterization, Miltonic Satan is a contradictory, dramatic character which possess traces of humanity, and it’s set in solid background of story, while the Blakean Satan is a character of imagination, a center of vision or prophetic voice set in an abstract background.

In Paradise Lost, Satan is the main character which plays the major role in the story. Paradise Lost is about the fall of Adam and Eve, however, it is the antagonist Satan that impresses people the most. Miltonic Satan is a contradictory character with sophisticated personality that made such great impact on the readers. Satan’s soliloquies in Paradise Lost, as Hong suggests, make it clear that Milton build the image of Satan as a dramatic character (Shen, 2017). Miltonic Satan is born with contradictory traits, a fallen angel, a pure and innocent being before his obedience against God. Evil started when he rebels: “That brought into this world a world of woe, Sin and her shadow Death”. The Miltonic Satan is not just pure evil, there are still some angelic characteristics in him. He is the unification of humanity, divinity, and evil. Satan praised himself as evil incarnated: “To do aught good never will be our task, But ever to do ill our sole delight, As being the contrary to his high will Whom we resist.” and the famous line: “Myself am Hell” He is evil as he was found beguiling eve to mankind’s fall:

    Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve;
    Assaying by his devilish art to reach
    The organs of her fancy, and with them forge
    Illusions as he list, phantasms and dreams

However, before he conducts his revenge, he felt remorse:

    Now conscience wakes despair
    That slumber’d, wakes the bitter memory
    Of what he was, what is, and what must be
    Worse; of whose deeds worse suffering must ensue.

Such introspection and hesitation are just like those of Hamlet conceived by Shakespeare, tinged with rich humanity. In the depiction of the angelic war, Satan is described as

    High in the midst exalted as a god,
    The apostate in his sun-bright chariot sat
    Idol of majesty divine, enclosed
    With flaming cherubim, and golden shields

suggesting a trace of divinity in him, even though later he degraded into a serpent.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell of Blake is an ironic evocation of biblical prophecy which expressed Blake’s Romantic and revolutionary beliefs. In it he tries to express a deliberately depolarized and unified vision of the cosmos. This poem described the experience of the narrator’s visit to the hell, which is actually a description of the awareness of an “infernal” (Hilton, 2003). There are few descriptions of the appearance of the Devil and the behavior, but mainly the voice. “I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock, with corroding fires”, the Blakean Satan is a Satan in fire, a figure with no clear inclination towards hatred, evil, or jeal-
ousy. The Devil here seems to be a shadow without substantial form since he is covered in black fog. Through the mouth of the Devil, Blake is actually expressing his own ideas. He makes abundant use of paradox: “Once the meek, and in a perilous path, The just man kept his course along”. There is a line in the Bible: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5), which is to say men must be humble, and depend on God, and by being meek and submissive, they will be awarded with a good earthly life. Yet here in this verse, the meek is on a perilous path. The Devil also states: “Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained” is actually implying that the meek are those lack of vitality and life energy and weak in character. The Devil here is only a voice, not a character.

4. Satans with different philosophical agenda

In terms of philosophy, behind the Miltonic Satan it is dualism, while implied in the Blakean Devil is monism.

The Miltonic Satan is a self-contradictory figure, he is conceited yet full of self-doubt. “and what surmounts the reach Of human sense, I shall delineate so By lik’ning Spiritual to corporeal forms, As may express them best” and “Therefore what he gives (Whose praise be ever sung) to man in part Spiritual, may of purest spirts be found No ingratitude food: and food alike those pure intelligences require, As doth your rational” these two verses imply the duality of spirit and body. Such duality can be seen in Satan, because when he falls, his spirit turns evil, while he can still change his corporeal form to magnificent angelic appearance:

> But first he casts to change his proper shape,  
> Which else might work him danger or delay:  
> And how stripling cherub he appears,  
> Not of the prime, yet such as in his face  
> Youth smil’d Celestial, and to every limb  
> Suitable grace diffus’d, so well he feign’d;

He can also change to creatures like lion, toad, or serpent. Such corporal changes imply the duality of Satan—he can be angelic, and traces of divinity and humanity may remain inside him, yet still he is the embodiment of evil.

In the Blakean Devil, there is a straightforward statement: “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call’d Body is a portion of Soul discern’d by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.”, in which the Body and Soul are not just two separate individual being, but rather entwined together. “Without Contraries is no progression.”, “From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil.”, and “Good is Heaven evil is Hell” imply that the duality of nature exists, but not separately, just like the two sides of a coin or Ying and Yang in Daoism, they are together in formation and being, hence the marriage of Heaven and Hell. Just like Blake wrote in his songs of Innocence and of Experience, when God created the innocent and pure Lamb, he also created the fierce and violent Tygrer, because innocence and experience are interdependent. Such dialectical view is also manifested in the Devil, as evil incarnation, as well as embodiment of paradoxical truth.

5. A Biblical Satan vs. A Dionysian Satan

The cultural notions behind the Miltonic Satan and Blakean Satan is dramatically different. Miltonic Satan, as the directly related to image of the original Biblical Satan, is characterized with rage and obsession of a mission of vengeance. However, Blakean Devil is a figure of excessive, Dionysian energy, a sublimated and amoral version of Biblical Satan.

The Miltonic Satan is put into the context of an epic story. He has been expelled from Heaven and fallen to Hell, and he is full of rage and jealousy and seeks for revenge of all sorts. He used his beguiling skill to gather an army to fight against God and Heaven, and he disguised and seduced Eve and Adam to their fall. Everything he has done seems to be out of evil, rage, and jealousy, but such emotion is just “nihilistic emotive force stirred up from the ‘bottom’ of Satan’s despairing consciousness” (Reisner, 2011). Before his revenge, he questioned himself:

> Me miserable! which way shall I fly?  
> Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?  
> Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;  
> And in the lowest deep a lower deep,  
> Still threatening to devour me opens wide,  
> To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.
In which he was doubting the purpose of his own being as he was feeling the emptiness and hollowness, and it’s until he sees the happiness that Adam and Eve are having that the indignation drove him to beguile Eve to her fall. The wrath Satan has towards God is the wrath about God’s almighty power that rides above all. The almighty power serves as a prison that holds free will in. When Satan saw the happiness of Adam and Eve, he was angry that God creates such beautiful creature yet making them hollow. Satan becomes the free will, which is against God, and that’s why “myself am hell”, but “to which the hell I suffer seems a heaven”. Satan’s rebellion is true aspiration for freedom in disguise of anger and his yearning for power. Free will is suffering, a torment out of having self-consciousness while being besieged. Milton depicted his Satan as heroic leader, as C. J. Jung proposed: “Milton is somehow aware of the threat his own Satan is becoming to his purpose” (Jung, 1952). The fall of Adam and Eve is fortunate. From God’s side, it’s rebellion, but for them, they’ve got free will to choose, to suffer, to learn, to be something more than caged spectacle in Eden. Milton himself is an advocate of free will. In 1644, Milton published Areopagitica; A speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc’d Printing, to the Parlament of England to defend the right of freedom of speech and expression, which has profoundly influenced the modern justifications.

The Blakean Devil, on the other hand, is not as depressed and dark as the Miltonic Satan. This Devil of his advocates active energy of negation as a propelling force for progression, the “Eternal Delight”, claiming that “Energy is the only life”, which posed a stance on the opposition of the orthodox Puritans belief. The Hell to the Devil is not a place for punishment like the Hell of the Miltonic Satan. Here the Devil is a Dionysian figure in opposition to the regulated Heaven. In his poem, Blake states that Milton “is of the Devils party without knowing it, yet he himself knowingly stand with the Devil. By standing in the opposite side with the orthodox, Blake is asserting the necessity of the opposite being. “For everything that lives is Holy”, here the Devil doesn’t seem to be an evil being, but a force of negation necessary for the spiral transcendence.

6. Conclusion

The Miltonic Satan and the Blakean Satan, though originated from the same myth, are yet vastly different. Besides the different ways of depiction and different style of composition, the most notable difference is their Satanism: a restrained and evil Satan who nonetheless achieves the status of a tragic hero, and represents Milton’s own repressed creativity and revolutionary politics, versus a Dionysian yet somehow positive Satan as a necessary negating force in the scheme of progression. Behind this is the different beliefs that the two poets hold: the puritan orthodox and repressed diabolic force as poetic energy in Milton, and the anti-puritan thoughts and dialectical unification of good and evil as passive and active energy that together complete the requirement for progression in Blake.

References


