

Rationality and Free Will in Paradise Lost from Satan and Human Degradation

Lili Zhang

Jinzhong University, Yuci, 030619, China

Abstract. *The theme of Milton's Paradise Lost has always been different. The theme of the long poem Paradise Lost is interpreted through the images of Satan and the two fallen characters of mankind, which provides a new perspective for the theme interpretation of Paradise Lost. Free will leads individuals to the right path under the guidance of reason and truth. Free will deviates from reason, which is the abuse of freedom. Without the guidance of truth, desire is tainted by crime. Milton's ideal personality is self-improvement and self-control, free will and rationality.*

Keywords: *Free will; Degeneration; Reason*

0. Introduction

Milton's epic Paradise Lost takes the story of the Bible as the prototype and recreates the characters on the basis of the original story. Milton not only reveals the theme of the long poem, but also answers the puzzles of the readers through his characters. For example, when God was created, why did Satan, the archangel, and Adam and Eve, the representative of mankind, fall? How does crime come into being? God knows everything and can do everything. Why doesn't he stop Satan from tempting mankind to fall? These questions are not answered by boring Christian doctrines, but indirectly explained by characters. Satan's unrestricted abuse of freedom led to degeneration at will, and human beings who made the right choices under rational constraints were ultimately redeemed. This paper tries to answer these questions by analyzing the relationship between free will and reason. Milton believes that the abuse of freedom is not only harmful to society, but also to the individual itself. Real freedom belongs to the person with noble character. Only the person with noble character can have it. People of noble character are free to do

what they ought to do by virtue of their own judgement under moral restraint. As Milton said, "Love virtue, only virtue is free."

1. From the Perspective of Human Degradation, Free Will Needs Rational Restraint

1.1 Free will without rational restraint leads to human degeneration

In *Paradise Lost*, the degeneration of human beings comes from the free will given to them by God. Human beings misuse the free will and thus commit crimes. Human degeneration is not due to desire, but to the fact that human beings do not use reason under the guidance of God, which results in the defilement of desire by sin. If desire is self-centered, it is sin; if it is directed at the Creator, it is true happiness. Milton's theory of free will tells readers that people can fight against fate, but at the same time they should be alert to the dark side of themselves. In terms of desire and emotion, God gives human freedom, while sin is a misuse of freedom^[1].

Schmidt, an American scholar, said: "When Milton reiterated the basic doctrine of Christianity, he also expressed concern about the continuing consequences of human degradation in everyday life. He is reminding people that the situation of being expelled from the paradise and its terrible consequences are always with us. *Paradise Lost* is not only a work of worrying about the world, but also a work of requiem. Fundamentally, *Paradise Lost* focuses not on how human beings fall from the Garden of Eden, nor on why the world is full of bloody and evil, but on how to face the darkness of the world and the gloom of human nature and how to save the suffering soul^[2]."

How does free will come into being? Some people believe that only when human beings have mastered labor skills can they begin to think independently. When human beings begin to leave the heavenly Garden of Eden and create value independently through labor, they can produce real free will. The difference between man and other animals is that man is the product of free will. The human desire for knowledge and participation in labor and production acquire free will. From the beginning of human life in the Garden of Eden to the temptation of Satan, and then to whether human beings can atone for their sins, are the choices of human beings to

use their free will. Knowledge and labor give people free will, so they get rid of ignorance and lose the sacred paradise, but at last they get redemption and rebuild the paradise of the world because of free will.

1.2 Free will under the restraint of reason makes mankind redeemed

Free will can also have a negative impact. If it is not combined with reason, free will can easily become an emotional impulse, making people lose the intuition of good, and can not find the right direction. Eve's image in Paradise Lost can especially illustrate this point. Eve has a strong love for beauty and thirst for knowledge, but she has not withstood the temptation of Satan, her pursuit of free will and the power of independent self has actually evolved into an inflated desire. She pitied herself and was intoxicated with her beautiful figure. Because of her lack of reason, she became a slave of passion, ate forbidden fruit secretly, and finally lost her paradise. Adam is a strong, intelligent and rational person with an unusual relationship with God. In fact, before the fall, he reached the perfect level that a person could reach: he had a strong reasoning ability, and could understand the deepest thoughts immediately; he could talk to Raphael in almost equal capacity, and immediately understand Raphael's story; self-doubt and anger after the fall also reflected his new indiscriminate and irrational attitude to things. Skill. But after degeneration, he lost his pure reason and intelligence. Adam's greatest weakness is also shown in his love for Eve: he fell in love with Eve immediately when he saw her and confided to Raphael that although Raphael warned him to constantly examine his feelings, Adam was unable to prevent love from overwhelming reason. Having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, Eve realized that in order to avoid losing Eve, he had to follow her and destroy her. Even if it meant betraying God, he would not be separated from her. Adam's curiosity and thirst for knowledge showed another weakness: he asked Raphael about creation and the universe, suggesting a temptation for the fruit of the knowledge tree to grow gradually, which implicitly showed that "the root of human misfortune is due to lack of reason, weak will, unable to withstand temptation and take the wrong path"^[3].

2. From Satan's Fall, Free Will Needs Truth Guidance

2.1 The lack of free will guided by truth led to Satan's degeneration

Satan's fall is the best indication that loss of reason leads to loss of freedom. If he obeys the Father and the Son, he is free. However, arrogance makes him feel hurt and decides to rebel, and finally deprives him of his freedom. Satan's greatest weakness is his arrogance. He sees himself as an innocent victim and is neglected in an important promotion. But in a paradise where all angels are equal, loved and happy, his ability to think so selfishly is amazing. He showed great vanity and arrogance in his self-confidence in overthrowing God. Satan devotes himself to sin. Every paragraph he says is deceptive. Every story he tells is a lie. If freedom is constrained by pride, jealousy, and passion for revenge, and loses rational control, it will bring degeneration and destruction, which shows that freedom is not arbitrary. The pursuit of freedom is positive, but excessive pursuit will bring serious consequences^[4].

2.2 Satan, who rebelled against truth, went to evil and destruction

Saint Augustine put forward in *The City of God* that Satan's degeneration was due to his changeable nature: "Indeed, if it were not for his changeable nature (changeable but indeed good, all creatures created by the most good God were originally good), he would never have been guilty of derailment." Milton has a vivid metaphor, that is, Satan "crawls like a mass of black fog", and the image of "black fog" is a commonly used metaphor for evil and witchcraft. Whales are another traditional image of Satanic magic. When Satan first appeared, Milton portrayed him as a giant whale, Leviathan, whose body was like an island, luring tired sailors ashore to rest. But Milton did not simply portray Satan as an old monster. Satan was also the son of God. Although he had fallen, Satan still had traces of his former beauty: "Although the light had faded, he still stood out among the angels^[5]."

When Satan shed tears in front of the defeated army, he revealed a sense of humiliation and compassion very similar to human beings. As a representative of evil, why can Satan still retain some good qualities? Thomas Aquinas provides a pertinent answer to this question in the *Theological Complete*: there can be no extreme evil, because as mentioned above, although evil always reduces good, evil will never consume it completely; for this reason, good will always be retained, and

nothing can become completely evil. Evil must be hidden behind a mask or curtain, otherwise it will become ineffective and vulnerable. Milton's excerpt book, page 4, shows that many good things can be cleverly incorporated into the evil of ethics and morality: "No one mixes poison with bile and black dahlia, but poison with delicious sauces and delicacies... So the devil immersed in God's dearest grace any fatal dish he had prepared." As long as good still exists, it can't be 100% evil. When Satan misuses free will and uses grandiose words to capture people's hearts, in doing so, he gradually drifts away from good and approaches the ultimate destruction of evil. Once he is completely separated from good, evil inevitably ends^[6-7].

In a word, Milton wants to express that freedom can go on the right track under the guidance of the sacred truth, bring goodness and happiness, and rebel against the truth will go to evil and destruction. Satan's fall tells readers that abuse of freedom costs a lot. The poet did not praise Satan, the "villain hero" for his rebellious spirit. Believing in truth is the right way^[8].

The first few words of *Paradise Lost* declare that the theme of the poem will be "the first disobedience of man". In essence, *Paradise Lost* proposes two moral paths that a person can follow after disobeying God: Satan represents the path of continued aggravation of sin and depravity, and Adam and Eve represent the path of atonement. Free will and rational choice are God's best gifts to angels and humans. If angels and humans do not have the freedom to rebel at the beginning of their creation, or God intervenes before they fall, then angels and humans can not be called priests of all things with free will. God only creates corpses and walking flesh. Without free will, there is no premise for rational implementation.

For Milton, on the one hand, he supports the pursuit of free will, including knowledge, labor, personal independence and personal dignity; on the other hand, he emphasizes that the pursuit must be guided by the principle of reason. Satan and human beings all have free will, but they all end up degenerating or even destroying because of the expansion of lust. In the long poems, the poet never allowed Satan and mankind to transcend the control of God, that is, the restraint of reason. Satan can't be saved from his own degeneration, but human beings can regain reason through atonement. Satan and mankind are too ecstatic, indulgent, degenerate and sinful after they break away from God's embrace. In his analysis of human spiritual history, Hegel once pointed out that "evil is born of consciousness, which is a

profound truth: because animals are not good or evil; nor are simple natural people good or evil." Human beings pursue knowledge not only to conquer the outside world, but also to recognize the inner world of human beings. Correct cognition can ensure that human beings have an independent and complete personality, not above the same kind, and live in harmony with the outside world rationally. From the poet's point of view, happy people have a peaceful mood and moral restraint at the same time. Milton's ideal personality is self-reliance and self-control, free will and rationality.

References

- [1] Chen Jingxi(2006). On the Humanistic and Artistic Implications of Paradise Lost. Xi'an: College of Literature, Northwest University.
- [2] Qi Hongwei(2009). On Satan's Image and Long Poetry Theme in Milton's Paradise Lost. Journal of the College of Literature, Nanjing Normal University, no.1, pp. 109-113.
- [3] Milton Lost Paradise(1984) Song Weiwei, Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- [4] Zhang Qin(2002). Reflecting on the Reason of Rebellion and Expectation: A Probe into the Theme of Paradise Lost. Journal of Zhejiang Normal University: Social Science Edition, no.5, pp. 42-45.
- [5] Xiao Sixin(2018). Call for Humanistic Rationality: also on the Theme of Paradise Lost. Journal of Xi'an Foreign Studies Institute, no. 1, pp. 71-78.