

Paradise Lost: Book I — The Complete and Exhaustive Story Retelling

The Poet Announces His Grand Theme and Purpose

The story of *Paradise Lost* begins with one of the most ambitious opening moments in all of literary history. The poet John Milton, a man who by the time he wrote this poem had gone completely blind, announces to his readers and listeners that he is about to undertake something that no writer in the history of human literature has ever attempted before. He is going to tell the story of everything, the very first moment when human happiness was shattered, the original cause of all suffering and death and sorrow that has ever existed in the world, and the grand divine plan that works even through that catastrophe toward the ultimate redemption of humanity.

Milton opens by focusing our attention on the fruit of the forbidden tree. This single image, a piece of fruit hanging on a tree in a garden, carries the entire weight of human history within it. That fruit represented the one commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were permitted everything else in that paradise of perfect happiness. Every other tree, every pleasure, every experience of that magnificent garden was available to them freely and joyfully. Only the fruit of one tree was forbidden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God warned them clearly that to eat of it would bring death. Yet they ate it. That moment of disobedience, the very first act of human rebellion against divine authority, is what Milton calls the mortal taste, mortal in both its senses, meaning both human and death-bringing.

The consequences of that single act were catastrophic beyond imagination. Death entered the world for the first time. Woe descended upon all humanity. The blissful seat of Eden was lost to the first human beings and to all who came after them. Everything that humanity suffers, every pain and grief and loss and illness and cruelty and injustice that has ever existed in human experience, traces its origins back to that single moment in the garden. Milton wants us to feel the full weight of this, to understand just how much was lost and how much damage was done by what might seem like such a small thing.

But Milton does not present this story purely as tragedy. He frames it within the larger context of divine providence and the hope of redemption. He tells us that one greater Man will eventually restore what was lost and regain the blissful seat for humanity. This greater Man is Jesus Christ, and Milton's poem is set against the backdrop of the entire sweep of sacred history, from the very beginning of creation to the ultimate promise of salvation. The fall of humanity is terrible, but it is not the end of the story.

With this grand theme announced, Milton turns immediately to invoke the assistance of his Muse. This is a traditional gesture in epic poetry, going back to Homer and Virgil, where the poet calls upon a divine source of inspiration to help him tell a story too vast and too important for merely human abilities. But Milton's invocation is distinctly and powerfully Christian rather than classical. He calls upon the Heavenly Muse, but he locates this Muse not on the classical Greek mountain of the Muses but on the sacred mountains of Hebrew scripture.

He mentions Oreb and Sinai first, those holy peaks in the desert where God spoke most directly and powerfully in the Old Testament. It was on Sinai that Moses received the Ten Commandments, the fundamental law of God. It was in these same desert places that the shepherd, meaning Moses himself, was first taught by divine inspiration how to write the account of the beginning of all things, how the heavens and earth rose out of Chaos at God's creative word. The Muse that Milton invokes

is therefore not a classical deity but the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit itself, the same power that moved Moses to write the Book of Genesis.

Milton then offers his Muse an alternative location, showing that this inspiration is not bound to any single place. If the Muse prefers Sion hill, which is the holy mountain of Jerusalem, or the brook of Siloa that flows near the oracle of God, then Milton is equally happy to invoke its presence there. What matters is not the specific geographical location but the nature of the inspiration, which is divine and holy.

The scope of what Milton is attempting is made very clear in these opening lines. He intends his poem to pursue things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. No one has ever written an epic on this subject before with this level of theological seriousness and poetic ambition. He intends to fly above even the greatest of classical poetic traditions, represented by the Aonian mount of the Greek Muses. His poem will surpass even Homer and Virgil not merely in literary achievement but in the grandeur and importance of its subject matter, because he is dealing not with the wars of men or the founding of cities but with the very origin of human history and the plan of divine salvation.

The Invocation to the Holy Spirit

Milton's second invocation is even more directly spiritual than the first. He addresses the Spirit specifically, the Holy Spirit of Christian theology, and makes a point of noting something theologically important about this Spirit's nature. The Spirit does not prefer before all else the outward forms of religion, the grand temples built by human hands, the elaborate ceremonies and rituals of formal worship. What the Spirit prefers is the upright heart and pure, the inner life of genuine virtue and sincere devotion. This is a deeply Protestant and deeply personal theological position, characteristic of Milton's religious outlook throughout his life.

Milton then asks the Spirit for three things. First, he asks to be instructed, because the Spirit was present from the very beginning and witnessed everything that Milton is about to describe. Second, he asks to have his darkness illuminated, recognizing that as a human being and a fallen creature he is himself subject to the very darkness that his poem explores. Third, he asks to have what is low in him raised and supported, acknowledging his own weakness and insufficiency for the task he has undertaken.

The purpose of all this assistance is stated with magnificent clarity. Milton wants to rise to the height of his great argument. He wants to assert Eternal Providence, meaning he wants to demonstrate and defend the truth that God's plan for creation and for humanity is eternally wise and good, even in the face of all the suffering and evil that exists in the world. And most famously of all, he wants to justify the ways of God to men. This phrase is one of the most famous in all of English literature, and it states the central theological and philosophical project of the entire poem. Milton is not simply telling a story. He is making an argument. He is defending God's actions and decisions against all possible objections, showing that what happened in the garden and what followed from it was not arbitrary cruelty or negligence on God's part but part of a wise and providential design that ultimately works toward the good of all humanity.

The Central Question: What Caused the Fall?

Having established his theme and invoked his inspiration, Milton now poses the central question that his poem will explore. He asks what moved the first human beings, in their state of perfect happiness and divine favour, to fall away from their Creator and transgress His will. They were lords of the entire world. They lacked nothing. They had been given dominion over all creation and lived in a paradise of unimaginable beauty and joy. The only restriction placed upon them was a single prohibition regarding a single tree. Yet they chose to violate even that one restraint.

Milton asks this question with a kind of awed incomprehension, as if the sheer irrationality of the act is itself part of what needs to be explained. How could rational beings, living in perfect conditions with perfect knowledge of what they stood to lose, make such a catastrophically self-destructive choice?

The answer, Milton tells us immediately, is that they did not make this choice in isolation or without manipulation. They were seduced. They were deceived. They were worked upon by a being of enormous intelligence, cunning, and malice, a being whose own prior rebellion against God had given him both the motive and the means to corrupt humanity as well. This being is the Infernal Serpent, the great adversary, the one who in Heaven was called Satan and who chose to use the form of a serpent to approach Eve in the garden.

What drove Satan to this act of seduction? Milton gives us two clear motivations: envy and revenge. Satan envied humanity its divine favour and the happiness it enjoyed. He was enraged that God, after casting him and his followers out of Heaven, should now create new beings to fill the heavenly places that the rebel angels had vacated, beings who would enjoy the divine love and favour that Satan himself had thrown away. And he wanted revenge on God for his own defeat, knowing that he could not harm God directly, so choosing instead to attack the thing that God had made and loved.

But to understand Satan's motivation fully, Milton takes us back before the events of the poem's opening to describe what happened in Heaven, the war and the fall that preceded everything else.

The War in Heaven and the Fall of the Angels

Satan's pride was the original sin, the first rebellion against divine authority in all of creation. Before Satan fell, before Adam and Eve were created, before the world itself existed, there was a perfect and harmonious Heaven populated by vast multitudes of angels, all living in the light of God's presence and carrying out His purposes. Satan at that time was one of the highest and most brilliant of these angelic beings, close to the throne of God in glory and power.

But Satan looked at his own brightness, his own power, his own high position, and he began to desire more. He wanted to be first. He wanted to be supreme. He looked at God and believed, or at least told himself he believed, that God's supremacy was merely a matter of custom and old repute rather than of genuine right. He told himself that he deserved to be equal to the Most High, perhaps even greater. He gathered around him angels who shared his resentment or who were persuaded by his arguments, and he raised the standard of rebellion in Heaven.

The war that followed was real and terrible and genuinely uncertain in its moment-by-moment progress. Satan and his followers brought their full force against the throne of God. They fought on the plains of Heaven with a fury and a courage that cannot be denied, and Satan himself claims honestly that he shook God's throne. The battle raged with such intensity that both sides were pushed to their limits, and Satan draws genuine pride from the fact that he forced God to reveal the full extent of His power, power that had previously been held in reserve.

But in the end, God's power was absolute and incontrovertible. The full force of divine omnipotence, wielded through the Son of God, was brought to bear against the rebel host, and they were driven out of Heaven and cast downward in a fall of nine days and nights. The imagery of this fall is one of the most vivid and terrifying in the entire poem. The rebel angels were hurled headlong, flaming, from the ethereal sky, falling in hideous ruin and combustion through the void between Heaven and the newly created Hell below. They fell in agony and fire, and when they struck the bottomless pit, they found themselves in a darkness and a pain beyond anything previously imaginable.

The Setting of Hell: Darkness Visible

Milton's description of Hell is one of the most famous and influential passages in all of English literature, and it deserves to be understood in all its philosophical and sensory complexity. Hell is not simply a very hot and unpleasant place. It is a realm constructed on principles that are the exact opposite of Heaven in every way.

The most famous and paradoxical detail is the darkness visible. In Hell, there is fire everywhere, flames of enormous intensity burning in every direction. Yet these flames produce no comforting light. They produce instead a kind of anti-light, an illumination that is worse than darkness because it shows things rather than hiding them, but shows them only in their most terrible aspect. The flames are sufficient to reveal the sights of woe that fill Hell in every direction, the regions of sorrow, the doleful shades, the waste and wild desolation of the damned. But they provide none of the warmth, comfort, or beauty that light brings in the world above.

This is theologically precise as well as poetically brilliant. In Christian theology, God is light, literally and metaphorically. God's presence is described as an unapproachable light, and the experience of Heaven is described as basking in that divine illumination. Hell, as the place most remote from God, is therefore the place most remote from light. But the fallen angels are not simply in darkness. They are tormented by a perverted version of light, fire that illuminates but does not comfort, that reveals but does not beautify, that burns but does not warm in any meaningful sense.

The landscape itself is presented as the absolute negation of everything that makes existence good. Where Heaven is a place of peace, rest, joy, and hope, Hell contains none of these things. Peace and rest can never dwell there. Hope never comes to Hell, even though hope comes to all other places and beings in creation. In their place, torture continues without end, a fiery deluge fed by ever burning sulphur that is never consumed. The geological substance of Hell is sulphur, which was in Milton's time associated with volcanic fire and with divine punishment, and which burns with a particularly acrid and suffocating quality.

The place has been prepared by Eternal Justice for the rebellious angels. This is an important theological point. Hell is not an accident or an improvisation. It is the deliberate creation of divine justice, constructed specifically as the appropriate consequence and punishment for the kind of rebellion that Satan and his followers committed. Just as Heaven is the proper home of those who align themselves with God, Hell is the proper destination of those who reject Him absolutely. The distance between them is as great as Milton can conceive: as far removed from God and the light of Heaven as from the centre of the earth to the uttermost pole of the universe.

Milton pauses to contrast this terrible place with what the fallen angels have lost. The simple exclamation of how unlike the place from whence they fell captures an entire world of loss and grief in just a few words. Everything that Hell is, Heaven is not. Everything that Heaven was, Hell is not. The fallen angels carry within them the memory of perfect happiness, and that memory makes their present suffering immeasurably worse.

Satan and Beelzebub: The First Conversation in Hell

Among the floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire that fill the surface of the burning lake, Satan soon makes out the form of his nearest companion in the fall. Lying weltering by his side, chained and suffering on the burning lake, is the one who among all the fallen angels was closest to Satan in power and closest in crime. This figure will later be known in Palestine as Beelzebub, one of the great demons of ancient mythology, whose name means lord of the flies in the Hebrew tradition. The sight of Beelzebub is shocking even to Satan, who knew him in his glory. Satan addresses him with a question that contains within it an acknowledgment of how catastrophically both of them have been transformed. He asks if this suffering, ruined figure is truly the same being who, in the happy realms of light, was clothed with transcendent brightness and outshone millions of other angels. The change is so drastic that Satan struggles to recognise his old companion.

Yet even in this recognition of how far they have fallen, Satan moves immediately to the assertion of what remains unchanged. The united thoughts and counsels, the equal hope and hazard of the great enterprise they shared together, the mutual league of rebellion, these things were real and genuine, and they have been joined now in equal ruin as they were once joined in equal aspiration. Satan acknowledges without flinching exactly where they are and how they came to be there: they have fallen from a great height into a great pit, and the cause of their fall is the superior power of God, whose thunder proved stronger than anything they had anticipated.

But the acknowledgment of God's superior power immediately becomes in Satan's mouth a kind of defiant boast. He had not known before this war, he says, the full force of those dire arms. Nobody had known. The war was a genuine test of strength and not simply a foregone conclusion, and if the outcome proves that God is stronger, well, at least now they know. And even knowing this, even having felt the full force of divine punishment, Satan declares with absolute conviction that he does not repent, does not change his mind, does not regret the rebellion.

What Satan has lost in this battle is his outward lustre, his physical brightness and glory. What he has not lost, he insists, is his fixed mind and his high disdain born from a sense of injured merit. These psychological and philosophical possessions remain entirely his. His pride, his resentment, his conviction that he deserved better than he received, his refusal to bow, his determination to resist, all of these things are as strong as they ever were, perhaps stronger for having been tested by the worst that omnipotence could do to him.

The most important strategic and psychological declaration in Satan's first speech is his enumeration of what cannot be taken from him by any power in the universe. The unconquerable will is the first and most fundamental. Satan's will remains entirely his own, unbroken and unsubmissive. The study of revenge is the second, the active intellectual project of planning and pursuing vengeance against God. Immortal hate is the third, the emotional fuel that will drive everything Satan does from this point forward. And courage never to submit or yield is the fourth, the determination that no punishment, however terrible, will break his spirit into the kind of submission that God would accept.

Satan then makes a declaration that is both politically shrewd and philosophically revealing. He says that the glory of never having yielded will never be extorted from him by God's wrath or might. This framing is important. Satan presents his defiance not as irrationality or mere stubbornness but as a matter of genuine honour and principle. To bow to God, to sue for grace on suppliant knee, to deify the power of one who he believes merely defeated him through superior force rather than through rightful authority, these things would be not just a personal humiliation but a betrayal of everything Satan believes about himself and his own worth.

The State of the Fallen Angels and Their Endurance

Milton pauses in his narrative to give us an important theological clarification about why Satan and his followers were able to rise from the burning lake at all. We might wonder, given the absolute power of God that has already been demonstrated, why He would allow the defeated rebels any freedom of movement or action whatsoever. Could He not keep them chained permanently to the bottom of Hell?

The answer Milton gives is yes, God could indeed do this, and in a sense He would be entirely within His rights to do so. But God's wisdom and providence operate on a longer and more complex timescale than simple punishment. God has permitted Satan to be at large in Hell and eventually in the wider cosmos not out of any weakness or oversight but as part of the divine plan itself. Every crime that Satan commits in his freedom only heaps more damnation upon himself. Every act of malice he carries out becomes an occasion for God to demonstrate His infinite goodness and mercy. Satan seeks to do evil, but God uses that evil to bring forth good, and specifically to bring forth the supreme good of showing mercy to fallen humanity.

This is one of the central paradoxes of the entire poem, and Milton returns to it throughout. Satan is real, powerful, and genuinely dangerous. His malice is genuine and his cunning is formidable. He will succeed in corrupting Adam and Eve and bringing death into the world. But none of this happens outside God's awareness or control. Satan's greatest victories are simultaneously his greatest defeats, because every evil he accomplishes becomes the occasion for a greater divine good. Treble confusion, wrath, and vengeance are poured on Satan himself for every act of malice he commits, while the mercy and grace shown to humanity only increases.

With this theological framework established, Milton describes Satan's physical resurrection from the burning lake. He rises with his mighty stature restored, the flames driven backward before him, rolling in billows and leaving a horrid vale in the midst. He spreads his vast wings and steers his flight across the dusky air, which feels his unusual weight as he passes through it, until he comes to land on what passes for dry land in Hell, though even this solid ground burns continuously with solid fire as the lake burns with liquid fire.

The ground where Satan lands has a visual quality that Milton compares to the devastation left by volcanic eruptions. He describes the shattered side of thundering Etna, whose combustible interior conceives fire and sublimates it with mineral fury, aided by the winds, leaving a singed and smoking landscape of desolation. This is the floor of Hell that Satan's unblest feet find beneath them.

Beelzebub follows him to this ground, and both of them glory in the sense of having escaped the burning lake, attributing this achievement to their own recovered strength rather than to any divine permission, which is of course a delusion but a characteristic one.

Satan's Second Speech: The Philosophy of Infernal Independence

Standing on the solid ground of Hell and surveying his new domain for the first time properly, Satan makes his second great speech, and it is arguably the most philosophically rich and psychologically complex of all the speeches he makes in this opening book. It has been admired and debated by readers for centuries as a statement of radical defiant independence, and it has also been recognised as a masterpiece of self-deception and rationalisation.

Satan begins by addressing the landscape around him with a kind of bitter and sarcastic welcome. He asks rhetorically whether this is the region, the soil, the climate that must be exchanged for Heaven, this mournful gloom for that celestial light. The answer is obviously yes, and the contrast between Hell and Heaven is expressed with concentrated pain. But Satan immediately attempts to reframe this terrible situation in terms that make it more acceptable, if not actually desirable.

He acknowledges that God, who is now sovereign, has the power to dispose of things as He sees fit. He even acknowledges, with a kind of grudging reluctant accuracy, that God's force has made Him supreme above His equals. This phrase is revealing, because Satan still insists on the word equals even in the moment of acknowledging God's superiority. He cannot bring himself to admit that God was ever truly greater than he was by right rather than by force. Force, in Satan's understanding, is not the same as legitimate authority.

Having acknowledged God's power while simultaneously denying God's right, Satan then bids farewell to the happy fields of Heaven. This farewell is extraordinary in its emotional complexity. There is real grief in it, a genuine mourning for what has been lost, but it is a grief that Satan forces himself to convert immediately into defiance and even a kind of embrace of his new situation. He greets Hell and its horrors, bids them hail, tells the infernal world to receive its new possessor. He is claiming Hell as his own, making it his by right of occupation if not by any divine grant.

Then comes the famous declaration of the mind's independence: the mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell and a Hell of Heaven. This is one of the most quoted lines in all of English literature, and it expresses a philosophical position of tremendous power and appeal, the idea that the individual mind is sovereign over its own experience, that external circumstances do

not determine inner reality, that what matters is not where you are but what you think and feel and believe. It is the philosophical foundation of all heroic endurance and psychological resilience. But Milton is doing something extremely subtle here. He is putting a true philosophical principle in the mouth of a being whose very situation demonstrates the limits of that principle. Satan declares that the mind can make a Heaven of Hell, but throughout the poem we see that Satan's mind is in fact unable to do this. He carries his Hell with him wherever he goes, because he carries his misery, his resentment, his envy, and his self-torment with him at all times. The great insight that Milton offers is that Satan's philosophy is correct in principle but that Satan himself cannot actually live by it, because the fundamental disorientation of his will prevents him from achieving the inner peace that his philosophy promises.

Satan then makes the declaration that at least here in Hell they will be free. God has not built this place for His own purposes. God will not drive them out of it. Here they can reign secure. And then comes the most famous line of the entire speech, indeed one of the most famous lines in all of English literature: better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

This declaration captures everything essential about Satan's character and the nature of his rebellion. It is a choice of pride over happiness, of dominance over joy, of independence over community. Satan would rather be the greatest figure in a world of misery than a subordinate, however glorious, in a world of perfect happiness. This preference reveals the fundamental error of Satan's values, his inability to understand that genuine greatness consists in relationship and love and service rather than in domination and control.

Milton's genius is that he makes this declaration genuinely comprehensible and even momentarily appealing, before showing us through the rest of the poem exactly what it costs. Satan's Hell is real, his freedom is real in a limited sense, his reign is real enough. But the happiness that comes from genuine relationship with God and with other beings, the happiness that Adam and Eve enjoy in the garden, that is precisely what Satan cannot have and cannot even properly desire anymore, because his will has been so distorted by pride and rebellion that he cannot conceive of happiness except in terms of dominance.

Satan concludes his speech by remembering his faithful companions still lying stunned on the burning lake and proposing that they should be called to share either in their new home or in a renewed attempt to regain Heaven or to discover what further adventures await them.

The Rising of the Fallen Legions

Beelzebub responds to Satan's proposal with enthusiasm and with a clear-eyed assessment of what the sound of Satan's voice will mean to the fallen host. He calls Satan the leader of those bright armies that fought in Heaven, acknowledging that only the Omnipotent could have foiled them. If the fallen angels hear Satan's voice, which they know so well from the desperate battles and worst extremes of the war in Heaven, they will respond immediately. That voice was always their liveliest pledge of hope in all their fears and dangers, their surest signal when the battle raged most fiercely. Even now, lying grovelling and prostrate on the burning lake, stunned and amazed by their fall from such a tremendous height, they will rouse themselves at that familiar call.

Satan begins moving toward the shore of the burning lake, and Milton uses this moment to provide one of the poem's great set-piece descriptions. Satan's shield is vast and round, hanging behind him on his shoulders like the moon itself as seen through the telescope that Galileo used from the hilltop of Fiesole near Florence or from the valley of the Arno, the Tuscan artist's optic glass revealing new details of the lunar surface. The comparison is precise and deliberate: just as the telescope reveals the spotty globe of the moon with its rivers and mountains and new lands, Satan's shield reveals the scale and nature of its bearer, a being of cosmic proportions.

His spear is even more extraordinary. The tallest pine ever cut from the Norwegian hills, intended to serve as the mast of some great flagship of a fleet, would by comparison to Satan's spear be nothing more than a walking stick or a wand. Satan walks with this colossal weapon to support his steps across the burning ground of Hell, and the contrast Milton draws between these painful, halting steps over the burning marl and the confident, easy strides that Satan once took across the

azure pavement of Heaven is deeply pathetic in the literal sense, designed to evoke genuine pathos and a sense of tremendous loss.

The torrid heat of Hell's climate, which is vaulted above by fire as well as burning below, strikes Satan as he walks, adding physical suffering to everything else. Yet he endures it with the stoic determination that characterises him throughout the poem. Nathless, Milton says, meaning nevertheless, he endured it and kept going. This capacity for endurance is genuinely admirable in Satan, and Milton does not deny it.

When Satan reaches the shore of the burning lake and calls out to his fallen host, his voice resounds through all the hollow deep of Hell. He addresses them with words that alternate between the magnificence of what they once were and a stinging challenge to what they have become in their present stupefaction. He calls them Princes, Potentates, Warriors, the Flower of Heaven, titles that acknowledge their former greatness while simultaneously mocking their present prostrate condition.

He asks sarcastically whether such astonishment can truly seize eternal spirits, or whether they have simply chosen this desolate burning lake as a pleasant place to rest after the toil of battle. He suggests with cutting irony that perhaps they have sworn to worship the Conqueror, lying there in their abject posture while God's swift pursuers from Heaven look down from the gates and see their advantage. And then the thundering conclusion of his exhortation, the command that crystallises the entire spirit of his infernal rebellion: awake, arise, or be forever fallen.

The response is immediate. The fallen angels spring up like soldiers caught sleeping on duty when the officer they most dread suddenly appears among them. They feel the evil plight of their situation acutely and the fierce pains of Hell are real to them, but their General's voice overrides everything. They obey in innumerable multitudes, rising like the cloud of locusts that Moses called up with his rod over the coast of Egypt, that vast dark swarm that covered all the land of Nile like a second night and darkened the entire realm of Pharaoh.

The rising fallen angels hover on wing between the upper, nether, and surrounding fires of Hell, and then, at the signal of Satan's uplifted spear, descend together onto the firm brimstone plain, filling it with a multitude that Milton compares to the great barbarian migrations from northern Europe that swept down across the Rhine and the Danube into the south in ancient times, spreading like a deluge all the way to Gibraltar and the Libyan sands.

The Great Catalogue of Demons

From the squadrons and bands of the fallen host, the leaders and heads hasten to where Satan stands, and Milton now embarks on one of the great set pieces of the entire poem, the catalogue of the chief demons. This is modelled on the catalogues of warriors in Homer and Virgil, but Milton's catalogue has a very different character and purpose. These are not simply warriors being enumerated. They are beings who will become the false gods of the ancient world, the idols that will corrupt humanity for thousands of years, leading people away from the true God and into the worship of evil under the guise of religion.

Milton frames this catalogue with a deeply serious theological observation. The names these angels bore in Heaven have been blotted out of the heavenly records, erased from the Books of Life by their rebellion. They have new names now, names they will acquire as they wander the earth and corrupt the nations of humanity. They have not yet done this, as the poem opens, but Milton is writing from the perspective of a poet who knows the entire sweep of history from creation to his own day, and he can therefore tell us what these demons will become and how they will make themselves known to human beings.

The chief of these are described as those who roamed from Hell to seek their prey on earth and established their seats of worship close by the very seat of God, setting their altars by His altar and daring to remain even when Jehovah thundered from Sion. Some of them were even placed within God's own sanctuary, their shrines set up within the very precincts of the Jerusalem temple, abominations in the holy place, their cursed rites profaning the solemn feasts of God and affronting His light with their darkness.

Moloch is the first and in many ways the most terrible of the demons described. He is a horrid king, smeared with the blood of human sacrifice, the tears of the parents mixed with that blood as they watched their own children consumed in his fires. The worshippers of Moloch used drums and timbrels to drown out the screams of the children being burned, a detail of almost unbearable horror that Milton presents with stark plainness. Moloch was worshipped by the Ammonites in Rabba and across the plain, in Argob and Basan and as far as the stream of Arnon. So bold was his worship and so extensive his influence that eventually his temple was built right against the temple of God in Jerusalem, on what Milton calls the opprobrious hill, through the fraud worked upon the wisest heart of Solomon, who was led astray by his foreign wives and their foreign gods. The pleasant valley of Hinnom, right outside Jerusalem, became his grove, and it was so defiled by these sacrifices and the fires that burned there continuously that it eventually became known as Tophet, and then as Gehenna, the black valley of hell, whose very name became in both Hebrew and Greek thought the standard word for the realm of damnation.

Chemos follows, described as the obscene dread of Moab's sons. His worship stretched across a wide territory from Aroar to Nebo and through the southern wilderness of Abarim, covering the realms of Hesebon and Horonaim, the realm of Seon beyond the flowery dale of Sibma with its vines, and reaching all the way to the Asphaltic Pool, meaning the Dead Sea. Under his other name of Peor, this demon enticed the Israelites during their march through the wilderness from Egypt to do him wanton and licentious rites, which brought terrible punishment upon them. His lustful orgies spread even to the very hill near Jerusalem where Moloch had his place, lust sitting close by hate in that terrible geography of corruption, until the good king Josiah finally drove them all out in his great religious reform.

Then come the Baalim and Ashtaroth, the male and female spirits who held general sway over the entire territory between the great river Euphrates to the east and the brook that marks the border between Egypt and Syrian ground to the west. Milton uses their description as an occasion for one of the poem's most interesting theological and philosophical digressions. Spirits, he explains, can assume either sex when they please, or both simultaneously, because their essence is so pure and uncompounded that it is not subject to the physical limitations of embodied creatures. They are not bound by joint or limb, not founded on the brittle strength of bones or weighted down by cumbrous flesh. They can be dilated to enormous size or condensed to nothing, bright or obscure, and they can execute their purposes in whatever shape they choose, whether the works they do are works of love or enmity. This elasticity of spiritual form makes the demons both more alien and more dangerous than any simply physical enemy could be.

Astoreth comes next, the queen of heaven, known to the Phoenicians as Astarte, worshipped with crescent horns and associated with the moon. The Sidonian virgins paid their vows and songs to her bright image nightly by moonlight, and her worship eventually penetrated even into Jerusalem itself, where a temple was built for her on the offensive mountain, meaning the Mount of Olives, by Solomon, that uxorious king whose heart was great but was beguiled by his many foreign wives and their idolatrous religions. The detail of the uxorious king, a man over-devoted to his wives to the point of compromising his principles, adds a very human dimension to this cosmic story of corruption.

Thammuz follows, a deity associated with a beautiful and deeply melancholy myth of annual death and mourning. The Syrian damsels lamented Thammuz each year in amorous ditties all through a summer's day, while the river Adonis flowed red to the sea, supposedly with the blood of Thammuz who was wounded anew each year. This love tale, with its mixture of erotic passion and ritualistic grief, infected even the daughters of Jerusalem with similar passionate and wanton mourning, which the prophet Ezekiel witnessed in one of his visions, when his eye was led by divine revelation to survey the dark idolatries that had corrupted and alienated the people of Judah from their God. Dagon is among the most famous of the false gods, a sea monster who is upward man and downward fish, one of the most ancient and widespread of the divine images in the ancient Near East. His temple stood high in Azotus and his worship was dreaded through the whole coast of Palestine, in Gath and Ascalon and Accaron and Gaza's frontier bounds. But Dagon suffered one of

the most memorable humiliations in all of scripture. When the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines and brought into Dagon's temple, the idol of Dagon was found fallen forward before the Ark, with its head and hands broken off on the very threshold of its own house. Milton describes this as the moment when Dagon mourned in earnest, which is a magnificent piece of dark irony, since the grief of a false god at the power of the true one is the deepest possible admission of defeat.

Rimmon is next, a Syrian god whose delightful seat was the fertile and beautiful city of Damascus on the banks of the Abbana and the Pharphar. Rimmon managed a particular and peculiar triumph of corruption in the story of the Syrian general Naaman, who was healed of leprosy by the prophet Elisha. After his healing, Naaman should logically have become a devoted worshipper of the God of Israel who healed him. Instead, Rimmon somehow managed through his corrupting influence to bring Ahaz, the foolish and sottish king of Judah, into his worship. Ahaz, having been defeated by the Syrians, was so impressed by their gods that he displaced God's own altar in Jerusalem and replaced it with one built in the Syrian fashion, on which he burned his odious offerings in honour of the gods he had been defeated by. This is a remarkable example of the perversity of idolatry, worshipping the gods of those who have defeated you rather than returning to the God who alone can help you.

The Egyptian gods come next in Milton's catalogue, Osiris, Isis, and Orus with their whole train, who are described as having abused the fanatic priests of Egypt with monstrous shapes and sorceries. The Egyptians were led to seek their gods in the forms of animals, sacred bulls and cats and ibises and crocodiles, rather than in anything human or divine. Even Israel was not immune to this infection. The golden calf that the Israelites made at Oreb while Moses was on the mountain receiving the law was the same corrupting influence at work, the desire to worship God in an animal form rather than in His true invisible spiritual nature. And King Jeroboam doubled this sin when he set up similar golden calves at Bethel and Dan, likening the God of Israel to the grazed ox, which was a profound and deliberate insult to the God who in a single night of the Exodus had killed the firstborn of all Egypt and simultaneously destroyed all of Egypt's animal gods with a single divine stroke.

Belial comes last in the main catalogue, and Milton's description of him is among the most psychologically subtle in the poem. Belial is described as the most lewdly fallen of all the spirits, more gross than any of the others in his devotion to vice purely for its own sake. He is not like Mammon, who loves wealth, or like Moloch, who loves power and destruction, or like Satan himself, who loves pride and independence. Belial simply loves evil, for its own sake, as an end in itself. He is the spirit of moral dissolution, of laziness and luxury and moral corruption.

What makes Belial's description particularly interesting is the observation that he had no specific temple and no specific altar in the ancient world. He was not worshipped under his own name and did not have a cult devoted to him. Yet Milton insists that he was more present and more active than almost any other demon, precisely because he operated through the corruption of people and institutions that should have been devoted to genuine religion. He was present when priests turned atheist, as did the sons of Eli the priest, who filled the house of God in Shiloh with lust and violence, using their priestly positions for their own gratification. He reigned in courts and palaces and in luxurious cities where riot and violence and injury dominated public life. When night fell and darkened the streets, it was the sons of Belial who wandered forth, swollen with insolence and wine. Milton cites the terrible events at Sodom, where the men of the city wanted to assault the angelic visitors who had come to Lot's house, and at Gibeah in the book of Judges, where a matron was exposed to violence by a Benjaminite mob to prevent an even worse assault, as examples of Belial's work in the world.

Milton then briefly mentions the gods of the Greek and Roman traditions, the Ionian gods who came from Javan's descendants, the Titans who were the first generation of Greek divinities and whose eldest, Saturn, seized the birthright that should have gone to Heaven's first-born, only to be overthrown in turn by his own son Jupiter. These gods were worshipped first in Crete and on Mount Ida, then on the snowy top of Olympus, then spread their influence to Delphi and Dodona and

throughout the whole of the Greek-speaking world, and even westward across the Adriatic with Saturn, who according to some traditions fled to Italy after his defeat and there introduced the golden age of peaceful civilization, going further still to the uttermost Celtic islands of the north and west.

The Standard of Azazel and the Marshalling of the Infernal Army

All of these demons and many more besides come flocking to Satan's position, but they come with looks that are downcast and dampened by their terrible situation. Yet even in their misery, there is among them some obscure glimpse of joy, a kind of relief at having found their Chief not utterly despairing and at finding themselves not utterly alone in their loss. Milton notes with characteristic precision that Satan's countenance bears a doubtful hue, meaning that his expression is itself ambiguous, neither fully despairing nor fully triumphant, reflecting the genuinely complex psychological state of a being who has lost everything but refuses to acknowledge the full extent of that loss.

Satan, as always, is the master of managing appearances and manipulating the emotions of those around him. He quickly recollects his wonted pride, that is, his habitual and characteristic pride, and with high words that bear the semblance of worth rather than its substance, words that sound magnificent and principled but are in reality hollow and self-deluding, he gently raises the fainting courage of his followers and dispels their fears.

He then commands that his great military standard be raised to the sound of trumpets and clarions. This is the gesture of a general preparing his army for review and for action, and it has all the grandeur and ceremony of a formal military occasion, even in Hell. The honour of bearing this proud standard is claimed by Azazel, a tall Cherub, one of the high-ranking fallen angels who now puts his great stature and dignity to the service of Satan's infernal court.

Azazel unfurls the imperial ensign from its glittering staff and raises it to its full height, where it shines like a meteor streaming in the wind, brilliant with gems and golden light and the arms and trophies of the fallen angelic host. Sonorous metal, the trumpet and horn music of Hell's military ceremony, blows martial sounds across the desolate plain. And then the universal host sends up a shout that tears through the vaulted concave of Hell's ceiling, a sound so tremendous that it frightens even the realm of Chaos and old Night that lies beyond the borders of Hell, the uncreated void through which the fallen angels fell on their way from Heaven.

In a spectacular visual moment, ten thousand banners rise simultaneously into the air, waving with orient colours that blaze in the lurid light of Hell. A forest of spears rises with them. Thronging helmets appear everywhere, and serried shields, pressed close together in thick array, fill the plain to a depth that seems immeasurable. The scale of this army is truly cosmic.

The Army Moves in Formation

The fallen army then does something unexpected and deeply significant. It moves not in the wild and passionate disorder that might be expected from a host of defeated and damned rebels, but in perfect phalanx formation, with military discipline that is precise and magnificent. And the music that accompanies this movement is the Dorian mode of flutes and soft recorders, the ancient musical mode that was associated by Greek music theorists with the most noble and steadfast qualities of human character.

Milton's description of the effect of this music is one of the most beautiful passages in the entire poem. He tells us that such music, played in the Dorian mode, was what raised the heroes of ancient times to the height of their noblest temper before battle. It did not inflame them with wild passion or bloodlust. Instead it inspired deliberate valour, a firm and unmoved courage that was not excited by the moment but steady and considered and deep. And beyond its military function, this

music had the power to mitigate and swage, meaning to soften and assuage, troubled thoughts, to chase away anguish and doubt and fear and sorrow and pain from mortal and immortal minds alike. The paradox is striking and intentional. Milton is giving these fallen angels the most noble and genuinely admirable musical tradition of the ancient world, suggesting that there is in them still something genuinely great and worthy of respect even in their fallen state. He does not want us to see the infernal army as simply ugly or grotesque. He wants us to see it as genuinely magnificent in its way, powerful and disciplined and capable of inspiring a kind of awe, while also understanding that all this greatness has been perverted and turned to the service of evil.

The army breathes united force with fixed thought, moving in silence to the soft pipes across the burnt soil of Hell, and when it advances to its position and stands ready, it presents a horrid front of dreadful length and dazzling arms. The word horrid here is being used in its original Latin sense of rough or bristling, as well as in its more modern sense of causing horror. The army is bristling with weapons and simultaneously horrifying to behold.

Satan Reviews His Host and Reflects

Satan then casts his experienced eye across the armed files of his army in a formal military review. He darts his gaze quickly and precisely from one end to the other, traversing the whole battalion, noting their order, their godlike faces, their stature and dignity, and finally summing their total number. As he does this, his heart distends with pride, and hardening in his own strength, he glories in what he sees.

The comparison Milton makes at this point is one of the most striking in the poem. Satan reflects that no military force ever assembled in human history or in the legendary past could compare to what he now commands. Not the giant race who fought at Phlegra in Greek mythology, not the heroic armies on both sides at Thebes or at Troy with their divine auxiliaries mixed in, not the knights of King Arthur with their British and Armorican warriors, not the great armies of Charlemagne and his peers who fought the Saracens at Fontarabbia, none of these legendary hosts could merit more than the small infantry of pygmies warred on by cranes when compared to Satan's army. The comparisons are precise and literary, drawing on both classical mythology and medieval romance to establish the scale of what Satan commands.

The Great Portrait of Satan Himself

Milton then turns from the army to its commander, and here he produces one of the most celebrated and debated character portraits in all of English literature. Satan stands above the rest, eminent in shape and gesture, proudly outstanding among his host of already extraordinary beings. He stands like a tower, which is a comparison that emphasises both his height and his solidity, his sense of being a fixed and formidable structure in a landscape of chaos.

His form has not yet lost all of its original brightness from his time in Heaven. This is an important detail. Satan has not yet been reduced to the purely monstrous form that his sins will eventually bring him to by the end of the poem. He still carries something of his former angelic glory, like a great building that has suffered terrible damage but still stands with its original architectural grandeur visible beneath the ruins. He appears as nothing less than an Archangel ruined, which is perhaps the most memorable phrase in the entire opening book, capturing both the greatness of what he was and the devastation of what he has become.

The excess of his former glory is obscured but not extinguished, and Milton's simile for this is extraordinarily powerful. Satan is like the sun when it is seen rising through a horizontal bank of misty air, or when it creates a dim twilight from behind the moon in eclipse, shedding a disastrous light across half the nations and perplexing monarchs who see it as an omen of terrible change. The sun in eclipse is still the sun, still the source of all light and warmth, but its light has become distorted and frightening rather than beautiful and life-giving. So Satan is still recognisably the great being he was in Heaven, but his glory has been perverted into something that inspires dread and a kind of terrified awe rather than love and admiration.

His face bears deep scars left by the thunder of God's divine power, wounds that mark him permanently with the evidence of his defeat. Care sits on his faded cheek, the care that comes from constant anxiety, constant planning, constant resentment. Yet beneath brows of dauntless courage and what Milton calls considerate pride, meaning a pride that is deliberate and calculating rather than simply impulsive, his eyes are both cruel and complex. They cast signs of remorse and passion as he looks upon his followers.

This moment of remorse is one of the most psychologically complex in the entire poem. Satan looks at the millions of spirits who followed him, who are condemned now because they followed him, whose glory has been withered because of his fault and his revolt, and he feels something that might be genuine grief and guilt. These beings were amerced, meaning fined or penalised, of Heaven for his fault. They were flung from eternal splendours because of his revolt. Yet they stood faithful to him even in their ruin, and their glory is now withered like the tops of forest oaks or mountain pines that have been scorched by lightning, standing still upright on the blasted heath but stripped of their former green magnificence.

The image of the lightning-scorched trees is one of Milton's most resonant, because it captures both the dignity of these fallen beings, they still stand, they have not been utterly destroyed, and the terrible damage that has been done to them. They are alive but blasted. Magnificent but ruined.

Satan's Final Great Speech of the Book

Satan prepares to address his assembled host, and finds himself overcome by emotion before he can begin. Three times he tries to speak and three times tears burst forth from him, despite his contempt for weakness. These are, Milton notes, the tears of angels, and the observation carries great weight. Angels who weep, who are capable of genuine grief and genuine feeling, are not simply machines of divine service or demonic malice. They feel real emotions, real losses, real grief. Satan's tears are genuine in this moment, whatever his subsequent speeches will make of them.

When words finally come, they are interwoven with sighs, and they represent Satan's most carefully calibrated speech of the book, designed to manage the emotions and restore the courage of his vast audience. He addresses his myriads of immortal spirits and acknowledges their matchless power, matchless except against the Almighty Himself, which is a careful and precise admission. He insists that their strife was not inglorious, that the war they fought was genuinely contested and genuinely honourable in its courage even if its cause was wrong.

He asks the rhetorical question of who could have predicted that such united force could know repulse, and then answers it with the argument that God's concealment of His true power was essentially a kind of deception. God sat on His throne upheld by old repute, consent, and custom, never previously having revealed the full extent of His might. This concealment tempted Satan's attempt and wrought their fall. God's victory was therefore not really a demonstration of rightful superiority but simply the revelation of hidden power. This is classic self-serving rationalisation on Satan's part, but it is expressed with enough superficial plausibility to serve its purpose of reassuring his followers.

Now that they know the full extent of both God's power and their own, Satan argues, they can calibrate their future strategies accordingly. They will not seek open force, which has proven insufficient. They will work instead by fraud and guile, by close design, by the patient and cunning manipulation of circumstances. And Milton gives us here the most important strategic insight of Satan's speech: he who overcomes by force has overcome but half his foe. The mind, the will, the spirit of the enemy, these remain to be conquered even after physical defeat, and Satan intends to work precisely at this level.

Then comes the most strategically important part of the speech. Satan reveals that there was in Heaven a rumour, a fame that spread through the angelic host, that God intended to create a new world and populate it with a new kind of being, creatures who would be raised by divine favour to something like the dignity of the Sons of Heaven. This is the first reference to the planned creation of humanity and the world, and it immediately becomes the centrepiece of Satan's strategic

planning. If such a world and such beings exist, then they represent both an opportunity and a target. Satan proposes that the fallen angels make their first eruption, their first active move, in the direction of this new world, to pry into it and to discover what possibilities it offers for the continuation of their war against God.

Satan concludes his speech with characteristic defiance. The infernal pit will never permanently hold celestial spirits. The Abyss will not cover them forever. But these thoughts require full counsel to develop into a proper plan. Peace with God is utterly despaired of and out of the question. Who among them could think submission? No one. Therefore war, open or understood, must be their resolution.

The Response of the Host and the Great Project

The host responds to this speech with an explosion of martial fury. Millions of flaming swords are drawn from the sides of the mighty Cherubim who form the army, and the sudden blaze of so many simultaneous sword-drawings illuminates all of Hell in a terrible flash. The fallen angels rage against the Highest with genuine fury, clashing their shields and hurling their defiance toward the vault of Heaven far above them.

A hill not far from where they stand belches fire and rolling smoke, and its surface shines with a metallic crust that clearly indicates the presence of ore beneath. Mammon, the least spiritually elevated of all the fallen angels, the one whose thoughts were always downward even in Heaven, whose eyes admired the golden pavement more than the divine presence, leads a brigade of fallen angels toward this hill with the speed and purpose of military engineers ordered to fortify a position. Mammon's crew opens the hill like a wound, digging out the ribs of gold within. Milton pauses to note with pointed irony that no one should be surprised to find riches in Hell, because that is exactly where they belong. The precious bane, wealth that tempts and corrupts and destroys, is most appropriately situated in the realm of damnation.

The construction of Pandemonium proceeds in three overlapping phases of extraordinary efficiency. The hill is opened and the ore extracted by the first group. The ore is melted, refined, and purified by a second group who work with what Milton calls wondrous art. And a third group uses the purified molten metal to fill moulds of remarkable complexity, the process working like an enormous organ system where a single blast of wind from the sound board simultaneously fills many rows of pipes with sound. Out of the earth rises a magnificent structure, enormous and beautiful, accompanied by sweet music as if the very act of its creation produces melody.

It is built like a great temple, with pilasters and Doric pillars overlaid with golden architrave, with cornice and decorative frieze, with sculpted bosses, and with a roof of fretted gold. Neither Babylon in all its glory nor Cairo with all its magnificence could have equalled this structure. The great temples built to house the gods Belus and Serapis in the ancient world, and the palaces of the greatest kings of Egypt and Assyria, were outdone in an hour by these fallen spirits working with supernatural skill and drive.

The ascending pile reaches its full stately height and the great brazen doors swing open to reveal the interior, vast and smooth and level, lit from above by rows of starry lamps and blazing cressets fed with naphtha and asphalt, the light falling as if from a sky rather than from a ceiling. The multitude of fallen angels enters and admires, some praising the building and some praising the architect.

The Architect: Mulciber

Milton uses the revelation of the architect's identity for one of the poem's most elegant and melancholy digressions. This architect was known in Heaven for having built the great towered residences where the sceptred angels held their courts and ruled their hierarchies. He was not

unknown in ancient Greece and Rome either, where men called him Mulciber, identified with the god Vulcan or Hephaestus, the divine craftsman and smith of classical mythology.

The Greeks told a story about this figure's fall from Heaven, namely that angry Jove threw him over the crystal battlements for some offence, and that he fell all day long, from morning to noon to dewy evening across the entire arc of a summer's day, before dropping at last like a falling star onto the Aegean island of Lemnos. It is a beautiful story, Milton acknowledges, and it has been elaborated with great artistry. But, he says firmly, it is wrong, or at least misplaced in time.

The truth is that Mulciber fell long before the events the Greeks describe. He fell with the rest of Satan's host in the great rebellion, and his extraordinary skill as a builder and craftsman saved him nothing and won him no exemption from the general punishment. He was sent headlong with his industrious crew, not to build the magnificent structures of Olympus, but to build in Hell.

This correction of the classical myth serves multiple purposes. It demonstrates Milton's commitment to the truth of scripture over the beauty of classical legend. It shows how classical myths can be understood as distorted echoes of genuine events in the history of the cosmos. And it deepens our understanding of the nature of Hell itself, as a place built by genuine skill and craftsmanship, not simply a realm of raw chaos and suffering, but one that has its own terrible magnificence.

The Naming of Pandemonium and the Summons to Council

The palace is named Pandemonium, a coinage of Milton's from the Greek that means the dwelling of all the demons, and it serves as the high capital of Satan and his peers. The winged heralds of Hell go forth with awful ceremony, meaning ceremony that inspires awe and terror, and with the sound of trumpets, to proclaim throughout the entire host that a solemn council is to be held there immediately.

The summons is directed to the worthiest representatives from every band and regiment, and they come trooping in their hundreds and thousands, attended by their followers. Every approach to Pandemonium is thronged. The gates and porches are packed, and especially the great hall, which Milton compares to the covered tournament ground of a medieval court, where champions rode in armed and defied the best knights of the Paynim to mortal combat at the Soldan's chair. The fallen angels brush through the air with the hiss of rustling wings, thronging both on the ground and above it.

Milton then provides his famous simile of the bees in spring, when the sun is in the sign of Taurus and the hive pours forth its populous youth in clusters. The bees fly to and fro among fresh flowers and dews, or rest on the smooth landing board outside their straw-built citadel, freshly rubbed with balm, expatriating and conferring about their affairs of state. So thick is the crowd of demons that they are packed and straitened for space, pressing against each other in the great hall of Pandemonium.

The Miraculous Reduction in Scale

Then comes the wonder of the book's conclusion. A signal is given, and in an instant something extraordinary happens. The demons, who just moments before seemed to surpass in size the very giants of the earth, now reduce themselves to the smallest possible forms. These vast, cosmic beings, enormous enough to fill the plains of Hell with their legions and each of whom stands like a tower in their natural dimensions, now become as tiny as the pygmean race that Greek legend placed in the distant east beyond the Indian mountains, or as small as the faery elves of English folklore.

Milton's description of the faery elves is particularly beautiful and somewhat surprising in its context. He describes a belated peasant, someone who has been kept out late and is making his way home after dark, who comes upon a forest-side or fountain where he sees, or dreams he sees, the

midnight revels of the faeries. The moon wheels overhead as their arbitress, closer to the earth than usual it seems, illuminating their dance. The peasant's heart rebounds simultaneously with joy and fear, a complex emotional response to an encounter with the supernatural that is genuinely wonderful and genuinely terrifying at the same time.

This comparison accomplishes several things at once. It connects the demonic host with the folk tradition of faeries and supernatural beings that would have been familiar to Milton's readers from both popular belief and literary tradition, suggesting that much of what people believed about such beings might be distorted folk memories of genuine demonic activity. It provides a moment of beauty and enchantment in the middle of Hell's horror. And it demonstrates the extraordinary flexibility of spiritual beings, their capacity to move freely between scales of existence that are completely impossible for physical, embodied creatures.

The incorporeal spirits reduce their immense shapes to the smallest forms and are at large within the hall of Pandemonium, though without number still, meaning that their reduction in size does not reduce their number. The hall that could not contain them in their full dimensions now holds them all.

The Great Seraphic Lords in Secret Conclave

But Milton is careful to note that this reduction in scale is not universal. Far within the innermost recesses of Pandemonium, in their own full dimensions and their own proper forms, the greatest of the fallen angels sit in close and secret conclave. The great Seraphic Lords and Cherubim, the highest ranks of the fallen hierarchy, do not diminish themselves for any occasion. A thousand demi-gods on golden seats fill this inner chamber, assembled in their full numbers, majestic and terrible.

After a short silence, and after the reading of the formal summons that has brought them all together, the great consult of the fallen angels begins. And on that note, with Hell's ruling council about to deliberate on the fate of a world not yet created and a humanity not yet brought into existence, Milton ends the first book of his epic.

What Book One Accomplishes

Looking back at the whole of what Book One of *Paradise Lost* achieves, we can see that it is doing something of extraordinary ambition and complexity. It introduces us to the central antagonist of the poem, Satan, with a psychological depth and richness that has been both admired and debated for centuries. It establishes the setting of Hell with such vivid and precise detail that the reader feels they have genuinely visited that terrible place. It explains the backstory of the fall of the angels and the motivation for Satan's subsequent actions. It catalogues the demons who will become the false gods of human history, connecting the cosmic story of the fall with the actual religious and cultural history of the ancient world. It builds a spectacle of infernal magnificence in Pandemonium that is deliberately designed to impress even as it horrifies. And it ends with the beginning of the deliberation that will lead to Satan's decision to corrupt humanity.

Throughout all of this, Milton is pursuing his stated aim of justifying the ways of God to men. He gives Satan every possible advantage of rhetoric and spectacle and psychological complexity, lets Satan make the most impressive possible case for his position, describes the infernal host in terms of genuine grandeur and power, and yet the overall effect of the book is to demonstrate precisely why Satan's rebellion was wrong and where it leads. The magnificence of Hell is always shadowed by the memory of Heaven. The courage of the fallen angels is always shadowed by the knowledge of what that courage is in the service of. And Satan's eloquence is always qualified by the moments of genuine grief and self-torment that break through his heroic posturing and reveal the real nature of his existence.

Paradise Lost Book One is not simply the beginning of a story. It is the establishment of a universe, a cosmology, a theology, and a psychology all at once, the foundation on which one of the greatest literary achievements in the history of the English language is built.