

Study Guide

Book I (798 ll.): Observe epic conventions, invocation of muse, appeal of poet for inspiration, statement of subject, *in medias res* opening, epic similes, epic catalogues, epic hero. Book one shows Milton entering into his subject with daring, learning, and a sense of high ambition. In matters involving the human soul, it can be a fatal flaw to underestimate the enemy. Milton's Satan attracts our pity and admiration in spite of embodying twisted and spiteful motives. How? Why are we so susceptible to language? How does it work in our imagination? ☞ Note Milton's grand style with suspended or periodic sentences woven through the blank verse. Map the sibilants in the opening verse paragraph. The wind is synonymous with the spirit. Why does he invoke biblical place names and classical pastoral traditions? Who is the shepherd of Sinai? Compare this with *Lycidas*. In what sense is death also an issue in this tale of the Fall, only more universally? What are Milton's oracles? To what extent does he submit himself for judgment here at the outset? Is this a prayer? How is the creation of the poem parallel to the creation of the poet, both starting in the darkness with the void? How are eyesight and insight connected? Why is the deficiency of the one not an impediment to the other? Why the description of primal creation as impregnation? What service does Milton hope to render? What is a theodicy? ☞ Does Milton know the answer to his question about why our "Grand Parents" abdicated as "Lords of the World," or is he truly perplexed? The answer somehow must involve "th' infernal Serpent," which is enough to launch the opening tableau of Satan writhing on the sea of fire, "confounded though immortal." Note how the tense of Milton's narrative evolves into the present in l. 54. This is the quintessential *forêt sauvage*, the place of confusion such as Dante awoke to find at the outset of the *Divine Comedy*. How does that precedent soften our first impression of the adversary? What visual picture does Milton give of the apostate angels burning in Hell? "Darkness Visible." How is Milton's voice present in lines describing it as a place "where peace / And rest can never dwell, hope never comes / That comes to all"? What hope was there in Milton's life at this time? Like the fallen angels themselves, Milton contrasts this place with the Heaven from which they have just been ejected, "O how unlike." Where does the passion of that "O" derive? Hell and apostasy are defined as extreme deprivation from the presence of God. Why is that so hard to portray in poetry? What dramatic function is served by Beëlzebub? Where does his name derive? ☞ Why are Satan's first words grammatically incomplete, a conditional clause? How are these heaps of clauses unconnected like ravings after a disaster? What themes recur? Hatred of God's power, despair at how they are all utterly changed in appearance. What subject enables Satan to control his grammar? Himself. Note his self-portrait and his instinctively heroic rhetoric: "What though the field be lost? / All is not lost." Compare him to Shakespeare's heroes and villains, Macbeth, Iago, Edmund? Defiance. Satan pledges "To wage by force or guile eternal War." ☞ What discrepancy is there between these bold words and the "deep despair" within. Does he have a private identity? Is he capable of reason? Of free will? ☞ How does Beëlzebub differ? What questions perplex him? Why does God permit our continued existence, he asks? ☞ Satan condemns their weakness and vows aggressively to corrupt all goodness, still raving about the Thunder. He wants to take the present lull as a time to regroup and form a new battle plan. ☞ Note the epic similes of Satan rising from the sea of fire. Why does Milton tell us God allows him such volition? What is the *felix culpa*? Which is more powerful in the contest of subtleties, good or evil? Is freedom conditional? ☞ Is Satan's reason really equal, as he asserts, to God's? Satan's valediction, trading heaven for hell. "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n." The former looks like a virtue, but is the latter indisputably a vice? Why is Heaven so nondescript? How is Milton's argument affected by allowing Satan so much initial coverage? What are Satan's motives? "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n." Why does he rouse his comrades? ☞ How does Beëlzebub flatter him? ☞ Note the epic similes describing Satan and his shield, his trouble walking, the appearance of the other angels as fallen leaves. Satan's first public address is marked by sarcasm, trash-talking: "have ye chos'n this place / After the toil of Battle to repose / Your wearied virtue, for the ease you find / To slumber here, as in the Vales of Heav'n?" The crux is, "Awake, arise, or be for ever fall'n." ☞ The words have immediate effect, and this very long verse paragraph rehearses the names and pedigrees of the apostate angels in an epic catalogue or roll call. Satan is like a Sultan, reviewing his eunuchs or harem. They muster like troops after a battle, which they are. This is the military sublime. Many lack names since they have been blotted out from the Book of Life, and the "Sons of Eve" have not yet conferred new names upon them. Milton knows the

damage they will wreak, but he appeals to the Muse for help with their names, though he is himself fully in command of the vast learning displayed here. Most have biblical precedents, and Milton weaves the complicated history of each into a brief sketch. Bloody king Moloch whose palace was the type of Hell. Chemos-Peor of Babylon and Egypt. Baalim and Ashtaroth, male and female, spirits being bi-sexual since of abstract, fleshless essence: Astarte, moon-goddess, worshiped on Zion (Sion); Thammuz (Adonis-Osiris) killed annually for a fertility rite; Dagon, half man, half fish, worshiped in Palestine; Egyptian deities, objects of blasphemous adoration, sons of Belial. Azazel, the standard-bearer, leads war-cry and army advances "in perfect Phalanx." Storm-troopers, breathing rage, not valor. Satan drinks power from the sight of these masses. Satan described in glory above them all, like the sun at dawn (epic simile). No regret at having brought them with him to damnation. Damaged arch-angel, "cruel his eye." Three times Satan begins to address them and "attention held them mute." Each time his words dissolve in "Tears such as Angels weep." But he finally suppresses these. ☹ Praises their warfare, though unsuccessful. Look at yourself, and never doubt your power to make a comeback. We've given God a taste of failure. Now we can really beat him "by fraud or guile." His force is superior, but "who overcomes / By force, hath overcome but half his foe." Try an indirect attack on his newest creation. Declaration of War. ☹ Flaming swords illumine Hell. Defiance against Heaven. ☹ Mammon becomes architect of Pandæmonium, a materialist who adored the gold in the streets of Heaven. Bent toward materialism. Extracting gold from the hills of Hell. Milton inserts warning about ostentation and self-promotion, the pyramids or tower of Babel. Refining is easy with plenty of fire. The edifice arises like sound from an organ (synaesthesia), described in terms strangely resembling St. Peter's in Rome. Mammon also known as Mulciber (Vulcan). Hosting of a solemn council of Satan and his peers, trooping of armies into the building, a sudden rescaling of the scene reduces the troop in proportion to the hall, a reduction they seem not to realize, being relatively identical to each other as before. How does Milton ridicule their judgment in this? Whose perspective permits this discovery? What has he indicated about the workings of pride and self-knowledge?