

Analysis of Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost from the Perspective of Historical Background

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ABSTRACT— *As Paradise Lost is the record of the poet’s course of mind and the product of the era, it is necessary for us to relate the great epic to the historical background of that age. This thesis, based on Stephen Greenblatt’s “new historicism” theory, analyzes the images of Adam and Eve from the perspective of the general historical background of the 17th-century England, aiming at exploring the influence of the Renaissance humanism on the depiction of Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost.*

Keywords—Adam, Eve, Renaissance humanism, Paradise Lost

1. INTRODUCTION

John Milton (1608-1674) is a great English poet of the 17th century, whose works have caused a great and far-reaching impact on European literature and politics. Milton has been accepted as second only to Shakespeare in the history of England on account of his most representative work—Paradise Lost, which has been studied by many people and comprehended in different way of thinking. Some critics held Paradise Lost in great esteem and produced illuminating discussion on its style. The Romanticists, for example, emphasized Satan’s pride, courage, rebellious spirit, and took him as the true hero of the poem. Such famous sayings as Shelley’s that “nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan” (cited in Miller, 1997: 149) and Keats’ “Paradise Lost is becoming more and more magical” (cited in Wang & He, 1996: 518) are still deeply-rooted in our minds.

Researches mentioned above seem to mostly concentrate on language, style, epic features, artistic quality, subject matter and potential. It was not until the last two decades of the 20th century, people began to focus on the cultural and religious tradition. According to Psychology of Literary Creation, the motivation of literary works are not only related to the author’s personal experiences but also penetrated with the historical background of his time. (Wang, 1997: 1) Milton spent twenty best years of his life in struggling for political, religious and personal freedom, and wrote numerous tracts and types of poetry. Through my study, I found that the political, cultural and religious background of the 17th-century England exerted a deep and wide impact on his literary writing. Therefore we have to look beyond and refer to the background of Milton’s time for a better understanding of his intention at the time of writing, which, in my opinion, is able to meet the author’s experiences with the readers’ in evaluating such a great epic as Paradise Lost. However, a systematic exploration of Milton’s motives for creation from this point is hard to find. This thesis will explore this issue based on Stephen Greenblatt’s “new historicism” theory, to perceive Milton’s psychological state in the depiction of Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost, which may be helpful to appreciate Milton’s other works from the perspective of psychoanalysis.

2. FREE WILL SHADOWED IN MILTON’S HUMANISTIC CONCEPT

In Paradise Lost, free will is the power that the epic celebrates. It is the faculty that makes human beings great and perfect. We can now turn our attention to the epic, where Milton’s humanism is outstandingly expressed by unfolding the free will of our two ancestors:

On Earth he first beheld
Our two first parents, yet the only two
Of mankind, in the happy garden placed,
Reaping immortal fruits of joy and love,

Uninterrupted joy, unrivaled love,
In blissful solitude. (cited in Abrams, 1986: 1494)

Adam and Eve are two crucial figures in exploring Milton's psychological motivation in the creation of *Paradise Lost*. Being made in the image of God according to His likeness, they lived ignorantly in the garden before their fall. Except for things arranged by God: the place they were born and living, the gardener position they were appointed to take, they hadn't their own choice. The only thing of our two ancestors knew was to obey the God and not to eat the Forbidden Fruit. Being in a state of ignorance, they couldn't distinguish good from evil and happiness from sorrow. But everything changed after they ate the Forbidden Fruit out of their own choice. We can feel those qualities as free will, adamant love and knowledge sprung up from their inner heart. They began to feel the sharp pains of life, and know what shame is. The practice of free will leads man to become mature and lifelike.

But why does Milton create such two images full of free will? In other words, what is the author's psychological motivation? In terms of "new historicism", interpretation of literary works should not be separated from the historical background, since history "gives a more complete understanding of a text". (cited in Bressler, 1998:239) Therefore, to answer the above questions, we should go back to the historical background of the 17th-century England to explore Milton's intention of depicting the two bright figures who long for free will.

It is no wonder that Milton's ideological concepts are complex, which contain various thoughts from ancient learning, Christian doctrine, theology of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance humanism. Basically speaking, Milton inherits two great traditions of Ancient Greek-Renaissance humanism and Jewish-Christianity. As C. A. Patridge and many Miltonic critics have pointed out that Milton is a "Christian humanist endeavoring always to reconcile the novelties of the present with the august tradition of the past". (Patridge, 1997:269) Therefore, we can say that Christian humanism has a significant influence on the creation of Milton's great epic. This thesis will deal with the tradition of Ancient Greek-Renaissance humanism externalized in the poem.

3. INFLUENCES OF ANCIENT GREEK-RENAISSANCE TRADITION

The English Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement in England. It began firstly in Italy in the late 14th century and gradually spread all over Europe by the 16th century. It marked the flowering of classical literature and the rebirth of humanism. During this period of time, people "ceased to look upon themselves as living only for God and a future world." (Liu, 2005:34) They began to reexamine the relationship between man and God, and show great interest in life and human activities. According to the humanists, man was the center of the universe instead of the passive slave of the Church. A new feeling of admiration for human beauty and desire for human value sprang up in contrast with the medieval theology concentrating on God. They praised the value and dignity of human beings, promoted the earthly life and natural desire of mankind, (Zhang, 2006: e157) and claimed that it was man not God who dominated the world.

The exaltation of man was reflected in many of contemporary arts including literature, science, music and painting, among which, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most remarkable:

What piece of work is a man,
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form
And moving how express and admirable, in action
How like an angel... (Shakespeare, 1984: 98)

Such a delight in nature and man was characteristic of humanists of the Renaissance. (Liu, 2005:99) The growing interest in man and the promotion of the status of women can also be seen in many of contemporary works. Portia, the heroine in Shakespeare's greatest comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, is a new woman of the Renaissance. She is active, vivacious, capable and clever, who frees herself from the usual feudal fetters for women. Shakespeare's keen description of Portia reflected the humanists' emphasis on the personal value and infinite capabilities of man, which results from man's consciousness of self value and rights.

As a direct inheritor of Renaissance humanism, Milton's ideology is unavoidably affected by the general historical background of his time. His concept of humanism is clearly shown in the great epic. Under the pen of Milton, man is beautiful, noble and full of energy:

Two of far nobler shape, erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honor clad
In naked majesty, seemed lords of all,

And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious Maker shone,
Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure. (cited in Abrams, 1986: 1514)

We are so impressed by the divine appearance of our ancestors that a feeling of esteem and respect arise from our inner heart spontaneously. Even Satan, when seeing Eve in Eden in Book IX, falls into raptures over her beauty and becomes good momentarily. Her loveliness and glorious radiance are shining in her:

Her Heavenly form
Angelic, but more soft and feminine,
Her graceful innocence, her every air
Of gesture or least action overawed. (ibid. 1555)

Attracted by the charming appearance of human beings, the traditional evil Satan even tries to give up his revenge. The description of beauty in Eden and human love also takes up considerable length. When our two ancestors appear in the fourth volume, everything in the Eden becomes alive and energetic, being penetrated with flowing breath and charming colors:

With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and their change, all please alike.
Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm off earliest birds; pleasant the sun
When first on this delightful land he spreads
His orient beams on herb, tree, fruit, and flower
Glistening with dew. (ibid. 1522)

We are deeply touched by the harmony of the garden, the simple and primitive love between our two ancestors. The delight of being alive, the innocence and passion of Eve, the true love between husband and wife, and the enormous bliss of the Garden, nothing can be more moving than description of them. Here, the Renaissance spirit of enjoying earthly life takes precedence over the asceticism of the Medieval theology.

Adam is sensitive to such a pure, gentle and sweet Eve. He wakes her up on the next morning:

Awake,
My fairest, my espoused, my latest found,
Heaven's last best gift, my ever new delight
Awake, the morning shines, and the fresh field
Calls us: we lose the prime, to mark how spring
Our tended plants, how blows the citron grove. (ibid. 1526)

The poetic description of the love between the two objects is so enthusiastic, honest and pure, that everyone is deeply moved and attracted. Through the depiction of the poetic love between the two objects, Milton expressed his enthusiastic admiration for happiness, enjoyment and true love, which is in line with the spirit of Renaissance. He also at his best voiced human aspirations for free will and equality. He had a firm belief in man's power. For Milton, man, as a free individual, would hold the will to choose or reject their magistrates and kings. He claimed that, since the king or magistrate held the authority of the people, man might rid themselves of such a king directly, because the power of kings and magistrates was committed to them in trust from the people.

Adam and Eve lived in Eden in perfect happiness and innocence before their fall, but they disobeyed God by eating the Forbidden Fruit from the Tree of Knowledge for the pursuit of free will, wisdom and independence. Milton exalted the noble character of human beings, and endeavored to establish a "New Heaven and Earth" (ibid. 1500) for mankind, which conforms to the circumstances of the European Renaissance tradition. After eating the Forbidden Fruit, Eve wants to make Adam notice her change on the one hand, and fears that Adam would marry another "Eve" on the other. The inner contradiction of Eve is depicted vividly and colorfully. In the following part, there are more than 60 lines of soliloquy of Adam, expressing his inner pains and regrets. When knowing Eve's eating of the Forbidden Fruit, he suddenly falls into the hell of despair:

Soon as he heard

The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed,

Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill

Ran through his veins. (ibid.1565)

Although aware of the consequence of eating Forbidden Fruit, Adam still resolutely wants to “die” with Eve, for he can’t live again in these wild woods forlorn without her sweet love. After a period of inner struggle, Adam becomes calm, and analyzes the situation reasonably: “But past who can recall, or done undo?/Not God Omnipotent, nor Fate”. (ibid.1566) Then he receives the fruit and eats it with determination. Adam makes his own choice at the cost of disobeying God, but it is the first time for him to practice his choice of freedom, which turns Adam into a real man with free will. Then he tells Eve:

So forcible within my heart I feel

The bond of Nature draw me to my own

My own in thee for what thou art is mine.

Our state cannot be severed; we are one,

One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself. (ibid.)

Adam and Eve are created as persons of flesh and blood. They are ready to share weal and woe together. This is a moving and passionate love declaration. The humanistic ideas of dignity of human beings and enjoyment of earthly life are completely reflected in the lovers’ declaration and pursuit. The fine qualities that man obtains from eating Forbidden Fruit, such as free will, love, hope and faith, make the image of man great and sublime. Milton turned to description of man’s joys and sorrows, expressing deep dimensions of feelings as opposed to the brittle logic of doctrine of the Middle Ages. Through the depiction of love and determination of our two ancestors, Milton realized his voice of humanistic enthusiasm. That is why Maynard Mack declares Milton is “fully recognizable as a Renaissance literary artist.” (Mack, 1992: 2178)

4. SUMMARY

Since literary works are the products of the era, and the political, cultural and religious background exert a great influence on the ideological system of the writer directly or indirectly. The reading process, therefore, becomes one of the contextualization rather than an “empty and meaningless game played in an intellectual vacuum”. (Scaglione, 1988: 149) This is especially applicable to Milton since he is one of the writers who involve much of themselves in their literary works. Milton puts his humanistic ideas into the great epic, and transfers his feelings, emotions and wishes into Adam and Eve. The fall in *Paradise Lost* changes man from an innocent beast to a real man. The two objects’ courage and determination represent the enterprising spirit of humanism. This is best shown when they seek for freedom, happiness, true love, and knowledge, reflecting Milton’s humanistic awareness of man’s value and right at that time, which is an externalization of ancient Greek-Renaissance tradition.

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