

Paradise Lost by John Milton

Book IX

I thought, to fully appreciate Milton's genius, you might be interested in the passage in the Bible he develops into Book IX of his epic. So here is the King James version of the story of Eve and the Serpent.

Genesis III:1-7. Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made, and he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the Serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die. For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

[1-47] The Poet gears himself up for the darkest, most tragic part of his tale. He tells about being visited nightly by his muse. He says he could have written about knights and battle, but chose not to. Moral heroism is a grander theme for epic than mere military heroism of the Homeric sort.

[48-98] Satan, who had been discovered in the Garden earlier by the Archangel Michael and expelled, wanders about the globe for seven days, and then reenters the Garden of Paradise through a fountain. He slips about, examining the animals, and decides to take over the body of the Serpent, an animal already known for its intelligence.

[99-178] Satan's soliloquy. Starts out describing his aching delight in the Earth itself, but then slips into nasty viciousness by the end. Confirms himself again in his determination to seduce and destroy the upstart human race.

[179-191] Satan finds the Serpent and slips into its body: half "possesses" it, half "wears" it. From now on keep in mind that you're *seeing* a Serpent but *hearing* the voice of Satan. Eve will never realize that the creature is other than a startlingly intelligent animal.

[192-392] Enter Adam and Eve. It is morning. Adam and Eve have come forth to garden. Their characters and relationship has been established in earlier books: they are the prototype of all lovers, of all married couples, of all kings and

queens: physically beautiful, gracious, courtly, tender with each other, both highly intelligent, and both naked. Adam tends to be more sociable, Eve more aloof; he is the wooer, she the wooed. They are in some ways naive, unknowing, and inexperienced (though fully adult, they've only existed a short time), but neither lacks intellectual power. Milton grants both powerful intellects (though, this being the 1600s, the man's is higher). They are also at this point still innocent, still perfectly sinless, though, interestingly enough, Milton has made it clear earlier that they are sexually active. He fiercely attacks the view that sexuality is itself *intrinsically* anything but pure, and they're a married couple. Their sinlessness does not, however, prevent disagreement between them, as you will see.

[393-472] Eve leaves Adam's company, goes off to garden by herself. Satan, still in the serpent, slides about in search of the human couple and stumbles upon Eve. He is stunned by her beauty but recovers.

[473-530] Satan, in the serpent, rises up and gets Eve's attention. Note the spectacular description of the serpent from 495-503. This is not your ordinary snake; this is a glamorous, fantastic crested dragon.

[532-630] The Serpent begins a discussion with Eve, to her amazement, and tells her of the fruit which he pretends bestowed on him (as a snake) the power of speech. (If an animal ever talks to you, it *will* get your attention.)

[631-794] The Seduction Scene. Satan, still speaking through the serpent, talks Eve into violating her pledge not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. See line 781: "she plucked, she eat"—one of the most painful caesuras in English poetry: right here the epic cracks in half. The Fall has occurred.

[795-1004] Eve returns to Adam, tells him what she has done, and offers him the fruit of the forbidden Tree. He, for reasons of his own, eats the Fruit, completing the corruption of the human race.

[1004-End] The effects of the Fall: all crushingly familiar. Book IX ends on a note of almost complete despair, anguish, and futility. Fortunately, the epic itself has three more Books to *partly* put itself out of this.