

**Surviving Milton: How to Read Milton's Poetry Well Enough to Appreciate
Its Genius (and pass the class)
University of California Santa Barbara's English Department**

For those of you who find Milton difficult to read, here are some practical suggestions on how to follow the poetry more easily as well as how to prepare for the class:

Reading

- *Read the "Argument" section of each book.* Each book is prefaced with a short description of what is to come--a plot summary. It's helpful to know what to expect as you read so don't skip these parts.
- *Read out loud.* Milton composed *Paradise Lost* when he was blind. He spoke the poem which was then transcribed. Many of the poem's nuances are better understood when read aloud
- *Negotiate the footnotes.* There will be many unfamiliar words and concepts in *Paradise Lost*. Try to strike a medium between reading through the poem to develop a sense of the rhythm and reading the footnotes to help you in your understanding. You may want to try to read through once without looking at the footnotes, and then return to passages, words, or allusions you thought were confusing and/or interesting and seeing what the editor has to say.
- *Read with a pen in your hand.* When a character is speaking, write his/her name and a short description of what is being said. Write notes regarding plot developments. Write down any questions you have as you read, any moments in the poem that seem important, and troubling or unusual concepts that come up. When you underline a passage, also write down why it was striking enough to underline. These notes will refresh your memory for discussions and also provide some seeds for writing exercises and the paper.

Helpful Sources

- *Cliff Notes* or other study guides can be useful to help you follow the plot. Read the book summaries first and then read the poetry. Don't place too much emphasis on the "commentary" section and, remember, I read them too.
- *Your Norton Edition* is probably the best edition of the poem out there. There is some really good background information and excerpts of Milton's other work in there. Take advantage of it. Read it early on. I especially recommend "Selections from *Christian Doctrine*" (401-428) for a closer inspection of Milton's religious thinking; "The Book of Genesis" (429-434); and "Important Concepts and Topics in *Paradise Lost*."

Adapted from handout written by Patricia Harrison --[Marthine Satris](#) 14:34, 18 September 2007 (PDT)

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