

## The Poetry of John Milton:

### Milton's Satan

Milton's depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost* has been a focal point of Milton critics and a point of contention. Most see Satan as an attractive character, one who fixates the audience with his grand, rhetorical speeches and his epic deeds which might match those of Achilles or Aeneas. Since Milton considered himself a devout Christian, it would seem unlikely that he would consciously craft the traditional embodiment of evil into a positive role model. Still, William Blake remarked that Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it. After all Milton, like Satan, assented to overthrow the King (Charles the First and God, respectively). Critics of the Romantic period see Satan as the true hero of *Paradise Lost*, a Prometheus-like figure who gave humans remarkable gifts at a great personal sacrifice. 20th century critics like A.J.A. Waldock and William Empson see Satan as sympathetic and commendable and God as distant and tyrannical. But to critics like C.S. Lewis in *Preface to Paradise Lost*, Satan may well be extremely well drawn, but he is nevertheless, egocentric, self-deluded, and just plain evil.

Stanley Fish in his groundbreaking work of Reader-Response criticism, *Surprised by Sin*, attempted to resolve the controversy by asserting that Satan is indeed attractive early in the epic because the readers are fallen into Original Sin and therefore are spiritually more aligned with Satan than God. Fish sees this as a teaching device by Milton, so that the readers may feel the full impact of their own sinful nature, experience the Fall with Adam and Eve, and then learn to grow in grace with them after the Fall. By the end of the epic, even though Satan's speeches are as lofty and grand as they were in the earlier books, Fish suggests that the readers are not as attracted to Satan as they were at the beginning, for they have now experienced vicariously the dire consequences of Satan's schemes.