

Teaching Paradise Lost at Iranian Universities: A Cultural Study

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Abstract

Studies on Milton have always decorated the pantheon of English literature since he is, as critics hold, the most challenging and the most inventive to a modern reader; that is because he is not limited to literature but explores political, religious, and gender domains, among others, as well as, according to recent studies, racial issues. Sometimes he is called a metaphysical poet for his difficult language, so working on him gives students a familiarity to the school's features. Besides, a course on *Paradise Lost* would be an introduction to the last Renaissance man's masterpiece, the era which bore other great writers such as Shakespeare and Marlow. However, the problem begins when we see the present trend in the field English Literature that can complete its work without studying the important works in the literary history. Wordsworth had also the same argument in The Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: "The invaluable works of our elder writers ... the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse". To examine this problem beside its reasons and solutions, the researcher in this article tries to bring forth the ways Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as a hard(-core) poem, could be taught. The study starts from the university courses at the B.A. to M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in order to present a level-wise piece of research. The main focus in this regard will be on students as foreign language learners; therefore, the Iranian universities will be taken as the case study. It is needless to say that the investigation homes in the cultural aspects that might help or hinder both teachers and students to take an easier path to the comprehension of this magnum opus.

Keywords

Paradise Lost, Teaching, Iranian Universities, Cultural Study, Milton

1. Introduction

Paradise Lost (1667) is surely one of the most important pieces in the history of English literature. If one asks about the great poets in line with John Milton in English literature, maybe the immediate answers would be, as M. H. Abrams compares (880), William Shakespeare and John Keats, the two whose writings were heavily influenced by Milton's masterpiece.¹ However, its influence has continued to be seen on contemporary literature as well. As we live in the postmodern period, another relevant question might be pertinent to the whole idea behind postmodern thought and

its philosophy of language claiming that words have lost their meanings after the Fall, the theme that is frequently recurring in the literary works of past few decades, say, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (43). Such an instance indicates that the importance of the work and its subject has not remained in the poetic genre, but has spread into fiction and drama as well.

On the other hand, reading Milton with his melodious but cantankerous language and style makes a reader, especially when he/she is a student, feel how uphill his poetic path is to take. Writing on religious, political, and social issues commingled with literary ones, he can be called as "the most challenging, the most inventive, and the most problematic for a modern reader" (Lerer 1: 2':30-45"). Falling into

1. For example, see:

Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001).

Beth Lau, *Keats's Paradise Lost* (Florida: UP of Florida, 1998). Abrams also mentions that Keats' *Hyperion* was directly on the model of *Paradise Lost* (878).

metaphysical poetry's coterie,¹ poetically speaking, and being the last Renaissance poet,² historically speaking, add to his catholicity or heterogeneity. Besides, reading him is one thing, teaching or making pupils understand his oeuvre is another problem, particularly when it comes to his verse, broadly, and his *Paradise Lost*, specifically. In addition, academicians know how it is different to teach a writer whose works are problem-free, that is, the ones far from controversial matters of religion and politics, from a poet like Milton in whom one may find the argumentative aspects in almost every stream or streak of his lines.

The next matter is poetry *per se* because it not only is a trepid job for students (Wrigg 1) and even so many teachers (Haugh et al. 25),³ but its classics are more complicated for them. It is probably very much easier to teach LANGUAGE poetry with its difficult terminology than teaching Chaucer (Showalter 64). Now when it comes to *Paradise Lost*, the instructor undertakes a herculean job to bring home the diction for B.A. students. All these reverberate the significance and the aim of the present research that is going to shed light on how university professors can grapple with the mentioned points. Still, there is another layer which is relevant to cultural sensitivities where we are supposed to work on such a poem in a foreign language and context.

Paradise Lost has been selected due to containing all of the given challenges; however, it could be seen as a case study representing long poetic works. In other words, length is at issue for poetry courses since it both bores students and exhausts the class time. It is here that the problem begins when we see the present trend in the field English Literature completing its career without studying the important works in its history (Weisinger 342). Wordsworth had also the same argument in The Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: "The invaluable works of our elder writers ... the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (128).

Digging such problems beside finding their solutions, the researcher in this article tries to bring forth the ways *Paradise Lost* could be taught. The study starts from the first steps of the poetic courses at the B.A. degree (Part I), going then through graduate and postgraduate courses (Part II). The main focus in this research will be on students as foreign language learners at Iranian universities; therefore, the investigation homes in cultural aspects that help or hinder one to take an easier path to the understanding of this magnum opus. Testing as a momentous compartment of teaching will also be inquired in the last section of the first part.

2. Argument

I

The major queries for teaching *Paradise Lost* to B.A. students in Iran, where English is a foreign language, could be counted as follows: As a difficult, classic work with unfamiliar, literary vocabulary, will it arouse their interest? Or, can they understand its multifarious thematic content? Are you expecting too much of them when they have many problems in general English whether in vocabulary or structure? These are probably the questions a teacher intending to work on *Paradise Lost* is frequently asked.

The teacher, as the first preparatory condition, must honestly believe that this literature is worth presenting and ought to communicate his/her enthusiasm to the class. An essential concomitant of this point is the instructor's conviction that his/her students are also worthy and merit the effort he/she is going to expend for the difficult presentation. Here, the matter is not students' endeavor but interest since even the youngsters whose aptitude tests indicate little proficiency in language will do reasonably well if they know that the teacher trusts them to do so.

The length is always there when we speak of *Paradise Lost*. Some professors like Lerer suggest a selective reading and teaching of the work, which is very much supported by the researcher's experience too. Lerer in a series of lectures reads just books I, II, III, IV, and IX that convey the main plot. Hence, our preparation begins with a review of the material and some decisions regarding what parts of the poem should be emphasized, which would most need clarification, and how the other sections ought to be skimmed or omitted. Cooper (323) deletes Book XI completely or the sections bearing the epic catalogs such as the list of classical deities (1.507-22), the demons (1.335-490), and the satanic games (2.506-628).

The ultimate path is taken by Weisinger who says "[i]t is surprising how much can be gotten into the course if we concentrate only on the texts themselves and ruthlessly cut out all extraneous matters" (345), by which he means that such great pieces need to be accompanied with explanatory or critical texts. In other words, the quote implies that the poem is supposed to be shared among some courses, which will be elaborated below in a moment, or it is not necessary to read it entirely in the class but at home. This is to underline the fact that the obliteration of the obligation to read the whole poem is just restricted to the academic condition when *Paradise Lost* is for university course(s), otherwise the holistic coverage had better be observed. Further, how should we manage the reading of the analytical texts on Milton? After all, the work can barely be claimed as a merely literary piece.

The next obstacle is connected to the arduous vocabulary and the matter of comprehension. EFL learners need a detailed study guide and supplementary reading in order to understand and enjoy Milton. Our study guide can be designed to be sequential, that is, no question anticipates the material that comes later. It makes no sense to ask students

1. For example, see: Lisa Low and Anthony J. Harding (eds.), *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Or, E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Metaphysicals and Milton* (Westport: Greenwood, 1975).

2. For example, see: Leah Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (London: Routledge, 1996).

3. The researcher has examined the different possible ways to teach poetry, from classical to contemporary forms, in "Teaching Poetry: From Traditional Forms to Performance Poetry." *IPEDR* 26 (Dec. 2011): 234-38.

how Pandemonium contrasts with heaven until students reach a description of the latter (Klawitter 107-11).

Some scholars (Cooper 5), likewise, propose giving a study guide as follows: If an important passage is unusually difficult, we substitute a rough outline in the questionnaire approach. The building of Satan's capital in Book I is treated thus: Mammon's first work gang digs out the foundations (688-9). We are admonished not to envy the riches of the earth (690-92). The demons create in one short hour a building greater than the Tower of Babel or the temples of Memphis (692-9). A second work gang draws forth from the earth molten metals to be used in the building (700-704). A third work gang begins to fill the foundations (705-9). Dulcet sounds arise with the ornate buildings (710-17). A commentary on Mulciber, the architect of Satan's capital, is given (730-51). Finally, Milton coins the term "Pandemonium" for the demonic city (756-7). However, mention should be made and attention must be paid that this is just for puzzling excerpts and cannot be extended to the whole work since it is like a plot summary which would be forgotten after a while.

These complexities aside, what enthruses students to read the poem is Milton's versatility. Superior students can write admirable essays on such subjects as "Milton's Angelology"; others may lead the class discussions of the books; average students would debate the dramatic merits of Milton's God, Christ, Adam and Eve, along with Satan. Those with scientific interests might demonstrate the contrasting views of the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems of the universe; even the least capable members of the class are able to produce Fisher's suggested activities such as imaginative, if not artistic, illustrations of Milton's cosmos as a poem-drawing activity. In addition, poem-acting finds room in this work due to the great dramatic dialogs between Adam and Eve, Satan and Eve, or Satan and other demons (3). Some of these creations will usually be whimsical and some pious. This procedure results in an ambience where pupils distance the terrifying atmosphere of poetry, classics, and Milton.

They can also focus on a single character; as an example, Sauro dealing with Eve believes that all of the characters in the work are described in the same way by rich titles (758): God speaks to His Son as "My sole complacence" (3.276). Eve addresses Adam as "my author and disposer" (4.635). Raphael is the "favorable Spirit" (5.507), Michael, the "safe guide" (11.371), and Satan, the "Prince of Darkness" (10.383). Therefore, by considering each character under several personality traits, the poem is made not only meaningful but relevant. This strategy is proper for undergraduate terms since poetry courses commence before "Literary Criticism" classes.

There is a delicate point here: we should not approach the *plot* (clearly differentiated from the text) partially. A problem occurs when we find out that Book I receives intensive study in classes as an introduction to the poem, its structure, and its place in the epic tradition. To add to the reasons, it also bears so many famous quotations that as a matter of fact students of literature should be familiar with. This would

monovalentize students' minds because the commentaries that are limited to the first book consider Satan as the hero. This approach is very problematic in that not only students do not understand the whole story, but they cannot also have a proper interpretation of the poem, which clearly tries to "justify the ways of God to men" (1.26). One might say that dispersing the poem among different courses is beyond his/her authority; what can he/she do as a teacher assigned only for one class? To propose a solution for lack of time, following an overall explication we can listen to the clearly articulated reading by William Blake; it makes students understand the atmosphere and the rousing and arousing language. Other versions are fine as well, if the close listening is in the agenda. The attraction of listening, rather than reading, by different tones helps pupils speed-read and visualize.

In Iran, students like to deal with the differences between the Islamic thought and the Christian one in cosmology, angelology, genesis, and the like. The relation between Milton and Islam is a very interesting issue for them, and teachers are not here bare-handed. The emergence of a counterrevolutionary discourse defining Milton's sacred politics as fundamentally Islamic, or the work of "enthusiasm", a term that in many ways has prejudicially been tried to be introduced as a direct progenitor of the modern discourse of "terrorism", are among the studies. From the 1640s on, the royalists imagined parliamentarians and defenders of regicide like Milton as "fanatical" revolutionaries, zealots who believed in divine inspiration and knew themselves soldiers of God. Milton, following Prophet Muhammad, embodies forms of revolutionary iconoclasm in his refusal of the established forms of politics. This moment marks a decisive transformation of both English politics and English representations of Islam. Against the old depictions of Islamic pleasure, which presumed Islam as a carnal perversion of Christian truth, there appeared a newly powerful image blurring the previous picture. This relationship is forged between Milton and the Muslim by a Europe that constitutes itself as the space of a rational, pure politics, separated from the seductions of both literary and religious enthusiasm. In this history, both romance and Islam play a crucial role. If during the 1630s, Charles I and his court had appropriated the language of pastoral romance as a part of an elaborate rhetoric of self-presentation that sought to displace the memory of the more militant fictions of Elizabethan chivalry, it is in this milieu that Milton denounces romance and writes *Paradise Lost* as a seminally religious and political masterpiece to defend "God" (Robinson 146-8). Such in-depth discussions not only motivate students to read the poem more thoroughly, but also incite them to boost their "extraneous" knowledge about the work and not to limit themselves within the lines, as Weisinger maintains. Nonetheless, the teacher should be always alerted not to take into consideration all of the sources comparing the two sides into extremes, for it may cause religious unease among students and arouse their sensitivities.

As was mentioned above, the poem could be investigated in some classes instead of one; for example, it is appropriate as a case study for the Elizabethan poetry in the course called "Advanced Poetry"; Matthew Arnold affirmed that I do not need to "dwell on our Elizabethan poetry, or on the continuation and close of this poetry in Milton. We all of us profess to be agreed in the estimate [esteem] of this poetry; we all of us recognize it as great poetry, our greatest, and Shakespeare and Milton as our poetical classics" (Weisinger 250).

The work is very much helpful to students' understanding of the bible. As one of the courses they should take in Iran is "Oral Reproduction of Stories 2" in which Greek and Roman mythologies along with the bible are routinely in the syllabus, this work succors apprehending the most significant chapters of the Scripture. Cooper suggests that after a brief introduction to the epic, the class should be asked to read, as a prelude to Book I, brief excerpts from Genesis (1-3), Revelation (12), and Isaiah (14). She says, "I find, incidentally, that the Bible is an attractive curiosity for many young people; regardless of their religion or irreligion, they seem to think that this is a volume they ought to know more about" (322).

"A Brief Survey of English Literature History 1", likewise, specifies at least four hours to Milton, if not assigning students to study the piece as their term project or self-study material. The researcher offers another possibility in courses such as "Simple Poetry" or "An Introduction to Literature 2" that treat of elementary poetry. In such classes, we may teach some excerpts from Shakespearean plays like the famous quote by Jaques in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage" (2.7.139-66); in the same way, even in elementary poetry classes, the teacher can select some parts from the Books. Concerning the peripheral texts, moreover, we can bring Joseph Addison, as one of the greatest prosaists who has eighteen essays on the masterpiece, to the class of "Selected Prose" to elaborate on the technical aspects through another classic writer in order to zoom in the highlights of the contemporary critical taste.

Coming to the test, if the poem is taught just in one course, it may have different components. The final examination could be an essay designed more to encourage each student to enjoy the fulfillment of his/her potential than to provide points for the report card since reading the work has been that much significant and of course burdensome that putting students to a single session test will not help. After several weeks of togetherness in Hell and Paradise with his/her students, the teacher is able to judge and grade the class based on the activities and arguments.

A research project could also be assigned for the course by distributing some questions referring to matters in different Books of the poem, and then asking students by reference to the due lines answer the items (Cooper 323). By giving the lines in Book 12, for instance, we interrogate why Adam rejoices on hearing Michael's prophecy (375-385). What trait, according to Michael, will make Christ's mission in the world successful (386-465)? Did Milton have this trait in

mind when he dictated the opening lines of the poem? Why is the stanza beginning "O goodness infinite, goodness immense" (469-478) crucial to the poem? Who are the "grievous wolves" (508-535) whom Milton attacks? What is Adam's state of mind as we hear his final words (552-573)? In what way does Michael's parting advice echo one of Raphael's earlier admonitions (574-587)? This method highlights close reading and prevents students from reading some summaries for each book.

II

To teach *Paradise Lost* or other long poetic and literary works in the M.A. or Ph.D. classes gives more room to the teacher to maneuver, as students are more knowledgeable of both language and literature, more capable in speed-reading, and more motivated in their fields of study. As Lerner says, "this book [*Paradise Lost*] is written for those who have mastered the language but [need to know more deeply about] literature" and want access to the universal ideas and values of canonical English Literature (58). This quotation favors teaching the poem in graduate studies.

As above, if the length is to be organized among some hours, Salwak tells us that we can teach *Paradise Lost* in the Renaissance course (55), which is taught at the M.A. in Iran. The poem can also provide us with all critical readings for the "Literary Criticism" of the M.A. or Ph.D. Despite the modern grimace at the traditional-historical approach, one cannot ignore the fact that young students' ability to appreciate—both apprehending and enjoying—a poem may be greatly enhanced by finding manifestations of the poet's own life in his work. Mention should be made that this is in line with the Eastern or Iranian culture relying on not only this approach but also the author in its evaluation. The concept of the author, obviously, can link this approach to the other critical methods. Milton's allusions to his own "darkness", (3.22-6; 41-50), violent verbal attacks suffered by him when the monarchy was restored (7.25-30), the poet's implied comparison between himself and the seers and epic authors of antiquity (3.32), Milton's keen interest in the science of the day (3.588), and his visit to Galileo on the Italian journey (1.283-91) are among the many samples. The relationship between Milton and his spouse viewed in the light of his fervent belief in extramarital chastity and the problems he had with his child bride, Mary Powell, appear especially in the nuptial hymn beginning "Hail, wedded Love" (4.750).¹

Having passed "Literary Criticism", at least in six credits, students are now able to discuss with the other theories

1. For other critical studies see the following:

Deconstruction: H. Rapaport, *Milton and the Post Modern* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

Formalism: Mahdi Shafieyan, *Heaven the Hero: A Formalistic Approach* (North Carolina: Lulu, 2008).

Marxism: Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977).

Psychoanalysis: W. Kerrigan, *The Sacred Garden* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

Reader-response method: Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

notwithstanding. On the account that in graduate and postgraduate trajectories students know how to apply various critical approaches, it is not suggested to concentrate on characterization, themes, epic elements and the like, especially when contemporary teachers feel the necessity to protest at the prominence given to Satan in students' theory-free responses to the poem (Forsyth 1). Among the other critical methods that directly deal with cultural issues are gender studies, or simply feminism. Girls are generally infuriated by Milton's putting woman in her domestic place, as in "He for God only, she for God in him" (4.297). The boys customarily tease their classroom Eves by declaring for Milton's logic. Among feminists, some are of the opinion that Eve is the symbol of naiveté, and Milton puts the paradisiacal wisdom into the mold of the spirits who are male and defines the satanic dimensions through Sin, who is a female (Gilbert 373-4). Another has commented that when Eve eats the fruit, she is submitting to patriarchy (Froula 156). These are the esthetic moments in the class that may cause the diversion of the discussion which should be controlled by the teacher.¹

A relevant point here is the use of small seminars, which make better teaching possible; instead of the professor as the lecturer to large groups, careful analysis of the text in a class under the guidance of his/hers will result in close reading and sober judgment (Weisinger 345). This method is helpful if the sessions are met in the form of a collaborative course with some professors, each specializing in one critical aspect, who read and interpret the text separately, although possibly on the same critical concept.

3. Conclusion

In this article, the effort was made to convince university instructors and students that teaching long poems is not terrifying, even if it is called *Paradise Lost* with its hugeness in length, difficulty of language, and toughness in structure. Shortage of class time and cultural matters were among other challenges. For each problem some pedagogical methods and critical materials were posed and suggested, the ones which could be applied to other large literary works. This research hopes to find the major English Language and Literature in the future working on the masterpieces of the great stars in the literary constellation.

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1. The same cultural case applies to racial issues or postcolonial studies, although they are not significant in the Iranian context. An African-American tradition has seen in Milton a potentially creative otherness. Ishmael Reed defines his own creative position in opposition to Milton's. His *Mumbo Jumbo* (1978) sees Osiris as central to Milton's mythology, but for Reed this means that Milton and Christianity are adversaries of a black culture that is polytheistic and life-affirming (Myrsiades and Myrsiades 180).

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