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What Sin Gave Birth To: The Children of Sin in the Garden of Eden

Michelle Deluse

The story of creation told in Genesis ends with the original sin of mankind. When Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they commit the original sin that condemns mankind to existence outside of Eden and eventual mortality. Milton retells the story of creation in “Paradise Lost” and he explores Sin through personification. The passage in Book II that describes Sin as the daughter of Satan and the mother of Death prompts the reader to think about Sin as the unwilling mother of evil. It also connects the narrative that takes place in Hell to the overarching narrative of “Paradise Lost” and Genesis. This passage emphasizes the suffering produced by sin through imagery and assonance and the unnaturalness of the products of sin through alliteration and variation in meter. Both of these characterizations of the products of sin connect to the results of the original sin committed in Eden.

This passage strongly emphasizes the suffering that Sin produces. First, violent imagery dominates this passage which leaves the reader with a picture of gore and pain associated with Sin’s children. The images describe Sin’s torturous experience when Sin gave birth to her offspring (the products of violent incest and rape). Sin describes the birth of her first child, Death, whom Satan fathered, with an image of Death as he “tore through my entrails” (Milton 2.783). Milton conveys the birth of Death with a disturbing image of the child ripping its way out of Sin’s womb, which provides the reader with some insight into the suffering associated with Sin. Sin also describes the birth of the monsters that plague her womb with violent images. They “howl and gnaw/My bowels... bursting forth” (Milton 2.799-800). Sin gives birth for a second time, and the imagery for this birth is similar to the first. The monsters chew on Sin’s insides as they are repeatedly born, which produces the same effect as the image of Death’s birth. It stresses the painful and violent suffering that the offspring of Sin creates.

The assonance in the passage also evokes the suffering associated with Sin’s children with linguistic sounds that align with the sounds of suffering. Take, for example, the line that describes the reaction to Death’s birth. When Sin gives birth to Death and names him, “Hell trembled at the hideous name” (Milton 2.788). The ‘eh’ vowel repeated provides a sense of whispers and trembles linguistically, which emphasizes Hell’s response to Sin the birth of Death. This particular vowel sound requires the same breathy sounds associated with fearful murmurs. Repeated vowels create a similar effect later in the passage when Sin gives birth to the monsters. She tells Satan that the monsters “howl and gnaw/My bowels” (Milton 2.799-800). The vowel sound “ow” repeated here provides the reader with a linguistic representation of the sounds the monsters make as well as the presumable pain of Sin as the monsters torture her. Since “ow” is a sound typically associated with pain, the repeated use evokes groans of pain. With this emphasis on the suffering associated with the children of sin through the use of imagery and alliteration, Milton connects this passage with the general suffering of mankind after the original sin. In Genesis, God curses mankind for the original sin; man must toil over the land and woman must suffer the pains of birth (*The Jewish Study Bible* Gen. 3.16-17). Violent images of the suffering that Sin endures as a result of her children, as well as assonance that evokes sounds typically associated with suffering connect directly to the suffering resultant of man’s sin.

This passage also conveys the unnatural characteristics of Sin’s children. The use of alliteration in this passage places an emphasis on the unnatural elements of chaos and cycles that characterize the offspring of Sin. For example, early in the poem, alliteration evokes the explosive and chaotic nature of Death’s birth. Sin describes Death to Satan as, “Thine own

begotten, breaking violent way” (Milton 2.782). The repeated use of ‘b,’ (“begotten, breaking”), a percussive consonant, disrupts the flow of the line and demonstrates the violence of Death’s birth. Later, the repeated use of ‘s’ sounds in the description of the monsters that cycle in and out of Sin’s womb create a linguistic effect that emphasizes the cyclical nature of the monsters continual rebirth. “These yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry/Surround me, as thou saw’st, hourly conceived/And hourly born with sorrow infinite/To me...” (Milton 2.795-798). ‘S’ is an elongated consonant which makes a section such as this seem elongated. With so many consecutive ‘s’ sounds, the language imitates the ceaselessness of the cycle. Similarly, the repeated ‘s’ and ‘f’ sounds later in the same section of the passage create an effect of frantic circular chaos and emphasize the restlessness of Sin’s existence. Sin says that the monsters chew on “My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth/Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round/That rest or intermission none I find” (Milton 2.800-803). The ‘f’ sounds in conjunction with the ‘s’ sounds in this section have the same linguistic effect described above; the drawn out nature of the consonants emphasizes the never-ending cycle associated with the children of Sin.

Milton’s strategic deviations from iambic pentameter also convey the offspring of Sin as unnatural. The opening line of the passage deviates from the iambic pentameter of the passage. Speaking to Satan, Sin refers to Death as “At last this odious offspring whom thou seest” (Milton 2.781). The use of “odious” to describe Death upsets the typical structure of 10 syllables, adding an additional unstressed syllable to the line. This variation in meter forces hesitation around the word “odious.” The horrific nature of Sin’s offspring becomes exaggerated by the need to slow down when reading. Later, Milton’s language deviates from iambic pentameter when he describes the cycles of the monsters born from Sin each hour. Sin describes how the monsters she conceived with Death “Surround me, as thou saw’st, hourly conceived” (Milton 2.796). The disruption of meter emphasizes the unnatural elements of the cyclical existence of the monsters. The phrase “hourly conceived” receives accents in such a way (stressed where it would normally be unstressed and vice versa) that it stands out as a major deviation from iambic pentameter. Reading the line aloud feels as unnatural as the cyclical births of the monsters seem. The emphasis on the unnaturalness of the children of Sin connects to the unnatural state of mankind after the original sin. Within the context of Genesis, the product of the original sin is man’s expulsion from Eden. The natural projection for man’s future before Adam and Eve ate from the tree was to live forever in the garden, but sin gave way to a different future for man. Instead, mankind was condemned to a cyclical pattern of life and chaos in which mankind must toil and eventually die (*The Jewish Study Bible* Gen. 3.17; Gen. 2.17). This passage uses alliteration and meter variation to emphasize that Sin gives birth to unnaturally chaotic and cyclical offspring, just as the original sin of Adam and Eve gives way to an unnaturally chaotic and cyclical existence for man.

The passage that describes the birth of Sin’s children in hell uses imagery and assonance to depict the suffering produced by sin and alliteration and variation in meter to emphasize the unnaturalness of the products of sin. The suffering and unnatural characteristics associated with Sin’s children are direct parallels to the suffering and unnatural characteristics that the original sin of Adam and Eve in Eden produces. The personification of Sin provides a strong depiction of her offspring and paints a vivid picture for the reader to associate with the fall of man later in “Paradise Lost”. Presumably, the description of the original sin in Book IX stimulates memories of this passage of Sin and her children. This forces the reader to make connections between sections of the text thematically. Additionally, since most readers of “Paradise Lost” are familiar with the story of the book of Genesis, this passage almost serves as a way to give the reader the

omniscient experience of God. Readers have 'foreknowledge' of the fall of man just as God does within the text, which allows the reader to apply the future narrative of mankind to the narrative in Hell. In this sense, the passage also connects to the greater questions of theodicy, as it encourages the reader to confront the difficulty of reconciling the concept of omniscience with the narrative structures that define the human experience.

Works Cited

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