Time: A True Miltonic Villain

In a famous passage in John Milton’s 1674 epic *Paradise Lost*, the character of Satan speaks to his audience of rebel angels with bold conviction, saying that it is, “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (2. 263) and with these words alone he establishes himself to be – by modern standards – a villain. However, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it was not until around 1822 that the word “villain” came to be used as it commonly now is, as “the character in a play, novel, etc., whose evil motives or actions form an important element in the plot” (1d). However, to understand the use of the word villain as John Milton would have known it in the mid 17th century, it is essential to know the meaning of the word as it was most commonly used then. Again, according to the *OED* in 1622, villain meant, “originally, a low-born base-minded rustic; a man of ignoble ideas or instincts; in later use, an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes” (1a). This word was also quite often used in a playful fashion, as well (1c). Quite interesting, and also important, is that according to the concordances of Milton’s poetry and prose works, throughout all of Milton’s works, the word “villain” is not used. Though Milton does use the variant “vilify,” he uses this only once in all of his poetic works, and thus, I will argue that Milton made a deliberate choice *not* to make use of the specific
term “villain,” a choice that reflects his desire to avoid its contemporary 17th century connotations.

For Milton to actually name Satan a “villain” would be destructive to the character of Satan that Milton seeks to create. Milton's Satan is not "a low-born base-minded rustic; a man of ignoble ideas or instincts; an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes." So, while Satan complies with our modern ideas of villainy in that he serves as a character whose “evil actions or motives form an important element in the plot,” we must remember that these standards did not exist until around the early part of the nineteenth century, and therefore Milton’s intentions for Satan are not to make him a typical seventeenth century villain. Further, though Time may not be typically viewed, in contemporary twentieth century usage, as a villain, Time was commonly aligned and allied with notions of villainy in Milton’s linguistic and cultural world. More specifically, Milton presents Time as a nontraditional villain within his poems “Lycidas,” “Sonnet VII,” and “Sonnet XIX.” Milton’s choice again not to utilize directly the word “villain” in these works additionally indicates his desire for readers to deduce in their interpretation of Time, the notion of Time as villainous.

While Milton’s Satan has been credited with being one of literature’s greatest villains, he stands, in fact, as quite the opposite. Created in Heaven, Satan’s birth should be considered far from being “low.” And a “base-minded rustic” he is not – for all readers of Paradise Lost agree that Satan thinks and acts quite brilliantly. Yet, of course, if using our contemporary definition of “villain,” Satan would fall right into line, for he is “a character within a play, novel, etc., whose evil motives or actions form an important element in the plot.” Satan’s motives and actions (or reactions, as Miltonists would argue), form the most important element in the plot of
Paradise Lost. It is because of Satan’s fall, and in turn his reaction to his fall that the characters and forces of Sin and Death are enabled to be brought to earth, and inflicted upon humankind. However, while Satan falls into the category of a twentieth century villain, Milton’s version of Time falls into the category of what Milton would have known as a villain, specifically within “Lycidas,” “Sonnet VII,” and “Sonnet XIX.”

Time fits the seventeenth century definition of “villain,” in that it indeed lives as “a base-minded rustic,” and the Oxford English Dictionary defines a “rustic” as “a countryman” or “a peasant” (1). In its adjective form, “rustic” means “plain and simple; unsophisticated” (4b). In a sense, Time exists as all of these things. Time remains very plain, simple, and unsophisticated in that Time in and of itself never changes. Sixty seconds creates a minute, and sixty minutes compose an hour. Time cannot be slowed or sped to adapt for anything else, and while it does move forward, it does so, as Milton points out in “Sonnet VII,” at an even measure, as he says, “It shall be still in strictest measure even/To that same lot, however mean or high,/Toward which Time leads me” (10-12). At the end of “Lycidas,” the poet leaves the reader with the words: “Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new,” indicating that with Time, comes the hope of another tomorrow, new and fresh landscapes in which to live and grow (192-93). However, also important to note is that the measure of Time itself remains the same. It progresses forward, but at the same rate that it always has. Therefore, the hope that Time brings becomes a product of its motion and of Life, not of Time itself. Further, Time fits the definition of a villain in that it commits the crime of thievery, a part of the seventeenth century definition of villain being “a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes.” To steal something equates to the committing of a crime, and the opening of “Sonnet VII” introduces Time as having committed that crime, saying, “How soon hath time,
the subtle thief of youth/Stol’n on his wing my three and twentieth year!” (1-2). Further, Time continues to threaten the poet, as the he continues to say, “My hasting days fly on with full career./But my late spring no bud or blossom shew’th” (3-4).

In addition to being guilty of criminal actions, Time is also guilty of “base” actions, “base” (according to the OED) meaning “low in the moral scale; without dignity of sentiment; reprehensibly cowardly or selfish, despicably mean” (9a). Time would be guilty of base actions, because it doesn’t move with the “dignity of sentiment,” but instead, it moves at a pace that is set and nonnegotiable. Time is insensitive to anything else but himself in that it doesn’t regard others in its pace. In “Lycidas,” Time keeps moving forward selfishly at its own pace, despite the sorrow over the death of young Lycidas, as within the opening lines, the poet says, “He must not float upon his wat’ry bier/Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,/Without the meed of some melodious tear” (12-4). According to their Dictionary of Ancient Deities, Patricia Turner and Charles Russell Coulter describe how Cronus, the Greek god of Time, devoured his own children, also rather selfishly – to prevent them from overthrowing him (135). This image is reflective also of Time, in that Time advances itself in a self-destructive manner; it paradoxically devours itself in order to live.

Time’s advancement is also somewhat cyclical, and in “The Archetypal Pattern of Death and Rebirth in Milton’s Lycidas,” Richard P. Adams analyzes Milton’s use of imagery concerning water to illustrate a cycle of death and rebirth within life, as in the Christian tradition of baptism (186). Also, on a surface-level examination, the imagery of water within “Lycidas” serves to reiterate that the subject, Milton’s Cambridge classmate Edward King, died as a result of drowning. However, relevant to this argument is that the recurrence of imagery dealing with the ebb and flow of tides and rivers in the poem also makes a statement about Time’s motion, an
example being found in lines 154-158, in which the poet says, “Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding seas/Wash far away, where’er thy bones are hurled,/Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,/Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide/Visit’st the bottom of the monstrous world.” Just like the waves that closed over the head of Lycidas, or the selfish Cronus that consumed his own children, Time cannot be stopped. It can only devour.

Perhaps most important, however, is another early definition of the word “villain” that the OED provides, meaning “a bird (esp. a hawk) of a common or inferior species” (2). This is of particular interest, first of all, because in “Sonnet VII,” Milton characterizes Time as being birdlike, saying, “How soon hath time, the subtle thief of youth,/Stol’n upon his wing my three and twentieth year!” (1-2). Furthermore, the term “villain” as being a bird makes reference particularly to a hawk, and hawks are birds of prey. Time can be considered a predator, in that it preys upon youth (“Sonnet VII”). Also fascinating is that in Birds of Prey of the World, written by Mary Louise Grossman and John Hamlet, the hawk is considered to be a descendant of the mythological griffon (68). In Roman mythology, the griffon was associated with the goddess Nemesis, daughter of Erebus (god of the underworld) and Nox (goddess of night), whose “proverbial wheel brought good luck or misfortune as it turned,” and this wheel was also known as the Wheel of Fate (Grossman 68). Also, Pierce Grimal’s The Dictionary of Classical Mythology informs us that Nemesis is the goddess of retribution or vengeance (305). Nemesis’ Wheel of Fate deals out retribution and vengeance, and it is similar to Time, for as Time turns, it has the power to bring with it fortune or bad luck, and it is the agent by which retribution and vengeance are delivered to those in need of it. Perhaps a bit more interesting, for the argument that Time is the villain of youth, is Yves Bonnefoy’s claim in Greek and Egyptian Mythologies
that Nemesis was also responsible for avenging the victims of Narcissus – a deified mortal representative of beauty and youth (192).

In “Lycidas,” Time brings misfortune to the mourners of the dead Lycidas, such as the poet himself who pleads with the gods, saying, “Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless deep/Closed o’er the head of your loved Lycidas?” (50-51). Further, misfortune is delivered to Lycidas himself, who “is dead, dead ere his prime” (8). Again, like the Wheel of Nemesis, Time is constantly turning, as the poet points out in the end of the poem, when he says, “tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new” (193). In addition to pointing out the fact that Time brings hope, the poet is also demonstrating that Time, despite its even measure, does continually change.

Just like misfortune is delivered by Time’s movement in “Lycidas,” it is also dealt in “Sonnet VII” and “Sonnet XIX.” In “Sonnet VII,” not only is the poet’s youth threatened by the passing of Time, but so is the poet’s progress. By stealing the poet’s youth, Time has also threatened the flourishing of the poet’s career, because already his “three and twentieth year” has slipped up on him, and he has no accomplishments to show for it (2-8). The threat in “Sonnet XIX” is perhaps more serious, and the misfortune dealt is considerably worse. In this case, Time has brought an end to light, and the beginning of darkness to the now-blind poet, as lines one and two read, “When I consider how my light is spent,/Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide.” In addition to the curse of blindness, the poet’s use of his talents is at stake, for he says, “That one talent which is death to hide,/Lodged with me useless” (3-4). Miltonically speaking, talents are gifts of grace, and must be used rather than wasted. The blindness that Time has brought to the poet’s life threatens the use of these talents, in that actually using them becomes much more difficult.
Difficulty, however, is necessary in any hero’s journey, whether it be the poet struggling against Time to make use of his talents, or the poet struggling against the blindness that Time has delivered. Therefore, in “Lycidas,” “Sonnet VII,” and “Sonnet XIX,” the villain of Time is wholly indispensable, for according to Areopagitica, “good and evil, in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably.” With the passing of Time comes the experience life, so Time is indeed considered a necessary evil. In the way that the removal of sin expels virtue, the ceasing of Time is the end of life (Areopagitica 944). So villains, by both the seventeenth and nineteenth century definitions of the word, are necessary for heroes to exist, and that principle is what helps to bridge the gap between these different ideas of the concept. For life to exist, so must Time. For the virtue of God to exist, so must the evil of Satan. Without one, the other cannot survive. Further, the ideas of heroism and villainy (by any definition) are dynamic and complex – much like the characters of Time and Satan. Milton gives us different pieces of truth while reading his works, and through assembling those pieces, we can come closer to an understanding of the whole truth – for we know also from Areopagitica that Truth is fragmented and ever changing, and the pieces of it must be gathered in order to construct a version of that truth. Therefore, though Milton doesn’t refer to Time outright as being a villain, he gives us many clues that allow us to lend our own interpretations to the concept of Time.
References


