

---

**The Psychology of Rebellion: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Satan in  
*Paradise Lost Book I***

---

**Nishita Nagar**

Postgraduate student, Department of English, Shree Dronacharya (P.G.) College,  
Dankaur, Gautam Budh Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. Affiliated to  
Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh.

NAAC A++

Email Id: [mail2gandhig@gmail.com](mailto:mail2gandhig@gmail.com)

---

Paper Received on 05-05-2026, Accepted on 20-06-2026

Published on 21-06-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.02.877

---

**Abstract:** In Book I of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* we are introduced to Satan, one of the most psychologically intriguing and complex characters in English literature. Satan is not an evil villain, but a character of ambition, pride, resentment and tireless quest for independence. This paper will discuss Satan's rebellion against God from a psychoanalytical point of view, using mainly the theories of Sigmund Freud and later psychoanalytical critics. It shows that Satan's rebellion is not just a theological one but an expression of a deep psychological disturbance, born of injured pride, of ungratified desires, and of an inability to be subordinate.

This study examines how the speeches of Satan reflect the operation of the unconscious mind, in particular the struggle between the id, ego and superego. His famous declaration, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1.263) is a strong statement of selfhood, but also reveals inner insecurity and psychological division. The paper also deals with the effects of narcissism, repression and formation of identity on the development of Satan's character. The paper deals with psychoanalytic theories, analyzes important fragments of Book I, and proves that Satan's rebellion is not a political or religious struggle but a fight for the right to define oneself and command.

John Milton (1608-1674) is one of the most distinguished poets in the English literature, notable for his intellectual depth, political vision and literary accomplishment. His epic poem *Paradise Lost* is a landmark of English literature dealing with themes of authority, free will, rebellion and moral responsibility. Satan has long been the object of critical attention to his psychological complexity and rhetorical power. The famous statement of his, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1.263), demonstrates his rebellion and desire for self-assertion.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Rebellion, Ego, Super Ego, Unconscious Mind, Identity crisis, Narcissism, Authority, Psychological Conflict.

Milton remains relevant to contemporary literary studies because of his profound engagement with human psychology and the question of rebellion. According to C.S. Lewis the mental condition of Satan is presented as “a sense of injured merit” (95), which fuels his pride and rebellion against God’s authority. Like Stanley Fish, who states that “the illusion of self-sufficiency” (13) is produced by Satan’s speeches, covering the insecurity and instability that characterize his psychological state. These critical perspectives depict Satan not only as a theological rebel, but as a psychologically complex figure wrestling with pride, identity and desire. The relevance of *Paradise Lost* for contemporary psychoanalytic studies remains, the poem still offering useful insights into the complexities of human behavior.

In conclusion, the paper argues that it is Satan's psychological complexity that generates his tragic grandeur and renders *Paradise Lost* a profound investigation of rebellion, identity, power and the human psyche.

Psychoanalysis offers a useful angle from which to view Satan’s rebellion in *Paradise Lost* Book I. Sigmund Freud argues that human behavior was caused by unconscious desires, repressed emotions and conflicts between the id, ego and the superego (*The Ego and the Id* 25). The rebellion of Satan against God can be viewed as an expression of an injured ego that does not want to accept subordination. His famous statement “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven” (*Paradise Lost* 1.263) demonstrates a strong desire to be independent and powerful. His claim that “The mind is its own place” (*Paradise Lost* 1.254) further exemplifies his effort to psychologically justify his fall while still feeling superior.

Psychoanalytic critics have noted Satan’s inner conflict and self-deception. Satan is motivated by “a sense of injured merit” (*A Preface to Paradise Lost* 95), and the “illusion of self-sufficiency” (*Surprised by Sin* 13) is a product of Satan’s rhetoric (Stanley Fish). The details suggest a character caught in the tension between pride and insecurity. Thus, Satan’s rebellion can be read as a psychoanalytic phenomenon, a revolt not only against a political order, but against the unconscious, narcissism and other psychological conflicts.

Satan’s defining trait in *Paradise Lost* Book I is rebellion, and it is the source of his psychological conflict. Satan will not accept the rule of God, and he changes his defeat into an assertion of himself against God. His famous statement, 'Better to

reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven' (Paradise Lost 1.263) shows his will to be independent even if it means eternal suffering. In the same vein, Satan argues that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Paradise Lost 1.254–55), illustrating his effort to justify rebellion through psychological self-persuasion.

From a psychoanalytical point of view the rebellion of Satan can be seen as a symptom of injured pride and unconscious craving for dominance. Sigmund Freud, however, believed that the ego is always fighting against any limitation and trying to maintain its sense of power (The Ego and the Id 29). C. S. Lewis, for instance, notes that Satan is motivated by "a sense of injured merit" (A Preface to Paradise Lost 95), and Stanley Fish remarks that his rhetoric "creates the illusion of self-sufficiency" (Surprised by Sin 13). So Satan's rebellion is a political act as well as a symptom of profound psychological unbalance.

Paradise Lost Book I. Satan's revolt is connected to an overweening sense of selfhood and a refusal to accept his inferior status in the divine order. He will not admit to defeat after his overthrow, but declares his independence, saying: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Paradise Lost 1.254–55). This is the ego trying to maintain self-esteem in the face of humiliation and loss. In the proclamation, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (Paradise Lost 1.263), Satan further cements his self-image.

According to Erich Fromm, destructive pride is the result of the self-striving for absolute autonomy and denying all external authority (The Heart of Man 44). Harold Bloom, too, remarks on Satan's "extraordinary consciousness of self" which fuels his defiance and tragic isolation (The Anxiety of Influence 58). Psychoanalytic theory would see Satan's ego as a defense mechanism against feelings of inadequacy and defeat. The language of strength covers deep psychological insecurity. Milton's Satan is therefore the result of an inflated ego, of wounded pride that becomes eternal defiance of the divine order.

The superego is the moral and ethical component of the psyche that controls human behaviour in terms of accepted values and ideals in Freudian psychoanalysis. Satan's rebellion in Paradise Lost Book I can be read as a rejection of the moral authority of God and heavenly order. Satan recognizes God's omnipotence, but refuses to submit, and declares: 'What though the field be lost? / All is not lost, the unconquerable Will' (Paradise Lost 1.105-06). His determination is a conscious refusal to obey the moral constraints that the superego normally imposes.

According to Sigmund Freud, the superego is the "representative of all moral restrictions" (The Ego and the Id 34). Satan's rebellion is a sign of the weakening of

this moral force in favour of pride and self-will. Similarly, Erich Fromm claims that destructive disobedience happens when people renounce ethical responsibility in the name of absolute freedom (Escape from Freedom 142). Northrop Frye also observes that Satan's rebellion is a tragic distortion of heroic aspiration into moral alienation (The Return of Eden 87). So Satan's rebellion against the superego increases his psychic struggle and makes rebellion a spiritual and emotional loneliness.

The unconscious mind is very important in shaping Satan's rebellion in Paradise Lost Book I. Following psychoanalysis, people often do things without realizing that they do them. These people are acting under the influence of unconscious desires and repressed emotions. Satan's speeches reveal a mind obsessed with hidden resentment, wounded pride, and an excessive lust for power. His assertion that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Paradise Lost 1.254–55) is an attempt to transform psychological defeat into imagined triumph. Similarly, his declaration, "All is not lost; the unconquerable Will" (Paradise Lost 1.106), exposes the unconscious resolve that propels his rebellion despite failure.

According to Jacques Lacan, the unconscious is "structured like a language," and it manifests itself in speech and symbolic expression (Écrits 203). Along similar lines Melanie Klein observes that destructive impulses frequently emerge from unmastered psychic conflicts which function below the level of conscious awareness (Love, Guilt and Reparation 96). The theories shed light on Satan's psychological state, showing how unconscious wishes for supremacy and acknowledgement form his identity. Milton thus shows Satan's rebellion as an external expression of inner conflicts rooted in the unconscious.

A psychoanalytic reading of Satan in Book I of *Paradise Lost* explores the theme of identity crisis. Satan, formerly the most exalted of angels, suffers a deep rift in his identity once expelled from Heaven. His fall creates a tension between his former identity as God's favored servant and his new position as leader of the rebel angels. This inner conflict is clear in his confession, "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (Paradise Lost 4.75). Yet, while the statement comes later in the epic, it reflects the psychological fragmentation that begins in Book I. Likewise, when Satan declares, "The mind is its own place" (Paradise Lost 1.254), he is lying to himself in an effort to build up a broken identity.

An identity crisis occurs, according to Erik Erikson, when one can no longer reconcile the past and present self (Identity: Youth and Crisis 17). R. D. Laing also observes that a divided self often develops alternate identities to escape psychological insecurity (The Divided Self 42). These views show Satan's effort to redefine himself

after his fall. Milton thus depicts Satan's rebellion as not only a political resistance, but also a desperate attempt to regain a coherent sense of self.

Narcissism is one of the most defining psychological traits of satanic character in *Paradise Lost* Book I. His revolt against God arises from excessive admiration of his own power and status, and an inability to accept subordination. Satan, notwithstanding his defeat, still thinks himself to be superior, and says: "Better to reign in Hell, Than serve in Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1.263). But this is not defiance, this is a grandiose self-image which denies any limits. His wish to defy the divine authority is indicative of a self-glorifying and hurt prideful personality.

Narcissism, according to Heinz Kohut, arises from an excessive need for self-confirmation and adulation (*The Analysis of the Self* 177). Similarly, Christopher Lasch observes that the narcissistic person seeks power and recognition as a compensation for inner insecurity (*The Culture of Narcissism* 32). These theories explain Satan's behaviour, for his outward confidence is a mask for deep psychological vulnerability after his expulsion from Heaven. Milton thus represents the revolt of Satan as a narcissistic self-assertion in which the surplus of self-love becomes alienation, pride, and destructive rebellion against divine order.

Authority is the central theme of *Paradise Lost* Book I and governs Satan's rebellion and the epic's larger moral framework. God, the insignia of divine power, is founded on justice, order, and obedience. This is a limitation of his freedom and his ambitions, says Satan. He makes his unwillingness to submit obvious when he states, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1.263). This statement exposes not merely political defiance, but psychological refusal of any power greater than himself. Satan's rebellion against divine authority is inspired by a tremendous thirst for self-assertion and for power.

Erich Fromm contends that rebellion is often a result of a person's failure to balance freedom and responsibility, which causes a person to oppose rightful authority (*Escape from Freedom* 177). Similarly, Michel Foucault asserts that power relations necessarily generate forms of resistance because power defines individual identity and conduct (*Power/Knowledge* 95). From these theoretical perspectives we can see Satan's rebellion as motivated by a psychological pride and a refusal of a hierarchical order. His authority over the fallen angels is a replacement for the divine power he has lost. Thus, Milton shows that authority is a two-edged sword. It can maintain order, but it can also stir up rebellion when it is challenged by ambition, pride, and the desire for freedom.

One of the most important elements in the Satan portrait in *Paradise Lost* Book I is psychological conflict. Satan appears invincible and unafraid but his

rhetoric shows a mind tormented by loss, humiliation and wounded pride. Cast out from Heaven, he puts on a brave face: “What though the field be lost? / All is not lost; the unconquerable Will, / And study of revenge, immortal hate” (Paradise Lost 1.105–07). In this statement his will to resist God's will is clear, but also the emotional conflict which fuels his act of rebellion. He says that “The mind is its own place” (Paradise Lost 1.254) which also demonstrates his attempt to turn the defeat into the psychological victory.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Satan's rebellion begins with a divided self that cannot reconcile desire and reality. According to Carl Jung, a ‘shadow’ is often formed in the psyche due to unresolved conflicts, and is expressed through destructive behavior (Aion 8). Otto Rank also notes that the desire for power is often the result of fear of weakness and dependency (Truth and Reality 54). These insights illuminate what is happening with Satan, who is after independence, but is really deeply insecure and emotionally disintegrated. His inability to accept defeat increases the tension between his ideal self-image and his fallen reality. Satan's rebellion is thus not only a theological act, but also a psychological conflict. Satan is a tragic figure whose struggle is as much a psychological battle as a cosmic fight against divine authority.

### **Works Cited**

- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford UP, 1973.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton, 1968.
- Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. Harvard UP, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. Translated by Joan Riviere, W. W. Norton, 1962.
- Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. Farrar and Rinehart, 1941.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*. Harper and Row, 1964.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics*. University of Toronto Press, 1965.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull, Princeton UP, 1969.
- Klein, Melanie. *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921–1945*. Edited by Joan Riviere, Vintage, 1997.

## RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

[www.rjoe.org.in](http://www.rjoe.org.in) | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.576 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 2 (April/May&June;2026)

---

- Kohut, Heinz. *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders*. University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Routledge, 2001.
- Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Penguin Books, 1965.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. W. W. Norton, 1979.
- Lewis, C. S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. Oxford UP, 1961.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2007.
- Rank, Otto. *Truth and Reality*. Translated by Jessie Taft, Alfred A. Knopf, 1936.