

English 2283 - Winter 2026:
Closely Reading
John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Professor: Richard Cunningham

Every T & Th @ 2:30 - 4:00

Rm. BAC 201

Cunningham's Office: BAC 431

Phone: 585-1345 (but I don't check messages)

Office Hours: T & Th - 12:25 - 2:20, & by appt.

Email: Standard Acadia firstname.lastname format.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory

We are in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.

This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship" which Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) and Mi'kmaq peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.

We are all treaty people -- because the treaties signed do not apply to only indigenous people, but to the off-spring of the settlers, too. And that means all of us.

Accessible Learning Services

If you are a student with documentation for accommodations or if you anticipate needing supports or accommodations, please contact Ian Ford, Accessibility Resource Facilitator at 902-585-1520, disability.access@acadiau.ca or Marissa McIsaac, Manager, disability.access@acadiau.ca. Accessible Learning Services is in Rhodes Hall, rooms 111-115.

Crucial elements of this course

You must have or get an @gmail.com address to take this course. And you must be willing and able to speak in class. These are requirements.

Course Description

In this course students will read one of the most intellectually challenging poems in the English language, John Milton's twelve-book Christian epic *Paradise Lost*. Students will write multiple short responses to their reading. You'll also have a short disputatio-based assignment to complete at or near the end of classes. Your responses and your in-class summations of them will both count toward the majority of your final grade.

If you are less than 100% confident that you can and will attend every class of English 2283 this term, then this really is not the right class for you. Be realistic with yourself, with your professor, and with your classmates: if attending every class, i.e. three hours a week, seems like a lot of class time to you, or if six to nine-ish additional hours of reading, thinking, and writing seems like a lot to you, do yourself and the rest of us a favour and drop this class immediately.

All students registered in 2283 will be required to compose a few sentences about at least one section of *Paradise Lost* for each day of class. Failing to meet this requirement will make it impossible for you to pass this course. In class, you will be required to summarize verbally what you have written. You will be called on to summarize or speak about what you have written, rather than simply reading it to us.

Texts

Read this first. It's the relevant passages from the Book of Genesis, KJV.

Then this: Biblical creation stories.

Then you'll be ready for John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

I used formerly to assign the following version of the poem, too, but I decided to forego it this year. If you feel you need something more than just Milton's text, you might want to try to get your hands on:

Milton, John. Paradise Lost. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Hackett Publishing: 2003.

You'll also want to opt for *the Oxford English Dictionary*, a.k.a. the OED, rather than any alternative English dictionary.

Supplementals

Ramm, Benjamin. "Why You Should Re-Read *Paradise Lost*." BBC Culture, April 19, 2017.

Neil Thomas. Excerpt from *Darwin and Milton: From Paradise Lost to the Origin of Species*, in *Evolution News & Science Today*, Oct. 27, 2021.

"Sympathy for the devil: Milton's Satan as political rebel," CBC Radio, Ideas, Mar 13, 2020.

"Milton's *Paradise Lost*: a survival guide for a fractured world," CBC Radio, Ideas, Apr 20, 2020.

Having been asked to clarify his poem, Milton added an explanatory "Argument" as a headpiece to each book. A link taking you to all twelve Arguments can be found in this place on the "Course Outline" webpage.

Requirements and Grading

You must have an @gmail.com account, and you must email your gmail address to me so I can give you access to the google docs in which you'll compose your commentaries.

Commentaries – 90%

Final Submission – 10%

Comments must:

1. inform your reader:
 - a) who is speaking in the passage of poem on which you are commenting; and
 - b) who is being addressed by the speaker of the passage; and
2. contribute something to our understanding of the passage under examination.

Comments might:

1. make connections to things outside the poem (you might explain classical or biblical references, for example, or suggest that the passage reminds you of something else you have read);
2. make connections to other parts of the poem (this is likely to happen for you more often in the latter parts of the poem than in the earlier parts);
3. question anything that is unclear (either to you personally, or, as you think, more generally);
4. offer any relevant thought(s) that enlightens.

* For more on commenting, see the headpiece to the Book 1 google doc.

Caveat:

You are not required to summarize the passage or to provide its main point. Sometimes you might be able to do so, and you are encouraged to do so when possible; but doing so may prove quite difficult most of the time, so focus on the details and we'll let the larger picture emerge in class.

Rules:

- In the event you know you are going to miss a class, you are required to submit your commentary well before class so that the rest of class can read it in your absence.
- In the event you come down with a sudden illness, you will still be able to submit your commentary in advance provided you develop the habit of preparing early.
- In the event a 16-ton weight falls out of the sky and onto your head on your way to class in the morning, your absence and your failure to provide written commentary may be excused.

If you fail to submit more than one commentary, you are required to visit the professor to discuss your situation. These commentaries will provide 90% of your final grade for ENGL 2283, and as much weight falls on your oral presentation as on your written submission.

Final Submission

Answer only two of the three pairs of disputations, and number 7. Be sure that the way you compose the first sentence of your response makes clear which half of which disputation you're addressing. In every answer, include quotations from the poem. Each question will count as much as each of the others. In no case will I read more than one page (double spaced) for each response. I.e. five pages in total.

- 1) The thesis of *Paradise Lost* is an attempt to “justify the ways of God to men.” Argue that the poem succeeds.
- 2) The thesis of *Paradise Lost* is an attempt to “justify the ways of God to men.” Argue that the poem fails. (So this could be as much as but not more than two pages. Etc. for the other pairs.)
- 3) Argue in favour of the assertion that Eve is most culpable for humanity’s Fall in *Paradise Lost*.
- 4) Argue against the assertion that Eve is most culpable for humanity’s Fall in *Paradise Lost*.
- 5) Argue that God can foreknow and humans can have free will.
- 6) Argue that if God foreknows, humanity does not have free will.
- 7) What did you learn from reading *Paradise Lost*?