

# NEA: Theory and independence

## example conventional response

This resource gives an exemplar student response to a non-exam assessment task, in this case, a conventional response rather than a re-creative piece. The moderator commentary illustrates why the response has been placed within a particular band of the assessment criteria. This resource should be read in conjunction with the accompanying document 'Teaching guide: Non-exam assessment'.

### Example student response A – Band 5

**According to Marxist literary criticism the writer is bound by his context and therefore merely translates social facts into literary ones.**

**To what extent is this true of Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*?**

Eagleton, reflecting the traditional Marxist paradigm, asserts that no writer is truly free from the socio-historical conditions in which they operate but rather the "social facts" that surround them determine what and how they write. This therefore means that Milton's *Paradise Lost* is not, according to critics like Eagleton, a freely wrought piece of literature but is instead a work intrinsically shaped by the social conditions within which Milton operated, including the Renaissance, the Restoration and the failure of Cromwell's administration.

However, even Marx himself conceded that the artist does operate with some degree of autonomy from their social and economic contexts. In his 1863 text, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Marx commented that "Milton produced *Paradise Lost* for the same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of his nature". These two views seem to be at odds. Marxist criticism appears to be stating that while a writer is "constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would not usually admit" they are also able to transcend these determining factors to some degree in their creation of literature.

If *Paradise Lost* is viewed as being born from within the social context and conditioning of the period within which Milton worked, he cannot be seen as the agent translating social facts into literary ones but rather the social factors surrounding him determined the creation of his poem. Milton was a writer and literary craftsman who claimed that his primary motivation for creating *Paradise*

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1. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2002)

*Lost* was to fulfil his aspiration of creating an English epic poem to rival those of Homer and Virgil. To many this desire would seem to stem entirely from within himself but some critics argue that Milton was spurred on by “the Renaissance thirst for enduring fame”<sup>2</sup> which formed part of the context within which he was operating. If this ambition to push the bounds of art could be seen as part of the social and cultural fabric of Milton’s time then he could be seen as in some ways being shaped and motivated by his context in the production of his literary masterpiece.

Many readers feel that this claim is not an adequate explanation of the literary process that resulted in *Paradise Lost*. In Book 1 Milton is at pains to stress the pre-eminence of the Judaeo-Christian God over and above the gods of the classical epics. In the poem’s opening lines, Milton invokes the aid of the ‘Heaven’ly Muse, that on the secret top of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire that shepherd’, alluding to the revelation of the Holy Spirit to Moses. This is significant in two ways; firstly, Milton asserts that the purpose and goal of his epic not only equals but exceeds that of the great classical epics and he draws on the classical convention of calling for inspiration to parallel its use by Virgil and Homer. However his ‘Heaven’ly Muse’ is far more powerful and more significant than the nine Greek muses, for it can ‘soar above the Aonian mount’ while it pursues things ‘unattempted yet’. Secondly, Milton is comparing himself to the great prophets, notably the ‘shepherd’, Moses, whose purpose was to ‘assert Eternal Providence and justify the ways of God to men’. Milton asserts his ambitious literary goals, which are synonymous with his apparent spiritual calling to ‘justify’ God’s ways. For many, *Paradise Lost* cannot merely be seen as a translation of social facts into literary ones but that, as an act of supreme literary ambition, Milton’s epic must be seen as a product of a deep-seated personal desire that drove him to attempt to equal and exceed the great poets of old.

Marx and Engels claimed that ‘the whole world, natural, historical, intellectual, is ... a process’<sup>3</sup> and that intellectual objects, in this case Milton’s literary creation, are a by-product of the material processes of history. If this aspect of Marxist thinking is applied to Milton’s poem then *Paradise Lost* can be seen as a product of the material circumstances of its author. There certainly does seem to be a clear link between Milton’s spiritual affinity and the literary creation of *Paradise Lost*. Most commentators affiliate Milton’s spirituality with Protestant, namely Puritanical, convictions and his theological writings, in particular, repeatedly stress the importance of human free will, in contrast to much of the Reformation’s Calvinist deterministic theology. The 1644 polemic *Areopagitica* urges the necessity of the freedom of the press and stresses how, for true virtue to exist, the free moral agent must be presented with vice and allowed a free moral choice. It is interesting therefore that Milton’s presentation of Satan’s

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2. Hanford, *A Milton Handbook* (1946)

3. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880)

splendid recklessness and vice in his rebellion against 'th' Omnipotent' is potentially so appealing and attractive to the reader, reflecting the gallantry and vane-glory of the heroic verse of Virgil and Homer as with 'ambitious aim against the throne and monarchy of God' he 'raised impious war in Heav'n and battle proud with vain attempt'. While traditional biblical readings of the Fall, in Genesis, and Satan's warring, in Revelation, see the attempt to supersede God as inherently evil, Milton's depiction of 'glorious battle' and 'battle proud' potentially depicts Satan's rebellion as an exercise in free will and self-determination; the oppressed fighting back and refusing to accept his destiny is inevitable, the downtrodden trying to re-shape the world around him. This sort of Marxist reading potentially sees Satan as a hero, although bound by the pre-determined nature of the narrative he finds himself in.

These moral ambiguities in this Christian epic can be seen as reflection of Milton's belief in freedom, as explained in *Areopagitica*, showing how the boundaries between his spiritual and political convictions cannot be seen as independent from his literary pursuits. In the light of political events in the

17th century, his literary illustration of attempted regicide, which 'endangered Heav'n's perpetual king', could be seen to reflect the social fact of the Parliamentary struggle to disband the monarchy. Milton himself was an enduring supporter of Cromwell and passionately believed that the monarchy should be replaced by a free Commonwealth, which could be an explanation as to why he makes the figure of the defiant Satan so appealing. However had he intended his work to carry this political message he would surely have chosen a plot line which did not have such a predetermined outcome? Instead of claiming victory Milton's literary usurper is thwarted by 'Eternal Justice' and the king, God, reigns supreme. It may be tempting to many readers to see Satan's rebellion as a brave stance against tyranny but ultimately Milton's poem conforms to the Christian narrative of good (God) triumphing over evil (Satan) as opposed to downtrodden underdog (Satan) overcoming unjust tyrant (God).

Although later writers such as Philip Pullman, whose trilogy *His Dark Materials* is so influenced by *Paradise Lost*, have tried to re-present the dynamics in this way, a reading which many readers find appealing, ultimately Milton does not champion the cause of his rebellious character.

A Marxist reading of *Paradise Lost* opens up many complex, and at times contradictory, ideas. The poem cannot be seen merely as a reflection of Milton's own political allegiances, because they were to the republican rebels of his time, not the crown. Eagleton's view of the writer as a translator of social facts is wrought with problems when other Marxist methods of reading are applied to the poem. When viewed through the lens of Marx and Engels' dialectic materialism, Milton was constrained, interwoven and determined by socio-economic and material-historical processes but also, like a silk-worm, capable of producing something that was inherently and intrinsically from his own nature. A Marxist reading ultimately shows that the conditions within which Milton wrote were so complex that it is not feasible, as Eagleton does, to merely state the writer translates social facts but it does show that he was intrinsically caught up in them.

## Bibliography and references

<sup>1</sup> Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 2nd Edition (2002)

<sup>2</sup> Hanford, *A Milton Handbook* (1946)

<sup>3</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880)

## Moderator commentary

This is an ambitious piece which stays focused on the task. The student teases out a complex line of argument that involves considering different aspects of Marxist criticism and several contextual factors. Despite having so many things to consider the student manages to produce a piece of work that has shape and structure and their line of argument has a conclusion. This piece is based on a poetry text that is featured elsewhere in the specification but this is permissible as the student does not refer to the section of *Paradise Lost* that is used in the poetry collection on the Tragedy paper. A real strength of this piece is that the student avoids a single interpretation of what Marxist criticism is and therefore looks at the text through multiple critical lenses. There is also a consideration of a range of contextual factors - historical, political, literary and biographical. In many ways this is a very sophisticated piece of work but the text seems somewhat marginalised. There is some sense of the literary text but perhaps this should be more central to the work? What advice might be given to ensure the student focused more on *Paradise Lost* itself?

Overall this piece of work is likely to be placed in the top band but would be more securely placed in band 5 if there was a little more focus on the poem.