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Different Equals

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The Researched Argument

Research in Progress for ENGL 2332: World Literature I

Faculty Mentor: W. Scott Cheney, Ph.D.

The following paper represents work produced by a student in a World Literature I course at Collin College. Students who take World Literature I, ENGL 2332, read a selection of texts that survey world literature from the ancient world through the sixteenth century. Students study works of prose, poetry, drama, and fiction in relation to their historical and cultural contexts.

In what follows, students have written essays that require them to research a work of literature and enter into a written conversation with the academic articles that they find. Kenneth Burke calls this process an “unending conversation” and describes it this way:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

The researched argument requires the author to not only read the assigned piece of literature but also to read the corresponding conversation about that work in academic journals. The literary critics who write academic articles always respond to the ideas of other scholars, and the purpose of this paper is describe this conversation and choose a side of the issue to argue. This paper is not merely a summary or an evaluation; instead, the author must make an argument about some aspect of the literary work.

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Different Equals

The idea that men and women are equal seems impossible to some, while to others, that concept could not be truer. These two opposing views are so diverse that the argument of gender equality has not been, and probably will not be, resolved. I do not argue in this essay whether women are or are not equal to men but rather consider if Eve's value was portrayed correctly throughout Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The topic of gender equality relates to this consideration because a common belief, or excuse in my opinion, for the lessening of Eve's importance is often blamed on her gender. Because Eve was tempted by Satan and was a female, many view her as not being as strong as Adam. Contrary to many beliefs, Eve's ingenious actions prove she was much wiser than Milton depicts yet at the same time not necessarily greater than Adam. Milton even says, "Best are all things as the will / Of God ordained them, his creating hand / Nothing imperfect..." (Milton 216). In other words, Milton believes that there is no flaw in Adam or Eve because God created them without flaw. Although many believe that Milton is portraying Eve as the weaker between the two, his depiction of Eve actually shows her to be just as capable as Adam.

When this topic is argued, many believe Eve was tempted first because she was spiritually weaker than Adam. Eve is often labeled as the "sinner" and her other actions are overlooked. Even though her actions are small and almost obscured, Eve's wisdom

is prevalent throughout *Paradise Lost*. For example, Maura Smyth points out that when Adam and Eve first awaken, Adam looks up because the brightness from the sun promotes him to do so (4.481-5). Likewise, Eve also awakens, but she automatically moves toward the water to look at her reflection. This self-discovery from the two of them will “deny Adam knowledge” because his ways of thinking are simpler than are Eve’s (qtd. in Smyth 4.481-5). In addition, Smyth also mentions that “Adam’s very ability to imagine is itself derivative” (8.207-16). Smyth claims the same argument that I do: “Despite the inevitable fact of Eve having fallen first, Milton still portrays Eve to be master of language and author of her own narrative—and even of her own self” (4.440-3). In other words, although Eve fell first, Smyth believes Eve had other attributes that Milton described that prove she is more intellectual than what many believe.

However, as in any argument, the issue has at least two sides. According to Fredson Bowers, “The Fall occurs when reason, stronger in the person of Adam, relinquishes its sovereignty over judgment, or decision, to passion which is stronger in the person of Eve” (265). This statement implies that Bowers believes that Eve was instilled with less reason than Adam. He continues by saying, “Eve’s weaker reason falls victim to a more powerful passion and under this influence she makes a decision that seals the fate of them both” (265). In other words, Bowers claims that because God created Eve with less reason, she falls into the temptation from the devil. However, this contrasts Milton, who describes Eve as being equal to Adam but different from him also.

First, Milton mentions Eve working in the home; however, he does not say this in a negative or sexist way that could suggest Eve being lesser than Adam. In fact, her work at home is applauded by Milton. For example, he writes, “For nothing lovelier can

be found / In a woman, than to study household good, / And good works in her husband to promote” (213). While some may view this statement as derogatory because it suggests that women must work in the home, I disagree with that assumption. I believe that Milton is saying that women should be honored and proud of supporting their husbands and providing for their family. Adam makes this statement, which proves that Adam appreciates a woman’s work and does not look upon her work as less important or easier than a man’s work. Certain tasks exist for everyone, and one task is just as important as another. Milton was not degrading women and saying they are unable to do things outside the home; he was simply praising women for their hard work and commitment to provide for their family in a different way than do husbands.

Second, in support of the claim above, Eve can do other things outside the home, and she is very good at those other tasks. For example, she is very strong and powerful through her words. She was able to persuade Adam twice. The first time is before Eve is tempted by the devil and introduced to sin. Not only is she able to persuade Adam, but she is also able to sway him even after an angel comes directly from Heaven to send Adam God’s message about the forbidden fruit. Milton’s use of Eve’s powerful words show her confidence and independence throughout the story. Eve proudly states, “The willinger I go, nor much expect / A foe so proud will first the weaker seek; / So bent, the more shall shame him his repulse” (Milton 217). In other words, Eve believes that if anything happens while she and Adam are apart, Satan would go after the stronger one first. After persuading Adam to split up and not stay together, she still does not fear what can happen. Eve is confident enough in herself that she does not feel a reason to fear. The second time is when Eve persuades Adam to taste the

forbidden fruit. These attributes of Eve that Milton provides prove that she is not weaker than Adam. However, she is not perfect either. When confronted by the serpent, she is overcome by temptation and falls into the evil ways of sin. “The heinous and despicable act / Of Satan done in Paradise, and how / He in the serpent had perverted Eve, / Her husband she, to taste the fatal fruit” (Milton 240). Not only does she sin, but she causes Adam to sin as well. However, it is important to note that Milton never claims that she is perfect nor does he shame her for this mistake. Rather, he continuously considers her to be Adam’s companion.

Finally, Milton does not say Eve is less important or less valuable than Adam; she plays a different role in their relationship. In addition, Milton does not victimize Eve for her actions. In Book 11 of *Paradise Lost*, the future of the new world is told to Adam. Despite Eve’s fall, the world will have plenty of good within, even with the negative consequences of her actions. If Milton wanted to make Eve feel guilty for her choices, then I do not think he would allow a lot of good in the new world. Yes, she is the first person to fall and therefore diminish Paradise. However, this one action does not define her as a person and Milton makes that clear throughout the book. Some may argue that, by saying “Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed” (93), Milton is proving that they are not equal. However, Milton proves that Eve is more like Adam than what we consider her to be. She is an independent, wise, and powerful woman. In this excerpt from Milton (above), he explains that their physical appearances are not equal or the same, but their appearances do not reflect their nonphysical worth.

One mistake, no matter how big, does not delineate a person’s overall importance. Milton provides a background of Eve that serves as evidence that she had

attributes and qualifications that Adam lacked. Without her, Adam would not have been the man he was because Eve's job was to promote "good works in her husband" (Milton 213). The differences between the two are unrelated, which causes them to be incomparable. Milton proves that neither Adam nor Eve is weaker. They are both important and, without the other, would be nothing. Milton gives each person different attributes that are equally essential: "For contemplation he and valour formed; / For softness she and sweet attractive grace" (Milton 93). Therefore, the argument that Milton depicts Eve as being the lesser between the two is entirely invalid.

Works Cited

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