



## Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost

*Stanley Fish*

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In 1967 the world of Milton studies was divided into two armed camps: one proclaiming (in the tradition of Blake and Shelley) that Milton was of the devil's party with or without knowing it, the other proclaiming (in the tradition of Addison and C. S. Lewis) that the poet's sympathies are obviously with God and the angels loyal to him. The achievement of Stanley Fish's "Surprised by Sin" was to reconcile the two camps by subsuming their claims in a single overarching thesis: 'Paradise Lost' is a poem about how its readers came to be the way they are -- that is, fallen -- and the poem's lesson is proven on a reader's impulse every time he or she finds a devilish action attractive or a godly action dismaying. Fish's argument reshaped the face of Milton studies; 30 years later the issues raised in "Surprised by Sin" continue to set the agenda and drive debate.

## Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost Details

Date : Published March 15th 1998 by Harvard University Press (first published January 1st 1971)

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Author : Stanley Fish

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### Phil Mullen says

Whether Fish is right or wrong, his theory of what Milton intended (in his desire to \*educate\* the English by his poems) gives me a glass through which to re-examine the poems.

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### Chad says

A helpful secondary resource on Paradise Lost and the literary and rhetorical criticism surrounding the work. Fish provides many great insights into the heart of Milton's readers.

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### Derek H says

Fishy stuff, this.

I just had the grand opportunity and great pleasure to quote from this book and do that always fun [sic]-ing thing. How pleasant to be arch with someone as arch as he.

Also: he was a rude customer and bad tipper. So nyah, nyah.

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### Heather Moore says

I haven't read the whole book, but many excerpts. Fish is amazing.

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### Jeremy says

Lewis writes in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters* that "the devil is a liar." As my advisor puts it, Fish assumes here that readers of *Paradise Lost* won't remember that Satan is the father of lies.

Here's W. Gardner Campbell's summary in "Temptation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost* (pp. 165–66): "The most influential solution to the problem of God's tempting his own creation [?] is offered in Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*. Fish believes that *Paradise Lost* is a kind of dramatic catechism, a moral education by means of temptation not only for Adam and Eve, but also for the reader. As we read the epic, according to Fish, we ourselves are tempted by the complexities of Milton's portrayal of temptation in ways that, if we are attentive to the bedrock assertions of Milton's theology, demonstrate to us again and again the realities of [our] own fallenness. For Fish, the fact that we find Milton's temptations problematic is the most compelling evidence possible that we are fallen ourselves; and Milton has structured his poem to bring us face-to-face with that compelling evidence over and over, thus continually surprising us with the irreducible sinfulness of our own fallen sensibilities. Unlike Blake or Empson, Fish offers a remarkably consistent

Milton, so consistent that Fish could confidently title an anthology of his own Milton criticism *How Milton Works*, a title suggesting an exhaustive and definitive answer to our many questions."

Rumrich takes aim at this work in his *Milton Unbound*. Peter Herman is happy to situate himself as an anti-Fish when it comes to Milton criticism. Kerrigan et al. offer a helpful summary in their introduction to *Paradise Lost* (somewhere around p. 280).

Nigel Smith's *Is Milton Better than Shakespeare?* is aimed in large part at combating Fish's claim here ("that Milton was trying to induce sinful thoughts in his readers so that he could then teach them the error of their ways" [12]) and his claim in *How Milton Works* ("that Milton is the apologist for an ultimately theological and contained view of life" [12]).

Ryken says in *Milton's Paradise Lost*, "Although not advertising itself as a Christian reading of the poem, it is the most influential Christian interpretation of *Paradise Lost*" (91).

Apparently, Fish:

- claims in this book that the plain style of Heaven is the teaching style, whereas the grand style of Hell is deceptive (see 6–7, 61, 89). That is to say, rhetoric/eloquence is essentially sophistry, and Christians ought to prefer logic.
  - reverses this claim in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*.
  - comes back to this claim in *How Milton Works*.
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## Catie says

Fish is the only person who has ever made me remotely interested in Milton.

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## Andreea says

This is an over-long book full of untranslated blocks of French and Latin with some surprisingly good points, let me summarize them (the good points) for you:

- 1) Milton tries to educate the reader through *PL* by repeatedly 'tempting' them to misinterpret the poem then showing them how they're wrong through the epic voice or God's speeches
- 2) God has to be such a boring character because He was to be authoritative and fun rhetoric is not authoritative
- 3) the epic voice is not always reliable
- 4) Milton uses some words (e.g. 'fallen', 'wand'ring', etc) repeatedly very different contexts, it's useful to keep an eye on them
- 5) the corruption of language after the Fall is shown through double-entendres in Adam and Eve's speeches
- 6) the War in Heaven is a mock-epic meant to show the superiority of Christian heroism over conventional epic poems / 'pagan' heroism
- 7) rereading *Paradise Lost* (and Milton's other texts) does a lot more to help your understanding of the poem than reading a book about it.

The fact that the chapters (more or less) follow the chronology of the poem and make it easier to read this alongside *PL* almost gained Fish an extra star, but then I remembered the appalling formatting of my edition.

## Kevin says

So one of the things I discovered quite by accident, mainly due to Matthew Sweet's "Sick of Myself", was post-modernism.

Luckily enough, at the time, Slick Willy told us that "it depends on what the meaning of is is".

I also was following the "Sokal affair"

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal\\_af...](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_af...)

All in all, this kind of clicked with how the views of ideas such as Jefferson being a slave holder, the Pilgrims being nothing but invading honkies, and in general Western Civ was nothing to be proud of were all boiling up in the mid 90's, mainly through "multi-culturalism". That always seemed to me like code speak for 'Every other culture is better than yours', including Muslims that splash acid in the faces of women and stab knives through the hearts of writers that disagree with them.

I think 9/11 has exposed the hilarity of all that gobbley gook, but we're all still acting like sheep, going along with the idea that 90 year old white women need to be searched for bombs. That also jives with many discussions over the past few weeks that kids aren't "stupid" or "bad" anymore, they're just troubled or LD. Whatever.

But to the point. From what I understand, this book may actually be a bona fide effective use of "deconstruction" and if Harold Bloom says its ok to read, Im all in.

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## Rick says

I really enjoyed this. Fish leads the reader through a reading of Paradise Lost that shines light on the true nature of all reading and our own inability for perfection. In the end, his conclusions show us just what it means to be humans in a world where paradise has been lost.

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## J. Alfred says

Descriptive language would probably fail me: I gave five stars to Fish's "How Milton Works" and this is simply better than that. It is perhaps the best work of sustained criticism I've ever come across.

If one is a Milton fan, one must know this book.

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