

Part II
English Honours
Paper -3
Topic – Paradise Lost

Significance of Invocation or Exordium in Paradise Lost.

It was customary with classical poets of yore to invoke, at the beginning of their works, the blessings of God for the successful composition as well as completion of their artistic endeavour. For they were confirmed in their belief that man is limited and so if he undertakes to perform any extraordinary work his limited imaginative faculty and intellectual caliber have to be supplemented with divine inspiration. Therefore, writers such as Homer, Virgil, in the West, and Vyasa, Valmiki, in the East, used to begin their works with a word of prayer in which they used to confess to their limited capacity and thus make themselves humble before God.

The word invocation is formed out of the Latin vocare, which means call, and the prefix, in-, meaning 'within', 'towards'. Etymologically, the Latin vocare comes from the Sanskrit root, vak. In the religious context, invocation means calling upon God from within the heart of the devotee. Milton's lines "And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer/before all temples the upright heart and pure" (PL, I, 17-18) can be said indirectly to bring out the true meaning of the word invocation, that is, praying to God within the heart.

Paradise Lost by John Milton deals with a Biblical subject, the Fall of Man. The poem is highly coloured by Milton's own temperament, personality and life-story. Milton has given a good deal of himself into this work. The poet John Dryden, calls *Paradise Lost* "one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems, which either this age or nation has produced," and others from William Blake to W. H. Auden have used it as a source of inspiration for their own writing. We all know that invocation to the heavenly muse at the outset of an epic is one of the age-old conventions of the classical epic poetry. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is written somewhat in the mould of a classical epic and in conformity with the epic conventions, he begins his book with an invocation to Heavenly Muse. Like Dante and Tasso, Milton, however, follows the classical epic writers like Homer and Virgil but with one notable difference. He does not address one of the nine Muses of Greek or Roman poets. He invokes the Muse of the sacred song. This is so because Milton does not believe in the Muses of Classical poetry and he looks upon heathen gods as devils. However, since a classical poet invokes the Muse to aid him in what he intends to write, Milton also asks his Muse to lead him higher than 'the Aonian Mount' of the Classical poets, because the subject of his epic is 'higher' than that of others'. Thus, Milton begins his book with a classical invocation which ultimately rises to the level of a Christian prayer to the

Holy Spirit, read by Christians in the Second verse of Genesis! “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the Waters’.

In the invocation part, again, in conformity with the classical epic conventions, Milton skillfully states the subject of his epic which is ‘man’s’ first disobedience. Milton has followed his classical masters not only in the immediate introduction of his main theme but also in the grammatical structure which is highly Latinised. In twenty six lines of the prologue characterized by a heavily involved syntax, the poet has informed his readers not only that the theme of the book are to be drawn chiefly from ‘Genesis’ and that Milton intends to write a classical epic but that he wants to do it with the help of the inspiration from the Heavenly Muse to transcend the classical. The readers also come to know that the poem is going to deal with the most profound of all problems, ‘to justify the ways of God to men’, a subject ‘unattempted yet in prose or rhyme’. In the first twenty six lines, thus, Milton has fused three great civilizations- the main sources of Renaissance religious poetry- classical, Hebrew and Christian.

Milton invokes the Heavenly Muse in the composition of his epic with an avowed purpose. He entreats the Muse to quicken into life his latent faculties: “What in me is dark/Illumine, What is low, raise and support” so that he “may assert external providence/ And justify the ways of God to men”. The conviction of the power of the poet also corresponds to the concept of the classical epic writers.

To sum up, in the invocation to the muse in *Paradise Lost*, Milton follows a poetic tradition adopted from antiquity. But he makes a departure from the classical convention by seeking the inspiration not of the pagan Muse of Homer or Virgil, but of the Christian or Heavenly Muse which is in reality the divine inspiration that revealed the truths of religion to Moses and also the spirit of God, which dwells in the heart of every believer. It also displays those that give essence of Milton’s thought and style.

Though in the invocation Milton first emphasises the role Lucifer and his followers, in the prologue he holds up man as the chief figure. The exordium suggests the disobedience of man as the cause of his loss of Eden. But as a prophet, Milton looks beyond the mere fact of the fall of man. He interprets that God who expels man from the Paradise is not without mercy and affection. So in this work his emphasis is upon “the ways of God to men”. The classical Muses only offer an aesthetic gratification through the literary material. But Heavenly Muse can lead to the indepth understanding of meanings. The poet has the intuition to appreciate the complex way of God’s blessings upon the fallen man. Thus, the invocation gives Milton a modern stand in relation to the theme of Genesis.

The blank verse used the invocation prepares the readers for something great. The main verb of the first sentence (‘sing’) occurs in the sixth line. So, the opening sentence is a broad leap helpful to create an effect of sublimity. Milton is guided by a poetic sense of soft music. Therefore, ‘Horeb’ is changed into ‘Oreb’ and ‘Zion’ into ‘Sion’. Again, the lines “Dove- like sat’st

brooding on the Vast abyss/ and mads't it pregnant" resound with the grand consonantal sounds necessary to reach an epical height. Milton is always conscious that he is pursuing "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme". Now and then he makes use of Latin constructions to create literary remoteness, but the tone of *The Old Testament* is in the poet's blood. He says in the beginning how the "Heavens and Earth/ Rose out of Chaos". The simplicity of the line indicates that Milton is consciously making himself a poet of divine inspiration something of which is discernible in the mono-syllabic Anglo-Saxon words which are pithy and forceful enough to express the grandeur of the central theme of this grand epic- "the ways of God to men".

In conclusion we can say that all images that can suggest a great beginning have been brought together. The logical connection between these images is not exactly the same as an emotional connection. Milton always provides a facade of logical connection as well. Thus, the poet is at his best in the prologue as there is a wonderful congruity between syntax and versification. The invocation to Milton's *Paradise Lost* has no parallel in English Narrative Poetry. Samuel Johnson calls the language of the poem "harsh and barbarous," Sir Walter Raleigh declares the work consisted of "dead ideas," and T. S. Eliot claims Milton's style in the epic would have a harmful influence on English poetry. Despite the controversy sparked by the poem, however, it continues to be one of the most widely read and discussed works of English literature, with a reputation for greatness surpassed only by Shakespeare's plays. Critics have found the narrative poem rich with meaning on its many levels: political allusions, cosmology, use of language, Biblical content, characterization, use of the traditional epic form, moral and spiritual meanings, and philosophical implications. Thus remembering the words of E. M. W. Tillyard, who acclaims that *Paradise Lost* is "the greatest subject in the world, overwhelming in its implications and in its consequences". Hence in *Paradise Lost*, with Scripture as his primary source, classical literature as a model, and Renaissance tradition as his guide, Milton writes an epic that has universal significance for all mankind and for his reader in particular.

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