

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Samson Agonistes (1671)

John Milton

*Historical setting* Milton was long involved with the kinds of issue that dominate his finest work: issues of power and faith, the role of the female in god's plan, social claims on the individual, man's strength in relation to the feminine principle, the laws of God and the penalty for ignoring them. All these sets of concerns challenge this multi-faceted writer, for whom the crucible of the English Civil Wars added intense personal focus. (In some ways he joins Montaigne, in fighting out his personal struggles against the canvas of Civil Wars which were tearing up the very ground on which he was writing. Exactly here we glimpse the battleground across which the modern consciousness was being forged.) The England of the mid-seventeenth century was a dramatic place in which to confess out one's deepest feelings, on all the central human topics. A man of high government position, a beneficiary of the finest education available both from St. Paul's stringent preschool and from Oxford University, Milton was staged for dramatic encounters with himself. Among the most potent texts Milton left, as vestiges of his from the beginning ambitious anthropology of man and God, is the *Samson Agonistes* (*Samson the Struggler*) before us.

*Latin and Milton* What does the figure of Samson, that towering block of resistance from the *Book of Judges—Chapters 13-23*—offer Milton as a vehicle for dealing with himself? (The he himself, enshrouded in formal language, *Samson*, is himself Milton. He explodes into a version of himself as both power and weakness, but before reaching to us with such verbal ferocity he establishes himself in that same passionate, Latinate, erudite but wry, language that seems never not to have been Milton's trademark. (Reading Milton without Latin, for instance, is to lose the high noble register he sustains almost everywhere in his poetic work. The synthesis of classical English iambic pentameter with its innumerable plays against its sister language, Latin, empowers a game of great mind power, an engine which, in Milton's poetry, rarely runs down.)

*The strategy of Samson Agonistes* Like the greatest of writers, Milton writes both a down to earth tale, and an allegory of that tale, in which his work is embedded, and which the universal stamp to the entire conception is visible. That universal message, which we can address in discussing 'themes,' below, is that great power of person and body can become proud and dangerous powder kegs for tragic developments. In Samson's case, in his condition as a redoubtable community leader, man of arms, the slayer of uncountable Philistines, the great enemy to his own tribe, the worst of personal reductions has taken its vengeance; he has been reduced to the Dungeon 'of himself.' Samson's soul is imprisoned now in real darkness of the body, where it dwells, 'shut up from outward light to incorporate with gloomy night.' For 'inward light alas puts forth no visual beam.' With an interiority packed into historically embossed language, Milton flies outward to the point where, in the present passage, he reminds us of no less a wounded congener of the modern human condition than Hamlet, Shakespeare's brilliant exemplar of a young modern philosopher, who found himself beset by a need for actions which his situation couldn't adequately explain to him.

*Modern dilemmas, modern resolutions* 'Sicklied over with the pale cast of resolution,' Hamlet deeply felt the obligation to act and 'clean up the stables,' but the fuzziness of the modern mandate clipped his intentions and he went out as a wounded 'sweet prince'. Faced with a similar incumbency, the lover of Israel, *Samson agonistes*, concludes that he has been humiliated by events, betrayed by his beautiful Dalila, forgotten by his own sense of honor, and that only one recourse remains to him, first to embrace his enslavedness, then to own it entirely and to become, inside his imprisoned condition, the over thrower of his fate. This Samson, crouching potently within Samson, the character, will attract the full attention of what Milton designs as a modern tragedy, a source of that pity and fear which were for Aristotle, as we see in the introduction to this play, the deep triggers of the tragic experience, and pathways (through pity and fear) toward resolution and even peace.

*The display technique* Milton's putting on of this moving psychodrama—a drama in the mind if you like, a play in which we meet Milton at every turn of feeling or sentence structure—places directly across from each other a wounded giant, the shell of what had been the most powerful of Israel's leaders, and a redoubted warrior. We are to know Samson as a tissue of layers, prominent among which is a susceptibility to women and their dangerous charms. It is in fact this demanning, by the seductive Dalila that has reduced Samson to the crushed condition of a wounded warrior. The backstory to this display is brisk, but sharp angled: lover of a fabled Philistine beauty, Samson is lured by her into giving up his strength—locks of his hair—so that he falls into the hands of her clan of Philistines. It is in that dudgeon that we have first met Samson, 'eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves,' and pitied him as a mighty giant torn from his tribe, and up for humiliation as a public prisoner.

*The succession of visitors* The playout of the drama transpires as a succession of visitor-specters who pass through the dramatic space of Samson, commenting on his condition—blinded, bound-- mocking him, bewailing the bad steps he has taken, that have led him to this destiny. Central to all these passing figures of the drama is the *chorus*, a well-intentioned crew of supportive community members who were close to Samson before his imprisonment, and who interact with his present worries and worrisome appearing plans. (Interestingly enough, the technique of a commenting visitor parade, adopted here, resembles that of the Greek tragedian Aeschylus, who employs it in *Prometheus Bound*, as he makes the bound hero the centerpiece of conversations with numerous passing spirits; Milton was living his classics to powerful effect here.) Samson's elderly dad visits his son, to say that he has collected ransom money which he is ready to offer for Samson's release—though before Manoa realizes it, Samson will have been led off to public trial, and will have brought down the temple on his own head and that of the Philistines. Dalila, Samson's wife, visits, with her seductive manners, but can no longer waken Samson's attention.

*Samson and the end game* We realize at this point how deeply Samson's mind is elsewhere, and how apocalyptic his thoughts. Harapha, a cowardly giant, visits to mock Samson in prison, but is chased away, scorned by Samson as a big mouthed coward. The final turn of events is at hand. The succession of visitors, through whose reaction we have taken the pulse of Samson's character—which is both volatile and powerful—has given us an open window onto Samson's depression, humiliation, undefined fury, and anguish. To put all this in contemporary terms we might want to say that Samson is brewing the ingredients of mass murder, and that an explosion is about to rock him and his world.

*The recounting of the end game* As it happens, a messenger is on his way to Samson's prison, to announce the calamitous finale of Samson's Fury. Taken as a display piece to the Philistine National Festival, where the whole community is engaged in festivities, Samson is called forth to perform feats of strength, to the awe and amusement of the assembled crowd. Assembling his fabled strength he raises the sacred temple of the regional god, smashing it to the ground, crushing the people of the bity, and killing himself. It is in this last action that Samson becomes *agonistes*, the Greek term Milton chooses to describe his protagonist. Samson is a *struggler*, a *battler*, as would be a fighter in classical Athens, all sweat, intention, and bulk, as he throws himself against the common enemy. A single man prizefighting is not an agonist, but a fighter; an antagonist fights from within a wider and deeper human commitment.

### **Themes in Samson Agonistes**

*Women* One of Samson's greatest weaknesses is beautiful women, and his wife Dalila is notoriously attractive. Certain strands of hair, on Samson's head, are the sources of his strength, of his power to resist her, and Dalila comes to realize that if she can snip his hairs gradually, until his strength to define himself and escape her fades, she will be able to exercise power over him. Nothing, of course, is simply what it seems to mean here.

*Violence* Violence (or huge summonable strength) is important to Samson, in the present closet drama. He worships a god of power, is notoriously combative, and yet, because his power is sulky-moody as well as potent, he must be treated as all times as vital danger. (Character types pass through the contemporary eye, as it considers the blend of personal insecurity with need for dominance, on the political sight scape brought us by television today.)

*Religion and Humiliation* The emasculation of Samson, by the wily Dalila and her co-plotting tribesmen, is the most devastating attack on Samson by his enemies. He is gradually deprived of his strength, which has for him a double religious meaning. He is more than ever forced to recognize the presence of others—which he does, appropriately, in facing the parade of visitors to his prison. He is also driven inward, with his strength, until it becomes some kind of nuclear engine of his behavior. It is this outreach of faith in which he brings his existence into the very face of God.

*Aesthetic morality* Milton designs his one act tragic closet drama to accomplish the aesthetic ends Aristotle desired, for the full scale of a Greek tragedy, like Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In Sophocles's play (as in Milton's) the audience gives its sympathy to a great man, who through his own error falls, raising in us the feelings of pity and fear, a catharsis which cleans and purifies us.

### *Study guide*

The two set pieces under discussion, as the heat of Milton's work, join in their celebration of the spirit of liberty, a constant concern of Milton (For a larger instance, *Paradise Lost*, arguably Milton's greatest work, builds constantly on the theme of liberty, dreadful as that condition is, when devoted to inner freedom and the power to do good. As well, of course, as the power to choose evil, and to join Satan in Hell. In *Samson Agonistes* we encounter the ultimate figure of humanity, and realize how strenuously he struggles to reject the temptations of humiliation-submission. The same striving figure dominates *Areopagitica*, which is the culminating masterpiece of the passion for freedom. Does freedom emerge as a goal to strive for, or as an ultimately unobtainable condition?

Milton's Samson is a figure of great power, ultimately strong enough to pull down the great temple and destroy his enemies. (The spirit of liberty, of that power which insists on freedom in *Areopagitica*, which unbinds the shackles of the mind.) Does Milton's powerful freedom loving man resemble the archetypal Man of Pico della Mirandola's *Oration*? Do the two writers conceive an ideal man of power or of freedom alone?

Do you find love in Milton's essays? Is freedom, as Milton presents it, related to any of the gentler emotions? The answer seems to be no. In fact, perhaps because we have largely sidestepped the lyric in our anthology, we have barely touched the topic of love, certainly romantic love, in this anthology.