

Dreams of Autonomy, Deeds of Authority: a Comparative Reading of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Jane Austen's *Emma*, and August Wilson's *Fences*

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Notwithstanding the fact that John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Jane Austen's *Emma*, and August Wilson's *Fences* are literary works of diverse generic backgrounds and cultural constructs, interestingly they intersect on a plethora of 'universal' metageneric and metacultural themes. Owing to this thematic intersection, it seems to me, a thematically informed comparative approach looms not only worthwhile but also tantalizing. Indeed, the fact that *Paradise Lost*, *Emma*, and *Fences* are correspondingly a Christian epic written by a dead White male in Restoration England, a domestic novel written by a White female in Pre-Victorian England, and a protest play written by an Afro-American male in Post-Civil Rights America is unlikely to undermine the critical legitimacy of such a precarious comparative project. The many universal themes inculcated in these multifarious texts, by the very virtue of being the artistic work of humans always capable of transcending the discursive boundaries of history, politics, gender, sexuality, class, nation, and race are ultimately rich Quixotic sites for wandering comparatists who are in eternal quest of journeying different words and worlds.

A remarkably tantalizing theme that appears to me overtly inviting in the three texts is the excruciating inner conflicts that major characters do experience in their search for self-discovery and fulfillment. These conflicts are the culmination of an ineluctable tension between the desires of the Self and the obligations of the Other,

which is mainly manifested in the characters' confrontation between their own dreams of autonomy and repressive deeds of authority. By focusing on the individual experiences of the major characters of each of the three texts, I will try to explore the natures of these tension and attempt to investigate the resistance these characters exhibit in their struggle to, at least, find an acceptable balance between the will of the Other and the will of the Self.

To begin with, it is conspicuous that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is replete with textual references that translate the tension between the duty to authority and the will to autonomy. Interestingly, in this, no character appears to be immune, not even the Son. Satan, Adam, and Eve, however, are the characters that best exemplify the complexity of this tension. Indeed, from the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, we are introduced to the complex relationship between God and Satan. Being created by God, Satan's duty was to abide by the law of the creator who is the most powerful by the virtue of being Power itself. What we understand from the epic is that it is very logical to assume that Satan, or Lucifer before the fall, was part of this contract that God mandates upon his creatures in Heaven. The breach of this contract results in an infringement of the Law and a transgression on the hierarchy of power by an angel whose very existence in Heaven hinges on his accomplishment of a duty imposed on him by God. This duty is to accept his "inferior" position to God the Father, the Son, and the newly created Adam. Milton writes:

Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
 Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd
 The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride
 Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host

Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
 To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
 He trusted to have equal'd the most High,
 If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
 Against the Throne and Monarchy of God.

(I.35-40)

Satan's duty is to accept whatever decision God makes. If Satan wants to keep his position as an angel in heaven, he must abide by the law of God. By being proud, envious, revengeful, and ambitious Satan violates this law.

Like Satan, God created Adam and Eve. This newly created couple must reciprocate a duty of faith, obedience and total submission to God's will apotheosized in a pledge of not eating the forbidden fruit. They are both indebted to God, who perfected and blessed them in the Garden of Eden. In book VIII, Adam recounts to Raphael God's appearance to him and how he mandated upon him the pledge of faith and obedience:

In adoration at his feet I fell
 Submiss: he rear'd me, and Whom thou soughtst I am,
 Said mildely, Author of all this thou seest
 Above, or round about thee or beneath.
 This Paradise I give thee, count it thine
 To Till and keep, and of the Fruit to eate:
 Of every Tree that in the Garden growes
 Eate freely with glad heart; fear here no dearth:
 But of the Tree whose operation brings
 knowledge of good and ill, which I have set

The Pledge of thy Obedience and thy Faith,
 Amid the Garden by the Tree of Life,
 Remember what I warne thee, shun to taste,
 And shun the bitter consequence: for know,
 The day thou eat'st thereof, my sole command.

(VIII, 315-29)

Conversely, Adam and Eve owe God faith, total obedience, and the refrain from eating the forbidden fruit.

In *Emma*, the webs of duties are much worldlier and socialized than *Paradise Lost*. The duties that the major characters of the novel owe to some extrinsic authorities are very essential in the development of the plot. The very setting, theme, and historical background of Austen's novel, however, all contribute to the confinement of the concept of duty to family, manners, and class. Although, it is very conspicuous that every major and minor character in *Emma* has his/her own duties with proportion to the centrality of the character in the narrative, one might affirm that the duties imposed on Emma, Harriet, and Mr. Knightly are the most crucial in the novel. Despite of Emma's power and independence, especially if one compares her to all the other female characters in the novel, one can possibly argue that Emma is burdened by her persistent sense of duty to her sickly father. Emma derives much of her identity from a double-edged autonomy that if one attempts to understand it, one would find that it is, indeed, a burden on the young shoulders of Emma. At the surface, this duty provides her with power and autonomy, yet, in reality it but consolidates her dependency on the authority of her father.

The opening chapter takes us behind the surface when it comes to the inner dilemma that has conquered Emma after losing Miss Taylor. Now, Emma has to face

this burden and of the father directly by herself without the mediation of such a domestic female as Miss Taylor really was in Hartfield. It was such a dramatic change to her. Emma was, indeed, alert to it. For the first time, Emma finds herself in direct confrontation with this intractable responsibility of taking care of a sickly and boring father. Austen writes:

How was she to bear the change? It was true that her friend was going on half a mile from them; but Emma was aware that great must be the difference ... She was now in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude. She dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful. (20)

Nonetheless, one has to admit that Emma like Adam and Eve was indeed very aware of this authority of the father, to whom she is indebted of all her economic wealth and social status in a community that worships money and manners.

Not different from Emma, the two characters close to her, Harriet and Mr. Knightly find themselves with similar burdening duties. Harriet feels a duty of obedience to Emma who introduced her to the high society of Highbury when even Mr. Knightly—the most humane and courteous of all the characters—cannot imagine a better match for her than Robert Martin (Ch.8). Like Harriet, Mr. Knightly feels a moral and familial duty towards Emma and her father Mr. Woodhouse. Despite the seriousness of the responsibility he holds to secure the welfare of Emma and her father, one might venture to say that the chief duty that burdens Mr. Knightly derives from the authority of manners and decorum in the small community of Highbury.

Unlike *Paradise Lost* and *Emma*, *Fence*'s webs of duties are very much influenced by the racial discourse of the play. It is not exaggerating to assert that every major persona in the play owes a family duty that is intrinsically connected to their history and reality of racial consciousness.

Troy's duty is concentrated on the authority of family, yet it bears a concomitant obsession with his experience with racial segregation in America. In *Fences*, Troy's obsession with the authority of race is displaced to a monomaniac reverse authority towards his family in general and his son Cory in particular. Cory, who does everything to convince his father to let him fulfill his dream of being a football player, is persistently met by Troy's rejection. Blinded by authoritarian history of racism, Troy stops in the face of his kid's ambition. When, Cory protested and claimed his right, Try furiously said to him:

TROY. It is my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house... sleep you behind on my bedclothes... feel your belly up with my food...cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to care of you. I owe a responsibility to you. (1.3.)

Like Troy, Rose acquires a great part of her subjectivity from her pledge to serve her husband and children. It is her obsession with her family and her husband that have for eighteen years shaped her identity. As it is this same qualities that have always made Troy love her and value her. Rose, who was a very devoted, patient, and strong willing woman has given up her life to serve Troy and his family. Although Wilson comments that her devotion to Troy is the very result of lack of other possibilities in her life (1.1.), Rose finds in Troy what she had never found in other

men. It is this quality in Troy that has always encouraged her to ignore his faults and forgive them.

As expounded earlier, *Paradise Lost*, *Emma*, and *Fences* do all examine the major characters' struggles to fulfill their duties towards God, family, society, etc. What is, however, more significant about these characters is, indeed, the inherent tensions between their extrinsic duties and their intrinsic drives for autonomy and self-realization. In *Paradise Lost*, this climactic tension is no better illustrated than in the narratives of Satan's revolt and Adam and Eve's disobedience of God's edict.

Satan's eloquent statement in the first book of the poem "Here we may reign secure, and in my choice/To reign is worth ambition though in Hell/Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heaven" (261-3) does exquisitely articulate this tension between authority and autonomy. It communicates the agony that Satan had felt before deciding to revolt against what he and his followers have always seen as God's hegemonic authority. It is this very revolt that makes us consciously or unconsciously sympathetic with Satan. It is this "sense of injur'd merit"(1.98) that every one of us feels whenever we feel ourselves obliged to obey an order from an authority when we are certain that this order is incongruous with our desire let alone our dignity and prestige. "No one had in fact done anything to Satan..." C.S. Lewis eloquently remarks, "he only thought himself impaired, of in the midst of a world of light and love, of song and feast and dance, he could find nothing more interesting than his own prestige" (96).

Likewise, Satan's obsession with his prestige and his will to fight for his autonomy is very humanistic. It translates the innate readiness of all creatures to challenge authority whenever authority threatens our individual drives and desires. What is, however, debatable in Satan's revolt is his radical will to power .In

Pandemonium, Satan perpetuates the same kind of authority he was the first among the fallen angels to denounce and subvert. The large number of angels, who joined Satan, convinces us of the gravity and of this tension. This latter originates from the discrepancy between serving God and striving for sovereignty. Indeed, like Satan, each one of them—as shown from the speeches of Belial, Moloch, Mammon, and Beelzebub in Book II— has a personal agenda. It is at that moment that one becomes very cautious about their motifs.

Although Adam and Eve's disobedience are almost put on the shoulder of Satan, one might easily discern the individualistic motifs behind their transgression. Even though Raphael warns them of Satan's intention to tempt them, Adam and Eve violate the pledge of faith and obedience because of their inherent inclinations to knowledge and power. Despite the fact that it is Eve who first manifested this will, Adam, who has the upper position, followed her. Adam by succumbing to Eve's desires, has, indeed, succumbed to the same human desire of knowledge and power. Adam's act of disobedience is also the result of his individualistic propensity to love and passion. At this level, one might venture to say, that by capitulating to Eve's desire, Adam capitulated to the human in him. Milton writes:

So *Adam*, and thus *Eve* to him repli'd.
 O glorious trial of exceeding Love,
 Illustrious evidence, example high!
 Ingaging me to emulate, but short
 Of thy perfection, how shall I attaine,
Adam, from whose deare side I boast me sprung,
 And gladly of our Union heare thee speak,
 One Heart, one Soul in both; whereof good prooff

This day affords, declaring thee resolv'd,
 Rather then Death or aught then Death more dread
 Shall separate us, linkt in Love so deare,
 To undergoe with mee one Guilt, one Crime,
 If any be, of tasting this fair Fruit,
 Whose vertue, for of good still good proceeds,
 Direct, or by occasion hath presented
 This happie trial of thy Love, which else
 So eminently never had bin known

(Book IX 960-75)

By realizing Eve's desire, Adam is, indeed, serving his own desire. At this level, Adam is close to Satan than he is to God. If in *Paradise Lost*, therefore, the tension is very metaphysical since its centers on the relationship between God Satan, Adam and Eve in the realms of heaven and hell, in *Emma* the tensions is much more related to the characters' search for social, economic, and –implicitly— sexual achievement.

In *Emma*, the tension between the duty to authority and individual autonomy is illustrated mainly through Emma's dilemma, which is resulted from the incongruity between her obligation to serve her father and her desire for love. This tension is also illustrated in Knightley's abiding by the authority of social mores and manners and both his love for Emma and his will to economic and social power. Likewise, Harriet's duty towards Emma is in an inexorable conflict with her obsession with romance and social integration.

From the beginning of the novel, Emma enjoys a considerable space of social and economic responsibility inconsistent with her gender at the opening decades of Victorian England. Yet, this autonomy is predicated upon her meeting of the

numerous and burdening demands of her sickly father. Because of the state of her father, Emma plays a double role: her father's and her own, a man's role and a woman's role. In spite of her social and economic responsibilities, Emma is aware of the gender duties in her patriarchal community. In her feminist reading of *Emma*, critic Debra Teachman contends that part of the internal conflict that Emma has to confront is the discrepancy between her social, political, and economic responsibilities due to her father's illness and the social restrictions she has always internalized because of her gender. Teachman writes:

Emma does not, however, enjoy all of the privileges that men of property in her time relish. Because she is female, society does not allow her the same freedom of movement and independence that sons of landed property have. Although she suffers few restrictions because of her gender within her father's home and community of Highbury, Emma is fully aware, as every woman of her society must be, that her freedom of movement and activity in the world beyond Highbury is very restricted. (107).

One ramification of this duty is Emma's willingness to sacrifice her personal life for the sake of her father. For many times, one is stunned by Emma's repetitive mentioning of her decision not to marry due to her awareness that marriage would be a transgression on her responsibility towards her father. This "clever, and rich" young girl with "a comfortable home and happy disposition", Austen tells us "had lived twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (19). The irony here lies in the fact that these very qualities do indirectly vex her because they are all the result of her compliance of her duty toward her father and her society. As a result of this she resorts to matchmaking.

Read from a psychoanalytical perspective, her obsession with matchmaking is a sign of her challenge of the duties imposed on her by the patriarchal institution. She finds in Harriet a very easy way of experimenting with romantic and social adventures. By trying to match the socially “inferior” Harriet to more established men in the community of Highbury Emma unconsciously defies class authority. Her duty to her father and the social mores resulted in a schizophrenic character. It is the persistent demands of her society and her individual inclination that make her often indecisive and ambivalent about love and marriage. In so many times, Emma confides to Harriet that she will never marry because of her father. Yet, in this very statement, one can easily detect a conflicting Emma who is torn between her familial responsibilities and her own desires for romance and love. Emma confesses to Harriet:

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! But I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature, and I do not think I ever shall. And without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I’m of Hartfield; and never, never, could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s. (67)

The passage is remarkable in many ways, the least it can be seen as a masked declaration against what Freud calls “the duty principle” for the sake of “the Pleasure principle”. What Emma is resisting here is not only the patriarchal hegemony, but also the very concept of duty. Indeed, what is unsaid is that she is ready to give up

everything for the sake of love. Love, however, must be understood from a modern perspective, which includes both the spiritual and physical desires. One has to remember that Emma is at a very critical age in which the unfulfilled individual drives are unconsciously manifested and realistically displaced into socially accepted behavior.

This is also very conspicuous when it comes to Harriet's relationship with Emma. From the very beginning, Harriet exhibits an ongoing struggle between her obligation to the authority of friendship and her individual desires that are threatened by the very obedience to that authority. Emma has done her best to integrate Harriet into the high society of Highbury. That's why Harriet has always been burdened by a feeling of dependence on Emma. Taking into consideration her social position, Harriet is the character that is the most affected by her indebtedness to Emma, yet at the same time this very indebtedness comes in many times in a direct conflict with her individual desires.

The most significant example is Harriet's romance with Robert Martin and her later desire for Mr. Knightly. Although, we have always been convicted of the strong bond between the two friends, much of the subtext of the relationship between Harriet and Emma is hidden. So often, one questions the veracity of this relationship. After all, Harriet is nothing but a substitute of Miss Taylor. At the surface, Harriet never resists Emma. But, deep down we see in her a friend that is ready to become by no stretch of the reader's fantasy a declared enemy.

Harriet was thrilled at the idea of having a man who is in love with her and who is ready to do everything to marry her. Emma mockingly reprimands Harriet and told her that "a woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her, and can write a tolerable letter"(56). Torn between her duty to

Emma— on whom her social integration hinges— and her inclination towards Robert Martin. The immediate reaction was Harriet's submission to Emma. By the end of the novel, however, Harriet by her willing return to Robert without consulting Emma translates her “always already there” resistance to Emma.

Like Emma and Harriet, Mr. Knightly is another example of this clash between one's obligations and one's drives. Mr. Knightly, who is hailed by many critics to be the voice of wisdom and social conservatism in the novel, is torn between his strong sense of duty to Mr. Woodhouse/Emma and his physical and spiritual infatuation with his young sister-in-law. Mr. Knightly and thanks to his social and economic stance in Highbury, has successfully masked his individualism in a social language and behavior that is extolled as ideal in his community.

Mr. Knightly's social integration cannot, however, overwhelm his individualistic inclination of love and passion. Despite his attempts to repress his desire for Emma, Mr. Knightly has always unconsciously manifested a social behavior that is in conflict with his reputation as the wisest and the most interfered person in the community. This is unconsciously manifested during the ball at the Crown Inn, where Mr. Knightly's contempt for Frank Churchill transforms into jealousy and hate. Austen writes:

Mr. Knightly, who for some reason best known to him, had certainly taken in early dislike to Frank Churchill, was only growing to dislike him more. He began to suspect him of some double dealing in his pursuit of Emma. (271).

Mr. Knightly's resistance to the authority of social mores is also inferred from his obsessive passion for Emma in spite of the significant age difference. One has to

imagine the internal struggle he has experienced because of his interest in the young daughter of the man who blindly confided in his manners and social status.

Like *Emma*, *Fences* is packed with instances of tensions between the major characters' social responsibilities and their individual drives. Although one may venture to say that this tension affects every character in the play from Bono to Gabe, Troy and Rose represent the most compelling evidence that *Fences* is first and most a play of the conflict between the authority of the other and the autonomy of the self.

Throughout *Fences*, the major character Troy Maxson is torn between his obligation to his family and his individualistic drives that are encapsulated in his affair with Alberta. "At the heart of the play," writes Joan Herrington, "is the juxtaposition of the decisions Troy makes regarding his family and his choice to have an affair" (65). Throughout his life, Troy strives to be committed to his wife and family. For this reason, he doesn't find any shame in working as a garbage collector. In one of the most moving scenes in the play, Troy scolds his son Lyons for not having any sense of duty in his life:

TROY. Yeh, I got it. You know why I got it? Cause I don't throw my money out there in the streets. You living the fast life...wanna be a musician...running around in them clubs and things...then, you learn to take care of yourself. You ain't gonna find me going and asking nobody for nothing. I done spent too many years without. (1.1.)

Troy's words translate his sense of commitment and duty. Despite of the demeaning job and the racism of his boss, Troy is aware that it is incumbent on him to have such a job as long as he is committed to his family and his dignity. His strong sense of responsibility makes him at conflict with his elder son Lyons who is depicted as meeting the prejudices of a young Black American man. Another evidence of his

commitment to duty is his long life friendship with Bono, whom he met in a prison twenty years ago. It is basically through the conversations between Troy and Bono that we learn of this conflict between Troy's sense of duty and his desire to individualism. Throughout these conversations, we learn that Troy's undaunted commitment to his family is in clash with his own individual inclinations.

Although none can doubt Troy's sense of duty towards his family and wife, his affair with Alberta translates his inner dilemma. Contrast to what he has always said to his sons, and to his devoted wife Rose, Troy couldn't resist his desire for Alberta. When Brono reprimands him for betraying his conjugal duty to Rose, Troy cannot deny the overwhelming power of this desire that has torn him apart before succumbing to it:

TROY. Hell you know me... I wasn't out there looking for nothing you can't find a better woman than rose. I know that. But seems like this woman just stuck onto me where I can't shake her loose. I done wrestled with it, tried to show her off me...but she just stuck on tighter. Now she's stuck on for good. (Act II,4)

Not very different from Troy, Rose is torn by this conflict. She has been, nonetheless, very patient in repressing this tension between her duty to her family and her personal inclinations and aspirations. With her knowledge that Troy is having an affair with Alberta, Rose exploded. It is at this moment that we become fully aware of the internal dilemma she has experienced and repressed for a long time. This time, however, Rose cannot ignore or forgive Troy's affair with Alberta. Rose has always worshipped Troy like a god. The only reward she has expected from him is being her man, being faithful to her, being always in "her bed". Rose devoted eighteen years of

her life to him, a devotion that, as we discern from her outrage at Troy, has always been at the expense of her own life:

ROSE. I been standing with you! I been right here with you, I got a life too. I give eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don't you think I had dreams and hopes. What about my life? What about me. Don't you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men. (2. 1.)

Rose has, indeed, experienced the same dilemma that has excruciatingly tortured Troy. Rose's responsibilities, as a mother and as wife, are consuming all her life, all her individuality: "but I held on to you. I held you tighter. You were my husband. I owed you everything I had (2.1.). Although she was sure that as long as she is committed to fulfill these responsibilities, she will never meet her individual inclinations. It is this sacrifice that differentiates her from Troy.

As pointed out earlier, all the major characters in *Paradise Lost*, *Emma*, and *Fences* are tormented by the tension between the deeds of authority and the dreams of autonomy. Although, one has to admit that the above-mentioned tensions are of tragic natures, many of those characters have struggled to find a redeeming balance so as to assuage its impact on their and others' lives.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan, for example, fails in providing this balance due to the nature of his motivation and the unfeasibility of his ambition. It is the impossibility of this desire that makes Satan eternally damned in spite of his success in challenging the authority of God. In fact, one may venture to say that in *Paradise lost*, this balance is the very gift of God.

Adam and Eve, whose individual inclinations induced them to disobey the authority of God, recognize the flagrance of their sin without. Their fall might be seen

as a God- given chance. Through this chance, they understand the duality of the godly and the human in them .It is, therefore, incumbent on them to comprehend the justice of God's authority and the destructive nature of disobeying this authority. Adam and Eve, as Milton describes them, are free willed. It is this free will that makes them aware of the need to accept the authority of God. The balance, therefore, is to fight for the godly in them on an earth where Satan will always whisper the human in their ears.

In *Emma*, this balance centers on marriage. Whether Jane Austen was fully convinced of this solution or she was just meeting the expectations of her readers is, indeed debatable. Nevertheless, one has to understand that marriage at that time was the only possibility through which men and women could find this necessary balance. Although, it is true that Emma by marrying Mr. Knightly, as many feminist critics contend, seems to succumb to the patriarchal authority, one might possibly argue that her marriage is a challenge to the long authority of the father and a fulfillment of one of her most obsessive inclinations: love. Seen also from the perspective of Mr. Woodhouse, her decision to marriage is a challenge to his will and an act of disobedience. As such the balance is achieved when Emma convinces Mr. Knightly to live with her and her father at Hartfield.

In *Fences*, one has to admit that this balance has been more difficult to attain because of the ghost of racism that haunts the protagonist of the play. Troy's failure to see a changing America and his obsessive internalization of a racist America make it impossible for him to negotiate this tension. Whether to see in his extra-martial affair with Alberta an instance momentary balance seems unlikely to me. Troy has built so many fences around his life that only death can liberate him from shackles of his history and his experience.

In spite of the different historical, political, racial, gender, and generic backgrounds and agendas of *Paradise Lost*, *Emma*, and *Fences*, these three major texts of the English language have much in common when it comes to the exploration of the tensions between duty to authority and desire of autonomy, between the deeds of the other and the dreams of the self. Whether these characters succeed in finding a proper balance to observe their duties and satisfy their desires is not likely to change our sympathy with all the affected characters. In arguing for the existence of universal themes in the above mentioned texts, one is not suggesting that *Paradise Lost*, *Emma*, and *Fences* are/or ought to be merely seen as the production of a universalistic human literary genius. What is suggested here, is that, if one delves into the humanistic unconscious of these three texts created by, whether we like it or not, humans, one might easily discover how the human conditions that colonize considerable territories in *Paradise Lost*, *Emma*, and *Fences* are very similar in spite of the dissimilar discursive subtexts of these three major texts of the literature of the English language.

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