Tasting the Forbidden Fruit: Transgressions and Rebellion Against God in Paradise Lost, Night, and The Innocence of the Devil

Amy Brinkmeyer
University of Redlands

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Amy Brinkmeyer

University of Redlands
Department of English Literature
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and *The Innocence of the Devil*

Introduction

What do a religious work published in 1667, a Holocaust memoir, and a
ccontemporary Egyptian feminist’s novel have in common? These three pieces seem to
have nothing in common at first glance. The ninth book of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,
Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, and Nawal El Saadawi’s *The Innocence of the Devil* are vastly
different works. *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem that aims to “justify the ways of God to
men” by telling the story of the Fall of man (Milton 1.26). *Night* chronicles Wiesel’s
experiences in concentration camps during the Holocaust. *The Innocence of the Devil* is
a novel about women in an insane asylum. They were originally published in 1667, 1960,
and 1994 respectively. Milton’s work comes from a Christian perspective; Wiesel’s from
a Jewish one; and El Saadawi’s from that of a Muslim.

There are bound to be cross-cultural situations that should be considered when
reading these works in concert with one another, but nonetheless, these works do have
some aspects in common. Each of the works deals with interactions between God and
man. Another commonality is the questioning of God’s character. The ninth book of
*Paradise Lost*, *Night*, and *The Innocence of the Devil* all involve transgressions
committed by the main characters against God, but for different purposes. In *Paradise
Lost*, Eve transgresses and rebels against God for the purpose of gaining knowledge. Also
the narrator in the story takes over God’s position. In *Night*, transgression serves as a way
to explore the character of God and to get attention. In *The Innocence of the Devil*,

transgression serves as a means to counteract the oppression of women. As with Milton’s work, El Saadawi’s narrator also assumes the role of God.

Conceptualizing God

One issue encountered when approaching these works of Wiesel, Milton, and El Saadawi is how to understand their conceptualizations of God. The question of how to conceptualize God is important for the reader. The reader needs to understand how the authors think about God if he is going to be able to adequately understand the interactions between God and people in the stories.

God in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Scriptures

One way to think about God is by examining the source materials or the scriptures. The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures all portray God in different ways. For Jewish people, God is a “loving, personal father,” with whom they have a covenant (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 111, 130). The covenant consists of 613 commandments by which the Jewish people must abide in return for the protection and provision of God. The covenant forces God to be a “perfect law giver” who can “punish iniquity” (Hexter 33-34). In the Jewish understanding, the sin of a person is that individual’s own iniquity as Jews do not believe in original sin, the notion that Adam and Eve’s sin has been passed down to every human in subsequent generations (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 111). Also, God has a very important role to play in history. He is the master “storyteller,” who allows history to unfold (120). The Jewish people have a long chronology of their interactions with God in history. Throughout their history, God
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made many promises to the Jewish people, including the promise of a messiah, who would come and rule over the “Kingdom of Israel” (122).

Unlike Jews, Christians assume that original sin is a true (39). The assumption that original sin is present allows for the introduction of Jesus into the history that is being created by God. According to Christians, Jesus is the Son of God sent to redeem man from his sin so that he can enter into a correct relationship with God (40). When man sinned, his relationship with God, the Father (similar to the Jewish conception of God as father) was broken and the Son of God is the only one who can repair it, according to the Bible. God the Father, Jesus, and a third member of the divinity, known as the Holy Spirit, compose the Trinity. The Trinity is the idea that God is “one God, but three persons” (38). Christians often stress God’s grace and mercy over adherence to commandments. They also believe the idea that Christ is the messiah, whom the Jews were waiting for to come.

In contrast to the Christians, Muslims believe that Jesus was not divine and did not die on a cross. They think that Jesus was a prophet, just like their founder, Muhammad (197). They also believe that the idea of the Trinity violates the fact that there is only one God. Like the Jews, Muslims do not believe in original sin (197). Muslims view their faith as a fulfillment of the earlier revelations of God by other prophets and acknowledge that God revealed himself first to the Jews, then to the Christians, and then to them (182, 196). Muslims, like Christians and Jews, believe in the unity of God and encourage dependence on him because he is a good provider, who also offers guidance and assistance (Beaver et al. 321).
Despite their multiple differences, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share some striking similarities in their conceptions of God. The *World Religions Today* textbook states, “While specific and significant differences exist, all three faiths share a belief in the one, transcendent God, creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe” (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 182). The biggest commonality, as the quote illustrates, is that each religion is monotheistic. There is a single God, as opposed to the multiple gods of polytheistic religions. He is the creator, who is sovereign and maintains the world he created. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all believe that God reveals himself in time and that the “highest goal in life” is to act according to God’s will (38).

David R. Blumenthal, in his book *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, proposes a theory about character of the God of the Scripture. In the introduction to the book, Blumenthal says that there are only two essential traits of God – personality and holiness (8). He spends the next two chapters defining these two characteristics.

Blumenthal argues that personality incorporates “character, sensitivity, an individual history, and moral capacity” (11). From this assertion, he is able to produce a list of six attributes of God:

1. “God must be fair.”
2. “God addresses, and can be addressed by, humankind.”
3. “God is powerful, but not perfect.”
4. “God is loving.”
5. “God gets angry.”

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1 I will use the pronoun “he” in describing God as those in religious circles often assign God the male gender, even though there is debate about whether or not God is a he/she/bi-gendered/it (lacking gender).
6. “God chooses, is partisan.”

Despite the fact that Blumenthal is Jewish, both Christianity and Islam also incorporate these traits in their concepts of God, too. J.H. Hexter writes that the God of the Jews is righteous, just, merciful, and loving, which translates into the idea that he is fair (30-34). Christianity and Islam reaffirm these as the traits of God, too (Hexter 92; Smith 237). The three religions portray him as a God who interacts personally and directly with the humans he created (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 49, 130; Smith 238). He interacts by revealing himself through, prophets, the scriptures, and his response to human beings. God is omnipotent in each of the religions as well as being loving (Smith 237; Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 49, 130). God can get angry, but the various scriptures always portray his anger in conjunction with his righteousness. The attitude that God chooses is commonly held by each of the faiths. The Jews believe that they are the chosen people who have entered into an everlasting covenant with God through their forefather Abraham (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 111). Christian people are “Chosen People by Adoption” (Hexter 92). When they convert to Christianity, they are adopted into the “family of God.” Some Muslims feel like they are chosen by God to establish his rule on earth (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 182).

Blumenthal’s list of characteristics is fairly comprehensive, but he errs in one major respect. He says that God is not perfect. Clearly the scriptures of the three religions indicate otherwise. The Jewish Torah says, “The Rock! – His deeds are perfect, / Yea all His ways are just;/A faithful God, never false,/ True and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 31:24). The Torah says that God’s deeds are perfect. How could an imperfect God perform perfect actions? The Christian Bible reads, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your
Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). God, the “heavenly Father,” according to the Bible is perfect. The Koran (Qur’an) also asserts that God is perfect: “He is God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! His [alone] are the attributes of perfection. All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise!” (The Exile 59:24). According to the Qur’an, Allah is perfect.

The question of God’s perfection is paramount when considering the seventh attribute of God that Blumenthal proposes. He asserts, “God is abusive, but not always” (246). It is upon this premise that the whole of Blumenthal’s argument is built. He says that God’s abuse follows “the well-known fight – beat – reconcile cycle” that is classic to abusive husbands (240). He comments, “In this mode [when he is being abusive], God allows the innocent to suffer greatly. In this mode, God ‘caused’ the holocaust, or allowed it to happen” (248). Blumenthal’s idea is flawed. For one thing, it is cavalier of him to leave such a wide gap in between God “causing” the holocaust and God “allowing” the Holocaust. Moreover, his theology only works in light of the idea that God is imperfect. If God is indeed perfect as the Torah, Bible, and Qur’an claim, how then could he cause great evils to happen? The evil would cause him to be imperfect.

God’s perfection refutes the idea that he would allow suffering to happen without controlling the situational constraints of it in some regard. His perfection is linked with the idea of holiness, the second essential trait that Blumenthal attributes to him. In chapter three, Blumenthal explains that holy is “a word that goes around in circles,” but that “it is related to the beautiful, the personal, and the moral” (24-25). Blumenthal also remarks, “The holy cannot be immoral or amoral” (25). Therefore, God’s morals must be
wholly ethical and perfect. How could God be morally perfect and allow suffering without controlling the situation in some regards?

God and Suffering

The issue of God’s character and suffering is critical to Milton, Wiesel, and El Saadawi. The questioning of God’s character is a similar feature in each one of the three works. Milton’s Eve calls God’s intentions and character into question. She wonders about God’s motives in telling her that the fruit of the tree should not be consumed. There is a threat of death that cannot be abrogated. The consequence of eating the fruit exists regardless of Eve’s knowledge of the extent to which it will impact her. The mere fact that God could make the threat of such a consequence makes his character questionable. In Wiesel’s case, the immense suffering of the Jewish people allows him to enter into a place where he can transgress against God in an exploratory manner. For El Saadawi, it is the oppression of women in the name of religion which forces her to confront God.

The Constructed God

Thus far the depiction of various conceptions of God in the Torah, Bible, and Qur’an has been sketched out, but this portrayal of God is hardly the rendering of God in the literary works under examination. The God portrayed in the scriptures is merely the template for the “constructed God” in literature.² In other words, the God of the holy texts becomes a deity onto which political, emotional, and social preferences/actions are

² Here I am using the word “constructed” to mean the god that an author creates, pieces together, as he/she writes – a man-made product consisting of images from previously read texts (such as scripture or religious literature), experiential knowledge of the deity, personal preferences, and understandings about the world.
ascribed. God's character becomes a distortion of its former self to fit the agendas of men. God retains the original connotations associated with his name, but becomes a pawn in the power struggles of humans.

In all three works, God is falsely constructed using his original features as a basis to become a god of the state, patriarchy, or figurehead. In *Night*, God becomes synonymous with the state through "guilt by association." The Nazis are the ones who mercilessly murder the Jews. God should intervene because the Jews are his chosen people and God by his perceived lack of intervention, God places himself in the Nazi camp. He aids and abets them in their pursuits by his silence.

In Wiesel’s understanding, the God of the Hebrews (the Jews) retains most of the features of the deity proposed by Blumenthal and the Torah, but these features are distorted in Wiesel’s construction of God. Wiesel thinks that God should be fair. Hence, Wiesel is outraged when the Jews are pious and faithful, but God allows them to be murdered. Wiesel also understands that both parties can address each other. Nonetheless, he feels that God is not unresponsive. Also, Wiesel knows that God chooses. He is counting on the fact that the Jews are the chosen people because, if this is the case, then God will save them from being murdered. However, God does not and this makes it seems as if the Nazis have more power than he does or that he is apathetic. In the end, the sins of the Nazi State become the sins of God simply because God does not seem to be responding. Destructive choices by people become a false reflection of God. Wiesel has simply misperceived God.

In *The Innocence of the Devil*, El Saadawi views God (both the Christian and the Muslim conceptions of God) as the being in league with the structures of male power.
Throughout her novel, the male authority figures, like the director of the insane asylum or Ganat’s grandfather reinforce the idea that women are unable to have a relationship with God. In this atmosphere, El Saadawi’s characters find themselves unable to trust God. The God portrayed in the Qur’an is a false reality for women in that society. The association of God with patriarchy shall be discussed more in depth at a later point.

For Milton, in the ninth book of Paradise Lost, the Christian God becomes merely a figurehead for Satan and the narrator for God is powerful in name only. Satan and the narrator are the ones with the power in the poem. At the beginning of Paradise Lost, Milton’s narrator asserts that he will “justify the ways of God to men” (1.25). In book nine, during the most crucial moment for which the book is titled, God is conspicuously absent. Instead of being present in the moment during which Eve convinces herself to eat the fateful fruit and then does so, there is no intervention by God. The only one wielding power in this situation is the serpent and the narrator, of course.

The idea that God is the absent figurehead is reinforced by Harold Bloom’s reading that “the reader’s sublime always replies that the poem is there for Satan” (Bloom 111). Satan is the reason for the epic poem’s existence. He is not only the reason for the poem, but he is the focus as well. Bloom also writes, “We love Satan not because we too are necessarily rebellious, but for the same reason that we secretly love Macbeth: both hero-villains are terribly interesting to us because of their terrible inwardness” (106). The developed inwardness combined with Satan’s eloquent speeches, draws the reader’s attention to him. Satan, being the focus of and reason for the poem detracts from God, especially because of God’s silence in book nine. The moment of crisis in the text, when Eve convinces herself to eat the apple and then does so, is mitigated only by the echoes of
Satan’s reasoning voice. No voice of God is present to counteract it. He is powerless and the idea of the loving God is shattered. He is constructed in such a way as to allow Milton’s Satan to become God. Whether or not Milton realizes that his construction of God has proven counterproductive to his desire to “justify the ways of God to men” is debatable (Milton 4).

God and Protest

Blumenthal explains two of Jewish theologian Anson Laytner’s methods of protest against God with only one cardinal rule attached. The first is what Laytner deems as the “lawcourt pattern of address” (251). In this style of address, God is “put on trial.” According to Blumenthal, three basic themes arise in this form of protest: “the questioning of God over the issue of justice,” “the appeal to God to act for the merit of the ancestors, the covenant, and the sake of God’s Name,” and “the confession of guilt” (251). The “lawcourt style of address” is clearly demonstrated in both the Wiesel and the Milton.

On the other hand, El Saadawi uses what Blumenthal broadly refers to as the modern protest forms. Here again Blumenthal lays out Laytner’s explanation. The modern protest forms are characterized by the following attributes:

- “The ‘for-our-sins’ mentality is rejected”
- An increasing body of religious writing authored by poets and laymen mean a movement away from “liturgy to folk forms”
- The “texts are addresses to people” leaving “God in the background”
- There is an “embracing of many different attitudes and experiences”
"The lawcourt pattern is conspicuously absent." (Blumenthal 253).

In the *Innocence of the Devil*, there is a rejection of the idea that women are more sinful than men and hence have a stunted or non-existent relationship with God. God himself remains in the background of the text until the final scene during which he comes to absolve the devil of guilt by confessing his own. Also, the use of multiple viewpoints allows the story to be more inclusive while relegating God to the background. The lawcourt pattern is not entirely absent as evidenced by God's confession in the final scene of the book.

The cardinal rule that applies to these protest methods is "One can question God, one can abuse God, but one cannot reject God" (262). Blumenthal states that men cannot "reject God" for three reasons – people are bound to God because they are his creation/are in a covenant with him, they have had personal experiences that encourage them to maintain a relationship with him, and they are obligated to uphold religious tradition (262). Milton, Wiesel, and El Saadawi all uphold Blumenthal's rule that "one cannot reject God" while employing forms of protest through transgression.

The Difference between Transgression and Rebellion

One more important distinction should be made before launching into the texts themselves. Transgression and rebellion is not the same thing. Rebellion is defined as the "open resistance to authority, especially organized armed resistance" (Oxford Pocket Dictionary 664). Rebellion as it is used in the context of this essay is an *intentional choice (made willingly)* to disobey a direct command for a purpose other than civil disobedience or social justice.
her.” She thinks that they sound true and reasonable. Maybe Eve has a fatal flaw - naiveté or gullibility, perhaps - or God has screwed up and did not tell her enough about truth or about her adversary. At any rate, Eve is in trouble even before she begins to truly think about what the serpent is saying. This is the start of the fateful journey towards the Fall.

Eve’s first fatal mistake is that she has a shift of focus. The shift of focus is unique to Milton’s rendering of rebellion. The shift is obvious because the reader is allowed to know Eve’s thoughts. Eve’s thoughts shift from picking flowers to the speech of the serpent and then to her own appetites. When the serpent first happens upon her in the garden, she is out tending flowers (Milton 9.424-433). She is busily adjoining them to myrtle stalks to hold them upright. This activity has all of her attention because she does not actually glance over when she hears the leaves rustling thinking that it is just some animal (Satan is in the bushes) (9.518-522). The serpent manages to gain her attention (9.529). Then by using his words, Satan redirects Eve’s thoughts to musing over eating the fruit. She addresses the fruit,

Great are thy virtues doubtless, best of fruits,

Though kept from Man, and worthy to be admired,

Whose taste too long forborne at first assay

Gave elocution to the mute and taught

The tongue not made for speech to speak thy praise. (9.745-749)

Eve is clearly covetous of the fruit and it has her attention. She is exalting the fruit by calling it the “best of fruits” and saying that it gives the power of speech to those who cannot speak. Also she thinks that it is worthy of being admired. If something is worthy
of being admired, then it is mesmerizing. She is almost worshipping the fruit and this is obviously transgressive because it is idolatry.

The language in this passage is very seductive. The repeated “s” and “f” sounds make the language in this passage very seductive. There are the obvious “s” and “f” words like, “speech” and “speak” or “forborne” and “first,” but there are also words like “doubtless,” “fruits,” and “assay.” These words sound like the hissing of the snake. They compel the reader to keep reading and Eve to keep speaking because they are smooth, sensuous, and seductive. By contrast, the “t” sounds provide a stop, a moment of holding back, but they are not strong enough to overpower the “s” and “f” sounds.

Also, the words themselves are rich and the repetition aids in speeding the passage along. The words “doubtless,” “admired,” “forborne,” and “elocution” are full and luxurious. The rhythm is very regular and so the passage maintains a nice, easy sense. There is also a repetition of similar sounds, like “speech” and “speak,” which speeds the passage up. The speed and beauty of these lines are a part of their seductiveness.

Eve remembers what the serpent has said about God withholding the fruit from man for his own purposes. The serpent’s idea is echoed back in Eve’s thoughts in the line, “though kept from Man.” This highlights that idea that man is being excluded from some great secret.

Similarly, the next passage maintains the fruit as its focus. Instead of the physical fruit being the most important element, the fruit actually becomes more about what it represents. The passage reads:

Thy praise He who also forbids thy use

*Some of these ideas about sound originated from the ENGL 420 class at the University of Redlands.*
Conceals not from us, naming thee the Tree
Of Knowledge, of knowledge both of good and evil,
Forbids us then to taste, but His forbidding
Commends thee more while it infers the good
By thee communicated and our want.
For good unknown sure is not had or had
And yet unknown is as not had at all! (Milton 9.750-757).

Eve uses inductive reasoning to figure out that God values the fruit highly and therefore, it must be very special for a reason unknown to her. Interestingly, there is a fleeting acknowledgement of the relative nature of good. The last two lines of this section convey the idea that if a person is not sure the she has experienced what is good or if she has but does not know it, it is as though she has not experienced what is good at all. This thought is echoed in “knowledge both of good and evil.” The repetition of the word “forbid” three times stresses that Eve is fully aware that she should not eat the fruit. To do so would violate God’s commands and constitute rebellion as it would not be done for the good of others who are oppressed, but rather for Eve’s own selfish reasons. However, the seduction of knowledge is so powerful that word is repeated twice.

The repetition of the word “forbids” continues in to the next set of lines. Eve repeats it over and over so that it is ingrained into the audience’s mind. Then a new tactic begins to emerge. Eve begins to question God’s character and why he would with forbid consumption of the fruit:

In plain then what forbids He, but to know,
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?
Such prohibitions bind us not! But if death
Bind us with after-bands what profits then
Our inward freedom? In the day we eat
Of this fair fruit our doom is we shall die (Milton 9.758-763).

Eve starts by asking, “what is God forbidding but knowledge?” Eve’s desire for
knowledge is not irrational, but the underlying assertion that God is stopping her from
“knowing” has deeper implications. It is an accusation of God. If Eve was questioning
God’s good for the sake of knowing him better, this would not be a transgression.
However, because she begins to challenge his goodness for her own selfish sake, she
becomes rebellious. She is insinuating that God is controlling and is withholding
something from His creation and this makes him suspect.

Eve goes on to ponder whether or not God is forbidding what is good for her. The
questioning is problematic in two ways. First off, it shows a lapse of reason on her part.
She admits that she does not know what good and evil are because they are relative and
she has never experienced evil. Therefore, how does she know what is actually good for
her? She does not know according to her own line of reasoning. Secondly, it shows a
distrust of God’s sovereignty over, and love for, the people that he has created. God is
typically portrayed in Christian scriptures as a loving being, who watches out for His
people because He knows what is in their best interest. As a result of these two problems,
Eve’s question is less of a question and more of a veiled accusation.

The audience is less inclined to condemn Eve for her lapse of reason because the
language is sublime. “Good,” “inward freedom,” and “fair fruit” is such lofty language.
The language is gorgeous, both sound-wise and visually. The exalted language of the
passage wants to break out of the “binding” and “forbidding.” The sublimity is seductive. The richness and grandness of the language of these lines and even those which preceded it mesmerize Eve and her audience. The repetition of words suggests that Eve is reveling in the words as though she is lost in them. For the audience, the beauty of the language and regular meter propel the story and events forward with great allure.

At this point, the third part of her query (“forbids us be wise?”) is no longer a question as it has been transformed. Knowledge is no longer knowledge, but filtered through the accusation of God’s suspicious intentions, it becomes an issue of wisdom. Eve wants wisdom. The message she is sending by wording the question “forbids us to be wise?” is that God is being controlling because everyone who wants wisdom should be able to receive it.

Also in this questioning, Eve invokes the use of the word “us.” The “us” refers to Adam and also to the audience. The question does double duty by helping Eve to both reason out her argument and garner sympathy for her rebellion from the audience. Eve is effective in gaining the audience’s sympathy. The attempt to gain empathy works because of the appeal to individualism and the concept of reason. Language plays a large role in making the reader feel the curiosity and temptation of looking at the fruit. The use of “us” draws the reader into Eve’s temptation. There is a collective approach and yet the “us” is a calling out to individual reader himself. The language also is strong and full of desire. The firm language can be found in lines like “Such prohibitions bind us not!” and “Great are thy [the fruit’s] virtues doubtless.” The desire is the words “taste too long forborne” and “fair fruit.” There is urgency present, a burning desire, not only in the words, but the punctuation. The exclamation mark signals a need to have her longing to
met immediately and the question marks demand an answer. Desire and strength can be very self-serving traits that feed the ego in a society that so highly prizes the individual. For Eve, there is a sense that she should not be denied anything. She wants her rights and she assumes that she has a right to know everything. Modern democracy, in theory, advocates that all individuals have equal rights, that nothing be withheld from any person. Therefore, it is not a stretch for the reader living in a democratic country to understand why Eve is demanding her rights.

Coupled with the individualism is a desire to be thought of as intelligent. Intelligence is directly connected to the ability to reason. Combined with desire, Eve reasons her way through the situation and concludes that she will eat the fruit. The narrator is desirous that the audience will follow Eve’s logic and give into the desire to rebel as shown by the employment of words such as “knowledge” and “wise” as well as the structuring of Eve’s argument.

Advancing through the passage, the line “Such prohibitions bind us not!” serves as a tonal shift from passive acceptance to unsatisfied desire resulting in decisiveness. Suddenly, it seems as if Eve has decided that she will make her own choice. However, a moment later she relapses with a consideration of the cost her rebellion – death. Her reservation is that if freedom is attained by eating the fruit, but then she and Adam die, how will that have been beneficial?

Apparently, Eve does not know the seriousness of death or even what death is because a moment later she is trying to rationalize her decision to eat the fruit. She reasons,

How dies the serpent? He hath eat’n and lives
And knows, and speaks, and reasons and discerns
Irrational till then. For us alone
Was death invented? Or to us denied
This intellectual food for beasts reserved? (Milton 9.764-768).
The question “how dies the serpent?” reveals Eve’s line of reasoning, which is “well if he did it, then why can’t I?” Eve feels cheated because not only does the serpent live, but he also “knows, and speaks, and reasons and discerns.” She forgets that she also knows some things, like how to tend the garden, be a wife, and have a relationship with God. She does not recall that she can already speak. Ironically enough, she is reasoning through her argument. The only thing that she cannot do is discern because she does not possess adequate knowledge.

Eve cannot help but question God’s intentions with “For us alone/ was death invented? Or to us denied/ This intellectual food for beasts reserved?” (9.766-768). The “for us alone” left at the end of the line reinforces humans as being isolated from God and other animals. Eve is insinuating that if death is created for humans alone, then the Creator must not have the welfare of his creation in mind if He would willingly destroy it. “Or to us denied” implies that God is preventing them from becoming intellectuals beings. Eve need not be direct in her accusation of God, her implied accusations are enough. The query about beasts being able to eat the fruit and become intellectual is essentially a way of making man lower than the animals in an attempt to gain validation and justification for the rebellion that will follow.
Despite the fact that the narrator imagines Eve as having been duped, Eve is a poor judge of character. Not only does she question and accuse God, but she misunderstands the serpent’s intentions because of his craftiness:

For beasts it seems: yet that one beast which first
Hath tasted envies not but brings with joy
The good befall’n him, author unsuspect,
Friendly to man, far from deceit or guile.
What fear I then, rather what know to fear
Under this ignorance of good and evil
Of God or death, of law or penalty? (Milton 9.769-775).

Eve trusts the serpent with a blind trust. She assumes that he is benevolent and since Eve has not directly heard God’s voice at this point (she has heard the command not eat the fruit via Adam and has not directly spoken to God), what else is she supposed to believe? God has not presented himself to her and the serpent’s seductive nature seems friendly enough.

In this part of the passage, Eve unknowingly ventures into the territory of false appearances, so of course any accusations that she makes will prove true. There is reference to things which are present, but have hitherto gone unnoticed. She uses the words/phrases “seems,” “him, author unsuspect,” “man, far” and “rather what know to fear.” The audience is privy to the falsity of these appearances. The beast only “seems” to have knowledge, but he is possessed by Satan. The line that contains “author unsuspect” is very suspect. “Author” is rendered in the footnote as “authority.” Both “him,” Satan, and the narrator have authority in this situation. Knowledge and experience (i.e. eating
the fruit or having the ability to tell the story) has given them authority. They both misuse it. The narrator manipulates the audience as the serpent manipulates Eve. Therefore, they are both “suspect.” Though Eve is asserting that the serpent is “far from deceit or guile,” the serpent is also “far” from his purported friendliness to man and man similarly is far from “deceit” and guile” in his prelapsarian stage.

Eve’s phrase about “rather what know [I] to fear” is a cover-up (Milton 9.773). She is afraid in a horribly mesmerized way. In this instant, she almost possesses a masculine bravado as though she is saying, “Since I don’t really know what will happen if I eat this fruit, nothing will happen to me.” She is trying to act as if the idea of eating the fruit is justifiable, even though her conscience bothers her. Her conscience is overridden by the seductive nature of the language coming out of her mouth. It is the voice of the serpent that is articulated by Eve. The conviction of her conscience is evidenced both by the fact that it takes her such a long speech (30 lines) before she actually eats the fruit and by the following passage:

Here grows the cure of all: this fruit divine,

Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste,

Of virtue to make wise. What hinders then

To reach and feed at once both body and mind? (9.776-779).

Eve begins the passage with “Here grows the cure of all.” There is a slight bit of exasperation in this phrase. The exasperation came from the phrase, “Under this ignorance of good and evil/Of God or death, of law or penalty?” (9.774-775). Eve claims ignorance of God in the “of –or” statements.” In this set of lines, Eve is now asserting that God, contrary to his function in a right relationship with human beings, cannot
“cure” Eve’s ignorance if he so chooses. In Eve’s mind, he has been displaced already with the idolized fruit.

The idolized fruit takes on a voluptuous nature. It becomes a sexualized object. Not only does it “engage” with the mind, but also with the body as seen in the line, “To reach and feed at once both body and mind?” Eve’s claim that she is desirous of the fruit invalidates her earlier assertions that the fruit is primarily used for remedying ignorance. This voluptuous sexuality hardly fits in with most notions of God. God is not generally conceived of as sexual being and in most instances, discussions of sex are taboo in the church. Therefore, ingesting a sexualized object is a perfect way for Eve to transgress the boundaries set forth by God. Eve eats the fruit and severs her relationship with God forever. Eating the fruit is rebellious because it is a choice made willingly with the intent to satisfy selfish motives and it is in direct violation of that which God has forbidden. In the moment when Eve eats the fruit, that is her final affirmation that God has been displaced from her mind and is no longer in control. Thus God has been dethroned.

The assumption of God’s role in Paradise Lost is evident in the reader-poet and reader-narrator relationship. The creation of the mesmerizing prelapsarian moments gives Milton the ability to manipulate his audience. He convinces the reader to love Satan because, as William Blake says, “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (Teskey, 389). By creating a devil who is easy to empathize with, Milton causes the audience to take the devil’s side. Bloom comments, Satan is “our old friend” and “the grandest of all the hero-villains” (Bloom 92).
Not only is the audience’s sympathy built up, but Milton uses the poetic form as a means of entangling the audience and allowing the narrator to take God’s place. The story of Eve and the Fall is engaging in general, but the poetic form enhances it. The Bible renders the Fall: “When the woman saw that tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). The narrator tells the audience about the “fruit divine” that is “inviting to the taste” (Milton 9. 776, 777). The Bible verse is plain, whereas the narrator makes the fruit tantalizing. He entrances the audience with his expert word use to the extent that he becomes God through the poetry. Bloom states that “the true God of Paradise Lost is the narrator” (Bloom 92). The narrator is God and thus the audience is subject to him via his kingdom built through poetry. The poetry is entrancing and deep. Bloom elaborates more about the poetry remarking, “Transumption may not be the condition of all belated strong poetry, but it is the poetic process or essential condition in Paradise Lost, and not just a figure of poetic allusion there” (96). The process of Paradise Lost’s poetry overtaking all other forms is the purpose. It has to be a grand overtaking, which elevates Milton’s narrator to the status of a god and not just the Christian God, but one of the Titans.

The assumption of God’s place is done stealthily by the narrator. The audience hardly notices it because it is cloaked in the language and the reader is a willing participant. So attached to Satan is the audience that God becomes a background figure and the narrator slides into his place. Bloom says, “Milton’s God is actually a highly successful usurper, like Milton the poet, and enormously successful usurpations generally
The passage continues with Wiesel describing how he will “never forget” the horrors of the crematoriums. He ends the paragraph with that thought. Then, he makes a one sentence paragraph that reads, “Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever” (32). The short nature and indentation of the sentence coupled with a longer paragraph on either side both visually and content-wise suggests that the loss of faith in God is the most deeply embedded consequence of the Holocaust for Wiesel. The loss of faith becomes a doorway into the memoir.

The “never passage” also illustrates the connection between the imagery of night and that of Wiesel’s experiences with God. The word “never” helps the thoughts to coalesce and links “night” in the first line to “God” in the last line. By extension, God becomes connected with the imagery associated with night, such as darkness. Darkness, traditionally a metaphor connected with evil and death, colors the way in which readers perceive God.

Wiesel goes on to tell about his loss of faith. In the scene just prior to the death of God, Wiesel recounts the hanging of a child at camp. The child, a pipel or helper of an Oberkapo, was hung because the Oberkapo had blown up an electric power station at Buna. The boy was interrogated after the incident, but refused to talk. So the Nazis decided to hang him. In vivid detail Wiesel recounts the incident. He writes that as the boy was being hung, he heard someone in the crowd behind him asks, “Where is God? Where is He?” (Wiesel 61). The order was then given and the chair kicked out from beneath the boy. The boy struggled against the rope for a half an hour before he died. The other prisoners were forced to march past the boy and the two others that were hanging with him. As Wiesel passed the child, “behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘Where
is God now?’ And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.’ That night the soup tasted of corpses’ (62).

It is important that Wiesel has witnessed other hangings prior to the hanging of the boy. He thinks they are sad, but the hanging of the child is very upsetting. He finds himself asserting that God is hanging on the gallows. Why was this specific hanging so poignant? This hanging demonstrates the extent of the evil of men. They can be so cruel that they will not even stop at hanging the most innocent of beings, a child. The extent of the evil, in turn, forces the question “Where is God?” to be less of a question about the physical location of God and more about the character of God. How could a supposedly “good” God be everywhere and yet allow this great evil to occur? And to allow a child to suffer so? The answer to this question is Wiesel is that a “good” God could not.

Nonetheless, it is significant that the original question, “Where is God?,” does not come from Wiesel himself. The question, repeated twice, comes from a fellow prisoner. It originates from outside of Wiesel and then is internalized. Since this is a memoir, there is obviously not going to be a reference to the devil because people in the period following the Age of Reason, no longer believe in such silly superstitions. However, this internalization of a hostile message to God does not seem unlike that of Eve’s internalization of the serpent’s temptation in Paradise Lost.

In this passage the metaphor of night is invoked again. Wiesel writes, “That night the soup tasted of corpses” (62). “Night” is associated with death and God again. In this passage the link between death and God is more blatant than in the earlier “never passage” because God is “hung.” The word “night” is used in conjunction with “soup
[that] tasted of corpses,” thereby reinforcing the connection between night and death as symbolic concepts. Thus night and God are still bedfellows.

Wiesel also makes reference to the connection between God and night in the scene where he finally chooses to accuse God and deny affiliation with him. The scene takes place on the eve of Rosh Hashanah when men are gathering to celebrate the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Wiesel writes, “Night was falling” (Wiesel 63). In the next paragraph, Wiesel begins a dialogue with God

“What are You, my God,” I thought very angrily, “compared to this afflicted crowd, proclaiming to You their faith, their anger, their revolt? What does Your Greatness mean, Lord of the universe, in the face of all this weakness, this decomposition, and this decay? Why do you still trouble their sick minds, their crippled bodies?” (63).

Beginning the paragraph with the question of God reinforces the association between God and night – both visually and logically.

The other important idea to note in the preceding passage is the way in which Wiesel manipulates the language to insult God and garner the reader’s support of his transgressive behavior. He starts out by saying, “What are You, my God?” It is an invocation of God in a prayer-like manner. The “almost prayer” is a scriptural distortion. It is most closely related to the phrase “Who am I” as both are question of identity. Man does not question God’s identity in scripture. Even though he is constantly seeking to know God, he never poses the question to God, “Who are You?” Instead, man is forced to question “who am I that You [God] would use me as unworthy as I am in such-and-such a way.” A prime example of this is Moses and God’s interaction at the burning
bush. God commands Moses to go bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses responds by saying, “‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?’” (Torah, Exodus 3:11). The “who am I” denotes Moses’ unworthiness.

In this same interaction, Moses asks what he should tell the Israelites if they ask what God’s name is. God tells Moses to say that “Ehyeh” or “I am” has sent him (Torah Exodus 3:14). “I am” is definitive and all-encompassing. God is self-contained and as such He does not answer to anyone.

Wiesel is questioning the rendering of God as “I am” in a denigrating manner. He does not say “who are You, my God?” Instead, it is “what are You, my God?” “What” implies that God is an identity-less object. The capitalization of “You” shows that Wiesel is still submitting to God’s authority.

Aside from the act of manipulating language to accuse God, Wiesel commits a physical act of transgression – the refusal to bow before God at the prescribed time and the refusal to fast on refusal on Yom Kippur. It is the day of Rosh Hashanah and all of the men gather together to pray for atonement of their sins. Wiesel recounts how the officiant intones, “Blessed be the Name of the Eternal” multiple times and the thousands of men bow down. While Wiesel does not explicitly say that he is not bowing before God, the detached way in which he relates the prostrations of the other men suggests that he does not bow down. He writes, “Thousands of voices repeated the benediction; thousands of men prostrated themselves like trees before a tempest” (Wiesel 64). Wiesel does not say anything that indicates that he is part of the number of people who bow down. He does not say “We prostrated ourselves.” Instead, he adopts a detached tone citing that thousands bowed down. The fact that Wiesel does not bow down is a transgression
because it is proper according to scripture for a man to prostrate himself (Genesis 17:3). Prostration is an act of worship because in it a person demonstrates his submission to and reverence for God. If someone refuses to prostrate himself, then he is in essence being disrespectful to God.

The use of the “trees before a tempest” imagery both reinforces Wiesel’s detachment from the act and serves to highlight God’s character. First, it functions as a way to emphasize Wiesel’s detached nature from the act itself. A person could not actually stand outside and watch trees that are bending in a storm. A storm that was strong enough to bend trees would involve such high winds and strong waters that it would not be possible for a bystander to look upon it. Therefore, the image can only be conjured up in the imagination. As a result, it can have many different renderings which might be very unlike what the actual event would look like. By choosing a metaphor because of its metaphysical aspects, Wiesel is creating a space in which he and the reader understand what the prostration means, but are not actually allowed to experience the concrete physicality of the act itself.

Beyond the detachment, the metaphor also serves to explain the character of God in Wiesel’s new conception. The fact that Wiesel has chosen nature images as a metaphor suggests that a simplicity and irreducibility of the objects being talked about is necessary for understanding his God. By choosing natural phenomenon, he means to allude to the basic nature or characteristics of God. Wiesel uses a “tempest” to represent God and the “trees” stand in for the Jewish people. It is telling that he does not choose the more common word “storm” to symbolize God. Instead, Wiesel chooses a word that has connotations of violence and strength. God then becomes a violently strong deity. The
people bow before Him like “trees before a tempest.” The relationship between the people and God and the trees and the tempest is that of powerless entity to oppressing tyrant.

The transgressive reading of Wiesel’s refusal to prostrate himself is reinforced by Wiesel’s thoughts in response to the later intonation of “Blessed be the Name of the Eternal.” The reader is privy to his thoughts:

Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He had six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed are Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end in the crematory? Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar? (Wiesel 64).

Wiesel says he is rebelling, but this not the case (a point which will be elaborated on momentarily). In the passage, there is a lack of reverence with which Wiesel speaks to God. He employs rhetorical questions in response to the question of why he should bless God. The rhetorical question serves as a means of exploration of God’s character. The use of God’s descriptive titles is juxtaposed with an indictment of his maliciousness in allowing so many people to die. The indictment highlights the sarcastic tone which is demonstrative of the disrespect. Yet the very idea that Wiesel would use religious titles, when he could have come straight out and insulted God, is also an acknowledgement that God’s character may have another side.
The above passage shows that Wiesel does not even allow God a passive role, one in which He just allows evil to occur without preventing it. Rather Wiesel indicates that God has “chosen” the Jewish people for this fate and has also created these terrible places of horror. As a consequence, there is a distinction between God and man. Since God “chose them to suffer,” there is already an inherent disconnect between God and mankind. If God has the power to choose, then his position as an authority figure separates Him from His creation.

The separation is also made apparent by Wiesel’s “us” and “Him” mentality. Wiesel’s invocation of “our fathers, our mothers, our brothers” points to the perceived solidarity of the Jews in Wiesel’s mind. While the utilization of family members denotes both relationship and hierarchy, the use of “our” acts as the uniting word. “Our” is emphasized by the use of commas and repetition. He is telling God that there is a distinct split between Creator and Created. Furthermore, Wiesel does not address God directly but instead speaks to Him in third person, which signifies the distance between the two beings. However, because the division exists, there is more reason to believe that an exploration of God’s character would be crucial for Wiesel.

Wiesel repositions man and God in relation to each other in hopes of gaining clarity about God’s character. The reposition is clearly heresy, but it is also constructive. The change in God’s position begins with the assertion that man is greater than God. This is especially meaningful as it highlights Wiesel’s earlier identification with the human race separate from God. He writes, “Yes, man is very strong, greater than God” (64). It is man’s strength and gloriousness that Wiesel is highlighting. He contrasts it to God’s greatness in hopes that he will be able to figure out how God could let man, who is the
glory of his creation, suffer so much. Wiesel writes about instances in the Torah where God’s wrath and subsequent behavior were justified. He cites Adam and Eve’s rebelliousness and exile from the garden, the flood brought down on Noah’s generation because they displeased him, and the sulphur and fire that fell on Sodom. However, at the end of this, he adds “But these men here, whom You have betrayed, whom You have allowed to be butchered, gassed, burned, what do they do? They pray before You! They praise Your name” (64). The clause “but these men here” places their situation in direct contrast with that of the prior scenarios where God’s “bad” character traits were demonstrated. The mightiness of men is demonstrated in that while they are being persecuted by God, they are still praising His name (The idea of “bless those who curse you” (The Bible Luke 6:28)). How very cowardly God appears when Wiesel contrasts Him with these men and how much greater the men look in light of that cowardliness. The exploration of God’s character does not yield positive results. The fact that God is so cowardly does not help Wiesel’s relationship with him.

From that acknowledgement of the greatness of man, Wiesel attempts to dismiss God. After all, why would Wiesel want to follow a God he perceives as cruel and cowardly? Wiesel relates:

This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone – terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long. I stood amid the praying congregation, observing it like a stranger (65).
In this passage, Wiesel tries to completely cut his ties with God as illustrated by the fact that he was “without God . . . to whom [his] life had been tied for so long.”

Wiesel’s attempts to cut his ties with God fail. This failure is related in later incidents. One of the failures comes on the page following his accusation and subsequent attempt to sever his connection to God. Wiesel explains an incident that occurs on Yom Kippur, a day of atonement for the Jews. There was discussion amongst the Jews about the ritual fasting that occurred on the holiday. Some wanted to fast, while others worried about the physical consequences of fasting because they were already starving. Wiesel chose not to fast because his father told him not to but also as another act of transgression against God. He remarks, “there was no longer any reason why I should fast. I no longer accepted God’s silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him. And I nibble my crust of bread. In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void” (66). The transgressive act is not in fact a rebellion, but rather an attempt to get God’s attention. It is very reminiscent of a child who throws a fit to get the attention of his parent. Wiesel clearly does not want God to leave him alone. Otherwise, he would just ignore God completely, but here is still trying to communicate with him. Rebellion would indicate a lack of trying to communicate and a severing of the relationship. A breaking down of the relationship does not occur, but instead Wiesel remains connected to God.

The choice not to fast is not only transgressive, but also unnecessary if Wiesel has truly severed their relationship. It demonstrates that God is still has a present in Wiesel’s thoughts. However, it is interesting that Wiesel “nibble[s] his crust of bread” and then
feels "a great void." The void is not a severance of relationship with God as is evidenced by a later incident in the memoir.

Near the end of Wiesel’s time in the camps, he is told to evacuate Buna because the Russians are coming close to the camp. It is winter, the snow is falling, and the Jews in the camp are forced to march to Gleiwitz. The wind is cold and people fell on the sides of the road dying. In the midst of the agonizing trek, the prisoners are allowed to take a break. During the break, Wiesel is greeted by Rabbi Eliahou. The rabbi is looking for his son, who unbeknownst to him has abandoned him. Wiesel tells the rabbi that he does not know where the son has gone. After the rabbi leaves, Wiesel later remembers that he saw the son purposely leaving the father behind. He responds,

I had done well to forget that. And I was glad that Rabbi Eliahou should continue to look for his beloved son. And, in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart to the God in whom I no longer believed. My God, Lord of the Universe, give me strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou’s son has done. (Wiesel 87).

Wiesel says he no longer believes in God and yet he prays to Him. If he had no connection to God anymore, why would he pray to Him? The prayer itself is not meant in jest as he cares deeply for his father’s well-being and does not want to abandon him on the trek.

Nonetheless, Wiesel does not need to use such an address as he did: “My God, Lord of the Universe.” The titles “My God” and “Lord of Universe” are used earlier in retort to God. However, here the tonality is markedly different. In the first instance, the titles were not used together because that added to the derision of God. Here, though, these words function as a personal acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty. “My” is the
personal aspect. “Lord of the Universe” works as the acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty and this is reinforced by the request, “give me strength.” Also, in the previous usage, the word “universe” is not capitalized, but in this example it is, confirming God’s sovereignty. God’s sovereignty would not be acknowledged if Wiesel was truly rebelling. Furthermore, since the prayer comes from Wiesel’s heart, “in spite of [himself],” this would be the true reflection of his inner feelings. These feelings indicate then that his relationship with God is not over.

Since Wiesel continues to believe in God, even after his exploration of God’s character yields terrible results, he does not actually rebel against him as he makes no 

willful choice to commit an act of rebellion or displace God. Even though Wiesel says he is rebelling, the continued acknowledgement and exploration of his relationship with God and the recognition of God’s sovereignty indicate that he is not. Whereas Eve chose to directly transgress the boundaries set forth by God with the intent to become like him, Wiesel instead uses transgressions as a way to explore who God is and why he allows suffering as well as a means for getting God’s attention.

Unlike Milton, Wiesel does not try to entrance the audience with lofty poetic language and take over God’s throne. Instead, Wiesel relies on the truth value of his memoir to garner the audience’s sympathy for his questioning and exploration of God’s character. Wiesel’s use of quotidian language is winning. Every audience member can relate to it. It does not require the extensive thought that Milton’s writing takes to decode the language. Wiesel’s writing is not seductive, but rather it is intriguing because he manages to relate the overwhelming horror of the Holocaust in such easy to understand terms.
The memoir is unique because it is a testimony. The use of testimony poses unique challenges in terms of dealing with God. In his book, Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity, Geoffrey Hartman writes,

"Stories about oneself, whether performed within the “public square” of encomium, funeral oration, and sanctioned self-praise, or outside of it never quite detach from narrative fiction. Like fiction, they expand the reality claim of what is, or appears to be excluded (Hartman 10).

If, as Hartman suggests, testimony in both the public and the private realm expands what is excluded, then the onus on God’s part to end suffering is exaggerated. The exaggeration can become so extreme that the non-responsiveness of God translates to a lack of God’s goodness becoming a threatening possibility.

Moreover, as Hartman suggests there is a fictional quality to Wiesel’s story. While Wiesel maintains that he is rebelling against God, he is not in all actuality doing so. He is only transgressing the proper religious boundaries that have been previously set out with the end effect of exploring God’s character and getting his attention. The lack of subjectivity in these instances indicates that Wiesel is not seeing the whole picture. While his words tell one story, his actions say something different. The discrepancy between the two means that a sort of fiction is present in the interstitial space.

Another part of the fictional aspect is the narrator’s own understanding of the surreal condition of the situation. Upon arriving at Auschwitz, the narrator comments,

"I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare . . . . Soon I should wake
with a start, my heart pounding, and find myself back in the bedroom of my childhood, among my books . . . (30).

The narrator is incredulous. He can hardly believe that he is seeing the crematorium or that he is even in the camp. His experiences are the nightmare that he refers to in this section. The nightmarish quality is confirmed by the use of the constant hellish-like imagery of the smoke, ash, and flames from the crematorium. For example, Wiesel writes, “A dark flame entered into my soul and devoured it” (34). Images like this seem more like something out of a work of fiction rather than out of a memoir.

The dreamlike quality is reaffirmed by Wiesel’s distortion of time in the memoir. At one point Wiesel wonders, “How long had we been standing like this in the icy wind? An hour? Simply an hour? Sixty minutes? Surely it was a dream” (35). The time blends together to create a dreamlike effect. Also throughout the novel, there is rarely a specific date given. Instead, Wiesel uses phrases like, “a week later,” “a few days later,” and “three days later.” Even though the events appear to be chronological, the sense of time is not realistic. A year’s worth of events in the camps is translated into roughly 100 pages, but the horrors are so numerous and the time so fluid that it seems like Wiesel was in the camps for many years. The fictional aspects leave the audience in disbelief.

Nawal El Saadawi’s The Innocence of the Devil

Nawal El Saadawi’s The Innocence of the Devil focuses on the story of three women, Ganat, Narguissa, and Nefissa, who are locked up in an insane asylum. The devil, Eblis is also locked in the asylum. All four of these characters are oppressed by God, who is represented metonymically by patriarchy. Here as in Paradise Lost and
Night, transgression is present. The women in the asylum are able to transgress patriarchy as a means of fighting oppression. El Saadawi’s narrator, like the narrator in Paradise Lost, is able to assume God’s role by ending the novel with the declaration that the devil is innocent of all the sins he is supposed to have committed because God had been using him as a scapegoat.

In the Innocence of the Devil, there are two passages involving Nefissa, one of the women in the insane asylum, which result in the questioning of God’s character. In the middle of the novel Nefissa is raped by God (El Saadawi 82-85). The mood of the passage is dreamlike and uncertain. Nefissa seems to think that the rapist is God as she constantly addresses him as “God.” However, this rendering is called into question by two other factors. First, “God” is described as being physically man-like. The narrator reports, “His nails were clean, carefully clipped. But in his clothes was a smell of sweat. Did God sweat like human beings? Her doubts did not last more than a moment” (83). The fact that his nails were clipped alludes to a finite body in need of constant preservation and care. The sweat makes him all too human, which in turns opens him up for the doubt about whether or not God sweats like human beings.

Nefissa questions who God is. When God first enters her presence, Nefissa describes him and then asks, “Could he be God?” (79). The question is preceded by the assumption that He would be wearing sandals, but instead he is barefoot. While doubting God’s physical appearance, the question speaks to the deeper issue of God’s identity and man’s expectations about who he is.

Another aspect that calls into question the identity of Nefissa’s rapist is that the person is taken away by the asylum guards for electroshock treatments following the rape
This leaves almost no doubt that Nefissa’s rapist is just a man, but still in her own mind, Nefissa views him as God. This evidenced by her calling him “Yahoua – yahoua” (rendered earlier in the novel as Jehova) (84). She continues to believe in God, even after the rape. The ambiguity about the rapist’s identity is purposeful and artful on El Saadawi’s part. It leaves the reader questioning who the man was and even if God was not directly involved, why he allowed the rape to happen.

The dialogue in this scene is intriguing, too. “God” questions Nefissa about the devil. He asks several questions to which the answers are always “no, my God” or “yes, my God.” “My God” is used four times in the space of half a page. The reader is led to conclude that Nefissa’s belief that he is “God” is sincere. Her answers show a submissiveness that will later be absent in her story. It should also be noted that in terms of dialogue, she is the one with the last spoken line in the rape scene. The last spoken line before she screams his name is “He is the everlasting God” (84). The continued acknowledgement that he is God means that she is submitting to him, but then he rapes her and she screams. Since Nefissa gets the last word, she has the power but is transferring it by willing submission to “God.” Unlike Eve or Wiesel, Nefissa does not need to accuse God. The rape scene incriminates God himself.

Nefissa tries to cut her ties with God, by her physically escaping from the asylum. Running away is a means of transgressing the rules set in place by the men who run the established system of oppression. Nefissa manages to escape into the night. She is breaking the law by running away. For this transgression, she be punished by death (196). Since patriarchy functions as a metonym for God, her transgression is also against God. The very act of running away is a refusal of God’s authority and an assumption of
autonomy. When Nefissa runs away, she must learn to fend for herself. Finding enough food and shelter often requires further breaking of laws and rules or sin.

Moreover, it is important to understand that Nefissa’s act of running away is also an accusation against patriarchy and God. The narrator tells us,

She did not know where to go. Even God was owned by them. They built houses for him with concrete and bricks. They imprisoned him between high walls or in stone engravings, or between leather covers, and lines of print, or in letters moulded out of lead. She could not read, nor did she have money to buy books. So sin after sin collected under her ribs, and grew into something she felt like a heart. (193)

The system of male-dominance “owns” God. If God is owned by man, then for Nefissa, he can no longer be God. He has become just a part of a man-made system and his very existence is called into question. How could an all-powerful God be imprisoned, especially when in a sense the Fall was a confinement of man to sin? It is sin that becomes Nefissa’s very heart. Therefore, she has, in essence, become sinful.

The manipulation of language in both Milton and Wiesel is mirrored in The Innocence of the Devil, when Ganat, another one of the women, takes a stand against the system. She is singing about her identity. She uses several “I am” statements. Ganat starts by asserting her name with an “I am” statement. By asserting her name, she is firmly establishing her identity. Her name is very significant as it means paradise and she is the only one of the three women who manages to find freedom, which could be associated with paradise at the end of the story.
Further along in the same passage, Ganat says that she is neither the “Virgin Mary” nor “Eve, the Wicked” (199). She is neither a saint or a sinner. This is a refusal to be categorized solely by religious terms. Her final I am statement is humanistic. She says, “I am a human being and my heart is my God” (199). “My God” is clearly indicative that she holds herself in higher esteem than God. The condition of her being human becomes more important than God’s sovereignty. These “I am” statements themselves are a transgression of the relational boundaries set forth by God (i.e. man is man and God is god). When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he asked God who he was and God answered with “I am.” The use of “I am” is transgressive. It also resists the male-dominated system’s ability to coerce people into conforming with accepted systems.

In Ganat’s passage, there are seven statements, only two of which do not begin with “I am.” The first one is “It’s rare for a flower to blossom in the desert” (199). It is placed after a line which makes reference to Zahra, the “Mother of the Universe”, and before the line about the Virgin Mary and Eve. This suggests that the flower is Ganat (or all women). The desert could be representative of patriarchy or the physical setting of Egypt.

The second line that does not begin follows the line “I am a human being . . .” It reads, “My crime was a poem” (199). In this instance, the reference is to an earlier incident during which Ganat was writing a poem for God (152-153). Her grandmother refuses to read the poem as she believes that poetry comes from “the devil of poetry.” The footnote reads, “Like the muse. Art is often associated with the Devil in Arab culture.” Poetry is evil. In writing the poem, Ganat has been tainted by the devil. Surely, God cannot be tainted by those tempted by the devil. Therefore, Ganat is unable to be
God, but her earlier assertions mean that she will never conform to the system of patriarchy either. Her “I am” statements are a rejection of the oppression caused by patriarchy.

As in Paradise Lost, the narrator assumes God’s role. She does this in three ways – through her use of a fluid style, by adopting a feminist viewpoint, and making Satan God’s scapegoat in the story. To begin with the style of storytelling is very unique in its fluidity. The fluidity is created by the constant sense of being in a dream or another metaphysical space. Characters are frequently found dreaming, just waking up, or having their thoughts blended with those of other characters. The dreamlike tone is indicative of the omnipresence of the narrator. She knows at all times where the characters are and what is happening to them otherwise she could not have interwoven all of their stories together in the complex and often shifting way that she does. In the world of the novel, the narrator knows all and is everywhere, just like God.

The fluidity of the narrator’s storytelling is reflected in her ability to shift perspectives with ease. Often the point of view shifts from one character to another seamlessly. Take for example this passage:

She [Narguiss] glimpsed him [the devil] sitting behind the tall stump of a trunk-tree, his body enveloped in the white folds of his gallabeya. His head swathed in a turban in the form of a cone, like a dunce’s cap, and it was topped with a peacock feather. His face was raised to the sky and he was gazing into space, while all the time his lips were opening and closing as though he were repeating a verse of the Koran, or murmuring something to himself.
He saw her standing at the window and immediately curled up around himself like a porcupine. He was more afraid of her than he was of the Director. She was a woman, and inside him was a deep-seated fear of women. (El Saadawi, 40-41).

As this passage illustrates, in the course of one and a half paragraphs the narrator seamlessly shifts from Narguiss’ point of view to the devil’s point of view. The first four sentences are Narguiss’ view. The pronoun “he” acts as a connector to the last three sentences, which are related to the audience from the devil’s point of view.

The use of pronouns is very significant. They are frequently employed in multiple paragraphs without re-stating a given character’s name. In some instances, the narrator alludes to the character by a character trait or new title without expressly saying that the character is called by those names. For instance, the title of chapter three is “Another Woman,” (30) which the reader then finds out is the “Head Nurse,” (37) who is also known as “Nargiuss” (38). The end result of using an excessive number of pronouns and re-naming characters is a sense of confusion for the reader, which only the narrator has the power to clarify.

The fluidity is seductive. It moves the reader smoothly through transitions from one perspective to another and in doing so the audience remains bewitched. The seductiveness comes in the form of delicious adjectives and strong nouns. In the passage, words like “white folds,” “peacock feather,” and “deep-seated fear” are all words that the audience gets lost in. Verbs like “gazing” or “murmuring” are sweet and soft. They move the story along, but they also move it into the realm of the supernatural. As a result of the supernatural, dreamlike quality of the writing, the audience is more willing to forgive the
transgression of the characters. There is a beauty about the fable-like state of the writing that captures the audience. Because the audience is captivated and engaged in the story, transgression does become somewhat more acceptable because it seems necessary.

The fluid writing style and the use of pronouns and re-naming make the novel very difficult, but it seems that El Saadawi’s narrator wants it this way. She takes these elements and creates order out of confusion by controlling our intake in much the same way that God controls what happens to people in life and helps them make sense of it. The God of the Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, operates in eschatological time (see Revelation in the Bible, Sura 22, 39 in the Qur’an). He allows His plans to unfold in human time without revealing the deeper meanings until the Day of Judgment. Similarly, El Saadawi’s narrator allows the story to unravel slowly, only giving the reader bits and pieces of the whole picture and then finally revealing them at the end of the story.

The storyteller adds layers upon layers of meaning to the text and crafts a story that has a definite plot line, but the deep understanding of what is taking place emerges only at the conclusion of the novel. For instance, she uses flashbacks as a way of adding meaning. Throughout the novel references are made to the fact that Ganat’s eyes were wide open when she was born: “The girl was a devil. She was born with her eyes wide open. She slipped out of her mother’s belly and stared around her at the world. People were born with their eyes closed and their mouths open ready to scream, but she was born with her eyes open and her mouth tightly shut” (90). The quote is a flashback, but the reader remembers that in a prior chapter, Ganat had undergone electroshock treatment
and tried to scream, but no sound came out (28). She is mute, yet sees, feels, and understands everything.

At a later time in the plot, the audience finds out that her eyes being wide open is part of the reason that she is in the mental institution in the first place (210). It is even more stunning to find out that the reason she is being given electro-shock therapy is so that she will forget everything that she and women as a collective whole have experienced (seen) (211). Since Ganat can see everything and is tortured (unsuccessfully) so that she will forget, the message being conveyed is that people do see the crime and choose to ignore it at the cost of having emotionally scarred, oppressed women who can never forget what they have gone through. Therefore, the narrator has controlled the impact of the story by placing the incidents in such a way that they do not totally make sense in the world she has created until she wills them to do so by revealing more insight about them.

A second way that El Saadawi’s narrator takes God’s place is by adopting a feminist position that subverts the “natural” hierarchy. The Qur’an establishes a hierarchy. It states,

Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them, forsake them in bed apart, and beat them. Then if they obey you take no further action against them. Surely God is high, supreme (Qu’ran, 4:34).
The Qur’an says that God is “supreme,” meaning that he is at the top of the hierarchy. Man is beneath God and woman is at the bottom of the hierarchy. Given that the Qur’an is supposed to be God’s word to humans, it holds an authoritative place. However, it should be clarified that the Qur’an does not necessarily promote the oppression of women. Several verses give women significant rights in marriages and divorces (see Qur’an 4:19, 4:23, 2:229-2:234). Some adherents to the faith argue that because the Qur’an mentions polygamy that it is indeed a misogynistic religion. There is only a single verse that speaks of polygamy and that verse says that a man can have up to four wives if he can treat them equally. If he cannot treat them equally, then he should only marry one (4:3). Other verses also allude to the fact that men and women were formed from a single person (4:1) and that they ought to love and cherish each other (30:21). These verses suggest that there is to be respectful behavior towards the opposite sex. Now this is not to say that men do not indeed remove scriptures and manipulate them into an oppressive system for women.

Since there is a natural, non-oppressive hierarchy that is established by God in the Qur’an, El Saadawi has no need to equate God with the patriarchal system of oppression in the novel, but for the sake of adding dramatic flair to the novel and pushing her feminist agenda, she chooses to do so. Just because men have appropriated God’s word and used it to their own end, does not put God in the camp with men. She fails to make a distinction between God and state as seen in the earlier passage where she discusses how the state owns God (El Saadawi 193). The link between God and state is also seen in this passage:

Her [Ganat’s] gaze met the wide open eyes of her grandmother.

-Who is Mamour, Nena?
-He’s your father’s chief at work.
-Why is he called Mamour, then?
-Because he has a boss above him who gives orders.
-Who is above him, Nena?
-The Governor of the Province.
-And who’s above the Governor, Nena?
-The King.
-And who is above the King, Nena?
-And who’s above the General, Nena?
-Our God.

Her grandmother drew the sign of the cross over her breast.

*Our Father which art in Heaven forgive us our trespasses* (Dashes are used in the novel to denote speech in place of quotation marks) (169).

Ganat’s grandmother seems to understand the links in the system of patriarchy (even though she conforms to its constraints) because her eyes, like Ganat’s are wide open. The grandmother links the government (which is totally male) with God by making a mental organizational chart (or chain of command). All of the titles are political titles. The end of the passage is very interesting though, because it invokes the foreign general and his God. The foreigner is the colonizer as the footnote reads, “Khawaga is a term that is used to indicate a foreigner. It implies contradictory feelings, fear of the coloniser but also disdain, as there are many things a foreigner does not understand” (169). God is the deity of the Christian conception because he is linked to the colonizer, the cross of the sign, and the “Lord’s Prayer.”

Nonetheless, Islam and, by extension, Allah are also linked to the patriarchal system by association. In her book, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, El Saadawi writes,
Islam in our region can be a spiritual force in the struggle against foreign penetration. But this must not blind us to the fact that ‘God’ in the eyes of the oppressed is different from the ‘God’ in the eyes of the oppressors. Under the name of ‘God,’ as a symbol of absolute power, our oppressors try to justify dictatorship. (El Saadawi Reader 98).

El Saadawi asserts that the state takes advantage of the power that goes with God’s name to control women. This can be seen in the novel, too. One passage states, “They [women] were the source of evil, the cause of sin as was written in the Bible. Their vengeance was terrible. He [Zakaria masquerading as Ganat’s grandpa] had learned that in the Koran” (El Saadawi Innocence, 167). The Koran assigns a punishment for women because of they are the ones who initiate sin. If the Koran condemns the act by punishing it, then there is an underlying agreement that women are evil, which provides a validation for patriarchy.

The connection between Allah and the state can also be seen in a conversation between Him and Narguiss. Narguiss dishonored her family by not being able to prove her virginity on her wedding night. As a result, her lover committed suicide and she went to work as the Head Nurse in the insane asylum. Narguiss implores God to tell her why events occurred the way that they did. He responds that Narguiss did not bleed on her wedding night because it was a part of the Headman’s plot to get revenge against Narguiss’ father for “crossing his legs at him” (in this context, it is an insult of some kind). Narguiss asks why her father should not have crossed his legs to which Allah responds, “People belong to different levels. The eye cannot rise above the brow” (47). Here God is reinforcing the political power structures that are already present. Narguiss
responds by quoting the words of The Prophet Mohammad back to God: “People are born equal. They are like the teeth of a comb” (47). Since she quotes the words of The Prophet, someone who Allah honored, it indicates that it was indeed the Muslim deity whom she was addressing. Also, she does not say that men are equal with one another, but rather that “people” are innately equal.

The narrator is a feminist as she wants the patriarchal system (and by association God) overthrown. One example of this is the reversal of power in the honor killing scene. In Muslim societies, the virginity of a woman was a sign of honor for the men: “For honour meant the honour of the male, even if the proof of it was in the body of the female” (44). A midwife would break the bride’s hymen on her wedding night and the blood that spilled on to the white towel beneath was a sign that a she had remained a virgin. However, if there was no blood on the towel, the bride’s family was dishonored. To regain the family’s honor, a male would kill the bride (an “honor killing”) (43).

Zakaria, Ganat’s lover (who is masked with Ganat’s grandfather’s face in this scene), is ready to kill Ganat for having dishonored her family. He has the knife and has already wounded her once. Then,

She stood still, her eye on the knife he was holding. She reached her hand out for it with a quick movement. The blade shown like a ray of lightning, and suddenly the knife was in her hand.

He stepped backwards quickly. Her hand was smaller than his, her bones lighter than his bones, but the stronger of the two of them was the one who was armed.

-Fallen man. Whore of a man (167).
The role reversal works on several levels. Firstly, Ganat ends up physically holding the knife. She does not actually touch it to acquire it, but instead simply moves her hand towards it suggesting an inherently mystical characteristic. Secondly, she comes to possess the strength, even though he is built to be the stronger of the two of them. Thirdly, the words, “Fallen man” and “Whore of a man” are a direct re-definition of the “Fallen woman. Whore.” that is constantly repeated throughout the novel. Since Ganat is meant to stand-in for all women and the male is in the role of oppressor, it is clear that this is a critique of patriarchy.

The “knife passage” is a great example of the use of fable in the novel. One of the fable-type elements in the preceding passage is the way in which the knife “switches” from Zakaria’s hand to Ganat’s hand. There is no explanation for this occurrence except to say that it occurs supernaturally. The supernatural elements pervade the novel and are certainly connected with the spirituality that the book explores. Also the supernatural is a transgression of the laws of the natural and this reinforces the transgression present in the novel. The overriding of the natural is also very alluring to audience. It keeps them intrigued. The fact that the knife just moves hands is fascinating.

Furthermore, throughout the book there is a constant refrain of “down with the system.” The phrase is very militant, but matches with the feminist agenda of trying to obtaining equal rights by dismantling and then rebuilding parts of the existing social systems. Just prior to the incident where Zakaria tried to kill Ganat with the knife, there is a scene where Ganat is dreaming about Zakaria. She talks about how he gets out of bed and leaves her. They had been together for thirty years and his name had always been on her lips. After relating this the narrator then comments, “He could have waited for her to
open her mouth and shout: - Down with the system. She heard her voice echo in her ears so she opened up a narrow slit between her lids” (161). In view of the fact that the comment is made in the paragraph about Zakaria, who is representative of patriarchy, it does not seem unlikely that “down with the system” is a reference to down with the male-dominated system of oppression. Initially, Ganat is unable to speak the words, which is indicative that she was meant to be silenced. The words wake her to an understanding that the system has oppressed her and that it needs to be collapsed.

Another example of the “Down with the system” refrain occurs much later in the book as Nefissa is trying to run away from the insane asylum. She comes upon an area crowded with people who are being beaten by people in positions of power. The narrator says,

The voices sounded in her ears like the whistle of the wind, and the whistle was like a thousand whistles, like a thousand voices shouting, The system, the system, and a thousand voices gasped: Down! Down! Everyone was shouting and everyone was silent. She opened her mouth as wide as she could and screamed, but no sound came out (195).

The people are calling for the system to be dismantled and yet they are also silent. Similarly, Nefissa screams, but no sound issues forth. It is apparent that neither Nefissa nor the people care for the system and yet because they are not actually able to voice anything the oppressive system remains in place.

Obviously, the narrator equates God with the government. She wants to bring the government, which is linked to male patriarchy, down. She wants to change the system. However, part of the initial way that the system started was by considering the natural
hierarchy that God laid out in the Qur’an. Since the narrator makes no distinction between God and the appropriation of Him for use by men, by displacing the system through the adoption of the feminist perspective (as evidenced by the passages cited above), she is also removing God from a position of authority.

There remains a final and undeniable way in which the narrator takes on the role of God by becoming a judge. The concluding chapter is entitled “The Innocence of the Devil.” In this chapter, the narrator effectively exonerates the devil of all the supposed evil he has committed by having God declare him innocent. The scene is amazingly well-crafted. God says, “In the court they declared me innocent and made you [the devil, who in El Saadawi’s rendering is also God’s son] the scapegoat” (230). In other words, God is charged with no crimes, wickedness, or responsibility for human suffering, while the devil takes the blame for all of it. To drive the point home even more, God goes on to say, “Forgive me, my son. You are innocent” (231). God is asking forgiveness from the devil because he has “used him.” However, no one will ever know that the devil has been acquitted as he dies shortly afterwards (233).

The scene functions in several different ways. It twists the traditional understandings of God’s character by making Him manipulative, crafty, and deceitful. By portraying God in this way, the narrator is both judging and condemning Him. The scene also supports the narrator’s feminist perspective in two ways. Firstly, it confirms the idea that God was connected to the patriarchal system by having the courts find Him innocent. God needed the court, a governmental institution, to declare Him innocent, but at the same time He upheld the system by allowing His name to be used in the justification of the oppression of women.
Secondly, by absolving the devil of guilt, the narrator is absolving women of the sin and shame that has been heaped upon on them on the basis of their sex. Throughout the novel, women are portrayed as fallen, sinful, wicked creatures and so is the devil. The women are often told that they are the devil or are being tempted by him. This poor treatment is a result of societal attitudes. El Saadawi writes,

Men see women as the other (the other half). This may explain why women and the devil (Satan, Iblis) are often related to each other, why women are often dismissed from religion, why God speaks in his holy books only to men, why prophets, priests and all religious authorities are almost all men. (El Saadawi Reader 137)

Women are assigned inferior positions because of their otherness. The devil comes to symbolize them.

It interesting that in the novel, even though the devil is male, he is never grouped with the rest of the men who belong to the system. His teacher at school tried to teach him that “men are the custodians of women,” but he does not understand what that means and therefore does not act on it (El Saadawi Innocence 134). He also does not know what the word “male” means (135). Since the devil is not a part of the system and is associated with women, a declaration of his innocence is also an acquittal of the female sex.

The scene also functions to keep the acquittal secret. It does so by killing the devil so that no one will ever know that he was innocent. His death further reinforces the culture of silence about the oppressive nature of patriarchy that the novel is attempting to deconstruct.
Conclusion

In summation, the ninth book of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, and Nawal El Saadawi’s *The Innocence of the Devil* all feature transgressive acts that have different uses. While Eve’s idolatry in *Paradise Lost* does end in rebellion, transgression does not necessarily mean rebellion. Transgression can also be used to explore God’s character as is evidenced by Wiesel in *Night* or as a means of fighting oppression as is the case in *The Innocence of the Devil*. The assumption of the role of God by the narrators in both Milton’s work and El Saadawi’s works demonstrate the extent to which the narrator can become a manipulator of the audience and is not necessarily a true reflection of God’s character as Bloom’s reading indicates.
Works Cited


