



# Lucifer: A Theological Tragedy

*George Santayana*

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*Lucifer: A Theological Tragedy*, by George Santayana, '86, is as remarkable for the high level of its thought and its poetical expression as for the magnitude of its plan. In the Book of Job we have the presentation of one aspect of man's struggle with the mystery of evil; in *Paradise Lost* we have another; in *Faust* still another. Mr. Santayana's method is to embody the various attitudes of man towards life in the persons of Lucifer, Hermes, Mephistopheles, and Christ, and to show how they all, except the last, fail and die through their imperfections. An immense amount of thought has gone to the production of this poem. Mr. Santayana has examined for himself the various systems which he here personifies; he has checked off theory with experience, and he possesses the faculty of sympathizing with and understanding the opinions of the various characters he depicts. In Hermes, for example, he gives a beautiful interpretation of Greek mythology. And yet, if we appraise his work as a drama, we find that it falls short in two essentials: first, the dramatis personae hardly ever put off their abstract nature; secondly, the crises in the "tragedy" are too subtle, too purely metaphysical or theological, to make that impression which is the end of tragedy. The long disputation between Lucifer and Christ, to cite only one instance, is hardly less abstract than would be a dialogue between personifications of Heredity and Natural Selection, with Environment standing by to represent the Chorus. The defect seems to be incorrigible, because the dramatic form does not lend itself to the unfolding of such a theme as Mr. Santayana has chosen. An epic narrative, like that of *Paradise Lost*, would have served far better. Successful tragedy never leaves us in doubt whether the characters are living or abstract; it never finds us asking, "Is this the climax?" *Othello* is no theory, *Macbeth* no abstraction. We suspect that Mr. Santayana takes more interest in principles than in persons. In a noteworthy essay on Greek Religion, printed in the *New World* for September, he points out that the "poetic audacities" with which the Greek humanized the divine idea underlying his mythology, proved that the god was not an invention but a fact; that "his character, like all character, was merely a principle which reflection discovered in his observed conduct." In *Lucifer*, Mr. Santayana deals so largely with principles that conduct and concrete personality count for almost nothing. It is the substance of his poem, therefore,— the substance and fine poetic expression, rather than the form,— which give it distinction of a high order. It contains more of the stuff of genuine poetry than would make the reputation of a whole batch of minor poets. Many pages might be filled with extracts illustrating these qualities; but readers of poetry whose minds are adult, and who have become a little surfeited with the recent effusions of marine and bellicose bards, will wish to taste Mr. Santayana's volume for themselves. They will find in it something different from tumty-tum balladry.

—*The Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, Volume 8 [1900]

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