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## DOCTOR FAUSTUS: A STUDY OF THE TRAGEDY WITH VARIOUS ASPECTS

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### Abstract

This research paper highlights a study of the tragedy, Doctor Faustus with various aspects. Really, Christopher Marlowe is the pioneer in good Tragedy writer in the Elizabethan age. This paper shows that Marlowe was a unique dramatist in his style of writing tragedy. This Research paper explores various aspects of this tragedy with a moral that man should never go against God. Even a great scholar should avoid his pride of power and knowledge. His purpose of passion for power and knowledge should ultimately for the welfare of mankind. Otherwise, he to face consequences likes the great scholar, Doctor Faustus.

### Key words:

Doctor Faustus, Passion, Power, Knowledge, Wills, God, Heaven, Hell, Irony, Salvation, Mercy, Redemption, Hero, Villain, Inner Conflicts, Repentance, Doom

## RESEARCH PAPER

*Doctor Faustus* could be considered one of Marlowe's masterpieces of drama. It was his turn from politics, which he established himself in with his plays *Edward II* and *Tamburlaine the Great*, to principalities and power. In it he asks the reader to analyze what the limits are for human power and knowledge and ponder what would happen if one man tried to exceed those limits.

**Passion of Faustus:** The play opens up with Faustus, who is supposedly the most learned man in the world, talking about how he has mastered every field of knowledge known to man. He is bored with theology, finding that man is doomed no matter what happens, and he has become a master physician, curing a whole village of a plague. He feels that there is nothing left for him to learn, as is frustrated by this; therefore, he decides to delve into the realm of necromancy and magic. He calls upon two other magicians, Valdes and Cornelius, to teach him how to conjure. He learns to do so, and upon his first private experiment into the black art, Mephistophilis appears to him in the form of an ugly devil.

This repulses Faustus, so he tells this devil to go away and return as a friar. The devil does so, but then explains that it was not his conjuring that brought forth this devil, but the fact that he conjured and, therefore, cursed the trinity that made him appear. Faustus realizes the amount of power that he can gain from being a necromancer, so he tells Mephistophilis to return to hell and tell Satan that he will sell his soul to him for twenty-four years of absolute power. Satan agrees to this, telling Faustus to sign the bargain in blood. Faustus does so even after a Good Angel appears to him trying to convince him not to do so and several omens appear which warn him not to make the bond.

**His Luxuries:** For the next twenty-four years Faustus, with Mephistophilis as his servant, has absolute power. However, in spite of this, he spends his time going to several different important places to display his power in the form of petty tricks. In Rome, Faustus turns himself invisible and, along with Mephistophilis, pokes fun at the Pope and some friars. He also goes to the German court where he shows of his power to Emperor Carolus by conjuring the ghost of Alexander the Great. When one knight is sarcastic with Faustus' tricks, he places a set of horns on his head. Later on, Faustus sells his horse to a horse-courser on the condition that he not take the horse into water. Soon thereafter, the horse-courser returns, furious that his horse turned into a bundle of hay in the middle of the lake. Finally, later on in the play, Faustus conjures up Helen of Troy for some fellow scholars for their viewing pleasure.

**His Dilemma:** As the play draws to its climax, Faustus begins to realize what he has done and that death, which he once thought didn't exist, is indeed his ultimate destiny. Several times he is given the hint that he should repent to God. For example, an old man enters towards the end of the play and informs Faustus that it isn't too late to repent because he himself was once a sinner but repented. Faustus still doesn't listen.

Finally, as the clock strikes twelve upon his hour of destiny, many ugly devils appear and drag him off as he finally screams for mercy.

**Faustus as a Renaissance Hero:** After finishing reading or seeing this play, one can argue that Faustus was a Renaissance hero. In fact, some argue that this play epitomizes the ideals of the Renaissance: egocentrism and the over-indulgence of knowledge. “The lust for power that led to the excess of the Renaissance the slaughter of Montezuma and countless American Indians, the launching of the Armada, the very creation of the English Church out of Henry’s spleen is epitomized in Dr. Faustus” (Shipley 404). Because Faustus gave his life and soul to Satan himself for the sake of gaining a greater knowledge is proof that he is a Renaissance hero. He rebels against the limitations set forth by medieval ideals and makes a contract for knowledge and power.

**A Medieval Tragic Hero:** In essence, Faustus, like every other Renaissance man, tries to prove that man can rise above the current set of limitations. Faustus does go to extremes by chancing damnation in order to gain his knowledge; however, he is considered tragic and God himself is seen as the bad guy because He set forth limitations on knowledge and makes man suffer eternal damnation when trying to exceed those limitations. The comedy then comes out when one thinks that man was created by God and, therefore, given his thirst for knowledge by God. When he tries to gain knowledge, then, he is damned forever. This divine comedy is one of the ironies that one can perceive in Marlowe’s play. However, this Renaissance views of Marlowe being a martyr much less realistic when considering Faustus to be a medieval tragic hero.

**Thoughts of Hell and Heaven:** This final area is where the irony is greatly seen in the play. Throughout the play, Faustus is given the option to repent for these sins and turn back towards God. When the Good Angel and the Bad Angel appear to him throughout the play, both sides try to persuade Faustus that they are right. The Bad Angel tells Faustus about how he should delve into necromancy, for this art is “wherein all nature’s treasury is contained”

The Good Angel, on the other hand, warns that by dealing with magic, he would ask for “God’s heavy wrath upon thy head”. At first, Faustus is so eager to gain this knowledge from Satan that he ignores the Good Angel. Later, when the Good Angel appears again and pleads for him to think on heavenly things, but again Faustus, either because he doesn’t want to or is afraid to, ignores this angel. The irony comes from Faustus’ view on the statement from the Book of Romans mentioned above. Faustus only recalls the first half of the verse; the entire verse states, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

His oversight of this pivotal verse, which in itself is the center for Christianity, is the ultimate irony in his downfall. He refuses to admit the love and mercy of God; he only, instead, sees His wrath. At any time, up until probably the moment of his demise, Faustus could have turned back to God. The Good Angel even

says this after the Bad Angel says that it is too late: “Never too late, if Faustus will repent”. However, because he felt like he was doomed and because he truly didn’t know what Christianity and faith was all about, he would never realize how saved he could have been.

**The True Tragedy of His Character:** Finally, Faustus returns with Mephistophilis, both dressed as cardinals, and poses as two fathers returning from a mission. All of this is pure slapstick comedy to the audience; it is also comedy against Faustus. He is given great powers, and resorts to using them for petty tricks. He does the same thing later on, while at the German Court and Emperor Carolus the Fifth, where he makes the ghost of Alexander the Great appear and where he also makes the horns appear atop the head of the knight, Benvolio. He then shows how his one-time thirst for the secrets of the universe become overshadowed by his simple lustful fantasies when he conjures up Helen of Troy and then, once he is faced by the old man and his warnings, exits with this legendary beauty. Not only is he blinded so much by his power that he resorts to simple tricks, but he is reduced to the indulgence of his simple pleasures. Through these displays of his necromantic powers Faustus shows the true tragedy of his character.

**Message To Man:** Finally, and probably his most tragic flaw, is the fact that he tries to gain a knowledge that is completely forbidden to him. Although the Renaissance view says that from the search of such forbidden power one become mighty and truly great, the medieval view says that there are certain limits for man and he should never try to break those limits. In nature, each and every thing obeys a certain order that God Himself set. First there is God, then the angels, then man, then animals, and finally inanimate objects. If man tries to sink lower into the realm of the animal, which implies trying to succumb to man’s animalistic lusts and tendencies, one is seen as succumbing to the “id” personality, as called by Sigmund Freud.

Then, on the other end of the spectrum, one can try to become more become superhuman, attempting to break the limits of man. Lucifer was once of the most beautiful angels until he was guilty of “aspiring pride and insolence / For which God threw him from the face of heaven”. Faustus thinks that he can become like God by gaining these great powers; little does he know that he is damning himself to eternal torment. Even when his final seconds are approaching, he tries to break the limitation that, since time began, man has tried to circumvent: time itself. Although he was given all of the power of the universe, he was ironically not given the power to halt time, and as he is about to meet his destiny, more time is all he can ask for so that he can repent for his sins:

“Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven, That time may cease and midnights never come;

Fair Nature’s eye, rise, rise again, and make, Perpetual day; or let this hour be but

A year, a month, a week, a natural day, That Faustus may repent and save his soul! ”

This last line, meaning “Slowly, slowly run, O horses of the night,” sums up Faustus’ desperation and tragic nature very thoroughly. Once he didn’t believe in death or in hell; sadly, now he realizes that those two things are the only reality he will have from then on.

**Dramatic Irony:** Henceforth, as the action of the drama proceeds on, the deep dramatic irony is gradually unfolded before us and we realize that the play is ‘shot through and through with grim dramatic irony’. If we follow the career of Doctor Faustus after the surrender of his soul to the Devil we find how all his great expectations are belied and how his failure to understand his own mind engenders in his soul the most intense spiritual conflict. Faustus with his pride and presumption undoubtedly abjured ‘the scriptures and his savior Christ’ and asserted boldly that:

“This word ‘damnation’, terrifies not him,

For the confounds hell in Elysium:”

But, this proud fellow with all his erudite scholarship could not release that though he was denouncing Christian doctrines intellectually, he was attached to them emotionally. Herein lays the irony of the situation and we find Faustus becoming a prey to his own doubts and diffidence and his mind wavering between his God and the Devil. And it is really an instance of grim irony when we find vacillating Faustus just to overcome the torments of his soul making a frantic appeal to the apparition of peerless Helen to make

**Doctrine and Art:** Doctor Faustus is a play about religion. This is a truism so obvious it does not need laboring. The question which criticism has been unable to settle is precisely what use Marlowe makes of religion in the play. Is it, as Una Ellis Fermor and Harry Levin, among others, maintain, a play of protest against the confinement of the human spirit by religious orthodoxy, or, as other writers such as Leo Kirschbaum and Douglas Cole have insisted, an orthodox Christian statement of the wages of sin?

Christopher Marlowe received his intellectual training at Cambridge University in the 1580s. He was an Archbishop Parker Scholar, and, as a six-year student, was apparently destined to take Holy Orders. This being the case, divinity would inevitably have taken first place in his academic curriculum. Theology was, of course, the most important of the graduate studies at Cambridge at the time. Marlowe's College, Corpus Christi, had the finest theological collection in the University, thanks to its association with Archbishop Parker, who deposited his private collection in the College library. Unfortunately, it cannot be shown, “What Marlowe read while up at Cambridge.”<sup>[1]</sup>

However, everyone attended the long and systematic Sunday sermons, and the divinity disputations were regarded as the most significant and prestigious of the school exercises. Although Marlowe's academic career was scarcely regular, and his later life marked by obscurities which led to the final extraordinary affair of the trial for atheism, and his curiously convenient murder before he came before the judges, there is



nothing in all this to disprove the reasonable conclusion that at least while he was at Cambridge Marlowe was extensively exposed to, and learned from, the study of divinity.

Certainly, even if the romancing of some of the more gullible biographers and critics is discounted, it seems that much of his theological learning proved dramatically viable in the composition of *Doctor Faustus*, a tragedy about a scholar of divinity whose faith is not equal to the challenges made upon it by other desires and ideals. Faustus was not the only learned man to find divinity inadequate, and turn to the doubtful rewards of magic instead.

Astrologers such as John Dee, William Lilly and Simon Forman are among the best-known of those who found conventional learning and religion insufficient for their ambitions: their careers, and those of many others, have much in common with that of *Doctor Faustus*. Thomas says: "Not everyone associated with magical enquiry or demonology was necessarily thought to be a mountebank: for much of the period magical enquiry possessed some intellectual respectability".<sup>[2]</sup>

The names of Hermes Trismegistus and Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, among others, were regarded with something like intellectual reverence, and there are many references to students at the universities experimenting in magical theory and practice. The primary source for the narrative basis of *Doctor Faustus* was the so-called English Faust Book (hereafter E.F.B.), an adapted version of the German original. From this, Marlowe took many (though by no means all) of the incidents for the plot of the play. Theologically, however, the E.F.B. is confused and inconsistent: there is nothing in it to suggest that a coherent use of theology was one of its author's criteria. To make the play's theology comprehensible, "Marlowe reshaped its doctrine into something that would be entirely familiar and readily understood and accepted by an ordinary Elizabethan Anglican."<sup>[3]</sup>

First, and most obvious, are the many places in the play where Marlowe borrows recognizable scriptural and liturgical language --including verbal resonances short of direct borrowing, structural similarities and tone using it conventionally. Secondly, there are the Biblical and liturgical similarities in imagery, situation, moral exhortation, doctrine, and an action which do not involve actual verbal "Echoes".<sup>[4]</sup>

These reveal Marlowe's ubiquitous use of theological doctrine, and comprise much of the very stuff of which the play is made. Thirdly, and of even greater interest, there are those passages where Marlowe uses his theological borrowings in contexts contrary to, or at least significantly different from what his audience might expect. The most obvious example of this third category is Faustus' blasphemous cry, "Consunatumest" upon signing the bond. However, this is only one of hundreds of such usages, both subtle and obvious, in which the audience is provoked by a distortion of a theological commonplace into a re-interpretation or revaluation of the play's meaning and significance. Marlowe uses his allusions as, "Intellectual and moral probes .....endeavor of art."<sup>[5]</sup>

**Salvation, Mercy, And Redemption:** Hell is eternal, but so is heaven. For a Christian, all that is necessary to be saved from eternal damnation is acceptance of Jesus Christ's grace. Even after signing away his soul to the devil, Faustus has the option of repentance that will save him from hell. But once he has committed himself to his own damnation, Faustus seems unable to change his course. While Christianity seems to accept even deathbed repentance as acceptable for the attainment of salvation, Marlowe plays with that idea, possibly rejecting it for his own thematic purposes.

**Faustus: Hero Or Villain:** Staging a complex and ambiguous portrait of a man who sells his soul in return for knowledge and power, Doctor Faustus eschews simple moral judgments, exploring instead the human implications of one man's agonized quest to reach beyond the limits of the possible. Articulating his at once noble and narcissistic desires in speeches of often astonishing beauty, Faustus both bravely and foolishly flies in the face of conventional morality. As a recent biographer comments, the play's openness to paradox is one of its key achievements.

Whether we applaud or condemn his decisions, Faustus seems to be in control of his own destiny. The good and bad angels repeatedly spell out the alternatives with which he is faced, differing only in their view of which path he should take. Yet the play raises troubling questions about human freedom and our ability to choose our ultimate fate. Protestant teaching in this era insisted that no individual was capable of saving his or her own soul.

### **Inner Conflict in Modern Tragedy**

This learned scholar from Wittenberg never realized that though he abjured God and the Trinity and denounced Christian dogmas and doctrines yet his emotional attachment to them was too deep to be rooted out. So we find that even before surrendering his soul to the Devil Faustus is experiencing the prick of conscience.

And henceforth we find the entire action of the drama fluctuating between the weak we find the entire action of the drama fluctuating between the good and the evil are trying to overwhelm each other. A guilty conscience dogs him from the beginning to the end we can follow his troubled career and the inner conflict in his soul from the beginning to the end of his tragic drama. Generally this inner conflict takes place when a man is faced with two alternatives one of which he missed have to choose but finds him pulled in opposite directions.

And in a modern tragedy we find the expression of the free will of man. He makes his choice god or bad and thus becomes the architect of his own fate. And Faustus makes his own choice to take to the black art of magic deliberately and then sells his soul to the Devil of his free will. Thus Faustus is like a modern man whose conscious self is opposed by the subconscious self as it is still deeply attached to the conventional doctrines and dogmas of Christian theology. These are some of the very significant characteristics for which we may regard Doctor Faustus as a modern tragedy.

**Power as a Corrupting Influence:** Early in the play, before he agrees to the pact with Lucifer, Faustus is full of ideas for how to use the power that he seeks. He imagines piling up great wealth, but he also aspires to plumb the mysteries of the universe and to remake the map of Europe. Rather, gaining absolute power corrupts Faustus by making him mediocre and by transforming his boundless ambition into a meaningless delight in petty celebrity. In the Christian framework of the play, Dawkins argues, “True greatness....what to do with it”.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Magic And The Supernatural:** The supernatural pervades Doctor Faustus, appearing everywhere in the story. Angels and devils flit about, magic spells are cast, dragons pull chariots, and even fools like the two hostlers, Robin and Rafe, can learn enough magic to summon demons. Furthermore, the real drama of the play, despite all the supernatural frills and pyrotechnics, takes place within Faustus’s vacillating mind and soul, as he first sells his soul to Lucifer and then considers repenting. In this sense Dawkins views, “The magic is almost incidental .....good and evil”.<sup>[7]</sup> The Chorus, a single actor, enters and introduces the plot of the play. It will involve neither love nor war, he tells us, but instead will trace the “form of Faustus’ fortunes.”<sup>[8]</sup>

The Chorus chronicles how Faustus was born to lowly parents in the small town of Rhode, how he came to the town of Wittenberg to live with his kinsmen, and how he was educated at Wittenberg, a famous German university. The Chorus adds, “Faustus .....his study.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The scholars leave, and an old man enters and tries to persuade Faustus to repent. Faustus becomes distraught, and Mephistophilis hands him a dagger. However, the old man persuades him to appeal to God for mercy, saying, “I see an angel hovers o’er thy head / and with a vial full of precious grace / Offers to pour the same into thy soul!”<sup>[10]</sup>

Once the old man leaves, Mephistophilis threatens to shred Faustus to pieces if he does not reconfirm his vow to Lucifer. Faustus complies, sealing his vow by once again acute his arm and marking it in blood. He asks Mephistophilis to punish the old man for trying to deter him from continuing in Lucifer’s service; Mephistophilis says that he cannot touch the old man’s soul but that he will curse his body. Faustus then asks Mephistophilis to let him see Helen again. Helen enters, and Faustus makes a great speech about her beauty and kisses her. “Now hast .....I’ll burn my books—ah, Mephistophilis!”<sup>[11]</sup>

### **Defects and Drawbacks of Marlowe as a Dramatist**

The most individual, the most talented of the pre-Shakespeareans” does not, of course, mean that his dramatic works taken together had in them the hall mark of perfection. Certainly, he did very great things for the popular drama of the time which deserve high recognition as his merits: and these merits must be summarized in a few lines before we proceed to point out his drawbacks as a dramatic artist.



He reformed and we may say reshaped the blank verse to be mighty vehicle of passion and vigorous romanticism of ambitions, of soaring ideas: he made poetry the hand maiden of dramatic expression. He gave to each of his dramas the stamp of the great personality of a death-defying hero, single minded individual.

In Dr. Faustus Marlowe may be said to lay the foundation of the conception of tragedy as due to internal conflict the conflict being delineated in the struggle within the mind of the chief character Faustus in this respect is unquestionably the greatest tragic figure in sixteenth century literature outside the work of Shakespeare”.

In the art of plot construction characterization and natural evolution Marlowe gave at least some signs of promising comprehension in his chronicle drama of Edward the second whether because Marlowe genius had developed or because the exigencies of historical drama obliged him to self-effacement this play has qualities which are properly dramatic progress in character study is also evinced over a numerous and diversified cast.”

#### (A) Unimportance of Minor Characters

The inevitable consequence of making the central a colossus representing one great passion is that the other figures lose their individuality they are almost non-existent. In the words of Nicol, “all his heroes, by their very greatness, stand alone. We have the feeling that they have no moral force to fight against. They are lonely figures in a world of Lilliputians. This may be to a certain extent a characteristic likewise of the Shakespearean tragedy, but always Shakespeare has given more of individuality to his lesser figures than has Marlowe.

#### (B) Absence of Women

Marlowe’s pre-occupation with the overmastering central character, which is always a male, gives no scope to introduce women. Perhaps there was something in his temperament which made him unable to study women. The gentle grace feminine loveliness, the warmth of devoted love, the softness and charm of womanly care-all these seem to lie beyond love, the range of Marlowe’s limited comprehension.

**Conclusion:** We can say that in this research paper, we find a good study of various aspects of the tragedy. The dramatist wanted to deliver a message that Man should never go against God. It is because God is ultimate and highest power. A man should have his passion ultimately for the welfare of mankind. But it is too late in case of Doctor Faustus who ultimately wished to believe in religion, God and Christ. But the time was gone. And he had to die a miserable death. This is the sad doom of the great learned hero for his unlimited ambition of knowledge, power and evil deeds.

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