



# Hamlet And Doctor Faustus: A Religious Discourse

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**Abstract:** The aim of this research paper is to analyze the Renaissance plays, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare and *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe as theological discourses depicting the influence of religion and the notions of sin and redemption prevalent in the Elizabethan period. Hamlet and Doctor Faustus, the protagonists of the two plays embody the elemental characteristics of a 'Renaissance Man'. However, both the characters are internally conflicted, majorly due to their religious faith which throw them into a realm of spiritual ambiguity. This paper aims to dissect the power that the societal institution of religion holds upon the external and internal lives of the people in the society especially during the Elizabethan period, through the study of the two most canonical texts of that time which explicitly and implicitly encapsulates the very influence of religion.

**Index Terms - Religion, Christianity, Sin, Redemption, Existentialism.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Religion in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* functions as an influencing and driving force for the main plot of the dramas. Shakespeare and Marlowe both utilizes religion or Christianity as a catalyst. In *Hamlet*, it acts a catalyst for Hamlet's indecisiveness, hindering his journey, superficially of vengeance and on a much deeper level that of self-discovery. Whereas in *Doctor Faustus*, it can be considered as a catalyst instigating his pride leading him eventually to self-deception. Hamlet and Faustus, both having studied at Wittenberg yet coming from different backgrounds, struggles with the somewhat similar conflicted questions of God and purpose of life and death. Although, as a reaction, one adheres and almost surrenders to religion and God, while the other rebel against it. Faustus as well as Hamlet's spiritual confusion and ambiguity determines their course of action and their eventual 'fate'.

## II. RELIGION IN HAMLET

In *Hamlet*, Christianity may not appear to be an active force determining the course of action of the entire play but the question of religious righteousness, adherence and deviation from it and the eventual fate of heaven or hell plays a significant role throughout the play. Shakespeare uses metaphors and religious imagery from time to time to emphasize the role of Christianity in a broader sense.

From the very first scene of the drama, the religious connotations of the circumstances have been alluded towards. The appearance of the ghost in the very first scene is a metaphor of the confusion which surrounded religion at the time of Shakespeare. It was a time of shift from Catholicism to Protestant reformation. Therefore, there was a theological ambiguity of the sense of belongingness and the questioning of one's own beliefs which were portrayed through Prince Hamlet and this can be paralleled with the theory of Existentialism of the modern era. In scene 2 of Act 1 Hamlet describes the world as 'an unweeded Garden', linking back to the scene of King Hamlet's murder, "... 'tis an unweeded garden, that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely." (Shakespeare, 25) The royal orchard where King Hamlet was

murdered is a religious and biblical imagery of garden of Eden stereotypically symbolizing the absolute good and sacredness. Therefore, King Hamlet's murder can be paralleled with the fall of the man from the Garden of Eden and the chaos which transcends thereafter. In Act 1 Scene 4, the ghost says, "when I to Sulphureous and tormenting flames must render up myself" (Shakespeare, 43). King Hamlet's Ghost's predicament of being in hell or in a sort of a purgatory state also emphasizes the idea of heaven and hell and the strong belief that was held in it at the Elizabethan time.

The theme of Repentance and Christian forgiveness plays a very prominent role in Hamlet's assessment of any given situation and understanding of morality. In act 3 scene 3 when Claudius appears to be praying and repenting to God for his abominable sin, Hamlet having an opportunity of killing Claudius and avenging his father and fulfilling his duty, he, at that moment is torn by Christian morals. Hamlet believes that if he kills Claudius while he is praying and repenting, then Claudius will probably find a place in heaven. He wishes to catch Claudius and kill him whilst he was in an act of sin which would surely mean he would go to hell. We see, Hamlet's decisions and actions are driven by his notions of religious morality fostered by Christianity and the idea of salvation in the afterlife. This entire scene however is filled with dramatic irony. In act 3 scene 3, Claudius says, "...since I am still possess'd; Of those effects for which I did the murder, My crown mine own ambition and my queen. May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?" (Shakespeare, 118) Claudius although seems to be praying, in reality, he is actually admitting to his intrinsic desire of retaining everything that he has gained from the sin he has committed even after being aware of the repentance that he knows he should feel as he says, 'words without thoughts never go to heaven' and also compares his predicament with Cain from Bible who killed his own brother Abel.

The final scenes of the play depicts Ophelia's funeral procession and the refusal of the priest to give Ophelia a proper Christian burial. A proper Christian burial to a maimed Ophelia would profane the dead as one of the Priests says, "...her death was doubtful; And, but that great command o'ereays the order, she should in ground unsanctified have lodged; Till the last trumpet: for charitable prayers, Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her..." Through this scene and depiction of the gravediggers, also referred to as the clowns, Shakespeare portrays religion and Christianity as social constructs hollowed of morals masked under the false sacredness of the idea of religious righteousness. Ophelia's death or alleged suicide also questions the moral legitimacy of suicide under theological law and raises further questions of the 'honour' of the dead. Suicide is considered a crime against God and The Great Plan, hence a Christian sin. Hamlet also ponders upon the idea of suicide a few times in the play which explores the complexity of a man's free will paralleled with the Christian belief of God's universal plan or religious determinism. In the very last scene of the play, Hamlet's military burial ordered by Fortinbras can be contrasted with the maimed burial of Ophelia further questioning the religious moralities and the idea of the 'honour' of the dead.

Hamlet, throughout the play, is concerned with question of religious righteousness and is seen consciously trying to do the absolute right thing in a subconscious attempt to secure a place in heaven which from Horatio's eulogy in the end, "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (Shakespeare, 198) alludes towards maybe he did go to heaven. However, towards the end of the play, we see Hamlet sort of surrendering to fate and accepting that his fate is controlled by someone else, some high power and not himself. This can be seen when in Act 5 scene 2 Horatio warn hamlet against dueling Laertes, Hamlet says, "there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" which is an allusion to Bible. This submission to fate and religious faith by Hamlet can be seen as mere adherence to Christian beliefs or believing in the helplessness and powerlessness of human beings when confronted with 'The Great Plan'. Some critics describe religion as Hamlet's Hamartia. Hence, Shakespeare does not argue for one specific set of religious beliefs instead he questions morality and it's synonymity with religion and the very religious morality which Hamlet lived by.

### III. RELIGION IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

Doctor Faustus is a Christian morality play which portrays the Christian understanding of the world through the depiction of a sin which leads to eventual and eternal damnation. Faustus commits the sin of selling his soul to the devil and swearing allegiance to him and hence suffers the fatal fate.

Being a morality play, there is depiction of religious and biblical imagery throughout the drama, from the appearance of the seven deadly sins (scene VI) to the depiction of heaven and hell. But the one religious theme which is at the heart of the drama is that of repentance and Christian forgiveness. Doctor Faustus holds the metaphysical rebellion against the order of religion to gain immense knowledge and power and to become more than a man. This leads him to acquire the two of the deadly sins, pride of knowledge and the greed for more. Doctor Faustus' actual stance on religion remains ambiguous and unclear. He does in the beginning of the drama discards divinity and calls necromancy 'heavenly'. Also, in scene 5, Faustus calls hell a fable and denounces his belief in any kind of afterlife. Even in the incident with the pope and the friars, Faustus along

with Mephistopheles is seen ridiculing religion and its representatives in the society further showcasing him as disapproving or rather just unconcerned about religion as an institution of the society. But we do witness him trying to repent at a few times in the play to save his damned soul from the eternal damnation in hell. Faustus, throughout the play, struggles with the conflict of adhering to the Christian belief, believing the divinity of God as he yearns for salvation for his sin and his conscious denial of the divinity of God. This oscillation between two contradicting beliefs becomes the major theme and conflict of the play.

In order to dissect Marlowe's intent towards depicting religion, the way he does, in the play, it becomes necessary to analyze the reason behind Faustus' failure to repent and this can be seen in two different lights. First reason behind Faustus' eventual fatal fate seems to be Faustus' actual motive or intent behind the act of repentance. There are certain uncertainties as to how, when and with exactly what intent Faustus repents for forgiveness. The appearance of the old man in the last few scenes can be interpreted as Faustus' conscience or as a human incarnation of Christ trying to steer Faustus to the path of repentance and eventual forgiveness. The reason why Faustus does not reach salvation maybe because he at almost all instances, especially in the penultimate scene of the play repents out of fear and not faith. The theme of faith and fear has been depicted in the play more prominently when Mephistopheles remarks, "His faith is great; I cannot touch his soul; but what I may afflict his body with; I will attempt, which is but little worth" (Marlowe, 105)

This further solidifies the Christian belief that even the worst of the sins can be forgiven through faithful repentance of one's sins. Faustus' act of repentance can be compared with Claudius' act of repentance in *Hamlet*. Both committed different yet solemn crimes according to Christian morality and ultimately fails to reach salvation. While Claudius' reason lies in his will to retain everything that he has gained by committing his very sin, Faustus' lies in his will to gain more until the very last moment of his 24 years of allegiance. Marlowe, somewhere also seems to be questioning this idea of Christian forgiveness that how the act of repentance after any solemn sin is all it takes to gain heaven and be eternally forgiven, regardless of the irreversible harm that has been done.

The second reason of Faustus' failure can be seen lying in Marlowe's intent to showcase a world outside of the Christian world where after a certain point repentance is not possible. Every time, throughout the play whenever Faustus tries to repent, there is always either divine or sometimes unholy interference. The appearance of good and bad angels every time Faustus begins to question his path, either can be seen as emissaries of God and divinity or personifications of Faustus' own conscience. And once, Faustus surpasses the angels and tries moving forward in his intent to repent, lucifer, himself appears with his devils to stop him. These can be seen as internal and external forces which leads one to the inevitability of conclusion which arises from one's own actions and being caught in the consequences of those actions till eternity. Marlowe actually seems to be depicting the reality of life which seems to be contrary to Christian religious beliefs of that time, debating the idea of Christian forgiveness. Marlowe seems to be alluding towards the possibility of a world where salvation is actually not possible and all sins are not forgivable, as is the traditional Christian belief. Faustus willfully selling his soul, even after symbolic congealing of his blood, to satisfy the merciless and implacable powers, is the very moment which decides his eventual outcome and this also emphasizes the twentieth century theory of Existentialism. This sixteenth century play seems to be embodying in itself the ambiguity of the concept of free will and the very responsibility one has to take for one's own actions when one is condemned to be free as Existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre writes, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." (Sartre, 30)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Christianity or religion in both *Hamlet* and *Doctor Faustus* is depicted as a driving force for the course of action in both the dramas, dictating the characters' ultimate fate and foregrounding the explicit and implicit, influence of the religious beliefs on the lives of the characters. However, both Shakespeare and Marlowe have held 'religion' under the analyzing lens with respect to its conflicting and incongruous ideas of morality, honour and forgiveness that it propagated especially in the Renaissance Elizabethan era.

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