

The Theme of Marlowe's Play *Dr. Faustus*

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Abstract

Doctor Faustus is an Elizabethan tragedy by Christopher Marlowe based on German stories about the title and character Dr. Faustus that was first performed sometime between 1588 and Marlowe's death in 1593. Marlowe was one of the greatest dramatists of Elizabethan age. Especially his tragedies are very famous. All his tragic heroes are towering figures and completely dominating. So in "Dr. Faustus" Marlowe concentrates all his powers of delineation on Faustus. Dr. Faustus is the representative of the Renaissance which brought the drastic changes in the fundamental beliefs of the people. There was a shift from heavenly to earthly life. Wealth and power of knowledge were the touchstone for the Renaissance man. He did not care more about religious beliefs of death and life after death, hell, heaven, salvation and damnation. Yet all the things were still unsolved riddles for them. In "Dr. Faustus" Marlowe has portrayed the same problems in a very beautiful manner. Dr. Faustus being the embodiment of Renaissance has an inordinate desire for attaining supreme power through knowledge by any means, fair or foul. He is dissatisfied with the conventional spheres of knowledge because he realizes that he is "Still but Faustus and a man". The knowledge of logic, medicine, law and Divinity are inadequate for him. Faustus has a keen desire to get fame and wealth. To fulfill this desire he chooses black magic so that he may get gold, pearl etc through spirits. He is lustful and is always attracted by women. He wishes to have a wife and asks Mephistopheles to bring her. He makes a fantastic appeal to the apparition of the peerless Helen of Greek to make him immortal with a kiss. For him Heaven lies on her lips. He says: "Sweet Helen make me immortal with a kiss". Faustus possesses rich imaginative faculty. He cherishes the idea that as a magician he will be greater than emperor and kings. He wants to become "as Jove is in the sky." He has an inordinate desire to attain super human powers which can only be attained by necromancy.

Key Words: Renaissance, Conflict between good and evil, Greed, Ambition & Necromancy

Introduction

The most prominent theme in Doctor Faustus is the conflict between good and evil in the human soul. In the play, Doctor Faustus is frequently accompanied by two angels, one good and one evil. Both spirits try to advise him on a course of action, with the evil one usually being more influential over his mind. These two angels embody

the internal battle that is raging inside of Faustus. On one hand, he has an insatiable thirst for knowledge and supreme power; on the other hand, Faustus realizes that it is folly to relinquish heavenly pleasures for mortal happiness. Although society is accustomed to believing that good will always prevail. Evil gains the upper hand in Marlowe's play. Innocent and often devout

men are tortured at Faustus's delight and command. He partakes in pleasures with devils and is even shown the seven deadly sins in person. Thus, Faustus is depicted as doomed from the very beginning. Although he has moments of contrition, he quickly gives up thoughts of God and turns to evil. Marlowe attempts to express to his audience that prayer and repentance are the paths to heaven. Sin and mortal pleasure cause hell.

Lucifer's acquisition of Faustus's soul is especially delightful for him because Faustus was once a good and devout soul. Even during his last moments on earth, Faustus curses himself for willingly burning the scriptures and denouncing God. In Doctor Faustus Marlowe shows the reader that everything in the mortal world is a double-edged sword. In his never-ending quest for knowledge, Faustus exemplifies how even scholarly life can have evil undertones when studies are used for unholy purposes. Doctor Faustus's miserable defeat enlightens the reader to beware of evil thing.

The second theme in Doctor Faustus is that of greed. Like many of Marlowe's heroes, Faustus is self-driven by greed and ambition. In this case the Doctor tries to satiate his appetite for knowledge and power. These heroes forget their responsibilities to God and their fellow creatures. Instead they attempt to hide their weak characters. While Faustus is amused by the seven deadly sins, he does not realize that he is guilty of every single one, namely avarice and jealousy. Marlowe presents to the reader how a good soul turns bad, a brilliant scholar who squanders his time with necromancy and is later courted by the devil himself. Although he is frequently

surrounded by powerful heads of state, beautiful women and servile devils yet Faustus is never truly happy. He tries to bury his unrest with luxury. Faustus does not realize that he craves for happiness and salvation, not wealth and damnation. Due to greed and despair, Faustus gets his miserable death.

The third important motif in the play is that of salvation through prayer. Doctor Faustus is an example of what happens to his soul. The old man begs Faustus to repent, regardless of the tortures that the devils inflict on him for this. He clings to his faith to the very end and even Mephistopheles is wary of harming him because of his good soul. Thus, the old man serves as a foil to Faustus's misery and damnation.

The fourth important theme in Doctor Faustus is that of the tragic hero. Despite his unholy soul, Faustus is often viewed by audiences with pity and compassion. A tragic hero is a character that the audience sympathizes despite his/her actions that would indicate the contrary. Faustus represents the evil in the world. He is a veritable human being with a range of emotions and thoughts. He displays pride, joy, contrition and self-doubt quite frequently. At many times, Faustus displays his cowardice and foolish strength against the devils. Thus Faustus's one saving grace with the audience is his identifiable character. Although Doctor Faustus himself does not care for humanity, many find themselves identifying with his all too human dreams of power, knowledge and lechery. Unfortunately Faustus's humanity was not enough in the play to make him repent and save him from the depths of hell.

For him “A sound magician is a mighty God. He has intense curiosity to gain knowledge and power. So he is ready to pay any price for the attainment of his goal. He paves the way for his own doom by selling his soul to Lucifer for twenty four years of service. He is determined to write the bond for surrendering his soul to the devil. But when he starts writing the bond, his blood congeals, which is the sign of prohibition from his inner self. Mephistopheles also warns him that he would be condemned to hell but Faustus’s reply is audacious. Then again when he has already “bequeathed” his soul to Lucifer, he has an illusion. All these are outward expression of the voice of virtue in him. We find the good angel and the bad angel, the symbol of virtue and vice in his soul. The good angel warns him again and again that he should not indulge himself in magic. He tempts Faustus to read the scriptures and turn to God again. He forbids him to read the necromantic books and says: “O Faustus! Lay that damned book aside and gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul.

Faustus does not pay heed to this advice but listens to the evil angel who says that with the help of magic: “Be thou on earth as Jove in the sky, Lord and commander of these elements.” In this way, he left the path of virtue and gave away his soul to devil and instead of gaining a deity paved the way for his eternal doom and damnation. If we follow the career of Dr. Faustus after the surrender of his soul to the Devil we find how his great expectations are belied. The man who wanted to gain a deity ultimately turns out to be a buffoon. He spends twenty four years in frivolous activities like

displaying his miraculous feats in the courts of king and emperors or playing nasty tricks, sometimes on the Pope, sometimes on a common horse courser. This degradation leads him towards his damnation. Creeping towards the end of the period of twenty-four years, he feels a sense of loss and grief. He feels guilty for his hateful deeds and out of depression he wants to commit suicide as he says: “Damn’d art thou, Faustus, damn’d, despair & die.”

In the last scene of drama Faustus’s desperation is clear when he says to his fellow scholars that he must remain in hell forever. Here we see that Faustus has realized his sins but nothing can be done now. The play records the gradual change in this man. His self-realization is at its climax, after completing the period of twenty four years. The soliloquy of Dr. Faustus starts just before an hour of his damnation. He then realizes that super natural powers are reserved for the gods and that the man who attempts to handle or deal in magical powers must face eternal damnation. He cries: “Stand still, you ever moving spheres of heaven, That Faustus may repent.” When the final hour strikes, there is thunder and lightning and Devil’s disciples come to hold his soul. Faustus is so much terrified that he calls for God’s mercy and says: “My God, my God, look not so fierce on me! Adders and serpents let me breathe a while.”

Conclusion:

The whole drama presents the story of Dr. Faustus who is damned forever. In the words of J. A. Symonds “Marlowe concentrated his energies on the delineation of proud life and terrible death of a man in revolt against the

eternal laws of his own nature and the world.” The question arises whether this damnation is justified or not. When we analyze the character of Dr. Faustus on the humanistic ground, it is totally unjustified, because it is human instinct that every human being wants to get power, knowledge and wealth. Faustus being a human being had the keen desire to possess wealth, knowledge, a great popularity and supreme power. Thus his desires were natural, and he should not have been punished. On religious ground, this damnation is justified because according to Christian theology the commission of any sin means turning away from God and godly things and turning towards things which are evil. Naturally the sin of man must lead to his damnation. Faustus abjures God and Trinity; denounces Christian theology and sells his soul to the Devil. His greatest sin is pride ---- pride that brought about the fall of Lucifer. The only thing which tempts him to repent is his fear

of damnation. So there is no reasonable justification for his salvation. On general ground it is justified. Faustus himself was a scholar and knew very well that black magic and necromancy are forbidden branches of knowledge but he did not care for it and turned to achieve ultimate power like God .When he signs the contract with Lucifer, he is warned by good angel again and again but he does not care for it and reaches the point of no return. He forgets his original plan to do something good for Germany and its people and indulges in useless activities not worthy of a scholar like him. Moreover, disappointment is a sin and Faustus is disappointed from the grace of God .The obvious result of these things is damnation. To conclude we may say that the crimes of Dr. Faustus were so gross that he had to be condemned .Moreover, his damnation was the demand of justice, otherwise the tragedy of Faustus would have become the tragedy of Lucifer.

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