

The problem of evil in doctor faustus



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The traditional Christian message Christopher Marlowe was working with during the time he wrote Doctor Faustus stated that one should avoid leading a life of temptation and sin, the origins of which were rooted in an enterprising proprietor of evil generally referred to as the Devil. But if one does succumb to these debasements, atonement is always possible so long as the person is alive. Faustus serves as a representative of the common man, or at least a type of common man: he is a knowledgeable seeker of knowledge; the knowledge at his disposal is not enough to satisfy him. Faustus is described as a character with 'cunning of a self-conceit' whose 'waxen wings did mount above his reach' [Prologue, Line 19]. Indeed, passionate Icarus is an ideal foil for the tragic Faustus. Icarus embodies the idea of inventiveness gone wrong, of humans who push the limits of human knowledge and attempt a compatibility with the godly that cannot be reached. Though warned by his father Daedalus not to fly too close to the sun because it would melt his wings, and not to fly too close to the sea because it would dampen them and make it difficult to fly, Icarus's exhilaration with the feat of flying provoked him to cross boundaries he wasn't meant to cross, melting his wings until he fell to his death. Seeking truth in the divine is not a sin, but it is a difficult and daunting task. Faustus gives up the task of understanding the divine and searches for an easier source of knowledge: the devil. Despite warnings from the Good Angel that the endeavor he shall set on is fruitless, Faustus follows the path of the Bad Angel and continues to have his earthly desires satisfied by evil. The presence of this dualism is a symbol for Faustus's conscience, and implies an innate ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Marlowe's point, therefore, is to place emphasis on the fact that the decision to be evil is

indeed a decision; evil is a behavior that is lured out of us, and not planted within, by a devil. The tragedy of Doctor Faustus is the fact that the modern world is more concerned with who and what the devil is than who and what the divine is. Initially it is difficult to see why the reader should blame Faustus for contractually binding his soul to Lucifer. Faustus's companion on his diabolic journey is a minion of Lucifer named Mephistopheles. When Faustus asks of him what the precise location of Hell is, Mephistopheles answers, ' Within the bowels of these elements, where we are tortured and remain for ever. Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed in one self place, but where we are is hell, and where hell is there must we ever be. And, to be short, when all the world dissolves, and every creature shall be purified, all places shall be hell that is not heaven' [2. 2 Line 119]. Here Marlowe presents the humanist's concept of Hell, that is to say that Hell is any place that lacks divinity, and since only Heaven contains divinity, everything beneath it is Hell, including the world in which we live. Essentially, it is the very nature of the human condition to be as close to Hell as possible.

Faustus is only doing what is natural in a moment of pain or discomfort: finding a distraction, as in Pascal's idea of *divertissement*. If we are not able to think thoughts that give us our dignity, thoughts that grasp the divine as closely as possible, we may as well avert our attention to something more pleasant, which in this case is the sensory stimulation that the devils provide Faustus. The distractions Faustus experiences are not only in the shows Lucifer provides, but are also in the tricks Faustus plays once he is granted power upon entering the pact with Lucifer. Faustus's initial lofty plans for his powers are a bit ridiculous (e. g. he wishes to redraw the globe, integrating Africa into Europe so that it will be easier to plunder), but they are almost

heroic. His plans certainly don't embody goodness, but they also don't embody badness; they are seemingly neutral. His fault is that the only reason he wants to do anything is so that he can be known for doing it. Perhaps it is because of this weakness that once he acquires the limitless power from the pact, he resorts to trickery of kings and noblemen, among others, that will garner him more tangible results and more easily observed affects. It is quite ironic that after being granted so much power, instead of being heightened to the level Faustus desired to be elevated to upon binding his soul, he is reduced to a mediocrity. This can be interpreted as the consequence of refusing greatness as ordained by God and accepting greatness from a temptation. To seek knowledge in a muddy origin is unproductive; the only way to guarantee prosperity is to accept God. This is the message that is constantly reiterated to Faustus by the Good Angel throughout the play. Occasionally it seems that Faustus will yield to the advice of the Good Angel. For example, at a point when Faustus meditates in his study with Mephistopheles by his side, Faustus seems to come to a realization that the only good to be found is in Heaven, and that Mephistopheles has, in taking him on his downward spiral, deprived him of this good. Mephistopheles tells Faustus that Heaven is not as glorious as he perceives it to be, that it was made for merely man. But Faustus says, ' If Heaven was made for man, 'twas made for me. I will renounce this magic and repent' [2. 3 Line 10]. Yet just as Faustus says this, the Bad Angel prevents him from doing so out of fear, telling him that the contract binds Faustus to a life of debauchery or he will otherwise be torn to pieces by the devils who sworn him into Hell. Despite the tidings of the Good Angel that if Faustus renounces Lucifer, he will be rescued from any promised torture,

Faustus is forced to reclaim evil because the Bad Angel proceeds to offer him spectacles for the eyes and other forms of hedonistic divertissement.

Faustus is too weak to denounce the evil within him; he is too weak to follow the path of good that is intrinsically in him. As if Faustus weren't enough evidence for the dualism in humans that prompts free will, and is the causation and origin of evil, the devils themselves are described as having dualistic natures. What was Lucifer but a fallen angel? An example with more textual support is the very character of Mephistopheles. Though in an aforementioned excerpt he was portrayed as a kind of 'Bad Angel' to Faustus, a tempter more interested having his own minion in the Hellish world, Mephistopheles is also portrayed as a seeker of the divine. On another occasion Faustus was inquisitive about Hell, Mephistopheles responded to his questions as follows: 'Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it. Think'st thou that I, that saw the face of God and tasted the eternal joys of heaven, am not tormented with ten thousand hells in being deprived of everlasting bliss? O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands, which strikes a terror to my fainting soul.' [1. 3, Line 75] To describe Mephistopheles as a devil who rues his condition veritably seals the deal on what it is Marlowe intends to assert on the human condition. For a devil to have remorse about being in Hell states that devils also had an innate element of goodness to them. Good and evil are intrinsically a part of all of humans, but distraction and temptation can tamper with those weaker in ability to control their desire. The various incarnations of Lucifer are in their wretched states because they strayed towards the evil, which in its most extreme case is attempting to reach a level of power that is on par with God. It is established in Genesis that to reach a level of compatibility with God is only possible if it is done on God's

terms; Eve ate from the tree of knowledge against the request of God and as a result she and the rest of humanity suffered. We are allowed to strive for God, but we can only strive for Him under conditions pre-established by Him. By the end of the play, Faustus realizes this and calls upon God. He realizes that he will only find a tainted version of truth in the gifts he receives from the devils, and that Hell is only Hell because even if we obtain what we desire, we are only obtaining superficial pleasures, not a real truth. One can only obtain pure pleasure and untainted truth when one has accepted God. But when Faustus calls upon the Good Angel to help him reach God, the window of opportunity for access to the divine has shut, and the Good Angel tells him, ' O Faustus, if thou hadst given ear to me, innumerable joys had followed thee. But thou didst love the world [5. 2, Line 97].' The world, we established, is in itself Hell. Faustus was too caught up in its distraction to cast it aside as an obstruction to the truth. The tragedy of Faustus is the inability of humans to free themselves from the obstacle that is the Bad Angel, or the evil within us. Marlowe's presentation of Faustus is interesting because of his radical Platonic recognition of the hedonistic human as the only perpetuator of evil. Still more interesting is the fact that in his ending, Marlowe rejects the Christian orthodoxy that states repentance can occur at any time idea for a more dramatic ending and one that makes Faustus identify more with the idea of the tragic hero. Perhaps in this way, Marlowe is celebrating the human condition, or even pitying it, rather than condemning it. Works Cited Marlow, Christopher. Doctor Faustus and Other Plays. New York: Oxford University Press 1995.