

Is faustus a tragic hero

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Much of the information in Dr Faustus is derived from a collection of semi-fictitious German stories (the 'Faustbuch') in which the life of German scholar and purported necromancer, Georgius Faust are narrated. Where the Faustbuch narrates a simple tale of sin and retribution, Marlowe creates a tragedy in which a human being makes a clear choice for good or bad, with some knowledge of the possible outcome. In order to do this, Marlowe has drawn on the conventions of classical Greek tragedy, many of which dictate the nature of the hero or heroine.

In ancient times, a hero achieved heroic status not because of saintliness or wickedness, but because of the acts he performed in life. The hero should have a socially elevated status and suffer a reversal of fortune in which he experiences great suffering. This is all certainly true of Faustus, who is highly regarded as both a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg, and an accomplished scholar. During his life, he performs extraordinary feats, which were unlike anything experienced by lesser mortals.

Even by modern standards, the notion of necromancy is disturbing; for a contemporary Elizabethan audience, for whom religion permeated all aspects of life, it would have been inconceivably horrific. Once Faustus is "glutted with learning's golden gifts and surfeited upon cursed necromancy" he uses his powers to embark upon amazing adventures (for example learning the secrets of astronomy upon the summit of mount Olympus) which, again, are befitting of the tragic hero. Faustus reversal of fortune is also typically tragic.

During the final scene of the play, in which we witness Faustus' final hour before being taken off to hell, he is, like all heroes of classical tragedy,

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completely isolated. There is a poignant contrast in Faustus' degeneration from the successful, revered conjurer of the previous scenes, to the disillusioned scholar we see here. In despair, he tries to conjure and command the earth to gape open but realises that, " o no, it will not harbour" him. His terror, desperation and frantic hopes are all conveyed by the final soliloquy, which is both graphic and physical in its nature.

The dramatic moment of Faustus' death, as his flesh is torn by devils, is at the same time horrendous and moving. He experiences the type of physical anguish reminiscent of the blind Oedipus, and this enactment of the spectacle of pain and death is at the heart of a true tragedy. In order for the audience to engage with the hero, and feel empathy and pathos as a result of his suffering, it is essential that he is presented with the opportunity to make conscious decisions about his fate, all be they the wrong ones. The plot of Dr Faustus contains several such opportunities.

Faustus is given a chance to repent on several occasions; before signing the contract with Mephistophilis, he seems to heed the voice of the good angel, and is about to " turn to God again", but denies this as a possibility because God does not love him. However, despite the " vain fancies" of God and heaven which clearly plague him, Faustus is resolute and clear about what he is committing himself to. Here, we see another trait of the classical tragic hero, hell bent on a course of action which he believes is right, even though he knows it will eventually bring about his downfall.

Even at the very end of his 24 years, when the hope of salvation comes along in the form of the old man, Faustus (fearful of the wrath of Lucifer) instructs " sweet Mephistophilis" to torture his would-be saviour. When

Faustus chooses to kiss the image of Helen of Troy, whom he knows is nothing more than a demonic spirit in disguise, we feel that he must realise he has made a fatal choice. By now the tragedy is inevitable; of his own free will Faustus has rejected all hope of salvation and the audience waits in trepidation for his impending doom.

The question of fate versus free will is a key theme in Dr. Faustus, and one which is important when considering Faustus himself as a tragic hero. If, indeed, Faustus has the freedom necessary to change or reverse his predicament then he is truly a tragic hero. The chorus' assertion that "cut is the branch which might have grown full straight", does seem to support the idea that Faustus was not doomed from the beginning, but was given choices and opportunities to repent his wicked ways.

Mephistophilis sums this up perfectly when, in response to Faustus' desperate, remorseful accusation: "thou hast deprived me of the joys of heaven", he reminds Faustus that "'twas thine own seeking...thank thyself". However, when we consider the religious beliefs held by most of Marlowe's contemporaries, there appears to be a contradiction in Faustus' apparent free will. In Elizabethan times, the ideas of a popular branch of Christianity known as Calvinism (of which Marlowe himself would certainly have been aware) were widespread.

Calvinists held the belief that human beings, as a direct consequence of original sin, have no free will. Also, Christianity has traditionally taught of God's omnipotence and omniscience- i. e. God knows all and sees all. It follows, therefore that God has planned our fate and knows it long before we are even born. If this is the case, then doubt must be cast upon the notion of

Faustus as a true tragic hero; if his fate was already mapped out then all the 'choices' presented to him are rendered arbitrary.

When debating with himself at the beginning of the play, Faustus does seem to have some awareness of this, reasoning that we are all inherently sinful and therefore are condemned to die, because "the reward of sin is death". Despite the fact that Faustus essentially cheats, twisting quotes from the Bible in order to justify his intended pursuit, one cannot help but feel that he shows insight into the problems raised by fate/free will, concluding that what is meant to be shall be ("che sara, sara").

In conclusion I would say that for the most part, Faustus is the perfect example of the tragic hero. He is an engaging character who holds the audiences' attention until the very last, even when we do not find his personality particularly appealing. Indeed, the arrogance and blasphemy apparent in many of Faustus' speeches ("a greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit", "Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity" etc) are characteristic of the classical tragic hero.

For example, Faustus' pride and arrogance (which the Greeks called 'hubris') is strikingly similar to that of Aeschylus' tragic hero, king Agamemnon. As far as the issue of free will is concerned, I think that Faustus does have the opportunity to make his own decisions, despite Marlowe's paradoxical portrayal of a God whom, whilst able to control our predestination, cannot (when it comes down to it) control or undo the contract which Faustus makes.