

Marlowe and the morality play philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



\n[toc title="Table of Contents"]\n

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1. [Marlowe and the morality play:](#) \n \t
2. [The Tragic Life and Death of Doctor Faustus:](#) \n \t
3. [Conclusion:](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

This term paper is analysis of Marlowes Doctor Faustus in the light of moral psychology, more particularly Nietzsches philosophy. I will support the point that Doctor Faustus is the product of the context during which it was written; the period during which new values have emerged and the scientific view has gained more validity and reliability over other means and sources of knowledge. Eventually, I will support the point that Doctor Faustus is, on the one hand, encouraging the new values of the Renaissance and, on the other hand, criticizing it for keeping some of the values of the old medieval period such as conscience. You NEED TO RECONSIDER THIS°

Marlowe and the morality play:

The period known as the Renaissance can be traced back to the succession of Edward I, but the flowering of this period come up during the reign of Elizabeth I, known also as the golden age. In the 16th century, great things were achieved in the art, sculpture, architecture & literature. Some of the well known British writers such as Shakespeare, Bacon and Marlowe emerged during this period as well. The morality play has also emerged during this period (Jump 1965). Generally, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is transplanted within this English morality framework.

The morality play serves the purpose of teaching lessons and morals, generally, from an orthodox view. It can also exhibit remarkable psychological ingenuity marked by keen insight and the ability to penetrate deeply and thoroughly (Ibid.). It is to make use of

By transplanting Marlowe's Doctor Faustus within this tradition, we might come to draw on his rejection of the morality tradition. By doing so, he brings the play to broader context by showing the potential of the myth and dramatic form. The context which is also found in the myth of Icarus and the Promethean archetype of human ambition repeatedly colliding with some extraneous forces, social, political, moral or divine. And, as a consequence, leading to frustration and internal struggle. Marlowe uses the morality in a genius and unconventional way to exhibit a deep psychological insight on the tragic life and death of Doctor Faustus.

The Renaissance philosophy, has raised the perplexing binary juxtaposition between the good human being (reason and the paternal benevolence of God) side by side with a human as a beast of appetite subject to God's terrible wrath. The Renaissance attempt to reconcile between the aspiration of mind and the desires of the body, which has later on being explained by Nietzsche as the tragic struggle between the 'Apollonian' and the 'Dionysian'. He argues that the greatest art – such as ancient Greek tragic drama – is a synthesis of both these powers. The Apollonian (after the Greek god Apollo) symbolizes the rational desire to order and control experience, and so it represents reality through forms or ideas; the Dionysian (after the Greek god Dionysus) represents a non-rational desire to go beyond these

forms, and to directly experience reality in its raw state. In this way, the two forces are directly opposed, and constantly war with one another for dominance.

Frederick Nietzsche: Moral Psychology

Moral psychology is the branch of ethics directly concerned with the psychology of the kind of agency we exercise in acting morally. Moral psychology asks whether such agency is psychologically possible and who these morals can be translated into actions (either spoken, written or physical). Among the influential figures who have contributed in the development of this field, we can mention Aristotle, Kant and more particularly Nietzsche (Doris 2002). For the purpose of this paper, much attention will be paid to Nietzsche's "philo-psychology" (by this I mean the use of philosophy and psychology to describe and explain morals) because it seems to be a promising frame to use in studying Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. This play is known for being a morality play and studying it from a 'Nietzschian' perspective seems to be logical. It will enable us to see to what extent moral psychology helps us to understand, describe and interpret Doctor Faustus, both as a play and as a character.

Yet, it would be difficult, just not to say inappropriate, to make use of Nietzsche without providing at least a brief description and explanation of some of Nietzsche's main ideas and key terms, particularly the will to power (knowledge, truth, ignorance. etc), 'slave' and 'master morality', 'resentment' and the 'superman' or the 'overman'.

One of Nietzsche's main ideas is the 'Will to power' and the different disguise it can exhibit such as ignorance, truth and knowledge. The will to truth is the first of the so-called 'prejudices of philosophers' that Nietzsche considers to have misled philosophers in the past. The 'will to truth' is therefore Nietzsche's phrase for the assumption, associated with most philosophers to date, that 'truth' exists separately from all human self-interest. He also posits it as a competing drive with the will to ignorance; it is the idea or the tendency to distort and simplify reality as a fundamental drive (such as one principle, one truth). This might be opposed to the will to knowledge (our desire to increase what we know). However, both drives are aspects of the more fundamental will to power.

The will to power is Nietzsche's idea that all creatures are driven by a desire to express their essential nature, and cast about dominance over the others, and perpetuate the expression of their own 'type'. This may take a physical (strong animals on weak ones) or an intellectual form. The will to truth is therefore, for Nietzsche, merely a form of will to power in disguise. The will to power can be compared to an actor who can wear any disguise which fits his characterization. The will (to power) can wear many disguises particularly that of knowledge, ignorance, truth, and dominance. This should not be confused with the will to truth, which is Nietzsche's term for the philosophical prejudice that we can approach absolute truth in an unbiased fashion.

Eventually, Nietzsche makes the distinction between two types of moralities, namely the 'Master morality' and the 'Slave morality'. By The former, Nietzsche denotes the values which stem from the ruling class and

aristocratic society in general. As such, it is characterized by pride, love of wealth, power, health and dominance. By the later, he expresses the outlook of the lower classes and common people – generally, the ruled and powerless. Nietzsche sees this as springing from ‘ressentiment’ and the desire of the ruled to have power over the rulers. However, since they cannot have more power in worldly terms (they cannot be more powerful than their ‘masters’), they create a way in which they are simply more deserving. Slave morality, therefore, proposes harmless qualities: brotherhood, friendship, love, peace, etc. Nietzsche uses this term (from the French, ‘resentment, jealousy’) to describe the tendency of those who feel inferior or jealous of others to attribute the cause of those feelings to the unjust actions of others (e. g. ‘slaves’ considering their ‘masters’ evil). More generally, Nietzsche sees it as the basis for slave morality.

Last but not least, One of Nietzsche most important ideas is “Übermensch”, the new man or free spirit. It is sometimes translated as ‘Over-man’ or ‘Superman’, but Nietzsche’s basic intention here is to suggest a progression beyond the current concept of ‘man’. The Übermensch will therefore go ‘beyond good and evil’ and establish a new set of values and a new philosophy.

So far, a brief account of the main ideas and concept that will be used in analyzing and interpreting Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus.

The Tragic Life and Death of Doctor Faustus:

Faustus is the protagonist and tragic hero of Marlowe’s play. He is a complex character, capable of colossal eloquence and possessing extravagant

ambition, yet inclined to a strange willingness to waste powers that he has gained at great cost. In the prologue, the chorus presents the play. He declares that this play is not about the traditional themes of war or love. It is not about kings or princes, either. It presents the life and downfall of an ordinary man, a scholar: Doctor Faustus. He was born into an ordinary family in Germany and studied at the University of Wittenberg, where he studied philosophy and divinity. He becomes proud of his achievements and eager to gain more knowledge and power. Like Icarus, who, because of his pride, had flown too high in the sky, had melted his wax wings, and subsequently had fallen to his death.

In the First act, Faustus is frustrated by the limits of what traditional sources of knowledge can offer. He tells Valdes:

“ Philosophy is odious and obscure;

Both law and physic are for petty wits;

Divinity is basest of the three,

Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile” (I. i, 105-108).

Dissatisfied with the academic routine of Wittenberg and frustrated that so much experience and knowledge is beyond human capacity, Faustus pledges his immortal soul in return for Apollonian attainment and Dionysian delights never before vouchsafed man. Like Adam, he would disregard God's rule and taste of the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Unlike Adam and Oedipus, Faustus is never deluded regarding the seriousness of his

offense and the severity of the inevitable punishment. His Apollonian pride is even more deserving of reprobation since to his “ inordinate ambition” is added “ his fatalism and his refusal to accept the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith” (Boorstin 1992).

Ultimately, it is Faustus’ desire for ‘ knowledge’ (the will to knowledge) and the unfolding of the secrets of nature, the universe, and pleasure which has lead him to align himself with the devil. Faustus swiftly testifies to his ardent curiosity, his desire for luxury and wealth, as well as to the longing for power which he has. Each item or set of items in the catalogue is introduced by the assertive first personal pronoun:

“ I’ll have them read me strange philosophy

And tell the secrets of all foreign kings;

I’ll have them wall all Germany with brass

And make swift Rhine circle fair Wittenberg;

I’ll have them fill the public schools with silk

Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad; 90

I’ll levy soldiers with the coin they bring

And chase the Prince of Parma from our land

And reign sole king of all our provinces;

Yea, stranger engines for the brunt of war

Than was the fiery keel at Antwerp's bridge

I'll make my servile spirits to invent." (I. i, 85-96)

He even states that ' a sound magician is a demi-god, (I. i, 61). These quotes leads us to think of Nietzsche's philosophy; the will to Power clearly disguised in Faustus's Will to knowledge and his ultimate goal to be more than man, The ' Superman' or the ' above man'.

Yet, Faustus is constantly undecided about whether he should repent and return to God or continue to follow his pact with Lucifer. His internal struggle goes on throughout the play, as part of him wants to repent and serve God, but part of him craves after the power that Mephastophilis promises. This internal struggle between the good and bad is the struggle

The good angel and the evil angel, each trying to bring Faustus to his side, symbolize this struggle. While these angels may be designed as pair of supernatural, they clearly represent " Faustus's divided will", which drives Faustus to consign himself to Lucifer but also to question this consign continually. For instance:

GOOD ANG. O Faustus, lay that damned book aside

And gaze not on it lest it tempt thy soul 70

And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head.

Read, read the scriptures; that is blasphemy.

BAD ANG. Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art

Wherein all nature's treasury is contain'd:

Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,

Lord and commander of these elements. (V, 69-76)

Doctor Faustus seems to suffer from the same symptoms that Nietzsche harshly criticizes the slave morality and scientists for; conscience and skepticism which make them unable to make a clear state of mind and therefore are a kind of paralyze of the will. For example, Mephistophilis informs Faustus that Lucifer was once “an angel most dearly loved of God”, but was expelled from Heaven for his “aspiring pride”. Having himself lost that bliss, Mephistophilis warns Faustus that the outcome of the Miltonic struggle, the fall of the angels, will be Faustus's destiny, too; but, Faustus, unheeding the warning, persists in his skepticism about Hell.

“Faustus: Where are you damned?

Mephistophilis: In hell.

Faustus: How comes it then that thou art out of Hell?

Mephistophilis: Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it.

Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God

And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, (iii, 74-80)

Eventually, it's Faustus's skepticism that makes him neglect the many warnings he encounters throughout the play. In scene 5, Dr. Faustus

neglects the warning of the drying blood and the forming of the words 'Homo fege' "Man, Fly"; he fall in state of hesitation and conflict:

"Homo, fuge: whither should I fly?

If unto God, he'll throw me down to hell.

My senses are deceived; here's nothing writ:

I see it plain; here in his place is writ

Homo, fuge: yet shall not Faustus fly". (V, 77-81)

It is worth noting that some critics consider the scene representing capitalism as evil. I agree with this interpretation, especially, due to methopholisis's act of loosening the blood and trying to seduce and convince Dr. Faustus to sign the contract. in similar path, this leads us to Nietzsche and the idea that the slave morality brought new (weak) morals as it tries to revolt against the master morality; such morals are equality, capitalism, materialism, secularism, and seeking knowledge through empiricism (observable through senses). (Our modern times are the outcomes of the Renaissance and the revolt of the slave morality over the master morality).

Due to his (and that of slave morality in general) weak 'will', Dr Faustus is practically affected by 'resentment; it is the desire of the ruled to have power over the rulers. However, since they are incapable of having more power in worldly terms (they cannot be more powerful than their 'masters'), they create a way in which they are simply more deserving. Slave morality

therefore proposes ‘harmless’ qualities: brotherhood, friendship, love, peace.

Dr Faustus supports this point by what might be described as childish acts. Although he acquires a colossal, and limitless, power, he wastes it by visiting Rome, where he plays tricks on the Pope and a Cardinal as way of revolt and rejection of the church and religion in general, and by entertaining the courts of all powerful Kings; he goes to the court of the King of Germany – where he shows his powers (to amuse them) by bringing back the spirits of Alexander the Great and his wife and making horns grow on an officer who dares doubt his powers. The qualities of the slave morality are evident- playing tricks is harmless act and does not contribute in any way to the fulfillment of Dr. Faustus desire. Unlike the slave morality, the master morality (the aristocracy) has all the qualities such pride, knowledge and the strong will to dominate.

Another interesting point in Doctor Faustus, is what Said (2003) would call “pre-colonial discourse”. In of the most interesting passages, Faustus states that by acquiring unlimited knowledge he would ultimately acquire unlimited powers and therefore he will be able to rule the world. In his words:

“ I’ll be great emperor of the world,

And make a bridge thorough the moving air

To pass the ocean with a band of men;

I’ll join the hills that bind the Afric shore

And make that country continent to Spain, no

And both contributory to my crown;

The Emperor shall not live but by my leave,

Nor any potentate of Germany.

Now that I have obtain'd what I desire"(III, 105-112)

This issue might be better understood under the frame of Edward Said 'Orientalism'. The 'will of dominance is "knowledge – if that is what it is – that is part of an overall campaign of self affirmation, belligerency and outright war" (Said 2003, xiv). Dr. Faustus contends that by acquiring Knowledge he will ultimately acquire power and therefore he will dominate the world and becomes more than man, superman. The renaissance was a period of exploration, expansion and imperialism par excellence; Al-Khawaldeh (2010, p. 36) states that: "Looking back at the past four centuries after the age of Marlowe, one can see how he has helped define and spell out those aspirations of imperialism. The British Empire would soon gain control over vast areas including those predicted by Marlowe: India, Saba, and North America, defeating the Spanish there and establishing their rule in Gibraltar". Nietzsche says that countries with strong will (will to power disguised in the will to dominate) dominate, whereas countries with weak morals will be dominated.

Eventually, and by the end of the twenty four years contract and therefore the damnation of our tragic hero, Dr Faustus is facing his death and blaming his learning for his downfall:

“ O, would I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book!” (xix, 45-6); we retain the impression Faustus puts the blame on his knowledge for his damnation. Relating this with the aforementioned, we can surely have no hesitation (or skepticism) in thinking of Faustus as embodying the new inquiring and aspiring spirit of the age of the Renaissance, and of Faustus as expressing in this play both his fervent sympathy with that new spirit and, ultimately, his awed and pitiful recognition of the peril into which it could lead those whom it dominated.

Emancipation from an old order; the free play of the mind; the assertion of one's individuality- these Renaissance purposes evidently attract Marlowe; but he delivers his last word on the subject in the Epilogue, where he makes it clear that ‘ such forward wits’ as ‘ practice more than heavenly power permits’ are preparing for themselves a ‘ hellish fall’ (ll. 7-8, 4).

Conclusion:

So Far, this term paper has shown that studying Doctor Faustus in the light of Nietzschean philosophy can be productive. The use of moral psychology provided a better understanding of the psychological aspect in this moral play. This term paper has also supported the assumptions which have been held. The assumption that Doctor Faustus is the product of the context during which it was written has been confirmed. Doctor Faustus represents scholars of that age and the emergence new set of values and morals such

as sense of individualism, free spirit. However, Marlowe seems also to criticize them for keeping the morals of the old and warning them that there end will be as catastrophic as that of Faustus. These types of morals and values can only lead to destruction.

It seems that both Nietzsche and Marlow hold the same assumption of science without conscience. They are, both, rejecting religion, divinity and holding a secularist view which posits man at the center. Whoever, I do not agree with this assumption. A world without morals and science without conscience can only lead us to destruction. Case in point, nuclear power can be used for the good of people, to have an unlimited source of energy, but when it has been used without conscience it has only brought destruction and the dominance of some countries over the other. Moral and logic reasoning is what makes us