

# The tragic example of doctor faustus



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Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus depicts a clash between the values of the medieval world and the emerging humanism of the Renaissance. During the Middle Ages in Europe, God is the center of intellectual life, and in art and literature, the emphasis revolves around the lives of the saints and the mighty instead of ordinary people. On the other hand, The Renaissance brings about a new sense of individualism and the pursuit of more secular knowledge. This clash between the old medieval piousness and the humanist Renaissance is the core of Faustus' character.

Faustus is a contradictory character, greatly ambitious and articulate, but strangely obtuse and willing to waste his costly powers. When Marlowe introduces Faustus, he is readying to recreate himself as a magician. From the very beginning of the play when the Chorus compares Faustus to Daedalus and his waxen wings, it is evident that Faustus' plight will end badly. Regardless of Marlowe's foreshadowing, Faustus' contemplations on the possibilities of his magical powers carry a sense of grandeur that goes far beyond the piousness of his medieval predecessors. His visions of reshaping Europe politically and geographically and acquiring ultimate knowledge show Faustus as the developing ego of the Renaissance humanist. The magician is arrogant and self-aggrandizing, but his ambitions are so amazing that their impressive nature work to create a feeling of sympathy for the misguided Faustus and his impossible dreams.

Early in his gain of magical knowledge, Faustus represents the spirit of the Renaissance, with its rejection of the medieval, God-centered universe, and its embrace of human possibility. The magic itself is the personification of human potentiality and the good or evil that man creates in his thirst for

knowledge. With the rejection of God and his sovereignty and the desire for control over the natural world, Faustus embodies the secular spirit of the developing modern era. Marlowe uses Faustus' rejection of the learned men who have come before him to symbolize the need of Renaissance man to find his own path. Faustus has no need for Aristotle, Galen, or Justinian, because he is his own man and only needs the knowledge he can discover for himself. In speaking out against the wisdom of his predecessors, Faustus puts aside the relics of a bygone era and steps bravely into a new world of discovery.

In spite of his vision and knowledge, Faustus exhibits an almost intentional obtuseness towards his fate. Once he decided a pact with Lucifer is the only way to achieve his goals, Faustus then willingly ignores the realities that such a pact infers. Faustus convinces himself that Hell cannot be as bad as the clerics say it is and that all he needs to survive Hell is fortitude. Even during his congress with Mephistophilis, Faustus has convinced himself that Hell does not exist, even though he is having extensive relations with one of Hell's major denizens. Marlowe uses Faustus' refusal to see the consequences of his pact to show how man can make himself ignore the consequences of the unbridled search for knowledge. Despite his lack of concern about his damnation, Faustus still has doubts of his vision of Hell. These doubts set a pattern of near repentance throughout the play. His pride, ambition, and feeling that God will not listen to him cause Faustus to never go through with his repentance. Marlowe seems to use Faustus' fear of not receiving grace from God to show that forgetting the face of God creates Hell.

Not only does Faustus' fear of God's indifference to his plight cause him to not go through with his repentance, but Mephistophilis' influence also sways him. Swaying Faustus is not as challenging as it should be, because although he has grand plans of power, he has a petty nature. Once he has the powers to fulfill his desires, Faustus does not know how to capitalize on them. This uncertainty is created by the fact that God grants all knowledge and power, and Faustus has turned his back on God, so he cannot truly be powerful. Absolute power corrupts Faustus; when he has the power to do anything he desires, he no longer desires to do anything. Instead of realizing his grand schemes and ambitions, Faustus travels Europe playing tricks on the peasants and performs simple conjuring tricks to impress various heads of state. He wastes his magnificent power for paltry parlor tricks, until Faustus is performing meaningless tricks for meaningless nobles. Thus, the magnificent Faustus reduces himself to nothing but a mediocre huckster; his delusions of grandeur defeated by his own petty ego.

The looming spectre of his damnation rescues Faustus from mediocrity. The knowledge of his fate restores Faustus' articulate rhetoric, and he again embraces his grand vision. However, the vision he now sees is a vision of the torments that Hell will soon inflict upon his wretched spirit. During his final hours, Faustus' desire for repentance finally conquers his maddening thirst for power, but it is too late for the magician. Still, Faustus' original brilliance resurfaces during his final soliloquy, brought about by the pains of his remorse. His remorse and repentance comes to late for poor Faustus; he has seen his folly and once more become a mere man. When he proclaims that he will burn his books, Faustus finally renounces his Renaissance spirit,

finally realizing the benefits of being humble and pious like those he spent his first speech renouncing. Marlow shows that Faustus has become undone because his ambitions went against the will of God.

In Marlowe's final lines, the Chorus proclaims Faustus' fate as a warning and an example of the dangers of man's decreasing need for God. This warning seems to make Marlowe an advocate for established religious tenets, counseling against the terrible fate of the Renaissance man who rejects God's grace. Although, by Faustus' tragic magnificence Marlow suggests a different lesson: knowledge is not evil, but without wisdom, it will corrupt and destroy. Marlowe's Faustus pays the price for all people that come after him, showing the modern man that he must hold on to his old moral self, while stepping into the new secular world.