

Doctor faustus' death essay



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Doctor Faustus` Death Faustus died a death that few could bear to imagine, much less experience. After

knowing for many years when exactly he would die, he reached the stroke of the

hour of his destiny in a cowardly, horrid demeanor. Finally, when the devils

appeared at the stroke of midnight, tearing at his flesh as they draw him into

his eternal torment, he screams for mercy without a soul, not even God Himself,

to help him. However, what to consider Doctor John Faustus from Christopher

Marlow's dramatic masterpiece The Tragical History of the Life and Death of

Doctor Faustus is a very debatable issue. For example, one can see that he threw

his life away for the sake of knowledge, becoming obsessed with the knowledge

that he could possess. In this case, he is unarguably a medieval tragic hero.

However, when considering the fact that he died for the sake of gaining

knowledge, pushing the limits of what is possible in spite of obvious

limitations and, eventually, paying the ultimate penalty, he could be considered

a Renaissance martyr. These two points of view have their obvious differences,

and depending on from what time period one chooses to place this piece of literature varies the way that the play is viewed. However, the idea of considering him a martyr has many flaws, several of which are evident when considering who Faustus was before he turned to necromancy and what he did once

he obtained the powers of the universe. Therefore, inevitably, the audience in

this play should realize that Faustus was a great man who did many great things,

but because of his hubris and his lack of vision, he died the most tragic of

heroes. Christopher Marlowe was borne on February 6, 1564 (Discovering

Christopher Marlowe 2), in Canterbury, England, and baptized at St. George's

Church on the 26th of the same month, exactly two months before William

Shakespeare was baptized at Stratford-upon-Avon (Henderson 275). He was the

eldest son of John Marlowe of the Shoemaker's Guild and Katherine Arthur, a

Dover girl of yeoman stock (Henderson 275). Upon graduating King's School,

Canterbury, he received a six-year scholarship to Cambridge upon the condition

that he studies for the church. He went to Cambridge, but had to be reviewed by

the Privy Council before the university could award him his M. A. degree because

of his supposed abandonment of going to church. He was awarded his degree in

July of 1587 at the age of twenty-three after the Privy Council had convinced

Cambridge authorities that he had “ behaved himself orderly and discreetly

whereby he had done Her Majesty good service” (Henderson 276). After this,

he completed his education from Cambridge over a period of six years.

During

this time he wrote some plays, including Hero and Leander, along with

translating others, such as Ovid’s Amores and Book I of Lucan’s Pharsalia

(Henderson 276). During the next five years he lived in London where he

wrote

and produced some of his plays and traveled a great deal on government

commissions, something that he had done while trying to earn his M. A.

degree. In

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1589, however, he was imprisoned for taking part in a street fight in which a man was killed; later he was discharged with a warning to keep the peace (Henderson 276). He failed to do so; three years later he was summoned to court

for assaulting two Shoreditch constables, although there is no knowledge on whether or not he answered these charges (Henderson 276). Later Marlowe was

suspected of being involved in the siege of Roven where troops were sent to contain some Protestants who were causing unrest in spite of the Catholic League. Then, after sharing a room with a fellow writer Thomas Kyd, he was accused by Kyd for having heretical papers which “ denied the deity of Jesus Christ” (Discovering Christopher Marlowe 2). Finally, a certain Richard Baines accused him of being an atheist. Before he could answer any of these charges, however, he was violently stabbed above his right eye while in a fight

Ingram Frizer (Discovering Christopher Marlowe 2). Doctor Faustus could be considered one of Marlowe's masterpieces of drama. It was his turn from politics, which he established himself in with his plays Edward II and

Tamburlaine the Great, to principalities and power. In it he asks the reader to analyze what the limits are for human power and knowledge and ponder what would

happen if one man tried to exceed those limits. The play opens up with Faustus,

who is supposedly the most learned man in the world, talking about how he has

mastered every field of knowledge known to man. He is bored with theology, finding that man is doomed no matter what happens, and he has become a master

physician, curing a whole village of a plague. He feels that there is nothing left for him to learn, as is frustrated by this; therefore, he decides to delve into the realm of necromancy and magic. He calls upon two other magicians,

Valdes and Cornelius, to teach him how to conjure. He learns to do so, and upon

his first private experiment into the black art, Mephistophilis appears to him in the form of an ugly devil. This repulses Faustus, so he tells this devil to

go away and return as a friar. The devil does so, but then explains that it was not his conjuring that brought forth this devil, but the fact that he conjured

and, therefore, cursed the trinity that made him appear. Faustus realizes the amount of power that he can gain from being a necromancer, so he tells Mephistophilis to return to hell and tell Satan that he will sell his soul to him for twenty-four years of absolute power. Satan agrees to this, telling Faustus to sign the bargain in blood. Faustus does so even after a Good Angel appears to him trying to convince him not to do so and several omens appear which warn him not to make the bond. For the next twenty-four years Faustus, with Mephistophilis as his servant, has absolute power. However, in spite of this, he spends his time going to several different important places to display his power in the form of petty tricks. In Rome, Faustus turns himself invisible and, along with Mephistophilis, pokes fun at the Pope and some friars. He also goes to the German court where he shows off his power to Emperor Carolus by conjuring the ghost of Alexander the Great. When one knight is sarcastic with Faustus' tricks, he places a set of horns on his head. Later on, Faustus sells

his horse to a horse-courser on the condition that he not take the horse into water. Soon thereafter, the horse-courser returns, furious that his horse turned

into a bundle of hay in the middle of the lake. Finally, later on in the play,

Faustus conjures up Helen of Troy for some fellow scholars for their viewing pleasure. As the play draws to its climax, Faustus begins to realize what he has

done and that death, which he once thought didn't exist, is indeed his ultimate

destiny. Several times he is given the hint that he should repent to God. For example, an old man enters towards the end of the play and informs Faustus that

it isn't too late to repent because he himself was once a sinner but repented.

Faustus still doesn't listen. Finally, as the clock strikes twelve upon his hour of destiny, many ugly devils appear and drag him off as he finally screams for

mercy. After finishing reading or seeing this play, one can argue that Faustus was a Renaissance hero. In fact, some argue that this play epitomizes the ideals

of the Renaissance: egocentrism and the over-indulgence of knowledge. “

The

lust for power that led to the excess of the Renaissance-the slaughter of Montezuma and countless American Indians, the launching of the Armada, the very

creation of the English Church out of Henry's spleen-is epitomized in Dr.

Faustus” (Shipley 404). Because Faustus gave his life and soul to Satan

himself for the sake of gaining a greater knowledge is proof that he is a

Renaissance hero. He rebels against the limitations set forth by medieval ideals

and makes a contract for knowledge and power. In essence, Faustus, like every

other Renaissance man, tries to prove that man can rise above the current set of

limitations. Faustus does go to extremes by chancing damnation in order to gain

his knowledge; however, he is considered tragic and God himself is seen as the

bad guy because He set forth limitations on knowledge and makes man suffer

eternal damnation when trying to exceed those limitations. The comedy then comes

out when one thinks that man was created by God and, therefore, given his thirst

for knowledge by God. When he tries to gain knowledge, then, he is damned

forever. This divine comedy is one of the ironies that one can perceive in

Marlowe's play. However, this Renaissance view of Marlowe being a martyr much

less realistic when considering Faustus to be a medieval tragic hero. In fact,

for the very reasons that one can argue that Faustus is martyr, one can give strong evidence that he fell from grace and became a tragic hero. First of all,

the Faustus claims that he is a master in all fields of study. In medicine, his

" prescriptions are hung up like monuments / Whereby whole cities have escaped the plague" (1. 1. 20-21). He is bored with the study of law for

" this study fits a mercenary drudge / Who aims at nothing but external trash, / Too servile and illiberal to me" (1. 1. 34-36). With theology,

Faustus claims that he is dumbfounded by the loose translation of the quote from

Romans 6: 23, " For the wages of sin is death." This final area is where

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the irony is greatly seen in the play. Throughout the play, Faustus is given the

option to repent for these sins and turn back towards God. When the Good Angel

and the Bad Angel appear to him throughout the play, both sides try to persuade

Faustus that they are right. The Bad Angel tells Faustus about how he should

delve into necromancy, for this art is " wherein all nature's treasury is

contained" (1. 1. 75). The Good Angel, on the other hand, warns that by

dealing with magic, he would ask for " God's heavy wrath upon thy head"

(1. 1. 72). At first, Faustus is so eager to gain this knowledge from Satan that

he ignores the Good Angel. Later, when the Good Angel appears again and pleads

for him to think on heavenly things, but again Faustus, either because he

doesn't want to or is afraid to, ignores this angel. The irony comes from

Faustus' view on the statement from the Book of Romans mentioned above.

Faustus

only recalls the first half of the verse; the entire verse states, " For the

wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ

our Lord.” His oversight of this pivotal verse, which in itself is the center for Christianity, is the ultimate irony in his downfall. He refu

Secondly, Faustus originally asks Mephistophilis and Satan for the power to do

anything, “ be it to make the moon drop from her sphere / Or the ocean to overwhelm the world” (1. 3. 38-39). He is even promised this power for twenty-four years if he sells his soul to Satan. However, when he is given his extraordinary power, he resorts to using it for petty tricks and tomfoolery.

Originally, Faustus gained this power in order to learn more about the essential

nature of the universe. However, when he travels to Rome, he doesn't try to use

his power in this way; he becomes invisible, boxes the pope in the ear and snatches cups away from the pope's hands. He then causes fireworks to explode at

the feet of the cardinals and the pope. Finally, he returns with Mephistophilis, both dressed as cardinals, and poses as two fathers returning from a mission.

All of this is pure slapstick comedy to the audience; it is also comedy against

Faustus. He is given great powers, and resorts to using them for petty tricks.

He does the same thing later on, while at the German Court and Emperor Carolus

the Fifth, where he makes the ghost of Alexander the Great appear and where he

also makes the horns appear atop the head of the knight, Benvolio. He then shows

how his one-time thirst for the secrets of the universe become overshadowed by

his simple lustful fantasies when he conjures up Helen of Troy and then, once he

is faced by the old man and his warnings, exits with this legendary beauty.

Not

only is he blinded so much by his power that he resorts to simple tricks, but he

is reduced to the indulgence of his simple pleasures. Through these displays of

his necromantic powers Faustus shows the true tragedy of his character.

Finally,

and probably his most tragic flaw, is the fact that he tries to gain a knowledge

that is completely forbidden to him. Although the Renaissance view says that from the search of such forbidden power one become mighty and truly great, the medieval view says that there are certain limits for man and he should never try to break those limits. In nature, each and every thing obeys a certain order that God Himself set. First there is God, then the angels, then man, then animals, and finally inanimate objects. If man tries to sink lower into the realm of the animal, which implies trying to succumb to man's animalistic lusts and tendencies, one is seen as succumbing to the "id" personality, as called by Sigmund Freud. Then, on the other end of the spectrum, one can try to become more become superhuman, attempting to break the limits of man. Lucifer was once of the most beautiful angels until he was guilty of "aspiring pride and insolence / For which God threw him from the face of heaven" (1. 3. 68-69). Faustus thinks that he can become like God by gaining these great

powers; little does he know that he is damning himself to eternal torment.

Even

when his final seconds are approaching, he tries to break the limitation that,

since time began, man has tried to circumvent: time itself. Although he was

given all of the power of the universe, he was ironically not given the power

to

halt time, and as he is about to meet his destiny, more time is all he can ask

for so that he can repent for his sins: Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of

heaven, That time may cease and midnight never come; Fair Nature's eye,

rise,

rise again, and make Perpetual day; or let this hour be but A year, a month,

a

week, a natural day, That Faustus may repent and save his soul! O lente

lente

currite noctis equi (5. 3. 133-139). This last line, meaning " Slowly, slowly

run, O horses of the night," sums up Faustus' desperation and tragic nature

very thoroughly. Once he didn't believe in death or in hell; sadly, now he

realizes that those two things are the only reality he will have from then on.

Over time, this play has received many critiques. In fact, there is question on

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whether or not Marlowe actually wrote this play in its entirety. One critic says that “ this drama should be regarded as a skeletal structure of the play written by Marlowe, for the surviving manuscripts are so interspersed with comic scenes and the lines themselves are so often revised according to whims of the actors that the original writing must be culled out of the surviving version” (“ Dr. Faustus” 261). This same author, when thinking along the same lines as the above quote, says, “ the exploits of Faustus are frequently rendered pure low comedy” (“ Dr. Faustus” 261). From this he concluded that these parts weren't written at all by Marlowe. Although this may be true, as the stylistic differences between the comical and the serious scenes is very broad, drawing this conclusion from the fact that the slapstick comedy that Faustus and Mephistophilis exhibit together is of a much different tone from the rest of the play is preposterous. In my opinion, Marlowe

included these scenes and these obvious examples of comedy to show the true

tragedy of Faustus. He begins the play as a great man who is a master in every

field of knowledge known to man. The best way to represent his truly dramatic

turn-around is to show Faustus becoming involved in petty tricks and antics to

show of his incredible power. This true tragedy is, I believe, a step that

Marlowe consciously took in order to show the dramatic change in the character

of Faustus. I am not saying that someone else besides Marlowe couldn't have

written these scenes. However, when looking at the debate from this point of

view, it is very possible that Marlowe did write them intentionally to show the

dramatic change in Doctor Faustus. Faustus was indeed a tragic hero. Many

scholars and literary experts may debate that, because this play was written

in

the Renaissance, Christopher Marlowe intended that Doctor Faustus be seen

as a

martyr trying to attain that which was forbidden to man in a time when doing so

was the noble thing to do. This is not true, however. Doctor Faustus was a tragic hero through and through, and the way that he presents himself in the play is solid evidence for this. To begin with, he feels that he can justify his turning to witchcraft and necromancy by his gaining of all other knowledges. The

irony here is that he never did, or he would have realized that even after he had committed blasphemy by conjuring spirits, he could have turned back to God.

He also is a tragic hero because of his methods of using his new power. Instead

of using it to attain the secrets of the universe, he plays petty tricks and tomfoolery on various important people around the world, including the pope and

the German emperor. Finally, he proved his tragic nature by trying to move above

and beyond the limitations set by God himself. Faustus knew that he had to abide

by certain laws and rules that God set aside for all of mankind. Faustus knew
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his limitations, and thus by trying to break those, he damned himself to eternal

torment. Ironically, Faustus could have been the most incredible human being who

ever lived. If he had repented, the world would have seen that God is truly

merciful because he forgave such a blasphemous heathen as Faustus.

Faustus could

have become an example for all of mankind and proven that if he could be

forgiven, then all could be forgiven. However, because he was stubborn,

ignorant, and blind, he refused to see that he was never truly damned until he

was drug by the devils into the heart of hell itself.

Poetry