

Heaven and hell as polarized ideas in dr. faustus



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In Doctor Faustus, good and evil are presented as two polarized ideas: God and Heaven on one side, and Lucifer and Hell on the other. Contrasting representations of this division also appear, such as the old man and the Good Angel opposed to Mephistopheles and the Bad Angel. Initially, this struggle between good and evil is Faustus' major internal conflict as he is deciding whether to make the blood bond. However, by the time Faustus views the seven deadly sins, evil persists as the dominant force and is the path that Faustus follows to his final damnation.

The struggle between good and evil begins with Faustus' divided conscience. The Good and Bad Angels represent the conflict between his devotion to knowledge and his longing for power. They most blatantly exemplify the traits of good versus evil when the Good Angel tells Faustus to "think of heaven and heavenly things" (2. 1. 20) while the Bad Angel tells Faustus to "think of honor and wealth" (2. 1. 21). However, at the end of the play, the Good Angel and the Bad Angel no longer appear. This absence represents Faustus' commitment towards evil, symbolized through the blood bond. No longer does he reminisce about turning to God, nor does he lament the path he has chosen until the end. Rather, he resorts to a wasteful use of his powers through playing pranks and satisfying royalty, such as his tricks on the Pope and the conjuring of Alexander the Great.

The most important part of the good versus evil conflict occurs at Faustus' turning point from good to evil. The dilemma between which paths to follow has settled towards evil by the time the seven deadly sins are paraded in front of him. Before this event, Faustus has good intentions. For example, he promises that he will "fill the public schools with silk, wherewith the

students shall be bravely clad” (1. 1. 90-91). He is persistent in his search for knowledge even though he is naive about the eternal torment that awaits him in hell. Faustus is even repulsed enough by the physical manifestation of evil that he asks Mephistopheles to change his appearance. He commands the devil to, “ Go, and return an old Franciscan friar; That holy shape becomes a devil best” (1. 3. 25-6). Faustus cannot bear to see the reality of hell; rather, he misinterprets it to be less evil than it actually is and even nonexistent at times. This blissful innocence can be seen in his succinct reply that hell is a myth immediately after Mephistopheles’ terrifying description of hell.

However, after making a blood bond with Mephistopheles, Faustus delights in the seven deadly sins, even when seeing them firsthand. He describes his anticipation to Lucifer: “ That sight will be as pleasant to me as Paradise was to Adam the first day of his creation” (2. 3. 103-4). In comparison to his disgusted reaction towards Mephistopheles’ devil figure, his acceptance of evil has become evident here and will later free him from his initial claims of benevolent aspirations, demonstrated with his later pranks and frivolous feats.

Three main factors contribute to this change of nature from good to evil after the presentation of the sins. One of these is that the forbidden, ultimate knowledge which he so desires at the beginning of the play is revealed to him as being elementary and redundant. In reply to Mephistopheles’ answers on astronomy, Faustus says, “ Tush, these slender trifles Wagner can decide. Hath Mephistopheles no greater skill? ... Tush, these are freshmen’s suppositions” (2. 3. 49-50, 55). The strongest blow may occur when he is

denied the knowledge of the world's origin. At this point, Faustus cries out in distress for his soul to be saved but is denied salvation. As a result, he realizes that his contract with the devil is irreversible.

This awareness of damnation becomes the second main contributor towards his acceptance of evil. In the middle of Faustus' plea to Christ, Lucifer appears and destroys any hope for repentance by stating that "Christ cannot save thy soul for he is just. There's none but I have interest in the same" (2. 3. 81-82). After this crucial moment, Faustus believes that no matter how hard he tries to repent, he has already sinned once and is thus permanently damned to eternal hell. Believing he cannot be saved, he tries to drown his pending damnation through pranks. For example, after having fooled the horse dealer, he laments that he is simply a man destined to die soon. His only consolation is in "confound[ing] these passions with a quiet sleep" (4. 1. 135). All of the practical jokes and feats that he performs serve merely as distractions to purge his mind from thoughts of repenting, as he knows he has chosen the path of evil.

One event that clearly shows his conformance with evil is his insistence for Helen near the end of the play. Remarkably, he openly acknowledges that he is guilty of one of the deadly sins, the only time that he does so. By demanding Mephistopheles to "let [him] crave of thee, to glut the longing of [his] heart's desire" (5. 1. 80), he is clearly aware of the path he is taking, yet proceeds to commit the evil deed. Irrelevant now is whether he can be saved as he has willingly submitted to evil. Faustus tells Helen to "make [him] immortal with a kiss" (5. 1. 92) and exclaims how "her lips suck forth [his] soul" (5. 1. 93). The immortality that he is asking for is rather the

eternal torment of hell, and it is possible that he sees how evil his soul has become. Furthermore, his first thought after his evil act is to ask Helen to give him his “soul” again. Thus, this realization of his irreversible damnation liberates him from any responsibilities to do good and encourages him to commit sin repeatedly.

The third influence that plays a part in Faustus’ turning towards evil is from the overwhelming presence of evil compared to good. Oddly enough, God does not appear throughout the play, while Lucifer and Mephistopheles consistently arrive at critical moments of Faustus’ doubts. The presence of the devils is important as it prevents Faustus, who initially regrets his decision, from renouncing their contract. For example, as Faustus contemplates repentance, Mephistopheles appears and threatens to tear Faustus to pieces. There is no reply from God nor is there any other counter to this evil. The closest influence we have to rival the powerful impact of evil is that of the Good Angel and the Old Man. Both are helpless at affecting Faustus’ conscience. The Good Angel asks Faustus to repent, to which he responds by immediately “cast[ing] no more doubts” (2. 1. 26) in favor of signing the contract. The Old Man is condemned to torment “with [the] greatest torments that our hell affords” (5. 1. 77). Thus, calls for evil drastically outweigh any appeals for good, primarily because God does not exert any direct influence.

Faustus is torn between good and evil as he decides to exchange eternal life for power. This conflict quickly changes after he makes the blood bond and mocks the seven deadly sins. Even when given the choice for good, Faustus continually accepts evil as he is convinced of his immutable damnation.

Perhaps it is not really a conflict of choice for Faustus, but rather an inevitable demise towards evil.