

Doctor faustus essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



' Dr. Faustus' is a play which deals with the two greatest powers prevailing in the mind of humanity, those of good and evil. It presents the audience with an account of the natural human tendency for transgression and warns against individualism with the message that every human has to serve somebody, be it God or the Devil. It is tragic because it presents a human figure greatly respected by others and how his potential to live in eternal bliss in the realm of heaven is lost by his own pride and insolence, similar to the story of Lucifer's fall from heaven into Hell.

The character of Dr. Faustus is essentially tragic because he fails to see the obvious flaw in his pact with the devil. However, when Faustus is persuading himself into thinking that the advantages of his rewards outweigh giving his soul to the Devil, he reads a verse from the Bible in scene one: ' Si peccasse negamus, fallimur, et nulla est in nobis veritas'¹ (i. 41), it's not until later on in the play that we find out that it may have been Mephistophilis who prevented him from reading the full verse about repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

This intervention of Mephistophilis lessens Faustus as a tragic figure because it takes away the element of choice even though essentially it was Faustus who summoned him from Hell in the first place. Dr. Faustus questions the acquisition of power by pushing what is acceptable, i. e. the dominant rules of the Church, he gains a false sense of power in defying God and selling his soul to the devil; Faustus vows never to look to heaven, Never to name God, or to pray to him, To burn his scriptures, slay his ministers,

And make my spirits pull his churches down² (v. 269-72). Faustus gains this sense of power when he puts forward the pact of twenty four years of what ever he wishes; Say, he surrenders up to him his soul, So he will spare him four and twenty years, Letting him live in all voluptuousness, Having thee ever to attend on me, To give me whatsoever I shall ask, To tell me whatsoever I demand, To slay mine enemies, and aid my friends, And always be obedient to my will. " 3 (iii. 91-8)

The play shows how his scholarly status, broad-based knowledge and education have given him access to higher powers but have also cut him off from general society and made a solitary figure out of him; he seems to have no master until he signs the contract with Lucifer. I think that Marlowe has included this isolated, solitary character of the scholar because he himself as a playwright in his time would also have had a very marginal place in his society. Mephistophilis captivates Faustus and distracts him from the truth that the power he has is only temporary and his soul is sold to the devil.

He takes what he is not meant to have. The consequence being that he must suffer in hell. This effect created in the moral outcome of the play is similar to the type of message in morality plays such as ' Everyman'. It shows man as being flawed and the Power of God as almighty. When Faustus discovers what the extent of his power will be he speaks grandly of how he will use his power for great accomplishments; he says ' I'll be great emperor of the world, And make a bridge through the moving air, To pass the ocean with a thousand men' 4 (iii. 05-7), however when granted the power he uses it to gain fame among royalties and uses his powers for his own personal

pleasure and status as told by the chorus: ‘ Now is his fame spread forth in every land’. 5 (viii. 12)

The middle section of the play is taken up with uses of his power which are hardly grand such as scene ten where he sells a horse to a horse-courser for forty dollars and tells him to ‘ ride him not into the water. Ride him over hedge or ditch, or where thou wilt, but not into the water’ 6 (x. 4-6). He uses repetition here to stress the importance of the warning, however the horse-courser ‘ like a vent’rous youth’ 7 (x. 36) rides the horse into the water and finds the horse has vanished. This scene seems to have no real deeply moral message, apart from the obvious warning of succumbing to curiosity of danger or transgression. This seems ironic to me as the story is all about the succumbing of Faustus to the temptation of twenty-four years of voluptuousness in return for his soul.

The vanishing horse is like the vanishing of Faustus’ soul and fantasies of powers when he is taken into Hell and left with nothing, it also echoes the possibly psychological and physical trickery of Mephistophilis when he persuades Faustus to sign the deal knowing he does not realize the full extent of what he is signing. The scene does serve some comical purpose and is similar to scene seven when he uses his power to wreck havoc on the pope and all his friars. Due to the distinctively divided nature of the play many have described ‘ Dr. Faustus’ as puzzling in structure and have often criticized the middle section.

It is not known how much of the middle section is Marlowe’s own work and how much was written by another hand. W. W. Greg writes in his essay ‘ The

Damnation of Faustus': ' I do not believe that as originally written it differed to any material extent from what we are able to reconstruct from a comparison of the two versions in which it comes down to us. ' 8 However constructed, these scenes show his use of power to be reckless, pointless and like an excitable child with a new toy; although Faustus is portrayed to be a wise, witty and intelligent scholar, he does not have the responsibility to handle such power.

This human quality of great ambition and greed for power and wealth is his hamartia or fatal flaw, before he makes the pact it is evident that he knows that he is only human; ' Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man' 9 (i. 23) and he also realizes that he must sin; If we say that we have no sin, We deceive ourselves, And there's no truth in us. Why then belike we must sin, And so consequently die. Ay, we must die an everlasting death 10 (i. 42-6). It seems to me that he overlooks the fact that instead of dying and going to heaven he will have to live forever in hell.

This tragic belief that he might be able to overcome his damnation and gain anything but evil by bargaining with the devil who is the personification of evil shows that Faustus cannot be completely wise and that ambition makes a fool out of him. However foolish and flawed Faustus is he has wit and intellect similar to Shakespeare's antihero Richard the third which helps him to engage well with the audience, this helps the character to seem more human and allows the audience to relate to certain qualities in him.

Marlowe also seems to make the scenes of transgression appealing to the audience and they are filled with indulgence and aimed to impress. The

audience can relate to the temptations Faustus embraces and can feel the flaw of having those human feelings inside themselves. This makes the issues raised in ' Dr. Faustus' more personal to the audience and creates a more interrogative atmosphere in the play; it creates a relationship between the audience and the character. I think the message laced into the story here is that power corrupts humans however morally stable or seemingly righteous they are to begin with.

The effect of this assertion of Faustus' human flaw seems to be not only an argument against blasphemy, greed, pride and insolence but a subtle attack on renaissance humanism. Shakespeare's ' Hamlet' seems to share a similar and extremely humanistic view What a piece of work is man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god. The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. 11 (II. ii. 288-91). This view would have been seen as outrageous in Shakespeare's time.

Marlowe is asserting that God is the only one worthy of those kinds of powers. Faustus relates to the ideas raised in the play about heaven and hell on a basic literal level whereas the unhappy and world-wearied spirit Mephistophilis tries to explain that " the drama of salvation and damnation is not played out in the theatre of dancing devils and the material fires of hell, but in the mind of man" 12and it comes from being trapped in the self. When Faustus asks " How comes it then that thou are out of hell? " 13 (iii. 76) Mephistophilis explains: Why this is hell, nor am I out of it:

Think'st thou that I, that saw the face of God, And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, Am not tormented with ten thousand hells, In being deprived of everlasting bliss? 14 (iii. 78-82) Power corrupts and I think that the way Faustus uses his powers for his own gain, and falls tragically because of it shows this notion clearly. This message has been used time and time again when man tries to step up and challenges the supremacy of God and I found one instance particularly striking in the lyrics of the contemporary songwriter, Bob Dylan: Well, God is in his heaven

And we all want what's his But power and greed and corruptible seed Seem to be all that there is" 15 This warning of corruption from power and the idea of challenging God or nature is still relevant today, maybe more than ever, with the rise of unstoppable political leaders with seemingly god-like powers and constitutions rapidly replacing religion. These kinds of warnings and insights into human nature, regarding particularly the use and abuse of power, are timeless and will stand as valuable lessons for anyone willing to listen. After all, we all have our good angel and our bad angel.