

Dr faustus as a tragedy essay sample



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Aristotle defines a tragedy as a 'representation of an action which is important, complete and limited in length. It is enacted not recited and by arousing pity and fear, it gives an outlet to emotions of this type.' However, for the Elizabethans, more specifically for Marlowe and Shakespeare, tragedy is not a restrictive view of human excellence or weakness as the Greeks are often inclined to present but an affirmative view of human aspirations whose pursuit brings a glory to the definition of a man. Struggle, conflict, suffering and failure may be the inescapable attendants but the human spirit is not stifled in its pursuits by what attends to them. The ability to withstand them is the tragic glory of man. Marlowe's tragedy, therefore, is in fact the tragedy of one man - the rise, fall and death of the tragic hero. His heroes are titanic characters afire with some indomitable passion or inordinate ambition discarding all moral codes and ethical principles and plunging headlong to achieve their end. Such intense passion and pitiless struggle with super-human energy to achieve earthly gain and glory make Marlowe's heroes great indeed and adds to the shining glory and grandeur to their personalities.

Doctor Faustus' Tragic Flaw

Doctor Faustus has elements of both Christian morality and classical tragedy. On the one hand, it takes place in an explicitly Christian cosmos: God sits on high, as the judge of the world, and every soul goes either to hell or to heaven. There are devils and angels, with the devils tempting people into sin and the angels urging them to remain true to God. Faustus's story is a tragedy in Christian terms, because he gives in to temptation and is damned to hell. Faustus's principal sin, tragic flaw according to Aristotle, is his great

pride and ambition, which can be contrasted with the Christian virtue of humility; by letting these traits rule his life, Faustus allows his soul to be claimed by Lucifer, Christian cosmology's prince of devils. And hence - ' A greater subject fitteth Faustus's wit.' Faustus' soul is afire with intemperate ambition and with a craze for super human powers and supreme sensual pleasure of life. Divinity adieu:

These metaphysics of magicians, And necromantic books are heavenly:

The Strength of the Tragedy

The play is a human tragedy for not only is Faustus tragically constituted in his boundless ambitions but, at the same time, the play questions the effectiveness of the cultural aspirations that shape his ambitions.

Consequently, the play provides a complex interaction between the human dimensions of the dramatic character and the ambiguities and ambivalences of the cultural situation the character is placed in. Yet while the play seems to offer a very basic Christian message—that one should avoid temptation and sin, and repent if one cannot avoid temptation and sin—its conclusion can be interpreted as straying from orthodox Christianity in order to conform to the structure of tragedy.

In a traditional tragic play, as pioneered by the Greeks and imitated by William Shakespeare, a hero is brought low by an error or series of errors and realizes his or her mistake only when it is too late. In Christianity, though, as long as a person is alive, there is always the possibility of repentance—so if a tragic hero realizes his or her mistake, he or she may still be saved even at the last moment. But though Faustus, in the final,

wrenching scene, comes to his senses and begs for a chance to repent, it is too late, and he is carried off to hell. Marlowe rejects the Christian idea that it is never too late to repent in order to increase the dramatic power of his finale, in which Faustus is conscious of his damnation and yet, tragically, can do nothing about it.

Faustus' Tragedy

Act I establishes Faustus' tragedy. The egocentric self-temptation of Act I gives way to an agonising conflict between the religiously constituted self and the aberrations of its human impulses of Act II: Now, Faustus, must

Thou needs be damn'd and canst thou not be sav'd.

Faustus' state of mind transcends his mental frame and is, possibly, rooted in his particular religious persuasion. As despair leads to the self-indulgent belief that divine providence as well as the divine wrath cannot reach him, Faustus signs the pact with the devil giving away his soul in return for his services.

As Faustus reaches his rebellious or tragic death in Act V, the nature of his death and the attendant torment bespeaks a magnificent tragedy

But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned:

The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved,

But not Faustus

The tragic conflict does not abate till the end. Faustus seeks an alternate heaven through the devilish Helen:

Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.

Thus the main cause of the tragedy of Doctor Faustus is ' aspiring pride and insolence' for which the Lucifer of Milton also fell. His inordinate ambition and proud presumption leads him to commit the sin of practising more than heaven permits. And that is why Faustus abjures God and the Devil leading to his eternal damnation.