

# Ambition and emotions



Dr. Faustus stands at the onset of the Renaissance period and the dawn of the middle ages as he contemplates the religious drama of his time. Indeed, during those medieval times, the understanding of heaven and hell was not far removed from the conceptual understanding of the occult. The play is lined with supernatural beings, angels and demons, which might have stepped onstage to clarify a major ambition in the medieval ages, the fervent pursuit of salvation. Indeed, this type of ambition is contrasted very well in the play Dr. Faustus, by the onset of the Renaissance period and the ambitions it provides.

A quick overview of the Renaissance period shows that it was also the Age of Discovery; word has just reached Europe of the existence of exotic places in the 'New World'. This Age of Discovery is responsible for the change in focus of ambitions from the 'otherworldly' of the medieval ages, to the more familiar 'worldly' ambitions of our times. We see Faustus, although moving to embrace worldly ambitions beset by mullings of the other world. For example he asks the demon Mephistopheles, FIRST WILL I QUESTION WITH THEE ABOUT HELL. TELL ME, WHERE IS THE PLACE THAT MEN CALL HELL (5.

120-135) And later, after being given an explanation, he says, COME, I THINK HELL'S A FABLE. (5. 120-135) In fact these arguments seem to capture well the transition between the middle Ages and the Renaissance period since no neat dividing line exists. As Dr. Faustus encourages his ambition to focus on the opportunities presented by this so-called Age of discovery. His single-minded concern is with luxurious silk gowns and powerful war-machines than with saving his soul. This contrast between wealth and salvation must be understood from the standpoint that Dr.

Faustus intends to acquire such wealth through an ambitious career in necromancy. Indeed, black magic seems to him as the only career that can match the scope of his ambition, the subject that can challenge his enormous intellect. Being a scholar, he has mastered the major professions of his time. Specifically he claims to have mastered Law, medicine and theology, and he finds them all dissatisfying. Dr. Faustus finds that his huge ambitions have seemingly met their match as he ponders to dig deeper into necromancy. Faustus is full of ideas for how to use the power that he seeks.

He imagines piling up great wealth, but he also aspires to plumb the mysteries of the universe and to remake the map of Europe. Though they may not be entirely admirable, these plans are ambitious and inspire awe, if not sympathy. They lend a grandeur to Faustus's schemes and make his quest for personal power seem almost heroic, a sense that is reinforced by the eloquence of his early soliloquies. Ironically, Faustus's ambition seems to sap as he realizes the initial goal of his ambitions, to master the dark powers of black magic.

This is depicted from the way he speedily narrows his horizons once he actually gains the practically limitless power that he so desires. Now that he realizes that everything is possible to him, he trashes the grand designs that he had contemplated early on, contending himself with performing conjuring tricks for kings and noblemen and taking a strange delight in using his magic to play practical jokes on simple folks. Strange as it may seem, the realization of Faustus's ambition makes him mediocre rather than elevating him to higher levels of grandeur.

The question begs; does power corrupt Faustus or is it through power that Faustus becomes mediocre? This is because Faustus's behavior after he sells his soul hardly rises to the level of true wickedness. Rather, gaining absolute power corrupts Faustus by making him mediocre and by transforming his boundless ambition into a meaningless delight in petty celebrity. Indeed this is a paradox since at the beginning of the play; Dr. Faustus seeks to gain more greatness from the realization of an insatiable taste to rise above manly standards of achievement.

Yet, as he gains the goal, he seems to sink lower than the basest man. Could we say that he should have been content with quelling his ambitious flames, as the medieval times' logic seemed to encourage? Saying so will mean he learns to live with his dissatisfying and unfulfilled life, which only opens the door to more emptiness in life. Extrapolating from the fore going leads us to believe that such an ambitionless lifestyle will lead him to the very state that he is now at the end of fulfilling his quest, only he would have reached there quicker than after twenty four or so years.

This state is of course, the state of being mediocre. From the fore going, it appears to me that it will be misguided to believe that Faustus is a villain. I believethat it is fitting to view him as a tragic hero, a protagonist whose character flaws lead to his downfall. THESE METAPHYSICS OF MAGICIANS, AND NECROMANTIC BOOKS ARE HEAVENLY! (1. 40-50) This is because, even from the above quote, the logic he uses to reject religion is flawed, since it leads him to use his ambition in diabolical pursuits.

This plays out slowly because initially, in Faustus's long speech after the two angels have whispered in his ears, his rhetoric outlines the modern quest for

control over nature (albeit through magic rather than through science) in glowing, inspiring language. He offers a long list of impressive goals, including the acquisition of knowledge, wealth, and political power, which he believes he will achieve once he has mastered the dark arts. These are indeed impressive ambitions that inspire wonder, to say the least. However, the actual uses to which he puts his magical powers are disappointing and tawdry.

Furthermore, Faustus goes on to exhibit blindness quite unlike a man of knowledge. This blindness serves as one of his defining characteristics throughout the play, and is arguably inspired by his ambition. He chooses to see the world, as he wants to see it rather than as it is. This shunning of reality is symbolized by his insistence that Mephistopheles, who is presumably hideous, reappear as a Franciscan friar so that he may not be terrified by the devil's true shape [as depicted by Mephistopheles' appearance]. Faustus even ignores Mephistopheles' urgings to him to abandon his "frivolous demands" (3. 81).

It is important to note that this so-called blind ambition of Faustus had catastrophic results. The height of which led Faustus not to even realize that he had reached the limits of his quest for knowledge. In scene six, we see the limits of the demonic gifts that Faustus has been given begin to emerge. He is given the gift of knowledge, and Mephistopheles willingly tells him the secrets of astronomy, but when Faustus asks who created the world, Mephistopheles refuses to answer. Faustus does not realize that this is the first occasion that the demon has been unable to divulge to him the knowledge he so dearly aspires to gain.

I believe that if Faustus had not been blindly ambitious but kept his head as he did when he mastered the knowledge of Law, Theology and Medicine, then his ambition would have led him to the following realization: that all the worldly knowledge that he has so strongly desired points inexorably upward, toward God. As it is, of course, he is completely detached from God to the point of being an atheist. This detachment started awhile back when he misread the New Testament to say that anyone who sins will be damned eternally—ignoring the verses that offer the hope of repentance.

Even when he sees Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Mephistopheles appear to him and becomes suddenly afraid exclaiming, “ O Faustus, they are come to fetch thy soul! ” (5. 264), Faustus still decides against repenting. This behavior is attributed to the bad angel and Mephistopheles who makes him believe that it is already too late for him, a conviction that persists throughout the play. This fact is seen at the end of his days when he says, SWEET HELEN, MAKE ME IMMORTAL WITH A KISS: HER LIPS SUCKS FORTH MY SOUL, SEE WHERE IT FLIES! (12. 81-87) At this point, he has realized the terrible nature of the bargain he has made.

Despite his sense of foreboding, Faustus enjoys his powers, as the delight he takes in conjuring up Helen makes clear. Faustus continues to display the same blind spots and wishful thinking in that he seeks heavenly grace in Helen’s lips, which can, at best, offer only earthly pleasure. “ Make me immortal with a kiss,” he cries, even as he continues to keep his back turned to his only hope for escaping damnation namely, repentance. In conclusion, Scholar R. M. Dawkins famously remarked that Doctor Faustus tells “ the story of a Renaissance man who had to pay the medieval price for being one.

" While slightly simplistic, this quotation does get at the heart of one of the play's central themes: the clash between the medieval world and the world of the emerging Renaissance. To Faustus, his ambitions for power worked as a corrupting influence to him so that although early in the play, before he agrees to the pact with Lucifer, Faustus is full of ideas of how to use the power that he seeks, he later uses this limitless power to achieve rather vain exploits and finally earn himself eternal damnation References: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/doctorfaustus/themes.html>