

Knowledge over Wisdom — a tragic path to Damnation — Marlowe's Dr. Faustus

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Abstract

Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe is a Masterpiece. The auxiliary themes revolved in the story are the lessons of acquaintance, not only to the people of Elizabethan era but also to the present modern generation. It throws light on the seven deadly sins including Pride, lying, wickedness, mischief and Man's limitations and his mortal potentials. It also talks about the importance of valuing wisdom over knowledge and valuing acts like 'Mercy', 'Redemption' and 'Salvation' of human soul.

Key Words: *Boastfulness, Damnation, Flesh, Gluttony, Mercy, Pride, Redemption, Sin, Spirit, Salvation, Knowledge and Wisdom*

Introduction:

True wisdom is not rooted in great learning or in human intelligence, but in the understanding of our place before the one who created this universe i.e. 'God'. For wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can be compared with it. The famous proverb 'Knowledge without wisdom is a load of books on the back of an ass' aptly suits Doctor Faustus. Faustus's inexhaustible thirst for knowledge, his worship of beauty, his passion for the classics, his skepticism, his interest in sorcery and magic, his admiration of Machiavelli and super-human ambition and will in the pursuit of ideals of beauty or power, prove him to be a man of Renaissance. He contemplates the world of profit and delight, of power, of honor, of omnipotence which he will enjoy as a magician. In dwelling upon the advantages of his magic power, he shows his ardent curiosity, his desire for wealth and luxury, his nationalism, and his longing for power. These were precisely the qualities of the Renaissance. It is necessary to differentiate between 'Knowledge' and 'Wisdom' i.e. if 'Knowledge' is misused it can be a threat to humanity i.e. manufacturing of highly explosive nuclear weapons. The present research paper is about an immensely skilled 'Doctor' who misused his powers and knowledge and lead his own path to damnation.

Summary:

Doctor Faustus, Christopher Marlowe supplies a nearly diagrammatic study of damnation—of the decline and fall of a human soul—growing out of excessive pride and overreaching ambition. The well-schooled Faustus, with his unbridled curiosity, skepticism, and knowledge, stands as the epitome of the Renaissance "new man." On his graduation from the German university at Wittenberg, Faustus casts about for a suitable profession. He rejects, in turn, philosophy, medicine, law, and theology, finding that all these fields fall short of what amounts to his supra-human desires. For example, medicine ("physic") promises the possibility of temporary healing but not of bestowing

everlasting life or of raising the dead. Accordingly, Faustus at last lights upon necromancy—magic and the black arts—as providing the sole means whereby he can achieve “omnipotence” and become a “mighty god.”

In the company of his like-minded friends Valdes and Cornelius, Faustus summons up the demon Mephistophilis and informs him that, in exchange for twenty-four years of earthly pleasure, wealth, and honor, he is ready to abandon his soul to Lucifer, the evil one himself. Immediately, Good Angel and Bad Angel appear to Faustus, the former urgently pleading for the scholar’s repentance, and the latter airily dismissing the efficacy of prayer. Willfully determined, Faustus stabs his arm and writes out his agreement with the devil in his own resisting blood.

Almost immediately, however, it becomes clear that there are limits to demonic power: For example, Faustus asks for a wife but in place of a wife, Mephistophilis promises Faustus a succession of prostitutes, an adjustment that the lascivious Faustus finds congenial. The demon then converses with Faustus about astronomy and cosmology. Throughout this long discourse, Faustus is tempted to repent from time to time; but Mephistophilis, Belzebub, and Lucifer are each time able to distract him with entertaining (if insubstantial) “shows”—for example, with a diverting parade of the personified Seven Deadly Sins—so that the enthralled scholar forgets any misgivings and hews to his bargain.

In a subsequent series of relatively brief and decidedly farcical vignettes—first at the Vatican at Rome, then at the imperial German court, and finally in the swindling of a lowly horse seller—Faustus, aided by the devils who accompany him, demonstrates the arguably paltry powers he has attained at the cost of his soul. In Rome, for example, he assumes invisibility in order to strike the pope about the head, set free the pontiff’s enemy Bruno, and befuddle a host of Ecclesiastes. At the royal court, he beguiles Emperor Charles by evoking the forms of such historical figures as Alexander the Great and Darius—all the while reminding the monarch that these apparently tangible manifestations are in fact “but shadows, not substantial.” Finally, he provides out-of-season grapes for the duchess of Inhaled and, in the role of court jester, amuses himself and the ducal assembly by cruelly hoodwinking some rustic yokels.

At last, however, as the end of Faustus’s life draws near, the mood of the play inevitably lurches from the farcical to the terrifying and demonic. Back in the magician’s study, a pious Old Man, representing God’s infinite mercy, warns Faustus of the eternal agonies of hell and entreats him, even at this late hour, to repent. Shaken, Faustus nonetheless gives way to the sin of despair and begs Mephistophilis to summon up the distracting image of Helen of Troy, a mythic figure metaphorically associated with fire—in this case, the fires of hell. Kissing Faustus, her “lips suck forth [his] soul.” By willfully embracing this demonic figure, Faustus permanently seals his fate, and even as he cries out pitifully for more time, the unholy group of Lucifer, Belzebub, and Mephistophilis lead the magician offstage to the unending torment that awaits his spirit. Two scholars later discover his earthly body, horribly torn and dismembered i.e. ‘Portraying his damnation in both the worlds’.

Marlowe’s Faustus can be critically analyzed as follows:

- 1) Supreme Pride
- 2) Knowledge over Wisdom
- 3) Belief in his own freedom
- 4) A sense of commitment
- 5) Vigorous protest
- refuses to accept fate
- 6) Valuing Flesh over spirit
- 7) Damnation

Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, arguable the one that leads to all the others. It is a lethal motivation because it makes the sinner forget his fallen state Faustus' first great sin is pride. He does not stop there. His pride gives rise to all of the other sins, and ends ironically with the proud man's abasement. Faustus goes quickly from pride to all of the other sins, becoming increasingly petty and low. Faustus has a thirst for knowledge, but he seems unable to acquire wisdom. Faustus' thirst for knowledge is impressive, but it is overshadowed by his complete inability to

understand wisdom. Because of this weakness, Faustus cannot use his knowledge to better himself or his world. He ends life with a head full of facts, and vital understanding gained too late to save him. Faustus is, with no exceptions, beautiful when he speaks and contemptible when he acts. His opening speeches about the uses to which he'll put his power are exhilarating, but once he gains near-omnipotence he squanders twenty-four years in debauchery and petty tricks. This gap between high talk and low action seems related to the fault of valuing knowledge over wisdom. While Faustus has learned much of the Greek world's learning, he has not really understood what he's been reading. He can talk about potential and plans in terms of a Greek worldview, but he lacks the internal strength to follow through on his purported goals.

Hell is eternal, but so is heaven. Even after signing away his soul to the devil, Faustus has the option of repentance that will save him from hell. But once he has committed himself to his own damnation, Faustus seems unable to change his course. Marlowe plays with that idea, possibly rejecting it for his own thematic purposes.

Flesh and spirit are divided to value the later and devalue the former. Faustus' problem is that he values his flesh, and the pleasure it can provide him, while failing to look after the state of his soul. If Faustus dies without repenting and accepting God, he will be damned forever. As we learn from Mephistophilis, hell is not merely a place, but separation from God's love.

It revolved entirely around Faustus' action of signing a contract with the play concludes with the end of Faustus' contract, the thoughts of the audience turn to their own fate at the time of resurrection, how the rest of humanity will fare, and also strike at the question of God and his involvement in their lives. Although he does not perfectly encompass the tragic fall and the unity of time and place, Christopher Marlowe applies the concept of the protagonist's fall in Faustus' surrender to the temptation of knowledge and power. Marlowe also keeps about his piece a unity of action, bringing in every element of the plot to deal with his theme in the digression of man through sin. *Dr. Faustus* holds a case to be considered a tragic play.

In the beginning he questions the existence of God, finds that his intentions to help the world are folly, and is both part of the system of nature, yet at his death learns he is rejected from the usual right of salvation. In addition to all of these things, Faustus strikes a chord with the seven characteristics that are to make the protagonist boastful. To mention a few, Faustus fully embodies the characteristic of pride. He seeks out both power and knowledge, initially coming to the conclusion that for him there is no hell and that he is in command of Lucifer, himself. This great pride sets the stage for his vigorous protest once he learns that his body and soul were damned from the moment his blood touched paper. Faustus fulfills the characteristics of both transfiguration and impact within the last scene of the play. Faustus cries out in agony, grasping for salvation as he is being dragged to hell. He has come to the realization that man cannot achieve immortality and the only way out is through God. The power of his final lines conveys the impact that is necessary of a tragic hero. His story resonates in the minds of the audience and gives all who witnessed his fall a better understanding of the condition of man.

Impact of Greed in the life of Faustus:

Definition of Greed: "Greed is a state of restlessness of the heart, and it consists mainly of craving for power and possessions. Possessions and power are sought for the fulfillment of desires. Man is only partially satisfied in his attempt to have the fulfillment of his desires, and this partial satisfaction fans and increases the flame of craving instead of extinguishing it. Thus greed always finds an endless field of conquest and leaves the man endlessly dissatisfied. The chief expressions of greed are related to the emotional part of man."

Greed (Latin, *avaritia*), also known as avarice, cupidity or covetousness, is, like lust and gluttony, a sin of desire. However, greed is applied to an artificial, rapacious desire and pursuit of material possessions. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "Greed is a sin against God, just as all mortal sins, in as much as man condemns things eternal for the sake of temporal things." In Marlowe's *Faustus*, the protagonist finally admits his 'Greed for worldly pleasure' i.e. for having concentrated too much on earthly thoughts. Hoarding of materials or objects, theft and robbery, especially by means of violence, trickery, or manipulation of authority are all actions that may be inspired by Greed. Such misdeeds can include simony, where one attempts to purchase or sell sacraments, including Holy Orders and, therefore, positions of authority in the hierarchy.

Faustus hold over knowledge was incredible but he lacked wisdom therefore he fell prey to the seven deadly sins. For instance, Faustus desires gold from the East Indies, pearls from the depth of the sea, pleasant fruit and princely delicacies from America. Faustus represents the new and aspiring spirit of the age of the Renaissance with limitless desires. The danger of Faustus doom is clearly seen in Faustus's last soliloquy in which Faustus offers to burn his books. .

Greed is the root cause of the *seven deadly sins* Faustus explicitly follows and practices them:

- luxuria / Lust
- gula / Gluttony
- avaritia / Greed
- acedia / Sloth
- ira / Wrath
- invidia / Envy
- superbia / Pride

Every human being is given a choice to choose the path of righteousness or the evil wicked path i.e. path of destruction. The present story of Doctor Faustus is an epic example of it, The life of Faustus follows many **major themes** which is eternally related to the Man of all ages.

- **Conflict between Good and Evil:**

One of the most important and prominent themes in Doctor Faustus is by far the conflict between good and evil in the world and the human soul. Marlowe's play set the precedent for religious works that were concerned with morals and suffering. In the play, Doctor Faustus is frequently accompanied by two angels, one good and one evil. Both spirits try to advise him on a course of action, with the evil one usually being more influential over his mind. These two angels embody the internal battle that is raging inside of Faustus. On one hand, he has an insatiable thirst for knowledge and supreme power; on the other hand, Faustus realizes that it is folly to relinquish heavenly pleasures for fleeting mortal happiness. Faustus choice to go with the desires takes him to utter destruction therefore evil gains the upper hand in the life of Faustus.

Innocent and often devout men are tortured at Faustus's delight and command. He partakes in many pleasures with devils and is even shown the seven deadly sins in person. Thus, Faustus is depicted as doomed from the very beginning. Although he has moments of contrition, he quickly shoves aside thoughts of God and turns to evil. Marlowe attempted to express to his audience that while prayer and repentance are the paths to heaven, sin and mortal pleasure are very hard temptations to pass over.

Lucifer's acquisition of Faustus's soul is especially delightful for him because Faustus was once a good and devout soul. Even during his last moments on earth, Faustus curses himself for willingly burning the scriptures and denouncing God. In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe shows the reader that everything in the mortal world is a double-edged sword. In his never-ending quest for knowledge, Faustus exemplifies how even scholarly life can have evil undertones when studies are used for unholy purposes. Doctor Faustus's miserable defeats against the forces of evil within and without enlighten the reader to beware a surfeit of anything.

- **Root cause for Damnation:**

Like many of Marlowe's heroes, Faustus was self-driven by greed and ambition. In this case, the Doctor tries to satiate his appetite for knowledge and power. These heroes forget their responsibilities to God and their fellow creatures. Instead, they attempt to hide their weak characters with a megalomaniacal insanity. While Faustus is amused by the seven deadly sins, he does not realize that he is guilty of every

single one, namely avarice and jealousy. In effect, Marlowe presents to the reader a good soul gone bad--a brilliant scholar who squanders his time with necromancy and is later courted by the devil himself. Although he is frequently surrounded by powerful heads of state, beautiful women and servile devils, Faustus is never truly happy. He tries to bury his unrest with luxury and debauchery, to no avail. What Faustus does not realize is that he craves happiness and salvation, not wealth and damnation. Instead, in a tragic cycle of greed and despair, Faustus sadly wallows in riches up to the time of his miserable death.

- **Salvation through Prayer:**

A third important motif in the play is that of salvation through prayer. While Doctor Faustus is an example of what happens to a wayward soul, the old man represents the devout righteous soul. The old man begs Faustus to repent, regardless of the tortures that the devils inflict on him for this. He clings to his faith to the very end and even Mephostophilis is wary of harming him because of his good soul. Thus, the old man serves as a foil to Faustus's misery and damnation.

- **Faustus- A Tragic Hero:**

A fourth theme in Doctor Faustus is that of the tragic hero. Despite his unholy soul, Faustus is often viewed by audiences with pity and compassion. A tragic hero is a character that the audience sympathizes with despite his/her actions that would indicate the contrary. Faustus is not the mere shell of a man in the play, existing only to represent the evil in the world. He is a veritable human being with a range of emotions and thoughts. He displays pride, joy, contrition and self-doubt quite frequently. At many times, Faustus alternately displays his cowardice and foolish strength against the devils. Thus, Faustus's one saving grace with the audience is his identifiable character. Although the Doctor himself does not care for humanity, many find themselves identifying with his all too human dreams of power, knowledge and lechery.

Unfortunately, Faustus's humanity was not enough in the play to make him repent and save him from the depths of hell.

- **Four lessons to learn:**

(i)*Doctor Faustus* reflects the Renaissance emphasis on the individual and the negative consequences of furthering one's own power and success.(ii)Faustus mistakenly believes that God will not forgive him for his transgressions when he makes his pacts with the devil.(iii)Marlowe opposes Faustus' desire for knowledge with his ignorance of God and morality.(iv)Faustus makes the choice to sell his soul to the devil and not to repent for his sins, and he suffers the consequences.

Many psychologists say that in any piece of writing, more can be learned of the writer than of the subject material. At the time of his writing, Christopher Marlowe was experiencing a shift in the way most people viewed their mortality, existence, and moral doctrine. Marlowe displays the complex nature of society's mixture of medieval and Renaissance world views. Throughout *Dr. Faustus*, the actions and beliefs of Faustus serve to model a hybrid of both of these world views, whether intended or not. With these interwoven social concepts comes the paradox of free will vs. predestination. Faustus believes that his own actions can propel him to a position in the order where he has power over death, Lucifer, and hell. When you view his fate, however, no matter what he does to avoid death and resurrection, Faustus is subject to God's authority. The paradox arises just there: Marlowe promotes the idea that God is the ultimate judge yet Faustus is made a victim by his own choice of living.

