

## **Damnation: The Downfall of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and his Intellectualism**

*Muhammad Saleh Habib<sup>1</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>University of Management and Technology – Lahore*

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### **Abstract**

*The current study aims at investigating the downfall of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and his intellectualism. For the said purpose, a play by Christopher Marlowe named "Dr. Faustus" was selected. The study textually and qualitatively analyzes the text The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. Faustus' character in Marlowe's play is an embodiment of his atheistic views. Faustus' free will leads to his damnation which then becomes a pinnacle reason for his downfall. Faustus' thirst for intellectual power beyond the limitations of his reason becomes his damning hamartia. In this way, Faustus mocks his own intellectualism in front of the world.*

**Keywords:** *Damnation, Intellectualism, Mockery, Psychoanalysis, Tragic Flaw*

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*Author's email: salehhabib.93@gmail.com*

### **Introduction**

The attractions of the Devil have always fascinated scholars, researchers, and intellectuals alike throughout history. This field is charged with some of the greatest conspiracies that the world has yet to figure out. The fascination also lies within understanding the need to attain devilish powers to bring some sort of immortal happiness to the individual who goes beyond the limits of religious boundaries.

Keeping in view Faustus' thirst for immortal power, this paper textually uncovers the questions: what made Faustus rise to this occasion, and what was he hoping to achieve? How was he influenced to take this step while being a sanely learned and scholarly man who might (as authors) believe had also studied Christian theology and the consequences of such decisions in detail? These questions have boggled the scholars and researchers who have studied Christopher Marlowe's play and

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contributed different interpretations regarding these questions.

Marlowe's self-religious views contribute an important role in figuring out the damnation that befell Faustus. Firstly, Marlowe belonged to an age where the Christian church had gained enough power to eradicate any hinges that might be deemed "unethical" and against the teachings of the church. Secondly, his play *Doctor Faustus* took his views on atheism in a different direction, as atheism reflects the absence of God as a major figure in the divine sentiments of the creation of the universe. His play relates to Satanism, which does profess the idea of God's existence. Marlowe although never disclosed his anti-religious views openly but his works paint such pictures.

Faustus is a man of great learning, who nonetheless possesses a brilliant mind but his faculty of reason becomes the victim of entrapment by the devil's attractions quite easily. One might look at Faustus and sympathize with his character that all that learning and ethical teachings have gone to waste because his Super-ego got dominated by his Id.

### **Literature Review and Analysis**

The nature of Faustus' sins is much more complex than they seem to appear in his character throughout the play. As many of the twentieth-

century interpretations are concerned with his life and actions, many take the side of the debate that there was no choice of free will as posed by Marlowe. The concept of free will is possibly the greatest matter of discussion in understanding the damnation of Faustus and generally, it is a vast field that has received an immense amount of critical evaluation over the years. Understanding this concept is difficult: Do we have an equipped free will? Or do we leave everything to fate, as fate has been predetermined for every individual? The answer to the question relies heavily on the concept of 'destiny'.

Fate is the start and end of the race while destinies are the checkpoints that we must cross through to reach the end. This whole belief is in controlling the actions of an individual and the decisions that shape the destinies and then reaching towards the desired fate. In Faustus' case, Miguel Lopez states the opposite:

According to popular belief, as well as to the uninterrupted teaching of the Church, he is not fully responsible for many of the 'objective' sins critics have thought him to commit in the course of the play. On the contrary, no sin is committed, when the above-mentioned rejection formally occurs, because by then he is no longer really

free to choose, since he is obsessed by the devil. (102)

Miguel mentions that Faustus' actions were pre-determined as he was under the control of the devil but as long as his destiny is concerned, he had plenty of opportunities to repent once he had received the devil's powers.

Faustus was only blinded by the attractions and the pleasures that he had yet seen during the course of his life and that he was currently enjoying his rise to power. In the play, the Good Angel warns Faustus of his damnable action, "Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable art" (2.1.15). To which he questions the integrity of the repentance put forth by God, "Contrition, prayer, repentance — what of them?" (2.1.16). Where the Good Angel affirms him that he will attain heaven if he repents, "O, they are means to bring thee unto heaven!" (2.1.17). And, "Sweet Faustus, think of heaven and heavenly things" (2.1.20). But Faustus easily gets swayed by the words of the Evil Angel who promises him power, "No, Faustus; think of honour and of wealth" (2.1.21). To this, Faustus reassures himself that as long as he has the devil beside him, no harm will come unto him as the devil will protect him and give him power that he desires:

Wealth!

Why, the signiory of Embden shall be mine.

When Mephistophiles shall stand by me,

What power can hurt me?  
Faustus, thou art safe:

Cast no more doubts. (2.1.22-26)

Faustus' actions pave the way for his death of total hope in his character as a tragic hero. The doctrinal and anthropological approaches in Faustus' moral consciousness and his death of hope bring forth the idea of two factors to determine the depth of his damnation. The "presumption" of what awaits ahead once his life reaches the end and the "desperation" of his repentance at the end after all the events have occurred. Faustus' moral blindness, his underlying tragic flaw along with his thirst for complete intellectual power are relateable to Oedipus' predicament in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The words of Teiresias for Oedipus "He will be blind, although he now can see" (Sophocles 550), can be a direct affirmation regarding many major tragic heroes (characters) of history. This means the characters see the true revelation of their personal desires and actions after all the tragic events have misfortunately occurred. The same is the case with Faustus who decides to reflect upon his actions and decisions when it is already too late.

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After being constantly reminded by the Good Angel those cares for his soul he finally is able to see what he has done during the course of his damnation. The "ego" of Faustus is constantly tested with the call to repentance from the Good Angel. From the beginning of his damnation, he is warned about the path that he is about to take. The Good Angel tries to wake his present morality as the means of his salvation while the Evil Angel takes him to the damnable side with the pleasures and the power of the devil:

**G. Ang.** O, Faustus, lay that damned book aside,

And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul,

And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head!

Read, read the Scriptures:-that is blasphemy.

**E. Ang.** Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art

Wherein all Nature's treasure is contain'd:

Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,

Lord and commander of these elements. (1.1.68-75)

Marlowe's psyche reveals an interesting factor when analyzing the character of Faustus. His atheism is not projected in the original/traditional

sense of the meaning of "atheism". Rather it is the mockery of the essence of God in a way because he mocks the Christian theological aspect of repentance even after constantly being reminded of his remorseful actions. Marlowe's psychological implementation of his personality is thus portrayed within his plays. Even though many scholars have reached a dead end while analyzing Marlowe's psyche as there is very little authentic information available on him. To support this claim, Bruce. E. Brandt reviews Constance Kuriyama's (qtd. in Brandt) claim that "She makes this case well, and most readers will grant that a writer is to some extent revealed in his writing and that the evolving language of psychoanalysis may usefully describe that revelation" (48).

The attractions of the devil have certain qualities that one cannot deny right at the spot. Even though Faustus was a learned and a reasonable man and a reasonable man always listens to reason first, he was convicted by his unreasonable ambition. After attaining all of the knowledge he possibly could from books, his natural inclination was to turn towards the supernatural. He knew he had the knowledge and the intelligence to outwit someone who was also well-read and even a mortal, but he wanted to go beyond that. It is human nature that no one is happy in their current state (whether they are kings or

beggars). Faustus, like so many others, also wanted to go a step further in his thirst for power. He knew with his reason that he could not achieve the ultimate power if he uses the moral resources. This inclination pushed him towards consulting the supernatural elements. Christian theology, on the other hand, depicts that knowledge is to be attained in the world from moral methods, yet Faustus called the devil to fulfill his need for power.

History can be treated as well-documented proof that shows that something that happens once can happen again if we let it, and the same is the case with Faustus. If we put Faustus in the real world rather than in ink, he (the genius that he was) must have read and understood the implementations of such historical and biblical accounts that he was dangerously close to repeating. The “Fall of Man”, an endearing story of Man’s first disobedience in the eyes of God contributed to the same background and actions that Faustus blindly took in his life. The cunningness of the devil is never to be taken lightly, which Faustus never really paid attention to. Faustus’ ambition and thirst for power paved the way for the devil to easily manipulate Faustus towards what he wanted to achieve; another pawn for his amusement and another soul to put in hell.

In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the same case occurs when Eve disobeys God and pushes Adam to do the same. Satan with his charming temptations strays Eve towards eating the forbidden fruit. Milton writes on the misleading charm of Satan in such a way:

The Eye of Eve to mark his  
play; he glad

Of her attention gained, with  
Serpent Tongue

Organic, or impulse of vocal  
Air,

His fraudulent temptation thus  
began...

Fairest resemblance of thy  
Maker faire,

Thee all things living gaze on,  
all things thine

By gift, and thy Celestial  
Beautie adore. (8.528-540)

Satan in *Paradise Lost* himself chose to stray both Adam and Eve towards his sinful purpose, whereas the case with Faustus is different because Faustus himself decided to take this step with his own free will rather than being tricked by Mephistopheles and Lucifer in the first place. It was later that the devil took the opportunity to distract him from the right path with his promises of ultimate power to Faustus.

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There is also an important similarity in the character of Faustus and Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Satan was once an angel but he wanted to have more power and his quest for power made him disobey God and as a result, he was thrown out of heaven. Satan claims in *Paradise Lost*, "Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down" (4.40). "Pride" and "ambition" are Faustus' tragic flaws in his quest for ultimate power. On the other hand, the "pride" that Faustus had within him was something he used to bargain with the devil. The intelligence that he had was used in such a way that it was a challenge to the devil's power as well. Faustus had thought that if he could trick the devil into handing him the power that he desired, he could also become immortal. As Erich Heller writes that "Faustus gathered sufficient intelligence of the Devil to know how to bargain with him" (Heller 2). This intelligence in terms of knowledge was a prideful quality of Faustus as he had thought he could use it to bargain with the devil and enjoy his power forever but the devil was an entity that is not to be challenged by a mortal. Faustus was intelligent but he was not more cunning or clever than the devil. Once the devil figured out what the truth was, Faustus took a more scientific approach in trying to explain why he took this step and why he called the devil to help him rise to power. Faustus insists that he was in

search for the truth of the moral ambiguity and that he had no soul within him and for that matter of fact he could not be condemned but the devil saw right through him and condemned him further away into hell. Heller explains it as such:

If once Dr. Faustus had sold his soul to the Devil for the promise of success in his search for Truth, he now tried to annul the bargain by turning scientist and insisting that in his role as a searcher for Truth he had no soul. Yet the Devil was not to be cheated. When the hour came, he proved that this search, conducted behind the back of the soul, had led to a Truth that was Hell. (Heller 8)

Apart from analyzing Faustus as a dramatic character, the glory, fame and power that are acquired through a deal with the devil have not been preserved in writing but there have been real life cases (although not completely proven) regarding this kind of witchcraft. Quite a number of famous personalities in the past have been accused of such activities in their own times. Pope Sylvester II, Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Johnson, Giuseppe Tartini, etc. are a few examples that have allegedly sold their souls to the devil to attain glory, power and fame and the interesting fact is that all of these people had something in common; they were all well-learned, brilliant, intelligent and immensely



talented much like the character of Faustus (Michgirt & Jfrater). Dr. Johann Georg Faust was a famous alchemist, astrologer, and magician of his time and he was Marlowe's major inspiration for devising the character of Faustus. Much like Faustus, Johann Georg Faust also allegedly regretted his actions and decisions after striking and enjoying the deal that provided him with fame and glory for many years but in return the devil brutally murdered him for breaking the deal (Michgirt & Jfrater). Faustus' situation is similar.

Subconsciously, Faustus adorned the idea of wanting to achieve omnipotence with the devil's help. This simply became a challenge to God and His power. But according to all major religious theologies, that can never happen as no mortal man or any supernatural force has ever achieved power of omnipotence greater than God. This reason also paved the way for Faustus' downfall.

The decision taken by Faustus was for his own sake and part of his personal free will. Even after he had numerous occasions to repent, the fear of being torn apart by supernatural forces imparted a genuine fear factor in Faustus' mind. The damnation was set and his decision was quite clear, he was not ready to repent yet.

The consequence of Faustus' actions however not only damned him

for hell but made him blind to his original purpose as well. Faustus was branded as a scholar with a brilliant mind but all this power at his hand drove him towards a frenzy that destroyed his good name in the process. Not only did he start to haul his new power over the people around him but he started to pull childish pranks on important figures which ultimately destroyed his "scholar" image. As A. N. Okerlund elaborates on the changing nature of Faustus:

He deliberately ignores the attendant promise of eternal life, thereby resorting to the tricks of facile disputation-half-truths and false premises-in justifying his coadjuvancy with devils. Faustus profanes the intellectual process by selecting only those data which substantiate conclusions predetermined by desire. (Okerlund 261)

While the life and death of Faustus can be considered as a tragic event, it appears more to be a mockery of the intellectualism that he had attained. Faustus succumbs to foolishness once he receives the satanic powers, and as Lord Acton's proverb goes, *absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Faustus decides to have fun and forgets his true nature in the process and he does what he wishes without contemplating the consequences. When his vision and ambition of power become true, he

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forfeits the intellectual power of reason and no longer remains a rational man in his final quest for immortality. The intellectualism that defines him slowly seeps down the drain once he decides to misuse this power to play childish pranks on important figures like the Pope. Faustus first asks Mephistopheles to charm him with invisibility:

Well, I'm content to compass then  
some sport,

And by their folly make us merriment.

Then charm me, that I may be  
invisible, to do

what I please,

Unseen of any whilst I stay in Rome.  
(3.1.50-54)

Then the Pope calls for the Lord of Lorrain and Faustus decides to spook him by speaking in between to have fun of his own and once startled he asks the friars to look around for the strange voice:

**Pope.** My Lord of Lorrain,  
will't please you draw near?

**Faust.** Fall to, and the devil  
choke you, an you spare!

**Pope.** How now! who's that  
which spake? — Friars, look about.

**Friars.** Here's nobody, if it like  
your Holiness. (3.1.56-59)

After spooking the Pope with his voice he decides to have more fun

in a more physical manner leaving behind his intellectual manners. He becomes a child who is mad with the excitement of pulling pranks to have the self-satisfaction of a popular trickster:

**Pope.** My lord, here is a dainty  
dish

was sent me from the Bishop  
of Milan.

**Faust.** I thank you, sir.  
[Snatches the dish.]

**Pope.** How now!

Who's that which snatched the  
meat from me?

Will no man look? — My lord,  
this dish was sent

me from the Cardinal of  
Florence.

**Faust.** You say true; I'll  
ha't. [Snatches the dish.]

**Pope.** What, again! — My  
lord, I'll drink to your grace.

**Faust.** I'll pledge your grace.  
[Snatches the cup.] (3.1.60-69)

After all the commotion, the Pope crosses himself because of this Ghostly ridicule. Faustus warns the Pope not to do it because Faustus is in control and he has the power to do these childish things. Faustus calls the Pope's crossing a "trick":



What, are you crossing  
of yourself?

Well, use that trick no  
more, I would advise you.  
(3.1.75-76)

After this the Pope crosses  
himself again and for Faustus, it  
becomes a mockery of his warning and  
he hits him in return to make his point  
clearer to the Pope.

Relating to these examples,  
Faustus' intellectualism which he  
egotistically displays with his  
'reasonable' mind degrades and his  
personal vanities become apparent.

### **Conclusions**

In terms of defining the psyche  
of Faustus, it is evident that his desires  
and ambitions were met during his life,  
some people work hard in mortal  
means to achieve their goals but  
Faustus was selected as a special case  
by Marlowe to define what does the  
thirst of ambition do to the moral  
conscience of an individual. One way  
or another, Faustus achieved what he  
wanted to and that was "the ultimate  
power" but lost his true self in the  
process and took the path of  
damnation.

There are certain cases where  
he reflects upon the actions that he had  
done but the fear of the devil and death  
clouds his judgments even at times  
when the Good Angel calls upon him  
to repent. But the true meaning of

repentance is what he realizes when it  
is too late. He reflects on his actions in  
these words:

What art thou, Faustus, but a  
man condemn'd

to die? Thy fatal time doth  
draw to final end; Despair

doth drive distrust unto my  
thoughts: Confound

these passions with a quiet  
sleep. (4.5.25-28)

After all the fun and games and  
enjoyment of power was over, there  
was a less moral dimension that  
remained, and could not break the  
shackles of damnation at the proper  
time due to his ambition and thirst for  
power.

Faustus is an example of what  
real-life attractions and the shortcuts  
do to the moral awareness of an  
individual living in the real world.  
Taking the easy route preferable to  
slow progress on the right path  
towards achieving a goal. This is what  
defines an inherent human nature in  
terms of the moral awareness that also  
takes Faustus towards his downfall.  
Faustus' moral conscience and  
intellectualism were corrupted by this  
inherent nature of the desire for power  
and false glory.

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