



Doctor Faustus as a Tragedy of a Typical Renaissance Hero

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Abstract

Without any shadow of doubt, Doctor Faustus has been hailed as the tragedy of a Renaissance man who, in his passionate desire to get a proper hold on the world wants to have the knowledge of necromancy with the help of this he will conquer the whole world. With the reason of this there is perpetual conflict, both internal as well as external whether to choose the world of necromancy or the path of decency. Right from the beginning till the end of the play, we can also witness how he is ready to barter his soul for the sake of necromancy.

Paper

It is an established fact that *Doctor Faustus* is the tragedy of a renaissance man with unknown caliber who, in his endeavour to become a jove in the sky, revolts against the human limitations and transgresses the will of God. Albeit, the structural compactness and the plot construction of the play has raised some eye brows because of some controversial interpolation of some of the scenes, but thematically the play is a heart thrilling dramatization of the power conflict between the traditional dogmas and the modern spirit of renaissance.

That is why, *Doctor Faustus*, in the beginning of the play, has been compared to mythical Icarus who started flying on the waxen wings to reach the sun, but as he neared the sun, his wings melted and he was thrown down in to the water of the sea. In the same way, doctor Faustus wants to soar high in the sky on the artificial wings of his knowledge to acquire dominance over the world, says Douglas Cole. After having analysed all the available options

with him, he takes recourse to necromancy- the forbidden path as it will facilitate him realizing the ambitions and dreams as he himself says:

Philosophy is odious and obscure
it's magic, magic that hath revish'd me.

As *Tamburlaine* is the tragedy of Scythian shepherd who wants to rule over the world; *The Jew of Malta* is the tragedy of a Jew Barabas who, like Machiavelli, worships gold and wealth, so *Doctor Faustus* is the tragedy of a renaissance intellectual whose lust for knowledge is merely a mean to acquire domination and power like a deity as he asserts himself:

O what a world of profit and delight
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence

A sound magician is a demi-god.

That is why, from presumption to despair, from doubt of existence of hell to the belief in the reality of nothing else, from a desire to be more than a man, to the recognition of his being less than a beast, from the hate to sign the bond to the desire for delay of the movement of time, from an aspiration to gain a deity and omnipotence, to the longing for extinction, such is the summary of doctor Faustus who has rightly been compared with Milton's Satan, and Shakespeare's Macbeth, and his tragic downfall can be summed up as "from proud philosopher, master of all human knowledge, to a trickster, to a slave of phantoms, up to a cowering wretch."

This is the brief character sketch of Doctor Faustus in the play and, in fact, the absurd egoism and lust for power of Faustus is intermixed with the social and humanitarian



concerns which makes doctor Faustus as a convincingly acceptable hero of the play as he himself remarks:

I'll have them read me strange philosophy
And tell the secrets of all foreign kings;
I'll have them wall all Germany with brass
And chase the prince of Parma from our land.

According to some scholars like S.T. Coleridge, Faustus is not fit to be the hero of the play because his struggle for power is more sensual and carnal than human or spiritual. In other words, Faustus's passion for power and magic is more omnipotence rather than omniscient that forces him to barter away his soul to the devil for a voluptuous life of twenty four years.

However, it should be kept in mind that Faustus' passion for knowledge and power is a virtue itself, but divorced from god, it become self-destroying. This is what Doctor Faustus realizes after signing the bond with the devil in Act-11, Scene- 2 of the book where he becomes disillusioned about the profits which he expects from necromancy as he himself points out:

When I behold heaven, then I repent
And cursed thee, wicked Mephistophilis
Because thou hast deprived me of those joys

In this way, as the time rolls on, Faustus in his desire to become a mighty God, gets swollen with the cunning of self-conceit to such an extent that he becomes the Icarus of Greek mythology, and aspires on the artificial wings of his knowledge to soar above the human limits to become a jove in the sky. That is why, there is a constant struggle both at the mental as well as spiritual level in Doctor Faustus, whether to abjure the scriptures and denounce the god, or to embrace the devil to gain a deity. This psycho-spiritual conflict has beautifully been dramatized by Marlowe in the form of the repeated appearance of the good angel and bad angel:

Good Angel: O' Faustus, lay that damned book aside.

Bad Angel: Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art.

Good Angel: Sweet Faustus, think of heaven and heavenly things.

Bad Angel: No Faustus, think of honour and wealth.

However, in spite of his having willingly surrendered to the devil for whom he was ready to sacrifice as many souls as there are stars in the sky, Faustus still finds himself to be a man sceptible to death as he asserts himself:

Had I as many souls as there be stars
I'd would give them all for Mephistophilis

It is during the course of his experiences that Faustus realizes the futility of his bargaining with Lucifer as his humanitarian concerns patriotic feelings degenerate in to a desire for the physical gratification and sensual enjoyment. His apostrophe to Helen speaks of the high imaginative faculty and mythological allusions reflecting the aesthetic flavor with tastes besides his intellectual pride and renaissance spirit as he explains :

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand of ships

And burnt the topless towers of Illium

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss

Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies

The appearance of the old man just after the scene of Helen symbolizes an incarnation of god as well as the Faustus's inner conscience who dissuades Faustus from committing suicide and shows him the right path of salvation. This last scene of the last hour is a superb dramatic expression of the acute mental conflict and spiritual agony of a man who denounces god and invites the pangs of hell on himself. Faustus' last soliloquy is a powerful and strong



expression of his mental agony in which he asserts:

O' I'll lead up to my god, who pull me down
See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament

One drop would save my soul, half a drop

In this way, the damnation of Doctor Faustus is the damnation of the renaissance man who, in his inordinate ambition to acquire omnipotence and even to become a demi God, stoops the level where he wishes to be a beast wanting soul, and even a drop of water so that he may mingle in to the ocean and may not be discovered by the devil who will come with the striking of clock and will take away Faustus' soul to the hell. George Santayana has rightly hit the nail on its blood when he says:

“Marlowe's Faustus is a martyr to everything that renaissance valued-the power, knowledge, enterprise, wealth and beauty.”

In this way, after making a close scrutiny of different aspects of Faustus' character , we can safely and rightly aver the fact that doctor Faustus is, and can legitimately be called a powerful tragic expression of the experiences, exploits, and extinction of a renaissance scholar cast within a traditional framework of morality play succinctly illustrates the myth of Icarus,” the higher you go, the more heat you get than heat”

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