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## Renaissance Elements in Marlowe and His Powerful Tragic Play *Doctor Faustus*

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### Abstract

The present research paper aims at finding out the elements of renaissance in the life of Christopher Marlowe, the dramatist as well as in the life of his powerful tragic hero Doctor Faustus. Marlowe was influenced by the Renaissance ideal of individualism. Another influence on Marlowe was that of Machiavelli. He was atheistic in his approach; he symbolised the spirit of revolt against religion. Faustus is a unique creation of Marlowe. Faustus is a character who is out and out individualistic. He depends so much upon himself and thinks so much of his talents that he may very safely be called an egoist. He is a trained physician, but he is neither happy nor satisfied with what he has learnt and always strives to know more and more. His passion for the unknown, his love for exploration, his curiosity, his attempts to unravel the mystery of universe and his efforts to establish his supremacy over others- all these take us essentially to the spirit of the Renaissance. Secondly, the theme of this play manifests itself in the form of Faustus's attitude towards religion. During the period of Renaissance, religion didn't count very much in men's life. What actually mattered was a concern for pleasure and privilege. Faustus accepts Satan and goes over to his camp by sailing away his soul. He is a Machiavellian character who is concerned not with the means but with the achievement of his aim. In a word, Marlowe's Faustus is a martyr to everything that Renaissance valued - knowledge, power, wealth and beauty.

**Key Words:** Renaissance, individualism, knowledge, power, beauty, atheism, conflict, Machiavelli.

### Introduction

The name of Christopher Marlowe goes down in the history of drama as an important

one. He did not write comedies or farcical plays; his domain was only tragedies. The five plays which ensure him a distinctive place in the history of English drama are *Tamburlaine*, *The*

*Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta, Edward II and The Massacre of Paris.* Marlowe was a highly educated man, and was one of the University Wits. He had also some experience and understanding of the political and administrative affairs of the State. He was, thus, thoroughly equipped with the necessary competence and insight into human nature to be able to write plays, more so tragic plays. It was really unfortunate that he led an abandoned kind of life and that he died almost in his youth. English tragedy lost a great writer and a talented explorer of human psychology.

Before Marlowe, English tragic plays were almost non-existent. There was only one tragic play called '*Gorboduc*', but it was a tragic piece only in name, not in spirit. It was Marlowe who inaugurated the writing of tragic plays in English. He was a typical man of the Renaissance, and as such his characters have certain qualities which stand amply reflected in his plays.

#### **Renaissance Elements in Marlowe**

Marlowe did not believe in gods or goddesses, or if at all he cared for anything, it was individual human beings alone. The Renaissance is associated with the cult of individualism. In Marlowe this individualism is inflated into egoism or an aggressive kind of self-assertion. He had a zest for life, and he always valued freedom. It is really remarkable to find that Marlowe effected a clean break with Medievalism. This influence of the Renaissance permeated his character and inspired him, with the result that his plays have always to be considered from this point of view.

Another influence on Marlowe was that of Machiavelli. Machiavelli was a sixteenth century Italian social and political writer. His thoughts, his philosophy and his writings have a spell of their own. He did not divide the world into the camp of the moral and that of the immoral; he had practically nothing to do with morality. He looked upon morality as a kind of

affectation or pretension which, in his opinion, always hampered the growth of the individual mind. He declared that what really mattered was the end, the objective aimed at or achieved; in his view, means had no importance of any kind. Machiavelli's influence on Marlowe was so deep and wide that his heroes are generally Machiavellian in spirit. His important characters stand for soaring ambition, and they do everything that is possible to attain the goal. Marlowe was different from other contemporary dramatists also in the sense that his attitude towards religion was rather extraordinary. He was atheistic in his approach; he symbolised the spirit of revolt against religion. It is precisely for this reason that he glorifies man in his plays and does not take much notice of the divine. These influences moulded Marlowe's character as a playwright and it is in this light that we have to examine his play, *Doctor Faustus*.

#### **Marlowe's Contribution to English Tragedy**

Marlowe's first great contribution to English tragedy consists in his consistent repudiation of the Senecan tradition. The Senecan tradition is associated with rhetorical platitudes. Marlowe brought about a sharp change in the verse pattern and introduced what is now commonly known as 'mighty line'. The Senecan verse with its undue accent on the last syllable in the line was not very conducive to stage effect. Marlowe's verse was peculiarly suitable for the theatre, and this accounts, to a great extent, for the applause that his play received from his audience. His second important contribution relates to the fact that his tragedies do not have the moral rigidity or edifying quality of the Medieval plays. As a matter of fact, we do not come across any palpable kind of moral bias in his dramas. His heroes are mostly criminals or downright bad men, and yet they appear to be demi-gods. What he presents in his plays is the immensity of human spirit and the gusto of human soul. He concentrated on the individuals and not on institutions. Shakespeare, we may safely say,

borrowed a good deal from Marlowe, though it would be difficult to maintain that Shakespeare worked without any sense of moral discrimination. Moreover, in his plays Marlowe doesn't present persons of loyal birth or feudal ancestry; his people belonged to the ordinary sections of life, though they enjoy extraordinary powers. His heroes may be malicious; their character might have been painted in dark colour; they may appear to be ruthless, recklessly ambitious and greedy, but there is always something distinctive about them. That is why, his heroes suffer death at the end of his plays, but they do not accept defeat; in fact, they go on struggling. This constant struggle till death is the overpowering element in Marlowe's tragedies. He does not merely describe people falling into miseries or adversity from prosperity; his tragedies deal mainly with the character in action.

Marlowe's contribution to English tragedies consists in respect of both theme and technique. It is true that his plays suffer from a conscious kind of lop-sidedness; it is also true that he does not draw female characters as much as he should have done. But in spite of all these defects, the form and substance of English tragedies would have been much different had Marlowe not contributed towards its proper growth and development.

#### Renaissance Elements in *Doctor Faustus*

*Doctor Faustus* is perhaps Marlowe's greatest tragic play. The story of this drama is clear and interesting. It is true that Marlowe is not the inventor of the story and that he has gathered material from different books relating to the life and character of Faustus, but his contribution consists in the fact that he has given a dramatic twist to the Faustus legend. As the story goes on in the play, Faustus is a German doctor, well-educated and competent in his trade, who suddenly decides to practise necromancy and black magic. He almost becomes ecstatic when, dwelling upon the benefits of magic, he says:

O, what a world of profit and delight, of power, of honour, of omnipotence, is promised to the studious artisan!  
.....A sound magician is a mighty god.

He is neither rash nor indiscreet for the simple reason that he finds time to consult his magician friends. There are people, his well-wishers, who advise him not to deviate into the world of black art, but at the same time there are others too who encourage him to get properly initiated and adequately trained in the art of black magic. Faustus analyses the claims of different branches of medieval learning, and it is thus that he vindicates his ardent commitment to the cultivation of magic. He says:

Philosophy is odious and obscure;

Both law and physic are for petty wits;  
Divinity is basest of the three,

Unpleasant, harsh, contemptable and vile:

'T is magic, magic that hath ravish'd me.

The brusque and summary rejection of these disciplines is matched or more than matched by an irrepressible enthusiasm for magic. Marlowe takes a decision and sells away his soul to the devil in return of an enjoyment of supreme power, pleasure and knowledge for twenty-four years. He has Mephistopheles and other dark spirits as his servants. Faustus is in a position to go anywhere he likes and do whatever he desires. He practices cruel jokes on the Pope and the Cardinals, kings and statesmen. At intervals he is reminded of Christ and the sanctions of religion, but he is pulled away from them by Satan. He, after raising the spirit of Helen, the paragon of Greek beauty, wonders and recalls that it was for the sake of this lovely woman that thousands of Greek and Trojan ships engaged in fierce battle which resulted in the destruction of the magnificent castles and towers of Ilium. He kisses Helen, and his ecstasy is so great that he thinks that this sweet kiss will make him immortal:

Was this the face that launched a  
thousand ships, And burnt the topless  
towers of Ilium! –Sweet Helen, make me  
immortal with a kiss. – Her lips suck  
forth my soul: she, where it flies! –  
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul  
again.

Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these  
lips, And all is dross that is not Helena.

I will be Paris, and for love of the,  
Instead of Troy, shall Wertenberg be  
sacked; And I will combat with weak  
Menelaus, And wear thy colours on my  
plumed crest:

Yea I will wound Achilles in the hill,  
And then return to Helen for a kiss. O  
thou art fairer than the evening air  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;  
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter  
When he appeared to hapless Semele;  
More lovely than the monarch of the sky  
In Wanton Arethusa azur'd arms;  
And none but thou shalt be my  
paramour.

These lines show Faustus's poetic and aesthetic sensibilities. His speech in the praise of Helen's beauty is a celebrated piece of poetry. These are highly romantic lines which bring to our mind several mythological stories. These lines are highly imaginative, highly suggestive, highly rhetorical and richly sensuous. They make a strong appeal to both our imagination and emotions. One lingers with delight over these lines the beauty of which puts the reader in a state of ecstasy.

At the end of the play, Faustus is terrified by the thought of his own impending doom. He reveals his excruciating pain that he undergoes before death or damnation. He is heartily repenting. The grim visions of death and dark hell have struck terror on him. After an hour or half an hour his eternal damnation in hell will set in. He wishes that this one hour may never end. He makes appeal to God for mercy. If God will not have mercy on his soul, He should at least fix a limit to his damnation. He

feels appalled to think that there is no end to the torture of damned souls. It would have been better if he did not have a soul at all or if his soul were not immortal. He wishes that Pythagoras's theory of the transmigration of souls were true so that after death his soul would enter the body of some beast, because all beasts are happy. But, alas he must go to hell and remain there forever. He says:

Ah, half the hour is passed! 'twill all the  
past anon. O god,

If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,  
Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath  
ransom'd me, Impose some end to my  
incessant pain.

Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,  
A hundred thousand, and at last we  
sav'd! O no end is limited to damned  
souls!

Why wert thou not a creature wanting  
soul? Or why is this immortal that thou  
hast?

Ah Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were  
that true, This soul should fly from me,  
and I be chang'd Unto some brutish beast!  
all beasts are happy, For, when they die,  
their souls are soon dissolv'd in elements;  
but mine must leave still to be plagu'd in  
hell.

These lines are remarkable as a piece of psychological self-revelation. The thoughts and feelings of a sinner who is on the verge of death and damnation would not have been more vividly and effectively expressed even by Shakespeare. As the period of contract with the devil lapses, his brain is smashed by Satan's agents, and he is taken straight to hell.

The story of this tragic play, *Doctor Faustus* reads like one that we come across in any detective fiction. But then it gives us some idea of the theme that Marlowe seeks to present to us. The theme of this tragedy is typically Renaissance in nature and spirit. In the first place, the most important element in the theme of this play is that of the Renaissance



individualism. The Renaissance was a movement which taught people the value of self-dignity, freedom and self-dependence. It also inculcated into man a deep desire for knowledge. Faustus is a character who is out and out individualistic. He depends so much upon himself and thinks so much of his talents that he may very safely be called an egoist. He is a trained physician, but he is neither happy nor satisfied with what he has learned and always strives to know more and more. His passion for the unknown, his love for exploration, his curiosity, his attempts to unravel the mystery of universe and his efforts to establish his supremacy over others- all these take us essentially to the spirit of the Renaissance. Faustus is supremely ambitious and tries to be so domineering that he behaves like the king of kings and the emperor of emperors. His attitude reflects an urge not only for academic domination, but also for political expansion. In dwelling upon the advantages which will accrue to him by the exercise of his magic power, he shows his ardent curiosity, his desire for wealth and luxury, his nationalism and his longing for power. He desires gold from the East Indies, pearls from the depth of the sea, pleasant fruits and princely delicacies from America. His friend Valdes refers to the Indians in the Spanish colonies, to Lapland giants, to the argosies of Venice, and to the annual plate-fleet which supplied gold and silver to the Spanish treasury from the New World.

Thus, Faustus's dream of power included much that had a strong appeal for the English people including Marlowe himself.

Secondly, the theme of this play manifests itself in the form of Faustus's attitude towards religion. During the period of Renaissance, religion didn't count very much in men's life. What actually mattered was a concern for pleasure and privilege. Faustus accepts Satan and goes over to his camp by sailing away his soul. He is a Machiavellian character who is concerned not with the means but with the achievement of his aim. This, however, does not

signify that he has completely forgotten or is usually indifferent to God. Off and on he is reminded of Christ and the sanctions of religion, and there is, thus, in him a conflict or tension between will and conscience. Faustus is a victim of self-intoxication. He does not correct himself with the result that he is destroyed by Satan. But at no time does he hold an irreverent attitude towards religion. This regular tussle between body and soul, between flesh and spirit, between the Devil and God, is a typical theme in most of Renaissance literature, and it is no wonder that we find this kind of theme in *Doctor Faustus* too. In a word, Marlowe's Faustus is a martyr to everything that Renaissance valued - knowledge, power, wealth and beauty.

### Conclusion

Marlowe was influenced by the Renaissance ideal of individualism. Another influence on Marlowe was that of Machiavelli. Machiavelli was a sixteenth century Italian social and political writer. Marlowe was atheistic in his approach; he symbolised the spirit of revolt against religion. Dr. Faustus is a character who is out and out individualistic. His passion for the unknown, his love for exploration, his curiosity, his attempts to unravel the mystery of universe and his efforts to establish his supremacy over others- all these take us essentially to the spirit of the Renaissance.

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