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## A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S "THE TRAGICAL HISTORY OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS"

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### ABSTRACT

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus: A Morality Play is an eternal composition by Christopher Marlowe in the monarchy of the Renaissance English literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the play, Good Angel stands for a conscience that is the voice of soul, and Evil Angel stands for the human desire that is in favour of the devils— Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephistophilis. Seven Deadly Sins have some certain purpose. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus fulfills the purpose of an old morality play. Appearance of the seven deadly sins is one of the major features of the morality play. English drama has its long history. The Miracle Play was based on saints' lives and divine miracle and The Mystery Play was based on the Bible. The origin of the morality play is there in the mystery and miracle plays of the middle age. The Morality Play is an allegory in dramatic form. It is a dramatization of the battle between the forces of good and evil in the human soul. The play is an exteriorization of the hidden sacred struggle. In it, virtues and vices appear as characters. Marlowe is well-known for his blank verse as he used in The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus and made it different. The poetic quality of drama is so powerful that the piece is considered more a poem and less a tragedy. The playwright has revolutionized the whole concept of the language of the drama and made poetry as an impressive medium of expression. After giving the life and force to the poetic drama, Marlowe became a glorious figure and later made the way for Shakespeare and Milton. There is no doubt that Marlowe was a writer of serious tragedy but we may not deny to the fact that The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus has little scope of comedy, or comic-scene for the purpose of comic-relief. It is hard to believe that a serious dramatist like Marlowe has scope for comedy. The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is a tragic-comedy: as it has blend of the tragedy and comedy. Generally, the mixing of tragic and comic is called tragi-comedy. The play is a fusion of the elements of tragedy and comedy. There are scenes of humour and pity. Marlowe's contribution to the English tragedy is of great importance and what is the most striking is in the field of art of the characterization, blank verse, and in the morality play. Marlowe portrays life-like characters: neither absolutely perfect nor a complete sort of evil, he is a combination of good and bad. Plot in a tragedy is important, but the most important is the role of the central character. Marlowe's The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is not only the tragic-story of Faustus but it is the tragedy of every man. There two Angels are the representative of man's two tendencies— one of the good and the rest is bad; one is constructive and another is destructive, the first is in favour of God and the second is in favour of devil.

**Keywords:** Doctor Faustus, Good Angel, Evil Angel, Morality Play, Tragedy, Tragicomedy, Renaissance, Character

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The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus: A Morality Play is an immortal creation by Christopher Marlowe in the realm of the Renaissance English

literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Christopher Marlowe is such a name of rebel and pioneer who shaped English Drama (Tragedy) from its helter-skelter. As a

prominent figure of the University Wits (1570-1590), he along with other members like Lyly, Peele, Lodge, Nash, Greene, and Kyd contributed immense to the development of drama during Elizabethan Era (1558-1603). He is as important to the development of English tragedy as Spenser for the long narrative verse and Richardson for the long narrative fiction. The dramatist is a great name among Pre-Shakespearean dramatists.

The chief features of Marlowe's drama includes a new concept of romantic tragedy, historical play, Blank-Verse or Mighty-Lines, a new shape of morality play, comic scene in tragedy, and a novel art of characterization. His Tamburlaine the Great (1587), Doctor Faustus (1588), The Jew of Malta (1590), and Edward II (1591) are important plays in the history of the Renaissance English drama (1400-1660).

It is Marlowe who brought out a great and revolutionary change in the concept of tragedy. He is responsible for the transition of the English drama from Medievalism of Seneca, Plautus, and Terence. He is the founder of genuine romantic-tragedy. Generally, the heroes of the tragedy had been taken from the stock of great personality, and in this manner it was "royalty of tragedy", but Marlowe changed it and his heroes are "Renaissance ideal of individual worth", as it is in The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus there is Faustus, a leading character.

He romanticized his tragedy due to marvelous charm of description of the rise and fall of the hero. In the drama, usual thing is described as in unusual manner. There is violation of the classical rules of a pure tragedy, and the Three Unities, the unity of Time, Place and Action. Marlowe presents a long period of his heroes' life in a romantic way. He made tragedy a matter of individual hero. Plot in a tragedy is important, but the most important is the role of the central character. He shows the rise and fall of an individual. There is conflict in his drama but not battle and duel like ancient classics. He introduces only conflict of the mind of the hero. His character himself is responsible for his rise and fall.

The dramatist introduced comic-relief scene in a serious tragedy. He presented abstract into concrete; as Good and Evil Angels and the Seven Deadly Sins. He revived morality play such as Doctor

Faustus on the theme of Omnipresent, and also introduced Blank-Verse in a form of "Mighty-Lines" (Ben Jonson) for his drama. He gave complete length of V Acts of the drama. Thus Marlowe gave a new concept of English drama, and shaped English drama from its disordered medievalism, and romanticized it. As a Pre-Shakespearean dramatist, and pioneer of the university wits, he played an important role for the betterment of the 16th century drama of England.

#### **Opening Scene of Doctor Faustus**

Opening scene of The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is motivating, and has power enough to instruct any reader, as it deals with the theme which is relating to the moral of man. Good Angel stands for a conscience that is the voice of soul, and Evil Angel stands for the human desire that is in favour of the devils—Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephistophilis. The play deals with the conflict between soul and the human desire; and at last, there is the victory of soul over human desire. Faustus' soliloquy, in the opening scene plays an important role in making of the concept of the goody, Faustus. Thus the opening scene of the play is remarkable: the Chorus introduces the whole of the story and the theme; the soliloquy discloses the internal-conflict of the central-character; and the element of the morality play—the good and evil angels display their impact. The scene is apt and suggestive.

#### **Seven Deadly Sins**

Seven Deadly Sins (Act II, Scene II) have some certain purpose. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus fulfills the purpose of an old morality play. The appearance of seven deadly sins is one of the major features of the morality play. Time to time, Faustus's conscience (Good Angel) makes him aware of God and divinity. Realizing the authority of Christ, the devils are almost shocked so for the purpose of the entertainment of Faustus, Lucifer calls the seven deadly sins. They are represented in the form of characters: (a) Pride, (b) Covetousness, (c) Wrath, (d) Envy, (e) Gluttony (f) Sloth, and (g) Lechery. All the sins appear before Faustus and introduce themselves their nature. The first among them is Pride, introduces:

"I am Pride: I disdain to have any parents  
I am like Ovid's flea; I can creep into every  
corner."<sup>1</sup>

The second sin appears after the first, and he is  
Covetousness. He expresses that he wants only gold,  
and gold. The character exclaims:

"O, my sweet gold!"<sup>2</sup>

Like Pride and Covetousness, the remaining  
five: Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery  
introduce their features. All the characters are the  
representation of the seven sins. By this interesting  
show, Lucifer would like to entertain Faustus. This  
art of the devils is powerful and impressive for the  
central-character, thus he forgets Christ and divinity  
again and deeply involves in the art of the black-  
magic which was the goal of Lucifer.

#### **Doctor Faustus as a Morality Play**

Christopher Marlowe's The Tragical History  
of Doctor Faustus is an old morality play. English  
drama has its long history. The Miracle Play (based  
on saints' lives and divine miracle) and The Mystery  
Play (based on the Bible) are accepted as the old  
form of drama. The origin of the morality play is  
there in the mystery and miracle plays of the middle  
age. According to J.A. Cuddon, the Morality Play is  
an allegory in dramatic form. It is a dramatization of  
the battle between the forces of good and evil in the  
human soul. The play is an "exteriorization of the  
inward spiritual struggle"<sup>3</sup>. In it, virtues and vices  
appear as characters.

The presence of Good and Evil Angels,  
Chorus (claimed to have been borrowed from the  
moralities), use of Seven Deadly Sins, and an old  
Man, the existence of Christ and the Bible, and  
Heaven and Hell, Appearance of the Devils:  
Mephistophilis, Lucifer and Belzebub, and the Comic  
Scene in a Tragedy, and so on are the chief features  
of the morality play in the Doctor Faustus.  
Characters of the morality plays were personified  
abstractions. In the Doctor Faustus, Good Angel  
represents goodness, truthfulness, spirituality,  
morality, and an order whether Evil Angel  
represents evilness, ugliness, falsehood, immorality,  
and a disorder. It is very clear by the first statement  
of the Angels:

Good 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.<sup>4</sup>

Evil 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.<sup>5</sup>

Marlowe finds a way in his play to give moral-lesson  
to the readers. The angels are nothing but two  
tendencies of people: the first leads towards the  
great God, the Omnipotent, and second towards the  
devil, the meanest thing of the universe.

The Chorus, it has been accepted that  
borrowed from the ancient morality play, serves a  
moral purpose of the dramatist. It is an essential  
element in the play.

#### **Doctor Faustus as a poetic play: more a poem than a drama**

Marlowe is well-known for his blank verse  
as he used in The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus  
and made it different. The poetic quality of drama is  
so powerful that the piece is considered more a  
poem and less a tragedy. The playwright has  
revolutionized the whole concept of the language of  
the drama and made poetry as an impressive  
medium of expression. After giving the life and force  
to the poetic drama, Marlowe became a glorious  
figure and later made the way for Shakespeare and  
Milton. It is Ben Jonson who has claimed the blank-  
verse of Marlowe as the "mighty-lines".

It is supposed that the impressive poetic  
language, blank verse was introduced by the Earl of  
Surrey in the 16th century in his translation of the  
Aeneid, and consists of unrhymed five-stress lines  
(Cuddon)<sup>6</sup>. It has become the most widely used of  
English verse forms and is the one closest to the  
rhythms of everyday English speech. This is one of  
the reasons why it has been particularly favoured by  
dramatists. It was, almost certainly first used for a  
play by Sackville and Norton in the Gorboduc (1561),  
and then became the standard verse for later  
dramatists as Marlowe who made it most subtle and  
flexible instrument.

It is Marlowe by whom the blank-verse became the supreme instrument for the dramatic poetry. The dramatist adopted it from the ancient classics but gave force and made it a native English verse. There is no doubt that he revolutionized the medium of the drama.

Marlowe's genius is more lyrical than dramatic. There is a flow and smoothness in the language of the drama. Marlowe has made Faustus the central speaker in the Doctor Faustus. There is power of expression in the language of the playwright. Marlowe's expression of the soliloquies of Faustus is made more influential by the use of the blank verse. The power of expression of the mighty lines is remarkable.

Faustus. "And necromantic books are heavenly;  
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters;  
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires"<sup>7</sup>.

It would be apt to claim that the lines in the blank-verse of the dramatist are mighty because these have the power of expression. The unique poetic language has made the tragedy as a remarkable poem in a form of drama. Rickett is of the view that Marlowe has elevated his style and he provided "coherence to the drama" by his powerful poetic language. Thus we may conclude that Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is an outstanding poetic play in the history of the Renaissance English drama.

#### **Comic Element in the Doctor Faustus: Comic and Farcical Element**

There is no doubt that Marlowe was a writer of serious tragedy but we may not deny to the fact that The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus has little scope of comedy, or comic-scene for the purpose of comic-relief. The blend of comic element in a serious tragedy like the Doctor Faustus is remarkable. The use of the comic scenes in the tragedy has a conscious purpose of the dramatist, and it is not a demerit but merit one. It has power to uplift the quality of the drama and Shakespeare has also the technique which is praised by Johnson. There is a sharp controversy among the critics and the scholars on the use of the comic scene in the play. It is hard to believe that a serious dramatist like

Marlowe has scope for comedy in his tragedy, but it is a fact in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus that out of 15 Scenes, nearly 8 Scenes have the comic elements. According to the nature of these comic elements, we may divide it into two parts: the comic scene and the farcical scene.

**The Comic Scene:** it is relating to comedy, raising the mirth or laughter such as in the Doctor Faustus (Act-I Scene-II, and Scene-IV; Act-II Scene-II, and Act-IV Scene III). The first comic scene is there in Act-I Scene II, the scene begins in front of Faustus's house where two scholars come to meet with Faustus. They ask to Wagner for his master but Wagner tries to confuse them by such type of conversation that is meaningless. Here is an example of the conversation among them:

First Schol. How now, sirrah! Where's thy master?

Wag:God in heaven knows.

Sec. Schol. Why, dost not thou know?

Wag:Yes, I know; but that follow not.

First Schol. Go to, sirrah! leave your jesting, and tell us where he is.<sup>8</sup>

The second comic scene is there in the Act-I Scene-IV. Here, Wagner meets a clown who has pointed beard, but calls him a boy. Wagner forces him to serve and threatens him by the terror of the devils and the clown runs away with fear.

Wag: Sirrah!, boy, come hither.

Clown:How, boy! swowns, boy! I hope you have seen many boys with such pickadevaunts as I have: boy, quotha!<sup>9</sup>

The third comic scene appears in the Act-II, scene-II. It is remarkable from the point of view of moral purpose that is representation of the Seven Deadly Sins in the form of characters. They create very much fun-scene. The presentation in the drama is striking, and mirth-making.

Faust:What art thou, the first?

Pride:I am Pride: I disdain to have any parents.

I am like Ovid's flea; I can creep into every corner.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth comic scene is in the Act-IV scene-III. Here, Faustus creates a pair of horn on knight's head for the pleasure of Emperor. This is so funny, comical and delightful scene.

**The Farcical Scene:** it is comedy of excessive humour, a meaningless display or a hollow-show. It has no particular purpose of great worth and it is not intellectual such as in the Doctor Faustus (Act-III Scene-I; Act-IV Scene-I, II and IV). In the Act III Scene I, Faustus gets invisible with Mephistophilis and snatches dishes and a cup from the Pope's hand. In Act-IV Scene I and II, there is dispute between Ralph and Robin, and Mephistophilis' anger that is farcical. The Act IV, Scene IV of the play has a HORSE-COURSER scene and it is the last farcical scene of the tragedy.

Both, the comic scene and the farcical scene have the quality of mirth and delight, but the basic difference between them is that the first has particular purpose and meaning that the second has not. The first is intellectual and the second is not—one may be a fair delight and the other may be unfair. The comic elements are of two types, yet the goal is same and it is delight, fun and humour. The dramatist has fulfilled the purpose of comic-relief by using the comic and farcical scenes in the Doctor Faustus.

#### **Doctor Faustus: A Tragi-Comedy**

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is a tragic-comedy: as it has blend of the tragedy and comedy. Generally, the mixing of tragic and comic is called tragi-comedy. It is "a play containing elements of both comedy and tragedy" 11. From this prospect, the Doctor Faustus is a tragi-comedy as it has 15 scenes and out of which 8 scenes have the features of comedy and farce. The play is a fusion of the elements of tragedy and comedy. There are scenes of humour and pity; humour is the result of comedy, and pity is the product of tragedy.

#### **Plot Construction: The Structure of the Doctor Faustus**

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus has a complete length of a tragedy as it consists of V Acts and XV scenes. The structure of the plot construction is remarkable. As far as the structure of the scenes is concerned, there are fifteen in number: the seven scenes are relating to the tragical history of Faustus, the main-plot of the tragedy. There is sub-plot, it is made up of eight scenes of that four are comical and the rest are farcical. Both, the comic scene and the farcical scene have the

quality of mirth and delight, but the basic difference between them is that the first has particular purpose and meaning that the second has not. The first is intellectual and the second is not—one may be a fair delight and the other may be unfair. To conclude, we may claim that the Doctor Faustus has a well-knit plot structure: forceful dialogue in the blank verse, a blend of tragedy and comedy, living human character, a proper beginning, development, and end. In the centre of the main plot we have the central character of Faustus, and the comic and farcical elements are there in a form of the sub-plot.

#### **Doctor Faustus: Marlowe's Art of the Characterization**

Marlowe's contribution to the English tragedy is of great importance and what is the most striking is in the field of art of the characterization, blank verse, and in the morality play. Marlowe portrays life-like characters: neither absolutely perfect nor a complete sort of evil, he is a combination of good and bad. Plot in a tragedy is important, but the most important is the role of the central character. Marlowe's characters are not so pessimistic like that of Hardy, and not so optimistic like that of Browning. But they are typically representative of the Renaissance—One Central Character. There is a long list of the characters in Marlowe's play but remarkable is its central-figure. There are about 33 characters in the Doctor Faustus such as Pope, Lucifer, Belzebub, Mephistophilis, Good Angel, Evil Angel, The Seven Deadly Sins, An Old Man, Wagner, Robin, Ralph and so on. But all over, the whole story of the play moves around the main character, Faustus. The characters of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus are immortal in the history of English drama. The characters like Mephistophilis, Lucifer, Belzebub, and Wagner are the minor characters of the play but they are interesting and we remember them even after long gap of the study of the play. There is universal appeal in the characters of good and evil angels, and in the seven deadly sins. The character of Faustus is the representation of everyman. Undoubtedly, Marlowe has good art of the characterization.

### **Ending of the Doctor Faustus: most moving-scene of the Doctor Faustus**

The ending scene of The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is the last scene of the 15 scenes of the tragedy which is generally considered the most moving scene of the plot. Marlowe has divided the tragical story of the life and death of Doctor Faustus into V Acts and 15 Scenes, and out of these scenes the last scenes of the Act V are the most powerful and impressive in which the realization of Christ by the central-character is remarkable.

Fautus cries:

“Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,  
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!”<sup>12</sup>

It has shown in the previous scenes that Faustus does not follow the voice of conscience, Good Angel, but follows human desire, Evil Angel which proves the tragedy of Faustus. As the fateful day draws near, his conscience urges him to repent, but Mephistophilis reminds him of his contract and his responsibility not to offend Lucifer. When the clock strikes the hour, he utters a last heartbreaking plea to be saved from the approaching death.

### **There is victory of soul over human desire in the Doctor Faustus**

When the clock strikes the hour; he utters a last heartbreaking plea to be saved from the approaching death. He unfolds:

“O soul, be chang’d into little water-drops,  
And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found!”<sup>13</sup>

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus has the theme of the victory of soul over human desire. It is a truth that the hero of the play enjoyed very much for 24 years of his life under the power of the devils, but at last he cries before God to save his life. Faustus cries:

“Ah, half the hour is past! ’twill all be past anon.  
O God,  
If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,  
Yet for Christ’s sake,”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Renaissance spirit in the Doctor Faustus: Doctor Faustus is a child of Renaissance**

Marlowe’s The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is undoubtedly a child of Renaissance and almost all

the elements of the spirit of the movement are reflected in the play. The difference between Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus and its counterpart, in the “Faustbuch” underlines the influence of the Renaissance on the play. In Marlowe’s hero, we find reflected most of the chief characteristics of the Renaissance, such as “individualism”, “self-confidence”, “impatience with earthly limitations”, “a spirit of revolt”, and “love of beauty” and “learning”. The Doctor Faustus displays both, the best and the worst element of the Renaissance. A typical representative of the Renaissance, he deserves both—our admiration and our pity. On the whole, Marlowe’s The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus has the impact of the spirit of the renaissance. Faustus’ sense of individualism, love for power, learning, beauty, and impatience with earthly limitations made him the representative of a renaissance individual. Finally, it would not be wrong to claim that Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus is a child of renaissance.

### **Lust for power is the cause of the tragedy in the Doctor Faustus**

Marlowe’ The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus deals with the lust for power of the hero, Faustus. Herein, there is a great creed for the power in the hero, so he studies very much of almost all the branches of the study. He finds that nothing is important; therefore, making himself the most powerful like Omnipotent, he selects the black magic even at the rate of his soul. Faustus considers:  
“O, what a world of profit and delight,  
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence”.<sup>15</sup>

The whole story of the tragedy moves around the lust for “power”, “omnipotence”, and “honour” of the central tragic-figure of the tragedy, therefore, it is the Tragical History of Doctor Faustus.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Doctor Faustus: A Tragedy of Everyman**

Marlowe’s The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus is not only the tragic-story of Faustus but it is the tragedy of every man: conflict between good and bad ideas, good and evil angels. There two Angels are the representative of man’s two tendencies— one of the good and the rest is bad; one is constructive and another is destructive, the first is in favour of God and the second is in favour of devil.

The first represents soul, and the second, human desires and worldly pleasures. Whatever is described about Faustus, is common to everybody from many prospects. Faustus is a typical representative of the Renaissance people but he has universal appeal. The subject-matter of the drama is very clear as it deals with the lust for worldly pleasure and it is the reason of the tragedy of everyman in the world, and so with Faustus. Thus Faustus in the Doctor Faustus is a representative of everyman.

N.B.

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