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DOCTOR FAUSTUS: MORE THAN A ROMANTIC TRAGEDY

The plot about a deal with the devil is one of archetypal ones in the world culture. Whenever it is met, the text acquires a new philosophical dimension. Below described case is about Doctor Faustus, created by Christopher Marlowe in 1594. Previously known as a folk legend, it received a dramatic and then a literary interpretation. Thus, although the play focuses on a tragedy of a human life, it is obvious that its philosophical aspect is of primary importance too. The author explores the questions that have concerned philosophers for centuries: whether people can shape their life or it is predestined, whether power and knowledge can make one happy.

To begin with, the character of Doctor Faustus is rebellious, and it surely must have been especially controversial in the epoch when it was created. Yet, it would be also true to say that the author raises an important philosophical dilemma that people of Renaissance and Enlightenment must have had. The epoch was indeed a turning point in the history of civilization because it celebrated a transfer from gloomy Middle Ages to new hopes and ideals. The medieval culture, focused on religion and



stating that a person is small and helpless in the face of God, gave way to a more anthropocentric vision. This means that a human rather than God became the focus of art, philosophy and culture. The grandness of human beings and their enormous potential was what inspired thinkers and artists. So, being part of this epoch, Marlowe apparently had his perception of major philosophical issues. In Doctor Faustus he is far from being exalted about omnipotence of humans, instead he offers a warning about dangers that vanity of people can lead to. Naturally, he refers to freedom of philosophy and science, which were about to undermine the pillars of religious order, where God was the center of Universe. Many thinkers wanted more for people, they were eager to acquire secret knowledge that would make them rulers of the world. The truth about Faustus is that he “seeks the mastery and voluptuous pleasure that come from forbidden knowledge” (Christopher Marlowe 1023). Yet, as the author implies, any rebellion against God is in fact a deal with the devil who manipulates human vanity. Besides, he demonstrates that a person is not that free and omnipotence without God and that a soul is too high a price to pay for knowledge and power.

The primary reason why Faustus decides to turn to the supernatural is boredom. He is bored with his life because he believes that his current knowledge, vast as it is, is still confined to the territory that humanity stuck to for centuries. What he wants is to expand that territory and step on the land, which no one had ever stepped before. He loves challenge and danger, and he is not afraid of God’s punishment for his rebellion. Being a product of his epoch, he believes that a human is strong enough to rule their own life. Moreover, paradox as it may sound, Faustus is his epoch’s atheist, which is treated as cooperation with the devil. Throughout the

story unfolding, the author demonstrates what the consequences of wrong actions are and what the final price that the protagonist will pay is.

It would be true to say that a story of Faustus is more than a deductive religious parable about the necessity to obey to God and the danger of moral corruption. In fact, it is an allegory of a human's inner world, which has its own temptations, its demons and angels. So, one may interpret all the figures met by Faustus as particles of himself, which gives a new perspective to the analysis of the play. There is a theme of temptation, which refers the reader to the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve. The dilemma between happiness and knowledge is one of archetypal ones, as the Biblical parable confirms. The religious interpretation of the issue is that knowledge is dangerous and bitter, that it can ruin a person's life. Adam and Eve are tempted by a forbidden fruit, and the same happens with Doctor Faustus. He does not have a good reason for the superhuman opportunities that he acquires when he sells his soul to the devil through Mephistopheles, which could probably justify him. If he needed magic in order to make the world better, he would be treated as a savior of humanity, but his motives are petty and selfish. He enjoys power and ability to affect other people because he believes himself to be superior to them. His main flaw is not so much his thirst for knowledge but his malicious abuse of this knowledge and naïve vision of himself as equal to God.

There are a number of symbolic characters in the play that can be analyzed as Faustus' alter-egos. Mephistopheles who is a key figure to the plot can be in one way interpreted as an external figure, as the incarnation of the evil that a person meets daily. It is remarkable that this kind of evil

is far from the epic one usually presented in stories about Satan as a romantic villain. On the contrary, Mephistopheles embodies the petty annoying evil that is not overtly horrible but quite common to the world of humans. So, he is only a messenger of his master, Lucifer, who he serves to entice people. One can also interpret Mephistopheles as an archetypal character, which embodies an inner demon that can take power of a human soul. The struggle between the good and the evil angels reveals the same idea.

One more aspect about *Doctor Faustus* that is worth to be discussed is the author's approach to whether a shaky path chosen by the main character can be changed or not after he has taken it. This issue is closely related to the question if a person's fate is changeable or not. Indeed, this question is important for Faustus because after some time of rebellion he does not see as much pleasure in it as he is expected. This is why he cares if he is doomed forever or he can be forgiven by God and start from the very beginning. In fact, one of the reasons why he continues his union with the devil is because he believes that nothing can be changed.

FAUSTUS

Why, then, belike we must sin

And so consequently die.

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.

What doctrine call you this? Che serà, serà?

What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu!

(Marlowe 1.1.42-46)

Mephistopheles assures Faustus of this too, persuading him that he cannot change anything, so there is no option for him now. As the author ascribes this point of view to a demon, he makes the reader hesitate that this is true. Yet, he never gives one answer to the question that he asked in the play. There are moments when Faustus still thinks of salvation and suspects that there might be a way out, that God can eventually forgive him if he gives in to his will.

FAUSTUS

Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damned?

Canst thou not be saved?

What boots it, then, to think on God or heaven?

Away with such vain fancies, and despair.

Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub.

(Marlowe 2.1.1-5)

Yet, though he ponders on salvation as a philosophical category, he never takes any real steps in direction of God, besides the demons ensure that this is not going to happen. So, it might be true that Faustus' main fault is not the fact that he is tempted by the devil but that he does not trust God. It is worth remembering the episode from the Bible when Jesus Christ gives absolution to the criminal who repents and trusts in him. So, there is an everlasting philosophical debate what is primary in Christianity: virtue or faith.

Another aspect of the religious interpretation lies in the belief that a person is destined to pertain either to the dark or to the light side from

the moment he or she is born. Besides, some Christian thinkers insist on the fact that there is no evil that does not belong to God. In other words, this point of view treats the devil as part of God's plan, and he is unable to work on his own. There is an assumption that this is a part of universal order to have the polarities because they create harmony. Hence, God allows the devil to tempt some people in order to make them experience different sides of human existence more deeply.

Motivation of Faustus is a crucial theme for the play, as it can give a key to understanding the faults of human nature, implied by the author. The gift of the devil that does not leave him indifferent is power. Vanity makes people think that they can be godlike by turning other people into their puppets. This is what especially luring for Faustus, not even the riches of the world:

FAUSTUS

O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor and omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
but his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.
A sound magician is a demigod.

(Marlowe 1.1.52-59)



As can be seen from the quote, Faustus is delighted by the prospects open in front of him. Yet, he is not aware that he is not going to be omnipotent, that this is just an illusion compelled by Mephistopheles. One cannot have power when he is not free to choose, and Faustus is himself in power of the devil. He gets the benefits that are minor compared to his immortal soul, so he gradually returns to the boredom and indifference that he has at the beginning. Hence, the author suggests that small pleasures cannot substitute the bliss of truly spiritual life. Neither can knowledge, nor wealth nor power. It is too late when Faustus starts suspecting it and he never really takes his second thoughts seriously. This is why his death is inevitable in the end, as Marlowe is quite moralistic about his character, which should convey his message about the severe but fair justice. Yet, Marlowe demonstrates that power can be real temptation not only for rebels or criminals but also for people who should have been an essence of spirituality. Thus, he is quite critical about Roman Catholic Church, and namely its head Pope Adrian who is demonstrated as the one who abuses his power instead of being God's servant. Apparently, the political motives also played a role when Marlowe criticized the Pope, as he belonged to the English Church, which was not always positive about Catholics.

Speaking about Doctor Faustus, symbolism and allegory are important techniques for the author to explore his characters. Magic is both a theme and a perspective to have a look at how far people can go and what potential they have in this world. These potential gifts can be spiritual or supernatural, and Marlowe is interested in whether they coexist peacefully without ruining a person. "Dr. Faustus focuses, through the multifaceted symbol of magic, upon the central, underlying question of the limits of human nature, but its response to this question is equivocal:

Dr. Faustus simultaneously reveals and conceals the searching reflections of its author." (Mebane 114). His answer is most definitely "no" as he believes that practicing magic is a forbidden territory. In fact, the clash between science and magic is obvious from the very beginning, when Faustus expresses his dissatisfaction about the limitations of people's scope of knowledge. Practicing magic in contrast to being a scholar is thus points to the borderline between human and superhuman lies. Faustus is eager to expand this scope of knowledge, which is not a negative aspect until one thinks about his motivation. Indeed, it is why he does it which is a crucial element for understanding the point about his sin. The author believes that dissatisfaction with what the world offers at the moment is a key to a dangerous path that desires can make a person to take.

The critics point out that the genre of the play is not a traditional tragedy, as the author incorporates much irony and philosophy into the plot and implication. "The irony with which Marlowe habitually invests the downfalls of his protagonists is ...based on theological concepts of sin and damnation, and dramatically expressed in two major patterns of action: the repetitive pattern of moral choice leading to the alternative of spiritual destruction, and the pattern of contrast between Faustus' grand imaginative designs and the actual, vacuous accomplishments of his magical career". (Cole 191) The second point is indeed a significant one when thinking about the ruin of Faustus. The irony lies in the fact that a person's idea about his grandness is nothing than illusion. Instead of becoming the ruler of the world, Faustus ends up making petty tricks on the local peasants like a wandering circus magician. This inconsistency between illusion and reality is both tragic and ironic, which makes the story more layered and multidimensional than the canonic genre of

tragedy.

To conclude, it is worth saying that *Doctor Faustus* is in many ways an archetypal story about a scientist who breaks spiritual laws in order to reach more than is allowed for a mortal human. It has a common pattern of a person selling his soul to the devil in exchange for the gifts that seem attractive at the point of the deal, but later are believed to be vain. Marlowe explores a question that has been of interest to thinkers for centuries: whether human life is ruled by destiny or if there is a choice for a human. He does not give a clear answer to the question but he is certainly successful in raising the questions that are of universal concern. Undoubtedly, *Doctor Faustus* is more than a romantic tragedy of a person who wanted to rule the world and ended up in condemnation. Due to rich symbolism and allegory, the story has a peculiar philosophic layer, and because of the irony used by the author, interpretation can be manifold.

