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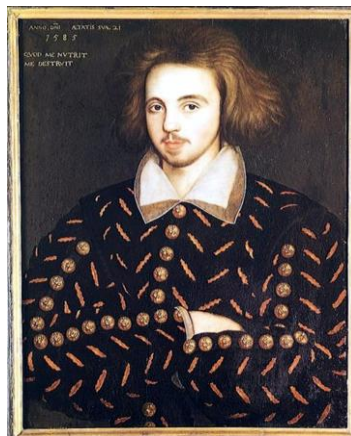
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Dr. Faustus – A Sermon against Atheism

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Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Marlowe

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Abstract

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Dr. Faustus, commonly referred to as *Dr. Faustus* is a play based upon the vicissitudes of life of a scholar from Wittenberg, Germany who sells his soul to the devil for power, knowledge, and sensual pleasures. Dr. Faustus is a rebellious character who shuns all the established conventions of his time and chooses to live a life of absolute voluptuousness and blasphemy. We can perceive Marlowe's gifted writing talent, which he has used in creating a gigantic character of Dr. Faustus. Bold and audacious, rebellious and adventurer at a time, Dr. Faustus is incomparable in the whole bulk of English Literature in his appearance, gesture, and genius. He makes a 24 years agreement with the devil to enjoy limitless power and infinite liberty to fulfill his satanic wishes without a prick of consciousness. Marlowe has presented him as a person who is afire with burning passions to achieve all unachievable. Absolutely unaware of the realities that he is inviting to catastrophe and absolute catastrophe to him and nothing else, he indulges himself in a life of sensual pleasures.

This paper deals with the purpose for which the play might have been written. An analysis of the character of Dr. Faustus and the consequences of his actions are discussed.

The Renaissance Age

In *Dr. Faustus*, Marlowe has projected a true spirit of the Renaissance era and it is also unignorable that Marlowe himself was a complete package of that time – Renaissance.

According to the dictionary definition, the word *Renaissance* means in general any rebirth or reawakening. "The term is specifically applied to the widespread cultural revival, which marks the division between the so-called 'Dark Ages' and the modern world. In fact, it began in the fourteenth century in Italy and this new wave gradually started spreading over Western Europe and England in the following two centuries ... The main ingredients of this new spirit were individualism and worldliness; and these two traits found manifestation in many forms such as its great yearning for knowledge and learning without fetters, its love of beauty

and hankering after sensual pleasures of life, its brave spirit of adventure and its sky-high ambition and supreme lust for power and pelf in this world” (Famous Publications, 2008)

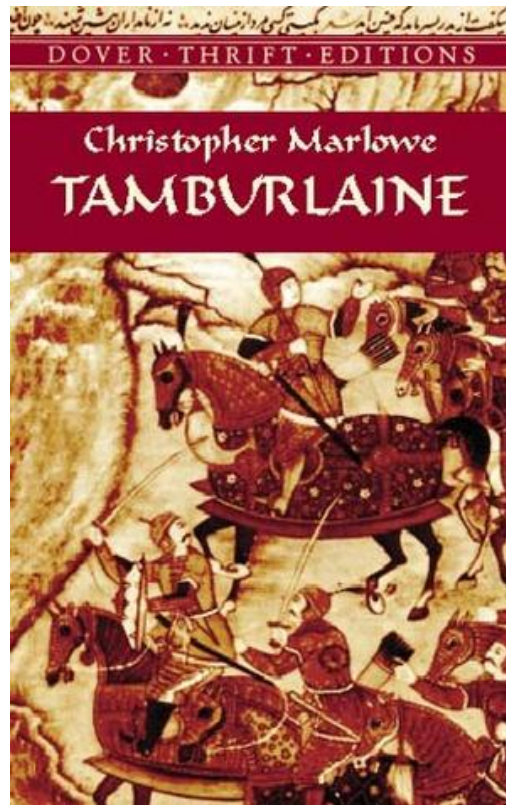
Marlowe’s Life (1564-1593) at a Glance

Marlowe was born in Canterbury, England less than three months before the birth of Shakespeare. He went to King’s School and then joined a college in Cambridge, where he received heterodox views on religion. After college, he joined some kind of secret service agency as an agent and traveled abroad also in this capacity. In 1586, he settled in London and soon joined the Lord Admiral’s Company of players. It seems quite possible that his career as a dramatist must have begun soon after his career as an actor. On May 30th, 1593, he was stabbed in an inn by a shady secret-service agent. Thus, sadly his career as a dramatist suddenly ended due to his death at the age of twenty-nine years and three months (Princiss, 1993).

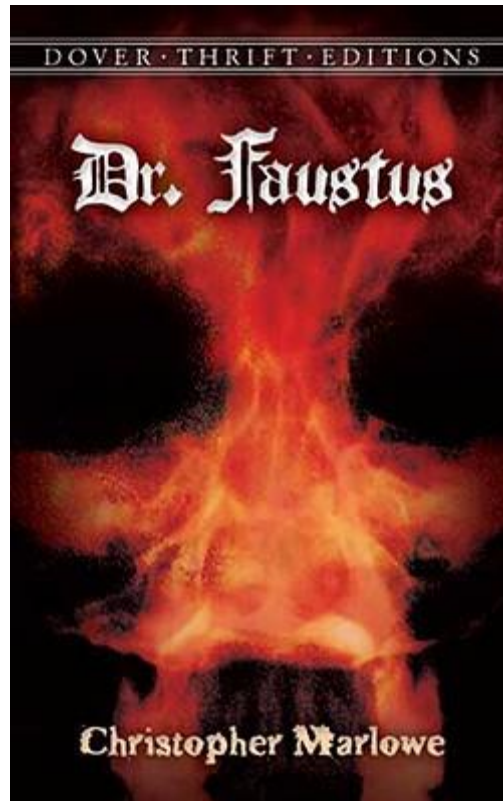
Though Marlowe lived for just 29 years, even in this limited period of life, he lived a life to its fullest with all its pleasures by all means. His only six but splendid plays are enough to make him immortal in the world of literature. He established blank verse as a creative form of dramatic expression. He is the predecessor of Shakespeare, thus he is credited to pave the way for Shakespearean drama in the Elizabethan age. Critics are unanimous in saying,

“If Marlowe had never written or lived, Shakespeare would not have been the same Shakespeare” (Famous Publications, 2008).

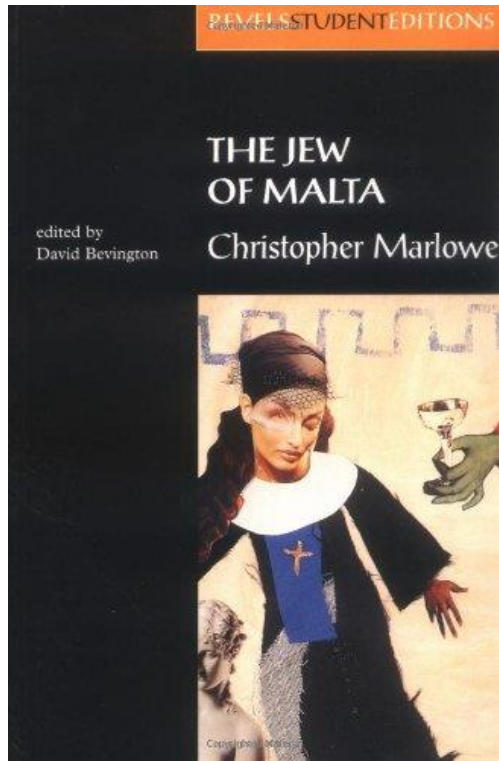
Influence of Renaissance on Marlowe’s Characters



Uncountable wealth, infinite knowledge, and limitless freedom to do anything fair and unfair had been the most favorite possessions not only of Marlowe's all mighty heroes but also of Marlowe himself. An insatiable lust of wealth and power didn't let his protagonists stay on the right path and they were determined to destroy every moral convention coming in their ways. His play “**Tamburlaine**” tells the story of a Scythian shepherd who dreams of the world conquest and achieves his aspirations magnificently. This is the story of an invincible human will, which ends with grim tragedy.



“**Dr. Faustus**” is as lustful and insatiable as Tamburlaine, who sells his soul to devil in his eagerness for the acquisition of universal knowledge. Faustus meets his tragic downfall due to his fate written by himself. “**The Jew of Malta**” due to his avaricious dreams of wealth invites his catastrophic end to him. These characters ‘Machiavellian’ in nature are unscrupulous, cruel in power, and are destined to go astray due to their deeds. “In all these illustrated Marlowe’s individualistic conception of tragedy, the classical Greek conception modified by the Renaissance spirit, the conception which portrays the struggle between the overweening soul, typically Renaissance in its insatiable ambition, and the limitations which it seeks to overcome (P 2).



The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus

The play starts with a scene where we find Faustus sitting in his study room and pondering over all worldly subjects; he wants to study now. After receiving his doctorate in Theology, he is still unsatisfied with his level of knowledge. He finds himself in a fix in deciding as what to study now. He thinks of law, medicine, science, and so on, but disregards all in a derogatory way. After rejecting all, he thinks of necromancy to study in order to gain limitless power and knowledge. The idea of black magic excites him as Faustus says,

“A sound magician is a mighty God” (Act 1, Scene 1)

A Deal with the Devil

In the moment of excitement, he makes a deal with the devil by offering his soul after twenty-four years and during this period; he is granted the opportunity to enjoy all worldly and sensual pleasures.

“O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: (Act 1, Scene 1)

Real-Life Clever Creation

The character of Faustus is a real-life clever creation of Marlowe and the play of Dr. Faustus has so much to offer to the reader even after four centuries. It provokes us, stills us, stirs us and startles us. Critics have been compelled to think about Marlowe’s objectives in portraying such destructive-natured characters who presents themselves as iconoclast. Faustus also throws the gauntlet to the established creeds of his time and the very destruction brings his final damnation. His desire to get all undesirable makes us his life agonized and miserable this much that in the last few moments he begs mercy, but all in vain. His efforts to save himself from devil prove abortive.

Dr. Faustus – A Tragedy of Man’s Aspirations

Dr. Faustus is Marlowe’s on man show and is dominated by overwhelmed passion of a chief character of Faustus. The play raised the questions of man’s aspirations and limitations in this universe. Marlowe gives full freedom to his protagonists to go to an extreme to fulfill their

wishes. His protagonists' achievements fascinate the readers and put his heroes in an ecstasy. Faustus experiences the same ecstasy; he forgot all about the deadline of his agreement. The back and forth visits of good and bad angels imply clearly that God grants the opportunity to repent to everyone, but it depends upon man whether he avails it or ignores it. Faustus also ignores this chance of redemption; thus is himself accountable for his downfall. His lust and avarice don't let him avail the chances of repentance.

According to an eminent critic, "Marlowe himself was saturated with the spirit of the Renaissance and so he enlivened his heroes with all its robust and fascinating characters so much so that his titanic heroes became the true embodiments of the Renaissance dreams and ideals. This is revealed in Tamburlaine's pursuit of military and political power, in Jew of Malta's aspiration toward wealth as an ultimate end in the most powerful and captivating way, and in Faustus's supreme quest for the ultimate power through knowledge throwing overboard all the moral and ethical principles" (Osborne, P 267).

Dr. Faustus – Internal and Tragic Conflict

Marlowe's contribution to English and/or Elizabethan drama is great and manifold. He is at his best to show the inner conflict of the character of Faustus who struggles to survive in the final moments of his life. An introduction of this internal or spiritual conflict in the mind of his proud and ambitious hero in Dr. Faustus is his greatest achievement.

Nicoll has rightly observed:

"In Dr. Faustus, Marlowe attempted something new – the delineation of struggle within the mind of the chief figure. This struggle is certainly somewhat primitive in its expression but it is a

foretaste of those ‘inward characters’ towards which dramas in its development inevitably tends. Faustus in this respect is unquestionably the greatest tragic figure in sixteenth century literature outside the work of Shakespeare” (P 65).

Discarding of Ethical Values

Dr. Faustus is a rigid incarnation of the bold and audacious spirits of Renaissance. As deeply fascinated by the attractions of his age, Marlowe portrays the character of Faustus, who reveals an indomitable longing for power and pelf, a craving for materialistic and sensual pleasures of life, and an extreme revolt against conventional and religious doctrines of Christian theology. Herein is hidden his eternal damnation as he gives free reins to his aspirations and ignores his limitations as a man in this universe. A sense of atheism and skepticism can be felt in the character of Faustus as he talks of divinity in disparaging terms. He asserts,

“Divinity is the basest of the three”

Erudition and Scholarship – of No Avail

Regardless of all his erudition and scholarship, Dr. Faustus does not choose his path wisely and his abnormal pride and presumption present him as a person who boldly asserts his individualism and raises the standards of revolt against the medieval restrictions on the mind of man. His aspiration to venture into unknown depths of knowledge finally leads to him to discard God and disobey all the Christian creeds.

“Divinity adieu!

These metaphysics of magicians

And necromantic books are heavenly.” (Act 1, Scene 1)

Final Moments of Faustus

Dr. Faustus is a heart-rending story of a meteoric rise and fall of a crestfallen protagonist by a mighty pen of Christopher Marlowe. By selling his soul to the devil he lives a blasphemous life full of sensual pleasures for twenty-four years. Of course, there is an inner struggle and Faustus is at war with his conscious as good and evil angels visit him and his destiny wants to give him a chance to survive but worldly pleasures allure him so much that he surrenders himself out and out to the charms of that life. And what happens to this great agnostic and egotist of his time who wants to unravel all the mysteries of the universe. By the time of the final hour, Faustus has realized that his sins are unpardonable and he has no way to escape. Before the devil snatches away his soul to the burning hell and deprives him of his life, the pangs of an agonized soul find an expression in the final soliloquy of Faustus:

“My God, my God, look not so fierce to me!

Alders and serpents, let me breathe a while!

Ugly hell, gape not: come not Lucifer:

I'll burn my books: Ah, Mephistophilis”. (Act 5, Scene 3)

Critics believed that Marlowe has projected himself in his towering heroes to give vent to his feelings. Deep and profound is the effect of Renaissance on Marlowe and he is everywhere in his for great tragedies, Tamburlaine, Dr. Faustus, Jew of Malta, and Edward 11. What his protagonist strive to achieve, these were his dreams also. On the surface level, Dr. Faustus is play of audacious adventures, rebellious desires, and passionate actions and Faustus is a protagonist

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who prefers to indulge him in the voluptuousness of life by ignoring impending catastrophe. But on the deeper level, it is a play that reminds human beings their limitations in this universe.

Marlowe delivers this message through the mournful monody of the chorus.

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,

And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough

That sometime grew within this learned man.

Faustus is gone regard his hellish fall,

Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,

Only to wonder at unlawful things,

Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits

To practice more than heavenly power permits. (Act 5, Scene 3)

A Sermon against Atheism

Notwithstanding a bohemian and boisterous life, the miserable plights of all of his protagonists and particularly Faustus' frantic appeals of salvation from Christ at the time of his approaching death seem to overshadow these doubts that Marlowe was an atheist at heart.

Marlowe presents his heroes hankering after worldly pleasures; he does not hesitate in showing their downfall and decay on the worst level.

Is Marlowe an Atheist?

As a matter of fact, Dr. Faustus is a sermon against atheism delivered by a confirmed atheist Christopher Marlowe who does not show the victory of his evil protagonist in the race of life. The greatest irony of the play lies in the fact that Marlowe, who was a true product of Renaissance, shows the victory of virtue in the race of good and evil. It seems that despite having the label of atheist, Marlowe must have known that turning away from God and godly things is catastrophic and leads human beings to the way of doom and damnation. The end of the play reveals the influence of Reformation on Marlowe. It seems in spite of his all great achievements, Marlowe, like Faustus, ultimately realized that nothing could help to save the soul of an agonized person who has lost the time to repent and to surrender the soul to devil is the ultimate destiny as it was cut off from the rich natural resources of belief and faith.

Osborne has rightly said:

“The descriptions of Faustus’s repentance, despair, and mental anguish are among the most vivid and poignant parts of the play. It is, of course, possible to suppose that Marlowe has passed through a stage of youthful skepticism in religion and with a sounder and deeper faith he had come to the knowledge of repentance. Nor indeed is he ever the pure scoffer. It is certain that that author of ‘Faustus’ must himself have walked some way along the path of religious doubts and must have known the sufferings attendant upon that journey” (P 198).

That’s why without a least hesitation, Marlowe presents a grim tragedy replete with poignancy and shows a premature downfall of his great scholar with great realism.

In this scenario, Hudson has rightly said.

“No finer sermon than Marlow’s Faustus ever came from the pulpit”

Faustus is gone, regard his hellish fall.

What a deterioration of a great scholar of Wittenberg presented by a confirmed atheist –
Christopher Marlowe.

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