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The Fear of Death and the Search for Immortality: An Existential Reading of *Doctor Faustus*

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ABSTRACT

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a famous Renaissance tragedy that explores human ambition, knowledge, power, and the limitations of human life. The central character, Doctor Faustus, is a highly educated scholar who is not satisfied with ordinary human knowledge and achievements. He wants to gain unlimited power, enjoy worldly pleasures, and escape the limitations of human existence. His desire for supernatural power leads him to make a contract with Lucifer by selling his soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistopheles. However, behind his ambition lies a deeper human desire: the wish to overcome death and achieve immortality. This article examines the character of Doctor Faustus through an existential perspective, focusing on his fear of death, desire for immortality, individual freedom, moral responsibility, and psychological anxiety. Drawing on the philosophical ideas of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger, the article explores how Faustus struggles with the meaning of human existence and the reality of death. Through a close reading of important dialogues and dramatic situations, it argues that Faustus's tragedy is not simply the result of his desire for magical

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power but also his inability to accept the natural limitations of human life. His final speech reveals the helplessness of a man who once dreamed of unlimited power but ultimately fails to control even the final moments of his existence.

Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is one of the important tragedies of English Renaissance literature. The play presents the story of a highly educated scholar who wants to achieve unlimited knowledge, power, and pleasure. Faustus is dissatisfied with the ordinary subjects of learning, such as philosophy, medicine, law, and theology. He believes that these subjects cannot fulfil his dreams. Therefore, he turns towards magic and supernatural powers in the hope of becoming more powerful than ordinary human beings.

At the beginning of the play, Faustus appears as an ambitious intellectual who wants to explore the unknown. He does not want to remain within the limits of human knowledge. He dreams of controlling nature, gaining wealth, and enjoying a life beyond ordinary human experience. However, his ambition gradually becomes dangerous because he begins to ignore morality, religion, and human responsibility.

One of the most interesting aspects of Faustus's character is his relationship with death. Although he desires unlimited power, he cannot escape the reality of human mortality. His agreement with Lucifer gives him twenty-four years of worldly pleasure and supernatural service, but it cannot give him eternal life or freedom from death. As the end of his life approaches, he becomes increasingly frightened and helpless.

The fear of death is a universal human experience. Every human being knows that life is temporary, but people often try to avoid thinking about death. Some seek wealth, others search for fame, knowledge, power, or religious comfort. Faustus represents this human desire to overcome the limitations of life. His search for supernatural power can therefore be understood as a search for a kind of immortality.

This article examines *Doctor Faustus* through an existential perspective. Existential philosophy gives importance to human existence, freedom, individual choices, responsibility, anxiety, and the awareness of death. The philosophical ideas of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Heidegger provide useful approaches to understanding Faustus's psychological and spiritual struggles.

Although Marlowe wrote the play long before modern existentialism developed as a philosophical movement, an existential reading helps us understand the deeper struggles of Faustus's character. The article

argues that Faustus's tragedy comes from his inability to accept the limitations of human existence. His desire to escape death leads him towards a decision that finally destroys his freedom, peace, and spiritual life.

Doctor Faustus and the Desire to Go Beyond Human Limitations

At the beginning of the play, Faustus is introduced as a learned scholar who has achieved a high level of education. He has studied different branches of knowledge, but he is not satisfied with his achievements. He wants something greater than what ordinary education can provide.

While thinking about his future, Faustus rejects the traditional subjects of learning and becomes interested in magic. He believes that supernatural knowledge will give him unlimited power.

He expresses his ambition through the following words:

"These metaphysics of magicians,

And necromantic books are heavenly"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 51).

These words show his attraction towards magical knowledge. He considers magic a way to achieve extraordinary power. He wants to become more than an ordinary human being and control things that are beyond human ability. Faustus's ambition becomes even clearer when he declares:

"A sound magician is a demi-god"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 52).

This statement is important because it reveals his desire to rise above the natural position of human beings. He does not simply want to become a better scholar; he wants to possess the power of a god. The word "god" suggests his desire for complete control, independence, and authority.

From an existential perspective, this ambition reflects the human desire to create a life beyond ordinary limitations. Human beings are limited by time, physical weakness, illness, and death. However, Faustus refuses to accept these limitations. He believes that supernatural knowledge can help him overcome the ordinary conditions of human life.

His desire is also connected with the spirit of Renaissance humanism. During the Renaissance, people became increasingly interested in individual achievement, education, scientific discovery, and human potential. Faustus represents this spirit of intellectual curiosity. However, he takes the desire for knowledge to an extreme level. Instead of using knowledge for the benefit of humanity, he wants power mainly for personal satisfaction.

His ambition therefore creates a conflict between intellectual development and moral responsibility. He wants to become powerful but does not think seriously about the consequences of his actions.

The opening soliloquy also shows that Faustus is dissatisfied with the limitations of traditional learning. He wants to move beyond what he has already achieved. However, his desire for unlimited knowledge gradually becomes a desire for unlimited control over life and death.

The Fear of Death and the Search for Immortality

The desire to escape death is one of the central ideas that can be explored through Faustus's character. Human beings often dream of living longer because they are afraid of losing their lives, relationships, achievements, and experiences. Faustus also wants to escape the limitations of ordinary human existence.

His agreement with Lucifer appears to offer him an opportunity to enjoy a powerful and extraordinary life. He exchanges his soul for twenty-four years of service from Mephistopheles. During this period, he expects to enjoy magical power, wealth, knowledge, and worldly pleasures.

However, the agreement does not actually provide immortality. It only gives him a limited period of supernatural assistance. Faustus seems to misunderstand the difference between enjoying extraordinary powers and achieving eternal life.

This becomes an important weakness in his character. He wants to control everything, but he cannot control time. He can perform magical tricks, travel to different places, and satisfy his temporary desires, but he cannot stop the movement of life towards death.

The twenty-four-year agreement becomes a constant reminder of his approaching end. Although Faustus initially considers the contract an opportunity for unlimited enjoyment, the agreement gradually becomes a source of anxiety. His future is no longer open because he has already fixed an ending for himself.

An important moment occurs when Faustus asks Mephistopheles about the nature of hell. Mephistopheles replies:

"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 58)

This statement provides a deeper understanding of the meaning of death and spiritual suffering in the play. Mephistopheles explains that hell is not simply a physical location. It is also a condition of separation from God. Even when he is away from the physical place of hell, he continues to experience spiritual suffering.

Faustus, however, does not take this warning seriously. He continues to believe that he can enjoy supernatural power without suffering any serious consequences. His inability to understand Mephistopheles's experience reveals his limited understanding of human existence.

This scene also suggests that the fear of death is not only a fear of physical disappearance. It can also be connected with the fear of losing spiritual peace, identity, and the possibility of salvation.

Faustus wants to escape death, but he does not understand that his search for unlimited power may bring a different kind of suffering. His tragedy begins when he mistakes temporary pleasure for permanent freedom.

Existential Anxiety: Kierkegaard's Understanding of Fear and Despair

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical ideas provide an important way to understand Faustus's inner struggles. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard discusses anxiety as a condition connected with human freedom and the possibilities of choice. Human beings experience anxiety because they are free to make decisions, but they cannot always know what those decisions will bring.

Faustus's decision to sell his soul can be understood through this idea. He knows that his agreement with Lucifer is dangerous, but he is attracted by the possibilities of supernatural power. He wants to experience something beyond ordinary human life.

His anxiety becomes visible in his repeated struggle between repentance and continued sin. The Good Angel and Evil Angel represent the two opposing directions of his mind. The Good Angel encourages him to turn towards God, while the Evil Angel encourages him to continue following his desires.

This conflict reveals that Faustus is not completely satisfied with his decision. He wants supernatural power, but he also fears the spiritual consequences of obtaining it.

In Act 2, Scene 3, Faustus experiences a moment of serious spiritual conflict. He thinks about repentance but also doubts whether he can receive forgiveness. His statement captures this divided condition:

"I do repent, and yet I do despair"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 104).

These words reveal the psychological condition of a man who is caught between hope and hopelessness. The word "repent" suggests that he still wants to return to the path of goodness. However, the word "despair" shows that he has lost confidence in the possibility of forgiveness.

This is an important moment because it demonstrates that Faustus's suffering begins long before his physical death. His mind is already disturbed by the consequences of his decision.

Kierkegaard's understanding of despair is also useful here. In *The Sickness unto Death*, he examines despair as a condition in which an individual struggles with the relationship between the self, freedom, and the power that establishes human existence. Faustus's despair can be interpreted as his refusal to accept his human condition and his spiritual dependence.

He wants to become completely independent, but he cannot escape his relationship with God, morality, and mortality. His desire to control everything creates an inner conflict that he cannot resolve.

Thus, Faustus's fear is not merely the fear of physical death. It is also the fear of losing the possibility of spiritual restoration.

Freedom and Responsibility: An Existential Reading through Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy provides another important perspective for understanding Faustus's character. Sartre gives importance to individual freedom and personal responsibility. According to his existential philosophy, human beings make choices and become responsible for the consequences of those choices.

Although Sartre developed his philosophy centuries after Marlowe, his ideas can be used to examine Faustus's decisions.

At the beginning of the play, Faustus believes that magic will make him completely free. He imagines that supernatural power will allow him to do whatever he wants. He wants to become the master of his own world.

However, his decision to sell his soul creates a new form of dependence. Instead of becoming completely free, he becomes dependent on Lucifer and Mephistopheles. His freedom becomes limited by the agreement he has made.

This situation reveals a contradiction in his character. Faustus wants independence, but he makes a decision that places his future under the control of supernatural powers.

Sartre's idea of responsibility helps explain this contradiction. Human freedom is not simply the ability to satisfy every desire. It also involves accepting responsibility for one's decisions.

Faustus repeatedly receives opportunities to reconsider his actions. The Good Angel reminds him of the possibility of salvation, and Mephistopheles explains the suffering associated with hell. However, Faustus continues to follow his ambition.

His behaviour can also be examined through Sartre's concept of bad faith. Bad faith refers to a form of self-deception in which an individual avoids accepting personal freedom and responsibility.

Faustus often behaves as though his future is already decided and nothing can be changed. At times, he blames supernatural forces or believes that repentance is no longer possible. This attitude allows him to avoid fully accepting the responsibility for his earlier decision.

However, the play also presents the influence of Lucifer and Mephistopheles, which makes Faustus's freedom complicated. He is tempted and manipulated, but he is also an individual who makes repeated choices.

His tragedy therefore comes from the conflict between his desire for freedom and his failure to use that freedom responsibly.

Time, Mortality, and Heidegger's Concept of Being-Towards-Death

Martin Heidegger's philosophy provides one of the strongest theoretical approaches to the fear of death in *Doctor Faustus*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains that human existence is closely connected with time and the awareness of death. He uses the idea of "being-towards-death" to describe how the awareness of our own mortality shapes our understanding of existence.

Death is not simply an event that happens at the end of life. The knowledge that life is limited influences the way people make decisions and understand their existence.

This idea is particularly relevant to Faustus. His entire life after signing the contract is controlled by the knowledge that he has only twenty-four years left. Although he enjoys supernatural powers, he cannot forget that his time is limited.

At the beginning, Faustus sees the twenty-four years as a long period of enjoyment. He believes that he has gained enough time to fulfil his desires. However, as the end approaches, the meaning of time changes.

The final scene presents this change very clearly. Faustus becomes increasingly anxious as the clock approaches midnight. He cries:

"Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 110).

This line is one of the most important expressions of his fear of death. He asks the heavenly bodies to stop moving because he wants to prevent the arrival of the final moment.

The phrase "ever-moving spheres" represents the continuous movement of time and the natural order of the universe. Faustus knows that he cannot control this movement, but he desperately wishes to stop it. He also says:

"The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 110).

These words express his growing awareness of mortality. Time continues to move regardless of his wishes. The clock becomes a symbol of the unavoidable ending of human life.

Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death helps us understand why this moment is so powerful. Faustus finally becomes fully aware of his own mortality. The possibility of death is no longer an abstract idea; it has become an immediate reality.

However, unlike an individual who accepts mortality and uses this awareness to understand the meaning of life, Faustus responds with desperation. He wants to escape death rather than understand his existence through its limitations.

His final suffering reveals the difference between possessing supernatural power and having control over one's own life.

The Inner Conflict between Faith, Reason, and Human Desire

One of the most interesting features of Faustus's character is his inner conflict. Although he makes an agreement with Lucifer, he is never completely free from religious fear and moral doubt.

Throughout the play, he experiences moments when he thinks about repentance. The Good Angel and Evil Angel represent the opposing forces working within his mind.

The Good Angel encourages him to think about heaven and divine mercy, while the Evil Angel encourages him to follow his worldly desires. Their repeated appearance gives a dramatic form to Faustus's internal struggle.

This conflict shows that Faustus is not completely satisfied with his decision. A part of him wants to return to his earlier spiritual position, but another part continues to follow his ambition and pleasure.

The conflict becomes particularly serious when Faustus thinks about the possibility of repentance. He wants forgiveness, but he also believes that he has committed an unforgivable sin.

His spiritual confusion is connected with his fear of death. As long as death appears distant, he can continue to enjoy his supernatural powers. However, when death becomes immediate, his religious doubts become stronger.

His character therefore reveals a psychological struggle between human desire and spiritual responsibility.

From an existential perspective, this conflict also raises the question of whether a person can find meaning in life without accepting responsibility for the choices that shape it.

Faustus attempts to separate pleasure from responsibility. He wants to enjoy life without considering its moral consequences. However, his final experience shows that such separation is impossible.

The Final Hour: Fear, Regret, and the Reality of Human Mortality

The final scene of *Doctor Faustus* is the most powerful representation of the fear of death. As midnight approaches, Faustus becomes completely helpless. He understands that the time given to him has ended and that the consequences of his agreement are about to become real.

His earlier confidence disappears. The man who once wanted to become powerful like a god now begs for more time.

He desperately wishes that the final hour would not arrive. He imagines that he could escape death if time stopped or if the natural order of the universe changed.

His fear becomes more emotional when he imagines the possibility of divine forgiveness:

"O, I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?"

(Marlowe, 2005, *p. 110).*

These words reveal his final struggle between hope and despair. Even at the last moment, he wants to reach God, but he feels that supernatural forces are pulling him away.

The line is important because it shows that Faustus has not completely lost his desire for salvation. He still wants to escape the punishment that he believes is waiting for him.

His desperation becomes even stronger when he imagines the blood of Christ appearing in heaven:

"See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 110).

This image suggests his final desire for divine mercy. He understands that salvation is still meaningful to him, even though he has spent much of his life ignoring religious warnings. He then expresses his desperation through the following words:

"One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my Christ!"

(Marlowe, *2005,* p. 110).

The reference to a single drop of Christ's blood reveals how desperately Faustus wants forgiveness. He no longer desires magical power, wealth, or worldly pleasure. He wants only one opportunity to save his soul.

This is a significant change in his character. Earlier, he wanted to become a powerful figure who could control the world. Now, he wishes to receive mercy from a power greater than himself.

The contrast between his earlier ambition and final helplessness makes the ending deeply tragic. He also cries:

"I'll burn my books!—Ah, Mephostophilis!"

(Marlowe, 2005, p. 111).

The books that once represented his ambition, knowledge, and desire for supernatural power now become symbols of his regret.

His wish to burn them suggests that he wants to reject the path that brought him to destruction. However, his realization comes too late.

His final speech demonstrates the complete collapse of his earlier confidence. He once believed that knowledge and magic could make him almost equal to God, but he finally discovers that he cannot escape death.

The ending therefore presents mortality as a reality that no amount of worldly power can overcome.

The Illusion of Immortality and the Failure of Worldly Pleasure

Another important aspect of Faustus's tragedy is the failure of worldly pleasure to provide lasting satisfaction.

During his twenty-four years, Faustus uses his magical powers for different activities. He travels, performs tricks, entertains rulers, and satisfies his curiosity. However, these experiences do not bring him the greatness that he originally expected.

He begins by imagining that supernatural power will transform human life. He believes that he will gain unlimited knowledge and authority. However, much of his magical activity becomes ordinary entertainment.

For example, his appearance before the Emperor and his tricks involving historical figures show that his supernatural abilities are often used for amusement rather than meaningful achievements.

This creates a gap between his original ambition and his actual activities. He wants to become a godlike figure, but he gradually becomes a performer who entertains others.

This contrast is important because it reveals the emptiness of his search for power. He receives supernatural abilities but does not use them to achieve a meaningful purpose.

From an existential perspective, this failure can be connected with the problem of meaning in human life. Power and pleasure cannot automatically give existence a meaningful direction. An individual must understand what is valuable and take responsibility for the way life is lived.

Faustus fails to find such meaning. His search for immortality becomes an endless pursuit of temporary satisfaction.

His tragedy therefore suggests that the desire to escape death may prevent people from understanding the value of the limited time they actually possess.

Faustus as a Symbol of the Human Condition

Faustus can be understood as a symbol of the wider human condition. His desires are not entirely unusual because many people dream of becoming successful, powerful, famous, and free from suffering.

What makes Faustus different is the extreme nature of his ambition. He does not simply want to improve his life. He wants to overcome the natural boundaries of human existence.

His story reflects the conflict between human possibility and human limitation. People want to live forever, but they know that life is temporary. They want complete freedom, but they are responsible for their choices. They want unlimited knowledge, but human understanding always has limits. Faustus represents these contradictions in a dramatic form.

His final fear also reminds readers that death is not only a physical experience but an important part of human existence. The awareness of mortality can make people question the meaning of their lives and the value of their decisions.

Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death helps explain this aspect of the play. Faustus becomes increasingly aware of his limited existence when the final hour approaches. However, he has spent most of his life trying to escape the very condition that gives human life its urgency and seriousness.

His tragedy is therefore not simply that he dies. Every human being must face death. His tragedy is that he spends his life pursuing power without understanding the importance of responsibility, moral awareness, and meaningful existence.

Discussion: Is Faustus a Victim of Death or a Victim of His Own Choices?

An important question in understanding Faustus's character is whether he is a victim of supernatural forces or a victim of his own decisions.

Throughout the play, Lucifer and Mephistopheles influence his actions. They encourage him to continue along the path of sin and create an atmosphere of temptation and fear.

However, Faustus also has opportunities to change his direction. The Good Angel repeatedly reminds him of the possibility of salvation. Mephistopheles himself explains the suffering of hell. Despite these warnings, Faustus continues to follow his desires.

Therefore, his tragedy cannot be explained only through the influence of the devil. His own ambition, pride, confusion, and failure to accept responsibility also contribute to his downfall.

Sartre's philosophy of freedom and responsibility helps us understand this aspect of the character. Faustus makes decisions, and these decisions shape his future. Even when he feels trapped, he continues to struggle with the possibility of choosing another path.

At the same time, the play presents a Christian understanding of sin, repentance, and divine judgement. This religious framework must be considered alongside the existential interpretation.

Faustus is therefore a complicated character. He is ambitious but insecure, intelligent but unwise, powerful but helpless, and confident but deeply afraid.

His fear of death becomes the final result of a life spent searching for something that human beings cannot completely control.

In a broader sense, Faustus represents the human struggle against mortality. People often try to overcome the fear of death through achievements, wealth, knowledge, and power. However, these things cannot make human life permanent.

Marlowe presents this truth through the tragic experience of Faustus. His character reminds us that the desire to live beyond human limitations may become destructive when it is not guided by wisdom and moral understanding.

Conclusion

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* presents the tragic story of a man who wants to overcome the limitations of human existence. Faustus searches for unlimited knowledge, supernatural power, and worldly pleasure because he is not satisfied with an ordinary human life. However, his agreement with Lucifer does not give him true freedom or immortality. Instead, it brings fear, regret, and spiritual suffering.

The fear of death becomes most visible in the final scene, when Faustus realizes that his twenty-four years have come to an end. His desperate wish to stop time, reach God, and escape his final punishment reveals the helplessness of human beings before mortality.

An existential reading of the play shows that Faustus's tragedy is closely connected with human freedom, individual choices, responsibility, anxiety, and the awareness of death. Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety and despair helps explain his spiritual conflict, Sartre's ideas of freedom and responsibility reveal the consequences of his decisions, and Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death helps explain his final awareness of mortality.

Ultimately, Faustus's tragedy is not simply that he makes a contract with the devil. It is also that he spends his life trying to escape the limitations of human existence without understanding the value of the life he already possesses. He wants to control the world but fails to control his own desires and fears.

The play reminds readers that human life is limited and that no amount of worldly power can completely overcome death. It also suggests that knowledge and ambition must be guided by wisdom, responsibility, and moral understanding. Faustus's tragic end teaches us that the desire to become more than human can sometimes lead to the loss of what makes us human.

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