

Ambition Misguided: Black Magic and the Neglect of Knowledge in Doctor Faustus

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Abstract:

In *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe primarily emphasizes black magic as the central driving force of the drama, while the theme of intellectual curiosity or thirst for knowledge receives comparatively less serious treatment. Although Faustus begins as a brilliant scholar dissatisfied with traditional disciplines such as logic, medicine, law, and theology, his dissatisfaction quickly transforms into an obsession with necromancy. The play devotes significant attention to the rituals of summoning spirits, the pact with Lucifer, and the supernatural powers Faustus gains. These elements dominate the dramatic structure and create a spectacle of magic, devils, and illusions.

Rather than presenting a sustained exploration of Renaissance humanism or the noble pursuit of knowledge, Marlowe portrays Faustus's ambition as misguided and sinful. Faustus does not use his magical powers for genuine intellectual advancement or meaningful discovery; instead, he performs trivial tricks, seeks personal pleasure, and indulges in entertainment. His powers are often reduced to comic episodes, suggesting that black magic leads not to enlightenment but to moral and spiritual decay. The tragic ending reinforces the moral lesson that forbidden knowledge pursued through dark means results in damnation.

Keywords: Renaissance Humanism, Necromancy, Intellectual Hubris, Overreaching Ambition, Tragic Hero, Forbidden Knowledge

Introduction:

Doctor Faustus is one of the greatest tragic plays written by Christopher Marlowe during the Renaissance period. The play presents the story of Doctor Faustus, a highly learned scholar who becomes dissatisfied with traditional branches of knowledge such as philosophy, medicine, law, and theology. Instead of continuing his academic studies, he turns to black magic and makes a pact with Lucifer in exchange for supernatural powers.

Although the play begins with Faustus expressing a strong desire for unlimited knowledge and power, the dramatist mainly focuses on the practice and consequences of black magic rather than deeply exploring his intellectual thirst. Much of the action centers on magical rituals, the summoning of devils, and the misuse of supernatural powers. Faustus does not seriously pursue higher wisdom or meaningful discoveries; instead, he wastes his powers on trivial tricks and personal pleasures.

Therefore, it can be argued that Marlowe gives more importance to the dramatic and moral aspects of black magic than to the philosophical theme of the quest for knowledge. The play ultimately highlights the dangers of forbidden practices and over ambition, making black magic the central focus of the drama rather than genuine intellectual aspiration.

Objectives:

- To examine the central theme of black magic in *Doctor Faustus* and analyze how it dominates the structure of the play.
- To evaluate Faustus's character and determine whether his actions are driven by genuine thirst for knowledge or by pride and desire for supernatural power.
- To analyze the role of necromancy and supernatural elements such as devils, spells, and magical illusions in shaping the dramatic action.
- To investigate whether Marlowe gives serious importance to Renaissance humanism and intellectual curiosity, or whether these ideas are overshadowed by the theme of sin and damnation.
- To explore the moral message of the play, especially how the misuse of black magic leads to spiritual downfall.
- To assess how Faustus misuses his powers, showing that he does not pursue higher learning but instead performs trivial tricks and seeks personal pleasure.
- To understand the tragic outcome and how it reinforces the dangers of forbidden knowledge obtained through dark means.

These objectives help in critically analyzing whether the play truly neglects the theme of thirst for knowledge and instead focuses mainly on black magic and its consequences

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the theme of black magic and the absence of genuine intellectual pursuit in *Doctor Faustus*. The primary source of analysis is the original text of the play written by Christopher Marlowe. Important scenes, dialogues, and soliloquies of Faustus are closely examined to understand his motivations and actions.

The methodology involves textual analysis, focusing on Faustus's rejection of traditional branches of knowledge such as logic, medicine, law, and theology, and his

decision to practice necromancy. Special attention is given to scenes involving magical rituals, the summoning of Mephistopheles, and Faustus's pact with Lucifer. These episodes are analyzed to determine whether the playwright emphasizes black magic more than intellectual curiosity.

In addition, the study uses a thematic approach to explore major themes such as ambition, sin, pride, damnation, and misuse of power. Relevant critical interpretations and scholarly opinions may also be consulted to support the argument.

Finally, a comparative evaluation is made between Faustus's early desire for knowledge and his later actions to assess whether his thirst for knowledge is genuine or merely an excuse for seeking supernatural power. This method helps to critically justify the argument of the topic.

Review of Literature

Doctor Faustus has attracted wide critical attention for its treatment of ambition, knowledge, sin, and damnation. Many critics view the play as a reflection of Renaissance humanism, where Faustus represents the spirit of inquiry and intellectual curiosity of the age. According to this interpretation, Faustus's dissatisfaction with traditional fields of study shows his intense thirst for unlimited knowledge and power. Scholars argue that his character embodies the Renaissance overreached who seeks to surpass human limitations.

However, other critics emphasize that Marlowe gives greater dramatic importance to black magic and its consequences rather than to genuine scholarly pursuit. They point out that after making the pact with Lucifer, Faustus does not engage in serious intellectual achievements. Instead, he performs trivial tricks, entertains emperors and nobles, and seeks personal pleasure. This suggests that his initial desire for knowledge is quickly overshadowed by pride, greed, and misuse of magical power.

Some moralistic interpretations focus on the religious dimension of the play, arguing that it serves as a warning against forbidden knowledge and sinful ambition. From this perspective, the theme of black magic becomes central, while the thirst for knowledge appears secondary or even misguided.

Thus, existing literature presents divided opinions—some highlighting Faustus as a symbol of intellectual aspiration, while others stress that the play mainly dramatizes the dangers of black magic and over ambition.

Research Background

Doctor Faustus was written during the Renaissance period, a time marked by intellectual awakening, scientific curiosity, and the growth of humanism. Renaissance thinkers encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, exploration, and individual achievement. In this context, the character of Faustus appears as a highly educated scholar who desires to go

beyond the limits of traditional learning. At the beginning of the play, he rejects subjects such as logic, medicine, law, and theology, claiming they are insufficient for his ambitious mind.

However, instead of pursuing knowledge through acceptable academic or scientific means, Faustus turns to necromancy and black magic. This shift raises an important critical question: does the play truly celebrate the thirst for knowledge, or does it mainly focus on the dangers of forbidden practices? Much of the dramatic action centers on magical rituals, the pact with Lucifer, the appearance of Mephistopheles, and the misuse of supernatural powers. These elements suggest that black magic becomes the dominant theme of the drama. The research background of this topic arises from the ongoing critical debate about whether Faustus represents the Renaissance spirit of inquiry or a moral example of sinful ambition. By examining the emphasis placed on magical events rather than intellectual achievements, this study seeks to explore whether Marlowe prioritizes black magic over genuine thirst for knowledge in the play.

Conclusion

In *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe presents the tragic downfall of a brilliant scholar whose uncontrolled ambition, fascination with black magic, and neglect of true knowledge lead to his destruction. Faustus misuses his intelligence and learning to gain supernatural powers rather than pursuing wisdom and moral understanding. His decision to make a pact with Lucifer through the demon Mephistopheles symbolizes the dangers of seeking power without ethical limits.

The play ultimately conveys a strong moral lesson that knowledge should be guided by wisdom, humility, and moral responsibility. Marlowe warns that when ambition becomes excessive and knowledge is misused for selfish desires, it can lead to regret, suffering, and irreversible consequences. Thus, *Doctor Faustus* remains a powerful reminder of the importance of using knowledge for constructive and ethical purposes.

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