

Faustus as Medieval or Renaissance Hero

Marlowe was the foremost Elizabethan tragedian of his day who belonged to the group of university-educated practitioners of literature known collectively as the 'University Wits'. The analysis of his famous play *Doctor Faustus* reveals certain aspects of the drama that can be used to support an interpretation of Faustus as a Renaissance hero and other aspects suggest he is a medieval hero. According to the medieval view of the universe, Man was placed in his position by God and should remain content with his station in life. Any attempt or ambition to go beyond his assigned place was considered a great sin of pride. For the medieval person, pride was one of the greatest sins that one could commit. This concept was based upon the fact that Lucifer's fall was the result of his pride when he tried to revolt against God. Thus, for the medieval person, aspiring pride became one of the cardinal sins.

According to the medieval view, Faustus has a desire for forbidden knowledge. In order to gain more knowledge than he is entitled to, Faustus makes a contract with Lucifer, which brings about his damnation. Faustus then learns at the end of the play that supernatural powers are reserved for the gods and that the person who attempts to handle or deal in magical powers must face eternal damnation. When we examine the drama from this standpoint, Faustus deserves his punishment; then the play is not so much a tragedy as it is a morality play. The ending is an act of justice, when the man who has transgressed against the natural laws of the universe is justifiably punished. The chorus at the end of the drama re-emphasizes this position when it admonishes the audience to learn from Faustus' damnation and not attempt to go beyond the restrictions placed on humanity.

The character of Faustus can also be interpreted from the Renaissance point of view. At the time of this play, there was a conflict in many people's minds, including Marlowe's, as to whether or not to accept the medieval or the Renaissance view. The Renaissance had been disappointed in the effectiveness of medieval knowledge because many scholastic disputations were merely verbal nonsense. For example, arguments such as how many angels could stand on the head of a pin dominated many medieval theses. The Renaissance scholars, however, revived an interest in the classical knowledge of Greece and the humanism of the past. They became absorbed in the great potential and possibility of humanity.

According to the Renaissance view, Faustus rebels against the limitations of medieval knowledge and the restriction put upon humankind decreeing that he must accept his place in the universe without challenging it. Because of his universal desire for enlightenment, Faustus makes a contract for knowledge and power. His desire, according to the Renaissance, is to transcend the limitations of humanity and rise to greater achievements and heights. In the purest sense, Faustus wants to prove that he can become greater than he presently is. Because of his desire to go beyond human limitations, Faustus is willing to chance damnation in order to achieve his goals. The tragedy results when a person is condemned to damnation for noble attempts to go beyond the petty limitations of humanity.

Marlowe's characters are significant due to its newness, renaissance influence, Machiavellian morality, powerful and passionate expressions, element of tragic inner conflict and the character of Faustus speaks volumes about it.