

200-Level 2010 Writing Contest Winner: Literary Analysis

The Power of Illusion: Understanding Doctor Faustus through a Glimpse at Satan

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In Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, we see a character of supposed wisdom make unwise conclusions and decisions. This character, Doctor Faustus, is a learned man in many fields of study. Despite his knowledge, Faustus makes foolish conclusions and decisions throughout the play. The premise of the play is a rejection of wisdom, as Faustus rejects his various fields of real and logical studies and takes up black magic, an art that has no real powers. He claims that the real studies have limits, and that, therefore, there is no power in them. He adopts an art that has no limits, but also no true power. Faustus offers himself the limitlessness he desires by blinding himself to reality. Later, in his lowest moment of wisdom, Faustus disputes the existence of Hell in a conversation with a demon. The presence of this resident of Hell, Mephistophilis, is not evidence enough for Faustus to believe in Hell's existence. While it is difficult to understand Faustus's denial of Hell within this situation and his overall rejection of reality and truth, it becomes clearer when viewed through a lens of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Book 1 of this epic work, Satan finds himself cast into Hell, where he attempts to appear wise and powerful despite his fall from Heaven. Despite any wise appearance, much like Faustus, Satan also makes foolish conclusions. Satan denies the terrors and sorrow of his new residence as he surveys the fiery lake. Like Faustus, Satan denies the reality of Hell and the truth of the situation. Satan desires power and limitlessness, which he grants to himself as he rejects reality. Satan is able to blind himself to the reality of Hell while he is standing within it. While this seems impossible, it demonstrates how Faustus can blind himself to Hell as he stands in his own library. A look at Satan's self-imposed blindness paves the way for understanding that of Faustus. While it seems absurd that Faustus can deny Hell to a devil's face, this denial of reality pales in comparison to Satan's denial of Hell as he stands on the shore of the fiery lake. If Satan can deny Hell, within Hell, then it becomes clearer how Faustus can deny Hell from "outside" of it, as they both blind themselves to reality.

In Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, Satan retreats into his own mind in creating an illusion of his own desired power. He substitutes his desires for reality when he surveys Hell from the shore for the first time; here, Satan for himself makes a "Heav'n of Hell" (1.255). Satan initially admits that he is separated from any chance of being "happy" (1.249) or any hope of "joy" (1.250). He thus states indirectly his understanding that he is in a place of torment. He also clarifies that Hell is an undesirable place to God. Satan states that "th' Almighty hath not built/ Here for his envy" (1.259-260). From these

statements, one assumes that Satan understands the wicked reality of Hell as a place separate from happiness and comforts. However, Satan turns these statements around and uses them to build his personal comfort and power. He changes definitions of “good” and “bad” in order to make a “Heav’n of Hell” (1.255). Satan redefines Hell as a place of power, as he states that he can “reign secure” here (1.261). While he redefines terms, he doesn’t actually affect reality. Hell is not changed; instead, Satan’s perception is changed. He retreats into his own mind and into the illusion that, in Hell, he “shall be free” (1.259). Satan believes that he is powerful in Hell. In addition to this belief, Satan also believes he is free from the power of God. God does not “envy” Hell (1.260), which Satan finds liberating. However, Satan is not free from God’s power, even in Hell, as he believes. Earlier in Book 1, the narrator clarifies that God’s power does indeed extend into Hell. Additionally, it is clear that Satan makes no moves outside of “the will/ And high permission of all-ruling Heaven” (1.211-212). Satan is not beyond the power of God, though he believes that he “shall be free” in Hell (1.259). He rejoices that he no longer must “serve in Heav’n” and can now “reign in Hell” (1.263). Again, Satan has not changed reality; instead, he has only changed his personal perception. While Satan appears wise and powerful to himself, he is foolish in his rejection of reality. Satan’s denial of reality in this situation where reality seems utterly undeniable opens the door to understanding Faustus’s similar denial of Hell.

In the same way that Satan creates illusory power for himself in Hell, Doctor Faustus constructs an illusion of his own limitless power. Faustus, however, does so in a different location within Hell: his own study. Faustus is a well-educated man who believes he has “attained the end” (1.10) of his vast studies. From this opening statement, Faustus thinks he is wise, but he is truly a fool. He dismisses his various fields of study for their limitations. For example, he no longer wants to practice medicine on the grounds that he cannot “make men to live eternally” (1.24). Faustus cannot find the limitless power he wants in his life. He dismisses logic, law, and divinity with similarly false reasoning. Faustus replaces reality and wisdom with illusion and nonsense. He does this as he regards the “Lines, circles, schemes, letters, and characters” of a book, rather than perceiving its words or its meaning. This shallow perception matches up to Satan’s lack of acknowledgement for the atrocity of Hell. As Satan skimmed reality, so does Faustus. Additionally, Faustus finds reality to be no objection to his limitless powers. He finds “no object” (1.104) for his “own fantasy” (1.103). This indicates Faustus’s retreat into his own head and the construction of his illusion of limitless power. Faustus’s shallow perception and denial of reality is a reflection of Satan’s same actions, and these lead to the fall of his wisdom.

Faustus’s self-blinding builds his illusory perception of reality, and leads to his deceit in the hands of Mephistophilis. In scene 5, Faustus’s desire for limit-free living leads to his to his misperception of a key statement. Here, Mephistophilis states openly that “Hell hath no limits”

(5.120). While Mephistophilis was referring to Hell's inescapability, Faustus foolishly perceives freedom from limitation. Rather than finding objection to his own power, Faustus chooses to ignore reality. He does so in the same manner as Satan did in *Paradise Lost*, when he believes that he "shall be free" in Hell (1.259). Satan chose to deny the reality of Hell for the sake of his own illusory power. After Faustus misunderstands Mephistophilis's statement, he goes on to state his disbelief in the existence of Hell. He does not believe there is "any pain" to be suffered "after this life" (5.133), and goes on to refer this eternal damnation as "mere old wives' tales" (5.134). Faustus fails to warrant any credit to the devil with which he is speaking, who stands as an "instance to prove the contrary" (5.135). Thus, Faustus proves his own utter blindness as he fails to see what, literally, is right in front of him. He also exemplifies his refusal of reality, and lack of true effect on the situation. While he has redefined reality for himself, he has not changed anything. Faustus is still to suffer eternal damnation, whether or not he accepts the reality of it. He redefines but makes no changes to reality in the same way which Satan does. This denial of reality creates the opportunity to offer oneself power and freedom from limitation, as Satan and Faustus both do.

While they reign in their power by way of denial, Satan and Faustus do both know that their powers are limited. Satan does not support waging open war on Heaven, because he knows that Heaven is lost. Though he states to the other demons that he does not count Heaven "for lost" (2.14), he knows that Heaven is unattainable. In the same way, Faustus also knows the limits of his supposedly boundless powers. Faustus states openly to the Emperor that it "is not in [his] ability" to truly conjure the body of the deceased Alexander. While both characters know that their powers are still not limitless, they chose to deny this. They deny reality and live within their own minds. This choice to blind themselves builds the opportunity for their belief in limitless power. Satan and Faustus find it easier to reign in their own minds than to serve the limits of reality.

Works Cited

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