

## From Libido to Limbo: The Psychology of Faustus' Damnation

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**Abstract:** The present article provides a detailed psychoanalytic reading of Christopher Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus", a literary work which is generally studied from a traditional theological framework. The play dramatizes the average Elizabethan audience's greed and hunger for power and serves as a cautionary tale for becoming overambitious. The overarching intent is to go beyond the conventional explications of the aforementioned work and bring about nuanced and enriching perspectives. The study has drawn from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious, the id, ego, and superego, as well as the concepts of desire, repression, and the death drive. On the other hand, it has also incorporated Lacan's idea of lack and the symbolic other. By combining both the theoretical perspectives within the study, the study has concluded that the descent of Dr Faustus into damnation is not only religious but also psychological. Even Oedipal dimension and Thanatos interpretation is at once engaging and thought provoking and hence open up avenues for further research.

**Keywords:** *Psychoanalysis, Doctor Faustus, Freud, Id, Ego, Superego, Death Drive*

### Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" (1604) is one of the most well-known tragedies from the Elizabethan period, outside of the Shakespeare canon. The story follows a scholar named Faustus who sold his soul to the devil in return for the ability to perform magic and the knowledge of understanding the ways of the universe (Marlowe, 2). The play is generally read from a theological perspective, showcasing the social construct of the time, the anxieties faced by the Elizabethan

society, and the focus on sin and salvation. In several instances throughout the play, it is reinstated that God's mercy is infinite, but it is Faustus's relentless ambition that brings his slow descent into despair. Faustus is seen repeatedly regretting his decisions, but ultimately, his pride leads him to be dragged to hell. Psychoanalysis is a part of philosophy that deals with the subconscious parts of the mind; it challenges the conventional forms of morality and evaluates the intricacies of individual and collective psyche (Toshtemirovich, 2). Sigmund Freud is generally known as the father of psychoanalysis, and his understanding of the human psyche helped in connecting history, literature, philosophy and art. The purpose of the article is to offer a psychoanalytic reading of "Doctor Faustus", explore the concepts of id, ego, superego, the death drive, and Lacanian psychoanalysis to prove Faustus's tragedy is not religious but also deeply psychological.

### **Faustus's Desire and the Unconscious**

Society during the Elizabethan period was characterised by the desire for power, ambition and corruption, and thus, tragic figures such as Doctor Faustus are no exception. Similar to Shakespeare's Macbeth with the witches, Faustus also bargains his soul away without realising the consequences of his actions. The relentless ambition is an acute representation of a Renaissance individual; his hunger for power and knowledge exceeds all limits as he seeks dominion of both the natural and spiritual realms, leading to his ultimate downfall (Hossain and Habib, 4). The play can be seen as a cautionary tale, emphasising the dangers of pursuing power. Even after learning everything, Faustus is shown to still not be satisfied and believes there to be more; this is a critical flaw of his character, making him an easy target of the devil. Faustus is dissatisfied with the limits of human knowledge; he even acquires necromantic knowledge to postpone his own death (Vajnand, 20). He imagined the pact with the devil would allow him to gain control over his own destiny, but it only led to him facing eternal damnation.

Through Faustus's character, Christopher Marlowe has shown that yearning for infinite power results from his overambition, which makes him sell his soul to the devil. This can be compared to Oedipus and Agamemnon, who had extreme pride or hubris, leading to their downfall (Rahman, 16). While Dr Faustus wishes to achieve worldly success, he is shown to fail in actualising his potential to be immortal, as being a human being, he cannot escape death. Freud has stated that unconscious wishes and beliefs influence certain actions in individuals (Pataki, 57). This can be seen in Faustus, his deal with the devil leads to many great discoveries, but ultimately corrupts his soul. His character can also be compared to that of Icarus; his flying close to the sun is symbolic and foreshadows Faustus's relentless ambition to gain knowledge and power (Zerouali and Belhamidi, 21). The quotation "He that loves pleasure must for pleasure fall" projects the ambition and greed for power which Faustus possessed. In his first soliloquy, Faustus confirms to the readers that he has achieved all his goals; he is a very proud character. "Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin / To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess" (Staber, 28). His dissatisfaction with traditional knowledge is reflected as he laments being just a man and expresses his desire to learn the forbidden knowledge.

### **Faustus's Id, Ego, and Superego in Conflict**

Freud, in his research on psychoanalysis, has divided the mind into a tripartite structure; these three segments have been named the id, ego and superego. The id, according to Freud, influences selfish desires among people. This part of the mind is influenced by impulses that are aimed towards immediate gratification; Freud called this the pleasure principle. While the dominance of the id reduces with age, it is never really left behind; the demands are merely repressed. The ego is seen as the rational part of the mind, as it allows an individual to adapt to reality. This part of the mind is responsible for creating a sense of self among individuals; it also watches over the instinctual demands that are made by the id. The third and final component of the model is known as the superego (Rennison, 40). The superego is essentially a perfectionist version of the ego; it represents the

internalised voice of parents, elders and society on the rules and regulations that guide people beyond primary narcissism. The superego provides the basic consciousness and helps an individual differentiate between right and wrong. It regulates the behaviour and ensures that a person behaves in a socially acceptable way.

Analysing Christopher Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" from a Freudian lens reveals that the character of Faustus struggles with the good angel and bad angel throughout the play. Despite being a renowned scholar in the fields of law, medicine and theology, he was dissatisfied with the knowledge and sought more. In many instances, he is revealed to have contemplated repentance but eventually failed to turn towards God. His id is represented by his desire for knowledge, power and pleasure. The superego is represented through his willingness to repent and seek salvation; however, an inner conflict is seen brewing as he wishes to fulfil his inner desire of the id while also showing restraint with the superego. The line "O, Christ, my savior, seek to save distressed Faustus' soul!" shows Faustus feeling a pull of repentance, but his id is too strong and thus keeps him trapped in sin. In the end, Faustus ends up choosing lust over redemption. Faustus seeks the kiss of Helen to become an immortal; he wants to repent for his sins, but feels it is already too late (Hannan, Biswas, and Ahamed, 7). Faustus's decision to make a deal with the devil is a product of his impulsiveness and a manifestation of his id. His ego can be seen through his earlier scholarly pursuits for greatness. Being part of his psyche, his ego tries to mediate between his desires and moral considerations, while the superego in this context represents his social and parental standards of behaviour.

### **Freud's Death Drive and the Self-Destruction of Dr Faustus**

The concept of the death drive was introduced by Freud in 1920; the main purpose of this drive was to find out the dissolution of the individual. However, when the death drive was directed outwards, it gave rise to destructiveness. In his book "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", Freud states that the death instinct is a representation of the biological force which is much stronger than the life drive (De Masi,



2). Freud has stated that while people try to seek satisfaction to fulfil their erotic drives, the unconscious mind deals with the thoughts of unpleasure and death. Freud believes that the death drive is not fully able to express itself because it is fused to the libidinal drive. The death drive is heightened in the lack of emotional understanding; the behaviour of the individual becomes repetitive, impulsive and aggressive. High death drive also causes repetitive impulsive acts, a tendency to commit suicide, and self-mutilation. The death drive has been associated with aggression since the time of Freud, and it threatens the fabric of society. Freud has claimed that a strong superego is needed for the repression of this drive and administering grief in the individual (Fong, 200).

The thrust which Faustus possesses in terms of forbidden knowledge can be interpreted as both a manifestation of Eros, which is the life drive, as well as Thanatos or the death drive. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis helps in understanding how Faustus' desire to learn more transcends human limitations and allows him to gain godlike power, revealing Eros. While, on the other hand, his disregard for spirituality and salvation also denotes that the death drive is at play because the protagonist secretly craves his own self-destruction in the subconscious. Faustus personifies the negative principles, and thus, even though he experiences moments of doubt and temptation, his psychoanalytic defence mechanism prevents any form of confrontation with his own morality (Hero, 2). It is his death drive which prevents him from repenting, and it is a reflection of his unconscious desire for self-destruction. The inner conflicts between the id and the ego led to Faustus having a divided psyche. He is shown to desperately try to stop time, but the death drive pushes him towards his greatest weakness (Hannan, Biswas, and Ahamed, 5). Regardless of the power he gained from the devil, Faustus was still a human and thus could not escape death, and his arrogance turned into regret.

### **Faustus and Lacanian Psychoanalysis**

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic philosophy considers "lack" to be an integral part of the human psyche. In his theory, Lacan has stated that the unconscious is always working; he believes that the

unconscious works like language. While metaphor works by linking the two concepts with each other, metonymy is represented by the closeness between the concepts. Lacan has argued that human beings are born without any fundamental sense of being; they do not possess the unified sense of self that an adult possesses. As per his findings, all human desires come into existence from lack as it continually tries to fill itself (Qazi, 8). As stated, human languages work similarly to lack and therefore they perform on the virtue of the absence and exclusion of the other. In the present context, the Lacanian framework can be utilised to examine Faustus's desire and hunger for power and knowledge. This can be seen as a symbolic lack of identity. Thus, the damnation which Faustus experiences within the play is not purely religious but psychological. Faustus possesses a fractured subjectivity which has been shaped by his desires that are impossible to meet. His inability to repent might have theological roots, but it is also a product of his fractured identity that he has given shape to through false ideas (Innocent et al. 8).

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the "Other" is often used symbolically to refer to abstract entities that represent language, culture and social norms. Throughout his career, Lacan has believed desire to be the desire of the other. While he agrees that children tend to have basic biological needs from birth, these needs are shaped through dialectical exchanges with others in their surroundings. He believes that each human being is a product of the other, as their whole personality is shaped through their shared experiences. The term other has been used in a number of ways. The image a child sees in the mirror is also another; this gives the child an idea of structural possibility and allows them to associate themselves with "I" or self. When a child encounters its own image, it learns to understand the concept of otherness and associate with things that are not itself. The loss of the object of desire has been represented through "objet petit a", the little other is not an other but rather a projection of the ego. The big other, on the other hand, transcends the illusory otherness (Qazi, 7). By establishing the two types of the other, Lacan argues that speech originates in the other and that language is beyond

anyone's control. The devil Mephistopheles can be seen as the other in this context, as he had an immense impact on the character of Faustus, as he warned the protagonist of the danger (Austin, 8).

### **Psychoanalysis of Damnation**

The moral struggle that Faustus undergoes throughout the course of the play leads to a failure in repentance and becomes the sole reason for his damnation. Right from the start of the play, Marlowe introduces the character of Faustus as someone who prioritises pleasure, and he is seen to always find a way to fulfil his desire. In various instances in the play, his superego has tried to remind him of doing the right thing. In his soliloquies, Faustus is seen to think about repentance. The superego is the representation of the good angel, and it directs him to turn away during his final hours, but when he realises the gravity of the situation, he triggers a self-destructive impulse (Hannan, Biswas, and Ahamed, 9). A subconscious desire for destruction is seen in him, which foreshadows his damnation. While he enjoyed his powers, he also feared the agreement he had with the devil. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Faustus was reckless but, at the same time, experienced psychological distress for his existential choices.

The final soliloquy, which he narrates one hour before his death, showcases the regret that he has been facing for his actions. Faustus is scared of facing both the wrath of God and the devil. His damnation is a result of his own mistake, and he tries his best to run away from the everlasting damnation. Faustus is visibly seen regretting always listening to his id and not his superego, and this has led to anxiety about dying and spending the rest of eternity in hell. The superego portrayal has been significantly high in this last scene; he imagines becoming as light as air, so the devil fails to catch him or transform himself into little drops of water and disappear in the ocean (Hannan, Biswas, and Ahamed, 10). His cries for stopping time are a recognition that repression has failed and that Dr Faustus has been completely consumed by the unconscious. The damnation is ultimately not a theological result but becomes a psychic consequence of desire and greed for knowledge.

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## Conclusion

As concluding remarks for the present article, the study has provided a psychoanalytic reading of “Doctor Faustus”, thus providing that Marlow’s tragedy is not a mere product of theology but the complications of the human mind. The relentless ambition of Dr Faustus and his constant oscillation between repentance and indulgence make it harder for him to repent and ultimately cost him his soul. The study provides detailed accounts of the subconscious, the significant role of the id, the ego, and the superego in influencing a person’s actions. The death drive and the concepts of “lack” and “other” have also been explored to show the inevitable collapse which the protagonist faces due to his inner conflicts.

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