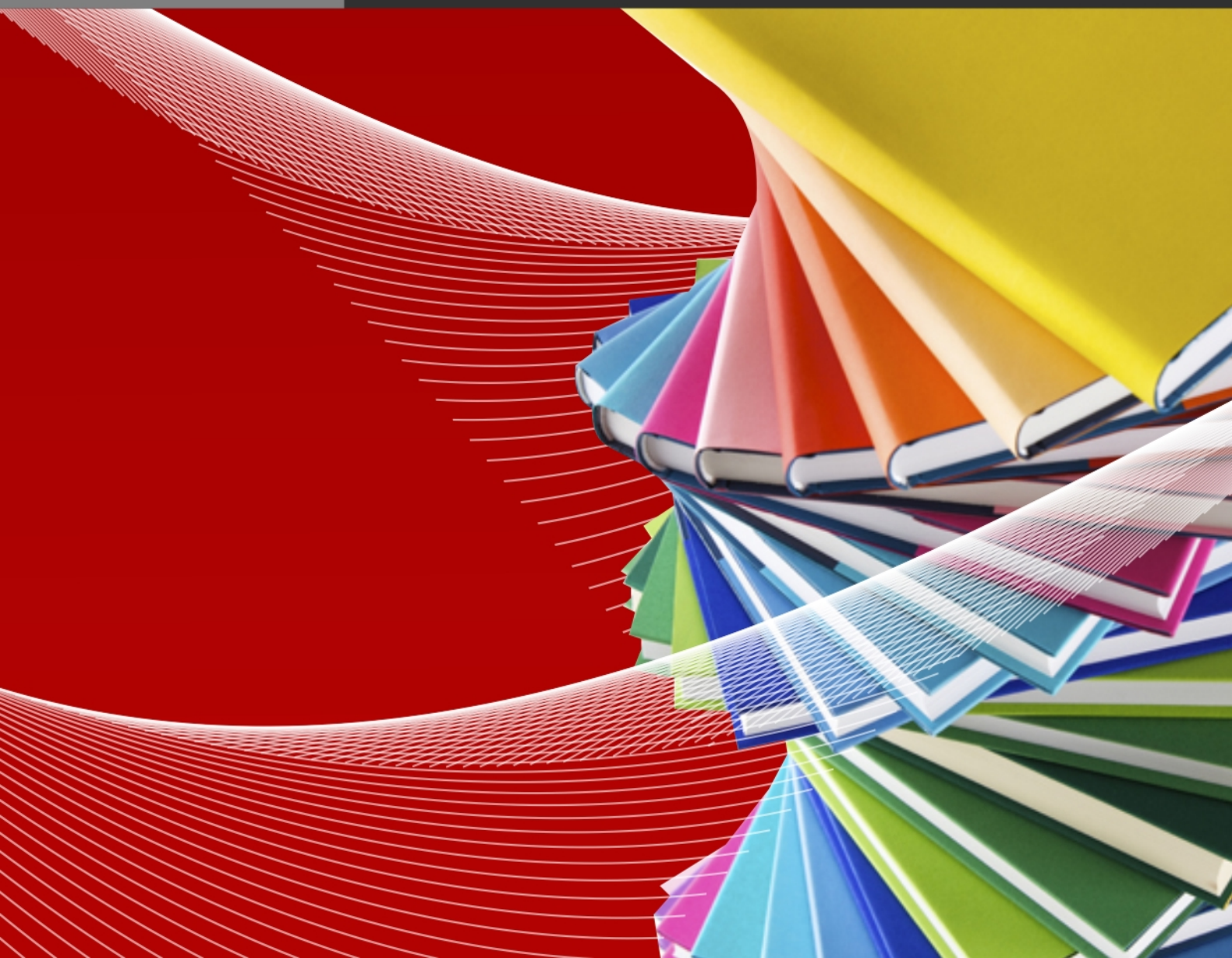




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Christy GU JUNYUAN

AB222303

Year 2

English Studies

Christy Gu AB222303

Professor Damian Shaw

ENGB210 (002)

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The Tensions between the Christian World View and the Pagan World View in

Doctor Faustus

Owing to a series of transformations in economies, politics and science, a great movement named The Renaissance spread throughout England during the 15th century to 17th century. The concept of humanism had gradually appealed to persons at that time. According to Main, people began to shift their interest into the secular world, pouring increasing attention into “human life here and now” rather than theology (par. 20). Nearly

concurrent with the Renaissance was another revolutionary movement: the Reformation. A significant discrepancy lay between traditional Christians and Protestants, explicitly revealing itself in the two groups's world views, i.e., the way they perceived the world. This essay will aim to explore the tensions between the two world views conveyed through Marlowe's work: *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*.

To start with, the first tension exists in the authority of knowledge. It is Christian belief that only in the event that the knowledge in question is authorised by God can it be legitimate for human to possess it (Slick par. 16). From the view of the pagans, however, individuals should be the judge of the acquisition of knowledge. At the beginning of Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, in the course of trying to select a subject best worth learning, Faustus has rejected all the subjects that should have been regarded as containing the most supreme knowledge (1. 5-48). Here, it is apparent that Faustus has no intention of observing the Christian doctrine – pursuing that knowledges that humans are allowed by God to possess, which is further proved through his following declaration: “Philosophy is odious and obscure, Both law and physic are for petty wits; Divinity is basest of the three, Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile” (1. 106-109). Moreover, his inclination to explore the natural world and even to unveil the secret of hell indicates that the knowledge he most desires is totally beyond the so-called human limitations (1. 85-90, 5. 115-125). Nevertheless, it is not the case in the pagan world view. Faustus's behaviour is decidedly acceptable even praiseworthy with respect to the Pagan or the Greek idea, that is, there should not exist any imposed obstacle in the pursuit of knowledge. To sum up, the tension here is of whether the acquisition of knowledge is based on God's authority or on human's own capacity and will.

The second divergence lies in the ideology of pursuing self-excellence (“Classical Greek” par. 1) and original sin (Slick par. 17). The Greeks encourage people to make every effort to find the good in themselves. Achieving relative superiority through striving for “intelligence and self-mastery” is a great possibility for human beings (“Classical Greek” par. 1). On the contrary, Christians take the attitude that since human beings are doomed to be sinful there is no way for them to achieve or even be close to the excellence (“Classical Greek” par. 2). Even worse, striving for honour would be considered mortals’ pride, which is rather likely to lead to the everlasting damnation (“Christopher Marlowe's” par. 13). In the work of Marlowe *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus’ s discarding divinity study in contempt of the original sin (1. 38-48) illuminates the inclination to pursue the good-in-itself or the human excellence, consequently disclosing a deeper idea with respect to the Pagan world view: human’s will, self-esteem and self-worth ought to transcend any doctrine in religion. This tension can be perceived in Faustus’s exclamation when necromancy exerts a tremendous fascination on him. “O what a world of profit and delight, Of power, of honour, of omnipotence/ Is promised to the studious artisan!” (1. 53-55). According to Christians, he undoubtedly commits the sin of pride and would inevitably be damned due to the ambition to be someone else other than himself whereas the Greeks might think highly of him because of his endeavour to prove self-worth. In short, it is the different understanding of providence (predestination) and self-endeavour that constitutes the second tension.

In the third place, a pronounced tension manifests itself in the perspectives of divinity and sorcery. As the article “ About *Doctor Faustus*” points out, Christians attempt to draw an essential distinction between sacrament and sorcery while Marlowe intends to blur the line

(par. 4). Christians define magic outside churches as sorcery (i.e. Black magic) but magic conforming to the practice of churches as “ritual and sacrament” (“ About *Doctor Faustus*” par. 4) so as to preserve their superiority (“ About *Doctor Faustus*” par. 4; Koznesoff pars. 9-11). To conflict with the Christian view, Marlowe intentionally creates diverse scenes composed of some evil ceremonies or practice that are quite similar to those appearing in Christian rituals. For instance, in his *Doctor Faustus*, when Valdes imparts the approach to conjure a demon to Faustus, the man merges the items relating to divinity, namely, *The Hebrew Psalter* and *New Testament* into the process of conjuration (5. 155), asserting the sacred books a “requisite” (5. 156). Koznesoff illustrates this point in virtue of the similarity lying in the manner of pledging humans’ allegiance to the party concerned, namely, God or Lucifer (pars. 9-11). By means of sealing a contract with their blood, people are capable of obtaining grace granted by God, which resembles the way in which people gain black power delivered by Lucifer (5. 34-37, 53-58). In addition, the blasphemous proclamation “ A sound magician is a might god” (1. 62), along with the designed plot in scene 9 that scarcely had the emperor expressed his worship of Faustus when the knight claimed that “ I’ faith, he looks much like a conjuror” (9. 10) suggests that those seemingly holy magic and miracles are nothing but tricks, and God holds no significant difference from a magician (Koznesoff pars. 9-11). Koznesoff even goes further to conclude that “one of the themes in the play is that Jesus was just a magician playing tricks on people and held no divinity or power” (pars. 9-11). In short, Christians believe in the absolute divinity and superiority while the pagans begin to cast doubts on this belief, and from which the tension between the two world views is evoked.

The comparison of the demands from heaven and hell, as well as the disparate conceptions of hell consists of another similar tension. According to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus considers the hell as "Elysium" rather than a perpetual miserable and afflicting place (3. 59). Such thought derives from classical philosophy and fundamentally violates the Christian view of hell (3. 59). From scene 12, one can more or less capture the feeling that the thing both God and Lucifer expect humans to beware of is virtually identical, that is, obedience (12. 57-59). Hence, wonders have inevitably arisen: whether there is really a remarkable distinction between hell and heaven, God and Lucifer.

Furthermore, there is a major tension throughout the play, revealing itself most pronouncedly in scene 12. The conflict between Christian and Pagan world views embodies the entitlement to judge an individual's moral value as well as the matching standards to evaluate it ("Christian" pars. 13-14). The lines uttered by the old man in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* to persuade Faustus to repent can serve as a solid example to manifest this tension:

FAUSTUS Break heart, drop blood, and mingle it with tears,

Tears falling from repentant heaviness

Of thy most vile and loathsome filthiness,

The stench whereof corrupts the inward soul

With such flagitious crimes of heinous sins,

As no commiseration may expel

But mercy, Faustus, of thy savior sweet,

Whose blood alone must wash away thy guilt. (12. 30-37)

Those words used to describe Faustus's sin are incredibly strong, ruthless and cruel. It might be reasonable from Christian perspectives on the ground that Christians are convinced that moral virtues are bound to be connected with religious doctrines ("Christian" pars. 13-14). Precisely, possessing moral virtues is equal to showing obedience to God. Considering his renouncement of God, Faustus is deemed to lack moral worth. Nevertheless, such speech must be counted unjust from the opposition for the reason that Pagans are more inclined to believe that it is the individual concerned who preserves the ultimate right to judge whether he is good enough or not ("Christian" pars. 13-14). Therefore, the tension aroused from the disparity between two sides lies in the judgment about moral value.

Last but not least, a crucial tension must be highlighted. The possibility of redemption plays a profound role in the Christian world view. In their world, it is widely acknowledged that even the vilest deed could have the chance to be forgiven through repentance in that God has promised not to forsake human beings ("Christopher Marlowe's" par. 13; Slick par. 21), just as Scriptures depicts "He who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (qtd. in "repentance" par. 4). In contrast, Faustus, for some reason, failed to repent and is damned to go to the hell forever consequently. Basically, the failure to repent is owing to Faustus's doubt and disbelief in God and its power. To obtain God's forgiveness, the following prerequisites are to be fulfilled. Initially, the person in question must "gratefully recognise His Atonement and His power" ("repentance" par. 6). Subsequently, he is expected to express the most profound sense of guilt and remorse for his former deeds, along with the most solid determination to abandon the temptation forever

(“repentance” par. 6). Apparently, Faustus’s wavering revealed in his attempts to repent cannot accord with the above preconditions. In Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus’s conscience represented by the good angel and the evil angel also communicates the uncertainty on Christian doctrine:

FAUSTUS Ay, go accursed spirit, to ugly hell,

‘tis thou hast damned distressed Faustus’ soul:

Is’t not to late?

[Enter GOOD ANGEL and EVIL ANGEL]

EVIL ANGEL Too late.

GOOD ANGEL Never too late, if Faustus will repent. (5. 249-253)

In light of the requirements of redemption, it is obvious that Faustus from beginning to end never dispels former doubts, for instance, whether there is hell; whether the power of God prevails over that of Lucifer. (5. 113-140). Additionally, in the depth of his heart he has ever accepted that he is guilty and in need of remorse. How could it be wrong to pursue such wonderful knowledge and experience? Why on earth must he surrender all the lovely things? Such courageous underlying interrogations have undoubtedly given a heavy blow towards Christianity and echoed the revolutionary idea of humanism. The most ironic part lies in the fact that even if he is going to end up with the everlasting damnation Faustus is still incapable of repentance, i.e. cannot realise his “faults”:

FAUSTUS Ah, my God--I would weep, but the

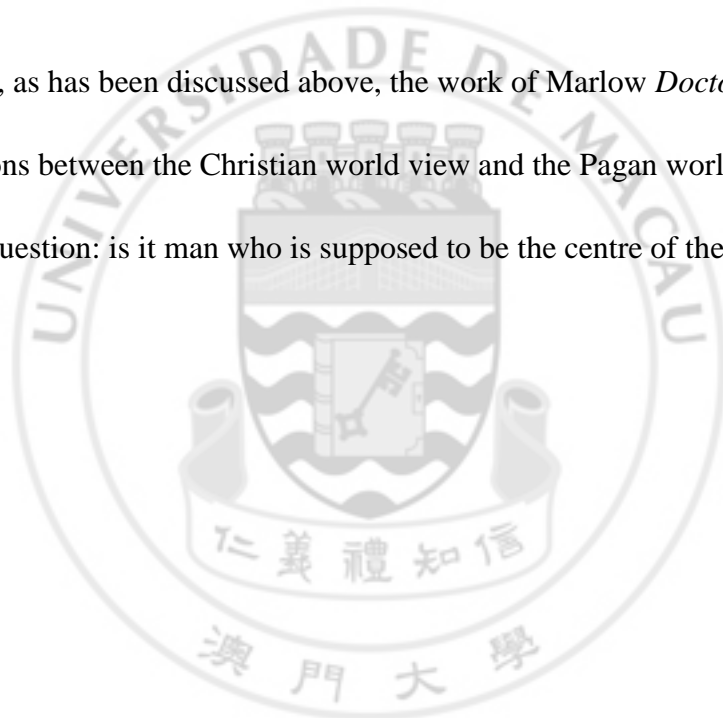
devil draws in my tears! Gush forth blood, instead of tears--yea,

life and soul! O, he stays my tongue! I would lift up my hands, but

see, they hold them, they hold them! (13. 28-31)

Certainly, it is his wavering, even denial, of belief in God's power that makes his damnation certain (Campbell, 223). In short, such intense skepticism and immense desire for pursuing humanity have given rise to an irreconcilable conflict between Christianity and Paganism.

In conclusion, as has been discussed above, the work of Marlow *Doctor Faustus* reveals tremendous tensions between the Christian world view and the Pagan worldview, based on the fundamental question: is it man who is supposed to be the centre of the world or God (Campbell, 222)?



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