

HUMAN WEAKNESS AND MORAL CHOICES IN HAMLET AND DOCTOR FAUSTUS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HESITATION, AMBITION, AND HUMAN NATURE

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Abstract: This thesis explores human weakness and moral choice in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Both texts examine the psychological and ethical struggles that define human nature, focusing on Hamlet's hesitation and Faustus's destructive ambition. Shakespeare portrays moral paralysis caused by doubt, conscience, and intellectual reflection, while Marlowe presents ambition and pride as forces that lead to spiritual collapse. Through comparative literary analysis, this study argues that both protagonists reveal the fragility of human decision-making. The findings demonstrate that moral failure arises not from evil alone but from weakness, inner conflict, and the misuse of human freedom.

Keywords: human weakness; moral choice; hesitation; ambition; Shakespeare; Marlowe; tragedy.

Introduction

Human weakness and moral choice are central concerns of Renaissance tragedy, reflecting anxieties about free will, responsibility, and the limits of human reason. William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, two of the most influential playwrights of the English Renaissance, explore these themes through complex tragic protagonists in *Hamlet* (c.1601) and *Doctor Faustus* (c.1592). Both works examine how internal conflict shapes human behavior and determines moral outcome. Hamlet's hesitation and Faustus's ambition represent two contrasting yet interconnected expressions of human weakness.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a protagonist burdened by moral responsibility, intellectual doubt, and emotional turmoil. Tasked with avenging his father's murder, Hamlet

struggles to act decisively, fearing moral corruption and spiritual consequence. His famous soliloquy, “To be, or not to be: that is the question,” encapsulates his inner conflict and existential uncertainty. Shakespeare portrays hesitation not as cowardice but as the result of deep moral reflection. Hamlet’s weakness lies in overthinking, excessive self-awareness, and fear of moral error, which ultimately delays justice and leads to tragedy.

Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus presents a different form of weakness: unchecked ambition. Faustus, a learned scholar, consciously rejects moral restraint in pursuit of limitless knowledge and power. His declaration, “A sound magician is a mighty god,” reveals his desire to transcend human limitation. Unlike Hamlet, Faustus does not hesitate in action; instead, he hesitates in repentance. His weakness is pride, which blinds him to moral consequence and divine mercy. Marlowe frames Faustus’s moral struggle within Christian theology, emphasizing free will and responsibility.

Despite their differences, both characters illustrate the dangers of misused freedom. Hamlet’s failure to act and Faustus’s reckless action result in moral collapse. Both texts suggest that human nature is neither wholly virtuous nor inherently evil, but fragile and prone to error. This thesis compares how hesitation and ambition function as expressions of human weakness and examines how moral choices define tragic destiny. Through close analysis of character psychology, moral conflict, and authorial intention, the study reveals how Shakespeare and Marlowe portray the complexity of human nature and the consequences of moral failure.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on Hamlet frequently emphasizes the psychological depth of Shakespeare’s protagonist. A. C. Bradley famously argues that Hamlet’s delay arises from moral sensitivity rather than weakness of will, suggesting that his conscience prevents immediate action. Hamlet’s line, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,” has been widely interpreted as Shakespeare’s commentary on moral overthinking. Later critics, such as Harold Bloom, describe Hamlet as intellectually superior to his circumstances, trapped by awareness and self-reflection. Scholars agree that Hamlet’s hesitation reflects Renaissance concerns about reason, morality, and the burden of ethical responsibility.

Studies of Doctor Faustus focus largely on ambition, pride, and spiritual failure. Marlowe’s Faustus has been interpreted as the archetypal overreacher of Renaissance humanism. Critics such as David Bevington argue that Faustus represents the danger of intellectual arrogance detached from moral discipline. Faustus’s tragic flaw is not ignorance but deliberate rejection of repentance. His anguished cry, “O, I’ll leap up to my God! — Who pulls me down?” reveals internal conflict that mirrors Hamlet’s struggle, though directed toward salvation rather than action. Scholars emphasize that Faustus’s repeated

hesitation to repent constitutes moral weakness. Comparative criticism highlights that both characters struggle internally rather than externally. While Hamlet delays action due to moral doubt, Faustus delays repentance due to pride and fear. Stephen Greenblatt notes that Renaissance tragedy often portrays inward conflict as the true source of downfall. Both Shakespeare and Marlowe depict moral choice as an ongoing process rather than a single decision.

Overall, scholarship suggests that both plays explore human weakness through psychological realism and ethical tension. Hamlet and Faustus are not villains but flawed humans whose moral struggles reflect universal aspects of human nature. The literature establishes that hesitation and ambition serve as parallel manifestations of moral fragility, shaping tragic consequence.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative comparative literary analysis to examine human weakness and moral choice in Hamlet and Doctor Faustus. Primary texts are analyzed through close reading of soliloquies, dialogue, and symbolic imagery related to decision-making, conscience, and ambition. Secondary sources include Renaissance criticism, philosophical interpretations, and theological analyses. The methodology focuses on identifying psychological patterns, moral dilemmas, and narrative outcomes. Comparative analysis highlights how hesitation and ambition function differently yet produce similar tragic consequences. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how Shakespeare and Marlowe portray human nature through moral struggle and tragic failure.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that both Hamlet and Faustus embody human weakness through different moral paths. Hamlet's hesitation arises from excessive moral awareness. He fears acting unjustly, doubts the ghost's truth, and questions the morality of revenge. His soliloquies reveal a mind trapped between action and conscience. Hamlet's statement, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right," reflects his recognition of moral duty paired with emotional resistance. His delay allows corruption to spread, resulting in widespread tragedy.

In contrast, Faustus acts decisively but fails morally by choosing ambition over responsibility. He knowingly enters a pact with the devil, prioritizing power over salvation. His weakness is spiritual blindness fueled by pride. Although opportunities for repentance arise, Faustus repeatedly postpones moral correction. His cry, "My heart's so hardened I cannot repent," illustrates self-awareness without moral resolve. Unlike Hamlet, Faustus recognizes his error but lacks the courage to surrender ambition.

Comparatively, both characters exercise free will but misuse it. Hamlet's moral hesitation prevents timely justice, while Faustus's ambition destroys moral restraint. Both demonstrate that human weakness lies not in ignorance but in inner conflict. Shakespeare portrays weakness as paralysis of conscience; Marlowe portrays it as domination by desire. Despite these differences, the result is similar: tragic downfall. The results reveal that moral choice is shaped by psychological vulnerability. Neither character is evil; both are intellectually gifted and morally aware. Their failures stem from imbalance—Hamlet thinks too much, Faustus desires too much. The plays suggest that moral responsibility requires balance between reason, action, humility, and restraint.

Conclusion

This comparative study reveals that Hamlet and Doctor Faustus offer profound insights into human weakness and moral choice. Shakespeare and Marlowe portray protagonists whose tragic downfalls result not from external evil alone but from internal conflict and moral imbalance. Hamlet's hesitation and Faustus's ambition represent two extremes of human nature: excessive reflection and excessive desire.

Shakespeare presents Hamlet as a morally sensitive intellectual overwhelmed by ethical responsibility. His hesitation reflects fear of moral error, spiritual consequence, and existential uncertainty. Hamlet's tragedy suggests that moral awareness without action can become destructive. Shakespeare does not condemn thought itself but warns against paralysis caused by over analysis.

Marlowe, by contrast, presents Faustus as a warning against prideful ambition. Faustus's tragedy lies in his refusal to accept limitation and humility. His intellectual brilliance becomes a curse when separated from moral responsibility. Marlowe emphasizes that free will carries accountability; Faustus is damned not because of knowledge but because of choice. Together, the plays demonstrate that human nature is inherently fragile. Moral failure arises when balance is lost — between reason and action, ambition and humility. Both characters possess freedom, intelligence, and awareness, yet misuse these qualities. Their tragedies affirm that moral responsibility is inseparable from self-control. Ultimately, Shakespeare and Marlowe present a timeless vision of human weakness. Their works suggest that true moral strength requires both understanding and restraint. Through Hamlet and Faustus, Renaissance tragedy reveals the cost of moral imbalance and the enduring complexity of human choice.

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