

The Rationality of Dr. Faustus's Pursuit from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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As a conflicted character in the drama, Dr. Faustus is controversial in various literary analyses about his good and evil. While in 1943, Maslow, an American psychologist, proposed the theory of hierarchy of needs. That is, human needs are mainly divided into five levels, including “physiological needs”, “safety needs”, “love needs”, “esteem needs” and “need for self-actualization” (Maslow 7-13). This essay attempts to analyze Marlowe's representative work The Tragedy History of Dr. Faustus through the theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, so as to psychologically interpret the character of Dr. Faustus and explore the motivation and rationality of some of his behaviors.

First, the motivation for Dr. Faustus's pursuit is based on the satisfaction of low-level needs. The story opens with a chorus reciting Dr. Faustus's background and achievements. In the prologue:

So soon he profits in divinity,
The fruitful plot of scholarism grac'd,
That shortly he was grac'd with doctor's name,
Excelling all, and sweetly can disputes

In th 'heavenly matters of theology (Marlowe 49).

Dr. Faustus rose from modest origins but through talent and hard work, he earned a doctorate from the University of Wittenberg, making great contributions to medieval theology, philosophy, medicine and law. Owing to these successful achievements, Dr. Faustus, as a great and respected class of scholars, most likely had an outstanding social status and a satisfactory financial condition, without the concern for the lower needs of the first two levels. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, “man is a perpetually wanting animal” (Maslow 5). That is to say, “the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need” (Maslow 5). As the saying goes, when the belly is full, the mind is among the maids. The fulfillment of low-level needs paved the way for Dr. Faustus's pursuit of higher-level requirements—unlimited knowledge, love, and self-worth.

Second, the love needs, the need to connect with others in social life, is Dr. Faustus's deeper pursuit. After gaining the magic power by signing a contract with Mephistopheles, Dr. Faustus immediately and firmly demanded a beautiful wife. Maslow explains:

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs, and the whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new center (12).

Even before the expiration of 24 years, his soul was about to go to hell, but he was still obsessed with the Greek classical beauty Helen, and put forward the final request to the Mephistopheles, wanting to gain the beauty a kiss to die without regret, showing his deep desire for beauty and love. On the surface, it seems like a superficial bourgeois pleasure

and a low-level sensuous need. However, this pursuit of Dr. Faustus is opposed to the theological view of happiness of medieval asceticism, which has the characteristics of liberating instinct and personality, with a higher level of spiritual needs, affirming the rationality and progress of a better life.

Ultimately, the radical reason for surrendering his soul to the devil lies in “cognitive need” (Maslow's five-stage model has been expanded to eight stages, including cognitive and aesthetic needs) and self-actualization (Maslow 15). In scene I:

Philosophy is odious and obscure;

Both law and physic are for petty wits;

Divinity is basest of the three,

Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile:

'Tis magic, magic, that hath ravish'd me (Marlowe 54).

Dr. Faustus was not satisfied with current knowledge. As a theological scholar, he must submit to the authority of God and as a doctor, he had no ability to bring the dead back to life, while only as a magician could he control everything. He deviated from the once-sacred theology, while Newton, the father of modern physics, shockingly entered alone into the realm of theology after pushing physics to its zenith. They seemed to be completely opposite, but they were essentially the same—having reached the boundaries of their own cognitive theory, eager to break through themselves to explore an eternal path of knowledge. In other words, when one's own theoretical system fails to provide an answer to the constant bewilderment, it becomes possible to break with old patterns of behavior and even go to the other extreme.

On a deeper level, today we are more or less Dr. Faustus, to some extent hoping that knowledge and wisdom will give us more power to overcome various diseases, change our personal destiny or tame nature. Although due to the limitations of the time of creation, Marlowe's Dr. Faustus did not use his magical power for anything of real value after acquiring it, and only to satisfy his own desires and play with the authority of the Pope meaninglessly, it doesn't affect the fact that his desire for power is understandably driven by cognitive need, which also further embodies his desire for self-actualization and self-recognition.

In conclusion, although Dr. Faustus was finally addicted to the desire of the real world and lost the balance between desire and rationality, thus inevitably leading to failure and degradation, his decisions and actions in the step from heaven to hell were reasonable and logical, according to Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs. On the one hand, the material and educational conditions of Dr. Faustus determined the causes of his high-level needs. On the other hand, his fanatical pursuit of love and knowledge revealed the resistance of intellectuals in the Renaissance against the shackles of traditional thought, expressing the eternal topic of "man is a perpetually wanting animal" (Maslow 5).

Works Cited

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