# UNIT 3 IRONY AND THE TRAGIC DILEMMA IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

**Structure**



## 3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit helps you to understand irony as the distinguishing feature of *Doctor Faustus'* tragedy and how the essence of irony and tragedy lies in a dilemma with which *Doctor Faustus* dies without being able to resolve it.

## 3.1 NATURE & DEFINITION OF IRONY

In the preceding unit, we discussed how *Doctor Faustus* holds a sort of balance of opposites between the morality and the heroic strains of tragedy This oppositional balance is not simply thematic or intellectual but is the core of drama, and particularly that of tragedy, defined as irony. The subtlety of irony, in the form of a flux of opposite experiences distinguishes a good play from an inferior one and, to an extent, drama itself, which attempts to realize the human paradoxes in the dramatic action, and distinguishes itself from other genres of literature.

Dramatic irony is an intermediary between the subjectively felt ironies of experience on the part of the dramatist and the objectively found ironies of the world Understood textually, dramatic irony refers to the possibilities of a multivocal or a privileged reading as against a popular reading of a play that is not available to the character and, at times, to the playwright himself. Renaissance drama favours irony

or an ironic reading by virtue of its transitional experience wherein the acceptance of medieval values has become uncomfortable and, at the same time, there is a hesitation to accept the aspirations of the new age. Consequently, the transitional experience of the times required a dramatic strategy or trope that would play an uncharacteristic role of remaining subtly evasive instead of standardizing the dramatic experience. The term irony was given literary sophistication by Friedrich Schleger in the nineteenth century. He liberated the term from "simple verbal raillery" to explain the paradoxes in Shakespeare and the romantic poets. In Schlegel's understanding, Bert O. States writes:

> Irony was the highest principle of art, and the poet stands ironically above his creation, as God does above his own; the creation is utterly objective in character, and yet it reveals the subjective wisdom, will and love of the creator. Thus the author pervades his characters and their actions but he is never subjectively identifiable with them. Like God, he always expresses less than he thinks.[1]

Crediting irony with an infinitely variable strategy for encompassing nature's possibilites and an ability to summon "vital tension—producing mechanism of dramatic action", Bert O. States attempts to define irony:

> By irony, in its widest context, I do not refer to that negativity of attitude we associate with common irony, but rather to the very principle of negation itself. The difference between irony as dry mock or perverse negativity, and irony as an unlimited capacity to negate, or oppose ideas, is not a difference in the kind of operation the mind performs but rather a difference in the mind's intentions towards the observed content. Hamlet is ironic in the first sense. Shakespeare creating Hamlet is ironic in the second... Irony is the dramatist's version of the negative proposition. It helps him to avoid error, and by this I mean that it widens his vision, allows him to see more circumspectively the possibilities in his "argument"; and in so doing it ensures his not falling into the incomplete attitudes of naivete, sentimentality, selfrighteousness, or unearned faith. In short, the complete dramatist-- if there is such a person -- is unironically ironic.[2]

## 3.2 MARLOWE: AN IRONIST

More than any dramatist of his time, Marlowe faced the task of intellectual and artistic correction or reformulation. He had no more the world of established truths to live in but rather one of half-truths, the age-old truths which have become half-truths by his time and, further, the axioms of the new humanist learning which are limiting in themselves. The Christian faith in his time was at loggerheads with the new humanist values of material prosperity and pagan aesthetics. There was also the schism between the Catholics and the Protestants within the Christian faith. A scholar of vast learning, unlike many of his contemporaries, Marlowe could not help a critical and even a sceptical attitude towards both the dogmatic and the resurgent ideas current in his time. Scepticism, undoubtedly, represented the intellectual acumen and rigour of the Elizabethan mind. Marlowe's intellectual predecessors are the Latinist Erasmus and the great Thomas More. In *The Praises of Folly*, written in England at Thomas More's house, Erasmus, formulating the concept of serio-ludure-- the serious or the great as inseparable from the weak or the frivolous-- sums up the ironic perspective necessary for the cultural experience of the times. More wrote a companion piece to *The Praises of Folly* in Latin called *Utopia* (1515) presenting the tragi-comicality of his times.

Irony as a self-defeating human presumption was the structure of medieval Miracle and Morality plays. Marlowe follows the dramatic form of these plays but the point

of Marlowe's irony is a dilemma on the part of man whether there are infinite possibilities in him or all that he confidently feels about himself is simply a presumption. The essential irony implicit in the Miracle and Morality plays precludes human tragedy while the Marlovian irony makes the human dilemma poignantly tragic.

The nature of irony in *Doctor Faustus* is confounded by the fact that Marlowe nowhere articulated either his religious convictions or his humanist yearnings. It is equally difficult to say whether Marlowe suffered a schism within his mind with regard to the Catholic or the Protestant faith or with regard to the values of the Christian faith as against the emergent humanist values.

Except stating that Marlowe was deeply sensitive to the raging intellectual and religious controversies of his time, it is difficult to say what Marlowe's specific persuasions were. Critical perception often centers around Marlowe as a cynical Neitzsche bent on dismantling all orthodoxies. This view has its basis in Marlowe's "atheist lecture" which led to the charges of Richard Baines, an informer, and Thomas Kyd, against Marlowe for blasphemy before the Lord Keeper. But this perception is very tentative, especially in view of Faustus' last soliloquy containing the most passionate religious faith. Obviously, Marlowe's atheism was polemical against religious obscurantists; and the religious passions of the dying Faustus do betray Marlowe's deep religiousity.

With Marlowe's convictions eluding any definite critical point of view, Marlovian irony has to be credited to his dramatic genius that could evalute all kinds of experience with an unfailing objectivity. What Marlowe presents in *Doctor Faustus* are two distinct structures of irony, one based on the theological concepts of sin and damnation and the other on the self-limiting structures of human possibilites. Marlowe's specific dramatic achievement lies not only in making one irony intelligible in terms of another but in fusing them in such a manner that one heightens the other.

## 3.3 THE IRONY OF FAUSTUS' ASPIRATIONS

The original Faust Book on which Marlowe bases his play did not have serious theological or human implications. Marlowe gives Faustus both a theological and human motivation. Faustus experiences spiritual pain and intense suffering caused by the nature of both his religious and human impulses. There is an irony implicit in the very combination of religious and human impulses.

A doctor of divinity and a master of several human sciences like Medicine and Law, Faustus is fully aware of the nature and indispensability of religious faith on the one hand, and the nature and possibilites of human excellence and achievement on the other. A religious faith is a positive and humble acceptance of human possibilites and the formulation of a concept of a power superior to man and omnipotent in itself. Similarly, non-religious human learning is based on the concept of human reason as the regulator of human affairs. Pride, both religious and secular, should adhere to the formulations that shape religious faith and human learning. There is no scope for any human achievement in religion and for godly power in human learning.

The basic irony of Faustus's aspirations is one of misplacement. He misplaces human learning in the realm of religion and the power of religion in the realm of human learning and achievement. He wishes to be "divine in show" and would "live and die" in Aristotle's works. Logic has "ravished" him. The divine show, Faustus wants, is not of god but of man. Similarly, logic which has ravished him by its analytics should produce "miracles". Medicine, which has saved several cities from plague and cured several maladies, should help him to "heap up" gold and should make Men

"live eternally" and also "raise the dead" to life. Law does not suit human excellence and only divinity comes nearest to it but divinity does not recognize human excellence but presupposes human sin:

> If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us.
> Why, then, belike we must sin, and so consequently die.
> Ay, we must die an everlasting death.
> What doctrine call you this, Che sera, sera--
> What will be, shall be. Divinity, adieu![3]
> (1,i,42 -47)

The belief in religion is an admission of human sinfulness and religion must be dispensed with but Faustus does not consider whether there is any human failure outside the realm of religious formulations of sin and, further, as Douglas Cole points out, Faustus

> arrives at his fatalistic conclusion by joining together two premises which themselves are glaring half-truths for each of the propositions he cites from the Bible is drawn from contexts and passages which unite the helplessness of the sinner with the redeeming grace of God..."For the wages of sinne is death but the gifte of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"..."If we acknowledge our sinnes he is faithful and just to forgive our sinnes to cleanse Us from all Unrighteousness."[4]

Phoebe S. Spinard observes that Faustus' translation of Che sera, sera could just as easily have been, "What shall be will be". In the first, there is a rejection of will; in the second, an affirmation at least of the "possibilites of the will". Faustus is indeed refusing to consider his "being" in God, but by disposing of the question along with the answer, he is betraying the humanist goal of seeking the truth of "being" outside of religious systems.[5]

## 3.4 FAUSTUS' TRAGIC DILEMMA

Faustus' dilemma is essentially that while religion precludes human possibilites other than sin and repentance, the Humanist thought and learning gives him no solace being in itself self-limiting. Faustus is frustrated by the divine limitation of the human condition but the human condition, left to itself is as frustrating as the divine limitation. 'Yet, art Thou Faustus, and a man' and Faustus' dilemma is tragic for the human aspirations are whetted by divine power but the divine power is not within the human realm even if human capabilities are strained to the utmost. There is no escape from a sense of limitation, either religiously felt or humanly realized. Hence the need for religious faith, however constrictive it may be.

The human condition, at its best, is, thus, a delicately built irony of unrealizable ambitions. The irony compounds itself when man does not contend with this irony. Trangressing this irony is demeaning the human condition and subverting religious faith. Faustus' acts of necromancy and the sale of his soul to the devil are diabolic. The diabolic is the very antithesis of the human as well as the divine.

## 3.5 SELF-MULTIPLICATIVE IRONY IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

The play presents a course of regenerative irony, for Faustus having strained the delicate irony of human condition has set it on a course sui generis. The theological

formulation of sin could never be farther than human truism. The greater the man tries to be, the less he becomes in fact. Douglas Cole writes:

> *Doctor Faustus* is a man who of his own conscious wilfulness brings tragedy and torment crashing down upon his head, the pitiful and fearful victim of his own ambitions and desires. The irony with which Marlowe habitually invests the downfalls of his protagonists is here wrought to its finest and sharpest point; it is an irony based on theological concepts of sin and damnation, and dramatically expressed in two major patterns of action: the repetitive pattern of moral choice leading to the alternative of spiritual destruction and the pattern of contrast between Faustus' grand imaginative designs and the actual, vacuous accomplishments of his magical career.[6]

*Faustus' achievements through his pact with the devil are in an inverse proportion to the magnitude of his ambitions.* Ironically, Faustus's fatalistic interpretation of the scriptural assertion that what shall be will be becomes a matter of self-conscious choice. Further, the choice becomes a repetitive pattern of continual wilfulness in the face of an agonizing awareness that the God he rejects is the one he continues to cherish. Necromantic books are "heavenly". The magician he wishes to be is a "mighty God". He rebels against God but the divine consciousness characterizes even his rebellion. God, always, continues to be the measure of all things for Faustus.

The irony of Faustus' revolt does not end with its divine awareness. Lucifer and Mephostophilis whom Faustus courts, share the ironic predicament of Faustus--Rejecting the God but cherishing Him. Mephostophilis describes Lucifer's revolt against God as not heroic but as one of "pride and insolence" and hell is the absence of "heavenly joy and everlasting bliss". Faustus himself looks upon his own revolt of "desperate thoughts" against God as securing "eternal death".

*No dramatic character could be a creation of such an enduring irony as Faustus is.* His is the paradoxical case of a revolt against something that constitutes his very being. Irony builds up the character of Faustus and the play so forcefully that the greater the revolt of Fautus is against God, greater still is his divine awareness. Irony builds up not merely the paradox of Faustus' revolt but, also through the paradox, intensifies Faustus' self-awareness and his sense of the human condition.

> Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damn'd?
> And canst thou not be sav'd. What boots it, then, to think of God or heaven?
> Away with such fancies, and despair;
> Despair in God, and trust in Beelzebub.....
> Abjure this magic, turn to God again!
> .....
> To God? He loves thee not.
> The God thou serv'st is thine own appetite,
> Wherein is fix'd the love of Belzebub.
> To him, I'll build an altar and a church.[7]
>
> (II, i 1-15)

The tragic dilemma in Faustus does not rest in his choice between God and the devil but in their inseparable coexistence within his human condition. Fear of God and damnation and the trust of the devil emanate from the human condition. God is the heavenly joy of human limitations and the devil is the appetitie of human aspirations. The heavenly joy lies for man in a condition of human limitation and a tragic torment awaits in the human state of promise and excellence. Both god and the devil define man in a mutuality and confront him with an acute tragic dilemma as to whether he be content with the humanly limiting bliss or contend tragically with the magnificence of human promise and possibility.

The tragic dilemma is all the more tormenting for there is no truly human resolution of this dilemma. God calls upon him to return to Him but the devil manipulates him to retain his contractual bond with him.

The parity of God and the devil in the centrality of man, however, is only a stage in the human predicament of Faustus and does not last long. Faustus has not, in fact, rejected one in favour of the other but has replaced God by the devil, with the divine awareness constituting his being, remaining more or less intact.

The divine awareness is a sense of humility and veneration towards a superior being. What Faustus gave as a devout soul to God, he would now give to the devil raising an altar and building a church. He would complete the bond with the devil using the same words,"Consummatum est", Christ used in completing the "work of redemption on Calvary". However, the devil does not redeem Faustus from his divine awareness but rather intensifies it and generates deep despair:

> Home fuge: whither should I fly?
> If unto God, he'll throw me down to hell.[8]
> (II, i. 75-76)

The devil is no less despairing of Faustus' ambitions of divine power on earth. Neither could Faustus give wholehearted commitment to the devil nor could the devil keep up the obligations of the contract. Both despair of god, reject Him and lead a life of distraction as wounded rebels rather than as defiant fighters. The analogy between the man and the devil ends there for the loss is gruesome for Faustus who can only fall back on his despair whereas the devil could live on the thoughts of avenging their defeat as ineffectual angles.

*The signing of the pact with the devil starts unfolding the fundamental irony of Faustus' aspirations. Faustus signed the pact only to undo himself totally.* The pact signed to gain absolute power on earth only leads to Faustus' mental disintegration,for what he gets through the pact is only an increased despair in God as well as in the human condition. Mephostophilis would not answer Faustus' query about hell for it reminded him of his own tortured state of being. He wouldn't answer Faustus' question about the creation of the earth as well, for the creator is his bitter enemy nor could he give Faustus a wife, for marriage is a divine sacrament. Ironically, the show of the Seven Deadly Sins, he arranges is what he could give and what Faustus could relish vicariously. The period of contract of twenty four years turns out to be not only a denial of Faustus' aspirations but one of a progressive degradation of Faustus as a man. Douglas Cole writes:

> In not choosing the God in his desire to be as
> God, Faustus has provided not only for his
> destruction, but also for his degradation. Instead
> of reaching the stature of demi-God or even
> commander of the world, Faustus becomes an imperial
> entertainer. The restless scholar hemmed in by the
> limits of mortality gains his satisfaction by playing
> the practical jokes on the papal court: the man
> who looked forward to controlling the lives and the
> power of all the earthly rulers now becomes the
> magician of the emperor, building castles in the
> air, and presenting spirits that resemble great men of the past.[9]

Further, the fascinating devil providing allurements turns out to be a tormentor threatening punishment as Faustus attempts to seek divine grace which amounts to disobedience to the devil.

The devil is temptation, distraction and soverign power but doesn't stand by the contractual obligations. Faustus who aspired to rule the world cannot even insist on

the devil's obligations much less abrogate the contract for its breach but meekly assures obedience without insisting on the same from the devil.

> Thou traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul,
> For disobedience to my soverign Lord.[10]
>
> Sweet Mephostophilis, entreat thy lord
> To pardon my unjust presumption,
> And with my blood again I will confirm
> My former vow I made to Lucifer.[11]
> (V, i, 74-81)

Faustus asks Mephostophilis to torment the old man who agonizes him with his advice. Mephostophilis' reply is significant.

> His faith is great; I cannot touch his soul;
> But what I may afflict his body with
> I will attempt, which is but little worth.[12]
> (V, i, 85-90)

Implicitly, Faustus could be tormented, for his faith in God is so shaky, but not the old man. Obedience to the devil and faithlessness to God bring the same fate. In fact, the devil heaps degradation whereas God could only pose a serious limitation on his human condition. Further, faith in God could be such a terrifying human strength that the devil would not dare to touch him. If the human condition is limiting, the limitation is a virtue, and a divine blessing too. Faustus should not have despaired in being Faustus and a man but should have felt supreme confidence in his human state. This realization couldn't be farther from Faustus but the human will would rather suffer its choice than retract meekly even if the choice is degrading and torturous.

At best, Faustus can distract himself from the gravity of wilful choice with whatever appeals to the baser human instincts. He asks for Helen but Mephistophilis can only give him a devilish shadow of Helen in whom we can read his predicament.

> Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.-
> Her lips suck forth my soul: see, where it flies!
> Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
> Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
> And all is dross that is not Helena.
> . . . . . .
> Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
> When he appeared to hapless Semele:
> More lovely than the monarch of the sky
> In wanton Arethusa's azur'd arms.[13]
> (V i, 95-100)

Imagery builds up the irony of Faustus' predicament. Douglas Cole sums up the ironical thrust in Faustus' passions:

> Helen, whose beauty caused Troy to burn, will do the same for Faustus; the immortality offered by the kisses of a demon lover is an eternity in hell; the soul that is sucked forth cannot be given back again; hell not heaven is in these lips; the flames of Jupiter that destroyed admiring Semele are the flames of this Helene's abode which will destroy a hapless Faustus; wanton Faustus, like Arethusa, will hold the burning sun in his arms but not without fiery pain.[14]

The apostrophe to the devil in Helen's form is a desperate attempt to heighten his predicament and allow it to reach its logical end where the nature of his undoing comes in full force to his realization.

But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned; the
serpent that tempted Eve may be saved,but not Faustus[15]
(V, ii, 13-15)

## 3.6. SUMMING UP : TRAGIC IRONY AND DILEMMA IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

Faustus comes to full repentance at the end of the play. The last soliloquy is an admission of the possibility of divine grace and forgiveness. Ironically, the realization comes at a time when the devil is around to torture him to death and if only his doom could be postponed, he would gain the divine forgiveness. Faustus willed his destruction so long, now he craves for time to be able to gain his salvation. But Faustus knew that the possibility of repentance and forgiveness waited on him until he reached his end. As he dies with all the opportunities of repentance and forgiveness thrown away wantonly, what remains is the burden of the human condition that contained the germs of his degradation and destruction.

Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
. . . This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd
unto some brutish beast! All beasts are happy . . .[16]
(V, iii. 100-110)

The pain of devilish torture is so intense, Faustus cries to God to save him from the tortures of the devil:

O God,
If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
Yet, for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransom'd me
Impose some end to my incessant pain.[17]
(V. iii. 100-104)

*Faustus who sought the devil to oppose God, seeks God's mercy and his innate forgiveness to rescue him from the devil.*Christian theology proves itself forcefully in Faustus' predicament. However, its point is religious didacticism whereas Marlowe brings out irony and a tragic dilemma. For Christian theology, Faustus' predicament falls short of a tragedy for he was motivated by nothing but presumption which could have been easily remedied by repentance and, consequently he could have been rescued by divine forgiveness. But for Marlow, the immensity of the human condition forces desperate choices on man which could not justifiably be termed right or wrong but which have to be understood in terms of reality that constitutes human condition. What happened to Faustus may justify Christian theology but what it explains are the irredeemable paradoxes of man. Hence the irony of Faustus' career and his tragic dilemma. Douglas Cole sums up the Marlovian irony:

For Marlowe, the tragedy lies, not in the inevitable
falling off of human achievement from the
ideal, but in the travesty of the ideal that the
deeds of man so often represent, and in the
illusory aura of nobility with which man persist-
ently invests his base desires. It is the tragic
view of the ironist who sees in man the responsible
cause of his own undoing, who presents man as a
destructive agent who, by the abuse of freedom and
will, persistently, betrays others and inevitably
betrays himself.[18]

## 3.7 REFERENCES

1. Bert O. States. *Irony and Drama: A Poetics* Ithaca. Carnell University Press. 1971.p.3.

2. Ibid.,p.xviii.

3. Marlowe. *Doctor Faustus*, p.5.

4. Douglas Cole. *Suffering: Evil in the plays of Christopher Marlowe.* Princeton, Princeton UP.1962,p.198.

5. Phoebe S. Spinard. "The Dilettante's Lie in *Doctor Faustus*". *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 24,2, 1982. pp.245 to 247.

6. Douglas Cole. *Suffering and Evil in the plays of Christopher Marlowe*, p. 191.

7. Christopher Marlowe. *Doctor Faustus*, pp. 16-17.

8. Ibid., p. 19.

9. Douglas Cole. *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Marlowe,* p. 216.

10. Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, p. 46.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.,

13. Ibid., p.17.

14. Dougles Cole. *Suffering and Evil in the plays of Marlowe* p. 220.

15. Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* p. 46.

16. Ibid.,p.57.

17. Ibid.

18. Dougles Cole. *Suffering Evil and Evil and in the plays of Marlowe.* p. 263.

## 3.8 KEY WORDS

**Arethusa**: A nymph in Greek mythology who was persued by the river God, Alpheus. She flies to Sicily where she takes the the form of a spring in Ortygia, an island near Syracuse. Alpheus, flowing under the sea, was there united with her.

**Fredrick Schlegel** (1772-1829): German critic, aesthetician and writer of romanticism, Schlegel formulates the aesthetic theory of romantic poetry and also the notion of romantic irony.

**Helen:** The most beautiful woman in Greek legend; married to Menelaus, later the King of Sparta. She was abducted by Paris the Prince of Troy. Aided by many admirers of Helen's beauty, Menelaus wages a war against Troy. When Paris dies, Helen marries his brother Deiphobus whom she betrays to the Greeks. Helen returns to Sparta with Menelaus after the Fall of Troy.

**Semele:** Princess of Thebes in Greek mythology with whom the Greek God Zeus falls in love. By Zeus, she conceives, Dionysus. While Dionysus was still unborn Semele gets consumed by the radiance of Zeus Olympian splendour which Semele herself entices him to wear, under the malicious prompting of Zeus' wife, Hera.

## 3.9 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how irony constitutes the chief element in the characterisation of Faustus.

2. Illustrate the use of dramatic irony from the text of *Doctor Faustus.*

3. The essence of irony is dilemma: Discuss the statement with reference to *Doctor Faustus.*

4. Tragic irresolution is the dramatic strength of *Doctor Faustus.* Discuss.

## 3.10 ANNOTATIONS

Annotate the following passages with reference to the context.

A. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us.

Why, then belike we must sin, and consequently die?

b. What doctrine call you this, che sera, sera - What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu!

c. Alas, poor slave! see how poverty jesteth in his nakedness! The villan is bare and out of service, and so hungry, that I know would give his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton, though it were blood-raw.

d. To him I'll build an altar and church, And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babes.

e. Hell hath no limits nor is circumscribed In one self place; for where we are is hell, and where hell is, there we ever be:

f. O, no end is limited to damn'd souls! why were thou not a creature wanting soul?

g. This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd unto some brutish beast!

## 3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Cole, Douglas. *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe.* Princeton, Princeton University Press. 1962. The book presents an exhaustive background to the Marlovian tragedy and discusses the nature of evil and tragic suffering in *Tamburlaine, The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus.*

2. Hardin F. Richard. "Irony and Privilege in Marlowe" *Centennial Review* 33,3, 1983. pp. 207-227. The article discusses Marlowe as an ironist and looks into the possibility of two audiences for Marlowe's plays, one making an ordinary reading or viewing, and the other, the privileged, who could see the irony implicit in the play.

3. States, Bert O. *Irony and Drama; A Poetics.* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1971. The book analyses the concept of irony, its relation to dialectics, besides discussing patterns of irony.