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The Middle Spectrum: On Anti-hero and *Doctor Faustus*

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Abstract:

This paper takes into account the inception and steady rise of the anti-hero figure in literature while elucidating how general opinion about protagonist has changed over time. It also incorporates how interpretation plays a key role in classifying an anti-hero while identifying some key examples of it in text, namely, poems, novels and plays. Along with that, this paper attempts to re-read the protagonist of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in the light of anti-heroism. Through *Faustus*, the paper explores how morally complex characters come out as relatable ones with the audience understanding and sympathizing with the fact that human emotions do not work in a black and white fashion. This relatability in turn leads to a nuanced perspective on understanding the human nature better.

Keywords: Anti-hero, hero, interpretation, protagonist, *Doctor Faustus*, relatability.

It has been a maxim that evil has persisted as long as good has and will continue to persist as long as goodwill. However, with time, the perceptions of good and evil have become increasingly subjective and impressionistic- they are no longer black and white terminologies, no longer extremities of a moral spectrum, no longer an absolute categorization parameter. A case in point happens to be the portrayal of protagonists in the literature and how they have evolved, courtesy of the growing complexities of society among other factors. The last century has been a witness to a flawed, realistic and fallacious protagonist in sharp contrast to the one which embodied valor and gallantry during the early years of literary history. These protagonists subvert the traditional concept of "heroes" and thus are often labeled as "anti-heroes" who vacillate between the two extremities forcing us to question and reconsider our understanding of justice, fortitude and heroism. Despite being morally complex characters, they can stir a sense of empathy in the reader. It is this concept and history of antiheroes that this paper explores along with the examples

of such characters in poems, novels and drama with a special emphasis on Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

The birth and even the meaning of the term anti-hero remain debatable even to this day. The Oxford English Dictionary catalogs the first usage of this term in Sir Richard Steele's *The Lover and Reader* where he rebukes men chasing after women by calling them anti-heroes. From then, the term has widened its ambit and today includes a wide variety of characters that can be appropriately categorized under this label. Percy Adams in *The Anti-Hero in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (1976) contends that such protagonists were "twin-born with the hero," that is, they have existed as long as the concept of hero has existed. Other critics have instead earmarked the inception of anti-heroes from the character of Don Quixote in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes and also from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) where the term was first used by the protagonist for himself. The concept can also be understood as a continuum of Byronic Hero who tweaked the entrenched view of a traditionalist hero. In *Anti-hero Worship: Emergence of Byronic Hero* (2016), Palfy introduces the character developed by George Gordon Byron by stating that "this novel hero manipulated standard behaviors and plot outcomes associated with the earlier conceptions of the 'hero' archetype, creating an entirely new standard character that revolutionized literature and art" (162). Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* can be read as an example where the Byronic hero swims against the tide by diverting from societal expectations, having a turbulent and arrogant disposition and yet retaining the capacity to be tender and sensitive.

For this paper, I will adhere to Adam's view of anti-heroes existing from the very formation of heroes themselves. My perception of the topic aligns with Peter Thorslev who in *Byronic hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962) gives the early diversions of heroism by giving examples of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* along with the character of Prometheus. This paper is an attempt to understand the nuances of anti-heroes in various forms of literature with the reading of the protagonist Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as an anti-hero figure. It seeks to give a comprehensive understanding of how the notion of heroism itself has metamorphosized into a convoluted phenomenon while understanding how perceptions play a key role in the interpretation of what constitutes an anti-hero. It develops on this idea by the case study of Doctor Faustus and delineates how Marlowe's treatment of Faustus can be understood through the simultaneous lens of anti-heroism and the subjectivity of the audience.

Transgressing the Boundaries: What Constitutes an Anti-Hero

The concrete definition of an anti-hero is again a matter of disputation. He has been defined as a figure of “ambiguous heroism, a character adept at delivering effective justice who is willing to bend or break the rules usually by adopting villainous tactics” to achieve his/her purpose (Comerford 2). This definition, however, restricts and bounds the character to pursue the course of “delivery effective justice” which is not the case with many characters such as the modern antihero Quentin Compson in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* or Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Jonason et al label an antihero as “a protagonist whose character is conspicuously contrary to an archetypal hero” (92). This definition again has the natural drawback of relying heavily on the concept of ‘hero’ to determine the antithesis of it. Similar is the definition that the antihero is “the principal character in a play or novel who exhibits qualities the opposite of those usually regarded as ‘heroic’” (Quinn 28,29). It does not take into account the characters in poems such as that of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the Duke in Browning’s *My Last Duchess*. The issue with defining the term lies in the parent word ‘hero,’ which itself is too dynamic and complex a term to define. Goethals and Allison very adeptly put that “heroism exists in the eye of the beholder” (230). Historically, a hero embodies the virtues of valor, courage and is a character that aspires a form of human divinity such as Aristotle’s hero in *Poetics* should have “goodness” and “propriety.” However, the notions of heroism itself have evolved over time to incorporate a sense of acceptance towards the flaws in the character and the portrayal of the hero in its most raw and realistically human manner. Antihero, despite his evident flaws and apparent wickedness or unheroic characteristics, strikes a sympathetic chord with the audience.

Like the subjectivity which determines heroism, the same subjectivity works to associate a character as an antihero. The complexities which reverberate with such an antihero make the audience question their own convictions regarding justice, morality and goodness. With interpretation playing a key role, an antihero can thus be one of the prominent characters in art who works in the middle ground of “good” and “evil,” whilst willing to jeopardize ethics and morality to achieve his intended goal. Essentially, such a protagonist transgresses the two defined peripheries of right and wrong whilst penetrating the layers of justice, of goodness and of humanity itself, they exude the hope that heroism lies in the fallibility and thereby appearing more relatable and realistic to the audience. Calling them a “children of necessity and complexity” (Wilson 53), the current anti-heroes have found their way into the mainstream literature, particularly in the post-

war era with social factors of war, disillusionment, political upheavals, despair, uncertainty and alienation playing their parts in establishing the fact that the traditionalist understanding of heroism is now a narrow one. While the hero only battled the external conflict he faced, the anti-hero battles an internal conflict along with the external thereby rendering the character rounder than a hero. Gaine (2010) employed the term “liminal heroism” for such characters while Selvik (31,32) comments that they operate in the “grey area” with inclinations towards either good or bad asserting their individuality which may or may not conform to the established social norms. One may then ask, and rightfully so, about the difference between a villain and an anti-hero. The line of demarcation is indeed a vague one but one of the key aspects is the anti-hero being the central character and justifying his non-conformist ways in a way which elicit a sense of sympathy in the reader whereas the villain is not the central character and actively works against another prominent positive eminent character. Thus, the antihero is not an absolutely upright character and yet generates the sympathy of the reader. It is this interpretation that this paper employs to bring forth various antiheroes in literature with a primary focus on the play *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe.

Anti-Heroes in Poems

The two key characters that would be discussed here would be the character of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the character of Duke in Robert Browning’s *My Last Duchess*. When it comes to *Paradise Lost*, the protagonist has been the subject of much speculation. Dryden thought of Satan as a hero; Blake and Shelley advocated Dryden’s stand while Addison argued that there happens to be no hero. The debate here is not of the hero but of the very centrality of character in a work. Historically, literature was thought as a tool for moral instruction with Horace in his epistle *The Art of Poetry* establishing the purpose of literature to be “to instruct and delight” with Sir Philip Sidney backing up the claim in *An Apology for Poetry*. To cater to this purpose, the ‘hero’ or protagonist was depicted as someone who the reader could look up to, mirror and emulate. With Satan seeming as the protagonist in *Paradise Lost*, this moral angle was subverted and thus the confusion and debate. While Satan comes forth as the leading character in the poem, he plays the part of an anti-hero by aspiring pride and insolence by challenging the throne of the Creator and refusing to accept defeat even after his fall by stating it is “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (Book 1). His belief in the rebellion was so concrete that a reader finds himself

sympathizing with his cause despite the apparent moral fallacy. Comparing the development of the protagonist, Kadiroglu states-

This heroic diction was shattered with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and the question of "unheroic" hero (meaning protagonist here) emerged. Dryden says that in *Paradise Lost*, Satan is "technically" a hero. On the other hand, Joseph Addison argues that Milton had no hero in the classical sense. Romantics, later, had a different point of view. Blake and Shelley declared that Milton was favoring Satan, meaning he was the hero of the work. However, romantic "heroism" differs from it in the archetypal sense. At this stage, we have the Romantic Hero and Byronic Hero whose thoughts and feelings become more important than his action - as opposed to Aristotle's view that action determines character. As a consequence, it can be concluded that the early debate for antihero shows itself with Milton's protagonist. The romantic poets saw Satan as their hero. (9)

This is the foundational aspect of anti-heroism that through the character, the reader's own sense of justice, morality, and sense of probity is questioned. By ascertaining that Satan's cause was unjust and yet having that soft corner somewhere for the character, the complexity of emotions is put under an uncomfortable yet crucial lens. Likewise, Browning in his poem *My Last Duchess* brilliantly presents the protagonist in the form of the Duke but without offering any moral judgment and leaving the audience to wonder where does the truth lie- whether the Duke is attempting to convince himself and others of a lie or blatantly confessing a crime, whether it is an attempt to reassure oneself that the interpreted murder was for a just cause or guilt resounding within those statements. It makes the reader wonder why Browning chose such a character as a protagonist and why, despite the Duke appears to be a loathsome character, the audience can see through the complexity of emotions that this masterpiece of a dramatic monologue is capable of inciting. Thus, he can be regarded as the anti-hero of the poem.

Anti-Heroes in Novels

It is with the prose work that the word 'anti-hero' truly took flight with Richard Steele mentioning it for the first time in *The Lover and Reader* (1723) by stating:

I shall enquire, in due time, and make every Anti-Heroe in Great Britain give me an account why one woman is not as much as ought to fall his share; and shall show

every abandoned wanderer, that with all his blustering, his restless following every female he sees, is much more ridiculous (Steele 1723:13).

The term has now taken various shades and deeper connotations blurring the defined lines between a protagonist, antagonist, hero and villain. From Richard Steele, the next work to use the term was *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky where the narrator notes:

Why to tell long stories showing how I have spoiled my life through morally rotting in my corner, through lack of fitting environment, through divorce from real life, and rankling spite in my underground world, would certainly not be interesting; a novel needs a hero, and all the traits for an anti-hero are EXPRESSLY gathered together here, and what matters most, it all produces an unpleasant impression, for we are all divorced from life, we are all cripples, every one of us, more or less (166).

Dostoevsky's narrator does not mince his words in describing himself to be devoid of any heroic quality by labeling himself "wicked" and "unattractive" and overturn as well as impair the established traditionalistic expectations of a protagonist. He feels alienated from society, takes a skeptical look at life and deplores how other seemingly less intelligent people are capable of leading a happier life than him and this realization makes him come face to face with his own inadequacy to find happiness within himself. However, by calling himself an antihero and accepting his own flaws, the narrator ends up giving words to his misery and in turn, is capable of generating empathy from his reader.

Another well-known protagonist which fits into this parameter of an anti-hero is Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* who acquires his wealth through illegal and unjustified means. His love for materialism and acquiring it through crooked means to achieve his purpose of having Daisy in his life characterizes him as our typical anti-hero protagonist who breaks and bends the rule to achieve a greater goal in life. Gatsby transforms himself into the illusion that he has of himself, into the character who he believes Daisy would approve of, into a reinvented personality that masks his true roots of being from a humble background. While he is too utopian in his perception of Daisy, Gatsby through his character portrays that unrealistic expectations and quixotic desires are also a part of human nature. It is this subtle characteristic that makes Gatsby likable even in his delusionary pursuits.

A wonderful depiction of my interpretation of an antihero can also be found in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* where the protagonist explores the dubiety of

meaning in existence and beautifully demonstrates the aspect of wavering emotions and second doubts in a person. Through the character of both Tomas and Tereza, Kundera can weave how diametrically opposite our notions and views of life could be and yet it is the acceptance of individual selves by others that we yearn for. It is this complexity that anti-heroes demonstrate and whether they can find that acceptance through readers vary from subjective interpretations of people.

Anti-Heroes in Drama and the Character of Doctor Faustus

The characters in drama historically have given space to anti-heroes and they have been accepted whole-heartedly by the audience as well. One can look for the antihero in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* who vies for power and dominance and in its pursuit turns into a murderer. However, how many of us have characterized Macbeth in the same strain that we have put Iago from *Othello*? It is there the difference lies between a villain and an anti-hero that despite Macbeth's frantic and immoral path to gain power, we do not classify him as the villain. The moral dilemma faced by him, the battle between his unwonted desires and his impulse of goodness strikes a chord within us and depicts the human flaw in all its glory- to find heroism in the unheroic.

The same Elizabethan Age was witness to another playwright Christopher Marlowe whose play *Doctor Faustus* embodied the elements of anti-hero that this paper seeks to explore. The tragic plays of that time resulted in the demise of the noble character. Faustus, however, was different as the character could not be classified as virtuous and exemplary. It is this bent towards challenging God's authority, similar to the way that Satan did in *Paradise Lost*, which makes Doctor Faustus an appealing and complex character. When he speaks, vanity and arrogance drip from his words; when he acts, he transgresses the bounds of decency and sin. The very first soliloquy in Act I begins with Faustus examining the limitations of knowledge and how he has reached the very end of what is humanly possible. He snubs law, medicine, polemics and, even theology to conclude that only "heavenly necromancy" is worth studying by an accomplished Faustus. A crucial aspect is that the play itself begins with the downfall of Faustus and there are no instances where Faustus' 'heroism' is on display, quite in contrast with tragic characters who concretize virtue. Faustus, since the beginning, is a prey to his own follies. His will to become the god on Earth is on full display when he terms himself "conjurer laureate". Faustus' disregard for religion is found throughout the play, even before making the Faustian bargain. On conjuring up Mephostophilis,

Faustus categorically states “There is no chief but only Belzebub, to whom Faustus doth dedicate himself” (Act I Scene III, 83). Some key aspects of Faustus which highlight his vacillating ethicality and his bent towards the direction opposite of heroism can be best understood by contrasting the speeches of Mephostophilis and Faustus. While questioning, Mephostophilis calls himself an “unhappy soul” that had fallen with Lucifer. It is, in fact, the character of Mephostophilis that appears more tragic than that of Faustus. Ironically, he is more of a believer in faith than Faustus as while Faustus lauds Belzebub as his chief, Mephostophilis calls on God by referring to him as “our God” and goes on to voice his guilt by lamenting:

Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?
O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands
Which strikes a terror to my fainting soul (Act I Scene iv, 84)

Interestingly, Marlowe reverses the roles of the devil and human with Mephostophilis warning Faustus of the consequences of damnation and Faustus, in turn, chides the devil for grieving about his loss of heaven and calling hell “a fable.” Papagagi takes note of this instance by writing:

Strangely enough, if one were to consider anyone a true Renaissance character in this play, that would be Mephostophilis. He is Faustus' tragic double who has the awareness of sin and the full consciousness of neverending damnation. At the same time, he realizes that Faustus is far happier than him, because he can still repent. He warns him about the terror of everlasting damnation, but, on the other hand “solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris”... He tells him that hell is not circumscribable, and makes him aware that each man carries a hell in himself, which can outgrow him if he gives it power over himself (81).

A scholar of divinity claiming that God cannot hurt him depicts his initial stage of ignorance which unravels throughout the play especially in his failure to understand that his salvation was always at an arm's length had he but tried to reach out and converted his many attempts at repentance into a reality. Faustus with his refusal to accept God, with his disregard of divinity, with his advocacy of evil to the devil himself as well as his inability to repent turn him

into a protagonist which can only and only be termed as an anti-hero. Faustus, after exhibiting his sheer insolence, furthers spirals down into spending his part of the bargain in vain pursuits and entertainment. His initial vision of doing great things crumble almost immediately when the first thing he desires is a wife as he is “wanton and lascivious” which in turn sufficiently contends Faustus’ initial claim of moving towards magic to acquire and enlarge his knowledge. The idea that Faustus is a mere tragedy also disintegrates as it is not as though God has abandoned him and fated his doom. Throughout the play, Faustus receives divine signs in the form of the “homo fuge” inscription on his arm, the appearing of the old man and his own conscience; digression and transgression thus becomes Faustus’ purely conscious decision where “the main aspect of the salvation problem of the play is Faustus’ inability to abandon materiality and attain spirituality” (Papahagi 76). The consciousness of his actions is best arrayed when he teases Mephostophilis into taking God’s name by following dialogues:

Faustus: Now tell me, who made the world?

Mephostophilis: I will not.

Faustus: Sweet Mephostophilis, tell me

Mephostophilis: Move me not, Faustus (Act II Scene ii, 98)

Apparently, Faustus knows the terminus that his path would lead to and yet chooses to walk the same lane quite obstinately and defiantly “in pleasure and in dalliance” (Act III Scene I, 108). Faustus, despite having supernatural powers, is corrupted to the point that he spends his life in abject mediocrity, trifling and jesting with the common men, pleasing the nobles and harming his enemies. He is most unheroic in his attempts at frivolously dilly-dallying with Pope on St. Peter’s feast and ironically extricating curses and damnation for himself. By the end of the play, not a single incident can be traced where Faustus has worked to uplift humanity or done a deed for the greater cause. Faustus as a protagonist exemplifies neither rectitude nor propriety and yet, scholarship such as Clifford Leech in *Christopher Marlowe Poet for the Stage* (118) have argued that God was too harsh on him in letting him be damned towards the end despite his incessant pleas of redemption. Such an empathetic view of the character despite his fallibility is what makes Doctor Faustus a copybook example of an anti-hero. By the end of the play, Faustus’ passionate supplications render pity in the reader when he says:

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:
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd.
Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true,
This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd
Unto some brutish beast (Act V Scene III, 154-155).

The character has been a subject of controversy of whether Faustus is the hero or the villain. It, instead, can be put in the grey area of the two radical absolutes. Faustus, with his defiant nature, with his temerity in disregarding religion is not a character without susceptibility. He is more relatable to the general mass as an internal conflict is central to human nature and it is a manifestation of this conflict that Marlowe explores through Doctor Faustus.

Conclusion

The utopian or idealistic characters do not contest the same level of relatability as the reader is not able to identify with him in a way that he/she can with anti-heroes. Whether heroic characters are comparatively flatter to the characters of anti-heroes is a pertinent query which however is beyond the scope of this paper. An interesting aspect which the history of anti-heroes put forth is the gradual acceptance of non-conformity and morally convoluted stands in literature. Mirroring the society, this acceptance points that we have begun to be tolerant towards the ethical dilemma demonstrated by anti-heroes, in fact stretching beyond the norms with characters such as Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* or Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*. The question is not whether our notion of heroism has evolved over time but whether this evolution has been gradually moving from one end of goodness to the other, darker end. The gradual proliferation of anti-heroes in the mainstream literature also demonstrates how the audience has psychologically matured and caters to nuanced complex characters thus demonstrating how working in neat binaries is unrealistic in this world. The anti-heroes demonstrate how the heroism and villainy, the propriety and infamy, the good and the bad play their parts in the lives of each individual echoing the realistic view of life.

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