

Satan, as The True Doctor of Rebellion: A Nietzschean Reinterpretation with Faustus

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Abstract

Within the Western literary canon, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* explore humanity's enduring desire to transcend the limits imposed by divine authority, social convention, and moral law. Both Faustus, the ambitious Renaissance scholar who trades his soul for knowledge and power, and Satan, the fallen angel who rebels against Heaven, emerge as iconic figures of defiance. Yet when examined through Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, their trajectories reveal significant differences. Faustus ultimately remains constrained by Christian guilt and moral anxiety, preventing him from achieving the radical self-affirmation that Nietzsche associates with human greatness. Satan, by contrast, demonstrates a more persistent commitment to self-determination through his rejection of divine authority and his attempt to create meaning through his own will. Although the title of Doctor formally belongs to Faustus, the symbolic role of a teacher of rebellion belongs more convincingly to Satan, whose rhetoric and example inspire continued resistance against established order. By applying a Nietzschean framework to both texts, this paper argues that Milton's Satan functions more effectively than Marlowe's Faustus as the true Doctor of rebellion in the Western literary imagination.

Keywords: *Doctor Faustus; Paradise Lost; Satan; Doctor of Rebellion; Übermensch; Nietzsche*

Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* explore humanity's enduring desire to transcend the limits imposed by divine authority, social convention, and moral law. Both Faustus, the ambitious Renaissance scholar who trades his soul for knowledge and power, and Satan, the fallen angel who rebels against Heaven, emerge as iconic figures of defiance. Yet when examined through Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, their trajectories reveal significant differences. Faustus ultimately remains

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Doctor Faustus emerged from the intellectual ferment of the Renaissance, a period characterized by humanist inquiry, religious transformation, and the beginnings of modern scientific thought. Renaissance humanism celebrated the potential of the individual intellect while simultaneously remaining bound to a Christian worldview. Faustus embodies this contradiction. His dissatisfaction with medicine, law, logic, and theology reflects a desire to exceed traditional limits and attain a godlike mastery of knowledge. Yet his pursuit of necromancy reveals the persistent anxiety that intellectual ambition may lead to spiritual ruin. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, composed after the English Civil War and the Restoration, reflects a different historical moment. Milton's political commitments and republican sympathies inform his treatment of authority and rebellion. Satan's challenge to divine hierarchy echoes contemporary debates concerning freedom, obedience, and legitimate power. Although Milton ultimately reaffirms divine justice, the poetic force of Satan's resistance generates a figure whose appeal frequently exceeds the theological framework of the poem. Nietzsche's philosophy provides a productive lens through which to interpret both works. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presents the *Übermensch* as an individual who overcomes inherited moral systems and creates values through an affirmation of life. Critics such as Walter Kaufman and Martin Heidegger emphasize Nietzsche's concern with self-overcoming and value creation (Kaufmann ; Heidegger). Through this perspective, Faustus and Satan become contrasting models of rebellion, one marked by failure and the other by a remarkable, though incomplete, form of self-assertion.

Faustus's pact with Lucifer represents his attempt to transcend the limits of ordinary human existence. By exchanging his soul for knowledge and power, he seeks mastery over nature, politics, and the cosmos itself. His ambition to "command all things that move between the quiet poles" (*Doctor Faustus* 1.3.) reflects the Renaissance aspiration toward limitless intellectual achievement. Despite these aspirations, Faustus never achieves genuine autonomy. His power depends entirely upon Mephistopheles and Lucifer, making his apparent freedom a new form of dependence. Rather than creating values for himself, he merely exchanges one authority for another. Nietzsche's *Übermensch* achieves transcendence through self-overcoming, whereas Faustus seeks it through external assistance. Consequently, his rebellion remains fundamentally compromised. Throughout the play, Faustus vacillates between confidence and despair. The recurring appearances of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel dramatize his inability to escape Christian moral categories. Although he repeatedly rejects repentance, he remains haunted by guilt and fear. His rebellion therefore lacks the self-affirmation necessary for Nietzschean transcendence.

Faustus's ultimate failure derives from his inability to free himself from Christian morality. Nietzsche criticizes Christianity as a system that cultivates guilt, weakness, and dependence upon transcendent authority (Nietzsche). Faustus exemplifies this condition. Even after embracing forbidden knowledge, he continually longs for divine forgiveness. His final

soliloquy reveals the collapse of his ambitions. As the hour of judgment approaches, he cries, "O soul, be changed into little water drops / And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found" (Doctor Faustus 5.2.119–20). Rather than affirming his choices, he seeks annihilation. He later turns once more toward divine mercy, demonstrating his continued attachment to the religious framework he attempted to reject. His final declaration, "I'll burn my books!" (Doctor Faustus 5.2.196), symbolizes not triumph but renunciation. From a Nietzschean perspective, Faustus fails because he cannot affirm the consequences of his rebellion. He seeks transcendence but recoils from the responsibility it demands. Consequently, he remains trapped within the moral universe he hoped to escape.

Unlike Faustus, Satan responds to defeat with a remarkable assertion of selfhood. Cast from Heaven into Hell, he refuses repentance and instead transforms suffering into a source of strength. His declaration that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Paradise Lost 1.254–55) exemplifies his commitment to subjective value creation. Satan's rebellion represents more than simple opposition. He actively reinterprets his circumstances and establishes a new hierarchy of meaning. His famous assertion, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (Paradise Lost 1.263), demonstrates a willingness to privilege autonomy over comfort and obedience. Through this act of revaluation, Satan transforms punishment into sovereignty. Although Milton condemns Satan within the theological framework of the epic, the character's vitality and rhetorical force often complicate that condemnation. As several critics have observed, Satan's charisma makes him one of the most compelling figures in English literature (Fish; Forsyth). Through a Nietzschean lens, his refusal to submit appears as an early form of self-overcoming.

Satan's authority derives not only from action but also from language. His speeches repeatedly transform defeat into possibility and despair into determination. Addressing the fallen angels, he commands, "Awake, arise, or be forever fall'n!" (Paradise Lost 1.330). Through rhetoric, he creates a new collective identity founded upon resistance. This rhetorical power allows Satan to function as a figurative doctor or teacher. He instructs others in the art of rebellion by offering alternative interpretations of reality. Even his temptation of Eve depends upon persuasion rather than coercion. Through language, he redefines disobedience as enlightenment and transforms transgression into a pursuit of knowledge. Faustus, by contrast, fails to use his learning in any transformative way. Despite possessing immense intellectual potential, he devotes much of his magical power to trivial entertainments and spectacles. His knowledge never becomes a source of creative value. Consequently, he remains a scholar in title rather than in influence.

Satan is not a perfect embodiment of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. His identity remains partially dependent upon opposition to God, and thus his rebellion is never entirely self-generated. Nevertheless, he comes closer to Nietzsche's ideal than Faustus does. Satan repeatedly affirms his existence despite suffering, loss, and exclusion. Rather than seeking forgiveness, he embraces his condition and attempts to create meaning within it. His refusal to submit reflects what Nietzsche describes as the will to power, the drive to shape reality according to one's own values (Nietzsche). Although Satan's project remains incomplete, he demonstrates a degree of existential courage absent from Faustus. In this sense, he functions as a proto-*Übermensch*, a figure who anticipates Nietzsche's later philosophical vision.

When examined together, Faustus and Satan reveal two distinct models of rebellion. Faustus seeks knowledge but remains psychologically dependent upon Christian morality. His rebellion collapses because he cannot affirm its consequences. Satan, by contrast, transforms defeat into a source of strength and repeatedly reinterprets suffering as opportunity. The contrast is particularly evident in their responses to crisis. Faustus longs for escape and annihilation, whereas Satan embraces struggle and continues to assert his will. Although Faustus possesses the formal title of Doctor, Satan fulfills the figurative role more effectively. He teaches rebellion, inspires followers, and creates new interpretations of existence through rhetoric and action. Viewed through Nietzsche's philosophy, Satan emerges as a more compelling example of self-overcoming than Faustus. His rebellion remains flawed, yet it demonstrates a capacity for value creation and self-assertion that Faustus never achieves.

Conclusion

A Nietzschean reading of Doctor Faustus and Paradise Lost reveals a striking paradox. Faustus, despite his learning and ambition, fails to transcend the moral framework that governs his existence. His quest for knowledge ends in guilt, fear, and repentance, rendering him incapable of achieving genuine self-overcoming. Satan, though condemned within Milton's Christian cosmos, displays a far greater commitment to self-determination. Through his rhetorical power, refusal of repentance, and continual revaluation of suffering, he anticipates many of the qualities associated with Nietzsche's Übermensch. Consequently, the true "Doctor of rebellion" within the Western literary imagination is not Marlowe's scholar but Milton's fallen angel, whose defiance continues to challenge inherited notions of authority, morality, and freedom.

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Priyogopal Chakraborty(pgc) earned his Master’s degree in English Literature and Cultural Studies from The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India. He has successfully qualified the UGC-NET and WBCSC examinations on multiple occasions, demonstrating his commitment to advanced studies and academic research. His scholarly interests lie in exploring underexamined areas of literary studies, with particular emphasis on the convergence of German theoretical perspectives and English literature. Alongside his academic pursuits, Chakraborty is also an illustrator, and his artworks have appeared in numerous national and international journals.
