

**‘That Light is not Bright’:  
Cosmos vs. Chaos in Stein’s Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights**

**‘Bu Işık Aydınlık Değil’:  
Stein’in Doktor Faustus Işıkları Yakar Eserinde Kozmos Kaos Karşıtlığı**

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**Abstract:** Written in 1938 by Gertrude Stein, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* reinterprets the Faustian myth presenting the character Doctor Faustus as a man who has sold his soul to Mephistopheles to make electric light. The setting of the play is a chaotic universe in which the cycle of day and night is broken. Doctor Faustus, along with his companions, is stuck in this artificially lit space in which they are perpetually subject to the “unbright” light of electricity. The use of the light/dark opposition in the play is reminiscent of a similar use in biblical literature in which the cosmos/chaos opposition is accompanied by the opposition of light/dark, with the light serving as a metaphor for providing the cosmos and abolishing chaos. The aim of this study is to compare the use of light in biblical narratives as a necessary divine tool to create an ordered cosmos out of a dark chaos with Stein’s metaphoric use of “electric light” in order to understand Stein’s criticism of modern technological chaos.

**Keywords:** Cosmos vs. Chaos, Light vs. Darkness, Gertrude Stein, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*

**Özet:** 1938 yılında Gertrude Stein tarafından yazılan *Doktor Faustus Işıkları Yakar*, elektrik ışığı yaratmak için ruhunu Mefisto’ya satan Doktor Faust karakterini sergileyerek Faust mitini yeniden yorumlamaktadır. Oyun gündüz gece döngüsünün bozulduğu kaotik bir evrende geçmektedir. Doktor Faust, ona eşlik edenlerle beraber sonsuza kadar “aydınlık olmayan” elektrik ışığına maruz kaldıkları yüzeysel olarak aydınlanan bu mekanda tutsak kalmıştır. Oyundaki aydınlık/karanlık karşıtlığı, kozmos/kaos karşıtlığının aydınlık/karanlık karşıtlığı ile birlikte kullanıldığı ve ışığın kozmosu oluşturmak ve kaosu önlemek için bir mecaz olarak kullanıldığı İncil edebiyatını hatırlatmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Stein’in modern teknoloji kaosu eleştirisini anlamak için, İncil anlatılarındaki ışığın karanlık bir kaosu düzenli bir kozmosa dönüştürmek için gerekli bir tanrısal araç olarak kullanımı ile Stein’in mecazi “elektrik ışığı” kullanımını karşılaştırmaktır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Kozmos Kaos Karşıtlığı, Aydınlık Karanlık Karşıtlığı, Gertrude Stein, *Doktor Faustus Işıkları Yakar*

The biblical narration of the beginning depicts a change from a chaotic void to a divinely structured cosmos. However, following the creation of the cosmos, the universe remains under threat of a return to chaos. The forces of chaos always threaten this ordered cosmos which is most apparent in biblical eschatology. The light is a significant metaphor within these biblical scenarios in which it represents the cosmos while the darkness represents chaos. Of a similar pattern, in Gertrude Stein’s work *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, the “light” emerges as an

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important tool through which Stein reveals the ordered bright cosmos has already changed into a dark chaos. Focusing upon this similarity, this study aims to compare the use of light in the biblical chaos/cosmos duality to Stein's metaphoric use of the "light" in order to delineate Stein's criticism of modern technological chaos. For this reason, firstly the role of light in biblical accounts of the cosmos/chaos dichotomy is examined and then an analysis of Stein's re-interpretation of the biblical metaphoric use of light in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* is given.

In the Book of Genesis, the creation of heaven and the earth is followed by the description of the earth as "without form", "void" and "dark". In order to give form to this empty dark mass, the next divine step is the creation of light and its division from the darkness (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Gen. 1. 3-4). After separating the light from the darkness, "God call[s] the light Day and the darkness he call[s] Night" (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Gen. 1.5). Tikva (1987) stresses that "In Genesis 1, the creation of the universe is presented as the creation of order out of chaos, the progressive demarcation and division of an originally undifferentiated mass" (236). In a similar manner, Brown (2010) evaluates the plot of creation in the Book of Genesis as "the progressive differentiation of the cosmos from a formless chaos to an intricate structure" (2187). Thus, in the very beginning of the Bible, the darkness is associated with a chaotic formlessness whereas the light emerges as the initial harbinger of the elimination of chaos and the maintenance of an ordered cosmos.

Despite the divine creation of an ordered cosmos out of a chaos, "[c]haos always threatens to return and engulf the good creation" (Boring 1989, 105). This threat of the return of chaos is in its most potent form in the apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good which aim to protect cosmos and the evil forces which endeavor to spread chaos. Therefore, in the apocalyptic texts, the evil forces attempt to reverse God's act of creation, through returning to chaos through an elimination of the cosmic order. The apocalyptic beasts, such as the four beasts arising from the sea in the Book of Daniel (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Dan. 7.3), Gog in the Books of Ezekiel and Revelation (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Ezek. 38.21; Rev. 20.8), Magog, (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Rev. 20.8) the Dragon, (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Rev. 12) "the beast from the sea" and the "beast from the land" (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Rev. 13) in the Book of Revelation, are among the best representatives of the evil forces which aim to demolish the ordered cosmos. Against these apocalyptic chaotic beasts stands God together with his angelic army.

This biblical apocalyptic struggle between the good and the evil, unsurprisingly, ends with God's triumph. The apocalyptic beasts, which burst out inducing chaos, are either slain, such as the four beasts and Gog, or forever tormented in the lake of fire, such as the dragon and the beasts of the Book of Revelation (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Rev. 20.10). Upon his triumph, God repeats his act of creation and recreates the cosmos out of chaos. As depicted in both the Books of Isaiah and Revelation, God creates a new heaven and a new earth (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Rev. 21.1, Isa. 65.17). In this new cosmic structure, there is no need for the sun or the moon because God in Isaiah and God together with his Lamb in Revelation will be the light for the chosen (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, Rev. 21.23, Isa. 60.19). Collins (1996) explains that in the new creation "[n]ight, darkness and the things they symbolize (evil and ignorance, for example) will be no more. The temporary lights which move and change will be replaced by permanent, unchanging luminaries" (133). Therefore, just as the biblical account of creation in which the light acts as a precursor of the

maintenance of an ordered cosmos, the light reemerges as a metaphor in the biblical eschatology once again indicating the transformation from a chaotic universe into a cosmos. For this reason, in biblical literature, it is evident that the pattern of the divine change from chaos to cosmos is always associated with a transformation from darkness to light.

This association of the binary oppositions of cosmos/chaos with that of light/dark is also evident in Stein's play *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. In order to understand the representation of this biblical dichotomy of chaos/cosmos, a close scrutiny of the play is required. Even though *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* was originally written as a libretto for opera, it "*has an immaculate pedigree in the American theatrical avant-garde*", as a play that was produced by famous theater groups such as The Living Theater, Judson Poet's Theater and which was directed by some acclaimed figures such as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson (Savran 1993, 25). The play presents the character Faustus as a man who has sold his soul to Mephistopheles to enable him to make electric light. As is also noted by Tabor and Bay-Cheng, unlike Goethe's and Marlowe's Faustian dramas in which Faust's decision to sell his soul serves as a climax or main action, Stein's play begins after Faustus gives his decision (Bay-Cheng 2004, 78; Tabor 2009, 167). This fact illuminates Stein decision to place the emphasis not upon the process of deception but upon the consequences of being deceived by the Devil for the sake of creating electric light.

"*Throughout Gertrude Stein's play*" states Cardullo and Bay Cheng, "*major characters themselves usurp or reject power typically associated with God*" (Bay-Cheng 2004, 82; Cardullo 2010, n.p.). As such, Doctor Faustus's ability to make electric light is reminiscent of God's creation of the light in his cosmic design. Moreover, Faustus is not the only character in the play who usurps godlike power through an ability to make light. The character named Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel after being cured by Doctor Faustus of a bite from a viper, earns the ability to "*turn night into day*" (Stein 1998, 601); although, in Cardullo's words, "*she seems less interested in this power than Faust*" (Cardullo 2010, n.p). Thus, in Stein's play Doctor Faustus's creation of electric lights as well as Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel's creation of candle lights are forms in which the humans wield god-like power; however, the results of human creation are different from the divine creation of light. In contrast to God's creation of the light in which an ordered cosmos replaces the former empty dark chaos, Doctor Faustus's creation of electric light results in the formation of a chaotic universe.

This chaotic universe is evident in Faustus's disturbances due to these artificial electric lights. Doctor Faustus is depicted as he is being haunted by his own creation. "*The fact that the devil helps to create the electric lights in Faustus makes them suspect from the start, though for Faustus they prove more annoying than harmful*" (Balkin 2008, 447). The play opens with the image of "*Faust standing at the door of his room, with his arms up at the door lintel looking out behind him a blaze of electric light*" (Stein 1998, 577), and in the rest of the play the electric lights seem to follow Doctor Faustus wherever he goes. Indeed Faustus regrets his decision which is obvious in his line:

*I have no soul I had no soul I sold it sold it here there and everywhere  
What did I do I knew  
I knew that there could be light not moon-light star light day-light and  
candle light, I knew I knew I saw the lightning light, I saw it light, I said  
I I I must have that light, and what did I do oh what did I do too I said I  
would sell my soul all through but I knew I knew that electric light was  
all true (Stein 1998, 588).*

Doctor Faustus's regrets as well as his disturbances due to the electric lights are delineated by his inquiry into the brightness of the universe. Doctor Faustus's unrest with regard to his invention is apparent in his line in the first act as he says: "*I keep on having so much light that light is not bright*" (Stein 1998, 577). It is evident, according to Bay-Cheng (2004), that Doctor Faustus's "*remorse is motivated not by fear of an almighty creator or a crisis of conscience, but rather by his immediate physical discomfort—caused by the relentless glare of the lights*" (85). Later, with his desire to be left alone, Doctor Faustus utters "*no light is bright, I have no sight*" (Stein 1998, 601). In addition, towards the end of the play, Doctor Faustus states that "*I have sold my soul to make a light and the light is bright but not interesting in my sight*" (Stein 1998, 604). His questioning of the brightness of the electric lights as well as his sight in the presence of them is an indicator of the fact that the creation of the electric lights has led Doctor Faustus into a kind of darkness without brightness and sight.

Doctor Faustus's approach to the electric lights he has created also includes a moral design. The moral tone is most explicit in his line as "*[w]ho cares if you lie, if you steal, there is no snake to grind under one's heel, there is no hope there is no death there is no life there is no breath, there is just every day all day and when there is no day there is no day*" (Stein 1998, 578). According to Bay Cheng (2004), this line through which Doctor Faustus "*articulates the new 'moral order' of the play*" also illuminates that "*[t]he cycle of day into night has been broken and with it the moral certainty of the separation of light from dark, good from evil*" (87). The absence of the cyclical pattern between day and night is also evident in Doctor Faustus's mourning about "*that light however bright will never be other than light, and any light is just a light and now there is nothing more either by day or by night but just a light*" (Stein 1998, 579). Also, in a dialogue with the little boy in the song entitled "*Let Me Alone*" Doctor Faustus mourns for the absence of the moon:

*The Little boy*  
*The day begins to-day*  
*The day*  
*The moon begins*  
*The moon begins the day*  
*Doctor Faustus*  
*There is no moon to-day*  
*Dark silence*  
*You obey I obey*  
*There is no moon to-day* (Stein 1998, 580).

Doctor Faustus's repetitive remark as "*There is no moon to-day*" (Stein 1998, 580) is especially significant since Stein's placement of a hyphen in the word "*today*" between "*to*" and "*day*" suggests that the night is not followed by the day.

Moreover, Doctor Faustus is not the only character of the play who grieves over the lack of a cyclical night and day pattern. The little boy and the dog that accompany Doctor Faustus also share his laments about the broken cycle of day to night, especially through the reference to the absent moon. Both the dog and the little boy make a comparison between the past and present exclaiming that formerly they used to bay at the moon (Stein 1998, 600) and the dog's following lines explicate the change caused by the invention of electric light:

*Not bright not night dear Doctor Faustus you are right, I am a dog yes I*  
*am just that I am I am a dog and I bay at the moon, I did yes I did, I used*

*to do it I used to bay at the moon I always used to do it and now now not any more, I cannot, of course I cannot, the electric lights they make it be that there is no night and if there is no night then there is no moon and if there is no night then there is no moon and if there is no moon I do not see it and if I do not see it I cannot bay at it (Stein 1998, 600).*

The dog's remark makes it clear that as the electric lights appear, the moon disappears. When this image of the absent moon is reconsidered in respect to the biblical account of creation, it is obvious that Doctor Faustus can only create light, being unable to separate it from the darkness unlike the divine creation which is followed by its distinction from the darkness.

Aside from this link to the biblical narrative of the beginning, the absence of the moon presented in the play can be also compared to the opposition between cosmos and chaos as illuminated in the biblical accounts of endings. In the apocalyptic narratives which once again portray the dichotomy of cosmos/chaos, one of the harbingers of the coming of doomsday is the absence of moonlight. In the Books of Isaiah and Ezekiel and in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, it is stated that in the end-time "*the moon shall not give her light*" (*The King James Version of the Holy Bible* Isa. 13.10, Ezek. 32.7, Mark 13.24, Matt. 24.29). For this reason it is possible to connect the absent moon in Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* to the apocalyptic destruction of the moon in the biblical eschatology. When the biblical apocalyptic scenario is compared to Stein's play in terms of this image of an absent moon, there is a significant difference. The biblical apocalypse depicts the destruction of all light giving sources including the moon, the sun and the stars, whereas Stein's play only refers to the absence of the moon indicating humanity's inability to separate day and night, light and darkness, good and evil.

In addition to this portrayal of an absent moon, when Stein's play is compared to the depiction of the cosmos/chaos dichotomy in the biblical apocalypse in general, the most important difference is that Stein's play lacks the structure in which chaos is once again transformed into cosmos. In contrast to this transformation of chaos into the new cosmos in the biblical apocalyptic literature, space in Stein's play is portrayed as being stuck in chaotic darkness. In order to understand the play's exclusion of the final drama of the biblical apocalypse in which God maintains the light for humanity through himself, a close look at how the play ends is necessary. Through the end of the play, Doctor Faustus, who has been mourning his inability to go to hell without a soul, makes a bargain with Mephisto who reveals that Faustus can go to hell if he commits the sin of killing. After killing his companions (the dog and the little boy), Doctor Faustus offers Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel to take her to hell with him. Even though Mephisto makes Doctor Faustus young in order to enable him to persuade Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, she rejects Faustus's offer and she "*falls back fainting into the arms of the man from over the seas*" (Stein 1998, 606-7). Meanwhile, Faustus "*sinks into the darkness*" and the stage becomes "*all dark*" (Stein 1998, 607). Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel who is able to produce the candle light—a more natural form when compared to electric lights, is not deceived by Doctor Faustus. However, her falling into the arms of the man from over the seas still connotes a form of deception since the man is "*a double for Mephistopheles*" (Elder, 2005, 60). Also, the closing line in which Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel utters "*please Mr. Viper listen to me*" (Stein 1998, 607) reinforces that she is left in a dark space pleading to Mr. Viper who is just another deceptive figure like Mephistopheles, the serpent, and the man from over the seas. Then, as is made evident in the closing scene, "*the world [Faustus] leaves behind has not resolved the torment of electric lights*" (Bay-Cheng 2004, 91). As for the

darkness Doctor Faustus sinks into, Balkin (2008) states that “*Stein does not make clear whether or not the darkness signifies hell*” (400). Whether the darkness signifies hell or not, the play ending in darkness shows the chaotic universe is not restructured into a cosmos. Above all, there is no presentation of a deity or of an angelic army to fight against the apocalyptic beast which takes the form of the electric lights in the play. Therefore, in the absence of a godly figure to represent the forces of good, humanity does not have that chance to stand against the forces of evil. This is the reason why the universe remains in chaos.

If *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* is evaluated in regard to Stein’s approach towards the technological development represented by electric lights, Stein’s hopelessness in regard to its results is evident. The social context in which it was written is also significant for illustrating Stein’s criticism of technology, since it was written in 1938—an era in which some technological developments were being deliberately designed with the intent of spreading destruction, death and chaos. “*Stein wrote Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights as Hitler annexed Austria, completing it as the last Jews to escape that country fled to France and England, and in the daily expectation of the outbreak of the war*” (Neuman 1988, 189). Savran (1993) comments on how the play “*dramatizes a crisis in Western rationalism (that is, in the Enlightenment project)*” (25):

*In Stein's view, it seems to have produced not the unlimited social progress and human omniscience it promised, but darkness and death (which for a Jew in France in 1938 meant, among other things, Hitler). In Stein's text Enlightenment is at once literalized and subtly degraded. Reconceptualized for a technological age, it means little more than flicking on a switch (Savran 1993, 25-26).*

Similarly, Bay-Cheng (2004) notes that “*rather than offer romantic nostalgia and spiritual redemption to a Depression weary and war-wary American public ... Stein accepts the impotence of humanity without a god, without morals, and without a real sense of itself*” (89-90). For Bay-Cheng (2004), *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* elucidates the fact that “*the spiritual wrath of God is systematically replaced by the secular wrath of technology*” (85). Commenting on the scholarly links between Stein’s conception of modern technology and Goethe’s criticism of the Enlightenment, Bay-Cheng (2004) complains that in the criticism of the play, the “*spirituality of electric lights*” and “*the tremendous theological or ontological weight placed on the electric lights in the absence of a god figure*” has been ignored (85-86). The electric lights, along with its criticism of the modern chaos of technology and the perilous potential of technological progress, refer to a dark chaotic society devoid of divine illumination and control.

Mircea Eliade in his renowned work *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* emphasizes the validity of the cosmos-chaos cycle in the contemporary era. Eliade asserts that for religious man the world “*is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos*” (Eliade 1987, 47); however, “*the same images are still used in our own day to formulate the dangers that threaten a certain type of civilization; we speak of the chaos, the disorder, the darkness that will overwhelm ‘our world’*” (Eliade 1987, 49). In Stein’s play, represented by the electric lights, the danger that threatens and turns the world into a godless chaos is technological development.

In conclusion, as the title of the play also indicates, one of the most significant images in Stein’s play is the “*lights*” through which the writer criticizes modern technological chaos. This

retelling of the Faustian myth takes place in a chaotic universe in which the cycle of night and day is missing and the characters are subject to the everlasting brightness of electric light. Stein's use of electric lights has been evaluated in terms of its criticism of technology and its derision of Enlightenment morality. By comparing the play with the biblical accounts of the cosmic and chaotic structure of universe in the Books of Genesis, Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation, this study focuses upon the "spirituality of electric lights" which, according to Bay-Cheng, has been ignored in the criticism of the play (2004, 85-86). Stein's use of electric lights is evocative of the biblical narratives concerning the beginning and ending that depict God changing chaos into a cosmos. In this pattern of divine transformation from chaos to cosmos, the light serves as a significant metaphor for a brightened and ordered cosmic structure. In other words, in the biblical literature the oppositions of cosmos/chaos are used together with the oppositions of light/dark. Stein's play reinterprets the biblical use of light and illustrates that the human creation of electric light results in the reversal of the pattern of God's maintenance of light which, in the end, changes the cosmos into a modern technological chaos.

### Author's Note

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