



Free will and Predestination in Literature: To what extent can we exercise our free will?

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Received 03 Feb., 2024; Revised 11 Feb., 2024; Accepted 13 Feb., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

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The relationship between God and mankind manifests in one of the alarming and apparent conflicts between ‘free will’ and ‘predestination.’ This contradiction is at the heart of theology. Taking a closer look at it, one may come across unresolved questions such as ‘to what extent are we free to exercise our free will? Or is everything predetermined by God?’ In the context of Christian mythology one may even go further to question the ways of God. An archetypal question is how God who is both omnipotent and omniscient, can permit the existence of evil in this world or how God, the creator who is the source of all, can cause damnation to mankind, if one may hark back to the story of creation. Saint Augustine, the great philosopher, theologian, and bishop of Hippo, took upon himself the task of restoring to mankind his lost faith. He plays upon the two words, ‘free will’ and ‘predestination’ and even ventures further to say that they work together. At the heart of this conflict lies the two opposite forces ‘free will’ and ‘predestination’ which maybe said to have influenced the course of human actions.

The Cambridge Advance Learners’ Dictionary (2008) third edition defines predestination as “the belief that people have no control over events because these things are controlled by God or by fate.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary states that free will is: (1) the ability to choose how to act, (2) the ability to make choices that are not controlled by fate or God. As per these definitions, one may indulge in the severity of this contradiction. Augustine, acknowledged as a Church Doctor, does is, strikes a perfect harmonious balance between the two. For him, one does not overlap the other. Furthermore, the two contradictory ideologies work in tandem. He is the advocator of free will as well as a defender of predestination.

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English Literature gives a full flowering to this theological enterprise through some of the breathtaking stories, Christopher Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus', John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and Shakespeare's plays. Not only does this conflict find voice and expression through characters but also brings out the repercussions it has on the inflicted souls.