

## Summary & questions on Doctor Faustus

### PROLOGUE:

The Chorus gives us a brief biography of Faustus up till this point – his birth, studies at Wittenberg, excellence at disputation, and arrogance.

### QUESTIONS ON THIS CHORUS:

Why do you think Marlowe give us so much detail on Faustus' background?

Why is this a good way to start the play?

This Chorus seems a lot more pious and orthodox than the rest of the play, and would make a good introduction to the German Faust tale, translated by PF. Why do you think Marlowe gave this pious introduction to his play? What expectations is he building up in his audience? Are they satisfied?

If you were directing the play, how would you direct this opening?

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**SCENE 1:**

Faustus is revealed in his study. He has reached the top of all the studies a renaissance university can train you in: the Trivium (the Quadrivium if you include Theology).

Logic is represented by Aristotle's *Analytics*; Medicine by Galen; and Law by Justinian's *Institutes*. The fourth part of the Quadrivium (Theology) is represented by Jerome's *Vulgate*, a fifth century Latin translation of the Bible.

Finding that he is already damned to Hell by the definitions he (mis)reads in the Bible, Faustus decides to start studying necromancy. This (magic or daemonology) will give him power of the supernatural, and thus he will have real power in the world.

He asks his servant, Wagner, to call his friends Valdes and Cornelius, who know about necromancy.

A Good Angel and an Evil Angel come to dissuade and persuade him from his planned necromancy. Faustus is pleased with himself and his political plans to free Germany.

Valdes and Cornelius suggest that he should be worshipped as a god, in the same way the Spanish Conquistadores are by the Native Americans, and he shall be richer than the King of Spain.

He needs the work of Roger Bacon (a noted thirteenth century Professor at Oxford and possible dabbler in black magic), Pietro d'Abano (an early fourteenth century humanist and doctor), and the Psalms and opening of St John's gospel for his conjuring.

**QUESTIONS ON THIS SCENE:**

Faustus complains about Aristotle, but he actually quotes from a much more recent French philosopher, Petrus Ramus, to dismiss him. Why?

For Faustus, magic is seen as an extension of science, almost the natural climax to a university career. This would certainly be what contemporaries such as John Dee would have thought. The Church and much of contemporary society, however, would see it as sinful by definition. Which position does the play suggest Marlowe has? Why?

Faustus discusses raising the dead and all the political actions he is going to do once he gets power. Why do you think he does not do these things?

The seventeenth century playwright Ben Jonson praised “Marlowe’s mighty line” and the skill Marlowe had in creating images out of the iambic pentameter. To what extent is Marlowe more interested in the magic and power of language rather than the power of magic itself?

Who is Wagner? If you were acting him, how would you make him stand out as a character?

What is the purpose of Valdes and Cornelius? Cornelius might be named after the famous alchemist Cornelius Agrippa and Valdes after the famous heretic (and possible Cathar) Peter Waldo, but what are they doing here?

It is often said that Faustus is tempted by the devil, but throughout the play Faustus seems to do the tempting himself, and the devil either acquiesces or tries to dissuade him. What is Marlowe saying about Faustus when he does this?

Faustus is arrogant, pompous and a devil-worshipper, yet somehow we like him. What has Marlowe done to make him likeable?

During this scene, Marlowe makes reference to contemporary political figures the Prince of Parma & Philip II of Spain, and to obscure philosophical and mythological characters Musaeus, Roger Bacon, Pietro d’Abano, Peter Waldo, Cornelius Agrippa. He also refers to the four pillars of the Quadrivium, Aristotle, Galen, Justinian & Jerome. This was, when originally produced, Marlowe’s most popular show with an audience which was not necessarily particularly educated. So why has he made so many references that they would not have understood? What is he saying about Faustus by doing so?

Faustus makes a number of references to the Americas, which had just been opened up to the Europeans, including Frobisher’s expedition to what is now Canada. The Americas were seen as a great source for new gold. What other reasons do you think Marlowe had for mentioning the “new found world” and its inhabitants so much?

Throughout this scene, the language about magic seems almost sexual (or certainly sensual). Why has Marlowe written it like this? What is he saying about the power of magic?

**SCENE 2:**

Wagner, Faustus' servant, indulges in banter with two scholars. Very possibly this was an already worked out comedy routine (*lazzi*), but Wagner's use of arguments reminiscent of the Scotists or Dunses (followers of Duns Scotus) is characteristic of the style Marlowe used.

**QUESTIONS:**

How clever is Wagner really? Or is he just using long words to fool the scholars?

Why do the scholars react to Wagner's news as they do?

Many scholars think the prose scenes of the play were written by another author (possibly Thomas Nashe), or that Marlowe deliberately wrote them in a banal style to show the banality of the actual, as opposed to the power of the imaginative and language. To what extent is this a fair analysis of these scenes?

**SCENE 3:**

It is night (or possibly an eclipse) and in Winter, and Faustus prepares to call the devil, using anagrams of the four letters of the Hebrew name of God (JHWH, the Tetragrammaton), signs of the Zodiac and other cabalistic symbols.

He then, in Latin, calls upon the gods of Acheron (one of the rivers of the Greek underworld), rejects the Christian Trinity, calls on the spirits of the four elements (fire, air, water and earth), on Lucifer (Prince of the East), Belzebub (Lord of the Flies) and Demogorgon to let Mephistophilis appear to him.

Initially it doesn't work, so he calls again on Jehovah, Gehenna (a rubbish dump and place of child sacrifice outside Jerusalem, often used as a synonym for Hell in English readings of the Bible), and sprinkles some (presumably deconsecrated) holy water to summon up the Devil.

When the Devil appears, it is too ugly, so Faustus sends it away to reappear in the form of a Franciscan Friar.

Mephistophilis answers Faustus' questions about why he came, about what he wants, about Hell and the place of Lucifer and the Devils in it.

Faustus agrees to the deal that he will sell his soul for twenty-four years of ordering Mephistophilis to do whatever he wants.

Faustus tells the audience he wants to become Emperor of Emperors, join Africa to Spain, and, like the Persian Emperor Xerxes, who made a bridge of boats across the Hellespont to enable his army to cross into Greece, make a bridge across the skies.

**QUESTIONS:**

When the Devil does not initially appear, why does Faustus call on Jehovah (the most common form of the name of the Christian God), sprinkle holy water and make the sign of the cross to force him to appear? Wouldn't this be inappropriate in the circumstances?

Why does Faustus want Mephistophilis in the form of a Franciscan Friar? What is he saying about the Church and the Friars in the sixteenth century?

Marlowe makes Mephistophilis answer Faustus' questions very honestly, yet Faustus refuses to listen to the meaning of his answers. Why?

A lot of Faustus' comments seem very stupid when you imagine they are spoken to The Devil (such as denying the existence of Hell or damnation). Why does Marlowe make Faustus so blind to what Mephistophilis is telling him?

Why does Faustus agree to sell his soul for only twenty-four years? Should he not ask for more? Is twenty-four years actually a long time in the sixteenth century, bearing in mind that Marlowe was dead at 29, and Shakespeare retired at 50 and dead at 52? To what extent does Faustus mean 'a lifetime' when he says twenty-four years?

To what extent is Hell (for Mephistophilis) an existential state of mind, rather than a physical place? Does Marlowe understand it in the same way?

**SCENE 4:**

Wagner and the Clown have a comedy of misunderstanding, where Wagner tries to engage the Clown as his servant. He calls up the devils Baliol and Belcher (possibly misremembered versions of Belial and Belzebub) who persecute the clown.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why do you think both characters get the names of the devils wrong?

If you were the actors or director of this scene, how would you do a version that made it funny to watch?

**SCENE 5:**

Faustus plans to sell his soul, and is again advised by the Good and Evil Angels: the Evil Angel says he will be rich if he does.

Mephistophilis tells Faustus he needs to sign an official deed of purchase of his soul with Lucifer, signed in his own blood. When his blood starts to congeal, he wonders if this is a message from God, as he does when the words "*Homo fuge*" (Man, run away) appear on his arm.

He gives his soul to Mephistophilis, and becomes a "spirit in form and substance", with great power.

He wants to understand how Hell fits under Heaven.

Once he has power, Faustus immediately asks for a wife, but Mephistophilis will only give him a devil, dressed as a woman.

Faustus asks for all the books of modern scientific knowledge, which reveal the glories of God's creation to him. Nonetheless, he finds he cannot repent.

Faustus asks Mephistophilis about the shape of the Universe, and Mephistophilis gives him a piecemeal version of what was the then-accepted geocentric version. He tells Faustus nothing he does not already know.

Mephistophilis refuses to answer Faustus' questions on the Creation of the Universe, because he knows the answer will have to be God.

The Good Angel tells him he still has time to repent, if he can.

Mephistophilis brings Lucifer and Belzebub with him to persuade Faustus not to backslide: he is forbidden to name Christ, as the name takes away Lucifer's power. They bring him the Seven Deadly Sins to tempt him.

**QUESTIONS:**

Walter Greg, the noted Faustus scholar of the 1950s, said that Faustus' selling of his soul was the moment when he was damned. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth century Doctor of



the Church, said that God could not forgive Devils/Spirits, because they could not repent. Do you think Marlowe agrees with this? Why? Does Faustus still have a chance to repent at this point?

Marlowe deliberately mentions that Faustus attended Wittenberg University, as did, among others, the Protestant reformers Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon and Shakespeare's Hamlet. It has been suggested that the play is a struggle between competing Christian viewpoints: is Faustus a free agent, or is he a puppet? Is he condemned before he was born (Calvinist)? Is he able to do penance (Catholic)? How can he repent (Lutheran)?

Marlowe has long been said to have been homosexual. Is there anything in this scene that suggests his attitude to women and sexuality?

Mephistophilis' version of the shape of the Universe is now known to be false; indeed, many people would have thought it was already wrong, because they were following the theories of Copernicus, which Marlowe doesn't mention. Does the fact that we now know Mephistophilis to be wrong change our opinion of anything else he tells Faustus?

Faustus always seems to agree with the last person he speaks to: the Good Angel makes him want to repent; Lucifer makes him want to reject Christ; etc. It has been suggested that all the characters in the play (except possibly for the Old Man in scene 12) are in Faustus' head. To what extent is the whole of this play a "psycho-drama" and to what extent do we get the feeling that the events of this play are "real"? Why?

During his lifetime, Marlowe was accused of being an "Atheist". From what you have read in this scene, do you think Marlowe believes in the power and morality of God, or not? Why?

Marlowe deliberately brings on the Seven Deadly Sins from the traditional medieval Morality Plays. In the Morality plays, these would be real and frightening. Why does Marlowe make them an "entertainment"? Is this effective?

For a medieval person, Hell was a real place and your soul was at stake. For Faustus, Hell is "a fable". For Mephistophilis, Hell is a state of mind. For Marlowe, is a state of mind "real"? Do you create your own sufferings?

If you were the director staging the scene with the Seven Deadly Sins, how would you make it interesting? How would you dress them? How would you have them act?

**SCENE 6:**

Robin the ostler has stolen one of Faustus' conjuring books, and wants to make all the girls in the village dance for him stark naked. He also wants to use the book to get drunk on nothing. His friend Rafe wants to have sex with Nan Spit, their kitchen maid.

**QUESTIONS:**

How different are the desires of Robin and Rafe from Faustus' towards Helen in scene 12?  
How would you bring this out if you were a director?

**CHORUS 2:**

Wagner explains that Faustus is now in Rome, on St Peter's Day (29th June)

**SCENE 7:**

Faustus and Mephistophilis have been on a trip seeing most of the civilised world. They are now in Rome, and become invisible in order to play tricks on the Pope and the Cardinal of Lorraine.

**QUESTIONS:**

While it was patriotic in the sixteenth century to mock the Pope and the Cardinals, is it offensive to Catholics now? If you were directing this scene, how would you make sure this scene was not offensive? How would you make it funny?

In the sixteenth century, one of the (supposed) differences between Catholics and Protestants was a belief in Purgatory and therefore in ghosts. To what extent is Marlowe taking advantage of this belief to create a comically effective scene?

The B text (with lots of emendations that were almost certainly not Marlowe's own) adds lots more anti-Catholic scenes. Does the A text of the play suggest an anti-Catholic attitude or is it more anti-everyone? Why?

**SCENE 8:**

Robin & Rafe attempt to use magic to trick a vintner, but they summon Mephistophilis (from Constantinople) and he angrily curses them to become animals.

**QUESTION:**

If you were directing this scene, how would you make the characters more like animals after Mephistophilis has cursed them?

**CHORUS 3:**

Wagner tells us how Faustus is now at the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V's court.

**SCENE 9:**

Faustus shows off his skills to the Emperor, including producing the physical bodies of Alexander the Great and his Paramour (wife?), alive and well, and making a knight who mocks him grow horns on his head.

**QUESTIONS:**

In Scene 3 Faustus plans to become the most powerful Emperor in the world, yet here he is doing very powerful conjuring tricks for the Emperor. Why has this changed?

Marlowe's audience would have considered Faustus selling his soul as being evil, but is there any action Faustus does which is evil in itself? In what sense is Faustus evil himself?

There have long been stories that Marlowe was homosexual, and the paramour is never named, or even gendered until line 63 (there have also been other stories that Alexander was homosexual). When you notice how few women there are in the play, does Dr Faustus feel like a "gay play"? Why?

It was said that a man whose wife was cheating on him (a cuckold) would grow horns. What does this suggest about Faustus' relationship with the knight?

Marlowe makes it clear that the Emperor in the story is Charles V, but his behaviour is much more like that of Rudolph II, who invited "conjurers" like John Dee and Edward Kelley to his court. Why has Marlowe made this identification so clear, while leaving the identity of the Pope (in Scene 7) to be guessed at?

**SCENE 10:**

A comedy scene where Faustus and Mephistophilis use magic to trick a horse dealer.

During this scene, Faustus becomes aware that time is catching up with him, but expects that as long as he repents towards the end of his life, he can be forgiven.

Wagner tells Faustus that the Duke of Vanholt wants to see him.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why does Marlowe insert the moment which is Faustus' first awareness of his own mortality and impending damnation into the middle of this comedy scene? If you were directing this scene, how would you move between the two styles of comedy and self-awareness?

**SCENE 11:**

Faustus impresses the Duke and Duchess of Vanholt by finding her grapes in the middle of winter. He sends Mephistophilis to India or the Yemen to find them.

**QUESTIONS:**

The Duke and Duchess of Vanholt (Anhalt) were historically important leaders of the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century. Why has Marlowe included them in his play? What point is he making in this scene?

The Duchess is the only female speaking part in the whole play. Why?

Both in this scene and in Scene 9, everyone is grateful to Faustus for putting on a good show, and he is described as “blest”. Where is the sinfulness or evil in any of his actions?

**CHORUS 4:**

Wagner tells us that Faustus has given away his goods, so is likely to die soon, but continues to party with his friends.

**SCENE 12:**

Faustus and his Scholar friends discuss who was the most beautiful woman ever.

As he did for the Emperor with Alexander, Faustus produces the physical spirit of Helen of Troy on stage, and everyone admires her.

An Old Man appears to tell Faustus to repent, and this affects Faustus' attitude. He starts becoming worried for his soul. He wants to commit suicide.

Faustus' decision to reject Lucifer and return to Christ is legally wrong: as a vassal of Lucifer, according to Mephistophilis, he would be a traitor if he deserted Lucifer. As the serf of Lucifer, he is an indentured labourer.

Faustus asks one last request: to have Helen as his paramour, which Mephistophilis grants for him.

The Old Man returns to warn Faustus, but he is frightened off by the devils.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why are these scholars discussing such a trivial matter? What is Marlowe saying about the standards of education and academic debate in his time?

The appearance of Helen is tricky: as a director, how would you make this more than just a peep-show for the audience? How do you lift the dramatic content of this scene for a modern audience?

In Marlowe's time, all female parts were played by boys or young men, and the audience would have to use its imagination to make a young man appear to be the most beautiful woman of all time. What does Marlowe do with language to make this effective?



Why has Marlowe introduced The Old Man at this point? Why has he not brought back the Good Angel? What do the two characters do differently?

It has been suggested that the Old Man is the only character in the play that is not in Faustus' mind, and the sending of the devils to torture the Old Man is the only "actual evil" (as opposed to the technical, ontological evil of selling one's soul to the Devil) Faustus does in the whole play. Are there any moral realities in the play, or is it all relative? Does Evil exist?

Faustus says that "I do repent and yet I do despair". Despair, for sixteenth century Protestants, was the ultimate sin, suggesting complete separation from God. Can one repent and despair at the same time?

Does Faustus have sex with Helen? For medieval audiences that (demoniality – having sex with a non-human spirit) would automatically condemn him to eternal hell, but Walter Greg suggests that he is already a demon himself since selling his soul in Scene 3, so that he cannot be damned any more. Is that correct?

Dr Fred Parker of Cambridge University has suggested that the important issue is not whether Faustus has sex with Helen, but the fact that he can make this speech about her. Even Faustus is aware that she is not real, as his speech echoes Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, where Hermes holds up the skull of Helen and asks a similar question. To what extent does Faustus realise that Helen is a demon or dead? To what extent is he fooling himself?

Why is the Old Man so ineffective at saving Faustus? What is his dramatic purpose? If you were directing him, how would you make his role interesting?

In Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, the Old Man is a representative of Death. Does he fulfil the same function in *Doctor Faustus*?

**SCENE 13:**

Faustus tells his friends about the deal he has made with Lucifer, and they tell him to repent.

He regrets having ever come to Wittenberg, and his education, that has led to this, but he does not repent.

The scholar suggests that divines praying for Faustus's soul might be able to save him, a very Catholic idea (Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, who also studied and lectured at Wittenberg, said that only your own faith can save you).

Faustus is left alone and he asks for longer in which to repent.

Even though Christ's blood streams through the firmament, Faustus still does not repent. Every time he names Christ, he suffers physical pain.

He tries to come up with possible suggestions for escaping going to Hell, none of which work.

Time speeds up (11-11.30pm lasts 30 lines of text, 11.30pm to midnight lasts only 17) and Faustus is taken into hell.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why does Faustus not repent, when he knows what will happen if he doesn't? He regrets; he says he wants to repent; he cries; but he never quite actually achieves it. What is Marlowe saying about him in this scene?

Marlowe was, during his lifetime, accused of "Atheism". When you read or watch this scene as the climax of his play, do you see this as rejecting God? Or rejecting God's Mercy? Or God's Grace? In what sense could this be described as an Atheistic play? Is his inability to repent theological (he is a reprobate and cannot be saved) or psychological (he thinks he cannot repent, so therefore he cannot repent)? Is he merely summoning up his agony and damnation from his own imagination?

The scholar RM Dawkins has described Faustus as being "a renaissance man who had to pay the medieval price for being one". In what sense does he suffer medieval punishments? In what sense is he a renaissance man?

Normally, the hand or arm of God is seen as being an image of safety. Not here. Why not?

Faustus tries to imagine himself into either salvation or non-existence. As his imagination has taken himself everywhere else in the play, why can't he imagine himself there?

In the B text, the mention of Christ's Blood is removed from the text, probably partly because of the anti-blasphemy laws contained in the 1606 Act of Abuses. The Devils, including Mephistophilis, have a larger role in this scene in the later version, mocking Faustus as he is taken to Hell. To what extent is this a logical extension of what Marlowe has written, or to what extent do these changes reflect what Fred Parker calls "a closure of the Protestant imagination"?

In a traditional Aristotelian Tragedy, the protagonist has a moment of anagnorisis (self-realisation) followed by a peripeteia (reversal of fortune). Marlowe seems to have made these happen almost simultaneously. To what extent do you think this is effective? Could it have worked any other way?

**EPILOGUE:**

Like a traditional morality play, the Chorus presents us with a moral: don't do what Faustus did.

**QUESTIONS:**

Is what Faustus did really so bad? He doesn't kill or enslave or rape anyone. So why is he punished? Do you think his punishment is just? Did Marlowe think his punishment was just? Do you think he agrees with his own epilogue? Why?

If you were directing this epilogue, what message would you want to get across? How would you make this effective?



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