



Doctor Faustus

Objectives

By the end of this unit, you will:

- know about the author and the background information behind the play
- thoroughly understand the speech from the play
- be able to identify figurative language in the speech
- be able to summarize the speech
- be able to put the speech into modern English
- be able to analyze the characters, setting, symbols, and themes of the play
- know about tragic heroes in some depth
- be able to use the speech to support your opinions and write a literature essay



Learn About ... Christopher Marlowe



Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) was an English playwright, poet, and translator, but much of his life is a mystery. He was born in the same year as William Shakespeare, and his writing influenced Shakespeare a great deal. Marlowe was a poet, a playwright, and a translator. He attended college and received a Master of Arts degree in 1587. In the following years, he wrote several successful plays that were widely performed in England. He also wrote poetry and translated Roman poetry.

For some reason, in May 1593, the courts issued a warrant for Marlowe's arrest. The charge was most likely blasphemy – or the writing of things that went against official church teachings – but no one knows for sure. Ten days after the warrant was issued, a man named Ingram Frizer stabbed Marlowe to death. Some people think that this was related to his arrest. Others say it was a simple fight over money they owed at an inn or tavern. Despite his early death, the influence of Marlowe on English literature is immense.

Predict

Step 1

Discuss these questions with a partner.

- 1 What motivates people to learn new things?
- 2 Do you think that one kind of knowledge can be better than another? Explain.

Step 2

Look at the key words from the speech from *Doctor Faustus*. With a partner, discuss the meaning of the words. Based on these words, predict the main ideas of the speech.



Background information

1 Read the text and answer the questions.

- 1 How did people react to *Doctor Faustus* originally?
- 2 What deal does Faustus strike with Mephistophilis?
- 3 What makes Mephistophilis sympathetic to the audience?
- 4 How much does Faustus worry about what will happen to him after twenty-four years?
- 5 How is Faustus flawed as a character?

Doctor *Faustus* is the most famous of Christopher Marlowe's plays, and caused enormous controversy and even scandal when it was first performed because of its content. It tells the story of Doctor Faustus' tragic downfall. Faustus is very smart. He is already an expert in philosophy, medicine, law, and religion, but he wants more. He decides to turn to black magic in order to gain more power. This, he thinks, will give him the ability to do and learn nearly anything.

Faustus summons an evil spirit, Mephistophilis. This spirit is a servant to Lucifer, the Devil. Faustus tells Mephistophilis what he wants: unlimited knowledge and power. Mephistophilis tells Faustus that he can have it. For twenty-four years, Faustus will be able to do and have whatever he wants. After the time is up, however, Mephistophilis will take Faustus to Lucifer. Faustus will have to live forever in Lucifer's terrible kingdom.


Mephistophilis urges Faustus not to go forward with this plan. He talks about his lifetime of servitude to Lucifer and says that if he had known how awful it would be, he never would have agreed to it. In this way, Mephistophilis is a tragic character as well. He made a bad decision and regrets it. His thirst for power led to his eternal suffering. Mephistophilis' fate foreshadows what will eventually happen to Faustus, but Faustus dismisses Mephistophilis' warnings without much thought. Faustus signs a contract with Lucifer (using his own blood as ink), and Mephistophilis becomes Faustus' personal servant.

At first, Faustus tries to learn everything that he can. After all, his first motivation was to gain knowledge. Over time, however, Faustus stops trying. He spends his time doing meaningless things, like summoning Helen of Troy to his side so that he can kiss her. During this whole period, Faustus does not think much about his eventual fate. Even when he receives warnings from his friends, he continues down his path of destruction. Although a good and a bad angel appear time and again to advise Faustus (indicating that he could still take the path of good) he ignores the sign. Throughout the entire play, Faustus is blind to the fact that he could be saved from his terrible punishment. He simply doesn't seem to think about it.

At the end, Mephistophilis comes to take Faustus away. He spends his last minutes worrying and hoping that he will not have to die. But he never regrets his decision or asks for forgiveness. It is implied that all Faustus would have to do is ask and he would be saved. He never does this, and his blindness to the possibility of his own salvation is one of Faustus' tragic flaws. Mephistophilis drags Faustus off the stage, and takes him to his master, Lucifer.

The play had a profound effect on the audiences of the time, with some even reporting the appearance of evil spirits in the theater. It was the first time such a controversial subject had been addressed in English drama, and it has helped make the story of Faust one of the most commonly told in English literature.

Listen & Read

- 2  Listen to and read the speech from *Doctor Faustus*. First, read for general understanding. Then, reread the speech. As you read the second time, ask yourself: what kind of a person is Faustus?

This speech comes from Act 1, Scene 1, at the very beginning of the play. It takes place in Faustus' home (in Wittenberg, Germany) in the late 16th century. Here, Faustus talks about all of the things that he has learned and studied. One by one, he dismisses them for different reasons. In the end, he realizes that only one subject interests him: black magic.

FAUSTUS

Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin
 To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess:
 Having commenced, be a divine in show,
 Yet level at the end of every art,
 And live and die in Aristotle's works.
 Sweet *Analytics*, 'tis thou hast ravished me:
Bene disserere est finis logices.
 Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?
 Affords this art no greater miracle?
 Then read no more, thou hast attained the end;
 A greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit.
Bid on kai me on farewell; Galen come:
 Seeing, *ubi desinit philosophus, ibi incipit medicus.*
 Be a physician, Faustus, heap up gold,
 And be eternized for some wondrous cure.
Summum bonum medicinae sanitas.
 The end of physic is our body's health.
 Why Faustus, hast thou not attained that end?
 Is not thy common talk found aphorisms?
 Are not thy bills hung up as monuments,
 Whereby whole cities have escaped the plague,
 And thousand desperate maladies been eased?
 Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man.
 Couldst thou make men to live eternally,
 Or, being dead, raise them to life again,
 Then this profession were to be esteemed.
 Physic farewell! Where is Justinian?
Si unae ademque res legatur duobus
Alter rem, alter valorem rei, etc.
 A petty case of paltry legacies:
Exhereditare filium non potest pater nisi...

Such is the subject of the Institute,
 And universal body of the law:
 This study fits a mercenary drudge
 Who aims at nothing but external trash!
 Too servile and illiberal for me.
 When all is done, divinity is best:
 Jerome's Bible, Faustus, view it well:
Stipendium peccati mors est: ha! Stipendium, etc.
 The reward of sin is death? That's hard.
Si pacasse negamus, fallimur, et nulla est in nobis
veritas. If we say that we have no sin,
 We deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us.
 Why then belike we must sin,
 And so consequently die.
 Ay, we must die an everlasting death.
 What doctrine call you this? *Che serà, serà*
 What will be, shall be! Divinity, adieu!
 These metaphysics of magicians,
 And necromantic books are heavenly!
 Lines, circles, schemes, letters, and characters!
 Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
 O what a world of profit and delight,
 Of power, of honor, or omnipotence
 Is promised to the studious artisan!
 All things that move between the quiet poles
 Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
 Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
 Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds;
 But his dominion that exceeds in this
 Stretcheth as far as doth the mighty mind of man:
 A sound magician is a mighty god.
 Here Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity.

Respond

- 3** Respond to the speech by answering these questions with a partner.
- Was your prediction about the main ideas of the speech correct? Explain.
 - How did the author communicate the main ideas? Pick one (or more) and explain.
 - with images
 - with dialogue
 - by explaining them directly
 - Which of the words from the phrase bank do you think best describe how Faustus feels in the speech? Explain.



Understand

- 4** Read the questions and choose the correct answers.
- What does Faustus say is the goal of logic?
 - to perform miracles
 - to argue well
 - to help people
 - to get rich
 - What can you deduce about Faustus?
 - He is a well-known doctor.
 - He has no children of his own.
 - He enjoys his job.
 - He does not have many friends.
 - What does Faustus dislike about the subject of law?
 - It inspires greed in people.
 - It cannot make a person famous.
 - It is unimportant and tedious.
 - It takes too much time to learn.
 - What does Faustus NOT hope to get from black magic?
 - riches
 - fame
 - political position
 - god-like power

Figurative Language

- 5** Work with a partner. Find one example of personification and one example of a metaphor in the speech.

Summarize

- 6 First, fill in the graphic organizer based on the speech you read.

Character(s)

Setting

Main Idea(s)

- 7 Now, use your graphic organizer to summarize the speech with a partner.

Listen

- 8 Listen to a lecture about *Doctor Faustus*. Then, answer the questions.

- What aspect of *Doctor Faustus* is the speaker discussing?
 - its symbols
 - its themes
 - its characters
 - its background
- Why does the speaker mention Germany?
 - to show where the play takes place
 - to explain where the idea for the play came from
 - to point out an important detail in the play
 - to illustrate the global influence of the play

Translate

- 9 Marlowe wrote *Doctor Faustus* sometime shortly before his death in 1593. The language he used is very different from the English that people use today. Look at the example below. Use it as a guide to translate the rest of the speech into modern English on a separate piece of paper with a partner. Leave the ancient Greek and Latin as they are.

Original	Modern
Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess; Having commenced, be a divine in show, Yet level at the end of every art, And live and die in Aristotle's works. Sweet <i>Analytiks</i> , 'tis thou hast ravished me: Bene disserere est finis logices. Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end? Affords this art no greater miracle? Then read no more, thou hast attained the end; A greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit. Bid on kai me on farewell; Galen come:	Decide on your studies, Faustus, and start To measure the extent of what you will declare; Having begun, be a theologian in appearance, But aim at the goal of every art, And live and die in Aristotle's works. Sweet <i>Analytiks</i> , you have swept me off my feet: Bene disserere est finis logices. Is arguing well the main goal of logic? Does this subject hold no greater miracle? Then read no more, you have reached the goal; Faustus' intellect is worthy of a greater subject. Say goodbye to on kai me on; come here, Galen:

About the Title

The story of Faust, the man who sold his soul for knowledge, power and wealth, has been told and retold in book, poem, and on film. It comes from a German legend that had been translated into English in 1592, so the story would have been very familiar to audiences in Marlowe's time. The Faustian theme tells people that they should not overstep their natural boundaries. That is, people should not try to achieve more than they can naturally achieve. People should be satisfied with what they do have and accept their limitations. This is Faust's fatal flaw: being dissatisfied with the limits of his own knowledge. Certainly, the pursuit of knowledge is not bad in and of itself. But when Faustus comes up to the edge of knowledge, he wants to go beyond, and this desire supersedes everything else in his life – even his own sense of morals. When a character acts in such a way, people immediately think of Faust, and understand the consequences.

- 10 *Doctor Faustus* is the shortened name of the play. The real name is *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. Over time, the name of the play was shortened. Answer the following questions with a partner.

- Why do you think that the name of the play was shortened?
- Why do you think Marlowe chose the name *Doctor Faustus*, rather than just calling the play (and character) *Faust*?
- If you could choose a new name for the play, what would it be?

Analyze the Characters

11 Fill It In.

First, listen to the lecture. Then, complete the graphic organizer.

Character	Attributes	Conflict
Faustus		
Mephistophilis		

12 Think About It.

Use the graphic organizer to write a short descriptive paragraph about Faustus. Write another about Mephistophilis.

13 Talk It Over.

Share your paragraph with a partner. As a class, discuss the paragraphs.

Analyze the Setting

14 Fill It In.

First, listen to the lecture. Then, fill in the graphic organizer.

Aspect of Setting	Importance
time	
place	

15 Think About It.

With a partner, discuss the importance of the setting in *Doctor Faustus*.

16 Talk It Over.

As a class, discuss the graphic organizer. Then, answer the following question.

- Could the play take place in a different setting?

Analyze the Symbols

17 Match It.

Some of the important symbols in the play are blood, the good and bad angels, and Faustus' contract. Match the symbols with their meanings.

Symbols

- 1 Faustus' blood
- 2 good and bad angels
- 3 Faustus' contract

Meanings

- A the duality of human nature, Faustus' conscience
- B Faustus' descent into black magic, the permanency of his decision
- C Faustus' soul, his inner spirit

18 Think About It.

Share your answers to the previous activity with a partner. Then, discuss why you chose the answers that you did.

19 Talk It Over.

As a class, discuss the following question.

- Which symbol is most important to the play and why?





About the Meter

20 Answer the following question with a partner.

Though *Doctor Faustus* was published later than many of Shakespeare's plays, it was performed before them all. Marlowe was, in fact, the first playwright to use blank verse in the English language, and it is virtually certain that he inspired the other Elizabethan playwrights to do so too. Like Shakespeare, Marlowe uses unrhymed iambic pentameter. Interestingly, his characters only use it in the serious scenes. In the comic scene that follows every serious scene, prose is used.

- Why do you think Marlowe chose to use verse and prose in the way he did?

Analyze the Themes

21 Fill It In.

There are many different themes in Faustus' speech. The graphic organizer lists some of the most important. Find lines from the speech that are related to each of the themes.

Theme	Lines from Speech
knowledge	
rejection of the past	
magic and the supernatural	

22 Think About It.

Which theme do you think is most important to this speech and why?

23 Talk It Over.

Discuss your answer to the previous question with the rest of the class.



In-Depth Analysis: Tragic Hero

Doctor Faustus is a tragedy. The main character in a tragedy is a “tragic hero.” Thus, Faustus, who is the main character in the play, is a tragic hero. These characters follow a specific pattern – one that was laid out many years ago by the ancient Greeks.

There are three important characteristics of tragic heroes. First of all, they must have something wrong with them. That is, they must have a tragic flaw. Usually, the tragic hero is not completely immoral or bad. Instead, they have this one little problem that they need to work on. Inevitably, it is this problem that causes their downfall. In Faustus’ case, it is his unceasing and overreaching quest for knowledge. It’s important to remember that Faustus is not the villain in the play. That is, he is not, in himself, an evil person. He just wants to push the limits of human understanding a little too far. He is still the protagonist, or main character, of the play, and as such the audience are on his side despite his shortcomings.

Secondly, the hero’s tragic flaw must result in ruin for the tragic hero. A tragedy is not a simple and easily fixable mistake. Instead, it is a total transformation of the tragic hero’s life. He loses

everything, for example, or he even dies. In Faustus’ case, he ends up selling his soul and gaining very little. Understanding Faustus’ character arc – or the changes that his character goes through in the story – reveals a lot about his ruin. At the beginning of the play, Faustus is a very smart man who wants to learn everything that he can. He’s well-respected and important. Over the course of the play, however, he becomes nothing more than a prankster. He loses the respect of his colleagues. In addition, he loses his own soul. Obviously, Faustus’ tragic flaw is directly related to his eventual ruin.

Finally, the audience must feel a mixture of fear and pity for the tragic hero. Audience members should be afraid because they can see some of themselves in the tragic hero. They should feel sorry for the hero for the same reason. Tragedies should remind people that no one is perfect. Everyone has flaws, and sometimes those flaws lead to serious consequences. Doctor Faustus is a sympathetic character in many ways. The audience can certainly relate to his attempt to improve his place in the world and his desire for fame and knowledge.

24 Read the In-Depth Analysis. What are three characteristics of a tragic hero?

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25 Explain how each of the characteristics listed above relates to Faustus.

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26 With a partner, write a paragraph explaining why Faustus is or isn’t a tragic hero.

Write

27 The passage from *Doctor Faustus* is the first speech the audience hear from the main character. Write a 250- to 300-word essay explaining how the speech shows Faustus to be a tragic hero, using direct quotations where possible.



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for video activities
& essay writing