

A Summary of Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus

The legend of Faust became a frequently related myth from the times of medieval period itself in Europe and the tragic story of Faust has spread across continents since then. There are a lot of contributors who made this feat possible and one of the earliest references to the story is believed to be the description of Simon Magus, the magician in the Bible's New Testament. Christopher Marlowe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Thomas Mann, etc. fuelled the thought of a practitioner of magical arts who goes by the name of Doctor Faustus.

However, it was Christopher Marlowe's version of "Doctor Faustus" that gained a huge impetus for it being written in blank verse and the style so complex yet understandable seems as if it is actually reflecting the thoughts of the legendary magician himself.

Prologue by Chorus :

The chorus enters with clearly stating their intent of appearing on stage. They do not want to sing of the battles of Roman gods nor do they want to praise the great heroes of the past. Instead, it is of the mighty Faustus they want to talk about and introduce a bit about the man. Faustus was born in Rhodes, Germany to humble parents and left to Wertenberg, where his relatives took care of him. He had great curiosity for knowledge and mastered many fields of knowledge and was awarded with doctor of divinity for his Theological debates and comprehension of the divine material. After all the praise on Doctor Faustus, the chorus sobs on the fact that he was absorbed by pride and went on to darker realms of knowledge which were forbidden. He took Necromancy or the art of summoning spirits as his subject which led to his demise. As the first scene is revealed, the chorus gives a clear notion of the man who is seen in his study room.

Act – 1, Scene -1 (Reading room in the house):

Faustus, alone in his reading room disputes with himself as to which field of knowledge he wants to pursue in the future. He thinks of logic, but then again stops as he reads about the ultimate achievement of logic is to speak well in debates of all kinds.

"Is, to dispute well logic's chiefest end?"

Affords this art no greater miracle?"

He understands that he doesn't need logic as he's well-versed in the art of logical debates. Doctor Faustus goes on with different fields considering Medical science, divinity, law and at the end turns to the art of magic. His urge to become a god amongst men comes forth with learning the powerful art, hence decides to practice magic. He asks his servant Wagner to call his friends Cornelius and Valdes so that he can take advice in the matter.

As Wagner exits, good angel and evil angel enter, the former to ensure that Doctor Faustus doesn't end his life in damnation while the latter tries to influence him in pursuing the evil

book of magic. He becomes obsessed with the idea of getting unlimited power while on Earth which would immortalize his name after death. Meanwhile, his friends visit and are delighted to know about the interests of Faustus and give plenty of reading suggestions. Valdes, Cornelius and Faustus decide to have a dinner and start with conjuring that night.

Act – 1, Scene – 2 (Before the house of Doctor Faustus):

Two scholars are looking for the whereabouts of their teacher Faustus and from their dialogues it is apparent that Faustus has not been teaching for quite some time. Wagner has his share of fun with the scholars when they enquire about his (Wagner) master. They eventually find out that Faustus is involved in studying Necromancy and is now involved with the necromancers Valdes and Cornelius. The First Scholar believes that Faustus is doomed, whereas the other hopes there is still hope and they decide to inform of the horrible matter to the Rector.

Act – 1, Scene – 3 (Grove):

Faustus has determined to offer his soul to the Devil and draws a blasphemous circle so to prove his willingness to join the dark side. He begins the incantations and after the invocation of the Devil is complete Mephistopheles, the servant of Lucifer appears. However, he finds Mephistopheles too repulsive and asks the dark angel to disperse and come back with a neat form. The devil returns in the form of a friar and asks Doctor Faustus of the purpose of incantation. However, the curious doctor asks a lot of questions and asks Mephistopheles to serve as his slave. The devil rejects the offer as it is Lucifer to whom the devil is obedient and without his permission he cannot take such liberal decisions like serving others.

Mephistopheles explains that all devils are eager to appear whenever there is a conjuring of the devil so that they can claim the soul of the conjuror. Faustus' curiosity makes him a willing individual to swear allegiance. Mephistopheles describes of the events that led to the downfall of Lucifer and the others and describes that being separated from God is Hell. But, Faustus doesn't take the words of the devil into consideration and asks him to forward a message to Lucifer about the willingness to offer his (Faustus) soul. In exchange of the soul, Doctor Faustus asks the obedience of Mephistopheles for 24-years and granting of limitless power. The devil exits and Faustus wishes that if he had more souls like the number of the stars he would give them for being the Emperor of the world and being treated as god amongst mortals.

Act – 1, Scene – 4 (Street):

(Christopher Marlowe, after revealing cosmic matters of Necromancy provides with a bit of comic relief with Wagner in this scene.)

The page of Doctor Faustus, Wagner is seen to lure a clown into becoming his servant. Initially, he offers mutton for which the clown refuses profoundly. He gives some money to the clown, but he tries to give them back. However, Wagner who has learnt a few conjuring tricks himself makes Baliol and Belcher (demons) appear. The clown terrified at the sight of

demons accepts to serve Wagner. He further asks his new master to teach him magic. Wagner promises the clown to teach the art of changing oneself into animal. However, if there be any disobedience Wagner warns the clown to conjure the demons again, which makes the clown to follow Wagner in silence.

Act – 2, Scene – 1 (Faustus in reading room):

Faustus thinks of repenting and rethinks of his decision. He feels that it is too late to repent; moreover, he sees Lucifer as a trustworthy Devil and decides to be resolute about his decision. As he becomes resolute to build altars for the Devil; Good Angel and Bad Angel enter trying to persuade Doctor Faustus to join their own side. However, the Bad Angel wins and leaves Faustus to think of wealth, honour and position. He calls on Mephistopheles who comes with the news that Lucifer has accepted the offer of Faustus.

Good Angel: Sweet Faustus, leave the execrable art.

Faustus: Contrition, prayer, repentance – what of them?

Good Angel: O, they are means to bring thee unto heaven!

Evil Angel: Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy,

That make man foolish that do trust them most.

Good Angel: Sweet Faustus, think of heaven and of heavenly things.

Evil Angel: No, Faustus; think of honour and of wealth.

Faustus: Of wealth!

Why, the signatory of Embden shall be mine.

When Mephistopheles shall stand by me,

What God can hurt thee, Faustus? Thou art safe.

Cast no more doubts...

Thrilled to hear the news, Faustus cuts his arm to write a blood covenant but his blood thickens and Mephistopheles goes to obtain fire. Faustus thinks that the thickening of the blood is some sort of warning to get him away from all the misdeeds. After the devil brings fire and makes the blood to flow again, he completes the deed by writing with his blood. Suddenly, on his arm appears a two word inscription – “Homo fuge” (Man fly). Faustus has misgivings but he knows there is no turning back now. Mephistopheles in order to distract his new master arranges a dance of the spirits who offer great gifts to Faustus. He becomes happy again and turns over the agreement to Mephistopheles.

After enjoying the presence of the spirits, Faustus asks Mephistopheles to bring a wife, but the devil returns with a spirit dressed as a woman and explains the downsides of marriage. He falls for the false interpretation of the devil and asks for books on spells, heavenly bodies and flora, which Mephistopheles is quite happy to bring him.

Act – 2, Scene – 2 (Near an Inn):

The name of the Clown is revealed as Robin and he steals one of the magic books owned by Doctor Faustus. The Clown though is in possession of the book cannot read but boasts of doing magic. He gets into banter with a servant named Dick and later on they decide to head to a tavern.

Act – 2, Scene – 3 (Home of Faustus):

Faustus' misgivings increase and he curses Mephistopheles for pursuing him to write the agreement. However, Mephistopheles reiterates that it was Faustus who wanted to exchange his soul. Faustus decides to repent when the Good Angel enters and encourages him. But, the Bad Angel intervenes and tilts the interest of Faustus towards Hell again. He turns to Mephistopheles to discuss of the constellations, heavens and planets. The devil gives out what all he could but denies to reveal about the Creator of the world for which Faustus gets frustrated. He thinks of salvation again, but this time Mephistopheles comes with Lucifer and Beelzebub.

They offer all kind of offerings to Doctor Faustus and Beelzebub summons "The Seven Deadly Sins" to appease the man. Faustus expresses his desire to see Hell and Lucifer shows willingness to take him to Hell that midnight. Before their departure, Beelzebub gives Faustus a book that contains secret knowledge on how to transform oneself into any shape and the doctor is very pleased.

Act – 3, Chorus:

The Chorus sings of the great deeds achieved by Doctor Faustus with the powers he got from the exchange. It's mentioned that Faustus has visited Mount Olympus, flew with dragons riding the chariot and even dealt with Cosmography. Now, he longs to visit Rome and involve himself in the feast of St. Peter's Day.

Act – 3, Scene – 1 (Rome):

After reaching Rome, Faustus and Mephistopheles wait for the arrival of Pope at his chamber. The devil narrates of the wonders of the Rome and Doctor Faustus expresses his wish to tour them; but Mephistopheles holds him back by reminding Faustus about their purpose to visit Rome i.e. to take part in the St. Peter's Day feast. As they are uninvited Faustus asks Mephistopheles to perform a charm of invisibility so that no one can see them and the devil gladly does so.

As the Pope enters the chamber along with King of Hungary (Raymond), Cardinals and Bishops, it is seen that he also has a man bound in chains. The man, Bruno, was selected as the worthy man to become the Pope by German Emperor. The Pope chides him and uses

abusive language. Faustus desires to restore the liberty of Bruno and expresses the same to Mephistopheles and they achieve the feat quite easily.

Act – 3, Scene – 2 (Pope’s chamber):

The Pope is shown as the sufferer due to the hilarious tricks generated by the invisible Doctor Faustus. He abuses the Pope, takes away the food and creates a lot of confusion in the chamber. As a Bishop recognizes the presence of a ghost the Friars hurry to prepare for the rites so they can drive the ghost away. Meanwhile, the Pope is hit by Faustus and he exits with all the companions. The Friars come back to perform the rites and Faustus along with Mephistopheles hammer them and set fireworks to the place before leaving.

The chorus re-enters at this point, to describe of the returning of home of Doctor Faustus. He becomes very famous due to his magical abilities and expansive Astronomical knowledge. As a result, Faustus becomes the best-loved individual to the German Emperor Carolus the Fifth and is due to present his feats at the court shortly.

Act – 3, Scene – 3 (Tavern):

The Clown, Robin is shown taking care of horses (ostler) who boasts a great deal in front of Rafe about performing magic to attain pleasure. Robin and his friend end up stealing a silver cup from Vintner. As the Vintner recognizes that his silver cup is stolen by the two, he follows them. As he catches up on them, Robin to escape from his hands conjures Mephistopheles. The devil gets furious with the summoning as the two fools are not worthy enough to call upon someone like Mephistopheles. So, the devil puts fireworks on Robin and his friend, who run around scared. Rafe unable to continue takes the silver cup and gives it back to Vintner. However, the Vintner couldn’t see Mephistopheles and returns with his cup. Whereas, Mephistopheles warns the two about transforming one to an ape (Robin) and the other to a dog (Rafe) and the devil disappears. They love the fact that they can get transformed into animals and think of all the deeds they could perform by being an ape and a dog.

Act – 4, Scene – 1 (The Emperor’s Palace at Innsbruck):

As the scene opens two nobles serving Carolus the Fifth, Frederick and Martino are seen conversing. They talk of Bruno and how he came back riding on a demon. Both the men are eager to look at Doctor Faustus and help themselves with amusement as Faustus pleases the Emperor. They share their excitement with their friend and Knight Benvolio who shows disinterest and states to watch Faustus from a window.

Act – 4, Scene – 2 (The Emperor’s Palace at Innsbruck):

The Emperor Carolus the Fifth enters the court along with Doctor Faustus, Bruno and other attendants. The Knight Benvolio is seen near the window watching over the proceedings. Carolus declares gratitude for saving Bruno and Faustus promises to show the court many wonders. On hearing the claims of Faustus Benvolio mocks him for which Faustus takes revenge afterwards. Based on the wish of the Emperor to see Darius, Alexander and his Paramour, Faustus with the help of Mephistopheles conjures their spirits. Faustus agrees

that he cannot summon them in flesh and they are only spirits; nonetheless the Emperor is mighty pleased to see the shapes of the great names. Meanwhile, Faustus uses his powers to grow antlers on Benvolio's head as he mocked his capabilities. With Emperor's involvement Faustus restores the natural shape of Benvolio.

Act – 4, Scene – 3 (The Same):

Benvolio longs to take revenge and reveals his plot to Frederick and Martino. They both agree to the plan and wait to ambush on Doctor Faustus. As Faustus is seen coming on the same path, they all attack him at once and Benvolio cuts the head of Faustus. He longs to place horns on the head of the doctor with the help on nails. However, Faustus' head unites with the body again as he cannot die until the agreed 24-years of life are complete. Furious at the imbecile efforts of the three, he commands his devils to drag each man to various places of wilderness. The trio arise to see that there are horns on each man and they decide to live the rest of their lives (or as long as the horns are present) concealing themselves in the castle of Benvolio.

Faustus, with all his mighty ambitions is shown to have turned into a court jester appeasing the wills of the Emperor. He declines further by playing pranks and summoning demons to punish three foolish men. Christopher Marlowe through the actions of Faustus provides a message that with the unlimited power gained through forbidden means man tends to sway off the natural course and forgets the initial ambitions and turn up only to amuse others rather than making use of the powers they acquired.

Act – 4, Scene – 4 (A Green):

Doctor Faustus is seen with Mephistopheles, talking about the end of days as promised by the Devil. So, he wishes to return to his place of birth. Meanwhile, a horse-courser interesting at the horse of Faustus asks to sell the horse. He does so, but warns not to ride the horse in water and sends him off. But the horse courser doesn't heed the advice of Faustus and runs the horse into water and the horse become hay. He comes back to Faustus wailing, complaining and tugging at the leg of Faustus. The doctor plays a prank again and the leg comes off which leaves the horse courser terrified. Mephistopheles threatens to complain the matter and the horse courser offers some money and leaves them. Meanwhile, Wagner enters to inform that the Duke is expecting Faustus to perform at his court but Faustus shows no disinterest.

Act -4, Scene – 5 (Tavern):

A comic relief scene, where the people cheated by Doctor Faustus such as the Horse-courser, Carter, etc. talk of the misbehaviour of Faustus and decides to find him to deal with their problems appropriately.

Act – 4, Scene – 6 (The court of the Duke of Vanholt):

Faustus with all his power and magical abilities pleases the Duke and asks the Duchess to wish for anything. She politely requests to have ripe grapes and everyone wonders how this feat is possible as it is the month of January, the most unlikely season to have grapes.

However, with the help of Mephistopheles Faustus presents the grapes to the Duchess and explains about the difference of seasons in different hemispheres. As the Duke shows interest and asks to give lecture, the fellows cheated by Faustus bang at the gates. As they are allowed in, they question about the injustice they've faced and Faustus turns each one into a mute and they all exit. This feat amuses the Duke and the Duchess and Faustus takes leave.

Act – 5, Scene – 1 (The study room of Doctor Faustus):

(Faustus stoops further and further, only to entertain the crowd and through the 24-years of time he couldn't achieve what he sought for initially.)

With great lightning and thunder Mephistopheles and other devils are seen on the stage with Mephistopheles showing the way to reach Doctor Faustus.

Wagner expresses to the audience that the end is near for his master and he is ready for the final journey. So, Faustus gives everything he has to Wagner by writing a will claiming that Wagner is the sole possessor of all his properties. During his final day, Faustus is seen dining and making merry with the three scholars. It is at this moment and at his last day of time he summons the Helen of Troy. As the scholars exit, an Old Man comes in to warn the doctor. He asks the doctor to repent and states that God will always do well for those who think of Him. However, the thoughts of Faustus are fixed towards damnation and thinks it is too late.

The Old Man exits and Faustus contemplates on the sins he has done. Mephistopheles warns Faustus to not vary with the pact or else he will tear the body of the doctor. Threatened by Mephistopheles, Faustus asks the devil to torment the Old Man who created a delusion of happiness in his mind. However, Mephistopheles clearly states that the Old Man is pure of heart and soul, and such individuals cannot be harmed by devils. Unable to get his first request, Doctor Faustus asks to summon Helen of Troy so that he can forget all that has happened and live in bliss for the remainder of his time. Mephistopheles is happy to conjure the spirit of Helen of Troy and Faustus is seen to be amused and filled with pleasure by the sight of her.

*“Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies.
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell for heaven in those lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.”*

Act – 5, Scene – 2 (The study room of Doctor Faustus):

Lucifer, Mephistopheles and Beelzebub seem to be waiting for the clock to strike midnight so that they can have the most valuable soul of Faustus.

Faustus and Wagner talk of the will written and Wagner expresses his joy and gratitude towards his master. Meanwhile, the three scholars enter and the pact with the Devil is revealed. The first scholar is confused as to why this was not revealed earlier? Faustus exclaims that the devils would have tormented him physically. The third scholar doesn't want to leave Faustus, but as it is too dangerous the rest of the two convince him to not to stay. They tell Faustus that they will in the next room praying for his welfare. Mephistopheles is blamed by Faustus by luring him into damnation and the devil loves the fact that he could offer Lucifer such a soul as of Faustus' to the Devil.

“Fools that laugh on Earth, must weep in Hell.” (Mephistopheles)

A final effort is made by the Good Angel by lamenting of the fact that Faustus can never have the gates of Heaven open to him. She bids Faustus goodbye as there is no place in Hell for virtues and Faustus is doomed to Hell. The Evil Angel terrifies Faustus by opening the gates of Hell.

As the clock strikes Eleven, Doctor Faustus has only an hour of life left and he starts to show signs of remorse. He thinks of God and how even a half drop of Christ's blood is enough to save his soul. He envisions God being angry with him and he is rushed with a lot of horrible aspects which won't stop from terrifying his mind. He is angry with his parents, angry with himself and Lucifer also but he is a helpless soul lost in the wilderness. He swam so deep into darkness that he cannot come back to light again.

The time comes and with great lightning and thunder the devils enter. Doctor Faustus pleads to dissolve his soul in air or water so that there is no chance for the devils to torment him. However, in the late hour there is no help for Faustus and he is dragged away by the devils to eternal damnation.

Act – 5, Scene – 3 (The study room of Doctor Faustus):

The Three Scholars disturbed the devilish noises in the room where Faustus was left alone come to see what has happened. Their prayers go in vain and they find the body of Doctor Faustus torn from limb to limb in many pieces.

Epilogue by Chorus:

The chorus laments that a great potential like that of Doctor Faustus was cut short due to his longing for unlawful knowledge. A man who was acclaimed to be an equal to Apollo himself brought himself down to a mere conjuror who with ill knowledge couldn't become wise and brought his own destruction. The chorus emphasizes that the tragic end of Faustus should be a lesson to anyone who dwells in understanding the forbidden fruits of knowledge.