About the author

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury, Great Britain, in 1564, the second son of a shoemaker. He attended King’s School in Canterbury and graduated from Corpus Christi College in Cambridge. Rather than becoming a clergyman, Marlowe moved to London, where he became a playwright. Among his most important plays, written between 1585 and 1593, are Tamburlaine the Great, The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta, The Massacre at Paris, The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, and his most famous work, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, first published in 1604. He also wrote non-dramatic works and poetry. His short life in London was characterised by scandal and disruptive behaviour, which repeatedly led him into problems with authorities. In May 1593, he was arrested on charges of atheism and heresy. In the same month, soon after his release, he was stabbed to death in a tavern in an obscure episode involving a fight over a bill.

Summary

Doctor Faustus, a German scholar, feels that traditional sciences don’t satisfy him any longer and is tempted into exploring what magic can offer. Helped by two colleagues, Valdes and Cornelius, he decides to discuss the matter with two Angels. God’s Angel wants him to abandon his new plans; the Devil’s Angel promises the power that comes with the knowledge of all nature’s secrets. Valdes and Cornelius tempt him into exploring magic while two other scholars try to save him from his downfall.

Scenes 1–4: Having had a brilliant career, Dr Faustus feels he has to decide what to do in the future. Philosophy, medicine, law and theology don’t satisfy him any longer. Attracted by the secrets of magic, he decides to discuss the matter with two colleagues, Valdes and Cornelius, both well-known for practising this evil art. While he waits for them, two Angels visit him. God’s Angel wants him to abandon his new plans; the Devil’s Angel promises the power that comes with the knowledge of all nature’s secrets. Valdes and Cornelius tempt him into exploring magic while two other scholars try to save him from his downfall.

Scenes 5–8: Dr Faustus performs a ritual to summon the Devil and Mephistopheles, Lucifer’s minister, turns up in a monstrous shape. Faustus orders him to come back with the appearance of a monk, and sends a message to Lucifer through him. He wants twenty-four years of unlimited power in exchange for his body and soul. Mephistopheles warns him that hell is painful, but Faustus seems to have made up his mind. His blood dries as he is signing an agreement with Lucifer in his own blood, but Mephistopheles warms it to make it flow again. In the meantime, Wagner, Faustus’s servant, hires a poor young man, Robin, to work for him and serve the Devil.

Scenes 9–12: Mephistopheles gives Faustus a book that contains everything he wants to know. Faustus enjoys his new powers but on occasions doubts his decision. The Good and Evil Angels visit him, and Faustus even tries to speak to Christ, but is tempted back by Mephistopheles and the Evil Angel. Lucifer introduces him to the Seven Deadly Sins. In the meantime, Robin, Wagner’s follower, uses Faustus’s book of spells to try to help his friend Rafe have a woman he likes.
Doctor Faustus

Scenes 13–18: Faustus has become the most famous and skilful scholar and magician in Europe. He has been to the courts of all powerful Kings and now visits Rome – where he plays tricks on the Pope and a Cardinal, and the court of the King of Germany – where he shows his powers by bringing back the spirits of Alexander the Great and his wife and making horns grow on an Officer who dares doubt his powers. He also visits an important Duke and his wife. In the meantime, Robin and Rafe are visited by Mephistopheles, who threatens to turn them into a cat and a dog.

Scenes 19–23: The twenty-four years are nearly at an end and Faustus knows his death is approaching. He brings Helen of Troy to the sight of his fellow scholars at their request. Faustus then receives the visit of an old man who wants to help him repent but, although he wants to go to heaven, his soul is sold and he can’t. Mephistopheles brings Helen of Troy for Faustus, who experiences the taste of heaven in her lips. He then tells his fellow scholars about his sins and, at midnight, is taken by Lucifer and Mephistopheles amidst a thunderstorm and his own screams.

Background and themes

Inspired from the life of a real German scholar whose life became a popular legend soon after his death, Doctor Faustus was written towards the end of the sixteenth century. It therefore reflects the articulation between the religious medieval times that were coming to an end and the scholarly Renaissance that was gradually gaining ground.

Sometimes categorised as a heroic tragedy and sometimes as a morality play, Doctor Faustus has been published through the centuries with varied numbers of scenes and acts, and has been recreated on many occasions, outstandingly by the German poet, Goethe.

In its exploration of Faustus’s life and soul, Marlowe confronts us with the following themes:

Good and evil: Faustus’s choice brings to the surface the good-evil dichotomy, symbolised by the Good and Evil Angels, Heaven and Hell, God and Satan, redemption and damnation, the temptation of power on earth at the cost of losing eternal happiness in heaven and, ultimately, the dual character of human nature.

The religious medieval times and the scholarly Renaissance: Faustus’s hunger for magic starts with his desire for further knowledge, which leads him into abandoning God, which suggests a confrontation between religion and knowledge.

The effect of power on people: While originally thirsty for knowledge and the unfolding of the secrets of nature and the universe, once he is given access to it Faustus uses his power to earn fame, play tricks on, or for, important personalities in Europe, and punish whoever opposes him. Power is, therefore, used to satisfy Faustus’s greed and ambitions.

Hell: Different concepts of hell are explored in the play, ranging from an all-encompassing state of permanent pain to an invention to frighten children.

Discussion activities

Scenes 1–4
Before reading
1. Pair work: Tell students: Life is a series of choices, and whenever we choose something, we lose something else. What we lose, is the price we pay for what we choose. Some people choose to pay a very high cost for power and wealth. Can you think of examples? Pairs share their ideas.

After reading
2. Role play: Divide the class into groups of three. Tell them: Imagine an old lady drops her purse, and you pick it up and find the exact amount of money you need to buy something that you really want but can’t afford. The Good and Evil Angels stand on each side of you; one tells you to keep the money, the other to give it back to the lady. Groups role play their conversations and the class votes for the one with the most persuasive arguments.

3. Read carefully and write: Students read carefully the first part of Scene 3, The Excitement of Magic, where Faustus expresses his desires. Then they write what Dr Faustus would wish if he lived in the twenty-first century. Students share their ideas.

4. Debate: Tell students: The two scholars in Scene 4 want to save Faustus. To do so, they need get in the way of Faustus’s desire. Then divide the class into two groups and have them debate the following: Do people have a right to try to get in the way of another person’s decisions, or should we always be respectful of what people decide to do with their own lives?

Scenes 5–8
Before reading
5. Group work and guess: Divide the class into groups. Tell them: In this section of the book, Dr Faustus will perform a ceremony that involves a cup of water, lamps, and circle drawn on the floor, with a word written forwards and backwards and some signs inside it.
Doctor Faustus

Groups discuss what they think the ceremony is for, what it is like and where it is performed. Then they compare their ideas with the ritual described at the beginning of Scene 5.

After reading
6 Discuss: Tell students: When performing the ceremony, Dr Faustus tells himself not be afraid and to be brave. Later he has doubts about what he is doing. Do you think he is afraid? If so, why? Do people sometimes do things they are curious about but are afraid of? Why do they do so? Have you ever done something you wanted to do but were afraid of? What?

7 Artwork: In groups, students decorate sheets of paper and write the document in which Dr Faustus promises to give his body and soul to Lucifer. Groups explain what their decorations mean.

8 Write: Tell students: Imagine Robin writes a letter to his family to let them know about the new job he has got. What does he tell them? Write the letter.

Scenes 9–12
Before reading
9 Guess: Tell students: Now Faustus can have whatever he wants. What do you think he is going to ask Mephistopheles for? Why? What would you ask for?
10 Guess: Tell students: In the coming scenes, Faustus will meet the Seven Deadly Sins. What do you think they are?

After reading
11 Discuss: Tell students: Whenever Mephistopheles tells Faustus that what he asks is in the book he has given him, Faustus wants to know something else. Is this because our human desire is never satisfied and whenever we have something we want something else? Does perfect happiness exist?
12 Debate: Tell students: Mephistopheles tells Faustus that he recommends that he has all the women he wants rather than a wife. Then divide the class into two groups and have them debate the following: Group A: If we could enjoy the pleasure of love without loyalty, we would suffer less. Group B: If we enjoyed the pleasures of love without loyalty, we would suffer more.
13 Group work and write: Divide the class into seven groups. Each group takes one Deadly Sin; they read how the Sin introduces itself to Faustus and write a new introduction that could replace the one in the book. Groups read their texts and the class votes for the one they like best.

Scenes 13–18
Before reading
14 Guess: Tell students: In the coming scenes, Faustus will meet the Pope and the King of Germany. He will play tricks on one and show his power to the other. What do you think he’s going to do to each of them? Why?

After reading
15 Write and artwork: Tell students: In Scene 14 Faustus talks about the places he has visited. Rewrite his speech talking about the places you would like to visit. Make a map showing the places he chose to go to in one colour and the ones you have chosen in another colour. Students then tell the class why they have chosen those places.
16 Role play: In groups, students invent other tricks that Dr Faustus played on the Pope and the Cardinal of Lorraine. Then they role play their scenes.
17 Pair work and discuss: In pairs, students discuss how they think the Army Officer that was with the King of Germany would take revenge on Faustus if he could.
18 Research: Students find out who Alexander the Great was and prepare brief presentations for the class.
19 Role play: Tell students: Imagine that the Duchess finds out that Faustus gets his powers from Lucifer. How does she feel about having eaten the grapes he brought for her? Write and role play a conversation between her and her husband.

Scenes 19–23
Before reading
20 Guess: Ask students: What do you think will happen to Faustus when the twenty-four years have passed? If he is damned forever, were the power and fame he enjoyed worth the cost?

After reading
21 Group work and research: Students search the Internet for different paintings, drawings, or pictures of Helen of Troy and, in groups, make a collage poster that shows her beauty. Groups explain to the class why they think the illustrations they selected show her beauty and the class discusses how the stereotypes of beauty change over time.
22 Debate: Divide the class into two groups and have them debate the following. Group A: A person who has done much evil should be punished and not be forgiven, even if they repent. Group B: No matter how much evil a person has done, they should be forgiven and given a new opportunity if they repent.
23 Role play: Tell students: Imagine Faustus has a conversation with God just before his death. Role play their conversation.
24 Pair work and write: In pairs, students write the speech that the scholars make at Faustus’s burial ceremony.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.