

# Doctor Faustus

a well-respected German scholar, grows dissatisfied with the limits of traditional forms of knowledge—logic, medicine, law, and religion—and decides that he wants to learn to practice magic. His friends Valdes and Cornelius instruct him in the black arts, and he begins his new career as a magician by summoning up a devil. Despite Mephistophilis's warnings about the horrors of hell, Faustus tells the devil to return to his master, Lucifer, with an offer of Faustus's soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis. Meanwhile, Wagner, Faustus's servant, has picked up some magical ability and uses it to press a clown named Robin into his service.

Mephistophilis returns to Faustus with word that Lucifer has accepted Faustus's offer. Faustus experiences some misgivings and wonders if he should repent and save his soul; in the end, though, he agrees to the deal, signing it with his blood. As soon as he does so, the words "Homo fuge," Latin for "O man, fly," appear branded on his arm. Faustus again has second thoughts, but Mephistophilis bestows rich gifts on him and gives him a book of spells to learn. Later, Mephistophilis answers all of his questions about the nature of the world, refusing to answer only when Faustus asks him who made the universe. This refusal prompts yet another bout of misgivings in Faustus, but Mephistophilis and Lucifer bring in personifications of the Seven Deadly Sins to prance about in front of Faustus, and he is impressed enough to quiet his doubts.

Armed with his new powers and attended by Mephistophilis, Faustus begins to travel. He goes to the pope's court in Rome, makes himself invisible, and plays a series of tricks. He disrupts the pope's banquet by stealing food and boxing the pope's ears. Following this incident, he travels through the courts of Europe, with his fame spreading as he goes. Eventually, he is invited to the court of the German emperor, Charles V (the enemy of the pope), who asks Faustus to allow him to see Alexander the Great, the famed fourth-century BCE Macedonian king and conqueror. Faustus conjures up an image of Alexander, and Charles is suitably impressed. A knight scoffs at Faustus's powers, and Faustus chastises him by making antlers sprout from his head. Furious, the knight vows revenge.

Meanwhile, Robin, Wagner's clown, has picked up some magic on his own, and with his fellow stablehand, Rafe, he undergoes a number of comic misadventures. At one point, he manages to summon Mephistophilis, who threatens to turn Robin and Rafe into animals (or perhaps even does transform them; the text isn't clear) to punish them for their foolishness.

Faustus then goes on with his travels, playing a trick on a horse-courser along the way. Faustus sells him a horse that turns into a heap of straw when ridden into a river. Eventually, Faustus is invited to the court of the Duke of Vanholt, where he performs various feats. The horse-courser shows up there, along with Robin, a man named Dick (Rafe in the A text), and various others who have fallen victim to Faustus's trickery. But Faustus casts spells on them and sends them on their way, to the amusement of the duke and duchess.

As the twenty-four years of his deal with Lucifer come to a close, Faustus begins to dread his impending death. He has Mephistophilis call up Helen of Troy, the famous beauty from the ancient world, and uses her presence to impress a group of scholars. An old man urges Faustus to repent, but Faustus drives him away. Faustus summons Helen again and exclaims rapturously about her beauty. But time is growing short. Faustus tells the scholars about his

pact, and they are horror-stricken and resolve to pray for him. On the final night before the expiration of the twenty-four years, Faustus is overcome by fear and remorse. He begs for mercy, but it is too late. At midnight, a host of devils appears and carries his soul off to hell. In the morning, the scholars find Faustus's limbs and decide to hold a funeral for him.

## Characters and Analysis

**Faustus:** Doctor Faustus is the leading character. He is a brilliant scholar in sixteenth century Germany. He has a thirst for knowledge, fame and fortune that runs so deep that he is willing to trade his mortal soul to Lucifer in return for cosmic powers.

Faustus's tragic grandeur is diminished by the fact that he never does completely come to terms with his decision to trade his soul and constantly struggles with whether or not he should repent. His drive is admirable, however, he appears to lack tremendous inner strength. Faustus never seems completely willing to adopt his dark path.

Faustus is a professor of divinity at Wittenberg, as well as a renowned physician and scholar. Not satisfied with the limitations of human knowledge and power, he begins to practice necromancy. He eventually makes a deal with Lucifer (commonly referred to as the "Faustian bargain"), whereby he exchanges his soul for twenty-four years of the devil's service to him. In the next twenty-four years, Faustus obtains all kinds of knowledge and power through his devil-servant, Mephistophilis. They travel all over the world, playing practical jokes on peasants and even the Pope, displaying magical powers to the emperor and the nobility; Faustus wishes and whims are played out in his various adventures. At times Faustus experiences doubt and despair over having sold his soul to the devil. He comes close to repenting at several crucial points in the story, but never follows through. Even to the end, Faustus refuses to fully repent, and he is eventually taken by the devils to hell. The character of Faustus comes from a well-known legend of a German physician who reported sold his soul to the devil in exchange for magical powers. In Marlowe's rendition, he is portrayed as a tragic hero in that his unbridled ambitions lead him to an unfortunate end. But at a deeper level, the tragedy is twofold. First, there is a clear devolvement of his character, from a confident, ambitious scholar, to a self-satisfied, low-level practical joker. Although he makes a name for himself as an expert magician, Faustus never accomplishes the lofty goals he initially sets for himself. Second, there are times when Faustus despairs over his decision and comes close to repenting, only to back away at the last moment. On the other hand, Faustus can be seen as a hero in that he rejects God's authority and determines his own course of life. Faustus is the paragon of the Renaissance Man—turning away from the religious strictures of the Medieval Age (God-centeredness) in favor of the enlightened age of reason and human achievement (man-centeredness).

**Mephistopheles:** Summoned by Faustus, Mephistopheles is a devil connected with Lucifer and the rest of the underworld. His motives are ambiguous in nature. In part, he aims to capture Faustus's soul, in another part, he attempts to discourage Faustus from making a pact with Lucifer by warning him about the horrors that lurk in hell. The devil that appears before

Faustus, Mephistophilis makes the deal where he is to serve Faustus for twenty-four years in exchange for Faustus' soul. Mephistophilis is the main antagonist in the story, but he is also a conflicted character in his own right. As part of the rebellion of heaven, Mephistophilis was cast out with the other angels and sent to hell. When Faustus inquires about hell, Mephistophilis admits that he regrets forgoing the joys of heaven for the torment of hell. Mephistophilis tries to talk Faustus out of making a pact with Lucifer. But when Faustus makes the deal, Mephistophilis dutifully fulfills Faustus' wishes, whims, and desires for the next twenty-four years. Although Mephistophilis warns Faustus about the torments of hell, once the deal is made, Mephistophilis uses his power and cunning to prevent Faustus from repenting.

**Chorus:** A character standing outside of the story, delivering commentary and narration. The Chorus is a common part of Greek tragedy.

**Old Man:** An mysterious figure appearing in the last scene, the old man pleads with Faustus to pray, repent and to seek mercy from God. He serves as a replacement for the angels of good and evil.

**Good Angel:** A being of all things good and just, the Good Angel asks Faustus to repent his pact with Lucifer and find the path back to God. An agent of God who appears in pair with the Evil Angel, the Good Angel tries to make Faustus think about God and of heavenly things. The Good Angel represents the good side in the good/evil dichotomy. In a literary sense, the Good Angel reflects the good side of Faustus' conscience, for Marlowe tries to show that Faustus, like every human being, has two natures, both good and bad. What the Good Angel says mirrors what Faustus' good nature is thinking. Thus, the interchanges between the Good Angel and the Evil Angel reveal Faustus' inner struggles with himself. The Good Angel's main message to Faustus is that it is never too late to turn to God.

**Evil Angel:** A being of all things evil and unjust, the Evil Angel offers reasons why Faustus should continue his pact with Lucifer and not repent. An agent of Lucifer who appears in pair with the Good Angel, the Evil Angel tries to keep Faustus focused on power, wealth, and worldly pleasures. In direct contrast to the Good Angel, the Evil Angel represents the evil side in the good/evil dichotomy. In a literary sense, the Evil Angel reflects the evil side of Faustus' conscience, for Marlowe tries to show that Faustus, like every human being, has two natures, both good and bad. What the Evil Angel says mirrors what Faustus' evil nature is thinking. Thus, the interchanges between the Good Angel and the Evil Angel reveal Faustus' inner struggles with himself. The Evil Angel main message to Faustus is that God will not accept his repentance.

**Lucifer:** The ruler of hell and the king of the devils. The Prince of the devils, Lucifer was once an angel of God who was cast out of heaven with other rebel angels because of their pride and insolence. Lucifer authorizes the deal between Faustus and Mephistophilis. If Mephistophilis is a conflicted devil, Lucifer shows no such weaknesses or signs of remorse for having been cast out of heaven. When Faustus cries upon the name of Christ, Lucifer comes, as though Mephistophilis is not crafty enough in such urgent cases. Lucifer masterly prevents Faustus from turning back to God at key points in the story.

**Wagner:** Faustus's servant, Wagner uses the magic he learned in his master's books to summon devils and cast spells. Faustus' servant and eventual heir of his fortunes, Wagner is a pale reflection of Faustus; he displays a nature similar to his master, even trying to obtain his

own servant through the practice of magic. Wagner's background is not known, but it is clear from his language and demeanor that he is a young servant who looks up to Faustus. Wagner tries to imitate Faustus in many ways, in the way he talks and even in his taking up of magic. Wagner is Faustus' image-bearing progeny. That he inherits Faustus' fortunes suggests he might even be of physical progeny. At several points, Wagner acts as a narrator, filling in gaps in the story.

**Valdes and Cornelius:** Friends of Faustus, also magicians, and responsible for teaching Faustus the black arts.

**Horse Courser:** A horse trader who purchases a horse from Faustus. The horse vanishes while the horse-courser rides it into the water, prompting him to seek revenge.

**The Scholars:** Colleagues of Faustus from the University of Wittenberg. They are loyal to Faustus and appear at both the start and the end of the play. They are dismayed by the direction that Faustus's studies have taken and are deeply horrified to learn of his pact with Lucifer.

**The Pope:** The pope is the head of the Roman Catholic church and a strong political figure in Europe. He serves as a source of amusement for the play's largely Protestant viewers and also a symbol of the religion that Faustus has denied.

## Doctor Faustus (Marlowe) Themes

### Man's Limitations and Potential

The possible range of human accomplishment is at the heart of Faustus, and many of the other themes are auxiliary to this one. The axis of this theme is the conflict between Greek or Renaissance worldviews, and the Christian worldview that has held sway throughout the medieval period. As Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, contact with previously lost Greek learning had a revelatory effect on man's conception of himself. While the Christian worldview places man below God, and requires obedience to him, the Greek worldview places man at the center of the universe. For the Greeks, man defies the gods at his own peril, but man has nobility that no deity can match.

Doctor Faustus, scholar and lover of beauty, chafes at the bit of human limitation. He seeks to achieve godhood himself, and so he leaves behind the Christian conceptions of human limitation. Though he fancies himself to be a seeker of Greek greatness, we see quickly that he is not up to the task.

### Pride, and Sin

Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, arguable the one that leads to all the others. Within the Christian framework, pride is a lethal motivation because it makes the sinner forget his fallen state. For Christians, men are fallen since birth, because they carry with them the taint of original sin. A man made haughty with pride forgets that he shares Eve's sin, and must

therefore be saved by the gift of grace. Only God, through Christ, can dispense this grace, and the man who forgets that fact deprives himself of the path to salvation.

Faustus' first great sin is pride. He does not stop there. Reflecting the Christian view, pride gives rise to all of the other sins, and ends ironically with the proud man's abasement. Faustus goes quickly from pride to all of the other sins, becoming increasingly petty and low.

## **Flesh and Spirit**

The division between flesh and spirit was stronger in Greek thought than in Hebrew thought, but Christians adapted the divide into their own belief system. While Westerners now take this conception of being for granted, the flesh/spirit divide is not a feature of many of the world's major belief systems. Nor is the flesh/spirit divide necessary for belief in the afterlife: both Hindus and Buddhists conceive of the human entity differently, while retaining belief in life after death.

In Christianity, flesh and spirit are divided to value the later and devalue the former. Faustus' problem is that he values his flesh, and the pleasure it can provide him, while failing to look after the state of his soul.

## **Damnation**

Damnation is eternal. Eternal hell is another concept that Westerners take for granted as part of religion, but again this belief's uniqueness needs to be appreciated. While the Jewish view of the afterlife was somewhat vague, Christians developed the idea of judgment after death. Moslems adapted a similar conception of hell and heaven, and to this day eternal hell and eternal heaven remain an important feature of Christianity and Islam. While Buddhists and Hindus have hell in their belief systems, for the most part in neither religion is hell considered eternal. For example, an eternal hell in Mahayana Buddhism would contradict Buddhist beliefs about transience and the saving power of Buddha's compassion.

Not so in Christianity. If Faustus dies without repenting and accepting God, he will be damned forever. As we learn that hell is not merely a place, but separation from God's love.

## **Salvation, Mercy, and Redemption**

Hell is eternal, but so is heaven. For a Christian, all that is necessary to be saved from eternal damnation is acceptance of Jesus Christ's grace. Even after signing away his soul to the devil, Faustus has the option of repentance that will save him from hell. But once he has committed himself to his own damnation, Faustus seems unable to change his course. While Christianity seems to accept even a deathbed repentance as acceptable for the attainment of salvation, Marlowe plays with that idea, possibly rejecting it for his own thematic purposes.

## **Valuing Knowledge over Wisdom**

Faustus has a thirst for knowledge, but he seems unable to acquire wisdom. Faustus' thirst for knowledge is impressive, but it is overshadowed by his complete inability to understand certain truths. Because of this weakness, Faustus cannot use his knowledge to better himself

or his world. He ends life with a head full of facts, and vital understanding gained too late to save him.

## **Talk and Action**

Faustus is, with no exceptions, beautiful when he speaks and contemptible when he acts. His opening speeches about the uses to which he'll put his power are exhilarating, but once he gains near-omnipotence he squanders twenty-four years in debauchery and petty tricks. This gap between high talk and low action seems related to the fault of valuing knowledge over wisdom. While Faustus has learned much of the Greek world's learning, he has not really understood what he's been reading. He can talk about potential and plans in terms of a Greek worldview, but he lacks the internal strength to follow through on his purported goals.

## **Good versus Evil**

The push-and-pull conflict between good and evil is a motivating force throughout Doctor Faustus. Faustus personally embodies the concepts of good and evil. As a theologian, he represents the good or spiritually uplifting study of divinity. However, he abandons theology to pursue forbidden knowledge, falling prey to sin. His noble intentions for acquiring power through magic soon give way to fancy tricks bought with his soul. Whenever he wavers in his commitment to evil, Mephistophilis finds it easy to tempt him back from the good of repentance by appealing to his baser nature. Whether it's a book of hidden knowledge or the beautiful Helen of Troy, Mephistophilis knows just what to give Faustus to hold on to his soul. Lucifer, too, knows how to beguile Faustus and quiet his conscience. He invokes visions of the Seven Deadly Sins, to which Faustus exclaims, "Oh, this feeds my soul." Every prick of conscience expressed by Faustus signals a new skirmish. Faustus is mentally and spiritually torn by desire and fear: desire for salvation and desire for unholy knowledge; fear of damnation and fear that it is too late to repent. This conflict is embodied by the Good Angel and the Evil Angel. They appear at times when Faustus seems close to renouncing magic and asking God's forgiveness for his defiance and heresy. The two angels act as counselors, offering advice, warnings, and arguments intended to persuade the doctor toward salvation or damnation. Other characters echo Faustus's inner struggle as well. In Act 5 three scholars beg Faustus to conjure the spirit of Helen, the world's most beautiful woman. He complies, and they enjoy it. Soon after, the same men shift gears instantly when he admits to them how he has sold his soul to Lucifer. Now they offer to pray for Faustus, "that God may have mercy upon [him]," but it is too late. Mephistophilis is perhaps the most surprising representation of this theme. While as Lucifer's minion he is clearly a servant of evil, he is a demon with feelings and the occasional impulse for good. He devotedly serves Lucifer, but he is tormented by his separation from God. He scouts for souls to add to hell's population, but in Act 1 he warns Faustus to "leave these frivolous demands, / Which strike a terror to my fainting soul!" With this unexpected mix of good and evil, Mephistophilis breaks the mold of the traditional fiendish villain.

## **Destiny versus Free Will**

The theme of destiny versus free will is related to that of damnation versus salvation. Faustus appears unable to repent. Even in moments of greatest despair, when he teeters on the brink of repentance, he ultimately pulls back and renews his allegiance to Lucifer, assuring his

doom. Too late he renounces pursuit of magic in the last line of the play with a final, desperate cry, "I'll burn my books." Playwright Christopher Marlowe uses Faustus's apparent helplessness to explore the idea of predestination posed by French-born Protestant theologian John Calvin. Calvin reasoned that God, being omniscient, knows from the outset who will be saved and who will not. Therefore, human action and choice are not the keys to salvation. That end is predetermined. Whatever action or choice a human makes has been set up in advance by God. This suggests that no matter how free Faustus seems in his choice to pursue magic or reject redemption, he is simply playing out a script already written. His natural defiance and rebellion guide him to fulfill his destiny.

On the other hand Marlowe also suggests that Faustus may have a choice. On numerous occasions in the play, he considers the possibility of asking God to forgive his sins, allowing him to change his spiritual path from damnation to one of salvation. The Good Angel, the Bad Angel, Mephistophilis, the old man, and other characters chime in to encourage him to save himself or give in and go to hell. Faustus himself goes back and forth, until it is too late. The question remains: is Faustus helplessly driven by destiny or doomed by his own poorly exercised free will? Marlowe provides no definitive answer but weaves the two possibilities into his play. However, to believe that Faustus has no choice denies the more pitiable aspects of his character. The doctor's intelligence, skepticism, and deeply human desire for knowledge incite choices and actions that anger heaven and fate him to be destroyed.

## Power as a Corrupting Influence

In the beginning of the play, prior to Faustus's pact with Lucifer, he is overflowing with ideas of how to use the power he desires. He fantasizes about great fortunes, but also desires to learn more about the great mysteries of the universe and wants to redraw the map of Europe. Despite these plans not being entirely admirable, they are certainly ambitions and capable of inspiring an awe of sympathy.

## Religion

At the beginning of *Doctor Faustus*, the not-so-good doctor thinks the study of religion is a plain old waste of time. But we're betting that by the end of it, he'll be singing a different tune altogether. See, through all his conjuring exploits and exotic travels, Faustus just can't escape the subject of religion. He finds himself questioning the nature of hell and salvation, and even winds up smack dab in the middle of the papal court, where he does his fair share of mocking the Catholic church. Yet while religion follows him, step-by-step on his slow journey to eternal damnation, we can't help but think that Faustus never really gets just how important religion really is in his life, or the role it will eventually play in the fate of his soul.

## Sin

Just as Faustus refuses to take religious issues seriously, he laughs at the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins in Act 2, Scene 3 of *Doctor Faustus*. But really, buddy, they're no laughing matter, which becomes all the more clear when the Sins start to tell Dr. F a bit more about themselves. This parade of sins should be a warning to Faustus to repent, but he has already decided he'd rather serve the devil than God, all so he can grab himself some wealth and power before his soul hits the road.

## **Symbols:**

### **The Good and Evil Angels**

These two angels appear on-stage when he wavers in his decision to give his soul to Lucifer and considers repenting. The Good Angel encourages him to seek God's mercy and tells him that it is never too late to do so. The Evil Angel persuades Faustus not to repent, arguing that he is too damned to ever be able to return to god and so he should just keep indulging his desire for knowledge, power, and enjoyment. The angels can be seen as symbolizing the opposing pulls of sin and repentance, or the opposing sides of Faustus' own conscience. However, they also have a presence as actual entities, real angels on the stage.

### **Blood**

Mephistophilis is very clear that Lucifer will only make a deal with Faustus if he signs a formal deed of gift signed with his own blood. Faustus' blood thus symbolizes some true essence of himself, which Lucifer desires as a sign of his commitment. When Faustus tries to sign the agreement, the blood congeals, and Faustus interprets this as a sign that his own body is reluctant to make the bargain with Lucifer. As Faustus' death draws near and he considers repenting, he says that a single drop of Christ's blood would save him. Christ's blood also serves as a symbolic guarantee of a bargain, though a holy one in contrast to that between Lucifer and Faustus. Christ's blood is shed through his crucifixion, the sacrifice by which Jesus redeemed mankind's sins. While the imagery of blood is thus an important symbol throughout the play, there is also a tension between blood as a physical part of Faustus' body, of which he is aware (he fears devils tearing his flesh and causing him pain), and blood as a symbol of someone's inner essence or soul, which Faustus entirely neglects.

### **The Seven Deadly Sins**

Lucifer entertains Faustus by calling up the Seven Deadly Sins, personifications of Pride, Covetousness, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery. These figures rather obviously symbolize the sins for which they are named, but they also serve to reveal Faustus' foolish neglect of sin. He takes pleasure in seeing them parade past him, but does not seem to make the connection between these sins and his own (including his own excessive pride and, with Helen, lechery), which will turn out to be quite deadly for him.

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