

Christopher Marlowe's
Dr. Faustus

Student Activity Packet and Teacher's Guide

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Instructional Rationale:

Using Christopher Marlowe's play Dr. Faustus in a high school curriculum can fulfill a number of objectives. It provides an excellent vehicle for introducing the basics of Renaissance scholarship. It is an appropriate text to use to introduce the rudiments of literary criticism to novice scholars. It is a springboard for initiating a discussion of current and topical issues which can lead students to examine and explore significant issues in their own lives. In doing so it fulfills a particular usefulness of art-- of literature-- a usefulness that is well expressed by Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker in the declaration that "literature must leave its academic cloister and sally forth into the marketplace to speak out and be heard." (208) Youth Suicide Prevention: Lessons From Literature (Plenum Press, 1989). Marlowe's work is indeed heard by young people.

Marlowe's early version of the pervasive and poignant Faust myth speaks clearly to teenagers. The story of Dr. Faustus, learned and praised, yet unsatisfied with his lot in life strikes a clear note for teenagers. Teenagers, be they restless, idealistic, bored, overreaching or overwrought, all seem to hear Marlowe's words. Students recognize that often they, metaphorically, are faced with the temptation to "sell their souls." Marlowe's Dr. Faustus gives students an object lesson in choice and consequences.

General Goals:

- To acquaint students with the fascinating life of the playwright Christopher Marlowe
- To introduce the background of Elizabethan drama
- To introduce the classical roots of Elizabethan tragedy
- To explore the universal themes presented in Dr. Faustus.



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Instructional Goals

Students will:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of Marlowe's biography **(Handout 1)**
2. Demonstrate knowledge of Aristotle's precepts of tragedy and be able to apply in an essay **(Handout 2)**
3. Evaluate the character of Dr. Faustus according to the Aristotelian criteria for a tragic hero. Write a thesis paper defending or refuting Dr. Faustus as a tragic figure. **(Handout 3)**
4. Demonstrate knowledge of the universal themes in the play Dr. Faustus. **(Handout 4)**
5. React in writing to passages from the play. **(Handout 5)**
6. Demonstrate knowledge of the Elizabethan concept of the Great Chain of Being. **(Handout 6)**
7. Demonstrate critical thinking skills in a written reaction to questions concerning the play. **(Handout 7)**
8. Produce a creative project which displays the student's knowledge of the play. **(Handout 8)**
9. Demonstrate critical thinking and research skills by completing a project dealing with Marlowe's life. **(Handout 9)**



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Synopsis of the play:

Introduction:

The textual history of the play is long and complex. The text itself has survived in two forms referred to by scholars as the "A-text" and the "B-text." The following synopsis follows the A text in Roma Gill's New Mermaid edition. The play is organized with alternating "serious" and "comic" scenes. The comic scenes serve to undercut the overreaching attitudes and ambitious presumption of Faustus that is presented in the serious episodes. Scholars have long noted that the quality of the comic sections differs greatly from the tragic portions. Because of the "mediocrity" of these passages, some speculate that these sections were not written by Marlowe at all. These sections are slapstick and disjointed, with much of the humor stemming from "sight gags" that might be difficult for a modern student to understand. The teacher might choose to summarize the comic scenes for students and concentrate on a close reading of the tragic sections of the text.

An interesting and easily accessible version of the play can be found in the Richard Burton/Elizabeth Taylor video.(Columbia Tri-Star Home Video, 93 minutes, 1967) Students can appreciate both the comic and tragic sections in this fascinating performance.

Prologue: The Chorus enters and promises to reveal "the form of Faustus' fortunes good or bad."

Scene 1: Faustus rejects the significance of his scholarly achievements and yearns to learn the secrets of black magic.

Scene 2: (comic) Faustus' servant, Wagner, engages in a mock scholarly dispute.

Scene 3: Faustus' attempts conjuring. Mephistophilis appears bringing Faustus visions of necromantic power.

Scene 4: (comic) Faustus' servant parodies his master's devil-dealing.



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Synopsis - *(continued)*

Scene 5: Faustus contemplates the necromantic arts. The Good Angel and the Evil angel appear to play a tug-of-war with Faustus' conscience. Mephistophilis appears and Faustus signs his soul to Lucifer for what he thinks will be 24 years of power and delight. Despite the advent of two miracles -- the staying of Faustus' blood and the appearance on his arm of the words *Homo, fuge!* (Man, flee!) -- Faustus seals the bargain. Faustus then discusses astronomy with Mephistophilis. He then requests a wife. Unable to provide a "church-sanctioned" wife, Mephistophilis returns with a devilish spirit. Faustus begins to wonder if he has made the correct decision. Sensing that Faustus might be wavering towards repentance, Mephistophilis fetches spirits to delight Faustus' mind. A dumb show of the Seven Deadly Sins diverts Faustus' attention back to the devil.

Scene 6: (comic) Two clowns, Rafe and Robin, introduce Faustus' upcoming actions.

Scene 7: (comic) Faustus appears at the Papal Court and uses his new-found power to play practical jokes!

Scene 8: (comic) The joking continues with Rafe and Robin.

Scene 9: (comic) Faustus now appears at the Emperor Charles V's court and raises the spirit of Alexander the Great and his paramour.

Scene 10: (comic) Faustus plays practical jokes on a horse-courser.

Scene 11: (comic) Faustus uses his grand powers to procure out-of-season grapes for the pregnant Empress.

Scene 12: Wagner enters and laments his master's illness. Faustus has been dining with his students, discussing the question: "Who is the most beautiful woman in the world?" The answer is Helen of Troy. The students convince Faustus to make the spirit of Helen appear before them. Helen passes across the stage and so inspires Faustus to speak the famous lines: *Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?*

The Old Man enters and warns Faustus to leave off his sinful ways. Faustus is not convinced and seals his fate by kissing the demonic spirit of Helen.

Scene 13: The end is near for Faustus. He struggles with his conscience and his fate. He meets his end as the mouth of hell opens to swallow him.

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(Handout 2)

Pre-Writing Visual Organizer Marlowe's Dr. Faustus as Tragedy

Fill in the chart below. Some suggestions are given to help you get started. Remember that there are many possibilities for "right" answers. One of the delights of the play is its ambiguity!

Aristotelian characteristic	Plot point descriptions, questions, thoughts	Quotes
"a man like us" often of "high estate"	Is Faustus just a regular guy? How many of us have four doctorates? Does having a good education made one classed "of high estate?" What's his economic status?	"Now he is born, his parents base of stock, /In Germany..." <i>(Prologue)</i>
" <i>hamartia</i> " (fatal flaw, tragic error, cosmic boo-boo)	Selling his soul? Kissing Helen of Troy? Vanity?	
evidence of suffering		" O soul, be changed into little water drops, / And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found. / My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!" <i>(Scene 13)</i>
evidence of enlightenment	How late is too late to be enlightened?	"I'll burn my books--ah, Mephistophilis!"
opportunities for provoking <i>catharsis</i> in the reader	What are the lessons of the play?	"Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight...?" <i>(Epilogue)</i>

All quotes are from the New Mermaids edition of Dr. Faustus edited by Roma Gill.
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(Handout 3)

Marlowe's Dr. Faustus as Tragedy

Background: Aristotle, in The Poetics, says the tragic hero is “*a man like us,*” who reveals a *hamartia* (fatal error) that causes his *downfall, suffering and enlightenment*. Related ideas include-- transformation, consciousness, and illumination. The tragic character has free will but is influenced by fate. The tragedy produces *pity* and *terror* in the audience-- *catharsis*. Related ideas include-- impact, nobility, lessons.

Assignment: In an essay of significant length, discuss the following questions. Do you see Dr. Faustus as a classical Aristotelian hero? Why or why not? Cite specific criteria to support your answer. Complete the pre-writing visual organizer (Handout 2) before you begin.



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(Handout 4)

The Archetypal Faustus

The Historical Faustus -perhaps real, perhaps not

Born in Germany between **1480 and 1340**

Studied medieval alchemy

Symbol of "wrong" doing -- philosophically and scientifically

In Germany

1587 The Faustbook

The Faust character rejects traditional religion, flies across the skies and conjures Helen

In England and Germany

1590 Marlowe's Dr. Faustus

1808 Goethe's Faust, Part I

1830 Goethe's Faust, Part II

1947 Thomas Mann's Doktor Faustus

In America

1800 Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker"

1936 Stephen Vincent Benet's "The Devil and Daniel Webster"

In Music

1869 Faust opera by Charles Gounod

Artistic representations: Eugene Delacroix, Ernest Barlach, Max Beckman

In modern culture: Dracula, Damn Yankees, The Little Mermaid

Assignment:

The history of the Faust legend is long and varied. In a personal essay of at least one typed page, reflect on the archetypal, universal, contemporary messages and meanings of this play. You should be able to see that there is something going on here other than a simple didactic tract that both entertained and scared an Elizabethan audience. What questions does this play raise for you? What are the limits of power? What is the proper use of science? How does the play use the metaphor of sin? Do people still "sell their souls" for "vain pleasure?" Why? How? How is this a play about coming to consciousness? What are your views on this play?



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(Handout 5)

Find the following passages in the play and cite their significance to the play as a whole.

Old Man:

I see an angel hovers o'er thy head
And, with a vial full of precious grace,
Offers to pour the same into thy soul:
Then call for mercy, and avoid despair.

Dr. Faustus:

O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan!

Mephistopheles:

Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Dr. Faustus:

Was this the face that launch'd 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 be in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.



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(Handout 6)

Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and The Great Chain of Being

Background: The Elizabethan belief in a hierarchy of life -- what scholars term "The Great Chain of Being" -- is crucial to understanding the literature of the times. Use the visual below to help you understand this "organization of life" that was so important to the people in the age of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Element	Attribute
God	"Everything and more"
Angels	Intuition
Mankind	Existence, Growth, Passion, Reason
Animals	Existence, Growth, Passion
Plants	Existence, Growth
Minerals	Existence

Assignment: In an essay of significant length, discuss the following:
In what way does the Elizabethan philosophy of the Great Chain of Being illuminate the play Dr. Faustus?



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(Handout 7)

Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and the theme of the Overreacher

Background: Research the myth of Prometheus.

Assignment: In an essay of significant length, discuss the character of Dr. Faustus as an overreacher. Is he a Promethean rebel? What other literary figures/ stories come to mind on this theme?



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(Handout 8)

A great power of this work is its visual imaginative force.

Please react to Marlowe's "mighty line" with some sort of creative or research interpretation of the work. Remember when you were little and you could do "shoe box" book reports? Well, get out the yarn and glitter!

Some ideas:

1. Create a photo interpretation of a staging of the play.
2. Do a visual interpretation of Faustus. What does he look like?
3. Pick music to set the scene.
4. Give a symbolic representation of some aspect of the play.
5. Be a director-- cast the characters with modern actors!
6. Create a Faustus recipe! (Devil's food cake, maybe?)
7. Pick a quote and illustrate it. (There are some beautiful lines in this hellish play!)
8. Write a parody of the play.
9. Research some of the "ancestors" or successors to Dr. Faustus.
10. Research Elizabethan theater-- draw a picture, make a model.
11. Design a calling card or stationery for the esteemed Dr. Faustus. See the sample!

Celebrate the great poetry of the play!



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(Handout 9)

Who is this man?

This portrait, which is now displayed in the dining hall of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge is reputed to be a likeness of Christopher Marlowe. Scholars continue to debate whether the portrait is authentic. The answer remains one of the great mysteries of literature. What do you think? Is this Marlowe? Research and state your opinion in written form.

