

An introduction about Dr Faustus:

Faustus is the story of a great scholar who decides a little magical mojo will cure his **ennui**. The catch? He has to sign his soul over to the devil in order to get that **mojo workin'**.

The legend of Faustus was already well-known in Europe by the time **Christopher Marlowe** turned it into a play in 1594. It had been making the rounds as a folktale in Germany since the early 1500s, and was translated into English and published in England in the 1590s as a chapbook (that's the Renaissance version of a pulp paperback) entitled "The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death, of Doctor Iohn Faustus." So Marlowe had all kinds of sources to draw from when it came to bringing the devil to life.

And boy did he ever bring him to life. We know *Doctor Faustus* was immediately popular with audiences because it was actually published in 1604. That's something that only happened if people were really clamoring for a printed version of their favorite play. Apparently *Doctor Faustus* struck a chord or two in the hearts and minds of its renaissance audience.

That might have something to do with its uniqueness. *Doctor Faustus* stood out from the crowd by combining things we associate with medieval drama (like allegory) to explore what we now think of as modern questions: What form should knowledge take? What is the nature of true power? Should we believe in fate or free will?

At the time that Marlowe was writing, a Protestant church reformer named John Calvin had developed a theory about human salvation called Predestination. This theory said that each human being was fated from the beginning of his or her life to be damned or saved. It raised questions about exactly how much control a person had over his or her own salvation.

Faustus grapples with this same question at the beginning of the play, and eventually arrives at the shaky conclusion that he's damned no matter what he does. The way he handles this belief is the subject of the rest of the play. All along characters like the Good Angel and the Old Man try to convince Faustus that he *does* have a choice; they insist that he can repent and turn to God again. Are they right? That's a question only you can answer, because Marlowe is annoyingly coy.

So dig in to *Doctor Faustus*, and tackle the big questions. Then get back to Shmoop to give us the skinny.

John Faustus, an elite scholar who has already reached the limits of human knowledge in the traditional academic disciplines, longs to "ransack the ocean

for orient pearl, / And search all corners of the new-found world," to probe "strange philosophy" and "the secrets of all foreign kings" (1.1.81-82, 84-85).

That all sounds like a grand ol' time, right? Right. There's just one problem. In order to ransack, search, and discover all that awesome knowledge, Faustus has to make a deal with the devil. And we know those never end well.

Now, a modern person like you might say that knowledge is always a good thing, and that seems to be what Faustus believes, too. But what [Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*](#) forces us to consider is that knowledge almost always comes at a price.

Sure, we don't usually get (spoiler alert) torn limb from limb (like Faustus does) when we learn something we shouldn't. And we don't get handed a one-way ticket to the underworld like the one the not-so good doctor receives from his buddy Lucifer. So the price of knowledge in *Doctor Faustus* might seem exaggeratedly steep.

But the price itself might be beside the point. The point of *Doctor Faustus* seems to be that knowledge can be so seductive, so desirable, that we often don't consider the cost—whatever it may be—until it's too late. So really, it's the question that matters most: how far are you willing to go to know what you want to know?

Summary and Analysis Chorus

Summary

The chorus announces that this play will not be concerned with war, love, or proud deeds. Instead, it will present the good and bad fortunes of Dr. John Faustus, who is born of base stock in Germany and who goes to the University of Wittenberg, where he studies philosophy and divinity. He so excels in matters of theology that he eventually becomes swollen with pride, which leads to his downfall. Ultimately, Faustus turns to a study of necromancy, or magic.

Analysis

The technique of the chorus is adapted from the traditions of classic Greek drama. The chorus functions in several ways throughout the play. It stands outside the direct action of the play and comments upon various parts of the drama. The chorus speaks directly to the audience and tells the basic background history of Faustus and explains that the play is to concern his downfall. The chorus is also used to express the author's views and to remind the audience of the proper moral to be learned from the play itself. The opening speech of the chorus functions as a prologue to define the scope of the play.

The chorus speaks in very formal, rhetorical language and explains that the subject of this play will not be that which is usually depicted in dramas. Instead of a subject dealing with love or war, the play will present the history

of a scholar. The purpose of this explanation is that, traditionally, tragedy had dealt with such grand subjects as the history of kings, great wars, or powerful love affairs. Consequently, Marlowe is preparing the audience for a departure in subject matter. Most frequently, tragedy is concerned with the downfall of kings, and Marlowe's tragedy does not fit into this formula since this drama deals with the downfall of a man of common birth.

The Icarus image is used in the opening passage to characterize the fall of Faustus. Icarus was a figure in classical mythology who because of his pride had soared too high in the sky, had melted his wax wings, and subsequently had fallen to his death. This classical image of the fall of Icarus reinforces the Christian images of the fall of Lucifer brought out in Scene 3. Both images set the scene for the fall of Dr. Faustus during the course of the drama.

Another image used by the chorus to describe the situation of Faustus is that of gluttony or overindulgence. Throughout the play, Faustus is seen as a person of uncontrolled appetites. His thirst for knowledge and power lead him to make the pact with the devil which brings about his downfall. The chorus points out the dangers involved in resorting to magic. It makes clear that Faustus is choosing magic at the danger of his own soul.