UNIT 3: CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE: *DR. FAUSTUS* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- describe the distinctive features of a morality play
- distinguish between mystery, miracle and morality plays
- appreciate the tragic elements of the play
- evaluate the themes of the play
- analyse Marlowe's art of characterisation
- discuss the concept of Renaissance humanism with reference to Faustus
- comment on the critical reception of the play

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit helps you to discuss the different important aspects of the greatest Elizabethan Tragedies entitled *Dr. Faustus* written (1586) by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593). In order to appreciate this play, it would

be useful to go back to the native tradition of English drama, to the earliest of the formal plays. These early plays were performed in the Church and later in the city streets and in open-air staging in pageant wagons. These plays known as the Mystery plays, Miracle plays and later the morality plays contained the germs of the popular drama that flourished in the Elizabethan age. You perhaps know that the mystery plays were based on stories from the Bible and they explained in detail the principles of moral conduct. The popular mystery plays that survive include *Crucifixion, The Harrowing of Hall* and *Resurrection.* On the other hand, the miracle plays dealt with the lives of the saints with the objective of instructing and edifying the audience. Though quite a number of them were last, the plays that survive include *Many Madgelene*, *St.Meriasek* and *Play of the Sacrament*. The morality plays that had followed the mystery and miracle plays had been the popular dramatic form even during the time of Marlowe. Only five morality plays survive: *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind and Everyman*. These plays offer moral instructions through dramatic actions that is broadly allegorical.

The audience for whom Marlowe wrote his plays was basically a morality play-loving audience. In order to satisfy his audience, Marlowe drew heavily from these early plays. They offered him a number of stock situations and themes dealing with social and religious issues. The provided the literary and Christian context for an understanding of *Dr. Faustus*. In fact, a first reading of the play would make it clear that the play contains a number of morality elements, the most notable being the dramatisation of the conflict between the forces of good and evil in the human soul; presence of allegorical characters like sin, virtue, vice and so on; man's need for salvation and the temptations which beset him on his journey through life to death.However, a close reading of the play makes it certain that Marlowe's intention was not to write a morality play in *Dr. Faustus*. On the contrary, his aim was to present a Renaissance scholar with an aspiration for greater power in the longer context of the human condition of the time. This unit aims to lead you to critically respond to the play by considering these issues.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How are mystery plays different from miracle plays?

Q 2: What are the distinctive features of a morality play?

3.3 READING THE PLAY *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

In the following subsections, you will find an opportunity to read about the play *Doctor Faustus* in terms of its various important aspects.

3.3.1 Tragic Elements in the Play

In an essay titled "*The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Morality Tradition", L. G. Salinger observes that the Moralities had been 'the staple of popular drama' when Marlowe began writing and "their methods were absorbed in *Dr. Faustus*" (P 209). We take that point to explore the morality elements in the play. The argument is that some elements were "absorbed" into the play; in other words, Marlowe's intention was not to write another morality play in 1586 when the ideas of Renaissance Humanism were making an impact in England. Marlowe merely chose to make use of the following morality elements rather deliberately:

- the conflict between good and evil
- the didactic element in morality plays
- the allegorical element in morality plays

The inner conflict of the protagonist between good and evil which is a basic morality element is brought out in *Dr. Faustus* with the Good Angel and the Bad Angel. In several episodes of the play, Faustus is advised by the Good Angel to "lay that damned book aside", to "repent" and so on. But each time, he is prevented by the Bad Angel from doing that. These two Angels symbolise the inner conflict in Faustus' mind.

The didactic element of the morality tradition is brought out in *Dr. Faustus* with the first and the fourth appearances of the Chorus. The reference to the myth of Icarus by the first Chorus suggests the horrible consequences of the overreached whereas the moralising by the fourth Chorus warns against the undesirable and hateful ways of gaining knowledge.

The allegorical element of the morality tradition is further brought out in the play by the characters of the Good Angel and the Old Man to represent Christian values and to offer Faustus guidance "unto the way of life". On the other hand, the Bad Angel represents sin and damnation. Besides, the Seven Deadly sins in the play are other examples of allegorical elements of this tradition.

However, when we examine the plot of the play, we find that *Dr. Faustus* is definitely not a Christian morality play. On the contrary, the plot of the play is an inversion of the structure of the morality play. Marlowe seems to satirise the moral intentions of the morality play. *Dr. Faustus* contains no affirmation of the goodness or justice of the contemporary religious system. It is rather a protest against this system, which reveals itself as imposing a limitation upon the aspiration of man. Traditional Christian theology had denied Faustus at the last hour of his life even the comfort of a single drop of blood of Christ 'that he sees streaming in its firmament barely half an hour before the Devil would claim his body and soul'. Thus, the play claims the right to be tragedy and not a morality play.



LET US KNOW

As starting point we may approach the issue on Marlowe's conception of tragedy. The opening Chorus gives a clear indication on this point. It is notable that Marlowe's conception of tragedy does not conform to the Aristotelian theory of tragedy in which a person of high a noble rank, eminent and good, because of some minor flaw or hamartia

experiences a reversal of his fortunes and rouses the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Hamartia for Aristotle is an error of judgement of the protagonist of the play. On the other hand, Marlowe's heroes are of humble origin: Tamburlaine is a shepherd; Barabas is just a money-lender, whereas Faustus "born of parents base of stock" is a scholar in the University of Wittenberg. Secondly, Hamartia for Faustus is not an error of judgement but a part of his character.

Thus, it is the character of Faustus that needs to be explored in order to discover the tragic elements of the play. Marlowe projects his protagonist not in terms of a morality play protagonist but in terms of a Renaissance man who is confronted with a duality of Renaissance ambitions and religious value. It is a duality of Renaissance humanism and Christian theology both of which form part of Marlowe's training as a student at Cambridge and later as a University wit in London. Humanism regarded man as the crown of creation, "the paragon of animals". It has made man to realise his powers and gifts. It is this aspect that is brought out in tease lines:

"A Sound magician is a demi-god
Here tire my brains to get a deity... (I i 61-62)

It is a god-like power that Faustus desires to attain with the help of his magic. Marlowe's major concern as revealed in Faustus' opening soliloquy is to present him an embodiment of some great Renaissance ideal. Faustus has mastered logic, medicine, law and divinity but these university subjects leave him still "Faustus and a man". Hence he looks towards the Devil and to Mephistopheles to achieve his ideal. This desire makes him an "overreacher" and conflicts with the Christian ethics that forbids man to think himself as equal or superior to God.

The tragic element of the play can be visualised through the inner conflict of Faustus. His own mind is the ground of tragic action. The main tragedy of Faustus starts in the opening soliloquy itself when he bids "Divinity adieu". Faustus has turned from God. God has not turned from him. There is always the presence of Divine Mercy available to him through the Good Angel and the old Man. But it is Faustus himself who deliberately rejects

salvation or repentance till the very last when the old Man sees his downfall in company with the spirit of Helen.

The end of a tragedy as generally agreed upon is to arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear and to achieve a state of catharsis for the audience. Dr. Faustus performs this function very effectively from the moment when the protagonist executes the deed of agreement fill the final hour when his mutilated body was discovered by the scholars in VIII. The gradual and continuous degradation of the protagonist, his sufferings and his intense agony evoke a feeling of pity and fear not only in the reader/ audience but also in the heart of the Old Man who exclaims:

"Accursed Faustus, miserable man
That from thy soul exclud' st the grace of Heaven,
And fliesth throne of his tribunal seat." (Vi 18-20)

He seems to suffer an intense agony. That is an experience demonstrated in tragic heroes only.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How is the inner conflict of Faustus brought out in the plays?

Q 4: Do you think that Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* can be considered in the tradition of a Christian morality play?

3.3.2 Major Themes

The central theme of the play is the theme of misdirected desire and consequent damnation of Faustus, the protagonist of the play. The theme is introduced in the opening soliloquy. His ambition to become a physician is directed only by the desire for wealth and fame. But neither wealth nor fame can satisfy an aspiration which would make him a "demi-god".He can achieve such a status by bidding "Divinity adieu" and laying his trust in Belzebub. He feels certain that with the power of magic and the Devil, nothing would be impossible for him. But it is only after he executes his bond to the Devil that he realises that the power which he had bargained for is

only shadow power. He could not do anything substantial either for Germany or for himself.

Yet he had great plans earlier. What he has achieved now is merely a semblance of achievement. He uses his “immense power” to disrupt the Pope’s St. Peter’s Feast or to contend a pregnant duchess with out of season grapes. More and more does he come to realise, the more his overreaching desire would be leading him to damnation.

The designation of Faustus leading to his domination is obvious from the beginning when we meet him for the first time as a proud scholar, master of all human knowledge with a vision on the development of Germany. From that position after his execution of the deed of agreement to Lucifer, he turns into trickster. He tricks the Pope at the feast, he tricks the Horse-courser by selling his horse and finally he becomes a slave to the Devil, losing all faculties of taking decisions on his own. Faustus, after his agreement with the Devil demonstrates incapacity to change to a better state or to repent. The initial act is an act against nature. His association now is with sin; he is entertained by the seven Deadly sins. In this process, he becomes bogged down by sin.

The theme of sin in the play is linked to the damnation of Faustus. Faustus’ act is not an act committed by mistake, it is not an error in judgement, it is an error of will. He willingly chooses the path of sin that leads him to despair. He despair in Christ and it is to Lucifer that he prays “O spare me Lucifer!” He had willingly signed his bond with Lucifer that now leads him to his eternal damnation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Enlist the important themes of the play *Dr. Faustus*?

3.3.3 Characterisation

The "Dramatis personae" of *Dr. Faustus* consists of a long list of characters. They range from the purely abstract and allegorical to human characters besides a few historical and mystical characters that appear only as part of a dumb show or as silent spirits gliding across the stage. In the dramatic structure, each of these characters has its own distinctive function.

The purely abstract characters include Lucifer, the "Arch-regent and commander of all spirits "(I iv 66). He is behind the damnation process of Faustus and asserts Mephistopheles, his Chief agent in gaining Faustus' soul. Though Mephistopheles is an abstract character,except for his first appearance and for his disguise as a Cardinal before the Pope, he appears throughout as an Old Franciscan friar. According to the terms of the contract with the Devil, he is engaged as Faustus' servant and at his command staying near him invisible but has to appear at all times, in whatever form or shape that Faustus pleases.

Among the human character, besides Faustus, there is the Pope with his cardinals, there are the Emperors of Germany and the Duke and Duchess of Vanholt and scholars and friends of Faustus. In addition, there are common character like Wagner, the Vintner, Robin, and Dick who provide low comedy to an otherwise serious plot.

But among this wide range of characters, there are only two characters that demand full attention: Faustus and Mephistopheles. While depicting these two characters, Marlowe conceives them as the embodiment of two contrary concepts: Faustus is the embodiment of Renaissance Humanism whereas Mephistopheles is the embodiment of evil in the Christian context.

Mephistopheles is the fore-sufferer of Faustus' fate. He had at one time seen the face of God and tasted the eternal joys of Heaven. But he had taken sides with Lucifer in conspiring against

God and as a result he was one of the unhappy spirits that fall from Heaven to be damned forever in Hell. Since then he has been "tormented with ten-thousand halls" in being deprived of the everlasting bliss of Heaven. Mephistopheles does not hesitate to warn Faustus of the fate that would await him should he go against the laws of God. He hardly plays the role of the Tempter in seducing Faustus to the path of evil. It is the Evil Angel that does all this. It is the worlds of the Evil Angel that inspire Faustus to defy the advice of the Good Angel and the Old Man. Mephistopheles, as a servant and companion of Faustus, simply aids Faustus and acts as an executioner on Lucifer's behalf.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Briefly explain the moral or ethical downfall of Faustus. Identify the main events that bring out his downfall.

3.3.4 Marlowe's Use of the Chorus

When we turn to the reading of the play, we discover that the play begins with a Chorus. Let us, at this point discuss the Chorus in the play which can provide us a useful background to the understanding of the character of Faustus on the one hand and the nature of the play on the other.The Chorus is a dramatic device that was popularized in early Greek Drama. Aristotle in Chapter XVIII of *Poetics* regards the Chorus as one of the actors of the play. In Greek tragedies, the chorus consists of a group of twelve or twenty men trained to sing and dance. The Chorus in Greek tragedy provides a commentary on the action, represents the dramatic point of view in the perspective of the dramatic action.

One of the most striking aspects of Marlowe's play is the presence of the Chorus. In the play the Chorus makes four appearances as a single Character.

(a) At the beginning of the play i.e before Act I, Sc i begins.

(b) Before Act III opens

(c) Before Act IV Sc i opens

(d) Act the end of the play

Each of these appearances have special significance in the context of the plot and action of the play.

The first appearance of the Chorus

In its first appearance, the Chorus introduces the theme of the play by excluding right away three possible themes that the Elizabethan audience may have delighted in seeing:

- First, the Chorus excludes the theme of military victory as theme for the play. Military victory is exemplified by a reference to the field of Trasimene where the Carthegians defeated the Romans.
- Secondly, the Chorus excludes the theme of love and politics as a possible theme of the play.
- Thirdly, the Chorus excludes the theme of proud audacious deeds of a hero as a possible theme of the play.

Instead, the Chorus announces the life of Faustus as the theme of the play with a reference to his early life which is not tobe found in the scenes presented on the stage.

Two of the points of immediate interest in the words of the Chorus are Faustus' humble parentage and the myth of Icarus. Faustus was "born of parents base of stock" in the German town of Rhode. Thereby, Faustus is a deviation from the Aristotelian conception of the tragic hero who is supposed to belong to the highest class of the society.

The other point is that he had attended the University of Wittenberg supported by his relatives and excelled himself as a scholar and was conferred the degree of Dr.. But in the process he became "Swollen with cunning and self concert"; he aspired to over-reach himself. The "waxen wings" referred to by the Chorus is a reference to the mythical figure of Icarus. Like Icarus, Faustus' ambition makes him fall to his tragic end.

The Second appearance of the Chorus

The Chorus in its second appearance informs the audience that Faustus climbed Mt Olympus and was driven in a chariot drawn by dragons

from where he studied the clouds, planets and stars for eight days. In his next voyage on a dragon's back, he scanned the earth's surface and also planned to take part in St Peter's feast at Rome.

The Chorus here, provides a link and bridges the time span between Act II and Act III by relating to the audience all that had happened off stage during the time between the two acts. We understand that what Faustus had achieved by his magical powers could never be achieved by any medieval scholar. He had acquired a vast astronomical and geographical knowledge with the help of his magic.

The third appearance of the Chorus

The Chorus in its third appearance relates to the audience that Faustus is back at home after an extensive tour of many lands and visits to the courts of many kings. He had achieved fame far and wide. He also received invitations to the palace of Charles V to display his magic feats.Thereby, the Chorus updates the audience on Faustus' works during the intervening period.

The fourth appearance of the Chorus

The Chorus in its fourth and final appearance regrets to the audience that with his brilliant mind, Faustus might have done righteous things. It laments at his premature death. In spite of his scholarship and fame, he meets with a hellish fate. It should provide a warning to avoid activities beyond those sanctioned by God.

Thus, the Chorus, in all its four appearances performs different functions notably pointing out past action of the play, future events and throws light on the theme of the play besides achieving a unity of time, place and action for the play and warning and advising the degrees of overreaching.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What is a Chorus in a play?

Q 8: How is the Chorus in *Dr. Faustus* different from that of a Greek Play?

3.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION

There has been a wide spectrum of critical responses to Marlowe's play *Dr.Faustus* dwelling upon various aspects of the play. These responses can be traced back even to his own time where he managed to get a grudging recognition from his colleagues notably George Peele. This grudging recognition had nothing to do with the excellence of his works but with his unconventional lifestyle. His contemporaries praised him for his poetic abilities more than anything else. In fact throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Marlowe's reputation as a dramatist suffered because of the image of himself that had been projected about him; especially his atheism made him socially unacceptable as a key literary figure.

It was only in the nineteenth century that Marlowe gained a position as a poet and dramatist. The sudden interest on Marlow in the first part of the nineteenth century can be ascribed to Goethe's *Faust* which had the some sourced as Marlowe's play. The German source of Marlowe's play had made the play attractive to nineteenth century dramatic crates notably William Hazlitt (1778-1830) who had in his "Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth" (1820) paid a glowing tribute of Marlowe.

> "Marlowe is a name that stands high..... There
> is a best of power in his writings, a hunger
> and thirst after unrighteousness,
> a glow of the imagination, unhallowed by anything
> but its own energies. His thoughts burn within
> him like a furnace..."(Quoted from Casebook p 27)

It was Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* that became his most popular play. One of the leading literary critics of the time A.C Swinburne (1837-1909) regarded Marlowe as the "Father of English tragedy" as well as "the creator of the English blank-verse" and these two aspects had made him "the teacher and guide of Shakespeare". T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) "refers to these views of Swinburne on Marlowe in his remarkable essay "The blank verse of Christopher Marlowe" and follows up Swinburne's points by stating that "Marlowe exercised a strong influence over later drama". Besides Eliot

observes, “Marlowe had introduced several new tones into blank verse and commenced the dissociative process which draw it further and further away from the rhythms of rhymed verse”.

Apart from the poetic elements in Marlowe’s play, another aspect in which there has been a lot of critical response is the concept of Faustus as a Renaissance scholar. In fact Hazlitt had made a conscious attempt to project Faustus as a Renaissance scholar. Among the 20th Century critics Una Ellis-Fermar (1927) sees Faustus in exalted terms as the embodiment of the Renaissance scholar. She praises the logical clarity, the passionate desire for truth and the unswerving mind of Faustus and sees him as the victim of an unjust and even evil world power, ‘a plaything of the gods’.

The critical responses on the structure of the play also deserve mention. Among several critical responses on the structure of the play, mention may be made of Harry Levin (1952) who, while analysing the plot of the play, finds that the middle section is unquestionably weak. J.B. Steane, in his essay titled “The Instability of Faustus” (1964), takes up this point and argues that the play has the structural bareness of the fifteenth century *Everyman* which in several ways it resembles.Steane observes that Marlowe had characteristically reversed the traditional Morality pattern of Holy Living and Holy Dying to Evil living and evil dying.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Marlowe received “grudging recognition” from his contemporaries.

(a) What do you mean by “grudging recognition”?

(b) Why was the recognition “grudging “?

Q 10: What is “blank verse”?

Q 11: Briefly describe *Everyman*.

Q 12: What is the meaning of “a plaything of the Gods”?



3.6 LET US SUM UP

After reading the different sections of thus unit, you must be able to appreciate the major themes of the play along with having a fair idea of Marlowe's art of characterisation. You should by now have a clear idea of the function of the Chorus and the comic and tragic elements in the play *Doctor Faustus,* and the function they perform in the context of the play. The learner will have learnt to evaluate different critical opinions regarding the play *Dr. Faustus* in Marlowe's subsequent periods as well.



3.7 FURTHER READING

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6) Kanfmann, R. (Ex).(1968). *Elizabethan Drama*.OUP.
7) Levin, Harry. (2007). *The Overreacher.* ABS, N. Delhi.
8) Mukharjee, Suroopa. (2004). *Dr. Faustus*. N Delhi: Worldview.
9) Tydeman & Thomas. (1989). *Christopher Marlowe*. The Bristol Press.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The mystery plays were based on stories from the Bible and they explained in detail the principles of moral conduct. The popular mystery plays that survive include *Crucifixion, The Harrowing of Hall* and *Resurrection.* On the other hand, the miracle plays dealt with the lives of the saints with the objective of instructing and edifying the audience. Though quite a number of them were last, the plays

that survive include *Many Madgelene*, *St. Meriasek* and *Play of the Sacrament*.

Ans to Q No 2: The morality plays that had followed the mystery and miracle plays had been the popular dramatic form even during the time of Marlowe. Only five morality plays survive: *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind and Everyman*. These plays offer moral instructions through dramatic actions that is broadly allegorical.

Ans to Q No 3: The inner conflict of the protagonist between good and evil which is a basic morality element is brought out in *Dr. Faustus* with the Good Angel and the Bad Angel. In several episodes of the play, Faustus is advised by the Good Angel to "lay that damned book aside", to "repent" and so on. But each time, he is prevented by the Bad Angel from doing that. These two Angels symbolise the inner conflict in Faustus' mind.

Ans to Q No 4: No. *Dr. Faustus* cannot be considered a Christian morality play. On the contrary, the plot of the play is an inversion of the structure of the morality play as Marlowe seems to satirise the moral intentions of the morality play. *Dr. Faustus* contains no affirmation of the goodness or justice of the contemporary religious system. It is rather a protest against this system, which, it reveals as imposing a limitation upon the aspiration of men.

Ans to Q No 5: Overreaching tendencies of Faustus, Misdirected desire and consequent damnation of Faustus, the theme of sinfulness etc.

Ans to Q No 6: To be attempted on yourself.

Ans to Q No 7: The Chorus is a dramatic device that was popularised in early Greek Drama. Aristotle in Chapter X VIII of *Poetics* regards the Chorus as one of the actors of theplay. In Greek tragedies, the chorus consists of a group of twelve or twenty men trained to sing and dance. The Chorus in Greek tragedy provides a commentary on the action, represents the dramatic point of view in the perspective of the dramatic action.

Ans to Q No 8: Think and try to answer yourself.

Ans to Q No 9:(a) Grudging means giving on doing something unwillingly. The contemporaries of Marlowe were rather unwilling to recognise his talents.

(b) See paragraph 1 of 3.5.

Ans to Q No 10: It is a poetic composition consisting of unrhymed five-stress lines properly, iambic pentameters.

Ans to Q No 11: It is a morality play.

Ans to Q No 12: The Gods use humans for their sport.



3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. What was Faustus' aim in executing this deed of agreement?

Q2. Discuss Faustus's famous speech on Helen.

Q3. Discuss the damnation of Faustus with reference to the last soliloquy.

Q4. Discuss the morality elements in *Doctor Faustus*.

Q5. Discuss *Doctor Faustus* as a Renaissance tragedy.

Q6. What is a Chorus? Discuss the significance of the opening Chorus of *Doctor Faustus.*

Q7. Explain Marlowe's conception of a tragedy with reference to the opening chorus.