

CONTENTS

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION	How to study a play	5
	Reading <i>Doctor Faustus</i>	6

PART TWO

THE TEXT	Note on the text	9
	Synopsis	11
	Prologue (or Chorus 1)	12
	Scene 1	13
	Scene 2	21
	Scene 3	23
	Scene 4	28
	Scene 5	30
	Scene 6	36
	Chorus 2	38
	Scene 7	38
	Scene 8	41
	Chorus 3	42
	Scene 9	43
	Scene 10	46
	Scene 11	48
	Chorus 4	49
	Scene 12	50
	Scene 13	54
	Epilogue (or Chorus 5)	56
	Extended commentaries	
	Text 1 – Scene 5, lines 20–85	58
	Text 2 – Scene 10, lines 1– 62	63
	Text 3 – Scene 13, lines 59–115	68

PART THREE

CRITICAL APPROACHES	Characterisation	73
	Structure	83
	Time	84
	Narrative technique	86
	Language	88
	Themes	89
	Staging	92

PART FOUR

CRITICAL HISTORY	Conventional approaches	94
	Recent criticism	96
	Performance criticism	96
	New Historicism	97
	Psychoanalytic criticism	98
	Deconstruction	99

PART FIVE

BACKGROUND	Christopher Marlowe's life and works	100
	Literary background	
	The Faust story	103
	Other literary sources	104
	Morality Plays	105
	Poetic styles	108
	Historical background	
	Roman Catholicism	109
	Puritans	110
	Humanism	111
	Despair	112
	Chronology	114

FURTHER READING	119
------------------------------	-----

LITERARY TERMS	123
-----------------------------	-----

AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES	131
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LANGUAGE

Dramatists through the sixteenth century had used a wide variety of **prose** and poetic patterns to structure their language: **rhyming couplets**, fourteen-syllabled lines ('fourteeners'), short lines such as those used by the poet John Skelton ('Skeltonics') and many more had been tried in the increasingly successful innyard theatres (see also **Literary background on Poetic styles**). Christopher Marlowe adapted the **iambic pentameter** line, already familiar from poets such as Chaucer, and combined it with **blank verse** to create a strikingly effective new way of writing. This line, with its driving five-beat rhythm, has dynamic pace, but also the capacity to sound easy and colloquial when necessary, since spoken English, broadly speaking, tends to fall into iambic patterns. The grandeur of Marlowe's line is supplied by his use of **polysyllables** within it, and by its strongly **end-stopped** character. As with any poetic structure, variations on the basic line can be made once the **form** is established, and this process of varying the original structure displays the writer's skill. Marlowe's blank verse iambic pentameter is the verse form that Shakespeare later took up, rendering it more fluid and flexible by reducing the end-stopping in favour of **enjambment** (the run-on line), and increasing the number of lines shared between different characters.

Christopher Marlowe also uses a rich vocabulary, characterised by extreme or **hyperbolic** language, which carries the reader or audience into an imaginary world filled out with references to myth and to the limits of geographical knowledge. He thus generates a sense both of excitement, and of the importance and dignity of his subject matter. His use of proper names – in particular elaborate and polysyllabic ones such as 'Mephistophilis' – sustains that sense of dignity, as does his highly controlled habit of repetition. It is the combination of passion and control that marks out Marlowe's poetic achievement from those of his predecessors, an achievement which critics have described as a 'poetry of excess'.



CHECK THE NET

See <http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/NTO/16thc/cmarl/fausttop.htm> for a good example of how revolutionary 'Marlowe's mighty line' was.



CHECK THE BOOK

See especially Harry Levin, *Christopher Marlowe: The Overreacher* (Faber, London, 1954, reprinted 1961 and 1967), pp. 28–31 and 41.

THEMES

ATHEISM

Like Marlowe himself, Faustus has been described as an atheist, and the conflict between belief and unbelief is a dominant **theme** in the play, permeating plot, **dialogue** and **imagery**. In discussing belief and its absence, atheism, a distinction needs to be made between the beliefs held by Faustus himself and those represented by the effects of the play overall.

The concept of atheism in the sixteenth century was not clear-cut, but it can be broken down into two categories: one, denying the existence of God; and the other, denying the goodness of God. At various points Faustus asserts or implies that there is no such thing as either God or heaven, for example: 'There is no chief but only Belzebub, / To whom Faustus doth dedicate himself' (Scene 3, lines 57–8). He uses the concept 'a mighty god' (Scene 1, line 62) apparently as an alternative to the Christian God. This does not make Faustus an atheist according to modern definitions, but it does in the period of the play. Faustus's ambition to become a god ('try thy brains to gain a deity', Scene 1, line 63) marks him with the deadly sin of pride, or **hubris**. In spite of his scepticism about God, he appears to believe that he possesses a soul, thus subscribing – in a contradictory manner – to some aspects of conventional theology but not others. Faustus's beliefs are generally unstable and shifting; this is the essence of the doubt he feels when he uses one belief and then the other, for example in Scene 5, lines 1–10:

Now Faustus, must thou needs be damned,
And canst thou not be saved.
What boots it then to think of God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies and despair,
Despair in God, and trust in Belzebub.
Now go not backward: no, Faustus, be resolute;
Why waverest thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears:
'Abjure this magic, turn to God again'.
Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.
To God? He loves thee not



CHECK THE BOOK

For more information on atheism, see <http://www2.prestel.co.uk/rej/texts.htm> and the Marlowe Society's web site: <http://www.marlowe-society.org/fthink.htm>



CHECK THE BOOK

In Clifford Leech's book *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice Hall, London, 1964), Paul H. Kocher writes about 'Marlowe's Atheist Lecture' and gives the text of Baines's contemporary accusations against Marlowe.

World events	Marlowe's life	Literature/drama
<p>c1448 Birth of Johann Faust or Faustus, the man on whom Marlowe's protagonist was based</p> <p>1519 Charles V becomes Holy Roman Emperor</p> <p>1527 Birth of future King Philip II of Spain, son of Charles V</p> <p>1530 Martin Luther and others compose the Augsburg Confession, marking the culmination of the German Reformation</p> <p>1533 Birth of future Queen Elizabeth I of England</p> <p>1535 Execution of Sir Thomas More</p> <p>1536 Death of Desiderius Erasmus, Dutch priest and humanist thinker</p> <p>c1540 Death of Johann Faust or Faustus</p> <p>1546 Death of Martin Luther</p> <p>1553 Mary I becomes Queen of England</p>		<p>1516 Thomas More writes Latin work <i>Utopia</i></p> <p>1527 John Colet's <i>Aeditio</i> is published posthumously</p> <p>1534 Publication of Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible</p> <p>1535 First complete English translation of the Bible (by Miles Coverdale) is published</p> <p>1551 Ralph Robynson translates More's <i>Utopia</i> into English</p>

World events	Marlowe's life	Literature/drama
<p>1554 Mary I of England marries Philip II of Spain</p> <p>1556 Charles V abdicates, dividing his empire between Philip II of Spain and brother Ferdinand I of Austria</p> <p>1558 Elizabeth I accedes to the English throne following death of Mary I; death of former Charles V; birth of Thomas Kyd</p> <p>1564 Birth of William Shakespeare</p> <p>1566 Birth of Edward Alleyn</p> <p>1568 Mary Queen of Scots imprisoned by Elizabeth I</p> <p>1573 Sir Francis Walsingham appointed Secretary of State</p> <p>1576 James Burbage erects the first permanent theatre in England since Roman times</p>	<p>1564 Birth of Christopher Marlowe at Canterbury</p> <p>1579 Obtains scholarship to study at the King's School, Canterbury</p>	<p>1568 Richard Grafton, <i>A Chronicle at Large of the Affairs of England from the Creation of the World unto the First Year of Queen Elizabeth</i></p> <p>1569 Edmund Spenser, <i>The Visions of Bellay</i> and <i>The Visions of Petrarch</i></p>