

Dr. Faustus
Summary and Analysis Scene 1

Summary:

Faustus is alone in his study reviewing his achievements. He concludes that he has attained preeminence in all fields of intellectual endeavor. He disputes superbly and has mastered all treatises of logic. He is such a skilled physician that he has saved whole cities from the plague. He knows all the petty cavils of law but he finds them drudgery. In theology, he takes two scriptural passages which indicate that all men must eventually die and dismisses them. After reviewing his achievements, he decides that necromancy is the only world of profit, delight, power, honor, and omnipotence. He then has Wagner summon Valdes and Cornelius, who will help him conjure up spirits.

While Faustus is waiting for the two German scholars, the Good Angel and the Evil Angel appear. The Good Angel advises him to lay aside the "damned book" of magic and read the scriptures. The Evil Angel appeals to Faustus' ambitions. Faustus becomes absorbed in a vision of what he will be able to do by the power of magic.

When Valdes and Cornelius appear, Faustus welcomes them and tells them that he has decided to practice magic because he has found philosophy, law, medicine, and divinity to be unsatisfactory. Valdes assures Faustus that if they work together the whole world will soon be at their feet. Faustus agrees and tells the two men that he plans to conjure that very night.

Analysis:

The first question to be faced in connection with the entire drama is the reason for Faustus' yielding to the practicing of magic. In the opening of the scene, Faustus reviews the most important intellectual fields of endeavor and feels that he has mastered these areas so completely that there is nothing left for him. Not only is he learned in philosophy, but his medical skill is the best that can be attained by human knowledge. His mastery of law only serves to show him the drudgery involved in the practice. Finally, theology has not provided him with any final or satisfactory answers.

Faustus reads from the Bible that the reward of sin is death and then reads that if people think they are not sinners, they are deceived. For Faustus, this appears to doom humans from the beginning. Disgusted with the hopelessness of theological study, he turns to the practice of magic. But Faustus' reasoning is very ironic, for he has read both passages out of context. Although he is a learned man in divinity, he overlooks the obvious meaning of the passage. For instance, Faustus ignores the second part of the passage; he reads "the wages of sin is death" but does not finish it with "but the gift of God is eternal life."

Since Faustus thinks that he has achieved the end of all the various studies of the university, he is dissatisfied with the powers that he has gained from them. Although Faustus is a most learned man, he finds himself confined by mere human knowledge. In other words, he feels the limitations of human knowledge and decides to turn to magic to discover greater powers.

According to traditional Christian cosmology, the universe is viewed as a hierarchy which descends from God, through the angels, then humans, the animals, and finally to inanimate nature. Everything has been put in its proper place by God and each should be content to remain there. According to this view, it is dangerous for a person to attempt to rise above the station assigned to human beings and it is also forbidden to descend to the animal level. Ambition to go beyond one's natural place in the hierarchy is considered a sin of pride. Consequently, Faustus' desire to rise above his position as a man by resorting to supernatural powers places his soul in dire jeopardy.

Marlowe indicates this risk in the line "Here, Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity." Consequently, the first scene sets up the conflict between the limitation of human knowledge and the desire to go beyond their position in the universe.

The biblical quotations Faustus mentions refer to the concept of sin and death. The entire drama deals with the problems of sin and death and immortality. One of the things Faustus is trying to escape is the limitation of death. On the one hand, he alleges that he does not believe in death, but at the same time he spends all his time finding ways to escape it, especially by resorting to necromancy. At the end of the scene, he makes the statement that "this night I'll conjure though I die therefore." What he does not realize is that by resorting to necromancy, he will die a spiritual death also.

The appearance of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel is a holdover from the earlier morality plays. The medieval plays often use abstractions as main characters. The appearance of these allegorical abstractions functions to externalize the internal conflict that Faustus is undergoing; they symbolize the two forces struggling for the soul of Faustus. Throughout the play, these angels appear at the moments when Faustus critically examines the decision that he has made.

After the departure of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel, Faustus has a vision of what he will accomplish with his new magical powers. Some of his dreams demonstrate his desire for greater insight into the workings of the universe, and others suggest the noble ends for which he will use his power. Those desires should later be contrasted with what Faustus actually does accomplish. After receiving his powers from Mephistophilis, Faustus never does anything but trivial and insignificant acts; he resorts to petty tricks and never accomplishes any of the more powerful or noble deeds.

This first scene is filled with ironies. Basically, Faustus is so confident that his new powers will bring about his salvation, he never realizes that, quite to the contrary, they will bring about his damnation. He even refers to the books of necromancy as being "heavenly," whereas in reality they are satanic. He asks Valdes and Cornelius to make him "blest" with their knowledge. Throughout the scene, Faustus uses religious imagery and language to apply to matters which will finally bring about his own damnation.