

Dr. Faustus
Summary and Analysis Scene 3

Summary

Faustus decides to try incantation for the first time. He mutters a long passage in Latin which is composed of passages abjuring the trinity and invoking the aid of the powers of the underworld. Mephistophilis then appears in a hideous shape, and Faustus tells him that he is too ugly. He demands that Mephistophilis disappear and return in the shape of a Franciscan friar. Faustus is elated that he has the power to call up this devil. As soon as Mephistophilis reappears, Faustus finds that it is not his conjuration which brings forth a devil; a devil will appear any time that a person abjures the name of the trinity.

Faustus asks Mephistophilis several questions about Lucifer and learns that he is a fallen angel who, because of pride and insolence, revolted against God and was cast into hell. When Faustus begins to inquire about the nature of hell, Mephistophilis answers that hell is wherever God is not present. Faustus chides Mephistophilis for being so passionate about being deprived of the joys of heaven, and then sends him back to Lucifer with the proposal that Faustus will exchange his soul for twenty-four years of unlimited power. After Mephistophilis leaves, Faustus dreams of all the glorious deeds he will perform with his new power.

Analysis

In this scene, Faustus takes the first definite and inexorable steps toward his own damnation as he abjures the trinity and appeals to the black powers of hell. The incantation, the abjuring of the trinity, and the spectacle of the sudden appearance of a horrible looking devil on the stage are very effective dramatically. The mere fact that a man abjures the trinity and invokes the powers of hell carries an awesome significance. According to the amount of stage machinery available, the appearance of Mephistophilis could be accompanied by dreadful noises, bursts of lightning, smoke, or any combination of the above. In the following comic scenes, the appearance of a devil is accompanied by the explosion of firecrackers.

Mephistophilis' first appearance is also dramatically effective because he appears so suddenly and in a horrifying shape. The symbolic significance of his appearance is obvious: hell is a place of horror and damnation and anything emanating from there would appear extremely ugly. This physical detail alone should function as a portentous warning to Faustus, who, however, ignores the implication and simply orders Mephistophilis to reappear in a more favorable shape.

Faustus' command to Mephistophilis to reappear as a Franciscan friar satirizes the religious order which had been the subject of various literary attacks since the times of Chaucer. The satire on friars also reflects the English rejection of the Roman Catholic church which is also demonstrated in a later scene in the pope's chamber. Faustus' first reaction to Mephistophilis' appearance is one of pride in his power to evoke a devil. He thinks that Mephistophilis is completely obedient to his will and feels that he is a "conjurer laureate." Instead, Faustus learns that a devil will appear to anyone who curses the name of God. Faustus is foolish to think that a

devil is obedient to anyone except Lucifer. Thus, even at the beginning of the play, Faustus is greatly deceived about his own powers and deceived about his relationship with Mephistophilis.

Faustus acts as if he believes he has complete power and is completely free. But Mephistophilis' condition indicates that no person who deals with the devil is free. Even Mephistophilis is bound over to the devil, and as soon as Faustus enters into a contract he will no longer be free either.

At first, Faustus retains part of his old nobility as he begins to question Mephistophilis about Lucifer. Faustus is now intent upon gaining more knowledge; he wants to know something about the character of Lucifer. Mephistophilis reveals that Lucifer had once been a favorite angel until his fall. The story of Lucifer re-establishes the imagery of a fall which had first been referred to in the classical fall of Icarus.

Lucifer fell because of "aspiring pride and insolence." This image may be applied to the fall of Faustus because in his pride he is trying to discover more than is allowed to humans.

Faustus' next question involves the nature of hell and the nature of damnation. The reader should remember that at the time of this play, the Anglican church had been separated from the Roman Catholic church for only a short time. This passage emphasizes the newly established view of hell as advocated by the Anglican church. Rather than being an established or definite physical place, hell is seen as a state or condition. Any place that is deprived of the presence of God is hell.

Why this is hell, nor am I out of it. Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God, And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, Am not tormented with ten thousand hells, In being deprived of everlasting bliss? Thus, the greatest punishment a person can endure is not a physical torment but, more directly, exclusion from the presence of God. It is highly ironic that Mephistophilis, in remembering the bliss of heaven, suddenly tells Faustus to "leave these frivolous demands, which strike a terror to my fainting soul." Even with this definite warning from an authority of hell, Faustus does not modify his intent to carry out his plans. Instead, Faustus scolds Mephistophilis for not being resolute. Later these roles will be reversed and Mephistophilis will have to urge Faustus to be more resolute.

Faustus sends Mephistophilis back to Lucifer, naming the demands in exchange for his soul. The terms are rather broad in intent but later Faustus makes little use of the powers he now demands. After Mephistophilis leaves, Faustus revels in his sense of omnipotence. He becomes completely absorbed in dreams of what he will do with his newly gained power. Unfortunately for Faustus, he never achieves the things he is now dreaming of even though he has the potential. Instead, he will do no more than play insignificant and paltry tricks. Part of his tragedy is that he received this power but failed to utilize it in any significant manner.

In the Renaissance view, humans lived in an ordered universe which was governed by principles of law. Even Mephistophilis recognizes that the universe is governed by law, but Faustus is working under the mistaken belief that he has been able to abrogate divine law by his conjuration.