

UNIT 5 DRAMATIC POETRY IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit discusses the play, *Doctor Faustus* as essentially poetic. The play gained greater recognition as poetry than drama, mainly on account of the use of blank verse in place of the rhymed verse. Marlowe makes blank verse give greater freedom of language and imagination and an ability to present diverse thoughts and feelings to drama.

5.1 INTRODUCTION: FUSION OF DRAMA AND POETRY

Drama and Poetry are two distinct forms but when they are fused in a literary endeavour, the power generated is greater than their individual strength. As we read Doctor Faustus, what we get primarily is a feel of poetry though the impact of the powerful tragic drama is never lost. In fact, poetry heightens the effect of tragedy

in *Doctor Faustus*. Great poetry and drama inescapably arrive at the same thing: a perspective on human condition. The impact on the reader or the viewer, either through the dramatic interplay of ideas or through the rhetoric of poetry, is far-reaching. *Doctor Faustus* touches us deeply. In doing so, the tormenting conflicts and the irrepressible rhetoric of words merge indistinguishably.

5.2 MARLOWE'S INDIFFERENCE TO DRAMATIC ART

In rewriting the Faust legend, Marlowe, possibly, experienced the want of a progressive plot and action that would generate their own drama. Marlowe has in *Faustus* an unprogressive state of mind or conflict to dramatize or to rhetorise. There is a justifiable criticism against *Doctor Faustus* as drama. The play lacks structure, it is poorly organized presenting itself as a jumble of scenes rather than coherent drama. There is reckless fluctuation, critics allege, from high thoughtfulness to sheer frivolity and from magnificent poetry to insipid dialogue. Several critics found nothing in the play other than a few magnificent lines.

5.3 DOCTOR FAUSTUS : DRAMATIC RHETORIC RATHER THAN ART

Nonetheless, *Doctor Faustus* emerges as powerful tragic drama notwithstanding Marlowe's indifference to dramatic craft. Marlowe simply centered dramatic thought and action in the conflictual core of human aspirations at a crucial transitional phase of western history when religion, aesthetics and philosophy were poised to take a new turn. This drama had no premise other than the advent of the self-consciousness of man and the inescapable dialectics which history imposes on the beginning of every new era.

The apparent lack of an achievement in dramatic art is due to Marlowe's preoccupation with the dramatic core of an emerging man-centered world. The kind of human experience *Doctor Faustus* presents does not require the ingenuity of dramatic art so much as a rhetoric that aggressively fashions out the new human character. The rhetoric relies, not so much on dramatic devices but on language, its words, and their melody and poetry.

5.4 MARLOWE'S 'MIGHTY LINE'

In the very choice of Marlovian preoccupation in *Doctor Faustus*, dramatic art takes a backseat, and the rhetoric of human concerns evokes poetry provoking critics to say that *Doctor Faustus* is more poetry than drama. In fact, since the time Marlowe wrote the play, he faced criticism on several counts from critics but no one grudged paying a tribute to Marlowe's poetic excellence in theater. Tributes to Marlowe began with Ben Jonson who was impressed with the poetry in Marlowe's drama and called it the "mighty line". Robert Greene finds a thunder in Marlowe's voice. For Leigh Hunt, "if ever there was a born poet, Marlowe was one" and "Marlowe and Spenser are the first of our poets who perceived the beauty of words."¹

5.5 BLANK VERSE: RENAISSANCE RHETORIC

The poet in Marlowe was obviously born in the Renaissance love of rhetoric. Language was the weapon Renaissance chiefly used to explore human aspirations and

In relatively few words, Marlowe has written, perhaps, the most magnificent apostrophe to Helen. Marlowe's greatness is that he could present with great ease the most exquisitely romantic and also versify brilliantly the most pathetic and the anguishing. Faustus' last soliloquy is deeply touching for its rhythmic expression of the most tormenting human agonies.

Stand Still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,
 That time may cease, and midnight never come,
 Fair nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make
 Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
 A year; a month, a week a natural day,
 That Faustus may repent and save his soul! (V, iii, 66-71)

Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
 A hundred thousand and at last be sav'd!
 O, no end is limited to damned souls!
 Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
 Or why is this immortal that thou hast?¹⁶ (V, iii, 102-107)

In barely fifty four lines in the last soliloquy, Marlowe presents Faustus' arrival as a visionary after having gone through, in the course of the play, ambition, pride, insolence, impulse, passion and sheer frivolity besides the nagging doubts about divine mercy and wrath. In the last few minutes of his life, as charted in the soliloquy, Faustus sets forth the remorseless logic of time, immense divine mercy which nonetheless, is capable of ruthless wrath, and the futility of knowledge, and ambition and of the human life itself. A vehement protest against the denial of human worth is ironically presented through despair in human condition. Simple words like "live," "see", "look", "ever", and "perpetually" are loaded with immense philosophical significance.

The primary focus on the idea rather than on the metrical line, as could be abundantly seen in the last soliloquy, is Marlowe's redefinition of the poetic by the dramatic. He is credited for having begun a sentence period as against a line period for poetry. The fusion of drama and poetry, or specifically of the dramatic conflict and poetic rhapsody, perhaps, could never be as harmonious as in *Doctor Faustus*.

Marlowe's dramatic poetry, however, is not faultless. He is criticized for not maintaining poetic rhapsody for sustained effect. He is also criticized for alternating magnificent lines with purely pedestrian ones and splendid monologues with laboured verses. There is also an allegation that free movement of the verse is impeded by coloured epithets and 'sonorous phrases'.

Though not exactly careless artistically, Marlowe, as Harry Levin says, "is always himself" whereas Shakespeare is everybody. Further, the focus in the play had to be on Faustus, that too on the Marlovain Faustus. Poetry came rather intermittently waiting both for ideas and their conflicts to intensify and for Marlowe's imagination to strike. Yet at times, there is a mismatch of content and poetry as could be seen in Faustus' apostrophe to Helen. Helen, after all, as Faustus knows, is no Helen but a devil in disguise. The distraction of Faustus from his despair, is too little cause for the magnificent poetry of the apostrophe.

5.8 MARLOWE'S POETRY: AN ESTIMATE

The nature of Marlowe's achievement lies primarily in the nature of dramatic or poetic endeavours in the play. *Marlowe was basically searching for poetry and drama in what for him is to be an intensely human situation rather than attempting a work of art.* Swinburne was nearer the truth in his praise of Marlowe:

3. F.P Wilson. *The English Drama 1485-1585* Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 14.
4. Ibid.
5. Tucker Brooke Matthias A. Shaaber. *The Renaissance: A Literary History of England Volume II*, New York; Appleton-Century-Crofts 1967, pp. 508-9.
6. Christopher Marlowe. *Doctor Faustus*. Macmillan's Annotated Classics, Madras. P. 3.
7. Ibid., p.37.
8. Ibid., p.28.
9. Ibid., p.37.
10. Ibid., p.5.
11. Ibid., p.19
12. Ibid., p. 41.
13. Ibid., p. 95.
14. Ibid., p. 46.
15. Ibid., p. 50.
16. Ibid
17. A. C.Swinburne Encyclopedia Britanica.
18. T. S. Eliot. *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Clifford Leech ed. Prentice Hall, New Jersey 1964, pp. 12-13.
19. Harry Levin "Marlowe Today", *Drama Review* 8, 4, p. 23.

5.11 KEY WORDS

1. Soliloquy: Coined from Greek solus (alone) and loqui (to speak). Speaking one's thoughts aloud with none to hear, or regardless of the presence of hearers. It is a declamation in this manner by the characters. Soliloquies are popular in Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays.

5.12 QUESTIONS

1. Examine Marlowe's use of blank verse in *Doctor Faustus*.
2. Give a critical appreciation of *Doctor Faustus* as dramatic poetry.
3. Discuss Marlowe's contribution to the growth of dramatic poetry in English.

5.13 ANNOTATIONS

Annotate the following passages with reference to the context.

- (a) Her lips suck forth my soul: see, where it flies!
- (b) The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus' must be damn'd.
- (c) Mountains and hills, come, and fall on me,
And hide from the heavy wrath of God!
- (d) Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd!

5.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

T.S. Eliot, *Christopher Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Clifford Leech ed. Prentice Hall, New Jersey 1964. Eliot estimates the quality of Marlovian Verse, compares it with that of Shakespeare and also Marlowe's contribution towards the evolution of dramatic poetry in England.