UNIT 5 DRAMATIC POETRY IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

Structure

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* in 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 Malowe's poetic excellence in theater. Tributes to Marlowe began with Ben Jonson who was impresed 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 "Marlwoe 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

elevate man to a centrality in the cosmos. Barlett Giamatti notes Marlowe's achievement in *Doctor Faustus*.

> ... Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* celebrates that God-like Power of Language and shows us how words can soar, and tempts us to dizzying heights within our heads. But all the time, Marlowe is in control. He knows too much about the shaping power of words to be a Faustus.[2]

It is not Faustus alone who wanted to be a magician; Marlowe aimed at nothing short of it. Faustus fails for he chose a black art for magic. Marlowe chooses poetry to achieve the power of magic through the glory and power of language and its words. However, the power to be achieved required a change in the structure of the verse that is to be used. The earliest dramatic form of the Miracle plays use the intricate stanza form but as the dramatic discipline started gaining maturity, the rigidity of the stanza form was gradually given up in favour of the diversification of verse forms and their total simplification to approximate, as nearly as possible, to the spoken speech.

5.6 BLANK VERSE IN ENGLAND

F.P. Wilson details the course of versification in English drama. Speaking of John Skelton's versification in *Magnificence* Wilson says:

> Here then is a conscious attempt to introduce variety of verse and to fit the verse to the character. It has been said that Chaucer proceeds from complex metre to simple, and from simple metre to complex. The drama, too, as it moves from the simplicities of *Magnificence* to the complexities of *Hamlet*, proceeds from complex metre to simple. Skelton has abandoned the intricate stanza forms of the Miracle play but he is still experimenting with a great variety of verse. Later in the century, as we enter the great Age, even rhyme tends to disappear and we are left with blank verse and prose.[3]

The move towards blank verse is desirable for rhetoric. The historical importance of Skelton's *Magnificence*, Wilson says, is that "perhaps for the first time in English drama, a work of conscious art, a laureate devising a long work in conscious observance of rhetorical principle, the blank verse used by Marlowe and Shakespeare owes its freedom to a series of efforts to shed the metrical burden for gaining the rhetorical effect".[4] The freedom of the form also synchronizes with the declining popularity of the miracle and morality plays. Tucker Brooke & Matthias A Shaaber trace the growth of Blank verse in English up to Marlowe.

> Unriming decasyllables had been written before him by several sixteenth century Englishmen: by the Earl of Surrey and Nicholas Grimald, by Sackville and Norton in *Gorboduc*, by Gascoigne in *The Steel Glass* by Turberville, by Peele in *The Arraignment of Paris*, by the youthful Spenser, and probably by Kyd. Various, and yet similar, purposes seem to have prompted these innovators; the desire to approximate the Virgilian hexameter or the *senarius* of Seneca, the desire for a prose-like (Horatian) vehicle of contemporary satire in *Gascoigne*, the effort at Ciceronian eloquence in the play of Peele. They were all exotic ambitions and, except in Peele's few lines, they produced exotic effects. It was Marlowe who changed the sow's ear into the silken purse. When he employed it, blank verse became at once what Shakespeare, Milton and so many others have shown that it can hardly cease to be the most expressive and the grandest of English metres.[5]

Surrey used blank verse, perhaps for the first time to translate part of Virgil's Aeneid into English. Since then, blank verse became the medium of dramatic poetry. If one wanted to write serious kind of drama, it was felt, blank verse was the exalted

medium. Skelton, for example, used blank verse in *Magnificence* for describing virtues like Magnificence and used a light four stressed couplet or a two stressed line for describing vices. Similarly, Sackville and Norton in *Gorboduc* and Thomas Kyd in *The Spannish Tragedy* used blank verse for the purposes of subtle characterization.

Basically, the term blank verse is used for an unrimed iambic pentamet. An iamb is a metrical foot of two syllables, the first unaccented and the other accented, the first short and the other long as, for example, in to strive or to seek. A pentameter contains five metrical feet or measures. The pentameter is a ten syllable line with five stresses falling on the even syllables. A typical iambic pentameter reads like the following line:

In courts of kings, where the state is overturned. The foot or a measure in English prosody contains two or three syllables, with only one of them bearing stress. While in the iambic, the unaccented is followed by an accented syllable, in the other metrical unit, trochee, the accented syllable is followed by an unaccented syllable. Both the iambic and trochee differ from a spondee which is a double stressed foot. In addition, there is a pyrrhic foot which is totally unstressed. The variation of trochee, iambic and spondee within the decasyllabic line gives, especially in Marlowe, utmost melody. When it lacked this variation, as in Sackville and Norton or as in Thomas Kyd, blank verse produced monotony. Their attempt was to produce an English equivalent to the twelve syllable imabic trimeter used by the Athenian dramatists. The particular form suited Greek language in terms of its approximation to their every day speech. But the rather slow moving English language, as compared to Greek, required variation. Thus the five foot ten - syllable imabic pentameter with continual variations of the iambic with trochee, spondee and pyrrhic came to characterize the resurgent English dramatic verse.

5.7 THE POETRY OF *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

This variation for achieving a variety of rhythms was characteristic of Marlowe's dramatic verse. *Doctor Faustus* begins with the Chorus saying:

> Not marching in the fields of Thrasymene
> Where Mars did mate the warlike Carthagens.
> .....

the first line begins with a trochee but has a pyrrhic ending with the last syllable being unstressed. For the straightforward narration of the lines, there is a regular beat trying to give the impression of dignified order where an effect is warranted.

Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds (chorus line 5)
.....
Having commenced be a divine in show. (I, i, 3)

The iambic pentameter is falling on a trochee for a beginning and also for marking pauses.

Pause is an important element in blank verse providing a variety of rhythm. Surrey and others have made the pause occur at the end of a line making the sense rather coextensive with the line. Marlowe dispensed with the line as a unit of thought, and made the sense run on from one line to the next making in the process, the paragraph rather than single lines as units of ideas. This is a strategy of what is called run-on lines, a strategy typically Marlovian.

Learned Faustus,
To find the secrets of astronomy,

Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament,
Did mount him up to scale Olympus's top,
Where sitting in a chariot burning bright,
Drawn by the strength of yoked dragon's necksChorus.[6] (III, 1-6)

Or

As I was sometime solitary set
Within my closet, sundry thoughts arose
About the honour of mine ancestors,
How they had won by prowess such exploits,
Got such riches, subdu'd so may kingdoms,
As we that do succeed or they that shall
Hereafter possess our throne, shall
(I fear me) ne'er attain to that degree
Of high renown and great authority
Amongst which kings is Alexander the Great,
Chief spectacle of the world's pre-eminence,
The bright shining of whose glorious acts
Lightens the world with his reflecting beams,
As when I hear but motion made of him
It grieves my soul I never saw the man.[7] (III, iii 18-35)

In the older rhymed verse, the tendency was for the couplet which stood by itself. The pause in the couplet was invariably at the end of the line after the fourth syllable and the iambic beat was never varied. Marlowe varies the whole pattern of the regulated metrical verse. For Marlowe, whatever was the metrical pattern, it had to follow the overflowing idea and there is hardly any splitting of the idea for metrical regularity.

Though the run-on lines give the impression of formlessness at times, there are single lines that make a very compact and forceful expression of ideas. In fact, Marlowe's ideational and metrical mastery within a single line is remarkably exceptional. *Doctor Faustus* abounds in several memorable lines.

Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man[8] (I, i. 23)
Homo, fuge, whither should I fly[9] (II, i, 75)
What art thou, Faustus but a man condemned to die?[10] (IV, iv 37)
Damn'd art thou, Faustus, damn'd; despair and die?[11] (V, i, 48)
I do repent; and yet I do despair[12] (II, ii. 63)
Her lips suck forth my soul; see where it flies![13] (V, ii, 95)
See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament[14] (V, iii, 78)

The sheer compressive force and summative brilliance of the ideas is strikingly clear in these lines. Faustus' tragic impatience with human limitations comes out in a few words of the first line. Similarly, the next three lines, individually present the Protestant doctrine of predestination and Faustus, not being the elect of God is condemned to despair. "I do repent and I do despair." Marlowe sums up the conflicting notions of Catholics and Protestants about the possibility of eternal grace and the impossibility of such grace to the sinner. Similarly the nature of the self-willed damnation of Faustus is presented in the line on Helen. The supreme Christian virtue comes out with utmost devotion in the line, See see.....

Brevity, and consummate lyricism for heightening mental and emotional states mark several passages which continue to be memorable even after centuries.

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.[15] (V, ii, 90-94)

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:

> He is the greatest discoverer, the most daring and inspired pioneer, in all poetic literature. The place and value of Christopher Marlowe as a leader among the poets would be almost impossible for historical criticism to overestimate.[17]

T.S. Eliot was far more thorough in his praise of Marlowe:

> The less questionable judgement is that Marlowe exercised a strong influence over later drama, though not himself as great a dramatist as Kyd: that he introduced several new tones into blank verse and commenced the dissociative process which drew it further and farther away from the rhythms of rhymed verse; and that when Shakespeare borrowed from him, which was pretty often at the beginning, Shakespeare made something inferior or something different.
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> ..... Marlowe's rhetoric is not, or not characteristically, Shakespeare's rhetoric; ..... Shakespeare's is more exactly a vice of style, a tortured perverse ingenuity of images which dissipates instead of concentrating the imagination, and which may be due in part to influences by which Marlowe was untouched. Next, we find that Marlowe's vice is one which he was gradually attenuating, and even, what is more miraculous, turning into virtue. And we find that this poet of torrential imagination recognized many of his best bits (and those of one or two others), saved them, and reproduced them more than once, almost invariably improving them in the process. ... Contrary to usual opinion .... Marlowe was a deliberate and conscious workman.[18]

Harry Levin looks at Shakespeare's debt to Marlowe:

> Shakespeare seems to have marked the passing of Malowe through his own *Richard III* where he proved himself to be past master of the Marlovian attitudes and tonalities, even while he was ranging on toward richer complexities and subtler nuances of human relationships. To be sure, Richard II would be unthinkable without the example of *Edward II* or *The Merchant of Venice* without *The Jew of Malta*. Speaking more broadly *Hamlet* owes a certain amount to the precedent of *Doctor Faustus*, and *Coriolanus* to *Tamburlaine*.[19]

5.9 SUMMING UP

There stands Christopher Marlowe: a pioneering explorer of innovative poetry in drama. The poetry that is instantly dramatic and belongs essentially to the human mind and soul presenting their passionate ecstasies and tormenting conflicts and agonies. If Marlowe was not a great dramatic poet like Shakespeare, he nonetheless, is great in formulating the essentials of dramatic poetry in which Shakespeare and others who followed him, found a model for their dramatic endeavours. If the essentials of dramatic poetry Marlowe discovered and formulated were not shaped into an exquisite dramatic art of poetry, it was because, as Harry Levin says, Marlowe chose to be himself and left it to others to see what he could offer them.

5.10 REFERENCES

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2. Barlett Giamatti. "Marlowe: The Arts of Illusion". *Yale Review*, p. 543

3. F.P Wilson. *The English Drama* I 485-1585 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 Faus*tus.

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.