The concept of time in dr. faustus

The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, referred to simply as Doctor Faustus, is a play by Christopher Marlowe written in the late 16th century, based on the Faust story, in which a man sells his soul to the devil for power and knowledge. The idea of an individual selling his or her soul to the devil for knowledge is an old motif in Christian folklore, one that had become attached to the historical persona of Johannes Faustus, a disreputable astrologer who lived in Germany sometime in the early 1500s.

The play is written in blank verse and as in many Elizabethan plays, there is a chorus that does not interact with the other characters but rather provides an introduction and conclusion to the play and gives an introduction to the events that have unfolded at the beginning of some acts. In the story Doctor Faustus, the famously brilliant German scholar, becomes disenchanted with traditional knowledge: that of logic, law, medicine and religion, as he believes they have nothing more to give to him.

He then turns to necromancy and, aided by Valdes and Cornelius, he manages to summon Mephistophilis, a devil. Despite Mephistophilis's warnings about hell, Faustus tells the devil to return to Lucifer, his master, with an offer of Faustus' soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis. It is this particular analogy that I will speak of today. The time period of twenty-four years, serves to represent the recurring period of twenty-four hours in a day.

Strengthening this theory, Mephistophilis meets Faustus in his study at midnight to buy his soul and in the last scene the devils arrive to take away Faustus's soul as soon as the clock strikes twelve, it is an evident pattern

that Marlowe highlights. According to the critic Joseph Candido, this analogy is brought to light most perceptibly in the final scene of the play. When the final night of Faustus' life comes, he tells the scholars of the deal he has made with Lucifer.

They are horrified and ask what they can do to save him, but he tells them that there is nothing which can be done. As they leave to pray for Faustus, a vision of hell opens before Faustus's horrified eyes and the clock strikes eleven. The last hour passes quickly, and he begs the clocks to slow and time to stop, so that he might live a little longer and have a chance to repent. Faustus's final speech is the most emotionally powerful scene in the play, as his despairing mind rushes from idea to idea. One moment he is begging time to slow down, the next he is imploring Christ for mercy.

One moment he is crying out in fear and trying to hide from the wrath of God, the next he is begging to have the eternity of hell lessened somehow. His mind's various attempts to escape his doom, then, lead inexorably to an understanding of his own guilt. This scene masterfully depicts the ironies of time as human beings tend to experience it — i. e. , the paradox that time can seem virtually endless during a period of relatively short duration and, alternatively, often seem to slip by unnoticed during an interval of much greater length.

The twenty-four years that collapse into the brief period of stage action that comprises the temporal span of the play make this paradox obvious enough, but Marlowe is also at pains throughout the scene to embroider the idea with fine subtlety. For example, between the time that the clock strikes eleven

and eleven-thirty, Faustus' first speech is thirty lines long. However, within the next " half-hour", Faustus' speech is only twenty lines long, directly pointing to what Candido has pointed out, namely, that time slows down when we do not notice its passing and speeds up when we try to hang on to it.

The dramatic effect thus created makes the first half-hour appear to go slower than the second. This effect is further emphasized by Marlowe in the striking of the clock. In the dramatization, eleven strikes of the clock first take up thirty to forty seconds of time. But to the audience, that short span of time seems interminably long. The same feeling of " short" time becoming long: the relativity of time, the same as experienced by Faustus. The action of the play has thus telescoped twenty-four years into no more than two to three hours of stage time.

This last scene, brief though it is, represents the last hour of Faustus' life. The speed of time passing, captured in the rhythms of his speech, is psychologically rather than literally realistic. The doom that Faustus wishes to avoid seems to rush towards him. The effect is intensified by the continuous ticking of the clock, a sound which the entire audience is intensely aware of, marking the passing of the first half hour and when the clock strikes midnight. Critics have often also commented on how skillfully Marlowe uses rhythm in the final scene to underline the passage of time.

For instance, the line: ' Now hast thou but one bare hour to live' is a sequence of monosyllabic words, where it is not entirely clear which of them are stressed. It would certainly be possible for an actor to give a more or less

equally strong stress to each word, which is why the line seems to echo the striking clock. This echo effect is strengthened by the internal rhyme between ‘ Now’ and ‘ thou’. The monosyllabic words continue into the next line until the last word: ‘ And then thou must be damned perpetually’.

The sudden appearance of a long five-syllable word focuses attention on it and alerts us to what it is that Faustus most fears: an infinity of suffering. This sparks his desperate and futile plea for time to stand still. Time really is the essence of this soliloquy, not only because the clock is ticking for Faustus, but because, as we have seen, what most horrifies him is the prospect not of suffering but of endless suffering. After the clock strikes the half hour, Faustus pleads with God to place a limit on his time in hell

The final and most seemingly chilling parody of all is however, the manner in which Marlowe trivializes the time span allotted to Faustus. As the final hour of his apparently endless twenty-four year long period comes to an end, the clock strikes first, eleven times, then once and then twelve times, twenty-four strikes in all, each strike a reminder of what to come and of the omnipresent clock. A clock, with the momentum and monotony of one, impending catastrophe, encapsulating those twenty four years in the same fashion. Trivializing twenty-four years into the mere span of a hour.