

Write about what you have found interesting in Marlowe's presentation of Hell in

Dr Faustus.

In *Dr Faustus*, Marlowe presents Hell not as a specific place but as something which can be found all around us, with Mephistophilis describing it as having “no limits”. He describes also how “where we are is hell” suggesting that the view of a world in which sinners go to hell and other people are safe from it is a flawed one. Faustus initially thinks that “hell’s a fable” but soon comes to realize that this is far from the truth. This is a disturbing suggestion in modern times, but would have been even more so in a more Christian time, when people were perhaps more concerned with living Christian lives and protecting themselves from the Devil and from Hell. This idea might have been seen as a shocking taboo since a contemporary audience might have been more shocked by the idea that the two places were not separate than an audience in the present might. Lucifer tells Faustus that “in hell is all manner of delight”, but by the end of the play, Faustus sees it as “ugly hell” showing that he has realized the error of his ways, and that he has gained an awareness of the true nature of hell.

Marlowe uses a range of characters to show that in this world where Hell is all around us, the Devil can appear in many forms. Both Beelzebub and Lucifer appear in the play to show that there are many possible manifestations of Hell, and the fact that Faustus states that he will find the appearance of the Seven Deadly Sins “pleasing unto me” suggests the depth of his corruption by the visions of hell that he has seen. Those characters are portrayed as grotesque and abhuman, with characteristics that contemporary audiences would have found repellent, such as “like to Ovid’s flea” and “like a periwig” showing lowly positions on the Great Chain of Being. These characters appear from hell to show Faustus “some pastime” suggesting that they are there for his entertainment; again, suggestive of transgressive behaviour which might have been fascinating and repellent in equal measure.

Like the Seven Deadly Sins, Mephistophilis himself is abhuman. He is the Devil’s representative and is inherently linked with the transgression of Faustus’ making a pact with the devil, since he is the one with whom Faustus makes the pact “with thine own blood”. This is again an example of transgression and shows just how strongly the notion of hell being everywhere has affected Faustus – he knows that he is committing a mortal sin, but he wishes to “raise up spirits” and is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve this. Blood is an important Christian symbol, and the fact that the contract that he makes is written in blood would have signified the fact that his blasphemy would put him beyond redemption – something which he later comes to realize. This supports the idea that Hell is not a place;

that it is people, since Faustus' behaviour and desires are what makes Hell. He wants to have "power, ... honour... omnipotence" and is willing to take part in any behaviour that will enable him to achieve his desires, no matter what the consequences may be. That said, he does show that he is not totally without remorse since he tries, on more than one occasion and without success, to repent. The fact that he does not succeed implies that his transgressions are too severe for him to achieve forgiveness. He has become allied with the Devil, and even God has abandoned him. Faustus recognizes this when he says that it is due to "a surfeit of deadly sin" that he "can ne'er be pardoned". Despite his repentance, Marlowe suggests that his transgressions have been too severe to allow for forgiveness. This shows that hell is not only everywhere but for all time.

In his final soliloquy, Faustus' language reflects that of his opening soliloquy; once more, he uses imperatives to show that he wishes to take control. At the start of the play, he was concerned with himself and his own achievements "settling thy studies" and "being a physician" but by the end, he wants to show his control by making the heavens "stand still". The dramatic irony here is that he cannot hope to achieve these commands since he has no control. The language of the final soliloquy shows Faustus' desperation as he tries to escape his inevitable end. There is a sense of panic in this speech with his cries of "O spare me, Lucifer" and the repetition of "My God" which suggests that he has finally come to the realization of the true nature of Hell; that it is something that he cannot avoid. He is not going to Hell; he is already there.

It is perhaps telling that Faustus' last word is "Mephistophilis" since it implies that he is consumed by Hell and that he finally accepts his position in the hell that he himself has created. At the end of the play, the audience is left with an epilogue to remind them of the fact that his "hellish fall" could also befall any one of them who tries to "practice more than heavenly power permits", a timely warning to contemporary audiences about the fact that they should not follow in Faustus' anti-Christian footsteps for fear of the consequences. Modern audiences might not have such strong beliefs in heaven and hell, but might also take from this the warning that the consequences of doing the wrong thing could be as severe as those suffered by Faustus.