

# FAUST

## Goethe

### Overview

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German poet, playwright, philosopher, man of state, and scientist, whose achievements in all these domains made him perhaps the most nearly 'universal man' in German culture, the richest exemplar of German classicism in the second half of the 19th century, and an inspiration to such German Humanists as Thomas Mann, in the 20th century. Goethe's *Faust* is his greatest achievement, a vast two-part epic verse drama, the first Part of which was initially completed in 1806, although work on the total text—both Parts—continued until 1831.

### Story

This verse epic by Goethe opens in heaven, where angels are worshipping the Creator, while Mephistopheles is cursing the evil of mankind, and betting the Lord that he can win over one of the Lord's servants to sin and evil. This individual is one Dr. Faustus, a learned but spiritually risking scholar, whom the Devil feels certain he can turn into a servant of Satan. The Manichean struggle between God and the devil dominates Dr. Faustus, and drives the narrative of this work.

As the epic opens, Faust is sitting in his study, contemplating taking a fatal poison, and lamenting that, in his bookish alchemical existence, he has lost touch with nature and the simplicity of life. In the midst of these terrible deliberations he is visited by a chorus of angels, who inspire him with a fresh view of life. Faust goes for a walk outside the town, with a fellow scholar named Wagner, and wishes he could blend with the crowds of passing festival celebrators. In the course of the walk the two men meet a black dog, who follows Faustus back to his room, and suddenly morphs into Mephistopheles, the Devil, who conjures up a flock of spirits who take Faust on an hallucinatory journey. When Faustus awakes again Mephistopheles is there with him, making a wager. The wager is simple but powerful: if Faust will agree in future to be the servant of Mephistopheles in Hell, the Devil will provide the doctor with a 'moment of transcendence.'

First the Devil takes Faustus on an imaginary journey to visit a group of revelling men at a tavern (Auerbach's bar.) As it is, though, the devil plays nasty tricks on the guys at the bar, which elicit crude reactions, and threats to kill the visitors. Faust and the devil escape by the skin of their teeth. A second grotesque episode occurs—around a witch's cauldron; in a scuffle, the devil induces the witch to give Faustus some drops of her potion. After leaving the cave, and returning to the streets of the town, Faustus encounters a lovely young girl, Gretchen, whom he follows to her room—but whom he adores at once, far above sex, as one of God's sublime creatures. He orders Mephistopheles to bring the two of them together. Amidst some erotic frolicking, which the devil gladly participates in, Faust and Gretchen disappear into the woods; he hears the depressing story of her life, and before they part they convey their love for one another.

Faust hides out in the woods, but the devil finds him and—pleading the case for what he claims is the lustful Gretchen—he brings Faust back to the girl's room. There, having given Gretchen's mother a sleeping potion, Faust makes love to, and as it happens impregnates, the young woman.

Returning to Gretchen's house, Faust meets and stabs to death her vengeful brother, leaving Gretchen to flee to the Cathedral for forgiveness, while Faust himself is taken on a wild fanciful Walpurgis night ride through the Brocken mountains. In a play within a play, Faust is treated to a phantasmagoria of ideas and speculations, which canvas the main cultural themes of the Modernism of Goethe's time.

In a field, after this inner journey, Faust learns the fate of Gretchen, that she has killed her infant child, has been arrested, and is in prison. Faust and the devil rush to the prison to free the girl, but by now she has gone mad, and Faust and the Devil barely escape the authorities, as they flee the prison, to the cries of Gretchen in the background.

## Themes

**Sensuality.** Mephistopheles induces Faust to find a perfect transcendent moment, and in the end that moment is making love to Gretchen. Faust's sensuality destroys him.

**Innocence.** Gretchen is the ultimate in abused innocence, guilelessly charmed by the urbane Faust, whom she meets on the street, and enchanted by the jewels left her by the devil, as part of his entrapment of her into uncharacteristic lust.

## Characters

**Faust** is the supreme mediaeval scholar, deeply immersed in alchemy and works of mysterious lore. He is a passionate person, eager to recover his youth while now aging, and he takes reckless chances, wagering with the devil, which do him in.

**Mephistopheles** is 'the spirit who negates all.' He is the diabolical supreme spirit of negation, whose greatest delight is the destruction of innocence.

**Gretchen** is the very spirit of innocence. The devil tricks her, Faust—an innocent himself—impregnates her, and her simple, if abused, life is destroyed.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Faust** (open)

**Character** The principal character is a scholar—mediaeval in general conception—who becomes the gambling chip between God and the devil, Mephistopheles. The devil bets that he can win Faust over to evil—the Doctor is already tired of secular scholarly pursuits, and is turning toward magic and the sensational—but Faust enters the bargain, and plunges into a new life of rediscovering the secular world. He is a restless explorer of the realms of knowledge and experience. Among the daunting undertakings that confront his experiment is the seduction, and eventual destruction, of a beautiful young girl, Margaret. The death of innocence is a blow to Faust's project!

**Parallels** The figure of the indomitable striver/quester for knowledge / self-transcender is widespread in western literary tradition. Prometheus (Aeschylus' *Prometheus Unbound*, 430 B.C.) is a classic example, with his insistence on bringing fire and culture to humanity. In him the element of defiance, and fidelity to mankind against the gods, prevails. (Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, 1820, follows the Humanistic path of Aeschylus.) Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, 1604, in the play of the same name, strives for demonic power, while Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* provides a modern example of the Faust character who transcends reason and comfort to reach for a supreme grasp of power, art (especially music), and control. We might say that the Odysseus of Nikos Kazantzakis, in his *Odyssey* (1938), picks up the Faustian theme where it intersects with that of the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, whom no obstacle will stop, and who expends himself totally in the recovery of his goals, home and family.

## Illustrative moments

**Disappointment** Faust first appears to us at night, in his study. His initial self-evaluation is bleak. He has studied philosophy, jurisprudence, medicine and theology, and here 'poor fool, I stand once more, no wiser than I was before.' Faust's dilemma is there, in the failure of his studies to give him wisdom. He has fooled his students into thinking he knows something, but in fact he is nothing but a failure, who does not

even know how to acquire earthly riches. He speaks of 'his cell which stifles,' and of the 'universe of moths where I am pent into a dustbin with a thousand trifles.'

**Restless** Faust delights in the streaming crowds of townspeople, who are released into nature once again in Spring and he reflects gloomily on the little he has been able to accomplish as a doctor—a medical doctor—to help others. Not only is he ready for the fresh air of new experience, but he is ready to join the tumult of the human experience. He feels powerful desire to escape from the dusty, antique atmosphere of mediaeval science.

**Riskier** As he meditates he scrutinizes various magical signs, then to his amazement he 'pronounces the sign of the Spirit; a reddish flame flashes, and in the flame appears the Spirit.' Faust is invited by the mysterious Spirit, and feels its presence. Faust and Mephistopheles come to a subtle agreement, on the terms. The devil's challenge will be to bring Faust to a standstill, while Faust will give up his bet on the day he stops immersing himself in the fervor of the earth-spirit.

**Romantic** Faust is ripe for Margarete and falls for her. Mephistopheles listens cynically, while Faust replays in his mind the scenes of innocent bliss that must have transpired in these rooms as Margarete grew up in them. and he and Margarete find themselves, quite entranced, in the garden of the house of Martha, Margarete's older and savvier friend.

### Discussion questions

At what stage in his life is Dr. Faustus, when we first meet him in Goethe's play? Is he up for a change? What kind of change? What has grown stale for him?

What are Faust's feelings as he ruminates in the childhood bedroom of Margarete? Is he lustful? Longing? Charmed by innocence?

Is Faust attracted to Mephistopheles, or just to what this devil offers? Is what this devil offers, delight in the moment, such a bad thing, after all? If not so bad, why is it punished so severely?

**Mephistopheles** (unconscientious)

**Character** Mephistopheles is a demon in Germanic folklore, and appears associated with the figure of Dr. Faustus in the 16th century *Faust* chapbook. This demon typically serves as a vehicle for bad actors who have already in some sense 'lost their souls'; as the supreme negative force, into a 'literary character' in Goethe's *Faust*. Mephistopheles introduces Faust to a wide range of unpredictable and harmful actions. Questioned on his identity, Mephistopheles will only say—as Milton essentially said in *Paradise Lost*—that 'I am part of that force which would do ever evil, and does ever good.' He clarifies this: 'I am the spirit which eternally denies,' for all that has been created deserves to be uncreated. Is Mephistopheles a 'character' or a 'spirit'?

**Parallels** Mephistopheles springs from mediaeval German demonology, and is widely known in the Renaissance for his diabolic magic; as such he wreaks havoc in Marlowe's **Doctor Faustus** (1616). Milton's **Paradise Lost** (1676) gives classic expression to the principle of evil in his Satan/Lucifer, the angel rebelling against God; a concentrated form of evil targeted in Saint John's **Book of Revelation** (last third of first century A.D.) Klaus Mann, son of Thomas Mann, took up the Mephisto theme in the novel of that name (1956), in which an ambitious citizen of Nazi Germany sells his soul for political favors.

### Illustrative moments

**Pragmatic** Mephisto shows Faust how vain traditional academic learning is, thus mocks Faust's own life way, Mephisto dons Faust's academic garb, and pretends to interview incoming students in Faust's University. After ridiculing the studies of logic and metaphysics—central topics of mediaeval education—Mephistopheles turns to a young candidate with a disturbing summary of higher education: 'gray, dear young fellow, is all theorizing, and green, life's golden tree.' Metaphysics, a staple of mediaeval training,

comes in for a particular drubbing from Mephistopheles. He lards with deep irony his advice to the student of metaphysics. The real knowledge, of the senses and practical intellect, are what Mephistopheles has to offer.

**Destructive** As Faust and Margarete grow in love for one another—she a naïve, he old enough to know better—Mephistopheles delights in ridiculing their passion. ‘Just as a freshet floods its banks when swelled by thaw, you poured into her heart the raging current, and now your brook is shallow as before.’ He is in a sense the downdrag in all human enterprise, and as such he functions in Goethe’s play. He is the negative of all that is plan and desire, and he is cynical about human institutions and desires.

**Merciless** The devil has no mercy on those who make a pact with him and then complain at the consequences. He recalls that those who fall for his traps are already fallen, and have only borrowed him to provide mobility and function to their desires. Mephistopheles is well placed to enjoy the fatal breakdown of Faust’s desires. He delights in knowing that no lasting happiness could accrue to Faust and Gretchen as lovers, and in fact that his most ambitious spoiler schemes will bear fruit. Gretchen will poison her mother and get pregnant; Gretchen’s brother will defend her honor but be killed by Faust and Mephistopheles; Gretchen will kill her illegitimate child.

### **Discussion questions**

Mephisto is the spirit who denies, but does he not in fact also proffer delightful things and events, as though he were a source of things mortals love? Doesn’t Mephisto need to offer real pleasures in order to invade human souls?

Does Mephisto have a sense of play? How does he show it? (Bring specific passages to bear on your reply.) Has he a vicious and destructive attitude toward Faust? Or is he himself a bon vivant, enjoying life in his fashion, and (somewhat) enjoying the same pleasures as Faust?

Faust is a restless searcher for knowledge, as the play begins. He is a mediaeval scholar. Does his restless questing spirit generate an anti-force, Mephisto, simply from its intensity? Is Mephisto a psychological projection of Faust? Has Mephisto anything in common with Satan or the Devil, with their foundations in Christianity and Judaism? Or is he truly just a demon?