

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Goethe

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!

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.

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.

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?