

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mefisto (1986)

John Banville (1945-)

OVERVIEW

The novel tells the story of the life of Gabriel Swan, a character who has a great talent for numbers living in Ireland most likely in the 1970s or 80s. He appears to be looking for a numerical solution to many of the everyday problems he encounters in life. The title of the book – *Mefisto* – is also a reference to the great German folk legend in which the character Faust makes a pact with the devil at a crossroads to gain unlimited knowledge by sacrificing his soul. In later versions of the tale, the devil character is called Mephistopheles. The mephistophelean character in this novel is a man named Felix, who is a man about town involved in drug dealing and other unnamed nefarious activities. For some unexplained reason, he takes Swan under his wing.

The novel is divided into two sections. In the first section – ‘Marionettes’ - we encounter Swan in a house called Ashburn, where his mother used to live. We are never entirely sure why Gabriel spends so much time in the house and we learn little about his relationship with his parents. Felix lives at Ashburn with a Mr. Kasperl, who owns the local mine and his mistress Sophie, who is deaf. Swan develops an interest in Sophie towards the end of his time in the house.

The second part of the novel – ‘Angels’ - opens with Gabriel having been involved in a life-threatening fire. He has severe burns all over his body and he undergoes lengthy operations involving skin grafting and physiotherapy. We never find out how he was burned or how the fire started. The unexplained nature of the combustion leads to speculation whether this is another reference to the mysterious spontaneous combustion of *Bleak House* by Dickens, or – more likely – a reference to the fire that burns down the house that Faust loves in the story of *Faust* written by Goethe.

In this second part of the novel, Gabriel is once again being used by others for his mathematical abilities. And we have a mysterious group of characters employed by an organisation (possibly by the government) to work on codes that they analyse with a mysterious machine. Swan works with a Professor Kosok and a character named Leitch to break these mysterious codes. At times, the group resembles the famous British code-breaking group that worked under the famous mathematician Alan Turing during the Second World War.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Mefisto is a complex and meandering novel. When Banville wrote this novel, he was also still working on a trilogy of novels that began with *Eclipse*. Banville is intentionally very unclear about the location of the novel and about the backgrounds of the characters. It is also difficult at times to work out who is speaking. At times it feels as if we inhabit a dreamscape.

There are also many literary references in the novel. The most obvious is to the German folk legend *Faust*, a legend that has been interpreted many times by other writers such as Christopher Marlowe and Goethe. Banville takes many liberties with his version, but the underlying theme remains intact. Gabriel Swan is a young man who struggles to understand the world about him and his relationships with other. He places too much value in numbers and tries to interpret everything accordingly. He keeps getting co-opted to work on mysterious numerical projects that he hopes will give him greater knowledge. In the end, the quest to work with numbers only leads to failed relationships and a serious accident that almost kills him. The name Swan might also be a reference to the character Swann in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. As *Mefisto* is also a novel that deals with memory, and since Proust's novel is famous for giving us a lengthy exploration of memory, it is fitting that Banville's protagonist is named after one of Proust's main characters.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Gabriel Swan	The protagonist of the novel. A young man who is gifted with numbers.
Felix	The Mephistophelean character in the book who takes Swan under his wing.
Sophie	A character who lives in Ashburn where Gabriel visits. She is deaf.
Mr. Kasperl	The main authority figure at Ashburn, who also owns the local mine.
Professor Kosok	A scientist and mathematician, who works leads attempting to break codes.
Adele	A woman whom Gabriel falls for and who is a drug addict.
Uncle Ambrose	Gabriel's uncle and Mr. Kasperl's chauffeur.

PLOT

Section I Marionettes

Gabriel is a twin The novel begins in a deeply involved first-person voice. The main character and narrator, Gabriel, refers to his upbringing in terms of the Greek and Roman classical characters of Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux) famous fictional and semi-divine twins of Zeus. Gabriel's twin is also male. There was another pair of twins on Gabriel's mother's side, but they only lived for a day. We also learn the names of his grandfathers – John Kay and Grandfather Swan.

The family leave Ashburn The narrator (Gabriel) is looking back on the early days of the house Ashburn. He tells us his mother's parents were evicted from the house at Ashburn and had to come and live with her. The narrator then takes us back to the moment of his birth in his mother's house where his grandfather John Kay listens outside the front door. We also learn that his twin brother died at birth.

The narrator's memories The narrator – Gabriel - refers to himself in the third person in his recollections of his young self growing up and being nursed by his mother. Gabriel recalls his own memory of Grandfather Swan. The old man is in the sickroom, dying. However, the narrator then asks himself whether he has mixed up two memories. Whether he has replaced the gentle character of one grandfather with the more robust character of his other grandfather Jack Kay.

Gabriel's youth We learn that Gabriel's father worked as a tallyman for a grain merchant and that Gabriel grew up in a small town, where he attended the convent school. He was unhappy in school and used to fantasise about being able to escape into another identity. He relates this ability to visualise such a new identity as linked to his identity as a twin. He describes this connection with his departed brother as a "double" that accompanied him all through his life.

Gabriel discovers his love for numbers He tells us that he became obsessed with the "mystery of the unit". That he could count before he could talk. From numbers he gets a sense of harmony, symmetry and completeness, something he can never feel in other aspects of his life.

He excels at school He was top of the class each year and each year won the prize for mental arithmetic. But he made little of his achievements. He would tear up his report card at the end of each year.

The maths teacher comes to the house The teacher tells Gabriel's mother that Gabriel has a brilliant gift for numbers. We learn that there are new people living at his mother's old house, Ashburn.

The glory of discovery The gifted, young mathematician enjoys the wonder of discovery, spending hours hunched over his textbooks and scribbling calculations. Things happen in a flash – one moment the question is there and the next moment it is solved. Gabriel has the feeling that there is someone else inside him solving the equations.

Lonely but meets people Gabriel, who has no friends, goes on long walks on his own around the town and explores the old tunnels of the mine. It is while exploring these tunnels that he has his first encounter with Mr. Kasperl. Later, with Felix, Mr Kasperl hires men and restarts work at the mine.

He also walks out to the old abandoned big house at Ashburn, abandoned and padlocked. While walking there he meets Mr. Kasperl, Sophie and Felix for the first time. Next, they all meet again at Black's Hotel, where Gabriel's Aunt Philomena is the manageress. We learn that Felix is a travelling salesman.

Freedom at Ashburn At Ashburn, Gabriel has a great sense of freedom that makes him feel like an exile at home. He tells us that at Ashburn the horizon seemed limitless. However, he still conceives of his relationships with others – such as Sophie – in terms of mathematical problems. Sophie communicates in a language that consists not of words but of “moving forms”. She does not use sign language very often.

Felix kills a mouse One day, when Sophie and Gabriel are playing in her bedroom and have their first furtive kiss, Sophie notices a small mouse. She takes it up and lovingly strokes its hair. Jack Kay and Felix are arguing about something downstairs at the front door of the house. When Felix comes up to the room, with Sophie and Gabriel, he captures the mouse that has scurried away behind the bed. He pretends to be taking it outside. Felix opens his hand to show Gabriel the mouse when Sophie has run out of the room. It is motionless with its front paws folded over and a “bubble of ruby blood in its snout”.

Anxieties Gabriel learns that Uncle Ambrose has been kicked out of the old family home of Ashburn by Mr. Kasperl for a second time. Gabriel's mother is upset as it brings back the time she also had to leave the house. Gabriel's mother fears that Mr. Kasperl and Felix are also trying to take Gabriel from her.

Gabriel's rapport with Mr Kasperl Sophie takes Gabriel into Mr. Kasperl's room for the first time and finds it filled with papers and notebooks. On every page are calculations, diagrams, and algebraic formulas. Gabriel is transfixed. He understands most of it and realises that he shares Mr. Kasperl's interest in symmetries. He is oblivious to Sophie by his side as he becomes enthralled by the numbers.

Jack Kay dies Gabriel has to care for the dying Jack Kay – his grandfather – and under his watch he falls out of bed and is found by Gabriel's mother in a heap on the floor. Gabriel is surprised to see Felix at his grandfather's funeral. He beckons mysteriously to Gabriel, who notices a sculpture of the seraph with outstretched wings behind him.

Uncle Ambrose and Mr. Kasperl Uncle Ambrose becomes Mr Kasperl's chauffeur. He is to drive Mr. Kasperl from Ashburton to Black's Hotel and out to the mine whenever he requires it.

A wedding scene Felix persuades Gabriel and Sophie to act out a wedding with Gabriel dressed up as the bride in lipstick, veil and wedding dress, and Sophie as bridegroom in top hat and tails. Felix is the priest joining them in matrimony.

An explosion at the mine! Gabriel and Felix are near the mine when they hear an explosion. A puff of smoke rises from the pithead. Two men are killed and a dozen are maimed. The mine had been closed and over time the roof supports rotted. There were rumours the mine was haunted..

Sophie and Mr. Kasperl Shortly afterwards Felix tells Gabriel to look through the keyhole into Sophie's room where Mr. Kasperl and she are engaged in an amorous encounter. From what is described all we can see is that Mr. Kasperl buries his face in Sophie's clothes and seems to be weeping.

Gabriel's mother dies in a car crash Uncle Ambrose takes Gabriel's father and mother out for a spin in his car. The car crashes and Gabriel's mother is killed, while Uncle Ambrose and Gabriel's father escaped with injuries. Gabriel must go to the morgue to identify the body of his mother. But the doctor and attendants mix up the bodies and Gabriel is first shown the body of an older woman. When

he finally sees the body of his mother, he feels it is no longer his mother but something “she had left behind”.

Burning gas Gabriel revisits Ashburn and finds out that the gas in the mine has continued to burn and that people in the town are very unhappy as the “whole town is sitting on it”. He says there will be “hell to pay”. Felix suggests that they should get out of the town and never come back.

Sophie and Mr. Kasperl are lovers Gabriel returns to the house, where he and Felix creep up to Mr. Kasperl’s room. They peer through a crack in the door and they see a naked Mr. Kasperl on his bed with Sophie putting on her slip.

Sophie’s marionettes Gabriel finds Sophie’s marionettes in Ashburn on his last visit to the house. Each one is crafted to look like one of the people in Ashburn. There is a marionette of him, Uncle Ambrose, Mr. Kasperl and Felix.

Section II – Angels

Gabriel awakes from a long sleep and we learn he has been in a fire Gabriel awakes from a long sleep in a hospital. He appeals to the daemon Lamia who has cared for him during his season in hell. Lamia in classical Greek mythology is a daemon or fiend who takes the form of a beautiful woman to seduce young men and then devour them.

Gabriel has burns all over his body When he screams in pain in the hospital, a nurse comes to administer a painkiller through a drip to him. In his delirious state, he sees the nurse as the daemon Lamia. Dr. Cranitch arrives to tell him he will pull through. He undergoes a series of skin grafts and a lengthy period of physiotherapy.

He meets Felix again Gabriel meets the Mephistophelean character, Felix, again on a park bench when he has been discharged from hospital. Felix somehow recognises him and approaches. Gabriel asks Felix to help him since he is wandering the streets following the homeless and the destitute. Felix scribbles his address on a piece of paper and tells Gabriel to visit him. At Felix’s house he meets Adele and Professor Kosok.

Gabriel learns Adele is an addict Gabriel and Adele wander the shopping arcades together and ride the busses. Then she takes him back to the room she lives in. Gabriel discovers she is an addict. We also learn that Gabriel has been giving some of his strong painkillers away. Addicts come up to him on the street asking for more. He must push them away.

Felix asks Gabriel to work for Professor Kosok Felix takes Gabriel drinking and tells him that professor Kosok wants Gabriel to work for him. We are not told what the work involves. As they are leaving the pub Felix meets a couple and Gabriel sees him dealing out drugs to them.

Gabriel gets to see the “monster” Felix takes Gabriel to the house he will work in. He meets Leitch, the assistant to Professor Kosok. Leitch shows Gabriel the “monster” a special machine – called a Reizner 666 - the group uses to crunch numbers or solve puzzles. We are never told fully what their work involves.

How the machine works We learn that the machine is connected to others like it in other parts of the world. In the middle of the night its printer will spring to life, producing lists of coded questions. Once the correct codes are typed in, the machine produces reams of figures. Once the machine had finished Leitch and Gabriel would spend weeks sifting through the figures searching for patterns and correspondence and repetition. They work by night and then other users come from offices above them to manage the machine during the day.

Gabriel and Adele become lovers Felix is once again always ready to pounce when Gabriel is involved in extremely personal moments with those he loves. After their lovemaking, Felix appears to Gabriel and Adele to ask Gabriel how his work is going.

Gabriel begins to realise there is more to things than numbers After the party, Gabriel has another moment of realisation. From the start, the world had appeared to him as an “immense formula” but now he realises that it was not numbers that lay at the heart of things but something more subtle. He is convinced he will find it and describes it as a “dark flower opening its throat to the night”. It is in the “big world” that he will find the essence of things. The feeling is so strong inside him that he feels he is being followed by a kind of spirit.

Gabriel sees the error of his ways Gabriel hits upon another discovery: he had mistaken “pluralities for unities”. Things in the world are never so small that “they cannot be resolved into smaller things”. He shares his discovery with Leitch, who does not seem to understand.

Miss Hackett pays them a visit We meet Miss Hackett who has come to check on their work so she can report on their results to “the minister”. It is at this point that we realise they must be working for a secret government organisation. She complains about the lack of certainty in the results they provide.

Adele has an overdose Gabriel finds Adele unconscious in her bathroom. She has overdosed. He calls an ambulance. Once she is put on a stretcher on the pavement she wakes up and asks Gabriel, “What have you done?” While in hospital Gabriel begins stealing medication for the hospital for her. He becomes a kind of dealer. He provides her with drugs and in return they make love.

Felix’s friend Tony is killed Gabriel finds out that Felix’s friend Tony has been killed on the streets. He is filled with terror now when he is out in the city.

The communications to the machine dry up The communications to the machine dry up and the relationship with Leitch completely breaks down. Gabriel realises it is time to move on from his work with the group.

Gabriel learns that Professor Kosok was leading them astray Felix meets Gabriel and takes him to the Goat pub for a second time. There they go for a walk and Felix tells him that Professor Kosok was using the machine to prove that nothing can be proved.

Adele dies from an overdose Adele is found in the chapel of the hospital dead from an overdose. It is where they used to go to make love and where Gabriel left the drugs for her. He returns to her room in Chandos Street to find Professor Kosok grieving. It turns out that Kosok was her father.

Gabriel loses his talent for numbers Gabriel wakes one morning to find that he can no longer add or subtract. He then eventually starts again and this time he returns to basics. He is starting again with the “simplest things” and there is a suggestion that he will meet Felix again.

THEMES

Obsession and Isolation Gabriel is a character who is obsessed by numbers and the symmetries that can be observed and traced through numbers. He is a lonely boy who works tirelessly on equations and calculations. In lacking friends and family whom he can bond with, we learn that he falls for figures instead. Whenever he experiences a new relationship or a moment of loss, he returns to numbers and to equations for solace. He has convinced himself that the value lying behind all things can be found in numbers. Throughout the novel this value system is put to the test. In the end, Gabriel is left completely friendless and isolated and we come to realise that his belief system is flawed. He ends up being an accomplice to the suicide of Adele, the one person in the novel he has come close to. The novel might be highlighting ways of perceiving the world that privilege the empirical and the abstract above the everyday.

Loss In employing the literary figure of Mephistopheles as an archetype through which to understand the defining relationship of the novel – that between Felix and Gabriel – Banville reminds the reader how important is it to find your own way in life. It is because Gabriel feels so lost once his parents have died that he falls in again with Felix. Once in the company of Felix, Gabriel appears to lose all sense of direction. He becomes a mere pawn in the work of the groups he finds himself in,

following the rules set down by characters such as Mr. Kasperl and Professor Kosok. Gabriel appears to lack the fortitude and moral conviction to find his own way in life, and one begins to doubt by the end of the novel that the only reason for this is his obsession with numbers.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Gabriel Gabriel has a great gift for working with numbers. He is undeniably a special talent. However, his obsession with numbers leads to him being unable to understand how he should conduct himself in interpersonal relationships. He is something of a fish out of water when he must give up numbers for people.

Obsessed Gabriel's obsession with numbers leads him to believe that everything in the world should follow the rules and symmetries one finds in working on numbers. For example, when his mother dies in the car crash and his Uncle Ambrose also finally succumbs to the injuries suffered in the crash after the tragedy at the mine, Gabriel retreats to his room and to the world of numbers. We are told that after this period of tragedy he works flat out to find some rule or coherence in the world of numbers that will help him come to terms with what has happened. However, in the end, we discover that even his relationship with Adele is guided by a kind of mathematical quid pro quo where drugs are exchange for lovemaking. It seems that Gabriel has not learned from all the tragedies that human relationships do not only follow rules derived from the study of numbers. Even at the very end of the novel, Gabriel is still returning the "simplest things" but only, once again, according to the rules of numbers.

Naïve Gabriel is highly impressionable. On two occasions, he follows the course suggested to him by the Mephistophelean character Felix even though he has seen how much tragedy results from following Felix. Gabriel lacks direction because he is incapable of forming strong emotional bonds with the people in his life. All of the relationships he forms are mediated through his theories about numbers. Even though he appears to be wise to the antics of Felix in deciding not to follow him in leaving Ashburn, he still decides to follow his advice when he recovers from his accident. Once again, this is because he is not able to form strong emotional bond with other people. As a result, he leaves himself open to following those who appear to take an interest in him.

Felix

Impulsive In being something of a stock character, Felix is somewhat one-dimensional. Banville obviously intends him to be the Mephistophelean character in the novel so he can't really stray from type too much. Felix is therefore lacking in depth at times and yet at the same time he is the ringmaster of the plot. He gently guides Gabriel into all his occupations and relationships. He is a travelling salesman, a man about town, and someone who is immune to emotional entanglement. The only times we see another side of Felix are the moments when he is about to take up and leave a location. At these moments, he typically takes Gabriel on a walk or on a tour in the countryside and he tends to spend the time commenting on the beauty of the landscape and on the importance of spending time close to it. At these moments his character seems positive and offers us a refreshing alternative to Gabriel who is lacklustre, ponderous, and easily led. Felix is dynamic, impulsive, and resolute and this is an important and essential part of his character.

Selfish: Callous Felix must also surely be a callous character since he is the Mephistophelean character in the novel. He would not be living up to type if he was anything else. He demonstrates this when he captures the mouse that Sophie has been stroking tenderly and suffocates and crushes it in one grasp without admitting to doing it. His callousness is also clear at those times when he fails to help characters whom he has been working with. For example, when Mr. Kasperl and Sophie must deal with the aftermath of the mine explosion, Felix's first impulse is to get out of town. And when Adele kills herself by overdosing and Professor Kosok, her father, is grieving, Felix once again decides to head for pastures greener. There is never even a suggestion that he spent time sympathising with those characters who have experienced tragedy. The only character he seems to help out in any way is Gabriel, but this is found to lead him into situations that end in tragedy.

Adele Adele is a vulnerable and lonely character who is unable to form long and lasting relationships. She is the daughter of Prof. Kosok.

Vulnerable Adele is a vulnerable character, who keeps surrounding herself with characters who seem to care more for numbers than for people; her father is Professor Kosok and she has a

relationship with Gabriel. Adele ultimately commits suicide by taking a drug overdose. There is a suggestion that Adele's relationship with Gabriel is a case of history repeating itself and she is once again allowing a mathematician to take her under her wing; however, she remains isolated. By the end of the novel it seems that Gabriel's relationship with Adele has become little more than a kind of mathematical quid pro quo where drugs are exchanged for lovemaking. It seems that Adele and Gabriel both crave something that numbers will not give them.