

# FAUST

by Johann von Goethe



## THE AUTHOR

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) is considered by many to be the greatest of all German writers. His long career spanned both the classical and the Romantic eras, and his greatest work contains elements of both. Goethe was born into a middle class family in Frankfurt, and gained most of his education from his father, who taught him at home. He was interested in many things, especially the sciences, which he believed held the potential for ever-expanding knowledge. Goethe studied law at the University of Strasbourg, but while there he first became acquainted with the work of Shakespeare, which sparked his lifelong interest in theater. He practiced law for four years after finishing his degree, but during this time began writing plays and produced his first prominent novel, *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (1774). During his lifetime, he befriended such notable German thinkers as J.G. von Herder and Friedrich Schiller.

Goethe first encountered the Faust legend as a young boy when he saw it performed in a puppet show. While at Strasbourg, he began to investigate the legend, including reading Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Shortly thereafter, he began to write his own version of the Faust story. The effort turned out to be the work of a lifetime. Between 1772 and 1775, Goethe wrote a rough version of the drama, which he then set aside (his handwritten copy was not discovered until the late nineteenth century, and is now known as *Urfaust*). Because Goethe had the habit of working on many major projects at once, further efforts on *Faust* were delayed. In 1790, he published *Faust, A Fragment; Faust, A Tragedy* (what we know today as Part One) was not published until 1808. He continued working on the drama, but found himself stymied in his efforts again and again. Finally, he completed Part Two in 1831; it was published posthumously the following year.

Goethe claimed that all of his writings were based in one way or another on his personal experience. This was certainly the case with *Faust*. The protagonist was in many ways modeled on Goethe himself - a Renaissance man with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and experience. The key plot element introduced by Goethe into the legend - the Gretchen narrative - was based on an actual occurrence. In 1772, Susanna Margarethe Brandt was beheaded for murdering her own child. Though she claimed to have been possessed by the devil, she had actually been raped, and the rapist had forced her to murder the baby.

The Faust legend is based on an actual person. Johann Faust (1480-1540) was a contemporary of Luther. He was a noted skeptic and sought to duplicate the miracles of the Gospels by studying magic at the University of Cracow. It is said that he gained his magic powers by selling his soul to the devil. Luther and Melanchthon deplored the heretic, and Melanchthon is one of the sources of the story that Faust traveled in the company of the devil, who took the form of a dog. Within fifty years of his death, the first versions of the Faust legend appeared in print. The various versions of the story reflect the ages in which they were written; in each Faust sells his soul for what the age values - knowledge for Marlowe, experience for Goethe, and a pennant for the Washington Senators in *Damn Yankees*.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Faust - A scholar and university professor, he tires of the academic routine and thirsts for more. Using his magic to fulfill his desires, he summons up spirits, including the Devil himself, Mephistopheles, to whom he sells his soul. Because Goethe could not bring himself to write a real tragedy, Faust is saved in the end.
- Mephistopheles - The Devil, who appears first to Faust in the form of a dog, and then as a wandering scholar. He leads Faust through a variety of experiences, then allows his soul to slip through his fingers at the end of the play.
- Margaret (Gretchen) - A poor seamstress with whom Faust falls in love. He gives her a sleeping potion for her mother so they can be together, but unbeknownst to him, the potion is poison, and Gretchen's mother dies. After they have slept together numerous times, Gretchen gets pregnant, but kills her baby after it is born. She is arrested and executed for murder, but repents at the end and is received into heaven. At the end, she is one of the spirits who receives Faust into the heavenly realm.
- Wagner - Faust's assistant, a pedestrian figure who cares for nothing but scholarship.
- Martha - Gretchen's neighbor, wooed by Mephistopheles, she allows her garden to be used as a trysting place for the lovers.
- Valentine - Gretchen's brother, a soldier, who is killed in a duel by Faust with Mephistopheles' aid.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast,  
And one is striving to forsake its brother.  
Unto the world in grossly loving zest,  
With clinging tendrils, one adheres;  
The other rises forcibly in quest  
Of rarefied ancestral spheres.

If there be spirits in the air  
That hold their sway between the earth and sky,  
Descend out of the golden vapors there  
And sweep me into iridescent life.  
Oh, came a magic cloak into my hands  
To carry me to distant lands,  
I should not trade it for the choicest gown,  
Nor for the cloak and garments of the crown.” (Faust, Part One, lines 1112-1125)

## NOTES

**Part I** - After a dedication and prelude, the story begins with a scene in heaven reminiscent of the Book of Job. Mephistopheles appears before the Lord, who points out His child Faust. Mephistopheles insists that he can lead the scholar astray, and God gives him leave to try. We then meet Faust, frustrated with his inability to gain the esoteric knowledge he craves by means of magic. Faust considers suicide, but decides against it when he hears the Easter celebration beginning. When Faust and his assistant Wagner take a walk on Easter Sunday, they are followed home by a poodle, who turns out to be the devil himself - Mephistopheles. Back in Faust's study, the poodle transforms himself into the form of a wandering scholar, revealing himself to be the devil. He bargains with Faust for his soul, and Faust consents if Mephistopheles will serve him on earth, doing his bidding. Faust also insists that he will gladly turn himself over to the devil if Mephistopheles can show him one moment of satisfaction or contentment. Faust then signs the pact in blood.

Mephistopheles first takes him to Auerbach's Tavern in Leipzig, where young revelers are enjoying themselves. The two then visit a witch, who gives Faust the appearance of a young man. Next they stand outside a church, where Faust spots a beautiful young seamstress named Margaret (also called Gretchen) and falls in love with her. He demands that Mephistopheles get her for him, and he proceeds to do so, enticing her with jewelry planted in her room and gaining the cooperation of her neighbor Martha to provide a place for them to meet. Faust then seduces Gretchen, who unintentionally kills her mother with a sleeping potion given her by Faust (and given to him by Mephistopheles). Gretchen becomes pregnant, and her angry brother Valentine challenges Faust to a duel. With Mephistopheles' help, Faust kills Valentine. While Gretchen suffers from her grief, Mephistopheles takes Faust to a Walpurgis Night celebration (April 30, the eve of May Day - a witches' festival somewhat like Halloween) in the nearby Harz Mountains. While there, Faust sees a vision of Gretchen in chains - in her madness, she has drowned her newborn baby, and has been imprisoned and condemned to death. Faust is determined to rescue her, and insists that Mephistopheles take him to her. When he arrives at the jail, he finds Gretchen mad - so mad that she refuses to come with him, though the door to the cell is open and her chains have fallen off. Mephistopheles drags the unwilling Faust from the dungeon, Gretchen is executed, but a voice from heaven announces her salvation.

**Part II** - Our translation only includes scene 1 and Act V of the second part of the play. In scene 1, Faust is comforted in his grief at the loss of Gretchen by friendly spirits. In Act V, Faust, now a hundred years old, is busily engaged in a land reclamation project (he had earlier invented paper money, traveled with Homunculus - a miniature man created by Wagner in the laboratory, and

conjured up and produced a child with Helen of Troy). His project is being spoiled by an old couple, Philemon and Baucis, who refuse to leave their cottage, which is, coincidentally, in the very place Faust wishes to erect his castle. Faust gets Mephistopheles to arrange for his three “strong men” (read thugs) to evict the couple and relocate them to another estate. Instead, they kill the old couple and burn their house down. Faust is then visited by Want, Debt, Need, and Care, and the last strikes him blind. He then has a beautiful vision, but just before arriving at the contentment he had asked Mephistopheles to provide, he dies. Mephistopheles, convinced he has won the bet, prepares to carry Faust’s soul to Hell, but angels arrive and carry him to Heaven, where he is met by the souls of the blessed - Gretchen among them.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The career of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe spanned the Enlightenment and the Romantic Era. How does his great play *Faust* reflect the strengths and weaknesses of both periods? With which do you think Goethe sympathized more? Why? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
2. Goethe’s *Faust* contains numerous allusions to the works of Shakespeare. Choose three of those allusions and evaluate the extent to which Goethe is faithful to the sources from which he borrowed. What aspects of Shakespeare’s work does he retain? In what ways does he use familiar images or characters for his own purposes, taking them in different directions than those developed by Shakespeare?
3. Goethe’s *Faust* is full of biblical allusions. Choose three of these and evaluate Goethe’s use of them in the play. To what extent is he faithful to Scripture in his use of biblical ideas, and to what extent does he distort biblical teaching for his own purposes?
4. Would you consider the protagonist of Goethe’s *Faust* to be a tragic hero? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
5. Is the protagonist of Goethe’s *Faust* a hero or a villain? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
6. In Goethe’s *Faust*, the protagonist rejects the realm of knowledge for the realm of experience - he is a true man of the Romantic Era. In your opinion, does Goethe endorse Faust’s decision? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
7. Compare and contrast the Prologue of Goethe’s *Faust* with the first two chapters of the book of Job in the Bible. Give attention to both the characters and the dialogue in your assessment.
8. In Goethe’s *Faust*, what do the final destinies of Gretchen and Faust communicate about the religious views of the playwright? Analyze the theology of Goethe using the two death scenes as well as any other appropriate events from the play.

9. In Goethe's *Faust*, is the relationship between Faust and Gretchen more one of love or lust? Why do you think so? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
10. Evaluate the character of Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*. To what extent is she a victim of the machinations of others, and to what extent is she the cause of her own troubles?
11. Discuss the theme of "striving" as it appears in Goethe's *Faust*. Why may it be considered the central value of the play? What does this theme convey about the underlying philosophy of the playwright? Support your discussion with details from the text.