

Faust

by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe · Language: EN

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Overview

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* is a two-part tragic play that reimagines the medieval legend of a scholar who makes a pact with the devil. The story follows Heinrich Faust, a learned but dissatisfied doctor and philosopher, who feels that his vast knowledge has not brought him true understanding of the world. Frustrated and on the brink of suicide, he enters into a wager with Mephistopheles, the devil's envoy: Mephistopheles will serve Faust on Earth, fulfilling his every desire, but if Faust ever experiences a moment of such perfect contentment that he wishes it to last forever, he will lose his soul and serve the devil in the afterlife. The play explores Faust's journey through a series of worldly experiences, from love and tragedy to political intrigue and classical mythology, ultimately questioning the nature of human striving, redemption, and the limits of knowledge.

The first part of *Faust* (published in 1808) focuses on Faust's love affair with Gretchen (Margaret), a young, innocent woman. Their relationship leads to Gretchen's social ruin, the death of her mother and brother, and her infanticide, culminating in her imprisonment and madness. Faust, urged by Mephistopheles, abandons her, and she is ultimately saved by divine grace despite her crimes. The second part (published in 1832) is far more allegorical and expansive, taking Faust through the imperial court, a journey to the realm of the Mothers, a union with Helen of Troy, and finally a grand project of land reclamation. In his old age, Faust, now blind, envisions a free people on free soil and utters the fateful words that he would wish to stay. Mephistopheles tries to claim his soul, but divine grace intervenes, and Faust is redeemed, ascending to heaven.

Faust is considered one of the greatest works of German literature and a cornerstone of Western drama. It grapples with the Enlightenment's faith in reason, the Romantic yearning for the infinite, and the perennial human questions of ambition, sin, and salvation. Its influence extends across literature, music, and philosophy, and its famous lines, such as the wager and the final chorus, have become part of the cultural lexicon. The play remains a profound meditation on the human condition, challenging readers to consider the price of relentless striving and the possibility of redemption even after a life of error.

Key Takeaways

- Faust's tragedy lies not in his pact with the devil but in his restless dissatisfaction with any finite achievement, which drives him to ever-greater excess.

- The wager between Faust and Mephistopheles is not about good versus evil but about whether a human being can ever be fully satisfied with a moment of existence.
- Gretchen's fate illustrates the destructive consequences of unchecked desire and the social double standards that punish women more harshly than men.
- Part Two of Faust moves from personal drama to grand allegory, showing that human striving can be directed toward collective, constructive ends, such as land reclamation.
- Goethe's Faust is not a simple morality play; it suggests that error and striving are inherent to human life, and that redemption may come through relentless activity, not moral perfection.
- The play's final scene, with Faust's soul ascending to heaven, implies that divine grace can forgive even the most flawed of strivers if they have never ceased to strive.
- Mephistopheles is not a traditional devil but a cynical, nihilistic spirit who denies the value of all human endeavor, making him a foil to Faust's eternal aspiration.
- The work is best approached as a philosophical poem rather than a conventional drama, with its two parts differing greatly in style, structure, and tone.

Chapter Summaries

Dedication, Prelude on the Stage, and Prologue in Heaven

The play opens with a dedication reflecting on the passage of time and the return of old friends. A theater manager, a dramatist, and a comic actor discuss the purpose of theater, debating between popular appeal and artistic merit. The Prologue in Heaven sets the cosmic stage: Mephistopheles appears before the Lord and wagers that he can lead Faust astray. The Lord accepts the wager, confident that Faust, despite his errors, will ultimately find the right path. This prologue establishes the framework of the entire drama, framing Faust's story as a test of human striving and divine grace.

Part One: Night to Study

Faust, a learned scholar, is in his study, despairing over the limits of human knowledge. He has mastered philosophy, law, medicine, and theology, yet feels no wiser. He attempts to conjure the Earth Spirit, but is rebuffed. His assistant Wagner enters, representing the pedantic scholar, and Faust dismisses him. In his despair, Faust contemplates suicide, but the sound of Easter bells and angelic choirs draws him back to life. He goes for a walk with Wagner, where he is greeted by townspeople, but he remains alienated. Returning home, he finds a poodle that follows him, which will soon reveal itself as Mephistopheles.

Part One: The Pact and the Student

In his study, Faust translates the Gospel of John, changing 'In the beginning was the Word' to 'In the beginning was the Deed,' signaling his turn toward action. The poodle transforms into

Mephistopheles, who introduces himself as a spirit that denies. Faust and Mephistopheles strike a wager: Mephistopheles will serve Faust, but if Faust ever becomes so content with a moment that he cries 'Stay, you are so beautiful,' he will lose the wager and his soul. Mephistopheles then appears to a young student, offering cynical advice on academic life. Faust, rejuvenated, prepares to leave his study and experience the world.

Part One: Auerbach's Cellar and the Witch's Kitchen

Mephistopheles takes Faust to Auerbach's Cellar, a tavern in Leipzig, where drunken students mock them. Mephistopheles performs a trick, making wine flow from a table and causing a fire illusion, but the students are not impressed. The scene satirizes lowbrow revelry. Next, they visit a witch's kitchen, where Faust is served a potion that makes him appear younger and inflames his desires. In a magic mirror, Faust sees the image of a beautiful woman, Gretchen, and is immediately smitten. The potion and the mirror set the stage for his fateful encounter with Gretchen, marking his descent into sensual passion.

Part One: Gretchen's Tragedy

Faust meets Gretchen on the street and is captivated by her innocence. With Mephistopheles' help, he gains access to her room and leaves a gift of jewels. Gretchen, seduced by Faust, falls in love. Their affair leads to tragedy: Gretchen's mother dies from a sleeping potion administered by Faust, her brother Valentine is killed by Faust in a duel, and Gretchen, pregnant and abandoned, drowns her newborn child. She is imprisoned and condemned to death. Faust, urged by Mephistopheles, tries to free her, but she refuses, recognizing his companion as the devil. In the dungeon, she is saved by a voice from heaven, while Faust is dragged away by Mephistopheles.

Part Two: Act I – The Imperial Court and the Mothers

Part Two opens with Faust, weary and guilt-ridden, sleeping in a meadow, healed by spirits. Mephistopheles takes him to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, where the state is in financial crisis. Faust and Mephistopheles propose a solution: to issue paper money backed by hidden gold. The Emperor, pleased, asks Faust to conjure the spirits of Helen of Troy and Paris. Faust, with Mephistopheles' guidance, descends to the realm of the Mothers, a mysterious place of eternal forms, and brings back the shades. The court is amazed, but when Faust attempts to embrace Helen, an explosion occurs, and he collapses.

Part Two: Act II – Classical Walpurgis Night

Faust lies unconscious in his old study, where Wagner, his former assistant, is now a celebrated scholar. Wagner creates a homunculus, a tiny artificial man in a vial, who sees Faust's condition and suggests a journey to the Classical Walpurgis Night in Greece. There, they encounter mythological figures: sphinxes, griffins, and the wise centaur Chiron, who takes Faust to see the healer Manto. Manto leads Faust to the underworld to seek Helen. The homunculus, seeking to become fully alive, shatters his vial on the chariot of Galatea, merging with the ocean. The scene

is a phantasmagoria of classical myth and alchemical symbolism.

Part Two: Act III – The Marriage of Faust and Helen

This act is a play within a play, reimagining the tragedy of Euripides. Helen of Troy, having returned to Sparta, is threatened with death by Menelaus. She seeks refuge in a medieval castle, where Faust, now a feudal lord, offers her protection. Faust and Helen fall in love and marry, and they have a son, Euphorion, who embodies the spirit of poetry and striving. Euphorion, in his reckless ambition to fly, falls to his death, and Helen, mourning, returns to the underworld, leaving Faust with her garments, which transform into clouds. The union symbolizes the synthesis of classical and romantic ideals, but it is fleeting.

Part Two: Act IV – The Emperor's War and the Bestowal of the Shore

Faust, now back in the German lands, helps the Emperor quell a rebellion using Mephistopheles' magical illusions. As a reward, Faust is granted a coastal territory to rule. He envisions reclaiming land from the sea to create a prosperous realm. However, his methods are ruthless: he forces the elderly couple Philemon and Baucis to move, and when they refuse, their hut is burned down, and they are killed. Faust is horrified but also determined. He becomes blind in his old age, yet he continues to plan his great project, seeing in his mind's eye the future of his reclaimed land.

Part Two: Act V – Faust's Death and Redemption

In his final moments, Faust, blind, hears the sound of shovels and believes his workers are completing his land reclamation project. In reality, Mephistopheles and his minions are digging Faust's grave. Faust, imagining a free people on free soil, utters the fateful words: 'Then to the moment I could say: Stay, you are so beautiful!' He dies, and Mephistopheles believes he has won the wager. However, angels descend, scattering roses that distract the devils, and they carry Faust's soul to heaven. In the final scene, the Chorus Mysticus proclaims that the eternal feminine draws us upward, and Faust is redeemed, his soul saved by divine grace.

Themes

- The limits of knowledge
- The nature of temptation
- Striving and redemption
- The conflict between good and evil
- The eternal feminine
- The pursuit of the infinite

Notable Quotes

- "Whoever strives with all his might, that man we can redeem." — Spoken by the angels in the final scene of Part Two, as they carry Faust's soul to heaven, indicating that redemption is granted to those who never cease striving.
- "The eternal feminine draws us upward." — The closing line of the Chorus Mysticus in Part Two, Act V, summarizing the play's theme of redemption through love and the feminine principle.
- "I am the spirit that denies! And rightly so, for all that comes to be deserves to perish." — Mephistopheles introduces himself to Faust in the study, revealing his nihilistic nature and his role as the force of negation.
- "If ever I say to the moment: 'Stay, you are so beautiful!' then you may cast me into chains." — Faust's wager with Mephistopheles in the study, stating the condition under which he would lose his soul.
- "In the beginning was the Deed." — Faust's translation of the Gospel of John, replacing 'Word' with 'Deed,' signifying his turn from passive knowledge to active striving.
- "Gretchen: 'Heinrich! I am afraid of you.'" — Gretchen's words to Faust in the dungeon scene of Part One, as she recognizes the demonic influence of Mephistopheles and recoils from Faust.
- "Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, and one is striving to be separate from the other." — Faust's lament in his study, expressing the inner conflict between his earthly desires and his spiritual aspirations.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Faust about?

Faust is a two-part tragic play about a scholar who, dissatisfied with his life, makes a pact with the devil Mephistopheles. He agrees to serve Faust on Earth, but if Faust ever finds a moment so perfect he wants it to last forever, he loses his soul. The play follows Faust's journey through love, tragedy, and grand projects, ultimately questioning the value of relentless striving and the possibility of redemption.

Is Faust worth reading?

Yes, Faust is a cornerstone of Western literature and essential reading for anyone interested in philosophy, drama, or German culture. Its themes of ambition, temptation, and redemption remain deeply relevant. However, it is dense and often allegorical, especially Part Two, so it may require patience and some background knowledge. Many readers find Part One more accessible than Part Two.

How does Faust end?

Spoiler: In the final act, Faust, blind and old, believes he is completing his land reclamation project. He utters the words that he would wish to stay, fulfilling the wager. Mephistopheles tries to claim his soul, but angels intervene and carry Faust to heaven. The play ends with the Chorus Mysticus proclaiming that the eternal feminine draws us upward, suggesting redemption through divine grace and striving.

Who should read Faust?

Faust is ideal for readers of classic literature, philosophy students, and anyone interested in the human condition. It appeals to those who enjoy complex characters, poetic language, and deep moral questions. If you are new to Goethe, you might start with Part One, which is more narrative-driven. Part Two is more challenging and rewards readers with knowledge of Greek mythology and medieval allegory.

How long does it take to read Faust?

The full text of Faust, including both parts, is around 12,000 lines of verse, which translates to roughly 300-400 pages in a typical translation. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take about 8-10 hours to read. However, due to its poetic density and philosophical depth, many readers take longer, often reading it in sections.