



## WORLD LITERATURE II (ENG 252)

### *Faust* Study Guide

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[Goethe](#)

[Faust's Romantic Structure](#)

[Faust is Eclectic](#)

[The Bet in Heaven](#)

[The Story](#)

[Faust as Hero](#)

### GOETHE

Goethe is not very widely read in America these days, but in many other countries he is considered a world class author, along with Shakespeare, Dante and Homer. Consequently, he belongs on any world literature reading list and is worth some effort to appreciate. Goethe lived from 1749-1832. He was revered in his lifetime as a true genius, a master of many forms of writing, a lawyer, a scientist, a great humanist. *Faust I* and *Faust II* are the culminating works of his long, fruitful life.

[Top](#)

### FAUST'S ROMANTIC STRUCTURE

*Faust's* structure is deliberately fragmentary, a series of scenes loosely strung together instead of tightly integrated acts. This loose structure is based on the Romantic rebellion against the French classical insistence on the unities of form. For example, *Tartuffe* takes place in one room at one time with a single focused action, that of *Tartuffe* tricking *Orgon*.

The romantics shunned this "artificial" form in favor of a more "organic" or natural form that developed out of the experiences of the characters themselves. This is fine in theory, and even makes good sense on stage when interpreted by actors.

However, to a reader, *Faust*, like many romantic works, seems at first like bits and pieces tossed together. This was intentional, and was intended to represent the fragmentary nature of experience, but is not easy on the reader. I have prepared a synopsis of the story, below, to help you sort out the story line of *Faust*.

[Top](#)

### FAUST IS ECLECTIC

*Faust* is an eclectic, thoroughly romantic mixture of traditional Christianity, the Old Testament, medieval magic and alchemy, folklore and witchcraft, and a non-Christian evolutionary philosophy of human development. Parts keep looking familiar, yet the whole is not.

For example, *Margaret/Gretchen* is a traditional Christian story character. A good girl is seduced into evil ways, commits sins, becomes insane, is condemned to die, repents at the end and is saved and taken off to heaven. We are all familiar with this story. It is the stuff of folklore and ballads and even saints' lives.

But intertwined with *Margaret's* traditional story is the story of *Faust* who makes a bet with the devil, does all sorts of nasty and/or illegal stuff, and gets away in the end in the name of human evolution towards higher levels of being. This is not a traditional Christian story. In the earlier version of the *Faust* story, *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, *Faustus* does not get away with his bet with the devil, but is hauled off to hell in the end.

So be careful not jump to conclusions about what *Faust* means. Parts are traditional, parts are not. Always think about the entire play, instead of focusing too much on any single part. The *Walpurgis Night*, for example, is indeed a *Witches' Sabbath*, and

those are typically nasty damnable things, as is this one, but Faust is able to go there, enjoy its fantastic illusions, and then escape with his skin and his sanity.

[Top](#)

## THE BET IN HEAVEN

An interesting mix of the old and the new is the Bet in Heaven in the Prologue to the play. It is based on the dialogue between God and Satan in the Book of Job, but its purpose is very different. The Book of Job's purpose is to show the impossibility of human beings ever comprehending the mystery of God's ways.

However, the Bet in Heaven in *Faust* is perfectly rational and makes good sense. The reasonable Lord of Goethe's imagining explains that Mephistopheles may try to lead Faust astray, but in the end he will lose, because:

"A good man in his darkling aspiration  
Remembers the right road throughout his quest."

Faust will make mistakes, but he will never forget that his goal is to develop and learn and grow.

In fact, Mephistopheles will be useful to Faust's development because:

"...man's activity can easily abate,  
He soon prefers uninterrupted rest;  
To give him this companion hence seems best  
Who roils and must as Devil help create."

And indeed, Faust has nearly killed himself shortly before Mephistopheles enters his life. He has developed his intellect as far as he is able, and he is not able to cross the gap to spiritual development. This totally frustrates him, as we see when he is rejected by the Earth Spirit and tries to kill himself. Only the sounds of traditional Christianity, the choir of angels and church bells of Easter, prevent his death.

Then, along comes Mephistopheles and his bet to lure Faust on to more experiences and eventual human spiritual growth. Clearly, this is non-Christian use of Christian imagery. No traditional Christian would replace concepts such as morality and spiritual goodness with human development through emotional experience, but for Goethe, this is the path of the developing human being. So, again, don't jump to any simple conclusions about either the Christian or the pagan imagery in this play--both are there simply as building blocks to create Goethe's vision of the potential of human development.

[Top](#)

## THE STORY

*Faust* is constructed of several scenes or acts. The following is a rough outline of the scenes and the main events of each one (all line numbers refer to the version in your Norton textbook).

### The First Part of the Tragedy: Night

(There is a second part, *FAUST II*, but we will not be reading it in this course.)

Faust is in his study, despairing over the fact that although he has spent his entire life studying, and is smarter than everyone else, he has really gotten nowhere: he's neither rich nor powerful, he does not know the answers to life's essential questions, and he has no joy in his life. Since ordinary book learning is of no more use to him, he turns to magic and alchemy and conjures up the Earth Spirit, thinking he is its equal. No Way!! The Earth Spirit scorns him as "A miserably writhing worm" (l. 146).

Wagner, Faust's assistant enters and wants to know what's up, but Faust does not tell him. Faust is now despairing of ever being anything like the gods despite all his knowledge and prepares to commit suicide and show that at least he can die with dignity. Just as he is about to drink the poison, he hears bells and a choir of angels singing "Christ is arisen" (l. 385). It is Easter morning and Faust responds by deciding to be part of life again.

[Top](#)

---

### Before the City Gate

People are out walking on a fine spring day. Faust and Wagner are among them. Faust is complaining about his unrest, while complacent Wagner urges him to relax and conform. Here Faust speaks the most famous lines of the play:

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.  
(lines 305 - 310)

This is really what *Faust* is all about--the conflict between that part of the human spirit which lives happily in the real present daily world and that part which longs for "higher things."

A black poodle approaches Faust and Wagner and follows them home.

[Top](#)

---

### Study

The poodle is alone with Faust in his study. The dog starts acting strangely, and soon enough it is transformed into a specter. Faust tries spells on the specter and out steps Mephistopheles, the devil of the romantic imagination. When asked who he is, he replies,

Part of that force which would  
Do evil evermore, and yet creates good....  
I am the spirit that negates. (lines 168 - 170).

Mephistopheles puts Faust to sleep, plunging him "into an ocean of untruth" (l. 334). Then, Mephistopheles breaks the threshold's spell and get out of there.

[Top](#)

---

### Study (again)

Mephistopheles knocks on Faust's door and this time he is invited in. They strike a pact. Mephistopheles will be Faust's servant during his life; Faust will serve Mephistopheles after his death (lines 126 and following). But Faust is not worried about what happens after death; he is only interested in THIS life. However, he specifies the deal:

If ever I recline, calmed, on a bed of sloth,  
You may destroy me then and there,  
If ever flattering you should wile me  
That in myself I find delight,  
If with enjoyment you beguile me,  
Then break on me, eternal night!  
This bet I offer.  
(lines 162 -168).

The point is, what Mephistopheles has to offer is all sham and illusion and tawdry stuff which will never SATISFY Faust, and consequently, he'll escape the clutches of the devil in the end. That's the bargain.

After Mephistopheles has some fun confusing one of Faust's students, they set off to SEE THE WORLD.

[Top](#)

---

### Auerbach's Keller in Leipzig

This is where a bunch of students drink and revel. Faust and Mephistopheles arrive and join in. They sing drinking songs and Mephistopheles does conjuring tricks.

[The Story](#)

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### Witch's Kitchen

Mephistopheles takes Faust here to get a drink to make him into a young and virile man. The witch is away at the moment, and two monkeys tend the cauldron. Faust scorns such trashy witch stuff, but he wants to be made thirty years younger (lines 5 - 6). The witch returns down the chimney and Faust drinks her brew to become younger again. Mephistopheles leads him away assuring him:

And soon you will perceive the most delightful pleasure,  
As Cupid starts to stir and dance like jumping jinn.

.....  
You'll soon find with this potion's aid,  
Helen of Troy in every maid.  
(lines 261 - 268)

This potion of youth is evidently also a love potion.

[Top](#)

---

### Street

Sure enough, we next see Faust on the make. A young girl passes by and he immediately tells Mephistopheles to "Get me that girl, and don't ask why!" (line 15)

This is not love, but the most callous lust. Mephistopheles teases Faust about what an innocent young virgin she is, but Faust just warns Mephistopheles:

I tell you, if you don't comply,  
And this sweet young blood doesn't lie  
Between my arms this very night,  
At midnight we'll have parted ways.  
(lines 32 - 34).

Mephistopheles starts making arrangements for Faust to "have her" by fetching a present of jewels for her.

[Top](#)

---

### Evening

Faust and Mephistopheles enter Margaret's room while she is out and leave a case of jewels for her to find, which she does. She likes the jewels and puts them on.

(Note: she is called Margaret at times, and Gretchen at times. Gretchen is a German nickname for Margaret.)

[Top](#)

---

### Promenade

Mephistopheles is miffed, because Margaret showed the jewels to her mother, who insisted on giving them to the church. Faust just tells Mephistopheles to get more jewels for her.

[Top](#)

---

### The Neighbor's House

Here we see Mephistopheles plot to help Faust seduce Margaret, using her neighbor Martha as a go-between, since Margaret's mother would not let her have anything to do with Faust in her own house.

[The Story](#)

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### Street

Mephistopheles and Faust tell Martha the lies she wants to hear about her dead husband. Martha will allow Faust to meet with Margaret at her (Martha's) house.

[Top](#)

---

### Garden

Faust woos Margaret while Mephistopheles woos Martha.

Here Faust comes dangerously close to losing his bet with the devil when he says:

What is unspeakable:  
To yield oneself entirely and feel  
A rapture which must be eternal.  
Eternal! For its end would be despair.  
No, no end! No end!  
(lines 118 - 122)

Luckily for Faust, about this time Martha interrupts his happiness and tells him it's time to leave.

[Top](#)

---

### A Garden Bower

Faust continues wooing Margaret.

[Top](#)

---

### Wood and Cave

Faust still has his problems. He experiences wonderful happiness, but the price is to hang out with Mephistopheles, a very devil who spurs him on from one desire to the next (lines 27 - 34). Faust has gone out into the wilderness to commune with nature, but Mephistopheles reminds him that Margaret thinks he has deserted her, so back they go to her

house.

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[The Story](#)

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■ Gretchen's Room

(Remember, Gretchen is just a nickname for Margaret.)

Faust is in love with Gretchen/Margaret, and she is in love with him, as we learn from this little spinning song she sings.

---

[Top](#)

---

■ Martha's Garden

Margaret is worried by Faust's lack of religion (as well she might be!). She is disturbed by Mephistopheles, who makes her feel sick. She wants to be alone with Faust, but says her Mother doesn't sleep deeply, so it would be too dangerous. Faust gives her a bottle and tells her "Merely shake/Three drops into her cup,/And she won't easily wake up" (lines 99 - 101). (We will discover later that these drops killed Margaret's mother. There is no reason to believe that Faust knew they were poison and not a sleeping potion.)

---

[Top](#)

---

■ At the Well

Here Gretchen hears from a friend that another girl had been made pregnant by her boyfriend, who then left her. Gretchen knows that she herself is in no position to criticize the girl.

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[Top](#)

---

■ City Wall

Gretchen is praying and extremely unhappy. Her mother is now dead.

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[The Story](#)

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■ Night

Valentine, Gretchen's brother, is in front of her house. He is furious about Faust and Mephistopheles having seduced Gretchen (we can assume she is quite pregnant by now). Mephistopheles sings a song and Valentine smashes his instrument and draws his sword. Faust kills Valentine and runs off, far off. Valentine dies cursing his sister as a whore (these matters were taken a lot more seriously a few years ago than nowadays).

---

[Top](#)

---

■ Cathedral

Gretchen tries to pray, but she is tormented by evil spirits.

[Top](#)

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### Walpurgis Night

This is a Witches' Sabbath and includes all sorts of devilry and witchery and fairy stuff. Faust and Mephistopheles travel along with all sorts of weird creatures to get to the Witches' Sabbath.

Walpurgis Night's Dream or the Golden Wedding of Oberon and Titania

Oberon and Titania are the king and queen of the fairies and their wedding is presented as a play to entertain at the Witches' Sabbath.

[Top](#)

---

### Dismal Day

Faust has finally found out what has been happening to Gretchen. He is furious at Mephistopheles, who is cool, indifferent and points out, quite truthfully, that it was Faust who "plunged her into ruin" (line 37). Faust wants to go immediately and rescue her.

[The Story](#)

---

### Night, Open Field

Just a bit of travel detail.

[Top](#)

---

### Dungeon

Faust and Mephistopheles break into the dungeon where Gretchen is being held. She is fairly crazy, as we see from the song she sings about "My mother, the whore" and such (lines 8 and following). When Faust first enters, Margaret (Gretchen, the name keeps changing) thinks at first that he is the hangman, who is due to hang her in the morning. She doesn't recognize him and talks of her baby (which she killed--that's why she's going to be hanged). Faust finally yells "Gretchen!" and she recognizes him. He wants her to leave with him, but she refuses. She is saner now and says:

I've put my mother away,  
I've drowned my child, don't you see?  
(lines 106 - 107)

Faust wants to deny the past, but she refuses again, and tells him what kind of grave she wants, and has visions of how she drowned her baby and of her dead mother.

Mephistopheles tells Faust he must leave immediately or be captured (he's wanted for killing Valentine, Margaret's brother). Margaret sees Mephistopheles and is horrified, saying "Judgment of God! I give/Myself to you" (205 206). Faust leaves with Mephistopheles, who would like to get Margaret, but cannot, because a voice from above says "Is saved" (line 211). Faust runs off with Mephistopheles, but he is NOT being dragged off to hell, just leaving for future adventures in **FAUST II**.

[Top](#)

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Faust was new and different in his day, but today he seems right at home with our contemporary heroes and heroines who live to explore and experience the universe, "to go where no man or woman has gone before," and to risk all in bets with unknown forces, whether evil drug dealers, dangerous unknown viruses, or mysterious opponents from other galaxies. Faust is an existential hero, seeking to create himself through his actions. He is the ultimate hero of the Human Potential Movement, not particularly concerned with society as such, but intensely involved in his own development and his personal goals.

Faust is a hero for the twentieth century, and yet there is an ancient hero who reminds me much of Faust--Homer's Odysseus, the Greek hero of wide-ranging exploration and everlasting curiosity, whose travels took him throughout the known world of his day and even to the underworld. Odysseus, like Faust, expressed a morality that was primarily personal, and did whatever he needed to do to get what he wanted.

Medieval Christians were quite correct in recognizing how extremely disruptive Odysseus was of communal values, with his focused self-striving and tricky ways. Dante did not hesitate to place the villainous Odysseus into his version of the medieval Christian Hell. But nowadays many of us recognize a kindred soul in the intelligence and self-sufficiency of Odysseus, struggling through a difficult and intriguing world. Similarly, we recognize a kindred soul in Faust, striving to know and master the world, lacking malice, yet causing harm, always learning, growing, becoming the most fully developed person he can be.

[Top](#)

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