

Faust

by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Summary

Part 1:

Faust is a scholar and wizard whose good works as a university teacher and as a physician to the downtrodden have earned him heaven. He is proof that the world has worthy men. But Mephistopheles wagers that he can bend the will of Faust away from God – presumably by providing him the knowledge he seeks – and thereby win his soul for all eternity. It's a bet. The Lord grants Mephistopheles permission to tempt Faust, saying that even in his darkest moment Faust will be conscious of the righteous path.

The scene switches to earth – to Faust's study. Faust laments that though he has studied philosophy, medicine, law, and theology he really knows nothing about the inner workings of the universe. Even his magic – powerful as it is – fails to lift the veil of mystery. On the brink of despair, he considers suicide. However, it is Easter morning, and the hubbub of strollers passing a window tempers his gloom. With his assistant, Wagner, he takes a walk in the invigorating spring air. An ominous black poodle circles them warily, then follows them home. In his study, Faust reads from a Bible, causing the dog to bark and howl. Realizing it is possessed, he recites magical words that force the supernatural presence to manifest itself. It is Mephistopheles, who appears in the garb of a scholar.

The following day, Mephistopheles offers to show Faust the secrets of the world and let him experience the profoundest pleasures. In return, when Faust dies, he must surrender his immortal soul to Mephistopheles. Faust agrees on one condition: The adventure must culminate in a moment when he experiences the highest, most exquisite pleasure attainable by man. After Mephistopheles accepts the condition, they sign a pact in blood. Faust believes he has struck a bargain, for he doubts that human souls live eternally.

Off they go, traveling through the air. They first visit Auerbach's Cellar, a tavern in Leipzig, where four men are drinking and singing. Taking a gimlet from the landlord's toolbox, Mephistopheles bores holes in a table and makes wines flow from them into the glasses of the revelers. They are delighted at first. But when spilled wine turns to fire, they accuse him of sorcery and attack him with knives. Mephistopheles parries with a spell that transfixes the men; they believe they are in a vineyard. After lifting the spell, he disappears with Faust, leaving the men dumbfounded. But the experience only disgusts Faust.

Mephistopheles decides it is time to shock Faust with a genuinely extraordinary experience: regaining his youth in the kitchen of a witch – through a magical liquor that will erase thirty years from Faust's life. Out on a street, Faust becomes infatuated with a passerby, Margaret, who is nicknamed Gretchen. When he confronts her, she demurely turns away and walks on even though Faust intrigues her. Faust vows to seduce this comely maiden. When she visits her neighbor Martha, he steals into Gretchen's room and leaves her a casket of jewelry provided by Mephistopheles. Margaret wonders about the gift-giver. Who was he, an

admirer? Thanks to the machinations of Mephistopheles, Faust meets Margaret and woos her in a garden at Martha's house while Mephistopheles dallies with Martha. Margaret is overcome with joy that a young nobleman finds her attractive. Faust, meanwhile, is torn between love and lust, but Mephistopheles sees to it that lust conquers. Soon, Faust and Margaret lie together, and she becomes pregnant. Faust, however, has disappeared, and Margaret – though pining for him – regrets her sinful behavior. She prays for forgiveness to the Mother of Sorrows, the Virgin Mary. Eventually, Faust yearns anew for Margaret's body. When he and Mephistopheles return to her home, Margaret's brother, Valentine confronts them. In a sword fight, Faust kills Valentine.

A year passes. Faust attends an annual nocturnal gathering of sorcerers and evil spirits, called Walpurgisnacht (Walpurgis Night). But a fraction of his former self surfaces when he thinks of poor Margaret (Gretchen) and has a vision that she has been imprisoned. Guilt-ridden, he persuades Mephistopheles to help him rescue her. After riding magic steeds to the prison in darkest night, they gain entry to a dungeon and Faust enters her cell. Sitting in a bed of straw in a corner, she awaits execution for drowning the baby that Faust fathered, an act that has driven her insane with guilt. But she regains her sanity upon recognizing Faust's voice. When she rises, her chains miraculously fall off. Faust urges her to flee with him. However, though fearing death, she refuses to leave, realizing that she must pay for her crime. When Mephistopheles appears, she perceives him as an evil spirit and throws herself on the mercy of God, begging angels to descend from heaven to protect her. A voice from above says, "She is redeemed." Mephistopheles and Faust disappear.

Part 2

Faust reclines at twilight in a verdant field. Spirits of the air circle about him, singing and playing harps. For a moment, he knows peace and tranquillity. In the morning, he awakens with renewed vigor and the will to carry on – but at a measured, less impassioned pace. Meanwhile, Mephistopheles masquerades as the new court jester of an emperor in deep financial distress that threatens to undo him. Mephistopheles points out that the country is rich in unmined gold, and ears come to attention. In the morning, a marshal reports that the financial crisis has ended. When Faust and Mephistopheles – no longer disguised as a jester – present themselves to the emperor moments later, the emperor's treasurer credits them for the miraculous financial turnaround. The emperor wants Faust to conjure the spirits of Paris and Helen of Troy. Mephistopheles gives Faust a magic key that transports him to the abode of the Eternal Mothers, who live deep within the earth. When Faust returns to the court, Faust causes the images of Paris, Helen, and a Greek temple to appear. Helen's beauty overwhelms Faust. When he tries to enter the scene, an explosion knocks him unconscious and the images disappear.

Faust – still unconscious – now lies on a couch at his home. Meanwhile, Wagner has been working magic of his own. While conducting laboratory experiments, he has created a tiny man – small enough to fit into a phial – named Homunculus. When the creature hovers over Faust, he sees into his dreams of Greece and Helen and warns Mephistopheles not to awaken him; the shock of finding himself in his mundane surroundings could kill him. Instead, Faust must be taken to Greece for participation in a festival celebrated by the spirits of Greek myth. All but Wagner then ride the wind to Greece. Their destination is the plain of Pharsalus, where Caesar defeated Pompey in 48 B.C. in a decisive battle during the Roman Civil War. A strange light in the sky heralds the arrival of Faust and his companions. Faust meets Chiron the centaur, he rides on his back while Chiron tells stories of ancient Greece. When Faust describes his adoration of Helen and bids Chiron speak of her, the centaur says he once

carried her on his back, like Faust. The centuries have not dimmed her beauty, he says; she remains young, her figure beyond compare.

Meanwhile, Mephistopheles romps with witches, and Homunculus travels in search of the secret to becoming fully human. Two ancient sages – Anaxagoras and Thales – advise him, and they further consult with creatures of myth. Homunculus learns that there is only one way for him to achieve his goal: let time and nature do it for him. So he hurls himself into the sea, there to evolve as did primordial life forms.

Faust and Mephistopheles travel to Sparta, home of King Menelaus, who has returned from the Trojan War with Helen. While he celebrates the Greek conquest of Troy, Helen and a chorus of captive Trojan women fret about what will be done with them. Mephistopheles, in the guise of a hag, tells them Menelaus means to kill them. However, he says, they can save themselves if they submit to the protection of a great lord of the north, who is Faust. Terrified, they flee with Mephistopheles to Faust's castle. There, over time, Faust woos and wins Helen. When Mephistopheles warns that Greek soldiers are marching on the castle, Faust sends his own army against them while he and Helen flee to Arcadia, a pastoral region in southern Greece. There, they live peaceful, secluded lives and raise a son, Euphorion, who is gifted with intelligence and good looks. But because he inherits Faust's restless curiosity, he yearns to explore beyond the woods and thickets and cliffs that confine him all around. One day, he begins to climb a rock face. Although his parents caution him lest he fall, he continues on, attracted by the roar of the unseen ocean. At the top of the precipice, overcome with the ecstasy of the moment, he hurls himself into the air and then falls to his death. Soon afterward, Euphorion's voice calls out to Helen from the depths of Hades; he fears abiding the afterlife alone. A mother cannot let the complaints of a child go unanswered, and so she bids farewell to Faust, embracing him for the last time.

While Faust grieves, Mephistopheles importunes him to embark on another adventure, one filled with earthly pleasure. But Faust has changed; he seeks a challenge to test him, and he can think of none better than to reclaim land from the sea and put it to productive use. The same emperor whom they saved from a financial crisis grants Faust land for his project. All goes well and Faust wishes to acquire more property on which an impoverished elderly couple, Baucis and Philemon, live in a cottage. But they refuse to leave even though Faust promises to relocate them to a grande estate. Without Faust's knowledge, Mephistopheles and his henchmen kill the old couple and burn their property. Faust is deeply remorseful.

Four Gray Women born of the smoke and fire visit Faust at midnight. They are Want, Blame, Need, and Care. Three of them warn Faust that he will soon die. Faust tells Care that he now realizes that man cannot know everything about life; he must content himself with limited knowledge. Care then blinds him. But Faust, undaunted, carries on with his project. When spirits of the dead under the command of Mephistopheles dig Faust's grave, Faust's ears mistakenly tell him that the digging is actually the work of laborers continuing his reclamation project. Overjoyed, he says he is experiencing the great moment he has been looking for all along; it is his profoundest moment of happiness. Mephistopheles misinterprets Faust's words, thinking he has made good on his promise to give Faust a moment of highest ecstasy. But Faust is happy because his project will benefit humankind, not himself. Faust dies, at age 100, and the Lord claims him for heaven. After angels receive him and escort him to the Virgin Mary, Margaret appears and acts on his behalf. Mary allows him to ascend to the highest realm. Mephistopheles is defeated.¹

¹ Michael J. Cummings, "Faust: By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832): A Study Guide", Cummings Study Guides, www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Faust.html

Character List:

Faust:	scholar, medical doctor, and magician
Mephistopheles:	the devil
The Lord	
Raphael, Michael, Gabriel:	Archangels
Wagner:	Faust's assistant
Margaret (also called Gretchen):	young woman who attracts Faust
Valentine:	brother of Margaret
Martha:	Margaret's neighbor
Homonculus:	tiny man created by Wagner
Emperor:	ruler of a domain saved by Mephistopheles and Faust
Helen of Troy:	mythological figure of extraordinary beauty
Euphorion:	son of Faust and Helen of Troy
Numerous other mythological figures:	witches, spirits, soldiers, students
Tavern revelers	