



## *Goethe's Faust I*

### **I. LIFE**

From *Storm and Stress* to *Weimar Classicism*: Situating Goethe in a historical and cultural context

- long productive life
- wide range of interests: Goethe is known as a literary giant (poetry, prose, drama/epic) but he was also a natural scientist (e.g. *Theory of Colour* 1810), an art historian, a painter, a theatre director, a chronicler of his life and time (e.g. *Poetry and Truth* 1811-1814, his vast correspondence), a lawyer, and a political administrator.
- art and society and world literature

1749	b. into a wealthy family in Frankfurt/M., an imperial free city of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation
1774	<i>The Sorrows of Young Werther</i> – “the” novel of <i>Storm and Stress</i>
1775-1786	moved to Weimar at the invitation of Duke Carl August to become a member of his government. Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) called Goethe a ‘servant of princes’.
1786-88	travelled to Italy
1789-99	French Revolution
1794	friendship with Schiller (1759-1805) – <i>Weimar Classicism</i>
1803-15	Napoleonic Wars
1808	<i>Faust I</i>
1832	d. in Weimar. <i>Faust II</i> published posthumously

### **II. TEXT/S**

- unity vs. fragmentation
- four different versions/stages of *Faust* written over a period of more than sixty years that saw significant political, social, and cultural change:
  1. *Urfaust* (c. 1772-1775)
  2. *Faust, A Fragment* (1790)
  3. ***Faust I*** (1808)
  4. *Faust II* (1832)
- intertextuality: The Faust legend (dates back to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century), the Bible (the Book of Job in Part I, 3 “Prologue in Heaven”), texts from classical antiquity, in *Faust I* mainly Homer and Virgil, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare’s plays, especially *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, Pedro Calderon de la Barca’s *Great Theatre of the World*, ...

### **III. FAUST I (1808)**

1. **Genre:** drama, epic, theatre of the world

2. **Narrative structure:** a number of interrelated stories – “plays-within-the-play”, as Brown says (in Sharpe 2002: 97) – the most important are:
  - 2.1. the bet between the Lord and Mephistopheles (I, 3 “Prologue in Heaven”) added relatively late to *Faust I*, serves as metaphorical background
  - 2.2. the bet between Faust and Mephistopheles (I, 4 “Night” – 7 “Faust’s study”) set against the background of Europe’s increased secularization and the idea of pantheism
  - 2.3. the Gretchen story (I, 10 “A Street” – 28 ‘Prison’)
 

A story of seduction, love, unfulfilled hope, infanticide, and imprisonment that is at the heart of *Faust I* and close in spirit to the *Storm and Stress* movement.

When Mephistopheles declares Gretchen “condemned,” at the end, a voice from above exclaims, “She is redeemed!” (I, 28, 4612) Despite this happy ending, Goethe called his play a tragedy. Why? Is human erring and suffering necessarily part of life and the black dog (whose essence is Mephistopheles) something we carry within us as part of human nature?
3. **Interpretations**
  - 3.1. Faust and the modern individual
    - Faust the rebellious Promethean man. But Faust differs from Prometheus in that he does not remain confined to his study room but leaves his books (Prometheus’ rock) and accompanied by Mephistopheles “flee[s] into the open land” (I, 4, 418).
    - Faust is never “standing still” (I, 7, 1759), he continually strives for more, his thirst for life, experience, and the world at large is never satisfied – very similar to the restlessness of the modern individual.
    - “The pursuit *is* the goal, man is defined by movement. This goes further than the old Aristotelean definition of happiness as lying in the pursuit of worthwhile goals, and singles out the element of continual striving as the source of value in that process.” (Reed 1984: 81)
  - 3.2. Faust and gender or Gretchen as the other
    - subject (mind/reason) vs. object (body/passion)
    - Gretchen, the real woman, disappears behind the idealized projections Faust’s subjectivity and creative genius bring forth. Mephistopheles thus describes her correctly as “a poor innocent little thing” (I, 10, 2624) – a creation of male fantasy, selfless, seductive, and self-destructive at once, “a figure out of a ballad or a Märchen,” as David Luke says in his introduction (Luke 1998: xviii).
    - the so-called “Gretchen-question” (I, 19, 3428-3432): A question that shows awareness of what is at play and cannot possibly be answered by the one who seeks to conceal the truth and who is partly responsible for Gretchen’s confinement (imprisonment and death), while he “flee(s) into the open land” (I, 4, 418) and continues his journey in *Faust II*.

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#### FURTHER READING

- David Luke, “Introduction,” in: Goethe, *Faust. Part One*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. ix-lv.
- T.J. Reed, *The Classical Centre. Goethe and Weimar 1775-1832*, Croom Helm, 1980.
- T.J. Reed, *Goethe*, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Lesley Sharpe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Goethe*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

*Quoted text passages from Faust I*

1.

“FAUST (...) And so I sit, poor silly man,  
No wiser now than when I began.  
They call me Professor and Doctor, forsooth,  
For misleading many an innocent youth  
These last ten years now I suppose,  
Pulling them to and fro by the nose;  
And I see all our search for knowledge is vain,  
And this burns my heart with bitter pain.  
I’ve more sense, to be sure, than the learned fools,  
The masters and pastors from the schools;  
No scruples to plague me, no irksome doubt,  
No hell-fire or devil to worry about –  
Yet I take no pleasure in anything now;  
For I know I know nothing, I wonder how  
I can still keep up the pretence of teaching  
Or bettering mankind with my empty preaching.” (I, 4, 358-373)

2.

“MEPHISTOPHELES. The little earth-god still persists in his old ways,  
Ridiculous as ever, as in his first days.  
He’d have improved if you’d not given  
Him a mere glimmer of the light of heaven;  
He calls it Reason, and it only has increased  
His power to be beastlier than a beast.  
He is – if I may say so, sir –  
A little like the long-legged grasshopper,  
Which hops and flies, and signs its silly songs  
And flies, and drops straight back to grass where it belongs.  
Indeed, if only he would stick to grass!  
He pokes his nose in all the filth he finds, alas.  
(...)  
The earth’s as bad as it has always been.  
I really feel quite sorry for mankind” (I, 3, 281-295)

3.

“THE LORD. He lives on earth, and while he is alive  
You have my leave for the attempt;  
Man errs, till he has ceased to strive.” (I, 3, 315-317)

4.

“FAUST. (...) If any pleasure you can give  
Deludes me, let me cease to live!  
I offer you this wager!  
MEPHISTOPHELES. Done!  
FAUST. And done again!  
If ever to the moment I shall say:  
Beautiful moment, do not go away!” (I, 7, 1694-1700)

5.

“FAUST. My sweet young lady, if I may  
I will escort you on your way.

MARGARETA. I’m not a lady and I’m not sweet,  
I can get home on my own two feet.

[She frees herself and walks on.]

FAUST. By God, but that’s a lovely girl!  
More lovely than I’ve ever met.

So virtuous, so decent, yet

A touch of sauciness as well!

Her lips so red, her cheeks so bright –

All my life I’ll not forget that sight.

It stirred my very heart to see

Her eyes cast down so modestly,

And how she put me in my place,

With so much charm and so much grace!” (I, 10, 2605-2616)

6.

“MARGARETA. Do you believe in God?

FAUST. My dear, how can

Anyone dare to say: I believe in Him? (...)

MARGARETA. Then you don’t believe?

FAUST. My sweet beloved child, don’t misconceive

My meaning! Who dare say God’s name?” (I, 19, 3428-3432)

7.

“MARGARETA. I’m in your power now, I’m ready to go.

Just let me feed my baby first.

I was cuddling it all last night, you know.

They took it from me; that was just

To hurt me. I killed it, is what they say.

Now things will never be the same.

They’re wicked people: they sing songs against me!

There’s an old tale that ends that way –

Who told them it meant me?” (I, 28, 4442-4450)