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Faust, Part One

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe · *1808 · Bayard Taylor translation*

Heaven allows Mephistopheles to try Faust, a scholar weary of his own learning. Faust makes a compact with the Spirit that Denies, and the first fruit of that bargain is the ruin of Margaret, an innocent girl. Part One ends not with Faust's death, but with a voice from above: she is saved.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If a man trades his soul for knowledge and pleasure, what becomes of those he uses — and is grace still possible?

"A good man, through obscurest aspiration, / Has still an instinct of the one true way."
The Lord · Prologue in Heaven

The Lord permits the trial, not the victory of denial. Faust's compact leads him to use Margaret and leave her in despair; her prayer and her refusal to fly with him are answered from above. Faust himself is not finished — that is Part Two — but mercy has already spoken.

KEY CHARACTERS

Faust
striving, unrest, a deadly bargain

Mephistopheles
the Spirit that Denies

The Lord
permits the trial; keeps the end

Margaret
innocence, fall, repentance

Valentine
the brother's honour and curse

Martha
the neighbour; a worldly aid

Wagner
the famulus; dry learning

THE DENIAL AND THE BLOOD

> *"I am the Spirit that Denies!"*
> **Mephistopheles** · The Study

> *"Blood is a juice of rarest quality."*
> **Mephistopheles, at the compact** · The Study (the compact)

Grades 11–12
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01
The Wager in Heaven
DEDICATION; PRELUDE; PROLOGUE IN HEAVEN

The Lord grants the devil a leave to try a striving man.

- The poet's dedication and a prelude in the theatre frame the work
- Mephistopheles presents himself among the Lord's servants
- He scorns man's restless striving; the Lord names Faust, and will allow the tempting
- The Lord says a good man still keeps an instinct of the true way

02
The Compact
NIGHT; BEFORE THE CITY-GATE; THE STUDY

A scholar at the end of knowledge calls in a spirit he cannot master.

- **Faust**, in his study, has tried all learning and finds no peace
- He walks among the people at Easter, still divided: "Two souls ... reside within my breast"
- The poodle he brings home reveals **Mephistopheles**, the Spirit that Denies
- They make a compact, sealed in blood: if Faust ever says to the moment, "Stay, thou art so fair," he is lost

> *"Two souls, alas! reside within my breast, / And each withdraws from, and repels, its brother."*
> **Faust** · Before the City-Gate

03
Margaret
AUERBACH'S CELLAR THROUGH THE GARDEN

The first "gift" of the bargain is a girl's trust.

- Mephistopheles takes Faust through the wine-cellar and the witch's kitchen; the scholar is made younger
- He sees **Margaret** (Gretchen) and demands her
- Jewels and Martha's garden do the tempter's work; Margaret is drawn into a secret love
- She is devout, and already uneasy; Faust is not

> *"My peace is gone, / My heart is sore: / I never shall find it, / Ah, nevermore!"*
> **Margaret, at her spinning-wheel** · Margaret's Room

04
The Ruin
AT THE FOUNTAIN; NIGHT; CATHEDRAL; WALPURGIS-NIGHT

A mother, a brother, and a name destroyed.

- Margaret, to meet Faust, gives her mother a sleeping-draught; the mother dies
- She bears a child, in secrecy and shame
- Her brother **Valentine** fights Faust and, dying, curses her in the street
- In the cathedral an evil spirit and the Dies Irae crush her
- Faust is drawn away to the Walpurgis revel; a vision of Margaret checks him

05
The Dungeon
DREARY DAY; NIGHT; DUNGEON

He comes too late to save her in this world; Heaven has not forgotten her.

- Margaret, out of her mind, has drowned her child and is condemned to death
- Faust and Mephistopheles come to the dungeon to snatch her away
- She will not go with them; she turns from the demon and commends herself to God
- Mephistopheles cries that she is judged; a voice from above answers that she is saved
- Faust is borne away; Part One ends. His own judgment is not yet

> *"She is judged! ... She is saved!"*
> **Mephistopheles; then a voice from above** · Dungeon, the close of Part One

Temptation | Striving | The Soul's Worth | Innocence Destroyed | Repentance | Grace

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Part One is not the whole of Faust. Faust does not die here; Margaret does, and is saved. Do not import the ending of Part Two.
2. Taylor's text calls the girl Margaret (not always "Gretchen"). Watch her speeches for prayer, shame and refusal.
3. The Lord's line in the Prologue is the frame: a good man may wander and still be led. Does Faust, in this part, justify that trust — or only Margaret?
4. The compact is about a moment Faust would wish to keep. He never quite speaks it here; the damage is done all the same.
5. Valentine's curse and the cathedral scene show public shame. Set them beside the voice from above.
6. Mephistopheles is witty. Do not let the wit hide that he is, as he says, the Spirit that Denies.

Quotations are verbatim from the Bayard Taylor translation, Project Gutenberg #14591, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/goethe-faust-part-one/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.