

SAMPLE

Note: These are just excerpts from the book summary. The complete summary is much more detailed and complete. The purpose of this sample is to provide you with an overview of the format and structure of the complete booknote.

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Barron's Booknotes for

Faust: Parts I and II by Johann Wolfgang Goethe

1808

by Ruth Mitchell

SERIES COORDINATOR

Murray Bromberg ,Principal, Wang High School of Queens,,Holliswood, New York
Past President, High School Principals Association of New York City

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THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

Faust and its author, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, developed side by side. The work is not an autobiography, but it reflects Goethe's intellectual development. (Goethe did write an autobiography, called Poetry and Truth, about his early life.) He began Faust when he was in his twenties, continued it at intervals- sometimes neglecting it for years at a time- until his seventies- and then worked intensively on it until just before his death, at eighty-two.

When you hear the name "Faust," you probably think of the story of a man who sells his soul to the Devil in return for supernatural powers. It's a story that depends on the Christian tradition for its plot, for Faust is a learned man who wants to know more than God allows man to know, and to gain superior knowledge, Faust makes a bargain with the Devil. Faust enjoys magical powers for many years, is entertained by an emperor, and lives with the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy. In the end, however, he has to go down to Hell with the Devil, who comes to claim Faust's soul, in accordance with their bargain. This traditional Faust story is a Christian cautionary tale- it warns that you will lose your eternal soul if you try to.....

THE PLAY

THE PLOT

The story of Faust begins in Heaven. Mephistopheles, the Devil, is visiting the Lord, complaining, as usual, about the Lord's creation, man. When the Lord asks him whether he knows Faust, Mephistopheles, saying he does, seizes the opportunity to bet with the Lord that he can lead Faust astray. The Lord is quite confident that Faust knows the right way; he's also tolerant of Mephistopheles, whose role is to keep prodding man into action.

Faust is a very learned professor, who, however, is dissatisfied with human knowledge, which by its nature is limited. Using magic, he conjures up the Earth Spirit in his darkened study. Regarding himself as more than mortal, he tries to claim the Earth Spirit as a colleague, but the Spirit rejects him scornfully and disappears. Despairing, Faust contemplates suicide. He is saved by the sound of the bells welcoming Easter morning. He and his research assistant, Wagner, go out into the sunlight and enjoy the greetings of the crowd, which remembers the medical attention given to the people by Faust and his father. Faust is still depressed, denying the value of medicine and feeling torn between the two souls in him, one longing for earthly pleasures, the other seeking the highest spiritual knowledge. A dog follows Faust and Wagner home.

Back in his study, Faust tries to translate the Gospel of St. John, while the dog becomes restless. Eventually, the animal changes shape so monstrously that Faust realizes he is dealing with the Devil. Presto! There is Mephistopheles!

At this first meeting, Mephistopheles introduces himself and his powers to Faust; then he tricks Faust into sleeping so that he can leave. When he returns, magnificently dressed, Mephistopheles makes a bet with Faust. He agrees to do anything Faust wants, but if Faust ever says that he is totally satisfied, that the moment is so perfect he wants time to stop, then he will die and Mephistopheles will have his soul. They sign their pact in blood.

Mephistopheles tries to please his "master." He takes him to a Witch's Kitchen, where Faust is magically transformed into a young man. When Faust meets Margarete- called Gretchen, the shortened.....

THE CHARACTERS - ANALYSIS

The following is a discussion of the major characters in Faust. There are in addition many other interesting, if less developed, characters, and they are discussed at the appropriate places in The Play section of this guide.

- **FAUST** - While Faust has clearly recognizable human characteristics, he is larger than life. He embodies the best and the worst in man, and in many ways he is a symbol of all humanity. Faust is involved in most of the scenes, but he probably reveals himself most clearly through his monologues and through his conversations with Mephistopheles. The monologues show a man without satisfaction or inner peace, always striving. He is continually reaching for more knowledge, more power, more experience. He is also.....

- **MEPHISTOPHELES** - It may seem strange, but some think that Mephistopheles, the Devil, is more human than Faust. Mephistopheles is a cynic, and cuts things down to size with his quick wit. He calls the Lord an "old gent," satirizes the university faculty, teases the mythological creatures he meets on the Peneios River, and ends scenes with comments that puncture inflated sentiments. Several explanations have been given for Mephistopheles' name, including that it derives from the Greek, Me-phaustopheles, meaning "No Friend of Faust" and that it comes from the Hebrew Mephiztophel, "corrupter and liar."

In Faust, Mephistopheles is the spirit of negation, "the spirit that always denies." In that respect, he is the exact opposite of God, who is the spirit of creation. Why did Goethe make Mephistopheles seem.....

- **MARGARETE (GRETCHEN)** - Margarete, or Gretchen (a favorite name in German folk tales), is a more lifelike character than Mephistopheles and Faust; she is a person you would recognize if you met her. She is a sweet, simple, modest girl, who lives at home and helps her mother. She knows right from wrong (as you can see from her polite refusal of Faust's advances at first) and has an innocent religious faith of the kind idealized by Romantic writers.

Her downfall is a puzzle to you only in the sense that all similar cases are puzzles. Why does such a girl give in to presents and flattery? Gretchen's mother is so strict that she gives the first casket of.....

WAGNER - Wagner is called Faust's "famulus," a combination of servant and research assistant who lives and studies close to Faust, his mentor. Wagner is the sort of person you feel you ought to admire but can't bear. He has his heart in the right place, and says all the expected things. Look at him trying to appease Faust with praise of his father. You can't object to what he says, but it doesn't.....

STUDENT-BACCALAUREUS - The only character besides Faust, Mephistopheles, and Wagner common to both Parts I and II of Faust is the Student whom Mephistopheles interviews in Faust's study and then meets again as a graduate. He begins timid and wide-eyed, eager to learn from.....

THE EMPEROR - The Emperor is found only in Part II, where he appears in two of the five acts. The character derives from the traditional Faust story, which includes a visit to

HELEN - Helen is not so much a character as an embodied myth, as she herself recognizes. She is the heroine of Homer's *Iliad*, a great Greek epic poem. (When Paris fell in love with her and stole her from her husband King Menelaus of Sparta, the Trojan War was ignited. Helen's.....)

OTHER ELEMENTS

FORM AND STRUCTURE

Faust is a verse drama in two parts. Part I has three preliminary sections (Dedication, Prelude in the Theater, and Prologue in Heaven) and twenty-five scenes, each with a name, usually describing the setting. Part II, like many conventional plays, is divided into five acts, and each act contains scenes with.....

IS FAUST ONE PLAY OR TWO?

You'll want to make up your own mind about the unity of Faust. Some readers argue that the two parts are separate and should be treated as such. It's true that the story of Part I is better known than anything in Part II, perhaps because of Gounod's opera, *Faust*, which is based on Part I.

Other readers believe that the two parts form an essential unity. The parts are divided artificially, because they were composed at different times in Goethe's life. These readers believe that if you separate one part from the other, you'll miss major themes.

The original Faust story had a fairly simple structure. Faust, or Faustus, as he was originally called- the Latin word *faustus* means "lucky"- made a bargain with the Devil and signed it in blood. The Devil takes Faust to a student tavern- where the two fool the students with magically produced wine- and then to the Emperor's court, where Faust magically calls Helen of Troy from the dead and falls in love with her. At the

IS FAUST A PLAY?

Faust doesn't have the structure you probably expect in a play- a rising action that reaches a climax, and then a falling action during which the plot is resolved. It has been called a "cosmic vision or dream," and readers have thought of it as a series of episodes in dramatic form- somewhat like an epic.

An epic is a poem or narrative on the largest scale, dealing with national origins and heroes (as do Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*) or man's relation to God (as do Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*). Epics can have the structure of a journey (for example, the *Odyssey* is a.....)

IS FAUST A TRAGEDY?

Goethe subtitled Faust "A Tragedy," thereby presenting his readers with a puzzle. In what sense is Faust a tragedy? To the Greeks, who developed the literary form called tragedy, as well as to the Elizabethans (Shakespeare and his contemporaries), tragedy meant a play dealing with the fall of

SETTING

If you're asked where the action of Faust takes place, you're justified in answering "Everywhere!" The action takes place in Heaven; in Germany and the Greek Islands; in the air above the earth; in mountains, forests, caves, rivers and river valleys, and the sea. Its settings are those required by the story as it moves, episode by episode, through the epic tale of Faust's life.

As with space, so also with time. Faust is a Renaissance scholar, and the first few.....

THEMES

Faust has a general overarching theme- man's life on earth and quest for knowledge and power. Naturally, such an ambitious theme must include many subthemes. Some of these are listed below, and you will be able to add to the list as you read the play.

1. CONSTANT STRIVING

The stories on which Faust is based were cautionary tales for Christians: Man must not seek to go beyond the limits set by God. In those stories, the Devil promises Faust unlimited power for a limited time and then, as repayment, takes Faust's soul to Hell.

Goethe's Faust does not contain such a bargain with the Devil. Instead, it has two wagers. The Lord bets Mephistopheles that he won't be able to make Faust deviate from "the appointed course," and Faust bets Mephistopheles that he won't be able to make any moment so pleasurable that Faust will cry out for time to stop. Thus, the bet between Faust and Mephistopheles concerns fulfillment. If Faust is ever tempted to stop reaching for something new, he will forfeit his soul. But he doesn't lose it, because he is never satisfied, emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually.

You may have heard the expression "the Faustian spirit." It refers to the restless.....

AUTHOR'S STYLE

The great variety of styles in Faust reflects the range of the poem's characters and settings. Some readers have said that Faust contains more poetic meters (measured, patterned arrangement of syllables) and forms than any other single work. Others think that it is stylistically too exuberant, that its large number of styles sometimes interferes with communicating a clear message.

The styles include a sixteenth-century German form called Knüttelvers or Knittelvers (doggerel), which is irregular, though rhymed; ballads and songs, often as simple as folk songs; the trimeter (a line of verse with three measured feet) of classical tragedy, as well as the strophes (stanzas of the chorus as it moves to the right or the left of the stage) of the choruses; Shakespeare's blank verse; the Alexandrines (iambic line of twelve syllables) used by the seventeenth-century French playwright Jean-Baptiste Racine; and.....

THE STORY

PART I

Part I of Faust is divided into twenty-five scenes. The scenes have descriptive names, not numbers. Most scenes are short. Line breaks are used in this guide where scenes are long enough to be treated in parts. The first three scenes stand outside the main drama. The most important of them for the meaning of Faust is the Prologue in Heaven.

DEDICATION

Goethe worked on Faust intermittently throughout his long life, sometimes setting it aside for a number of years. The poem that constitutes the Dedication was written after Goethe had left Faust virtually untouched for more than twenty years, from 1775 to 1797. The Dedication reflects his mood as he speaks to the ideas, people, and emotions connected with the earlier manuscript. He is reminded of lovers and friends, most now dead, who had read the earlier version of Faust. These memories fill him with emotion and seem to make the present fade away.

NOTE: Faust contains numerous poetic rhythms, or meters. If you don't understand German, it's difficult to appreciate the meters and the contribution they make to the play's effect. A translation that follows the original German meters, with their different line lengths and rhyme schemes, will give you some idea of Goethe's poetic genius. The Dedication is written in what is called ottava rima, because it has eight lines, the first six rhyming ababab and the last two rhyming with each other, cc.

PRELUDE IN THE THEATER

There's an important message in this Prelude that you shouldn't miss. No matter how fanciful Faust may seem (its characters include animals, spirits, angels, witches, and God himself, while its settings include mountain tops, palaces, and Greek islands), and even though it is written as poetry, it is a play and Goethe intended it for the theater.

The three characters of the Prelude have three different views as to what makes a good play. The Director, who wants a commercial success, considers what the audience will pay for and what they want in the theater. He calls for plot, action, variety, and spectacle.

In the Poet's remarks, you can see the Romantic theory of poetry. Poetry is the highest essence of things, he says, since it is concerned not with ordinary affairs, but with the most deeply felt emotions and the highest, most abstract principles which make the play meaningful for people in all times and places.

The Merry Person (called Comic Actor or Comedian in some translations) laughs at the Poet's argument. Don't worry about eternal values and posterity, he says. The successful playwright draws from real life and makes people laugh.

The Director cuts the debate short by calling for action. You can imagine him gesturing to include the whole stage as he promises that the entire universe, including Heaven and Hell, will be presented on his stage.

PROLOGUE IN HEAVEN

As if to prove that the Director isn't exaggerating, the next scene takes place in Heaven. God is enjoying the songs of his archangels who praise the wonders of His creation. You may be surprised to find Mephistopheles, the Devil, in Heaven as well, but remember that in Christian theology he is a "fallen angel." He is a cynic who shifts the conversation from the praises of God to a criticism of humanity. Men are unhappy, he says, because God has given them intelligence and reason. He compares them to grasshoppers that constantly jump about and stick their noses into everything.

Abruptly, God asks whether Mephistopheles knows Faust. Mephistopheles does know him and thinks he's a strange man who's never satisfied. Mephistopheles asserts that Faust could easily be turned away from God. God is tolerant of Faust's confusion, saying "Man ever errs the while he strives." In other words, so long as man continues to search after truth, he will probably make mistakes. Mephistopheles wagers that he can corrupt Faust, and God says that as long as Faust lives, Mephistopheles may try to corrupt him. Both are confident of winning the wager. God even encourages Mephistopheles to corrupt Faust.

After God and the angels have disappeared, Mephistopheles addresses the audience. You already know that he is a cynic and that there is probably a mocking tone in his voice when he refers to God as the "old gent" and comments on what a compliment it is for "a swell [an important person] like him [to be] so man-to-man with the Devil!"

NOTE: All the Faust stories tell of a bet between Faust and the Devil, but only Goethe's Faust includes a wager between God and the Devil. Does this scene remind you of the wager between God and Satan in the Old Testament Book of Job? In both Job and Faust, God, the creator, allows the Devil, the negator, to try to corrupt an "upright man." The Satan of the Old Testament tries to lure Job away from God by destroying his health and possessions, but you will see that Goethe's Mephistopheles will try to ruin Faust by putting pleasure in his reach. You might also contrast Goethe's Faust, who constantly searches and strives for understanding, with Job, who blindly accepts his fate. In fact, Goethe introduces you in the Prologue to the idea that man must be constantly striving. It is this striving toward absolute truth and satisfaction that leads man toward his highest development. The most dangerous sin is inaction, or accepting any condition of life as satisfactory.

You will notice that Goethe uses a great deal of Christian symbolism, and many wonder about his religious attitudes. His religious philosophy is not traditionally Christian, but has been called "religious paganism," meaning that he has religious feelings but doesn't accept any specific beliefs.

NIGHT

LINES 354-520

This is your first view of Faust, in his dark and gloomy study. You'll recognize the Romantic atmosphere right away. Faust is wearing the black gown and square hat of the late medieval scholar.

NOTE: Although Faust is portrayed as a medieval scholar, he is voicing the.....

A STEP BEYOND

TESTS AND ANSWERS

TEST 1

- _____ 1. Goethe changed the traditional Faust legend by
- I. having Faust fall in love with a young maiden, Gretchen
 - II. allowing Faust to find redemption at the end of the drama
 - III. bringing in the episode of Helen of Troy from Greek mythology
- A. I and III only
 - B. I and II only
 - C. I, II, and III
- _____ 2. Faust was written
- A. in the last twenty years of Goethe's life
 - B. during his Italian visit, 1786-1788
 - C. on and off throughout sixty years of his life.....

TEST 2

- _____ 1. Romanticism is identified with
- A. feeling, folk poetry, the gloomy North
 - B. order, aristocracy, Italy and Greece
 - C. reasoned thought
- _____ 2. Goethe imitated the verse forms of
- I. Shakespeare
 - II. Dante
 - III. Euripides
- A. I and II only
 - B. II and III only
 - C. I, II, and III
- _____ 3. Mephistopheles will get Faust's soul when
- A. Faust dies without the last rites of the Church
 - B. Faust says to a moment of fulfillment, "Stay! thou art so fair!"
 - C. he has served Faust for twenty-four years
- _____ 4. Gretchen takes the second gift of jewels to Martha's house because
- A. she has stolen them
 - B. Mephistopheles told her to
 - C. her mother gave the first jewels to the Church

ANSWERS

TEST 1

- 1. B
 - 2. C
 - 3. B
 - 4. C
 - 5. C
 - 6. A
 - 7. B
 - 8. C
9. Make a list of Faust's monologues and characterize each one briefly. The first takes place in the opening scene. Faust is dissatisfied with his knowledge, tries to raise the Earth Spirit, is rejected, and falls into such despair that he almost commits suicide. This is basic information for your answer, the beginning of Faust's journey. The second monologue occurs in Forest and Cave, where Faust thanks the Earth Spirit for giving him

the opportunity to experience life fully. Clearly, Faust's journey has taken him toward sensual satisfaction. The third great monologue opens Part II, in Charming Landscape. Now Faust is recovering from the horrors of Gretchen's death and his infinite guilt. Where is he in his life's journey at this point? He certainly isn't buoyant, as he was in Forest and Cave, and he isn't expressing the dissatisfaction he.....

TERM PAPER IDEAS AND OTHER TOPICS FOR WRITING

• THE CHARACTERS

1. Is Faust the hero of Faust? Explain.
2. Write a character study of Mephistopheles.
1. What does Faust tell you about students in German universities in Faust's day?

REFERENCE

THE CRITICS

ON THE MEANING OF FAUST

For after all it is a poem and not just a moral discourse- a poem which, more boldly perhaps than any in the modern era, attempts to convey what life is like, not, to be sure, in all its characteristics, but in some of them, as they appeared at a great moment in history. It so happens that Goethe came at

ON HELEN

This Helen is not the dream Helen of the Imperial palace. She is real, real in the sense that she takes part in the dramatic action, just as any other character does. She lives in Greek surroundings, uses authentic Greek metres and has a Greek chorus to accompany her. Moreover, she feels herself to be.....

ON MEPHISTOPHELES

Mephisto has baffled more than one admirer, notably Schiller, for he is a complex figure who borrows his many traits from Christianity, from the Faustian legend, from Lucifer and Ahriman (hardly understood by Goethe), from the poet himself, or from his friends Behrisch and Merck, perhaps even.....

ON GRETCHEN

It is remarkable that even the most important point in the Gretchen tragedy, Faust's desertion of Gretchen, is only implied and nowhere directly presented or even mentioned. Some critics,

AUTHOR'S OTHER MAJOR WORKS

1773 *Gotz von Berlichingen*, a play about a medieval German knight.

1774 *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a novel.

1787 *Iphigenie in Tauris*, a play.

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