Faust – A tragedy

Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s Faust 1 is a tragedy no doubt. And as tragedies do, have moments of beauty, surprise, chance, and regret. Here Faust is no different. What struck me the most about Goethe’s Faust were two things: How much he resembles myself, and any man who ever lived. Both in the biological and the metaphorical sense of the word. In the sense that Faust is a man who lives life by doing what feels good. And in the sense that Faust is a man who lives life by destroying what feels good, safe, and at times a little dull. The two main characters in the play are Faust and Margarete. Faust is a man of knowledge and power. He traded his soul away to the devil in exchange for knowledge. Margarete is the opposite of him and just as knowledgeable. Her beauty and purity are the main reason Faust pursues her. He yearns for and feels a connection to her. It is also the main reason she, in the end, rejects him.

The second thing that struck me is how virtuous and pure Margaret was, as in life as in death. Especially in death. She would not let herself be led astray by anything, not even the man she loves. The exact opposite of Faust.

I have chosen to draft this essay in English for two main reasons. The first one being, I feel more comfortable expressing myself in a language broader and more extensive than my native tongue. Because I mostly express my thoughts in this language when communicating this becomes a natural choice.

The second reason being I read Faust in English. And when already thinking and processing the play in one it becomes a hindrance switching betwixt the current and another language. This being said I do hope you find my English on par with what is expected when one chose to go against the norm and type in a second tongue at an academic level when there is no need.

In the extract, "*Two souls, alas! reside within my breast, And each withdraws from, and repels, its brother. One with tenacious organs holds in love And clinging lust the world in its embraces; The other strongly sweeps, this dust above, Into the high ancestral spaces*" (Goethe and Taylor, 2005), which I am, to some degree, basing this essay on it becomes clear that Faust is struggling with an inner conflict based around lust and lost time. In the play Faust tiered with and full of earthy knowledge makes the choice to gamble with his life. Opening the book of Nostradamus “*And this one Book of Mystery From Nostradamus’ very hand, Is’t not sufficient company?*” (Goethe and Taylor, 2005) and going against the catholic state trying to ascertain the knowledge not of this world. Faust at this point in his life seems bored with the world and all it has to offer even going as far as to express apathy towards the afterlife. Faust may not have been a gambling man in his earlier life, but an idle mind is the devil's playground. This depression Faust feels at the beginning of the play roots in him having learned, yes, but have not experienced anything other than the insides of studies. This depression leads Faust to commit the greatest taboo one can do inside the world he knows, exploring the high ancestral spaces.

Faust at this time bored with the world tries to find another. He sells his soul for worldly pleasures. In some sense taking control over his destiny and mapping out a route for the afterlife. Predictable, just as he has led his life up till that point. Faust's depression causes him to do more self-harm. Trading eternal fire for a moment of happiness in this one. In the meanwhile, he can do whatever his heart desire. Taking the gamble that this life will be more important than the eternal one ahead.

The play in some way is a critique of the church and religion. Faust must sell his soul to the devil in order to have his worldly pleasures. It is a point of view that the church and religion is an empty shell. A religious man would never do this, but a worldly man would. This is also seen in Mephistopheles who represents the devil. He is very worldly and cares not for the afterlife.

The play does not say as much about the church as it does about the individual person. The play is about a person who must choose between his earthly pleasures and his eternal fate. He chooses his worldly pleasures and in the end, is remorseful for his choice. Faust is not the only one to blame for his own actions. Mephistopheles is the one who destroys Faust. He is the representation of Faust's conscience. The devil is also to blame for Faust's actions. If Faust had a keen sense of right and wrong, he would not have sold his soul. But over time worn down by the life, he chose to live the life he chose felt wrong.

The Devil is a cunning and intelligent demon, who has a deal with God. The Devil is given Faust's soul, but Faust gains his worldly desires. But the Devil also has a trick or two up his sleeve. The Devil can manipulate Faust into thinking that all his worldly desires are fulfilling his spiritual desire for human knowledge and experience. If Faust gives up his worldly desires, he will be able to fully live his spiritual desires. In this way, Faust is damned by the Devil. The Devil gives Faust a choice between spiritual fulfillment and worldly fulfillment. Faust chooses his worldly desires and is doomed to live in misery. The Devil has successfully tempted Faust. Faust is now a slave to his own desires.

This leads me to my next point. Another way to interpret the two souls passage is in the sense that even though his body and mind feel old there is still a youthful spirit within, yearning for the undiscovered wonders of the world. One says that the problem with growing old is that one does not feel old. And in the case of Faust, this is no different.

The first is the soul that weighs down the body and is the soul that is referred to in the two soul's passage. The second is the soul that lifts the body and is the soul that Faust refers to when he says that he is not as young as he used to be “*Too old am I to play with passion; Too young, to be without desire*” (Goethe and Taylor, 2005). The first soul weighs down and brings one down into the mud, whereas the second soul lifts the spirit and enables one to ascend to heaven. The first soul is the physical body, and the second soul is the soul of the mind. The soul of the mind is the higher part of the human that is able to do things that the body cannot do, such as reach the stars and travel to far-off places. It is the soul of the mind that enables one to read books, write books, and study. It is the soul of the mind that makes one better and makes one feel young. It is the soul of the mind that Faust refers to when he says that he is not as young as he used to be. In Faust’s case, the soul of his mind was able to read about a great many things, learn about a great many things, and study a great many things, just as it is able to do today. The soul of Faust’s mind is able to do these things because the soul of Faust’s mind is just as young as when it was able to do these things when Faust was a young man.

Over the years Faust's mind has undoubtedly acquired a plethora of knowledge in almost any subject that was available to him at the time, this is evident in Faust’s first line in the play “*I’ve studied now Philosophy And Jurisprudence, Medicine,— And even, alas! Theology,— From end to end, with labor keen; And here, poor fool! with all my lore I stand, no wiser than before:*” (Goethe and Taylor, 2005). Faust after having studied for all the years he has come to the conclusion that the knowledge he has not made him any wiser or more fulfilled. This is where the problem of lust and prudence comes into play. Faust has mastered many a skill, so far even that he discredits his achievements and has no illusion of superiority. Having reached the end of the Dunning-Kruger curve (Dunning–Kruger effect - Wikipedia, n.d.) his mind for science and studies is a great one, no doubt. Even still this still does not free him from his mortal shortcomings.



Faust has reached the plateau of sustainability of the Dunning-Kruger curve and has come to the realization that he has not learned anything substantial. This is the point where he realizes that the knowledge that he has acquired is not of worth and has not made him any wiser, or any more fulfilled. Faust is at the top of the curve and has reached the culmination of his efforts. Faust is no longer able to increase his knowledge in the way that he has been able to do in the past. This is the point where Faust makes the realization that he is mortal and limited in what he can learn and know. Faust has come to the realization that he is not capable of knowing everything (including science, religion, and philosophy…etc.) and that he cannot attempt to do so. This is where lust comes into play.

His lust for more and his apathy for what he knows leads him to study the dark arts, sell his soul and make a deal with the devil in hopes to discover what no man has before. This can be seen as him on the peak of mount stupid, not in knowledge but wisdom. His ability in knowledge and wisdom on the opposite sides of the same curve. Faust is knowledgeable, sure, but wise, no. Having never seen grass greener than the one described in scrolls Faust has come to the realization he has lived an unfulfilling life. Recognizing this, his “young soul” has become restless and makes an appearance in the form of lust. A feeling Faust has not had to deal with for decades.

Focusing on lust, Faust is drawn to the seductive nature of the devil. Faust sees the devil as the key to his problems and wants to uncover all the devil's secrets. Faust is so driven by lust that he is willing to commit the ultimate sin by selling his soul to the devil. Faust realizes that in order to acquire the knowledge he so desperately desires he must give up his soul and live with the devil. This can be seen as Faust feeling that there is no other way to achieve what he wants and he is willing to make a deal with the devil. Faust feels that the only way to achieve his goals is to give up his soul and sign a deal with the devil. Faust finds a way to make sure he is able to live a fulfilling life by making the deal.

Is this a calculated act of great virtue sacrificing himself for a greater cause or the hasting's of a lustful man? I believe the second. This is based on the infatuation he feels for Margaret. While in love with Margaret, Faust curses the devil “*Rescue her, or woe to thee! The fearfullest curse be upon thee for thousands of ages!*” (Goethe and Taylor, 2005) leading me to believe he, Faust, for the first time, has found a cause greater than himself.

This leads me to the ethical part of the journey. If the soul is young and the body transformed is one young again? Of course not. The mind is still old. It is not a question of old and young but of the morality and ethics behind seducing and lying to achieve one's own goals. In this sense, as in many others, Faust is not a moral man. Faust uses his knowledge and his personal devil to achieve feelings that life has to offer hitherto unbeknownst to him. Faust is for all intents and purposes using a love potion to gain Margaret's trust and earn her love. Morally abhorrent and bordering on rape. To say that Faust is an immoral man would be to tread lightly. Not only does he avoid answering the question asked when Margaret asks him “*Believest thou in God?*” (Goethe and Taylor, 2005), he makes it seem as if he is so moral and believing in God that saying it becomes a farce. When in fact he is defending the devil, actively playing God and setting himself above God at every chance he gets.

Circling back to what I said earlier about Mephistopheles being the manifestation of his own conscience Faust is aware of what he is doing, cursing himself for being the way he is. He realizes what he is doing but continues to act in the same manner blinded by the love he never felt as a normal man. I think that is the most interesting part of the story, the love he never felt. Faust is the origin of the expression “I’d sell my soul for X” selling his soul for youth, beauty, power. It is fascinating to see what makes him continue in his actions. To paraphrase the great Tom Waits, some men do it for diamonds, other for gold. In the case of Faust, he did it for both power and love.

The power Faust has leads to corruption and the feeling that his worldly pleasures are more worth than the pleasures and well-being of the people around him. It is in this sense that Faust is a monster. He has become the devil incarnate. He has sold his soul. He has become the man who knows no remorse. This is a man who has the power to stop the suffering of millions yet is so wrapped up in his own affairs that he does nothing. He is a man who actively seeks to destroy people in order to achieve what he wants. He is a man who is not in control as he thinks he is. He is the devil. He is the devil that people never realize is there. He is the devil that has the power to stop the suffering but does nothing. He is a devil that is distracted by his own needs. A devil that is a man who has sold his soul. Faust is a monster who has become the devil.

In conclusion, Faust is just as the day he was born. As egocentric and as stubborn as the day he was brought into this world. Faust thinks he is a man of reason, of science, and the benefits of the Enlightenment but in fact, he is a man of passion and emotion, of love and lust, which in the end will be both his and Margarets bane. He is torn between these two sides of his personality, of what he thinks he is and what, he, in fact, is. Faust is a rash and stupid man. He is not a realist. And given the choice (which he in some sense was) he would have taken one marshmallow over two (Stanford marshmallow experiment - Wikipedia, n.d.).

One can say that Faust throughout his journey learns this about himself and recognizes his own faults and wrongdoings. In the end, risking his own wellbeing and his and Margarets love so that she can go free. The most selfless act Faust can do in the position he is in.

I think it's vital to remember that after all Faust is but a man. A man given otherworldly powers. Any man given these powers would undoubtedly be torn apart by the sheer weight of having them. And one should remember that Faust is using these powers to compensate for the love he never had, and, in some way, this makes it both more forgivable and understandable.

The story is just as relevant today as it was in its time. And it is this that makes it so timeless. Speaking on the subject and morality of having absolute power. Faust is a very human story. The story of the human condition. It's the story of our everlasting striving to achieve beyond our limitations. It is the story of the human condition that is never-ending. Just like Faust himself. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

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