

Devilish Echoes: Goethe's *Faust* and Its Modern American Interpretations

By Caleb Miller

Of all the devilish motifs that are propagated in America, none may be as sinister as the devil's familiar. My first encounter with this idea was from the Grateful Dead, and their 1970 studio version of "Friend of the Devil":

Ran into the devil, babe, he loaned me 20 bills...

I ran down to the levee, but the devil caught me there,

Took my 20 dollar bill and he vanished in the air. (The Grateful Dead)

The condemned folk hero is nothing new to art, or even popular culture. In 1808, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe produced one of the most well-known works of German stage: *Faust: The Tragedy Part One* (Ramm). Considered an integral part of the German "Classics", *Faust* by definition carries a mythological background, one that is rooted in alchemy and the truth. It's author, Goethe, also came to fruition as an artist during the "Sturm und Drang"¹ period of German art and philosophy, which turned the inquisitiveness of the Enlightenment on its head and attacked everything man had created to remove himself from the natural essence of being (Pausch 39). In order to unify these different motifs and storylines in *Faust*, Goethe added another piece to the myth: Gretchen, the pure and devout object of Faust's infernal desires (Ramm).

The story, as told by Goethe, begins in heaven, where God and Mephistopholes strike a deal that allows Mephistopholes to tempt Faust with his wanton desires (von Goethe 15). Dr.

¹ "Storm and Stress"

Faust is a cynical and dying genius who has devoted his life prior to the story to science and philosophy. Distraught that he has not explored the world of human pleasure, Faust begins to attempt suicide, only to be stopped in the most absurd of fashions (von Goethe). The devil strolls into his house and persuades him to allow his natural course of life to be reversed for the youthful sensations Faust has forgone to discover knowledge. Faust, after some time, tentatively agrees, and, under a devilish spell, he meets Margarete, or Gretchen, a devout and innocent teenager. Under the auspice that Faust is a young and affluent man, Gretchen falls in love with him, only to slowly have her world torn asunder as the dark dealings of Mephistopholes begin to run their course in the world.

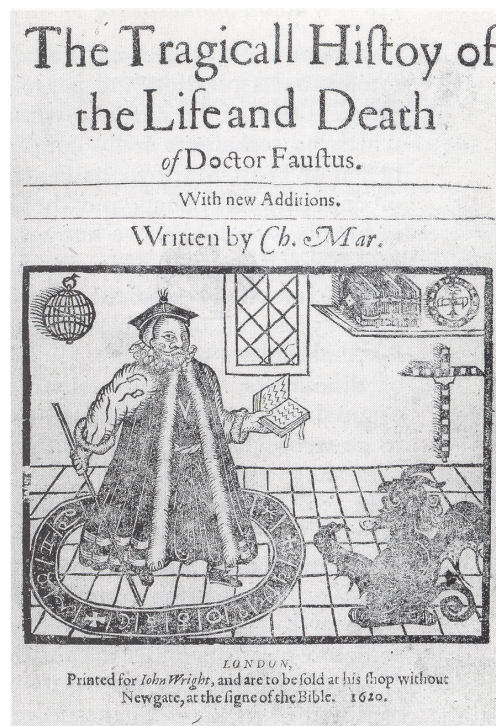


Figure 2 The title page of Christopher Marlowe's 16th-Century *Doctor Faustus*

Myths like what has become known as the "Faustian legend" deal very much with concrete facets of the human psyche. The greek myth of Oedipus, in which a king kills his father and marries his mother, for example, was used by Sigmund Freud to describe a psychological

complexes. Napoleon's legacy in popular culture might be the negative correlation between his height and the attempted conquest of the western world. *Faust*, on the other hand, deals very much with man's quest to become that which he is not.

This is one aspect of the Goethe's legacy on the Faustian legend. The Sturm und Drang philosophers hoped to uncover true "Genius" in the masses by awakening their natural talents (Pausche 39). This can also be found in the television show *Hannibal*, a work featuring the titular Hannibal Lector from the movie *Silence of the Lambs* prior to his incarceration.

Hannibal follows one Will Graham, an FBI special advisor with a natural inclination towards empathetic projection of a serial killer's motives (Hannibal). This talent makes Will a valuable teacher at the FBI academy, but too unstable to place in a permanent field position (Hannibal). Unfortunately, Will begins to lie to his superiors in order to catch criminals that he may be getting too involved with. Topped off by Hannibal Lector's perverted "therapies" that force Will to imagine that he is becoming a serial killer, Will begins to lose himself in his perceived need to stop serial killers from continuing (Hannibal).

It is this natural genius we find in both Will Graham and Faust to be the most compelling facets of their characters. Both have talents that have demonstrated their effectiveness and mastery in their proper fields. Unfortunately, both find it better to ignore future consequences for their short-term desires. Some of the natural motifs present in both *Hannibal* and *Faust* include references to the sheer power of nature. In *Hannibal*, it is the recurrent figure of a monstrous stag that plagues Will Graham (Hannibal). The motif of nature's power also can be seen in *Faust*, when Faust expresses his desire to stand atop mountains under the moonlight, surrounded by ghosts (von Goethe 18).

Gounod's Opera, *Faust*, debuted at the Met in November 2011 with a mechanized update of the original story. In that rendition, Faust is characterized by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb and the appearance of atomic bombs in the opera drive home the point the director is attempting to make: no matter how genius an idea, nature is dark and terrifying when owned by humans (Tommasini). This separation between humans and their environment can be seen in the metallic set pieces, which partition the love story from the natural science which occurs throughout the Opera.



Figure 1 The Metropolitan Opera's Staging of Faust

So how does Goethe's *Faust* inform us of ourselves today? In an article from September 26, 2017 by Benjamin Ramm of the BBC, entitled "What the Myth of Faust Can Teach Us", the author writes:

Despite its theological underpinnings, the Faust legend has thrived in secular consumer societies, particularly in a culture of instant gratification. From credit cards to fast food, we opt for immediate pleasure even in the knowledge that it brings long-term pain.

(Ramm)

This might be the foundation of Goethe's *Faust* taking root in American culture. *Faust* found its place in America through the disruption of nature and the human's presence in it. These circumstances raise the question to Americans: in what ways should we deny ourselves?

It is possibly the goal of Faust in Goethe's text to explore his human nature after having sacrificed his life to ethereal subject matter. "Hat die Natur und hat ein edler Geist/ Nicht irgendeinen Balsam ausgefunden?"² (von Goethe 78). Faust speaks in amazement at the lack of transcendent grace to accompany the weight of human achievement. This can be seen in the Met's staging of Gounod's opera, as the physicist kills himself over his total ruination of humanity, and it can also be seen in Will Graham's inability to understand what is making him slowly lose his mind under the guidance of Dr. Hannibal Lector (Tommasini, Hannibal). The pressures of desire that must be channeled through symbols are what give the Faust legend its character and its power.

The plays of truth and falsehood in *Faust* provide the reader with an understanding of what questioning meant to philosophers of the Sturm and Drang. That trend of losing truth through inherently false means can be seen not only in Goethe's *Faust*, but also in the American landscape today. It may be untimely to view how *Faust* is represented in our culture because of this fact, but that is also self-serving to see how this system of right and wrong fuels

² Hasn't nature or a noble Ghost/ figured some concoction out?

misinterpretation on a greater scale. Just as the witch's brew begets Faust's transformation, science becomes the criticized in *Faust's* modern interpretations—a dangerous play.

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Figure 2 Wright, John. "Title Page of a late edition of Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, With a woodcut illustration of a devil coming up through a trapdoor." *Wikipedia*, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Faustus_\(play\)#/media/File:Faustus-tragedy.gif](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Faustus_(play)#/media/File:Faustus-tragedy.gif)

Figure 1 Krulwich, Sara. "Marina Poplavskaya as Marguerite and Jonas Kaufmann as Faust in the Metropolitan Opera's production of Gounod's 'Faust'". *The New York Times*, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/arts/music/a-review-of-the-metropolitan-operas-faust.html>