



Knowledge Power and Desire Goethe's *Faust* and the Conquering of Gretchen

Le pouvoir de la connaissance et le désir de Faust de Goethe et la conquête de Gretchen

قدرة المعرفة ورغبة "فاوست" ل: غوته وغزو "جريتشن"

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ملخص

ركز العديد من النقاد الأدبيين في دراساتهم في مجال الأدب على "الأنماط الأصلية" أو تلك القصص الأسطورية التي يتم إحياؤها عبر العصور وخاصة تلك التي لها علاقة بما يُعرف بـ "الصدى الأسطوري" الذي يجعل النصوص الأدبية جاذبة للقراء وفعالة. و لهذا حاول معظم الباحثين إيجاد هذه الأنماط وتحديدتها في الأعمال الأدبية من خلال تتبع عناصرها الرئيسية وتحليل أجزائها المختلفة. ولذلك ركز هذا البحث على هذه الأنماط الأصلية من خلال التركيز على النمط "الفوستي" باعتباره أحد أشهر الأنماط الأصلية وأحد الأنماط الأكثر تأثيراً في المجال الأدبي. كما يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الصفة الفاوستية التي تستحضر عن طريق رغبة فاوست في السلطة أو ما يسميه نيتشه "الإرادة الدافعة للسلطة". لذلك لما كان هذا البحث يركز على الدافع وراء الصفة الفاوستية فإنه يقدم كان منظوراً جديداً كذلك عن تصرفات فاوست ورغباته. يهدف هذا البحث إلى الكشف عن وجود رغبة وراء الصفة الفاوستية التي تمت بين فاوست وميفستوفيليس في عمل غوته المشهور "فاوست" ودراسة طبيعة هذه الرغبة. كما يهدف إلى تحليل شخصية فاوست ورغباته عبر تحليل أفعاله خلال أحداث القصة وبشكل رئيسي من خلال تحليل علاقته مع جريتشن.

الكلمات الدالة: الأنماط الأصلية؛ النمط الفوستي؛ الصفة الفاوستية؛ فاوست؛ الرغبة في السلطة؛ الإرادة الدافعة للسلطة؛ جريتشن.

Abstract

Many literary critics and scholars focus on archetypes in their studies in the field of literature. Archetypes are important because they provide what is known as the "mythic resonance" that makes literary texts relatable and effective (Gillespie, 2010 pp. 59). Most literary researchers try to identify these patterns in literary works by tracking its major elements and analyzing the different parts of the archetypal stories. This paper analyzes the Faustian archetype as one of the archetypes that can be analyzed through tracking and analyzing its major elements. In this sense, the major aspects of the Faustian archetype are Faust, the

devil and the Faustian deal. The Faustian deal is triggered by a desire for power or what Nietzsche calls the will to power. Therefore, this paper focuses on the motive behind the Faustian deal while offering a new perspective on Faust's actions and his desires in one of the most influential reincarnations of the Faustian archetype. This paper aims to reveal the existence of a desire behind the deal made between Goethe's Faust and Mephistopheles and to examine the nature of such desire. It also aims to analyze Faust's character and his desires through his actions during the events of the story and mainly through his relationship with Gretchen.

Keywords : archetypes; the Faustian archetype; the Faustian deal; Faust; the desire for power; the will to power; Gretchen.

Résumé

De nombreux critiques littéraires se concentrent sur les archétypes dans leurs études dans le domaine de la littérature. Les archétypes sont importants car ils fournissent ce que l'on appelle la «résonance mythique» qui rend les textes littéraires attrayants et efficaces (Gillespie, 2010, p. 59). La plupart des chercheurs littéraires tentent d'identifier ces modèles dans les œuvres littéraires en suivant leurs principaux éléments et en analysant les différentes parties des histoires archétypales. Cet article analyse l'archétype faustien comme l'un des archétypes qui peuvent être analysés en suivant et en analysant ses principaux éléments. En ce sens, les principaux aspects de l'archétype faustien sont Faust, le diable et le contrat faustien. Le contrat faustien est déclenché par un désir de pouvoir ou ce que Nietzsche appelle la volonté de pouvoir. Par conséquent, cet article se concentre sur le motif de contrat faustien tout en offrant une nouvelle perspective sur les actions de Faust et ses désirs dans l'une des réincarnations les plus influentes de l'archétype faustien. Cet article vise à révéler l'existence d'un désir derrière le contrat faustien conclu entre Faust et Méphistophélès dans « Faust » de Goethe et à examiner la nature d'un tel désir. Il vise également à analyser le personnage de Faust et ses désirs à travers ses actions lors des événements de l'histoire et principalement à travers sa relation avec Gretchen.

Mots-clés: les archétypes; l'archétype faustien; le contrat faustien; un désir de pouvoir; la volonté de pouvoir; Gretchen.

Introduction

The archetypal story of Faust, a dissatisfied scholar who sold his soul to the devil, which inspired Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (or *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, continues to inspire many creators of literature. It tells the story of a deal made between a human and the devil in exchange for



power, wisdom, wealth, and other human desires. In its initial form, Faust is a scholar who realizes that he cannot reach his goal using conventional means, so he makes a deal with the devil to grant him wishes. The Faustian archetype entitles the idea of making a pact with a divine or a supernatural force in exchange for worldly treasures and the fulfillment of human desires. This idea provides a significant source for many creators of literature and art who try to replicate it or repeat its core components to create new versions of the Faustian deal. For this reason, many reincarnations of the Faustian archetype can be identified in literature and art.

Goethe's significant addition to the Faustian archetype was able to drastically transform the myth by adding a new focus to the myth. This new focus highlights the nature of the relationship between Faust and the devil. Goethe's *Faust* focuses on one element in particular to explain the initiation of the Faustian deal which is human desire. This is why many studies in the field of literature are dedicated to investigating human desires in relation to the Faustian archetype. Many researchers conclude that the Faust-devil contact is triggered by a desire to obtain knowledge considering Faust's academic interests. Other researchers believe that he desires youth while others believe that this desire is the desire for immortality. However, the motive behind the Faustian deal is not knowledge, truth, immortality or youth but another desire which is the desire for power or what Nietzsche calls "the will to power".

1. What is power

In humanities, there is a notable lack of agreement about the definition of power. Therefore, many academics, philosophers and theorists offer different definitions of power. The German sociologist Max Weber provides one of the most acknowledged definitions of power in his work *Economy and society*. He defines power as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons" (Hamilton, 1991, pp. 12). This definition suggests that the purpose of power is to impose one's preferences on those who are subject to it. Robert Dahl, the American political scientist, provides another definition of power: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do." (Giddens, 2010, pp. 302).



According to Dahl's *theory of community power*, "power is exercised in a community by a particular concrete individual, while other individuals are prevented from doing what they prefer to do" (Sadan, pp. 36). To Dahl, power is not only imposing one's will on others but also preventing others from imposing their preferences. The British mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell provides another view of power. He defines power as "the production of intended effects" (Russell, 2004, pp. 23). According to Russell, power is the ability to do or carry out something or reach a certain effect. Guardini agrees with this definition and defines power as "the ability to move reality." (Lauer, 2014, pp. 58)

Dahl's and Weber's definitions of power focus on the notion of '*power over*'. Russell and Guardini, however, define power more broadly as a capacity to achieve intended effects, namely '*power to*'. Power is usually defined and dealt with from these two perspectives. What is common between these two perspectives is that power is seen as a force or as a tool which 'function' is to achieve a certain goal and therefore is viewed by individuals as a necessary element in social dealings (Hanifi, 2019). In his *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Michel Foucault defines power as the capacity to cause effects, changes and 'do' work. Foucault insists that power is also the ability to influence people to follow your preferences (Foucault, 1980, pp. 98).

Since power allows certain individuals to impose their preferences on others directly or indirectly, it is tempting for many to try to obtain it. The desire for power can be an important drive that pushes individuals to use all possible methods to obtain it. Some of these methods include traditional methods such as obtaining money, knowledge, education, and political influence through public approval.

Other methods include non-traditional methods that are morally ambiguous and socially rejected. In this sense, while some individuals attempt to improve their life conditions using socially accepted methods to obtain power such as seeking knowledge and education through migration (Musette and Labdelaoui, 2017), other individuals choose morally ambiguous methods such as obtaining money or influence through illegal activities (Moffatt, 2003). Since the Faustian deal is one of the methods in which power can be obtained, the desire for power is possibly the drive behind the initiation of the Faust-devil relationship.



2. Goethe's *Faust*, desire and the will to power

Goethe is such an important figure in the wake of Faustian archetype. Goethe's contribution to the archetype does not only include a return of the myth to its former glory and respect (Watt, 1997) but also its transformation. Goethe's new addition to the myth lies in highlighting new themes such as redemption and focusing on the human aspect of the myth and its impact on the human-devil relationship (Watt, 1997). As a result, Goethe's *Faustis* highly regarded as an influential reincarnation of the Faustian archetype and one of its major sources.

Goethe's *Faust* is commonly referred to and analyzed in many pieces of research in literature that deal with the Faustian archetype. One of these works is *The Faustian Century: German Literature and Culture in the Age of Luther and Faustus* by James M. Van der Laan, Andrew Weeks in which Goethe's *Faust* is referred to multiple times in relation to the Faustian archetype. The human aspect of the myth which Goethe draws the attention to is reflected through the focus on human desire as the drive behind the initiation of the Faustian contract.

This inspires many literary studies to focus on desire when dealing with the Faustian archetype. An example of these works is *Temptations of Faust: The Logic of Fascism and Postmodern Archaeologies of Modernity* by Evelyn Cobley which discusses the notion of desire while referring to the Faustian archetype. Most literary critics and literary researchers agree that human desire is the reason behind the initiation of the contact between Faust and the devil. They also agree that this human desire is what sets the basis of the relationship between Faust and the devil.

The motive behind the Faustian deal is the first and the most important element of the deal because it sets the ground for the human-devil relationship. It also explains the actions of both Faust and the devil and the nature of the relationship between them. That is why many scholars try to investigate this particular element in relation to the Faustian deal. Most scholars agree that desire is what motivates Faust to trade with the devil.

The desire for power is especially important for the Faustian archetype because it explains some of the behaviors of Faust, his cooperation with the devil and perhaps even the final consequences of the Faustian deal. One of the most influential theories that deal with power from this perspective is Nietzsche's theory on power: the will to power. In his famous work on



power, *the Will to Power*, Nietzsche suggests that all humans, and not only a specific group of individuals, have an innate desire to obtain power. Nietzsche calls this desire “the will to power” (Claeys, 2013). This includes Goethe’s Faust who shows many tendencies toward obtaining power.

3. Faust and the quest for power

According to Nietzsche, the will to power is “an insatiable desire to manifest power; or as the employment and exercise of power, as a creative drive”(Nietzsche, 1902, pp. 267). This means that the will to power involves a desire to employ power, exercise power and demonstrate power. In this sense, power is a tool to obtain and maintain power, an active act of imposing one’s will on others and causing an intended effect, and a manifestation of power in its different types and forms. Nietzsche continues his definition of the will to power by stating that it is:

A description of the causal process as a whole, according to which every event tends toward the maximal manifestation of power in the form of the activity of resisting, of action against obstacle. (Miyasaki, 2013 pp. 265)

Nietzsche explains what happens once power is obtained. According to Nietzsche, even after power is obtained, the will to power continues to manifest in a form of resistance of anything that may threaten its existence. This means that the will to power is not only the force behind engaging in an act that will allow the individual to obtain it but also the force behind engaging in various forms of resistance that will allow him/her to maintain it

Faust shows a lot of tendencies toward obtaining control or power that will allow him to have control over his life and fulfill his ambitions. These tendencies are expressed at first by rejecting his limitations and seeking to overcome them through knowledge and later by directly expressing his desire to obtain power. Faust is frustrated at the beginning of the story with his lack of knowledge:

*I can even juggle myself to own
There is any one thing to be truly known.
Or ought to be taught in science or arts
To better mankind and to turn their hearts
... So to magic I've vowed myself to give (Goethe, 1902, p. 13)*



Here, Faust declares that he desires knowledge and that the main reason he desires to obtain knowledge is to “better mankind”. This statement is perhaps what led many scholars to believe that Goethe’s Faust is a selfless scholar who resorts to magic only to benefit humanity. This explains why, unlike other inner human desires, the desire for knowledge is seen as a noble quest because it does not benefit only its bearer but humanity as a whole. In his statement, Faust declares that the main reason for his frustration is the limitations of his knowledge. Therefore he resorts to magic in an attempt to surpass these limitations. However, after a closer inspection of his statement, it is evident that it is not the limitations themselves that are causing such frustration but Faust’s lack of power to overcome these limitations:

*Yet here, poor fool! For all my lore
I stand no wiser than before
[...] and yet there is nothing can ever be
By mortals known, too well I see!
This is burning the heart clean out of me
[...] but just for this I am dispossess’d
Of all that gives pleasure to life and zest (Goethe, 1902, p. 13)*

Faust is frustrated not because his knowledge is limited but because he has no power as a human being to overcome these limitations. He suggests that what “mortals” can offer gives no “pleasure” to life. This is a clear statement that he desires what goes beyond what humanity can provide. Faust does not only show his frustration with his lack of knowledge, but with his lack of power as well:

*Besides, I have neither land nor pence,
Nor worldly honor nor influence
A dog in my case would scorn to live;
So to magic I’ve vow’d myself to give, (Goethe, 1902, p. 13)*

What Faust mentions here are the different forms of power that existed in Goethe’s time. Property, land, honor and influence are the signs of a powerful man in Goethe’s time. Therefore, showing the frustration of his lack of these forms of powers clearly shows that he desires power in its different forms. To Faust, even knowledge is a tool that may grant him the power he desires:



*The heart from some mysteries cannot be wrung;
 If I cannot escape from the bitter woe
 Of babbling of things that I do not know,
 And get to the roots of these secret powers,
 Which hold together this world of ours,
 The sources and centers of force explore,
 And chaffer and dabble in words no more.* (Goethe, 1902, p. 15)

Faust declares that he wishes to reach the roots of secret powers and understand them. This can be interpreted that he only wishes to obtain knowledge about these powers rather than obtaining these powers themselves. However, a closer inspection suggests otherwise. After announcing his desire to know the secrets of these powers, Faust mentions how he does not only wish to know about these powers but to “explore” them. The word “explore” or exploration in this context, and especially considering Faust’s academic background, suggests experimentation or the exercise of these powers. This means that Faust intends to “explore” these powers through actions. He later confirms his willingness to obtain and exercise these powers by stating that he desires to “move” away from words: “chaffer and dabble in words no more” (Goethe, 1902, pp. 15). Faust, here, shows that he does not only wish to know about these powers and only to describe them with words but to exercise them and explore them through moving from words into action. Therefore, Faust’s intention to obtain power and then exercise is clear.

The actions of Faust are also an indication of his desire for power. In many instances in the play, Faust does not only try to obtain power but also tries to actively impose his will on others. His trickery toward his peers, for example, illustrates how he desires to have control over them. His attempt to gain influence and treasures is another indication that he desires power. Another example is his involvement with the Emperor in Part II of the play. Faust helps the Emperor to win against his enemies with the help of Mephistopheles. He, however, helps the Emperor simply to gain influence and rewards from him. The influence, the land and the riches that Faust receives reveal his intention with the Emperor. These rewards fulfill some of his desire to obtain power.

Another example from the play that shows how Faust attempts to both gain and maintain his power is when Faust complains about the couple’s cottage



ruining his view. He asks Mephistopheles to deal with them. Mephistopheles, then, disposes of them after burning their cottage and the nearby Chapel. Faust protests that he only wanted to buy them out but shows no further complaints or remorse. He later asks Mephistopheles to secure his land and protect it from the sea, thus, showing a desire to maintain the newly gained power that he received through getting rid of his competitors and securing his land. This shows that Faust intends to maintain the power he receives through Mephistopheles as *a form of resistance to anything that may threaten the existence of his power.*

4. Faust and Gretchen

The lustful relationship of Faust with Gretchen is the perfect example of his will to power. It reveals all sides of Faust's character and exposes his motives. The lustful relationship with Gretchen in part I of the play is another way Faust is displaying and exercising power granted by Mephistopheles. *Faust confesses his desire to Mephistopheles when he sees Gretchen for the first time: "Get me that girl" (Goethe, 1902, pp. 94). Thus, Faust reveals his desire to obtain power over Gretchen. He later tries to seduce Gretchen through "gifts" and "treasures" provided by Mephistopheles until she is finally under his control. The gifts and treasures are a manifestation of the power that is gained through his contract. Faust, here, is using the power granted by Mephistopheles as a tool to further his control over Gretchen. Faust repeatedly reminds the audience that he desires Gretchen because of her "innocence" and mainly to "possess her" (Goethe, 1902, pp. 96) and "to enjoy her" (Goethe, 1902, pp. 122). Therefore, his desire for Gretchen does not stem from lust or love but from his desire to gain power over her. Faust even confesses his desire to gain power over Gretchen in the Forest and Cavern act:*

*Thou glorious nature for my realm hast given,
With power to feel, and to enjoy her, thou
No mere cold glance of wonder hast vouchsafed,
But let's me deep down into her breast,
Even as into the bosom of a friend. (Goethe, 1902, p. 122)*

Faust confesses to the nature spirits that it was supernatural forces that gave him the power to "enjoy her". He then continues that he wants to go "deeper" by having full control over her. Ian Watt argues that:

We never really know just what Faust's motives are, as far as Gretchen and her family are concerned. He certainly feels love for Gretchen, saying when he thinks of her coming death, "I wish I had never been born" (line 4596);



but the two are not often seen together, and Mephistopheles keeps Faust away from Gretchen at her end (Watt, 1997, pp. 198)

Ian Watt agrees with many other researchers that Faust's motives with Gretchen are unclear. However, Watt mentions how Faust feels "love" toward Gretchen. In fact, Faust's "love" for Gretchen is nothing but a manifestation of his desire for power. To Faust, Gretchen is a prize that he must "get" and then later "enjoy". That is why, after the death of Gretchen, Faust shows a little or no remorse for causing her death. He also does not take responsibility for his actions that later lead to the death of her mother and her brother and her execution. Faust, later, simply moves on in his quest to fulfill his desire for power.

Faust's relationship with Gretchen and his desire to overpower her is also another manifestation of his frustration with his powerlessness. It also shows a desire to overcome such powerlessness at all costs. At a moment in the story, Faust becomes obsessed with Gretchen. Gretchen's innocence plays a big role in his obsession and the intensity of Faust's desire to have power over her. Such desire grows even bigger after Mephistopheles confession that her innocence may prevent him from helping Faust to possess her:

*What! She?
She has to her confessor been,
Who gave her—he could scarce do less—
Full absolution; I was there,
Lying ensconced behind the chair.
Though she had nothing to confess,
Nothing whatever, to him she went,
Poor thing, she is so innocent.
Over that girl I have no power (Goethe, 1902, p. 94)*

Faust's insistence to have power over Gretchen shows his refusal to be bound in his quest for power. Her innocence is a challenge that Faust must be overcome at all costs. It answers to the inner rage that stems from his frustration toward the limitations of his power. Such rage grows bigger especially after gaining Mephistopheles to his side. That is why Faust becomes obsessed with Gretchen under the pretext of love. Faust becomes obsessed with manifesting his power and testing its limits. Faust remains obsessed even after his lustful relationship with Gretchen and refuses to



leave her side after conquering her. This obsession is a mere display of his desire to maintain the power he could finally gain over her. Faust confesses the satisfaction he received from having power over Gretchen in the Forest and Cavern act:

*Oh, now I feel no perfect boon e'er
Achieved by man, with this ecstatic power,
Which bring me hourly nearer to the gods, (Goethe, 1902, p. 122)*

Here, Faust shows the satisfaction he received after his encounter with Gretchen and overcoming her innocence that hinders his quest to gain power over her. Gretchen's young age, her innocence and her devotion to religion could not stop Faust from attempting to gain power over her. This shows that Faust has no regard for moral codes, religion and social expectations in his quest for power. Just like his lustful relationship with Gretchen, Faust intends to overcome all his powerlessness and his limitations regardless of means used or the moral codes that may prevent him from doing so.

Conclusion

The Faustian archetype entitles many ideas and notions that appear throughout its different incarnations. The Faustian deal is one of the most important aspects of the Faustian archetype and one of its defining elements. Therefore, an understanding of the Faustian deal and especially the motive behind it is a necessary step toward understanding the archetype as a whole. Goethe's *Faust*, one of the most influential reincarnations of the Faustian archetype, highlights key concepts that may reveal the motive behind the engagement of Faust with Mephistopheles. After a close inspection of Goethe's *Faust* and a thorough analysis of the actions of its protagonist, it is apparent that Faust's desire for power is what leads him toward making the deal with Mephistopheles.

Faust's motives do not only include a desire for power, but also a desire to manifest, to exercise and to maintain power. This is apparent through his frustration with the limitations of his knowledge as a form of power, his frustration with the lack of power in its different forms, and mainly through his relationship with Gretchen. The complicated relationship between Faust and Gretchen and her innocence reveals Faust's true motives and the depth of his will to power. It also shows how one's



frustration with the limitations of his power can lead to an obsession that will eventually lead to a disaster.

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