

Name _____ Date _____

from *Faust: "Prologue in Heaven" and from "The First Part of the Tragedy"*
by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Literary Analysis: Legends

A **legend** is a widely told story about the past. It may or may not have a foundation in fact; but it does reflect the values of the people from whom it emerged. A legend may also reflect the superstitions or deeply held fears of the people who tell and retell it.

The Faust legend apparently arose at a time when people were deeply suspicious of intellectual curiosity or achievement. Heinrich Heine, a contemporary of Goethe's, reflected on the legend's origin: "Whenever the people of the Middle Ages saw great intellectual potency anywhere, they ascribed it to a daemonic pact" (that is, to a pact with the devil). A result was that medieval scholars like Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon were considered sorcerers and exorcists.

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following questions on the lines provided.

1. Why, in your opinion, were the people of the Middle Ages suspicious of intellectual curiosity or achievement?

2. Do you think that the lessons of the Faust legend are applicable only to the Middle Ages, or do they offer modern readers food for thought as well? Explain your response.

3. What person in the news or characters from present-day fiction, movies, or TV remind you in some way of Faust? In what respects are they similar to Faust? How are they different?

4. Generalize from this exercise: State one reason why legends tend to change over time. Does the tendency to change affect their relevance for contemporary readers?
