

Deals with the Devil

by Zach Elton

"Remember this town's soul is mine...the moment you get started."



ILLUSTRATION OF FAUST AND THE DEVIL.

After stating that ominous promise, the Stranger disappears and the Man has to make a choice. Will he risk the soul of the town to gain respect and wealth, or will he continue to live his life completely alone? Can he trust this stranger he invited into his house? This is what Donnetta Lavinia Grays makes the Man wrestle with in her play *Where We Stand*. While the Man is not wise enough to see he shouldn't trust this stranger, the audience can tell Grays is employing one of the most well-known motifs in folklore: the deal with the Devil.

This motif can be found in stories all across the world, including in the United States, Europe, Africa, and more. In these stories, someone who is down on their luck makes a bargain with an evil spirit to obtain some type of worldly gain, such as money, fame, or power, in exchange for their soul. Most scholars agree that in western Europe, stories about making deals with the Devil began emerging during the Middle Ages. This is when the Catholic Church gained a lot

of power in Europe, and with its ascent, it brought stories of the Devil, demons, and witches. Soon, tales began to be woven about these evil beings. These stories were used as a tool to warn people against coveting worldly gain, and instead encouraged them to focus on their eternal spirit.

This motif became solidified with the development of the legend of Faust. As the story goes, Faust was a very successful man, but he was always dissatisfied with his position in life. One night, as luck would have it, he meets an evil being (sometimes this character is the Devil himself, and other times it is a demonic figure) and exchanges his soul for unlimited knowledge and pleasure. Depending on the version, sometimes the devil character reappears and takes his soul at the end of his life, or sometimes angels of God intervene and take his soul to heaven. Either way, Faust has been the inspiration for multiple folktales, songs, and plays, including Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust*.

As Faust's story became ingrained in Europe, stories about deals with the Devil developed simultaneously in other cultures. Though there are many variations on this story throughout the world, certain elements remain the same fairly regularly. For example, one of the most consistent parts of these fables is that a person meets an evil being at a crossroads. Crossroads are liminal spaces, meaning they are places that connect two areas, such as bridges and stairways, but they themselves are betwixt and between. These spaces represent the need for a choice. Will you go forward or go back? What road will you take? In liminal spaces, people are always forced to make a decision. Crossroads often play an integral part in these stories because many cultures believe that unearthly creatures reside there. In Hoodoo, a form of African magical spirituality practice in the United States, the crossroads represents the human cycle of death and rebirth; the center of the crossroads is also where conversations with



ILLUSTRATION OF PAPA LEGBA.

spirits can take place. The Yoruba people of western Africa believe that the trickster deity Eshu-Elegba resides at the crossroads and will leave offerings at the crossroads for him. In the Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo traditions, Papa Legba is the messenger between the spirit world and our world who resides at the crossroads.

Tales about deals with the Devil are found all throughout the United States, and are especially popular in the South. Some famous ones include "The Delta Legend" and "The Deal at the Crossroads," which follow a frustrated guitarist who meets Satan and trades his soul for talent and fame. No one knows who the protagonist of the story originally was, but over the years, the tales have been conflated and are now mostly associated with the early-twentieth-century blues guitarist Robert Johnson.

Johnson was a Black American guitarist, singer, and songwriter. The story goes that he yearned to play the guitar like his idol, Son House, but he possessed little natural ability. Many of his friends and colleagues picked on him because of his lack of talent, and they refused to play with him in public. One version of the story claims that one day, a stranger told Johnson to take his guitar to the crossroads near Dockery Plantation at midnight, and he would find someone there who would be able to help

him. That night, he met a strange man who took his guitar from him, tuned it, and when he handed it back, Johnson could play any song he wanted to. Another version of the story says that Johnson disappeared for months with no words to anyone, and when he reemerged he had an unrivaled proficiency on the guitar. This led many to speculate that he had made an unnatural deal with the Devil to get his skill.

Whether or not he actually made a deal with the Devil, the fact remains that Johnson is one of the most proficient and influential blues guitarists of all time. He had an unparalleled talent and, though he only recorded about 30 songs, he had a loyal following during his lifetime. He died at the age of 27, which made the rumors of his association with the Devil only grow. Famous musicians such as Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, and Eric Clapton have praised Johnson, and Clapton even called him "the most important blues singer that ever lived."

No matter if you hear a story about Faust or Johnson, about the Devil or Papa Legba, the basic elements of the story remain the same, and the story never ends well. The lesson is always not to make a deal with the Devil unless you are willing to give up more than you gained.



ROBERT JOHNSON.