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“Laughter” or “Tears”?

(On the question of details in Thomas Mann's “Doctor Faustus”)

The clarification of the functions of the marginal details is important for complex themes and motifs of “Doctor Faustus”. We consider two details – 'laughter' and 'tears' – in the context of the strings of words that run throughout the text space of “Doctor Faustus”. Adrian Leverkühn's “laughing” in its basic meaning points to the loneliness of the individual, to the isolation of man from the rest of the world and to the closedness within himself. “Tears” have been used throughout human history, and particularly in the Christian religion, as a symbol of mourning, repentance, and catharsis. In the novel, the tear detail serves as a counterweight to evil and cruelty, and consequently signifies the victory of good over evil, of the genuinely human over the inhuman, the satanic. In this meaning, the teardrop detail is contrasted with the leitmotif detail “of laughter”. On this basis, one can state that in the text under study there is an antithesis of evil and good, or of the victory of evil and the triumph of good, represented in the novel by two leitmotif details: “Laughter” ↔ “Tears”.

We trace the joint movement of the word-row details “laughter” and “tears” throughout the text, infer their meaning in the main character's life, and determine the frequency of their use in the text.

Quantitatively, laughing details dominate very strongly, but towards the end the tearing details already predominate. The crux of the matter is that the string of words ends with a teardrop detail.

In summary, it can be said that at the end of the work Adrian Leverkühn is no longer laughing, he is crying. So here is the triumph of good over evil. Adrian Leverkühn moves away from the Devil and approaches the God.