

Faust and the
german nation: how
literature dictates
manifestations of
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As Benedict Anderson makes evident in *Imagined Communities*, literature and the nation are often intertwined in a multitude of ways. In the case of Goethe's *Faust*, a single work of literature became so meaningful to the German people that they made it their national text, and use it, whether consciously or unconsciously, to help them decipher what it means to be German. The story of *Faust* itself conveys truths about nationalism and nationhood; throughout their journeys, *Faust* and *Mephistopheles* encounter various portrayals of nations, and *Faust* also endeavors to create his own nation. Among the principles that the text conveys are the idea of the nation as a people bound by their past as well as the present, the existence of the nation as an expression of a homogeneous community, and the symbolic importance of women to the national imagination.

Ernest Renan's *What is a Nation?* is an overview of one important definition of a nation. In the course of his analysis, Renan develops this definition in a series of points. It is his belief that people wishing to become a part of a larger nation must display active consent toward doing so. He also argues that members of a nation should share both a common past and the desire to exhibit commonalities in the present. He states, "A nation has a soul, a spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession of a rich legacy of memories; the other is the desire to live together and to value the common heritage." Consider *Faust*'s nation and its inhabitants; two members don't seem to fit in. *Philemon* and *Baucis* are in many ways *Faust*'s antitheses; they are perfectly content to stay where they are, worship God, and live a relatively meager existence. For this reason, it is clear to both parties that the old couple does not consent to be a part of

Faust's nation, and in lines 11275-77, Faust calls for their relocation: "Then go and push them aside for me! -/ You know the land, with my approval, / Set aside for the old folks removal." Because Faust, Philemon, and Baucis do not share a past and have no desire to live together in harmony, they cannot effectively form a nation together.

In order for one nation to grow strong and prosperous, there must be other nations to which it can compare itself. In Faust Part 2 Act II, Faust and Mephisto travel through Greece, and while they observe the area, Mephisto remarks about the sins of the Greek people, saying, "They lure the heart of man to happier sins: /While ours, one always finds, are gloomy things." (Goethe 6974-75) This comparison is telling, not in the opinions it details, but the very fact that it exists. Goethe presents a very clear 'us versus them' situation in this act. This coincides with the ideas presented in Anderson's *Imagined Communities*; Mephistopheles assumes the overarching qualities of both his own people and this foreign entity, even though he can't possibly personally know any significant percentage of the people about which he is passing these judgements. Anderson argues that this is the foundation of what a nation is; there is a sense of familiarity and brotherhood that is felt throughout a nation. Nationhood turns strangers into family, and, as Anderson states, "Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings." This clarifies why it is so easy for Mephisto to discern alleged differences between the two nations.

Faust closes with a scene in the heavens where several important women from the Bible, as well as Gretchen, appear. In the final lines of the work, the <https://assignbuster.com/faust-and-the-german-nation-how-literature-dictates-manifestations-of-nationalism/>

mystic choir proclaims "Woman, eternal, / Beckons us on." (Goethe 12110-11) This line from a famous work of German history can be compared to sayings from another, darker time in Germany's past: Yuval Davis discusses the slogans of Hitler youth, stating "For girls the motto was - 'be faithful; be pure; be German'. For boys it was - 'live faithfully; fight bravely; die laughing'. The national duties of the boys were to live and die for the nation; girls did not need to act - they had to become the national embodiment." Women are often seen as the faces of national movements, as is shown in Faust; in the end, it is the woman who is calling Faust and Germany forward into the future.

The nation is complicated, multifaceted, and constantly changing, but there are some core elements that solidify its existence. As evidenced in the quintessential German text, Faust, a nation must be made up of consenting individuals, who share a past and, additionally, desire to share a present, perhaps because they feel a strong sense of fraternity among themselves, despite the impossibility of their actual acquaintance with one another. Furthermore, Goethe reveals that his ideal nation looks to its women for symbolic guidance. As such, this famous work of literature functions as a path to a deeper understanding of the German nation.