

Gretchen's inexplicable fall: goethe's "faust"



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In its own haunting and mysterious way, the line between sanity and insanity can be incredibly blurry at times. Goethe's masterpiece, *Faust*, is filled with this mysterious case of insanity. In this first part of Goethe's great work, the embittered thinker, Faust, and Mephistopheles, the devil, enter into a contract. Soon, Faust is living a rejuvenated life and winning the love of the beautiful Gretchen. However, in this compelling tragedy of arrogance, unfulfilled desire, and self-delusion, Gretchen heads inexorably toward an infernal destruction. A question thus comes into play; who is responsible for Gretchen's fall? In order to accurately assess this question, we must analyze the words and actions of Mephistopheles, Faust, and Gretchen herself.

The first one to be considered for Gretchen's fall is Mephistopheles, the Devil. Mephistopheles makes a deal with the Lord to tempt Faust. In response, Faust wagers that Mephistopheles will not be able to show him an eternal moment that would ever satisfy his thirst for knowledge. Faust soon finds his eternal moment in his love for a young girl, Gretchen. Although the devil sees it as a hard task when asked to get Gretchen for Faust, he helps Faust win her over: "We'd waste our time storming and running; we have to have recourse to cunning" (Goethe 10). Hence, Mephistopheles ignites a plan using wit and deceit. He knew Gretchen was a good person, he even said, "innocent, sweet dear!" (Goethe 94) referring to her. In accordance with the plan, the Devil leaves jewelry to her, which Gretchen wears and adores (Goethe 33). This temptation of the jewelry causes her to hide it from her parents, sneak around with Faust, murder her child with Faust, and, ultimately, go mad. Mephistopheles is a reasonable candidate for being responsible for Gretchen's fall to insanity.

Faust is also responsible for Gretchen's fall since he seduced her, leading to most of her misfortunes. Even after Gretchen refuses to be with Faust as she says, Faust kept on insisting: " I'm not a lady, am not fair; I can go home without your care" (Goethe 81). Faust asked for Mephistopheles help him so as could get Gretchen: " Get me that girl, and don't ask why"(Goethe 10). After winning her heart, Faust gives Gretchen a sleeping potion to give to her mother, yet the potion turns out to be poisonous, leading to the mother's death. Gretchen eventually becomes pregnant and goes insane, drowning her newborn baby in the process. In another instance, Faust adds to Gretchen's misery by killing her own brother in a fight (Goethe 116). Faust, consequently, is profoundly reckless and is responsible for her fall.

Finally, Gretchen herself is plausibly responsible for directly compromising her own sanity. When Martha presents her with jewelry, she agrees to wear it. Gretchen also falls in love with Faust after he seduces her, despite her inner feeling that Faust's friend Mephistopheles has an evil motive. Gretchen says to Faust, " The man who is with you as your mate deep in my inmost soul I hate" (Goethe 109). Gretchen is, however, attracted to Faust, and once they are together, she says, " Yet I confess I know not why my heart began at once to stir to take your part" (Goethe 101). Gretchen's words show how she fell for Faust despite the latter talking vulgarly to her. Gretchen's naivety and loneliness contributed to her falling for Faust. Eventually, her actions led to the deaths of her mother and her newborn child. Later, it contributed to her downfall when she became insane and went to prison (Goethe 145). Because her choices are intimately linked to her fate, Gretchen is a major contributor to her own fall.

So who is responsible for Gretchen's fall to insanity? After considering Mephistopheles, Faust, and Gretchen, we can see that Gretchen is the most to blame for her fall. Most of Gretchen's problems came about due to naivety and poor decision-making. Overall, Faust helps to illustrate that people's actions affect others—and that people are responsible for their own failings.

Work cited

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, and David Luke. *Faust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.

"Responsibility." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, n. d. Web. 23 Mar. 2016.