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Senior essay

Faust's Unique Redemption

In *Faust* the protagonist, Faust, Goethe portrays Faust as a highly regarded scholar who has become displeased with his choice in lifestyle. He feels as if he can never reach beyond the limitations of knowledge and so is only constantly chasing the truth. Faust agrees upon a pact with Mephisto, a Devil, whose intentions are to serve Faust by convincing him to indulge in worldly pleasures in hopes that they lead him to satisfaction. If Faust loses this bet it will cost him his soul because of a deal Mephisto has with God. The bet between God and Mephisto is that if the devil can satisfy Faust in worldly pleasures then he goes to hell. The dilemma falls upon Mephisto because he is unable to truly satisfy Faust in any of the activities of fleshly pleasures that the Devil presents. Faust is resistant up until a certain point in the play, when Faust falls under an alchemic spell. Faust meets a young girl by the name of Gretchen and falls in love with her due to a witch's potion. Gretchen is a faithful Christian while Faust is not a firm believer in theology and even goes as far to say he dislikes it. Faust gets Gretchen pregnant after she poisons her mother and Faust then kills her brother, Valentine, and Gretchen ends up in jail. Oh the misery! After all of the immoral actions Faust has committed, how does God allow Faust to be saved?

Faust and Gretchen are discussing religion and she asks of his Faust religion, to which he replies,

“Leave that, my child. I love you do not fear
And would give all for those whom I hold dear,
Would not rob anyone of church or creed. (Pg.325, Ln. 3418)

Faust is telling her he doesn't particularly care for such endeavors but she insists that it is faith that they need. The language of this passage is trochaic pentameter that gives off the feeling Faust is very quick to insure Gretchen he will not try and convince her to leave her religion. Faust doesn't chastise Gretchen for her belief of God. However Faust questions the need for faith, but attempts to convince her that he still respects her beliefs. Then Gretchen replies,

“But without desire.
The mass and confession you do not require.
Do you believe in God? (Pg. 325 Ln.3424).”

Gretchen being, in an essence, a perfect Christian, is worried that Faust is lacking the faith of God that she holds dearly. Faust is not fond of theology which proves as a difficulty between them. Faust replies,

” My Darling who may say I believe in God? (Pg. 326 Ln. 3436”

And later,

“Do not mistake me, you who are so fair.
Him-who may name?
And who proclaim:
I believe in him?
Who may feel,
Who dare reveal
In words: I believe him not? (Pg.327 ln.3435).”

Faust is explaining to Gretchen the conflict of the idea that he cannot grasp hold of complete knowledge regarding God and the impossibility of accurately

pointing God out directly. Again Faust isn't fond of theology for the reason that it has no definite answers such as a science does, and this bothers Faust immensely. His life of a perpetual pursuit of complete knowledge of the world has led him to believe there isn't a point to life, which is extremely tragic. For a man to be so incredibly well read and to know so much but lack faith to the point he finds no point in life makes the tragedy grimmer. Faust understands the limitations of his rational mind and thus seeks for a sort of transcendental knowledge, but since Faust lacks faith, this drives him into a state of nihilism. He becomes increasingly self-centered with his endeavors that Mephisto sets up and is more easily manipulated by Mephisto. Faust, while attempting to indulge in worldly pleasure, begins to harm those around him such as Gretchen and her family. It is questionable if all of this turmoil rests on the shoulders of Faust, because Mephisto more or less tricks him into doing certain things he won't normally do on his own free will. The gamble Mephisto makes with God is not won by the Devil because, although Faust takes part in some sinful actions of the fleshy world, Mephisto cannot satisfy Faust in the same way knowledge does.

In the first part of Goethe's tragedy, Gretchen (or Margret) says,

“Had I my own when I sleep,
I should not bolt the door tonight;
But Mothers slumber is not so deep...”(pg.331 ln.3505).

Faust replies,

“My angel if that's what you dread,
Here is a bottle. Merely shake
Three drops into her cup
And she won't easily wake up” (pg.331 ln.3510)

Faust convinces Gretchen to secretly slip a deadly potion that she received from him, to her mother without her mother's knowing. She does this so she and Faust can spend the night together and confess their love, but the potion accidentally kills Gretchen's mother. This is the first sin that Gretchen commits after being wooed by Faust. It causes her to go against her religion. Also, as a result of sleeping with Faust, Gretchen becomes illegitimately pregnant with Faust's child. Gretchen's pregnancy is a physical symbol that she has gone against the very religion that she claims to hold so dearly. This is the beginning of a series of unfortunate events in Gretchen's life, which lead to her imprisonment.

Gretchen has a brother named, Valentine, who is a soldier returning from war. He has heard gossip regarding his sister's illegitimate relations with Faust. Valentine holds his sister very dearly saying no one "could hold a candle to her" but is in despair when he finds out about Faust. He wants to "tear out my hair..."(pg.343 ln.3639). Mephisto and Faust encounter Valentine and get into a fight after he breaks Mephisto's zither for playing it outside his sister's window. Valentine begins to fight with the devil when he draws his blade from his side and attacks. Mephisto uses his devilish powers to make Valentine go limp, allowing Faust to deal a fatal blow to Gretchen's brother. Faust and Mephisto flee the scene and escape from any detection of the murder. Soon after they flee, Gretchen rushes out to see her dying brother on the street in front of her house. Valentine says to Gretchen

"When you threw honor overboard,
You pierced my heart more than the sword" (pg.353 ln.3773)

Valentine then dies in more sorrow from the pain of his sister's betrayal than from Faust's deadly blade. Gretchen's own brother refuses to forgive her for the sins she has committed and doesn't do so with the use of his last breath. Faust's action of killing Gretchen's brother, Valentine, is similar to that of Cain's murder of his brother Abel because this actions sends Faust into a unsatisfactory state with God. Faust is able to recover from his mistake unlike Cain, but only because he recognizes the atrocities he is committing. Faust didn't attack Valentine first, which makes the case for self-defense. There is more than a hint of foul play with the use of Mephisto's devilish powers to paralyze Valentine while dueling Faust.

Goethe continues piling on the morbidly melancholy moments of Gretchen's wretched life, while utilizing Faust as the primary cause of her turmoil.

Faust says,

“In misery! Despairing! Long lost wretchedly on
the earth, and now imprisoned! As felon locked
up in a dungeon with horrible torments, the fair
ill-fated creature! It's come to that! To that! (Pg. 401)”

Faust has discovered Gretchen's fate of being jailed for her actions with him. The language of this passage shows how sincere Faust is and brings light to his remorse for his actions. He is quick to turn on Mephisto when he finds out this information regarding Gretchen. Faust is vigorously enraged with Mephisto and says,

“Tracherous, despicable Spirit-and that you have
kept from me!-Keep standing there, stand! Roll
your devilish eyes wrathfully in your face! Stand
and defy me with your intolerable presence! Im-
prisoned! In irreparable misery! Handed over to

evil spirits and judging, unfeeling mankind! And
 meanwhile you soothe me with insipid diversions;
 hide her growing grief from me, let her perish
 helplessly!" (Pg.401).

Faust has always been somewhat reluctant to carry out the actions that Mephisto advises him to do for worldly pleasures. The inability to fully satisfy any of the fleshy pleasures of Faust will only cause him to lose his wager with God, but the turmoil that Gretchen and Faust are dragged through far surpasses what Mephisto has on the line. For instance Faust later becomes enraged with Mephisto for purposefully lacking to inform him about Gretchen's imprisonment while they were in the tavern and rather distracted him with "insipid diversions". Goethe switches to prose here, which gives an indication that Faust has escaped the imprisonment of Mephisto's destructive influence. By investigating the language and meter of the language in the poetry the situation at hand is more easily interpreted. He calls him a "Treacherous, despicable Spirit" because he finally sees Mephisto for what he is. Faust is no longer rhyming his lines and has broken free from the poetic meter he was previously using which is a parallel to him breaking free from the manipulation of Mephisto. Faust, finally thinking on his own, demands they go help Gretchen and free her from jail. The first action Faust takes upon himself is very virtuous, one that he feels very necessary to follow through. When they arrive Faust says,

"Come! Come! Soon dawns the light of day" (pg.415 Ln. 4506).

But Gretchen then replies,

"I've put my mother away,
 I've drowned my child, don't you see?
 Was it not given to you to me?
 You, too-it is you! Could it merely seem?"

Gretchen has killed her mother and now admits to killing their child.

Gretchen has committed some horrible acts of murder how is she to be forgiven in the eyes of God? Faust continues trying to convince her to leave with him, but she refuses. She is overwhelmed with guilt and feels that she,

“May not go; for me there is no hope any more” (pg.417 Ln. 4544).

Gretchen decides to stay and repents her sinful actions for she is extremely pious and recognizes her unholy actions. Gretchen by remaining in prison on her own will repents

“Judgment of God! I give myself to you”(Pg. 421 Ln.4605).”

Gretchen saves herself from damnation by repenting to God in a holy sense, that lets her return faithfully to her religion. This kind of redemption seems to be a sort of purely Spiritual kind by the use of prayer and self-awareness of her sinful acts. Faust is still bearing weight of the sins he has committed, but remains not a firm believer in theology. So how will Faust save himself from the wrath of God? In the second part of Goethe’s play we see Faust achieve his own redemption. But the Second Part of the tragedy focuses more on the soul of Faust than his worldly bodily actions as in the first part of the tragedy.

Faust is much older now at the age of one hundred and he is walking about thinking to himself. Faust says,

“This is highest wisdom that I own,
The best that mankind ever knew:
Freedom and life are earned by those alone
Who conquer them each day anew.
Surrounded by danger, each one thrives,
Childhood, manhood, and age lead active lives” (pg.469 Ln. 11576).

Faust is saying one must be in a perpetual state of doing well and learning. This mindset of knowing what is good to do for itself and not for a heavenly prize allows Faust's redemption. The angels are carrying Faust's soul to a higher part of the atmosphere but not yet heaven. The angels say, "who ever strives with all his power, we are allowed to save" (Pg.493 Ln. 11936) Even while living his life in doubt of God's Existence, Faust by striving has earned himself at a chance at redemption but there is something missing. Gretchen is now talking with the spirits and she says about Faust,

"Grant that I teach him; he appears still blinded by the new day's glare"(Pg.503 Ln.12092)

The language used by Gretchen here echoes back to Plato's analogy of the cave she says that Faust is "blinded by new day's glare". The use of Plato by Goethe lets him stuff previous ideas of the soul into the second part of the tragedy. The soul of Faust is being examined thoroughly by many heavenly spirits, one being his past lover. Gretchen is attempting to educate Faust in her faith so that he may save himself from damnation when the chorus mysticus, of which she is a member says that,

"The Eternal-Feminine Lures to perfection." (Pg. 502, Ln. 12110)

Gretchen and Faust both save themselves from damnation of their sins in the end, but offer two seemingly different manners of. Doing so Gretchen, being faithful

and a believer in God, repents her actions and gives herself fully to God in a pious manner. Now Faust, being skeptical in the theology of God, cannot truly repent in the same way Gretchen did. He strives to attain knowledge not for power but as sort of a transcendental knowledge that the rational mind cannot grasp. Although he isn't as religious as Gretchen, Faust gains salvation for striving with all his might to be a virtuous man. In the end Faust needs Gretchen to guide him closer to heaven because he is unable to see the path himself. While Faust helped Gretchen enjoy herself in worldly pleasures, such as their intimate relationship, Gretchen helps him achieve his redemption. Goethe is trying to say that Faust must not do the right thing for the sole purpose of a divine reward of heaven, but instead Faust needs to always strive with all his power towards the good itself.

In the second part of Goethe's tragedy, Faust saves himself but in a different manner than Gretchen has. Is this is a feasible manner for Faust to redeem himself from the sins of his past? Faust regrets the sinful actions he has committed with Mephisto and is conscious of them. This is when Faust redeems himself from damnation. The Lord of Heaven and Mephisto make a wager in the first part of the Tragedy, but Mephisto being a Devil is blind to the infinite essence of God. Therefore Mephisto is unable to see his inevitable defeat, unable to persuade Faust by earthly pleasures. Faust speaks to Care and says,"

"It sounded hollow, ghostlike, as a threat.
I have fought my way to freedom yet.
Could I but banish witchcraft from my road,
Unlearn all magic spells-oh, if I stood
Before you, Nature, human without guile,
The toil of being man might be worthwhile. (Pg. 457 Ln. 11400)

The language is very grim in this passage, exemplifying the way in which Faust feels about his past. Faust is more rational with his actions now that he is older and regrets his previous actions. Although he is agitated by the sorcery he is able to calm himself. He discusses with the force, Care, the nature of living as a human in the earthly realm. He becomes more acceptable with the idea of God as an infinite, unintelligible, and undeniable force. Faust says in his dying breath,

"This is the highest wisdom that I own,
 The best that mankind ever knew:
 Freedom and life are earned by those alone
 Who conquer them each day anew.
 Surrounded by such danger, each one thrives,
 Childhood, manhood, and age lead active lives.
 At such a throng I would fain stare,
 With free men on free ground their freedom share.
 Then, to the moment I might say:
 Abide, you are so fair!
 The traces of my earthly day
 No aeons can impair.
 As I presage a happiness so high,
 I now enjoy the highest moment. (Pg. 469, Ln. 11573)

Faust makes many earthly accomplishments in his life, but none seem to satisfy him. He has abandoned his relation with Mephisto by admitting that he is not satisfied in life by serving only his earthly desires. God the ultimate source of Truth knew this would happen. God sent Mephisto to Faust knowing he could not persuade Faust and that he would fail in his attempts. Much like Job, Faust is able to ultimately save himself, even while the Devil attempts to sway him into sinful acts. God had a plan for the future and Faust's fate cannot be change by the Devil's interferences. The Lemures catch Faust as he falls indicating that they are on his side. Mephisto says,

“No pleasure sated him, no great bestowment,
 He reeled from form to form, it did not last;
 The final, wretched, empty moment,
 He sturdily resisted all my toil;
 Time conquers, old he lies here on the soil.
 The clock has stopped-“(Pg.469, Ln.11587)

Mephisto then says,

“There lies the body; if the soul would fly away,
 I shall confront it with the blood-signed scroll.
 Alas, they have so many mean today
 To rob the Devil of a soul
 Our ancient manner is too crude.
 The new way does not work too well;
 I used to work in solitude,
 Now I must get some help from hell” (pg.473, Ln.11612-11619)

Mephisto could not get him to become addicted to any of the earthly pleasures that he presented to Faust before his death. Mephisto still wishes to capture Faust's soul if it attempts to fly away. Mephisto summons his demons from hell for the purpose of capturing Faust's soul and dragging it to hell. Mephisto makes note of this new sort of redemption and states his distaste for it even though he recognizes the “ancient manner is too crude”. Goethe is stating there is not only one way in which someone can achieve salvation from damnation and allowing a reservation for a place in heaven with God. God prevents the Devils plan to capture Faust's soul by interrupting Mephisto and his demons. The Heavenly Host says,”

“Follow, oh holy
 Heaven's kin' slowly
 In leisure flight:
 Sinners forgive,
 Make dust live;
 bring to all being
 As it is seeing

Our host fleeing
A trace delight!" (Pg.477, Ln. 11676)

God has sent angels to inhibit Mephisto and his demons from stealing Faust's soul. The notion of forgiveness is a critical element of the religion Goethe is referring to. The Chorus of Angels surround Faust's body with a growth of Heavenly roses. The roses make Mephisto's demons flee the scene while he stands his ground for as long as he can, but he is unable to withstand the force of God's Angels. Mephisto loses his wager with God and is unable to bring Faust's soul to damnation as he intended. Goethe presents Faust saved even though he was reluctant to accept God at first. By his own volition and selfless virtue he is able to attain a relationship with God. Goethe makes the claim that one needs to follow the spirit of the religious law rather than the letter of the *Bible*. He uses Faust's actions in the play to illuminate his virtuous aspects that lead to his soul's redemption and uses Mephisto to test and thereby indicate God's faith in the virtuousness Faust holds. The Chorus of Angels says,

"Turn toward clarity,
Flames of love, speed!
Those damned by deed
Are healed by verity-
Joyous retrieval
From earthly evil-
They find impunity
In comic unity." (Pg. 485, Ln. 11801)

The Angels are explaining to Mephisto why he was incapable of polluting Faust's soul with sin. Mephisto is unable to comprehend the fact that God had a plan before they wagered the gamble with Faust's soul. Faust has offered much

assistance to his fellow humans in the later part of his life, making himself a holy philanthropist. Faust is conscious of his past decisions and is voluntarily remorseful. Faust does not regret his actions because they go against the word of the *Bible* but because he genuinely feels the pain he has inflicted upon others with his selfless endeavors with Mephisto. This is a new sort of redemption that Goethe is suggesting in his tragedy. The allowing of Faust into God's Kingdom after all he has committed seems to be a mockery of the current religious factors Goethe recognizes. Goethe breaks down the idea of religion by also making God and the Devil almost friendly rivals, who make a wager with the use of someone's life.

The Angels take Faust's soul to a higher realm for his virtuous decisions. The Angels say,

"Saved is the spirit kingdom's flower
 From evil and the grave:
 'Who ever strives with all his power,
 We are allowed to save.'
 And if, besides, supernal love
 Respond to his plight,
 The blessed host comes from above
 To greet him in delight." (Pg. 493. Ln. 11934)

Faust, at the end of his life, strives for the better good. He was temporarily distracted with Mephisto, but never offered his undivided attention to the temptations put in front of him. Faust's satisfaction cannot be made through earthly pleasures regardless of what Mephisto tries to throw Faust's way. The mischievous events he participates in with Mephisto only begin to strengthen his belief of faith in humanity. Even if he remains quite weary of the idea of God, he remains remorseful. He learns through his action that wholly living a worldly life is insufficient in order

to satisfy him. This striving for what is good in the universal sense, leads Faust towards what God had planned for him.

Faust's satisfaction is almost met in worldly pleasures with one of the suggestions Mephisto pushes him towards, Gretchen. But Faust falls for her only because of a cursed potion given by the Devil himself. This exemplifies his discipline to remaining unsatisfied in worldly pleasures. Although it is sinful in the word of the *Bible* for such a relation to occur, Faust becomes more attuned with his spiritual self with the meeting of Gretchen and learning of her religion. He never becomes fully engulfed in the idea of theology, but he does go on to live the life of an unintentional pious man. Faust causes God to win the wager between the devil and the Lord, which grants his salvation. Even while doubting a divine gift given to those who act with virtue, Faust continues to naturally strive towards virtue.

This new redemption that Faust is rewarded with is a kind that Goethe uses to deconstruct the notion of the current idea of pious salvation. He began writing the first part of Faust in his twenties and finished the second part of the tragedy near his time of death. Because Goethe writes this play as a young man and finishes it as he dies, the character development of Faust is more natural. Goethe has a secular point of view that he projects through Faust. The idea of a concrete way of life and praising the divine are unintelligible for Faust. Although he becomes slightly religious, he eventually loses all faith only to be saved from damnation in spite of his past sins.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von, Walter Arnold. Kaufmann, and Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe. *Goethe's Faust: The Original German and a New Translation and Introduction*. New York: Anchor, 1961. Print.