

# Commentary on “Gretchen’s Shade”

By Nicole Martinelli, English 275

Contracts with the devil ignorantly made, true love found and lost, an innocent young girl corrupted by the promises of an older man – these tropes are neither new nor uncommon but they do all culminate in Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe’s *Faust*. The German play surrounding bargains made with devils give rise to dozens of popular derivations from Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” to films like *The Shining* and *Bedazzled* and even anime like *Death Note*. The piece inspires Faustian deals to be made in all sorts of media and throughout popular culture.

At its core, *Faust* may be about a man seeking to live to his fullest capacity and discover the secrets of life, but we also see who suffers for his nihilism—his love, Gretchen, the one who manages to deliver his soul from evil.

For all his deals, it is Gretchen who suffers like so many young women do in these stories of dark, handsome strangers leaving behind shining gifts and ill-kept promises, and it is in that spirit that the short story “Gretchen’s Shade” is written.

“Gretchen’s Shade” attempts to follow an old German tale from a fresh, modern, and feminine perspective. Gretchen’s point of view adapts the supernatural tale into something that absolutely any young woman walking alone down a dark street can relate to. From that first

meeting with a very forward Faust in the street, to their reunion at her neighbor’s house, this story endeavors to turn the virginal love interest into her own protagonist. The reader can take several detours to get there, but all roads eventually lead back to that shade, Faust, that she can never quite shake. Underneath the deceit, of course, Faust does love Gretchen – but never so honestly as Gretchen loves him while the young girl is lusted after and preyed upon by the older man. It’s an unfortunately common

tale that is told, and lived, time and time again. From *Lolita* to *Twilight*, the story hardly ever depicts its women making healthy decisions.

Here, as the reader, we are offered several decisions that differ from the original incarnation. As Gretchen, you may choose to speak to Faust when he initially con-

fronts her or continue on home. You can have Gretchen reveal the second box of jewels to her mother or keep it a secret. You may decline Mephistopheles’s invitation to meet Faust at Martha’s garden or agree to the liaison. Unfortunately, no matter the choice, Gretchen still ends up in Faust’s company, unaware of what his presence in her life will bring. Seeing this from Gretchen’s perspective we can see how smart and earnest she is, even in her naiveté – but the machinations of a devil are not so easily ignored.

