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Rhetoric, Composition, and Literature – Period 6

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**Core Question:**

Based on the scenes “Martha’s Garden” and “A Cathedral”, would Gretchen’s actions indicate that she is enlightened according to Kantian ideology?

Gretchen, though she may follow the higher truth of religion and think for herself on occasion, easily allows herself to fall prey to others’ suggestions in her life as she fails to think independently for herself. She remains part of the minority and fails to take action unless prompted by Faust.

Immanuel Kant describes that enlightenment is a “human being’s emergence from his self incurred minority” (Kant 1). Additionally, if one does not achieve the status of enlightenment, one is in a constant state of minority where those in the minority are unable to thinking independently “without direction from another”, much like how Gretchen relies upon Faust for interpretation her own thought process. As a result, she develops a close minded attitude, illustrated when she questions Faust reputedly because he did not believe in a figure such as Christ, stating that it was all “mere noise and smoke” (Goethe line 3456).

Furthermore, in the scene “A Garden” where Gretchen and Faust first meet, Gretchen elects to leave their relationship up to luck with the picking of the daisy petals. Though it may be perceived as a romantic game, it could be indicative of larger problems Gretchen has with lacking ability to think for herself. Gretchen puts herself at the will of external beings and forces to make her decisions for her and elects not to use her own thought and decision making skills, as illustrated by the flower game. According to Kantian ideology, Gretchen would be considered as part of the minority as she leaves decisions for chance.

Gretchen’s inability to think for herself leads inevitably to the death of her mother and the indirect death of her brother. In the “Cathedral” scene, Gretchen faces the consequences of listening to Faust too much as she is tortured by the Evil Sprit. While she is being verbally assaulted by the spirit, she wish that she “could get rid of these thoughts/ That move across me and through me,/ Against my will!” (3795-7). This last plea to fight off the voice which tortures her, represents how enfeebled her mind is because she has been part of the minority for a large part of her life, meaning that she does not know how to think for herself and eventually succumbs to the voices of evil spirits, which lead to her descent into madness later on in the play. Thus the example further illustrates how Gretchen is not enlightened according to Kant since she cannot think for herself, nor can she avoid being taken advantage of.

Gretchen’s inability to enter into an enlightened state according to Kant leads to her ultimate downfall and her status as one of the minority. Though it is human to avoid thinking for oneself during times of distress, it is necessary to understand one’s actions and make a concerted effort to make a decision rather than leave things to chance and let external forces take care of the work as Gretchen did.