

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

Goethe

Reading

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Overview

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German poet, playwright, philosopher, man of state, and scientist, whose achievements in all these domains made him perhaps the most nearly 'universal man' in German culture, the richest exemplar of German classicism in the second half of the 18th century, and an inspiration to such German Humanists as Thomas Mann, in the 20th century. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774, was written when he was 24 years old, and became an overnight success, remaining to this day the best known of Goethe's works.

Story

The period of *Storm and Stress*, in German literature, gets its most dramatic expression in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1779), the story of a young man for whom the pains of intense first love are finally fatal. The mystery of that fatality—why Werther can't pick up and move on—is the mystery of the self-indulgent, emotion laden, mood of much late 18th century European literature. In the sensibility of that period romance and the feeling of the brevity of life melt together, into an agony of love and loss.

Young Werther first appears to us in a rural town to which he has retired, in order to paint, read, and admire the 'patriarchal style' of country life. At a short distance from the town in which he has settled, Werther comes on a charming village, in which he meets an even more charming sight, Lotte the daughter of the local bailiff. Signals of love pass between them, buttressed by a common taste in some of the literary style setters of the time—Homer and Ossian, for the ancients, Klopstock and Goldsmith for the moderns. There is only one problem; Lotte is engaged to a fine young man, named Albert.

Albert is out of town while Werther is deepening his attachment to Lotte, but when Albert returns, Werther is surprised to find the young man surprisingly attractive and intelligent. Werther feels quite sure, though, that Albert would never make Lotte happy; for one thing, Albert does not share the compelling love for *Sturm und Drang* literature, which joins Lotte and Werther.

Discouraged by Lotte's determination, to remain true to her fiancé, Werther moves away to take on a new position, in which, to his despair, he clashes with aristocratic colleagues, who snub him, and make his work life intolerable for him. At the same time, Werther is impelled back toward the village of Wahlheim, where he had known peace before, and first fallen in love with Lotte. He can hardly admit to himself, that he is fatally addicted to this woman. By chance he is awakened to his mental reality, when he meets one Heinrich, a former employee of Lotte's father. Heinrich recounts his own former unrequited love for Lotte, which left him periodically deranged.

Just before Christmas, as the pressure of Werther's infatuation is becoming intolerable to her, Lotte orders Werther not to see her again until Christmas Eve. (After that time, her wedding, he will be 'just another friend.')

Werther concludes that he will not be able to live on such terms with Lotte, who will become another man's wife. He pays Lotte a final visit, during which he plants a kiss on her—and is told never to see her again.

Werther goes home and writes Lotte a letter, in which he asks for the loan of Albert's hunting pistols. Lotte complies, and sends them. (With what in mind? the reader wonders.) With these weapons Werther shoots himself, while Albert and Lotte watch him die—which means not until he expires the next morning. At the novel's end Werther is buried without a ceremony, and Lotte's is rendered dangerously unstable by the death of her lover. As with the *Faust* of Goethe, love proves fatal to Werther, who does not know moderation in his longing.

Themes

Passion. Werther is a passionate young man; when he falls in love, he gives his whole soul to his desire. Like many passionate people, furthermore, Werther's drive is not simply for a sexual object, but for an ideal, of fusion and possession, which cannot be realized, and which eventually destroys the lover.

Suicide. For Werther, love and death are closely interrelated. Something about the unattainability of his love object, who never encourages his longing for marriage with her, renders Werther particularly helpless in face of the inevitable. He lives under the spell of self-destruction, from the time he first meets Lotte.

Characters

Werther. Werther is a driven young soul who has gone to the countryside in search of peace. What he finds is intense love, which only fortifies his feeling of the fatal transitoriness of life. His thought process is this: the closer we come to a transitory and unique love the more impermanent and lethal it seems.

Lotte. Lotte is from the start afraid of Werther's love, because she is already engaged to an upright and responsible young man. Her worst premonitions are realized, when Werther returns shortly before the wedding, and forces a (now) unwanted kiss on her.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Werther (emotional)

Character *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was composed in 1774—during six weeks of intensive writing—and represents a collection of letters written by a passionate young man to his friend Wilhelm. In these letters, Werther describes his enchantment with a certain removed mountain village, then with a young woman, of great dignity, whom he meets there. Their growing love affair is blocked by the decision of Charlotte (the woman) and Albert (the fiancé) to marry, despite the continuing love of Charlotte and Werther for one another. A dreadful impasse is created, by this love triangle, and from it Werther emerges the ultimate victim, removing himself from the equation by a gunshot.

Parallels Werther, the type of the romantic but hypersensitive, and potentially suicidal young man, brings to mind any number of figures from nineteenth century culture—Edward (in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, 1811), Dominique (in Fromentin's novel of that name, 1862), Reinhart (in Theodor Storm's *Immensee*, 1849.) More widely, the figure of the ingénu or young star-crossed lover, like Werther, shows up everywhere: from Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, through Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

Illustrative moments

Ecstatic Werther writes to Wilhelm, upon arrival at the mountain village to which he has gone on vacation. 'A wonderful serenity has taken possession of my entire soul, like these sweet spring moments which I enjoy with all my heart. I am alone and feel the joy of life in this spot...' He goes on to explain the closeness to God, which he feels as he stretches out in the grasses of a mountain meadow. All the tensions of bourgeois life, which he is in flight from, drain from him. 'I shall perish under the splendor of these visions.'

Amorous Even as he becomes keenly aware of the Albert factor, and of his own growing jealousy, Werther starts to fall hopelessly in love with Charlotte. Upon returning from the ball, Werther asks Charlotte if he can visit her later that very day, to which she agrees, plunging him yet more deeply into the depths of passion. 'Since that time,' he writes to Wilhelm, 'sun, moon, and stars may pursue their course; I know not whether it is day or night; the whole world about me has ceased to be.' To which he adds: 'little did I imagine, when I selected Wahlheim as the goal of my walks, that all Heaven lay so near it.'

Unhappy Werther increasingly loses the power to control himself inside the hotbox of his small mountain village. As the situation degenerates, Werther ceases to keep up his flow of letters to Wilhelm, and we are left for coverage with a few final letters, and an editorial by the collector of Werther's letters: 'His mind became completely deranged; perpetual excitement and mental irritation, which weakened his natural powers, produced the saddest effects upon him....' His love for Charlotte grew, while his distaste for Albert also grew; in addition he struggled with the bad conscience, that he was tearing his friends' marriage apart.

Suicide The editor describes the final meeting between Charlotte and Werther. It follows upon a reading, together, of the romantic poems of Ossian, a reading in which the two lovers sensed the essence of their longing for one another. 'He clasped her in his arms tightly, and covered her trembling, stammering lips with furious kisses.' With a feeble effort she pushed him away, as they struggled to regain composure. Then Charlotte strikes the body blow that had to follow: 'This is the last time, Werther! You shall never see me again!' Werther knocks on her door, later, but getting no response gives up. Werther committed suicide by the power of the Romantic love.

Discussion questions

Is Werther's main problem jealousy? Or is it possessiveness—of Charlotte? That is, would he have been suicidal even if Albert was not in the picture, if he could not possess Charlotte?

Was Werther able to be happy? Did you see him that way on social occasions? Was he on one level a sociable and 'adjusted' guy?

What does Goethe himself, as the stage manager of this whole novel, think about Werther? Is he writing a cautionary novel, to warn young people of the dangers of giving themselves up to their passions?

We have discussed the complexity of Goethe's self-image in *Werther*, an image which in part self-portrays, in part self-transcends. On the face of it, knowing nothing of Goethe's actual life, would you read this text as autobiography? Will most of the work we are calling 'autobiography' carry on its face the watermark of actually 'being an autobiography'?

Think of *Werther* as life writing. Can we learn a lot about the world Goethe wrote this text in? Are autobiography and life writing properly considered two different kinds of writing? Or are they different words for the same thing?

Perhaps the writing of this text was therapeutic for Goethe! Let's broaden that speculation. Does it seem to you that autobiographical writing is naturally part of a therapeutic project? Or is that a highly simplified way to describe what goes on in the writing of autobiography?

How do you explain the fact that there is no autobiography in German before the mid 17th century, while other literatures in Europe were generating this kind of writing during the Renaissance? Does even *Simplizzisimus* seem to you a genuine autobiography? What kind of quantum leap, of self-presentation, seems to you have occurred between the work of Grimmelshausen and Herder's *Journal* or *Werther*?

Both Herder's *Journal* and Goethe's *Werther* deal with young male consciousnesses setting off on journeys, and stumbling into the rich reality of the social/cultural world. Both these texts involve life writing, the presentation of the human experience of venturing into the new. Do you see significant traits in common to these two forms of autobiography?

Do you observe already, in your reading of autobiography, a variety of rhetorical options for the 'presenting of the self'? How do Grimmelshausen and Herder, for example, deal differently with the presentation of the self in their 'autobiographical writings'?