

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Sorrows of Young Werther as Life Writing (1774)

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

OVERVIEW

The nineteenth century in Western Europe ushers in a multisided expansion of the human capacity to express ideas, invent techniques and devices, and to define humanity itself. By the broad terms, of this kind of approximate thought, the eighteenth century could be described as a readying for a freeing of emotion and thought, which in the nineteenth century would make of itself at least a preview of our own fractious and daring modernity. For what it is worth, the position of Goethe's *Werther* seems to fit between the impulses of these two surrounding centuries, the eighteenth and nineteenth.

The year 1774, the date of publication of the final version of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, saw the twenty four year old Goethe taking his own initial stand inside cultural history. Did he begin, at that moment, to write off his life onto the page? He was, of course, from the start an expression of himself, a radiant intelligence, who penetrated all corners of the intellectual and feeling life. *Werther*, the text, shows us Goethe unpeeling from himself the deepest dimensions of the intelligent person of his historical moment.

The sensibility of Goethe was multiple, but at its center lies *Weltschmerz*, a sense of the fatal sadness of the human condition. It is what haunts the teen ager who discovers, along with puberty, longing and loving, that the intensity of his passion is doomed by the human condition. Goethe's discovery of these life conditions led him to invent a psychological double, call him Werther, through whom to work out his own dilemmas. This trick of psyches within psyches is pulled off by a simple linguistic maneuver: letters. Much of the brief book before us consists of letters written by Werther to his friend Wilhelm. The letter provides the perfect vehicle of intimacy for the close talk of one soul to another.

PLOT

When one stands back and reviews the accomplishment of the twenty four year old novelist, Goethe, one marvels at the depth with which he is able to comprehend a multiple social scene and find the appropriate language to characterize its various members. Part of this skill derives from the way he writes his own life off into the figures of his imaginative understanding. He is able to become the countryfolk, fine ladies and gentlemen, and the court at Weimar, and even the rich beauty of Alpine and lowland South Germany.

Goethe's plot is simple but firm, and gains its power from the conviction the author conveys, that Werther is himself Goethe. So there is this hypersensitive young man who has wandered into the world and is confronting it with his romantic temperament. He is Werther but he is also Goethe. Goethe is writing him.

Werther is, like Goethe himself, essentially an innocent young man. He is open to the world. He stands before the moment as well intentioned, fond, and clear hearted as one can be. But he is impetuous, which accounts for his initial plunge ahead with his newly beloved, Charlotte, even though he knows she is engaged to Albert, and will no longer be available to him. Werther is also thin skinned, as well as impetuous, and thus is easily hurt when the aristocratic circle around Fraulein B in Weimar—to which court he moves, after finally despairing of Charlotte-- looks down on him. He is too innocent and unwilling to play the rules of the social game. Like many innocent people, he is not careful to protect himself emotionally. Goethe writes his own youthful insecurities into Werther. And his own bewilderment at the dilemma of life, that it seems to offer so much and to give so little.

Rejected by the elite at Weimar, to which he had gone after the initial failure of his relation to Charlotte, Werther returns to Wahlheim, the village where he first met and fell in love with Charlotte. But the second time around at Wahlheim does not go so well. Charlotte is by now married. She decides that Werther should not visit her so often—too disturbing to the marriage. Charlotte visits Werther one more time; Werther reads to her from his translation of *Ossian*—a traditional Celtic narrative, which was drenched in *Weltschmerz* and sentimentality. The Werther-Charlotte affair dissolves in the status of the human situation. Life is indeed sadness. We are looking directly at the sorrows of young Werther-Goethe.

Even before this moment it had occurred to Werther that his initial triangular love triangle –Albert-Charlotte-Werther---was going to have to end in violence. One of the group would have to go. After writing a letter to Albert, asking for 'his two pistols, Werther says that he is 'going on a journey Charlotte receives the letter and sends the pistols. Werther then shoots himself in the head, but does not die for twenty four hours. He is buried between two linden trees, a peaceful setting about which he had written often in his letters. Charlotte, it seems, has at this point simply come to the end of her life.

The life writing element

Nothing said so far, about the broad strategy of this work, goes very deeply into the issue of life writing. What we need to be looking for is the interior story of Goethe's early experiment in life writing. His own early life, his actual movements inside society, social interactions, and sense of complex inferiority are packed together, as it were just on the inner side of the text before us. It's as though this text was a kind of code for the real life lived on the other side of it. It is the formula that needs opening. Is the reality the 'real life' or the fiction which transpired inside it? Some writers, obviously, 'write their lives' far more directly than others.

THEMES

Self-awareness Goethe writes his own presence-to-self off into the painfully self-alert construction of Werther, a construction which is the very exemplar of self-consciousness.

Romance. Werther exists as in love, in love both with his romantic-sexual partners and with the entire world of nature, which coalesces with his condition as lover. He gives himself totally to this condition, which defines him.

Despair. Just as Goethe makes evident to us the very essence of romantic absorption, so he finds, in himself, the essence of despair, of finding love blocked at every access point. We are made to face the exclusion by Weimar high society, an exclusion which, we know by Goethe's language, Goethe is peeling right off his own skin onto Werther.

Class. Goethe himself came to know both high class and rural life, and could feel the deep humanity of both conditions tugging at him. He gives us, accordingly, a heart wrenching picture of Werther's exclusion, which is consummated with the exclusion from Charlotte's love.

Violence. Goethe has created a character, Werther, to whom it begins to seem that there is no way out of one's painful dilemmas except violence. The woman he first falls in love with, Charlotte is already engaged to Albert when Werther first meets her. Werther has nowhere to turn. He can neither pursue his love nor abandon it. Should he kill himself? Should he murder Albert?

CHARACTERS

Goethe is especially at home in the creation of characters. We have up to this point been reviewing nothing but Goethe himself in the role of self-depicter, self-confessor. He has served as his own model, though in fact, in the text, he never says anything explicit about himself being Werther; and it would only coarsen his narrative to make such an identification. The Werther he depicts, as a spin off of himself, is a young man in his twenties, still fairly close to home and family, who is highly susceptible to young romantic love. What Goethe gives us to know of him is a predictor of the tragic in romantic love, for

Werther follows his heart rather than his understanding, in giving way to hopeless love and self-destruction.

Charlotte is the first, and most fateful, of Werther's impetuous loves. Goethe peels her off from his sense of nature and its bounty, from his adulation of the simple life and in particular from the innocent country life of the Alps. Werther was aware of Charlotte's engagement to Albert, when he first fell in love with her. He is not an innocent victim of love and misunderstanding.

Fraulein von B. The aristocratic lady Werther falls for, when he leaves Charlotte to return to Weimar. Fraulein Von B is fond of Werther but she and her upperclass friends look down on Werther as a 'country' person. Goethe shows his wonderful skill, in investing himself in characters of various social status. Goethe is a master of the art of imagining the mind of one person inside another.