

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Characters in Goethe

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.

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.

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).

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?