

# The Sorrows Of Young Werther

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by

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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*The Sorrows of  
Young Werther*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Translated by  
Bayard Quincy Morgan



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## Introduction

ON 30TH OCTOBER 1772, Legation Secretary Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem in Wetzlar shot and killed himself with a pistol borrowed from J.C. Kestner, a friend of Goethe. Jerusalem was Goethe's friend too; he had first met Goethe, who was two years his junior, as a student in Leipzig, and their association had been renewed that summer in Wetzlar. The tragedy made a profound impression on Goethe, and I see in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* a certain vindication of his friend (what his contemporary Lessing might have termed a *Rettung*, i.e., a rescue from misjudgement). Jerusalem's death must have been discussed with animation and some heat, and much of what Goethe put into Werther's letter of 12th August 1771 was no doubt a digest of arguments which he had himself used in trying to explain, if not to justify, Jerusalem's act. I think even the hero's name may be significant, for in German the word *wert* (old spelling *wert*) means "worthy, estimable".

Not a little of Werther's story derives from Jerusalem: his dislike of official conventionality (24th December 1771), his annoyance at verbal pedantry (*ibid.*), his aversion to the Ambassador (17th February 1772), his wounded feelings at being snubbed by aristocrats (16th March 1772) and his unhappy (and unrequited) love for a married woman (whose husband threw him out). The rest is largely supplied by young Goethe himself, who in his passionate attachment to Charlotte Buff, later the wife of Kestner, wrote letters just like Werther's. It will be noted that Werther's birthday is the same as Goethe's (28th August 1771); quite Goethean is his rapturous delight in nature; his admiration for Homer; his

pantheism (letter of 18th August). As to Werther's suicide, we may confidently assume that Goethe had entertained thoughts of ending his life at times when overmastering emotion resulted in feelings of frustration and defeat.

The result of this combination of actualities was a milestone in German literature. *Werther* is the first German novelette (a form in which German writers have excelled), the first German epistolary novel and the first German work of any kind to make both its author and his country's literature internationally known. Translations appeared promptly in France and England, where twenty-six separate editions (of a translation from the French) were published up to 1800. No less a realist than Napoleon was a great admirer of the story, which he is said to have read seven times, and which he discussed with Goethe when they met in 1808. In Germany the work created a tremendous sensation: within twelve years after its first publication twenty unauthorized editions had been issued. The "Werther costume", consisting of blue tailed coat, yellow waistcoat and trousers with high boots (16th September 1772), was adopted everywhere and was worn at Weimar by the court when Goethe went there in 1775.

We need to recall such facts when we approach a story which is in many respects so foreign to our present modes of thought and expression. Young men today, however greatly they may be influenced by emotion, do not shed "a thousand tears" or impress "a thousand kisses" on a lady's picture. But this is the way the eighteenth century talked, the way it liked to think that a lover's devotion should express itself. No single work can communicate to us as authentically as *Werther* the extravagances of feeling and utterance which mark the trend in German letters commonly designated as "Storm and Stress", a trend which was the precursor of the Romanticism that took the lead in German literature at the turn of the century and kept it for more than thirty years.

At the same time, *Werther* is the first psychological novel in German. There are few actual happenings, and what we

experience, with extraordinary clarity and vividness, is the drama which runs its course in the mind and heart of the hero. Considering Goethe's self-imposed limitation – there are no replies to Werther's letters – it was a *tour de force* hardly equalled in Western literature to make the reader inhabit Werther's soul, as it were, without any flagging of interest and even with peaks of considerable excitement.

A special note on Ossian seems in order, since today the Ossianic poems are probably deader than any other item in eighteenth-century literature. We need to remind ourselves that when Goethe wrote *Werther*, Macpherson's fake had not been disclosed, and that his sentimental fabrications were believed to represent a genuine, wild primitivity. Hence the vogue of Ossian can make a signal contribution to our understanding of eighteenth-century mentality and aid in the correct assessment of *Werther* itself. Knowing that Werther's feeling towards Ossian was actually Goethe's, we can better appreciate the artistic purpose underlying the introduction of a lengthy quotation from Ossian (in Goethe's own translation). It was necessary, he saw, that Lotte should be moved to the depths, lifted out of herself and thus prepared to be overcome by Werther's outburst of passion; to achieve this, she had to be withdrawn from her own everyday world and immersed in a wholly different one, in which she should be bathed in beautiful diction, saturated with sentiment. Assuming her (and the reader's) enthusiasm for Ossian, this was the perfect agency for Goethe to employ. The *matter* of the long quotation is of little moment: Goethe wanted merely the emotional build-up. What serves them as catalyst is the short passage (remote in Ossian from the previous one, and slightly altered in Goethe's version) in which the singer foretells his own death; Werther, by now in a state of the utmost turmoil, cannot fail to break down at this point, and that in turn brings on a crisis which makes his suicide inevitable.

So great was Goethe's success in bringing Werther to life, so deep was the sympathy he evoked for him, that he was thought by many to have put the stamp of his approval on

Werther's character, and moreover to have written a defence of human suicide. As to this, it need only be remarked that Shakespeare could make Hamlet understandable without sharing his views or living his life. The mere fact that young Goethe did not take his own life, for all his tempestuous nature and his passionate grief over Lotte Buff, is sufficient evidence that he intended Werther's suicide to be understood as the necessary culmination of a course of action which was itself not necessary, although humanly understandable.

It is interesting that Werther-Goethe discovered a principle (15th August 1771) which Rudyard Kipling was to put into practice in his *Just so Stories*. And it is amusing to find Werther advising a poet to let his own work alone; for Goethe did not take his hero's advice. Originally dashed off in 1774 in a veritable fever of creativeness, *Werther* was thoughtfully revised in the years 1783–86, the most substantial addition to the letters themselves being the episode of the servant in love with his employer (30th May 1771), who finally murders his rival. The other important change was a marked enlargement (about fifty per cent) of the epilogue written by the "editor". It is however noteworthy – and to that extent Goethe did abide by his own prescription – that not only the basic substance of the story remained unaltered, but that even its external form was not tampered with. Goethe did not rewrite *Werther*, he merely saw to it that his original intent should be even more effectively carried out than in the first version.

*Werther* remains, then, along with the *Urfaust* and some deathless poems, as the literary monument which young Goethe erected to himself and to the people from which he sprang. As long as German literature of the eighteenth century is studied, *Werther* must be included.

– Bayard Quincy Morgan

## Chronology

- 1749 Born at Frankfurt-am-Main.  
1765–68 Studied at Leipzig.  
1770–71 Studied law at Strasburg.  
1772 Spent some months in Wetzlar at the Supreme Court of the Empire.  
1773 *Götz von Berlichingen* (prose drama).  
1774 *Clavigo* (prose drama).  
1774 *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (novel; rev. 1783–86).  
1775 *Stella* (prose drama).  
1775 Invited to Weimar as companion to young duke, remained there.  
1776–85 *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* (novel).  
1779 *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (prose drama; changed to blank verse in 1787).  
1781 *Torquato Tasso* (verse drama; completed 1789).  
1786–88 Journey to Italy, sojourn in Rome.  
1787 *Egmont* (prose drama).  
1790 *Faust (Fragment)* (verse drama).  
1794 *Reineke Fuchs* (verse epic).  
1795–96 *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (novel, revision of the *Sendung*).  
1797 *Hermann und Dorothea* (verse epic).  
1797–99 *Achilleis* (unfinished verse epic).  
1803 *Die natürliche Tochter* (verse drama).  
1808 *Faust, erster Teil* (verse drama).  
1808 *Pandora* (masque in verse).

- 1809 *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (novel).  
1809 *Farbenlehre* (theory of optics).  
1811– *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (autobiography).  
1819 *Der west-östliche Divan* (poems).  
1829 *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (novel).  
1831 *Faust, zweiter Teil* (verse drama, printed post-  
humously).  
1832 Death of Goethe.

*The Sorrows of  
Young Werther*

I HAVE CAREFULLY COLLECTED all I could possibly find out about the history of poor Werther, and I lay it before you here, knowing that you will thank me for doing so. You cannot deny his mind and character your admiration and love, or his fate your tears.

And you, good soul, who are feeling the same anguish as he, draw consolation from his sufferings, and let this little book be your friend, if fate or your own fault prevent you from finding a closer one.

*First Book*

*4th May 1771*

How happy I am to be gone! Best of friends, what is the heart of man! To forsake you, whom I love so much, from whom I was inseparable, and be happy! I know you will forgive me for it. Were not my other associations so chosen by Fate as to make a heart like mine uneasy? Poor Leonore! And yet it was not my fault. Could I help it that while the compelling charms of her sister gave me agreeable entertainment, that poor heart developed its own passion? And yet – am I quite without fault? Did I not nourish her feelings? Did I not myself delight in those wholly authentic manifestations of nature which so often made us laugh, little laughable as they were? Did I not – O what is man, that he has a right to lament what he is? I will, dear friend, I promise you, I will reform, will no longer harp on the misfortunes with which fate presents us, as I have always done; I will enjoy the present, and the past shall be past. You are certainly right, best of men: there would be fewer sufferings among men if they did not – God knows why they are so made – so industriously employ their imagination in recalling the memories of past evils, rather than endure a colourless present.

Please be so good as to tell my mother that I shall attend to her affair as best I can and send her a report of it as soon as possible. I have seen my aunt and find her far from being the vixen that people at home make of her. She is a lively, impetuous woman with the best of hearts. I explained to her my mother's complaints regarding that portion of the inheritance which has been withheld; she gave me her reasons and the facts, and named the conditions under which she would be ready to hand over everything, and even more than we demanded – in short, I don't care to write about it now, but tell my mother that everything will be all right. And in

connection with this little matter I have again found, my dear fellow, that misunderstandings and lethargy perhaps produce more wrong in the world than deceit and malice do. At least the two latter are certainly rarer.

For the rest, I like it here very much. Solitude in this paradise is a precious balm to my heart, and this youthful time of year warms with all its fullness my oft-shivering heart. Every tree, every hedge is a bouquet of flowers, and one would like to turn into a cockchafer, to be able to float about in this sea of scents and find all one's nourishment in it.

The town itself is unpleasant, but on the other hand all around it lies inexpressibly beautiful nature. It was this which induced the late Count M. to lay out a garden on one of the hills which intersect with the most charming diversity, forming the loveliest valleys. The garden is unpretentious, and you no sooner enter it than you feel that it was designed not by a scientific gardener but by a man with a sensitive heart, who wanted to use it for the enjoyment of himself. I have already shed many a tear for the deceased in the decayed little bower which was his favourite spot and is now mine. Soon I shall be the master of the garden; the gardener has a liking for me, even after so few days, and he will not suffer by it.

*10th May*

A wonderful cheerfulness has taken possession of my whole soul, similar to the sweet spring mornings which I enjoy with all my heart. I am alone and glad to be alive in this locality, which was created for such souls as mine. I am so happy, dear friend, so completely immersed in the realization of a tranquil existence, that my art is suffering neglect. I could not draw at all now, not a line, and yet I have never been a greater painter than I am now. When the beloved valley steams around me, and the lofty sun rests on the surface of the impenetrable darkness of my forest with only single rays stealing into the inner sanctuary, then I lie in the tall grass

beside the murmuring brook, while on the earth near me a thousand varied grasses strike me as significant; when I feel the swarming life of the little world between the grass blades, the innumerable, unfathomable shapes of the tiny worms and flies, closer to my heart, and feel the presence of the Almighty, who created us in his image, feel the breath of the all-loving one, who, afloat in eternal rapture, bears and sustains us – O my friend! – then when twilight invests my eyes, and the world about me and the heaven above me rests wholly in my soul like the image of a woman one loves – then I am often all longing and I think: ah, could you express all that again, could you breathe onto paper that which lives in you so fully, so warmly, so that it would become the reflection of your soul, as your soul is a mirror of the infinite God! My friend – but this experience is beyond my strength, I succumb to the overpowering glory of what I behold.

*12th May*

I don't know whether deluding spirits hover about this region, or whether it is the warm, heavenly fancy in my heart which turns my whole environment into a paradise. Thus, directly outside the town there is a well, one to which I am magically bound like Melusine and her sisters.\* You go down a little slope and find yourself in front of a vault in which about twenty steps descend to a spot where the clearest water gushes out of marble rocks. The little wall which serves as coping at the top, the tall trees which give shade all around, the coolness of the spot – all this has a suggestive, mysterious character. Not a day passes without my sitting there for an hour. Then the maids come from the town and fetch water, the most innocent and necessary of employments, which in former days the daughters of kings engaged in themselves. When I sit there, the patriarchal idea is vividly realized about me, as all the men of old make friends or go courting at the well, while beneficent spirits hover about the wellsprings and

fountains. Oh, a man who cannot share that experience must never have been refreshed, after an arduous journey in the summer, by the coolness of a wellspring.

*13th May*

You ask whether to send me my books – friend, I beg you for the love of God, don't load me up with them! I do not wish to be guided, encouraged, enkindled any more; my heart effervesces enough all by itself. What I need is lullabies, and I have found an abundance of them in my Homer. How often do I lull my agitated blood into quiet, for you have never seen anything as uneven, as unstable, as this heart. Good friend, do I need to tell that to you, who have so often borne the burden of seeing me pass from grief to extravagant joy and from sweet melancholy to disastrous passion? Moreover, I treat my heart like a sick child, granting its every wish. Do not pass this on; there are those who would reproach me for it.

*15th May*

The lower classes here know me already and love me, especially the children. When I sought their acquaintance to begin with, and put friendly questions to them about this and that, some of them thought I was making fun of them and snubbed me quite rudely. I did not let this bother me; I only felt most keenly what I have often observed before: people of some rank will always keep the common people coolly at a distance, as if they thought they would lose something by approaching them, and then too there are social apostates and practical jokers, who seem to condescend, making their arrogance all the more painful to the poor.

I am quite aware that we are not equal and cannot be equal, but I hold that he who thinks it necessary to withdraw from the so-called rabble in order to keep their respect is just as

reprehensible as a coward who hides from his enemy because he is afraid of defeat.

Recently, as I came to the spring, I found a young servant girl who had put her pitcher on the lowest step and was looking around to see if no fellow servant were coming along to help her get it on her head. I descended and looked at her. "Shall I help you, girl?" said I. She blushed up to her ears. "Oh no, sir!" she said. "Don't stand on ceremony." She adjusted her head cushion, and I helped her. She thanked me and mounted the steps.

*17th May*

I have made all kinds of acquaintances, but so far I have not found any companions. I don't know, something about me must attract people; so many of them like me and cling to me, and it pains me when our common journey takes us only a short distance. If you ask what the people here are like, I must tell you, "Like people everywhere!" Uniformity marks the human race. Most of them spend the greater part of their time in working for a living, and the scanty freedom that is left to them burdens them so that they seek every means of getting rid of it. O fate of man!

But these people are a very good sort! If I forget myself once in a while, tasting with them the joys that are still granted to me, such as exchanging pleasantries in all candour and ingenuousness around a prettily set table, planning an excursion, or arranging for a well-timed dance, and the like, the effect on me is very good; only I must not let myself think that in me lie ever so many other powers, all of which moulder for lack of use, and which I must carefully conceal. Ah, and that fetters my whole heart – and yet! To be misunderstood is the fate of such as I.

Alas that the friend of my youth is gone! Alas that I ever knew her! I could say, "You are a fool! For you are seeking what is not to be found here below!" But I did have her

friendship, I sensed that heart, that great soul, in whose presence I felt myself to be more than I was, because I was all that I could be. Good God! Was there a single force in my soul which remained unused? Could I not, when with her, unfold that entire power of feeling with which my heart embraces all nature? Was not our association an endless play of the subtlest feeling, of the keenest wit, a wit whose variations, not excluding some flippancy, bore the stamp of genius? And now! Ah, the years of hers which exceeded mine brought her before me to the grave. Never shall I forget her, never her steadfast mind and her divine indulgence.

A few days ago I met a young man named V., an ingenuous youth with a very happy physiognomy. He has just come from the university, and though he does not exactly think himself wise, he does believe he knows more than others. He was diligent too, as I can tell in all sorts of ways – in short, he is pretty well informed. Having heard that I draw a great deal and know Greek (two rare phenomena in these skies), he sought me out and unloaded much learning, from Batteux to Robert Wood, from Roger de Piles to Winckelmann, assuring me that he had read Sulzer's *General Theory of the Fine Arts*, that is, the first part of it, from beginning to end, and that he owned a MS of Heyne on the study of classical antiquity.\* I let it go at that.

Furthermore, I have made the acquaintance of a very fine person: a steward of the prince, a frank and ingenuous man. They say it rejoices the soul to see him in the midst of his children, of whom he has nine; in particular they make a great fuss over his eldest daughter. He has invited me to his house, and I will call on him one of these days. He is living in one of the prince's hunting lodges, an hour and a half from here on foot, having received permission to move there after the death of his wife, since he found residence here in the town and in the official dwelling too painful.

In addition, a number of eccentric freaks have crossed my path whom I find insufferable in every respect, most unendurable being their manifestations of friendship.

Farewell! This letter will suit you, for it is nothing but a report.

*22nd May*

That the life of man is only a dream has seemed to be so to many before now, and I too always carry this feeling about with me. When I behold the narrow bounds which confine man's powers of action and investigation; when I see how all his efficiency aims at the satisfaction of needs which in their turn have no purpose save to prolong our unhappy existence, and then see that all our reassurance regarding certain matters of inquiry is merely a resigned kind of dreaming, whereby we paint the walls within which we are confined with cheerful figures and bright prospects – all this, Wilhelm, forces me into silence. I return into myself, and find a world! But again a world of groping and vague desires rather than one of clear delineation and active force. And then everything grows hazy to my senses, and in a sort of dream I keep on smiling at the world.

All learned schoolmasters and educators agree that children do not know why they want what they want, but that adults too, as well as children, stagger around on this earth, like them not knowing whence they come and whither they go, pursue true goals just as little as they, and are just as completely governed by biscuits and cakes and birch rods: nobody will believe that, and yet it seems to me palpable.

I am ready to grant – for I know what you would say to this – that the happiest are those who like children live for the day, drag their dolls around, dressing and undressing them, slink with bated breath about the drawer where Mama keeps the sweets locked up and, when they finally get hold of what they want, gobble it down by the mouthful and cry, “More!” – those are happy creatures. Happy are those too who give sumptuous titles to their shabby occupations, perhaps even to their passions, recommending them to

the human race as gigantic operations contributing to man's salvation and welfare. Happy the man who can be like that! But one who recognizes in all humility what all this comes to, who sees how amiably every happy citizen manages to shape his little garden into a paradise, and how indefatigably even the unhappy man plods along panting under his burden, while all of them take the same interest in having one more minute to see the light of this sun – ah, he holds his peace, and he too creates his world in himself, and is moreover happy because he is a human being. And then, confined and fettered as he is, still he continues to keep in his heart the sweet feeling of freedom, knowing that he can quit this prison whenever he will.

*26th May*

You have long known my way of settling down, pitching my tent in some spot I like, and lodging there in a modest fashion. Here too I have again come upon a nook that I found attractive.

About an hour's walk from town lies a place called Wahlheim.\* Its situation on a hill is very interesting, and when you leave the village on the upper footpath, all at once you are overlooking the entire valley. A good-hearted hostess, who is obliging and lively for her age, dispenses wine, beer and coffee, and rising above everything else are two lindens whose spreading branches cover the small space before the church, which is completely ringed about with farmhouses, barns and courtyards. So private, so homelike a spot I have not readily found, and I have my little table carried out there from the inn, and my chair, and there I drink my coffee and read my Homer. The first time when I chanced to walk in under the lindens on a fine afternoon, I found the little spot so lonely. Everyone was in the fields, and only a boy of about four was sitting on the ground and holding close to his breast with both arms another one, perhaps half a year old, sitting

between his feet, so that he made a kind of armchair for the baby and, for all the liveliness with which his black eyes looked about him, sat quite still. I found the sight charming: I sat down on a plough across the way and sketched this brotherly posture with great enjoyment. I added the nearest fence, a barn door and some broken wheels, all of it just as it stood there, and after the lapse of an hour I found that I had completed a well-disposed, very interesting drawing, without putting in the least imaginary detail. This strengthened me in my resolve to keep henceforth exclusively to nature. Nature alone is infinitely rich, and she alone forms the great artist. One can say much in favour of rules, about the same things as can be said in praise of civil society. A person who trains himself by the rules will never produce anything absurd or bad, just as one who lets himself be modelled after laws and decorum can never become an intolerable neighbour, never an outright villain; on the other hand any "rule", say what you like, will destroy the true feeling for nature and the true expression of her! I hear you say that that is too severe, that the rule merely restrains, prunes rank shoots, etc. – good friend, shall I give you a comparison? It may be likened to loving. A young heart is wholeheartedly bound up in a maiden, spends every daytime hour with her, squanders all its talents, all its fortune, in order to employ every moment in expressing its complete devotion to her. And now suppose some pedant comes along, a man who holds a public office, and says to him, "Fine young gentleman, to love is human, only you must be human in your loving! Apportion your hours, keeping some for work, and devote the hours of recreation to your maiden. Figure up your fortune, and whatever is in excess of your needs I will not forbid you to spend on a present for her, only not too often, say on her birthday or name day, etc." – if the youth obeys, then a useful young person will be the result, and I would even advise any prince to make him a counsellor; however, it will be the end of his love and, if he is an artist, of his art. O my friends! You ask why the stream of genius

so seldom bursts forth, so seldom sends its sublime floods rushing in, to make your souls quake with astonishment? Dear friends, why, there along both banks of the river dwell the placid gentlemen whose summer houses, tulip beds and cabbage fields would be ruined, and who consequently manage to avert betimes, with dams and drainage ditches, any future threat.

*27th May*

I see that I have lapsed into raptures, parables and oratory, and have thus forgotten to complete the story of my further doings with the children. Wholly engrossed in the feelings of an artist, which my letter of yesterday presents to you in very fragmentary form, I sat on my plough for a good two hours. Then towards evening a young woman with a small basket on her arm came towards the children, who had not moved all this while, calling from a distance, "Philip, you're a good boy." She spoke to me, I thanked her, got up, approached her, and asked if she was the children's mother. She said yes and, giving the older one half a roll, she picked up the baby and kissed it with all a mother's love. "I told my Philip to hold the baby," said she, "and went into town with my oldest boy to get white bread and sugar, and an earthenware saucepan." I saw all this in the basket, the cover of which had fallen off. "I want to cook my Hans (that was the name of the youngest) a bit of soup for supper; the big boy, the scamp, broke my saucepan yesterday while quarrelling with Philip over the scrapings of the porridge." I asked about the oldest, and she had hardly told me that he was racing around the meadow with some geese when he came running and brought the second boy a hazel switch. I went on talking with the woman and learnt that she was the daughter of the schoolmaster, and that her husband had gone on a trip to Switzerland to get the legacy of a cousin. "They wanted to cheat him out of it," said she, "and didn't answer his letters; so he went there himself. I only hope