The Sorrows of Young Werther

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the son of a wealthy jurist and civil servant who educated his child to follow in his footsteps. Towards this end, Goethe began studies at Leipzig University when he was only sixteen, but soon found that he preferred both drawing and poetry to law. He left college without earning a degree and returned to his hometown of Frankfurt, where he published several poems and his first play, *Götz von Berlichingen*, which won him his first small fame. The desires of his father remained strong, however, and Goethe eventually returned to academia, earning a law degree at the age of twenty-three. Seeking to set up practice, he moved to the town of Wetzlar in 1772. The experiences he had there, coupled with the concurrent suicide of a friend, formed the semi-biographical basis of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the book that vaulted Goethe into international stardom. Shortly after its publication, a high ranking nobleman became Goethe's patron and friend, and Goethe soon found himself in a variety of jobs within the government of Weimar. In time, he would be granted nobility himself, and add to his fame with further prose publications, including *Wilhelm Meister*, *Elective Affinities*, and *Faust*. His poetry motivated an entire German movement known as introversion. In his later years, Goethe supplemented his fictional works with well-respected scientific tracts in such diverse fields as botany and meteorology. His wide variety of interests and skills can be seen in the range of people he influenced: philosophers such as Nietzsche and Hegel; composers such as Beethoven and Mozart; and writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Enlightenment, with its belief that anything could be understood through empirical observation and rational thought, triggered a new movement in the arts—called Romanticism—towards the end of the eighteenth century. Romanticism was a backlash against the Enlightenment's rationality, and it embraced, among other things, emotion and nature. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is an early and fervent example of Romantic literature. In addition, when *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was written, the Age of Revolution was dawning, which was a period marked by revolutionary movements in multiple countries that sought equality for all. Coming on the heels of the Enlightenment, the Age of Revolution reacted as violently against the wisdom of the previous age, which is also what happens to Werther, a young man discontented with the confines of his own time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Sorrows of Young Werther inspired a great deal of what would today be called fan-fiction: writing that makes use of existing characters and stories in new, inventive ways. Examples of this include poems such as "Lotte by Werther's Grave" by Karl von Reitzenstein, so popular in Goethe's day that crowds would gather to hear it read. Other examples persist even into the nineteenth century, when *The Sorrows of Young Werther* fell under the satirizing pen of William Thackeray in his poem "Sorrows of Werther." Nor was the phenomenon limited to poetry. Sir Herbert Croft, using the same epistolary style as Goethe, wrote his *Love and Madness* in reaction to real-life events allegedly inspired by *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Wilhelm Haring did the same in his *The English Werther*. Goethe himself took up the subject of love again in his third novel, *Elective Affinities*. Love proved a common theme for many of Goethe's contemporaries as well, who were developing a tradition that came to be called German Romanticism, of which *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is arguably the first example. Goethe's glorification of unbridled emotion was shared by his contemporaries Johann Gottfried von Herder and Friedrich Schiller, as well as by the next generation of German Romantic authors, such as Heinrich Heine and G.W. Hegel.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Sorrows of Young Werther*
- **When Written:** 1774
- **Where Written:** Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany
- **When Published:** 1774
- **Literary Period:** Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress)
- **Genre:** Epistolary Novel, Confessional Literature, Autobiographical Novel, Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Wahlheim (a fictional town based on Wetzlar, Germany), and its surrounding countryside.
- **Climax:** Upon realizing that he and Lotte will never see one another again, Werther returns to his home and shoots himself.
- **Antagonist:** While the novel has no traditional antagonist, Werther struggles against the expectation that he behave rationally instead of emotionally, ultimately succumbing to it.
- **Point of View:** The bulk of the novel is told through letters (which are written in the first-person), though a third-person narrator tells the story at the end.

EXTRA CREDIT

Cottage industries. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was one of the first books to become so celebrated that it inspired tourism. An innkeeper in the town that inspired the book created a dramatic gravesite and passed it off as Werther's, while a contemporary guidebook also directed sightseers to the tree under which Werner and Lotte once sat. Visitors would often wear the same iconic clothes attributed to Werther. In that way, the book was like the *Harry Potter* of its age!

Plague of Suicides. A rumor persists that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* inspired a spate of suicides and suicide attempts in the name of young love. While there seems to be little evidence of this, the thought that the novel recommended suicide was enough for it to be banned in Leipzig, the town that initially published it.

PLOT SUMMARY

A fictional, unnamed editor introduces *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, presenting the novel as a nonfictional compilation of all the material he has been able to discover of the sad story of "poor Werther." The opening is short and assertive: the editor takes it on faith that the novel will have a great emotional effect on its reader, and that Werther's spirit and character will engender both love and admiration. He hopes that the reader will find a friend in Werther when no other friends present themselves.

Werther's narrative begins with a letter written to his friend Wilhelm. In it, Werther describes how happy he is in the small, unnamed town where he has recently settled. While Werther finds the town proper to be unlikable, the countryside—especially its **trees**—is idyllic, and he sees it as though encountering nature for the first time. By the writing of his next letter, some six days later, the place possesses him utterly. In his contentment, he admits that he has neglected his studies—**books** have begun to seem insufficient in comparison to the beauty around him. In the letter that follows, Werther instructs Wilhelm not to send the books from home that he'd originally requested; he won't be needing them.

Already smitten with the beauty of his new home, Werther finds himself at ease among the townsfolk, as well. He expresses remorse for the way men of his social status look down on peasant life and he paints a portrait for Wilhelm of a nearly pristine way of living—peasants live simply and close to the earth, he claims. Just as Werther begins to lose his book learning, so too does he lose some of his higher social graces. He finds himself sitting around hearths and joking, or dancing in an unrefined way. Yet, if he manages not to think about how improper these actions are, he enjoys himself heartily. In his next letter, he openly admits that he finds peasant life to be superior to his own.

Several days later, Werther stumbles upon the town of Wahlheim, about an hour from his home. It agrees with him much more readily than the rural town in which he presently resides. In Wahlheim, there is an inn where Werther can read comfortably and sip coffee, and nearby are country scenes that he can sketch. Both reading and drawing were skills Werther had hitherto put aside in favor of simply absorbing nature, but Wahlheim seems to inspire Werther to return to these pastimes. He begins to feel that the place might offer an acceptable middle-ground between his learned, highbrow ways and the simpler peasant life he has come to adore.

After sending a letter describing the doomed love of a Farmer Lad for his employer, the Widow, Werther goes silent for two weeks. His next letter to Wilhelm confesses that he has failed to write because he met a woman in Wahlheim, Lotte, whom he calls "perfection itself" and for whom even the word angel is insufficient. He gushes to Wilhelm about her, struggling to find words, and he even pauses mid-letter to go and visit her.

Werther describes to Wilhelm how he met Lotte. En route to an outdoor country ball, Werther's companions stopped to pick her up. Before Werther met her, however, Lotte's Aunt warned him that he must not fall in love with Lotte, as she is engaged to Albert. Werther ignores this advice and goes into the house to retrieve Lotte, where he meets her siblings and finally Lotte herself. He's instantly smitten. At the dance, he jealously seeks her arm for each round, and finds a kind of rapture in her willingness to allow it. As Werther's emotional fervor builds, a **storm** appears outside; the couple admire the strange beauty of springtime storms, both remembering the same poem.

What follows is a whirlwind of letters to Wilhelm highlighting Werther's increasing infatuation with, and ultimately love for, Lotte. He travels to Wahlheim daily, pausing only when Lotte's visits to her dying friend Mrs. M. prevent it. Werther's initial belief that Wahlheim might afford him some of his old, educated life in a country setting proves groundless; he is idle once more, unless he is helping Lotte with her siblings, or visiting the Vicar of S. and his Wife to discuss the church's grove of walnut **trees**. While Albert, Lotte's fiancé is out of town on business, Werther becomes increasingly possessive of Lotte, remarking to Wilhelm about the pangs he feels when Lotte looks at others during carriage rides or during conversation. Werther's jealousy becomes a crisis, as apparent in his letters to Wilhelm growing shorter and more distracted. Wilhelm's responses, gleaned from Werther's rebuttals to them, seem focused on providing Werther with distractions from Lotte. He asks about Werther's drawing and suggests that Werther might find gainful work with an Ambassador. Werther does not take these suggestions.

When Albert finally returns, Werther finds him to be a man worthy of much esteem, and he compliments Albert's treatment of Lotte. Because of this, Werther resolves to abandon his pursuit of Lotte and stay away from Wahlheim,

though his despair is palpable and his behavior turns to mania, which frightens Lotte and puts Albert off. Realizing this, Werther instead seeks out Lotte whenever she is alone. Over time, his letters make it clear that he has decided not to leave after all, instead prolonging the untenable situation by trying to befriend Albert. He and Albert have a lengthy and passionate debate on the morality of suicide, and Werther argues that suicide is a valid option for some people. In fact, he believes that suicide can sometimes be no more escapable than death from a fever might be. This statement shocks and disturbs Albert.

In the months following Albert's arrival, Werther's letters become increasingly long, dramatic, and philosophical. He becomes absorbed with self-pity and mired in thoughts of death and pain, ranting endlessly to Wilhelm about his foolishness and helplessness. In one moment he resolves to leave, but in the next he is certain that he might continue on forever. Finally, a discussion regarding Lotte's Mother and her untimely death so shakes Werther that he decides follow through on Wilhelm's suggestion to flee Wahlheim and find employment at the court of the Ambassador.

Though Werther has some growing pains at court, he generally finds the work tolerable. The ambassador proves a difficult man to work for, but Werther nevertheless finds a friend in Count C., who advises him in how best to deal with the ambassador. He befriends Miss von B., a local aristocrat whom he imagines might become a romantic interest. Indeed, Werther seems on the verge of shaking Lotte's ghost when, seemingly out of nowhere, he writes to her. Thereafter his mania is restored and his work becomes unbearable. He desires to flee again, an impulse greatly magnified after receiving word from Albert that he and Lotte have finally married.

After Werther is humiliated at a party by the Count's noble friends who find Werther too low-born to mingle with them, Werther resigns his job. For a while he travels, but he ultimately returns to Wahlheim and to Lotte. He finds the world there at odds with his memories of it. The Farmer Lad has been let go by the Widow he loves because he tried to rape her, but Werther sympathizes with the Lad rather than the Widow. Noting that the Widow has taken on a new servant, and remembering his feelings towards Albert, Werther wonders how the new servant must make the Farmer Lad feel. The **trees** so beloved by the Vicar and his wife have been cut down, and with them the memories that Werther and Lotte made there.

One day, Werther meets a man named Heinrich, who turns out to be quite insane. The next day Werther reports that Heinrich was driven to madness by unrequited love for Lotte, though he makes no mention of how he's learned this information, and it seems suspect. Instead, the mania of his own letters approaches madness. Soon, the editor is forced to intercede in the narrative, filling in the gaps left by Werther's scant letters. The Farmer Lad killed the Widow, and Werther defended the boy's actions vehemently to Albert. Albert was so aghast at this that he broke with Werther and demanded that Lotte do the same. Then a **storm** ravaged Wahlheim, bringing with it a flood that laid waste to many of Werther's favorite spots.

Lotte, for her part, rejects Albert's call to abandon Werther, but she does attempt to lessen their time together and she has to ask him to control himself often. During their final visit, Werther reads from his own translations of Ossian, and both he and Lotte weep for the beauty of the story and their own ruined friendship. When Werther forces kisses upon Lotte, the spell is broken, and she banishes him from her home. He flees, resolving to end his life. After writing a letter to Lotte to be delivered after his death, he prepares for the act by borrowing Albert's pistols. He shoots himself that night and dies from his wounds the following day. The novel ends with the iconic line "No priest attended him."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Werther – Werther, the protagonist and primary narrator of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, is an amiable young man known for wearing a blue frock coat, buff waistcoat, and boots. He falls in love with Lotte and, when rebuked in his advances, he ultimately commits suicide. Werther is largely the author's autobiographical creation, as Werther's impressive education and erudition, as well as many of his experiences, are similar to Goethe's. Like Goethe, Werther hails from a wealthy family and, after taking his degree, settles in a nearby town to begin his career. Prior to falling in love with Lotte, he proves himself a careful observer of the human condition, a good friend, and a skilled conversationalist. Werther's narration takes the form of a series of letters: generally to his friend Wilhelm, occasionally to Lotte, and once to Albert. Through these letters, he shows the gradual decline of his promising youth as emotional obsession replaces rationality. In the work's final moments, Werther's narration is replaced by that of the Editor.

Lotte (Charlotte S.) – Lotte is Werther's love interest, though she is engaged (and later married) to Albert. Lotte comes across as nearly flawless and angelic. After her own mother dies, she gladly accepts the burdens of mothering her siblings. She also visits Mrs. M. on her deathbed, maintains a full relationship with Albert, and still finds time to spend time with Werther. Given Werther's narration of the events, one might wonder if Lotte isn't toying with his affections somewhat. The Editor, however, with his unique point-of-view, shows that Lotte is just as confused and heartbroken by the situation as Werther, though she handles it more maturely than he does. Goethe based the character of Lotte on Charlotte Bluff, his friend in real life with whom he was deeply infatuated. Like Bluff, Lotte ultimately informs Werther that he must not hope

for her love and their friendship dissolves.

Albert – Fiancé then husband to Lotte, and erstwhile friend to Werther. Albert is an amiable young man who likes Werther despite Werther's obvious affection for Lotte. The two engage in hearty conversations often, but Werther's increasing obsession with Lotte becomes a strain on their friendship. Things are brought to a head when the Farmer Lad murders the Widow out of lovestruck jealousy, and Werther defends the boy's actions to Albert in a way bordering on insanity. The episode scares Albert, who sees strong parallels between the Lad's obsession with the widow and Werther's feelings for Lotte, and it causes an irreparable rift between him and Werther. Albert subsequently advises Lotte to see far less of Werther. Goethe based Albert on a man who was engaged to Goethe's own love interest (and the woman who was the basis for Lotte), Charlotte Bluff. Bluff's fiancé considered Goethe a genius whose passion could do with some restraint, and Albert seems to follow along in this vein as a sensible man ruled more by reason than emotion.

Wilhelm – Wilhelm is Werther's close friend. As Wilhelm lives far from Werther, their friendship occurs through letters—in fact, Werther's letters to Wilhelm constitute the bulk of the book. Wilhelm never appears bodily in the text, and his responses to Werther's letters are never printed, though Werther's replies shed some light on their content. These clues show Wilhelm to be someone deeply concerned for Werther's well-being, and they suggest that Wilhelm would act as a moderating force against the whirlwind of emotions Werther experiences if he were only present and able to do so. It is Wilhelm that assists Werther in finding employment with the Ambassador, and Wilhelm who constantly reminds Werther to find solace in his old hobbies of reading and drawing. When Werther is at his most desperate, Wilhelm intends to go to him, but Werther (who is already contemplating suicide) requests that he postpone the trip for a while.

Editor – The editor, a fictitious publishing supervisor responsible for compiling Werther's correspondence with Wilhelm, is one of the book's narrators (alongside Werther himself). The editor, who first appears in a short foreword introducing the book, shows a genuine affection for Werther and recognizes that most people reading the book will genuinely feel for Werther and the helplessness of his predicament. He hopes that, by telling Werther's story, others greatly affected by emotion will find some comfort in knowing that they aren't alone. The editor also steps in during the final moments of the book to fill in the gaps in the story that Werther's letter-based narration leave. Ultimately, the Editor takes over for Werther after his suicide and shows a strange, seemingly complete, knowledge of not simply the events following Werther's death, but also the feelings and thoughts of those affected by it.

Werther's Mother – While Werther's mother is an important character in Werther's life, she never makes a direct appearance in the book. Readers only understand her importance through Werther's mentions of her in his letters to Wilhelm. She was left a single parent when Werther's father died, and has an unknown source of wealth that Werther sometimes taps. Werther often expresses regret that his lackadaisical lifestyle will cause her pain, but little else (including the reasons for her absence from Werther's life) is known about her.

Count C. – A friend of Werther's at court. The Count is an aristocrat who, despite his higher social stauts, befriends Werther. He often has Werther over to his house for dinner and he speaks freely with him, as though they were equals, while at court. The two share a genuine affection for one another that seems to transcend social status. However, when the Count's noble friends come to call, they are outraged to find Werther in their midst.

Heinrich –Werther meets Heinrich one day while Heinrich is foolishly attempting to gather wildflowers for his "sweetheart" in the winter. Coming upon Werther and Heinrich, the Old Woman on the Path informs Werther that Heinrich has spent the last several months in an asylum. Despite his eccentricity, Heinrich is a pleasant man. Towards the end of the novel, Werther claims that it was unrequited love for Lotte that drove Heinrich to madness, but he offers no source for this claim.

Farmer Lad – The Farmer Lad is the Widow's servant, and he falls desperately in love with her. When she releases him from her employ, he murders his replacement to prevent any rivals from winning her heart. When the Farmer Lad is arrested, Werther defends him bitterly, arguing that his act was one of passion. This defense leads to a break in the friendship between Albert and Werther.

Mr. Schmidt – Sweetheart to Friederike. Mr. Schmidt is intensely jealous of Friederike's time and dislikes others, especially Werther, talking to her. His ill-humor is the cause of a lengthy conversation between Lotte, Werther, and the Vicar's Wife. Ironically, Werther condemns Schmidt's mood, though his own mood will sour for much of the novel.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss von B. – An aristocratic young woman with whom Werther entertains a fledgling courtship. Miss von B.'s social status (which is higher than Werther's), however, prevents her from continuing the romance, as she faces increasing pressure from both her mother and others in her social circle.

Louis, Malchen, Marianne, Sophie – Lotte's younger siblings, to whom Lotte becomes a mother after their mother dies. Werther is especially fond of the children and they of him.

Ambassador – Werther's employer following his departure from Wahlheim. The ambassador is said to be a morose and difficult man, which makes working for him neigh on impossible.

Minister – A court official to whom the ambassador complains about Werther's style of work. The minister admonishes Werther publicly, but sends him a private letter saying that he only sought to bend Werther's useful enthusiasm to a more productive end.

Vicar of S. – The Vicar of S. is an elderly religious official who lives about an hour away from Lotte. He especially enjoys telling stories from the past. Werther and Lotte visit him one day and speak pleasantly about the walnut trees at the vicarage.

Vicar's Wife – The wife of the Vicar of S. is an outspoken woman and mother to Friederike. The Vicar's Wife cuts down the walnut trees of which Werther is so fond, an act which Werther believes paves the way for her downfall in the eyes of the local townsfolk.

Adelin – A co-worker of Werther's.

Mr. Audran, N.N. – Attendees of the party where Werther and Lotte first meet.

Colonel B., Baron F., J., Mr. von R., Lady von S., Lady von T. – Guests at the aristocratic soiree of Count C. who are outraged by Werther's presence there.

Miss von B.'s Mother – The aristocratic mother of Miss von B. who prevents her from seeing Werther.

Count von M. – The now-deceased aristocrat who initiated the gardening at Werther's country home.

Friederike – Daughter of the Vicar and his Wife and sweetheart to Mr. Schmidt.

Hans, Philipps – Children of the Woman with Basket.

Leonore – A young woman with whom Werther entertained a youthful romance prior to arriving at Wahlheim.

Lotte's Aunt – Lotte's Aunt accompanies Lotte and Werther to the dance where they first meet. She warns Werther not to fall in love with Lotte.

Lotte's Mother – The death of Lotte's mother leaves Lotte in charge of her siblings. She is remembered as an angelic woman and a near-perfect mother.

Mrs. M. – An old woman who requests Lotte's bedside presence as she prepares to die.

Old M. – Husband to Mrs. M. Werther recalls him as a hard man.

Old Woman on the Path – Mother to Heinrich.

Prince of — – Werther's patron following his departure from court.

V. – A young academic with whom Werther remembers having an invigorating conversation.

Widow – An otherwise unnamed woman who employs the Farmer Lad.

Woman with Basket – A young peasant woman, mother to Philipps and Hans. Werther views her as the epitome of idyllic country life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE HEART VS. THE MIND

The idea that the mind and body are distinct entities is one that originated in seventeenth century philosophy and has informed cultural attitudes ever since. Goethe accepts this divide in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; he depicts emotion and intellect as conflicting and irreconcilable forces, with the heart incessantly needing love and attention, and the mind trying to moderate these needs to little avail. Rather than coming down in favor of the rational influence of the mind (as is culturally conventional), however, Goethe advocates for emotions over reason, and the heart over the mind. By using his title character, Werther, to embody emotion, Goethe argues for the beauty of a passionate existence over the rational and deadening influence of the intellect.

As the reader is naturally aligned with Werther (the protagonist), Werther's opinions and desires carry significant weight. Thus, Goethe's choice to wholly align Werther with emotions, rather than intellect, is itself an implicit argument for body over mind. Werther allows himself to be fully driven by his passions and desires, and he actively rejects any tempering that either his own mind or the advice of his friends supply. Early evidence of this comes when a minor character advises Werther not to fall in love with Lotte, the beautiful (but taken) young woman he meets shortly thereafter, but Werther fails to rationally consider the situation and instead falls deeply in love with a woman engaged to someone else. This initial abandonment of rationality in favor of emotion is repeated throughout the book, becoming its primary conflict. For example, when Werther has fled from Lotte and sensibly taken up employment, he finds himself unable to concentrate on his work or abide by the restrictions it places on his life. Instead of allowing work to distract him from his destructive emotions, he quits his job to return to Lotte, who is by then married. Werther is unable ever to temper the needs of his heart.

While Werther comes to embody emotion and the heart, Goethe uses Werther's friends—particularly Wilhelm, with whom Werther corresponds throughout the novel—to stand in for reason and intellect by giving practical advice or making

rational observations. While well-meaning, these characters tend to underestimate the hold that Werther's emotions have on him, and their advice has little effect. Wilhelm, for example, tries to reason with Werther, often regarding the folly of his love for Lotte. While Wilhelm's letters are not included in the novel, Werther's responses to them make clear that Wilhelm has been fruitlessly advocating clearheaded thought. Werther's servants, seeing the increasingly disheveled appearance and erratic comings and goings of their employer, respond only with silence. In this, they recognize the fruitlessness of trying to rationalize with Werther. Goethe, by highlighting the servants' silence, shows just how evident Werther's runaway emotions are to those around him. As mentioned previously, Lotte advises Werther that their situation cannot continue in its current state. Embodying the heart, Werther naturally goes into a rage at this. Lotte's suggestion, however, is merely a sensible one, suggesting that if he wishes to continue seeing her, he need only modify his behavior somewhat.

While the above conflict may seem as though the story laments Werther's inability to control his emotions, Goethe is instead showing that the cultural norm of trusting input from the mind more than input from the heart is arbitrary and baseless. If readers take heart and mind to be of equal value, or the heart to be of greater value, then Werther's story is not one of tragically succumbing to the vagaries of love; instead, it's a story of choosing emotion over reason in order to live, for at least a short while, fully and passionately. Goethe shows the value of choosing emotion over reason through his writing itself; the book's most beautiful language comes during the moments when Werther is seized by emotions, and especially when he speaks of Lotte. By contrast, the text becomes especially bland when the fictional editor steps in, offering a wholly abstract, intellectual view. Not only does this contrast magnify the audience's identification with Werther (and thus with emotion), but it also suggests that the beauty in life is to be found in passion rather than in intellect. This argument is strengthened by the fact that Werther, more than any other character in the novel, is known for his intellectual prowess and worldliness. He doesn't choose emotion, in other words, because intellect is unavailable to him or because he doesn't understand its appeal. This is a choice that he makes with full comprehension of the stakes, and thus (ironically) Goethe is presenting emotion as not simply the more beautiful choice, but a choice that can withstand rational scrutiny, as well. Thus, neither Goethe nor Werther regrets that Werther decided to allow himself to become caught up in his sorrows, despite the consequences.

It's notable that Goethe wrote The Sorrows of Young Werther at the age of twenty-four, and he disowned the book shortly thereafter, coming to despise the Romantic movement and its obsession with emotion over reason, and calling it "everything that is sick." Despite that Goethe outgrew his conviction that Werther was wise to choose his heart over his mind, he did once remark that, "It must be bad, if not everybody was to have a time in his life, when he felt as though Werther had been written exclusively for him." Thus, whether or not Goethe ultimately stood by the book's unequivocal endorsement of passion, he remained, throughout his life, able to relate to the passions that consumed Werther and the wild popularity of the book, particularly among lovestruck youths.

SELF-ABSORPTION OF YOUTH

The Sorrows of Young Werther contains characters of nearly all ages, but its primary concerns rest with Werther, Lotte, and Albert, three youths at the threshold of adulthood. As Goethe depicts it, young adulthood is a dangerous time: the authorities of youth (parents, teachers, elders) become less powerful, while the young adult's own perceptions begin to seem like the only reliable, true guide in the world. Werther is a classic example of a youth in the grip of such self-absorption, and while the novel acknowledges that this is both normal and understandable for his age, it also portrays both the absurdity and destructiveness of self-absorption that goes unchecked.

The very form that Goethe chose for *The Sorrows of Young Werther* suggests self-absorption. The book is an epistolary novel, a novel written as though it were a series of letters, and the only letters presented are Werther's. Therefore, Werther's voice—and his endless rhapsody about his emotions—is the only voice readers hear. In addition, Werther's letters do not show evidence that he ever listens to Wilhelm, his primary correspondent, or even that he cares much about their friendship. The letters rarely allude to anything Wilhelm has written, and when they do, it's typically in the form of rejecting advice or justifying some mistake Werther has made in spite of Wilhelm's pleas. Thus, Werther comes to seem self-absorbed to the point of isolating himself; nobody can temper Werther's actions, perceptions, or emotions because he won't listen to anyone else. In fact, the only relief from Werther's narration comes when he has descended so far into his madness that the editor must take over and explain that Werther succumbed to his passions. In other words, Werther is so self-absorbed that the entrance of another voice does not indicate Werther's willingness to listen and share the stage—the presence of a new narrator shows that Werther has died.

Werther's relationship with Lotte also highlights his self-absorption in two ways. First, Lotte is not a self-absorbed character, so her presence highlights Werther's own flaws. Though Lotte is Werther's age, she is not still a youth; after her mother died, she took on the adult responsibility of raising her siblings, and she has taken on the adult commitment of marriage. Since Lotte's life is so closely connected to others—namely Albert and her siblings—Lotte understands empathy, compromise, and respect. She lives so much for

others that she cannot be self-absorbed, unlike isolated Werther who cannot fathom that another person's perspective could be equal to his own. Second, Lotte seems to inspire new heights of self-absorption in Werther. Though Werther claims to love Lotte above all else, his actions towards her lack empathy and respect, which casts doubt on the maturity of his definition of love. For example, when Lotte asks Werther to stop courting her and allow Albert to be her husband with Werther as simply their friend, Werther cannot honor her request or even understand the difficult position he has put her in. Locked within his crippling self-absorption, Werther utterly disregards Lotte's needs in favor of his own desires, which ruins their ability even to be friends.

Werther's self-absorption is tied inextricably to his insistence on prioritizing emotion over reason. While reason is a powerful moderator of impulse and emotion, Werther insists that reason (book learning, the advice of others, self-reflection) is unimportant. While this can be interpreted as a valid value judgment, Werther's choice of emotion over reason also seems, in a different light, to act as a justification for selfish behavior. Since dividing the mind from the body and labeling the mind as less important conveniently excuses the mind from its duty to temper and second-guess emotions, Werther's idea that his behavior is outside of his control allows his selfishness to rule him with impunity. In this way, Werther's self-absorption allows him to justify whatever behavior his emotions lead him toward. And this behavior, in turn, is destructive: it's deeply troubling to Wilhelm, it seemingly terrifies his mother, and it pushes away his dearest friend, Lotte, while making an enemy of her husband. Within the insular system of Werther's own mind, all of this—even his suicide—is justified, because his emotions are justified by the simple fact that he has them.

While Goethe takes Werther's pain and passions seriously (he doesn't mock or judge Werther outright), Werther's actions speak for themselves. Werther is a character who has, to an extreme extent, allowed his self-absorption to rule him, and it leads him to mistreat others and, ultimately, to behave in ways so self-destructive that it costs him his life. The novel, then, gives the sense of a normal developmental stage run amok. Most young people contend with self-absorption to some extent, but Werther's story shows that, if unchecked, self-absorption can be deadly.

UPPER CLASS AND LOWER CLASS

Goethe wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774, a year that also marked the beginning of the Age of Revolution, when many people across the globe fought wars for the sake of equality. His native Germany avoided the armed conflicts of France and America in part by enacting legislative reforms that sought to improve living conditions for the lower class. Serfdom, for example, was abolished in 1770, and for the first time, peasants were able to own land and travel. Nevertheless, stark social divides still existed between the upper and lower classes, and Goethe uses Werther's unique position in the middle class to examine the nature and effects of this divide. Goethe's position on social class is relatively conservative—he is deeply skeptical of the ability of revolution to provide equality, and he also seems to devalue the very idea of equality as a worthy goal.

Goethe begins by showing how happy the lower classes are to be in nature and how miserable they would be if they had to live any other way. Werther writes to Wilhelm repeatedly about farm workers, openly lamenting his inability to live like they do by working with his hands in nature, and never acknowledging the peasants' hard work or their lack of options to better their lives. He sees the workers' lives as idyllic and carefree and he infantilizes them, speaking of them just as speaks of the children in Lotte's family. By comparison, lower class people who are forced to work away from nature, such as Werther's servants, seem unhappy and quiet throughout the novel. These people live their lives in much closer proximity to the upper class, even living in the same nice homes and eating the same fancy foods. If the goal of revolution (bringing the upper and lower classes into equilibrium) were truly to be desired, Goethe suggests, one would expect the household servant to be happier than the peasant farmer. Werther's observations suggest that this isn't the case.

One reason Werther posits for the relative happiness of farmworkers is that the upper class live among societal standards so complex that the lower class can't understand them. While Werther learns to appreciate the rustic, childlike games of the lower class, everything is different around upper-class people. When he finds himself in the midst of an upper-class party, he so badly misreads those around him that his mere presence grinds the party to a halt. Even falling in love is a complex matter for the aristocracy. A prime example of this, Werther's flirtation with Miss von B., ends with a humiliated Werther resigning from his job and moving away. If Werther, a well-cultured member of the middle class, is unable to navigate the social complexity of having fun or falling in love with upper class people, then Goethe implies that members of the lower class would be utterly unable to handle mingling with high society.

Not surprisingly, Werther rejects the vague, seemingly unknowable rules of the upper class in favor of what he sees as the childlike freedom of the lower. Evidence of his preference comes in the descriptive language Werther uses to refer to both nature and lower class people, which simultaneously expresses affection for rustic life and condescends to the lower classes by conflating them with the natural world. Just as Werther uses certain trees and rocks as points of reference for treasured memories, he tends to remember lower class individuals associated with nature more fondly and thoroughly than he remembers anyone else. If all this weren't enough,

Werther also quickly forgets his more high-minded pursuits when placed in the lower class world. He abandons drawing and (for the most part) reading, both of which are pursuits of higher classes. Instead, he prefers to be in nature, speaking with farmhands and observing trees. His choice is authoritative: no other character has his social mobility, so Werther's observations on class carry weight. And since Werther, with all this authority, chooses the lower class, Goethe implies that the lower class would be fool-hardy to abandon its idyllic life through revolution. Instead, Goethe seems to believe, peasants should seek to appreciate what they have rather than coveting something beyond their understanding.

Unlike his youthful call for the value of emotion, Goethe never came to reject his position on class. Nearly twenty years after writing *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, he wrote a play called *The Citizen General* that directly satirized the French Revolution. In that play, Goethe further examined the class-based themes he first took up with Werther: namely, his conviction that class hierarchy is an appropriate social structure, and revolution can never understand or respect its complexity. As a member of the nobility himself, it should perhaps not be surprising that Goethe took this position. Indeed, the argument he provides in this book, speaking to the simple beauty of peasant life, feels traditional and conservative, and echoes many such calls for moderation that came during the Age of Revolution, especially those of Edmund Burke.

WOMEN

Although the story unfolds mostly as a series of letters from one man to another, women play a central role in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Goethe sometimes portrays them stereotypically as mothers, domestic servants, and wives or widows. At other times, though, he sketches women as intellectual equals, beings of tremendous resolve, and people of great emotional depth. But the work Goethe puts into creating varied and well-rounded female characters is lost on Werther himself, who instead views women merely as objects, often useful only as receptacles for his affection.

The primary object of Werther's affections is, of course, Lotte. Yet, Lotte is no mere object. She is, instead, a fully-rounded character who takes on many roles. One of them is that of Werther's good friend. In this capacity, Lotte looks to have fun with Werther and share ideas and thoughts with him the way that good friends do. Werther, however, seems blind to her desire for friendship. Instead, when he realizes that she has no intention of leaving Albert for him, he sees Lotte's friendliness as evidence that she has led him on with the intent to hurt him—he even suggests that she has made a reprehensible habit of doing this to other men. The editor, however, shows Lotte to be utterly heartbroken by the situation and highlights the great trouble Lotte went through to try to save her friendship with Werther. Her struggle to be a friend underlines her full human agency—her ability to act and feel for herself, to stand up for herself and what she wants, and to see herself as someone equal to, and as complex as, Werther.

Another of Werther's female "objects" is his own mother. He ignores her for most of the book, though he interacts with many other mothers, whom he sees as being mostly interchangeable. They're vulnerable women attempting to raise small children alone, while their husbands are away on some errand. Werther enjoys telling Wilhelm about his compassion for them, and how he's always sure to give them some money before sending them on their way. In turn, they praise him for his generosity, and that makes him feel good about himself. These women aren't really people to Werther; they're more like parrots trained to give compliments in exchange for treats. His own mother is nothing like them. She has a mysterious source of money, and she successfully raised Werther alone after his father died. Werther expresses concern that she will scold him for leaving his job and for his untoward behavior with Lotte, which shows his respect for her opinion and indicates that she may disapprove of his lifestyle. In addition, Werther finds himself often asking her for money. Since she doesn't make him feel good about himself the way the other mothers do, he does his best to ignore her.

Werther also largely ignores another woman who nevertheless plays a central role in the book: the widow. Like Lotte, the widow is beset by a man who mistakes friendliness for romantic interest, and she, too, shows quite a bit of willpower and discipline in rejecting his advances. Furthermore, she's a woman who hires a man to work for her in 1771, and she manages a wealthy household with aplomb, all of which certainly seems surprising and industrious. Yet, despite these obvious hints that the widow is something special, Werther doesn't even bother to learn her name. He simply refers to her as the widow, making her marital status the most important thing about her. When the farmer lad tries to rape her, Werther never considers the trauma that the widow suffers—instead, he commiserates with the fate of her attempted rapist. In fact, Werther sympathizes so much with the farmer lad that he makes it a point never to see the widow in person, lest her actual physical appearance mar the picture the boy has painted of her in Werther's imagination. Her complex, interesting existence, it seems, has less value to Werther than his idealization of her via the observations of her rapist.

Through these various (and shifting) presentations of women and femininity, Goethe subverts the idea that women can be neatly packaged into stereotypes. His female characters, even when they're fulfilling conventional roles like motherhood, have all the complexity and range of his male ones. Werther, however, (perhaps because he is obsessed with himself and endowed with the overconfidence of youth), just can't see that.

Like Werther, the younger Goethe who experienced the love triangle that inspired *The Sorrows of Young Werther* lacked the good sense to befriend the woman who spurned his love but wanted his companionship. In his later life, Goethe—a celebrity among intellectuals—overcame this. He befriended many women, and considered those bonds among the most formative to his thought. His depictions here represent a sadness at the inability of his younger self to recognize how impoverished his views on women truly were.

SUICIDE

Goethe wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther* at the end of the Enlightenment, a time that saw the role of religion drastically diminished in favor of reason and science. But despite the waning power of religion in Europe, Goethe's Germany remained largely Christian, with an audience who was generally against suicide on moral grounds. Still, suicide is a theme that circulates repeatedly in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and it's Werther's infamous suicide that ends the novel. While being careful not to take his audience's concerns lightly, Goethe uses Werther's death to craft a counter-argument that presents suicide as a natural, sometimes unavoidable act. Such circumstances, he says, occur rarely, but a general societal prohibition against suicide forces some (like Werther) to live an intolerable life that might, perhaps, be worse than death.

Werther is overwhelmed by his excess of emotion, which seems to be the sole cause of his suicide. Such rampant feelings, he says to Albert, are like a tyrannical power terrorizing a country. Usually a country has law and order to protect it, just as people use logic and intellect to help quell emotions. But when emotions come on strongly and quickly, mere logic becomes an insufficient tool with which to combat emotion, and the heart ends up in charge of the mind. In a real country, tyrannical rulers are usually overthrown by revolution. In Werther's analogy, the only way to overthrow emotion is through suicide. The grandiose scale of this analogy highlights the internal drama that Werther feels as his emotions take over. The war of emotion inside his head seems as large as any war between nations, and one can imagine the kind of terror he must have felt as he sees himself losing that war.

Indeed, Goethe uses that terror to highlight why suicide makes sense as a way out for Werther. Though his actions may be rash, overblown, and juvenile, Werther clearly *tried* to overcome his infatuation with Lotte. He left Wahlheim, moved to a new town, and tried to begin a new life. His emotions, though, remain in control of him all the while. As they gain increasing command, even his language (usually quite elegant) begins to fail him. His sentences become progressively unstable and interrupted, marred by gaps in thought and a failure to find the proper words. Such devices allow the reader to viscerally experience Werther's increasing agitation; reading his narrative becomes as painful and burdensome as Werther's emotions themselves. As a result, the audience must consider the question of his suicide more personally and in a more real, concrete way. Knowing his plight, and what he's already done to try to escape it, they must consider what other scant options Werther has for reclaiming his life.

Nevertheless, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* should not be read as a glorification of Werther's suicide. Much of the book is autobiographical, reflecting a love triangle that the author found himself in during his youth. Goethe wrote it as a kind of exorcism of that youthful transgression, and he once said that Werther had to die so that Goethe might live—clearly, then, Goethe is glad for the willpower that he found to move past this painful moment in his youth. Still, the act of writing healed Goethe where it did not heal Werther. In this, Goethe seems to posit that, for some, suicide might be the most appropriate solution. While Goethe never intended to glorify suicide in his work, and came eventually to reject the primacy of emotions that he championed in his novel, he never rejected his view that traditional Christian values needed to be questioned thoroughly before being applied in daily life. His relationship with religion remained complex and equivocal, and he is remembered as referring to himself neither as a Christian or an un-Christian, but rather a "non-Christian."

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TREES

Werther uses trees both as landmarks for countryside navigation and as cues for memory, with the trees serving as mementos of things past. When Werther and Lotte wander with the Vicar of S., their conversation centers around the trees under which they sit: who planted them, how old they are, who loved them most. Picking fruit from the trees in Lotte's orchard serves as another memory fondly wrapped up in trees. Though Werther attempts to differentiate between tree species, he nevertheless winds up describing trees as though they were all the same, declaring them all "thick and mighty" and beautiful. To him, they are images of strength and beauty that transcend time. In wrapping up his memories of idyllic times with Lotte with this way of thinking about trees, he tries to align those memories in the same solid light, in that special way that trees seem ageless. His feelings for Lotte, and their relationship, are to Werther as timeless and beautiful as the trees themselves. Thus, when the Vicar's Wife cuts down the trees Werther and Lotte sat under or when a willow under which they both sat is lost to the flood, he sees it as an attack on his image of their love and is cast into

despair.

STORMS

Written in a literary period known as "storm and stress," the presence of literal and emotional storms in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* stands out. Werther's emotions come upon him like a storm, as though they are something larger than him, and something he is incapable of controlling. This happens when he first meets Lotte and becomes enraptured with her—his emotions become a tornado of giddy young love magnified by the actual storm that interrupts their dance. Afterwards, as Werther's emotional storm builds, he becomes increasingly under its control, as though caught outside in a tempest. During the height of that fervor, the weather outside again comes to match Werther's internal state, and a violent flood rips through the valley of Wahlheim. It takes with it many of the landmarks (including **trees**) that Werther associates with Lotte. The storm, then, parallels the havoc that Werther's untoward emotions are wreaking on their friendship. He openly admits in this moment that he desires to succumb to the flood, to jump into it, but he knows that submission—seemingly either to the literal flood or to his emotive one—means death.

BOOKS

Books play a shifting role for Werther. When he is happy (that is, when he is with Lotte), he ignores them utterly. When he is sad, he turns to them for solace. Either way, he recognizes that he should be reading them and better attending to his studies, but he finds it difficult to do so in the face of his feelings. At the end of their friendship, Werther reads extensively to Lotte from his own translations of Ossian, and the pair descend into a fit of tears. Previously, Werther had abandoned books in Lotte's presence. That he now picks them up again with her symbolizes that he will no longer find happiness through his love for Lotte.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* published in 1989.

Book 1: May 4-13, 1771 Quotes

Poor Leonore! And yet I was innocent. Was it my fault that, while I was taking pleasure and amusement in the wilful charms of her sister, a passion was growing in that poor heart?

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Leonore, Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Werther has just arrived at his new home and he writes to his friend, Wilhelm, to express regret about the youthful fling he's had with a woman who hasn't taken their breakup well. It appears that he encouraged her feelings with no intention of returning them. His tone here is cavalier and his regret insincere; he is a young man who doesn't feel the weight of the hurt he's caused. This moment gestures forward to the emotional trauma that will befall Werther when Lotte fails to understand the depth of his longing for her—though Lotte, of course, is not so heartless in her handling of Werther.

Dear friend! do I need to tell you that you who have so often endured seeing me pass from sorrow to excessive joy, from sweet melancholy to destructive passion? And I am treating my poor heart like an ailing child; every whim is granted.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Werther again writes to Wilhelm, telling him of the joy he's found exploring the natural beauty of his new home. This passage gives some essential insight into his character: he's an extremely emotional person prone to throwing his heart recklessly into whatever he's passionate about. In fact, Werther outright admits that he grants his heart its every whim, which implies that his mind is not permitted to do what many would consider to be its duty of regulating emotions. Werther's use of the word "childlike" also alludes to what will become a repeated idea of Werther's: that the lives of children are superior to those of adults, and that "childlike" adults (i.e. peasants) are happier than others. This passage also, in Werther's reference to Wilhelm having "endured" his mood swings, shows a flicker of empathy for the effect of his actions and emotions on others, though this self-awareness and empathy will be sparse in the remainder of the book. Overall, this passage is a remarkably lucid articulation of Werther's emotional state, which will

ultimately lead to his downfall.

Book 1: May 15-22, 1771 Quotes

I well know we are not equal, nor can be; but…he who supposes he must keep his distance from what they call the rabble, to preserve the respect due to him, is as much to blame as a coward who hides from his enemy for fear of being beaten.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Werther begins to encounter his new neighbors who are mostly poor day laborers and mothers with children. Werther is better educated than they are and of a higher social class. As he often does throughout the novel, Werther expresses regret that social barriers like class keep people of good intentions from being friends with one another. However, as he lambasts upper class people who feel superior simply because of their social position, he subtly condescends to the lower class by saying that they can never be his equal, and by not clearly taking a position on whether the "respect due" to people of higher class is itself wrongheaded, or whether that respect *is*, in fact, owed to him, but he's not worried about losing it by mingling with the poor. Additionally, it is precisely Werther's elevated class that allows him to look down on, and subsequently analyze, his lower class neighbors, since the lower class does not have the mobility and leisure time for such activities. Werther remains willfully blind to this truth.

Book 1: May 26-30, 1771 Quotes

You ask why the torrent of genius so rarely pours forth, so rarely floods and thunders and overwhelms your astonished soul?—Because, dear friends, on either bank dwell the cool, respectable gentlemen…

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In a philosophical rant typical of his early letters to Wilhelm, Werther is discussing the advantages of following the rules of society. He remarks that he certainly understands the need for rules to contain and order people, but he claims that living by such rules—while it will surely produce respectable citizens—tends to squash genius. He regrets that this is true and makes an emotional appeal urging those who feel called to break the rules to do so. It's one of the many times that he openly chooses emotion over logic in his arguments. This passage also shows a certain lack of empathy for people who might value other aspects of life over genius, and it shows a profound underestimation of the chaos and hurt that might ensue if everyone were to abandon social rules to follow their emotions alone. Statements like this make it clear that, when he meets and is drawn to Lotte, Werther will not do the expected thing and respect her engagement to Albert.

I shall now try to see her too as soon as possible, or rather, on second thoughts, I shall avoid doing so. It is better for me to see her with the eyes of her lover; perhaps she would not appear to my own eyes as she does now, and why should I ruin the beautiful image I have?

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Widow, Farmer Lad, Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Werther has just encountered the farmer lad, and he relays the story of the boy's infatuation with his employer (the widow) to Wilhelm. The story of the widow and the farmer lad returns twice more in the book, and each time it is a barometer of Werther's relationship to Lotte. In this instance, it foreshadows Werther's meeting of a woman he will love but can't have, just as the farmer lad loves the widow to no avail. What's most notable about this quotation is that Werther is openly admitting that his imagined image of the widow might not align with reality, but he will avoid learning the reality of the widow because he prefers his beautiful illusion. This means that Werther values his own imagination of a woman more than he values her real being, and it introduces Werther's profound lack of respect for or curiosity about women, which will continue throughout the book. This passage also casts serious doubt on Werther's

subsequent narration about Lotte. Until the end of the book, the reader has no insight into Lotte's own thoughts or feelings, since all information about her is filtered through Werther. Knowing that Werther considers his own idealizations of women to be more important than their reality, the reader is left to question whether his observations about Lotte are rooted in fact or simply in his own desire.

Book 1: Jun 16, 1771 Quotes

❝ When I was younger there was nothing I loved better than novels. God knows how good it felt to be able to sit in some corner on a Sunday and share with my whole heart in Miss Jenny's happiness and sorrows. Nor do I deny that that kind of writing still has its charms for me. But since I so rarely come by a book, it has to be one that is quite to my taste. And I like that author best who shows me my own world, conditions such as I live in myself and a story that can engage my interest and heart as much as my own domestic life does.

Related Characters: Lotte (Charlotte S.) (speaker), Werther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Lotte is describing her love of reading to Werther (whom she's just met) on the way to the ball. Werther is an avid reader himself and is surprised to find another reader living in his new rustic, lower-class town (yet another example of his subtle condescension towards the poor). While this passage might suggest that their shared love of novels would be a way for Werther to bond with Lotte, Werther quickly comes to abandon both books and book learning as he becomes increasingly infatuated with Lotte. This is a result of one of the central conflicts of the novel: that between the heart and the mind. Books come to be a part of "the mind" for Werther, and the few authors that he doesn't disregard as a result, like Homer and Ossian, are ones who speak to the grand emotional turmoil Werther feels boiling inside of himself. In a sense, then, this passage—which appears to suggest Lotte and Werther's common ground—is actually one that reveals their ultimate conflict. While Lotte clearly associates books with the heart (even using the word "heart" twice in the passage), Werther is so consumed by his own thoughts and desires that he discards Lotte's interests and opinions in a misguided quest to woo her.

❝ I was one of the most afraid myself, and in pretending to be brave, to stiffen the others' courage, I found my own courage

Related Characters: Lotte (Charlotte S.) (speaker), Werther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Lotte and Werther have just weathered a storm together while at the ball. Many of the guests were afraid of the violent weather, so Lotte organized a quick party game to take their minds off of it. While this portion of the book is important because it's the first use of a storm as a symbol for Werther's emotional state, what's even more important here is Lotte's reaction to the storm. She's scared, but she takes control of the situation and helps everyone around her to overcome their own fears. This shows a remarkable amount of willpower, independence, and compassion for others. Werther commends these attributes in this moment, but as time goes by, Werther's narration of Lotte becomes conspicuously less three-dimensional. More and more, he forgets moments like these and comes to think of her only in terms of how he feels about her.

Book 1: Jun 19-Jul 6, 1771 Quotes

❝ It is good that my heart can feel the simple and innocent pleasure a man knows when the cabbage he eats at table is one he grew himself; the pleasure he takes not only in eating the cabbage but in remembering all those good days, the fine morning he planted it, the mellow evenings he watered it and the delight he felt in its daily growth.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Having fully described the ball where he met Lotte, Werther returns to the kind of philosophical musings he'd engaged in earlier by telling Werther about Lotte's siblings and how simple and wonderful their lives are. While simple lives might be happy ones, the logic of this statement is notably bizarre. The lives of 18th century German farmers were difficult, and Werther's assumption that peasants would find deep peace and satisfaction in the backbreaking labor of farming—labor whose stakes were a family's survival—is naïve at best, and ignorant and harmful at worst. It betrays Werther's (and, perhaps, Goethe's) social conservatism, in which the class hierarchy was deemed beneficial to all and benevolent to the lower class. In addition, this passage condescends to the lower class more subtly by associating peasants with children (after all, this whole passage is a musing about Lotte's young siblings), and by associating peasants with emotion rather than intellect. Yet, while Werther says he prefers the lower class to the upper because the lower class live better lives, he avoids work like the plague and keeps servants who tend to his needs (like eating).

❝ We don't know who planted that one. Some say it was one vicar and some say another. But the younger one over there is as old as my wife, fifty years old come October. Her father planted it in the morning and that same evening she was born.

Related Characters: Vicar of S. (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.), Werther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Werther and Lotte have gone to visit the Vicar of S. and his wife, who tell them the history of a magnificent grove of walnut trees. Up until now, Werther has talked a good bit about trees, though he tends not to differentiate one tree from another. To him, all trees are big or mighty—never weak, diseased, or even young (in the sense of being a sapling). As Werther conceives them, trees seem interchangeable and eternal—a generalization that evokes Werther's sweeping statements about women or the lower class. Here, the Vicar establishes a more specific pattern, in which trees are monuments to human memories through their association with particular events. For the Vicar, a particular tree is a marker of his wife's birth, and another tree marks the spot where he and his wife met. Werther will use this system of remembering events and emotions through nearby trees throughout his story. In turn, when those trees are destroyed, Werther feels as if the memories made there are also destroyed.

Book 1: Jul 8-19, 1771 Quotes

❝ My dear fellow, that is the uncertainty I am left in; and my consolation is that perhaps she did turn to look at me! Perhaps!

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Werther and Lotte have yet again shared a carriage, but she doesn't so much as look at him this time. When he leaves the carriage, he begins to cry, and he watches her depart in hopes that she'll spare him a glance. While she does lean her head from the carriage's window, Werther remains uncertain that she did so in order to see him. The repeated "perhaps" in the quote shows both his desperate hope that she did look at him and his complete inability to be sure either way. Like most of Werther's interactions with Lotte, this one focuses on what might have happened (with Werther liberally assuming certain emotions on Lotte's part) rather than what actually was.

❝ No, I am not deceiving myself! ...Yes, I can feel—and I know I may trust my own heart in this—Oh, dare I utter the words, those words that contain all heaven for me?—I can feel that she loves me!

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.), Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In his previous letter to Wilhelm, Werther expressed his

amazement at the ability of some men to deceive themselves. Ironically, he opens his next communication with a firm statement that he isn't doing the same thing. It's not clear who he's trying to convince, himself or Wilhelm, but his language shows that convincing is needed, since he's not dealing with facts. His verbs ("I feel," "I may trust," "I can feel") all prove that Lotte has never come out and said that she loves him. Rather, he's guessed at it and now (emotionally, rather than logically) he is looking for proof to back up that guess. This assumption that Lotte loves him is further in doubt based on Werther's reaction to the story of the farmer lad. In that context, he admitted that his emotions led him to prefer his imagination to reality. Here, since he says he is trusting his heart about the matter (his emotional intuition rather than his rational observations), the reader should be skeptical of whether his heart corresponds at all to reality.

Book 1: Jul 19-Aug 12, 1771 Quotes

I have started on a portrait of Lotte three times, and three times I have failed disgracefully; which depresses me all the more since I could take a very good likeness not so long ago. So then I cut a silhouette profile of her, and that will have to do.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Wilhelm has recently asked Werther if he's keeping up with his drawing, a hobby the two seem to place on the same intellectual level as reading. Werther admits that he hasn't, and also confirms that he can't even begin to draw Lotte anymore (although he used to be able to). Much like his imagined picture of the widow, Werther has created an image of Lotte in his head that's removed from reality. When he sits with the real, flesh-and-blood woman, he can only capture a general outline, because that basic silhouette is the only thing that can encompass both the real Lotte and his imagination of her. In other words, this passage shows that Werther's ideas about Lotte are becoming farther and farther removed from the reality of her, which casts further doubt on Werther's reliability as a narrator.

I grind my teeth and mock my own misery…I go rambling in the woods, and if my walk takes me to Lotte's and I find Albert sitting in the summerhouse with her in the greenery, and I cannot bear it any more.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Albert, Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Albert has recently returned from a prolonged period of being away on business, and his presence drives Werther into a kind of frenzy. Werther doesn't know what to do with himself now that he's forced to confront the fact that he's fallen in love with a soon-to-be-married woman—something that should have been clear to him much sooner. This passage hearkens back, then, to Werther's declaration that he has not deceived himself in believing that Lotte loves him. It seems, in fact, that he has. This passage is also an indicator of how truly self-absorbed Werther is. Lotte, who has tried to be his good friend all this time, is finally reunited with her beloved, and all Werther can think to do is be upset about it. He's so consumed in his misery, he never once considers being happy for her.

True, it is wrong to steal: but if a man goes thieving to save himself and his family from starvation, are we to pity him or punish him? Who will first cast a stone if a husband sacrifices his unfaithful wife and her worthless seducer in the heat of his righteous wrath? or if a girl abandons herself for one joyful hour to the irresistible pleasures of love?

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Albert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Werther and Albert have entered into a debate on the topic of suicide, and Albert, shocked by Werther's assertion that suicide is sometimes understandable, asks if Werther doesn't at least feel that suicide is always morally wrong. While Werther agrees that suicide is generally wrong, he offers in this quote several examples of things that are usually wrong but can sometimes be excused. While the first example—a family stealing to survive—seems to be a logical and relevant counterargument, his remaining examples

devolve into questions about infidelity, revealing what is really on Werther's mind. The last question—whether a girl might give herself for an hour to love—seems to be a direct and cruel barb at Albert, implying that Lotte might righteously desire a tryst with Werther. Of course, the substance of the debate—whether suicide is wrong—foreshadows Werther's fate. Werther, who openly suppresses his mind and indulges his heart, will remain unpersuaded throughout the book by Albert's use of reason to condemn suicide.

Book 1: Oct 20, 1771-Feb 20, 1772 Quotes

❝ And this glittering misery, the tedium of these awful people cooped up together here! and their greed for rank, and the way they are forever watchful and alert for gain or precedence: the most wretched and abominable of passions, quite nakedly displayed.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Wilhelm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Werther, in an attempt to get away from what he's beginning to feel is an unwholesome situation with Lotte, has accepted employment with the ambassador. He doesn't like the ambassador or the work very much, especially because it puts him into direct contact with the upper class. While Werther has always been kind (if naïve and idealistic) about the lower class, he can't stand the posturing of the aristocracy. One possible reason for this is that Werther can comfortably feel superior to the lower class people he meets, whereas feels inferior to people whose class is higher than his own. A related reason for Werther's contempt for the upper class might be that the upper class treats him in the same condescending manner that he treats the lower class.

❝ But I was meaning to tell you of Miss von B. She has a great soul, which gazes straight at one from her blue eyes. Her rank is a burden and satisfies none of the wishes of her heart. She is longing to put all this brouhaha behind her, and we spend many an hour imagining country scenes of unadulterated bliss…

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Miss von B., Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

While away from Lotte, working for the ambassador, Werther strikes up a kind of courtship with Miss von B. Oddly, he writes to Lotte to tell her about this new friend—perhaps to inspire a jealousy in her parallel to the jealousy he feels of Albert. Werther remarks that Miss von B. resembles Lotte, and then goes about the difficult work of trying to reimagine Miss von B. into a kind of second-edition Lotte. Werther's impulse to project his own desires onto Miss von B. should surprise nobody after his treatment of Lotte and the widow. Since the real Lotte is not an aristocrat, he says that Miss von B. doesn't value her title. Because the real Lotte lives in the country and not at court, Miss von B. wishes to put the "brouhaha" of city life behind her. As Werther spent his best days with Lotte in country scenes "of unadulterated bliss," so too does he pass the time with Miss von B. But, just as Werther can't have Lotte because she's engaged, he can't enter into a relationship with Miss von B. because she's of a higher class: something he'll soon realize.

❝ Oh, it would drive me insane if she could forget—Albert, the very thought is hell.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.), Albert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Lotte and Albert have married secretly, and Albert writes to inform Werther of this after the fact. Werther congratulates the two, but, self-centered as ever, he manages to turn even someone else's wedding (let alone the wedding of someone he claims to love) into an event about him. Werther's statement that Lotte forgetting about him would be hell foreshadows, in a sense, the psychological hell into which Werther descends after Lotte asks Werther not to see her for a while (though she hasn't forgotten him, it's almost as though she's trying to). The statement also seems to carry a second meaning: that Werther won't let his inappropriate presence in their marriage be forgotten,

either.

Book 2: Jun 11-Nov 3, 1772 Quotes

❝ It cost me a wrench but in the end I decided not to wear the simple blue frock-coat I had on when I first danced with Lotte any more; it had become quite unpresentable. Still, I have had a new one made, exactly like the other, down to the collar and lapels, and the very same buff waistcoat and breeches as well.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Having left employment with the ambassador and returned to Wahlheim, Werther resumes all of the behaviors that led him to flee the place previously. This is echoed in his literal remaking of the outfit he associates with Lotte. Though he must know that nothing will change with Lotte, he decides to keep on living (and dressing) in the same way as before. In this, he embraces his fate to die of his unrequited love, having failed at escaping this fate through the ambassador and Miss von B. The blue frockcoat outfit, which symbolizes this tragic choice, turned into an icon in 18th century Europe. Fans of the novel would emulate Werther's dress to signify that they agreed with his embrace of an emotional over a logical life and sympathized with his turmoil.

❝ I have so much, and my feelings for her absorb it all; I have so much, and without her it is all nothing.

Related Characters: Werther (speaker), Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

For months Werther writes letters to Wilhelm that lack substance. His life, it seems, has been put on hold, as though he were waiting for something to happen. The unmistakable torment present in the voice above hints that he is waiting either for Lotte to change her mind (which he knows is all but impossible) or for him to decide firmly on suicide—a final embrace of the nothingness he feels his life is without her. While this is a clear rumination of the theme of suicide, it also highlights Werther's constant self-absorption. He does indeed have so much: education, money, freedom. Many people would love to have the kind of life that he has. Yet, because he lacks the one thing he can't have, he intends to throw it all away.

Book 2: Dec 20-21, 1772 Quotes

❝ All of these reflections prompted a profound realization, albeit one which she was not consciously aware of, that her secret heart's desire was to keep him for herself, yet at the same time she reminded herself that she could not and might not keep him; her pure and beautiful nature, which at other times was so lighthearted and readily found a way out of predicaments, sensed the oppressive power of melancholy, banishing the prospect of happiness. Her heart was heavy, and her vision was clouded by sadness.

Related Characters: Editor (speaker), Werther, Lotte (Charlotte S.)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Werther is but a few days away from suicide and is going to see Lotte for what will be the last time. The editor offers a rare glimpse into what Lotte is thinking and feeling, free from Werther's projected hopes and expectations. This passage reveals a woman desperate to keep her dearest friend close to her, yet certain that she cannot do so without ruining all chances of his happiness. This editorial interlude is essential to the development of Lotte's character: without it, all that is known about her is what Werther supplies, which includes the possibility that Lotte has maliciously toyed with him. With this passage, however, Lotte becomes a compassionate and empathetic woman who carefully considers her actions and feelings. Rather than a mere receptacle for Werther's affections, she becomes a multi-faceted, interesting human being. What's more, her story becomes tragic, as she too cannot have the life she wants.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FOREWORD

The foreword to *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is written by the book's fictional editor. In it, he or she claims to have collected all of the available information regarding the events of Werther's unfortunate life. The editor goes on to directly address the reader, noting with certainty that readers will appreciate the work itself and come to love its title character.

The editor's introduction appeals instantly to the emotional side of the reader. Werther always takes the same emotional approach to life, though the editor foreshadows that Werther suffers a tragic fate because of it.

BOOK ONE: MAY 4-13, 1771

The text proper opens with a letter from Werther to someone he refers to as his "dear friend" (later, this character is revealed to be Wilhelm). The letter tells of Werther's great joy to be away from home, despite being away from this friend. Werther mentions Leonore, a young woman with whose emotions he has recently toyed. While he claims to regret Leonore's heartbreak, he seems at the same time indifferent towards it. Instead, he focuses on the idyllic beauty of his new home.

Despite the editor's assurances that the reader will like Werther, this first look at Werther shows him to be an emotionally reckless, even insensitive, young man. He's far too absorbed in his own feelings to understand the pain he's caused Leonore. In addition, his indifference seems related to the fact that Leonore is a woman, someone he believes to be incapable of emotional depth.

That home is a rural area outside of a small town. Werther dislikes the town proper, but quickly falls in love with the rural area around it. He enjoys the **trees** especially, and he attributes the property's natural beauty to the gardening skill of its previous owner, Count von M. Everything appears to him to be the prettiest, most serene thing he's ever witnessed.

It's especially telling that Werther thinks that the natural beauty of his new home is a product of aristocratic design. That's the way things are meant to be, in his world: the upper class manages the world, and the lower class enjoys the beautiful results.

All of the beauty around him ends up distracting Werther from things he used to enjoy, such as reading **books** and drawing. He playfully expresses concern about this to Wilhelm, yet he seems content in his new lackadaisical lifestyle. He loves simply wandering the countryside, which evokes in him grand thoughts about God and creation. Stumbling on a spring during his travels, he says that it has enraptured him as though he were Melusine, a figure from medieval literature. Werther enjoys sitting and watching this spring as the girls of the town come and go, fetching water. He enjoys it so much that he devotes an entire letter to Wilhelm about it.

A strong parallel begins here between the themes of heart and mind and upper/lower class. The upper classes are planners and intellects, while the lower classes simply feel things. Increasingly, as Werther embraces the emotions that nature makes him feel, he finds himself rejecting intellectual pursuits like reading. He also begins to idealize the kind of peasant work he sees the women doing (though, of course, fetching water is a grueling task).

The next letter opens with Werther responding to Wilhelm, who has asked if he ought to forward Werther's **books** to him. It's an idea that Werther doesn't even pretend to entertain: he no longer has a desire for books or book learning. He only wishes to read Homer. Reading Homer in that locale places a calm over his otherwise restless heart.

Though Werther often says he's reading Homer, he only ever references The Odyssey, which is the story of a man forced into exile by the gods for his stunning vanity. Goethe here begins to suggest parallels between Odyssseus' vanity and Werther's intellectual pretensions.

BOOK ONE: MAY 15-22, 1771

Moving away from descriptions of nature, Werther now turns to his encounters with the people of his new home. They are of a lower class than he is, and they live simpler lives. Yet, Werther holds no prejudice against them because of this. Instead, he laments that differences of class make befriending such people impossible. He doesn't think this can be changed, but he thinks it nonetheless regrettable. As if to illustrate his goodwill towards the lower class, Werther tells Wilhelm about a servant girl whom he helped to carry water.

Werther feels that the traditional distinctions between the upper and lower class are just as they should be. But this is easy enough for him to feel: he's of a higher class than those he's surrounded by here. As a member of the middle class, Werther will never have to perform physical labor of any sort, and certainly not in order to earn a living. He doesn't think about this in his evaluations, however.

Class remains on Werther's mind in his next letter to Wilhelm, which opens with another lament: that no members of high society are to be found in town. Still, Werther makes do with the peasants and country folk that befriend him. Soon, he finds himself wrapped up in their ways and enjoying their simpler humor and more rustic forms of entertainment and dance.

Werther feels a kind of self-conscious embarrassment as he leaves behind his intellectualism to mingle with his new friends. Here he deepens the novel's inferred understanding that to be a peasant is to operate primarily with one's heart.

Werther recounts to Wilhelm his recent meeting with a young man known simply as V. V is a recent academy graduate who is well-schooled and, like Werther, hopes for more elevated conversation than the locals are capable of providing. Though V. is the kind of society Werther hoped for at the beginning of his letter, Werther finds himself indifferent to V.'s interests and unwilling to engage in his banter. V. makes no further appearances in the novel, and Werther quickly moves on from recounting their meeting to describing a handful of other local eccentrics with whom he's interacted.

In his new home, Werther is an intellectual: a rare thing. His singular position in the town allows him to make observations (and judgements) without being challenged. So while Werther's snub of V may initially seem odd, it's really just that he doesn't want the competition. Outside voices would only serve to lessen the importance he attaches to his own voice.

Werther's next letter to Wilhelm, dated May 22, opens with a long and philosophical treatise on the meaning of life. Werther sees that most men do only as much as necessary to survive. They eat to avoid starvation and drink to avoid dehydration. Werther thinks that men would be happier if they were to recognize their lives to be no more than this. But they don't. They assign meaning to their life that can never be realized, and they are miserable for it. Children, by comparison, live simply by their desires. Their greatest joy consists of breaking into the sweets cupboard without being caught. The happiest of men, though, Werther strangely suggests, are those who recognize that they can end their struggle for existence whenever they choose: ostensibly through suicide.

It's surprising that Werther, who has spent so much of his life learning things from books, quickly advocates abandoning such learning in favor of a simpler, seemingly more honest life. Again, though, Werther does this without any real consideration of the advantages that his book learning (itself a product of his social class) afford him. While Werther will never know hunger, in the simpler life that he seeks to idealize, the ability to eat is often contingent on the ability to work. This is also the earliest moment in which Werther alludes to suicide.

BOOK ONE: MAY 26-30, 1771

As though the previous conversation had never taken place, Werther begins a new letter describing the picturesque town of Wahlheim, which exists about an hour away from his new home. The town boasts an inn where Werther enjoys drinking coffee and reading. It also affords him many opportunities for drawing, a pastime that has eluded him for a while. Here, Werther seems to feel nature fostering great artwork within him, and he resolves to remain in nature in the future. Society has too many rules that keep an artist from flourishing, he tells Wilhelm, although he knows that the other man won't agree. While those rules might be good for respectable young men, who manage to responsibly court their sweethearts while saving money, Werther suggests that the rules and norms of high society quash genius, love, and beauty altogether.

Werther seems clearly to advocate for art as a product of emotion here. Yet, art is one of the first things abandoned by Werther as he steps from his former life of intellectualism and into the emotional life of the lower class. In Wahlheim he hopes to find a space where the highbrow leanings of his artwork can coexist with nature. That he feels the beauty of Wahlheim cultivating greatness within him is a testament to Werther's youth. It's a trope of young artists to believe that they, and they alone, are being groomed for some great destiny by some unknown force.

Having sent Wilhelm two rather lengthy and heady letters, Werther begins his next letter by chiding himself. He's forgotten to recount a story about two young boys he's met: Philipps and Hans, along with their mother, the Woman with the Basket. Werther loves children, and he dotes on Philipps and Hans while their mother tells Werther of their family's circumstances. Their father has left for Switzerland to collect inheritance, though he's been gone longer than expected and the family has begun to fear for him. Werther sympathizes and gives them each a small sum of money to ease their burden.

Werther establishes a pattern here that he'll continue throughout the novel of infantilizing the poor. This perceived equivalence between children and the poor strengthens the already established one between the lower class and emotion, since children are largely incapable of logic and intellectualism.

In his next letter, Werther introduces the Farmer Lad, a young servant who has fallen helplessly in love with his employer, the Widow. The Widow was badly treated by her first husband and has no desire to remarry. Though she is considerably older than the Lad, the Lad still pines for her. Werther is touched by what he perceives to be an innocent crush and he makes it a point never to meet the Widow, since he doesn't want her actual appearance to spoil the image he's conjured of her in his mind.

Werther reveals a lot about how he perceives women in his recounting of the Farmer Lad's tale. Women are, for him, objects designed to receive masculine affection when men desire to give it to them. In turn, nothing about the widow matters except what the Lad says about her. To Werther, she's not even really a person.

BOOK ONE: JUNE 16, 1771

A gap of more than two weeks occurs between letters and Werther is forced to beg Wilhelm's forgiveness. He suggests, though, that if Wilhelm were truly thinking, he might already know why it's been so long since Werther wrote; Werther has met a woman, Lotte. Werther hesitates to call her an angel, as that's what all men call their beloveds, and such a common word simply isn't adequate to Lotte. Instead, Werther describes her as a soul possessed of equal parts goodness, tranquility, and vitality. Yet, even this praise proves insufficient: no words, it seems, are good enough to describe the woman. Werther works himself up into such a fever thinking about how to portray Lotte that, in the end, he simply runs off to see her again, mid-letter.

The speed at which Werther abandons his intellectual leanings for the rustic beauty of the countryside is impressive, but nevertheless it is no match for the speed with which he loses himself to Lotte. While "losing himself" might seem the antithesis of self-absorption, Werther undertakes his obsession with complete disregard for how it'll make others (his mother, Wilhelm, or even Lotte) feel. It's all about him; the desires of the woman he's chosen to gift with his affection do not matter.

Having calmed somewhat, Werther proceeds to tell Wilhelm of his meeting with Lotte. Some of his newfound friends had held a ball in the country, and Lotte's house was on Werther's way, so they had stopped along the way to pick her up. Lotte's Aunt had warned Werther, however, not to fall in love with Lotte: she was already engaged to Albert, of whom the aunt had spoken highly. Werther promptly forgot these sage words when he entered Lotte's house. Her siblings—for whom Lotte had cared since the untimely death of her mother—populate the home, enchanting Werther. When Lotte arrived, however, all other thoughts flew from Werther's head. He could scarcely concentrate. In his letter to Werther, he recalls the ensuing conversation only vaguely, relaying generalities about her "great character" and "fresh charms."

That love is a facet of Werther's self-absorption comes through quite clearly here. So, too, does Werther's conception of women: as with the widow, Werther's initial assessment of Lotte isn't one of a full, multi-faceted individual. He speaks of her in platitudes, openly admitting that he doesn't remember a word she has said. The picture that he paints of her is thus incomplete, and the reader must conclude that Lotte is not special of her own accord. Rather, she is special because Werther has decided to make her so by becoming infatuated with her.

Werther does, however, recall the **books** that Lotte mentions reading to her aunt. Like Werther, Lotte is an avid reader. The pair soon engage in a hearty conversation about the books they've read, forgetting the other passengers in the carriage. This earns them some reproachful looks, and it's clear that at least some of the others feel this easy friendship to be untoward.

Lotte's knowledge of literature marks her as a member of Werther's own class, and thus someone worthy of Werther's affection. (Notice how quickly books regain their value!) The others, unable to participate in this worldly conversation, don't so much as factor into Werther's thoughts.

Once at the dance, Werther struggles to keep his eyes off Lotte. Soon, Lotte and Werther arrange to dance the *allemande* together, a waltz traditionally danced by couples, but which Lotte claims her fiancé will be happy to give up to Werther, as Albert is not a good dancer. They continue dancing together even after this initial dance, earning Lotte a well-meaning reprimand from one of her older friends. The reprimand comes simply in the form of her fiancé's name coupled with a shaking finger. Yet, Werther seems surprised by the name Albert. Inquiring to Lotte who the man might be, her answer shocks him so badly that he collides with the dancers around him.

Albert, from this moment on, becomes something of an afterthought to Werther. More often than not, he refers to Albert not by name, but rather by his function: Lotte's "intended." This robs Albert of the three-dimensionality that he might be able to achieve in Werther's eyes. But it also shows Werther's hopefulness: if Lotte only intends *to marry Albert, Werther might be able to change her mind.*

At this point a **storm**, which had threatened in the distance since Lotte and Werther first met, finally breaks, forcing the countryside ball to move indoors. Dancing is no longer possible in these cramped quarters, so the party shifts instead to a game called counting. It proves a simple game, where people sit in a circle and count as quickly as possible, picking up wherever their neighbors leave off. Any mistakes in the count are playfully punished with a box to the ear. The game leads to a general fit of laughter and frivolity, and the storm is soon forgotten.

The storm becomes one of the book's great symbols, and you can be sure that when one appears, it's because Werther is undergoing a life-changing event. Werther felt embarrassment earlier when asked to participate in these sorts of rustic, child-like games. With Lotte, however, they take on a different light, and Werther is able to enjoy them.

Soon after, the party breaks up and Werther finds himself alone with Lotte. She confesses that she instigated the game because she was afraid of the **storm** and wanted to take her mind—and everyone else's—off of it. The topic then switches to **books,** as they both recall a poem that reminds them of the strange beauty of springtime storms.

One of the many roles that women perform in the book is that of caretaker. Lotte already serves as a mother to her siblings, and now she undertakes those same duties for an entire crowd of adults. She even caters to Werther's needs by intellectualizing the event with a literary reference.

BOOK ONE: JUNE 19-JULY 6, 1771

Werther has apparently sent the first portion of his memories to Wilhelm, and he resumes writing them three days later. He begins with the simple fact that he didn't get to bed until two in the morning following the party. The rest of the night, he says, was unremarkable.

The book never suggests that something inappropriate happened between Lotte and Werther that night. However, the mere mention of how late they stayed out serves to plant that suggestion in Wilhelm's mind.

The memories of the party being amply described, Werther now returns to his previous philosophical attitude. He once again expounds on the virtues of a simple life: of not wishing for things beyond one's station, of eating a dinner of plain cabbage that one has grown one's self. To eat such a meal—and to remember the simple chores of planting and watering that went into it—ought, Werther feels, to be enough for any man. He discusses his play with Lotte's siblings, whom he has come to befriend, and he likens the simplicity of their lives to that of the farmer eating his own cabbage.

Werther prescribes this simple life free from extraneous desires while actively coveting another man's fiancé. Nevertheless, his words likely come across as both beautiful and wise to many readers. The spotlight that Werther uses to examine those around him is by no means always wrong; it's just that he never turns that spotlight on himself. As such, a lot of his worthy advice becomes mired in the self-absorption of his youth.

In his next letter to Wilhelm, Werther discusses Lotte's habit of visiting the sick and dying. Recently she and Werther have been to see the Vicar of S. and his Wife. The Vicar, an old man, took great pleasure in talking with the young people, especially about the grove of walnut **trees**. He had distinct memories of many of them being planted, and most of these memories were tied up with other memories about his wife, his career, and his family.

As a Catholic figure, the Vicar is neither rich nor poor. He exists outside of money. Yet, Werther here aligns him with the lower class by situating him in nature. This creates a standard in the book whereby natural elements, such as trees, serve as focal points for memory. This becomes the selfsame system that Werther uses to remember his times with Lotte.

During this visit, Lotte and Werther also meet Friederike, the Vicar's daughter, and her beau Mr. Schmidt. The two couples go on a walk together. Friederike proves amiable enough, but Werther is disappointed in Schmidt's gloomy mood. Werther chalks this up to a kind of jealousy, and he takes the issue up with Lotte and the Vicar's wife when they return. Young people, he says, have the entire world before them and have only to realize it in order to be happy. Yet, so often they remain mired in their own thoughts that they let this opportunity slip by them. To Werther's annoyance, the Vicar's Wife counters that a person cannot change their disposition, but he can't accept what she says. Eventually, after much debate, Werther considers himself to have won the argument.

Goethe undertakes a bit of heavy-handed foreshadowing here. It's quite easy for Werther to criticize Mr. Schmidt's jealousy while traversing the countryside with another man's wife. But the same sullen disposition that Werther critiques here will come to characterize him in the near future, as Albert returns and Lotte focuses her attention on him. Perhaps not surprisingly, Werther never returns to his philosophical thoughts on Mr. Schmidt; although, he will remember his debate

Following this, Werther returns immediately to the subject of children. He remembers a time when one of Lotte's siblings fetched a glass of water for the group of them, but insisted that Lotte, their beloved caretaker, be the first to drink. This thoughtfulness so delighted Werther that he kissed the child, who was unwilling to be kissed. The child's subsequent fit, coupled with Lotte's exaggerated washing of the child's face to remove Werther's kiss, only served to further convince Werther of the good, simple lives of children.

A pattern emerges wherein Werther encounters something which troubles him (in this case, Mr. Schmidt's jealousy), criticizes it, and then instantly returns to thoughts of children. He does this as if to suggest that the way children live their lives is ideal; he's even said as much. Yet Werther, who has all the responsibilities of a child, nevertheless seems incapable of living a simple life.

BOOK ONE: JULY 8-19, 1771

"What a child one is!" opens the next of Werther's letters, but Werther is mocking himself with these words (rather than discussing Lotte's siblings). He and Lotte have yet again shared a carriage, but she doesn't so much as look at him this time. When he leaves the carriage, he begins to cry, and he watches her depart in hopes that she'll spare him a glance. While she does lean her head from the carriage's window, Werther remains uncertain that she did so in order to see him. His following letter to Wilhelm opens with a confession from Werther that he acts like an "oaf" at the mere mention of Lotte's name.

This is the first time that Werther truly expresses uncertainty about Lotte's feelings for him. He doesn't express those doubts very often afterwards, either. But it's important to remember that all we ever know about Lotte's feelings (until the last few pages of the book) come from Werther. Though he often says how he thinks *Lotte feels, he never suggests that she has actually told him this herself.*

Lotte, meanwhile, has been to the home of Mrs. M., who is dying and has requested the girl's presence to comfort her. Mrs. M. informs Old M., her husband, that she has (for thirty years) been skimming money from their business accounts to make the household's ends meet. She resorted to this because her husband refused to increase the amount of money allotted to household costs, despite both their property and family increasing in size over the decades. Mrs. M. doesn't feel particularly guilty about this—she only tells Old M. so that he doesn't expect his next wife to operate on the same meagre budget. Lotte relates this story to Werther, who in turn relates it to Wilhelm. Werther is amazed at the way Old M. deceived himself about the household expenses. But, he tells Wilhelm, people often deceive themselves about many things.

Mrs. M. shows herself to be a resourceful woman capable of going around her husband's demands when the situation calls for it—and also of lying to him about it for many years. These actions suggest that, while Old M. thought he was in charge of his house, he was really being managed by his wife. In fact, the entire household was. Werther ignores this impressive ability in Mrs. M. because she's a woman, and she isn't meant to do such things. Instead, he focuses on Old M.'s inability *to properly run his house. As a man, Werther feels that Old M. ought to have done better.*

Werther is not, however, deceiving himself about Lotte, he assures Wilhelm over the course of the coming days' letters. Lotte loves him; he is sure of it. She, in turn, is "sacred" to him, so that even the casual touch of her hand becomes a divine experience. One day, when he is unable to see Lotte because of prior commitments, Werther sends his servant to her to help with household chores. Upon the servant's return, Werther excitedly embraces him and feels joy at his presence—all because he's been around Lotte. Yet, Werther confesses, whenever Lotte mentions Albert (which, he notes, she always does in a warm, loving way), he begins to doubt himself.

While Werther rarely expresses his doubts about Lotte's feelings for him openly, as the novel progresses he increasingly offers these assurances of Lotte's love. It's as though he were drowning out reasonable, logical doubts with nothing more than his emotions. Whom Werther seeks to convince is an interesting question. He's writing to Wilhelm, but this feels more as though he were trying to convince himself of Lotte's love.

BOOK ONE: JULY 19-AUGUST 12, 1771

Wilhelm has offered to help Werther find a job with the ambassador. It's not a suggestion for which Werther has much enthusiasm. He doesn't like being bossed around, and he doesn't much care for the ambassador, either. Nor does he have much of a passion for drawing anymore (another subject Wilhelm has pestered him about). He admits that he cannot draw even a basic likeness of Lotte, though he's often tried. Speaking of Lotte, Werther tells Wilhelm that he has tried to see less of her, but something constantly forces him back to Lotte. He isn't sure if that something is emotion or some magic-like power she has over him.

Werther is an accomplished artist, and even recently he's produced some very respectable landscapes. He can't get Lotte's likeness right, though, because there are really two Lottes in his life: the flesh-and-blood Lotte, who is engaged to Albert, and Werther's imaginary Lotte, who is helplessly in love with him. The imaginary Lotte is perfect in Werther's mind, and he struggles to reconcile her image with the real woman he's trying to draw.

Finally, Albert arrives, and, in a fit, Werther resolves to leave. He likes Albert well enough, and Albert seems to like him (which Werther feels is Lotte's doing. He remarks that women often keep their admirers on friendly terms with one another, so that they can take advantage of them). But Werther simply can't endure seeing Lotte and Albert together. This is so obvious that, in his own words, he makes a fool of himself and Lotte is forced to reprimand him for his bizarre behavior.

Werther's accusation that Lotte is taking advantage of him is at odds with all the praise he had for her before Albert came. Of course, before Albert's return, Werther was free to imagine whatever he liked about Lotte's feelings. With her fiancé there, Werther's fantasies become more difficult to maintain, and he begins to demonize her.

Wilhelm reminds Werther that this fate was inevitable—after all, he knew that Lotte was engaged before he fell in love with her. Werther agrees, but still hopes to find some way around the problem. He chides Wilhelm for his pessimism, asking if Wilhelm would suggest that a terminally ill man commit suicide, since death was inevitable for him.

The position Werther takes on suicide here comes up again very soon, when he argues about suicide with Albert. Here, he's much more upbeat about it than he will be. His argument suggests that even a terminally ill man should keep fighting for his life.

In considering possible "ways around the problem," Werther decides that things maybe aren't as unbearable as he's made them out to be. He tells Wilhelm that he could actually be living the best possible life if he weren't thinking so foolishly about things. Albert, after all, is a quite enjoyable man—Werther even goes so far as to call him "the best fellow on earth."

The idea of "the best possible life" and Albert as the "best fellow on earth" both seem likely allusions to the book Candide by Voltaire. In it, a naïve young man believes his world to be the best one possible until experience teaches him otherwise.

Directly after making this declaration, Werther describes a debate that he and Albert have recently engaged in on the topic of suicide. Albert holds that suicide is morally wrong. Werther agrees, but suggests that there are times when it might be allowable. Stealing is wrong too, he suggests, but if someone steals a loaf of bread to feed their starving family, their actions can and should be forgiven. Werther goes on to compare the act of suicide to a nation overthrowing a tyrannical leader, and to make a handful of other comparisons that Albert declares nonsensical. In the end, they both agree the debate has accomplished nothing.

The theme of suicide (which didn't come up very often before Albert) is suddenly always on Werther's mind. It's interesting that here he attempts to use logic to make what is essentially an emotional argument. Fittingly, Albert, who is much more emotionally mature and responsible than Werther, can't really understand Werther's argument, even though Werther makes his case coherently. The two simply live in different worlds.

BOOK ONE: AUGUST 15-SEPTEMBER 10, 1771

In his next letter to Wilhelm, Werther remarks that Lotte's siblings, who once preferred Lotte's method of slicing bread, have come to enjoy the way he slices their bread just as much.

Werther takes pride in this, which is notable because this is something he would typically consider "women's work."

Some three days pass and Werther finds himself meditating on the state of nature in Wahlheim, returning often to the "thick and mighty" **trees** of the area. Such scenes are, he says, his only remaining source of comfort. Lately, though, even nature appears different to him—he has begun to see it as a destructive force, not simply because there are **storms** in nature that lay waste to entire villages, but because even a simple walk through the forest brings destruction with it. He worries that thousands of grubs and whole civilizations of ants might be killed by one of his walks in the woods.

Finding rejuvenation in nature became a major theme in the German Romantic movement that Goethe helped to initiate. It was also prominent in most other Romantic movements, including the English Romantic movement. Romantics saw city life as a kind of disease that made people ill. While spending time in nature could cure the disease, it also reminded people that their lives were very small and fragile in comparison to the greatness of the natural world.

Several days later, Werther confesses to Wilhelm that whatever comfort nature once provided him is completely gone now, and even his **books** make him feel sick. He claims to again be considering going to work for the ambassador as a way of escaping his current predicament, but he remains uncertain. He worries that his restlessness and desire for change will simply follow him, wherever he goes.

By saying that his unhappiness is a kind of sickness, Werther recalls the two previous times where he's discussed the right of sick people to kill themselves. In this way he suggests—without actually saying it—that his unhappiness will eventually drive him to suicide.

August 28 is Werther's birthday, and Lotte and Albert give him a pocket-edition of Homer that he can easily take with him on his walks. Lotte wrapped the **book** using one of the ribbons she wore when she first met Werther. Werther compares the friendship between the three to a blossom on a fruit **tree**. Such blossoms are plentiful but only a select few end up becoming fruit. Similarly, many people come together in the world, but few form friendships the way he, Lotte, and Albert have. Nor is this fruit strictly symbolic: Werther tells Wilhelm that he has spent much of the summer sitting in the fruit trees of Lotte's orchard, helping her harvest fruit.

Werther refers to his new book as a duodecimo. The word, Latin for twelve, is the term printers gave to small-format, novelty books where the paper was folded into twelve leaves (rather than the more common four, which produced a paperback-sized book called a quarto). Though books were becoming cheaper in this time, they were still expensive, and a duodecimo print (of a book Werther already had in quarto form!) would probably have been considered a lavish gift from well-off friends.

Two days later, however, Werther declares that he can envision no other end to his misery than "the grave." By September 3, Wilhelm has convinced Werther to leave Wahlheim to find employment with the ambassador. A week later, Werther leaves; his sudden stiffening of resolve is the result of a conversation that occurred between himself, Lotte, and Albert, on the subject of life after death. The topic impacted Werther deeply, and he resolves (both to himself and his friends) that he and Lotte will meet again after death.

Werther wants to meet Lotte again after death because he hopes that, in the next world, things will be different than they are in this one. But remember that only recently Werther had proclaimed this the best of all possible worlds. His sudden shift in opinions marks how hopeless he feels his chances of winning Lotte away from Albert have become and how unable he is to live happily otherwise.

BOOK ONE: OCTOBER 20, 1771-FEBRUARY 20, 1772

Some ten days later, Werther writes Wilhelm to inform him that he's begun work for the ambassador. It's a difficult job, especially after having had so much free time in Wahlheim, but Werther admits that it's just what he needed. Those who don't work, he says, always think of themselves as inferior beings in need of some vague, but poetic, improvement. Working keeps the mind grounded and that makes for happier, more genuine people.

Werther, as usual, seems to be an expert on everything as soon as he's begun it. His philosophizing on work is a bit hard to take from a character who hasn't worked a day up until now and who will, very shortly, begin to complain bitterly about having to work at all.

By the end of November, Werther has made a friend out of Count C. The Count's education and warmth impress Werther, and he feels they have a genuine friendship that extends beyond the workplace. The ambassador proves another matter. Werther already detests the man's inflexibility and stringent work habits. The ambassador, for his part, is jealous of Werther's friendship with the Count and constantly sends Werther's work back for revision.

Werther's ability to exist naturally amongst members of either the upper or lower class sometimes seems to make him forget his own class position and the limits it has. Though he can be friends with the Count, that friendship has limitations that he fails to recognize.

Another friend that Werther has made in his new position is Miss von B. This friendship, however, causes Werther to bemoan the strict class divisions of his day and age. Miss von B. is an aristocrat, and her aunt (with whom she lives) disapproves of her friendship with Werther, who is of a lower class. Werther writes angrily to Wilhelm about this, saying that even kings must take some guidance from those of the lower class if they wish to be successful. This, he feels, proves that class (and the noble titles that come with it) is essentially meaningless.

Up until now, Werther has only been shown interacting with members of the lower class. While he clearly admires them and respects them to some degree, it's equally clear that he also feels superior to them. He uses his higher class as a way to distance himself from them. When others do the same to him (as Miss von B.'s aunt does) he is instantly outraged at the injustice without pausing to consider his hypocrisy.

On the 20th of January, Werther finds himself in a small country inn, weathering a **storm**. He decides to write to Lotte to tell her about his new life as an employee of the ambassador. He likens his job to a game that he is playing but not truly invested in. His thoughts turn to Miss von B., and he admits that he has spent a lot of time with her, often daydreaming about nature side-by-side. But, in the end, their conversations always end with Werther telling Miss von B. everything he can about Lotte.

Most storms in the book come when Werther has whipped himself up into some emotional frenzy (as when he first met Lotte). While he's upset about Miss von B.'s aunt here, his emotions aren't nearly at that level when this storm rolls through. His decision to write to Lotte out of the blue, however, suggests that maybe Werther is still dealing with his feelings for her—just silently, for now.

A full month later, on February 20, Werther again writes back to Wahlheim. This time he writes to congratulate Albert on his marriage to Lotte. The two married without telling Werther. Werther had previously decided that he would remove Lotte's picture from his bedroom wall on her wedding day. Since Albert and Lotte hid their marriage from Werther, however, the day has passed without the picture being removed. Werther decides to leave it on his wall.

Though Werther congratulates Albert, there's an unasked question between the two: why did Albert feel the need to hide the marriage from Werther in the first place? There are no cut-and-dry answers to this question, but two possibilities are that Albert feared Werther would create some scene or that he hoped Werther had moved on.

BOOK TWO: MARCH 15-MAY 25, 1772

Werther attends dinner at Count C.'s house and the two find themselves absorbed in after-dinner conversation. The Count, however, has a party planned that evening with other members of the aristocracy. While Werther takes no notice as they begin to arrive, the nobles, quickly noting Werther's lower class, take great notice of him. Soon groups of people can be found whispering about him in the corners of the halls, and even Miss von B. seems embarrassed to talk to him. Sensing this, the Count apologetically approaches Werther, letting him know that his presence is upsetting the other guests. Werther leaves without having to be asked, instead choosing to read the **book** Lotte gave him while watching the sunset. Later, he learns from Adelin, a coworker, that the story is the workplace gossip of the day. Werther recounts all of this angrily to Wilhelm, whom he blasts for suggesting the job in the first place.

Remember that the book Lotte gives Werther is Homer's Odyssey. *Its main character, Odysseus, is a lot like Werther: he just wants to get back to his home and to the woman he loves. And, like Werther, Odysseus meets a woman from a higher class than him while on the road: the goddess Circe. They even have a scandalous feast together. In the* Odyssey, *Circe turns all of Odysseus' companions into swine. Miss von B., of course, doesn't do this, but there's still a strong parallel between the two books. The aristocrats at the Count's party act as though Werther were a swine, behaving in much the same way they would if a literal pig arrived at the door.*

The next day, Werther meets Miss von B. on the street. She tells him, with tears in her eyes, that the previous evening is also a source of great amusement for her aunt and the other nobles, who have been mocking Werther ceaselessly ever since he left the Count's home. Werther regrets (privately, to Wilhelm) that none of the aristocrats have mocked him to his face. If they were to do so, he promises to stab them. Instead, he turns to thoughts of stabbing himself.

Werther has turned a corner in his life, after which it seems like any hardship at all is met with thoughts of suicide. This episode confirms the prediction Werther made earlier, when he told Wilhelm that he worried his troubles would simply follow him if he left Wahlheim. Of course, Werther is not blameless in creating these problems, so their following him might be expected.

As a result of his humiliation, Werther resigns from the court. He asks Wilhelm to let his mother know, though he hopes that she will not try to stop the court from accepting his resignation. He also asks her for money, again through Wilhelm. In his next letter, however, Werther reveals that his resignation has been accepted. He also tells Wilhelm that the Prince of —, a local nobleman, has offered him a home at his hunting lodge. Thus, he will no longer need the money from his mother.

This Werther, asking for money from a single mother (though his own), is far removed from the Werther of Wahlheim. That Werther was always quick to help overburdened mothers by giving them money or even by helping them with chores. Werther certainly prefers this latter version of himself.

En route to the hunting lodge, Werther stops by the town where he was born. There he relives the scenes of nature that he first encountered as a boy. He tells Wilhelm that he can't understand the value of being able to repeat random, disconnected facts (such as, the Earth is round) the way a schoolboy does. If one has their own plot of ground where they can readily encounter nature, then it doesn't matter if the Earth is flat or round.

Werther's sudden, total contempt for book-learning is at odds with his background. While it fits the pattern of his regression into nature, the complete disregard for book-learning he offers here feels like a rejection of who he is. Perhaps this is fitting, given his return to his birthplace.

At the hunting lodge, Werther finds himself out of sorts. The Prince's friends aren't exactly what he expected, and he isn't sure he can trust them. Furthermore, the Prince himself seems only to care about Werther's **book**-learning and not about his feelings. In response to this, Werther tells Wilhelm that anyone can know what he knows, but only he can feel the things he feels.

This is a beautiful sentiment. However, readers know a lot about Werther's knowledge (he has discussed classical literature, art, and so forth), but they know only a narrow slice of what he feels, since he only speaks of his feelings for Lotte. In a way, then, Werther doesn't even seem to know the full breadth of what he feels.

BOOK TWO: JUNE 11-NOVEMBER 3, 1772

On June 11, after a little more than a month at the Prince's lodge, Werther decides to leave. The Prince, he tells Wilhelm, is too wrapped up in intellectual concerns and has grown boring. Furthermore, Werther has decided that he is a wanderer at heart. Nevertheless, it takes him a week to leave. Initially, he suggests that he might go to visit a series of nearby mines. However, he ultimately confesses that he intends to return to Wahlheim and Lotte.

Werther styling himself as someone born to wander is, of course, laughable. He left Wahlheim because he feared that he would kill himself otherwise. Once away from the town, however, he used the first possible excuse to return to it. As nothing has changed there, it's arguable that Werther accepts his suicide in this moment.

Once back at Wahlheim, Werther imagines what things would be like if Lotte were his wife. She would be happier, he is sure: Albert lacks Werther's emotional sensitivity, after all, and doesn't share as deep a bond with Lotte. By the end of the following month, Werther begins to wonder what would happen if Albert were simply to die. He struggles to imagine how Lotte can love Albert, and at the same time he struggles to find happiness in the places where he and Lotte once spent time. Returning to Wahlheim, he tells Wilhelm, feels like a ghost returning to the castle where it once lived, only to find the place in ruins.

Goethe was an avid fan of Shakespeare, and Werther's imaginings here echo Shakespeare's character Hamlet. Like Werther, Hamlet faces a traumatic event and becomes trapped inside his own head thinking about it. He becomes so obsessed with "what-ifs" that he can't act on anything. Furthering this parallel, Hamlet's father—the King of Denmark—returns to his castle after death (as a ghost) to find his kingdom in disarray.

In his next letter, Werther notes that the **trees** have begun changing to their fall colors. It's a change he sees happening in himself, as well. He asks Wilhelm if he remembers the story of the farmer lad. While Werther was away working for the ambassador, the lad's obsession with the widow continued to grow. Eventually he tried to rape her, resulting in his termination. The community, too, turned its back on the lad as a result of his actions. In the meantime, the widow has hired a new servant. In his letter to Wilhelm, Werther expresses his sadness for the boy's fate and his deep admiration of the lad's love for the widow. He compares it to his own love for Lotte.

Werther is beginning to lose his grip on the real world in a way that is meant to be at once obvious and shocking to readers (who, up until now, have probably been fond of Werther and his kindness). When Werther sides with the farmer lad's attempted rape, however, it becomes easy to fear for Lotte and to feel for the position Albert is placed in. But, since Werther sees the parallels between himself and the lad, one can at least hope that the story will help him avoid the same end.

Later, Werther finds that the walnut **trees** so beloved by the Vicar of S. have been cut down by order of the Vicar's wife. He reports that the whole village is upset by this development and predicts that the Vicar's wife will soon regret her actions.

Because Werther saw the trees as a kind of memento of his time with Lotte, their destruction makes it as if those times he spent with her had never occurred.

In his next letters, spanning from October 10 to November 3, Werther speaks often to Wilhelm of his increasing melancholy. He recognizes the way that he has attached himself to Lotte is no different than the way a child might reach out for a treat, but he sees no reason why he shouldn't be allowed to be happy. Nothing, he claims, gives him joy anymore, and he hasn't even the energy to cry about it.

It might seem like Werther is mocking himself for the childish way he's behaved. Yet, Werther has made it obvious at multiple points that he considers children to be the ones living life correctly. Having tried to live that philosophy, he's confronted now with its failure.

BOOK TWO: NOVEMBER 8-DECEMBER 6, 1772

Lotte chides Werther for drinking too much, and Wilhelm suggests that his friend should seek comfort in God. Werther, however, responds that God cannot possibly offer him solace, because God has forsaken him. Later, he considers that his fate (pining after Lotte) might be unique among all men, but then he remembers that unrequited love is often a theme taken up by ancient poets. Their **books**, he reminds himself, sometimes feel as though they are addressing him directly.

Werther undertakes the impressive task of comparing himself to Jesus Christ (who, when on the cross, famously asked God why He had forsaken him) as well any number of characters from classical literature. While dramatic, this highlights the magnitude of Werther's emotions and narcissism. He's sure none but the greatest have ever felt anything like them.

In late November, Werther stumbles upon Heinrich, a man searching for wildflowers to give to his sweetheart. Werther reminds him that the season (winter) isn't right for wildflowers, but the man persists. They engage in conversation, and Heinrich confesses that he has been desperately unhappy lately. Before Werther can discover the source of Heinrich's unhappiness, however, Heinrich's mother approaches. From her, Werther discovers that Heinrich has only recently been released from an insane asylum and remains an invalid. Inside the asylum he was happy; outside, he is not. His sweetheart is imaginary. Werther feels sorry for Heinrich, but he also feels jealousy at the man's ability to leave behind reality. On the next day, Werther writes to Wilhelm to tell him that he's discovered the source of Heinrich's madness: he once was employed by Lotte and fell hopelessly in love with her.

Like the farmer lad, Heinrich seems to offer a model for how Werther's life might go if it continues on its current path. With the farmer lad Werther didn't make that parallel obvious; it had to be inferred. Here, however, there is a sudden and mysterious source of information telling Werther that Lotte was the cause of Heinrich's madness. Werther never names this source, nor does he confront Lotte about it. In fact, he never mentions it again. Up until recently, there's been no reason to doubt Werther's narration. But his increasing melancholy and irrational thought are starting to make him into an unreliable narrator: someone whose account of the story the reader can't exactly trust.

BOOK TWO: EDITORIAL INTERLUDE

Shortly after the episode with Heinrich, a lack of correspondence from Werther forces the editor to interject into the story. The remaining story, the editor says, will be told using both Werther's letters and additional sources as required. He reports that in the following days, those close to Albert, Lotte, and Werther found Albert and Lotte largely unchanged. Instead, Werther himself began to act with increasing irrationality and melancholy. He came to resent Albert in a way readily apparent to others, but also publicly resented himself for forcing his way into Albert's happiness.

For being an outside researcher working off of letters and second-hand accounts of the story, the editor knows an awful lot about how the characters feel and think at any given moment. That's because Goethe is using the editor as a solution to Werther's increasing unreliability: he needs someone that can tell the story clearly, while also showing Lotte's side of the story.

The editor goes on to recount the final ending of the Farmer Lad's story. Driven to madness by the thought that his replacement would marry the widow, the lad murders the other man. On hearing this, Werther rushes first to the scene, where the lad confesses his act, then to the officer in charge of the investigation. Werther is said to argue for the lad with the "greatest possible liveliness," saying that his crime was a crime made understandable by the boy's passion. The officer is not in the least persuaded by Werther's argument, nor is Albert, who is also present. Albert offends Werther with his argument against the farmer lad.

Werther's sudden energy is surprising considering the depression he's sunk into recently. But he sees the farmer lad as an analog of himself, and his argument on behalf of the lad is, in reality, a defense of his own actions over the past few months. Normally Werther, as the most educated man in the room, should dominate such arguments. But the logical thought that would normally guide him has been overtaken entirely by a whirlwind of emotion.

Walking home from the scene, Albert advises Lotte that she needs to see less of Werther and that Werther's too-friendly behavior towards her needs to change. Their situation has become a subject of town gossip. The editor says that Albert advises all this with the greatest possible fairness to Werther. He adds that Werther's attempt to save the farmer lad was "the last flaring up of a dying flame." Afterwards, the editor attests, Werther became sullen and confused in a way that seemed to make his suicide inevitable.

The importance of town gossip makes its appearance again. Remember from the episode with Miss von B. that Werther has a very low tolerance for being the talk of the town, even when he's capable of admitting that he's behaving foolishly. Nor does he think that other people should be able to tell him what to do.

On December 11, a raging **storm** tears through Wahlheim, flooding the valley there. Werther watches the floodwaters from above and comes close to jumping into them, ending his life. But, in a letter to Wilhelm the following day, he remarks that it was not yet his time. During the storm, he witnesses the destruction of the willow **tree** under which he and Lotte once sat.

Since the storm represents Werther's emotional turmoil, jumping into its floodwaters would be like giving himself over entirely to emotion. And he's already made clear that he believes that those possessed of great emotions should be able to commit suicide without being condemned for it.

BOOK TWO: DECEMBER 20-21, 1772

Wilhelm offers to take Werther in, saying that it would be better for him to leave Wahlheim. Werther agrees to this, but says he wants to make the trip in a roundabout way since the weather should be good for travelling. He asks Wilhelm to delay meeting with him for two weeks to allow for this.

Werther's lie to Wilhelm about taking a roundabout way recalls the lies he told on his last meandering trip, where he meant to visit some local mines and instead ended up back in Wahlheim.

During this time, the editor suggests, Lotte walks a fine line between pushing Werther away and trying not to hurt him. She asks him to come to her home on Christmas Eve to open presents with the children, and promises a gift for him as well. He can only have the gift, however, if he agrees to stay away until Christmas Eve. The situation as is, with Werther nearly always by her side, cannot continue. Lotte candidly addresses Werther's desire for her and tries to show him that it can only end badly. Werther takes her words to be remarks prepared for her by Albert and does not listen.

The editor's narration provides a newfound window into Lotte's character, which helps to clear up a lot of confusion. The shifting ideas that Werther had about her (did she love him? Was she using both him and Albert?) have a final answer in these moments. Lotte's diligence in trying to respect Albert while trying not to hurt her friend becomes remarkably commendable. Meanwhile, Werther's error becomes tragic.

The following day, Werther writes his suicide note. He addresses it to Lotte. One of the three must go, he says, so it ought to be him. In preparation for his suicide, Werther makes sure to pay all of his outstanding debts, collect any books he has loaned out, and other such matters. He then prepares to visit Lotte one final time, though before Christmas Eve. Albert is away on other business.

It's interesting that Goethe takes the time at the climax of his story to show Werther going about town and settling his affairs. While Werther is obviously saying goodbye to his life, he's doing so as the kind of responsible, sensible man he was before his emotions overwhelmed him.

Meanwhile, the editor says, Lotte has realized how painful separating from Werther will be. She tries to imagine him with another woman, perhaps one of her friends, but she finds fault with all of them. She realizes that she has always thought she could keep both Albert and Werther. When Werther arrives, she is thrilled at his coming, but nevertheless chastises him for ignoring her request to stay away until Christmas Eve. Since Albert is away, she attempts to find others who can sit in with them, to avoid any appearance of impropriety. However, no one is available, and the two are left alone together.

There's a moment here where the story totters on a fine edge. If Lotte comes to realize that she's been wrong to dedicate herself to Albert, all of Werther's dreams of them being together might come true. What remains unclear is if this would solve any of Werther's problems. Through the insight of the editor, the reader has learned that this isn't a story about tragically unrequited love, but rather a story about a young man lost in himself.

Flustered, Lotte suggests that Werther pass the time by reading aloud from his own translations of Ossian. He does so, but the sadness of the tale moves them both to tears. Werther casts the **book** aside and embraces Lotte, who accepts his embrace until he begins to kiss her. At this, she pushes him aside, telling him that they will never see one another again. Werther offers no resistance and leaves, returning home to add a final few passages to his suicide note. When Albert returns home, Lotte does not tell him what has taken place.

Ossian was the name given to the author of a series of Gaelic epic poem fragments that had been discovered and translated into English in Goethe's time. The fragments later turned out to be fakes, written by a modern poet, but this was unknown to Goethe. In his day, they were a worldwide bestseller. Werther's quick translation of these new poems into German mark him as a serious, erudite scholar.

BOOK TWO: DECEMBER 21-22, 1772

That night, Werther writes to Albert, requesting to borrow Albert's pistols for a journey he's planning to undertake. Lotte, who is there when Albert receives the note, grows pale when she hears Werther's request, but does not stop the pistols from being lent.

There's a certain symbolism in using Albert's pistols. It's as though Werther wants the man who figuratively killed him to be in some way responsible for actually killing him.

Werther has made arrangements for his burial, and he requests in his suicide note that Lotte make sure they're honored. He asks, also, to be buried in his traditional clothes: a blue coat, buff waistcoat, and boots. He orders his servants to bed early, telling them that he plans to leave on a journey before six o'clock. At midnight, he shoots himself in the head. Werther does not die immediately. Rather, his passing takes much of the following day. When she discovers his suicide, Lotte faints at Albert's feet. She is unable to attend Werther's funeral, and neither is Albert, as he fears that Lotte might follow in Werther's path. No priests were present, either.

In the end, Werther remains as alone as he felt in life. Even his belief that God has forsaken him proves true. Since the church forbade (and forbids) suicide, Werther was unable to have his funeral attended by priests. It's also fitting that Werther fails to die immediately after shooting himself. Remember that every time he made his mind up about something, it ended up taking weeks for him to act on it, since he was mired in uncertainty about everything.

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