

Aristocratic and bourgeois ideology in the sorrows of young werther



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Literary critics such as Karl Grun and Johannes Scherr have propped up Johann Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as revolutionary social criticism that paved the way for many of the rebellions in 1848 - Grun even arguing that the novel prepared the grounds for the French Revolution. But as one of the most prominent figures of sentimentality in Western literature, *Werther* is difficult to construe as a social critic without acknowledging the barrier his affect presents in taking on such a role. Friedrich Engels even accused Grun of "confusing genuine social criticism with Werther's lamentations about the discrepancy between bourgeois reality and his equally bourgeois illusion. *Werther*, says Engels, is a 'schwarmerischer Tranensack' (dreamy lachrymal sack)" (Duncan 76).

Can we, then, denounce the criticism *Werther* voices as not genuine because of his bourgeois identification and his self-serving vision of social order? Can we understand the grumbling of a "dreamy lachrymal sack" as social commentary? Although Engel raises legitimate concerns surrounding a critical reading of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, we dilute the significance of a series of letters *Werther* dedicates to deriding his aristocratic company in the second half of the novel without engaging in a critical analysis of the novel. His criticism is particularly informed by his characterization of genius as torrential and transcendental. While *Werther's* opinions on class division and on the romanticization of labor seem to detract from his ability to criticize the social order, Goethe complicates the temptation to dismiss *Werther's* polemic against aristocratic society by distancing him from the almost equally problematic bourgeoisie at the end of the novel.

Werther's hostility towards the aristocracy stems from a clash of ideologies: a barrier to class mobility bulwarked by privileging an individual's pedigree over his strength of character is utterly detestable to Werther because it demeans that what makes him exceptional. In a letter dated 26 May, Werther jests, " Oh, my friends! 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, whose summer-houses, tulip beds and cabbage patches would all be washed away, and who are therefore highly skilled in averting future dangers in good time, by damming and digging channels" (33). Werther explains the constraint placed on the genius through his relationship with respectable gentlemen. Although Werther never explicitly claims that the respectable gentleman is a figure of the aristocracy and the genius is a figure of himself, the similarity within the groupings is striking. The genius is characterized by an image of complete surrender, which is similar to Werther's disposition while writing the letter 10 May; the respectable gentleman is associated with scheming and self-gain, two qualities that Werther criticizes in the nobility he meets working under the Ambassador. Werther's criticism of the aristocracy is that this group values future gains over pleasure in the present. Shortly after working for the ambassador, Werther complains, " 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" (75). His judgment becomes increasingly explicit as he continues his argument - he begins by pointing out their " greed for rank," implying that they are not satisfied with their current status. Then he moves on to further

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denounce the aristocratic mentality that is consumed with rank by pointing that aristocrats are specifically “ watchful” and “ alert” for gain. Here he is more explicit: Werther is frustrated with the aristocratic focus on future advances rather than on satisfaction in the present. This is especially “ wretched and abominable” for Werther, who tells Wilhelm, “ I am so happy, dear friend, so absorbed in this feeling of peaceful existence” (26). Unlike the aristocracy that seeks happiness in future gains, Werther believes that happiness should be “ absorbed” in the present. For this reason, he claims, “ It is enough that the source of my wretchedness lies within myself, as the source of all my joy once did” (98). By rejecting the aristocratic mentality of looking to the future and by focusing on the beautiful transience of existence, Werther gains autonomy: he is his own source of both pleasure and dissatisfaction.

Although it is easy to broadly categorize Werther as an advocate for the working class, it is important to note Werther’s own problematic viewpoints. This task becomes important as this essay shifts from examining Werther’s criticism of the German aristocracy to Goethe’s own criticism of society and its relationship to the type of person that Werther represents. Werther romanticizes labor by stating, “ It is good that my heart can feel the simple and innocent pleasure a man knows when the cabbage he eats at a table is one he grew himself; the pleasure he takes. . . in remembering evenings he watered it and the delight he felt in its daily growth” (45). By portraying farming through an idyllic vignette, Werther creates the narrative that the farmer enjoys his labor. This construct is destructive for two reasons. First, Werther praises the picturesque image of a man dependent on nature for

sustenance, but completely ignores the arduous nature of agrarian life and thereby glorifies the image of the farmer without sympathizing with any of his struggles. Second, he imposes his own narrative on a group of people whom he knows “are not equal, nor can be” (28). He does not know the experiences of a farmer because he is not a farmer. By suggesting that the working class enjoys its labor, Werther perpetuates a narrative that the upper class uses to oppress its subordinates; in Werther’s mind, the labor of the working class is necessary to my social standing and there’s no moral cost to thrive on the backs of these simple people because they enjoy it! Yet, although Werther holds to beliefs that work against the lower class, Goethe still makes it clear through Christ metaphors and the juxtaposition of Albert and Werther that, even if marked with hypocrisy, criticism is preferable to inaction.

Albert serves to embody the upper-class ideals of the wealth and respectability of the bourgeoisie, and thus serves as a foil to Werther. Even though he is competing with Albert for Lotte’s affections, Werther declares, “I cannot help esteeming Albert. The coolness of his temper contrasts strongly with the impetuosity of mine” (22). Moving beyond the well-mannered behavior that earns recognition from Werther, even the editor exalts Albert as a “pure-hearted man,” establishing that he is a man viewed positively by society. Yet, the pure-hearted Albert is the one to give Werther the pistol to kill himself. A symbolic reading indicates that the bourgeois society perceives characters that hold to beliefs similar to Werther’s as threatening to its lifestyle and seeks to eradicate these individuals. Furthermore, Werther compares himself to Christ, asking, “What is the Fate of Man, but to . . . drink

the cup of bitterness," (99) establishing parallels to Christ. After all, Christ similarly asked God to take his cup from him while praying in Gethsemane before his crucifixion. When Werther recognizes that out of Albert, Lotte, and himself, one must die, he acknowledges that there is no room for his criticisms of the German bourgeoisie and aristocracy and, like Christ, chooses to sacrifice himself for the " sinners" Albert and Lotte, who represent the bourgeoisie. At the scene of his death blood was everywhere — " a vein was opened in his arm; the blood flowed" (134). The overpowering images of blood suggest that Werther was a sacrifice: in order to maintain a society in which people like Albert and Lotte live and thrive, social critics must die and suffer. By comparing the latter stages of Werther's life to those of Christ's life, Goethe puts Werther on a moral high ground relative to the rest of his society. Although his imperfections kept him from " saving" his class and reversing the rhetoric of the bourgeoisie that oppresses the working class, Werther was at least able to partly save himself from the criticisms he raises, even if he did so through his death.

Through the lens of social criticism, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* can be interpreted as a novel centered around class structure and the perils of its effects on society. Werther serves as a voice to critique the greedy, calculating, and rigid upper class. His death, depicted using religious motifs, indicates Goethe's criticism of German society, a society in which individuals who advocate for social change have no place.