

# The catharsis of prose: a strategy employed by goethe and chamisso



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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) composed the semi-autobiographical epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* at the young age of 24 and under the timespan of two months. This highly riveting “Briefroman,” as the genre is called in German, is a series of letters from May 4, 1771 until December 1772 written by the first-person narrator, Werther, to his friend, Wilhelm. As time passes, the letters written to Wilhelm increasingly reflect the deterioration of Werther’s mental state and it becomes evident that his anxiety and depression burden him more than he can bear (Zimmerman 1). The certain events in Werther’s life which are based upon Goethe’s experiences make this novel semi-autobiographical, such as his romantic shortcomings, and Goethe described the text as “an innocent mixture of truth and fabrication” (Appelbaum viii). In addition to life events, however, Goethe molds Werther’s mental distress after his own struggles in a way to manifest and rationalize his innermost thoughts (Holm-Hadulla).

Along with Goethe, the French author Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838) also employs writing as a cathartic strategy to externalize conflicted feelings. In the Romantic novella *Peter Schlemihl*, von Chamisso creates a Faustian tale of Peter Schlemihl, a man who sells his shadow in return for a magical cap of unending gold. Peter Schlemihl is narrated by Schlemihl and addressed to his good friend Chamisso, in which the former chronicles his unfortunate deal with the devil, writing “And what do you think I did? Oh, my dear Chamisso, it makes me blush to confess it even to you” (von Chamisso 29). While the Chamisso to whom the novella is narrated might be the alter ego of Schlemihl, it is apparent that the author created Schlemihl after his

own identity, and von Chamisso spins a narrative that projects the sense of not belonging, as well as manifests his opposing loyalties between his French and German nationalities. Given that both *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Peter Schlemihl* are composed as letters but are one-sided correspondences, the literature could be interpreted as versions of a diary. In particular, *Peter Schlemihl* could be understood as a journal for the protagonist, as Schlemihl reports on his discoveries, such as of *Flora universalis terrae*, as one might do in scientific manuscript (123). Due to the similarities between the authors and their respective protagonists, the emotions and thoughts which Werther and Schlemihl relay are indicative of Goethe's and von Chamisso's self-expressions and reflect a cognitive assessment of their emotional disaccord.

There are different factors in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* which allude to the prospect that Goethe shaped Werther after his own anxieties and mental turmoil. As there were few discourses and inadequate literature on the topic of mental health, the references which Goethe draws are distinctly accurate. For instance, Werther's disinterest in activities which he previously enjoyed, as well as a feeling of hopelessness for his future, are symptoms of depression (Klein 97). In a particular depressive episode, Werther grieves to Wilhelm, " I weep inconsolably as I face a gloomy future...I have no power to depict things, no feeling for nature, and books disgust me" (Goethe 81).

Additionally, before Werther makes mention of or commits suicide, suicidality is intertwined in the novel, suggesting Goethe's awareness that the road to suicide begins long before the first mention (Niederkrötenhaler).

As early as July 1st, Werther writes that his tenuous existence is held together only by Lotte, writing " Oh, you angel. I must go on living for your

sake,” which implies that merely existing is an arduous undertaking (Goethe 51). Another instance which forebodes his eventual suicide occurs in the August 12th letter, when Werther glorifies the act of taking one’s own life, without alluding to his own intentions of committing suicide (71).

In a similar instance, von Chamisso manifests his feelings into the unfortunate Schlemihl, who then in turn rationalizes his situation to Chamisso, his alter ego. This supposition that von Chamisso shaped Schlemihl and his dilemmas after his own is drawn from the parallels between the protagonist and the author; von Loewenstein-Wertheim writes that von Chamisso experienced loneliness and suffered from poverty when he was a young adult (5). Loneliness is certainly a prevalent theme in Peter Schlemihl and the protagonist eventually chooses poverty over attempting to assimilate into society without a shadow. In an instance of poverty, at the beginning of the novella, Schlemihl turns out his coat in order for it to appear new and makes his way to a wealthy acquaintance. Moreover, the tale of Peter Schlemihl involves several journeys, which mirror von Chamisso’s frequent travels between France and Germany, as well as his world travels from 1815-1818 (12). It was prior to this world tour that von Chamisso truly felt like a “ Schlemihl,” a Jewish term for a ridiculous and unlucky person. Chamisso creates the cautionary tale of misvaluation of worth; be it a nationality (even though part of von Chamisso’s identity was German, he felt that he could not fight against the French as a Frenchman) or a shadow (von Loewenstein-Wertheim 8).

In the novella, Schlemihl observes a fete which is taking place at his rich acquaintance’s abode and he watches a man in grey with intrigue; from the <https://assignbuster.com/the-catharsis-of-prose-a-strategy-employed-by-goethe-and-chamisso/>

man's pockets, he procures tents, horses, and other impossibly large objects. Schlemihl is approached by the man in grey and is offered a deal to trade his shadow for unyielding wealth. With desperation of fitting in weighing heavy on his shoulders, Schlemihl acquiesces and the man in grey detaches his shadow in return for Fortunatus's cap. Not long after, Schlemihl realizes that he received the poor end of the deal and he is highly self-conscious about his lack of shadow and his new reception in society, which entails gossip and ostracization. Shadowless but wealthy, Schlemihl relocates under a false persona, as von Chamisso may have had to alter his identity expression when interchanging between French and German culture. Being a Frenchman who wrote in German, von Chamisso had an undeniable struggle with experiencing of a sense of welcoming or feeling a sense of belonging in either nation. Von Chamisso believed that he was doomed to a life of condemnation, persecution, and homelessness. He defined his feelings to a romantic acquaintance, writing " I am Frenchman in Germany and a German in France. A Catholic among Protestants, a Protestant among Catholics, a Jacobin among aristocrats, an aristocrat among democrats" (8).

After a lengthy amount of time with Schlemihl's shadow, the man in grey returns and suggests an exchange of Schlemihl's shadow for his soul. By this time, Schlemihl has understood the importance of elements connected to his identity. Exasperated but resolute, Schlemihl casts Fortunatus's cap into a ravine and uses his last resources to purchase a second-hand pair of boots. These boots are miraculously the seven-league boots, in which the wearer is transported from continent to continent and Schlemihl delights in his newfound ability to travel the globe and engage in his inclination for

collecting specimens and understanding the vegetable kingdom (von Chamisso 123). Schlemihl gushes that “ Shut out as I was from human society...the glories of nature, which I had always loved were spread before me like a garden of unparalleled richness” (111). Within the realm of science, Schlemihl, like von Chamisso, meets no borders of nationality and can educate himself and explore as he pleases.

Although *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was scorned for romanticizing suicide, due to the copy-cats suicides which resulted, it can be argued that the taboo of suicide underwent a change of thinking during the Enlightenment as a result of this novel. Goethe believed that suicide was a necessary subject of discussion and wrote in his autobiographical *Truth and Poetry*, that suicide “ demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew” (507). Additionally, Goethe did not aggrandize the concept of suicide – even if his character Werther glorified it to a certain extent – if anything, Goethe created a horrific and prolonged suicide for Werther to mimic the chaotic disarray of thoughts and persisting panic which anxiety and depression entail (Eysenck 75). Due to Goethe’s aforementioned mental health struggles, writing *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was indubitably a method of cognitive rationalization for him and a cathartic strategy for coping with his own episodes (Zimmerman 6). Written at a time when there was not much information about anxiety and depression, Johann von Goethe’s success in life serves as a beacon of hope for those struggling with mental health.

In a similar instance of literature serving as a source of inspiration – in this case to those who feel like they do not belong – Adelbert von Chamisso  
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provides his character with an alternative solution to trying to fit in – to be one's own person, focus on one's goals, and partake in that which makes one happy. Both *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Peter Schlemihl* are exemplary illustrations of the relationship between inner unease and creativity and they demonstrate the advantageousness of literature in coming to terms with one's feelings of confliction.

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