

# The sorrows of young werther: passion vs. rationality



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In "The Sorrows of Young Werther", by Goethe, one of the prevalent themes is the control that passion wields over one's actions. Passion may cause one to act irrationally, a belief that Goethe espoused despite the paradigm that dominated the society of his day: that man should allow rationality and common sense to control his life. The story takes place in Germany in 1771, and is written in epistolary form. The letters are composed by a lovesick man named Werther, destined to take his life because the object of his affection is married to another, and are addressed to a trusted friend named Wilhelm. Werther takes a romantic view on life, letting his heart and passions guide him. He sees death as a heroic escape, often favors imagination over reality, and hates the fact that the men of his time are mechanical, static conformists that allow so-called "common sense" to rule their decisions. Passion and romantic ideals lead Werther down the path that will ultimately end in his demise. When speaking of a friend, Werther states that "he admires my intelligence and my talents more than my heart, which is, after all, my only pride, and the fountainhead of all - all strength, happiness and misery" (97). Because he lets his heart guide him, the misery he speaks of outweighs his strength and happiness. Werther lets his imagination take control of his mind more often than his common sense, yet another trait of romantics. He believes that one is happiest when under the spell of delusions, as can be seen when he writes of a woman described to him by a boy: I shall try to see her as soon as possible, or rather, after giving it a second thought, I shall avoid her. It is better that I see her through the eyes of her lover; she might not appear to my own eyes, in reality, as I now see her; and why should I destroy the lovely image I already possess? (20)

Werther prefers an image, a picture existing solely in his head, to an

<https://assignbuster.com/the-sorrows-of-young-werther-passion-vs-rationality/>

uncertain reality. It is his heart that Werther listens to, and his heart that he feels he must sacrifice. It appears, on the surface, that Goethe is reprimanding those who have the same perspective on life as Werther by murdering him at the end of the novel. It seems that those who oppose him are, in fact, “correct” in their actions. Nearly every character in the novel, with few exceptions, subscribe to classical ideals and dogmas. Classicists, the opposite of romantics, favor uniformity, common sense, rationality, and the mind over romantic ideas. Throughout the book, Werther’s friends demand that he gain some common sense: Wilhelm writes, “pull yourself together and try to get rid of an unfortunate passion that is bound to burn up all your energy” (54). Wilhelm tries to convince Werther to toss aside his passion, the very emotion on which he thrives. Wilhelm is aware that should Werther continue to live with such passion in his life, his energy will soon be spent. Even Lotte, the woman Werther loves and lives for, hopes that he will turn away from his irrationality: Werther! You can, you must see us again; only do be reasonable. Oh, why did you have to be born with this violent temper, this uncontrollable clinging passion for everything you touch! Please...be reasonable! Your intellect, your knowledge, your talents, should offer you such a variety of satisfactions! (138) The word “reasonable” is repeated to emphasize the way that Werther should be, according to the classical ideals of the time. Lotte speaks of intellect and knowledge, both of which are basic facets of classicism. Knowledge is based on facts, and facts are unchanging, solid, and static; these are traits that Werther’s friends try to impose on him throughout the book. However, Goethe is not trying to encourage people to embrace the classical outlook on life. Although it may appear so, he is in fact doing just the opposite; into Werther’s suicide,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-sorrows-of-young-werther-passion-vs-rationality/>

Goethe weaves heroism, sympathy, and honor. Throughout his life, Werther has been urged to embrace rationality and think things through. Ultimately, however, he realizes that he cannot control his passions; to the contrary, his passions control him. Werther meets another like him, who cannot control himself either: "his passion for the woman...had daily grown on him, to the degree that he finally had not known what to do...He had not been able to eat, to drink or sleep; he had felt as if something was choking him(103)." Werther, too, feels as if some higher force is controlling his actions. Werther is not punished for letting his passion rule him; he takes his life, and this is what he has longed for more than anything. He welcomes death with open arms: he "shuddered with awe and also with longing" (133). Werther's death is heroic, at least in his eyes; this is proven when he reads from some songs of Ossian to Lotte. He says, "Tall thou art on the hill; fair among the sons of the vale. But thou shalt fall like Morar; the mourner shall sit on thy tomb" (149). He envisions his own death as similarly heroic, with Lotte weeping for him atop his grave, because he was brave enough to take his own life. He argues profusely with Albert, Lotte's husband, when Albert says that suicide is weak: "For it is certainly easier to die than bravely to bear a life of misery" (59). Werther never changes his view on this subject, believing that suicide is grand. Goethe also uses the epistolary form to glorify Werther's death. It is common for heroes to be described as god-like, immortal, and impervious. Because the letters show the passage of time and end with Werther's death, Werther is dropped to the rank of a mere mortal. However, he is still a hero, and the fact that his death is imminent only suggests that he is normal: an everyman hero. In this manner, readers are encouraged to relate to Werther, and to embrace his romantic ideas. Though

<https://assignbuster.com/the-sorrows-of-young-werther-passion-vs-rationality/>

“The Sorrows of Young Werther” appears to praise the classical outlook on life, a closer reading reveals that Goethe is, to the contrary, espousing the romantic view. It is the classical element in those around Werther that kills him, for none of his friends can stand the fact that he has let his heart guide him through life. His death touches those close to them, despite their many differences. It is passion that rules Werther: he can do nothing to appease his heart, and must ultimately accept that perhaps this is simply how life is.