

# Werther's plunge; a path of self-destruction and nature's contribution



“ What wastes my heart away is the corrosive power that lies concealed in the natural universe – in Nature, which has brought forth nothing that does not destroy both its neighbor and itself.” (Goethe, 66)

In Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's novella, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a romanticized concept of nature is used to illustrate the internal state of the protagonist, Werther. When the story begins, Werther is a young, optimistic artist who finds beauty and awe in all of nature. By the end, however, Werther is distressed and suicidal; he comes to see nature as a wild and destructive force. As he transforms from buoyant to deeply depressed, and his perception of nature as the tangible manifestation of God is destroyed and replaced by the dark view that nature is merely a sadistic monster. In his recognition of nature as a “ corrosive power”, as declared in the above quotation, Werther throws himself onto a path of self- destruction that eventually leads to his death. Werther's artistic nature, his devotion to nature, and his passion are the self- destructive qualities that provoke his suicide.

Werther's artistic nature causes him to look at the world in terms of art and provides him with a romanticized concept of nature; both of which have the ability to affect him greatly. As his view on nature shifts, and he becomes more deeply involved with Charlotte, Werther loses his ability to participate in art and can no longer see the world in terms of art. The loss of artistic beauty in nature eventually drives Werther to his death. When the story opens, Werther describes a lush, countryside paradise as his new home and is lost in the endless wonders of nature. With this picturesque setting comes an infallible optimism and a deep appreciation for the artistic value of

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nature. The combination of the two, art and nature, hold a powerful sway over Werther's emotions. Looking out at a rain-swept countryside, Charlotte's poetic reference brings Werther to tears. "At once I remembered the glorious ode she had in mind, and was lost in the sensations that flooded me on hearing the name. It was more than I could bear; I bowed over her hand and kissed it, shedding tears of the greatest joy..."(Goethe, 43). Here, Werther allows himself to become swept up in his emotions and this plays a hand in his self- destruction at the end of the novel.

As he becomes more deeply involved with Charlotte and increasingly depressed and hopeless, Werther can no longer appreciate such scenes. As the situation progresses, Werther loses the ability to participate in art. This becomes evident in his journal entry from July 24th, when he states, "I do not know how to express myself; my imaginative powers are so weak, and everything slides and shifts before my soul, so that I cannot grasp the outlines" (55). By the end of the novel, nature is seen as "a monster"; a destructive machine that "...has brought forth nothing which does not destroy both its neighbor and itself" (66). Now Werther is swayed by the dark and demonic tendencies of nature and it is this sway, combined with his tragically strong devotion to nature, which aids in leading him to suicide.

Werther's devotion to nature causes him to be deeply affected by the state of nature, which, as it shifts from being seen as inspiring to being seen as destructive, leads Werther to a path of self-destruction. From the beginning, we see that nature influences many of Werther's thoughts and actions; he relates all aspects of life to nature. Nature is often connected to the purity of children and their separation from the rational, adult world, the same adult

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world that Werther longs to escape. In one journal entry, he confesses, “they are the happiest who, like children, live for the present moment” (31). And so Werther resolves to live in the present moment and allows nature to dictate his actions and feelings.

This supreme power that nature holds is justified by the citation of God in nature; nature becomes a deity and a force that controls Werther's fate. When he is surrounded by nature, Werther can “feel the presence of the Almighty who created us in His image, the breath of the All-loving who bears us aloft in perpetual joy and holds us there” (27). In this way, nature essentially plays God. So when, in his deepening state of depression, Werther's perception of nature shifts, nature comes to hold an adversely powerful effect over Werther. He realizes this in a letter to Wilhelm, stating, “My heart's immense and ardent feeling for living Nature, which overwhelmed me with so great a joy and made the world about me a very paradise, has now become an unbearable torment, a demon that goes with me everywhere, torturing me” (65). In the end, this demon manifests itself in a violent storm that urges Werther to end his “sufferings and sorrows by plunging, passing on with a crash like the waves!” (112). These morbid sentiments are fueled by his uncontrollable passion, the driving force behind his rash decisions. With Werther's devotion to nature evoking extreme emotional states, and his passion causing him to act on these surges of emotion, Werther is thrown onto a deadly path that results in his self-destruction.

Werther's passion is a driving force in his self- destruction because it dictates his beliefs and decisions and, combined with the influences of nature, <https://assignbuster.com/wethers-plunge-a-path-of-self-destruction-and-natures-contribution/>

provides suicide as an answer to his woes. Throughout the novel, Werther's passion is a source of contention between Charlotte and Albert and himself. When an argument arises, Werther allows his passion to propel him into heated engagement in the dispute. Metaphorically, a battle of reason versus passion rages in the subtext of the book; one personified in Albert, Charlotte's worthy betrothed, and the other in Werther. In the end, reason presides over passion and Albert remains with Charlotte.

In a moral debate with Albert over the justification of suicide, Werther calls upon us to “ consider a man, confined within his bounds, influenced by impressions, beset by ideas, till one day a growing passion overthrows his contemplative composure and destroys him” (62). He goes on to argue that it is senseless for a rational man to try to reason with the destroyed man, because reason cannot change or evoke emotions. Werther has succeeded in describing his own dilemma; he is a man influenced by impressions, overthrown by his growing passions, and destroyed. Reason and logic are of no use to him; all his acts are born of a wild passion and a force of nature. The devouring, self- destructive monster that nature has become evokes the self-destructive nature that lies within Werther. His artistic nature, devotion to nature, and passion are all simply integral character traits, always existing, their self- destructive properties lying dormant within him, waiting to go off like a timed- bomb. These lethal traits result in Werther's suicide: one complete and final action and the culmination of his self-destruction.

It has been argued, however, that the change in nature is merely a metaphorical reflection of Werther's frenzied mind, and does not actively contribute to his suicide. It is true that Werther's increasing desperation is <https://assignbuster.com/wethers-plunge-a-path-of-self-destruction-and-natures-contribution/>

accompanied by an increasing violence of nature and therefore it is plausible that one is a reflection of the other. However, what is not taken into account here is the element of choice. Werther chooses to change the way in which he views nature, because the depletion of his artistic tendencies calls for a re-evaluation of the role of nature. In coming to see nature as a “corrosive power” (66), Werther embarks on a self-destructive path that is fueled by the new, destructive properties he associates with nature.

“What wastes my heart away is the corrosive power that lies concealed in the natural universe – in Nature, which has brought forth nothing that does not destroy both its neighbor and itself” (66). Werther's artistic nature, devotion to nature, and passion all play a hand in his self-destruction. Werther is his own un-doing; he brings forth nothing that does not destroy itself. But what about destroying his neighbor? He has certainly stained the lives of Charlotte and Albert and perhaps they have been set on their own path of self-destruction, the catalyst being Werther's death in the place of nature. If so, this would increase the extent and effect of the destructive powers of nature and of Werther. Werther has become part of a chain reaction involving the destruction of all that surrounds him. Here, it is important to consider the cost of our ambitions and passions and even the self-destructive traits that lie dormant within us. Werther's self-destruction and the destruction of others are brought about by an inevitable, natural chain of effect, a 'fate' governed by a new God, Nature.