

The suicide of young werther: a pathological release



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In the form of a semi-autobiographical epistolary novel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) composed the highly emotional *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* within a matter of weeks. Suitably known as a “Briefroman” in German, the novel is a compilation of letters from Werther to his friend, Wilhelm, and is assembled from May 4, 1771 until December 1772 by an unknown third narrator, who concludes the novel after Werther takes his life. It is this narrator who mentions the presence of Lessing’s tragic play *Emilia Galotti*, opened to an unnumbered page atop Werther’s desk as he slowly dies on the floor. The significance of this reference to *Emilia Galotti* is fiercely debated, with theories ranging from political to personal reasons as to why Goethe incorporated the bourgeois tragedy. Analyzing key letters written to Wilhelm depicts the deterioration of Werther’s mental state and the manner in which his anxiety and depression lead to his death. In comparison to the concept of suicide in 18th century Europe, Werther’s suicide focuses on the pathology and is independent of religion or theological discourse.

Werther’s suicidal thoughts occur throughout the novel, suggesting Werther’s propensity for mental health instability and his opening sentence “*Wie froh bin ich, dass ich weg bin!*” (How glad I am to be gone!) portends a proclivity of escapism (Goethe 2). As early as his May 22nd letter, Werther broods over man’s limitations and the activities which merely prolong the “wretched” human existence. He glorifies one’s ability to take his own life, writing “*And then, with all his limitations, he nevertheless always has in his heart the sweet feeling that he’s free, and can leave this prison anytime he wants*” (Appelbaum 15).

Werther's pessimistic attitude prevails despite his bursts of happiness, with him claiming that these moments of bliss will be short lived and lamenting to Wilhelm, " Must it so be that whatever makes man happy must later become the source of his misery?" (77). Lotte, Wilhelm's source of bliss and misery, admonishes him for his excessive compassion (Goethe 50). In truth, Werther has more empathy for the world than he can bear and these emotions weigh on him with a heaviness that contribute to his depression. He outlines his disinterest in reading, nature, and art, previous pastimes of his, concluding with a melancholy " When we lack ourselves, we lack everything" (Appelbaum 81). Coupled with his depression, Werther yearns for something more – such as in applying for the embassy position – but his anxiety inhibits him. Trapped between these opposing feelings, Werther turns to thoughts of self-harm, with imaginative scenes such as jabbing a knife through his heart (109). The reader may notice that Werther's suicidal inclinations are mentioned with increasing frequency and complexity, as he applies analogies to describe his tormented feelings. Such can be found in the March 16th entry: " Naturalists tell of a noble race of horses that instinctively open a vein with their teeth, when heated and exhausted by a long course, in order to breathe more freely" (111). This description also foreshadows his unnecessarily bled arm after committing suicide (201). Werther outrightly states his yearning for a permanent respite with " I am often tempted to open a vein, to procure for myself everlasting liberty" (111).

The mysterious third-person narrator returns to chronicle Werther's laborious death scene, in which Lessing's Emilia Galotti lays open on Werther's desk.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) was Goethe's literary predecessor

and while the two intellectuals never met, Goethe credits him as an inspiration (DeGuire). There are many theories regarding Goethe's intentional omission of Lessing's name. Given the absence of any reference to which act, scene, or page number to which the play is open, the most logical reason is that Goethe wanted the reader to focus on the essence and overall message within Emilia Galotti. Many interpretations of Emilia Galotti in Werther are political, having to do with a critique of the bourgeois. Dr. Mary DeGuire argues, however, that "Goethe's inclusion of Emilia Galotti at this textual site marks Goethe's aesthetic disagreement with Lessing's ideas concerning pain and beauty in death" (94-5). This is a valid argument, given that Emilia's death is quick, her beauty is retained, and her father lays her on the floor whereas Werther is discovered with paralyzed limbs and his brains spilled out, yet a pulse continuing to beat six hours later (Lessing 68; Appelbaum 201). This truly sickening scene destroys the romanticization of suicide which Werther had previously painted. It is not until twelve hours after committing the deed that Werther is finally released from his suffering (Appelbaum 201-3). Despite the graphic discrepancies between Werther and Emilia, both death scenes share similarities in motive and circumstance, such as the existence of a love triangle. Death serves as their only escape from the entanglement between passion and sin - through Emilia's feelings of impurity from the Prince and Werther's romantic last encounter with Lotte. Additionally, Emilia and Werther hope their deaths benefit their loved ones. While Emilia sacrifices herself to maintain her virtue, as that is her father's will, Werther sacrifices himself in order to restore contentment and serenity to Lotte's life. In a final comparison, borrowed weapons are the means with which each suicide is committed and are handled by the one whom each

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victim wishes to appease. As Emilia's mediary suicide is suitably carried out by her father's hand, Werther delights in the fact that Lotte touched the pistols; she from whom Werther wished to receive death (197).

As a contrary interpretation, perhaps no symbolism exists between Emilia Galotti and Werther. It may be that Goethe simply modelled Werther's end after a suicide of actual occurrence, namely that of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem (1747-1772). The son of a theologian, Jerusalem made acquaintance with Goethe in 1765 in Leipzig during the latter's study of law. Jerusalem had Gotthold Ephraim Lessing as his patron, as an extension of his father's friendship with the author of Emilia Galotti. Goethe and Jerusalem were not fond of each other and thusly fell out of contact until a chance encounter in 1772, the same year in which Goethe met the inspiration for Werther's love, Charlotte (Lotte) Buff, and her fiancé, Johann Georg Christian Kestner. Before Jerusalem killed himself, he wrote a letter to Kestner asking to borrow his pistols. Goethe used Jerusalem's exact words in Werther's request to Albert, writing " Would you lend me your pistols for a trip I intend to make? Farewell and be happy!" (Appelbaum 191). Similar to Werther, not only was Jerusalem suffering from failures in romantic and diplomatic realms, but more significantly, the last book for him to read before his suicide was Emilia Galotti. While Goethe did not address the plagiarism of Jerusalem's death, he described the Briefroman as " an innocent mixture of truth and fabrication" in a letter to Charlotte (Appelbaum vi-iii). In this way, the significance of the Emilia Galotti reference may only reach as far as being a tribute to a man whom Goethe hardly knew, although it is more generally assumed that

Goethe wanted the reader to assess Werther's suicide based on the morals in Emilia Galotti.

The condemnation of self-killing, which was formally based on religious beliefs, underwent a change of thinking during the Enlightenment. Goethe saw suicide as a necessary subject of discussion and his use of the taboo topic epitomizes Werther as Sturm und Drang literature, an offshoot movement of the Enlightenment which advocated nature, anti-establishment, and boldness (Appelbaum vi). Despite the few accounts of alleged copycat suicides – also known as the “Werther-effect” – which resulted in the novel's publication ban in various locations, there is no evidence to prove any epidemiological consequence (Niederkrötenthal). The concept of self-murder, as suicide was known since the 1650s, was common well before the 18th century and was characterized as a crime, in addition to being considered an expression of pathological madness (Bähr). Due to St. Augustine's declaration that the 5th commandment “Thou shalt not kill” applied to suicide as well as murder, suicides were subject to moral and religious implications. Lutherans believed suicide to be a result of the devil, with Martin Luther arguing that suicides were merely damned people “overpowered” with evil and who might still be saved by God, although God's discernment on this matter was ultimately equivocal (Stuart). On the other hand, Catholics asserted the act as a mortal sin, as suicide cannot be absolved through confession. Under the fear of eternal damnation, the idea of suicide by proxy came into being. This entailed a murder of an innocent person, generally a child, in order to save them from the damnation of life as well as allowing the murderer a confession before their execution. While

murder was the most common form of suicide by proxy, suicidal individuals might commit a different capital offense or falsely confess to such a crime. The earliest recorded suicide by proxy occurred in 1612 and this phenomena continued well into the 18th century, when German jurists designated the act “mittelbarer Selbstmord.” The remains of suicide victims were handed over by the Catholics and Protestants to the authorities for disposal. The location of suicide graves varied from region to region in Germany, but were generally either cremated, thrown into the river, or dumped in a mass grave underneath the gallows (Stuart).

These religious penalties were alluded to in Werther, as the protagonist wrote to Lotte in his suicide letter that he wished to be buried in a secluded spot, between two lime trees in the church courtyard, explaining “I don’t want to give pious Christians the unpleasantness of laying their bodies down next to an unfortunate wretch” (Appelbaum 199). Furthermore, during the account of Werther’s burial, the third person narrator writes that no clergyman attended which corresponds with the Catholic belief that suicides were not worthy of proper burial (Goethe 202). As stated by Dr. Andreas Bähr, the concept that is known today as “suicide” reflects a gradual and complex historical process of pathologizing and decriminalizing the act of taking one’s own life. Prior to the German term “Selbstmord” and the relative normalization of suicide, “Selbstentleibung,” or self-disembodiment, was used to describe self-murder. In the German dictionary from Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, German writer Joachim Heinrich Campe defines “Selbstentleibung” as “das widerspiel derselben (der selbsterhaltung) ist die willkührliche oder vorsätzliche zerstörung seiner animalischen natur...die

totale heiszt die selbstentleibung” (The contrary of this (self-preservation) is the arbitrary or intentional destruction of its animal nature ... the whole is called self-disembodiment).

In Goethe’s autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, he writes that suicide “demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew.” Given that Goethe had anxiety and depressive episodes, perhaps writing *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* was a method of cognitive rationalization for Goethe and a cathartic strategy for coping with his own mental health (Holm-Hadulla). According to Dr. Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, “suicidality plays a role in the novel a long time before the suicidal act at the end,” a reflection of Goethe recognizing the predisposition to mental health issues. Can anyone without suicidal tendencies truly understand the motivation or mindset of someone who commits suicide? Through creating a therapeutic piece of prose for his own suffering, Goethe may have also been attempting to educate readers who simply cannot fathom such a depth of despair that one would take their own life. Additionally, by incorporating *Emilia Galotti*, Goethe proves that such feelings of anguish are not isolated occurrences. The reader can only hope that in his afterlife, Werther is able to remark to himself once more, “Wie froh bin ich, dass ich weg bin!”

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