

Existential statements in the sorrows of young werther



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It is presumable that the main character of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a man from whose thoughts we can glean wise and important statements about life. Throughout many of the passages, Werther offers us his unique perspective on various elements of living including survival, freedom, mortality and moral outlook. Mainly, he is speaking to his dear friend Wilhelm, and so it is clear that these are personal letters containing deep thoughts and feelings. However, contradictions arise in the letters that will be examined. I therefore contend that, although much of what he says is eloquent and thought-provoking, it does not all necessarily constitute a series of wise life lessons. Perhaps there is an available wealth of truths in what Werther says, but whatever life lessons he imparts come not only from what he thinks but how and to whom he presents these ideas, and in what ways he applies them to his own life. He speaks in great detail about how he views the rest of human existence. This outlook is not necessarily positive; in fact, he is quite critical of the people he encounters. In the letter from May 17th, Werther writes, "The human race is but a monotonous affair. Most of them labour the greater part of their time for mere subsistence; and the scanty portion of freedom which remains to them so troubles them that they use every exertion to get rid of it. Oh, the destiny of man!" (Goethe, 6) In the same letter, he also happens to say "Alas, that the friend of my youth is gone! Alas, that I ever knew her! I might say to myself, "You are a dreamer to seek what is not to be found here below." (Goethe, 7) What this appears to say is that there is a certain caliber of person, and that people are comparable to a certain ideal. In his case, Werther seems to not be able to find anyone equivalent or better in quality to his dear departed friend. He seeks company, but what is paradoxical about this is how little he

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appreciates the bulk of the company he receives, also believing that he is adored by those who meet him. Perhaps he is not utterly wrong in perceiving that people find it necessary to suppress certain talents, emotions or impulses for practical reasons. This is brought up in the letter from May 22nd, where he writes "...I consider the narrow limits within which our active and inquiring faculties are confined; when I see how all our energies are wasted in providing for mere necessities, which again have no further end than to prolong a wretched existence..." (Goethe, 8) He argues our passivity in this world makes us out to be no more than large children, who are attracted and repelled by a few sensory things, but do not look to anything for any deeper meaning. What's more, he proposes that to other bodies in the universe, the dead individual is immediately mourned, and then is soon forgotten. In the letter from October 26th he says " I often contribute to their happiness, and my heart seems as if it could not beat without them; and yet — if I were to die, if I were to be summoned from the midst of this circle, would they feel — or how long would they feel the void which my loss would make in their existence?" (Goethe, 78) This tells me that, not only is Werther just as willing to discard the human race as he is eager to have it embrace him, he is frightened his own life will fade away into nothingness, and all the people who apparently adored him will enough forget him. There may be a life lesson here, but it is not necessarily coming from his philosophy alone. The paradoxical, insecure and irrational side of man is demonstrated in Werther, who generalizes the universe in order to account for his own fears and wishes. The general dissatisfaction of Werther adds to the irony of his character when one considers his disdain for what he calls " ill-humour"

(Goethe, 29). In his letter from July 1st, he writes "' We should daily repeat to
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ourselves," I exclaimed, " that we should not interfere with our friends, unless to leave them in possession of their own joys, and increase their happiness by sharing it with them! But when their souls are tormented by a violent passion, or their hearts rent with grief, is it in your power to afford them the slightest consolation?"' (Goethe, 29-30) Maybe there is something to be said for overcoming hardship with optimism; but what's truly interesting about his argument are the lingering contradictions between his words here and other letters. His dissatisfaction with society and with himself, seen in the May and October letters is overlooked in this one. Something that's obvious about Werther is that he feels things very sharply, so it's interesting that his apparent desire would be to isolate pain and share happiness. The contradiction here is that he expresses pain all the time, as we saw in previous letters. He suggests pain is personal and yet when he feels it he demands an ear. This can easily be seen in his letter from August 18th, where his despairing view of existence comes out fully: " My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power which lies concealed in every part of universal nature." (Goethe, 47) The idea of mortal frailty is bothersome to him in that he realizes that in life there is inevitable death. He seems to be having recurring fears of passing through life unsatisfied and dying and fading away into oblivion. This may be why he turns to God for consolation: it's something perfect and eternal. This seems not like someone with the moral fortitude to overcome his fears, rather someone consumed by insecurities and needs to be coddled and reassured. As far as life statements are concerned, what we can gather from Werther is that a man consumed by ills would possibly wish to be without them. He comes to this realization himself in his letter from August 12th, in which he writes " My good friend, if <https://assignbuster.com/existential-statements-in-the-sorrows-of-young-werther/>

resistance be strength, how can the highest degree of resistance be a weakness?...Human nature, I continued, “ has its limits. It is able to endure a certain degree of joy, sorrow, and pain, but becomes annihilated as soon as this measure is exceeded. The question, therefore, is, not whether a man is strong or weak, but whether he is able to endure the measure of his sufferings.” (Goethe, 42-43) Werther reiterates the notion that pain and despair cannot be generalized, but can only be examined in cases. He determines that when one is sick and dies, it is very much akin to ending one’s life after a deep depression. However, he also likens suicide to seeking remedy, much like what casting off ill-humour is. I believe this relationship between sickness and remedy is what Albert calls “ all paradox” (Goethe, 43). The lesson here is in the paradox: there seems to be a demonstrated duality of the human condition. He who is immersed in pain, dreams of discarding it, and yet seems to identify himself by it. And despite this wish for universal happiness, one only has a threshold for so much until those feelings need to be expressed in one way or another. Can we then say that Werther is a great thinker abounding with relevant life lessons? I think it’s fair that Werther’s hopes of universal happiness, remembrance, freedom and Godliness are all relevant things, maybe even things to aspire to. But they are not necessarily all useful as statements on life in general. However, his internal paradoxes, contradictions and exuberant irrationalism tell us more about the dualistic and contradictory possibilities of the individual than his words do. His lessons are found in his character more than anywhere else, therefore making them seem like all the things man could be as opposed to all the things man is presumed to be. Goethe, Johannes Wolfgang von. Trans.