

# Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Excerpts from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)

## Abstract

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The son of a prosperous, educated family, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), was a towering figure in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary and cultural life. His genius as a poet and man of letters was recognized and celebrated throughout all of Europe. In his early works, including *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*], he offered, in the name of human emotion and aesthetically charged nature, an impassioned critique of narrow Enlightenment rationalism. Yet, as an heir to Enlightenment universalism, he also spoke out for common humanity and against the elitism of the aristocratic old regime. Many fundamental themes of later German and European Romanticism are evident in this text, which tells the story of a young man named Werther who falls in love with Charlotte, an intellectually gifted and emotionally sensitive woman married to the rationalist physician Albert.

## Source

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### The Sorrows of Young Werther

Book One

May 4, 1771

How glad I am to have got away! My dear friend, what a thing is the heart of man! To leave you, from whom I was inseparable, whom I love so much, and yet be happy! I know you will forgive me. Were not all my other attachments especially designed by fate to torment a heart like mine? Poor Leonore! And yet I was not to blame. Was it my fault, that, while the capricious charms of her sister afforded me agreeable entertainment, a passion for me developed in her poor heart? And yet—am I wholly blameless? Did I not encourage her emotions? Did I not find pleasure in those genuine expressions of Nature, which, though but little amusing in reality, so often made us laugh? Did I not—but oh! What is man, that he dares so to accuse himself? My dear friend, I promise you, I will change; I will no longer, as has ever been my habit, continue to ruminate on every petty annoyance which fortune may have in store for me; I will enjoy the present, and the past shall be for me the past. No doubt you are right, my best of friends, there would be far less suffering amongst mankind, if men—and God knows why they are so constituted—did not use their imaginations so assiduously in recalling the memory of past sorrow, instead of bearing an indifferent present.

Will you be so kind as to inform my mother that I shall look after her business to the best of my ability, and shall give her news about it soon. I have seen my aunt, and find that she is very far from being the disagreeable person our friends make her out to be. She is a lively, temperamental woman, with the best of hearts. I explained to her my mother's grievances with regard to that part of the legacy which has been withheld from her. She told me the reasons why she had done it, and the terms on which she would be willing to give up the whole, and to do more than we have asked. In short, I cannot write further upon this subject now; only tell my mother that all will be well. And in this trifling affair I have again found, my dear friend, that misunderstandings and neglect cause more mischief in the world than malice or wickedness. At any rate, these last two are much rarer.

For the rest, I am very well off here. Solitude in this terrestrial paradise is a wonderful balm to my mind, and the early spring cheers with all its warmth my often-shivering heart. Every tree, every bush is full of

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flowers; and one might wish himself transformed into a cockchafer, to float about in this ocean of fragrance, and find in it all the food one needs.

The town itself is disagreeable; but then, all around it, nature is inexpressibly beautiful. This induced the late Count M. to lay out a garden on one of the sloping hills which here intersect and form the most lovely valleys. The garden is simple; and it is easy to see as soon as one enters that the plan was not designed by a scientific gardener, but by a man who wished to give himself up here to the enjoyment of his own sensitive heart. Many a tear have I already shed to the memory of its departed master, in a summerhouse which is now reduced to ruins, but was his favorite resort, and now is mine. I shall soon be master of the garden. The gardener has become attached to me within the few days I have spent here, and, I am sure, it will not be to his disadvantage.

*May 10*

A wonderful serenity has taken possession of my entire soul, like these sweet spring mornings which I enjoy with all my heart. I am alone, and feel the enchantment of life in this spot, which was created for souls like mine. I am so happy, my dear friend, so absorbed in the exquisite sense of tranquil existence, that I neglect my art. I could not draw a single line at the present moment; and yet I feel that I was never a greater painter than I am now. When the lovely valley teems with mist around me, and the high sun strikes the impenetrable foliage of my trees, and but a few rays steal into the inner sanctuary, I lie in the tall grass by the trickling stream and notice a thousand familiar things: when I hear the humming of the little world among the stalks, and am near the countless indescribable forms of the worms and insects, then I feel the presence of the Almighty Who created us in His own image, and the breath of that universal love which sustains us, as we float in an eternity of bliss; and then, my friend, when the world grows dim before my eyes and earth and sky seem to dwell in my soul and absorb its power, like the form of a beloved—then I often think with longing, Oh, would I could express it, could impress upon paper all that is living so full and warm within me, that it might become the mirror of my soul, as my soul is the mirror of the infinite God! O my friend—but it will kill me—I shall perish under the splendor of these visions!

*May 12*

I know not whether some deceiving spirits haunt this spot, or whether it is the ardent, celestial fancy in my own heart which makes everything around me seem like paradise. In front of the house is a spring—a spring to which I am bound by a charm like Melusine and her sisters. Descending a gentle slope, you come to an arch, where, some twenty steps lower down, the clearest water gushes from the marble rock. The little wall which encloses it above, the tall trees which surround the spot, and the coolness of the place itself—everything imparts a pleasant but sublime impression. Not a day passes that I do not spend an hour there. The young girls come from the town to fetch water—the most innocent and necessary employment, but formerly the occupation of the daughters of kings. As I sit there, the old patriarchal idea comes to life again. I see them, our old ancestors, forming their friendships and plighting their troth at the well; and I feel how fountains and streams were guarded by kindly spirits. He who does not know these sensations has never enjoyed a cool rest at the side of a spring after the hard walk of a summer's day.

*May 13*

You ask if you should send my books. My dear friend, for the love of God, keep them away from me! I no longer want to be guided, animated. My heart is sufficiently excited. I want strains to lull me, and I find them abundantly in my Homer. How often do I still the burning fever of my blood; you have never seen anything so unsteady, so restless, as my heart. But need I confess this to you, my dear friend, who have so often witnessed my sudden transitions from sorrow to joy, and from sweet melancholy to violent

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passions? I treat my heart like a sick child, and gratify its every fancy. Do not repeat this; there are people who would misunderstand it.

*May 15*

The poor people hereabouts know me already, and love me, particularly the children.

When at first I associated with them, and asked them in a friendly way about this and that, some thought that I wanted to ridicule them, and treated me quite rudely. I did not mind this; I only felt keenly what I had often noticed before. People of rank keep themselves coldly aloof from the common people, as though they feared to lose something by the contact; while shallow minds and bad jokers affect to descend to their level, only to make the poor people feel their impertinence all the more keenly.

I know very well that we are not all equal, nor can be so; but I am convinced that he who avoids the ordinary people in order to keep his respect, is as much to blame as a coward who hides himself from his enemy because he fears defeat.

The other day I went to the spring and found a young servant girl, who had set her pitcher on the lowest step, and looked round to see if one of her companions were near to place it on her head. I went down and looked at her. "Shall I help you?" said I. She blushed deeply. "Oh no, sir!" she exclaimed. "Come now! No ceremony!" I replied. She adjusted her headgear, and I helped her. She thanked me and walked up the steps.

*May 17*

I have made all sorts of acquaintances, but have as yet found no one I really like. I do not know what attraction I possess for people, so many of them like me, and attach themselves to me; and then I feel sorry when the road we go together takes us only a short distance. If you ask what the people here are like, I must answer, "Much the same as everywhere." The human race does not vary. Most people work the greater part of their time for a mere living; and the little freedom which remains to them so troubles them that they use every means of getting rid of it. Oh, the destiny of man!

But they are a good sort of people. If I occasionally forget myself, and take part in the innocent pleasures which are left to us humans and enjoy myself, for instance, with genuine freedom and sincerity, round a well-set table, or arrange a walk or a dance or suchlike, all this has a good effect upon me; only I must forget that there lie dormant within me so many other qualities which wither unused, and which I must carefully conceal. Ah! All this affects my spirits. And yet to be misunderstood is the fate of a man like me.

Alas, that the friend of my youth is gone! Alas, that I ever knew her! I might say to myself, "You are a fool to seek what is not to be found here below." But she was mine. I have felt that heart, that noble soul, in whose presence I seemed to be more than I really was, because I was all that I could be. God! Was there a single power in my soul that remained unused? In her presence did I not fully develop that intense feeling with which my heart embraces Nature? Was not our life together a perpetual interplay of the finest emotions, of the keenest wit, whose many shades, however extravagant, bore the stamp of genius? Alas! the few years by which she was my senior brought her to the grave before me. I shall never forget her, never forget her steady mind or her heavenly patience.

A few days ago I met a young man named V., a frank, open fellow, with most pleasing features. He has just left the university, does not think himself overwise, but yet believes that he knows more than other people. He has worked hard, as I can tell from many indications and, in short, is well informed. When he heard that I sketch a good deal, and that I know Greek (two unusual accomplishments for this part of the country), he came to see me and displayed his whole store of learning, from Batteux to Wood, from De Piles to Winckelmann: he assured me he had read all of the first part of Sulzer's "Theory" and possessed

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a manuscript of Heyne's on the study of antiquity. I let him talk.

I have become acquainted also with a very worthy fellow, the district judge, a straightforward and kindly man. I am told it is most delightful to see him in the midst of his children, of whom he has nine. They talk a good deal about his eldest daughter. He has invited me to visit him, and I will do so soon. He lives at one of the prince's hunting lodges, an hour and half walk from here, which he obtained leave to occupy after the loss of his wife, since it is too painful to him to live in town at his official residence.

I have also come across a few other curious fellows who are in every respect annoying and most intolerable in their demonstrations of friendship. Good-by. This letter will please you; it is quite factual.

*May 22*

That the life of man is but a dream has been realized before; and I too am everywhere haunted by this feeling. When I consider the narrow limits within which our active and our contemplative faculties are confined; when I see how all our energies are directed at little more than providing for mere necessities, which again have no further end than to prolong our wretched existence; and then realize that all our satisfaction concerning certain subjects of investigation amounts to nothing more than passive resignation, in which we paint our prison walls with bright figures and brilliant prospects; all this, Wilhelm, makes me silent. I examine my own life and there find a world, but a world rather of imagination and dim desires, than of distinctness and living power. Everything swims before my senses, and I smile and dream my way through the world.

All learned teachers and doctors are agreed that children do not understand the cause of their desires; but no one likes to think that grown-ups too wander about this earth like children, not knowing whence they come or whither they go, influenced as little by fixed motives, but ruled like children by biscuits, sugarplums, and the rod—and yet I think it is so obvious!

I know what you will say in reply, and I am ready to admit it, that they are happiest who, like children, live for the day, amuse themselves with their dolls, dress and undress them, and eagerly watch the cupboard where Mother has locked up her sweets; and when at last they get what they want, eat it greedily and exclaim, "More!" These are certainly happy creatures; but I envy those others just as much who dignify their paltry employments, and sometimes even their passions, with high-sounding phrases, representing them to mankind as gigantic achievements performed for their welfare and glory. Happy the man who can be like this! But he who humbly realizes what all this means, who sees with what pleasure the cheerful citizen converts his little garden into a paradise, and how patiently even the unhappy people pursue their weary way under their burden, and how all alike wish to behold the light of the sun a little longer; yes, such a man is at peace, and creates his world out of his own soul—happy, because he is a human being. And then, however confined he may be, he still preserves in his bosom the sweet feeling of liberty, and knows that he can quit this prison whenever he likes.

*May 26*

You know of old my way of settling down somewhere, of selecting a little place of my own in some pleasant spot, and of putting up in it. Here, too, I have discovered such a comfortable spot which delights me.

About an hour from the town is a place called Wahlheim. It is interestingly situated on a hill; and by following one of the footpaths out of the village, you can have a view of the whole valley below you. A kindly woman keeps a small inn there, selling wine, beer, and coffee; and she is extremely cheerful and pleasant in spite of her age. The chief charm of this spot consists in two linden trees, spreading their enormous branches over the little green before the church, which is entirely surrounded by peasants' cottages, barns, and homesteads. I have seldom seen a place so intimate and comfortable; and often

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have my small table and chair brought out from the inn, and drink my coffee there, and read my Homer. Chance brought me to the spot one fine afternoon, and I found it perfectly deserted. Everybody was in the fields except a little boy about four years of age, who was sitting on the ground, and held between his feet a child about six months old; he pressed it to his breast with both arms, so that he formed a sort of armchair for him; and notwithstanding the liveliness which sparkled in his black eyes, he remained perfectly still. The sight charmed me. I sat down upon a plow opposite them, and sketched with great delight this little picture of brotherly tenderness. I added the neighboring hedge, the barn door, and some broken cart wheels, just as they happened to stand; and after an hour I found that I had made a well-arranged and interesting drawing, without adding the slightest thing of my own. This confirmed me in my resolution of adhering in the future entirely to Nature. Nature alone is inexhaustible, and capable of forming the great master. Much may be alleged in favor of rules; about as much as may be said in favor of middleclass society: an artist modeled after them will never produce anything absolutely bad or in poor taste; just as a man who observes the laws of society and obeys decorum can never be a wholly unwelcome neighbor or a real villain: yet, say what you will of rules, they destroy the genuine feeling of Nature and its true expression. Do not tell me that I am “too severe, that rules only restrain and prune superfluous branches, etc.” My good friend, I shall give you an analogy. It is like love. A warmhearted youth becomes strongly attached to a girl: he spends every hour of the day in her company, wears out his health, and lavishes his fortune to prove that he is wholly devoted to her. Along comes some Philistine, a man of position and respectability, and says to him: “My good young friend, to love is human; but you must love within human bounds. Divide your time: devote a portion to business, and give the hours of recreation to your sweetheart. Calculate your fortune; and of what you have left over, you may make her a present, only not too often—on her birthday, and such occasions, etc. etc.” If he were to follow this advice, he might become a useful member of society, and I should advise every prince to give him a post; but it is all up with his love, and, if he be an artist, with his genius. O my friend! why is it that the torrent of genius so seldom bursts forth, so seldom rolls in full-flowing stream, overwhelming your astounded soul? Because, on either side of this stream sedate and respectable fellows have settled down; their arbors and tulip beds and cabbage fields would be destroyed; therefore in good time they have the sense to dig trenches and raise embankments in order to avert the impending danger.

*May 27*

I see that I have fallen into raptures, declamation, and parables, and have forgotten, in consequence to tell you what became of the meeting with the children. Absorbed in my artistic contemplations, which I described so inadequately in yesterday's letter, I had been sitting on the plow for two hours. Toward evening a young woman, with a basket on her arm, came towards the children, who had not moved all that time. She called out from a distance, “You are a very good boy, Philip!” She greeted me; I thanked her, rose, and went over to her, inquiring if she were the mother of those pretty children. “Yes,” she said; and, giving the elder half a roll, she took the little one in her arms and kissed him with a mother's tenderness. “I left my baby in Philip's care,” she said, “and went into the town with my eldest boy to buy some white bread, some sugar, and an earthen dish, for his cereal.” I saw these various things in the basket, from which the cover had fallen. “I shall make some broth tonight for my little Hans (which was the name of the youngest): that wild fellow, the big one, broke my dish yesterday while he was scrambling with Philip for what was left of the food.” I inquired about the eldest; and she had scarcely told me that he was chasing a couple of geese in the field, when he came running up and handed Philip a hazel switch. I talked a little longer with the woman, and found that she was the daughter of the schoolmaster, and that her husband was gone on a journey into Switzerland after some money that had been left to him by a relative. “They tried to cheat him,” she said, “and would not answer his letters; so he has gone there himself. I hope he has not had an accident; I have heard nothing of him since he went.” I left the woman with regret, giving each of the children a penny and one too for the youngest, to buy some wheaten bread for his broth when she went to town next; and so we parted.

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I tell you, my dear friend, when my thoughts are all upset, the sight of such a creature as this quiets my disturbed mind. She moves in a tranquil happiness within the confined circle of her existence; she makes the best of it from one day to the next; and when she sees the leaves fall, she has no other thought than that winter is approaching.

Since that time I have often gone out there. The children have become quite used to me; and each gets his bit of sugar when I drink my coffee; and in the evening they share my sour milk and bread and butter. They always get their pennies on Sundays, and if I do not get there after evening service, my landlady has orders to give it to them.

They are quite at home with me, tell me everything; and I am particularly delighted when I can watch their passions and the simple outbursts of their desires when some of the other village children are with them.

I had a great deal of trouble to satisfy the apprehensions of the mother, lest (as she says) “they should inconvenience the gentleman.”

*May 30*

What I said the other day about painting is equally true of poetry. We must only know what is really excellent and dare express it; and that is saying a great deal in a few words. Today I watched a scene which, if I could only convey it, would make the most beautiful idyll in the world. But why talk of poetry and scenes and idylls? Can we never take pleasure in Nature without thinking of improving it?

If, after this introduction, you expect anything grand or magnificent, you will be sadly mistaken. It was only a peasant lad who aroused this interest. As usual, I shall tell my story badly; and you, as usual, will think me eccentric. It is again Wahlheim—always Wahlheim—that produces these wonderful things.

There was a coffee party going on outside the house under the linden trees. The people did not exactly please me; and, under one pretext or another, I lingered behind.

A peasant lad came from an adjoining house, and busied himself with the same plow which I had sketched the other day. I liked his manner; spoke to him, and inquired about his circumstances. We became acquainted, and as is my way with people of that sort, I was soon on fairly familiar terms with him. He told me that he was in the service of a widow and was fairly well off. He spoke so much of the woman, and praised her so, that I could soon see he was desperately in love with her. “She is no longer young,” he said, “and was treated badly by her former husband; now she does not want to marry again.” From his account it was so evident what beauty and charms she possessed for him, and how ardently he wished she would choose him to extinguish the memory of her first husband’s faults, that I should have to repeat what he said word for word in order to describe the genuineness of the poor fellow’s attachment, love, and devotion. It would require the gifts of a very great poet to convey the expression of his features, the harmony of his voice, and the fire of his eye. No, words cannot portray the tenderness of his every movement and his manner. Whatever I might say would only be clumsy. His fears lest I misunderstand his position with regard to the woman or question the propriety of her conduct touched me particularly. It simply cannot be conveyed, how charming it was when he spoke of her figure and body, which although without the graces of youth, had won and attached him to her. I can only recall it to myself. Never in my life have I seen or imagined such intense devotion, such ardent affections, in such purity. Do not blame me if I say that the mere recollection of this innocence and truth burns in my very soul; that this image of fidelity and tenderness haunts me everywhere; and that I consume myself in longing and desire, as though kindled by the flame.

I must try to see her as soon as I can; or perhaps it is better that I should see her through the eyes of her lover. When I actually see her, she might not appear as she now stands before me; and why should I spoil

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so sweet a picture?

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*August 12*

Certainly Albert is the best fellow in the world. I had a strange scene with him yesterday. I went to take leave of him, for I had taken it into my head to spend a few days in these hills from where I now write to you. As I was walking up and down his room, my eye fell upon his pistols. "Lend me those pistols," said I, "for my journey." "By all means," he replied, "if you will take the trouble to load them; they only hang there pro forma." I took down one of them, and he continued: "Ever since I nearly paid for my extreme caution, I will have nothing to do with these things." I was curious to hear the story. "I was staying," said he, "some three months ago at a friend's house in the country. I had a brace of pistols with me, unloaded; and I slept without anxiety. One rainy afternoon I was sitting by myself, doing nothing, when it occurred to me—I do not know how—that the house might be attacked, that we might require the pistols, that we might—in short, you know how we sometimes imagine things when we have nothing better to do. I gave the pistols to the servant to clean and load. He was dallying with the maids and trying to frighten them, when the pistol went off—God knows how! The ramrod was still in the barrel; and it went straight through the ball of the right thumb of one of the girls and shattered it. I had to endure her lamentations and pay the surgeon's bill; so, since that time, I have kept my weapons unloaded. My dear fellow, what is the use of prudence? We can never guard against all possible dangers. However,"—now you must know I am very fond of him until he says "however"; is it not self-evident that every universal rule must have its exceptions? But he is so exceedingly anxious to justify himself that if he thinks he has said anything too precipitate or too general or only half true, he never stops qualifying, modifying, and extenuating till at last he appears to have said nothing at all. On this occasion Albert was deeply immersed in his subject; I finally ceased to listen to him, and became lost in reverie. With a sudden motion I pointed the mouth of the pistol to my forehead, over the right eye. "What are you doing?" cried Albert, turning the pistol away. "It is not loaded," said I. "Even so," he asked with impatience, "what is the meaning of this? I cannot imagine how a man can be so mad as to shoot himself; the very idea of it shocks me."

"Oh, you people!" I said, "why should you always have to label an action and call it mad or wise, good or bad? What does it all mean? Have you fathomed the motives of our actions? Can you explain the causes and make them inevitable? If you could, you would be less hasty with your 'labels.'"

"But you will admit," said Albert, "that some actions are vicious, let them spring from whatever motives they may." I granted it, and shrugged my shoulders.

"Still," I continued, "there are some exceptions here too. Theft is a crime; but the man who commits it from extreme poverty to save his family from starvation, does he deserve pity or punishment? Who shall throw the first stone at a husband who in just resentment sacrifices his faithless wife and her perfidious seducer; or at the young girl who in an hour of rapture forgets herself in the overwhelming joys of love? Even our laws, cold and pedantic as they are, relent in such cases, and withhold their punishment."

"That is quite another thing," said Albert, "because a man under the influence of violent passion loses all reasoning power and is regarded as drunk or insane."

"Oh, you rationalists," I replied, smiling. "Passion! Drunkenness! Madness! You moral creatures, so calm and so righteous! You abhor the drunken man, and detest the eccentric; you pass by, like the Levite, and thank God, like the Pharisee, that you are not like one of them. I have been drunk more than once, my passions have always bordered on madness; I am not ashamed to confess it; I have learned in my own way that all extraordinary men who have done great and improbable things have ever been decried by the world as drunk or insane. And in ordinary life, too, is it not intolerable that no one can undertake

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anything noble or generous without having everybody shout, 'That fellow is drunk, he is mad'? Shame on you, ye sages!"

"Here you go again," said Albert; "you always exaggerate, and in this matter you are undoubtedly wrong; we were speaking of suicide, which you compare with great actions, when actually it is impossible to regard it as anything but weakness. It is much easier to die than to bear a life of misery with fortitude."

I was on the point of breaking off the conversation, for nothing puts me off so completely as when someone utters a wretched commonplace when I am talking from the depths of my heart. However, I controlled myself, for I had often heard the same observation with sufficient vexation; I answered him, therefore, with some heat, "You call this a weakness—don't be led astray by appearances. When a nation which has long groaned under the intolerable yoke of a tyrant rises at last and throws off its chains, do you call that weakness? The man who, to save his house from the flames, finds his physical strength redoubled, so that he can lift burdens with ease which normally he could scarcely move; he who under the rage of an insult attacks and overwhelms half a dozen of his enemies—are these to be called weak? My friend, if a display of energy be strength, how can the highest exertion of it be a weakness?"

Albert looked at me and said, "Do forgive me, but I do not see that the examples you have produced bear any relation to the question." "That may be," I answered; "I have often been told that my method of argument borders a little on the absurd. But let us see if we cannot place the matter in another light by inquiring what may be a man's state of mind who resolves to free himself from the burden of life—a burden which often seems so pleasant to bear. Surely, we are justified in discussing a subject such as this only in so far as we can put ourselves in another man's situation."

"Human nature," I continued, "has its limits. It can endure a certain degree of joy, sorrow, and pain, but collapses as soon as this 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 suffering, moral or physical; and in my opinion it is just as absurd to call a man a coward who kills himself as to call a man a coward who dies of a malignant fever."

"Paradox, all paradox!" cried Albert. "Not so paradoxical as you imagine," I replied. "You admit that we call a disease mortal when Nature is so severely attacked and her strength so far exhausted that she cannot possibly recover, no matter what the change that may take place."

"Now, my friend, apply this to the mind; observe a man in his natural, confined condition; consider how ideas work upon him, and how impressions affect him, till at length a violent passion seizes him, destroys all his powers of calm reflection, and utterly ruins him."

"It is in vain that a man of sound mind and cool temper recognizes the condition of such a wretched being, in vain that he counsels him. Just as a healthy man cannot impart his strength to an invalid."

Albert thought this too general. I reminded him about a girl who had drowned herself a short time previously, and I related her story.

"She was a good creature, who had grown up in the narrow sphere of her domestic chores and weekly appointed labor; one who knew no pleasure beyond a walk in the company of her friends on Sundays, dressed in her best clothes, which she had got together gradually; or perhaps going to a dance now and then during the holidays, and chatting away her spare hours with a neighbor, discussing the scandals or the quarrels of the village—trifles sufficient to occupy her heart. At length the warmth of her nature is aroused by unfamiliar desires. She is flattered by the attentions of men; her former pleasures seem to her more and more insipid, till eventually she meets a young man to whom she is attracted by a strange, new feeling; upon him she now rests all her hopes; she forgets the world around her; she sees, hears, desires nothing but him, and him only. He alone occupies all her thoughts. Unspoiled by the empty indulgence of



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enervating vanity, her affection moving steadily towards its object, she hopes to be his, and to realize, in an everlasting union with him, all that happiness which she sought, all that bliss for which she longed. His repeated promises confirm her hopes; embraces and endearments, which increase the ardor of her desires, overpower her soul. She floats in a dim, delusive anticipation of her happiness; and her feelings become excited to their utmost tension. She stretches out her arms finally to embrace the object of all her wishes—and her lover abandons her. Stunned and bewildered, she stands upon a precipice. All is darkness around her. No prospect, no hope, no consolation—forsaken by him in whom her existence was centered! She sees nothing of the world before her, thinks nothing of the many others who might fill the void in her heart; she feels herself deserted, forsaken by all the world; and, unseeing and impelled by the agony in her soul, she plunges into the deep, to end her sufferings in the broad embrace of death. You see, Albert, this is the story of thousands; and now tell me, is not this a case of physical infirmity? Nature can find no way out of the labyrinth of confusion and contradiction; and the poor creature must die.

“Shame on him who can look on calmly and say, ‘Foolish girl! She should have waited; she should have let time wear off the impression; her despair would have been eased, and she would have found another lover to comfort her.’ One might as well say, ‘The fool, to die of a fever! Why did he not wait till his strength was restored, till his blood became calm? All would have gone well, and he would have been alive now.’”

Albert, who could not even now see the justice of the comparison, offered some further objections, amongst others, that I had taken the case of a mere ignorant girl. But how a rational being of sense, of more understanding and experience, could be excused, he was unable to comprehend. “My friend!” I exclaimed, “a man is a man; and whatever be the extent of his reasoning powers, they are of little avail when passion rages within, and he feels himself confined by the narrow limits of human nature. Rather—but let us talk of this some other time,” I said, and took my hat. My heart was over full; and we parted without having understood each other. How rare in this world is understanding!

*August 15*

There can be no doubt that in this world nothing makes us indispensable to each other but love alone. I know that Charlotte could not lose me without a pang, and the children will take it for granted that I should visit them every morning. I went this afternoon to tune Charlotte’s piano. But I could not do it, for the little ones insisted on my telling them a story; and Charlotte herself asked me to satisfy them. I gave them their supper, and they are now as fully contented with me as with Charlotte; and I told them my favorite tale of the princess who was waited upon by hands. I learn a great deal doing this and am surprised at the impression my stories create. If I sometimes invent a minor episode which I forget the next time, they are quick to remind me that the story was different before; so that I now practice reciting them unchanged in the same singsong tone which never changes. I learn by this how much an author injures his work by altering it in a second edition, even though it may be improved from a literary point of view. The first impression is readily received. We are so constituted that we believe the most incredible things; and, once they are engraved upon the memory, woe to him who would endeavor to erase them.

*August 18*

Must it ever be thus—that the source of our happiness must also be the fountain of our misery?

The rich and ardent feeling which filled my heart with a love of Nature, overwhelmed me with a torrent of delight, and brought all paradise before me, has now become an insupportable torment—a demon which perpetually pursues me. When I used to gaze from these rocks upon the mountains across the river and upon the green valley before me, and saw everything around budding and bursting; the hills clothed from foot to peak with tall, thick trees; the valleys in all their variety, shaded with the loveliest woods; and the river gently gliding along among the whispering reeds, mirroring the clouds which the soft

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evening breeze wafted across the sky—when I heard the groves about me melodious with the music of birds, and saw the million swarms of insects dancing in the last golden beams of the sun, whose setting rays awoke the humming beetles from their grassy beds, while the subdued tumult around me drew my attention to the ground, and I there observed the hard rock giving nourishment to the dry moss, while the heather flourished upon the arid sands below me—all this conveyed to me the holy fire which animates all Nature, and filled and glowed within my heart. I felt myself exalted by this overflowing fullness to the perception of the Godhead, and the glorious forms of an infinite universe stirred within my soul! Stupendous mountains encompassed me, abysses yawned at my feet, and cataracts fell headlong down before me; rivers rolled through the plains below, and rocks and mountains resounded from afar. In the depths of the earth I saw the mysterious powers at work; on its surface, and beneath the heavens there teemed ten thousand living creatures. Everything is alive with an infinite variety of forms; mankind safeguards itself in little houses and settles and rules in its own way over the wide universe. Poor fool! in whose petty estimation all things are little. From the inaccessible mountains, across the wilderness which no mortal foot has trod, far as the confines of the unknown ocean, breathes the spirit of the eternal Creator; and every speck of dust which He has made finds favor in His sight—Ah, how often at that time has the flight of a crane, soaring above my head, inspired me with the desire to be transported to the shores of the immeasurable ocean, there to quaff the pleasures of life from the foaming goblet of the Infinite, and to realize, if but for a moment with the confined powers of my soul, the bliss of that Creator Who accomplishes all things in Himself, and through Himself!

My dear friend, the mere recollection of those hours consoles me. Even the effort to recall those ineffable emotions, and give them utterance, exalts my soul above itself, and makes me feel doubly the intensity of my present anguish.

It is as if a curtain had been drawn from before my eyes, and, instead of prospects of eternal life, the abyss of an ever-open grave yawned before me. Can we say of anything that it *is* when all passes away—when time, with the speed of a storm, carries all things onward—and our transitory existence, hurried along by the torrent, is swallowed up by the waves or dashed against the rocks? There is not a moment but consumes you and yours—not a moment in which you do not yourself destroy something. The most innocent walk costs thousands of poor insects their lives; one step destroys the delicate structures of the ant and turns a little world into chaos. No; it is not the great and rare catastrophes of the world, the floods which sweep away villages, the earthquakes that swallow up our towns, that affect me. My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power which lies latent in every part of universal Nature. Nature has formed nothing that does not destroy itself, and everything near it. And so, surrounded by earth and air and all the active forces, I stagger on with anguished heart; the universe to me is an ever devouring, ever ruminating monster.

Source: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *The New Melusina Novelle* (1774). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949, pp. 1–14, 41–49.

Source of original German text: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. *Kleine Prosa*. *Epen*, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*. *Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. Waltraud Weithölter, volume 8. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994, pp. 11–35, 93–109.

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