



The Diagnoses of Young Werther: A Clinical Appraisal

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Abstract— *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a genre-defining novel written in 1774 by the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It is the story of a complex character by the name of Werther. The novel is a romantic tragedy with unrequited love, a love triangle, and a tragic ending. However, the reader who is following Werther eventually realizes that the protagonist is no longer a sympathetic character. This article explores the reasons behind Werther's extreme emotions and drastic behaviors. A 'clinical examination' of the novel reveals elements of depression, traits of several personality disorders, and, finally, bipolar disorder. We also discover that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was based on true events with Werther representing Goethe in his younger days. How many of Goethe's own personality traits are reflected by Werther is unclear.



Keywords—Mental health, Diagnoses, Werther, Goethe

The Sorrows of Young Werther is a short novel written in 1774 by the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe when he was only twenty-four years old. Goethe went on to write poetry and drama and he is perhaps best known for the play, *Faust*, which was based on ancient European legends. Goethe had diverse interests performing experiments ranging from botany to the properties of color. In modern terms, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* may be called a romantic tragedy having the elements of unrequited love, a love triangle, and the tragic demise of the protagonist. It is wonderfully recounted mostly in epistolary form with a veritable cache of philosophical musings, similes, metaphors, and aphorisms. There are several translations of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and the one I am using for this article is by Michael Hulse published by Penguin Books. This is a superb rendering from the German original and, I believe, that Hulse has captured the poignancy and pathos of the prose remarkably. There is an informative fifteen page introduction to the novel by Hulse that places the story in context to Goethe's personal life. The reader learns that the book is based upon true events and that the first half of the story is about Goethe and the second about his acquaintance, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem. In fact, Goethe had an unrequited romantic interest in a young woman named Charlotte (variously called Lotte or Lottchen) Buff, whose 'intended' was Christian Kestner. This novel should be

appreciated for the plot, its format, the prose, and the expert treatment of the subject matter. It is almost vulgar to consider it a showcase for mental illness although this has been claimed repeatedly. Accordingly, we will re-examine this novel from a clinical viewpoint to see if such an analysis is justified and what conclusions, if any, can be reached. The approach will be to consider some potential diagnoses and then re-examine the text for evidence.

One of the commoner conditions that can be attributed to the protagonist Werther is depression. The reader discovers quite a rapid change in Werther's mood in a letter to his friend, Wilhelm, dated August 18: "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." The reason for this change may have been the arrival of Albert, Charlotte's 'intended,' mentioned in the letter to Wilhelm on July 30 at which point Werther decides that he has to leave. However, he does not leave and his melancholy is persistent until his death at the end of December. Werther has realized that Charlotte cannot be his since Albert is a fine individual who has all the qualities to make Charlotte happy: "Enough, dear Wilhelm; her intended is here! A dear and honest man whom one cannot help liking." The perceived loss of Charlotte likely triggered a grief reaction. Acute grief reactions, if

prolonged, can result in so-called complicated grief. In severe cases where there is overwhelming sadness, with feelings of hopelessness, lack of concentration, chronic fatigue, sleep disturbance, and suicidal ideation, one should suspect depression. I believe most readers would agree that the protagonist's mental state does, indeed, deteriorate into depression. An isolated case of depression with a clearly definable cause is sometimes referred to as reactive depression. Although one is more likely to suffer from depression again following a first episode, this sub-type does not usually portend chronic mental illness.

Werther goes on to experience other losses and failures which exacerbate his mood disorder. He starts working in an ambassador's office and finds the job onerous: "The ambassador is extremely trying, as I foresaw. He is the most punctilious oaf imaginable, doing everything step by step..." Unfortunately, this trial of employment leads to another unpleasant encounter. Werther becomes friends with Count C., an associate of the ambassador, who invites him to dinner. Werther senses that something is amiss when the Count's other guests arrive. The Count takes Werther aside and informs him that the nobility objects to his presence: "'You know how absurd things are,' he said. 'I gather the company takes exception to your presence here...'" When the young lady who was with him at the event also tells him the disparaging comments that she had to hear about him, he writes to Wilhelm "Everything is conspiring against me." Werther feels helpless and resigns from the position in the court. He writes "Indeed, I am nothing but a wanderer and a pilgrim on this earth!" This incident also foreshadows the final scenes of rejection in the story. Depression is one of the least challenging diagnoses made by physicians but clinical presentations are usually not so simple. Depression can be part of another mood disorder or it can accompany other medical conditions. Physicians have to maintain a high index of suspicion to ensure that they are making the correct diagnosis. When depression is not complicated by another mood disorder, it is called unipolar depression. The same can be said of our patient in this novel: should we now seek a more definitive diagnosis?

Borderline personality disorder may be a more appropriate diagnosis for the protagonist. This psychological disorder is challenging to treat and carries one of the higher rates of suicide in medical conditions, approaching 10%. It is characterized by intense and unstable relationships along with pervasive fears of abandonment, mood swings with anxiety and sadness, and impulsive behaviors, including thoughts of self-harm. Werther's passion is so intense that he claims "She is sacred to me." He becomes distraught when he suspects that she may not be as interested in him as he imagines. At one point, he is standing by a carriage with other passengers and he is trying to catch Lotte's gaze:

"I tried to catch Lotte's eyes; but ah, they gazed from one to another! But not me! Me! Me!...And she did not see me! The carriage drove off, and my eyes filled with tears."

In many cases, such psychiatric diagnoses are not mutually exclusive and clinicians may list more than one to describe the full spectrum of symptoms that they are observing. Moreover, there are ten personality disorders and it is not uncommon for a person to meet the criteria for more than one. These ten personality disorders are grouped into three clusters, which tend to be related or tend to occur together in the same individual. Borderline personality disorder falls into cluster B, which includes the emotional and dramatic personality types. The three others that are included in this cluster are antisocial, narcissistic, and histrionic personality disorders. There can be little doubt that Werther has narcissistic and histrionic personality traits. Narcissistic individuals believe that they are special and deserve better treatment than others. They lack empathy and continually seek admiration from others. Werther often mentions that he is an artist or a poet in his correspondence without really providing evidence of any accomplishments. However, he is quick to ridicule others: "The doctor is a pedantic jack-fool of a fellow who is forever folding the frills on his cuffs...", or: "Then came in the most gracious Lady von S., with her spouse and her scheming little goose of a flat-chested, trimly corseted daughter...", or: "What fools they are not to see that the position one occupies is in reality immaterial, and that he who is in the topmost position so rarely plays the most important role!", or: "There is one woman, for instance, who tells everyone who will listen about her family and estate, so that a stranger would needs think her a fool with an inflated opinion of her drop of aristocratic blood and of the importance of her estate." He certainly has harsh words for some of the people that he encounters. On the other hand, Werther frequently claims that he is better than others, even going so far as to calling himself a genius: "I am, however, growing daily more aware how foolish it is to judge others by one's own standards, dear friend," or: "Never in all my life have I danced so well. I was no longer a mere mortal," or: "I have been intoxicated more than once, my passions have never been far off insanity, and I have no regrets: because I have come to realize, in my own way, that people have felt a need to decry the extraordinary men who accomplish great things, things that seemed impossible, as intoxicated and insane," or: "Am I to despair of my own powers, my own gifts, when others with paltry abilities and talents go showing off, smugly self-satisfied? Dear God who bestowed all these gifts on me, why didst Thou not keep half back, and in their place grant me confidence and contentment?"

The traits of a histrionic personality are readily recognizable in Werther as well. Histrionic personalities have a pattern of

excessive attention-seeking behavior all the while looking for approval. They may dress provocatively or act seductively. They display exaggerated emotions often acting dramatically: "She does not see or feel that she is concocting a poison that will be my destruction and her own..." There are several scenes where he cries hysterically, at times in Lotte's presence.

What is most concerning about Werther is that he never asks Lotte about her feelings toward him. He is preoccupied with his own passions. The fact that Lotte has a partner with whom she is engaged does not deter him; he keeps visiting her frequently, seeing her even in Albert's presence: "At times I cannot grasp that she can love another man, that she dare love another man, when I love her and her alone with such passion and devotion..." The reader discovers as the story unfolds that the protagonist is a selfish, self-centred individual who is no longer likeable. It takes on a particularly sinister turn when we find that Werther shamelessly blames Lotte for the drastic, tragic steps he is about to undertake, and he wants to make certain that she knows: "I am convinced I have endured my fill of sorrows, and that I am sacrificing myself for you," or: "...and you, Lotte, hand me the implements, you at whose hands I desired my death, and from whom, ah, I now receive it," or: "You see, Lotte, I do not flinch from taking the cold and terrible cup from which I must drink the sleep of death! You handed it to me, and I do not hesitate."

In literature, the cognitive leap from suicide to murder is not unfathomable. Recall the infamous lines when the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* comes upon a sleeping woman: "...it stirred the fiend within me-not I, but she shall suffer: the murder I have committed because I am for ever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: be hers the punishment!" Similarly, we learn that Werther is not totally averse to murder for he comes to the rescue of the young lad who has murdered the woman he desired: "...sympathy took an irresistible hold on him...even as a criminal he considered him so blameless..." A note, written by Werther, found posthumously reads: "You cannot be saved, unfortunate man! I well see that *we* (italics mine) cannot be saved." Goethe vividly illustrates that, in Werther's eyes, the line between murder and suicide is blurring. Indeed, we know from Dante's *Inferno*, suicide, like murder, is an act of violence, and both are punished alongside each other in the seventh circle of Hell; only the victims are different.

Laymen will often raise the spectre of bipolar disorder when discussing this novel. As we know, bipolar disorder is a major psychiatric condition classified under mood disorders. Its older name was manic-depressive disorder since it consists of alternating depressive and manic or hypomanic

phases. Manic episodes are periods of increased energy, reduced requirement for sleep, hypersexuality, euphoria, and increased anxiety possibly with irritability and agitation. We usually try to elicit the triad of increased sexuality, reduced sleep, and increased spending behavior. Of course, we don't know the precise diagnostic criteria when this condition is taken out of the context of contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century society. This novel opens with unmitigated exuberance expressed by Werther to his friend: "A wonderful serenity has taken possession of my entire soul...I am alone and rejoicing in my life in these parts, which were created for just such souls as mine..." This is probably more than mere setting-and-projection but possibly the hypomanic phase of a mood disorder. Things get more complicated, in more than one sense, once he meets Charlotte. He appears to be euphoric: "You know my Wilhelm; I am quite at home there now, and from there it is only half an hour to Lotte, and there I take pleasure in myself and all the happiness that can be Man's." Werther's feelings and behaviors are described several times in the novel both by himself and external observers. When he describes Albert, he writes: "His tranquil evenness of manner is in marked contrast to the turbulence of my own disposition, which I cannot hide." He goes on: "...I behave like a complete fool, and clown about, and talk gibberish.-'For God's sake,' Lotte said to me today, 'please spare us scenes like last night's! When you're so merry you are terrifying.'" As pointed out earlier in this essay, there is a sudden change from this mood and demeanor to intractable sadness reminiscent of bipolar disease. This is the source of our hero's tragic flaw. His mood and passion are beyond his control and beyond help setting the stage for the tragic end. The erudite reader can follow the dramatic irony penned by Goethe and is left to answer the question: is this story about romance and tragedy, or about the hero's psychiatric shortcomings? Werther writes early in the tale: "And still, to be misunderstood is my fate." It was pointed out at the beginning of this essay that in the first half of this novel Werther is Goethe. Some have suspected that Goethe personally had the hallmarks of bipolar disorder suggesting that this might be the hero's ultimate diagnosis.

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