

Nature and Narcissism

An essay reflecting mad love in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe- The Sorrows of Young Werther.

Nature plays a powerful role in Werther, where it is a mirror for the protagonist. Standing before that mirror is Werther, whose mad love makes us feel his experiences of desire and despair. What seems like a cliché of love at first sight, and a hope for young Werther to conquer a forbidden lover, a different kind of passion reveals itself. Goethe's synchronizing of Werther with nature creates traces of the progress of that sickness. While his observations of nature feel real and generate a sense of self-awareness, we know he is a narcissist with a complete lack of self-awareness.

Werther is a narcissist, but Goethe in his writing, proves to be the bigger narcissist. Goethe grooms his reader, convincing us Werther is a lover, and then a victim of love. All the signs are there for us to see that Werther is empty, searching for validation, but we overlook them in our association to comparative experiences. Goethe strategically enmeshes images of nature and desire, we feel them as Werther, never as an observation of Werther. "With the request that I see her again the very same day...sun, moon, and stars can quietly go about their business, I don't know whether it's day or night, the whole world around me vanishes." (Goethe 43). Werther is experiencing a loss of reality, but it allows him to fill the void with his new, imaginary relationship.

In these early stages of perceived romance, Goethe makes it impossible to identify Werther as anything more than a man in love, experiencing heartache. All too familiar to a healthy relationship with self. As summer comes to an end, in a self-reflection from Werther, a sense of delusion appears. "I have no power of imagination, no feeling for nature...when we are inadequate to ourselves, everything seems inadequate to us." (70). We realize the only reality Werther perceives is his own.

Werther receives a gift on his birthday from his beloved Lotte and Albert, her husband. To his surprise, she sends him a pink ribbon she wore the first time they met. Goethe reinstates the cycle of manipulation, for both his audience and for Werther. Fall is near, just when Werther begins to touch madness, he's grounded in Lotte's participation: this is no longer one sided.

Werther wasn't mad, a glimpse at the reciprocated love is given to all. A change in seasons has reset the threshold for desire. While Werther is mostly experiencing sadness in his time alone, a mirror of winter and depression provides him relief. "If now it rains hard and blows and freezes and thaws- ha! I think, it can't be any worse in the house than it is outside, or vice versa, and so all is well." (85). To freeze outside would be no different from the sorrow he feels inside. Werther knowing it is out of his control to escape an attachment to pain, and to his rationalization, an idea that everyone is experiencing some degree of misery, Werther finds comfort. But this comfort is short lived: his mad love, reflected in the winter thaw, pushes him over the edge into self-destruction.

Werther's imagination is dead, exposing his insanity now for Lotte to see and feel. Lotte knows he doesn't love her, and it is narcissism that makes her the object of his affection. "Can't you tell that you are deluding yourself...I'm afraid it's only the impossibility of possessing me that makes you want me so much." (126). Werther succumbs to his narcissism, with pistols borrowed from her husband Albert, he succumbs to mad love. Not before informing Lotte of his plans and in true narcissistic form, blames her for his sacrifice. Werther's suicide was inevitable. For Werther, death becomes the most intimate form of sublime romance. The terrifying mysteries of the unknown.