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psychiatry in literature

The Sorrows of Young Werther: that which must not be read

Dori Zosmer 

In 1774, and over roughly 6 weeks of intensive writing, the 24-year-old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published his semi-autobiographical book *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. It was an immediate success, arguably one of the first 'bestsellers', was hailed by Napoleon Bonaparte and even led to merchandise such as Werther-themed perfume.

The book was an important part of the German proto-Romantic literary movement known as Sturm und Drang, often translated as Storm and Stress. It is presented as a collection of letters written by Werther, a young artist, to his friend Wilhelm. Werther falls hopelessly in love with Charlotte, but she is already engaged to Albert and does not requite his love. Although the three become friends, Werther remains infatuated and becomes imprisoned in the ensuing love triangle. Eventually and after seeing no alternative, he borrows Albert's pistols and at midnight on Christmas Eve, shoots himself in the head. He dies an agonising 12 hours later.

While for Goethe the writing of this novel was cathartic, for his readers it led to alarming consequences. It is reputed that after reading the book, young men started taking their lives in a similar manner to Werther, wearing similar clothing and using similar pistols. A copy of the book was often found on their person. There is controversy about the details and numbers, but there was enough fear of contagion that the book was banned in countries such as Denmark and Italy. In the 1970s, researcher David Phillips coined the term 'Werther effect' to describe the phenomenon of copycat suicides, whereby publicised suicides are followed by spikes in suicides in the general population.

Goethe's still accessible book opens a plethora of ethical, psychoanalytic and philosophical discussion. The later-coined Werther effect gives pause for thought on how best to approach suicide prevention campaigns, and the ethical guidelines of media coverage. Indeed, through increasing knowledge we try to negotiate the see-saw, on one side inadvertently increasing suicide rates and on the other, like J.K. Rowling's infamous villain Voldemort, having a fear of mentioning it.

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