Johann Wolfgang Goethe
The Sorrows of Young Werther

- A literary analysis-

Content:

The main character of Goethe's novel is Werther. From his letters to his friend Wilhelm we get to know that he is in his early twenties and not yet sure what the purpose of his life is, which profession he is to take up.

Another role holds Lotte, the 19 year old daughter of a widowed official. Since her mother's death she has been leading the household on her own and takes loving care of her many smaller siblings. Lotte has been engaged for 4 years to the 11 year older (i.e. 30 year old) secretary Albert, who is a good-spirited and gentle man but becomes Werther's antagonist.

The reader does not get to know anything about Wilhelm, whom Werther's letters are sent to. Furthermore, one needs to guess about the content of Wilhelm's letters by the context of Werther's replies. Thus the reader himself takes the role of Wilhelm.

Werther, who is of bourgeois origin, leaves his home to regulate some issues about a family estate for his mother. But soon he neglects his tasks and spends his time enjoying his life and long afternoons in the nature. He quickly acquaints with the nice people who populate his "paradise".

Invited to a dance by his new acquaintances he gets to know Lotte on the ride to the prom and instantaneously falls in love with her, though knowing that she is already engaged. During a thunderstorm, as the situation reminds them of a romantic poem, both realize that their affection is mutual. From now on, Werther visits her nearly daily and spends blissful hours close to her.

But when Albert, Lotte's fiancé returns from his journey, Werther's feelings for Lotte change from "bliss" to the "source of his unhappiness" because Albert's presence renders it clear to him that his love needs to remain unfulfilled as Lotte will never be able to return his feelings. Although Albert is well-spirited towards Werther, their relationships remains ambiguous as in addition to their rivalry over Lotte it becomes clear that they honor opposing value systems. It is
in his letters that Werther realizes that his strong feelings for Lotte might be his doom, for the sentiment of absolute love remains one-sided. He ultimately decides to leave her in order to save himself.

When a duke offers him a job as an envoy, Werther hopes to physically, psychologically and emotionally flee Lotte's influence. His efforts to succeed as a citizen in nobility are crushed by the circumstances of a society determined by class.

Disillusioned Werther returns back to the place his soul calls home, back to Lotte. But in the time Werther has been away, Lotte and Albert have married. Werther’s state of mind becomes ever more unstable due to this obvious and insurmountable barrier for his unconditional love. His reason is not able to hold back his emotions. One night Werther visits Lotte as Albert is away. He hugs and kisses her passionately and throws himself to the floor in front of her. But Lotte breaks free and locks herself in another room in order not to succumb to Werther's passions.

Desperate after this event, Werther continues a farewell-letter he had begun earlier, borrows two pistols from Albert under a pretence and shoots himself.