Lectures 11-12:
Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*
18th Century German Literature

• Transition from Latin to vernacular and to/from French paradigm
  – Gottsched (1700-1766)
• Enlightenment literature
  – Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*
• *Sturm und Drang* (1769-1786)
• Goethe and Schiller
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

- (1749-1832)
- Lawyer, political advisor, scientist, but primarily author
- Novels, dramas, poetry
- *Sturm und Drang*, Classicism, and Romanticism
- 210 and 20,000?
- Importance
Goethe’s Major Works

- *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)
- *Roman Elegies* (1790)
- *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796)
- *Faust*, Parts I (1808) and II (1832)
- *Elective Affinities* (1809)
- *Theory of Colors* (1810)
- *Italian Journey* (1817)
Outline of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

- Main Characters
- Plot
- Literary Form
- Major Themes
- Influence
Main Characters

• Werther
  – Talented, isolated, emotionally volatile protagonist
  – Mentally ill (severe depression)

• Lotte
  – Idealized woman of virtue
  – Ambiguity in affections

• Albert
  – Representative of enlightenment values
  – Despite friendship, incapable of understanding W.
Plot

• Plot Points
  – W arrives, meets and falls in love with L
  – A’s arrival, W’s unhappiness and departure
  – W’s return, increased woes, climax
  – Suicide/resolution

• Plot Features
  – Plot plays only minor role
  – Few external incursions
Literary Form

- Epistolary novel
  - Subjective perspective of main character dominates
- Editorial intervention
  - Provides information excluded by epistolary form
  - Provides independent moral framework
Outline of Major Themes

• Nature
• Sentimentalism
• Social Groups
• Suicide
  – W’s “justifications”
  – G’s critical stance
Nature

• Nature vs. social life
  – freedom vs. constraint
• Nature as an active force and source
  – vs. something to be mastered
• W’s emotional connection to nature
• Transformation in W’s attitude.
• Anticipation of Romantic Conception
Sentimentalism

- Philosophical Characterization
  - Sentiment/passion vs. intellect/reason

- Literary references
  - Vicar of Wakefield, Klopstock, Ossian, Lessing’s Emilia Galotti

- “Man is not master of himself, least of all master of his own emotions” (7-1).

- Mourning as a form of love
Social Groups

- Nobility
- Bourgeoisie
- Peasants
- Children
Suicide

- Multiple instances of foreshadowing
- Only possible resolution?
- Werther’s “justifications”
  - Natural consequence of disease (8-12)
  - Relieve suffering (3-16)
  - Gain eternal freedom (3-16)
  - Atonement for sin (11-24, 12-20)
  - Sacrifice (12-20)
- G’s critical stance
Influence

• Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*
• 19th Century French Opera, *Werther* (Jules Massenet)
• *The New Sorrows of Young Werther* (Ulrich Plenzdorff)
Summary

• New inner world is revealed.
• Fundamental Ambiguity
  – In Goethe
  – In us