

# Humanities 4

Lecture 12:

Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

# Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



- (1749-1832)
- *Sturm und Drang*,  
Classicism, and  
Romanticism

# 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
- Social Groups
- Suicide
  - W's "justifications"
  - G's critical stance
  - Blame?

# 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

# 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

# What's the point?

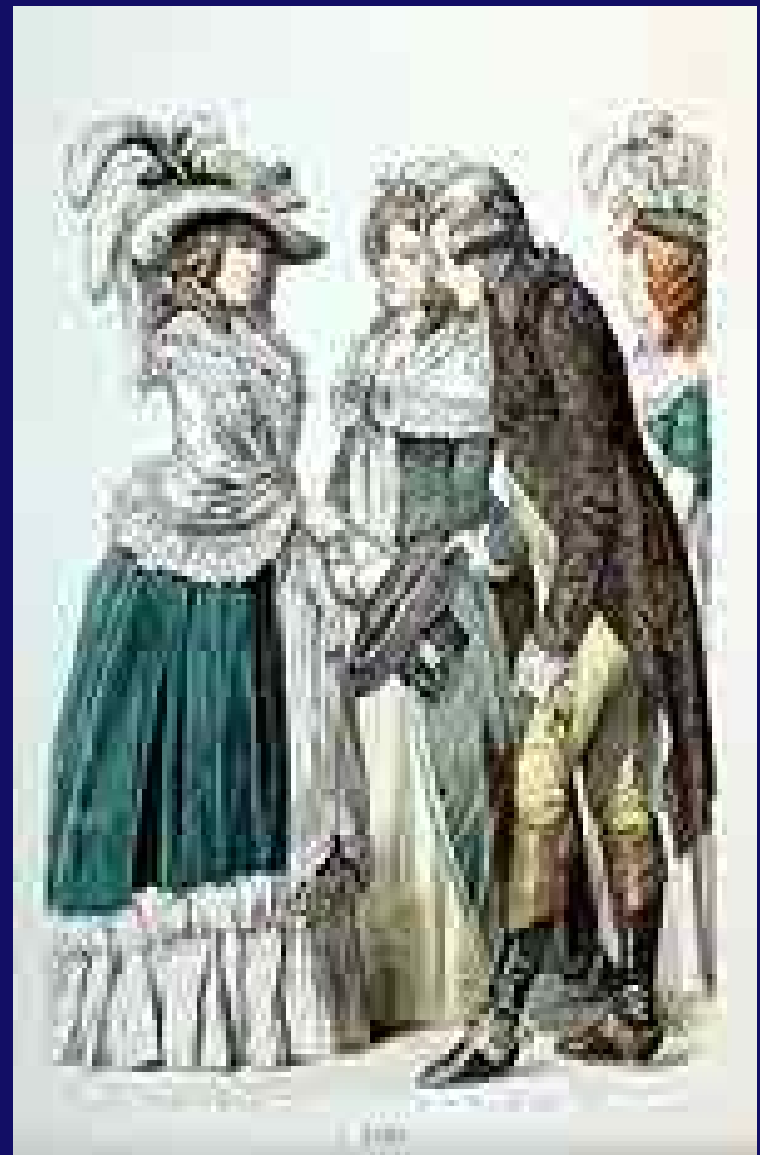
- Suicide?
- Importance of feeling?
- Is the central figure Werther or Lotte?

# Who's to blame?

- Lotte?
- Albert?
- Werther?



Deutsche Tracht der Biederzeit.



# Summary

- New inner world is revealed.
- Fundamental Ambiguity
  - In Goethe
  - In us