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?
Summary

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