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November 2, 2019

Werther's Ideals Ruined by Realities

In the letter written on May 9, Werther describes his “nostalgic journey” to his hometown along the route to the Prince’s hunting lodge with enthusiasm about old places and indifference for new places in his town (Goethe 56-57). Seeing the places he is familiar with again, Werther fervidly recollects the purest happiness and the most sincere dreams he had during his childhood. Indeed, beyond the affection for his hometown, what Werther truly yearns for is the ideal life. Even though this longing can give Werther deep joy in some moments when he encounters the places and people he appreciates, his overly idealistic mind would eventually clash with the reality of the imperfect world he lives in, which consequently gives him great agony caused by his helplessness and finally leads to his tragic suicide.

Firstly, Werther’s description of places he cherishes and his recognition of himself as a “pilgrim” can give us a sense of how much he is obsessed with and enjoys being surrounded by anything natural, which is one important part of ideal life he purses. Indeed, from the word “pilgrim” itself, Werther has already given us a clue to his attitude. Like the pilgrim who travels for a long time to visit a secluded spiritual place, after wandering in the outside world for a long time, Werther goes back, with reverence, to the place where he was born in search of a natural life. With close attention, it’s not hard to discern that nearly all of Werther’s favorite spots are tranquil natural settings where he can immerse himself in: “the great linden tree,” “mountains,” “valleys,” and “water.” When he is in those natural settings, in contrast to Werther’s brief description of his brief journey as “a quarter of an hour’s drive,” the depiction of his movements all seem to be slowed down — he says he “could sit here for hours” in front of the mountains,

and mentions with “what reluctance [he] would leave” the wooded valley. This suddenly prolonged timeline shows how deeply Werther attaches himself to those tranquil natural places and how much he desires to live in this ideal environment forever. Apart from the change of speed in his description, a similar place Werther loves to stay also shows his affection for serene natural settings — “Wahlheim,” a secluded village, where also has a valley, two linden trees and some simple houses (10-11). When Werther loves multiple similar places, his love for tranquil nature would not be accidental. Given how similar those places he loves are, and the fact that Werther regards himself as a pilgrim, it’s obvious that nature serves as Werther’s own religion. When Werther encounters his religion, such as in his hometown and Wahleim, his soul is so full of happiness that he has to “savor” nature —tasting the beauty of nature repeatedly and joyfully. Thus, it’s easy to conclude that what Werther truly cherishes is not only his hometown but nature itself, which is one paramount component of his ideals.

Even though Werther pursues and enjoys an idealistic, natural life in places like his hometown, imperfections in the world always oppose his ideals and cause his incurable sufferings. While Werther appreciates the “old familiar garden houses,” he “heartily dislike[s]” the new ones and even “all the other changes that had been made.” Werther gives readers abundant details of the original “schoolroom,” where he gained knowledge but he doesn’t provide much information about the current building (a small store) he dislikes. This example shows that Werther seems to deliberately ignore things that don’t fit his ideals. However, he cannot always ignore what he dislikes either in his hometown or in the outside world. This was problematic and would make him suffer greatly in the long run. If the hometown can be regarded as a model for an ideal life, then those changes are the cruel reality that breaks Werther’s dream and hurts his feelings because of his helplessness to preserve his idealized world.

Besides the changes in Werther's hometown, in the outside world, various imperfections that are beyond his control also constantly break Werther's feelings. No matter how Werther deeply attaches to his idealized world, he still has to set out into outside world, where he would certainly find many realities contradicting his ideals. The first example appears immediately after he leaves his precious hometown. At the Prince's hunting lodge, Werther feels undervalued by the Prince who is not intelligent enough to understand his heart, and disappointed by some "peculiar" people who are not honest and trustworthy. When Werther discovers that those people don't have the perfect qualities that he expects to see, he suffers huge pains since his dream of having conversations with another open and intellectual soul cannot be fulfilled. Nevertheless, the worst situation happens when he realizes that even his idealized nature also turns violently against him. When "the rushing floodwaters whirling down" swallow the entire valley in Wahlheim (76-77). Werther describes his suffering as "raging down! raging away like the waves!" In this case, his perfect Wahlheim is not only created but also destroyed by nature, which is a hard fact for Werther to accept, since in his mind, nature should only bring him happiness but not sufferings. However, after realizing that even nature can not fit his ideals, Werther gets more disappointed because one of the few sources providing joys for him is also disappeared. With so much despair brought by the gap between the reality and his ideals, the sentence he says in his hometown that "[he] returned from the great world...with how many shattered hopes, with how many ruined plans" is much easier to understand. After facing the cruel reality created by either human beings or nature over and over again, Werther finally loses interest in exploring the world, in which he had expected to encounter innumerable surprises that could nourish his heart.

In this letter, although it seems that Werther only emotionally describes his journey back to his hometown, indeed, he implicitly expresses great agony when all of his ideals are broken by the unavoidable reality of the imperfect world he lives in. While his home represents the ideal life he cherishes, the changes there epitomize the reality that makes him suffer all the time. As a tragic novel, *The Suffering of Young Werther* is not only a tragedy of romance. In fact, it narrates the tragedy of a young man who pursues an idealized life but is destroyed by brutal reality.

Works Cited

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *The Sufferings of Young Werther*. Translated and edited by Stanley Corngold, W. W. Norton and Company, 2013,