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**The Function of The Sorrows of Young Werther in
Plenzdorf's The New Sufferings of Young W.**

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Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther has several usages in New Sufferings (The New Sufferings of Young W.) which all revolve around Edgar's understanding of Werther. Not only does one notice in the beginning the lack of understanding and recognition of Werther's quotes (linguistically and philosophically) which Edgar recites to other characters, but one also notices the nearly parallel scenes from both books. Plenzdorf takes scenes out of Sorrows of Young Werther and superimposes them in New Sufferings through Edgar's own conscious and subconscious repetition of scenes out of the books he reads. The scenes are parallel, but they differ greatly in psychology and philosophy. The gap of differences between Werther and Edgar gradually decrease and eventually converge at the end of New Sufferings. Through mimicking scenes out of Sorrows of Young Werther Edgar brings himself closer to understanding Werther, a youth who also struggles with love and societal rules of conduct, and thereby brings himself to his own self-realization and form of self-expression, making him a Werther for a new age.

Sorrows of Young Werther provides the foundation for many of the scenes in New Sufferings. Although the scene setups in the two books tend to parallel, the emotions and psychology behind them differ greatly. For instance, Werther delights in the presence of children while he paints, whereas Edgar admits that "*Charlie's brats couldn't be helped...Me? Crazy about kids?...The brats were my only chance to stay close to [Charlie]*" (28). Edgar's thoughts make him out to be a selfish youth, if anything--posing as something he is not in order to get the girl. In contrast, Werther naturally enjoys the children around him and admires the relationship between Lotte and her sibling children. One might wonder why the psychology differs between Edgar and Werther if the scenes parallel so well. However, in order to understand the juxtaposition of Edgar to the parallel scene setup, we must first examine how Edgar influences these scenes, as to steer them in the direction of Sorrows of Young Werther.

Edgar self-selects many of the scenes in New Sufferings through his imitation of characters in the books he reads, albeit often subconsciously. If we trace the story of Edgar from beginning to end, we can see that his life first resembles Holden from Catcher in the Rye and then next, Werther from Sorrows of Young Werther. Firstly, Edgar's sojourn in Berlin and his voluntary departure from school, before having to see Flemming concerning his behavior, highly reflect Holden's sojourn to New York and his departure from school before almost certain expulsion. Secondly, we see early on in New Sufferings that Edgar really feels as if he understands Holden, when he says, *"How he creeps around New York in the rain and can't come home 'cause he's run away from school when they wanted to kick him out anyway, that really got to me"* (13). It becomes clear that until Edgar reads Sorrows of Young Werther, his life closely resembles that of Holden's. The first instances of Edgar's self-selection of scenes from Sorrows of Young Werther and transposing them on his life begin with the silhouette that he draws of Charlie. This parallels the scene in Sorrows of Young Werther when Werther is unable to draw a full portrait of Lotte and instead settles on a silhouette. Yet Edgar does not indicate that he got the idea of the silhouette from Werther. However, in this same scene, he does quote Werther for the first time, referring to it as a joke (25). This suggests both a conscious and a subconscious imitation of Werther. We see the same sort of outline repeated in other scenes in New Sufferings, for instance, in the scene where Edgar takes down Dieter's air rifle from the wall. Edgar does not ask to take down the gun as Werther does, but Edgar, like Werther, does faint suicide: *"I just held the barrel up to my temple and pulled the trigger"* (36). The 'just' in this sentence indicates that there was hardly any thought put into the action; it indicates subconscious thought. Then just as most every other parallel scene, Edgar quotes Werther. It was not necessary that Edgar pull down the air rifle. It seems that Edgar does so, because he foresees how this moment will go. It thus becomes quite clear that Edgar

imitates Werther to the point of self-selecting the way he will act based on scenes from Sorrows of Young Werther.

If we trace Edgar's understanding and usage of Werther throughout the book from beginning to end, it reveals to us that Edgar undergoes a transition from at first not understanding Werther at all to being in complete agreement with Werther. At first Edgar employs Sorrows of Young Werther as a way to communicate what is happening in his life to his friend Willi, although in part as a joke. Edgar first thinks to himself *"I got the best idea of my life. At least it's gotten me a lot of laughs"* (22). This would indicate that Edgar did not necessarily understand all of Werther's words at first and therefore used the quotes in order to be perceived as intelligent--much like he admits that he painted abstract to be considered an undiscovered genius (23). Later, Edgar uses Werther as a way of communicating ideas and feelings for which he had no better way of expressing. In the instance where Edgar accidentally drops the book out of his shirt at the playground, he tells us that he would've *"felt really stupid if she'd figured everything out...[he] wanted to keep playing the charmer"* (31). This indicates that the function of the book at this point was to be used to charm Charlie with its poetry, however, Edgar seems to at least believe that he is in agreement with the quotes he chooses. At one point, he reflects on having spoken one of Werther's quotes to Charlie, saying, *"was that ever a crock. Especially that stuff about desire. But on the other hand, it wasn't really so dumb. I just couldn't come to grips with that language"* (25). Here Edgar recognizes that these things he says were not just jibber-jabber, rather, they started to make sense to him. The role of Werther as "charmer" for Edgar continues on late into the story until Edgar realizes he *"just didn't have a chance with [Charlie] any more with Werther"* (53). At this point, Edgar seems to have a greater affinity to Werther than before. He stops using Werther's quotes to woo Charlie or to make himself appear intelligent--a point of self-realization where

Edgar begins to express himself using his own words. Despite this, Edgar continues to reference Werther to himself and to others, even admitting, *"I never thought that I'd understand this Werther so well"* (57). Edgar's comprehension of The Sorrows of Young Werther changes him from a confused youth who could not express himself into someone who began to individually articulate his feelings and understandings of people, environment, and society. No longer after this point does Edgar self-select scenes out of Sorrows of Young Werther. He is then able to go about things normally with his newfound ability to articulate himself.

Edgar's self-realization and newfound ability to articulate himself become first apparent in the boat scene after Charlie asks him if he can drive a motorboat. Edgar replies, *"Hardly. Normally I'd have said; 'Course. Only I'd done such a good job of taking on the role of the well-behaved young man that I just went ahead and told the truth"* (60). Edgar is unaware that the role of the well-behaved young man is actually part of his self-realization and taking responsibility for what he says. His newfound articulation is made apparent shortly thereafter when he says, *"her face smelled like laundry that was bleached about twenty times"* (62). This language deviates from his typical vernacular, his quoting of Werther, and simply his inability to express himself. We can thus conclude that Edgar has made his first expression using his own words. The kiss in this scene does not parallel Werther's attempt to get Lotte to kiss him, simply because Edgar does not initiate the kiss, Charlie does. From this we may conclude that the self-selection of scenes on Edgar's part has ceased. Even his newfound interest in building a sprayer suggests he is no longer trying to fake his own worth, rather he wants to prove his worth. Nonetheless, even though Edgar appears transformed, he remarks at the end, *"I'd almost gotten to the point where I could understand Old Werther when he said he couldn't continue. I mean, I'd have never turned in my cards voluntarily...But I never would've really gone back to Mittenberg. I don't know if you understand*

me" (68). This last remark leaves us to conclude that Edgar understands Werther even on the point of death, yet saying he does not know if we understand him makes one wonder if he has fully come into his own right.

In a way, Edgar's self-selection of scenes out of Sorrows of Young Werther is his way of working through the book and coming to an understanding of Werther. The Sorrows of Young Werther therefore serves to facilitate Edgar's development through the conscious and subconscious rehashing of events played out by Werther. This leads Edgar from having an unrealized self and not being able to articulate himself without imitation, to someone who has fully grasped his own worth and can express his own ideas with his own words. Edgar does not begin his sojourn as anything except a Holden like figure, however, he ends as a Werther for a new century--different, yet able to bring across his own criticisms of society as well as some of Werther's.