

MASSENET

# Werther

A Guide for Educators

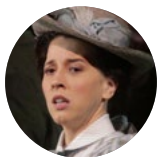
The Met  
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Opera 

# Werther

Many operas focus on women who love too much, love wantonly or foolishly, or love their way straight to a tragic end. Jules Massenet's *Werther* is different: It is a study of the seething emotions that can overwhelm a young man. When the poet Werther falls in love with a woman who can never be his, he believes his fate has been sealed. But what ultimately drives the story of this opera is not fate but a decision—the shocking decision of a romantic youth facing the strongest feelings he has ever known.

Massenet based his opera on a best-selling book from a century earlier, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, first published in 1774. The 24-year-old Goethe wrote this semi-autobiographical novel as a series of letters in which his protagonist recounts his love for Charlotte, a young woman who is betrothed to another man. This impossible, ever-intensifying love leads the self-absorbed Werther to suicide. But where Goethe brought his readers into Werther's feverish mind, Massenet and his librettists open out into the community, offering rich, full characterizations of Charlotte, her husband, and a society in which the protagonists' passions collide with convention and honor.

This guide delves into *Werther* as both a late 18th-century literary phenomenon and a finely crafted work for the 19th-century operatic stage. By tracing the creation and reception of both the novel and the opera, students will be able to consider how a given story can be created, developed, and reimagined across a variety of media. In addition, this guide offers tips for discussing some of the more difficult aspects of *Werther*, particularly the title character's death by suicide. By inspiring intellectual exploration, creative expression, and open discussion, this guide will empower students to engage with *Werther's* story, music, and design while also creating a safe space for personal insight and growth.



OROPESA



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## THE WORK

An opera in **four acts, sung in French**

Music by **Jules Massenet**

Libretto by **Édouard Blau, Paul Milliet,**  
and **Georges Hartmann**

Based on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*  
by **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

First performed on **February 16, 1892,**  
at the **Court Opera, Vienna**

## PRODUCTION

**Sir Richard Eyre**

Production

**Rob Howell**

Set and Costume Designer

**Peter Mumford**

Lighting Designer

**Wendall K. Harrington**

Video Designer

**Sara Erde**

Choreographer

## PERFORMANCE

*The Met: Live in HD*  
Broadcast: March 15, 2014

**Lisette Oropesa**

Sophie

**Sophie Koch**

Charlotte

**Jonas Kaufmann**

Werther

**David Bizic**

Albert

**Jonathan Summers**

The Bailiff

**Alain Altinoglu**

Conductor

Production a gift of Elizabeth M. and  
Jean-Marie R. Eveillard

Major funding from Rolex

Additional funding from The Fan Fox and  
Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Inc.; the  
Gamma Fisher Foundation, Marshalltown,  
Iowa; and The Gilbert S. Kahn & John J.  
Noffo Kahn Foundation

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Department of Education.

# Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *Werther's* story, music, and themes. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Werther* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

## WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

**Philosophical Chairs:** A series of questions that will introduce students to the opera's main themes while sparking their creativity and encouraging debate

**Who's Who in *Werther*:** An introduction to the opera's main characters and their roles in the plot

**Synopsis:** A complete opera synopsis for young readers

**The Source:** Information about the literary sources and/or historical events that inspired the opera

**Timelines:** One or more timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

**Deep Dives:** In-depth looks at various topics relating to the opera

**Active Exploration:** Interdisciplinary activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

## THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

**Critical Inquiries:** Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

**Fun Facts:** Entertaining tidbits about *Werther*



## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

**This guide invites students to explore the opera through:**

- Social-Emotional Learning
- English Language Arts
- Visual Arts
- Stage and Costume Design
- History
- Storytelling
- Poetry
- Creative Writing
- Music
- Rhythm and Melody
- Improvisation
- Critical Listening



## Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play a game of Philosophical Chairs, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element of the game is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Classroom.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Werther*—including the power of love, the beauty of nature, and the impact of grief and loss. As you and your students explore and learn about *Werther*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

Keep in mind that the process of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Imagine a world in which everyone actively listens to one another and engages in respectful dialogue, honoring others and showing respect for the wide array of diverse ideas and opinions that others hold. Philosophical Chairs fosters exactly this kind of space, encouraging students to take what they've learned and change the global landscape for generations to come.

## THE STATEMENTS

- **Grief is like the ocean.**  
The opera begins with the death of a loved one. Ask students how they would describe what grief is. Remind them that we may grieve more than just the physical loss of someone. Ask students what else someone might grieve over.
- **Grief is good.**  
Ask students what “good grief” might be. Is grieving healthy? Is it okay to show our emotions?
- **Letter writing is an ancient art, not meant for a modern society.**  
Ask students about the last time they wrote a letter to someone. How is writing a letter different from sending an email?
- **Everyone has an innate desire to love and be loved.**
- **Nature inspires me.**  
If students agree, ask them ask them which places inspire them and bring them joy.
- **I am a romantic.**  
Ask students what they think a romantic is. What are the things have they seen or heard that may have impacted their definition and response to the statement?
- **Love that burns with the brightest flame is often a love that is fated to fail.**
- **The mind can control the heart.**
- **You can never love someone (or something) too much.**  
Have a conversation with students about what fixation is, and if loving someone (or something) can become an unhealthy obsession that might cause harm.
- **Nothing in life is unmanageable.**  
Ask students: Is everything that is handed to us on our life’s journey manageable? Or are some things simply unmanageable? Discuss various coping strategies (including those listed elsewhere in this guide) to help students better overcome situations they might feel are unmanageable.
- **Suicide is steeped in stigma.**  
Ask students what the statement means, and provide clarity if needed—particularly for the word “stigma.”
- **I am optimistic about the future.**  
If students disagree, ask them why. Discuss with students the difference between optimism, realism, and pessimism, and relate it back to *Werther*.
- **It’s okay not to be okay.**
- **I know whom to reach out to if I, my friend, my family member, or even a complete stranger is suicidal.**  
See the tips in the guide for who to contact, and how to act in a suicidal situation.

With the nature of many of the topics in *Werther*, additional suggestions have been provided on how to guide your class’s discussion. Allow ample time for students to process the subject matter that is discussed in this activity and all other lessons for the *Werther* unit. Create a safe space from the start, and acknowledge confidentiality among those gathered (while acknowledging that confidentiality will and should be broken when someone’s life is in danger). Encourage students to ask questions, share their experiences, and freely share their thoughts and emotions. The conversations you have with students in this unit may very well save a life.



### FUN FACT

In Act III of the opera, Charlotte asks Werther to read from the works of the poet Ossian. Ossian actually never existed. The poetry published under his name, supposedly of ancient Scottish origin, was written by James Macpherson only a decade and a half before Goethe set to work on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Its authenticity was long and hotly disputed. Today, Macpherson’s work is known, in the words of one scholar, as “the most successful literary falsehood in modern history”.

# Who's Who in Werther

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
<b>Werther</b> A young poet	vehr-TEHR	tenor	The brooding poet Werther falls head-over-heels in love with Charlotte. When he finds out that she is engaged to another man, the grief sends him on a downward spiral to a violent end.
<b>Charlotte</b> A young woman, engaged to Albert	shar-LOHT	mezzo-soprano	Ever since her mother's death, Charlotte has taken care of her younger siblings. She is deeply attracted to the young poet Werther, but her sense of duty will stand between her and this new romance.
<b>Sophie</b> Charlotte's sister	soh-FEE	soprano	Sweet and naïve, Sophie loves her sister and wants her to be happy.
<b>The Bailiff</b> Charlotte and Sophie's father		baritone or bass	The Bailiff (who is never given a name) hopes for a happy future for his children even as he mourns his dead wife.
<b>Albert</b> Charlotte's fiancé	ahl-BEHR	baritone	Charlotte promised her dying mother that she would marry Albert. Now, no matter what she feels for Werther, she cannot break her promise.



WERTHER



CHARLOTTE



SOPHIE



THE BAILIFF



ALBERT

# Synopsis

## PRELUDE

While singing Christmas carols with her children, a mother suddenly collapses and dies. Her heartbroken family buries her in the frozen ground. Winter melts into spring, and still the family grieves.

## ACT I *The Bailiff's house, early July.*

The newly widowed Bailiff is, oddly, rehearsing a Christmas carol with his young children on a warm summer evening. Since the death of his wife, his eldest daughter, Charlotte, has been looking after the family. Two of his drinking friends stop by and discuss the young poet Werther, who is to escort Charlotte to a ball that evening. They also ask about Charlotte's absent fiancé, Albert.

After the family disappears into their house, Werther appears. Looking around him, he reflects on the beauty of nature, which seems to him full of hope and possibility. Charlotte returns, dressed for the ball. She gives her younger siblings a treat and leaves them in the care of Sophie, her 15-year-old sister. Werther watches. He is deeply touched by the idyllic scene.

Werther and Charlotte leave for the ball, and the Bailiff sets off to join his friends at the inn. Sophie remains alone as night falls. When Albert suddenly appears, Sophie is surprised: He has been gone a long time, and he told no one that he was planning to return home. Sophie and Albert talk happily of his planned marriage to Charlotte, which can finally take place now that he has returned.

Charlotte and Werther dance at the ball. Each feels a remarkably strong connection to the other. When they return to the Bailiff's house, Werther praises Charlotte's beauty and devotion to her family. Werther passionately declares his love for her, and they are about to kiss when the Bailiff calls out from the house that Albert is back. The spell is broken. Charlotte tearfully tells Werther that she promised her mother she would marry Albert. She cannot dishonor her mother's memory by breaking the engagement. Werther is devastated by this news.

## ACT II *A grove of linden trees, late September.*

The town prepares for a party for the pastor's 50th wedding anniversary. Charlotte and Albert have already been married for three months. Werther has maintained a friendship with the couple, but he is tormented by the idea that Charlotte is married to another man. To Werther's surprise, Albert seems to understand what he is going through, and in a moment of candor he tells Werther that he, too, would find it unbearable if he lost Charlotte. Werther assures Albert that he thinks of Charlotte only as a friend.



Sophie enters and happily invites Werther to dance that evening at the party, but Werther, brooding on a garden bench, avoids her overtures of friendship. When Charlotte appears, however, he cannot prevent himself from recalling their first meeting. It is clear that Werther still loves her. Charlotte reminds him that she is now married. For both of their sakes, she says, he must leave town and not return until Christmas. Charlotte quickly departs.

Left alone, Werther thinks about the one sure way of ending his suffering: suicide. Sophie returns to invite him to the festivities, but he brusquely replies that he is departing forever and rushes off, leaving her in tears. When Sophie tells her family that Werther has left, Albert realizes that Werther is still in love with Charlotte. The celebration for the wedding anniversary begins.

### **ACT III** *Charlotte and Albert's house, Christmas Eve.*

Alone in her library, Charlotte obsessively reads Werther's letters, admitting to herself that she loves him as much as he loves her. Sophie arrives and tries to cheer her up, but Charlotte is inconsolable.

Suddenly Werther appears, utterly desolate. He tells Charlotte that he's still in love with her, and he begs her to admit that she loves him. But as his pleas turn to threats, Charlotte becomes increasingly terrified, torn between her love for Werther and her fear of him. When Werther kisses Charlotte, she panics and runs from the room, swearing that they will never meet again. Werther replies that, for him, this is a death sentence.

Albert returns home. He knows that Werther is in town, and he asks Charlotte if she plans to see him. Then the servant hands him a note from Werther asking to borrow Albert's pistols. Charlotte fears that Werther is going to use the guns to kill himself, but Albert orders his wife to hand them over. As soon as Albert leaves the room, Charlotte rushes off to save Werther.

### **INTERLUDE**

Desperate to reach Werther before he kills himself, Charlotte runs through the snow to his cramped study. Werther begins to write a letter, but he soon abandons it. Taking one of Albert's pistols out of its case, he shoots himself.

### **ACT IV** *Werther's death.*

Charlotte arrives to find Werther mortally wounded. He asks her not to call for help, since he'd rather spend the last moments of his life enjoying her presence. She admits that she has loved him since they first met. As the children's Christmas carol is heard outside, Werther dies in Charlotte's arms.





## The Source

### THE NOVEL *THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER* BY JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

In May of 1772, the young poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe moved to the German town of Wetzlar. Within a few years, Goethe would prove to be one of the most influential polymaths of his age, and his written output would include not only poems, plays, and novels but also works on the natural sciences, mineralogy, anatomy, physiology, optometry, and even a scientific discourse on the nature of colors. Yet in 1772, Goethe had only a few poems and a single play to his name, and he had arrived in Wetzlar with the intention of attending law school. Shortly after arriving in Wetzlar, he made the acquaintance of two local court secretaries, Christian Kestner and Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem; then, at a dance on June 9, he met Kestner's fiancée, Charlotte Buff. Goethe's friendship with Kestner and Buff would soon become uncomfortably close, and on September 11, Goethe extricated himself from the relationship by skipping town. Jerusalem, meanwhile, had gotten embroiled in his own love affair with a married woman, and in October, he shot himself. By then, however, Goethe had arrived in Koblenz, where he met a young woman with black eyes by the name of Maximiliane von La Roche. Goethe's youthful dalliances and love affairs would likely have been consigned to the dustbin of history had he not, a year and a half later, mined these experiences for his first novel, the story of a young man desperately in love with an engaged woman named Charlotte (or "Lotte") with riveting black eyes. When the hero, Werther, realizes that she will never be his, he shoots himself.

The resulting book, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, is an epistolary novel, constructed as a series of letters that relate the story's development. Unlike most examples of the genre, however, *Werther* is not structured as a correspondence: All of the letters are written by Werther to a single individual, and Goethe includes neither responses from the addressee nor letters by (or to) any other character in the story. The result is a riveting portrayal of the hero's tortured psychological state. As Werther's love progresses, we experience—through his own voice—his agonized descent into obsession and death.



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



*Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), first edition (1774)  
WIKICOMMONS / FOTO H.-P.HAACK



A scene from *The Sorrows of Young Werther*: Werther sees Lotte with her brothers and sisters.  
WIKICOMMONS

# Timeline

## THE COMPOSITION OF WERTHER



Jules Massenet in 1880  
WIKICOMMONS



Prussian victory parade through Paris in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War  
WIKICOMMONS

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

When *Werther* premiered in Paris, French critics applauded the French style of the music. Which recent political events might have inspired them to draw a distinction between French and German art?

### 1774

On February 1, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a 24-year-old writer in Germany, begins the writing *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The novel, published later that year, is phenomenally successful.

### 1842

Jules Massenet is born on May 12 in Montaud, a town in the Loire region of France. His mother is a gifted amateur pianist, and Massenet will receive his earliest music lessons from her.

### 1848

The Massenet family moves to Paris.

### 1853

Massenet, only 11 years old, begins studying piano at the Paris Conservatory. He is an excellent pupil, and in 1859 he wins the conservatory's first prize for piano students.

### 1861

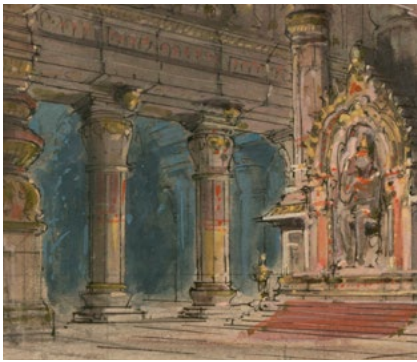
Massenet begins formal composition lessons at the conservatory. The following year, he wins not only second prize in the conservatory's composition competition but also an honorable mention in the contest for the Rome Prize, the most important compositional award in France. While at the conservatory, Massenet earns extra money by giving private music lessons and playing piano and timpani in the cafés and theaters of Paris.

### 1863

Massenet wins the Rome Prize, which funds two years of study in Rome. While in Italy, he meets the pianist and composer Franz Liszt, who introduces him to Louise-Constance de Gressy, a young French woman traveling through Italy with her mother. De Gressy and Massenet will marry on October 8, 1866. Their only child, Juliet, is born 18 months later.

### 1870

The Franco-Prussian war breaks out. Massenet joins the French National Guard.



Set design sketch for *Le Roi de Lahore*  
GALLICA



Caricature showing "M. Massenet's bland pâtisserie and Mlle Sanderson's sugar-candy notes" baked in "The National Musical Oven"  
WIKICOMMONS



Poster from the premiere of *Werther*  
GALLICA

## 1871

A group of French composers founds the Société Nationale de Musique (National Music Society), intended to support young French composers. In the wake of the French-German hostilities of the previous year, the organization also hopes to develop a distinctly French style that can hold its own against the German style currently popular in Europe. Massenet is a founding member.

## 1878

Massenet is appointed director of composition at the Paris Conservatory; he will stay in the position for 18 years. He also enjoys his first taste of international acclaim when his opera *Le Roi de Lahore* (which premiered in Paris the previous year) receives a tremendously successful performance in Turin.

## 1880

In a letter to a friend, Massenet mentions that he has been thinking about writing an opera based on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Nevertheless, he waits until 1885 to begin this work.

## 1887

Massenet finishes the score for *Werther*. He offers it to Paris's Comic Opera for the premiere, but the organization turns him down.

On May 22, Massenet meets Sibyl Sanderson, a 22-year-old American soprano. He is instantly taken with her voice (and likely her beautiful face as well). Over the next decade, Massenet will write many of his most important female roles for her, including the title role in *Thaïs*.

## 1892

*Werther* finally premieres on February 16 in Vienna.

## 1893

*Werther* is performed for the first time in Paris, where it is enthusiastically welcomed by the French musical establishment. A critic in the Paris newspaper *Le Monde* declares, "Goethe has said somewhere that 'where words leave off, music begins'; in the score of *Werther* words and music are so closely allied as to seem born of one and the same inspiration."

The next few years will be remarkably productive for Massenet. In 1899, his *Cendrillon* will premiere at Paris's Comic Opera, the very house that rejected *Werther* more than decade before.

## 1912

On August 13, Massenet dies in Paris.

# Deep Dive

## WERTHER-MANIA

It would be difficult to overstate the impact that Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* had on late 18th-century Europe. Within a few years of its publication, it had become an international phenomenon, with everyone from novelists to Chinese porcelain manufacturers eager to capitalize on the novel's success.

On the literary front, authors began offering their own versions of Goethe's story. In 1775, only one year after the work's publication, a German author published a version of the narrative told from Charlotte's perspective; a decade later, an English writer published a similar version, titled *Letters of Charlotte during her Connexion with Werther*. Another tactic was to offer readers a less sorrowful version of Goethe's great tragedy. The German critic Friedrich Nicolai, for instance, wrote a work titled *The Joys of Young Werther*, which ends with Albert allowing Charlotte to marry Werther and the two young lovers living happily ever after.

On the mercantile front, artisans were all too ready to give consumers the *Werther* paraphernalia they so eagerly desired. Women wore a perfume called "Eau de Werther," and men dressed in a recognizable "Werther" costume that included a blue coat and yellow waistcoat. In China, teacups intended for sale in the West were manufactured with Werther's image. And in England, a certain Mrs. Salmon's Royal Historical Wax-Work (i.e., a wax museum) featured a tableau of Werther's death scene.

Not everyone embraced Goethe's novel, however. Clerics railed against the book's extra-marital love affair and its final death by suicide—which was both a sin and, as news of copycat suicides spread, a concern for public safety. In 1778, for instance, a young German woman drowned herself with a copy of the novel in her pocket. In an effort to stave off such rash acts, the city of Leipzig banned the book entirely. Yet no matter how clerics and lawmakers tried to stem the tide of this *Werther*-mania, the book proved to be unstoppable. By the early 19th century, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* counted among its admirers both Napoleon Bonaparte and (as Mary Shelley took pains to specify in her novel) Frankenstein's monster.



### CRITICAL INQUIRY

Branded merchandise is still common today. Can you think of any toys, clothes, or other objects sold in conjunction with a movie, video game, book, or television show?



*The Nightmare* (1781) by Henry Fuseli, an excellent example of Sturm und Drang in the visual arts

DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS, FOUNDERS SOCIETY  
PURCHASE WITH FUNDS FROM MR. AND MRS. BERT L.  
SMOKLER AND MR. AND MRS. LAWRENCE A. FLEISCHMAN

## Deep Dive

### STORM, STRESS, AND THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

Sturm und Drang (“Storm and Stress”) was the name of a German literary movement that reached its apex in the 1770s—just as Goethe was writing *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. For much of the 18th century, rationality and objective detachment had been prized in poetry and art, but writers of the Sturm und Drang movement believed that powerful emotions, rather than intellectual reason, should be the driving force behind artistic work. Ideally, these writers believed, poetry should overwhelm the reader, leaving them awestruck by both the work’s content and its form.

Though it initially began as a literary movement, Sturm und Drang was quickly taken up by artists and musicians, as well. Paintings of gloomy land- and seascapes were all the rage, as were depictions of nightmarish visions. Composers drew on minor keys and employed dark orchestration, including low-pitched instruments and frequent use of tremolo, to create a similar sentiment in music. (For two excellent examples of Sturm und Drang in music, listen to the opening bars of Mozart’s Piano Concerto in D Minor or the overture to his opera *Don Giovanni*.)

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

For poets, artists, and composers of the Sturm und Drang movement, the goal of art was not beauty. Instead, they believed, art should sweep one away in a wild rush of emotion. Think about how you respond to art, music, and literature. Do you approach it intellectually? Do you respond more emotionally? Is it possible to do both?



### FUN FACT

The name Sturm und Drang comes from the title of a 1776 play by Friedrich Maximilian Klingler about the American Revolution.

Emanuel Leutze’s famous 1851 depiction of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*  
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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# Timeline

## JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE



Goethe in 1828, by Joseph Karl Stieler  
WIKICOMMONS / NEUE PINAKOTHEK



Goethe's birthplace in Frankfurt  
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY



Charlotte Buff, the inspiration for Lotte in  
*The Sorrows of Young Werther*  
WIKICOMMONS

### 1749

On August 28, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is born in Frankfurt am Main. His father is a lawyer and hopes that his son will follow in his footsteps.

### 1765

In accordance with his father's wishes, Goethe moves to Leipzig to study law. Yet he is already interested in literature, and in 1767, inspired by his love for one Anna Katharina Schönkopf, Goethe will publish his first volume of poetry.

### 1768

Goethe returns to Frankfurt. A lifelong polymath, he begins to study philosophy, science, and art. He also expresses an interest in alchemy.

### 1770

Goethe returns to law school, this time in Strasbourg. In a seeming repeat of his experience in Leipzig, he once again publishes a volume of poetry inspired by his love for a young woman. This time, the woman in question is Friedericke Brion, a pastor's daughter.

### 1772

While working as a lawyer in Wetzlar, Goethe strikes up a friendship with two local court secretaries, Christian Kestner and Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem—along with Kestner's fiancée, Charlotte Buff. The turbulent events of this summer will inspire his first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

This same year, Goethe begins working on a drama based on the story of Faust. He will work on the play, on and off, for the next six decades. Over the next few years, he will also strike up friendships with many of the most influential poets of the Sturm und Drang movement.

### 1774

*The Sorrows of Young Werther* is published. It is an immediate hit across Europe.



Karl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar and Eisenach by Georg Melchior Kraus  
GOETHE NATIONAL MUSEUM



Goethe in the Roman Campagna by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein  
STÄDEL MUSEUM



The Goethe-Schiller Monument at the Weimar Court Theater  
WIKICOMMONS / MARKV

## 1775

Goethe is offered a position as an advisor to Grand Duke Karl August at the court of Weimar. His courtly duties keep him busy, and he will finish no major literary project during the next decade. He does, however, manage to undertake studies in anatomy and mineralogy.

In the meantime, Goethe's romantic entanglements continue. In 1775, he falls in love with a young woman named Lili Schönemann and proposes to her, but he soon breaks off the engagement. In November of the same year, he makes the acquaintance of Charlotte von Stein, the wife of another employee at the Weimar court. Goethe and Stein will remain close friends for much of his life.

## 1786

Without taking leave of either his employer or his friends, Goethe abandons Weimar and spends two years traveling in Italy under a pseudonym. Inspired by the art of both Renaissance Italy and Classical antiquity, Goethe considers becoming an artist.

## 1788

Goethe returns to Weimar. The time away has been good for his productivity, and in the second half of the 1780s he completes several plays and publishes another collection of poetry.

## 1790

Goethe publishes the first volume of *Faust*.

## 1791

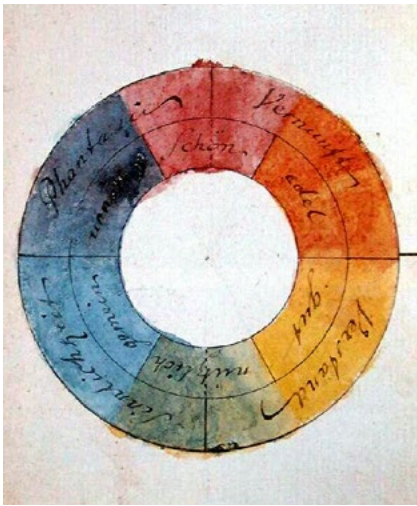
Goethe is appointed director of the Weimar Court Theater. Although he will travel extensively over the coming decades, he will retain the position until 1817.

## 1792–93

Grand Duke Karl August leads the Prussian military on several campaigns against Napoleon's troops. Goethe often accompanies him.

## 1806

Goethe finally gets married. The bride is Christiane Vulpius, a young woman who works in Weimar's artificial flower factories. This same year, the Prussian army is defeated by the French at the Battle of Jena, and Napoleon's troops invade Weimar.



Goethe's symmetric colour wheel with associated symbolic qualities (1809)



Frontispiece from *Faust*  
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY



Drawing of Goethe at his funeral  
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

## 1808

Although Goethe has long been a trusted advisor of Napoleon's enemy Grand Duke Karl August, Napoleon is a great admirer of his work. In 1808, the French emperor names the Prussian poet to the French Legion of Honor.

## 1810

Goethe has continued his studies in a variety of fields, and in 1810 he publishes *On Color*. Although his theories of color have more to do with art, philosophy, and perception than with science, the work will be highly influential in the 19th century.

## 1811

The first volume of Goethe's poetry collection *Poetry and Truth* is published. Two more volumes will be published in 1812 and 1813.

## 1812

Goethe meets the composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

## 1816

Goethe's wife Christiane dies.

## 1823

Visiting the spa town of Marienbad, Goethe meets and falls in love with the teenage Ulrike von Levetzow. When she turns down his proposal of marriage, he writes a set of three poems documenting his heartbreak; one of these poems is titled "To Werther."

## 1831

Goethe completes the second volume of *Faust* and the fourth volume of *Poetry and Truth*. Both works will be published posthumously.

## 1832

Goethe dies on March 22. He is buried in Weimar.

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

Why might Goethe have written a poem "to Werther" following his rejection by Ulrike von Levetzow? Can you think of any other artists who use events from their own lives to inspire their work?



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## Resources

### IN THE OPEN: IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY

Werther's final scene includes an act of suicide. It is important to approach this scene carefully with students, offering ample content warning and helping them prepare for what they will see. At the same time, this opera offers an opportunity to speak with your students about depression and other mental health challenges and to create a safe space for students to share their feelings and seek help if necessary.

The activity "Mental Health Myth Busters," included in your Google Classroom, has a large collection of resources and statistics. Remind students that, although mental illness is often viewed as a source of shame, one in five Americans will experience some form of mental illness during their lifetime, and by the World Health Organization's count, around 350 million people around the world suffer from depression. Mental illness and depression can be treated, but treatment requires acknowledging the problem.

Faced with a global pandemic, students are struggling. Many face food or housing insecurity, the death of loved ones, and the challenges of remote learning. Consider having every one of your students take an online youth mental health screening quiz by Mental Health America, linked in the sidebar on this page. As you discuss these issues, remind students that they are NOT alone. Recovery IS possible, and numerous resources exist for both those combatting depression and other mental illnesses and those whose loved ones face mental-health challenges.

One great place to look is Mental Health America (MHA). Founded in 1909, MHA is the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and to promoting the overall mental health of all. MHA offers a plethora of resources with honest, thoughtful, conversational podcasts, articles, and resources to address a myriad of topics. A few of our favorites are listed on the right-hand side of this page.

### THE MHA PODCAST IN THE OPEN, ESPECIALLY THE FOLLOWING EPISODES:

["I Can't Get Motivated"](#)

["I Can't Deal with Pressure and Expectations"](#)

["Will I Always Have Anxiety?"](#)

["I Can't Stop Thinking About Bad Things That Could Happen"](#)

["I'm Afraid to Talk to Someone about my Mental Health"](#)

["I Hate Myself"](#)

["I Don't Feel Like I Belong Anywhere"](#)

### THE FOLLOWING MHA ARTICLES:

["I Don't Want to Leave my Room"](#)

["Who Can I Talk to About my Anxiety?"](#)

["Nobody Likes Me"](#)

["Someone I Care About is Harming Themselves"](#)

["I Think Someone I Care About has a Mental Illness"](#)

Also check out the online Youth Mental Health screening quiz by Mental Health America, which is one of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether students are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition: <https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/youth>

#### SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINES

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800.273.8255

Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741741

Trevor Project Lifeline Saving Young LGBTQ Lives:  
866.488.7386

#### OTHER MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

[Youth Mental Health First Aid USA](#)

[Mental Health America](#)

[Deconstructing Stigma](#)

[Time to Change](#)

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

# Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *Werther*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

## LETTERS TO MY LOVE

Love letters play an important role in the relationship between Charlotte and Werther. Invite students to create “magnetic poetry” using a list of words related to the notion of love. Then have them read and analyze selections from Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and write a love letter of their own from Werther’s perspective.

## PAIRED PERFORMANCE

Have students listen to and analyze four arias from *Werther* (“Ô Nature, pleine de grâce,” “Lorsque l’enfant revient d’un voyage,” “Va! Laisse couler mes larmes,” and “Pourquoi me réveiller”). Then invite them to create a modern translation of one of these arias.

## FEELING BLUE

Have your students ever felt blue? Teach students to recognize and notate the blues scale, identify stylistic features of blues music, scat, and improvise a blues melody with an original blues text. Use this opportunity to listen to the work of noted blues artists like Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Muddy Waters, and ask students to think about how different kinds of music express sadness or sorrow.

## MOOD BOARD

Have students create a mood board for a modern production of *Werther*. Guide them through an analysis of the opera’s libretto and music, and then support them as they use these analyses to design their own production.

## “I AM” SELFIE

Many students struggle with anxiety, and the pressure to consistently perform at a high level may leave them feeling as if they are never enough. Invite students to come up with a list of positive attributes about themselves. Using Bitmoji or another portrait app, have them create a selfie that incorporates these positive attributes. Finally, share these portraits over a virtual learning platform or post them around your classroom.

*Note that the Google Classroom associated with Werther also includes a collection of materials designed to support students and educators struggling with mental health challenges. These resources include stress management bingo, mental health myth busters, and first aid tips for recognizing and responding to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.*

Werther Educator Guide © 2021 The Metropolitan Opera  
WERTHER PRODUCTION PHOTOS: KEN HOWARD / MET OPERA



### FUN FACT

Act II of the Met’s production of *Werther* takes place in a grove of linden trees. In German literary and folk traditions, linden trees were associated with love, marriage, and fertility.

Avenue of linden trees  
(*Tilia* genus)  
DAVID HAWGOOD / WIKICOMMONS

### COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

**These activities directly support the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:**

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7-12.1e

Seek to understand other perspectives and cultures and communicate effectively with audiences or individuals from varied backgrounds.

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-12.11

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama, aesthetically and philosophically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-12.3d

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.