

The Sorrows of Unrequited Love: A Comparative Study of Tom Hanson and Young Werther

By Denise Velarde

Denise Velarde is a WT English major graduate and a member of Sigma Tau Delta since 2022. She is now a graduate student at Texas Tech working towards a Master's in Technical Communication. The topic she chose for her research was for her undergraduate senior capstone, in which she chose to focus on the tragic tale, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. This story captivated her since the first time she read it and she kept finding reflections of the character Werther represented in modern media. Rejection from love is a human experience that is certain to come across one's life. Each individual copes with rejection differently, and the topic of love and its consequences has been a long-term interest of Denise's. Werther's character is a complicated one, but it is one that deserves to be studied.

"The Sorrows of Unrequited Love: A Comparative Study of Tom Hanson and Young Werther" compares Werther from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Tom Hanson from *500 Days of Summer*. *Werther* was written in the 1700s and was quite a marginalized book for its time, due to the graphic nature of depicting Werther's suicide after experiencing heartbreak. *500 Days of Summer* is a twenty-first-century retelling of *Werther*. This article compares Tom and Werther and notes how despite the hundreds of years in difference, the stories are too similar to be coincidental. This essay argues that *Werther* laid the foundation for modern stories of unrequited love, and presented an Ur-figure for those rejected from love.

There are many books that not only leave an impact on their readers but also on the world. One story that globally left its mark in literature is Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. This peculiar story touched on taboo subjects such as mental illness and suicide that other love stories of its time did not discuss. Goethe transformed the way writers approach love and mental disorders, and the severe consequences relationships can carry if a partner is mentally ill. Goethe takes fragments from his own experience with losing a friend to suicide and writes about the risks of being in a

relationship with a suicidal person. One can believe that *Werther's* story of unrequited love precipitated other writers' love tales. Centuries later, it is still possible to connect Goethe's themes in modern media and trace them back to *Werther*. Tom Hanson, from the 2009 movie *500 Days of Summer*, is a great example of how *500 Days* is linked to *Werther*. The stories share much in common, and it is impossible to ignore how Goethe influences the themes and characters presented in *500 Days*. Tom and Werther seem to share similar roles and follow similar paths that lead to heartbreak and life-changing decisions. Though the stories are not precisely the same, *500 Days of Summer* draws on the Romantic tradition of unrequited love that is initiated by texts like Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*.

German Romanticist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe made waves when he offered a different kind of love story from the typical medieval love tales in the 1774 epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In this epistolary, Werther struggles when he falls in love with Lotte, who is engaged to Werther's friend Albert. Werther spends his days pursuing Lotte, and although he knows she is engaged, he deliberately misinterprets Lotte's innocent remarks as evidence that she loves him back. One day, Werther painfully accepts that Lotte will never belong to him. He commits suicide to

set Lotte and Albert free from what he thought was an awkward love triangle where someone would undoubtedly be hurt. Ultimately, Werther's suicide worsens the situation by leaving his friends feeling guilty, grieving, and dealing with his gory demise. With this ending, Goethe shifts from traditional happy endings—and even from noble, high-minded deaths—by introducing an alternative ending in romantic tales. He uses *Werther* to show that suicide is a possible response to unrequited love and that this is not a story about perseverance, but rather shines a spotlight on the effects of mental illness. Nonetheless, after *Werther's* publication, protagonists who are incapable of understanding unrequited love, such as Tom Hanson from the movie *500 Days of Summer*, become part of the standard in romantic stories.

In the romantic comedy, Tom Hanson experiences a similar situation to Werther's. The movie tells the love story of Tom and Summer in the span of 500 days. Tom and Summer become coworkers, and the pair spend a lot of time together in and outside of work. While the two seemingly act and do romantic couple-related things, Summer is very clear that she does not want to enter a serious relationship with Tom, despite her actions hinting otherwise. Like Werther's treatment of Lotte, Tom takes Summer's assertion as a challenge and wholeheartedly

believes he can change her mind. During a karaoke night, Summer and Tom compare their different points of view on relationships and love. She confesses that she hates being someone's girlfriend and states, "There's no such thing as love. It's fantasy," to which Tom objects, "Well, I think you're wrong. I think you'll know it when you feel it." Summer changes the subject and "nominate[s] young Werther here" to sing karaoke next. This subtle reference suggests that director Marc Webb intentionally alludes to Goethe.

Like many others who read the story, the writers and directors from *500 Days* felt connected to *Werther*. Werther's story is relatable because the humanity of Goethe's characters is as true for us today as it was for people of his moment. In fact, the collective experience is demonstrated by the number of people who sought to emulate Werther's actions when Goethe's novel was published. As Clara Tuite claims, Werther is the "Ur-figure of the romantic unrequited lover, modelling a range of ritualistic behaviours that were imitated at various social levels across different cultural media and transnational contexts" (337). She notes that many people committed suicide as an act of love following the publication of *Werther* and that many unrequited lovers were seen wearing Werther or Lotte's garb or found with copies of *Werther* at the scene of their suicides.

Of course, *Werther* is not intended to provoke readers to think of Werther as a hero or suppose that suicide is reasonable. As Edward Batley explains, Goethe recognizes the seriousness of suicide and only includes the gory details of Werther's death to "shock and alienate his reader...against the act of suicide itself" (877). Werther is intended to be an anti-hero and a sort of cautionary tale of how wrong unrequited love can turn. Goethe writes Werther as a character who is depressed and existential in the sense that he struggles to find meaning in his existence but romanticizes the idea of attempting to fill the lonely void within himself with a relationship. Werther's pessimism is rooted in his disregard for adulthood's social order and "continually draws attention to constraint and unfreedom and complains bitterly when he suffers from them" (Constantine xxiv). This disgust for conformity to a socially constructed order births existentialism, or the belief that life is meaningless but that meaning can be created by the individual, within Werther's personal principles. Before Werther even meets Lotte, the relationship is already forbidden as other people tell Werther that Lotte is already betrothed to Albert. Werther disregards this information and dedicates his time to pursuing a relationship with Lotte, one that he knows could never occur, to create his own existential meaning.

Werther's strong opinions on the meaning of life reject the ideals we see exemplified in his relationship with nature and work. Werther hates being a working-class member of society and is not keen on allowing mundane labor to distract him from what he thinks is truly important in life. He instead wishes to focus on seeking a simple life with Lotte living isolated from others in nature, but he knows the chances of her joining him are slim, and he creates chaos in his mind. Before he meets Lotte and Albert, Werther ambles around in nature, painting and observing others. Werther even admits that nature is what makes him such a good artist. In his letters to Wilhelm, he writes that "rules destroy the true feeling of nature and the true expression of nature" and compares nature to love (12). Werther concludes that love should be able to grow as free as nature intends it, and that the only reason love has been reduced to small tokens of appreciation on special occasions is that humanity has involved the need for work. Werther thinks that human rules, such as putting employment above all else, intrude upon the world's natural sentiments. This idea spells for Werther the end of sensibility and creativity, and thus the end of him. John Bolin explains that Werther believes a mate would "fix" his sorrows, adding that Werther "sees life as a 'raree show' of human marionettes whose efforts 'serve no purpose but to prolong

[a] wretched existence'" (104). Werther turns to nature in hopes of finding self-sufficiency but fails due to finding the world he lives in valueless. Once Werther meets Lotte, however, "Lotte replaces nature as Werther's 'beloved,' forcing him to abandon what he now realizes are 'tiresome abstractions' for a physical and independent other who nevertheless remains identified with the freedom and unity sought from the world within" (Bolin 105). Werther suffers constraint and denial from his position in the world's social order and feels further denied as he tries to find love with Lotte.

As part of his condition, Werther rewrites the "real" world according to his preferences. For example, Werther knows Lotte is marrying Albert but chooses to believe that she secretly loves him. Alice Kuzniar explains that Werther interprets her actions in a way that is convenient for him, as he wants "the license to interpret both idiosyncratically and unequivocally. We see evidence of the former in his fetishizing of Lotte's words and actions" (17). Kuzniar's theory is proven when Werther exaggerates Lotte's actions during a ballroom party. Lotte invents a game where players count numbers quickly and without mistakes, or they receive a slap. Werther romanticizes Lotte's slaps towards him as he "noticed that the blows were harder than those she was dealing to the rest of the

company” (Goethe 22). Kuzniar admits that Werther is aware that he exaggerates his interpretations: “Engrossed by the fragment, Werther reads the slightest sign as an omen,” she says (17).

One can infer from Werther’s letters to Wilhelm that he is an exaggerated romantic. Werther dramatizes everything in his letters to Wilhelm, especially concerning Lotte. Werther exclaims, “When Lotte came up, I’d have liked to prostrate myself before her as a prophet who had by holy rituals taken away the sins of a nation” (30). When he discovers that Lotte is already engaged, he tells Wilhelm that it matters little because he feels a special connection to her. Werther writes to Wilhelm about how happy he is to have chosen Wahlheim to live in after meeting Lotte. He describes everything he sees in nature to Wilhelm and appears in good spirits. Werther writes, “I shall see her! And for the whole day then I have no further wish.” (34). Readers see that Werther’s perspective on life changes according to how deeply in love he is. His letters’ pessimistic or infatuated content depends on whether or not he has seen Lotte that day. Unfortunately for Werther, this infatuation does not last long. As Martin Silverman recounts in “*The Sorrows of Young Werther* And Goethe’s Understanding Of Melancholia,” Lotte forbids Werther from seeing her every day: “She offers to remain fast friends with him, but he

cannot accept such a lesser relationship with her” (203). Silverman also suggests that “Goethe was able to peer into the soul of those afflicted with what is now termed Major Depressive Disorder” (199). Werther’s obsession and mental illness prevent him from moving on as a neurotypical person might.

Instead of seeking a purpose within himself, Werther spends his time looking to nature and art in hopes of finding a sign that will tell him how to live, with or without Lotte. Kuzniar explains that much like looking through a window, one sees the image on not only the other side of the glass but also the pale reflection of themselves (17). He cannot correctly read the signs he wants to see outside of the window because he projects himself onto the signs he sees and is trapped inside the window in his imagined world. These signs lead Werther to suicide because he realizes he uses Lotte as a placeholder for finding true meaning in his life. Even when Werther leaves town to detach from Lotte, he writes to Lotte that he met a woman with the same qualities as her and ends the letter asking Lotte if she is still with Albert. Werther’s attitude has a distinct shift from Book One to Book Two. His letters have an infatuated tone in Book One, whereas, in Book Two, Werther turns obsessive. As the end of the novel shows, this obsession leads to Werther’s tunnel vision and catastrophic suicide that

marks a distinct literary change from past writers’ precedent on love stories, such as medieval courtly love stories. Goethe’s point is to lift the blindfold on previous fairytale-like stories and open a discussion on mental illness. Werther takes the liberty of cleaning up, paying all of his debts, running last-minute errands, and even coming up with an alibi before committing suicide. He borrows a gun from Albert and learns that Lotte is the one who handed the weapon to Werther’s servant. It could be said that Lotte metaphorically kills her unrequited lover:

They have passed through your hands, you wiped the dust off them, I kiss them a thousand times, you touched them. The spirits of heaven favour my decision! And you, Lotte, you hand me the instruments, you whose hands I desired to receive my death and now receive it! Oh I questioned my boy very closely! You trembled when you handed them to him, you said no goodbye... (Goethe 108)

The letters give readers a look into Werther’s thoughts, and Robyn Schiffman theorizes on the effectiveness of Goethe’s writing this story as an epistolary novel. In “*Werther* and the Epistolary Novel,” Schiffman explains that “Werther’s letters consistently maintain a kind of immobility” (432). Goethe keeps Werther confined to the town as he speaks through a monologue of letters. This confinement

symbolizes how Werther is stuck in an arrested development in Wahlheim, which continues the motif of one-sidedness. Additionally, Schiffman adds, “It becomes easy to read the novel as a confession or a diary and to forget altogether the exchange that epistolary correspondence, by definition, guarantees” (433). Readers do not get to see anything outside of Werther’s perspective. Silverman notes in his article that Goethe himself was recovering from a depressive infatuation with a woman betrothed to someone else.

In *500 Days of Summer*, this movie offers a case study of how Werther’s story evolves in the twenty-first century. “This is the story of boy meets girl” is how the narrator begins *500 Days of Summer*. The narrator introduces Tom, who describes him as someone who “grew up believing he’d never be truly happy until the day he met the one.” Right away, the narrator labels Tom as a romantic. The narrator claims, “This belief stemmed from early exposure to sad British pop music and a total misreading of the movie *The Graduate*.” Viewers can infer from the first impression of Tom that he overromanticizes and falls in love at first sight. When Summer first appears, the narrator confirms, “He knows almost immediately, she’s who he’s been searching for.” As with Werther’s relation to Lotte, Tom’s relationship to Summer transforms when it is clear she is not looking

for a serious relationship. Tom and Werther know that they are getting into something that could hurt them. Still, because they tended to over-romanticize, they let themselves yearn for a relationship, ignoring that their lovers never intended to establish relationships in the first place.

Tom and Werther share several characteristics aside from the tendency to overromanticize their place in a potential partner's life. Despite being an architect, Tom is stuck at a dead-end job writing greeting cards, and it is evident that he longs for something more. Tom enjoys sitting at a park where he spends most of his time drawing the buildings. Werther is nearly exactly like Tom in this aspect. He, too, spends a lot of time in nature, painting under his favorite lemon trees. If Werther is Tuite's Ur-figure of the unrequited lover, I propose that Tom is a successor of Werther's tragic life. *500 Days* splits from the suicidal theme as Tom transitions from rejection into accepting himself. In a way, he experiences death several times throughout his story. The first occurs when Summer's guilt of pursuing another relationship behind Tom's back encourages her to tell him that they should stop seeing each other. After arguing about the specifics of his and Summer's relationship, Tom gets up to leave as she shouts, "Tom, don't go. You're still my best friend." The scene turns to slow motion, which gives

the audience time to see Tom figuratively die inside at the thought of being her friend and nothing more. Towards the movie's end, Tom "kills" the old version of himself. After the breakup, Tom indulges in his grief and lies in bed, drinking liquor and eating junk food. However, by day 456, Tom decides to quit his job at the greeting card office after being relegated to writing condolence cards. He begins a new architecture career that symbolizes the end of Tom's Wertherian behavior with Summer.

Just as Werther commits suicide, Tom similarly eradicates his old self. This eradication begins when Tom gets out of bed and erases his chalkboard wall. He literally wipes away the chaotic wall filled with notes and papers, which one could argue, signifies his old messy self. We see Tom study and drop off his work at several jobs which shows how hard he is trying to improve and move on from Summer. He replaces the notes with a neat list of contending jobs and crosses them off as time passes. More significantly, he carefully draws a city on the board. The detail in this scene shows how Tom is now acting with calculation and not going through life according to his whims. He learns from his situation with Summer and finds his purpose independently. Tom differs from Werther because he reinvents himself instead of committing suicide. Tom's story does not end after his rela-

tionship with Summer. He continues to work to create his own meaning in life and overcomes depression.

Summer offers to remain friends with Tom, but he cannot accept it as he feels he has invested too much time and feelings in her. Just as Tom rejects being friends with Summer, Werther challenges Lotte's request to stay away and revisits Lotte. Tom, too runs into Summer again and rekindles a spark with her at a friend's wedding. Unfortunately, he later learns Summer is engaged after she invites him to a rooftop party. Similarly, Summer "kills" Tom during her rooftop party as she gives him false hope that she is open to starting a relationship with him again. The demotion to writing condolence cards and Summer's engagement are metaphors for Tom's death and foreshadow his life change.

Tom buries his suffering and relationship with Summer and starts a fresh new career. Tom and Werther show signs of depression as their characters aimlessly attempt to find a fulfilling career and relationship. Tom confides in his sister, Rachel, who offers him words of wisdom. Rachel reassures him: "Look, I know you think she was the one, but I don't...next time you look back, I really think you should look again." She is always there to set her brother back on the right path to reality. Wilhelm equally appears to give Werther advice: "I thank you,

Wilhelm, for your kind sympathy, for your well-meant advice" (Goethe 77). Wilhelm and Rachel play a kindred role in connecting the audience to the character by giving them an exclusive pass to Tom and Werther's innermost thoughts. Wilhelm and Rachel provide the characters with honest advice that they may not want to hear but aid them in coming to terms with their reality.

Similar to *Werther*, *500 Days* only tracks Tom's life. The movie is only told from his perspective, and viewers only see his friends, outings, and thoughts. The film specifically follows Tom's journey and pushes the audience to side with Tom's point of view. The director of *500 Days*, Marc Webb, purposefully juxtaposes the story out of chronological order. He uses a series of flashbacks and flashforwards, switching between the happy and miserable days of Tom and Summer's relationship. Viewers are taken on an emotional roller-coaster as the film builds up to the inevitable heartbreak in the rooftop party scene. The movie transforms into a split-screen of Tom's expectations versus reality. The audience sees that Tom hopes to get back together with Summer, but the reality screen tells the truth: Summer is engaged. Michael Weber, the writer of *500 Days*, explains why he chose to frame his story as an unconventional romantic comedy. He tells *Entertainment Weekly* writer Mary Sollosi, "The secret sauce, in some ways,

is that memory isn't linear, and the way you look back on things, it jumps around." The writers explain that many of the scenes from the movie were anecdotes taken from their individual experiences. Just as Goethe writes about events from his personal life in *Werther*, the writers of *500 Days* also projected their experiences. *Werther* and *500 Days* are based on actual events, show characters stuck in life, and demonstrate how consequential love can be to anyone involved in the relationship. On another note, both the movie and novel highlight how those in love view the world through rose-colored lenses.

Tom experiences the same happiness. After being intimate with Summer for the first time, Tom breaks out in a musical number. Tom walks to work as the world around him seems to move in his favor. People engage in a flash mob-style dance with him, and a cartoon bird even appears to exaggerate the bliss he is in. Francesca Minerva explains in her article, "Unrequited Love Hurts: The Medicalization of Broken Hearts Is Therapy, Not Enhancement," that "emotional responses such as euphoria, intense focused attention on a preferred individual, obsessive thinking about him or her, [and] emotional dependency" are all part of the beginning of a relationship (480). However, the happiness that Tom and Werther were experiencing can only be met by something of

opposite and equal force—misery. After Tom's musical number is over, he enters the elevator to go to work, and the scene cuts to Tom exiting the elevator looking disheveled. Like Tom, Werther also took control of his life after his heartbreak. Werther had decided to end his life, but not before seeing Lotte one last time (95). As Werther arrives, he and Lotte share an intimate moment where he reads her poetry (96). Lotte suddenly cries in an outburst, and Werther joins her in grief. Lotte cries because she cannot return the love Werther gives to her and possibly because she loves him, too. He cries because he knows this is the last time he will ever be close to her again. He kisses her in a last desperate attempt, but his expectation of winning her over ends in the reality of Lotte kicking him out and exclaiming she will never see him again.

Tom's final meeting with Summer is equally painful. Tom goes to his favorite park, and to his surprise, Summer is there. She sits on the bench next to him as Tom congratulates her on her wedding. After exchanging cordial words, Tom confronts her: "You should've told me when we were dancing." Summer never gives him an answer on why she strung him along, but she admits that her belief in love has changed and that he was right to be a romantic. Summer and Tom exchange a teary-eyed look before she walks away. The tears expose Tom's feelings

of mourning for what could have been, but also the sigh of relief from gaining closure after spending months in agony. Minerva believes that unrequited love is such a painful experience that it should be recognized as a medical condition. She describes unrequited love with an analogy: "Just as the brain in love releases 'good' chemicals that make us feel good, the rejected lover's brain also produces chemicals [that] make us feel miserable, if not desperate [and obsessed]" (480). In Frederick Miller's article, "Adolescent Transition: *Ordinary People* (1980), *Fly Away Home* (1996), and (500) *Days of Summer* (2009)," he recounts how *500 Days'* flashback sequence format "symbolizes the progression, fixation, arrests, and regression frequently seen in psychological development" (102). He explains that traumatic fixations from childhood affected how the relationship plays out. Both Summer and Tom experience childhood trauma from their parent's divorce, but they each process it in different ways, resulting in Summer finding it hard to believe in true love, and Tom growing up to be a romantic.

Unlike Tom, Werther never gets closure on his relationship. Goethe included Werther's suicide letter to Lotte in the novel, where he confesses his feelings to Lotte. Tuite explains the role that Werther's suicide note plays, "as the Goethe scholar David Wellbery notes, 'is not to communi-

cate something to someone, but rather to make imaginatively accessible the tonality of a unique subjective experience'" (338). Readers get to see all of Werther's final thoughts in this note. It sets the reader in Werther's headspace as he prepares to end his life. He writes, "From this moment on you are mine, Lotte, mine" (105). Even in his final moments, Werther never gave up on his obsession for Lotte. Minerva ends her article by saying, "Sometimes people learn something important when they suffer for love, and sometimes they don't learn anything at all" (483). This sentence is relevant to Tom and Werther. Tom was able to rise again and create art through architecture, but Werther could not handle the rejection and was unable to produce any art as he settles on making a simple silhouette of Lotte instead of a portrait.

As each romantic story begins, one can usually guess the plot and infer that the main characters end up together. For *500 Days* and *Werther*, the probability of guessing where the stories go becomes less. One would not guess that Werther's story ends in suicide, or that Tom finds another potential relationship soon after Summer. After introducing Summer at the film's beginning, the narrator repeats, "This is the story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story" (*500 Days*). The ending of Tom's story concludes on an ambiguous note.

During his talk with Summer, she never tells him why she hid her relationship with someone else, why she let him be her impromptu date to their coworker's wedding, or what it was about him that was not enough to convince her that love is real. The only thing Tom learns is that this is just the way Summer is, "You just do what you want, don't you?" is his only response (*500 Days*). Later in the movie, Tom meets another woman. She states her name is Autumn, and Tom looks into the camera with a suggestive smile. The ending offers an array of interpretations. In Sollosi's interview, the writers and director have their own speculations. For example, Weber comments, "I think it's fun to think he makes all new mistakes on the next relationship" (Entertainment Weekly).

The vague endings leave much to wonder. The point of each tale is that love is not something that can be expected. Love is not always linear and sometimes takes many years of starting and ending romances before understanding that love is out of anyone's control. It is something that can be so beautiful yet excruciating and catastrophic. But unrequited love can also be learned from and retold to help others cope and know they are not alone. Unrequited love is a universal experience that people with vast differences and cultures like Werther and Tom will always endure. As the introduction to *Werther* notes, "draw

comfort from his suffering and let this little book be your friend...if you can find none nearer" (Goethe 4). *Werther* and *500 Days* help us find better ways to address unrequited love and alienation. Such stories, though heartbreaking, give us an outlet to talk about anger and depression in productive ways. Goethe's social and romantic rejection themes continue to be reproduced in media and provide cathartic healing to anyone who has suffered the same misfortune as Werther.

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