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Section 01

Comparison of Love in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and “The Sandman”

Love is an important aspect to the lives of many people because it acts as a strong connection between friends, families, and lovers. The strong social bond that is created with love acts as a way to bring people closer together and feel particularly special and involved with another person. Although love can impart a very strong feeling it is also contains many different aspects and is experienced in many different ways by different people. In most cases it is likely to be in some way beneficial to both parties and to carry out some positive aspect such as providing happiness for those involved. There are other cases where love can become harmful to the individuals in love and to the people around them. This can be considered a distorted form of love and is represented in various ways throughout literature. In E. T. A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman” and in Johann Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* the audience can draw a link to the ways in which love is represented through the main characters of the short story and novel. The main characters Werther and Nathaniel are both young, intelligent men that are full of potential but their ways they experience love greatly influences their entire lives. The love that these two individuals show is for a significant other and in both cases presents several irrational aspects from the subject of the love to the way the love has changed these men and ultimately leading to their demise. Goethe and Hoffman have touched on a similar theme of irrational and destructive love that is slightly different in each work but together portrays the tragic effects and experience with love.

To begin to understand what Goethe is trying to show about love to the audience, we must understand the character that he uses as a medium to get his point across. Werther is the main character and is a young man that shows he is highly in touch with his emotions and an intellectual. On page 2 Werther says “I should be incapable of drawing a single stroke at the present moment: and yet I feel that I never was a greater artist than now” which establishes that he is an artist that is most likely educated and of upper class birth. Werther describes himself as currently wasting his “talents” which seems to set up the image to the reader that he is a young individual full of potential but his emotions and feelings can really take control over him. The control that Werther’s emotions and feelings have upon him is supported on page 3 by the statement that “I treat my poor heart like a sick child, and gratify its every fancy”. This statement reveals a lot about Werther’s character as being self absorbed and childlike in his way in dealing with love and romance. He describes himself as having a “poor heart” which may fit with a young adult because it is typical for a young person to get deeply involved and concerned about love. Werther is also implying here that his heart is vulnerable and that he will try and please everyone of his desires so therefore the audience must take note that he will most likely have an extreme emotional reaction when dealing with love. The approach to which Werther takes to love and his “heart” is the mere beginning to a type of love that will simply lead to his destruction because of his irrationality and self absorbed behavior.

The irrationality of Werther becomes clearer in the novel when he becomes involved with Charlotte and Albert. At the very first meeting with Charlotte Werther has been told that he shouldn’t like this woman because she already plans to marry another man named Albert. So from the very beginning before even meeting this woman it should be clear that she is something unattainable for him because she is set to be married. In the first meeting though Werther shows an extreme infatuation to Charlotte which is established by him saying “my whole soul was absorbed by her air, her voice, her manner”. This is a very powerful statement having just met this woman and having your soul absorbed by something almost suggests an identity with or a strong enough action that is shared between a husband and a wife. Clearly Werther is in close connection with his emotions and leaves himself completely vulnerable by becoming so engrossed by an engaged woman. At the very beginning of their meeting, a rational choice would be to try and convince oneself that such a love would be impossible because the rules of society frown upon affairs with married individuals. Werther doesn’t fill the needs of society because his extreme emotions won’t be stopped even if the situation is impossible. As the story develops Werther becomes good friends to Albert and Charlotte and his obsession can be heard in the statement “What creature must he be who merely liked Charlotte, whose heart and senses were not entirely absorbed by her”. This is an ironic statement because Werther is questioning all individuals who aren’t as obsessed as he when if his love with Charlotte should be questioned because it is beyond his reach and therefore irrational.

After taking a look at Werther and analyzing his experience of being highly emotional and in turn presenting an irrational love, Nathaniel represents in ways a similarity in forbidden and unreasonable love. When looking at Nathaniel, there are some similarities that both young men share. In “The Sandman” Nathaniel is the main character who is a young scholar, an intellectual, and an individual who is highly in touch with his emotions. In these aspects Nathaniel and Werther are similar but they differ in the ways that love affects them and changes them as a person. Werther shows many changes in emotions from being very content and pleasant to debating suicide, while Nathaniel by the tragedies of his childhood seems to have a more nightmarish and paranoid vision of life and this leads his love life to irrational and borderline insanity. To understand more about Nathaniel it is of utmost importance to understand what has shaped him as an individual and what influences his actions throughout the story. Nathaniel has had a tragic experience as a child where he witnessed his father’s death and struggles to deal with the nightmarish figure of “The Sandman”. Due to the fact that no one every believed in him and in presence of “The Sandman” he is in a great need of someone to accept his stories and the experiences he has had. This need for someone to acknowledge his childhood experiences is clearly the key to what he is looking when finding someone to fall in love with. This can be clearly seen when Clara his romantic interest tells him to “do throw that mad, senseless, insane stuff into the fire!” which brings about this passionate response from Nathaniel “Oh, inanimate, accursed automaton!”. By saying this Clara is calling his notion of reality into question and this is too hurtful for Nathaniel so is only response is to call her a robot or something without emotion and distance himself from her. The kind of love that he seems to need will not question what he says and therefore keep his vision of life intact and unchanged. From the emotional needs of Nathaniel it is clear that there is a slight resemblance to Werther because both individuals are so influenced by love that to the very extremes it can change their lives. Along with the slight symbolism of the character Clara whose name suggest clarity, cannot have a loving relationship with Nathaniel because he is irrational and requires a different kind of love.

Now that the psyche of Nathaniel is better understood the audience can look at the aspects of his experience with love and its irrationality. After Nathaniel was going to fight Lothaire and Clara broke up the fight, there was a slight amount of peace and contentment that could be seen. This was short lived because when Nathaniel had to move to go back to school he found a new object of desire and this was Olympia. The main struggle between Clara and Nathaniel was that he was incapable of accepting that she would question him and hurt his version of reality and bring back his nightmarish childhood. This is where the new romance began to seem so appealing to him because whenever he spoke to Olympia the basic response was “ah, ah”. This suited him for the time being because his personality needed that docile thing that would listen to him and seemingly agreed with his actions and thoughts. This was a type of security blanket for Nathaniel and the reason why he became so attached to Olympia. The part of this relationship that leads to the irrational and forbidden is the fact Olympia is an automaton or mechanical object that plays music and dances but resembles a human woman. The idea of a human being falling in love with an inanimate object is a ridiculous notion because objects are incapable of love. This is a very extreme situation but it shows the complete irrational state that Nathaniel is in because he is seeking a forbidden love. In both cases of Nathaniel and Werther there searches for love reveal what they need psychologically and this shows the irrational nature of both men.

Werther and Nathaniel were two figures that showed much potential being young adults, intellectual, and talented. Although they held these characteristics, they also showed many signs of deep emotional distress that triggered them to extreme situations. These individuals seemed be focused on love and when they found that certain individual their souls were “absorbed” by their presence (Goethe). In “The Sandman” Nathaniel’s need for love so deluded his mind that he could not recognize the inanimate from human beings. It is quite the irony that Nathaniel called Clara the “automaton” when in fact she was a caring and a voice of reason. He felt thought that she was emotionless or without humanity for questioning his fears, when in fact he didn’t understand how to react with her concern for him. This paradox shows the complex nature of Nathaniel and his need for someone or something to be there and just listen to him. Nathaniel couldn’t bear the world that was so misunderstanding of his vision of the world and Werther couldn’t live in a world where his irrational love went unreturned. Therefore both Werther and Nathaniel killed themselves to end their emotional struggles and because simply their views couldn’t match up with the rest of the world.

Goethe and Hoffman present two very distinct stories that deal with young men and their extreme situations that deal with irrational love. Although the extreme situations described here do not happen very often or to many individuals, this still speaks some about human nature. Especially in young adults, the tragic nature of love at some moments can bring about the most happiness but when it turns sour then the world seems dreary and without hope. So then this might raise the suggestion that an individual should guard him or herself by not allowing their whole heart into the relationship but this also can bring some major problems. What kind of world would we be living in when in our closest situations we are limiting ourselves so that we cannot every really experience all of the best and with that some of the worst. This becomes a struggle to every individual to decide how they will control their feelings and whether or not they will guard themselves from the strongest love and quite possible the strongest hurt. The examples of Nathaniel and Werther make us examine our own lives and how we approach love because it is dangerous to be so open and emotionally attached to one person or an idea. To a much lesser degree it is clear that Goethe and Hoffman are cautioning the audience to stop and think about their own struggles with tragedy and love.