

Die Leiden des jungen Werthers

Director: Egon Günther
Script: Wolfgang von Goethe, novel, and Helga Schütz
Production Co.: Deutsche Film (DEFA)
Production Year: 1976
Cast: Hans-Jürgen Wolf, Katharina Thalbach, Hilmar Baumann, Heinz Dieter Knaup, Herwart Grosse, and Dieter Mann

Summary prepared by Ed Cohen

The Sorrow of Young Werther

WERTHER had a love for Charlotte
Such as words could never utter;
Would you know how first he met her?
She was cutting bread and butter.

Charlotte was a married lady,
And a moral man was Werther,
And for all the wealth of Indies
Would do nothing for to hurt her.

So he sigh'd and pin'd and ogled,
And his passion boil'd and bubbled,
Till he blew his silly brains out,
And no more was by it troubled.

Charlotte, having seen his body
Borne before her on a shutter,
Like a well-conducted person,
Went on cutting bread and butter.

Not long after its publication in 1774, William Makepeace Thackeray satirized Goethe's sensation-creating *Sturm und Drang* novel in the foregoing poem. Goethe came to regret the celebrity and adulation that his transparently autobiographical, epistolary novel brought him. It overshadowed many more serious works of his, and

attracted an unending stream of curiosity seekers to Weimar. The little novel also brought much unwanted attention on the actual Charlotte Kastner (née Buff), and her husband.

Napoleon Bonaparte loved *Sorrows...* He carried a copy with it with him on his campaigns. Young men of the day dressed like Werther was described to have dressed, and there were some copycat suicides. The many literary works influenced or inspired by it include an opera by Massinet, and Thomas Mann's 1939 novel, *Lotte in Weimar*, which portrays fictional conversations of Goethe and Charlotte Kastner forty years after their first meeting. They talk about the impact of the novel's notoriety on all their lives.

Egon Günther (b. 1927) was a promising DEFA director, whose early films were well received by the critics, but not by the GDR authorities. After trying to mollify those authorities with politically harmless literary films, such as tonight's feature and a film adaptation of Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* two years earlier, he emigrated to the BRD in 1978. In 1998, he returned to the topic with "*Die Braut*," a chronicle of Goethe's relationship with his mistress—later his wife—Christiane Vulpius, told from her viewpoint. **Hans-Jürgen Wolf** (b. 1950), like Ms. Thalbach, grew up in East German theater and film. But he accumulated only a few additional film acting credits in the '70s and '80s. His forte has turned out to be as a voiceover artist in films dubbed into German. He can be heard in the German versions of "The Matrix Reloaded," "Bullets over Broadway," "Pulp Fiction" and many others.

Katharina Thalbach (b. 1954) came from a well established East Berlin theatrical family. She gained extensive early stage and television film experience. Prior to tonight's film, she appeared in a DEFA film adaptation of Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, and in Günther's *Lotte in Weimar*, as Goethe's daughter-in-law, Ottilie. Her long list of credits includes main roles in *Das Zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages*, *Die Blechtrommel*, *Kaspar Hauser* as well as a supporting part in "Sophie's Choice."