



COVER SHEET

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“The Werther Effect and You.”

By D. Bruno Starrs. Copyright 2002.

In 1774 an almost unknown young German writer called Johann Wolfgang von Goethe anonymously published a short epistolary novel entitled *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (most commonly translated as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*¹). It became an instant success, prompting the author to reveal his identity and commence a career which was to see him labelled the ‘father of modern German literature’.

The novel concerned an intelligent and emotional young man who, in his scorn for society, his despair at unattainable love and his desire to become as one with nature, borrowed the pistols of his love-object’s husband and, in a gesture meant to poetically align his suffering with that of Jesus Christ, blew his brains out at the stroke of midnight on Christmas morning. This novel was the pre-eminent literary work of the Romantic period and was, and still is, immensely popular. As Stuart Atkins describes it: “The cult of Werther was exploited by the trade: eau de Werther was sold, and Charlotte and Werther figures [were] as familiar and ubiquitous as Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck today...”²

However, the novel was banned in several European states owing to the curious effect it apparently had on some readers. Many young men were found dressed in the yellow breeches and blue frock-coat of the novel’s antagonist Werther, with the slim volume by their side and a self-delivered bullet through their skulls.

In recent years the mass media of television and newspapers have come under fire for their alleged promotion of violence and unhealthy lifestyles, including suicide. Lobby groups have managed to have cigarette advertising banned from TV, and actors like Russell Crowe have been criticised for being depicted enjoying the perfectly legal—albeit disgusting and unhealthy—recreation of smoking. From 1 December 2002, advertisements for motor vehicles are to be pulled from the Australian airwaves and print media if they show reckless, menacing or unsafe driving. And the Commonwealth government has issued media guidelines for the responsible portrayal of another deadly but legal behaviour in Australia: suicide. This is all due to the widely accepted belief that viewers copy what they see, or as psychologist Albert Bandura said in 1977, people model their violent behaviour on that of those they watch (note: suicide and self-harm are considered to be violence against oneself).

The claim that we model our own violent behaviour on what we see in news reports, theatre, TV, films or even computer games is in contrast to the much older claim by the Greek philosopher Aristotle that we purge ourselves of these violent tendencies when we view them. Aristotle believed that the experience of watching tragedy is cathartic—it nullifies the spectator’s strong emotions of a similar kind. When the audience views violence: “Such pictures of the imagination... arouse passions and by arousing them also lead them to the point of exhaustion.”³

If this is true, watching suicidal behaviour would not make viewers more aggressive to themselves. On the contrary, since the vicarious experience of violence would remove the viewer’s similar tendencies, the result should be less violent or suicidal behaviour. However, the Aristotlean view is no longer in vogue. It seems certain that sociologists are responsible for this shift, and it must be recalled that the ‘father’ of sociology, Emile Durkheim, devoted himself in the late 1900s to the

study of the social environment and how it influenced suicide.⁴ American sociologist David Phillips was clearly a supporter of the Bandurian ‘modelling’ theory when he argued that televised reports of suicide were followed by an increase in rates of suicide in the community. In a reference to the wave of imitation or copycat suicides after the publication of Goethe’s novel, Phillips dubbed this the ‘Werther effect’.⁵

Sociology is a relatively new scientific discipline, and the understanding and explanation of human behaviour are and always have been difficult and fraught with exceptions to any hypothesised rule. The notions of scientific method, statistical analysis and replicability are relatively modern approaches to the quest for knowledge. However, the publication of seemingly authoritative scientific articles in academic journals can have far-reaching ramifications. Laws can be enacted or repealed, censorship relaxed or strengthened and artistry encouraged or quashed, solely on the basis of a study which purports to reveal a ‘truth’ of human behaviour. While Aristotle may have been onto something, Bandura had the currently more respectable approach of modern scientific methodology to back his theorising. In addition, Aristotle lived in a predominantly illiterate, superstitious, insulated world where the mass media of the times was the theatre—and even this was not necessarily available to all who wanted to utilise it. The world of today is super-connected through various media. Vast masses of people read print media, watch television and movies, listen to radio and ‘surf’ the Internet. Some still even go to the theatre! Not only can we communicate more easily with other people anywhere in the world, we can meet them face to face more easily due to vastly superior modes of transport. The electronic media of the 21st century are the most powerful ever; they can sell us anything from religion to politics to washing powder, and maybe even... suicide. Marshall McLuhan says:

All (mass) media work us over completely. They are so persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.⁶

Television has become the ultimate media, and while Shakespeare’s Globe theatre may have squeezed several-hundred patrons in to witness the suicides of Antony, Cleopatra, Juliet, Ophelia, Othello, Romeo and others, today billions of people can be simultaneously ‘entertained’ by an act of human tragedy. The television news bulletin vacuums up all the shocking, titillating and bizarre aspects of the frailties and foibles of men and women from all over the planet to sustain itself as an advertisement-securing attraction. Such constant activity makes for easy research pickings for the aspiring sociologist wishing to be published.

One must nevertheless question whether any other media can have a Werther effect on their viewers. Surely theatre and opera, while not as popular as the mass media, must have some measurable effect on their audiences. Opera has a long history of the graphic portrayal of suicide on stage. John Hofsess cynically argues:

When political moralists worry about the effects of culture upon the great unwashed, it is invariably pop culture which concerns them. [But] If anyone’s cultural output can ‘influence’ human behaviour it is likely to be the powerful and original works of art created by men and women of genius... Consider the world of opera... In the world of opera, suicide is the first choice of death on stage by every leading soprano and tenor. Glorious suicide, noble suicide... suicide is not only not condemned but is positively condoned.⁷

The opera, like theatre and novels, has a much older history than television and films. But modern sociology researchers seem compelled to prioritise television and film media because of the size of their audiences. If today's journals of sociology existed when *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* was published by Goethe in 1774, or when Massenet premiered his opera *Werther* in 1892, there might be a completely different body of research.

The subject of suicide has always been a thorny one legally. In days past, the laws decreed that the bodies of suicides were to be burnt and thrown onto the public garbage heap (France), floated in a barrel down the river away from places they might want to haunt (Germany), disallowed departure from a house via the door (they had to leave through the window and the window frame was burnt afterwards— Austria), and buried away from other graves with their self-murdering hands cut off and buried separately (Greece). Meanwhile, the suicide's name was defamed, the family stripped of nobility and the assets seized by the state. The fear and loathing of suicides saw the degradation of their corpses well after the end of witch-hunting hysteria. It was not until 1823 that it became illegal to bury a suicide at a public highway crossroads in England, and the repeal of legislation regarding confiscation of property did not occur until 1870.

Curiously, these Christian revenges seem to represent a primitive, pagan belief that the suicide did not really die; rather (s)he was capable of returning to haunt or destroy her or his enemies. This horror of suicides, of blood wickedly spilt and unappeased, meant that for many years suicide was legally equated with murder. Unsuccessful suicides (or uncompleted or parasuicides as some commentators prefer to call them) were still liable for imprisonment until 1969, when an Isle of Man youth was birched for attempting suicide.

In Australia today, suicide and attempted suicide are not crimes, but it is illegal (and punishable by life imprisonment in Queensland) to assist—physically or psychologically—a suicide, even in the name of euthanasia. Recently, a 69-year-old woman committed suicide during a 'party' with 21 of her family and friends in which she drank an alcoholic liqueur, smoked a cigarette and then took an overdose of barbiturates she had obtained illegally over the Internet. *MX News* reported the alleged psychological assistance: "Police are interviewing family and friends who watched euthanasia campaigner Nancy Crick take her own life."⁸ Charges have not been laid against those who apparently assisted Nancy Crick's suicide, but investigations are continuing. Interestingly, the coroner's report showed no signs of the bowel cancer which had previously plagued the unfortunate woman despite her claim to be terminally ill. But as the public face of the pro-euthanasia campaign in Australia, she may well have been thinking along the lines of: 'The show must go on.' When the bedside party/audience clapped at the perceived act of bravery and nobility in the face of her intractable pain and suffering, it could be argued they were applauding a fictional performance! A Melbourne newspaper described the event as: "a political statement... a circus."⁹

In Holland recently a 52-year-old woman put on a not dissimilar show to secure the means to die, when she convinced doctors her life was unbearable due to depression after the death of her two sons. They assisted her suicide and were subsequently charged. "The Dutch courts then examined the case and judged that depression was a valid form of suffering and accepted the decision of the doctors to help her die."¹⁰

Possibly falling prey to the Werther effect initiated by Nancy Crick was another woman who was interviewed by that blandest of TV 'journalists' Ray Martin about her intentions to kill herself through the apparently illegal acquisition of barbiturates. Middle-aged Sandy Williamson, while coherent, alert and relatively comfortable, wanted to kill herself before her motor neurone disease

robbed her of the physical ability to do so. The kind, smiling and inoffensive Mr. Martin did not refer her to counselling nor advise the police. He didn't even question her distorted views nor those of her sister regarding entry of a suicide into the Christian heaven. Most Christians, of course, perceive life as the greatest gift from God, and self-murder as therefore the greatest sin through which act suicides are refused entry to heaven. Nevertheless, a subsequent poll of Melbourne residents revealed that over 70 percent supported doctor-assisted euthanasia.

Without question, attitudes to suicide today are in a state of flux, especially if there is even the merest suggestion of terminal illness. We shall surely see the Werther effect occurring again among the sick, depressed, or simply middle-aged and bored who consider their lives as unbearable as Nancy Crick's or Sandy Williamson's.

In an era of concern about our unprecedented capacity for global human extermination, it strikes me as curious that we should be so ready to kill off the frail, unhappy or sickly at their first whimper of discomfort. Is the world headed for another period of Stoicism, akin to the Ancient Romans, where magistrates will give permission for people to take the pharmaceutical equivalent of hemlock, as long as they are convincing enough in their pleas? Or even more frightening, are we headed for an era of voluntary sacrifice of our middle-aged bodies to meet the nutritional requirements of the young, as foreshadowed by the movie *Soylent Green*?

Who can say where our increasingly aged society is headed? But one constant remains: suicide is a uniquely human behaviour which defies simple explanation, a multi-dimensional malaise. Metaphorically speaking, it is an intrapsychic drama played out on an interpersonal stage, and we in the stalls can only wonder at the whys and wherefores of the performers, Academic and poet A. Alvarez, in his brilliant 1971 study of suicide entitled *The Savage God*, states: "It seems to me that even the most elegant and convincing sociological theories are somehow short-circuited by this simple observation that suicide is a human characteristic, like sex, which not even the most perfect society will erase."¹¹ Whatever the social environment or the physical conditions that exist prior to people deciding to kill themselves, the reasons are only truly known to the actor of the event:

...a suicide's excuses are mostly by the way. At best they assuage the guilt of the survivors, soothe the tidy-minded and encourage the sociologists in their endless search for convincing categories and theories. They are like a trivial border incident which triggers off a major war. The real motives which impel a man to take his own life are elsewhere: they belong to the internal world, devious, contradictory, labyrinthine, and mostly out of sight.¹²

But one thing is certain about suicide: the idea is certainly contagious. Somebody does it and the notion—especially if it is either publicised in news reports or fictionalised in movies, theatre or opera—is copied and spread like an infectious mind virus. The vulnerable will succumb, modelling their behaviour on the Nancy Cricks, the suicide bombers, the Kurt Cobains, the Buddhist monks, the Thomas Chattertons, the Sylvia Plaths, the Brett Whiteleys, the Michael Hutchence's or the Werthers of their particular world of influence. Only the strong will somehow deal with their exposure to the all-pervasive media portrayal of suicide with an Aristotelean cathartic response. So unless you can insulate yourself entirely from the constant message of the media, be it the seemingly benign theatre and opera or the 'inherently' evil TV, Internet and computer games, watch out! Be strong. Be original. Be not moved by the examples set by others, or the Werther effect may get you too!

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12. *ibid.*, p. 89.