

# Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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**Born** August 28, 1749



Frankfurt, Germany

**Died** March 22, 1832 (aged 82)



Weimar, Germany

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** , IPA: [gø:t̪ə], (28 August 1749 – 22 March 1832) was a German polymath. Goethe's works span the fields of poetry, drama, literature, theology, Humanism, science, and painting. His most enduring work, the two-part

dramatic poem *Faust*, is considered one of the peaks of world literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Goethe's other well-known literary works include his numerous poems, the Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and the semi-autobiographical novel *Elective Affinities*.

Goethe was one of the key figures of German literature and the movement of Weimar Classicism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; this movement coincides with Enlightenment, Sensibility ("Empfindsamkeit"), *Sturm und Drang*, and Romanticism. The author of *Faust* and *Theory of Colours*, he influenced Darwin<sup>[2]</sup> with his focus on plant morphology.<sup>[3]</sup> Goethe's influence spread across Europe, and for the next century his works were a primary source of inspiration in music, drama, poetry, and philosophy.

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## Overview

Goethe was a German poet, novelist, dramatist, theorist, painter, natural scientist, and long-serving government minister ("Geheimrat") of the duchy of Weimar. He was born **Johann Wolfgang Goethe**, and in 1782 he was ennobled, becoming **von Goethe**.<sup>[4]</sup>

Goethe is also the originator of the concept of

*Weltliteratur* ("world literature"), having taken great interest in the literatures of England, France, Italy, classical Greece, and Persia, among others. His influence on German philosophy is virtually immeasurable, having major impact especially on the generation of Hegel and Schelling, although Goethe himself expressly and decidedly refrained from practicing philosophy in the strict sense.

Goethe was one of the key figures of German literature, his career spanning the periods of Enlightenment, Sentimentality (*"Empfindsamkeit"*), *Sturm und Drang*, Weimar Classicism, and Romanticism. His scientific ideas influenced Darwin<sup>[5]</sup> with his focus on plant morphology.<sup>[6]</sup> Goethe's influence spread across Europe, and for the next century his works were a primary source of inspiration in music, drama, poetry, and philosophy. He is widely considered to be one of the most important thinkers in Western culture, and is generally acknowledged as the most important writer in the German language. Early in his career, however, he wondered whether painting might not be his true calling; late in his life, he expressed the expectation that he would ultimately be remembered above all for his work in optics.

# Life

## Early life (1749–1765)

Goethe's father, Johann Caspar Goethe (1710–1782), lived with his family in a large house in Frankfurt am Main, then part of the Holy Roman Empire. Goethe's mother, Catharina Elisabeth Textor (1731–1808), the daughter of the Mayor of

Frankfurt, married 38-year-old Johann Caspar when she was only 17. All their children, except



Goethe's birthplace in Frankfurt, Germany (Großer Hirschgraben)

for Goethe and his sister, Cornelia Friderike Christiana, who was born in 1750, died at an early age.

Johann Caspar and private teachers gave Goethe lessons in all common subjects, especially languages (Latin, Greek, French, and English). Goethe also took lessons in dancing, riding, and fencing. He had a persistent dislike of the church, and characterized its history as a "hotchpotch of mistakes and violence" (*Mischmasch von Irrtum und Gewalt*). His great passion was drawing. Goethe quickly became interested in literature; Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and Homer were among his early favourites. He had a lively devotion to theatre as well, and was greatly fascinated by puppet shows that were annually arranged in his home — a familiar theme in *Wilhelm Meister*.

### **Leipzig (1765-1768)**

Goethe studied law in Leipzig from 1765 to 1768. Learning age-old judicial rules by heart was something he strongly detested. He preferred to attend the poetry lessons of Christian Fürchtegott Gellert. In Leipzig, Goethe fell in love with Käthchen Schönkopf and wrote cheerful verses

about her in the Rococo genre. In 1770, he anonymously released *Annette*, his first collection of poems. His uncritical admiration for many contemporary poets vanished as he became interested in Lessing and Wieland. Already at this time, Goethe wrote a good deal, but he threw away nearly all of these works, except for the comedy *Die Mitschuldigen*. The restaurant Auerbachs Keller and its legend of Faust's 1525 barrel ride impressed him so much that Auerbachs Keller became the only real place in his closet drama *Faust Part One*. Because his study did not advance, Goethe was forced to return to Frankfurt at the end of August 1768.

### **Frankfurt/Strasbourg (1768-1770)**

In Frankfurt, Goethe became severely ill. During the next year and a half which followed, because of several relapses, the relationship with his father worsened. During convalescence, Goethe was nursed by his mother and sister. Bored in bed, he wrote an impudent crime comedy. In April 1770, his father lost his patience; Goethe left Frankfurt in order to finish his studies in Strasbourg.

In Alsace, Goethe blossomed. No other landscape has he described as affectionately as the warm,

wide Rhine area. In Strasbourg, Goethe met Johann Gottfried Herder, who happened to be in town on the occasion of an eye operation. The two became close friends, and crucially to Goethe's intellectual development, it was Herder who kindled his interest in Shakespeare, Ossian, and in the notion of Volkspoesie (folk poetry). On a trip to the village Sesenheim, Goethe fell in love with Friederike Brion. But after a couple of weeks, he ended the relationship. Several of his poems, like *Willkommen und Abschied*, *Sesenheimer Lieder* and *Heideröslein*, originate from this time.

Despite being based on his own ideas, his legal thesis was published uncensored. Shortly after, he was offered a career in the French government. Goethe rejected – he did not want to commit himself, but to remain an "original genius".

### **Frankfurt and Darmstadt (1771)**

At the end of August 1771, Goethe was certified as a licensee in Frankfurt. He wanted to make the jurisdiction progressively more humane. In his first cases, he proceeded too vigorously, was reprimanded and lost the position. This prematurely terminated his career as a lawyer after only a few months. At this time, Goethe was



acquainted with the court of Darmstadt, where his inventiveness was praised. From this milieu came Johann Georg Schlosser (who was later to become his brother-in-law) and Johann Heinrich Merck. Goethe also pursued literary plans again; this time, his father did not have anything against it, and even helped. Goethe got hands on the biography of a noble highwayman from the Peasants' War. In a couple of weeks, the biography was converted into a colourful drama. The work, called "Götz von Berlichingen", went straight to the heart of his contemporaries.

## **Professional and later life (1772-1832)**

Goethe could not  
subsist on being  
one of the editors of a literary periodical (published by Schlosser and Merck). In May 1772, he once more began the practice of law at Wetzlar. At the invitation of Carl August, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, he went, in 1775, to live in Weimar where he held a succession of political offices, even becoming the Duke's chief adviser.

## **Later life**

He was ennobled in 1782. His journey to the Italian peninsula from 1786 to 1788 was of great significance for his later aesthetical and philosophical development, as was his admission in 1782 that he was "a decided non-Christian".<sup>[7]</sup> His diaries of this period form the

basis of the non-fiction *Italian Journey*. In the autumn of 1792, Goethe took part in the battle of Valmy against revolutionary France, assisting Duke Carl August of Saxe-Weimar during the failed invasion of France. Again during the Siege of Mainz he assisted Carl August as a military observer. In 1794 Friedrich Schiller wrote to Goethe offering friendship, which lasted until the former's death in 1805; they had previously had a wary acquaintance since 1788. In 1806, he married



Goethe. Painting by Luise Seidler (Weimar 1811).

Christiane Vulpius. By 1820, he was on friendly terms with Kaspar Maria von Sternberg. From 1794, he devoted himself chiefly to literature and after a life of immense productivity, died while in Weimar, in 1832. He is buried in the Ducal Vault at Weimar's Historical Cemetery.

### **Siege of Weimar**

In 1806, Goethe was living in Weimar with his mistress Christiane Vulpius, the sister of Christian A. Vulpius, and their son August. On October 13, Napoleon's army invaded the town. The French "spoon guards", the least-disciplined soldiers, occupied Goethe's house.

The 'spoon guards' had broken in, they had drunk wine, made a great uproar and called for the master of the house. Goethe's secretary Riemer reports: 'Although already undressed and wearing only his wide nightgown ... he descended the stairs towards them and inquired what they wanted from him ... His dignified figure, commanding respect, and his spiritual mien seemed to impress even them.' But it was not to last long. Late at

night they burst into his bedroom with drawn bayonets. Goethe was petrified, Christiane raised a lot of noise and even tangled with them, other people who had taken refuge in Goethe's house rushed in, and so the marauders eventually withdrew again. It was Christiane who commanded and organized the defense of the house on the Frauenplan. The barricading of the kitchen and the cellar against the wild pillaging soldiery was her work. Goethe noted in his diary: "Fires, rapine, a frightful night ... Preservation of the house through steadfastness and luck." The luck was Goethe's, the steadfastness was displayed by Christiane.

– *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, Ch. 5<sup>[8]</sup>

The next day, Goethe legitimized their relationship by marrying Christiane in a quiet marriage service at the court chapel.

## Works

### Literary Works

The most important of Goethe's works produced before he went to Weimar was his tragedy *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), which was the first work to bring him fame, and the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which gained him enormous popularity as a writer in the *Sturm und Drang* movement. During the years at Weimar before he met Schiller he began *Wilhelm Meister*, wrote the dramas *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (*Iphigenia in Tauris*), *Egmont*, *Torquato Tasso*, and *Reineke Fuchs*.

To the period of his friendship with Schiller belong the continuation of *Wilhelm Meister*, the idyll of *Hermann and Dorothea*, and the *Roman Elegies*. In the last period, between Schiller's death, in 1805, and his own, appeared *Faust*, *Elective Affinities*, his pseudo-autobiographical *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From my Life: Poetry and Truth*), his *Italian Journey*, much scientific work, and a series of treatises on German art. His writings were immediately influential in literary and artistic circles.

## **Scientific work**

Though his literary work has acquired the greatest

amount of interest, Goethe considered his most significant work to be his understandings of nature.

“ As to what I have done as a poet,... I take no pride in it... But that in my century I am the only person who knows the truth in the difficult science of colours - of that, I say, I am not a little proud, and here I have a consciousness of a superiority to many. ”

—Johann Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, (tr. John Oxenford), London, 1930, p.302

In biology, his theory of plant metamorphosis stipulated that all plant formation stems from a modification of the leaf; during his Italian journey (1786-1788), in July 1787, he writes as the first indication of this idea:

“ Furthermore I must confess to you that I have nearly discovered the secret of plant generation and structure, and that it is the simplest thing imaginable.... Namely it had become apparent to me that in the

plant organ which we ordinarily  
call the leaf a true Proteus is  
concealed, who can hide and reveal  
himself in all sorts of  
configurations. From top to bottom  
a plant is all leaf, united so  
inseparably with the future bud that  
one cannot be imagined without the  
other. ”

—Suhrkamp ed., vol 6; trans. Robert R Heitner, Italian  
Journey

He is credited with the discovery of the  
intermaxillary bone in humans, during 1784;  
however, Broussonet (1779) and Vicq d'Azyr  
(1780) had identified the same structure several  
years earlier.<sup>[9]</sup>

Although it was never well received by scientists  
due to its apparent conflict with Newton's theory of  
light, against which Goethe fulminated, Goethe  
considered his *Theory of Colours* to be his most  
important work. Although much of his position  
within this field is often blurred by misconceptions  
among both his detractors and eulogizers,<sup>[10]</sup> based  
upon his experiments with prismatic colors Goethe  
characterized color as arising from the dynamic

interplay of darkness and light, and standing between their polar qualities:

“ ...they maintained that *shade is a part of light*. It sounds absurd when I express it; but so it is: for they said that *colours*, which are shadow and the result of shade, *are light itself*, or, which amounts to the same thing, *are the beams of light, broken now in one way, now in another*. ”

—Johann Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, entry: 4  
January 1824; trans. Wallace Wood

He also regarded light's physical nature, physiological effects (including the afterimages induced in the eye), and psychological effects as interrelated phenomena. In the twentieth century, Goethe's *Theory of Colours* influenced the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, Werner Heisenberg and Max Planck have indicated the accuracy and suggestiveness of many of Goethe's scientific statements, and it has had a tremendous impact in other fields.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the Kurschner edition of Goethe's works, the



science editor, Rudolf Steiner, presented Goethe's approach to science as phenomenological. He elaborated on this in the books, *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World-Conception* (1886) and *Goethe's Conception of the World* (1897), where he emphasizes the need of the perceiving organ of intuition in order to grasp Goethe's biological archetype (i.e. *The Typus*).

## Key works

The following list of key works may give a sense of the scope of the impact his work had on his and modern times.

The short epistolary novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, or *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774, recounts an



Statues of Goethe and Schiller,

unhappy romantic  
infatuation that  
ends in suicide.

Weimar.

Goethe admitted that he "shot his hero to save himself"--a reference to Goethe's own near-suicidal obsession with a young woman at the time, an obsession he quelled through the writing process. The novel remains in print in dozens of languages, and its influence is undeniable; its central hero, a Hamlet-like figure tortured by his unrequited love for the young Lotte, has become a pervasive literary archetype. The fact that *Werther* ends with the protagonist's suicide and funeral — a funeral which "no clergyman attended" — made the book deeply controversial upon its (anonymous) publication, for it seemed to condone suicide. The act was considered sinful by Christian doctrine, and suicides were denied Christian burial, with the bodies often mistreated in various ways and property and possessions of the deceased and their family confiscated.<sup>[11][12]</sup> Epistolary novels were common during this time, letter-writing being people's primary mode of communication. What set Goethe's book apart from other such novels was its expression of unbridled longing for a joy beyond possibility, its sense of defiant rebellion against authority, and, above all, its total

subjectivity—qualities that pointed the way toward the Romantic movement.

The next work, his epic closet drama *Faust*, was to be completed in stages, and only published in its entirety after his death. The first part was published in 1808 and created a sensation. The first operatic version, by Spohr, appeared in 1814, and was subsequently the inspiration for operas and oratorios by Schumann, Gounod, Boito, Busoni, and Schnittke as well as symphonic works by Liszt, Wagner, and Mahler. Faust became the ur-myth of many figures in the 19th century. Later, a facet of its plot, i.e., of selling one's soul to the devil for power over the physical world, took on increasing literary importance and became a view of the victory of technology and of industrialism, along with its dubious human expenses. In 1919, the Goetheanum staged the world premiere of a complete production of Faust. On occasion, the play is still staged in Germany and other parts around the world.

Goethe's poetic work served as a model for an entire movement in German poetry termed *Innerlichkeit* ("introversion") and represented by, for example, Heine. Goethe's words inspired a number of compositions by, among others, Mozart,

Beethoven, Schubert, Berlioz, and Wolf. Perhaps the single most influential piece is "Mignon's Song" which opens with one of the most famous lines in German poetry, an allusion to Italy: "*Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?*" ("Do you know the land where the lemons bloom?").

He is  
also



*Goethe in the Roman Campagna* (1786) by  
Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein. Oil  
on canvas, 164 x 206 cm. Städelches  
Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.

widely quoted. Epigrams such as "Against criticism a man can neither protest nor defend himself; he must act in spite of it, and then it will

gradually yield to him", "Divide and rule, a sound motto; unite and lead, a better one", and "Enjoy when you can, and endure when you must", are still in usage or are paraphrased. Lines from *Faust*, such as "Das also war des Pudels Kern", "Das ist der Weisheit letzter Schluss", or "Grau ist alle Theorie" have entered everyday German usage. Although a doubtful success of Goethe in this field, the famous line from the drama *Götz von Berlichingen* ("Er kann mich im Arsch lecken": "He can lick my arse") has become a vulgar idiom in many languages, and shows Goethe's deep cultural impact extending across social, national, and linguistic borders. It may be taken as another measure of Goethe's fame that other well-known quotations, such as Hippocrates' "Art is long, life is short", which is also found in his *Wilhelm Meister*, is usually forgotten to be originally associated with Hippocrates. (In the final chapter of Book VII in *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe quotes Hippocrates, but inverts it. In the original, Hippocrates wrote that life is long and art is short.)

## **Eroticism**

Many of Goethe's works, especially *Faust*, the *Roman Elegies*, and the *Venetian Epigrams*, depict

hetero- and homosexual erotic passions and acts. In fact, some of the *Venetian Epigrams* were held back from publication due to their sexual content. However, Karl Hugo Pruys caused national controversy in Germany when his 1999 book *The Tiger's Tender Touch: The Erotic Life of Goethe* tentatively deduced from Goethe's writings the possibility of Goethe's homosexuality. The sexual portraiture and allusions in his work may stem from one of the many effects of Goethe's eye-opening sojourn in Italy, where men, who shunned the prevalence of women's venereal diseases and unconscionable conditions, embraced homosexuality as a solution that was not widely imitated outside of Italy.<sup>[13]</sup> Whatever the case, Goethe clearly saw sexuality in general as a topic that merited poetic and artistic depiction. This went against the thought of his time, when the very private nature of sexuality was rigorously normative, and makes him appear more modern than he is typically thought to be.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Historical importance

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It is very difficult to overstate the importance of Goethe on the 19th century. In many respects, he was the originator of—or at least the first to cogently express—many ideas which would later become familiar. Goethe produced volumes of poetry, essays, criticism, and scientific work, including a theory of optics and early work on evolution and linguistics. He was fascinated by minerals and early mineralogy (the mineral goethite is named for him). His non-fiction writings, most of which are philosophic and aphoristic in nature, spurred on the development of many philosophers, such as G.W.F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernst Cassirer, Carl Gustav Jung, Ludwig Wittgenstein and others, and of various literary movements, such as romanticism. The mystical philosopher Rudolf Steiner named two buildings after Goethe. He embodied many of the contending strands in art over the next century: his work could be lushly emotional, and rigorously formal, brief and epigrammatic, and epic. He would argue that classicism was the means to controlling art, and that romanticism was a sickness, even as he

penned poetry rich in memorable images, and rewrote the formal rules of German poetry.

His poetry was set to music by almost every major Austrian and German composer from Mozart to Mahler, and his influence would spread to French drama and opera as well. Beethoven declared that a "Faust" Symphony would be the greatest thing for Art. Liszt and Mahler both created symphonies in whole or in large part inspired by this seminal work, which would give the 19th century one of its most paradigmatic figures: Doctor Faustus. The Faust tragedy/drama, often called "**Das** Drama der Deutschen" (**the** drama of Germans), written in two parts published decades apart, would stand as his most characteristic and famous artistic creation.

Goethe was also a cultural force, and by researching folk traditions, he created many of the norms for celebrating Christmas, and argued that the organic nature of the land moulded the people and their customs—an argument that has recurred ever since, including recently in the work of Jared Diamond. He argued that laws could not be created by pure rationalism, since geography and history shaped habits and patterns. This stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing Enlightenment view that reason was sufficient to create well-ordered



societies and good laws.

## **Influence**

Goethe's influence was dramatic because he understood that there was a transition in European sensibilities, an increasing focus on sense, the indescribable, and the emotional. This is not to say that he was emotionalistic or excessive; on the contrary, he lauded personal restraint and felt that excess was a disease: "There is nothing worse than imagination without taste". He argued in his scientific works that a "formative impulse", which he said is operative in every organism, causes an organism to form itself according to its own distinct laws, and therefore rational laws or fiats could not be imposed at all from a higher, transcendent sphere; this placed him in direct opposition to those who attempted to form "enlightened" monarchies based on "rational" laws by, for example, Joseph II of Austria or, the subsequent Emperor of the French, Napoleon I. A quotation from his *Scientific Studies* will suffice:

We conceive of the individual animal as a small world, existing for its own sake, by

its own means. Every creature is its own reason to be. All its parts have a direct effect on one another, a relationship to one another, thereby constantly renewing the circle of life; thus we are justified in considering every animal physiologically perfect. Viewed from within, no part of the animal is a useless or arbitrary product of the formative impulse (as so often thought). Externally, some parts may seem useless because the inner coherence of the animal nature has given them this form without regard to outer circumstance. Thus...[not] the question, What are they for? but rather, Where do they come from?

– Suhrkamp ed., vol 12, p. 121; trans.  
Douglas Miller, *Scientific Studies*

This change would later become the basis for 19th century thought—organic rather than geometrical, evolving rather than created, and based on sensibility and intuition, rather than on imposed order, culminating in, as he said, a "living quality" wherein the subject and object are dissolved together in a poise of inquiry. Consequently, he

embraced neither teleological nor deterministic views of growth within every organism. Instead, the world as a whole grows through continual, external, and internal strife. Moreover, he did not embrace the mechanistic views that contemporaneous science subsumed during his time, and therewith he denied rationality's superiority as the sole interpretation of reality. Furthermore, he declared that all knowledge is related to humanity through its functional value alone and that knowledge presupposes a perspectival quality. He also stated that the fundamental nature of the world is aesthetic.

His views make him, along with Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, and Ludwig van Beethoven, a figure in two worlds: on one hand, devoted to the sense of taste, order, and finely crafted detail, which is the hallmark of the artistic sense of the Age of Reason and the neo-classicistic period of architecture; on the other, seeking a personal, intuitive, and personalized form of expression and polity, firmly supporting the idea of self-regulating and organic systems. Thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson would take up many similar ideas in the 1800s. His ideas on evolution would frame the question which Darwin and Wallace would approach within the scientific paradigm.

## Notes and references

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1782

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11. ^ Pips Project – THE STIGMA OF SUICIDE A History
12. ^ Ophelia's Burial
13. ^ *Outing Goethe and His Age*; edited by Alice A. Kuzniar (page number needed)
14. ^ *Outing Goethe and His Age*; edited by Alice A. Kuzniar (page number needed)

## See also

- List of works
- Minna Herzlieb

## External links

- Works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe at Project Gutenberg

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Weimar Classicism in the Literary Encyclopedia
- BBC In Our Time Programme on Goethe (online)
- "Goethe's Delicate Empiricism," A Special Issue of Janus Head
- Der Versuch als Mittler zwischen Objekt und Subjekt, 1792; first publ. 1823 (in German)
- Goethe's dual language poems (English and German)
- Goethean Science Site
- Goethe Statue - Lincoln Park, Chicago

### **Romanticism**

18th century - 19th century

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