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Literary Studies and Psychology

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Cult Fiction

During my time at Simon's Rock, I have become fascinated with the interplay of words and people, of text and culture, due in large part to the effects I have seen books have on myself and my peers over the course of our college education. This is why I chose to double concentrate in Literary Studies and Psychology (both of which are fascinating areas of study in their own right): to better understand the role of literature in the shaping of individuals and the cultures they comprise. One particularly interesting facet of the culture-literature interface is the phenomenon of "cult fiction". Hardly anyone (if anyone at all) living in contemporary American society can claim to be wholly unaffected by the peculiar touch of a work of cult fiction, be it *Catcher in the Rye*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *On the Road*, *The Bell Jar*, or even the *Harry Potter* series of books.

As I discovered over the course of my Intersession independent project, defining the term "cult fiction" is no small task. Though all of the books that have had the distinction of being labeled in the popular tongue of our culture as "cult" have similarities, such as having some sort of self-identificative properties whereby the reader sees some (oftentimes marginalized) part of themselves reflected back at them through the text's characters or situations, they are also all tremendously different. It is my hope to in my thesis explore the question of what makes a cult book a cult book, and what it means for a book to be called 'cult'.

To this end, I hope to organize my thesis into four parts. The first will be an introductory essay, essentially asking the question "What is Cult Fiction?" and describing the current thinking on the subject, as well as an exploration of how exactly the term is so difficult to define and has merited so little attention from academia.

The second section will be a study of the first cult novel, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the history leading up to the frenzy caused by this book, the situations surrounding its writing and publication, its reception (both critical and popular), and its impact. I will also include psychological theories to gain a different perspective on the reasons a novel so widely affected a culture and a generation. The third section will be my attempt at something the scholarship on *Werther* is surprisingly lacking: a reading of the novel as



a cult book. I will go through the text in detail and tease apart what in the language and sentiment of the piece so spoke to the people of the time. This will be a sort of mirror image to the second section; whereas there I will explore how the time was ripe for the emergence of a cult book, here I will explore what (if any) aspects of the text made it more than any other work appropriate for the time.

The fourth and final piece of my thesis will not have a single text at its base, but will be an exploration of the theory behind cult fiction and the direction in which the genre is going in this day and age. I will ask questions such as "Is *Harry Potter* the new face of cult fiction? Is *Harry Potter* cult fiction at all?" and consider the current social and economic climate for hospitality towards the further development of the genre. Abstract theory, rather than concrete observations, will be my main instrument for dealing with this chapter.

I hope that the thesis as a whole will provide a cohesive introduction to the study of Cult Fiction, as well as a unique perspective on Goethe's first novel and the fanaticism it caused in its time.

