

**Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*
and the
Early Twentieth Century**

Keith R. Murray, Jr.

“The Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad.”¹ These are the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, among the most influential philosophers of the modern era and one who has exerted an incontrovertible influence on many German authors, including Hermann Hesse. That Hesse should feel drawn to a figure so prominent in the German consciousness is not surprising, that he should do so in spite of the religious zeal of his family seems almost heretical.

No less an influence on Hesse, though, was the groundbreaking psychologist Sigmund Freud, himself also an admirer of Nietzsche, and who “several times said of Nietzsche that he had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was ever likely to live.”² This theme, the “knowledge of self,” is a recurring one in Hesse’s works, and is central to the personal crises he faced in the years after the outbreak of World War I.

Hesse’s post-1914 novels reflect his progress through successive self-examinations. *Demian*, published in 1919, explored his break with conventional morality in a decaying world. *Siddhartha*, published in 1922, features Hesse’s lifelong fascination with Eastern spirituality. It was his 1927 novel, *Steppenwolf*, which first attained a complete break with the past while retaining an overtly autobiographical flavor amidst otherwise total abstraction.

It is *Steppenwolf*’s break from the past which distinguishes it from the styles of two of Hesse’s most prominent contemporaries: Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka. While Mann and Kafka are themselves dissimilar, their novels are characteristic of the novel as a form: as totality. Mann’s novels are intricately detailed and firmly situated within their historical contexts. Further, we are intimately familiar with the characters, with their backgrounds, their tastes, their values, and their fates. And while Kafka’s novels are heavily symbolic, we are nevertheless presented with a total worldview, a worldview we can consider in all its irony and terror. Moreover, we can identify completely with the characters, who are really only reflections of ourselves, struggling for definition amidst ambiguity.

Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, conversely, is quintessentially fragmentary. We know little of Harry Haller beyond that which is immediately apparent from the text. We are as the nephew in whose aunt’s boarding house Haller resides. We are also unable to identify the historical setting for the novel without referring to Hesse’s own life. *Steppenwolf* is without question a product of the Weimar Republic, a period of unprecedented innovation in the arts, and whose principal “style,” expressionism, marks the novel. Yet there is virtually no reference to 1920s Europe in the narrative, no sense of the slaughter of just ten years earlier, no mention of the inflation of the early years of the Weimar Republic, no discussion of the tensions between left and right which prevailed throughout the continent. Harry Haller is isolated in every sense of the word—isolated from us, the readers; isolated from society; and isolated from his past.

This isolation from the past is a distinctly Nietzschean concept. When Zarathustra encounters the saint in the forest, he asks himself in astonishment: “Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that God is dead!”³ For Nietzsche it is self-evident that the old morality is dead, that there is in fact no more morality at all, and likewise no immorality. The way to move forward is to move into the moment,

¹ *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 172.

² *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. xi.

³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 12.

into experience, and to forget the past. One must realize one's own potential, and yet move beyond it, and become an "overman."⁴

That Nietzsche and Hesse should adopt such a view is striking given their similar heritages. Nietzsche's father, Ludwig, was a Lutheran minister who had tutored the children of Prussian royalty. The young Nietzsche had even acquired the nickname "the little pastor," and eventually enrolled at the University of Bonn to study theology and classical philology. Both Hesse's father, Johannes, and Hesse's maternal grandfather, Hermann Gundert, were devout Pietist missionaries. Nietzsche anticipated the spiritual crisis of 1914; Hesse experienced it. In a letter in December 1914, he wrote, "I find that, in the whole, the moral impact of the war has been very positive. I think genuine artists will value a nation more highly if its menfolk have confronted death and experienced life in the POW camps."⁵ For Hesse, one must confront death to fully experience life.

This idea receives especial treatment in *Steppenwolf*. In a complex and fantastic scene near the conclusion of the novel, Harry Haller attends a drug party at Pablo's Magic Theater. While there he becomes intoxicated and, finding Pablo and the prostitute Hermine asleep side by side, he hallucinates driving a knife into Hermine's chest. Still fantasizing, he imagines a conversation with Mozart about the necessity of learning to laugh at the apparently real and to remain mindful of only the ideal, then a trial in which he is sentenced to eternal life for his imagined murder of an imaginary figure. Mozart suddenly returns and becomes Pablo, who likewise chides Haller for his confusion of the ideal and real and then vanishes, with Hermine in his vest pocket, leaving Haller to his thoughts. Sober again, Haller is prepared to resume the game of life, to suffer its agonies and senselessness once more, hopeful that he someday will be able, like Goethe and Mozart, to distinguish between ideas and appearance and to rise above it all and laugh. Or, in Nietzschean terms, to overcome himself, to become an "overman," unfettered by conventional and artificial limits and free to experience.

Hesse's *Steppenwolf* is very much a product of its times, despite its more overt abstraction. That Hesse could fashion a narrative which broke so completely with convention yet was so emblematic of its environment indicates the tumult which characterized both Hesse's life and the general European atmosphere of the 1920s.

Steppenwolf is distinctly autobiographical. While the life of Harry Haller—Hesse's alter ego—is in the details dissimilar to that of his namesake, it nevertheless suggests the latter's trials. His brief marriage to Ruth Wenger, his second wife, had collapsed. She had become ill early in 1925 and subsequently passed in and out of several sanatoria. The stress of her illness and of his and his wife's mutual estrangement took its toll on Hesse, who began frequenting the bars and dance halls of Zurich, and often in the company of women. Wenger herself appears briefly in the novel as Erika, who implores Haller to return to her.⁶ Hesse's habits in Zurich also provide the setting for many of Haller's experiences in the novel, where he encounters an eclectic assortment of pimps, prostitutes, musicians, drug dealers, and other individuals who, like Haller, and Hesse, see themselves on the fringes of society.

Precisely the more lurid scenes in *Steppenwolf* form an intriguing intersection among the plot, the author, developments in visual art, and Hesse's environment. Although Zurich

⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.12. The German word is "Übermensch."

⁵ *Soul of the Age*, p. 74.

⁶ *Pilgrim of Crisis*, p. 281.

has never had a reputation as a city of hedonism, it was the city where the ultimate avant-garde art movement—Dada—was founded, by, among others, Hugo Ball, a longtime friend of Hesse's. Dada was nothing short of revolutionary within the development of art and of German expressionism, a style which emphasizes abstraction and personal experience: motifs central to Hesse's novel. But Dada was by definition a self-abnegating movement, and Hesse borrows this concept into his novel. When Haller enters a drug-induced stupor in Pablo's Magic Theater, he extinguishes his isolated and mortal self, his itinerant and purposeless Steppenwolf.

A second art form contemporary to Hesse was Cubism. The movement was led by such artists as Picasso, Braque, and Gris, who were attracted to the idea of the *tableau-objet*: "the painting as a built up, constructed object or entity with a separate life of its own, not echoing or imitating the external world, but re-creating it in an independent way."⁷ One variety of such an artwork was the collage, which incorporated a variety of extraneous matter onto the painting's surface. *Steppenwolf* is a literary collage. Characters come and go throughout the novel, characters whose identities revolve and whose relation to the plot—and to "reality"—shift as Hesse explores one theme and then another. At the same time the novel assumes the quality of a Cubist painting, drawing upon specific elements in Hesse's personal life, fictionalizing and blurring them, and reconstructing them into an independent entity whose relationship to the originals is at best tenuous.

Hallucination, fantasy, and irreality are important elements in the novel. They all mirror Hesse's experiences with psychoanalysis and his efforts to explore his subconsciousness. It is important for a reader of the novel to understand Freud's influence, as the founder of modern psychology, to 20th-century thought. Freud's theories on sexuality, on the permanence of one's traits in youth, and on the pervasiveness of latent impulses changed man's view of his condition in the 1900s just as Karl Marx had done in the 1800s. Under the stewardship of Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, an early adherent of Freud's, psychoanalysis emerged as a tool for understanding one's self against a backdrop of widespread turmoil. In other words, Freud imposed order where most saw only anarchy.

In 1916, on the verge of collapse after the death of his father, the concurrent illnesses of his wife and child, and the ongoing war, Hesse entered the "Kurhaus Sonnmatt" sanatorium near Lucerne, where he first encountered Josef B. Lang. Lang, a student of Jung, became Hesse's long-term therapist, and facilitated Hesse's exploration of his youth, his desires, and his own neurosis. Hesse was already familiar with the theories of psychoanalysis and eventually included many of these theories in his writings.

The female is an important and recurring motif for Hesse. He first borrows Freud's Oedipus complex for *Demian* in his construction of Frau Eva's character and in his exploration of her relationship with Emil Sinclair. His treatment of the female becomes more intricate, however, in *Steppenwolf*, as the prostitute Hermine becomes an alter ego for Harry Haller. According to Jung, "Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image...I have called this image the 'anima'."⁸ As the novel progresses, we observe the flowering of Haller's sexuality, and Hermine is for Haller a personification of his previously-suppressed eroticism. The transformation of Hermine into a doll is a critical point in the narrative.

⁷ *Concepts of Modern Art*, p. 63.

⁸ *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, p. 670.

Conceptually she was never real to begin with; she was Haller's anima, and her sublimation in the context of Haller's drug-induced fantasy coincides with his spiritual liberation.

So where does *Steppenwolf* fit in Hesse's fictional world? The novel is characterized by a thematic complexity missing from such earlier works as *Peter Camenzind* and *Gertrude*, yet lacks the breadth and vision of his 1943 masterwork *Das Glasperlenspiel*. *Steppenwolf* moves beyond the scope of *Demian* and *Siddhartha*, both *Bildungsromane*,⁹ and explores a single character against an environment that is far less subtle than in the earlier novels, an environment with whom the central character has an active discourse.

In every respect *Steppenwolf* is far less conventional than any work he composed before or afterward. It acknowledges everyday life yet attains a total but believable break with it. It easily lends itself to a thousand different interpretations, a feature which assures its continuing popularity across boundaries of language, nationality, and time. The novel is at once rooted in the European 1920s and the American 1960s. It is at once symbolic of a man's struggle with his identity, whether his name is Harry Haller or Hermann Hesse is immaterial, whether he lives in Germany, Switzerland, the United States, or China.

⁹ A novel of maturation. The term was first used to describe Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and was a novel form common in Romanticism.

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