

HERMANN HESSE

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“I wanted only to try to live in obedience to the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?”

-Herman Hesse (1877-1962), *Demian*

I**N HIS SHORT STORY** “Inside and Outside” (1920), about a little idol that ruptures a friendship, Hermann Hesse revealed his life’s philosophy: “Our mind is capable of passing beyond the dividing line we have drawn for it. Beyond the pairs of opposites of which the world consists, other, new insights begin.” Hesse, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in

Where to Start

THE GLASS BEAD GAME, generally considered Hesse’s masterpiece, embodies his great theme: the quest for self-knowledge and enlightenment. Try **DEMIAN** for a painful coming-of-age tale that presages these themes or **STEPHENWOLF** for a surreal journey that captures the anxiety of the world wars. For Hesse’s quintessential Eastern work, start with **SIDDHARTHA**, which inspired many generations of idealistic youth.

1946 and whose stature as a 20th-century German writer equals his friend and rival Thomas Mann’s, examined the dual tendencies of human nature: to suffer and affirm life, to juxtapose idealism and reality, to be drawn to both good and evil. Though he initially wrote within the 19th-century German Romantic tradition, two world wars imbued him with a deep sense of modernity’s isolation and surrender of the individual spirit.

Hesse's works, which meld Western and Eastern philosophy with existential, spiritual, and mystical themes, embodied the search for self-realization and spiritual fulfillment. How can a person escape the bonds of society—and his or her own dual nature—to live a fulfilling life? Is there a balance between a life of spiritual contemplation and one of physical action? He portrayed this split between the spiritual and the physical in *Demian* (1919), *Siddhartha* (1922), and the surreal *Steppenwolf* (1927). In all his works, Hesse urged his characters—and his readers—to search deep within their souls to rise above the physical world.

HESSE WAS BORN IN 1877 in the Black Forest region of Germany. His father, a Russian citizen, and his mother, born in India to the Pietist (Protestant) missionary and Indologist Hermann Gundert, both served as missionaries in India. Although they had hoped their son would follow in their footsteps, at age 13 Hesse, familiar with his grandfather's large library, declared he wanted to become "a poet and nothing else at all." He rejected his inherited evangelicalism when he entered the Protestant seminary at Maulbronn in 1891 and ran away soon after. Hesse later criticized the severe educational system in *Beneath the Wheel* (1906). As a youth, he experienced the soul-searching yearnings and anxieties portrayed in his novels. Though he strived for harmonious relationships, he struggled to follow his inner voice—one that didn't always conform to his family's and society's expectations. After a stint in secular schools, Hesse worked as a bookshop clerk, apprentice clockmaker, mechanic, and book dealer. At age 21, he published his first book, *Romantic Songs*. The publication of the *Peter Camenzind* in 1904, a novel rooted in the German Romantic tradition, allowed him to write full time, become financially independent, and marry his first wife, Maria Bernoulli, with whom he had three children.

In 1911 Hesse visited India, which inspired his studies of Hindu and ancient Chinese religions and eventually resulted in *Siddhartha*. In 1912, Hesse and his family moved to Switzerland, where his antiwar activism earned him a traitorous reputation. His wife's mental illness, his father's death, and the chaos of the First World War soon contributed to a nervous breakdown. After undergoing psychoanalysis by Dr. Joseph B. Lang, a student and associate of Carl Jung, Hesse studied Jung's analytical psychology. He subsequently applied many of Jung's theories about the duality between reason and creativity in his mature work.

In 1919 Hesse left his family and moved to Montagnola, in southern Switzerland, where he embraced a quieter life; he became a Swiss citizen in 1923. His breakthrough novel, the autobiographical *Demian*, which appeared under the pen name of Emil Sinclair, reflected his emotional crisis. *Siddhartha* earned him new audiences. But personal crisis returned. Hesse divorced Maria and in 1924, he married singer Ruth Wenger. The years between the World Wars produced *Steppenwolf*, about the isolation produced by modernity and, on a personal level, about the problems Hesse experienced relating to others.

In 1931, after publishing *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930), Hesse married a Jewish woman, Ninon Ausländer. Though he had initially found wide support in Nazi Germany, he was blacklisted in 1943 when, in a reprint of the novel, he insisted on retaining the parts dealing with anti-Semitism. His masterpiece, *The Glass Bead Game*, was published in Zurich. Hesse received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946; he wrote no major novels after that but published poems and reviews in Swiss newspapers. He died in 1962, at age 85, in Montagnola.

The Cult Figure

HESSE FOUND VALUE in different Western philosophers, from Plato to Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. He claimed, however, that none of these philosophers influenced him as much as Indian and Chinese religious philosophy. He wrote his first short works about India in the 1900s; in 1911 he trekked to India, but he returned disappointed in the lack of spiritual fulfillment he found there. *Siddhartha* explored the idea that self-realization must come from within. As Hesse summarized the basic teachings of Buddhism in the novel, "Your soul is the whole world."

The Eastern philosophy articulated in *Siddhartha* and *The Glass Bead Game*, as well as the themes of protest and rebellion in earlier works like *Demian*, touched a generation of restless youth in the 1960s and 1970s. Though Hesse was not widely read outside the German-speaking world until 1946, his work appealed to a "counterculture" society concerned with the issues he had addressed in the 1930s—pacifism, humanitarian ideals, and the fate of individual freedom. In the United States, Hesse's work resounded loudly with youth living against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Hesse became something of a cult figure: the rock band Sparrow changed its name to Steppenwolf ("Born to Be Wild"); *Siddhartha* became a spiritual guide for American Beat poets; and the film version of *Siddhartha* became a cult classic. If less canonic today—devotees of Modern Library's list of 100 Best Novels of the 20th century won't find any of Hesse's novels there—he remains one of the best-selling German-speaking writers.

MAJOR WORKS

Peter Camenzind (1904)



Hesse's successful first novel provided him with the means to marry and write full-time. Critics see *Peter Camenzind* as a precursor to his more famous works, if more naïve and humorous. But like his later novels, it is also what Hesse called one of his "biographies of the soul"—the journey to reconcile the inner self with the outer world.

THE STORY: When the discontented Peter Camenzind leaves his Swiss mountain village in search of new experi-

ences in France and Italy, failed romances, calamitous friendships, and the suffering he sees around him squelch his optimism. Then he meets Boppi, a helpless invalid, who rekindles Peter's love of humanity and life.

"In a disillusioned aesthete's new style of life found its expression in a corresponding new style of art. ... Camenzind's story is less a smooth continuum of evolving action firmly anchored in space and time than a series of loosely juxtaposed recollections with interposed self-contemplation, nature description, and social comment."

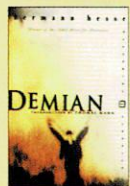
JOSEPH MILECK, HERMANN HESSE: LIFE AND ART, 1981

"The writing does not have the simple, parable-like power that makes so appealing, but it is surprising how modern and lively a book of 1904 reads. Peter almost feels like a lad written into a Nick Hornby novel, fretting about how to get a career, get a life, get a wife and be good all at the same time."

HELEN RUMBELOW, THE TIMES (LONDON), 5/11/02

THE BOTTOM LINE: Hesse's debut novel reflects his own life as an artist in his 20s.

Demian (1919)



Hesse wrote *Demian*, his breakthrough novel, during a major period of crisis. The U.S. had declared war on Germany, and, from his safe perch in Switzerland, Hesse was writing anti-war tracts and publishing books for prisoners. Breaking from Neo-Romanticism, *Demian* showcased Jung's concept of individuation, which posited psychological development as the encounter between consciousness and unconsciousness. The coming-of-age story resounded with returning young soldiers and the era's sense of disillusionment.

THE STORY: "I wanted only to try to live in obedience to the promptings which came from my true self," says Emil Sinclair as he reflects back on his childhood. "Why was that so very difficult?" As a boy, Sinclair acknowledges the good and evil of human nature and reluctantly embraces the "forbidden" world of dark thoughts and petty crime. Then he meets the precocious, radical Max Demian, who challenges his worldview. With war fast approaching, Sinclair searches his soul and finds that, "Nothing in the world is more disturbing to a man than following the path that leads him to himself."

"In the early Twenties... this brief, bewitching and bewitched novel created a deep stir among young intellectuals in Europe and even in America. What stirred these readers was its revolutionary attitude toward good and evil; its prophetic insight ...; its repudiation of the accepted forms of thought and behavior as unequal and even inimical to the content of man's nature. ... Today the ideas explored in are no longer new, but they are still fresh." ALICE S. MORRIS, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW,

2/1/48

Hesse's Nobel Prize Banquet Speech, 1946

"I feel akin to you and to the idea that inspired the Nobel Foundation, the idea that the mind is international and supra-national, that it ought to serve not war and annihilation, but peace and reconciliation. My ideal, however, is not the blurring of national characteristics, such as would lead to an intellectually uniform humanity. On the contrary, may diversity in all shapes and colours live long on this dear earth of ours. What a wonderful thing is the existence of many races, many peoples, many languages, and many varieties of attitude and outlook! If I feel hatred and irreconcilable enmity toward wars, conquests, and annexations, I do so for many reasons, but also because so many organically grown, highly individual, and richly differentiated achievements of human civilization have fallen victim to these dark powers." ■

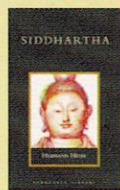
"The electrifying influence exercised on a whole generation just after the First World War by ... is unforgettable. With uncanny accuracy this poetic work struck the nerve of the times and called forth grateful rapture from a whole youthful generation who believed that an interpreter of their innermost life had risen from their own midst." HERMAN HESSE,

DEMIAN, FROM THE INTRODUCTION BY THOMAS MANN

"Hesse's was the first Jungian novel. ... In the traditional German the young hero progresses toward maturity, learning from his mistakes and from wise preceptors. Though belongs to this tradition, the preceptors are not entirely separate from the hero, Emil Sinclair, whose name suggests a combination of sin and enlightenment." RONALD HAYMAN, A LIFE OF JUNG, 2002

THE BOTTOM LINE: An unforgettable coming-of-age story about lost innocence and the search for self-awareness and fulfillment.

Siddhartha (1922)



"I tried to discover that which is common to all confessions and all human forms of religiousness and that which stands above all national differences, that which can be believed in and respected by all races," Hesse said of his most widely read work. Most critics read *Siddhartha* as a parable of the life of Gautama Buddha. Hesse explored his trademark themes from Buddhist and other Indian philosophical and religious perspectives, including alienation from humanity and the search for self-knowledge. Interestingly, the protagonist's final epiphany relates to nature.

THE STORY: In ancient India, true happiness and peace evade Siddhartha, the blessed young son of a Brahmin. He and his best friend thus leave his family for a group of wandering ascetics. But self-denial does not produce enlightenment, and Siddhartha seeks out Gotama the Buddha.

When this also fails, he meets a simple, contented ferryman who takes him to a city. After years of a hedonistic lifestyle, Siddhartha feels spiritually trapped. Returning to the ferryman, he achieves total enlightenment as he listens to the flowing river.

"Every great mystic and every great missionary reports essentially the same thing: the eternal flow, timeless series of evolutions, and so forth, and Hermann Hesse is one of the great visionary spokesmen of the twentieth century." TIMOTHY

LEARY, TURN ON, TUNE IN, DROP OUT, 1999

"It is neither dogmatic nor preachy. ... There are hundreds, if not thousands, of books on Buddhism that you could read, but few of them give the clarity of insight to be found in . Hesse is a writer of the first order and his simple, direct style brings home his points with extreme clarity." ALLEN L. SCARBROUGH, WHAT YOU

NEED TO READ TO KNOW JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING, 2001

THE BOTTOM LINE: Hesse's classic account of a struggle to find truth—and freedom—from within.

THE MOVIE: 1972, directed by Conrad Rooks and starring Shashi Kapoor, Simi Garewal, and Romesh Sharma.

Selected Other Works

* Discussed in Major Works

* PETER CAMENZIND (1904)

BENEATH THE WHEEL (1906)

This semiautobiographical novel recounts the story of a bright boy from a Black Forest village who, when he rises academically, cracks under a system that represses the human spirit.

GERTRUDE (1910)

In this fictional memoir, Hesse explores the paradoxes of human existence. Kuhn, a crippled but gifted composer, befriends a self-destructive opera singer, Heinrich Muoth, and falls in love with Gertrude Imthor. But he loses her to Heinrich. However, Heinrich's and Gertrude's disastrous and tragic marriage becomes the inspiration for Kuhn's opera—the most important artistic success in his life.

ROSSHALDE (1914)

In this short novel, a famous painter searches for peace at his magnificent estate, Rosshalde. Trapped in a marriage with his estranged wife, having a precious young son, and afflicted with creative block and great fear, he searches for freedom outside of conventional society.

KNULP: THREE TALES FROM THE LIFE OF KNULP (1915)

A vagabond man comes to terms with a life lived in pure freedom.

* DEMIAN (1919)

STRANGE NEWS FROM ANOTHER STAR (1919)

These eight short stories are concerned with the subconscious, surrealism, dream worlds—and

ultimately, wisdom.

KLINGSOR'S LAST SUMMER (1920)

The title novella in this collection, written shortly after Hesse's move to Montagnola, features a dying painter.

WANDERING: NOTES AND SKETCHES (1920)

With Montagnola as his base, Hesse walked everywhere in the German Alps and recorded his inspirations in prose and watercolor sketches.

* SIDDHARTHA (1922)

IN SIGHT OF CHAOS (1923)

A collection of essays.

* STEPPENWOLF (1927)

CRISIS: PAGES FROM A DIARY (1928)

NARCISSUS AND GOLDMUND (1930)

In medieval Europe, two men—one worldly, decadent, and sensual, the other ascetic, cerebral, and monastic—embark on a journey of self-discovery.

THE JOURNEY TO THE EAST (1932)

H. H., a German choirmaster, takes a pilgrimage through time and space with a mysterious League composed of famous real and fictitious characters. But their journey to the East and "home and youth of the soul" ends in disaster—and greater understanding.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS (1937)

Not exactly autobiographical, many of Hesse's musings veer into fantastical "what if" situations concerning his life.

* THE GLASS BEAD GAME (1943)

IF THE WAR GOES ON: REFLECTIONS ON WAR AND POLITICS (1946)

Hesse reflects on his pacifism, and

opposition to Nazi militarism, and the general political milieu of his life. About each essay he said, "I strive to guide the reader not into the world theater with its political problems but into his innermost being, before the judgment seat of his very personal conscience."

STRANGE NEWS FROM ANOTHER STAR (1972)

This collection of stories (1913–1918) deals with the world of dreams and the subconscious.

HOURS IN THE GARDEN AND OTHER POEMS (1974)

These six narrative poems describe nature.

TALES OF STUDENT LIFE (1975)

Ever fascinated with school life—the defiance that marked his own brief schooling and the tensions it created between freedom and discipline, intellect and emotion—Hesse penned stories that depict German student life from the 1700s on.

MY BELIEF: ESSAYS ON LIFE AND ART (1976)

In these essays on life and art (1904–1961), Hesse meditates on Dostoevsky and other writers (including himself), moral and political issues, and the dichotomy of science and poetry.

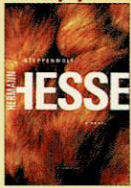
SOUL OF THE AGE: SELECTED LETTERS OF HERMANN HESSE, 1891–1962 (1991)

These autobiographical letters reveal Hesse's inner and outer life.

THE FAIRY TALES OF HERMANN HESSE (1997)

These lyrical tales, about the "essence" of life, weave together Eastern mysticism and the traditional European fairy tale. ■

Steppenwolf (1927)



Steppenwolf, a semiautobiographical novel, caused a minor scandal upon publication. While Hesse was writing this strange, surreal work—which was to bring him worldwide recognition—his first marriage and his brief second marriage collapsed, and he became psychologically ill. The novel, which reflected the anxiety caused by growing Fascism, anti-Semitism, and poverty in Germany, foreshadowed the violence to follow. Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Cardinal Ratzinger, once said this was one of his favorite books because it “exposes the problem of modernity’s isolated and self-isolating man.”

THE STORY: Middle-aged intellectual Harry Haller, aloof, suicidal, and disdainful of bourgeois convention while at the same time a part of it, imagines himself to be a “wolf of the Steppes,” torn between seeking human bonds and isolation. One evening Harry enters the “Magic Theater—For Madmen Only” and receives a pamphlet that describes his feelings as a Steppenwolf. Weeks later, Harry meets Hermine and her hedonistic friends, representations of his lost Self. When he returns to the Magic Theater, each door opens to a surreal, barbarous, but ultimately accepting world.

“[It is] atrociously horrible. ... This is no book for merry youth or to bring cheer in hours of despondency. But it is a most valuable contribution for the serious psychologist, for the



Statue of Hesse in his home city of Calw, Germany

seeker of knowledge of the abyss of the human soul. At the same time it is infinitely rich in colorful fancy and poetic variegation.” GABRIELE REUTER, NEW YORK TIMES, 9/25/27

“Despite its analysis of the neurosis of our time, and despite the fact that Hesse is deserving of a wide audience, is not likely to become very widely read ... the book may strike the average reader as too ‘European,’ too mystical and possibly too shocking in its brutal honesty.” CLAUDE HILL, NEW YORK TIMES, 3/16/47

“Hesse struck the nerve of the times. ... In this work Hesse uncompromisingly indicted middle-class materialism, hypocrisy, and conformity, as well as the manifestations of modern industrial society.” COLUMBIA DICTIONARY OF MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE, ED. BY JEAN ALBERT BEDE AND WILLIAM BENBOW EDGERTON, 1980

THE BOTTOM LINE: This mystical journey into the Self reveals the raw dichotomies of humanity.

THE MOVIE: 1974, directed by Fred Haines and starring Max von Sydow, Dominique Sanda, and Pierre Clémenti.

The Glass Bead Game (Magister Ludi) (1943)

◆ NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE, 1946



Hesse considered his last major work, which he began in 1931, as “a protective shield against these ugly times, a magical refuge.” Over 500 pages long, it summarizes Hesse’s lifelong concerns: Eastern religion and philosophy, pacifism, the duality of intellect and creativity, and humanity’s quest for self-knowledge and enlightenment. Some critics thought this philosophical novel abstruse; others viewed it as a brilliant critique of an anti-intellectual culture.

THE STORY: In a distant future in a “secular monastery” in the province of Castalia, a refuge for the intellectual elite, Josef Knecht (German for “servant”) tries to master the Glass Bead Game, an abstract synthesis of all arts and disciplines, from music to mathematics. Noticed by the Magister Ludi, Thomas von der Trave (a thinly veiled Thomas Mann), Knecht rises through the Order and becomes Master of the Game. After trying to reconcile the intellectual, spiritual world with material reality, he vows to devote his life to improving humanity.

“[The novel] is a book about the future which is really about the past; a timeless, universal game which is also the toy of a quaint passing culture; a work filled with impressive learning yet leading to a negation of reason and knowledge. ... Kafka, Proust, Joyce were far more accomplished, more original stylists. But none of them speaks that simple language accenting the search for salvation—simple while appearing complex—which is the secret of Hesse’s success.” RALPH FREEDMAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 1/4/70.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The highly philosophical work that earned Hesse the Nobel Prize for literature. ■