

The Persistence of Epiphany, Magical Transformations and Symbolism in Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*

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ABSTRACT

*Hermann Hesse, one of the most Germany's celebrated writers. He is tried several apprenticeships before finally working in a bookshop and beginning his own writing career. He is first composed poetry and later moved to writing novels and essays. Always suspicious of authority, Hesse tried to support artists who were persecuted by the Nazis, but he had to endure criticism for not being vocal enough for or against either side. Hesse's novels, mainly *Steppenwolf* and *Siddhartha*, gained popularity in the 1960s. Many of readers, writers and critics portrayed his works as a aligning with counter culture values. In this research paper discusses about how does Hermann Hesse uses the term epiphany, magical transformations and symbolism in his famous work *Steppenwolf*.*

Keywords: *Hermann Hesse, Aligning, Epiphany, Magical, Transformations and Symbolism*

In its literary dimension, the term 'epiphany' refers to an occasion on which a character in a work of fiction is suddenly overtaken by a moment of insight into the tenor of his or her life. Originally, the word had a religious connotation, since it refers to the experience of the biblical wise men who traveled to Bethlehem under the guidance of a bright star to bear witness to a miraculous birth. This element of a penumbra heightens the symbolic value of the epiphany in its figurative sense. A contemporary of Hermann Hesse, James Joyce made particular use of the epiphany as a poetic device in his early works. There is no direct evidence that Hermann Hesse knew Joyce, although Joyce lived for a time and died in 1941 in Zurich, a city quite familiar to Hesse and a primary location in the *Steppenwolf's* search for an identity. There is every reason to suppose; however, that Hesse would have been aware of, if not closely acquainted with, Joyce's linguistically challenging work. It is also likely that he was familiar with Joyce's concept of the role of the artist-writer in society, a subject of paramount interest to both writers. Within this frame Hesse use of the epiphany as a prototype in his most celebrated novel, *Steppenwolf*.

The critics have paid markedly little attention to the subject of the moment of epiphany as Hesse puts it to use in his fiction. At the same time, they have repeatedly taken note of his practice of embellishing his realistic accounts with fantastic events and magical transformations. These occur with some frequency throughout Hesse's work *Steppenwolf*. Joseph Milek, explores the concept of the epiphany to a limited extent but holds it to be an aspect of the concept of grace. Milek postulates Hesse's propensity, acquired as a child raised in a Protestant household, to associate Christ's birth with God's gift of grace rather than with an occasion for the presentation of gifts. Through such an overlapping of general and private symbolism, Hesse uses the literary device of the epiphany to describe effectively the turmoil of his life and times and the transcendence beyond the resultant despair. It is this theme which underlies his fiction.

In his *Steppenwolf* another designation, proposing that "Harry labels these magic moments *Gottesspuren* (traces of God)-Jung's 'flashes of insight.'" (Lewis p 12) Oskar Seidlin leaves aside such religious and psychological connotations and summarizes Hesse's literary search for his selfhood in these terms. Ralph Freedman uses the philosophic concept of *unio mystica* to characterize the moment of sudden insight that overwhelms the protagonist in stories dealing with the experience of an epiphany. In accord with Freedman, David G. Richards describes the *Steppenwolf's* progress toward experiencing a corona-embellished rebirth in these words: "Haller's despair and thoughts of suicide may be seen as manifestations of this stage which generally precedes the mystical experience of illumination" (David p 76)

The critics of *Steppenwolf* have neglected to examine the exact nature of this moment of enlightenment in the novel. It occurs when the protagonist, a disillusioned writer and inveterate member of the bourgeoisie, experiences, like the reformer Martin Luther, a confrontation with the equivalent of a symbolic lightning storm, namely, the moment of epiphany, which impels him to pursue his destiny. This

event takes place only after Hesse has provided two descriptions, one magnifying the other, of Harry Haller's desperate state of mind. The book's first section is ostensibly the work of a first person narrator, the landlady's observant. He gives an objective report about Haller's life of social isolation and personal wretchedness in a comfortable and orderly rooming house. The narrator has generously undertaken to prepare for publication the autobiographical papers Haller has left behind upon vanishing from his rooms. The second description is Harry's first-person narrative covering recent events in his life and their miseries.

Harry recognizes a part of himself to be an antagonist, rebelling against the social constraints imposed on him by the bourgeois world into which he was born. He illustrates one of his exhibitions of self destructive rage by portraying a visit he has made to the home of a professor, an old friend, whom he has just met again after a long period of separation. Harry finds himself incapable of communicating with his host and hostess and flees from their apartment after having wounded the feelings of the professor's wife. He has made scathing comments on her treasured portrait of Goethe, which, in Haller's view, depicts the German genius as a bourgeois idol. In recognition of his inability to conceal his hostility toward the superficiality of social norms, he condemns himself to living the life of an outcast and proclaims himself an 'outsider' (Hesse uses the English word in his German text).

In these circumstances, Harry is confined to roaming only ill-lighted and for the most part deserted city streets, while on occasion breaking up this routine with a visit to some dingy tavern where he orders a bottle of wine. On one of these nocturnal journeys, he experiences an epiphany that leads him to believe in the possibility of transforming his life into one in which he can achieve spiritual wholesomeness. The possibility of this transformation appears to him in the form of a fleeting vision. He glimpses a sealed shut door way with a pointed arch, now a part of a wall, at the opposite ends of which lie a church (symbolizing eternity) and a hospital (symbolizing life's fragility and brevity) concealed in darkness. The moving lighted letters of a sign above the portal illuminate the scene; the words become legible to Harry momentarily. They proclaim: "Magic Theater/ Admittance not for everyone/-not for everyone" (Hesse p 215). The message bewilders Haller; when his eyes look down at the mirroring surface of the street, darkened by rain, he sees the fading reflection of the advertisement's last words: "Only - for - the - Mad!" (Hesse p 219) Harry cannot immediately fathom the meaning of this pseudo-slogan that seems to apply to him and his tormented life, but he suspects that his discovery of the hidden doorway will lead him to pursue a path into the inner depths of his being.

After the death of Hesse's death in 1962 an untitled manuscript was discovered among his papers and subsequently published in *Materialien zu Hermann Hesses* as *Der Steppenwolf*. It can readily be looked upon as an earlier version of this episode. It tells the story of a writer, who, while on a journey, discovers in a way station town a remarkable, forest-like garden, enclosed within a wall. Nearby there is a restaurant in which he has a conversation with a mysterious old man. The author gives him the name 'Sparrow Hawk' which is a prominent image in *Demian*. He finds himself in a timeless world (*Urwelt*), a world of chaos, where wild delights and dismal fears contend with one another. Before the manuscript breaks off, the writer reveals that he believes the garden to be his own soul. As he listens to a piano being played, he concludes that for him every musical sound is a world in itself, is God himself. The supposition that the magic garden became, in *Steppenwolf*, the Magic Theater lies close at hand. This earlier draft is significant in that it provides a contrast to the final version, especially in regard to the omission of the scene of the epiphany and the entire section devoted to the Magic Theatre. In comparing the neo-romantic writing in this fragment with the masterfully subtle writing in the finished novel, one cannot but agree with Thomas Mann evaluates *Steppenwolf* as an experimental novel than James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Andre Gides *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*.

Harry leaves the forest-like garden, where he has entered into the farther reaches of his mind or consciousness, the *Steppenwolf*'s instinct is to seek out, in a reflex action, the thriving nightlife of the city. His thoughts remain focused on the promise of an incipient enlightenment that his epiphany has afforded him. He asks himself: "And who sought beyond the ruins of his life its disintegrating meaning, endured the seemingly senseless, and experienced the seemingly irrational, hoped covertly to find nevertheless in an ultimate insane chaos revelation and the nearness of God?" (Hesse p 219). Since the question has only one answer-the *Steppenwolf*-Haller is drawn back to the environs where the letters of the advertising sign had lit up the emptiness. Although only the darkness remains, Harry is light of heart. For his hopefulness he is rewarded by the appearance of a shadowy figure. It cannot be refuted that Harry's encounter with such denizens of the night represents reinforcing aspects of Harry's capability to go on with his soul searching. The man who is about to rush past him on the dark street appears to be a vendor, bearing a tray of brochures. In response to Haller's request, he is provided with one of these before the tout vanishes behind a door. It is, as he discovers back in his room, a treatise on the subject of the *Steppenwolf* written by members of a group joined together by their interest in the species.

The readers of the *Steppenwolf* are given the opportunity to consider the realistic aspects of the novel. However, the symbolic overtones of this pamphlet are indeed of special significance. In an important critical appraisal of Hesse's work, Theodore Ziolkowski analyzes the form of *Steppenwolf* on the basis of a statement in one of the author's letters, dated 13 November 1930. Plainly, it consists of a third-person (in a figurative sense) introductory passage, a first-person narrative in two parts, and the interpolated tractate. Subsequently, Ziolkowski determines that the text takes the form of a sonata, with its repetitions and inversions. An equally valid conclusion about the book's format can be reached by considering its tripartite nature. It is an introduction to the *Steppenwolf*'s personal revelations, the tractate, prologue, and elaboration of the Magic theatre episode. This tripling of viewpoints can also be regarded as a part of a consecutive mirroring that indeed dominates the symbolism of the entire story. Each section serves to reflect and simultaneously magnify the other; none provides contrast.

In the same way, the short lived epiphany continues to illuminate Haller's journey. In a symbolic sense, it allows Haller to make the transition from hopelessness to an affirmation of life's meaningfulness. In a literal sense, he ceases, as a result of the epiphanic experience, to roam the city's midnight mazes, and instead explores the Magic theatre's splendiferous corridors with Mozart. Thus, before the advent of the epiphany he is lost in the realm of his darkest despair, whereas after it he ascends in the Magic theatre to his highest imagination and most radiant peaks.

The significance of the epiphany unfolds within Hesse's description of his search for release from an alienation from his self. Although the 'Tractate' restates to a considerable extent what the editorial prologue to Harry's confessions has already contended, it takes him a step further down the path that the epiphany on the city street has illuminated. The booklet convinces Harry that he, like every human being, has not two but a multitude of selves. It will be his task, as he forces himself to think beyond the concept of individuation, to imagine the many aspects of his personality and to examine the conflict between the author and the society with which he is inextricably involved, a core concept in Hesse's work. As the *Steppenwolf* tractate looks back on Harry Haller's dichotomous self, the analysis in the pamphlet also represents a bridge to the adventure of the Magic theatre.

In this novel Harry's problematic character which is the concluding section, the Magic theatre episode. It again depicts his frustrations, affords him the knowledge of the 'true self' promised him on the occasion of the epiphany. This kind of revelation will enable him to throw off the burden of living on the brink of madness and self-destruction. The slogan appears at the end of the message provided by the epiphany. These words become the motto for the tractate and subsequently the motto that prefaces Harry's experiences in the Magic theatre. The *Steppenwolf* then makes his first notable attempt to heal his dichotomous self by reading the pamphlet, which, in effect, generalizes his situation. In taking the tractate to heart, he confronts its authors, whom he will come to know as the Immortals of the Magic theatre, a construction of much greater sophistication than that of the previous version's sage in the restaurant at the edge of a magic forest. Hesse's interweaving of these psychological configurations follows the pattern of mirroring, which is the main feature of the symbolism in the novel's climactic episode.

The pre-Magic theatre stage of Harry's life in the city allows Hesse also to introduce the people of the demimonde and the bohemian world in the Zurich of the twenties. One of them, the prostitute Hermine, becomes prominent in her role as Harry's guide in the preternatural realm. Her name, which reminds Haller of his childhood friend Hermann (the author himself), suggests that she is Harry's anima, the creative (life-giving) self, an aspect of himself that he has suppressed in order to have a secure place in the bourgeois world. To prepare him for his experiences in the Magic theatre, Hermine has previously undertaken to educate him in worldliness, that is, to teach him how to enjoy the freedom of dance, jazz music, and the world of erotic, sensual pleasures. These activities bring to the fore a number of his many selves. The novel becomes the story of Harry's painful acquisition of the talents that allow him to function as a city-dweller in the post-World War One world. He finds he has the ability to drink to excess, to dance to 'non-music,' or jazz, and to consort with, and enjoy the favors of, prostitutes. At this point, the novel is a straightforward account of his life as he approaches the age of fifty. Along with the women of the night, Hermine and her friend Maria, Haller is also guided by the jazz musician Pablo, a name faintly reminiscent of two of Hesse's fellow artists who are Pablo Picasso and Pablo Casals. They are here subtly presented as possible companions of Harry Haller in the hectic, pleasure-seeking activities of the bohemian inhabitants of a European metropolis. Their revelries reach a climax at a masked ball. It is at this point that the realism subsides, and the book becomes a surrealist fantasy.

The symbolism in this concluding section of the novel is the outcome of a challenge that the author Hesse has put to himself. In his blatantly autobiographical essay 'Krisis: ein Stuck Tagebuch' is a second

preliminary version of *Steppenwolf*. He acknowledges that a late-blooming but irrepressible urge to be strictly truthful and honest about himself led to his consciousness of the dark side of his nature. In a letter to Hugo Ball, who had been contracted to write Hesse's biography, Hesse stated this resolve. He also drew the conclusion that his, as he termed it, neurotic obsession with delving into the sicknesses of the times was indeed the result of those sicknesses which had overrun Europe like a plague. The treatment Hesse prescribed as a remedy for society dissolute practices. As a means to this end, Hesse chose to write an autobiographical account, detailing his bout with neurosis as an artist and intellectual.

In converting a hotel ballroom and its environs into a 'magic theater' Hesse has created a cosmography of his own mind and soul. The figures Hesse conjures up to populate the scene are hyperbolic versions of the characters whom the Steppenwolf has met during his adventures in the nightlife of the metropolis. Hermine now serves to illuminate a psychological concept, that of the anima. According to the psychoanalytical theory of Carl Gustav Jung, the anima, in its capacity as a creative force in the mind, engenders healing in the fractured self. Against this background, the role that Hermine plays in the Magic theatre becomes clear. She brings Haller closer to understanding himself and his plight. Nevertheless, Harry's possibly feigned murder of Hermine, which occurs as his adventures in the deepest regions of the self come to a close, can but signify that he must abandon her as his guide and go the rest of his way alone. Further evidence that he has taken responsibility for his own life and way of living is the change in his thinking manifested by the transformation of Pablo, the saxophone player, into the image of Mozart. This puzzling interplay of symbols tends to place the reader back on the dark street where the glowing letters on the rain-darkened sidewalk spelled out the warning 'Only for the Mad,' that is, for those in an ultimate stage of distress.

In Hesse's *Steppenwolf* does not champion escape from a world in upheaval by means of drugs that induce a false sense of security. Although licentious behaviour occurs in the scenes that take place in the Magic theatre, these are a prelude to an episode of spiritual transcendence that occurs as a final consequence of Harry's epiphany. Neither does the Magic theatre have a resemblance to the Theater of the Absurd. When, in an episode in this section, Harry aims his pistol at the drivers of cars who race down the highways, they are for him symbolically destroyers of the natural world. He is protesting an act of vandalism perpetrated by a bourgeoisie too eager to solve problems by making use of machines. On a more personal level, Harry fulfils his youthful sexual desires by taking part in a charade in the theatre's loges. In this latter adventure his Steppenwolf self whips his all too human self, and vice versa. These adventures serve mainly to lead him toward his ultimate adventure in the Magic theatre. Offering himself as a guide to Harry in reaching his goal, Mozart appears. Henry Hatfield, in an essay on Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, has pointed out that Mozart comes on stage at this point while reciting 'a Joycean sort of poem'.

Mozart is a many-faceted symbol. He stands, first of all, for the Immortals, namely, all creative artists. In a recent study of Hesse and his work, Karin Tebbin has associated artistic achievement with the process of becoming free of the bonds of the merely personal and reaching the lofty heights of the supra-personal; only from this vantage point can the writer share his views with the reader. In another capacity, Mozart symbolizes music and the power to express the ineffable. In a letter, Hesse explains his decision to select Mozart from among other musical geniuses to reign in the Magic theatre. He posits that Mozart's operas were for him the very concept of theatre. Significantly, Mozart also tries to teach Haller the art of laughter, the art of rising above the vicissitudes and dichotomies of life and above death itself.

In conclusion of the climactic scene in which Mozart provides Haller with a key to the puzzles that he has confronted in the Magic theater, this Immortal closest to Harry's heart vanishes. He leaves behind in Harry an intuitive sense of the meaningfulness of his experiences. As Ted R. Spivey explains, "In a visionary moment [Harry] glimpses the archetype of the cosmic man." (Spivey p 23) In regard to this archetype David G. Richards contends: "With mythopoic power Joyce and Hesse create figures originating in the archetype out of which the mythical heroes arose. They set out in search of the hero's image and power, which is awaiting discovery and activation in every individual. In this instance, Harry Haller, through Mozart and his compositions, begins to understand the cosmic aspect of the relationship between the artist and society, particularly bourgeois society, that has propelled the Steppenwolf's in its midst into madness. Harry Haller rids himself of his despair after his experience in the Magic theatre. The key function of the epiphany on the dark city street has been to bind together the three levels on which Haller's hegira tales place: the real world of Europe between the wars, the literary realm of the tractate, and the cosmic or eternal sphere of the Magic theatre. There the Steppenwolf momentarily puts aside his dual nature and transcends the ills of mortality.

The tentative aspect of his achievement, Haller finds him alone with the saxophone player Pablo (Mozart) at the end of his adventures and misadventures in the theatre. Pablo berates him for having taken these too seriously and for having perhaps misinterpreted them. He reassures Harry that further

experiments in reassembling the many selves of the onetime dichotomous Steppenwolf can be made at his discretion. The open-ended nature of the conclusion of *Steppenwolf* establishes that the moment of epiphany initiated by the moving lighted text that Haller seeks to interpret is a signpost to the artist-writer. It directs artists and writers in the direction of reorienting themselves in order to contend with a world gone mad. In the year in which *Steppenwolf* was first published, Hesse wrote to his biographer, Hugo Ball, and summarized what he had intended the novel to convey. Its message, so Hesse indicates, was that the writer's mission must be to become self aware and thus bring, by establishing an inner equilibrium, harmony into a world beset with wars and moral decay. In his letter Hesse also proposes that the writer's objective must not be to affirm the goodness of life, but to explore its heights and depths so that readers and critics can become enlightened about the burden they bear in common with the writer.

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