

Search of Self in Hermann Hesse's Fiction: an Observation

Jayesh Kachot

Ph. D. Scholar and Primary Teacher,
Government Primary School,
Shapar, Veraval, Rajkot.

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ABSTRACT

Hesse has been called a Neo-Romantic, meaning that his work echoes the ideas of the German Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Steppenwolf has the melancholy, pessimism, and preoccupation with death and suicide characteristic of the Romantics, while Siddhartha is an example of the Romantics' fascination with distant times and places, Eastern religions, and fairy tales and legends. Steppenwolf is the only one of Hesse's ten novels set in a twentieth-century city: all the others take place in past or future time and in exotic or imaginary places. Although modern in setting and content, the novel has numerous references to writers of the Romantic era; one of its "Immortals," the geniuses who hover above the earth, is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the greatest German writer of the period. Like the Romantic writers, Hesse treats artists and intellectuals as outsiders in their society. In Steppenwolf he calls them the "Steppenwolves," untamed wolves who have strayed into the city from the steppes, the open plains. He called him-self a Steppenwolf, and before writing the novel he wrote a series of poems titled "Steppenwolf: a Bit of Diary in Verse" (later published under the title Crisis). This concept of the artist as a stranger in his world stems in part from the fact that Germany in the Romantic era (and until 1871) was not a unified nation but a loose collection of mostly small states. Its writers generally considered themselves citizens not of their little communities but of the world. They were scornful of the restraints of propriety and sought the freedom to experience the heights and depths of the emotions. In the same vein, Steppenwolf's hero, Harry Haller, on his first appearance in the novel, is in a characteristically Romantic state of disgust with his placid day, which had held neither joy nor pain.

Key words: search of self.

In Hermann Hesse's fiction there is always the protagonist's quest to find what his life is and is going to be, as well as individual's search for a unique spiritual and physical identity amidst the backdrops of nature and modern civilization and the role of art in formation of personal identity in his novels.

No one knows the true nature of self as long as he is living it, or is it. The true nature of self can be disclosed only when it falls away and becomes known in retrospect, by its absence or what was. As it turns out, self is first and foremost an unconscious experience and only secondarily a conscious experience. Thus the self we know is the conscious-self, and the self we do not know is the unconscious-self; together these constitute the entire human dimension of knowing, feeling and experiencing. In essence, self is what it means to

be human. As a dynamic but non-eternal experience it is in passage, a passage that is our life. Thus we might say that what self or consciousness *IS*, is a passage through human existence. With the falling away of self, it becomes possible to get an overview of this passage along with its major milestones. From this particular perspective we will be discussing the experience that we consciously know as self, but unconsciously cannot recognize until it is gone.

It should be pointed out that beyond the human dimension of knowing and experiencing lie other dimensions of existence: animal, plant, mineral, elemental, as well as the dimension of ultimate Truth, the divine—Absolute, God, or whatever we wish to call the alpha and omega of all possible levels of existence. What keeps human beings locked within the centrality of their own