

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Hesse, Herman

Herman Hesse's Life. Herman Hesse (1877-1962) was a German novelist, poet, and short story writer, who won the Nobel Prize in 1942, for the novel *The Glass Bead Game*. Hesse was born in Calw, in the Black Forest in the State of Wuerttemberg, of parents who were missionaries of the Basel Mission, at one time in India. Hesse's mother was born on mission. Her husband, a doctor, hailed from Estonia, but the parents settled in Calw, when the father, who was severe and religiously powerful, settled the family into a new job. (Hesse himself was never comfortable with the small town culture he then found himself raised on, and from the start, with the help of a highly cultivated polylingual grandfather, considered himself a citizen of the world.) As Dad took on a job with a theological publishing company the Pietist atmosphere in young Hesse's family grew even more marked. Accordingly young Hesse grew up yielding to his powerful stubbornness—his Mother wondered what force could subdue him—and at times seriously depressed. By the age of twelve, Hesse had firmly decided to be a writer.

Hesse's Education. Hesse's formal education began at the Latin School of Goeppingen, in Switzerland, was then continued to the gymnasium level at the Theological Seminary of Maulbronn Abbey. Not a model student, Hesse took to drinking and smoking with older boys, not to mention a serious episode—a suicide attempt—to prove how deeply disorganized he was in that educational environment. After matriculation he took on a number of bookstore jobs, finally discovering a position in Tuebingen at which, after a twelve hour day as salesman, he was left free to read at his leisure—and did so, voraciously, in the German classics and Nietzsche, whose notions of good and evil, and transcendence of them, were compelling to Hesse.

Hesse's Work. Hesse had decided, from age 12, to devote himself to writing, and of course did fill his teen age years with essays and stories. But his first major public success came with *Peter Camenzind* (1904), a book Freud considered one of his favorite texts. In 1911 Hesse traveled to Sri Lanka and Indonesia, a trip on which he would build impressions and insights later to gel into the novel *Siddartha* (1922), a tribute to aesthetic withdrawal, and transcendence, which many found facile and unrealistically 'poetic,' at the time. (Interestingly enough, the American sixties, with their hippie stress on Peace and Love, brought back Hesse's novel as a cult commodity.) Like most sensitive Germans, Hesse was appalled at the sufferings and cruelties of WW I, but unlike most he tried to remain 'European,' rather than nationalist, throughout the conflict; though later he confessed that he had failed in his effort to use love against war. After the war, with return to civilian life, and to a second shattered marriage, Hesse readdressed himself to the realities of his world, and created his most powerful novel, *Steppenwolf* (1927). *The Wolf from the Steppe* is in fact a study of the profound split in the mind of Harry Haller, a disoriented post WW I middle class German, who both adores German comfort, classical values, the world of finance, and, on the other hand, reveals himself as exposed—a steppe wolf—to the vicious and uncivilized in mankind, and to the New Americanized World of jazz, danger, wild dreams and self-discoveries, and, foreseen but foresworn by the protagonist, the onset of a world catastrophic clash of forces. *The Glass Bead Game* (1944) projects into an ideally pure elite company of aesthetes, who have found a (temporary) solution to chaos, in the perfection of a game which is pure pattern.

Reading

Primary source reading

Hesse, Herman, *Siddartha*, 1981. (There are many updates of this translation; take your pick.)

Secondary source reading

Freedman, Ralph, *Herman Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis. A Biography*, 1978. (The classic study of Hesse.)

Further reading

Mileck, Joseph, *Herman Hesse: Biography and Bibliography*, 1977.

Original language reading

Zeller, Bernhard, *Herman Hesse*, 2005.

Suggested paper topics

From *Siddhartha*, with its sympathy for peace and withdrawal to the darker jungles of urban imagination, in *Steppenwolf*, is a long journey. Was the Hesse of *Steppenwolf* still the same peace seeking sensibility we saw in *Siddhartha*?

What was Hesse's experience of trying to bring love to the understanding and resolution of the conflict in WW1? Was Hesse discouraged by this experience? Did the experience change the direction of his thinking?

Excerpt https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1113469.Hermann_Hesse

“For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone. They are like lonely persons. Not like hermits who have stolen away out of some weakness, but like great, solitary men, like Beethoven and Nietzsche. In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfil themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves. Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured. And every young farmboy knows that the hardest and noblest wood has the narrowest rings, that high on the mountains and in continuing danger the most indestructible, the strongest, the ideal trees grow.

Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.

A tree says: A kernel is hidden in me, a spark, a thought, I am life from eternal life. The attempt and the risk that the eternal mother took with me is unique, unique the form and veins of my skin, unique the smallest play of leaves in my branches and the smallest scar on my bark. I was made to form and reveal the eternal in my smallest special detail.