

A Summary Of Hermann Hesse's
Demian

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Winter 1998

Demian is the story of a boy, Emil Sinclair, and his search for himself. Emil was raised in a good traditional home at the turn of the century in the young nation of Germany. His family is rather wealthy and they have a reputation as an upright, godly family. As a boy, Sinclair views the world within the walls of his home as representing all that is good, pure, innocent, and godly. But starting at a young age he feels a constant inner conflict between this world, which he refers to as the "world of light" and the outside world, or "forbidden realm" which represents sin, loneliness, deceit, and insecurity. And although his mother, father, and two sisters remain within the "world of light", he constantly feels drawn to the outside realm and is in this way somewhat estranged from his family and their sphere of security. He ends up vacillating between both and not belonging to either.

This struggle between Sinclair's two worlds manifests itself when Sinclair is about 10 years old. While playing one day with some fellow schoolmates, an older boy, Franz Kromer, joins them. In an effort to impress the older boy and his schoolmates, Sinclair makes up a story in which he and another unnamed accomplice stole a bag of apples from a fellow neighbor. Although the story is untrue, Kromer threatens Sinclair with exposure if Sinclair does not pay him off. Unable to pay the full amount, Sinclair is forced

to become Kromer's slave, ultimately sending Sinclair into depression and paranoia. Sinclair feels trapped by Kromer, forced to live within the "forbidden realm", which in turn exiles him from the "world of light" because he has defiled himself by lying and committing sinful acts for Kromer. This experience is traumatic for Sinclair and he is often haunted by nightmares, he is unable to eat, and he becomes withdrawn and sullen. His personality alters as he tries to cope with the bondage of his slavery to this lower-class, troublemaking kid, but he sees no escape and reluctantly succumbs to what he believes to be his fate.

The arrival of a new kid in town, Max Demian, is noticed by everyone due to the strange aura that surrounds him and his recently widowed mother. From the start, Sinclair feels a type of fascination for Demian, a confusing feeling filled with both love and hate. "He was in every respect different from all the others, was entirely himself, with a personality all his own which made him noticeable even though he did his best not to be noticed; his manner and bearing was that of a prince disguised among farm boys, taking great pains to appear one of them."¹

The first encounter between Sinclair and Demian occurs one day after school as the two boys are walking home. Sinclair had learned the biblical story of Cain and Abel

from the book of Genesis that day in class. Demian starts a conversation about the story and challenges Sinclair to look at the story from a different perspective. Demian proposes that Cain carried a mark of distinction because he was feared by others due to his strength and that Abel had been killed simply because he was the weaker one of the two. Sinclair is impressed and at the same time overwhelmed by this radical perspective which in fact challenges all the traditions and teachings with which he had been raised. He therefore denounces the idea as absurd, as a means to protect himself and all that he knows to be true.

It is not for some time later that Sinclair once again comes in contact with Demian. It is on a rainy day in the town square after Sinclair had a troublesome meeting with Kromer, who still plagues his life, making him constantly miserable. Through mere observation, Demian assesses the situation between Kromer and Sinclair, and Demian confronts Sinclair about his fear of Kromer. Angered by Demian's accurate insight, Sinclair rudely brushes Demian off out of fear and frustration, but within the next couple of days Sinclair is freed from his terrifying bondage to Kromer when Demian intervenes without Sinclair's knowledge, causing Kromer to leave Sinclair alone for good. Sinclair feels an immense sense of gratitude and indebtedness towards Demian for saving him, but due to his immaturity and fear he is unable

¹ Bantam, p.23

to express this to Demian. Instead, Sinclair confesses everything to his parents and regresses into a childlike state within the "world of light" which provides comfort and security. But due to the severity of the experience and consequent loss of innocence, Sinclair realizes that he can never really be a part of the "world of light". "So, in the blindness of my heart, I chose to be dependent on my father and mother, on the old, cherished 'world of light', though I knew by now that it was not the only one."²

Several years pass before Demian and Sinclair have any more contact. Then, due to odd circumstances, Demian is placed in Sinclair's confirmation class even though he is two years older. At this time, Sinclair is dealing, to an even greater extent, with the conflict between his two worlds, but no longer is Franz Kromer the outside threat, rather his own sexual maturity and desires, now constantly plaguing him. A bond is re-established between the two boys one day in class when the teacher recounts the story of Cain and Abel, bringing back the memory of their first encounter with each other. But this time Sinclair is not able to simply ignore the challenge of Demian's radical interpretation of the story, instead, Sinclair feels challenged and motivated by the new perspective. From this moment on, the two boys begin forming a friendship that will inevitably span their entire lifetime. Demian's friendship

² pg.38

is a constant challenge to Sinclair's "world of light" as he often presents Sinclair with new ideas and perspectives. This challenge helps to drive Sinclair towards new ways of thinking and feeling, and in the end detachment from his childhood, his family, and the "world of light".

The fourth chapter brings the separation of Sinclair and Demian, as well as Sinclair's separation from his family, when Sinclair is sent off to boarding school. This foreign world offers only loneliness and insecurity to Sinclair, who does not fit in with the other young men. Sinclair goes through a trying time of confusion and isolation at the boarding school as he searches for the road to himself. At one point, out of desperation, Sinclair resorts to rebellion. He begins to drink in bars and he becomes renowned among his classmates for being careless, sarcastic, and harsh. Slowly his grades begin to suffer and his reputation among professors is severely tarnished. "I simply did what I had to do, because I had no idea what to do with myself otherwise."³ Finally, his father is summoned and Sinclair is threatened with expulsion. But these consequences are not enough to change him, and just when he thinks his life could not be more senseless, he sees a young woman in a park one day. Her beauty overwhelms him and he becomes infatuated with her, giving her the name Beatrice. This infatuation is the motivation he needs to turn his life

around. "Once more I was trying most strenuously to construct an intimate 'world of light' for myself out of the shambles of a period of devastation; once more I sacrificed everything within me to the aim of banishing darkness and evil from myself."⁴ He also begins to paint, at first out of the desire to paint Beatrice, but since he is unable to do so to his own satisfaction, he paints all that he sees around him. Then one day, almost without knowing it, he paints the face of a woman that will forever alter his life. "It resembled a kind of image of God or a holy mask, half male, half female, ageless, as purposeful as it was dreamy, as rigid as it was secretly alive."⁵ He worships this painting, this image, finding security and comfort in it. He begins to dream again as he had as a child, and his dreams are filled with her. Then one morning he wakes up to realize that she resembles someone who is real, someone he knows. She resembles Demian. This realization brings back memories of his friend whom he had admired and respected so much. A terrible longing to see him again fills his heart, although he has no means to find him.

Then one day Sinclair recounts their first encounter with each other, the day Demian had told him his version of the story of Cain and Abel. Sinclair also remembers Demian's interest that day in an old coat of arms that hung

³ pg. 63

⁴ pg. 67

above the door of Sinclair's house. The emblem is that of a sparrow hawk. Sinclair feels propelled by this memory to paint the old emblem. After several days of painting, he finishes it to find a picture of a sparrow hawk emerging or fighting it's way out of a globe or a giant egg. He then mails the painting to Demian, not knowing if it will ever reach him. A while later, to his great surprise, Sinclair finds a note in his book one day during class. The note reads: "The bird fights his way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world. The bird flies to God. That God's name is Abraxas."⁶ The note is from Demian.

Not understanding what exactly the note means, Sinclair is just grateful to hear from his old friend who he misses so much. For the next several months Sinclair lives in isolation, he lives with his painting of the hawk, his painting of Demian, and his dreams. One particular dream comes to him often, continually gaining in meaning for him. The dream is of the woman who resembles Demian, but she is more feminine, almost motherly. This woman embraces him as he enters his father's house, first passing under the coat of arms which bears the sparrow hawk. The embrace of this woman fills Sinclair with every emotion, whether it is love or hate, sacred or defiled, right or wrong. "Too many

⁵ pg. 69

⁶ pg. 76

associations with my mother and friend comingled with this figure embracing me. Its embrace violated all sense of reverence, yet it was bliss. Sometimes I awoke from this dream with a feeling of profound ecstasy, at others in mortal fear and with a racked conscience as though I had committed some terrible crime."⁷

That winter, while taking a walk one night, Sinclair hears the beautiful sound of an organ in a local church. Sinclair takes to sitting nights outside the church and listening to the passionately played music, sensing an unknown connection with the player. One night he finally meets the player, Pistorius, an extricated theologian, the son of a pastor, and talented organist. The two become friends, realizing their connection is that of Abraxas. Pistorius teaches Sinclair to meditate; he teaches him Philosophy; he becomes a mentor to Sinclair. The companionship is a blessing to Sinclair, and Pistorius' teachings work to confirm all that Sinclair contemplated, dreamt about, or questioned during this journey towards himself. "[Our conversations] rarely confronted me with anything completely new, anything altogether astonishing. But everything, even the most ordinary matters, resembled gentle persistent hammer blows on the same spot within me;

⁷ pg. 79

all of them helped me to form myself, all of them helped to peel off layers of skin, to break eggshells..."⁸

Then one evening Sinclair encounters a younger schoolmate, Knauer, who seeks Sinclair's advice about spiritualism and white magic. The young man is confused and distraught because he feels so alone. Unable to help him, Sinclair lets him run off in a frustrated rage. But several nights later Sinclair is awakened from a deep sleep and leaves his room in the middle of the night drawn to something unknown. After stumbling through the town in search of unknown place, Sinclair comes upon an new unfinished building. He is drawn inside by some mysterious force only to come upon Knauer who is planning on committing suicide. After this experience, Knauer clings to Sinclair, coming to him with questions and ideas, wanting a guide, a mentor to lead him towards salvation. And although Sinclair is often annoyed by Knauer, he ends up learning a lot from his crazy ideas and stupid questions, but he is still unable to give Knauer the answers after which he seeks.

Meanwhile Sinclair and Pistorius meet often with each other, and they form a special relationship. Sinclair's fantasy woman also becomes more of a reality to him in the sense that she is no longer just a part of his dreams but of his entire conscious. He can send messages to her with his

⁸ pg. 89

mind, asking questions, and seeking guidance from this woman of his dreams.

The time nears for Sinclair to leave the boarding school. Shortly before he leaves, Sinclair comes in conflict for the first time with Pistorius, his mentor and teacher, who is so learned in ancient religions and philosophies, and has taught Sinclair all he knows about Abraxas. Sinclair, the student, has outgrown Pistorius, who is forever trapped in the past because he is a romantic and he does not have the strength to leave the past behind for something entirely new. "And suddenly I realized deeply within me: what Pistorius had been and given to me was precisely what he could not be and give to himself. He had led me along a path that would transcend and leave even him, the leader, behind."⁹

Sinclair finishes boarding school and during his break, before entering university, he returns to his hometown and visits Demian's old house. The old woman that presently lives there is not able to tell Sinclair where the Demian family now resides, but she does show Sinclair an album that contained old pictures of the mother and son. Fantasy turned to reality for Sinclair when he saw a picture of Frau Demian, his dream woman, his beloved guide. Demian's mother was the one in his dreams, the one he had unconsciously painted.

Sinclair spends his vacation in vain, plagued by anxiousness to find her, Demian's mother. In the fall, he begins university only to be disappointed by his Philosophy courses, which offer him no new knowledge or enlightenment. Then one night, as he strolls through the streets, which are filled with the sounds the many drunken fraternities in the bars and taverns, he comes upon two men having a conversation about the absurdity of the fraternities, since they only lead to conformity. Sinclair is overjoyed to realize that the voice he is listening to is that of his beloved old friend Demian. Demian is not surprised to find Sinclair, knowing that he would eventually come because he had wanted him there. Sinclair is even more overwhelmed to learn that not only Demian but Demian's mother also awaited his arrival.

Here the book seems to take a turn in focus. On page 115, Demian recites a long monologue about the state of European society at that time. It is approximately 1912, two years before the outbreak of the first World War. Up until this point the novel depicted the story of Emil Sinclair and his journey towards himself. But along this journey one of the most important things that Sinclair learns is that his destiny is not exactly individual, but rather a part of the whole. Once Pistorius had told Sinclair, "We always define the limits of our personality

too narrowly. In general, we count as part of our personality only that which we can recognize as being an individual trait or as diverging from the norm. But we consist of everything the world consists of, each of us, and just as our body contains the geneological table of evolution as far back as the fish and even much further, so we bear everything in our soul that once was alive in the soul of men."¹⁰

Demian's monologue on page 115 is a key turning point in the novel as well as a turning point in Sinclair's fate as he realizes that his destiny is tied to all those around him. Demian condemns the society of Europe as being lost and afraid, and he predicts the coming of a catastrophic event that will change the world. "He spoke about the spirit of Europe and the signs of the times. Everywhere, he said, we could observe the reign of the herd instinct, nowhere freedom and love. All this false communion - from the fraternities to the choral societies and the nations themselves - was an inevitable development, was a community born of fear and dread, out of embarrassment, but inwardly rotten, outworn, close to collapsing."¹¹

Although Demian's words intrigue Sinclair, the excitement of finding his friend and knowing he will soon see Demian's mother occupies Sinclair's mind. The next day

¹⁰ pgs. 88-89

¹¹ pgs. 114-115

he returns to their house to finally meet her. This moment is so joyous and fulfilling for Sinclair that his eyes fill with tears. He feels like he has reached a goal so long sought after, and he feels that all his experiences preceeded this very moment. "With a face that resembled her son's, timeless, ageless, and full of inner strength, the beautiful woman smiled with dignity. Her gaze was fulfillment, her greeting a homecoming." She relates the story of the first time that Demian came home to her, telling her of a boy at school who had the mark. From this point forward, she and Demian had hoped that Sinclair would find his way, the right path to himself. As she talked, Sinclair felt as if she had experienced all the pain and suffering with him, knowing his destiny all along. He is comforted by her words and filled with an inner peace unlike ever before. Demian's mother tells Sinclair to simply call her Frau Eva, and she becomes his mentor, his mother, his love, and his obsession.

Sinclair becomes a part of the family and joins in at all the meetings that take place in the house, the gatherings of those with the mark. Those in the circle believe in every sort of religion and God, and Sinclair learns about the many ideas thought up by mankind to explain God through these fellow seekers. Despite their many different beliefs and ideas, they all believe that a

collapse of the present world and society is imminent. Demian often says to Sinclair, "What will come is beyond imagining. The soul of Europe is a beast that has lain fettered for an infinitely long time. And when it's free, it's first movements won't be the gentlest".¹² All this foreshadows the first World War, which is only a year or so away from breaking out.

Meanwhile Sinclair falls deeper in love with Frau Eva. She understands everything about him. She is able to make sense of his dreams; at times, she even remembers them better than he himself does. Sinclair is in constant conflict with himself over his love for her. She encourages him in his desire, telling him not to be afraid. But she also tells him that her love must be won, and for her to be attracted to his love he must be confident and unafraid.

His love probably would have attracted her if it had not been for the events that came about in the summer of 1914. Shortly before the war begins Demian realizes what is to come, the tragic event that would change European society forever. It meant the death of the old world, an end to the conformity, a coming of a new age. Demian and Sinclair will be a part of this new world, they will be leaders because they have already accepted fate. One day Demian comes to tell Sinclair, "So it won't be the end of the world, no earthquake, no revolution, but war. People will love it!

¹² pg. 124

Even now they can hardly wait for the killing to begin - their lives are that dull! The new world has begun and the new world will be terrible for those clinging to the old."¹³

World War I begins and Demian is sent first to the front since he is an officer. Shortly after, Sinclair is also called to the front as an infantry soldier. He leaves Frau Eva behind, and the comfortable world he lived at her side which offered him so much security and peace. He leaves for the war, and he is later wounded. As he lies on a crowded hospital floor he comes to consciousness only to find his beloved friend and brother lying Demian beside him. For the first time Demian brings up the memory of Kromer. Sinclair realizes at this moment that Demian is his salvation. Demian leaves Sinclair with a kiss from Frau Eva, and he leaves him with the assurance that he would forever be a part of him. Sinclair had found himself, his search was over, he had been saved.

¹³ pg. 135