

Rosshalde

(1914)

Introduction and background

In order to appreciate the story of *Rosshalde* one needs to understand the personal circumstances of its author under which the book - as all of Hesse's works - was written and which are mirrored in it. *Rosshalde* is Hesse's first and only marriage novel and plainly describes the collapse of a family.¹ This had become not only a Hesse-story but also a literary theme of the time.²

Very soon after the birth of his third son Martin in July 1911, unquestionable an extra difficult time for his wife and children, Hesse left with a painter friend for what he hoped would be India but fell somewhat short in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a sea-trip in a way quite understandable for an author who as a child had heard much about India not only from his parents - former missionaries for the British mission - but also from his grandfather Hermann Gundert who was quite a learned man and who had distinguished himself from most of the rest of the family by a sound sense of humor.³ Gundert had gathered considerable knowledge of the Indian Kerala region and its culture, a big scholarly library and who had accomplished a research feat by writing a modern dictionary of the West-Indian dialect Malayalam.⁴

After his return from his arduous round-trip journey to Colombo⁵ which was complicated by serious digestive problems and considerable disappointments based on false expectations, Hesse's re-adjustment to life in Gaienhofen had become even more difficult - as could be expected.

Hesse's inner conflicts and problems were clearly aggravated by the mismatch of his calling as a writer and the chores of mundane everyday family obligations and love for the children. This problem had been carried along on his voyage and had hardly led to a resolution.

The family had lived in Gaienhofen in a beautiful lakeside setting and - more recently - in an attractive large house, and Hesse seemed to be headed in the direction of becoming a celebrated regional author or *Heimatsdichter* which was not, however, what he had in mind.

Consequently, he and Maria eventually agreed to move back to a new place near a big city

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosshalde>

² cf. Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901). <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddenbrooks>

³ This trait was possibly the source of Hermann Hesse's own humorous and often self-critical observations in his life and writings.

⁴ When the efforts to make Sanskrit based Grantha Bhasa as liturgical language British-German missionaries such as [Hermann Gundert](#) added more of Dravidian words of Malayalam to the Grantha Bhasa and created the Modern Malayalam which use Tulu ([Tigalari alphabet](#)) to write Malayalam. Like Grantha Bhasa modern Malayalam uses [Sanskrit Grammar](#) instead of [Malayanma Grammar](#). Hesse's royalties had increased since [Peter Camenzind](#) and his wife's father had helped out with a loan to finance the construction according to the couples wishes. The house and garden are now partly open to the public as part of the cultural exhibits of the community of Gaienhofen.

such as Berne. After years in the country she had no objections to a return to Switzerland, her family, friends, and music. Thus their early dreams of moving to a more idyllic, rustical life had ended as it had for many young people as the years passed by.

The house in Gaienhofen was sold 1912 and the family moved to Berne into the house of one of Hesse's former friends, a painter who had recently died. Hesse rented the secluded somewhat quirky place with reluctance but with the approval and active support of his wife who managed the transition and considerable chores of retrofitting their new abode.

The house and its large garden, its beautiful ancient trees, a little forest and a spectacular view of the Jungfrau peaks of the nearby Alps had been used many years ago as a retreat for a wealthy family in Berne, half primitive - half elegant, partly 17th century and still Patrician in style, but strangely enough without running water and electricity.

Hesse found Berne rather dull, but there was good music and this had been very important from his youth in Calw onward and in his entire development. He was not an active musician, we are reminded of the 12-year old's violin practice at the Monastery School of Maulbronn and its unfortunate demise, but there was strong compensatory musicality in his prose and poetry. Hesse said of himself that in music he was at the receiving end. One would also imagine that his choice of his wife had probably been influenced by her being an accomplished pianist.

Hesse's musician friends included Fritz Brun who was conductor of the civic orchestra and considered the Anton Bruckner⁶ of Switzerland. Another one was Edwin Fischer, a pianist, who had intoned poems from Hesse's first volume of poetry. There was also Ilona Durigo, a singer, and Othmar Schoeck, a young composer. Here in Berne Hesse was also introduced to orchestral music, and he befriended Volkmar Andreae, a composer and conductor in Zurich. Thus one can see that the years before WW-I represented a high point in Hesse's music appreciation. This was the place where he wrote *Rosshalde* and *Knulp*. He ended up living in Berne for almost seven years.

Two years after he and his family had moved to Berne World-War-I broke out. Hesse's marriage was sliding into an open and sometimes quite unpleasant crisis making any productive reconciliation – even if only for the sake of the children - almost impossible. A mental breakdown and serious depression of his wife led to the dissolution of the family and the marriage.

During the war years Hesse ended up living in the deserted and poorly maintained house with a maid servant as housekeeper while he started working for the cultural section of the German Embassy in Berne where he was assigned the care for German prisoners of war in France. He had been drafted for the war but was deferred because of recurring severe eye problems. He left Berne for Montagnola in the Ticino Valley of Southern Switzerland in the spring of 1919 where he lived for the rest of his life.

⁶ <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Anton-Bruckner>

The book.

Rosshalde is not simply the history of a family, but the story of a difficult situation as it evolved from what seemed to be a promising, if unusual beginning. The painter Veraguth is the only successful artist Hesse has portrayed.

Hesse finally came near mastery of the traditional novel form. Twenty-six years later he said he believed that - at this point - he had reached the peak of the mastery possible to him in technique and craft. The situation of marriage - one of the main social institutions in Wilhelminian society - was quite realistic in his opinion. A few other institutions were to be questioned soon thereafter, but Hesse restricted himself to this one, and thus not to the socially most significant: the conflicted family of a writer, that is of himself, his wife and their sons. Thus the general significance of the novel was atypical for the period. There was no indication of the broader impending social crises, and its humanistic perspective was exemplary but restricted. The steep path up- or downward of society in general led to the end on the battlefields of Verdun and Flanders.

Hitherto Hesse in *Gertrude* - in the spirit of Romanticism - tended to consider music the highest art form.⁷ During the India trip he changed that position. There were, after all, many arguments in the literature of the time that music might be dangerous. One would think of Tolstoj's novella *Kreutzerersonate* (1899),⁸ Thomas Mann's *Tristan* (1903),⁹ Emil Strauss' *Freund Hein* (1902).¹⁰ Painting as in *Rosshalde*, on the other hand, could be seen as a mere dedication to external reality and its perception by the painter. So when Veraguth had to learn to turn "to the objective world", to be a man of action, he had to be a painter. Yet now Romantic aestheticism came to the fore again, the life within, illusion, flight from reality and from objectivity, in short: the art for dreamers.

His paintings are exhibited internationally. His success shows in his economic situation as well as his relationship to bourgeois society. While Camenzind, the *homo vagabundus*, still had a critical distance from society and Kuhn in *Gertrude* retired into his study, giving up popular success, wealth and prestige, Veraguth appears to succeed.

He accepts the existing conditions of his society, which he is brought closer to through his entrepreneur-friend Burckhardt. His steep path upward professionally is not only to be seen in the continuity of his writing, but also his career which is in solidarity with his society. This is not specifically stated, but easy to deduce.

⁷ cf. Hugo Ball, p.129

⁸ The Kreutzer Sonata is a novella by Leo Tolstoy, named after Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata. The novella was published in 1889, and was promptly censored by the Russian authorities. (wiki)

⁹ *Tristan* is a 1903 novella by German writer [Thomas Mann](#). It contains many references to the myth of [Tristan and Iseult](#). The novella alludes in particular to the version presented in [Richard Wagner](#)'s opera of the [same name](#). As such, it can be seen as an ironic paraphrase, juxtaposing the romantic heroism of Wagner's characters with their essentially flawed counterparts in the novella^{[[citation needed](#)]}. It also heavily deals with psychology and a major part of the novel is set in a sanatorium and details the lives of two people who are patients at the sanatorium.(wiki)

¹⁰ <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/strauss-emil.html>

The backdrop was the ethos of normal middle-class people of the time before WW1 and the established institution of marriage. But there was another side of the coin as depicted in literature and drama. Ibsen had been the classic naturalist critic of society and a critic of marriage. Hesse was familiar with Ibsen's dramas¹¹ as well as with the novels of Turgenev¹². But as a writer he was neither the Realist¹³ or Naturalist¹⁴ of the time, far from it, but the problems covered resembled each other nevertheless, at least in what the role of marriage was concerned. And Hesse was caught in the middle, as it were.

In his *Rosshalde*, as in Ibsen's work, a marriage was rejected which is not - or no longer - based on love. In the 4th chapter of the book the ever-growing marriage crisis becomes apparent at the dinner table with Otto Burckhardt: there is stiff formality, silence, uneasiness, coldness, and embarrassment. Burckhardt - somewhat strangely - is selected by Hesse to represent a humanistic ideal of man, an erroneous characterization as one would assume, or simply an example for the way Hesse might still have been left with a degree of uncertainty about the world around him.

The couple's guest is a plantation owner, a "colonialist", active and successful at his trade. He might even have been considered strong-armed in keeping with the spirit of the times. Even if Burckhardt had been not described as a plantation owner in some far-away colony, it is fairly obvious that his ideas derive from a Wilhelminian emphasis on robust, productive people, *men of action* (cf. Nietzsche)¹⁵. This phenomenon was, of course, in no way restricted to Germany or Switzerland, of course. If needed - one might not only suspect for the sake of drama - a person should throw everything away, including one's family.

A Realist might opine that a boy like Veraguth's son Pierre was pampered and really needed his father. The problem could be that contemporaries give too much affection to their children. In the Real World one might need to throw everything problematic overboard, including the present and the past. That brachial attitude seemed to come near reflecting the typical frame of mind of many people of the colonial and pre-war period: go for adventure, be strong, deny the lessons of the past - if one took the time to study it.¹⁶

In *Rosshalde* the popular issue of the artist/poet vis-à-vis society, particularly in times like these and so essential to the heart of Hesse - returned with a vengeance after *Gertrude*. The artist moved from the position of the cultured outsider to be the precariously isolated antipode to the man of action, the realist who might be prepared to leave behind his family for concrete action, for power struggle, honor, conflict and war.

After the period of *Romanticism* and all the way to the time of Nietzsche, artists belonged to a "special kind of people"; the artist always had enjoyed privileges and respect as an outsider, to be respected and protected from the pettiness, misery and annoyances of practical life, or even - in the best case - be rewarded with a safe haven, the security of

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Plays_by_Henrik_Ibsen

¹² <http://ebooks.cambridge.org/chapter.jsf?bid=CBO9781139683449&cid=CBO9781139683449A028>

¹³ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/realism>

¹⁴ <http://www.online-literature.com/periods/naturalism.php>

¹⁵ Nietzsche's not well-informed views on German colonialism; cf.

https://books.google.com/books?id=dRheDbkmigIC&pg=PA33&lpg=PA33&dq=nietzsche+on+colonialism&source=bl&ots=RbdC4bFq53&sig=IFD7J0eMT0Te5PSPVR8ibQi9GnA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewia_JPdxXKAhUW7WMKH_aRmBhUQ6AEINDAD#v=onepage&q=nietzsche%20on%20colonialism&f=false

¹⁶ Compare this with *Demian's* advice to Sinclair.

normal life, love, family, children, happiness.

Hesse, with some hesitation and foreboding had started to live in this new world when he got married 1904. He was influenced by a distinct need for finding happiness and companionship with a woman who loved him and whom he could love. Ten years later, in *Rosshalde*, Hesse's alter ego Veraguth contrary to Hesse's own experience was assumed to have acted against his own better judgment by getting married, and sadly discovered a feeling of being caged and that he could no longer free himself.

Veraguth is very much tied to his cultural heritage and to his own personal past. He obviously feels emancipated as an artist and is justified to be entirely dedicated to his work to the extent that the sanctity of marriage vows is not the reason why one should want to stay with his family but that one should obey his calling. Surprisingly, this resembles the feelings of the activists which were described above, with only the goals being different.

However, if separated or divorced, justifiably or not, Veraguth would not get custody of their seven-year old son Pierre whom he dearly loves. His problem, consequently, is not only the imminent breakup of his marriage alone but is compounded by the fact that even his love for his son Pierre would also probably impact his life and end up conflicting with the demands of his calling, his art. The particular personal bond with his son with some likelihood would not survive the same challenge as his marriage. Facing this conundrum Veraguth, as well Hesse himself, appear utterly helpless.

The situation had moved the focus away from the man-woman conflict which is often cited as being central even in scholarship. In substance it ends up describing the failure of the artist to accept *any* bond - including that between father and wife and son - that might detract from his work. The absoluteness of the challenge which is implied thereby lifts it beyond the concepts of man and woman relationships, and the art-and-society conflict into the realm of the anxiety of self-preservation and maintenance of the psychological integrity of the writer. This problem might, of course, equally afflict not only male but also female artists and writers.

The end of the novel signifies the denial of bourgeois institution of marriage and dedication and return to an artistic mission. The type or content of this artistic mission is not specified. Only two paintings: a river with fisherman who shows his catch, and the symbolic new Romanticism in the figures of a boy between man and woman, a child innocent and unaware of the cloud over it's head. This would be the bourgeois art of the turn of the century and quite symptomatic of the time.

The author himself is not quite sure of a solution, nor is he consistent in considering it objectively. The result in the story of *Rosshalde* is that the figure of Pierre dies. Apparently it is Veraguth's view that Pierre dies not because he contracted encephalitis, a final intervention of fate, but because Pierre simply was not loved enough.

Conclusion

Once Hesse recalled his own experience as a child in one of his dreams: while wandering through the deserted garden, he felt a gap between himself and his parents¹⁷ which could

¹⁷ The "father-mother principle" in *Rosshalde*. The father as painter – the mother as musician.

not be bridged. The child, the innermost childish aspect of the soul, has to die. This was not simply the end of the natural phase of development and the sad and moving experience of the loss of childhood which was to be replaced by another stage of becoming an individual and adult.¹⁸ His conflicted relationship with his parents fluctuated from sincere attempts by both parties to understand and appreciate each other, to utter rejection.

Hesse cannot be simply identified with either Veraguth or Burckhardt nor with anyone else in this or any other of his books, although many autobiographical references are obvious. The author sees more than all of these factors together, and that within the context of his

own biography. He was obviously very much and nostalgically tied to his cultural heritage of the late 19th century, to Romanticism and, of course, to his own intensive exposure to Swabian Pietism.

His critical mind clarified the issues for himself as much as possible as time developed, considering the ever widening range of his actual life experiences. He certainly addressed these problems and showed considerable progress in coming to terms with a rapidly changing society and - as the years went by - ever more constructive solutions are mirrored in his works.

Veraguth's situation, promising at first, becomes ever more desperate. Hesse's figures in general were mostly gentle, agreeable, sensitive people. Now, as in *Gertrude*, worldly middle-class ethics of the time and a persistent Romantic view of the world clash with each other. Does Hesse, facing an emerging new issue react differently this time around? Essentially not. He appears paralyzed. No decision seems feasible for him, yet some decision needs to be made in the book and a resolution of his marriage reached. This is where fate comes in, irreversible and out of nowhere: Pierre, his son, dies of encephalitis and that is the end of it.

¹⁸ Compare this with the concept of the Märchenbrunnen in an *Hour Beyond Midnight*. Also to Hesse's famous poem "Stages" (1941): http://www.swiss-miss.com/2005/06/stages_herman_h.html