

Between Two Worlds: Individual Identity and the Reconciliation of Moral and Emotional Conflicts in Hermann Hesse's *Demian* and *Narcissus and Goldmund*

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Society strives to comprehend human nature and to create a coherent concept of individual identity. We attempt this through institutions such as religion and law, relationships, and literature. Demian and Narcissus and Goldmund by Hermann Hesse describe man's relentless struggle to forge an identity through friendship, spiritual guidance, introspection, and simply living. In these works, the protagonists find themselves by defying society's rigid value system, thus reconciling conflicts between individual and society, between abstract and sensual, and between "good" and "evil."

Although the process of self-exploration can at times be painful or disturbing, Emil Sinclair of Demian and Goldmund of Narcissus and Goldmund discover that such emotional and moral conflicts can only be conquered through security in one's identity. Oskar Seidlin explains, "To know oneself, to explore the hidden corners in one's soul, not to flinch even if one finds these corners populated with beasts and demons, this is the purpose of Emil Sinclair's [and] Goldmund's travels" (63). Thus, the "deconstruction of absolutes" – the breaking down of moral and philosophical constraints imposed on the individual by society – is an underlying theme in both stories (Mahin 5; Seidlin 61).

In Narcissus and Goldmund and in Demian, Hesse simplifies and idealizes the concept of the psychological conflict as a clash between two worlds – two opposing ideas. In both stories, a desire to conform to social norms battles with the urge to express one's thoughts and emotions.

Young Goldmund, a medieval student, struggles to reconcile the religious lifestyle encouraged by his father with his own adolescent yearnings for freedom and rebellion. One part of him aspires to become a disciplined monk while the other overflows with "youthful fervor" (Hesse, Narcissus 26). At Mariabronn Cloister, his teacher Narcissus befriends him with the intention of shaping the blossoming adolescent's identity. During one conversation, Narcissus

explains the differences between the intellectual, ascetic side of human nature, which Narcissus symbolizes, and the sensual, emotional side, which Goldmund soon discovers is his realm.

“You live fully; you were endowed with the strength of love, the ability to feel. Whereas we creatures of reason, we don’t live fully; we live in an arid land, even though we often seem to guide and rule you. Yours is the plentitude of life, the sap of the fruit, the garden of passion, the beautiful landscape of art. Your home is the earth; ours is the world of ideas. You are in danger of drowning in the world of the senses; ours is the danger of suffocating in an airless void. You are an artist; I am a thinker. You sleep at the mother’s breast; I wake in the desert. For me the sun shines; for you the moon and the stars. Your dreams are of girls; mine of boys . . .” (Hesse, *Narcissus* 43)

Emil Sinclair, the contemporary protagonist of *Demian*, begins his journey “towards self-realization” when he discovers the “two realms” as a young boy. His boyhood is characterized by a naive concept of good and evil, of the “light” and “dark” worlds (Hesse, *Demian*; Ch. 1; Mahin 1).

With ironic exuberance, Sinclair describes the “good” world as innocent, pious and straightforward: “[One realm] was familiar to me in almost every way – mother and father, love and strictness, model behavior, and school. It was a realm of brilliance, clarity, and cleanliness, gentle conversations, washed hands, clean clothes and good manners” (Hesse, *Demian* 5). Not only does this realm embody that which society considers pure and moral; it also articulates the rigid ideals of Christianity. Young Sinclair identifies this “world of light” with his privileged family and envies his well-behaved sisters who he believes are superior to him, “to whom the dark world seemed so much closer” (Hesse, *Demian* 7). This realm is characterized by the “straight lines and paths” of Christianity, the embodiment of all that is righteous and pure in the eyes of the child (Hesse, *Demian* 5-6).

In contrast, the dark world, which “contains things not only bizarre and disturbing, but things natural and real,” seems to stir fear as well as fascination in Sinclair (Mahin 4).

The second world contained servant girls and workmen, ghost stories, rumors of scandal. It was dominated by a loud mixture of horrendous, intriguing, frightful, mysterious

things, including slaughterhouses and prisons, drunkards and screeching fishwives, calving cows, horses sinking to their death, tales of robberies murders and suicides. All these wild and cruel, attractive and hideous things surrounded us. (Hesse, Demian 6)

At first, Sinclair feels safely isolated from the other world, noting that “one could still escape with a leap into one’s mother’s lap” (Hesse, Demian 6). Even as a child, however, he begins to observe the way dark and light aspects of his environment overlap. For instance, he is intrigued that the servant girl prays with the family every evening but later secretly tells Sinclair scary stories, and he reads tales of “sons who had gone astray . . . with passion” (Hesse, Demian 7). Increasingly, Sinclair is more excited by the “forbidden realm” than the mundane “realm of light.” The “unsullied and orderly” world of Christian dogma soon proves to be too simple for the complexities of Sinclair’s personality (Hesse, Demian 5).

When trying to overcome antagonism between the “good” and “evil” sides of one’s personality, one can either hate and punish that part of him that does not conform to social or religious standards, or he can find a way to reconcile the dichotomy within. Sinclair and Goldmund begin with the former and are brought by fate to the latter.

In both stories, friendship provides a social and spiritual context for introspection as well as for the resolution of inner conflicts. The conversations between the protagonist and his friend in both novels are reminiscent of Plato’s Socratic dialogues, in which two philosophers use their powers of reason to contemplate human nature. However, the dialogues of Demian and Narcissus are also fraught with emotion, rooted in the contrasts between two distinct personalities, one confident and wise, the other naive and full of wonder (Seidlin 64).

The friendship of Sinclair and Demian blossoms as Sinclair begins to lose the innocence of his childhood. With the onset of puberty, a brush with petty crime and the general confusion of adolescence, he plunges into the dark realm, tortured by fear and guilt. Here, Demian appears in an attempt to “rescue” him from his inner turmoil and moral dilemma, taking the form of a Christ figure. He has angelic physical qualities, such as a bright light that seems to radiate from his forehead and an appearance of perpetual serenity. Like an omniscient spirit, he is also able to exert a bizarre sort of psychic control over his teachers and classmates. The parallels between

Demian and Christ are “an ironic twist, since his teaching is anything but Christian” (Ziolkowski, E.W. 742). Demian questions “absolutist” Christian ethics because they accept only one side of human nature, showing that “what [Sinclair] has conventionally considered part of the ‘forbidden and fallen realm’ is that which makes up man’s world” (Mahin 5).

The first conversations in both stories involve the insecure protagonist shunning the advice of his new acquaintance, primarily because this stranger exhibits a deep wisdom that contradicts accepted moral and religious doctrines. This insight taps into the repressed side of the main character and is initially met with confusion or even hostility. Demian shocks Sinclair with his theory that Cain, the biblical outcast, could actually be a hero because he is a maverick – “the first rebel in mankind” (Minkus 1). Similarly, Narcissus surprises Goldmund by suggesting that “a wastrel’s life may be one of the shortest roads to sainthood” (Hesse, Narcissus 30). After Goldmund woefully confesses that one night, he secretly kissed a girl, Narcissus again surprises the boy. He rejects the idea that this first encounter with the opposite sex is a terrible sin, saying that he has “not broken any vows” as he has not yet been consecrated (Hesse, Narcissus 31). Goldmund, who believes he has broken a spiritual promise to God, mistakes his mentor’s wisdom for hypocrisy.

“Didn’t you long ago, in your heart, make the vow that has not yet been made with words before superiors, and don’t you feel bound by it forever? Aren’t you exactly like me?”

“No, Goldmund, I am not like you, not in the way that you think, although I, too, am keeping an unspoken vow . . . but I am in no way like you. Some day you will think of what I am going to say to you now: our friendship has no other purpose, no other reason, than to show you how utterly unlike me you are.” (Hesse, Narcissus 31-32)

Narcissus has known all along that Goldmund has repressed himself and assumed another identity, adopting ideals that are not his but those inculcated by the Church and by his overbearing father. Only Narcissus, who seems to embody these ideals, can pry into Goldmund’s inner conflicts and show him that he is striving to become what he is not. He demonstrates guidance, not hypocrisy, shaping his student’s realization that Narcissus and

Goldmund are two fundamentally different beings. Though their personalities overlap in some respects, each must ultimately pursue a different destiny and adhere to different values.

Thus, the Demian-Sinclair and Narcissus-Goldmund relationships are both comprised of a leader, who carries unconventional wisdom and initiates the friendship, and a follower, who is fascinated by his counterpart's radical ideas and is slowly guided out of his conformist exterior. Oskar Seidlin compares this relationship to the dialogue between a "patient" and his "analyst" (64). These complex friendships are not simply therapeutic, however. There is a mutual admiration between Narcissus and Goldmund, and Demian and Sinclair share an intense spiritual bond that remains strong even during periods of separation. Furthermore, Narcissus and Demian, though they may offer guidance, are themselves neither perfect entities nor role models. Through the experiences of both sides of each friendship, Hesse clearly shows that self-discovery is a lifelong process. The "analysts" are continually learning from themselves as well as their "patients" (Seidlin 64). For instance, Narcissus often expresses adulation for Goldmund's romantic spirit and sensuality. He even confides, "the soul oriented, the dreamers, poets, lovers, are almost always superior to us creatures of the mind" (Hesse, Narcissus 43). In other words, the goal of all four characters is to gain a better understanding of themselves, not to become closer to some conventional ideal; indeed, that is what they want to escape (Seidlin 64).

The idea that the human soul is not definitively good or bad, but a complex mixture of both, is also realized through other relationships and experiences. The diversity of these experiences in itself makes the life of the protagonist richer, enhancing his perception of human nature. One such relationship, more mysterious and transcendent than friendship, is the bond with the mother, or in Sinclair's case, the mother-figure (Mahin 5; Seidlin 61).

Through an intimate conversation, Narcissus evokes memories of Goldmund's estranged mother that had been repressed under the influence of Goldmund's father. She was a rebellious woman and an outcast, yet her son now reveres intensely. To him, she is a god, an eve figure and the spirit of the Virgin Mary in one. In her image, all aspects of life are fused together.

His mother meant not only all that was graceful; not only were her gentle look of love and sweet, happiness-promising smile caressing consolations; but somewhere beneath this enticing exterior lay much that was frightful and dark, greedy and fearful, sinful and sorrowful, all that gave birth and all death. (Hesse, Narcissus 57)

So his mother's image is essentially a universal figure, embodying the pious and virtuous as well as the dark and mysterious, the abstract as well as the sensual. Goldmund is extremely moved to discover that so many opposite qualities and emotions could coalesce in such a mystical and beautiful form. Goldmund's mother guides him in a way that Narcissus could not: while Narcissus demonstrates how to *think* deeply, she teaches him how to *feel* deeply.

Though Sinclair's actual mother plays a miniscule role in the story, he discovers a powerful mother-figure in Demian's mother, Frau Eva, who is also universal and transcends even the boundaries of sex. In the years preceding his first encounter with Frau Eva, he forms an ambiguous, androgynous "mother-image" or "anima" in his dreams that simultaneously resembles "Mother, Beloved, Devil and Whore" (Nelson 288; Ziolkowski, E.W. 742). He has dreams of embracing her that are clearly sexual, but also indicative of his admiration for the woman as a nurturer. This psychosexual "mother-image" is initially realized as his first crush-object, Beatrice, whom he admires and fears intensely (Nelson 288). Later, Frau Eva becomes the mother-image, symbolizing "a more mature conception of love . . . a challenge to Sinclair to test himself to the utmost to see what he can do by himself" (Nelson 289). This mother-image is more amorphous than Goldmund's mother in that she takes more than one definite physical form. However, like the universal mother in Narcissus, she remains a constant symbol of love, emotion, and the intermingling of virtue and sin, pushing Sinclair deeper into his own soul (Nelson 289; Ziolkowski, E.W. 742).

In addition to Narcissus and the mother-image, Goldmund's experiences as a vagabond open him further to the darker, hedonistic side of nature, showing how the pious and immoral intertwine and complement each other. "What are reason and sobriety without the knowledge of intoxication?" Goldmund muses as he contemplates his attraction to the duality of life (Hesse, Narcissus 193). The gritty reality, as well as the romanticism, of these adventures suggests that

although philosophical discourse may be the first step towards one's spirit, the conscious decision to live life to the full is a higher level of introspection – a final break between the individual and a conformist society. During his wayfaring journey, he has sex with many women, murders a man, and has several brushes with death while vacillating between intense joy, pain and ironic detachment. To illustrate, as he travels across plague-ravaged Germany, though pensive and despondent, he eventually grows rather indifferent to the scenes of death, rioting and destruction (Hesse, Narcissus 202-3). Still, having witnessed the madness and lawlessness that the fear of death perpetuates, he abandons himself to “the quiet passion to participate, to walk through hell with wide-open eyes” (Hesse, Narcissus 220). So he is spurred on by the inexplicable desire to explore the boundaries of the flesh and the soul, yet he is detached enough to know that pleasure is transitory and death is not to be feared. Seidlin describes Goldmund's wanderings as “an earnest and pious quest” to fully comprehend the mysteries of “the mother world” – a humble submission to a higher power rather than a reckless and impulsive reaction to the fear of death (Seidlin 60). This delicate, often dangerous, balance between sensuality and spirituality form a basis for the growth of wisdom.

While Goldmund explores how hedonism can be a divine endeavor, Sinclair discovers that religion can provide insight into the “amoral” (Hesse, Demian 92). He finds a cult-like religion with Pistorius, a reclusive organ player, adopting as an idol the ancient figure of Abraxas, “whose symbolic task is the uniting of godly and devilish elements” (Hesse, Demian 78). Pistorius' philosophy is centered on the belief that we are universal beings. He reflects, “Every god and devil that ever existed, be it among the Greeks, Chinese, or Zulus, are within us, exist as latent possibilities, as wishes, as alternatives” (Hesse, Demian 89). Sinclair learns that to accept life as a struggle towards the “artificially rationalized,” narrowly defined “good” and away from the vilified “evil” is to close oneself off from an intrinsic aspect of humanity, leaving oneself incomplete (Ziolkowski, E.W. 741-42; Buber 27).

Another medium for self-discovery in both novels is art. “The very process of artistic creativity” enables the main characters to pour emotions and ideas into an aesthetic form, helping them reconcile paradoxical aspects in each of their identities (Nelson 287).

Sculpture allows Goldmund to create something tangible and beautiful from his feelings while breaking down the division between the sensual and the abstract, between philosophy and nature. For years, he renounces the vagrant lifestyle and dedicates himself to capturing images of friends, lovers and his mother. However, art also negatively reinforces his identity. He eventually grows disillusioned, realizing that art is petty and shallow in comparison to the universe it attempts to represent in exchange for pleasure, reputation or money.

Sinclair's paintings, created while he is living apart from Demian at school, reveal the latent content of his dreams and symbolize a psychic connection to his estranged friend (Nelson, 289). His portrait of Beatrice as an androgynous figure becomes a representation of Demian, then of Sinclair's inner self and fate,¹ and finally, of Frau Eva (Hesse, Demian 70). He later impulsively paints a bird emerging from an egg-like sphere and sends the image to Demian. His friend's enigmatic response suggests that the bird is freeing itself from established constraints and flying to the God Abraxas. This leads Sinclair to "become" this bird and seek the new faith of Abraxas in order to form "a new reality" free of moral conformity (Ziolkowski, E.W., 742).

Narcissus and Goldmund and Demian illustrate that, just as the universe is full of opposing aspects that counterbalance and complement one another, human nature reflects this duality. Sinclair and Goldmund's embrace of the paradoxes of their identities is a triumph of "human free will" over society's absolute, often unjust, moral standards (Hesse, qtd. in Gellner 1). Hesse has given us two portraits of the individual who struggles to "live in accord with the promptings of [his] true self," subsequently growing closer to a universal higher power (Hesse, Demian 80). Although, as in reality, the question "who am I?" is never completely answered in either story, it is the quest to understand one's own destiny and personal conscience – separate from the accepted norms – that moves the reader. As Sinclair reflects in the prologue to Demian,

No man has ever been entirely and completely himself. Yet each one strives to become that – one in an awkward, the other in a more intelligent way, each as best he can. . . . We can understand one another, but each of us is able to interpret himself to himself alone. (Hesse, Demian 4)

¹ It is interesting to note that the name Demian is quite similar to "daemon," which is another term for fate used by the author in this context.

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