

Knulp

Background

Hesse, after having left the theological prep-school at Maulbronn monastery, had undergone for a short time an apprenticeship at the Perrot's tower-clock factory in his hometown of Calw. Surprising as it may seem, he cherished the memory of that period of mechanical labor and of close contact with craftsmen masters, journeymen, and fellow apprentices. The theme is reflected in much of Hesse's later writing. As early as 1902 he temporarily set aside his work on a book about journeymen.¹ In the introduction to these fragments, Hesse referred to Quorm² as a predecessor to Knulp.

"The figure of the tramp Quorm was to be the leading character, according to my plans at the time. Whatever I had in mind with him, I presented many years later in Knulp."³

Hesse discontinued his collection of stories in 1902 in order to concentrate on Peter Camenzind. Some more fragments were added while Hesse was reminded of the subject when writing that section of his autobiographical *Beneath the Wheel* which deals with Hans Giebenrath's episode at the machine shop. Until he began his work on *Glass Bead Game* in the thirties, he did continue, however, to publish isolated stories of apprenticeship in German, Austrian, and Swiss newspapers and periodicals. They were of a more "feuilletonistic" interest rather than literary merit and left out of most collections of Hesse's prose.⁴

The figure of the journeyman Quorm-Knulp was inspired not only by Hesse's personal experiences in his youth, but also by one of the best-known tales of German Romanticism of the early 19th century, the *Memoirs of a Good-For-Nothing* by Eichendorff.⁵ Eichendorff was one of the many lawyer-authors in German literature who lived most of his life (1788-1857) in the Eastern parts of Germany, and in Vienna. He came to be regarded as Germany's greatest lyricist after Goethe and is remembered in many of the most beautiful German folksongs, including the one Hesse quotes in Knulp: "In einem kühlen Grunde ...".⁶

Eichendorff's novelette *Taugenichts* (1822/23)⁷ portrays a "good-for-nothing" who is "naively self-conscious, wholly candid about his shortcomings, light-hearted and optimistic, incredibly stupid at times and nevertheless lovable."⁸ He wanders through a sunny paradise on

¹ 'journeyman' is an individual who has completed an apprenticeship and is fully educated in a trade or craft, but not yet a master. To become a master, a journeyman has to submit a master work piece to a guild for evaluation and be admitted to the guild as a master.

² Hermann Hesse, „Geschichten um Quorm“, *Prosa aus dem Nachlass*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965, pp.45-109.

³ *ibid.*, p.46.

⁴ For more information refer to Joseph Mileck, *Hermann Hesse: Life and Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p.51f.

⁵ Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff, *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*, 1826.

⁶ <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/einem-k%C3%BChlen-grunde-airy-hollow.html>

⁷ <https://www.languages-direct.com/aus-dem-leben-eines-taugenichts-joseph-von-eichendorff.html>

⁸ *Memories of a Good-For-Nothing*, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973, 120pp.

earth singing, fiddling, loving and being loved. The world is totally pleasant and unrealistic, a poetic dream portrayed in a masterful lyrical prose. It has been translated by Bayard Quincy Morgan.

Although *Knulp* does not seem to measure up to Hesse's best prose - from a literary point of view - it became one of his most popular books, highly praised by authors like André Gide,⁹ and translated into English as early as 1932. It also was of undeniable interest to the modern "outsider", portrayed for example in American writing beginning with Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957).¹⁰

Knulp, the outsider, does not "clash" with society; he deals with the settled people of society in a politely hostile manner, and his graceful social forms seem studied. Critical Hesse scholars such as Mark Boulby point to the blissful indifference with which *Knulp* responds to his rejection by bourgeois society. *Knulp* withdraws into a dreamworld of romantic self-delusions and a childlike state.¹¹ Hesse in the years approaching 1916 had given expression to his own attempts to walk away from the impending personal and world-crises and find a more promising way into the future via the minstrel world of the past.

The Book

"Early Spring." In the first of the three sections of *Knulp* it is a cold and rainy February evening when Karl Eberhard (*Knulp*) reaches the house of a former fellow-journeyman, a tanner in the town of Lächstetten. *Knulp*, a vagrant who had just been released from a hospital and who is suffering from the rain and the cold urgently needs a roof over his head. He puts his best foot forward when he meets his friend's young wife Lis, a former waitress. Lis who at first is apprehensive about the intrusion soon feels attracted to the obviously well-mannered and handsome stranger who shows the tanner his "legendary" neat journeyman's roadbook. The wife brings him a simple meal and *Knulp* enjoys the friendliness and the warmth of the typical village home.

After the meal *Knulp* is shown to a small guestroom in the attic where he spends the night and most of the next day resting. Toward evening he slips out of the house to wander around the village and inquire about old friends. After the evening meal at the tanner's he retires to his attic where he notices a young homesick servant girl in a house nearby who is preparing to go to bed. He attracts her attention by whistling a beautiful tune and strikes up a conversation with her. The next day after breakfast he leaves in order to visit old acquaintances, among them a resentful and envious tailor who is caught in a frustrating "normal" life with a wife and a houseful of children. While *Knulp* repairs and irons his clothes he advises the tailor to accept his fate and live by his religion. They agree that not too much practical relief can be expected from reading the Bible. *Knulp* mollifies the tailor by reminding him of his love for his children, something the lonely *Knulp* envies him for.

When he returns for a sumptuous lunch the tanner's wife is fixing, he becomes increasingly aware of the wife's attraction to him and his determination grows to avoid contacts with her. In the afternoon he manages to talk to Bärbele, the young servant girl, whom he meets that same evening for a clandestine date. He walks her to a dance in a nearby village where Bärbele is beginning to relax and to enjoy herself. On their way home *Knulp*

⁹ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1947/gide-bio.html

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Road

¹¹ Mark Boulby, *Hermann Hesse: His Mind and his Art*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967, p.77ff.

tells her of his resolve to leave town, not mentioning the real reason: his own unfortunate intrusion on the "happy" domestic life of the tanner. Bärbele who had been happy to have found such a gentle and attractive friend, sadly kisses him good-bye. Since she knows he has no money, she gives him one of her coins.

"My Recollections of Knulp." The second story takes place in midsummer when the narrator and Knulp are tramping together "through fertile country". While resting in a shady grave-yard their conversation naturally turns to death and dying. Knulp who enjoys the beauty of the moment would like to be reborn as a child. The narrator, on the other hand, would prefer to be the kind and wise old man he had once met. He is distressed by Knulp's seeming lack of values and goals which Knulp feels are essentially pointless. Man is guided by his instinctive awareness of what is good and bad, but any speculation about such inner guidance distresses him. Learnedness, he feels, does not solve the riddles of life.

Before bedding down for the night, the narrator plays his harmonica and then asks Knulp to tell a story. Knulp recounts a dream of having returned to what appeared to be his strangely unfamiliar hometown. He could utter only meaningless phrases when meeting familiar people and finally managed not to speak at all. Eventually he found the street he had grown up in and where he saw his first love Henriette stand in a doorway who appeared strangely transformed. When he tried to speak to her she changed into his second love Lisabeth who, after having given him a strange, piercing look, closed the door in his face. When he turned toward the town again, the evil spell seemed broken. The place was again exactly the way it had been and people in the street recognized him and even called out his name. Knulp, however, ran from town crying, knowing that he had left in disgrace and lost everything there including his father and mother, brothers, sisters, and friends.

Having finished, Knulp interpreted his own dream. Human souls are like flowers rooted on separate plants. They would like to go to each other but they cannot, having to leave it to chance whether the wind will carry their seeds. When loving Henriette and Lisabeth, he tried to make them his own and they had changed into a dream figure that looked like both of them and yet was neither. Even although love bound him to his father, he and his father were separate beings, each with his own place in life.

The narrator enjoyed Knulp's musing and found Knulp should have become a professor. Knulp said he preferred to be in the Salvation Army. He explains to the surprised narrator that in there he had found a few people who really believed in what they were saying, even if people were poking fun at them and if their voices are failing them. When the narrator cannot visualize Knulp missionizing, Knulp counters that believing in truth is sufficient. The narrator doubts whether there is one unchanging truth, particularly for the individual, and Knulp falls silent.

The next day is beautiful and Knulp gives the credit to his happy dreams. He sings some songs he has created at the spur of the moment, as they wander on. Toward evening Knulp's exuberance settles while the narrator becomes ever more stimulated. After having had a meal and a beer in a garden restaurant, Knulp excuses himself to take a walk, after which he returns to pick up the narrator and return to their sleeping quarters. The narrator, however, plans to stay at the beer garden a little longer. He later finds Knulp asleep. The next morning Knulp is gone. Now it was the narrator's turn "to taste the loneliness which in Knulp's opinion was the lot of every man.

The End. On a sunny day in October Doctor Machold, a former classmate of Knulp in Latin school, drives his one-horse carriage through the autumn countryside toward the town of Bulach. He meets a stranger on foot who looks vaguely familiar. The man turns out to be the "famous" Knulp, who says he is returning from a life on the road to his native town of

Gerbersau.¹² Knulp is now in his forties and does not look well. The doctor takes him along to his home in Bulach to shelter him and then provide proper care for him in a hospital. Knulp protests it is too late and his problem is not medical anyway. The doctor believes Knulp could have utilized his numerous talents better without necessarily having a dreary routine life. Knulp considers his own talents less remarkable: essentially they were to give pleasure and sometimes other people were thankful. "Why ask for more?"

Knulp tells the doctor reluctantly why he had dropped out of Latin school which is, in a way, the reason why he is returning to his home town of Gerbersau. He had started finding out about girls at the unusual age of twelve and fell in love with a laborer's daughter, Franziska, who was two years older than he. Franziska preferred mechanics or workmen to Latin scholars, and consequently Knulp managed to be dropped from Latin school.

Franziska, however, took up with a young mechanic instead. Knulp's sense of betrayal and loss was profound and he never trusted another person again, nor did he himself give his word to another person. The compassionate doctor reaffirmed his intention to commit Knulp to a hospital, fortunately, in Knulp's mind, to the hospital of Gerbersau since he had wanted to return to the place of his origin at least once more. Dr. Machold arranged a ride for Knulp, gave him a warmer coat and some money, and, after having shaved with a borrowed razor and cleaned himself up, Knulp climbed on the cart destined for Gerbersau. Before reaching Gerbersau, however, he got off to enter the town on his own and to enjoy his freedom.

Knulp spent the afternoon roaming from street to street and his dream of returning to his childhood paradise seemed to have come true. He also recalled, however, the encounter with Franziska and the point when his life had changed so dramatically. "He had thrown himself away, he had lost interest in everything, and life, falling in with his feeling, had demanded nothing of him."¹³⁷

On the next day he grew tired of the "jocose commiseration" of those who recognized him and, afraid the hospital staff might be searching for him, he left town for the wooded hills surrounding it. Knulp met with one more former acquaintance, however, the stone-breaker Schaible who, although surly in the beginning, cheered up when he recognized Knulp. Schaible reminded Knulp good-naturedly of how easily he could have become a normal citizen with house, wife and children.

Two weeks later winter arrived with bitter cold and snowfall. Knulp had stayed in close vicinity of the town brooding over the events of his "botched life". The town appeared more alien and hostile to him now and he felt no desire to return there, although he kept circling it in the snow like a lone wolf. As his condition worsened all the good things in his past came back to his mind, including his loves Henriette and Lisabeth. His life should have ended when it was at its best, yet then he was reminded that his life in its entirety, as he lived it, was God's will, and he would have lived it the same way if given another chance. "There is nothing you have enjoyed and suffered that I have not enjoyed and suffered with you", says God's voice to him, as Knulp accepts his fate, settles in the snow and dies.

¹² "Gerbersau" is an allusion to Hesse's native town Calw in the Black Forest region of Germany, which was known for its tanneries.

¹³ *Knulp*, p.103f.

Analysis

Although we recognize the origin of *Knulp* in a loose collection of "journeymen stories" dating back to the *Stories Around Quorm* of 1902, the little book strikes us as a unit. The three parts, being quite different in style and mood, are distinctly interconnected. The similarities between the first and third sections, "Early Spring" and "The End" point to a congruence which needs to be explored from a structural and thematic point of view. The second section provides the link between the others. While the book reports Knulp's story, the narrator of "My Recollections of Knulp" seems to have evolved out of the figure of Knulp and, as narrator, point to an alternate fate for Knulp, a fate which Hesse seems to have identified as his own.

In the first part, we are introduced to Knulp who is already effectively set apart from the small town milieu in which he had grown up. He is a vagrant, only by means of his fictitious road book a "journeyman",¹⁴ who has left his hometown not because his fellow citizen would not tolerate him, but because he is an "extraordinary" man who is unable to acquiesce to the restraints of the life of a Kleinbürger,¹⁵ in fact to any of the discipline and conformity which is essential for the functioning of the community. His solution to the problem of growing up in an increasingly disenchanting world is to continue to see the world with the innocence of a child, even if this means doing violence to reality and to a more insightful part of his own personality.

Hesse stresses repeatedly that Knulp has been provided with ample gifts some of which he managed to maintain during his vagrancy, while he had sacrificed others for the sake of his freedom. Knulp never lost his ability to please others. While his little, childish innocent feats of artistry seem insignificant in the context of the crafts, they are as spontaneous as are his Eichendorffian songs. Their effect on others is paralleled only by the effect of his likable, cheerful personality itself. In the sense of Peter Camenzind, Knulp is an artist through his existence rather than through works of art. While he, as a person, brings pleasure and enjoyment to others, and almost becomes a legendary and timeless figure, we are constantly reminded that all beautiful things and pleasures must pass, just as the seasons pass, and so must Knulp's glorious youth.

In the second part entitled "My Recollections of Knulp" the essential elements of "Early Spring" are exposed to a new viewpoint, that of the narrator, who is not part of Knulp's hometown milieu, but of Knulp himself. The two hikers rest in a shady graveyard under beautiful trees and amidst geraniums, gillyflowers, rosebushes and near a dense copse of lilac and elder.

In their conversation they touch on what they would like to be if they were reborn: Knulp a child, the narrator a wise old man. Yet Knulp's conversation was often "heavy with philosophy", and the narrator quite naive. At the present, both are somewhere on the journey between the two seeming opposites of childlike innocence and old age wisdom, and they are moving in opposite directions. Nevertheless, their journeys are very similar and the opposition seems to result merely from different ways of seeing things at different times. Either path will take them eventually to the point where they merge as individuals into a larger context and where their distinctive individualities cease to exist. The cemetery provides the backdrop for the lush and colorful summer growth and the beautiful resting place of the two friends. Whichever direction they go from the fullness of life in the middle of a graveyard, they will be reminded of the *everpresence* of death. In death, all polarities including the opposition of the naivety of childhood and the wisdom of old age cease to be meaningful.

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journeyman>

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petite_bourgeoisie

Knulp's thoughts keep returning to the places of his happy childhood and the familiar life in his small hometown. We are reminded of his visit to Lächstetten. In a dream, he tells the narrator, he had returned to visit his hometown but everything had become distorted and strangely unfamiliar. He could not communicate with people, and his first love Henrietta was transformed into his second love Lisabeth when he wanted to talk to her. As his youthful emotion had transformed his woman friends from one into the other, so had his nostalgia changed his hometown into a dream place with steep gables. Town and people, however, continued to lead their own existences, independent of his - Knulp's - subjective, idealistic, and wishful perception. Knulp, could not accept a reality other than that of his dreams. When people had returned to their own real respective identities, Knulp fled the town.
