This study examines the early works of Hermann Hesse in the historical context of early twentieth-century Germany. While Hesse’s literary career spans over six decades, most scholarship focuses only on a brief period. Historians study his Weimar novels, as psychologically penetrating pieces that offer insights into this fascinating and chaotic era of German history. Yet, Hesse’s early works have not received due attention in historical scholarship. This situation is unfortunate because Hesse’s prewar writings provide interesting and relevant commentary on life in fin de siècle Germany.

Hesse’s early writings offer unique insights into aspects of German culture and society, specifically regarding nature, education, cultural pessimism, and the Great War. As industrial society increasingly encroached upon middle-class life and the natural world, Hesse implored people to slow this destruction and love nature. Even though the German educational system became world famous, Hesse worried that its rigors often crushed the creativity and individuality of young men and women. In such a fast-changing world, many intellectuals pessimistically viewed progress and thought that society was in decline, but Hesse advised against such radical ideas. Finally, Hesse became an outsider during the Great War, as his pacifist commentary stood in contrast to widespread nationalism.

This study’s close look at Hesse’s early works will demonstrate that the Weimar image of the author does not allow for a complete picture of the writer or his relevance to German history. When Hesse’s prewar writings are better understood, we will gain insights into the struggles faced by middle-class Wilhelmine society, in a time of drastic change, through the eyes of one lonely romantic and individualistic outsider.