Geert Crauwels

**Hesse,** **Hermann** (1877–1962)

Hermann Hesse was born in Calw (Germany) in a pietistic missionary family. To his devout parents, the I, as a subject next to God, had no rights. This conviction not only lead to several personal crises in Hesse’s life but also inspired his central theme: the defense of the individual and its intellectual freedom, independent of any cause.

Destined to become a Protestant theologian, Hesse became a seminarist at the Protestant convent school Maulbronn in 1891, from which he fled shortly after. A suicide attempt followed in 1892. Some years later, Hesse was trained as a bookseller in Tübingen (1895-1898). Although Hesse had started his career as a lyricist in the neoromantic tradition by then (*Romantische Lieder*, 1898) and considered poetry to be his central literary medium, his novels and stories were the foundation of his success. His novels can be characterized as biographies of the soul, reflecting the protagonist’s subjectivist development and self-discovery. Hesse’s breakthrough came with *Peter Camenzind* (1904), which already dealt with his main topics: the uncompromising personality development, criticism of modern civilization and the education system, the mystic experience of nature and a return to the simple, authentic life – echoing Nietzsche’s philosophy of life. In the autobiographical novel *Unterm Rad* (*Beneath the Wheel*, 1906), Hesse returns to his childhood experiences in Maulbronn, thereby criticizing the authoritarian education system. Hesse’s own life is also thematized in *Roßhalde* (1914), a novel reflecting the tension between life as an artist and as a civilian as well as the disintegration of his first marriage. With his next novel, *Demian. Die Geschichte einer Jugend* (*Demian. The Story of a Youth*, 1919), Hesse showed affinity withexpressionist literature as well as with C. G. Jung’s and J. B. Lang’s psychoanalysis. In *Siddharta. Eine indische Dichtung* (*Siddharta*, 1922), the result of Hesse’s study of the philosophy and religion of India, legendary fragments of Buddha’s life are transformed into a psychological-religious Bildungsroman. *Der Steppenwolf* (*Steppenwolf*, 1927) is Hesse’s only work with a clear expressionist slant. Here, the narrative of the personal crisis of the neurotic protagonist simultaneously serves as a vehicle for social and cultural criticism. After this novel, Hesse resorted to a more conventional style, thus renouncing the aesthetics of avant-gardism, as in *Narziß und Goldmund. Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (*Narcissus and Goldmund*, 1930). Although the (medieval) tale of the friendship between Goldmund and his mentor Narziß is presented in the German romantic mode, the novel also deals with Jung’s psychoanalysis. In his last major work, *Das Glasperlenspiel* (*The Glass Bead Game*, 1943), Hesse designs a futuristic utopian vision of a monastic community, in which the yearning of the human mind for unity and reconciliation is symbolized through the protagonist’s arduous, lifelong training to become the master of the “glass bead game”, the game of lifeHH. Self-realization, openness towards other cultures, but also the sacrifice of the self for the benefit of the community form the basic themes. In 1946 Hesse – a Swiss citizen since 1924 - was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

References and further reading:

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Paratextual material