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 Second Prize, Literary Contest

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THE PLAY IS OVER?
 A TREATISE ON THE STEPPENWOLF OF HERMAN HESSE

"One day I would learn how to be a better hand at the game. One day I would learn how to laugh. Pablo was waiting for me, and Mozart too."

Harry Haller, by reflecting the dualism of the novel's title, is both a protagonist and an antagonist; symbolically he is half man and half wolf. In analyzing Steppenwolf, however, it is necessary to discard this dualism as Haller later does.

Haller is confronted with the evidence early. He is given a pamphlet called "Treatise on the Steppenwolf" - a rather clairvoyant manuscript that confronts Harry and challenges his dualistic interpretation of self. So Harry is a steppenwolf? But is this S steppenwolf not his own delusion? Can he really be secure in believing that his will is divided into only two sections? Is he not a man "divided into a thousand pieces?"

This pamphlet was given to him by a man with placards advertising "The Magic Theater." Haller had previously tried to gain entry into the magic theater but he was not successful. Apparently the pamphlet was the first stage of his entry into the theater which "is not for everybody" but "for madmen only."

Haller's other illusion is in his admiration for the "immortals," the enduring figures of the fine arts. He has a religious attachment to the works of Goethe and Mozart. This admiration will be challenged.

The spirit of Goethe, in a dream sequence, tells him:

"You take the old Goethe much too seriously, my young friend. - - - We immortals do not like things to be taken seriously. We like joking. Seriousness, young men, is an accident of time. It consists, I don't mind telling you, in putting too high a value on time. I, too, once put too high a value on time. For that reason I wished to be a hundred years old. In eternity, however, there is no time, you see. Eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke."

When finally, in the spectral climax of Steppenwolf, Harry Haller does enter the "eternity" or timelessness of the Magic Theater, he is fulfilling the price of admission, he is losing his mind. Madness is the state of no immediate norms, the state in which the Self becomes disseminated, the complete realm of human experience. The order of Harry Haller is shattered into a thousand pieces; it is replaced by a world of chaotic longing which includes the full range of love and ecstasy as well as the full range of terror and violence. At this confrontation, Harry longs for the security of his old identity but he cannot regain it. In reaching for immortality he has transcended his normal self and he has experienced the trauma of defining immortality.

He must admit that the desire for immortality is, quite simply, man's flight from death. By attaining immortality, man transcends time. But transcending time does not negate it. Transcendence allows you to become an old man too early. Time catches up.

The Magic Theater is transcendence, a universal goal of mankind. But what do you do when the play is over? What do you do when you attain immortality? Do you become a god? If so, then what is the fate of the gods?

Nietzsche has chronicled the fate of the gods: "They did not fade away, although that lie is told. They merely, once upon a time, laughed themselves unto death." A similar fate belongs to Harry Haller. He suffers the full privilege of the human irony - he goes out laughing.