

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

An Exploration of the Self in Hermann Hesses' Greatest Work: *Steppenwolf*

Dikari Bonnie Lamare

Research Scholar

Department of English,

North Eastern Hill University,

Tura Campus, Tura,

Meghalaya, India.

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.3.6.12

Abstract

The exploration of the self lies at the heart of a majority of Hermann Hesses' works and it gain him recognition worldwide. He believes that the individual search for ultimate truth lies in the fate of man in a sordid world. As a German writer, his characters represent the significance and importance of the 'self' thereby relating it to the reality and existence of human beings in general. This paper attempts to study Hermann Hesses' greatest work *Steppenwolf* in light of the significance and importance of the self in bringing about a change and renewal in the fate of man in this modern world. At the same time an attempt will be made to demonstrate Hesses' ability to reveal the search for 'oneness' within the self which is basically the central theme in all of the author's work.

Keywords – Self, Oneness, Ultimate Truth, Spirituality, Autobiography

Introduction

Herman Hesse has been considered as the most prominent writer of the twentieth century in Germany. His works deal with the knowledge of the self, the search for authenticity and the individual search for spirituality. As a German writer, his characters represent the significance and importance of the 'self' thereby relating it to the reality and existence of human beings in general. His characters also represent an aura of twentieth-century modernity and its quest for individual authenticity where the quest itself is the search for 'oneness' between self, world and universe – and this is basically the central theme in all of his works.

Hermann Hesses' *Steppenwolf* is regarded as a novel which deals with the exploration of the self. The novel is highly autobiographical as it reflects the crisis in Hesse's world during the 1920's portraying the divided self of his humanity and his inner world of the senses. The novel depicts the protagonist divided self of a civilized man and a wolf man. Hesse explores his inability to overcome his natural instincts, that is, half man and half wolf. His civilized world

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

consists of peace and order while his other half is a savage world of darkness and lawlessness. Hence, the half man and half wolf lives at enmity and he is bound by the alter ego of his divided self.

Steppenwolf is the story of a middle aged man, Harry Haller, who leads a quiet life and keeping all to himself the needs and aspirations of his very existence. This man is however tormented in living with two personalities of his divided self. The savage world and the orderly world gains momentum within him and he struggles to find the meaning and essence of his ultimate existence. The truth of oneness between self, the world and the universe lies hidden from him and he struggles to achieve it in the world of the bourgeois. For him the bourgeois world is one that is tasteless and everything about it frustrates him deeply. Theodore Ziolkowski views the identity of Harry Haller as, "...an individual capable of producing subjective images that in their vividness rival objective reality. Accordingly, his experiences on the upper level of reality assume fully as much intensity for him as the action on the level of mundane reality". (Costa 125)

When looking at the significance of the self, Edwin F. Casebeer declares that "The Self is a human's guide in the enormously difficult task of individuation or self – realization" and Harry Haller is undoubtedly one because he is a man who is over conscious about the nature of his existence and at the same time he lives too much in the ego of his senses. The Treatise on the Steppenwolf, a small booklet, addresses the discourse of a man who is torn between the two natures of his divided self. The booklet gives a review of the nature of every man's soul in a sordid world and Harry is unable to recognize the instinctive nature of both as he is tormented by suicidal tendency; just like certain people who would rather take their own life, but in spite of that Harry Haller as a Steppenwolf is deeply committed to become great or to be one with the 'immortals'.

The section called 'The Magic Theatre' plays an important part for Harry Haller because he discovers some of his long hidden personalities. Its slogan reads: 'Not for everybody!' and 'For mad people only!' The Magic Theatre describes Haller's divided self of the half man and half wolf and his hatred for the bourgeois lifestyle. However, he is unable to submit himself to the pleasures of the senses. It is through the Magic Theatre that he experiences all the fantasies in his mind. The description of the theatre is that it consists of a long corridor in the shape of a horseshoe with a mirror on one side and a number of doors on the other side, it is here that Harry Haller enters the five doors where each door symbolizes a portion of his life. The Magic Theatre becomes, as Bernhard Zeller indicates, "...the supra-real stage from which the divine and the spiritual can speak to man untouched by the distortions of barbaric civilization". (Zeller 127)

According to the treatise, Harry Haller consists of not just two personalities but a hundred or thousands selves and this is true in reality because Edwin Casebeer points out that "man does

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

not possess oneself or two selves but an infinity of selves.” The notion of multiple selves in Haller is further explored at the Magic Theatre.

Steppenwolf knows the reason of his unhappiness, Colin Wilson states that “he is resolved to forget that the desperate clinging to the self and the desperate clinging to life are the surest way to eternal death”; he discovers that “the way to innocence, to the uncreated and to God, leads on . . . not back to the wolf or the child, but ever deeper into human life...” it is due to his total surrender and patience to the bourgeois world that his salvation enables him to move forward to his goal in spite of losing sight of it. Haller glimpses the word: Tat Tvam Asi- That Thou Art- taken from the Upanishads which denotes that ‘in the heart of his own being man discovers the Godhead.’

Hesse's novel, *Steppenwolf* can be regarded as a pursuit for a new kind of faith which was within its grasp. Hesse himself points out that even though the story of The Steppenwolf ‘is one of sickness and crisis, these do not end in death or destruction. On the contrary: they result in a cure.’ Hesse understood that the self can only be acquired with the help of understanding the nature of one’s own existence and this he boldly declares that “A man cannot live intensely except at the cost of the self.” Through an exploration of the self Hesse question the existential fate of human existence, he states that:

Man is not... of fixed and enduring form... He is an experiment and a transition. He is nothing else than the narrow and perilous bridge between nature and spirit. His innermost destiny drives him on to the spirit and to God. His innermost longing draws him back to nature. Man is a bourgeois compromise.

References

- Casebeer, Edwin F. *Writers for the Seventies Hermann Hesse*. Indianapolis: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 2014.
- Costa, Richard Hauer. “The Man Who Would Be Steppenwolf.” *The South Central Bulletin* 42.4 (1982): 125-127. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 June 2014.
- Hesse, Hermann. *Steppenwolf*. Trans. David Horrocks. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2012.
- Wilson, Colin. *The Outsider*. London: Guernsey Press Co. Ltd., 1997.
- Zeller, Prof. Bernhard. “Worldwide Reception and Influence.” n.p. n.d.: Web. 25 Feb. 2015. <http://www.hermann-hesse.de/files/WORLDWIDE%20RECEPTION%20AND%20INFLUENCE_5.pdf>