

Beneath the Wheel

(Plot outline)

"Like many of the school novels, the book evidently rests in very large part upon personal experience; it is based not only upon memory but upon the most traumatic set of memories in Hesse's early life. Hans Giebenrath, the son of a small-town middleman of little education and less sense, is selected by his preparatory school teachers to be "crammed" unmercifully for the awful provincial examination upon which depends his chance of becoming one of the elect few – on this occasion thirty-six – who were given scholarships at the age of fourteen to the preparatory seminaries of Maulbronn, Blaubeuren, Schöndal, and Urach, and later educated free of charge at the Tübinger Stift for a career in the church, or occasionally in teaching. Hans passes second, and enters the seminary full of a promise which for a time he seems to maintain. But the price is terrible and has already in part been paid; his natural emotional development has been crippled and he is on the verge of a mental illness which will destroy him. Under the effects of this creeping malaise and through the intrusion of a stimulus from without (his friendship with Hermann Heilner), he falls from grace and suffers desperately, while his teachers and his father can think only of applying further violence to his personality. Sick and broken, he returns home from the seminary for a rest, but it is understood that he will never go back. A pathetic coda recounts his first experience of the opposite sex, his three days as an apprentice mechanic, and his death by drowning. ...at the end of Beneath the Wheel, when the teachers attend Hans's obsequies with proper and dignified sympathy, the cobbler Flaig, in conversation with Herr Giebenrath, points an accusing finger at them and their hypocrisy: "There go a few gentlemen ... they helped to bring him to this" (I, 546)."

Source: Mark Boulby. Hermann Hesse: His Mind and Art. Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell U. Press, 1967, p.44.