

A Summary Of Hermann Hesse's
Demian

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Demian is the story of a boy, Emil Sinclair, and his search for himself. Emil was raised in a good traditional home at the turn of the century in the young nation of Germany. His family is rather wealthy and they have a reputation as an upright, godly family. As a boy, Sinclair views the world within the walls of his home as representing all that is good, pure, innocent, and godly. But starting at a young age he feels a constant inner conflict between this world, which he refers to as the "world of light" and the outside world, or "forbidden realm" which represents sin, loneliness, deceit, and insecurity. And although his mother, father, and two sisters remain within the "world of light", he constantly feels drawn to the outside realm and is in this way somewhat estranged from his family and their sphere of security. He ends up vacillating between both and not belonging to either.

This struggle between Sinclair's two worlds manifests itself when Sinclair is about 10 years old. While playing one day with some fellow schoolmates, an older boy, Franz Kromer, joins them. In an effort to impress the older boy and his schoolmates, Sinclair makes up a story in which he and another unnamed accomplice stole a bag of apples from a fellow neighbor. Although the story is untrue, Kromer threatens Sinclair with exposure if Sinclair does not pay him off. Unable to pay the full amount, Sinclair is forced

to become Kromer's slave, ultimately sending Sinclair into depression and paranoia. Sinclair feels trapped by Kromer, forced to live within the "forbidden realm", which in turn exiles him from the "world of light" because he has defiled himself by lying and committing sinful acts for Kromer. This experience is traumatic for Sinclair and he is often haunted by nightmares, he is unable to eat, and he becomes withdrawn and sullen. His personality alters as he tries to cope with the bondage of his slavery to this lower-class, troublemaking kid, but he sees no escape and reluctantly succumbs to what he believes to be his fate.

The arrival of a new kid in town, Max Demian, is noticed by everyone due to the strange aura that surrounds him and his recently widowed mother. From the start, Sinclair feels a type of fascination for Demian, a confusing feeling filled with both love and hate. "He was in every respect different from all the others, was entirely himself, with a personality all his own which made him noticeable even though he did his best not to be noticed; his manner and bearing was that of a prince disguised among farm boys, taking great pains to appear one of them."¹

The first encounter between Sinclair and Demian occurs one day after school as the two boys are walking home. Sinclair had learned the biblical story of Cain and Abel

mind, asking questions, and seeking guidance from this woman of his dreams.

The time nears for Sinclair to leave the boarding school. Shortly before he leaves, Sinclair comes in conflict for the first time with Pistorius, his mentor and teacher, who is so learned in ancient religions and philosophies, and has taught Sinclair all he knows about Abraxas. Sinclair, the student, has outgrown Pistorius, who is forever trapped in the past because he is a romantic and he does not have the strength to leave the past behind for something entirely new. "And suddenly I realized deeply within me: what Pistorius had been and given to me was precisely what he could not be and give to himself. He had led me along a path that would transcend and leave even him, the leader, behind."⁹

Sinclair finishes boarding school and during his break, before entering university, he returns to his hometown and visits Demian's old house. The old woman that presently lives there is not able to tell Sinclair where the Demian family now resides, but she does show Sinclair an album that contained old pictures of the mother and son. Fantasy turned to reality for Sinclair when he saw a picture of Frau Demian, his dream woman, his beloved guide. Demian's mother was the one in his dreams, the one he had unconsciously painted.

too narrowly. In general, we count as part of our personality only that which we can recognize as being an individual trait or as diverging from the norm. But we consist of everything the world consists of, each of us, and just as our body contains the geneological table of evolution as far back as the fish and even much further, so we bear everything in our soul that once was alive in the soul of men."¹⁰

Demian's monologue on page 115 is a key turning point in the novel as well as a turning point in Sinclair's fate as he realizes that his destiny is tied to all those around him. Demian condemns the society of Europe as being lost and afraid, and he predicts the coming of a catastrophic event that will change the world. "He spoke about the spirit of Europe and the signs of the times. Everywhere, he said, we could observe the reign of the herd instinct, nowhere freedom and love. All this false communion - from the fraternities to the choral societies and the nations themselves - was an inevitable development, was a community born of fear and dread, out of embarrassment, but inwardly rotten, outworn, close to collapsing."¹¹

Although Demian's words intrigue Sinclair, the excitement of finding his friend and knowing he will soon see Demian's mother occupies Sinclair's mind. The next day

¹⁰ pgs. 88-89

¹¹ pgs. 114-115

he returns to their house to finally meet her. This moment is so joyous and fulfilling for Sinclair that his eyes fill with tears. He feels like he has reached a goal so long sought after, and he feels that all his experiences preceeded this very moment. "With a face that resembled her son's, timeless, ageless, and full of inner strength, the beautiful woman smiled with dignity. Her gaze was fulfillment, her greeting a homecoming." She relates the story of the first time that Demian came home to her, telling her of a boy at school who had the mark. From this point forward, she and Demian had hoped that Sinclair would find his way, the right path to himself. As she talked, Sinclair felt as if she had experienced all the pain and suffering with him, knowing his destiny all along. He is comforted by her words and filled with an inner peace unlike ever before. Demian's mother tells Sinclair to simply call her Frau Eva, and she becomes his mentor, his mother, his love, and his obsession.

Sinclair becomes a part of the family and joins in at all the meetings that take place in the house, the gatherings of those with the mark. Those in the circle believe in every sort of religion and God, and Sinclair learns about the many ideas thought up by mankind to explain God through these fellow seekers. Despite their many different beliefs and ideas, they all believe that a

collapse of the present world and society is imminent. Demian often says to Sinclair, "What will come is beyond imagining. The soul of Europe is a beast that has lain fettered for an infinitely long time. And when it's free, it's first movements won't be the gentlest".¹² All this foreshadows the first World War, which is only a year or so away from breaking out.

Meanwhile Sinclair falls deeper in love with Frau Eva. She understands everything about him. She is able to make sense of his dreams; at times, she even remembers them better than he himself does. Sinclair is in constant conflict with himself over his love for her. She encourages him in his desire, telling him not to be afraid. But she also tells him that her love must be won, and for her to be attracted to his love he must be confident and unafraid.

His love probably would have attracted her if it had not been for the events that came about in the summer of 1914. Shortly before the war begins Demian realizes what is to come, the tragic event that would change European society forever. It meant the death of the old world, an end to the conformity, a coming of a new age. Demian and Sinclair will be a part of this new world, they will be leaders because they have already accepted fate. One day Demian comes to tell Sinclair, "So it won't be the end of the world, no earthquake, no revolution, but war. People will love it!

¹² pg. 124

