

**TRANSCENDING THE CONCEPT OF ‘LIGHT AND DARKNESS’ IN  
HERMANN HESSE’S *DEMIAN***

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**Abstract**

A path to ‘self-exploration’ is what the analysis of this paper is. *Demian* by Hermann Hesse is not just an ordinary psychological fiction because it is the story of the writer, a story of every individual that goes through an existential crisis. This paper is an expedition of finding one’s own uniqueness that makes us special from other human beings. This journey of finding who we truly are is not very pleasant because it is not some sweet and invented story but a story of a real living person that shows the everyday struggle of youth fighting in a battlefield in order to survive. This paper will also explore the accepted notion of humanity that is being deconstructed by Hesse’s *Demian*. Human beings do not always have the qualities of goodness but are the disciple of the god ‘Abraxas’. We have both the quality of good and evil within us. The ideal world is the world of light where human beings have those utopian views and the shadows that is the inner voice, is the dark world. From the study of *Demian*, it is clear that one can find their true nature only by accepting one’s own shadow. The ‘self’ can only be acquired when we learn to accept that both good and evil are a part of us. This paper is written in order to transcend the stereotypical notion of the ideal human being and to go beyond what is good and what is evil.

**Keywords:** self, inner-voice, evil, light, dark, consciousness, individualism, journey, shadow, transcend.

*Demian*, the story of Emil Sinclair by Hermann Hesse, commonly known as ‘The Story of Emil Sinclair’s Youth’ is about his confused life and how he goes through different phases of life. In every stage of his life, he tends to depend on someone else for moral support. This paper will try to analyze the novel to look upon good and evil from a different perspective and is also an attempt to transcend the accepted ideas about humanity.

*Demian* could be put into the genre of Bildungsroman but there is something more to it. The life of Sinclair and his experience is a perfect blend of supernatural elements, philosophy, and symbolism. The main protagonist wanted to fully awake himself, to be fully aware of life, and to find the connection of different elements of this universe. This novel talks about ‘self’; a struggle to become one’s true self. Every human being should have this concept of finding who you truly are. This attainment of ‘self’ is not possible without gaining pain. Therefore we see Sinclair going through numerous suffering to find out his true self. This novel is a lesson that life is all about pain and suffering and those who haven’t suffered at all will never be able to attain their individualism. Sinclair’s journey was not a journey to become older but a journey to become his true self. He goes through numerous mental suffering that occurs at every stage of his life. In childhood, he had to cope up with his surroundings and become a liar but this lie made him lonelier than he was before in this society. Demian, whom we can consider as an alter ego or a strong character made up by Sinclair himself, to ease his pain is another form of accepting that lies are a part of human nature. From here we come to know that life is not only about truths but it’s a battle between truth and lie or between good and evil. From this incident, we come to know that individual or even Sinclair cannot overpower this battle but had to find a way to accept one’s fate in a more dignified way.

“To tell my story I have to start far in the past. If I could, I’d have to go back much farther yet, to the very earliest years of my childhood and even beyond them to my distant origins.” (Hesse, 2018,

p.11) Through this novel, Hesse tried to relive his childhood and also tried to show the world that living as his true self was very difficult. This novel is a quest for 'Self', the narrator is the seeker and the journey is to find the individual inner voice.

Emil Sinclair is the protagonist of this novel and the story begins when he was ten with nothing but childhood innocence. Through the help of the central character, Hesse shows the process of individuation. He uses the symbol of a bird to portray the breaking of eggshell that represents childhood innocence and the bird flying away to 'Abraxas' represents one's self-realization. "The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world. The bird flies to God. That God's name is Abraxas."(Hesse, 2018, p.108) This bird represents mankind individually as well as generally. Whoever is born in this world must fight against a world to achieve its true meaning of existence. The bird then flies to a 'God' whose name is 'Abraxas' and he represents both good and evil. This signifies that any individual after breaking the world created by others they realize that good and evil are both parts of a human being. Neither should be rejected by us but to choose what makes us more individual. The God Abraxas is the sole concept of an existence beyond good and evil. It transcends the very existence of humanity's moral concept that light and darkness are in contrast to each other and that human beings should be made up of goodness whereas evils should be cast apart.

Sinclair became aware of the existence of two worlds at an early stage of his life. His parent's home was the bright side of his life but he was getting drawn towards the dark world from which even his parents were unable to protect him. In ten years, Emil Sinclair goes through certain stages while traveling the road towards his self. This road towards his Self is full of detours and obstacles. The first obstacle Sinclair has to face occurs in the form of a blackmailer, namely, Franz Kromer who introduces him to the "other world". To hide his sophisticated family background Sinclair lies about apple theft and Kromer finding his truth starts blackmailing him. The entry of Kromer into his life destroys his mental

peace and Sinclair finally enters into the dark realm understanding what his shadow is. His quest for self-realization begins with his recognition and acceptance of his shadow which opens two opposite worlds for Sinclair: good and evil. Sinclair's ventures into the dark world alienate him from the peaceful, serene, and bright world of his parents. Gradually, due to the lack of communication, he started to feel alienated and the table, the chairs, the Bible seems unfamiliar to him. He realizes that his feet are already been deep-rooted into the dark from which his mother and father cannot save him. It seems to him that his serene world is detaching itself from him and he could only watch with a cold heart which is saying goodbye to him. Only he can perceive this change in him to which his parents are unknown. Therefore he starts to feel superior to his father because his father is unaware of his true self and Sinclair keeps on lying to his parents. The sense of superiority enforces him to leave the world of his father

I had had to endure our evening prayers, during which we had sung a hymn that was one of my favorites. Oh, I didn't join in, and every note was gall and wormwood to me. I didn't join the prayer when my father spoke the blessing, and when he ended "... upon us all!" I was convulsively torn out of their circle. The grace of God was upon them all, but no longer upon me. I left, cold and enormously weary. (Hesse, 2018, p.29)

Sinclair felt weak in this bright world and was lead by the devil to the dark world. The world of light was pleasant but the dark world was way more attractive where physical strength, aggression, and escapades played a significant role. He was losing control over himself morally and was being devoured by his shadow, Kromer. It was Demian who saved Sinclair from the clutches of Kromer. The characters found in this novel can be interpreted as the personified version of Sinclair's consciousness, shadows, or inner voices. When Sinclair was torn between the world of good and evil he created an alter ego,

Demian to protect himself from all this trauma and chaos. His encounter with his shadow is the cause of Demian's entry into his life.

As in a dream I was captivated by his voice, his influence. I merely nodded. Wasn't a voice speaking there that could only be issuing from myself? That knew everything? That knew everything better and more clearly than I myself did? (Hesse, 2018, p.51)

Demian became a guiding star for Sinclair and he became more and more interested in the words of Demian leaving him curious about his world. But even though Sinclair was saved by Demian his interest in the dark world was not lessen. It made him more curious when Demian speaks of 'Cain' as a marker of artistic thoughts. It made him realize that courageous people are often outcasts from society. Demian's entry into Sinclair's life was an eye-opener for him. He was introduced to look at things from a different perspective. It made Sinclair think that the dark side of his world is also the part of his journey of self-discovery. To attain enlightenment, it is important to understand that the exploration of the dark world as man's own shadow is an integral part of a spiritual journey.

Man's first encounter with himself is not pleasant and therefore Sinclair started to ignore Demian. After being free from Kromer and realizing his shadow Sinclair tried to hold on to his parent's ideology which is the bright world. But no matter where he went Demian's voice followed him. He could hear his voice as if Demian never left his side. This voice was nothing but his psyche calling him to accept himself as he is. Sinclair after dreaming about Demian drew a bird after which he was introduced to the God 'Abraxas' as a reply from Demian. "The bird is fighting its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Whoever wishes to be born must destroy a world. The bird is flying to God. The god is named Abraxas." (Hesse, 2018, p.108) From the point of view of Demian, the bird is on the way to Abraxas, the God that stands for wholeness. The symbol of the bird breaking the eggshell represents

Sinclair's struggle for liberation. It denotes his progress on the journey of the process of individuation. It stands for totality. Therefore, Sinclair's painting of the bird can be seen in the light of his efforts to attain totality or individuation. This encounter with Abraxas marks a new development and longing for life. It occupies the space of Sinclair's mind. He forgets about Beatrice, a girl whom he met in the park and fell in love with. Her obsession gets over because she represents only the bright side of life by being an idealized image of a girl. However, Sinclair desires the union of opposites. He is in search of an image, God, or anything that represents wholeness. He describes Him as:

Rapture and terror, man and woman combined, the most sacred and the most hideous things interwoven, deep guilt quivering in the heart of gentlest innocence – such was the image of my dream of love, and such was Abraxas, also... It was both, both and much more still. It was an angelic image and Satan, man and woman in one, human being and animal, the highest good and extreme evil. To experience this seemed to be my lot; to taste of it, my destiny. I longed for it and feared it, but it was always there, always hovering over me. (Hesse, 2018, p.112)

Whenever Sinclair went astray from his path there was always someone who brought him back. He met different kinds of people who helped him to reach his true self. For instance Kromer, his shadow showed him that the world is not always bright, Demian, his alter-ego gave him a new perception to look at things and showed him to accept the opposite aspect of human beings, Pistorius explained to him that we comprise of everything, all the gods and devils that ever existed and that comprise the world. Beatrice showed him the idealized, bright world, and Frau Eva gave him spiritual love. All these characters played a significant role in the journey of Sinclair in finding out 'who' he is and accepting both his qualities regardless of being moral or immoral. We can perceive this in all individuals. Moral courage is required to face the painful experience of the encounter with an archetype. The central theme of Demian is a quest for self-realization. Sinclair's inner journey is the process of individuation. In this process, the

ego, the personal consciousness, and the collective unconscious merge into the self. His journey towards himself is full of obstacles represented through symbolic figures that Sinclair conquered. The hurdles of symbolic figures become the milestones in his life and show his progress on his way. The symbolic figures, images, concepts are the products of Sinclair's unconsciousness. He discovers each of them as an integral part of his 'Self'. Accordingly, he integrates projections of the unconscious to progress in his quest for self-realization. In this sense, Kromer, Beatrice, Mother Eve, and Demian are not separate characters but the contents of Sinclair's unconsciousness which are produced in the form of symbols.

This ten year old boy Sinclair believes that there is more to this world than the things that we see or the things that are taught in school. This implies that today's youth are unable to recognize themselves with their shadows and wears a fake persona which only leads them to depression. In the case of Sinclair, he wanted to be free from his parents and wanted the youth to dream freely without any criticism from society. In the novel, we see the reference to 'apple theft' and 'Apple' has always been referred to as the original sin of mankind and also represents temptation. Sinclair lies to his parents about the crime. He tries to hide the crime that he has seen because he wanted to be free from the clutches of his mother. Sinclair in order to grow up needs to break free from his old self and Demian was a turning point in his life. He hated him but he also loved him. Demian was the one who taught him that the world is not divided into good and bad but that every human being has both qualities. We must not separate ourselves based on good and evil but just like God, Abraxas we must accept both sides of human nature. Sinclair, while staying at his parents' house, which was bright, was suffering but when he accepted his dark world he was able to confide with himself. Even though it has shattered his childhood innocence but he was able to find his true self. *Demian* teaches us that the young generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is suffering unable to fully accept themselves because of societal norms. They

are expected to be ideal human being while living the dreams of their parents. Because of this, the youth are going astray of their path just like Sinclair who almost lost himself. They are trying to imply that you will be able to love yourself when you will accept both your perfection and imperfection, both your skill and flaws. Human nature by itself involves both good and evil characteristics. The idea that human nature is completely pure is a utopian idealism and through the exposure to evil, the characters come to understand that perfect human nature does not exist in this universe.

Emil Sinclair undergoes a variety of adventures and associations in the course of the plot. During this time, Emil learns a great deal about life in general and particularly about his true self. The novel talks about the dark side of human beings especially the youth that has to follow societal norms by destroying their dreams. The youth may go astray while learning about oneself but if there is someone just like Sinclair had in his life everyone would be able to accept the true form of themselves. In essence, the learning experiences result from Emil's meeting with and getting to know a series of characters, each of whom "teaches" him something significant. Emil receives assistance in his search mainly from Demian, who many scholars believe to be a sort of alter ego of Sinclair, and the very name suggests a "daimon".

The theme of the isolated individual seeking identity through the exertion of the will has its origin in the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The novel reflects Hesse's view that the unique individual represents the highest value. The purpose of the individual in life is self-discovery and development; these goals are achieved through suffering, through unconscious illumination, through interaction with others, and an understanding of universal symbols.



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