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Demian



Synopsis

A brilliant psychological portrait of a troubled young man's quest for self-awareness, this coming-of-age novel achieved instant critical and popular acclaim upon its 1919 publication. A landmark in the history of 20th-century literature, it reflects the author's preoccupation with the duality of human nature and the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment.

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Customer Reviews

In *Demian* Hesse relates the spiritual struggle of one Emil Sinclair, the growth of his psyche (utilizing symbolism influenced by Hesse's embrace of the psycho-analytic methods of Carl Jung, the mystical writings of Novalis and--inevitably, as in many of Hesse's other tales--the philosophy of Nietzsche) from childhood through adolescence to young adulthood, each stage of his growth determined by encounters with the prodigious Max Demian. While Max Demian is introduced into the narrative as a school-mate of young Sinclair, the title character is more an alter-ego, the very Self toward whom Sinclair ultimately strives, than a "flesh and blood character"--but, then again, *Demian* itself is more a symbolic dream tale than a concrete "coming of age" story (when I originally read the book as a sixteen-year-old high school student, I took much of the action much too literally, oftentimes to hilarious effect--as when I imitated the narrator and sketched a portrait, burned it and swallowed the ashes, an act I see now in my middle age quite other than the sort of contemplation Hesse intended to inspire). The novel presents one of the finest depictions to be found in all of literature of a certain sort of conflict: the struggle between the individual, whose spiritual growth posits him as an Outsider to bourgeois society (*Demian* describes these as having "the mark of Cain"), and the herd, the common run of humanity who seek not growth but unreflective

contentment.

This story considers the evolving, somewhat troubled psyche of a German youth, Sinclair, as he matures during the decade prior to WWI. The analysis of Sinclair's turmoil purportedly reflects the European or German moral malaise at the time. As a prepubescent boy, Sinclair recognizes the realm of good and light, symbolized by his God fearing parents and innocent younger sisters, as separate from the realm of evil and dark, symbolized by Franz Kromer, an older, opportunist who extorts Sinclair into fibbing and petty thievery. Another older boy, Demian, rescues Sinclair from Kromer's clutches, and then sows a new perception of the light and dark realms with an inverted interpretation of the parable of Cain and Abel. Demian perceives the mark on Cain's forehead not as a curse, but as a badge of courage, character and power. Tainted by his experience with Kromer, Sinclair cannot entirely reject Demian's heroic characterization of Cain, and Demian nurtures this upset of clarity, muddling Sinclair's once clear distinction between the realms of good and evil. Demian then plants the alternative perception that the individual must delve into the self to discover his peculiar fate and destiny, a unique purpose apart from the mundane consensus, the mores of the hoard. Hesse then projects Sinclair's turmoil into a characterization of, or perhaps a reflection of, the mass psyche of prewar Europe. I first read "Demian" forty years ago, shortly after years of total immersion in university studies. Then younger and perhaps arrogant with intelligence, I felt armed and charged for the uncertain challenges ahead. For some reason I saved "Demian," packed it away along with my complete set of Ayn Rand's novels, trig tables and "100 Master Games of Modern Chess.

Hermann Hesse is without a doubt one of the most intriguing writers I have ever read. However, when reading reviews and hearing other people's opinions, I usually feel that people misunderstood what he is like and what his character represents. This is particularly the case with Demian. This book is often described as a great insight into what it is like going from child to teenager and then entering the adult world. However, I believe that Sinclair, the main character, is not entering the normal world on any level. In fact he is leaving it. The first time he meets Demian, both know there is something different about him. As their friendship/relationship grows, it becomes more and more clear that they should not be part of the normal world, where people choose to be part of a group, to share a religion, to accept the truth as it is told to them. Demian shows Sinclair a new world, where people of a higher intelligence, and by that I am referring to more than simply an academic intelligence, will find each other. Those who are different, who choose to be individuals instead of be

part of the the main stream mass meet, are Hesse's version of the ubermensch. Where Nietzsche claims that all men can let go of the standards and morals of our society, their religion, their need to be part of a group, can focus on themselves and become better, become the ubermensch, someone who is above all others, someone who is not alone in his existence, but who is alone in his own life, Hesse contradicts this with an ubermensch who is born different, someone who will find others like him, someone who will has a clear vision of what people are like and who he is, an individual, an ubermensch.

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