

Fate and "the others": Woman as vehicle for the journey to the self in Hermann Hesse's *Peter Camenzind*, *Demian* and *Der Steppenwolf*

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RESUMEN

Al indagar en el recorrido vital de Hermann Hesse, especialmente en lo que se refiere a las relaciones humanas, hallaremos rápidamente su bagaje religioso que influirá notablemente en la marcada dicotomía hombre/mujer, y en derivaciones literarias como las de bien/mal, animal/razional, emergiendo interesantes conceptos como el hermafroditismo, estrechamente relacionados a su vez con la esquizofrenia y la homosexualidad. El tratamiento de la mujer en las tres obras de Hesse es muy diverso; no obstante, existen en todas ellas puntos en común que muestran claramente la evolución en el papel de ésta. Personajes femeninos como Frau Eva, Hermine y Elizabeth poseen algo masculino que las transforma en seres completos: figuras andróginas, en las que el héroe contempla el reflejo de sus propias experiencias aún sin vivir. Pero además Hesse retrata a las mujeres como madres-amantes fatales que guían al personaje masculino principal -Sinclair, Peter o Haller- hacia la muerte como medio de dejar atrás los prejuicios de su educación y romper sus ataduras familiares para encontrarse a sí mismo. Todo ello se enmarca en las pulsiones filosóficas de amor y muerte, motivos que conducen al ser humano hacia su destino.

1. INTRODUCTION

On attempting to explain Hermann Hesse's role of the woman as a vehicle for the search of the self, we first need to establish the frame in which the author was raised. Hesse's background was a very religious one. His grandfather, Dr. Hermann Gundert, was the one who introduced his mother Marie Gundert to missionary life. They were Lutherans and had a very obstinate vision of the world that at times was difficult for the young Hermann Hesse to assimilate. It sounds as if this is a decisive point in his life, which established a bipolarity between his parents in his mind. His father was a stubborn man who devoted most of his time to his books

and his work, whereas Marie Gundert was not only a very strong woman, but also a sweet mother for the young Hermann. Her face had a somewhat masculine appearance, but she had all the tenderness of a mother. The author felt much closer to his mother's world than to his father's. Here begins the main dichotomy between man and woman, which might have given rise to others in Hesse's world, such as good and evil, animal and rational, religiously orthodox or heterodox, and the half-male/half-female characters.

Once we know something about Hesse's life, especially concerning his family background, we can begin to analyse the treatment of the woman in three of his most representative novels. In this paper, I will deal with the most representative female characters for each period of Hesse's life as presented in these three novels.

2. FROM ROMANTIC HEROIN TO IDEALIZED MOTHER

Hesse published *Peter Camenzind* soon after his mother's death in 1902. In this novel we have three different main female characters: Rösli, Erminia and Elizabeth.

In the first case, Peter does not have contact with Rösli. He is very young and he loves her as something pure, untouchable and ideal. This is his first love, and so it is clearly romantic. Thus, he acts according to that, and he does not even try to express his feelings when he gives her the alpine roses that he had looked so hard for in the mountains. Rösli Girtaner is a phantom of his youth, the *object of adoration* which is beyond his reach. And this is exactly what makes her so precious, and at the same time, so distant. It is a spiritual, platonic love, and its beauty lies in the fact that it is a fantasy. The woman he loves does not even know that he exists. She is a goddess, a princess in her palace, and he will never obtain her. The impossibility of this love is what makes him think about it as a highly ideal state, a dream which is perhaps more important for him at this point than love itself:

Diese meine erste Liebe fand nie einen Abschluß, sondern verklang fragend und erlöst in meine Jugendjahre und lief neben meinen späteren Verliebtheiten wie eine stille ältere Schwerter mit. Immer

noch kann ich mir nichts Nobleres, Reineres und Schöneres vorstellen als jene junge, wohlgeborene und stillblickende Patrizierin. (Camenzind 246)

Erminia, a sensuous Italian woman, is the painter, although she is not an excellent artist. She shows a feminine attitude towards life, but she also has a masculine strength and other traits that make her extremely attractive, yet not necessarily at first sight.

When he meets Erminia, Peter gives his first opinion about the men and women he finds in her house. He is not looking for external beauty in a woman, but for internal features that he can admire. He is now attracted by the mature traits of the woman. He is no longer the mountain boy, but a young man introduced to the artistic world. His sensibility has shifted. We can observe a possible relation between this change and his mother's recent death, since he is now attracted to a mother-like figure, even though he also admires the strength and courage of Erminia, living by herself and earning her own money:

Zu Hause dachte ich oft über Herminia nach. Es berührte oder verminderte meine Leidenschaft gar nicht, daß ich ihre Kunst nicht verehren konnte. Sie selbst war so schön, gütig, klar und sicher; was gingen mich ihre Bilder an? Ich fand vielmehr in ihrer fleißigen Arbeit etwas Heroisches. Die Frau im Kampf ums Leben, eine stille, dulddende und tapfere Heldin. (Camenzind 71)

He finally decides that he has to tell her about his love for her. He could have endured it if they had not seen each other as often, but since this was not the case, he feels he must talk to her. But as he goes to communicate his feelings to her, she starts telling him about her own love story, and he suffers for the first time the bitterness of *unrequited love*:

und mitten in dem Wirbel von Jammer und Scham, der in mir kochte, fühlte ich, wie mir der Schweiß in großen Tropfen übers Gesicht lief, und froz zugleich. Wenn ich vollends daran dachte, wie nahe ich daran gewesen war, den knienden Bittsteller und mütterlichfreundlich abgewiesenen Liebhaber zu spielen, lief mir ein Schaudern durchs Mark... Ich ruderte wie besessen heimwärts. (Camenzind 276)

Elizabeth appears in a slightly different light to Peter. She is not unreachable and fancied, though she is not loved by Peter as Erminia or Rösia. His attraction for Elizabeth begins to be a reflection of her attraction to him. He then notices that he trusts Elizabeth because she understands him and listens to him talking about himself:

“Es fiel mir plötzlich ein, daß ich, fast wider Willen, diesem fremden jungen Mädchen intime Erinnerungen und eine ganzes Stück meines inneren Lebens preisgegeben hatte. Wie kam ich dazu?”(Camenzind 307). His love for Elizabeth makes him love nature, think about many things in an optimistic way, and somehow it prepares the way for the journey to himself. He now thinks that woman is a superior being and so he is afraid to come to her, because she might reject him. At the end, when he finally attempts to get closer, it is too late. He is frightened of being completely known to someone, because he will then be vulnerable to any attack or danger. For this reason, he attributes his lack of success with women to his selfishness: “Zwei selbstsüchtige und mächtige Neigungen stritten in mir wider die echte Liebe. Ich war Trinker, und ich war menschenscheu”(Camenzind 311). In this respect, Esselborn-Krumbiegel (1994) believes that even though women in Hesse’s works epitomize the motherly nurturing along with erotic feelings, they can never be deemed as real lover partners; instead, physical love is sublimated like in Sinclair’s love for Beatrice in our next work, *Demian*.

3. DANTE’S ADORATION OR SELF FATE

In 1919, after his father’s death and a subsequent period of psychoanalysis with Dr. J.B. Lang in Luzzern, he publishes *Demian*, whose psychological technique constitutes, for some authors, a crucial development of the XXth century narrative. The title of the story responds to the fact that *Demian* acts as Sinclair’s *alter ego* as we can infer from Hesse’s words in a letter to Frau Sarasin dated February 15, 1954: “*Demian* is der Tat nicht eigentlich ein Mensch, sondern ein Prinzip, die Inkarnation einer Wahrheit oder, wenn Sie wollen, einer Lehre”.

The treatment of Beatrice follows basically the same pattern of that of Rösia in Peter Camenzind, though here Sinclair is more aware of loving Beatrice as a mere object of adoration. His only aim is to direct his illusions

and love toward something or somebody who might attract his attention. Once again, at first sight, he is mainly struck by the appearance of Beatrice, her masculine traits and maturity:

Sie war groß und schlank... und hatte ein kluges Knabengesicht. Sie gefiel mir sofort, sie gehörte dem Typ an, den ich liebte, und sie begann meine Phantasien zu beschäftigen. Sie war wohl kaum viel älter als ich, aber viel fertiger, elegant und wohl umrissen, schon fast ganz Dame, aber mit einem Anflug von Übermut und Jungenhaftigkeit im Gesicht, den ich überaus gern hatte. (Demian 104).

Like Rösi's, her face shows something ethereal as well as spiritual: the Beatrice of Dante in many respects. Due to the many doubts about religion that Sinclair was beginning to have, he experimented a crisis. He no longer had an eternal object of veneration, and his Beatrice could have served this purpose at least temporarily. She was the force that kept him living and improving his habits, which helped him on his way toward spirituality and purity. When he tries to paint her portrait, he realizes that the face is neither hers nor Demian's, but his *innermost demon*. So, his cult of Beatrice has somehow pushed him closer to himself:

Es schien mir eine Art von Götterbild oder heiliger Maske zu sein, halb männlich, halb weiblich, ohne Alter, ebenso willenstark wie träumerisch, ebenso starr wie heimlich lebendig. Dies Gesicht hatte mir etwas zu sagen, es gehörte zu mir, es stellte Forderungen an mich. Und es hatte Ähnlichkeit mit irgend jemand, ich wußte nicht mit wem. (Demian 109)

What Sinclair attempts is to return to himself and discover who he really is, as well as to identify with nature and with God. In his relationship with Demian, Sinclair learns how to look at others and to view things from an alternative point of view, other than from the perspective main stream, as well as to differentiate between thinking and doing. His masters, who are always men, help him find the way to himself, but they all lack the feminine part of the teaching. For this reason, he often tends to look for a woman who can play the *High Priestess* in the initiation journey to his inner self. Hesse's feminine characters always have something masculine in them, like his mother. He misses his mother much more than his father. A sort of *Oedipal syndrome* arises from his handling of all feminine characters.

Through the figure of Frau Eva, we may better comprehend the views of Hesse about women at this stage of adulthood.

The picture of the sparrow hawk and the face eventually lead him to the High Priestess, Frau Eva. He realizes this when he sees the portrait of Demian's mother for the first time. When he meets her, it is as if his dream of becoming one with himself had come true: the return to the womb, the self, his roots and his fate. He recalls her as ageless, timeless and full of inner strength, with firm and warm hands. It is the happy conclusion of his journey to himself. She is his consciousness, his spirit, his fate. When he kisses her hands, he feels the embrace of his destiny that leads to himself. But Frau Eva is somewhat different from the others. She is very difficult to obtain because she epitomizes his struggle to get to know himself, and he must die in order to be reborn in her:

‘Liebe muß nicht bitten’, sagte sie, ‘auch nicht fordern. Liebe muß die Kraft haben, in sich selbst zur Gewißheit zu kommen. Dann wird sie nicht mehr gezogen, sondern zieht. Sinclair, Ihre Liebe wird von mir gezogen. Wenn sie mich einmal zieht, so komme ich. Ich will keine Geschenke geben, ich will gewonnen werden.’ (Demian 193)

Later on, his love for Frau Eva begins to turn more and more real. He has to learn to love himself, and to be capable of giving himself in order to experience an authentic love. Now Eva means everything to him. She is mother, slut, beloved, whore, respectable woman, fate, death, womb and rebirth, because she represents the ultimate goal for the group of people who bear the stigma of Cain. The individual development functions as a paradigm of man's value; thus Sinclair considers Frau Eva as the mother of humankind as well as the meaning of his innermost self. He must accept his fate even if it is bad or evil, so that he can at last find himself.¹

The God Abraxas, whose characteristics are conjured up by Max Demian, is the total god, the god of good and evil, masculine and feminine, the god of fate and the universe. Through the symbol of the bird, Frau Eva tells him about the difficulty of setting himself free. He realizes afterwards that he has not struggled enough to reach Eva, his own fate, but he has just desired her body in his erotic dreams:

Mein Gott, wie bald, dann sah ich sie nicht mehr, hörte nicht mehr ihren festen, guten Schritt durchs Haus, fand nicht mehr ihre Blumen auf meinen Tisch! Und was hatte ich erreicht? Ich hatte geträumt und mich in Behagen gewiegt, statt sie zu gewinnen, statt um sie kämpfen und sie für immer an mich zu reißen! Alles, was sie mir je über die echte Liebe gesagt hatte, fiel mir ein, hundert feine, mahnende Worte, hundert leise Lockungen, Versprechungen vielleicht -was hatte ich daraus gemacht? Nichts! Nichts! (Demian 204)

He has been on the right path, but he has not been capable of pulling himself together and grasping his destiny completely. We notice this when at last she kisses him on the mouth: the kiss of his destiny, a symbol that conveys that he is on the way to his goal, yet far from having achieved it.² At last, Hesse gives us a poetical vision of death as self-negation for the sake of sacrifice: "Bald nahm auch ich Abschied von ihr, sie küßte mich auf den Mund und hielt mich einen Augenblick an ihrer Brust, und ihre großen Augen brannten nah und fest in meine"(Demian 209).

4. ANDROGYNIA OR THE STRUGGLE TOWARDS REALITY

In 1927 he finishes *Der Steppenwolf*. Hesse is now in his fifties, and his vision of women has somewhat changed. At this stage of his older adulthood, he regards woman as much better adapted to living in this world than man. He keeps on searching for a mother and a lover in Hermine: "Weiß Gott, woher das Mädchen diese Stimme hatte, diese etwas tiefe, gute Stimme, eine mütterliche Stimme"(Steppenwolf 281).

Haller, the Steppenwolf, struggles between what he thinks are two separate worlds: the good and the evil. We can see the connection between Demian and Haller in this fact. He still needs somebody to show him the way to himself, to understand his multifaceted character and accept it. He does not want to go home when he finds the girl, because he is afraid of himself and needs somebody to help him find the way to his inner self: "Nein, du, nach Hause kann ich nicht gehen"(Steppenwolf 288).

Hermine teaches him that men are all basically the same, in that they are worried about the same things, though it may be they approach the problems from different points of view. Furthermore, we realize the

moral superiority of her over him, when she orders him to go to bed, like a mother would do with her little child. Even though he is a professor, he must learn banal things in order to get to know himself, not only through books, but also through trivial life experiences.

One has to reflect himself in others. Also one needs to trust people and give himself to them, if one wants to get a response from them: “so, wie es dir mit mir geht, daß mein Gesicht die Antwort gibt, daß etwas in mir dir entgegenkommt und dir Vertrauen macht -ebenso geht es mir auch mit dir”(Steppenwolf 298). Again we find the idea of unrequited love, as well as references to fate and death, when Hermine talks to him.³ She is attempting to break his ideal concept of spiritual love and make him aware of reality: the imperfection and complexity of human relationships. Later on she plays the role of fate and mother. She symbolizes the closed rational world in which he is living. Of course, he has to kill her, as far as he has to kill his static vision of the world, his aimless notion of life, and his utopian vision of woman, in order to find the way to reality and to himself. Hans Dieter Zimmermann (1983) affirms in this regard that Hermine’s murder epitomizes the narcissistic love for the self, which parallels the fear of “the others” -especially of women-, and eventually provokes an incapability to give love to others in relation to the sinful component of the traditionally Christian representation.

Another point in common that Hermine has with Max Demian is the fact that she knows everything about the main character, but she always keeps secrets about her own life. It is almost the same sentence that we find in Demian, when Max tells Sinclair that it was good to know that one of them knew everything. According to Zimmermann (1983), the question of the *Doppelgänger* that we also observe in Demian refers in Hesse’s works to diverse fluctuations happening inside the Freudian concept of the “Ego”, which is in turn influenced by both the “Id” and the “Superego”. Hermine is like the feminine part of himself, his other life that he tries to disguise, but which he needs in order to be a complete person: “Hermine stand mir allzu nah, sie war mein Kamerad, meine Schwester, war meinesgleichen, sie glich mir selbst und glich meinem Jugendfreund Hermann, dem Schwärmer, dem Dichter, dem glühenden Genossen meiner geistigen Übungen und Ausschweifungen” (Steppenwolf 315). The schizophrenia represented by the opposites such as mannish/womanish and soul/nature -which

the main character of the Steppenwolf talks about- is here symbolic and responds to a yearning for the integration process in relation to "the others".

Loneliness appears to be one of her points in common with him. They need each other in order to reassert themselves. When he asks why they know and understand each other so well, Hermine answers "Weil ich bin wie du. Weil ich gerade so allein bin wie du und das Leben und die Menschen und mich selber gerade so wenig lieben und ernst nehmen kann wie du"(Steppenwolf 316). Hermine plays the role of his master. She will teach him how to play the game of life:

Wofür ich aber zu sorgen habe, das ist, daß du die kleinen, leichten Künste und Spiele im Leben etwas besser erlernst, auf diesem Gebiet bin ich deine Lehrerin und werde dir eine bessere Lehrerin sein, als deine ideale Geliebte es war, darauf verlasse dich! (Steppenwolf 318).

He has to learn to laugh at himself and at everything. He cannot take life so seriously, yet he needs to feel like a man and to experience new things to keep himself moving on.

Maria acts as the instrument of Hermine that the latter displays in order to teach Haller to feel physical sensations. Her function, though not very relevant in our study, belongs to the sexual issue of the women in Hesse's works. In this respect, Peter Huber (1994) considers that a reunion of both characters, Hermine and Maria in the magic theatre, would function as a cathartic healing for the spiritual strains of the conscience. On the other hand, Erika is a figure of the past, whom he thinks of from time to time, but without a great significance for him or for the story.

Hermine tells him once that the way to himself is very hazardous, and that he must suffer if he really wants to achieve his goal: "Aber je mehr das Leben dich geweckt und zu dir selber gebracht hat, desto größer ist deine Not geworden, desto tiefer bist du in Leiden, Bangigkeit und Verzweiflung geraten"(Steppenwolf 341-2). He has to open his eyes to the world, even if it is not as nice as it ought to be. The way they have chosen is the difficult one, as Frau Eva said in Demian. They must strive for their own lives without any external help: "Und wir haben niemand, der uns

führt, unser einziger Führer ist das Heimweh”(Steppenwolf 346). The *magic theatre* is the final test for him that Hermine sets in order to check whether he is at last prepared to live in this world. He must learn to play other people’s games if he wants to survive. In the magic theatre, he realizes that Hermine is his *alter ego*, because she knows everything about his present and his past:

Ohne sie nur berührt zu haben, unterlag ich ihrem Zauber, und dieser Zauber selbst blieb in ihrer Rolle, war ein hermaphroditischer. Denn sie unterhielt sich mit mir über Hermann und über die Kindheit, über jene Jahre vor der Geschlechtsreife, in denen das jugendliche Liebesvermögen nicht nur beide Geschlechter, sondern alles mit dem Liebeszauber und der märchenhaften Verwandlungsfähigkeit begabt, die nur Auserwählten und Dichtern auch noch späteren Lebensaltern zuzeiten wiederkehrt. (Steppenwolf 360)

We have again the idea of the hermaphrodite as a hint to homosexuality presented through Hermine. As Huber (1994) writes, according to Jungian theory, Hermine stands for Haller’s soul, the womanly representation in Haller’s unconscious.

Like Frau Eva, though to a greater extent, she gives him at last the *kiss of fate*. He now belongs to her, since she has performed her manifold role of master, fate, death and mother. Finally, she seems to reach her ultimate goal in making him kill her, a symbolic fact that leads to change and new life. Ludwig Völker (1970) explains that when Hermine dies, Haller recovers Hermine’s part of himself and thus he becomes complete, for Hermine represents the integration of both sides of Haller’s conscience. He has acted like a human, letting his worst trait out, and accepting it. He now understands the beauty of death: “Schauernd starrte ich auf die steingewordene Stirn, auf die starre Locke, auf den bleichkühlen Schimmer der Ohrmuschel. Die Kälte, die von ihnen ausströmte, war tödlich und war dennoch schön: sie klang, sie schwang wunderbar, sie war Musik!”(Steppenwolf 407). Huber (1994) believes that since Hermine stands for Haller’s soul, her murder ought to be considered from the perspective of the co-existence of Man and Wolf, especially if there is any hope for the main character to finally succeed in the novel.

5. CONCLUSION

Altogether, the rôle of women changes considerably in Hesse's novels, though there is a common thread running through all of them. In *Peter Camenzind* the female characters are not as well-depicted as the male. The treatment of women from a rather young perspective shows them as strange creatures. Peter feels inferior to them as soon as he sees the maternal side in them. Through his main character, Hesse relates them to his own mother, and loves the strength in them. He approaches them with a strange feeling of idyllic love and magic. In *Demian* and *Der Steppenwolf* he also deals with women as mother-like creatures, but with a more sophisticated perspective than in *Peter Camenzind*. Both works are written in a period when Hesse underwent psychoanalytic treatment, as we may infer from the symbols related to this.

The woman as a mother symbolizes the psychoanalytic concept of *womb-tomb*. For this reason, a woman is always the High Priestess in his learning experiences throughout life. According to Christian tradition, God is considered as a single-faced masculine image. But Hesse feels that God must be a total, superior being: masculine and feminine, good and evil. He is attracted to women because of his extreme Oedipal syndrome, which is perhaps the cause or the effect of his latent homosexuality. But his female characters always have something masculine in order to be complete beings; that is, they are more like androgynous figures, in which the heroes see the reflection of their own possibilities, not yet experienced. Like his mother, they must be at the same time tender and strong of character. Moreover, women are dealt with as lovers, who pull him towards death as a fate that he should undergo to find his innermost *dæmon*, and free himself from his education and his past ties. Finally, death and love are also considered by Hesse as the philosophical notions of *Eros* and *Thanatos*: the main leitmotifs of human beings. Perhaps, the best conclusion can be summarized in Hesse's own words, concerning his ideal of human development in relation to the others:

Denn Aufgabe, Sehnsucht und Pflicht der Jugend ist das Werden, Aufgabe des reifen Menschen ist das Sichweggeben oder, wie die deutschen Mystiker es einst nannten, das "Entwerden". Man muß erst ein voller Mensch, eine wirkliche Persönlichkeit geworden sein und die Leiden dieser Individuation erlitten haben, ehe man das Opfer dieser Persönlichkeit bringen kann.⁴

NOTES

- ¹ In this sense, Hesse stated that, “Die Mythen der Bibel, wie alle Mythen der Menschheit sind für uns wertlos, solange wir sie nicht persönlich und für unsere Zeit zu Deuten wagen. Dann aber können sie uns sehr wichtig werden”. Cited by Unseld (1986: 58).
- ² Peter de Mendelssohn (1972: 283), quotes Hesse in this respect: “Was wir ändern können und sollen, das sind wir selber: unsere Ungeduld, unseren Egoismus (auch den geistigen), unser Beleidigtsein, unseren Mangel an Liebe und Nachsicht. Jede Änderung der Welt, auch wenn sie von besten Absichten ausgeht, halte ich für nutzlos”.
- ³ Helm Stierling (1976: 313) defines the fear of dying in the following terms: “Daher ergeben sich zwei wesentliche Spielarten der menschlichen Todesfurcht: Die Furcht vor Verlassenheit und Einsamkeit einerseits und die Furcht vor der Desintegration als Individuum andererseits”.
- ⁴ Letter of Hesse to M. K., January 1933. Cited in Volker Michels (ed) (1972): 149f.

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