

From Self-Destruction to Self-Integration: The Protagonist's Psychological Transformation in Der Steppenwolf

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Abstract: *Der Steppenwolf* was written by German writer Hesse and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946. Lens of the book follows the mental transition of the protagonist Harry Haller, therefore, figuring out how he moves from self-destruction to self-integration becomes the key to understand the book. This article is going to discuss the causes of Haller's mental transition from the perspective of Freud's theory of personality. Through the analysis of ego, id and superego, this article argues that when Haller's superego judges the id and the ego is absent at the same time, the pain of being suppressed will point to a kind of self-destruction; When the id is gradually satisfied, those conflicts are temporarily put aside, and the pursuit of instinct goes beyond the persistence of death; When his ego returns and begins to reconcile the conflict among psychological personalities, his inner order is reconstructed and self-healing is completed.

1. Introduction

Der Steppenwolf is a novel written by the German thinker and author Hermann Hesse, first published in 1927. It was awarded the first Nobel Prize in Literature after World War II in 1946. Upon its release, the novel quickly gained widespread acclaim among readers worldwide, and the term “Der Steppenwolf” was even employed as a symbolic reference by youths grappling with disorientation, anxiety, and self-conflict to articulate their identity ^[1]. One reason *Der Steppenwolf* resonates so deeply with readers is its vivid portrayal of the agonizing struggles within an individual's soul, which aligns with the existential crisis widespread among youth in postwar society. This theme of emotional suffering was deeply connected to Hesse's own life experiences. When Hesse completed the first draft of *Der Steppenwolf*, he suffered a mental breakdown due to his failed marriage and personal hardships, leading him to seek psychoanalytic treatment from Carl Jung, a disciple of Freud. After being introduced to psychoanalysis, Hesse began studying psychological theories, particularly the works of Freud and Jung. He even published two book reviews in *Vivosvoco* on Freud's new editions, praising him as the pioneer of unconscious psychology and analytic techniques ^[2]. This demonstrates that psychoanalysis not only improved Hesse's own mental state but also influenced his application of its theories to his literary works. Therefore, it is plausible to interpret *Der Steppenwolf* through psychoanalytic theory. In this study, Freud's theory of psychic personality will serve as the primary analytical framework for

investigating both the underlying causes and developmental process of Harry Haller's (protagonist of the novel) transition from self-destructive to self-integration in the work *Der Steppenwolf*.

2. Struggle and Conflict: The Superego's Judgment

Freud divided the psychic personality into three levels: the id, the ego, and the superego. The superego, operating at the unconscious level, represents the internalized moral compass or conscience. Originating from external authority, particularly parental influence, it internalizes punishments and threats, subsequently exercising surveillance over the ego. Positioned at the highest level of the personality structure, the superego suppresses the id and operates according to the principle of morality, constituting the social component of the psychic structure ^[3]. An essential theme in the first half of the novel revolves around Haller's internal struggle between his "human nature" and "wolf nature," which, from a psychoanalytic perspective, manifests as the conflict between the "superego" and the "id." Haller is a well-educated person with humor, elegance, and talent -- at least that's how he appears to others. He articulates his admiration for the landlord's aesthetic sensibilities through refined and decorous language, engages in animated and cordial discourse with the professor encountered fortuitously, and offers a warm and gracious response to the latter's invitation. "*Within himself Harry discovered the human - that is to say, a whole realm of thought, emotion, culture, and disciplined refinement.*" ^[5] This is Haller who is controlled by the superego. The internalized social morality and conscience compel the "Steppenwolf" to suppress his true nature and wear the mask of a "human being" to live his life. Unfortunately, besides making Haller exhibit a domesticated form of "human nature," the judgment of the superego also brings about irreconcilable pain and despair. He has a tendency to disrupt the life of the petty bourgeoisie, yet he remains bound within the petty bourgeois society and is compelled to integrate into it, affirm it, and praise it. He longs to escape into a world of freedom and wild abandon, but is tormented by guilt and self-reproach after ruining the professor's dinner party by speaking the truth. Whenever the "wolfish" side emerges, the "human" side stands by to scrutinize and condemn, preventing him from fully immersing himself in the simple, primal joys of untamed instinct. Haller's superego, like a merciless judge, tyrannizes his pitiful id from above, while his id instinctively rebels against this unbearable life of domestication, hypocrisy, and polished civility. Due to the relentless struggle between his human nature and wolf nature, between superego and id, he often experiences a bewildering mix of pain and pleasure, terror and ecstasy. The two Hallers within his being engage in fierce battles at times, while getting along harmoniously at others; one issues commands, exerts violence, and mercilessly chokes the other, while the latter is pushed into a corner, howling in agony, pitifully enduring the storm of relentless assault.

This endless struggle, conflict, and torment give rise to self-criticism and self-destruction, ultimately inducing him to fulfill his death drive ^[3] -- suicide. Haller repeatedly contemplates his razor, obsessively envisioning the moment it slices through his throat. He even drafts a plan to end his life at fifty and openly refers to himself as "the suicide." So long as the superego persists in its moral condemnation, the internal war rages on, and the aggression of the death drive remains fixated on the self -- until it finally consumes him. This is the root of Haller's unbearable anguish and despair.

3. Savagery and Desire: The Id's Fulfillment

In contrast to the superego, the id is primitive, unconscious, and resides at the lowest stratum of the psychic apparatus. It is neither organized nor governed by a unified will, driven solely by impulsive urges seeking immediate gratification. The id recognizes no values, no distinction between good and evil, no morality -- its sole content consists of instinctual impulses demanding

discharge ^[3]. Undoubtedly, Harry Haller's wolf nature as the "Steppenwolf" embodies the unconscious id. The "Steppenwolf" instinctively scorns the pretentiousness of the bourgeoisie and derides the mediocrity of bourgeois existence. *"The wolf in him regarded all human behavior as ridiculous, even horrifying - foolish and vain in the extreme."* ^[5] The Steppenwolf yearns for a primal, untamed, and unrefined pleasure, which fuels his near-fanatical obsession with entering the Magic Theater. He proudly declares himself a madman, craving anarchic nighttime pleasures within its confines. During his pursuit of the Magic Theater, he encounters Hermine, a mysterious bar dancer. Under her guidance, he masters the steps of foxtrot, the art of flirtation, the rhythms of American jazz, and ultimately the forbidden pleasures of mind-expanding substances. As their relationship deepens, his long-suppressed id grows stronger, while the once-dominant voice of his inner judge weakens. His primal instincts and desires attain unprecedented fulfillment. He enters into a passionate affair with Maria, Hermine's friend, attracted by her curvy body, graceful flesh, and the sheer sensory ecstasy of their lovemaking. Though she lacks intellect and cultural refinement, spiritual connection now seems trivial at that moment. The Steppenwolf ignores commandments, rebels against tradition, and chases after absolute freedom, shedding the constraints of social norms and moral values. He immerses himself entirely in an illusory world of sensory indulgence and carnal pleasure.

At this stage, Haller's inner struggles and self-criticism gradually subside as he begins to live more instinctively, indulging in worldly pleasures and suspending his inner conflicts through dance, alcohol, and erotic encounters. This carnal indulgence allows for the release of Haller's libido and the fulfillment of his sexual instincts. Freud posits that the sexual instinct constitutes the true life instinct, as it leads to reproduction, brings forth new life, and prolongs the human lifespan ^[3]. Thus, unlike the destructive death drive, the satisfaction of sexual instincts is constructive and life-affirming. Through his intimate relationships with Hermine and Maria, Haller achieves sexual union, removing all barriers to the realization of his primal desires. Simultaneously, sexual gratification discharges the accumulated libidinal energy stored within his id, dissolving the aggression previously directed inward. This transformation triggers a fundamental shift in Haller's psychological state -- from prohibition to pleasure, from judgment to fulfillment, from self-destruction to survival.

4. Integration and Unity: The Ego's Restoration

Since the superego adheres to societal moral rules while the id acts in accordance with the pleasure principle, an inherent and irreconcilable conflict exists between them. Though their influence may wax and wane, their fundamental opposition persists. To mediate this tension between id and superego, the ego's function becomes crucial. The ego represents reason and common sense, striving to pursue morality ^[3]. For the id, the ego represents the external world. It bridges the conflict between reality and the id, and replaces the id's pleasure principle with the reality principle. As for the superego, the ego is the bearer of the superego's judgment, and every move it makes is under the surveillance of the superego ^[4]. Thus, when the ego gains strength, it maintains balance within the psychic hierarchy, whereas when compelled to acknowledge its weakness, the psychological personality becomes destabilized. In Harry Haller's case, the ego is initially absent. Before encountering Hermine, he struggles bitterly between the id's impulses and the superego's condemnations, perceiving only two warring souls within himself -- one "human," the other "wolf." He fails to recognize any intermediate realm in his psyche, consequently stuffing all reason and cultivation into the human nature while putting all savagery and chaos into the wolf nature. With no third agent to mediate, only polarized antagonism persisted. Due to the absence of the ego, the criticism of the superego could only be borne by the id. As his desires were gradually

gratified, the feeble ego failed to provide information about the external world to restrain the amoral id, ultimately leading him onto the path of self-exile. However, as Haller entered the Magic Theater and delved deeper into its depths, his ego gradually awakened. Through the mirrors of the Magic Theater, he glimpsed countless fragmented reflections of himself -- youthful and handsome, bloodstained and violent, ragged and destitute... Each one was undeniably Haller. The binary opposition between “wolf nature” and “human nature” dissolved, revealing a multiplicity of selves beyond the mere struggle between savagery and morality. Through dialogues with the Eastern sage, the ego -- that arch-manipulator of existential play -- began to stir into wakefulness. He came to realize that human nature is not fixed - the ego can reorganize those fragmented pieces of the soul into new patterns, allowing life’s chessboard to be rearranged in countless ways. Each new game could begin afresh, making existence richer and more profound. Later, he entered the Taming Theater where his sense of self was reaffirmed and his inner strength grew stronger. In this theater, performances of ‘man taming wolf’ and ‘wolf taming man’ alternated in such absurd and horrifying fashion that Haller cried out: *“Oh friends, it shouldn’t be like this!”* ^[5] This cry came from his newly awakened ego, so clear and loud that every part of himself could hear it. As he tried to escape this ghastly scene, he finally recognized the prolonged violence and cruelty he had inflicted upon himself. No external oppression could compare to this self-imposed tyranny. The absurd taming performance had fully awakened his ego, allowing him to clearly see the brutality of his own superego and the pitiable state of his id.

At the end of the novel, Haller returned to the ordinary reality, signaling the final integration of his fragmented self. As he stepped out of the Magic Theater, he achieved full understanding of all the experiences that had unfolded both within its walls and within his own psyche. Emerging from this illusion, he gained stronger affirmation of his own existence and reestablished connection with external reality, using this newfound awareness to reconcile his internal conflicts. Most significantly, he develops the fortitude to directly confront his past sufferings -- even if doing so means returning to the psychological torment that still resides within him. The longstanding opposition between Haller’s wolf nature and human nature finally gives way to reconciliation under the guiding influence of ego. After enduring profound struggles, anguish, self-destruction, and exile, Haller ultimately achieves psychological integration and wholeness. Despite fleeting impulses toward self-destruction, Haller ultimately achieves self-redemption while maintaining hopeful anticipation for the future: *“One day I would play the game better. One day I would learn how to laugh. Pablo was waiting for me, and Mozart as well.”* ^[5]

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of Freud’s theory of personality, Haller’s psychological transformation follows a clear track: When his superego mercilessly judges the id while the ego remains absent, his repressed anguish manifests as self-destructive impulses. As the id’s instincts and desires gradually find fulfillment, the intense inner conflict is temporarily suspended, allowing the pursuit of pleasure to override the fixation on death. Finally, with the reintegration of his ego, mediating between these warring forces and reconstructing his internal order, he achieves genuine self-reconciliation and healing. *Steppenwolf* is undeniably a painful novel, laying bare the individual’s existential struggle, which may well reflect a collective crisis of its era. Yet it is also profoundly therapeutic. Haller’s psychological evolution offers readers both a blueprint for confronting personal turmoil and a beacon of hope: so long as one persists in self-exploration, a path to healing can ultimately be found. Beyond the oppressive gloom, a faint but enduring light of hope awaits.

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