Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth

Hermann Hesse · *1919 · N. H. Priday translation (1923)*

Emil Sinclair grows up in a respectable German family and lives, as he tells us, in two worlds: the bright, ordered one of his parents, and a dark one of servants, rough boys, and secrets. A lie brings him under a bully's control, and a stranger boy, Max Demian, frees him. Hesse's novel of self-discovery was first published under Sinclair's name.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does a young person find himself when the world has divided good from evil and he feels both in himself?

Demian offers Sinclair a different reading of old stories, such as Cain and the thief on the cross, and a different idea of the divine. Sinclair's search takes him through a wild time, a vision of a woman, a teacher in a church, and the circle of Demian's mother. The war breaks the circle, and Sinclair finds Demian in a hospital. The novel is a young man's book and speaks in a symbolic and sometimes obscure way about becoming oneself.

KEY CHARACTERS

Emil Sinclair
The narrator, a seeker in search of himself.

Max Demian
A strange older friend who guides Emil.

Franz Kromer
A bully who frightens Emil.

Pistorius
An organist and teacher.

Frau Eva
Demian's mother.

Beatrice
A dream-figure Emil paints.

Grades 11–12
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01
Two Worlds
CHAPTER 1

Emil Sinclair describes the bright and dark worlds of his childhood and the lie that puts him in the power of Franz Kromer.

- The two worlds meet at the household door.
- The lie is a small one with big consequences.
- Kromer's threats make a young boy afraid.

02
Cain and the Thief on the Cross
CHAPTERS 2–3

Max Demian rescues Emil, tells him a new reading of Cain, and speaks of the two thieves.

- Demian's way of speaking is calm and strange.
- The mark of Cain is turned into a sign of strength.
- The two thieves raise the question of choice.

03
Beatrice and the Bird
CHAPTERS 4–5

Emil lives in a time of dissipation until a vision of Beatrice and the dream-bird leads him to Demian's message about Abraxas.

- Emil's school years are a decline.
- Beatrice is an ideal he paints.
- The bird fighting its way out of the egg is the book's key image.

04
Pistorius and Mother Eve
CHAPTERS 6–7

Emil learns of Abraxas from the organist Pistorius, and meets Demian's mother, Frau Eva.

- Pistorius is a teacher who is stuck.
- Frau Eva is a figure of calm and warmth.
- Emil is drawn into a circle of seekers.

05
The Beginning of the End
CHAPTER 8

War breaks out. Emil is wounded and finds Demian in the hospital.

- The war scatters the circle.
- The last meeting is brief.
- The ending is a call to look inward.

Self-Discovery | Two Worlds | Good and Evil | The Bird and the Egg

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The book is told by Emil Sinclair, who says he writes in his own voice.
2. Notice how Demian rereads old stories. Ask what he wants Emil to see.
3. The bird breaking out of an egg is the central image. Ask what the egg is.
4. The book was published right after the First World War. Look for its effect on the ending.

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