

Steppenwolf Is Out There

Herman Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf* has haunted readers since it was first published in 1927. It haunted me since I first read it in 1972. Yet, like so many others, I used to be dissatisfied with the story's ending.

No, I didn't like the vague, indefinable conclusion in the Magic Theater. It's not that Harry Haller, the steppenwolf, didn't need the life of the jazz clubs or the mysterious bar girl Hermine. Harry needed that interlude to restore his spirit. The darkness of the human world had been too much for him and he was on the verge of defeat. Before he met Hermine he was at a dead end, with no way out except the suicide that he contemplated every night.

But the hypocrisy, superficiality, and moral darkness of the world that he had fought so hard against was still there. All through the gay tumultuous night of the fancy dress ball, the implacable modern world remained outside waiting for him. It was returning with the dawn - the party was over - it was Harry's destiny to face again what was out there and I'm sure he knew it. For if the steppenwolves among us won't do that, who will?

Learning to accept civilization would have been a cop out for the Steppenwolf. It's one thing for a solitary man like Harry to learn about social life, to appreciate it and sympathize with those who live it, even sometimes to take part in it and find love there, but that doesn't mean that a solitary person's destiny is in the social world.

Yes, the lone Steppenwolf belongs in those streets at night. That's who he is. That's why we love him.

And, in fact, he is still there.

For the ending of Hesse's book is not where it appears to be. It's not on the last page where Harry's consciousness is dissolving along with the image of Hermine. The ending is actually in the beginning, in the prologue. The narrator of the prologue, who has read the diary, confesses his affection for this 'wolf of the steppes' that had 'lost its way and strayed into towns and the life of the herd', then concludes 'No, I am sure he has not taken his own life. He is still alive and somewhere wearily goes up and down the stairs of strange houses, stares somewhere at clean-scoured parquet floors and carefully tended araucarias, sits for days in libraries and nights in taverns ...he has not killed himself, for a glimmer of a belief still tells us that he is to drink this frightful suffering in his heart to the dregs.' *

That is the real ending of the book.

And that's what we want isn't it? To know that the Steppenwolf is still out there, that someone is still brave enough to reject the falseness of this world and remain apart from it. We want the Steppenwolf, his spirit renewed from his encounter with Hermine and Pablo, to be out there in the streets at night, whatever the weather, his soul as resistant and romantic as ever.

For a long time these thoughts were on my mind. Finally, at fifty-one the same age as the Steppenwolf, I began a new story about him, one that would bring his up to date. I set out searching for another answer to his predicament. But I soon realized that I didn't know who the Steppenwolf was. That is, I didn't know why he was so different from other people. Why do shy solitary people exist in a world where they don't seem to belong? I didn't realize until then that Hesse hadn't answered that question at all.

During the seven years I spent writing the new story, I learned some things that I didn't know you could learn. They can be found in my novel *The Birdcatcher*. Though the character's name is Christopher Stone, and although he has to work for a living, unlike Harry Haller who had an independent income, I think you will recognize him immediately as another Steppenwolf.

As the little magic book said, there are many of them.

There is another Hermine too, just as there had to be.

If you read the book (you can now download it free in PDF form), I think you'll agree with me that the story of the Steppenwolf isn't over yet. He is still out there, whatever the season, walking alone in the night on that path of his, and I hope that *The Birdcatcher* will not be the last of the stories about him.

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* The quotation is from the Henry Holt & Co Inc, New York/Owl Book edition, 1990, based on the 1929 Basil Creighton translation – p.29.