Original Paper

Ethical Conflict and Identity Crisis: A Postmodern Ethical Perspective on Steppenwolf

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Abstract

In Hermann Hesse's Steppenwolf, the protagonist Harry Haller, a middle-aged intellectual living on the margins of modern society, suffers from profound inner turmoil and spiritual confusion. Trapped between self-exploration and resistance to reality, he becomes deeply entangled in ethical dilemmas and an identity crisis. Adopting Zygmunt Bauman's theory of postmodern ethics as the analytical framework, this paper focuses on the individual's psychological struggles and quest for self-identity within a context marked by social fragmentation and moral pluralism. The analysis centers on how Harry Haller experiences identity disorientation in a fractured modern world, how he reconstructs the self through ethical interaction with the Other, and ultimately how he comes to accept multiple identities by transcending inner dualities. Through this exploration, the study aims to provide a critical reflection on modern ethical responsibility, the construction of subjectivity, and the relationship with the Other, offering valuable theoretical insight for ongoing literary ethical criticism.

Keywords

hermann hesse, Steppenwolf, postmodern ethics, identity crisis

1. Introduction

The literary works of Hermann Hesse consistently focus on the fragmentation and redemption of the human spirit in the face of modernity's crisis. Through poetic reflection and psychological insight, Hesse distilled the existential plight of twentieth-century intellectuals into timeless allegories. From the seeker torn between Eastern wisdom and Western rationality in *Siddhartha* (1922), to Harry Haller in *Steppenwolf* (1927), a character caught in the rift between "humanity" and "wolfishness", and finally to Josef Knecht in *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), who attempts to reconstruct order within a spiritual utopia—Hesse's protagonists often traverse the extremes of Enlightenment rationality and mysticism,

individual freedom and collective discipline. As noted in the Nobel Prize in Literature citation, Hesse's works offer "a paradigmatic diagnosis of the human spiritual predicament, conveyed with noble style and profound insight".

This "diagnosis" finds particularly vivid expression in *Steppenwolf*. Harry Haller, as an intellectual marginalized by bourgeois society, is plunged into self-loathing due to the schism between his human and wolf-like natures. Alienated from the mundane order of the middle class and consumed by an obsessive pursuit of sublime art, Haller ultimately descends into nihilism. The novel employs a nested narrative structure, combining stream-of-consciousness with magical realism, to portray a soul torn between rationality and wildness, civilization and instinct.

In recent years, scholars have examined *Steppenwolf* from diverse perspectives, including psychotherapy, dialectical thinking, religious consciousness, and representations of women. For example, Li Jialu explores the manifestation of Nietzsche's "Dionysian spirit" in *Steppenwolf,* arguing that Nietzschean thought informs Haller's journey of self-redemption (Li, 2024). Dong Kefei applies Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "machine of expression" to analyze the novel's structure, highlighting the interconnection of the Preface, the Treatise, and the Autobiography as a resonant triad within the text (Dong, 2022). Yi Shuihan adopts a temporal perspective, offering both horizontal and vertical readings of *Steppenwolf*, thereby providing a conceptual model for addressing the Western cultural crisis of temporality (Yi, 2006).

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, relatively few studies have addressed *Steppenwolf* from the perspective of ethical relations. To address this gap, the present study applies Zygmunt Bauman's theory of postmodern ethics to reexamine the novel. Bauman's postmodern ethical critique interrogates the internal logic of modern rational civilization—namely, how normative ethics, moral conscience, and individual responsibility have been shaped and distorted by modernity. Bauman contends that the core ethical dilemma of modernity lies in the loss of moral autonomy. In its attempt to impose a universally binding moral framework, modern society replaces self-governance with external moral authority. This heteronomous structure may provide social certainty but simultaneously deprives individuals of the capacity for moral choice. Drawing from Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other, Bauman proposes an ethics "for the Other", striving to construct a viable moral system capable of addressing the ethical realities of contemporary life.

By interpreting *Steppenwolf* through the lens of postmodern ethics, this paper analyzes Harry Haller's ethical conflict and identity crisis as he grapples with his dual nature, and emphasizes the central role of the Other in his moral transformation. This approach not only deepens the ethical reading of the novel but also offers a humanistic perspective on the spiritual dilemmas faced by individuals during the transitional period of modernity.

2. At the Crossroads of Modernity: Identity Loss in a Fragmented Age

"Every age, every culture, every ethos and tradition has a style of its own, has the varieties of gentleness and harshness, of beauty and cruelty that are appropriate to it. Each age will take certain kinds of suffering for granted, will patiently accept certain wrongs. Human life becomes a real hell of suffering only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap" (p. 16).

This reflection is voiced by the protagonist Harry Haller in a conversation with the daughter of his landlady, as they discuss the brutality of the Middle Ages. Yet, their own era is no less torn. The path toward modernity has brought with it not only freedom and emancipation but also spiritual fragmentation and social conflict. After the outbreak of World War I, capitalism transitioned into its imperialist stage, intensifying various social contradictions. Zygmunt Bauman characterizes the ethical condition of postmodern individuals in the following way: "Ours is an era acutely aware of the ambiguity of morality, one that offers unprecedented freedom of choice while simultaneously thrusting us into a state of uncertainty more troubling than ever before". Such ambiguity, born of a fragmented age, leads directly to moral disorientation.

Hesse himself foresaw the emergence of a morally ambiguous age, yet he lacked a clear conceptualization or firm recognition of this new era. He rejected both the American capitalist model and the Bolshevik revolution, as well as the Soviet system. Consequently, Hesse's Harry Haller is depicted as perpetually melancholic and anxious, estranged from the present and uncertain about the future. Unable to define "morality" with any precision, he struggles to determine whether he aligns with socially accepted notions of the moral self—thus experiencing a loss of social identity.

Haller is emblematic of the cultivated bourgeois class, a class that, during this period of social transformation, was shrinking and declining. No longer the stabilizing force it once was, the bourgeoisie lacked the strength to counter the emerging values and ideologies. Through Haller, Hesse conveys a sense of helplessness and despair over the demise of this class and its culture:

I can see that Haller's sickness of mind is no individual eccentricity, but the sickness of our times themselves, the neurosis of that generation to which Haller belongs (p. 15).

Haller is one of those "caught between two epochs, deprived of a sense of security, plagued by self-doubt, and burdened by the question of whether life has meaning—a question he experiences as personal suffering". Trapped in the vortex of nihilism, he views the future with pessimism and despair. In a time dominated by technological advancement, materialism, and the values of war and greed, spirituality and morality were increasingly neglected, while traditional culture and humanistic ideals were being destroyed. An upright intellectual like Haller inevitably clashes with harsh realities. He advocates for peace and stands against populism and militarism, yet his efforts are not only ignored by a society blinded by fervor, but he is branded a traitor.

In Germany at the time, culture was deeply intertwined with war and militarism. For Haller, the war was not just a conflict of arms but also a struggle over cultural values. He firmly believed that Germany

was a nation rich in cultural heritage, inheriting the spirit of Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant—especially in the realm of music:

"To an extent never experienced by any other nation, the intellectual and spiritual life of Germany is dominated by the notion of matriarchy, of close ties to Mother Nature, and this finds expression in the hegemony of music. Instead of manfully resisting this by obeying the dictates of the mind, the Logos, the Word, and winning a hearing for them, we intellectuals all dream of a language without words, a language that will express things inexpressible, represent what cannot be given shape" (p. 108).

In *Steppenwolf*, Hesse contrasts two types of music to reflect on the cultural transformation of the era and mourn the decline of authentic bourgeois culture. In a tavern, Haller hears popular jazz music and mockingly calls it "nonsense". To him, this commercialized music represents the shallowness and vulgarity of modern society. In contrast, he reveres the true music of old Europe—symbolic of spirituality, grace, and the sacred. Yet in the present day, such culture has faded like a ghost of the past. "Our whole cultural world was a cemetery in which Jesus Christ and Socrates, Mozart and Haydn, Dante and Goethe were now nothing more than faded names on rusting metal plaques" (p. 61). Haller and those who share his sensibilities have become relics of another time, dismissed by the masses as madmen or fools.

The disappearance of true culture has left Haller uprooted. "Was what we called 'culture', spirit, soul, or dubbed beautiful and sacred, merely a ghost, long since dead and thought to be real and alive only by us few fools?" (p. 27). Thus, the Steppenwolf believes himself to be "rootless existence 'swimming in water'" (p. 11). In a world filled with declarations of war and spiritual desolation, his soul verges on collapse, and he is consumed by inner emptiness and despair. "I stood alone, an outsider to all social circles, loved by no one, viewed with suspicion by many, in constant, bitter conflict with public opinion and public morality. And even though I still lived in a bourgeois setting, everything I thought and felt nevertheless made me a stranger among the respectable people of that world" (p. 54). As a foreign creature in an alien world, the Steppenwolf feels utterly out of place. "I am wrong, I am mad. I am indeed the Steppenwolf that I often call myself, a beast that has strayed into an alien and incomprehensible world and is no longer able to find its home, the air it is used to breathing or the food it likes to eat"(p. 21). He exists outside the cultural mainstream, separated from the masses by a "thick wall".

From the perspective of postmodern ethics, Haller represents the fragmented subject of a divided age. He stands at the crossroads of modernity and traditional culture, where the fluidity and ambiguity of identity place him in a profound moral dilemma. Bauman notes that postmodern society grants individuals unprecedented freedom of choice, but with it comes deep anxiety and uncertainty. Haller cannot integrate into the vulgarity of modern society, nor can he recover the lost spiritual world. He is caught between a sublime spiritual ideal and a sorrowful reality, swinging between the poles of "humanity" and "wolfishness". His anguish is not merely a personal affliction but a symptom of an

age-wide spiritual rupture. In order for individuals to locate their social identity in the current of the times, they must search for meaning amid fragmentation and reconstruct the self through encounters with the Other.

3. From the Emptiness of Estrangement to Groundedness: Reconstructing Identity Through Interpersonal Integration

The protagonist Harry Haller longs for freedom, dreading and rejecting all forms of constraint. Yet, it is this obsessive pursuit of freedom that casts him into a state of involuntary solitude. In the process, he comes to recognize with clarity that his alienation from society is a consequence of his own semi-voluntary, semi-enforced choice. He finds himself drifting on a vacuum, separated from others and society by an invisible wall. While he pursues noble art and seeks the fleeting "eternity" within human history—perfect order—he overlooks the fact that chaos is the Other of order. "Chaos, the 'Other of order', is pure negativity. It is the negation of everything that order seeks to establish" (Du, 2025). Thus, the coexistence of chaos and order is the true norm. Haller's ideals are inevitably destined to remain abstract illusions.

Caught between an ideal of perfection and the oppressive weight of reality, Haller manifests contradictions both in character and in behavior, resulting in an identity crisis. Psychologically, he sees himself as a being torn between "man" and "wolf", two forces locked in eternal struggle. Behaviorally, he displays duplicity: during a dinner with a professor, he flatters a portrayal of Goethe that he secretly finds flawed and listens to radical criticisms of himself with forced politeness. This inability to reconcile his humanity and wolf-nature leaves him socially estranged—incapable of forming moral-emotional bonds with others or establishing identity through social interaction.

"I can remember clearly the moment when I did so. You see, precisely when the professor was talking about that traitor to the Fatherland Haller the awful feeling of depression and despair that had been building up in me ever since the scene at the funeral, getting stronger and stronger, reached maximum intensity. Its pressure was terrible; I experienced it physically as an acute abdominal pain, a harrowing, fearful sense that my fate was sealed. I felt something was lying in wait for me, some threat stealing up on me from behind" (p. 64).

"From the perspective of the will to order, the Other—or the stranger—is the embodiment of chaos, and thus a latent threat to the fixed boundaries established by modernity" (Du, 2025). Postmodern ethics argues that the pursuit of perfect order is inherently based on separation and exclusion, accompanied by the suppression and rejection of all that resists assimilation. In Haller's mind, intellectual clashes with others are irreconcilable. The professor's remarks provoke internal turmoil that escalates from psychological discomfort to a sense of existential threat. The "wolf" within him is magnified—more precisely, the instinct for survival takes precedence. Haller begins to view the Other as an obstacle to his moral self-realization, seeking to assert subjectivity by excluding others and thereby evading moral

responsibility. Yet this strategy of self-isolation as a mode of identity construction only deepens the paradox: in evading relationships, he also abdicates ethical responsibility. He oscillates between total integration and complete withdrawal—an emotional extremism that again drives him out of the human world, to suffocate slowly in an increasingly rarified, inhuman air.

Amid the endless entanglement of humanity and wolfishness, Haller succumbs to nihilism and develops suicidal tendencies—until he meets Hermine. If Haller's self-exile represented his flight from secular life, then Hermine marks his return to "being-with-others". Her presence is crucial to his ethical reconstitution. Through worldly pleasures—such as the foxtrot—she challenges Haller's detachment. As she remarks, "Come on, how can you say you've gone to a lot of trouble to make something of your life when you don't even want to dance?" (p. 70). She takes him to a music shop to buy a gramophone—a symbol of bourgeois triviality that Haller once scorned. At her prompting, he dances for the first time in his own home, accompanies her to nightclubs, and begins to engage with the mechanisms of modern social life. In doing so, he begins to understand others and forge emotional bonds. Haller finds himself marveling: "New, indirect, and complex relationships and connections appeared before me—new possibilities in love and life".

Haller's indifference toward others mirrors society's tendency to suppress and extinguish emotion through socialization. Yet after encountering Hermine, the human side of his nature gains ascendancy over the wolfish pole. He gives emotion free rein, letting it boil over. In his relationship with Hermine, he not only falls in love but also experiences an overwhelming sense of "closeness". This closeness spurs a desire to understand others more deeply: Pablo, who lives purely for music; Maria, who is faithful to her desires. Nevertheless, Haller never fully comprehends Hermine; theirs remains a relationship of proximity and distance, tangled yet elusive.

"As I allowed myself to contemplate it for a minute or so, her face began to speak to me, reminding me of my own boyhood and of my then friend whose name had been Hermann. For a moment she seemed to have changed completely into this boy Hermann" (p. 85).

All individuals in society are shaped by the influence of Others. This influence is reciprocal: as one shapes the Other, one is also shaped in return. In turning his attention to the Other and beginning to understand them, Haller finds himself speaking on their behalf. As he gazes at Hermine, her face transforms into that of his childhood friend Hermann. Emmanuel Levinas once said, "Every person has a face—the face is the most visible and vivid marker of our singularity". Through Haller's eyes, Hesse portrays the transformation of Hermine's face, which represents the "exteriority" and "alterity" of the individual. This transformation signals a diminishing of the exclusivity between self and Other, suggesting that Haller, in his effort to reconstruct identity, now exercises a form of ethical power that facilitates integration.

From the perspective of postmodern ethics, Haller's identity crisis is rooted in his modernist obsession with "perfect order" during a time of social transition. He attempts to escape modern society's

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interpersonal dynamics in favor of an idealized spiritual realm. However, as Bauman emphasizes, genuine ethical relations begin with the acceptance and response to the Other. In Haller's past, others were viewed as emblems of chaos—entities to be rejected. This closed ethical stance led to his isolation and existential loneliness. Hermine's appearance disrupts this deadlock: through dance, music, and emotional connection, she reintroduces Haller to secular life and to the possibility of relational understanding. His identity reconstruction no longer hinges on exclusion but is instead rooted in integration. This shift—from rejection to understanding—exemplifies the ethical responsibility central to postmodern ethics and marks a pivotal step in Haller's journey toward self-redefinition.

4. Breaking Through the Mirror's Mist: Embracing Secular Life and Recognizing the Self

Zygmunt Bauman argues that both modern and postmodern ethics are plagued by a fundamental dilemma. Modern society attempts to establish a unified moral code that serves as a standard for all, thus creating an ethical environment characterized by heteronomy rather than autonomy. Postmodern ethics, while allowing individuals the freedom to choose their own values, simultaneously deprives them of the opportunity to generate morality from within. This double bind constitutes, for Bauman, an ethical impasse. The only way to transcend this predicament is to construct one's own moral compass—a stance Bauman terms "moral relativism".

In *Steppenwolf*, Harry Haller exemplifies this very idea. He searches for a coherent moral framework by elevating himself to the realm of the "Immortals", transcending the illusion of a mirrored identity, discovering his one true self, and constructing an inner world with which to confront the tragic absurdities of reality. In the later stages of his life, he learns to face existence with a sense of humor. Haller's path to redemption is, in fact, foreshadowed at the very beginning of the book, in the small pamphlet titled Treatise on the Steppenwolf:

"You will just have to go down the longer, more onerous, more difficult road to becoming truly human. You will frequently have to multiply your two selves, make your already complex nature a great deal more complicated. Instead of making your world more confined and your soul simpler you are going to have to include more and more world, ultimately the entire world in your soul as it painfully expands, until one day, perhaps, you reach the end and find rest" (p. 49).

This "small mirror" is evidently the Treatise itself. It adopts the perspective of an outsider to guide the reader beyond Haller's own narrative voice, vividly depicting the condition of the "Steppenwolves"—figures caught in a time of transition—and revealing the trials and the redemptive path they must endure to find their true selves. The Immortals, naturally, are Haller's revered figures—Mozart and Goethe. In a dream, Haller passionately critiques their lives, remarking that Goethe sought permanence, tranquility, and a rigid dignity. Yet Goethe—representing the Immortal in Haller's heart—responds simply: "I was always filled with a great desire for lasting significance, and I did constantly fear and battle against death. It is my belief that the struggle against death, the stubborn,

unconditional desire for life is what has driven all outstanding human beings to act and live their lives as they did" (p. 77). Upon waking, Haller can admit candidly: "This was precisely what I found so abhorrent: the fact that I was profoundly, agonizingly afraid of cutting my own throat, dreaded the thought of dying with a force just as wild, tenacious, self-protective" (p. 83). This signifies that Haller is drawing ever closer to the path of the Immortals. He realizes "mechanisms were quite transparent to me. However, knowledge and understanding were not what I needed. Instead, what I was desperately longing for was experience, decisive action, the cut and thrust of life" (p. 84) represents a hope born from the confrontation with death. When Haller enters the Magic Theater, Pablo finally reveals the route to salvation for the Steppenwolf:

You know, of course, where this other world lies hidden, know that the world you are seeking is that of your own soul, and that the different reality you are longing for is only to be found deep in your own self (p. 141). "you would be inhibited and blinded by what you are accustomed to term your personality. I have no doubt you guessed long ago that the terms you use to characterize what you are longing for—"overcoming time" or "finding release from reality" or whatever—have no other significance than your desire to rid yourself of your so-called personality. It is the prison you are doing time in" (p. 142).

His guides—Hermine and Pablo—appear sequentially to awaken in him the pursuit of another reality: a hidden, timeless inner world. Thus begins his path toward self-redemption and spiritual transcendence.

"You are familiar with the mistaken and harmful notion that human beings constitute lasting, unified wholes. You are also aware that they are made up of a multiplicity of souls, of very many selves. To split up the ostensible unity of the person into all these different pieces is considered mad. Science has coined the term schizophrenia for it. Of course, in as much as it is impossible to bring any large number of things under control without leadership or a degree of combination and categorization, science is right to do so. On the other hand, scientists are wrong in believing that the only possible combination of our many sub-selves is a once-and-for-all thing, a binding arrangement valid for the whole of our lives. This error on the part of scientists has many unpleasant consequences" (p. 156).

Within the Magic Theater, Haller discovers that the self is composed not of two elements, but of hundreds, even thousands. Like everyone, his life is not a pendulum swinging between two extremes but a dynamic interplay among countless polarities. No single, conceptual "original formula" can resolve the problem of self-recognition. Instead, the complex self must be mercilessly dissected, its layers peeled back, and its contradictory fragments confronted. Only after such arduous struggle can these fragments reveal a state of harmony and integration. After embracing the standards of the Immortals, Haller finds value even in suffering and setbacks: My life may have been arduous, wayward and unhappy, my experience of humankind's bitter fate causing me to renounce and reject a great deal, but it had been rich, proud and rich, a life—even its misery—fit for a king. No matter how pitifully I might waste what little time was left to me before finally going under, my life was essentially a noble one. It had a profile and pedigree. Not content with cheap rewards, I had aimed for the stars (p. 113).

"They constituted everything of value that my life possessed. Remaining indestructibly in existence, they were fixed for ever like the stars, experiences I could forget but not destroy. Their sequence represented the saga of my life, their bright starlight the indestructible worth of my existence" (p. 113).

Jacques Lacan once observed: "I consider the mirror stage as a special case of the function of the image, based on the relation between the organism and reality, inside and outside". The mirror stage is the beginning of human self-construction, and it does not end in infancy. Throughout life, individuals remain intertwined with the Other—receiving self-affirmation through the Other and depending on the Other to construct the self. Social environment, ethical norms, and language all serve as mirrors; they are essential components in the process of constructing the self. Regarding Haller's future relationship with others, Hesse offers a hopeful and open-ended conclusion at the end of the Treatise:

It is time for us to take leave of Harry and allow him to continue his journey on his own. Just suppose he were already in the realm of the Immortals, had already reached what seems to be the goal of his arduous quest. How amazed he would be to observe Steppenwolf's wild meandering, as he zigzags here and there, unable to make up his mind as to the best course to take. How he would smile at him—both encouragingly and reproachfully, with compassion as well as amusement (p. 51).

This is a heartfelt blessing. Hesse traces the past and gestures toward the future, hoping to guide more Steppenwolves—but he also clearly acknowledges that the rest of the journey must be walked alone. The narrative ends with Haller's promise for the future: "One day I would play the game of many figures better. One day I would learn to laugh. Pablo was waiting for me. Mozart was waiting for me" (p. 177).

Haller's path of self-redemption is a direct response to the ethical impasse Bauman described. He does not rely on pre-established moral frameworks, but reconstructs himself amid desolation and solitude, seeking a moral standard that aligns with his true self. He ultimately realizes that the genuine "Other" is not external, but an inner voice waiting to be awakened. Through repeated struggles and self-reflection, he learns to smile at fate and begin life anew. This "game of life" has no definitive answer—but as long as one is willing to start over and confront suffering, the day will come when one can finally laugh. On that day, Pablo will be waiting. Mozart will be waiting too.

5. Conclusion

This paper employs Zygmunt Bauman's theory of postmodern ethics as a conceptual framework to examine the ethical conflicts and identity crises presented in Hermann Hesse's Steppenwolf. It aims to explore the spiritual predicaments faced by modern individuals amidst ethical pluralism and the fragmentation of self-identity. The protagonist, Harry Haller, becomes lost at the crossroads of a rapidly modernizing society, constructs a secular identity through interactions with others, and ultimately liberates himself from multiple conflicting selves through a process of self-negation and internal struggle, culminating in the reconstruction of his identity.

Through an analysis of Haller's behavioral logic and psychological states, this study reveals his ongoing tension between reason and irrationality, self and other, moral responsibility and personal desire. These tensions reflect the postmodern ethical emphasis on the responsibility of choice and the ethical tension of uncertainty. The present research not only enriches the ethical interpretation of Steppenwolf, but also addresses the broader human challenges of moral ambiguity and identity imbalance in the postmodern context. It offers insight into contemporary ethical discourses surrounding the concepts of the "liquid subject" and "ethics of responsibility", thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions of the modern human condition.

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