



# Lonely Among Loners

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## Lonely Among Loners:

### Emil Sinclair's Existential Coming of Age

Throughout Herman Hesse's *Demian*, the use of verbal irony illuminates Sinclair's struggle to deal appropriately with his callow behavior and thereby evolve. As he tentatively begins to experiment with his sense of self through interactions with friends and family, Sinclair often speaks in indirect ways and skirts direct encounters with the implications of his callowness. As Sinclair comes of age, he awkwardly straddles the dichotomy between the protective world of his family and the threatening outside world. If he says what he *really* thinks and faces direct implications, he fears he risks losing the comfort of his closest relationships which guide him along his path; yet while he knows the world beyond those relationships is full of existential alienation and solitude, he nevertheless desires to mature, even if that maturity means isolation and pain. The use of verbal irony functions to illuminate the gradual development he undergoes from callousness to a budding acceptance of his existentialism thereby coming to terms with himself. This is evidenced when Demian reprimands him for offering money to Kromer, when he resents having hurt Pistorius, and when his father confronts him in the boarding school.

When Sinclair asks Demian if Demian offered Kromer money to keep Kromer from harassing Sinclair, Sinclair does not understand Demian's significant double-entendre in his reply. "No, that's your method," Demian ironically retorts (Hesse 132). Demian's response can be understood in two ways: he admonishes Sinclair by suggesting that to have offered Kromer money would have been cowardly, and with that gentle ridicule, he

also wants to urge Sinclair to lose the fearful grip Kromer has on him which will eventually lead Sinclair to deal with his life's existential problems in a more straight-forward way. Demian implies that Sinclair could have handled Kromer differently, but he understands that Sinclair still has some maturing to do and he uses this double entendre to make Sinclair aware that he need not fear Kromer. In fact, Sinclair will come to remember Kromer not only as a stumbling block on his path to know himself better but also as a turning point that will have moved Sinclair's callousness a step further into maturity. Thus, Demian's use of irony—insofar as he uses one phrase to both chastise and encourage Sinclair—is a subtle contribution to Sinclair's maturation.

When Sinclair realizes that Pistorius cannot help him advance further on his path, he speaks up against what he sees as Pistorius' flaw, but then attempts to recant. "I'm afraid you've misunderstood me," Sinclair claims (191). In his view, Pistorius is an antiquarian attached to religious principles that prevent him from advancing further on his path. Here, Sinclair tries to apologize minimally with an understatement by not aggravating the situation further: although Pistorius' silence leads Sinclair to believe he has hurt his friend with the insult, he is not actually afraid that Pistorius has misunderstood him: he meant exactly what he said although he at once regrets his accusation. However, because Sinclair has not yet matured sufficiently to stand confidently by his conviction, he has to resort to such ironic backpedaling to attempt to maintain his friendship with Pistorius. Sinclair does not realize that he could potentially grow from standing his ground; however painful it might be to say something unpleasant to a friend. What he misses by smoothing the aggravation he has caused is an

opportunity to take a crucial, albeit difficult, step forward on his own path toward independence.

When Sinclair's father comes to confront him at the boarding school after hearing from the tutor about Sinclair's improper behavior, Sinclair strongly reacts to his father's exclamation that he will have the school expel Sinclair if he does not change up. "Well, let him!" Sinclair exclaims (156). To Sinclair, his father represents a world to which he belongs no longer: a world that reminds him of innocence and purity among his family now that he is a young man struggling with inner demons. Sinclair does not even attempt reconciliation because that would ultimately mean to revert to immaturity—however, that impossibility is also part of the reason for his feeling resentment and contempt for his father. Sinclair feels his father does not know how to deal with him and thereby cannot help him either. Thus, the traditional father-son relationship has dissolved in the face of Sinclair's seeking for answers to his problems in others. Although Sinclair displays contempt for his father in his ironic overstatement, it marks yet another turning point in Sinclair's attempts to come to terms with himself: Sinclair's father inability to connect or understand him makes Sinclair realize, just as he did by leaving Pistorius, that he is now alone even among the loners, not knowing Demian's whereabouts either. Nevertheless, he has to carry on.

Throughout "Demian," then, verbal irony marks how each step along Sinclair's path moves him from a callous attitude of a young man bewildered with himself to the gradual realization of a budding existentialist marching a lonely path. By the end of the novel, when Demian asks Sinclair "Can you remember Franz Kromer?" The question

existentially unfolds how Sinclair's now more mature realization has brought out the long-avoided subject matter of his childhood bully. When Demian asks him the question, Sinclair simply smiles: he does so because now, it is no longer his childish denial or his callous attitude that brings Kromer back, it is because of the courage Sinclair needed to face his demons upfront, speak up, and be truthful to himself to confront the remembrance of Kromer made it to him only after a long period of struggle to live and speak in a manner consistent with his own path rather than what he believed was expected of him. Sinclair now owns it. After all, for him and many of us, coming of age meant a continuous struggle to be present in the here and now: neither avoidance nor denial of being, but through the joys and pains of being.

### Works Cited List

Hesse, Hermann, et al. *Siddhartha, Demian, and Other Writings*. Continuum, 1992.