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 encounter 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 he 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 retorts (Hesse 132). Demian’s response can be understood in two ways: he admonishes Sinclair by suggesting to offer Kromer money would have been cowardly, and with that gentle ridicule, he also wants to urge Sinclair to lose the fear he feels of Kromer, which will eventually lead Sinclair to deal with his life’s existential problems in a more straightforward 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 see Kromer not only as
a stumbling block on his path to himself 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 regrets (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 such back peddling 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 at his father’s exclamation that he will have the school expel him if he does not change up. “Well, let him!” he overstates (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 make an attempt at a reconciliation because that would
ultimately be 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, thereby cannot help him either. Thus, the traditional father-son relationship has
become non-existent in face of Sinclair’s seeking for answers to his problems in others.
Although Sinclair displays contempt for his father in his overstatement, that is ironic, however,
because it is not that he would rather be expelled from the school, but that he would rather be
free from school where he could find a spiritual guide during this tormented state—a wise
mentor he finds neither in his teachers nor in his classmates. Nor is it that he would rather be in
perpetual contempt of his father, but in reality his father has not filled that void in Sinclair’s life
either. Displaying such ambiguous contempt for his father—and at the time for his own situation
at school, that overstatement 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” 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. One could look to Hesse’s “Siddhartha” to find
more mature iterations of Hesse’s self-realized characters as in “Demian” the characters’
realizations are but budding. “Can you remember Franz Kromer?” is an exposition of how
Sinclair’s budding realization brought out the long-avoided subject matter of his childhood’s
bully. When Demian asks him that question, Sinclair smiles: he does so because now, it is no
longer his childish denial of or his callous attitude that brings Kromer back, it is because the
courage Sinclair needed to face his demons upfront, speak up, and be truthful to himself in order
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. After all, for Sinclair, self-realization means the continuous struggle to be present in the here and now: neither an avoidance nor denial of being, but through the joys and pains of being.