

# **A STUDY IN SYMBOLISM AND PARADOX**

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## **Introduction**

This essay is a study about SYMBOLISM, PARADOX AND PLAY. It may be regarded as a companion to the author's *Play and the Spiritual Life* essay — <https://stinnocentmonastery.org/playandthespiritualife>. It deals with the vital issues of discerning what the ideal life is and how to attain it, especially how to integrate spiritual, intellectual and artistic pursuits, as well as how to integrate the interior life and exterior life and service in the outer world. The essay's discussion focuses on exploring the 20<sup>th</sup> century German-Swiss writer, Hermann Hesse's novel, *The Glass-Bead Game*, also called in English, **MAGISTER LUDI**. Even though it is most unlikely that you, dear reader, have read this novel, I think that this essay can still be meaningful and interesting to read because it deals with universal issues from a fictional and highly symbolic perspective. This amazing and profound novel, written after a lifetime of Hesse's spiritual searching for the ideal life and how to live it, can be viewed essentially as a **modern day parable** about the universal questions of:

- ◆ what the meaning and purpose of life is;
- ◆ the search for perfection and the ideal life;
- ◆ and how to attain that perfection and ideal life.

## **About the Novel and Its Author**

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) was a German-Swiss author, poet and painter, who wrote 12 full-length novels, the last of which is *The Glass Bead Game*, also titled in English, **MAGISTER LUDI**.<sup>1</sup> His novels usually explore an individual character's search for authenticity, self-knowledge and spirituality (which reflect Hesse's own search for these same intangibles). His other 11 novels include the well-known *Demian*, *Steppenwolf*, and *Siddhartha*. During Hitler's Nazi regime, Hesse had to flee Germany to Switzerland. In 1946, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Hermann Hesse's **MAGISTER LUDI**<sup>1</sup> is an eloquently profound novel, originally conceived in 1931 and ultimately published in Switzerland in 1943, when the author was in his mid-60's, after which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946. To describe the novel using musical terms and images is appropriate because music is a major underlying theme of the novel. Thus, we can say that the novel is like a dazzling presentation of a Mozart piano sonata or concerto, or perhaps like a Mozart opera, where Hesse composed both the libretto and the musical score, to form a perfect contrapuntal unity. Hesse's work may be regarded as a lyrical composition of many variations on basically a single theme, where, like the complex contrapuntal voices of a Bach fugue, all the developments of the themes and variations are tightly interwoven and interrelated, contributing to the overall definition of the primary theme.

**MAGISTER LUDI** is set in the 25<sup>th</sup> century in a futuristic utopian Order of Castalia, scholarly, isolated and withdrawn from the outer world, located in the fictional province of Castalia in Central Europe. The novel is developed as a narration of the life-story of Joseph Knecht, written by his biographer after his death, who tells the story of how Joseph Knecht came to Castalia as a student, joined the Order of Castalia — a male semi-monastic community of scholars — rose to become its chief Master at the top of the hierarchy of Castalia, known as the Master of the (Glass Bead) Game or Magister Ludi (Master of Play or Master of the Game). The Glass Bead Game

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<sup>1</sup> “Magister Ludi” will be capitalized when referring to the book title, and in lower case when indicating the person or post. The Latin term literally means ‘master of play’ or ‘master of the game.’ The original German title, *Glasperlenspiel* means ‘glass-pearls game.’

itself is a kind of synthesis of human learning, especially music, mathematics and cultural/artistic history. As the Game progresses, associations between the themes become deeper and more varied. Later on, Joseph Knecht becomes disillusioned, resigns his position as Magister Ludi, and leaves the Order; he becomes a private tutor, in order to be of service to the outer world.

### **The Dominant Theme of Hesse's Novel, MAGISTER LUDI**

The dominant theme upon which Hesse expounds is man's perennial and archetypal quest for that serenity which proceeds from his enlightenment and resultant harmonization of polar opposites, which are no longer in conflict, but are perceived and experienced as aspects of a single unified whole. Hesse's chief mode of developing this theme is through the universal archetype of the "Wise Old Man," who is approached by a young boy who desires to serve the master as a pupil and learn from him the secrets of wisdom and serenity. The pupil then in turn becomes a master and the successor of the wise old man, to whom pupils come. However, in the exposition and development of the themes and variations, Hesse artfully harmonizes lyrical beauty and the skill of an expert storyteller, together with that profound insight and wisdom that could only be born out of his own inner suffering in the interminable quest for enlightenment and the perfect spiritual life. The consequent achievement is the transposition of the archetypal symbols from the realm of abstract forms, onto the concrete tangible stage of human life, where the reader may share and vicariously participate in the process and development of the attainment of spiritual enlightenment, and its product, serenity.

### **Symbolism of the Main Character's Path to Perfection**

Upon Hesse's stage of human life, we encounter the main character, Joseph Knecht, who, through the special tutelage of the Magister Musicae (Music Master), and the pedagogy of the Castalian Order, attains to that spiritual unity that is the goal of the pure ideal world of Castalia. Then, as the Order's most perfect embodiment of its ideals, he becomes the Magister Ludi, the Master of the Glass-Pearls-Game (*Glasperlenspiel* in German, the original name of this novel), the highest office in Castalia. This game symbolizes the highest and the most sublime goal of the intellectual elite, the harmonization of all knowledge into the perfect unity, balance and rhythm of the Glass Bead/Pearls Game. However, having achieved the perfection for which the way of truth and meditation strives, Joseph Knecht must carry it a step further than Castalia allows, but which is the logical and inevitable progression of having attained the ideal perfection. Ultimately, he must seek to harmonize the outer reality (the world outside Castalia), with the inner reality (the pure cerebral world of the intellect and spirit), and therefore is inwardly compelled to leave Castalia in order to teach in that outer world from which Castalia has virtually isolated itself.

Let us briefly look at some of the subtleties and intricacies of the development of the various major and minor themes and variations of Hesse's musical composition.

### **Symbolism of the 'Wise Old Man' Archetype**

According to Carl Jung, the archetype of the Wise Old Man is "...the superior master and teacher, the archetype of the spirit, who symbolizes the pre-existent meaning hidden in the chaos of life."<sup>2</sup> Certainly then, the form of Hesse's story, revolving as it does around the various masters of the Castalian pedagogy— the Masters of music, of the bead-game, of grammar, of mathematics, etc. — is intrinsic to the intellectual search for meaning and the spirit. Symbolically, the spiritual-intellectual quest for truth, meaning and understanding are equated and associated with the sun, light, enlightenment, wisdom, divine Spirit, and the Word. Symbolizing the human who has achieved such wisdom and spirit are various archetypal figures — the Wise Old Man, the Sage, the Teacher,

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Gustave Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, "The Collected Works of C.G. Jung," Volume 9, Part 1, Bollingen Series XX (New York: 1959, Pantheon Books), p.35.

the King, the Yogi, the Medicine Man, the Shaman, the Philosopher, and the Eastern Orthodox Christian equivalent, the Starets. However, the aged gray-beard Master is but one side of the dual and paradoxical nature of reality, for as Jung instructs us:

...archetypes are in principal paradoxical, just as for the alchemists, the spirit was conceived as *'senex et iuvenus'* — an old man and a youth at once.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the nature of the archetypal theme requires that the master have a young pupil-son-disciple-servant in order to provide the paradoxical balancing element.

### **Symbolism of the Main Character's Last Name, 'Knecht'**

The plays on words and names by Hesse is artful, and provides a more subtle harmony of paradox. The German word, *knecht*, means both servant and knave. Thus our author gives in his main character's name, two opposing elements of the Wise Old Man archetype. As a servant, we have the pupil-youth-servant, counter-balancing the Wise Old Man, as well as the opposing component of the wise master — the trickster or knavish element. As a youth and pupil, Knecht provides the balancing factor for an external Sage, the Magister Musicae. In later life, he symbolically expresses through his name the unity and harmony of the two opposites within himself when he becomes a Magister, and is simultaneously master and servant. Knecht is well aware of the ambiguous experience of becoming less free the higher one rises in the Castalian hierarchy, so that finally, as the perfect master, he must become the perfect servant — Magister-Knecht.<sup>4</sup> As Knecht struggles to bring into balance the master-servant polar opposites within himself, so does he correspondingly wrestle to reconcile the 'freedom' of the master with the 'slavery' of the servant. Likewise does he experience the natural paradox of the true magister-master's desire to teach, and of the true magister-pupil's desire to learn. Knecht's post as Magister Ludi thwarted the balancing of the teacher-student duality and was one of the influencing factors in Knecht's leaving his high post and Castalia.

### **Symbolism of the Main Character's First Name, 'Joseph'**

Hesse also displays subtle artistry in his choice of first name for his main character — Joseph. *The* Joseph prototype is Joseph in Egypt, who has a similar life story as Joseph Knecht. Joseph-ben-Jacob, more or less orphaned when sold by his brothers, was taken to a foreign country (Egypt/Castalia) as a servant to a Wise Old Man (the Pharaoh/the Magister Musicae). There he resisted the temptations of the unenlightened worldly life (Pharaoh's wife/doubts and disputes with Designori), and after he proved himself through the tests of the initiation experience of being plunged into the chasm of death and darkness (prison/elite schools), he re-emerged victoriously into the sunlight, due to his inner superior spirituality and wisdom (perceiving the meaning hidden behind the veil — of the Pharaoh's dream/of the Bead Game). Then, through wisdom, insight and inner spirituality, he was elevated by the Master (the Pharaoh/the *magisterium*, especially the Magister Musicae) to a high post in the hierarchy, where he excelled in the management of the affairs of the society in which he served as Master. Joseph in Egypt was reunited with his eleven brothers and his father, Jacob. There is also a Jacob in Joseph Knecht's life, Father Jacobus, who sired Joseph's second birth into the world through the study of the history of the 'secular world' outside Castalia. A further paradox is implicit here, since the usual 'second birth' refers to a spiritual birth, but here it is the reverse. Joseph Knecht's return to the world outside Castalia is analogous to the other Joseph's being reunited with his biological family.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.38. Perhaps such an understanding sheds light on the symbolism of the idea and the primarily Western artistic representation of God the Father as an old gray-bearded King, and Christ the *Logos* as a young man.

<sup>4</sup> In the wisdom of the Gospels, the master-servant paradox is no stranger, for it is clearly stated in Christ's teaching that he who would be the Master must be the servant of all (Mk. 10:43-44). Similarly, the prophet Deutero-Isaiah spoke with great wisdom of the Messiah as the 'suffering servant' (Is. 53). Such wisdom is found universally in most spiritual and wisdom literature.

### **Symbolism of the Name ‘Castalia’**

Hesse’s choice of name for the fictional elite Order and Province, Castalia, is also highly significant, for, in its similarity to the word ‘castle,’ it points to both the positive and negative aspects, yet overall highly alluring quality of the elite distillation of the intellect in a community of scholars. What is the symbolism of a castle? Most everyone is charmed by a castle: it is usually elevated on a beautiful hill, and tempts by its cool, reserved isolation from the banalities of the world, by its self-sufficiency, strength and endurance, and by the fanciful tales associated with a castle of knights and noble men and women. The castle, by its shape and location on a hill-top, shares symbolic value with obelisks, columns, high towers and the tops of sacred mountains — first as places where humans reach out toward the celestial and divine, seeking to communicate with and understand the unity of Cosmic Being; and second, as places where God talks with humans and veils/reveals-reveals His dazzling Splendor, which conceals Him from humans, while seeking to illuminate people’s mind and spirit. Nevertheless, a person cannot remain continually in the pure celestial light of the top of the holy mountain (of Mt. Sinai or Mt. Tabor, the place of the Transfiguration), for it is too dazzling. The person must return to the everyday life of the people below, to show them the way of enlightenment. Therefore, the inherent danger of Castalia is the sun-stroke which blinds the inhabitants to its polar opposite — the people in the world — and how necessary it is to harmonize the two polarities. A castle may be enticing, but its very isolation can be suffocating, like a castle’s dungeon or the abyss of the deep. How very rich in meaning is Hesse’s name, ‘Castalia.’

There remains for us to consider two very important components of Hesse’s themes in *MAGISTER LUDI: Glass-Pearls-Game (Glasperlenspiel)* and music.

### **Symbolism of the Glass-Pearls-Game (Glasperlenspiel)**

First we will discuss the symbolism of the three parts of the original German title that Hesse gave to this novel, *Glasperlenspiel*, literally, *Glass-Pearls-Game*.

**First**, what is *glass*? Glass is both reflecting and transparent. Glass reflects light and images, and thus, metaphorically, points to mental reflection and thought, and then to the ascendancy of light and order over chaos — that is, the state of darkness where no reflection is possible, and thus where there are no images, only disorder and the void of non-being. Glass then, reflects the light of wisdom onto the beholder. But furthermore, insofar as glass is also transparent, it additionally signifies the quality of enlightenment which sees through and penetrates the surface of things to see the inner light of spirit and meaning which resides in and permeates existence.

**Second**, Hesse connects ‘glass’ to ‘pearls.’ *What is a pearl?* A pearl is a round, white jewel, a gem of great treasure, whose existence is enigmatic and paradoxical, for it is seemingly mysteriously created in a sea shell as though by parthenogenesis (*virgin-birth*). The pearl represents the enigmatic purity of the complete harmonization of opposite cosmic forces — of life/death, good/evil, male/female, parent/child, love/hate, despair/joy. The pearl furthermore represents the mystic center, the Self. In its roundness, it symbolizes the perfect reconciliation of opposites, the round oneness from which all life emanates and to which all life is to return, by traversing the path full circle. The round is the enter point of the cosmic wheel, the center of the cosmic cross, and the *via crucis*, the ‘way of the cross.’ The pearl is the priceless treasure that resides within each person, the treasure given to the person who brings into unity the disparate warring forces within himself, through the struggle which Jung call the ‘process of individuation.’ This symbol of the unified self, the pearl, in the novel’s *Bead Game* is made of glass. There are two ways in which we may interpret this. We can combine the double symbolism of pearls and glass, and interpret the glass pearl to mean that the pearl of the Self, when claimed by the individual, is transparent, in that the light may pass outside oneself as the light of the world. Another interpretation is that since the pearls are not genuine, but artificially made of glass, we have an inherent and paradoxical warning that the game and Castalia are artificial and not all that they appear to be. Both interpretations may be equally valid and exist side by side.

**Third**, in what way are these pearls of glass a *game*? Many explanations come to mind. The *glasperlenspiel* of the Castalians was a microcosm of pure distilled knowledge, danced and played as a cosmic game, in which all observers and participants joined in unifying contemplation and meditation. The Game was the absolute pinnacle of Castalian existence at its best, but like all attempts to institutionalize — in order to preserve the pure distillation

of divine wisdom, spirit and light — it was a game, an esoteric and divine liturgy, a microcosmic crystallization of Reality, but ultimately a game. This is because it was not the goal itself, but pointed beyond itself to the Ultimate Reality — Cosmic Divine Being. The sublime *glasperlenspiel* symbolizes the Divine Light and points to and leads one to one's own pearl within oneself, but the game is dangerous when it comes to be regarded as an end in and of itself. Thus it is an esoteric game of the highest order, but ultimately dispensable, replaceable and reformable. Such is what Joseph Knecht awesomely discovers when he becomes the Master of the (Bead) Game, for he has to transcend even this, the sublimest of sublime cosmic games.

However, in a paradoxical way, can we not view the whole of learning and wisdom as a game in which the players are losers (the word *lusors* means players)? Just as the necessary polar opposite and paradoxical components of wisdom and the master are folly and the knave/trickster, perhaps likewise the game is the necessary component of existence that keeps us from taking reality too seriously. Perhaps the problem of Castalia was that it forgot to play, and the higher up in the hierarchy one went, the more that playfulness of heart was forgotten. Is *homo ludens* (playing-man) ultimately ludicrous or of ultimate seriousness? Who is the most ludicrous — the one who plays at playing or the one who plays too seriously?

### **Symbolism of Music in *MAGISTER LUDI***

Another component of the highest magnitude in *MAGISTER LUDI* the novel and for the Magister Ludi the character, is music. Music played an important role in the Bead Game. But whereas Knecht could imagine life without the Bead Game, without music life would not be possible. Music, indeed, is infinite in its ramifications and vast symbolism. Its universal symbolism represents the cosmic harmony and unity inherent in its multiplicity of parts, yet somehow music also shares in that cosmic reality and imparts its serenity and balance to its listeners and players. Although all the various notes, intervals and rhythms have specific symbolic values, (mostly associated with the symbolism of numbers), yet, without a doubt, the total sum of music transcends the sum of its components. Celestial beings play or sing music continuously: music never ceases from the celestial sphere, for it is the harmonic rhythm of the ordered unity of the cosmos. Yet to terrestrial beings who void their lives of the secrets of music and have forgotten how to play, it is as though “the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (*Genesis 1:2*). To such a person the *homo ludens* indeed appears as a ludicrous fool. Such a person could never be admitted as an initiate of the secret wisdom of play, music or the Bead Game. It is appropriate, then, that the art of the Bead Game was a secret to which one could be initiated only after the many years it took to master its wisdom, much as it takes many years of daily practice and of apprenticeship to the secrets of music and its performance before one is transformed into a masterful musician, a master of unified harmony and balance.

### **Symbolism of the Master/Knave-Trickster Duality**

There is much more to be played with here concerning the universal symbolism in Hesse's profound novel, such as the master and knave/trickster paradoxical dualities. Does a master play tricks, or just play? If God is the supreme prototype of the Sage, does He play tricks on the world and on us humans? Does the Wise-Old-Man play tricks on God or humans — or on himself — with his artistry? Or could the trickster element be an earlier stage of the development of the Master which must be transcended by the master, lest he remain simply a magician? On the other hand, perhaps the trickster element points to the essential need to maintain a playfulness of heart in order to attain to true wisdom, like a ‘holy-fool’. And the glass pearls — are they a trick? Only marbles? Are we being duped by a con-artist with his shell and bead game, which is nothing but walnut shells and a pea or marble? Are we duped into believing that such things as time, space, movement, life and death are true ‘reality’? Do they belong to the ‘real’ or ‘fantasy’ world? There are so many paradoxical questions!

The supreme experts of the secret art of play certainly are children. Why? Could it be because they are closer in time to their pre-birth participation in the cosmic play and dance? Many have expressed the wish to be born old and then grow younger, which implies a linear concept of development. However, if growth and development



were thought of as circular rather than linear, then one would become more like a child the further around the circle one traveled, becoming closer to the child's uninhibited, carefree abandon to the most serious work of play as one grows older.<sup>5</sup> To many who struggle around the circle, the temptation to live the peaceful Castalian life, withdrawn from the rest of the outer world, is sirenically alluring, like the sirens' song.<sup>6</sup>

### What Was Wrong With Castalia?

Castalia was dedicated to the noble ideal life of pursuing perfection. But there was something very strange and wrong about Castalia. They were not allowed to create anything of their own — music, art, poetry, literature, or even children (there were no women in Castalia). They could only vicariously partake of creativity through the creative anguish of others, through their cultural predecessors who lived and created before the 'ideal' era of Castalia. Why? Creativity is accompanied by suffering, or ecstasy and exhilaration, neither of which existed in Castalia, because passion did not exist in Castalia. Perhaps their creativity died precisely because passion did not exist in Castalia. Perhaps their creativity died because they took their games of beads so seriously that they forgot it was a game, and forgot to play. Perhaps it was because they got stuck at one place on the wheel — the circle of growth — and the game froze. Perhaps it was forgotten that one must continually transcend previous transcending — that once the goal is reached, it is immediately lost to a further goal, and that the process is ever-becoming, ever-reforming, ever-transforming, ever-transcending. Perhaps Joseph Knecht only truly became the Wise Master when he discovered that the play, the game, and the dance still go on — and he then followed the Lord of the Dance, who sang:

“Dance then, wherever you may be,  
I am the Lord of the Dance” said He,  
“And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,  
and I'll lead you all in the dance,” said He.<sup>7</sup>

*St. Innocent of Alaska Orthodox Monastic Community; <https://stinnocentmonastery.org>; February 2, 2021*

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is the deepest significance of Jesus' sayings about children and the Kingdom of God: “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:16-17, RSV, and similarly in Matthew 18:3-4 and Mark 10:14-15)

<sup>6</sup> “A siren song typically refers to the song of the sirens, dangerous creatures in Greek mythology who lured sailors with their music and voices to shipwreck.” (*Wikipedia*) The origin of this story comes from Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus' sailors were lured by the sirens' song. A major part of the words siren, sirenically and serene is the Greek word *eirene* (Irene), which means peace.

<sup>7</sup> See the complete words of the song, “Lord of the Dance,” by Sidney Carter, sung to an old Shaker melody. The words can be found on page 4 of the companion to this essay, *Play and the Spiritual Life*, at <https://stinnocentmonastery.org/playandthespiritualife>

### PASSION

Passion is not a luxury  
It is essential to life.  
Passion is what distinguishes real life  
From comfortable existence.  
Passion nourishes the little child inside.  
Passion is the driving force  
From which all creative energy flows,  
The very source of all creativity.  
To create is to affirm life in its fullest .  
To create is to passionately embrace life.  
To create is to be real and to really live and love.  
To be filled with creative life-force energy  
Is to be filled with passion.  
  
Without passion there is mere existence,  
Where the little child inside  
Dies a slow, apathetic, dull death.  
Without passion life might be comfortable,  
But monotonous, boring, empty – uncreative.  
  
With passion, life is continually renewing itself,  
Continually growing and expanding.  
With passion life is always new, vital, joyous.  
With passion there is energy, enthusiasm,  
Health and wholeness.  
Passion is the manifestation of having been touched—  
Yea, consumed –  
By the abundance of the Love of God.