

# [War in hesse’s demian](https://assignbuster.com/war-in-hesses-demian/)

In Demian, Herman Hesse discusses the meaning behind an apparently futile war under the guise of one boy’s search for personal identity. While Hesse spends much of the novel illustrating Emil Sinclair’s search for meaning, the tying in of the Great War at the end of the novel is neither surprising nor unnecessary. In fact, in introducing World War I, Hesse puts Sinclair’s quest in perspective and shows the reader that Sinclair’s journey may seem unique, but an entire nation went through a similar journey during wartime. Throughout the novel, the reader is led to believe that Sinclair and Demian are unique, as they carry a special mark of “ people with courage and character” (24) who can project its will on others. Demian acts as a mentor for Sinclair, teaching him strategies and aphorisms to help him understand his dreams and find his own identity. The special group to which they belong exalts Nietzsche’s theories on good and evil and on the Ãbermensch, and its members seem to live on the fringes of society, having little interaction with the outside world. Although Sinclair’s journey is interesting, it may appear too idealistic and impractical to the average reader of the novel. However, Hesse may have realized this, for his use of World War I applies Sinclair’s journey to the struggles of a war-stricken generation who struggled for meaning. Demian had taught Sinclair that “ who would be born must first destroy a world” (78), implying that Sinclair must question and reject many of his previously-held values and break from society in order to find himself. Sinclair ultimately realizes his belief in good and evil are based on society’s values, and is able to eliminate society’s grip on him by finding his own value-system independent of society. This leads to a reassessment of his life and a different view of the world, and symbolically “ the bird flies to God” (78). Much like Sinclair had to destroy the egg (society) in order to come into his own, Hesse implies that World War I destroyed old-world values so that “ something akin to a new humanity” could “ take shape” (142). Sinclair describes his observations of the men fighting in the war, saying “ their bloody task was merely an irradiation of the soul, of the soul divided within itself, which filled them with the lust to rage and kill, annihilate and die so they might be born anew” (142). Sinclair’s comments resemble both Demian’s quote in which the bird must destroy a world to be born anew, and Sinclair’s acknowledgement early on of the conflict between his “ two realms” (3), in which his own psyche is divided. Suddenly, Sinclair is made to realize that his internal struggle, which he had viewed as unique to him and his small group, occurs to many around him-to ones he did not realize bore the crucial mark. Not only does the War show Sinclair that regular men grapple with a struggle similar to his, but he also realizes that he, Demian, and the rest of his group are not invincible or even so exceptional as he had once thought. Demian, once a lofty and vague figure who appeared rather unrealistic, admits that he is a lieutenant-“ that was one of the ways I compromised” (140), who, despite his grandiose ideals, was still forced to live within society. The War threw men like Demian together with “ regular” men, and reminds him that “ each of us will be caught up in the great chain of events” (140). While “ every man’s story is important, eternal, sacred” and thus each person is “ worthy of every consideration” (2), as Sinclair prologues his work, the application of the War to Sinclair’s personal struggle is important, as it implies that each of us can have a similar struggle. While few may bear the mark that enables Sinclair to reevaluate his world and destroy his previously held tenets, Hesse implies that every man has the ability to destroy his world, but sometimes a war or huge change is necessary to see this. It is true that this understanding of the novel lends itself to criticism, for it implies a somewhat positive view of World War I. However, Hesse wrote this novel in 1917, and World War I was not yet over. It is possible that Hesse disapproved of the War, while still believing that its consequences could be, in some respects, positive, for it could lead to a new world view, incorporating the philosophy which he puts forth in this novel.