INTRODUCTION

The last section of the previous chapter introduced the theme of death as one worthy of further educational investigation. This chapter takes up that challenge and ponders, at some length, the educational significance of Knecht’s death. It is argued that this pivotal moment in the book tells us a great deal about Knecht’s life and the process of educational transformation he undergoes as a citizen of Castalia.

The chapter falls into three main parts. The first section sketches a number of responses from critics to this part of the novel. Hesse himself, it will be noted, saw the death as a moment of profound pedagogical importance. Others, however, have provided alternative interpretations of Knecht’s character and premature demise. For some, Knecht ‘outgrows’ the confines intended by Hesse and, with a less than revealing narrator, lends himself to multiple readings. The second section focuses on the theme of incompleteness as a key to understanding Knecht’s life and death in educational terms. It is suggested that if the deeper meaning of Knecht’s death is to be grasped, attention needs to be paid not just to the main part of the book but also to the poems and fictional autobiographies that follow. The final section considers the role of education in serving as a bridge between death and life. The chapter concludes that The Glass Bead Game, when read holistically, has much to offer those seeking to address questions of enduring philosophical and educational importance.

THE DEATH OF JOSEPH KNECHT

What happens at the very end of the main part of the book? Let us add further detail to the events already summarised in previous chapters. Having made the momentous decision to resign his position as Magister Ludi and to leave the Order, Knecht is reinvigorated and ready to take on the new task of educating Plinio’s son Tito. He spends a short time with Plinio before meeting up with Tito at the Designori’s cottage by a mountain lake. The next day, despite having felt unwell, he follows Tito into the lake for an early morning swim. Tito is already well across the lake when, in looking back, he finds the older man is no longer behind him. He searches desperately but with his own strength beginning to ebb he is eventually forced to return to land. Warming himself with the dressing gown Knecht had left behind, he sits, stunned, staring at the icy water. He feels overwhelmed by
perplexity, terror and deep sadness. In this moment, he reaches a new state of awareness:

Oh! he thought in grief in horror, now I am guilty of his death. And only now, when there was no longer need to save his pride or offer resistance, he felt, in shock and sorrow, how dear this man had become to him. And since in spite of all rational objections he felt responsible for the Master’s death, there came over him, with a premonitory shudder of awe, a sense that this guilt would utterly change him and his life, and would demand much greater things of him than he had ever before demanded of himself. (Hesse, 2000b, p. 403)

With these words, the main part of the book closes. It is difficult for the reader who has lived with Knecht through all his years of youthful education in the schools of Eschholz and Waldzell, his time in the Benedictine monastery with Father Jacobus, his tenure as Magister Ludi, and his difficult departure from Castalia not to feel profoundly moved by this abrupt ending. This seems too sudden, too violent a disruption to the life that was being told and the promise of what lay ahead. It is a testament to the power of Hesse’s story that the reader comes to feel a deep connection with Joseph Knecht, despite the ‘distancing’ effect created by his Castalian biographer.

Yet, Knecht’s premature death can also be seen as a form of release – perhaps even a form of liberation. It must be remembered that Hesse was heavily influenced by Eastern philosophy. He took the Hindu notion of reincarnation and the Buddhist concept of rebirth seriously. Hesse confessed that he was not sure what lay beyond the death of the physical body, but he felt certain that death was not the end. Death can be seen as a new beginning, a new form of life. There is, as Walter Naumann puts it, no need for despair: ‘there will always be another human, like Knecht, to transmit a sense of responsibility to the younger generation’ (cited in Cohn, 1950, p. 353).

Hesse’s original plan for the book is significant here: he envisaged a work depicting a series of lives, with the same man living at different moments in history. With these points in mind, Knecht’s death can be seen as a fulfilment, not a denial, of his destiny – something he had, in various ways, predicted or at least prefigured from his days as a young Waldzell student.

Hesse does not give a definitive answer to the question of death, but death is present throughout the book. We discover that Joseph’s parents may have died while he was very young (the narrator remains uncertain about this); careful attention is paid to the changes the Music Master undergoes in the months leading up to his death; the brutal treatment of Bertram by his colleagues in the Order prior to his rumoured death is described in some detail (Bertram served as deputy to Knecht’s predecessor in the role of Magister Ludi); and in the autobiographies death figures prominently as a theme. Joseph’s death is, however, arguably the most important in the book.

Hilde Cohn sees Knecht’s death as a symbolic event of vital significance for the work as a whole (Cohn, 1950, p. 353). She argues that the book is about a