

UCLA

Departmental Honors Theses

Title

THE BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS OF MY YOUTH: BTS'S 2016 WINGS AS A RETELLING OF HERMANN HESSE'S 1919 DEMIAN

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wg349gb>

Author

Park, Ellie

Publication Date

2026-04-01

Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

THE BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS OF MY YOUTH: BTS'S 2016 *WINGS* AS A RETELLING
OF HERMANN HESSE'S 1919 *DEMIAN*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY
ELLIE PARK
ADVISOR: ADAM BRADLEY

LOS ANGELES, CA

20 MARCH 2026

ABSTRACT

THE BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS OF MY YOUTH: BTS'S 2016 *WINGS* AS A RETELLING
OF HERMANN HESSE'S 1919 *DEMIAN*

BY ELLIE PARK

The KPop group BTS is often dismissed in the Western music industry as being simplistic or catering too much to their fanbase. However, they've incorporated several intricate levels to their artistry since their debut, the most prominent being the creation of the Bangtan Universe, the fictional storyline that accompanied much of BTS's discography and is an intricate tale of coming-of-age. In 2016, BTS released their fourth studio album, *WINGS*, which alluded to several Western works; the most prominent was Hermann Hesse's bildungsroman, *Demian*. Although the group confirmed that the album was directly referencing Hesse's work, they never confirmed what the references meant or how they tied into the Bangtan Universe. Several scholars have analyzed the allusions scattered throughout the *WINGS* content, and numerous fans have come up with their own theories over the decade. However, there is no official scholarship that explains the *WINGS* narrative in the context of BTS's mainstream narrative. In this thesis, I analyze the short films, music videos, and the teaser trailer that accompanied the music album to argue that *WINGS* is a reimagined, non-linear version of *Demian* that underscores the darker aspects of youth and self-actualization. Furthermore, I argue that Jin represents Sinclair, and the other six boys are subconscious manifestations that help him come into adulthood, just as Demian did for Sinclair. In the larger conversation, I argue that BTS offers a new understanding of what it means to have a coming-of-age, and encourages a general audience to reconsider how intricate KPop is.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my advisor, Professor Bradley, for reaching out to me regarding my application for the RAP Lab and giving me the chance to complete several research projects on KPop. I really enjoyed talking to you about the importance of music in pop culture and introducing you to the more niche aspects of KPop. Additionally, thank you for reading through so many pages of my research for the past two years; there were over 100 pages, and you continued to reassure me that the projects were nonetheless great—albeit a little long.

I would also like to thank my peers, particularly those who took the Honors seminar with me last spring, and my friends and family who had to hear me talk about my senior thesis over and over. I hope that my ramblings were, at the very least, somewhat interesting. And thank you to everyone who saw me actively crash out on Instagram as I slowly worked on this.

Finally, although they'll never read this, I would like to thank BTS for inspiring my project. I'm glad I stumbled upon you guys during COVID. Thanks to you, I was able to try new things and pursue a bunch of my interests, both academic and personal. Ironically, I'm submitting this thesis a decade after WINGS was released, and the day of ARIRANG's release. Hopefully, that means this thesis will go well. See you in May!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iii
List of Illustrations	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The Bangtan Universe: Understanding BTS and Their Narrative	5
Chapter 2 <i>WINGS</i> , the 2016 Retelling of Hesse's 1919 <i>Demian</i>	11
Chapter 3 Revisiting Boy Bands and Themes of Youth and Coming of Age	54
Conclusion	58
Works Cited	61

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 2.1. “Blood Sweat & Tears” opening scene	19
Figure 2.2. “Blood Sweat & Tears” table scene	20
Figure 2.3. Jungkook and the wing imprint	21
Figure 2.4. Jungkook’s winged shadow	21
Figure 2.5. Jin’s eye	24
Figure 2.6. Painting of Taehyung as Demian	25
Figure 2.7. Jin and the winged statue	27
Figure 2.8. Jin in “Blood Sweat & Tears” Japanese version	28
Figure 2.9. Colorful shattering	29
Figure 2.10. Jin’s cracked face	29
Figure 2.11. “Blood Sweat & Tears” mirror scene	30
Figure 2.12. “Blood Sweat & Tears” purple room	33
Figure. 2.13. Jin and Bruegel’s “The Fall of the Rebel Angels”	34
Figure 2.14. The two rooms	35
Figure 2.15. Hobi in blue	36
Figure 2.16. Jimin in red	36
Figure 2.17. JHope’s “Intro: Boy Meets Evil” in white	37
Figure 2.18. JHope’s “Intro: Boy Meets Evil” in black	38
Figure 2.19. Jungkook being fed absinthe	40
Figure 2.20. Hobi’s eye in “MAMA”	41
Figure 2.21. Jin in the hallway of “Awake”	42
Figure 2.22. Yoongi playing the organ in “Blood Sweat & Tears”	43

Figure 2.23. Jin and the apple in “Awake”	45
Figure 2.24. Jimin and the apple in “Lie”	46
Figure 2.25. Six polaroids in “Awake”	50

Introduction

In 2016, the KPop boy group BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan)—composed of its seven members RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook—released their fourth studio album, *WINGS*.¹ The 15-song album emphasized dark themes of temptation and the struggles of coming of age, a step away from the nostalgic focus of their earlier album trilogy, *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE*. Though the album generated the typical, energetic buzz among their fans, ARMYs, there was a heightened interest coming from the general public, who were curious about the allusions to Western works. The album followed BTS's general narrative about youth, but it was unique from its predecessors because of its explicit references to Hermann Hesse's 1919 bildungsroman, *Demian*. The comeback trailer, "Intro: Boy Meets Evil," in addition to the two music videos for "Blood Sweat & Tears," and the seven short films accompanying the album, tied the band's message about coming of age to Emil Sinclair's classic story. However, BTS only officially announced that the album reflected their personal journeys into adulthood—the members were in their early 20s at the time, with the youngest member at 19 years old—and never confirmed what the references meant nor how this new narrative tied into their earlier works (Kang 211). Such ambiguity left their audience with unanswered questions that relied on literary analysis and scholarship for some form of understanding.

Though incomplete, some scholarship does exist on the two sources as distinct works and on their overlap, much of which is set within the framework of Jungian psychology and the general, recurrent themes of a bildungsroman. The existing discussions surrounding *Demian* agree that the journey to find one's true self is only accomplished by uniting the good and the

¹ In this paper I will refer to all of the members by their real names, rather than their stage names. So RM will be referred to as Namjoon, Suga as Yoongi, J-Hope as Hobi (a nickname commonly used by fans), and V as Taehyung.

bad into one. Moreover, the contrast between the realms, recognized as visually represented by light and dark imagery and symbolically represented by the supporting characters Sinclair encounters, blurs together and eventually becomes assimilated into one being (Rodchyn and Blahun 165). Bettina Knapp underscores how the light and dark are contrasted by Sinclair's home and the outside world/the "other side." She argues that the conflict begins when his home, representing "all that was connected to light and goodness," becomes less of a priority as Sinclair is drawn to the tainted other sphere, and that he is only able to reduce conflict by accepting both sides as important (30). Other scholars have commented on how the self functions as the final stage of individuation and "inculcates all, shadow, collective unconscious, anima, and animus," that encapsulate one's complete personality in definite proportion (Aimen and Khan 45). Similarly, literary discussions about *WINGS* are focused on analyzing major motifs and references to Jungian psychology. Many look into the artwork, such as Pieter Bruegel's "The Fall of the Rebel Angels" and "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," claiming that the music video for "Blood Sweat & Tears" "illuminates BTS's use of the Western art historical canon to reconfigure expected relationships among artist, audience, work, and world" (Kwon 70). However, what they lack is a general agreement on what the exact narrative is. For instance, Daniel Nedelcu argues that the main plot is that of the members losing their innocence to temptation, emphasized by Jungkook and Taehyung's symbolic representation of Icarus as they fall from grace (47-48). Others claim that the older members—Namjoon, Yoongi, and Hobi—are leading the younger members—Jimin, Taehyung, and Jungkook—towards clarity and adulthood; here, the former function as Demians and the latter represent the Sinclairs in the story (Aimen and Khan 53). This general idea is shared among scholars and fans, but there seems to be a disagreement over what the main narrative is and the roles the members play.

Though these existing conversations provide good insight into the major concepts in each source and the intertextuality in *WINGS*, I find that they fail to take into account the role of BTS's mainstream narrative on the central narrative in *WINGS*.² I aim to address these gaps in my thesis by close reading the visual elements in the seven short films (“Begin,” “Lie,” “Stigma,” “First Love,” “Reflection,” “MAMA,” and “Awake”), two music videos (the original “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video and the Japanese version), and the comeback teaser trailer (“Boy Meets Evil”) that accompany the music album. I argue that *WINGS* offers a reimagined, non-linear version of Hesse’s *Demian*, pulling major motifs and plot points to introduce a narrative centered on the darker aspects of youth and self-actualization. Moreover, though we—the audience—are initially led to believe that all boys except Jin are paired to represent Demian and Sinclair, Jin’s short film “Awake” reveals that the pairs are more subconscious manifestations meant to help Jin understand that for him to come into his full self, he must give them up,³ allowing them to disappear as Demian did from Sinclair’s life at the end of the novel. However, the boys also parallel Sinclair’s journey as certain members play specific roles: Yoongi represents Pistorius, Namjoon represents Abraxas, and Taehyung represents Demian.

After briefly explaining the lore that surrounds and founds my theory, I will dive into an in-depth explanation of the new *Demian* narrative *WINGS* is painting by highlighting the major parallels between the works and then analyzing several major motifs: light and dark, the

² The mainstream narrative is the fictional storyline that accompanies all of their albums, though the particular one I am referencing is that which begins with their *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE* trilogy. I will discuss more of this in Chapter 1.

³ I discuss the storyline in-depth in Chapter 1, as I need to dive into the *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE* lore and the *WINGS* lore to place this thesis in context.

sparrowhawk, the painting of Demian, mirrors, and Manichaeism. I then analyze three minor motifs pulled from the novel: Abraxas, Pistorius, and the apple. I would like to acknowledge that the plot I introduce is going to be confusing, given that BTS never provided an official, coherent plotline for their lore/storyline. However, I do my best to make my claims and theorized narrative as clear as possible. I will close by discussing the larger stakes of my thesis: that by rewriting the *Demian* narrative and centering a section of their larger narrative on the classic bildungsroman, BTS shines a new light on both the general population's perspective of BTS and on their understanding of well-established works as well as the universal themes that come with them.

Chapter One:

The Bangtan Universe: Understanding BTS and Their Storyline

In 2015, BTS released their mini album, *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE Pt. 1*, and with it, the accompanying fictional narrative, dubbed the Bangtan Universe.⁴ The concept of incorporating a continuous storyline into an album was new, even within the KPop industry, so fans and idols alike were curious but simultaneously hesitant to see the potential. Although a risk, BTS believed that utilizing a fictional narrative to accompany their larger, underlying messages would let them “live up to their foundational goal of telling their own stories” in addition to their company’s ideology of “music and artists for healing” (Lazore 52). It quickly caught fan attention, spreading like wildfire as fans began to consume the content immediately as it came out, curious as to what would happen to the characters in the next chapter or video. The use of a fictional narrative then began to spread to other groups and companies, who started to incorporate their own stories in their works. For example, ATEEZ is known for their time-traveling pirate narrative, and ENHYPEN is known for their vampire lore. For BTS, the BU resulted in a stronger fan attachment to the band as fans experienced a nostalgia for a youth that wasn’t necessarily theirs, but was so relatable it felt like theirs. It created an effect similar to what a bildungsroman might bring: the ability to absorb a story’s message through a character's relatability, as if their experiences came directly from our own lives.

⁴ The Bangtan Universe will be referred to as “the BU” for the remainder of this thesis, as that is what ARMYs refer to it as.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE and Save Me

In this section, I will briefly explain the plot for *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE*, as it precedes *WINGS*, and is essential to understanding the latter's plot, especially as a retelling of *Demian*. As aforementioned, the BU is primarily associated with BTS's 2015 album trilogy, *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT IN LIFE*, parts 1, 2, and Young Forever, known collectively as "Hwa Yang Yeon Hwa" or HYYH. It ties together music videos, concept trailers, short films, highlight reels, mini books, and the webtoon series *Save Me*, released by BigHit (BTS's company), to tell the fictional story of seven boys—played by the seven BTS members—and their friendship as they navigate life against the expectations and pressures of society.⁵ The video content available on YouTube spotlights each boy's life and their group adventures over time, and the webtoon focuses primarily on the oldest member, Jin, and his journey to reunite the friend group; the two, however, do essentially tell the same story and so in describing the HYYH story, I will refer to the webtoon, as it is more chronically organized.

Save Me begins with a brief flashback to high school, when the boys are being scolded and assigned detention for the week. It then skips to the present day, April 11th, 2022, two years after Jin had left to study abroad in the US. Upon his return—though the webtoon had yet to reveal why he left and what happened in between their first interaction—Jin passes by Jungkook, who is still a high school student, and Namjoon, who works at the local gas station, but quietly ignores them. A month later, he decides to pay Namjoon a visit at the station, only to find out that the latter was spending time in jail. During visiting hours at the local jail, Namjoon reveals that the rest of the group no longer stays in touch, that Jungkook and Yoongi had died, Hoseok

⁵ The narrative and stories are all fictional; any references made to the BTS members, both in the content and in my thesis, are representative of their fictional selves rather than their real selves.

was hospitalized, and Jimin and Taehyung's locations were unknown. As Seokjin leaves the visitation, he runs into Taehyung, swarmed by reporters, and arrested for murdering his abusive father. Dejected, he returns home and falls asleep, where he is visited by a talking white cat, who asks him, "If you could turn back time, do you believe you can straighten out the errors and mistakes, and...save everyone?" (HYBE ep. 01). And Jin declares he would: "If I could straighten out the errors and mistakes, and make us all happy again like we used to be, I would do anything" (HYBE ep. 01). He is then sent back in time to April 11, 2022, an event marked by some shattering glass. From there, the story officially begins. Jin wakes up and brushes off the experience as a weird dream, unaware that he had time-traveled and was given the opportunity to save his friends. In the beginning, Seokjin experiences what he believes to be *déjà vu*, as he is sent back to April 11th every time one of his friends dies or meets their untimely demise, starting with a repetition of Jungkook's death. Once he grasps the situation, he then begins his journey to save all his friends without breaking the glass and being sent back.

As readers experience these time loops with Jin, they are also shown glimpses of the boys' time together at school and introduced to the characters and their struggles: Namjoon and poverty, Jungkook and familial issues, Yoongi and his self-destructive tendencies, Taehyung and his abusive father, Jimin and depression, and Hobi and his Munchausen's Syndrome. Throughout the webtoon, Jin attempts to save his friends by weaving elaborate plans and trying to handle the situation on his own, but he fails every time. By episode 13, Jin has begun to give up on saving his friends, but is then visited by Taehyung, breaking the cycle of handling the situation on his own. With Taehyung's arrival, the plot begins to shift; the boys have united successfully, and they begin to hang out, a mirror of their time together in high school. Riding on a high note, the readers are led to expect that the webtoon will end happily, but those who have followed the

narrative through the YouTube content know otherwise. In episode 15, Seokjin dies at Taehyung's hands in an attempt to prevent him from killing his father and going to jail, sending the former back in time. When he wakes up, he hears the voice of the white cat telling him he "won't make it out here alone in this entangled destiny" (HYBE ep. 15). And there the webtoon ends.

WINGS

After the end of the webtoon and the album "era," which simply refers to the brief time period in which a KPop group promotes their new album, fans were left in the dark for half a year with nothing but fan theories and vague, open-ended plotlines to study. When BTS released *WINGS* in October 2016, it opened up the opportunity to gain more insight into the incomplete narrative from the previous trilogy. Fans quickly realized that this narrative was a continuation of HYYH and began frantically devising new theories. Within the context of both *Demian* and the entirety of the BU—which includes the following album trilogy, the *Love Yourself* series—I believe that the *WINGS* narrative actually takes place during the *Save Me* time loops. Specifically, I believe it is set in one of the final loops, if not the final one, although I cannot say with complete confidence which loop due to the ambiguous nature of the narrative.

The album itself was preceded by the seven short films, which contained content that aligned with the HYYH storyline and one outstanding new element: quotes from *Demian*. The seven short films each focused on a member, recapping their story from the previous album and introducing new elements to it. They were released starting in September, in the following order:

“Begin,” featuring Jungkook; “Lie,” featuring Jimin; “Stigma” with Taehyung; “First Love” with Yoongi; “Reflection” with Namjoon; “MAMA” with Hobi; and “Awake” with Jin.⁶

“Begin” opens with Jungkook waking up from a dream, alone in a room, before the camera pans to him in front of a painting that begins to drip paint, then ends with a shot of him and his winged shadow, backlit by a single light. The second film, “Lie,” opens to a shot of Jimin in a white room, facing a camera and a robot arm that holds up different cards with different symbols on them—symbols that appear at the end of every short film and are unique to each member. The frame changes to him in a hospital room, before flashing between different shots of a burning piano, rain, an apple, and a flooding bathtub, then ends with Jimin biting into an apple and defiantly turning the camera away from him, before leaving the room. “Stigma” focuses on Taehyung, who, after getting caught vandalizing a wall with graffiti, is being interrogated by a police officer. Yoongi leads the fourth film “First Love” as he breaks into a store to play the piano, something that reminds him of his mother and Jungkook. Midway through playing, he runs out into the streets, narrowly missing a passing car, then runs back to the store to find it damaged and the piano in flames. Namjoon’s short film “Reflection” highlights Namjoon in his container, tattooing an image onto his arm, before falling unconscious, during which the tattoo begins to change and spread up his body. When he wakes up, the container shatters, and he runs to a locked, ringing phone booth. The sixth short film in the series, “MAMA,” focuses on J-Hope (aka Hobi), who is locked in a padded room and surrounded by pills. After taking a pill, the room changes, its walls splattered with neon paint, and he begins to tear at the walls in a frenzy before passing out. He then wakes up, opens the door to the room Jimin was in for “Lie,” then leaves

⁶ The seven short films and the comeback trailer were released in September 2016, teasing the release of the music album that was released the next month, October.

after eating a Snickers, a reference to his HYYH background. Finally, Jin wraps up the short films with “Awake,” the longest of the seven. He moves through a house, starting in a dining room, then moving out through a hallway to a room filled with bright light. He burns lily petals, seems to enter a hallucinatory state where the walls begin to warp, then leaves the house through another hallway.

Then, the comeback trailer, “Intro: Boy Meets Evil,” was introduced after the films, spotlighting three minutes of J-Hope dancing to the released segment of the song “Intro: Boy Meets Evil.”⁷ Finally, in October, the two music videos for their title track, “Blood Sweat & Tears,” were released; one with Korean lyrics and the other in Japanese. The content released with the HYYH trilogy had no reference to *Demian*, so when fans were met with eight different quotations from and several explicit references to the novel, they were surprised; after all, what could a novel from 1919 Germany have to do with a 2016 Korean album?

⁷ Here, J-Hope is referenced by his stage name because the trailer features him as a performer, as J-Hope of BTS, not as Hobi from the BU narrative.

Chapter Two:

WINGS, the 2016 Retelling of 1919 *Demian*

Language and historical context aside, both *WINGS* and *Demian* clearly deal with the coming of age, of the temptations and struggles that come in your youth as you try to navigate who you were with who you are becoming; who are you truly, and how can you step into that person even with the things life throws at you? But before I can explain the parallels between the two, I need to explain Emil Sinclair's story, as told in *Demian*.

Sinclair recalls his youth to his audience, focusing on his transition from the light world, as he calls it, into the dark world, a transition triggered by his first lie: he had stolen a sackful of the best kind of apples from a nearby mill with two other boys. As he navigates the guilt from this lie, he meets Max Demian, a boy in his class who helps him deal with the consequences of the lie and introduces him to the dark world, to a life that is only painted negatively by those in the light world and may not be as horrible as perceived. Years pass, and Sinclair, although he has lost contact with Demian, is still deeply affected by their interactions and finds himself talking to Pistorius, an organ player for the local church. Pistorius plays a major role as his mentor, Sinclair explains, providing him a space to explore Abraxas, the god who was "both God and Devil" and "had the symbolic task of combining the godlike and the devilish" (Hesse 109-110). The concept of Abraxas was something Demian had introduced to him, and Pistorius essentially functioned as a physical manifestation of that underlying connection between Sinclair and Demian. Sinclair again skips several years in his recount, jumping to when he was reunited with Demian. He recounts his experiences with the latter and his mother, Lady Eva, focusing on when he was living with them until he was drafted into the war. It is during the war that we get the famous

kiss. Sinclair, on the battlefield, was hit by a “star —likely a missile from the opposing side—and severely injured. While recovering, he was visited by Demian, who told him, “Perhaps you’ll need me again sometime... If you call me then...you’ll have to listen within yourself, and you’ll notice that I’m inside you” (Hesse 188-189). Demian kisses Sinclair on the lips—a gift from Eva—before leaving for good.

Pulling back to *WINGS* and the BU, we see several parallels to Sinclair’s youth. Jin, having lived in the light world for most of his childhood, is exposed to the dark world for the first time in school when he receives detention with the other six boys for “being lazy” (HYBE ep. 01). As he spends more time with his new friends, he begins to spend more time in the dark world, breaking away from the light—the worlds are represented by the upper (light world) and lower (dark world) classes. Jin begins to navigate this new world of “delinquency” with the boys, who show him that the dark world isn’t as bad as the light world perceives it to be; that they, too, can be happy and enjoy the small joys in life together, just as Demian showed Sinclair. The time they secretly spent together in the abandoned detention room was Jin’s first “lie.” However, Jin falls into a second lie, one that breaks his dark world and the happiness he found there: he reveals that the boys have been using the abandoned detention room as a hideout, causing the principal to hit Jungkook and Yoongi to physically retaliate against the man. With Yoongi’s expulsion and Jin’s betrayal, the group falls apart, and Jin is sent to the States for two years. When he returns, he runs into Namjoon and Jungkook in passing, just before the boys’ lives

begin to end tragically: by suicide, forced hospitalization, or incarceration.⁸ As the time loops begin, Jin is reunited with his friends and begins his journey to find his self, to unite the good parts with the bad as Sinclair learns to do. I believe that the journey across multiple time loops functions as Jin's "Pistorius" moment, where he learns about the unity of good and evil, the light and dark, but also about the difficulty in achieving that unity. He, like Sinclair, learns to navigate the dark world and its secrets with the help of someone from that dark world; for Sinclair, it was Pistorius, and for Jin, it's his friends, specifically Yoongi, though I touch on this more later in the chapter. However, just as he achieves a sense of stability in his journey, he loses control. Taehyung, fed up with his father's abuse, chooses to kill the latter, but at the last minute, ends up stabbing Jin, who ran into the broken bottle in an attempt to prevent the murder of Taehyung's father. The timeline resets with a crack, and Jin wakes up with a newfound realization: "I can't do anything by myself," he narrates. And in response, a voice reminds him, "You won't make it out of here alone in this entangled destiny" (HYBE ep. 15).

Up to this point, fans have been led to believe that the other six boys are real and stuck in the same time loop as Jin. The HYYH storyline, though it never directly references *Demian*, falls in line with that of Sinclair's, and the six boys are prominent, real people to Jin, just as Demian was to Sinclair. However, as I considered the final scene in the novel and the new content in the *WINGS* videos, I realized that it is very likely that the six boys we see in the time loops may not be real. Just as Demian disappears at the end and shifts from a physical person to a subconscious

⁸ In the webtoon, Jungkook and Yoongi die by suicide, Jimin and J-Hope are forced into hospitalization due to mental and physical instability, and Namjoon and Taehyung are incarcerated for physical assault and murder, respectively. These pairings are essential to the BU plot, as the members' stories are tied to their partners throughout the HYYH trilogy.

part of Sinclair, Namjoon, Yoongi, Hobi, Jimin, Taehyung, and Jungkook are likely the subconscious manifestations of the real people Jin used to know. My theory is that Jin alone represents Sinclair, and the other members play two roles: one as subconscious reflections of the Sinclair-Demian pairs that help Jin realize the goal of his journey through time, and another as the side characters that guide him to his Demian, or his “dark” self. As aforementioned, much of the scholarship on *Demian* argues that Demian functions as a physical representation of Sinclair’s dark side, which is why he is ‘absorbed’ into Sinclair—or rather, becomes a part of him—at the end of the novel. Keeping this in mind, the story makes more sense if the six boys were meant to be ‘absorbed’ into Jin at the end of his story to symbolize the unity of the good and bad in him. Additionally, three members play significant roles in the narrative: Taehyung represents Demian, Yoongi represents Pistorius, and Namjoon represents Abraxas. The remaining three—Jimin, Jungkook, and Hobi—solely function as the aforementioned subconscious manifestation. The six boys are paired into the following: Namjoon and Jungkook, Hobi and Taehyung, and Yoongi and Jimin. One thing to keep in mind is that these pairings are not the same as those in the HYYH trilogy, where Namjoon is paired with Taehyung, Jungkook with Yoongi, and Jimin with Hobi, and is one of the major hints to the fact that *WINGS* is set in a false reality.

In short, the *WINGS* narrative underscores Jin’s search for self after realizing that the happiness of his youth will no longer return, that he must bear the consequences of his actions and come to terms with them. The events featured in the album are manifestations of his coping with reality as he attempts to change his and his friends’ fates. However, they are unsuccessful because the end goal was never for him to change the past; they were for him to use the past as a way to move forward. It is as Pistorius explains to Sinclair: “The only reality is the one we have

in us. That's why most people's lives are so unreal, because they consider the external images to be real and don't allow their own world within themselves to tell them anything. But when a person once knows the other way, he is no longer free to choose the path that most people follow" (Hesse 132). The reality in Jin is the one where there is no happily ever after, no redos to fix everyone's fate. Up until he realizes this, he lives in a fictional world, believing what he sees, what is easy to believe, and not listening to what his inner self, his subconscious, is trying to convey. Once he "knows the other way" and realizes that he cannot make it out of the time loops alone, he cannot blindly believe in that happily ever after anymore.

Though they share many similarities, *WINGS* and the BU focus a lot more on the struggles of youth, while *Demian* focuses on the journey to maturity or adulthood—the final stage where you reach your true, united self. Moreover, the original narrative features other essential side characters like Beatrice and Knauer, who do not exist in *WINGS*. If we look at the quotes and visual motifs featured in the short films and music videos, they're all centered around the distinctions between the worlds, breaking out of the egg, and the temptation of the devil, emphasizing the struggles of transitioning from sheltered child to adult, and of coming to terms with the reality of life.

Light and Dark

One of the major motifs in *Demian* is the distinction between the light and dark worlds; the light, good world Sinclair had been living in and originally found comfort in, and the dark, bad world that he learns to accept. It is also a major motif within the *WINGS* content and is represented in two ways: through specific quotes from the novel and through the outfits worn by the boys in the video content. The first quote that we get that references the realms—and the first

quote in the series—is in the short film, “Begin,” which opens with Namjoon’s narration: “The realms of day and night, two different worlds coming from two opposite poles mingled during this time” (“Begin,” 00:00:10-18). The *WINGS* narrative begins with the worlds coming together rather than being separate spaces because, according to the BU timeline, Jin’s worlds were already combining as he was working to unite both sides of his self. He had already accepted and become familiar with the dark world, allowing it to merge with the light. Additionally, “Begin” is Jungkook’s solo film, adding another layer of symbolic importance. Jungkook, like Jin, comes from the light world and becomes familiar with the dark world after meeting Yoongi in school; he also represents the Sinclair in his pair with Namjoon. Moreover, as the youngest in the group, he also represents youth itself, symbolizing the middle ground—the point of merging—between the two worlds where innocence and temptation mingle.

The next quotation appears in the second short film, “Lie”: “My parents’ house made up one realm. This realm was familiar to me in almost every way—mother and father, love and strictness, model behavior, school” (“Lie,” 00:00:09-23). Here, we focus on the light world from Jimin’s perspective, which mirrors Sinclair’s irritation towards his once comforting home during Christmas, when “everything [there] was merely oppressive and embarrassing” (Hesse 93). Jimin, like Jungkook and Jin, is from an upper-class family that constantly pressures him to “be normal,” even though he went through a traumatic experience as a child. He lived in the light world, financially stable and with a complete, caring family, but it wasn’t perfect, nor was it entirely good. In the film, Jimin is trapped in a white hospital room, surrounded by nothing but blank white walls and a single, empty bed beside his. The monochrome color scheme symbolizes the clear-cut simplicity of the light world that is slowly suffocating him, evident in the way Jimin’s movements become more frantic and desperate, a juxtaposition to the calm he initially

exuded. However, the background changes slightly during the choreography, and the wall behind him goes from white to black. The presence of the dark world caused the shift in attitude, making the light world less appealing. The quotation itself does the same; its list is short but conveys the expectations of the world as being picture-perfect, falling under “strictness” and “model behavior” imposed by parents and society under the guise of love and goodness. These things are familiar and objectively good, but no longer a comfort.

The third quotation comes from Namjoon’s film, “Reflection,” and focuses on the dark world: “The other realm, however, overlapping half our house, was completely different. A loud mixture of horrendous, intriguing, frightful, mysterious things, including slaughterhouses and prisons, drunkards and screeching fish wives, calving cows, horses sinking to their death, tales of robberies and murders and suicides” (“Reflection,” 00:00:09-38). Namjoon’s story is the most relatable to a general audience; although he’s a good student, he struggles financially and faces the reality of life while working multiple part-time jobs that expose him to the ease of the light world, contrasted by the struggles of the dark world. The description of the dark world is an interesting choice, particularly because of how it is both “frightful” and “intriguing.” The dark world is often misperceived as frightful because of the overpowering descriptions of “slaughterhouses and prisons” and “tales of robberies and murders and suicides.” However, it’s also intriguing, and to a lot of us, familiar. The irony is not lost on the audience, especially since fans have commented on how relatable the struggles of the boys were in HYYH, and it encourages a reconsideration of what the dark world really stands for. Does it represent the typical “bad” things in life, or simply the uncomfortable realities of living in an imperfect world? Overall, though the quotes highlight different things, they properly introduce the audience to the light and dark worlds newly depicted within the context of the BU.

This distinction between the worlds is also evident in the boys' outfits across various videos. They are often split into two groups: one wearing white and the other wearing black (or other darker colors), and the group they're in symbolizes which world they are placed in/most associated with. For instance, in the "Blood Sweat & Tears" music video (see figure 2.1), the boys are wearing variations of the two colors. Jin is on the far left, alone and the only one wearing solid black and white; Taehyung (on the far right with blonde hair) is in a white undershirt and dark striped robe; Hobi is next to him in a dark colored jacket; sitting in the back are Namjoon and Jungkook in a dark colored coat with a white button up and a white shirt with black details, respectively; and Yoongi (on the bicycle) and Jimin are in the center of the room, also in dark clothes. Throughout the content, the younger members are often in the lighter colored clothes and the older members in the darker-colored clothes, implying that between the *WINGS* pairings depicted here and consistent throughout the other content, those in the darker clothes represent Demian, while those in lighter clothes represent Sinclair. As Daniel Nedelcu notes, the pairing "reflects a theme in *Demian*, that of mentorship" (46). Not only is it a visual distinction of the boys' placement into either world, but it also highlights their dynamic as mentor (the "corrupted" Demian/Pistorius role) or student (the "innocent" Sinclair role). Jin, however, is in a perfectly even split because he, as the main character, is working to achieve that balance between the light and dark.



Figure 2.1. “Blood Sweat & Tears” opening scene.

There is, however, one instance in the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video when everyone, regardless of their prior character assignment, is dressed in all white. All seven boys are sitting around a white table, and several frames later, Jin raises a glass, likely filled with absinthe (see figure 2.2). Given that they’re not set in a location from any of the HYYH content, I argue that they’re set in a new light world, one that is part of the aforementioned fictional reality Jin finds himself in to cope with his reality. In the novel, Sinclair explains how “This present ‘bright world’ was to some extent [his] own creation” that “no longer meant taking refuge and crawling back to...a sheltered life...but a new service that [he] had invented and demanded, with responsibility and self-discipline” (Hesse 96). The boys have been placed into the light world, but it isn’t the one Jin, Jimin, and Jungkook originally came from; it’s the reimagined version that Jin has created to prevent him from running away from the consequences of his earlier actions. It’s a new slate that allows him to move forward with “responsibility and self-discipline,” but also one where his friends’ fates cannot be changed as Jin desires.



Figure 2.2 “Blood Sweat & Tears” table scene.

The Sparrowhawk and Its Egg

Another important motif is the sparrowhawk and the egg from which it breaks through. The sparrowhawk, a small bird of prey, represents several things, notably freedom, independence, and the desire to break free from one’s constraints. In *Demian*, it is on Sinclair’s family crest and becomes a symbol of his overwhelming desire to break free from the restraints of his home, represented by its egg, in the light world. Jin’s short film “Awake” opens with the quote: “The bird fights its way out of the egg, the egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world. The bird flies to God; that god’s name is Abraxas” (“Awake,” 00:00:09-26). However, within the *WINGS* content, the sparrowhawk is most directly connected to Jungkook and Namjoon, although other members have their own connections to it.

The former is commonly depicted as having wings and also wears a plain white shirt with a bird embroidered onto it in his short film, “Begin.” His role as the personified version of the sparrowhawk ties well with his other role as Sinclair, as it was a symbol of Sinclair’s desire for freedom in the novel. One interesting thing to note about these depictions of him with wings is that in the Japanese version of “Blood Sweat & Tears,” Jungkook is in a yellow room and the

wings are painted on the mattress he was lying on (see figure 2.3), but in “Begin,” they were spread out in his shadow as if they were attached to him (see figure 2.4). In both, the wings aren’t directly attached to him—they’re imprinted on the mattress he was on or reflected in his shadow, signifying that they function more as an indication that the desire for freedom is constantly present, even if invisible.



Figure 2.3. Jungkook and the wing imprint.



Figure 2.4. Jungkook’s winged shadow.

Namjoon is the other member with a strong association to the sparrowhawk, although his is more parallel to both Demian and Sinclair rather than just the latter. In the novel, Sinclair

recalls that he had mailed a picture of the sparrowhawk to Demian (Hesse 106) and had later looked for a picture of Demian, but when he couldn't find it, "dimly [recalled] having burnt it. ...or had...dreamt about burning it while holding it, and then eating the ashes" (138). In "Begin," Jungkook folds the picture of the sparrowhawk into an envelope, an envelope that Namjoon receives in "Reflection." He tattoos the image onto his left arm, and then proceeds to burn it, throw the ashes into a cup of water, and then drink the mixture. Namjoon plays both roles, Demian and Sinclair, a reflection of how he doesn't represent the pure, untouched youth that Jungkook does as Sinclair, but also doesn't represent just Demian; he is a product of both worlds, perhaps even the perfect final product that balances the light and dark evenly.

Moving on, there are several references to the sparrowhawk's egg in the videos. In both "Intro: Boy Meets Evil" and the Japanese version of the "Blood Sweat & Tears" music video, there are frames where the ground beneath one of the boys is broken and cracked. In the former, J-Hope stomps mid-dance and breaks the ground beneath him;⁹ in the latter, Jin is standing in a white room, staring at the cracks on the floor, which are spreading slowly. The world around them is cracking, just as it had to in *Demian*. "A gigantic bird was fighting its way out of the egg," Sinclair explains, "and the egg was the world, and the world had to fall to pieces" (Hesse 186). He was talking about the sparrowhawk, his desire for freedom, and how for the bird to be freed, the world in which it was contained had to break, to "fall to pieces." And that is what the imagery in the two videos is conveying: the boys all desire freedom, and in order for them to successfully do so, they need to break out of their eggs—the world they reside in must fall to

⁹ Again, I refer to Hobie as J-Hope because in the trailer, he is playing his role as J-Hope of BTS and not the fictional character.

pieces. The fact that the world is already cracking implies that at this point in the BU timeline, the boys are approaching their freedom, but haven't quite yet reached it.

Finally, the colors associated with the sparrowhawk and the egg—yellow and blue, respectively—are also featured in the *WINGS* video content. Sinclair describes the sparrowhawk several times as being “yellow and gigantic” and tells Demian that once it was able to break free from its egg, “it flew into the dark blue sky” (Hesse 176). This is mirrored in Jin’s film, “Awake,” when he looks out to a window in his room. The camera zooms in, getting a close-up shot of his eye, lined with yellow eyeshadow, and catching the reflection of a bird flying across the window (see figure 2.5). The eyeshadow assigns the symbolism behind the sparrowhawk to Jin, just as it does with the other boys, but the simultaneous presence of an actual bird flying freely also suggests that he has managed to get to freedom, especially because Jin ends up pulling the curtains aside to reveal a mirror.¹⁰ Similarly, in “Reflection,” Namjoon is wearing a yellow jacket and sitting in a dark blue shipping container, which ends up shattering open, allowing him to freely roam the open space. In the larger context of the BU, the symbolism of the sparrowhawk and its broken egg suggests that it is during *WINGS* that Jin achieves freedom from his old, light world. He has finally flown into the dark blue sky.

¹⁰ I discuss this particular element (the window-turned-mirror) more in the section, “Mirrors and Shattering Glass.”

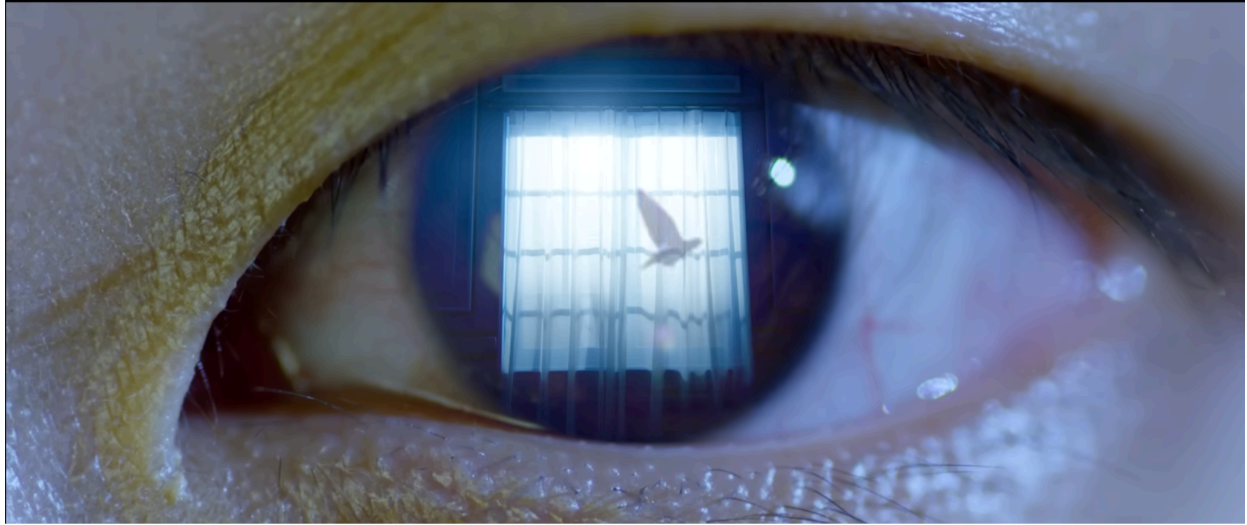


Figure 2.5. Jin's eye.

Demian

Demian, Sinclair's best friend and the catalyst in his coming-of-age journey, is another prominent motif in *WINGS*. As aforementioned, he's represented in two ways: by the older boys in each pair (e.g., Yoongi and Jimin, where the former is Demian) and by Taehyung. The assignment to the older boy in the pair reflects the mentor-like role Demian played for Sinclair as he helped the latter navigate the dark world; however, Taehyung's role as Demian plays a much more prominent part in the *WINGS* narrative. He first appears as Demian in Jungkook's short film, "Begin," when the latter is painting a portrait, akin to how Sinclair subconsciously painted a portrait of Demian early in the novel. The painting is colorful, splattered with different colors, a contrast to the novel's painting, which was less colorful and focused more on the ambiguity of the portrait's features than the colors; here, it is obvious that the painting is in Taehyung's likeness (see figure 2.6). The paint splatters appear in both "Blood Sweat & Tears" music videos, although they splash over Taehyung himself rather than his portrait, clarifying that he is the boy in the painting and thus represents Demian.



Figure 2.6. Painting of Taehyung as Demian.

“He, too, was a tempter,” Namjoon narrates during the interlude of “Blood Sweat & Tears,” “he, too, was a link to the second...world with which I no longer wanted to have anything to do” (“Blood Sweat & Tears,” 00:04:02-17). In the BU, specifically in *Save Me*, Taehyung plays a major role as the only other boy who is somewhat aware of the time loops without being informed by Jin. Just as Jin begins to lose hope in his ability to save his friends from their tragic fates, the reality “with which [he] no longer wanted to have anything to do,” Taehyung appears at his door at the start of one of the loops, cheerfully telling him that he came to visit after having a dream (HYBE ep. 13). All the other boys forget what happened in the previous loops, and their memories reset, but Taehyung seems to have some unique ability to remember the things that happened, implying that he is playing a more significant role than expected. In fact, when he appears at Jin’s door, the loop that follows is one of the most successful loops, as Jin manages to save all the others and maintain a sense of peace for longer than he could before. Taehyung keeps Jin linked to the loops, keeps him hopeful of success, and in a way, tempts him into persevering.

At the end of the original “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video, it is revealed that Taehyung, like an angel, was winged. It is the only time any of the boys are portrayed as physically having wings. However, the wings have been cut from his back, marked by the twin scars on his shoulder blades that are visible to the audience when he sits half shirtless, curtain rising to reveal his true form, and by extension, his hidden role. The frame shifts, transitioned by Taehyung’s hands covering the camera and Jin’s eyes, revealing a large winged statue, the wings that were missing from Taehyung’s back (see figure 2.7). Here, the wings function less as a connection to the sparrowhawk and more as a visual aid that allows the audience to connect Taehyung to the statue. Jin walks slowly to it, then reaches up to kiss the statue on the mouth, mirroring the final scene in the novel when Demian approaches an injured Sinclair to relay a kiss from Eva before disappearing. Demian’s final words to Sinclair are as follows: “I’m going to have to depart. Perhaps you’ll need me again sometime... Then you’ll have to listen within yourself, and you’ll notice that I’m inside you...” (Hesse 188). This final scene signifies Sinclair’s successful self-becoming as he manages a balance of both light and dark, represented by the ‘absorption’ of Demian into Sinclair post-kiss. And just as it does for Sinclair, this final scene in “Blood Sweat & Tears” marks Jin’s own successful self-becoming; he has kissed his Demian—albeit in the form of a statue instead of Taehyung himself—and has achieved the unity of both good and bad, the light and dark in him.



Figure 2.7. Jin and the winged statue.

Mirrors and Shattering Glass

One of the final major motifs pulled from *Demian* is that of mirrors and shattering glass. It is also my favorite motif because of how visually important it is to both the HYYH and *WINGS* narrative. *Demian* only mentions a “shattering” once, when Sinclair and Pistorius had argued: “I merely spoke a single, actually harmless, phrase to him—but nevertheless, at that very moment, an illusion we had shared was shattered into multi-colored shards” (Hesse 143). However, in the BU, it plays an essential role in marking the resetting of the loops; every time Jin fails to save his friends in *Save Me*, the panel shatters and sends Jin back to April 11, 2022. It visually signifies the failure and the break in the illusion of success, of comfort and stability, just as we see in *Demian*. The motif also appears across the *WINGS* video content, featuring visually in both music videos, “Begin,” “Reflection,” and “Stigma,” and audibly in “First Love.” It differs from the cracks I associated with the egg, primarily because they’re inherently different visually; the cracks in the egg are typically on the ground, breaking under the boys, but these cracks occur in front of the boys, in the air. Figure 2.8 highlights one such scene, where the glass shatters in front of Jin, who is standing in front of Bruegel’s “The Fall of the Rebel Angels,” exactly like it

does in the webtoon. The repetition throughout the content is meant to parallel the number of failed time loops Jin went through, supporting my theory that *WINGS* is set within the HYYH timeline, specifically at the end of it.



Figure 2.8. Jin in “Blood Sweat & Tears” Japanese version.

One instance where we see the “illusion...shattered into multi-colored shards” (Hesse 143) is in the Japanese version of the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video. About midway through the music video, we get a scene of Jin and Taehyung fighting on the floor. Though Jin seems to be winning in the beginning, Taehyung quickly overpowers him and then lunges at the former, a reference to the end of *Save Me* when the latter goes to kill his father but is stopped by Jin, who ends up getting stabbed in the place of his father. The camera then shifts to one of the boys—possibly either Jungkook or Taehyung—lying on the bed seen at the beginning of the music video. The wall in front of him bursts open, shattering into multi-colored shards (see figure 2.9). This scene clarifies how the world we see in *WINGS* is an illusion, a parallel, subconscious reality created by Jin to deal with the real world, the reality we see in HYYH. Moreover, by having the wall shatter, the illusion itself shatters, forcing Jin to realize that, in the end, he needs to come to his senses and return to the real world.



Figure 2.9. Colorful shattering.

We also see a subdued shattering in “Blood Sweat & Tears” on faces. Jin’s face cracks at the end of the music video (see figure 2.10), and the statue he kissed earlier also cracks. However, I believe that here, the motif plays a slightly different role from the previous examples. Here, they represent both the shattering of the illusion and the breaking of the sparrowhawk’s egg. The cracking faces symbolize the egg in which the self is physically contained, which, when cracked, simultaneously represents their freedom (like the symbolism behind the sparrowhawk) and the breakaway from the illusions that held them trapped in the endless loops.



Figure 2.10. Jin’s cracked face.

On the topic of faces, mirrors appear in the *WINGS* content, functioning as they do in the novel. After Sinclair’s kiss with Demian, he closes his story by explaining to readers how, whenever he “[descends] all the way into [himself], where the images of destiny slumber in the dark mirror,” he simply has to “lean over the black mirror to see [his] own image, which now looks exactly like...him, my friend and guide” (Hesse 189). The “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video ends similarly: Jin, seated in front of a dark mirror, looks into his reflection, which begins to crack (see figure 2.11). The mirror was normal at the beginning of the music video—where normal refers to the everyday mirror that reflects both you and the background behind you—and then changes at the end, reflecting Jin, but with a black background that does not reflect the room he’s standing in. Additionally, the flower next to him—a white lily—is not the flower inside the mirror; it is a purple liatris, or blazing star. The mirror is literally a mirror, allowing Jin to reflect and look at himself, but also functions more as a tangible manifestation of the introspection Sinclair describes after the ‘absorption’ of Demian. The motif also appears in “Awake,” when the window reflected in Jin’s eyes—the window that the bird flew across—is revealed to actually be a mirror. When he pulls the curtains open, trying to catch a glimpse of the bird, he’s met with his own reflection; Jin was the freed bird he was looking for.



Figure 2.11. “Blood Sweat & Tears” mirror scene.

Manichaeism

Finally, I argue that the spatial representation of Manichaeism is the last major motif in the *WINGS* content. Manichaeism refers to the religious philosophy of defining things as being either good or evil, and though it is present in *Demian*, I argue that, because of its prominence as a visual aid in the *WINGS* content, it dominates the latter more than the former. Manichaeism is represented through the spatial distinctions made in the video content, through visual details, the mirroring of actions and choreography, or the change in “locations” through camera movement. First, the distinction is evident through spatial placement in “Blood Sweat & Tears.” Earlier, in the section “Light and Dark,” I analyzed the color palettes of the boys’ outfits, spotlighted in figure 2.1. However, figure 2.1 also features the spatial manifestation of Manichaeism by physically separating Jin, who is wearing all white, from the other boys, who are wearing varying levels of black/dark colored clothes. There’s an invisible line separating the light from the dark by utilizing where the boys are placed in the room.

We see a similar effect in figure 2.12, where the boys are sitting together in a room. Here, there are several placement choices to note. First, Jin (left), Yoongi (center), Namjoon (right), and Taehyung (bottom left) are the four boys who are tied to the *Demian* characters Sinclair, Pistorius, Abraxas, and Demian, respectively.¹¹ They are placed on separate sides of the couch and are distinctly separate from the others in some way. Jin is on one end; Yoongi is in the middle, functioning as the bridge between Sinclair and Demian; Taehyung is between Jin and Namjoon, functioning as the bridge between Sinclair and Abraxas; and Namjoon is on the other end, representing Abraxas, the god who represents the equal balance of light and dark. They’re

¹¹ I will explain Yoongi’s role as Pistorius and Namjoon’s role as Abraxas in the following section, “Minor Motifs.”

all placed off the couch, a nod to their additional roles. The second placement is the split between the Demians and Sinclairs. On the left are Jin, Jungkook, and Jimin (in that order), who represent the Sinclairs in their *WINGS* pairs; and on the right are Yoongi, Hobi, Taehyung, and Namjoon, who represent the Demians in their pairs (or Demian as an overarching presence, in Taehyung's case). It's not an even split, due to the number of members in the group, but it manages to get the message across: even together, the boys are naturally split into the "tempted" and the "tempters."

The final placement here deals with Jin's separation from the rest of the group. Although Namjoon is placed at an equal distance from the couch as Jin is, it appears as if the latter is set further away from the other six boys, likely caused by the way the chandelier is placed closer to Namjoon than Jin, causing the shadows to cast more darkly on Jin and creating the illusion that he is further away. Additionally, Taehyung sits between Hobi and Namjoon, reducing the gap between the boys, while no one sits between Jin and Jungkook, making the space between them seem larger than it is. This final placement functions similarly to its predecessors: it allows the audience to recognize Jin's separation from the other boys as Sinclair, and ties into the theory that the world we see in *WINGS* is some alternate reality of the real world we see in the HYYH trilogy. Jin is physically distanced from this version of his friends because they are subconscious manifestations of his desire to reunite with them and fix their fates, not the boys themselves.



Figure 2.12. “Blood Sweat & Tears” purple room.

Another example of the spatial representation of Manichaeism is seen at the beginning of the music video, when Jin is standing in front of Bruegel’s painting (see figure 2.13). We have the presence of two doors on each side; one black and one white. These represent the entrance to the light and dark worlds, between which Jin stands, as he is caught between them as they merge. At this point in the video and the narrative, the doors are far from each other, not yet combined, because Jin has yet to come to terms with his fate and accept both the light and dark in him. However, the main focus of this frame is Bruegel’s “The Fall of the Rebel Angels.” The work ties more closely to the holistic meaning of Manichaeism, as the painting divides good and evil—God’s angelic army and Lucifer’s army of rebel angels, respectively—on the canvas through color and positioning, much like the music video does with the boys. God’s army is positioned in the top left corner, painted with lighter colors, closer to the black-framed door. On the other hand, Lucifer’s army is in the bottom right corner, painted in dark red, and is positioned closer to the white door. Within the painting, the light and dark touch, but the intention is not to merge together; it is to eliminate one side. However, if we zoom out and focus on the doors that sit next to the painting, they’re on the “wrong” sides. The door to the dark world is by God’s army, and the door to the light world is by Lucifer’s army. This juxtaposition underlines the

message that the merge between worlds, the unification of light and dark, is a lot closer than we expect it to be, which aligns with where *WINGS* falls in the larger BU narrative. To reiterate, it falls within the HYYH narrative during the time loops.



Figure 2.13. Jin and Bruegel’s “The Fall of the Rebel Angels.”

Another example of this spatial distinction and merging of worlds is seen earlier in the music video. “Blood Sweat & Tears” is shot in several different rooms, each captured as a space independent of the others. However, three minutes into the video, the camera pans up from Namjoon’s room to the room Jimin and Yoongi are sitting in, revealing that they are in the same building, merely separated by a floor (see figure 2.14). Just like the painting, the initial assumption that the rooms are clearly distinct from each other is disproven by zooming out and looking at the larger image. It too spotlights that the worlds are closer in space than we think; the separation of good and evil is actually not as clear-cut as expected.



Figure 2.14. The two rooms.

The second way Manichaeism is represented in the *WINGS* content is through the mirroring of actions and choreography, particularly in the Japanese version of “Blood Sweat & Tears.” Midway through the music video, Jimin and Hobi have a couple back-and-forth frames where they perform their respective choreographies, “Lie” and “Intro: Boy Meets Evil,” in the same room. However, though the room itself remains the same, the boys dance in it separately, and the elements within it change. Hobi is set in blue lighting (see figure 2.15), and Jimin is set in red (see figure 2.16), both under Bruegel’s “The Fall of the Rebel Angels.” However, Jimin dances under a dark ceiling, as the painting only briefly shows up in the beginning. The difference in color makes it so that Hobi is more visible to the audience while Jimin’s individual features, backlit by the red, are harder to see. This further supports my theory that the light and dark worlds are paralleling each other. Furthermore, the Jimin-Hobi pairing follows the HYYH narrative rather than the *WINGS* pairing (where Jimin is set with Yoongi and Hobi with Taehyung). This back-and-forth between pairs also aligns with my theory that the *WINGS* narrative is, in a way, not ‘canon’; that is, it is not the same reality that Jin spent his youth in with his six friends. It is actually the second, alternate reality by which Jin is coping with the

consequences and struggles of his journey to unite both the light and dark parts of his self. Switching between the HYYH and *WINGS* pairs allows the viewers to visually recognize that even if certain elements remain constant across both narratives—represented in the way Jimin and Hobi are in the same physical location, doing the same thing—they’re not the exact same. The differences in the frames and narrative indicate a newer message or subplot.



Figure 2.15. Hobi in blue.

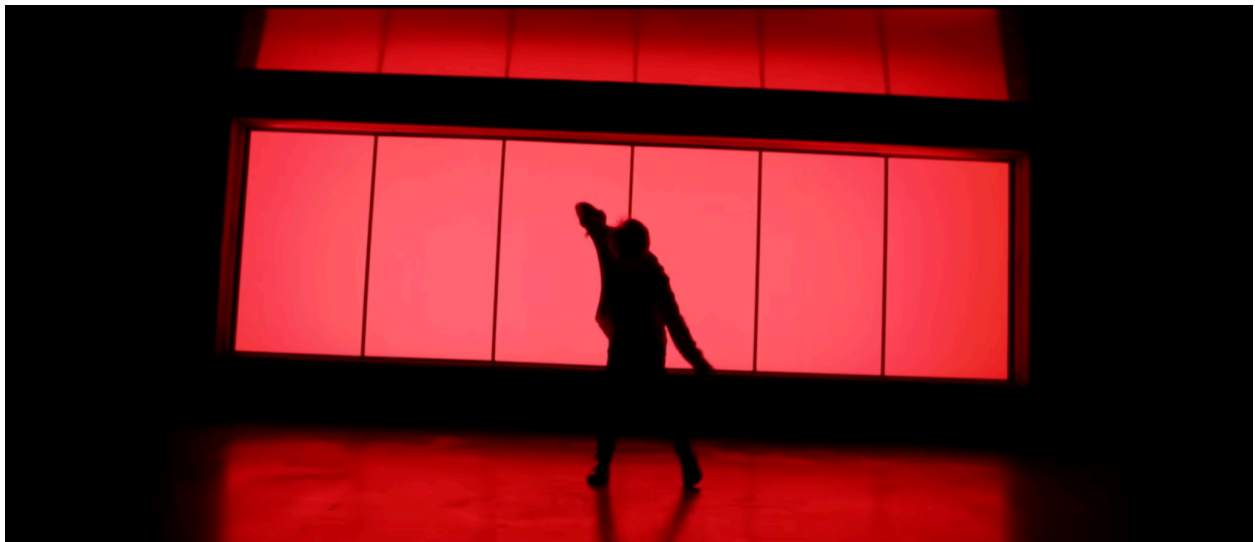


Figure 2.16. Jimin in red.

Finally, we get the element of Manichaeism in “Intro: Boy Meets Evil” through camera movements that indicate a change in “locations.” Just like in the “Blood Sweat & Tears” Japanese music video, the comeback trailer utilizes several shots where the room itself is the same, but the elements within it change. The location itself in which J-Hope dances is the same, but there’s an illusion that it changes as the camera flips and the lighting shifts from regular (see figure 2.17) to dark with neon splashes of paint across the walls and floor (see figure 2.18). The room with the regular lighting has the cracks on the floor that I mentioned in the section, “The Sparrowhawk and Its Egg,” but the other room doesn’t. Additionally, the choreography J-Hope is dancing to is continuous, not different like in the Japanese version of “Blood Sweat & Tears,” even as the camera and lighting change. This suggests that the worlds are mirrors of each other, and that at this point in the BU, they’re merging together, becoming one world. I argue that keeping the location the same but changing the lighting creates the illusion of a parallel world: one world set in the light, and the other set in the dark. Though the settings are the same, they have fundamental differences that underscore the differences in the two realities that the audience is exposed to.

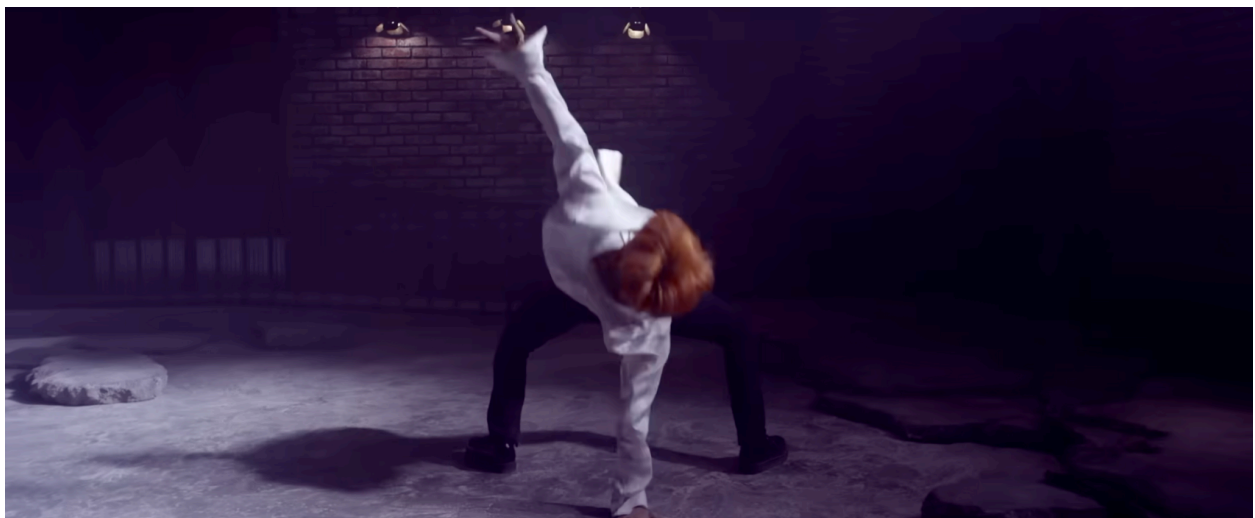


Figure 2.17. JHope’s “Intro: Boy Meets Evil” in white.



Figure 2.18. JHope's "Intro: Boy Meets Evil" in black.

Minor Motif: Abraxas

The following three sections deal with the motifs from *Demian* that play a minor role in the *WINGS* content; they are present and important to understanding the new narrative at hand, but not as essential as the preceding five. First, we have Abraxas. The novel describes him as “a deity who had the symbolic task of combining the godlike and the devilish” and functioned as the “god who was both God and Devil” (Hesse 109-110). He is the ‘final destination’ that the sparrowhawk flies to after breaking away from the egg; he is the goal at the end of our coming-of-age journeys: the balance of good and evil, light and dark. The motif is featured primarily in the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music videos, though it does appear briefly in the short films “Stigma,” “MAMA,” and “Awake” as an image on the wall or through the color green.

Earlier, I assigned the role of Abraxas to Namjoon, and I did so because of his connection to absinthe. Absinthe is an overproof liquor, an anise-flavored spirit made from a mix of different herbs like wormwood and fennel (Simon). Technically, there is no official link between absinthe and Abraxas, and to my knowledge, *WINGS* is the only work where the audience has connected

the two. So then why do fans align the two together in the *WINGS* content? On a very basic level, it's because both are tied to the color green in the music videos and short films. Absinthe often starts out as green, then transforms during its processing, and every frame featuring Abraxas is set in green lighting. I argue that they are further connected because of their implications of transformation. Absinthe's physical form literally transforms when being prepared, by turning from a mint green to a milky green after the burnt sugar is stirred in (Wild Dreamings) or from green to a milky, cloudy white when prepared with water/ice. It was also believed to transform those who ingested it; absinthe mythology called it the "Green Fairy of liberation," as it supposedly "altered perceptions and...appealed to creative libertines around the world" (Hicks). Similarly, Abraxas can only be reached by "reconciling and accepting good and evil within the human being, rather than repressing one or the other" (Knapp 35). Tying an intangible deity to a tangible drink allows the audience and the storytellers (i.e., BTS) to better connect the process by which Jin comes to terms with all parts of himself. Essentially, I assigned the role of Abraxas to Namjoon because he's the only one of the seven boys to directly drink the absinthe by his own will. The others do interact with absinthe, but they do not drink it on their own as Namjoon does.

The only other member who ingests absinthe is Jungkook, who is forced by Namjoon to do so in the Japanese version of "Blood Sweat & Tears" (see figure 2.19). Jungkook then falls into a hallucinatory state, a common side effect of absinthe,¹² where he switches between the reality set in *WINGS* and that of the HYYH trilogy, marked by the casual hoodie he wears and

¹² Although hallucinations were historically a common side effect of drinking absinthe, they stemmed from an overconsumption of overproofed liquor—which is essentially a spirit with an ABV (alcohol by volume) over 50%—rather than from some magical effects of the drink.

the outfit change, neon lighting/saturation, and flashes to scenes from *Save Me*, respectively. He, like those who drank absinthe for creative motivation, entered an altered state of sorts, a hallucination that blurred the line between the two realities. Additionally, if we consider Jungkook as a symbol of the sparrowhawk, then Namjoon's role as Abraxas is no coincidence, especially because the two are paired together in *WINGS*; Jungkook, as the sparrowhawk, fights its way out of the world and flies to Abraxas.



Figure 2.19. Jungkook being fed absinthe.

However, Abraxas also appears in three of the short films: “Stigma,” “MAMA,” and “Awake.” In the first, Abraxas appears, not as Namjoon, but as graffiti on a wall that Taehyung is scratching at with a knife. The image is difficult to see, but the camera captures him carving the word “Abraxas” onto the graffiti, set in green lighting. Taehyung might be associated with the role of Demian, but that, too, has ties to Abraxas. The image is clearer in “MAMA,” where we see the full image reflected in Hobi’s eye (see figure 2.20), before the room around him changes to neon lighting with splashes of paint on the walls. In the painting, we see the words, “I am Abraxas,” under the black image of Abraxas at the center of the graffiti-covered wall. There is a subtle reference to the HYYH narrative as well, as Taehyung and Namjoon used to spray paint

walls together in the HYYH video content, tying him not only to Abraxas as a motif but also to Namjoon as both Abraxas and his HYYH partner. Additionally, the use of neon lights and flashes functions as it does in “Blood Sweat & Tears” earlier: it represents the rapid switches between the HYYH and *WINGS* worlds as Jin nears his final form of self, and the worlds begin to merge.



Figure 2.20. Hobi's eye in “MAMA.”

Earlier, I discussed the seating arrangement in “Blood Sweat & Tears” that placed Taehyung between Jin (Sinclair) and Namjoon (Abraxas) and argued that he functions as the bridge between the two characters. The argument still holds with the addition of the Abraxas motif; Demian is essentially a stepping stone for Sinclair to use to reach Abraxas, the final stage of balance in the search for self, especially since Demian is often associated with the word daimon, or devil. Abraxas, as the god of both God (good) and the devil (evil), can only be reached by combining the good, represented by Sinclair, and the evil, represented by Demian. To take the analysis one step further, Taehyung's connection to Abraxas is found in *Save Me*, although it is made to Namjoon in the webtoon. Namjoon is Taehyung's HYYH partner and the one who tells Jin about his suspicions and concerns about Taehyung's home life. Because of Namjoon, Jin was able to save Taehyung from killing his father; the loop was reset because Jin

had died, but he wakes up with the realization that his inability to succeed in saving everyone was because he had attempted to do so alone (HYBE ep. 15). In a way, Namjoon had led Jin to his freedom by pushing him towards Taehyung and that final understanding that he needed to work with the other boys, the light and the dark in his life, to succeed and escape the loops. Finally, Abraxas appears in “Awake” on the wallpaper of the hallway Jin walks through as he heads towards the end of the hallway and towards the light (see figure 2.21). The light at the end represents his final destination, the final step of self-becoming: the combination of both good and evil that comes after Sinclair kisses Demian and becomes ‘whole.’ If we consider the release dates of the *WINGS* content, Jin exits the hallway, towards the light, and enters the museum that “Blood Sweat & Tears” is set in.



Figure 2.21. Jin in the hallway of “Awake.”

Minor Motif: Pistorius

The next minor motif is Pistorius. Pistorius plays a major role as Sinclair’s mentor, providing him the space to explore the concept of Abraxas and the idea of self-becoming. Demian was the first to introduce Sinclair to Abraxas, but Pistorius essentially functioned as a

physical manifestation of that underlying connection between Sinclair and Demian. Why do I assign Yoongi to this character? In the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video, Yoongi plays Buxtehude’s “Passacaglia in D Minor” on the organ, the “exquisite piece of old organ music” Pistorius promised to play for Sinclair the next time they met (Hesse 122). As he plays the organ, the light shines on Yoongi, alone and in the dark (see figure 2.22). The dark room, in addition to his dark clothes, represents his placement in the dark world, mirroring Pistorius’ placement in Sinclair’s dark world. As the passacaglia continues playing, the frame switches to the seven boys running through the museum’s back door; the Demians are pulling their Sinclairs to the light as Jin, looking around for the source of the music, and Taehyung, noticing Jin’s hesitation, lag behind. As I described earlier, Taehyung covers Jin’s eyes, and when he removes his hands, we see the winged statue. Just as Pistorius guided Sinclair to Demian, Yoongi indirectly led Jin to Demian by playing the organ, allowing Taehyung to reveal himself as Demian, but also allowing Jin to kiss his Demian and achieve the fulfillment of self.



Figure 2.22. Yoongi playing the organ in “Blood Sweat & Tears.”

Minor Motif: The Apple

The apple is the final motif that resonates in the *WINGS* content. In *Demian*, the apple represents Sinclair's first sin, the cause of his fall. Sinclair recalls how early in his youth, he had lied to his peers about having "stolen a sackful of apples at night, and not just ordinary apples but exclusively Reinetts and Golden Pearmaines, the best varieties" (Hesse 20-21). But Kromer, a classmate of his, had caught the lie and threatened him, demanding money in exchange for keeping his secret. And with this deal, Sinclair had "carried shadows alone with [him] that were unknown to the world of [his] home" (Hesse 26). In *WINGS*, it plays a similar, minor role, primarily with Jin and Jimin's individual narratives. The short film "Stigma" references the apple and the first fall: "It was the first fissure in the columns that had upheld my childhood," Namjoon quotes from *Demian*, "which every individual must destroy before he can become himself. Such fissures and rents grow together again, heal, and are forgotten, but in the most secret recesses they continue to live and bleed" ("Stigma," 00:00:09-38). I argue that there are actually two apples in the main *WINGS* narrative, both of which originate in the HYYH timeline, but are haunting the *WINGS* content. The first appears when Jin first meets the other six boys; though it isn't technically a lie, their friendship grows as they hang out in their secret hideout: an abandoned classroom. And as it grows, so does the distance between Jin and his home. The secret hangouts in the classroom function as the "first fissure" that chipped away at the rigid, rule-following columns of Jin's childhood. The second 'apple' is the one that breaks the new world Jin lives in with his friends, rather than the light world from which he originally came. This time, Jin breaks the columns with his own hands when he reveals to the school principal that they had been using the classroom without permission. As a result, the principal hits

Jungkook after finding him and Yoongi there, and Yoongi retaliates. He is expelled, and the friendship collapses. Had there been no secret, no lie, the boys would have never crossed paths, and their friendship would've never been broken. The apple appears in both music videos and Jin's short film, "Awake," a constant reminder of how Jin ended up in the endless time loop and of the consequences of his actions.

In "Awake," the apple appears in front of Jin, tempting him with yet another lie. He picks up the apple, pulls it close to his mouth as if to bite into it, but lets it drop to the floor (see figure 2.23). Jin's refusal to eat the apple signifies his refusal to recommit his 'first' sin, to lie again and ruin his friendship further; moreover, it allows him to break away from the loop he constantly finds himself in. Although we don't see Jin interacting with the apple in any of the other content—there is an apple in front of him in "Blood Sweat & Tears," but it just sits there—it holds symbolic value, and when he does come in contact with it, he rejects it. Again, if we consider the timeline of the *WINGS* content, once Jin throws away the apple, he walks out of the hallway towards the light and towards Abraxas, of self-becoming.



Figure 2.23. Jin and the apple in "Awake."

Although the apple holds some symbolic value to Jin, it holds more influence in Jimin's narrative, as spotlighted in "Lie." Jimin, one of the three boys who are in the upper-middle class,

holds the most secrets in the HYYH narrative; most of his backstory is kept a mystery, even to the audience, and he tells a lot of lies to keep it so.¹³ Earlier in the short film, Jimin was panicking in his isolated hospital room, before watching the curtains rise in the room, revealing that he was actually surrounded by a completely black room. The camera then switches back to the interview room he was in at the beginning of the film, and focuses on Jimin, who bites into the apple in his hand. Unlike Jin, who refuses the apple and sin, Jimin fully accepts it. He accepts his lies and willingly walks into the dark world; in a way, he represents an earlier version of Jin who lied to escape the suffocating light world and walk into a dark world that liberated him. The distortion seen in figure 2.24 represents the multiple versions of himself, the good and the bad, that are within him, and once he bites into the apple, we are presented with one singular Jimin, who defiantly stares into the camera, breaking the fourth wall, and essentially challenging perception by the inner world. For Jimin, the apple represents the acceptance of both the good and the bad in him, specifically the acceptance of the “bad” or the dark world.



Figure 2.24. Jimin and the apple in “Lie.”

¹³ Jimin’s backstory is more fleshed out in the 2024 K-drama, *Begins ≠ Youth*, but up until then, fans were provided very little information about it.

The *WINGS* Narrative on Coming-of-Age

Now that I've analyzed the *WINGS* narrative with close attention, looking at the motifs that make up the narrative and the details that accompany them, this section will be dedicated to analyzing the narrative on a more macroscopic level: the narrative as a whole and how it addresses coming-of-age. As I've argued throughout my thesis, the events we see in the *WINGS* video content are part of a false reality that Jin created to cope with the events in the HYYH trilogy.

In the three HYYH albums, the audience is introduced to the seven boys and their lives. Jin stems from a rich family, as his father is an important political figure (his mother is out of the picture, likely due to passing away, although we get very little information about her), and has moved to the small town where the other six boys reside. They meet by coincidence, all assigned to detention for various reasons. The seven boys then spend several months, possibly years, hanging out at the abandoned classroom they were assigned to clean during detention, bonding over silly things and becoming close friends.¹⁴ Then, as I've described before, Jin accidentally causes trouble when he reveals to the principal that they had been using the room without permission. The principal, disappointed in Jin for befriending "bad influences," then heads to the room and hits the boys. Yoongi hits back and is then expelled, causing the group to fall apart. Jin is sent to the States to study abroad and loses contact with the others for two years before returning. This is where the HYYH album content merges with the webtoon, *Save Me*, which sets the narrative on April 11th, 2022. After finding out what happened to his friends, Jin falls

¹⁴ The exact timeline of the HYYH story is a little difficult to grasp solely through the video content, which is why my summary isn't as precise as I want it to be

asleep, where he meets a talking white cat and is offered the chance to turn back time and save his friends from their tragic fates. Thus begins the time loops where Jin is repetitively given the opportunity to save his friends, though he fails continuously. And it is during the *Save Me* narrative that we find the *WINGS* storyline, specifically during one of the final loops featured in the webtoon. The order of the *WINGS* content is as follows: “Begin,” “Lie,” “Stigma,” “First Love,” “Reflection,” “MAMA,” “Awake,” “Intro: Boy Meets Evil,” “Blood Sweat & Tears,” and the Japanese version of “Blood Sweat & Tears.” If we are to summarize the layout of the BU narrative, the HYYH trilogy marked the before and during the time loops, *WINGS* represents the end of the loops, and the *Love Yourself* trilogy, which was released from 2017 to 2018, functions as the following epilogue of the narrative, capturing the final loop and what happens after.

The boys we see in the time loops, aside from Jin, are not real. They are subconscious creations of Jin’s imagination meant to guide him in his journey as he matures and learns to accept both the light and dark in him, just as Demian did for Sinclair. They are meant to disappear at the end of the story because they end up becoming a part of Jin, like Demian was to Sinclair, as a symbol of the unity of light and dark, good and evil in Jin. Their shift from the physical into the intangible highlights how the events in the album were meant to help Jin cope with reality and utilize the past—both the happy memories and the unfortunate consequences of his actions—to move forward into maturation.

Though the earlier motifs support my part of my thesis that deals with the minute details and parallels to Hesse’s *Demian*, there are several other elements to discuss that are essential to the second part of my thesis that argues for the claim about the false reality in *WINGS*. These elements are evident in the short films, “First Love” and “Awake,” as well as the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video. First, we have Yoongi’s short film, “First Love.” The biggest hint that Jin

was living a fake reality is found in the *Demian* quote that opens the film: “There are numerous ways in which God can make us lonely and lead us back to ourselves. This was the way it dealt with me at that time” (“First Love,” 00:00:09-21). Abraxas, the primary god in the BU narrative and in *Demian*, has physically isolated Jin from the others in an attempt to lead him back to himself, to his full, complete self. The method is a little magical, but it accomplishes the same result as in *Demian*: it allows Jin to come to terms with the events of his youth and enter adulthood as a complete person.

Next, we have Jin’s short film, “Awake,” which emphasizes the theory of a false reality through polaroids. Midway through the film, Jin walks through a dark hallway into a bright room with several key elements from the others’ films: Jungkook’s bed in “Begin”; the painting of Eva from “MAMA”; the scratches on the door spelling out “Lies”;¹⁵ Yoongi’s piano; the painting of Taehyung that mirrors that of Demian; and the lock on a wardrobe that mirrors those around the phone booth in “Reflection.” This room represents a ‘snapshot’ of the reimagined light world Jin creates that functions as a stepping stone for him to move forward in life with the understanding that his friends’ fates might not be as salvageable as he desires. Once inside, Jin set six lily petals onto the floor before burning them. Lilies symbolize purity, rebirth, and innocence, and burning them implies that Jin is letting go of his innocence, opening the door of opportunity to rebirth (“Lily Flower Meaning & Symbolism”). Once he burns them, the walls and the room around him begin to warp, almost as if he has been drugged—this is perhaps a nod towards the motif of

¹⁵ In “Stigma,” Taehyung asks to make a phone call, a phone we hear ringing in “Reflection.” When Namjoon goes to answer the phone, located in a phone booth, he is unable to because the booth is tied up in chains and unable to be opened. The camera then shifts to show the word “liar” spray painted on the side, likely by Taehyung, who used to graffiti walls with Namjoon in the HYYH content.

absinthe, which caused those who ingested it to hallucinate. After Jin comes to the realization that the window he was looking at was actually a mirror, he stands up and leaves the room, entering another dark hallway, a hallway with the image of Abraxas across its wallpaper. As he walks into the light at the end of the hall, the camera pans back to the room, where there are six polaroids left on the floor (see figure 2.25). In the HYYH narrative, Jin would be seen with a polaroid camera in hand, taking pictures of his friends as they hung out. The six polaroids here have replaced the six lily petals he burnt earlier, and as the images fade into view, the audience can see that they've captured six different elements to represent the six boys. There's a framed painting with the phrase “살아남아야 한다” (“I have to survive/live”) from Namjoon's “Reflection,” a picture of Eva from Hobi's “MAMA,” an apple from Jimin's “Lie,” a piano from Yoongi's “First Love,” the painting of the sparrowhawk from Jungkook's “Begin,” and the scratches on the door that spell “Lie” for Taehyung (see figure 2.25), from left to right. The fact that Jin is leaving the polaroids behind is symbolic of the fact that he is moving on from the imaginary world he's created and is moving forward into adulthood. Moreover, the fact that they've replaced the lilies symbolizes the boys' role in Jin's youth. He is not only letting go of his innocence as a child, but also his youth as an experience.

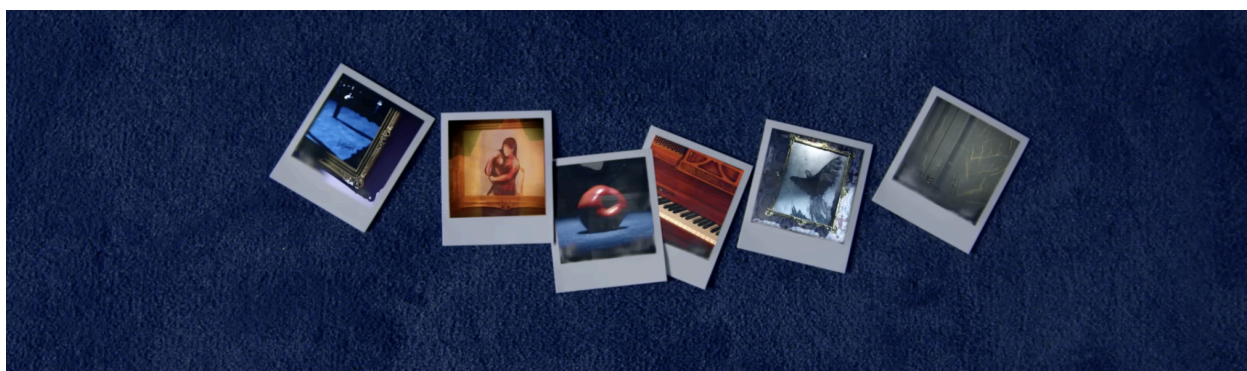


Figure 2.25. Six polaroids in “Awake.”

Finally, we are led to the music videos. Midway through the original “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video is an interlude, where Jin is standing alone, surrounded by a red background and holding a balloon. As Namjoon reads from *Demian*, Jin lets go of the balloon and watches it float up into the sky, symbolizing that he is letting go of his youth and childhood and stepping into adulthood as he accepts both the light and dark into his self. After letting go, the focus shifts to Yoongi, who begins playing the passacaglia. Jin is then able to come to the end of his story as he kisses the statue and learns to accept all parts of himself: the light and the dark. Not only does it represent Jin letting go of his childhood, but it simultaneously represents him letting go of the grief and guilt he held towards the others. Once he let go, he was able to step out of the time loops and back into reality. Additionally, the final scene in the music video is that of Jin standing in front of a now black mirror. As I’ve already discussed the symbolism of the mirror earlier in the paper, I will be focusing on the flowers next to him. There is a white lily next to the Jin we see moving around in the music video, and a purple liatris inside the mirror with the Jin that is reflected. As aforementioned, the white lily symbolizes rebirth and innocence—things Jin has both accepted and given up, respectively. Although I argue that Jin can step out of the reimagined light world he’s creating to cope with the events in HYYH, he doesn’t officially leave until the end of the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video, when he kisses the statue and then begins to crack. So, having him outside the mirror, still in the fictional reality, and placed next to a white lily, is a visual symbol of where he stands in the larger BU timeline. On the other hand, a liatris represents several things, the most important being a desire to start again (“Liatris”). Jin’s reflection is a representation of his true self and his innermost desires, and replacing a lily with a liatris emphasizes the idea that what we see might not be what is really happening.

The Japanese version of the “Blood Sweat & Tears” music video is where we get the most obvious implication that Jin is in a false, parallel world during *WINGS*. This is most evident in the use of mirroring through camera angles. Throughout the music video, the camera often captures one member looking to his left or right, then shifting to capture another member looking in the opposite direction, creating the illusion that they, although set in vastly different locations, are looking at each other. However, the scene that best supports my theory about parallel worlds is near the end, when Jimin, dressed in a colorful knit sweater, runs into a dark hallway that looks like the one Jin left in “Awake.” He had come in from the dark outside, where he had left Yoongi standing by his piano, and entered the hallway from the entrance filled with light. The camera changes to focus on another Jimin, dressed in the black and white shirt we see him wearing in “Lie,” and sitting in a blue room. The focus goes back and forth between the Jimin in the hallway and the one inside the room for a second, before the former stops in front of a door and looks to his right (the audience’s left). At the same time, the latter sits up and looks to his left (the audience’s right), as if sensing something was on the other side of the door. The first opens the door to the blue room, and just before the latter can see him properly, a hand comes in, covering his sight. Finally, we see the two in the same room: Jimin in the knit shirt has come into the room white shirt Jimin was in, although his eyes are covered by Yoongi—the Yoongi who was standing outside with Jimin (see figure 2.26).¹⁶ The fact that both boys exist simultaneously in the same universe emphasizes the theory that *WINGS* is set in Jin’s subconscious as an alternate reality that mirrors the original we see in *HYYH* as a way for Jin to come to terms with the events that took place in it. Given that the Jimin in the knit shirt comes into the dark from the light while white shirt Jimin is set inside in the dark, I further argue that knit shirt Jimin

¹⁶ This is evident in Yoongi’s leopard-print shirt, the same one he was wearing earlier when outside with Jimin.

represents a Jimin who has reached his freedom and has managed to unite both the light and dark in him, and white shirt Jimin represents the Jimin from HYYH, the Jimin from Jin's past who is stuck in the dark and unable to break free from his fate. Though I believe that these claims are, and have been, supported by the evidence I have presented in this thesis, I do acknowledge that they are still—to an extent—non-canonical due to the confusing nature of the BU, as BTS intended.



Figure 2.26. Yoongi and two Jimins.

Essentially, the *WINGS* narrative pulls from *Demian* to create a story of coming of age that is based on the journey to become whole by uniting and accepting both the light and dark parts of oneself, but then expands on it to focus on the darker struggles of youth, particularly those experienced during teen years and young adulthood. This allows them to reach a larger, general audience who may find themselves creating imaginary worlds to cope with the reality of the world they live in, or may use fiction as a way to understand and cope with their own struggles. They are then able to leave their imaginary worlds, as Jin does, to face the 'real world' they put aside. Highlighting seven boys and their very real problems appeals to a modern audience of teens and young adults, who can then use the lessons the boys learn to move on in their own lives.

Chapter Three:

Revisiting Boy Bands and Themes of Youth and Coming of Age

Up to this point, I've analyzed the references to a German bildungsroman made by a Korean boy band and have argued for the new, reimagined message that they've presented to both their fans and a wider, general audience. But why should non-fans care about these references? What does it matter that a KPop group references an old bildungsroman? In the larger conversation, *WINGS* offers a reimagined version of Hermann Hesse's bildungsroman, *Demian*, by pulling from the latter's motifs and narrative to provide an 'updated' story about youth and coming of age. In doing so, BTS encourages both the general audience and their fans to revisit their pre-established notions of what the novel conveys, of what it means to find your self and come into maturity. But they also encourage us to revisit preconceptions about what BTS stands for and the message they are trying to spread. That is, basing *WINGS* on *Demian* brings a new light, not just to the general population's understanding of BTS, but also their understanding of well-studied works and of universal themes like coming of age and youth, regardless of media form and background.

Essentially, *WINGS* adds to the discourse about intertextuality by opening up a discussion about the role of culture in reinterpretation. Although the general story is consistent across narratives, the *WINGS* album provides an artistic, multimedial reinterpretation of the novel that is inherently influenced by Korean culture and BTS's personal experiences, allowing them to expand on the pre-existing narrative found in the bildungsroman. People are already familiar with the message of self-becoming that dominates *Demian*; how, for someone to truly become themselves, they need to accept both the good and the bad in them, they need to allow their worlds

to merge so that they become whole. However, the *WINGS* interpretation adds a new level of relatability: how navigating self-becoming is less linear and not as universal as *Demian* conveys it to be. Sinclair navigates his coming of age mostly alone, occasionally interacting with Demian and his same-age peers, but he does so almost as if in a mentorship with the others rather than in a friendship of equal standing. The seven boys in *WINGS* navigate their coming of age together, battling stereotypes and societal expectations as a group, even if their backgrounds and individual struggles differ. Moreover, *Demian* is set in a historical context wherein the possibility of war looms over Sinclair, adding a stereotypical transition into manhood through military deployment to his journey. Although politics are still prevalent in *WINGS* and the BU, it becomes a minor detail, as the navigation of societal expectations to conform pushes through as the main struggle—a struggle that is widely applicable to a mixed audience. Emphasizing more modern problems and situations appeals to a modern audience and makes the old message easier to consume, allowing it to become relevant to an audience who may not have related to it in its original form.

The difference in media also adds to the discussion of intertextuality through reinterpretation, particularly how the fusion of literature with pop culture allows the former to become revitalized in the modern context, reigniting scholarly conversations and introducing new perspectives. *Demian* is provided in written form in a physical book, limiting readers and scholars to the imagery that is typed out and left to their imagination. The film content in *WINGS* and the BU enhances the existing narrative by introducing visual elements and a cinematic magic that draws the audience in and immerses them in the boys' stories, allowing them to explore the story outside the limits of their own imagination. Moreover, the BU narrative spans years of content, starting in 2015 with the release of *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life Pt. 1* to 2018

with the release of *Love Yourself: Answer*, but also spans multiple different forms of content, as the BU is featured in books like the *HYYH* (花樣年華) *The Notes* books, the webtoon, and the YouTube content. The use of real-time in releasing the content, and by extension, the story itself, better immerses the audience into the boys' journey into adulthood because they, too, are growing into maturation with these seven Korean boys. In a way, it speaks to the universality of youth that transcends individual differences.

Furthermore, we get a rare engagement of literary works and themes in music that goes deeper than simple surface-level allusions. Intertextuality is a common occurrence in BTS's discography, as evident in their reference to *Demian* here, but also to Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" in "Spring Day" and several other moments. However, it is not one found in other Kpop artists' discography, nor is it often found in Western artists' work—at least not to the narrative level found in the BU. The successful incorporation of literature in music should now encourage artists to utilize a deeper form of intertextuality in their own works to enhance the messages they hope to convey, whether they speak to personal or larger social issues. Furthermore, the impressive success of BTS's ability to revive conversations about *Demian* speaks to the potential of popular art and its ability to accomplish things larger than we typically expect of it. In fact, on top of enhancing their artist lore (i.e., the BU), BTS utilizes their discography to speak on larger social issues.

BTS is well-known for their social impact on the youth of today; their discography, starting from their 2013 debut album, *Dark & Wild*, to their current solo albums, addresses a variety of issues and scenarios that resonate with their listeners, including—but not limited to—academic pressures, romance, and societal expectations. Furthermore, BTS has been at the head of several projects, like their collaboration with UNICEF for the #LoveYourself movement

that began in 2017 and aimed to “help improve their (young people’s) lives and rights” (Wylie), and their \$1 million donation to the BLM movement during COVID-19 (Velez). For over a decade, BTS has been utilizing their platform as artists to convey messages of encouragement to their listeners and to reflect the reality of life through a creative outlet. In fact, there is a lot of existing literature about BTS and their larger, global impact, where “Many fans find BTS’s lyrics to be authentic, as they are imbued with philosophical depth that allows for contemplation of the precarities of life,” consequently dubbing the band as “the voice of the millennial reality” (Kim 193). Despite their range beyond just music, BTS is often stereotyped as a simple boy band from Korea that spotlights pretty faces and mediocre talent. So by introducing and acknowledging a deeper level of intertextuality and cultural message in their work, BTS forces the general audience to reevaluate their limiting expectations of the relationship between an artist and their work and their audience, or the larger world. They encourage the general public to see BTS—and their perception of pop culture—in a new light.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to highlight the intertextuality in *WINGS* and its impact on current understandings of youth and coming of age. It focused on Hermann Hesse's 1919 bildungsroman, *Demian*, and the video content that accompanied BTS's 2016 album, *WINGS*: seven short films, one comeback trailer, and two music videos. My analysis aimed to fill the gap in existing scholarship surrounding BTS, as it failed to consider BTS's mainstream narrative—referred to as the BU—on the reimagined coming-of-age narrative that was pulled from *Demian*. I close read a total of eight motifs from *Demian* that dominated the *WINGS* storyline, and argued that the central themes of youth, self-becoming, and coming-of-age remained consistent across these two works; however, the latter spotlighted the darker aspects of the journey to make the stories more relatable to a modern audience. Moreover, I highlighted the difference in narrative perspective: *Demian* featured a retrospective understanding of youth, focusing more on the journey to maturity from a point where you have already reached your true, complete self; *WINGS*, however, explores that journey as it is happening in real-time and allows for the more raw emotions to affect the way the story is told. The goal was not to make the *WINGS* storyline entirely comprehensive and coherent, but to come to terms with what the complexity was achieving and what it was trying to convey amidst the purposeful ambiguity. Finally, I argued that by utilizing *Demian* as the base, BTS encourages their audience—both fans and not—to reevaluate their understanding of what Hesse is conveying in his novel, and their understanding of the extent to which an artist—specifically a KPop boy band—can impact the larger social context in which they are placed.

However, given the limitations of this project—both in scope and page limit—I was unable to dive as deep into the BU lore as I might have wished. Furthermore, I was unable to analyze all of the *WINGS* content with equal attention, and mentioned some videos more than others based on how much information I could draw from them within the sections I chose to focus on in this project. If given a broader canvas to work with—that is, more pages and time—I could have studied the BU as a whole, from *HYYH* to *Love Yourself*, which would allow me to explore BTS’s coming-of-age narrative as an extensive work that spanned several years and included so many subplots and stories, rather than as a small part to a larger work. BTS’s fictional storyline starts with the *HYYH* trilogy, which has its own set of video/film content, books, and plotlines to explore, and it has been theorized to end with the *Love Yourself* series that was released from 2017 to 2018 and includes four parts: *Wonder*, *Her*, *Tear*, and *Answer*, so there may be new perspectives and theories to analyze in the other albums. However, I could also stay within the *WINGS* content and do an even deeper analysis of all the little details in all of the content, especially those I missed in this project due to the specificity of my topic. Finally, I could study how the BU and BTS’s discography, including their solo work during Chapter 2,¹⁷ functions as a *Künstlerroman*, a literary subgenre of the *bildungsroman* that is centered on the artist’s own coming of age as it is reflected in their work.

Despite my project’s limitations, my love for intricate fantasy worlds and for the messages BTS shares with their audience has allowed me to open a new door in scholarship for

¹⁷ The term “Chapter 2” refers to BTS’s second half of their career, during which they released several solo albums and worked as solo artists due to South Korea’s mandatory military enlistment requirement. Chapter 2 began in December 2022 with Jin’s enlistment, which was then followed by the other six members, and ended in June 2025, when Yoongi, the final member, was discharged from service.

deeper analyses of the impact BTS has on the world. What originally began as simple curiosity and fanship encouraged a critique of both my favorite artists and the possibilities of intertextuality between music and literature. When I started, I had hoped to break the presumptions surrounding BTS by arguing that their music was more than just KPop, which is so often degraded for their fandom and the language barrier. I believe that I was, at the very least, partially successful with the arguments and theories I highlight in this project and the arguments I encourage others to explore on their own. Youth, with its struggles and accomplishments, is, in fact, the most beautiful moment in life.

Works Cited

- Aimen, Bibi, and Shaukat Ali Khan. "The Jungian analysis of symbols and visuals in the BTS' Song *Blood, Sweat and Tears*." *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences*, vol 4, no. 2, 2023, pp. 45-53, <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsms/4.2.3>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) '피 땀 눈물' (Blood Sweat & Tears)' Official MV." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 9 Oct. 2016, <youtu.be/hmE9f-TEutc?si=wTSk5ZU-NwEI3tVG>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS 'Boy Meets Evil' Comeback Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 25 Sept. 2016, <outu.be/iJJSh-eEdRk?si=ZnIIBkEf9cON4Pa4>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #1 BEGIN." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 4 Sept. 2016, <youtu.be/yR73I0z5ms0?si=Ui4czrgBACrHOObTo>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #2 LIE." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 5 Sept. 2016, youtu.be/_y8-HD5O69g?si=owjrsfrXoeuqFyf-.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #3 STIGMA." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 7 Sept. 2016, <youtu.be/3i34dFsjRY4?si=nlpzUY5LigSWTjRh>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #4 FIRST LOVE." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 8 Sept. 2016, <youtu.be/7VPcnJ9oJ-k?si=57bFvZT0tc8Ktjz3>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #5 REFLECTION." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 9 Sept. 2016, <youtu.be/wzxjM-82RW8?si=TD6foSvDDTUCcuiE>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #6 MAMA." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 10 Sept. 2016, <youtu.be/wu82g0vyyTY?si=PhM-qXMNAyFMadnq>.
- "BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #7 AWAKE." *YouTube*, uploaded by HYBE LABELS, 13 Sept. 2016, <youtu.be/WYbrLIVeLYk?si=FxSqBFj0ceKAcGRd>.
- "BTS (防弾少年団) '血、汗、涙 -Japanese Ver.-' Official MV." *YouTube*, uploaded by

- HYBE LABELS, 9 May 2017, youtu.be/7OX7dIRReSA?si=EdWPkqq7ibgGuFt3.
- Hesse, Hermann. *Demian*. 2018, General Press, 2023.
- Hicks, Jesse. "The Devil in a Little Green Bottle: A History of Absinthe." *Distillations Magazine*, 5 Oct. 2010, www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/the-devil-in-a-little-green-bottle-a-history-of-absinthe/. Science History Institute Museum & Library.
- HYBE. *Save Me*. Illustrated by LICO, NAVER Webtoon, 2019, www.webtoons.com/en/drama/bts-save-me/list?title_no=1514.
- Kang, Myeongseok. *Beyond the Story: 10-Year Record of BTS*. Translated by Anton Hur, Slin Jung, and Clare Richards, Flatiron Books, July 2023, p. 211.
- Kim, Suk-Young, and Youngdae Kim. "The BTS Phenomenon." *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop*, edited by Suk-Young Kim, Cambridge University Press, 2023, p. 193.
- Knapp, Bettina L. "Abraxas: Light and Dark Sides of Divinity in Hermann Hesse's *Demian*." *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1984, pp. 30-35. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/abraxas-light-dark-sides-divinity-hermann-hesses/docview/1291664066/se-2?accountid=14512.
- Kwon, Marci. "Blood, Sweat, and Tears: BTS, Bruegel, and the Baroque." *Bangtan Remixed: A Critical BTS Reader*, edited by Patty Ahn et al., Duke University Press, 2024, p. 70. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.16331949.10>.
- Lazore, Courtney. "Success Story: How Storytelling Contributes to BTS's Brand." *Asia Marketing Journal*, no. 22, no. 4, 2021, p. 52. <https://doi.org/10.15830/amj.2020.22.4.47>.
- "Liatris." *FloraLife*,

floralife.com/flowers/liatris/#:~:text=Symbolizes%3A%20Liatris%20symbolizes%20happiness%2C%20joy,try%20again%20or%20an%20apology.

“Lily Flower Meaning & Symbolism.” *The Bouqs Co. Fresh Trimmings*, 6 Nov. 2023,

bouqs.com/blog/lily-flower-meaning-symbolism/?srsltid=AfmBOorjsVqbBIKyTtXvYXWvg9gNaUwHnK_SJnEeWz48bTHvrCf05wx9.

Nedelcu, Daniel. “Blending Cultures in BTS’s ‘Blood Sweat and Tears.’” *Linguaculture (Iași)*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2024, pp. 46-8, <https://doi.org/10.47743/lincu-2024-2-0383>.

Rodchyn, Zoriana, and Nataliia Blahun. “GENDER AND ARCHETYPE AS COMPONENTS OF THE CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN ‘DEMIAN’ AND ‘NARCISSUS AND GOLDMUND’ BY HERMANN HESSE.” *Ezikov Svyat (Orbis Linguarum)*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2022, p. 165, <https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v20i1.21>.

Simon, Lucy. “Absinthe Explained: Everything You Want to Know.” *Food&Wine*, 9 Dec. 2022, www.foodandwine.com/cocktails-spirits/what-is-absinthe.

Velez, Jennifer. “BTS, Big Hit Entertainment And The BTS Army Donate Over \$2 Million To Black Lives Matter.” *GRAMMY AWARDS*, 8 Jun. 2020, www.grammy.com/news/bts-big-hit-entertainment-and-bts-army-donate-over-2-million-black-lives-matter.

Wild Dreamings. “Green Fairies, Yellow Fairies: The Sistership of Wormwood & Damiana.” *Medium*, 24 Jan. 2019,

medium.com/@wilddreamings/green-fairies-yellow-fairies-the-sistership-of-wormwood-damiana-bdf63fe7455a.

Wylie, Helen. “UNICEF and BTS celebrate success of ‘groundbreaking’ LOVE MYSELF

campaign.” *UNICEF*, 5 Oct. 2021,

www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-bts-celebrate-success-groundbreaking-love-my-self-campaign.