

ENGLISH 11: INTRODUCTION TO HESSE'S *Siddhartha*

Mark up this text as you read in order to help you complete your assignment at the end.

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is a great story, a tale of a gifted individual struggling to discover the meaning of his life. Through his many colorful adventures, he does not settle for conventional answers, but experiences the whole range of human possibilities for himself and comes finally to profound insight and vast compassion.

The story brings to life a human being's arduous quest for enlightenment, and has a strong resemblance to the story of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Hesse intends it to echo the life of the Buddha: he gives the hero the auspicious name Siddhartha, which was the Buddha's name when he was still the crown prince of the Shakya nation, before he awoke to Buddhahood. On top of that, Hesse sets his story in the same time and has Siddhartha meet—at a critical moment in his quest, the Buddha himself in all his glory. Siddhartha has gained enough insight by this time to recognize a Buddha—an “awakened one”—and he feels overwhelmed with joy. He is inspired by the World Teacher and admires his liberating presence. Unstinting in the reverence he lavishes on the Transcendent One, Hesse is unusual for European intellectuals of that era, who tended to fear the Buddha, confusing him with a world-negating nihilist. Then, there is a twist to the plot that in its artfulness is characteristic of the author: Siddhartha honors the Lord of Bliss by *not* following him, by not taking refuge in the new community of seekers of liberating truth. Leaving his lifelong friend Govinda under the Master's care, Siddhartha meets with the Buddha and respectfully announces that he will seek the supreme fulfillment of enlightenment on his own. Hesse catches the deep point that the enlightenment of the Buddha, of Siddhartha, or of anyone, must be *original*—that is, brought out from deep within the individual, by the individual.

Nowadays there are endless textbooks introducing us to “Buddhism,” as well as learned and ever more accurate translations of important

texts from within the many Buddhist traditions themselves. I produce these kinds of works myself. But *Siddhartha* is a work on a different level. It is great art. It moves the heart. It tells a story. It brings the great issues of life and death to within our experiential reach. Hesse himself lived through the inner changes required on such a path. He refined his sufferings and his joys in the crucible of art, and thus he brings the path to life in our hearts. Written nearly ninety years ago, *Siddhartha* is still fresh and moving and illuminating.

Through a deep engagement with India, Hesse, a gifted yet troubled German-born poet from a European, Christian missionary family, dramatized his understanding of the Buddha, India, and the universal search for personal meaning, happiness, and perhaps even some sort of supreme enlightenment. He wrote at the moment when Europe was absorbing the fruits of centuries of imperial conquest of the planet, fighting over the spoils, so to speak, in World War I. After an initial knee-jerk patriotic reaction to the war, Hesse turned away from it and gradually became dedicated to nonviolence, even as Gandhi was developing his own understanding and practice of nonviolence in South Africa and then India, long before he was well-known. Further, just before and during his writing of *Siddhartha* in 1918 and 1919, Hesse was in the midst of a profound outer and inner crisis. His family had broken up: his wife had been institutionalized, his three sons had been placed under the care of relatives and friends, and Hesse had fled from their residence in Bern in northern Switzerland to take refuge in the southern town of Montagnola, in the idyllic Swiss-Italian region of Ticino. He visited Zurich on the way, seeking spiritual and psychiatric help from the great Carl Jung.

Hesse presents in *Siddhartha* a prose-poem of lived philosophy, expressing a deep personal search for the transcendent yet experienced meaning of life. It is a gripping human drama of fathers and sons, lovers and

ascetics, and it introduces the West to the possibility of the transcendent wisdom of the Buddha. In Hesse's time, in the heart of Europe, only a tiny number of people would even entertain the idea that there is such a thing as a truly higher consciousness, a kind of higher intelligence that makes conventional awareness seem like being asleep. To Westerners, a step in the right direction toward "enlightenment" meant awakening from the mental imprisonment inherent in **dogmatic** religion—as it meant secularism; manipulative rationality, science as the systematic measurement of all dimensions of the physical universe; and above all, materialism. The possibility that there is another, deeper enlightenment, one that is experiential as well as intellectual, spiritual as well as scientific, transcendentally stable and yet consciously evolutionary, blissful, loving, humorous, and earthy—such a state of being accessible to humans was unheard of and unimaginable. It was first of all Hesse who made such a possibility—a conscious human evolution upward into higher dimensions of awareness—seem real to the Western public, by dramatizing it.

Still today, materialism is far too prevalent, challenged only by a kind of regressive fundamentalism that in turn stiffens the resolve of the secularists to remain opposed to all spirituality. The path to enlightenment still needs to be brought forth to the imagination as a living possibility, as Hesse did so vividly nearly a century ago.

Given how much less scholars knew about the "inner sciences" of the East in Hesse's time, it is astonishing how accurately Hesse intuited the foundational individualism of the quest for enlightenment. He focuses on this individualism as a transcendent good, yet at the same time does not abandon the exalting taste of the selfless love of life and humanity. His tale is an evocation of the lush beauty of nature, an enrichment of the mystical aestheticism of Europe with the timeless earthiness of India.

I first read *Siddhartha* at the very start of the 1960s, and I can still remember the powerful inspiration it gave me. Why would a young person seeking to escape from WASP-hood at Harvard turn to India as the mother of inner

exploration, when nothing in Western education would indicate that India was a source of great explorations in the quest for some transcendent truth? Clearly, Siddhartha was a model for my own journeys, for my own development of his vaunted skills at "fasting—waiting—thinking."

Looking into Hesse's personal life, I was astonished to discover many parallels between the troubled youth of this great psychic explorer, poet, critic, novelist, painter, and gardener who wandered the world before World War I and finally fled from the Rhineland down to southern Switzerland, and that of my own more humble and less accomplished self, hailing from Manhattan and traveling more or less on foot to India my first time out in 1961. At fifteen Hesse began to rebel against his strict **Pietistic** father and mother and the mission school they placed him in; he never felt comfortable in the conventional German society of the time. Some of us—certainly myself, and I think Hesse, too—through born in the West, tend to wander as if doomed to exile and always feel like "a stranger in a strange land." For both of us, forty-plus years and another World War apart, "Mother India" was a **salve**, a home, for our wandering spirits. Why? Is it because India's civilization alone has had the wisdom to open itself up truly to embrace the naturally homeless? Hesse himself had this to say about India:

For example, with my Indian journey I had an unforgettable experience. At first it was a real disappointment, I returned completely downcast. But almost ten years later, as I was writing *Siddhartha*, suddenly the Indian memories were extremely precious and positive, and the little disappointment of earlier on was extinguished.

Siddhartha was published in German in 1922. Its first English translation was published in 1951. Siddhartha's quest was an important model for the whole postwar generation's seeking of "Enlightenment in the East." For Hesse himself, the book articulates a complex of strands in his character. It shows how his rich appreciation for India conceived in a specific

Western way, inherited from his missionary grandfather and parents. He says:

And this learned and wise grandfather had not only Indian books and scrolls, but also shelves full of exotic wonders, not only coconut shells and strange birds' eggs, but also wooden and bronze idols and animals, silken paintings and a whole cabinet stuffed with Indian cloths and robes in all materials and colors... All this was part of my childhood, not less than the fir-trees of the Black Forest, the Nagold river, or the Gothic chapel on the bridge.

Siddhartha is distinguished by Hesse's consummate artistic, spiritual, and poetic sense of the high transcendent experiences and values accessible through the Indian "inner sciences" and "mind yogas." At the same time, the book contains a certain European, world-weary cynicism and a sense of the inevitable faultiness of all religious paths. Hesse again: "At the age of thirty, I was a Buddhist, of course not in the church-sense of the word." The book hums with Hesse's pursuit of Christian, Tolstoyan nonviolence and the inner kingdom, all the while roiled from within by its opposite: his own driving inner violence, his volcanic sensuality, and his deep despair of fulfilling human relationships—a despair that stemmed from his ambivalent struggles with his parents and his ups and downs with his first wife and three sons.

Rereading *Siddhartha* now, I can clearly see its influence on my decision at twenty to leave college and the study of Western literature, philosophy, and psychology, and seek a higher enlightenment in India. More than forty years later, I have gone back and forth from "the West" to "the East" so many times I can hardly tell the difference anymore, though I observe certain groups still struggling to maintain the "never the twain shall meet" sort of attitude. Having trod a little bit in both of the Siddharthas' footprints in my own small way, I appreciate the book even more. I can now unravel the tangled threads of Hesse's mixing of Hindu and Buddhist worldviews, his entrapment in some of the stereotyped views of "the East" that were almost inescapable for a man of his time and culture, and his romantic depiction of Buddhist/Hindu enlightenment as

a kind of return to nature, a resignation to the flow of the great river of life. In spite of this creative Hindu/Buddhist mixing, I enjoy the book much more now than I ever could have in my youth.

Hesse seems to have been haunted by a keen insight into the human condition, and his work seems to mark a great turning point in the growth of a genuine European respect for the civilization of enlightenment that developed in ancient India. He himself loved nothing more than to leave hearth and home and wander south to Italy with artistic friends, the European version of a *sadhu* (Hindu ascetic). He slept in bed-and-breakfasts or camped *alfresco*, contemplated nature and art, and took a break from the routine chores of householding in northern Europe (very likely overburdening his high-strung wife with their three sons). But it was hard to wander with open mind and heart and intellect in the Europe of that time, so he also went to the East Indies and southeast Asia. His keen artist's perception saw there that the complex fabric of culture of India was rich enough and its weave loose enough to accommodate all manner of eccentrics, wandering here and there, always on some spiritual pilgrimage or other, seeking beauty or peace, magical energy, or complete transcendence.

At this moment in my journey, I am very pleased to have the chance to introduce *Siddhartha* to a new generation, since I think it still has the power to inspire the seeker of higher truth. I do not pretend to evaluate Hesse's great achievement from some higher vantage of supposed enlightenment, which I do not claim for myself. But I have put in a bit of study of enlightenment's various forms and levels, the institutions and cultural orientations it has supported in various countries, and the high civilizations it ultimately created. And following *Siddhartha's* inspiration more than forty years ago, I did make a bit of progress—just enough to know that, as elusive as it continues to be, enlightenment is still highly worth pursuing.

Enlightenment is a funny sort of goal, perhaps uniquely so. Full enlightenment definitely seems to be the kind of understanding

that is claimed only by those who do not have it, even though they may sincerely think they do. It is quite simple, really—a kind of understanding that goes beyond “having” and “not having,” claiming or not claiming. It is more like an extreme tolerance of **cognitive dissonance**, a complete, selfless openness that embraces both knowing and not knowing, consciousness and unconsciousness, rather than some sort of resolved state of final closure, as one might expect. That does not mean that an Enlightened One might not advance herself as competently aware in a certain context, just as she might deny any state of knowledge in another one. It is easy to forget that the “enlightened,” by definition, live beyond the habitual boundaries of the alienated, self-centered person. They feel as empathetically present in others around them as they do in themselves, whereas previously all was separate and alone. So, everything the “enlightened” do or say occurs for them mostly in others’ perceptions of them; their great compassion is their total openness.

“Siddhartha” is a common Indian male name; it means “one who has attained his aim.” The name became famous when a prince of the Shakya nation of ancient India became the fully enlightened Buddha. His father, King Shuddhodhana, had named him Siddhartha to celebrate the auspicious circumstances of his birth and the outstanding omens of his high destiny. In choosing this name for his hero, Hesse made the Buddha a real person for his European readers by imagining what he must have gone through to become enlightened, what his enlightenment must have been like, and what this meant for any human being seeking the way and the truth.

Siddhartha is primarily a gripping tale, a fiction about a young man in search of the truth

of life and of, most importantly, the potential to be released from inherited habits of being and achieve a higher self. Hesse’s Siddhartha is a junior contemporary of the Shakya prince Siddhartha who became the Buddha. Like the prince, he grows up in privileged circumstances, with the best education available in his country and era. He has a strong spiritual opportunity as a member of the well-respected priestly and intellectual class, the Brahmins, which loosely means “the divines.” (Brahma is the name of the Indian nation’s personal Creator God, and *Brahman* is the Sanskrit word for “the transcendental absolute reality beyond all imagination or idea.”) While still a youth, Siddhartha becomes disillusioned with his social status and priestly role and decides to join the wandering spiritual ascetics of his day. These yogis are called *shramanas*, which means “world-weary wanderers” or “seekers,” those who retire from ordinary life and desire.

I am impressed by Hesse’s sophisticated self-restraint and intuitive respect in not attempting a dramatization of the biography of the first Siddhartha, the prince who becomes Shakyamuni Buddha. Instead, he created a parallel Siddhartha whose character he could freely allow to flourish in the artistic imagination. Why does Hesse tell his story in this way? Why didn’t he just write a fictional account of the original Siddhartha, and tell the life of the Buddha? Did he himself disagree with the Buddha’s teachings of the meaning of life and the nature of the path? How well did he know the Buddha’s teachings, after all? Hesse himself says: “I am not Siddhartha, I am only always and again on my way to him.”

Your Assignment

In 2-3 paragraphs, respond to the article and answer the following questions:

1. What aspects of Hesse’s life most heavily influence his writing?
2. What is familiar about the spiritual ideas focused on in the novel? What is unfamiliar?
3. What interests you about this text? What do you hope to gain from your study of *Siddhartha*?

