Siddhartha, Herman Hesse

Siddhartha Study guide

ALLUSIONS

Historical Background:

Siddhartha incorporates numerous allusions to the myths, doctrines, and rituals of Hinduism and Buddhism. It is important to understand some basic ideas about these world religions in order to fully understand the novel.

1. Hinduism:
   • Has roots in the religion of the Aryan peoples (speakers of Indo-European or Indo-Iranian languages) who invaded India @1500 B.C.E.
   • No single founder, grew over the course of 4,000 years in India
   • Hinduism evolved into a Polytheistic religion
   • Sacred texts= Vedas
     -composed in Sanskrit
     -handed down orally for centuries
     -oldest gradually committed to writing around 1200 B.C.E. with the Rig Veda (a celebrated collection of hymns)
     -expanded in succeeding centuries ~ Brahmans (priestly commentaries on the sacrifice) and the Upanishads (complex philosophical treatises)
   • These texts, the shruti (that which is written), are regarded as a basic, legitimate source of religious authority. They are complemented by:
     o Smriti (that which is remembered)
     o The Puranas (collections of myth, ritual, philosophy, and two ancient Indian epics)
       • Ramayana
       • Mahabharata (100,000 lines of verse composed over time from 300 B.C.E. to @ C.E. 1500)
   • 1st phase of Hinduism—Brahmanism—perform Vedic sacrifice to establish proper relationship with the gods and the cosmos
   • Doctrine of Brahman: the absolute reality that is the Self of all things

2. Caste System: (Though not officially in effect any longer, still very influential)
   • Brahmins (priests & scholars) at the top, Kshatriyas (rulers & warriors)—Siddhartha was born into this class, at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. Thus, he can read and write, unlike other characters in the novel.
   • Vaisyas (farmers & merchants)
   • Sudras (peasants & laborers)
   • Below the caste system lie the Untouchables (engage in menial or religiously “impure” tasks. This caste was unable to participate in religious ritual, live near members of other castes, etc. Untouchable caste legally abolished in 1949 (soon after independence from Great Britain) Mohandas K. Ghandi, a Hindu, called the Untouchables Harijans (children of God) worked toward abolishment of caste system.

3. Buddhism
   • Historians think Buddhism began as a reform movement within Hinduism, then evolved into a separate religion.
   • It eventually declined in India as a result of devotional movements and reforms within Hinduism
   • Today, a minority religion in India; prospers in China, Tibet, Japan.

Note: Though neither Hinduism nor Buddhism is monotheistic, many devotees focus worship on one divinity. For Buddhists, Buddha is a figure of veneration, not typically regarded as a god. Hindus typically worship on god among the pantheon, usually a major deity—Siva, Vishnu, Krishna (sometimes regarded as a human incarnation of Vishnu), or the Great Goddess (Mahadevi).

Influence on the West: personal devotion to God, not injuring others (ahimsa), and individual sanctity—ethical dimensions of Eastern religions that exert a profound influence in the West.

4. The Buddha
   • Siddhartha Gautama (called Gotoma in the novel), c. 563 B.C.E-483 B.C.E. born in S. Nepal, predicted at birth to be a world teacher or ruler
   • The son of a king—raised in luxury, married, fathered a son

Background Notes: adapted from the Prentice Hall study guide & notes of Helaine Braunig.
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- At age 29, renounced the world on leaving the palace he saw, on successive excursions, an old man, a sick man, a corpse, a begging monk. From the 1st, learned the inescapability of suffering & death; from the 4th, his destiny. Left his wife and son; became a wandering ascetic; studied meditation; undertook fasting and self torture, afraid he'd die before attaining enlightenment. At age 35, after a long period of meditation, attained enlightenment while sitting under a bo tree. Began to preach about the 4 noble truths & the 8-fold path. Spent the rest of his life preaching and founding an order of monks.

5. The Four Noble Truths
- The sorrow of existence, all human experience involves suffering.
- Desire for sensual delights causes suffering.
- Suffering can be ended through the extinction of desire.
- Following the "eightfold noble path" is the way to salvation.

6. The Eightfold Path
- Right views/beliefs
- Right intention/resolve
- Right speech
- Right action
- Right livelihood
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right concentration—leads to Nirvana, cessation of suffering and release from Samsara.

ANALYSIS

“The Brahmin’s Son”
1. What role does nature seem to be playing as we open the novel? Track the development of the metaphor of the river as you continue to read.
2. At what stage or on what path, in the Hindu conception, do we find Siddhartha at the beginning of the novel? What reason do you think Hinduism would offer to explain why he is not satisfied?
3. What is the “only important thing” that Siddhartha wants to know?
4. Why do you suspect Siddhartha is drawn to the Samanas?
5. Twins are a popular motif in myths. This novel relies heavily on mythic structure and style to tell its story. Notice two things as you read: the mythic qualities of the story, and the role Govinda plays in the novel. Is he a type of “twin” for Siddhartha? If so, what might he represent?

“With the Samanas”
6. What changes do you see in Siddhartha joins the Samanas? Why do you think these changes occur?
   - Why does Siddhartha say: “What I have so far learned from the Samanas, I could have learned more quickly and easily in every inn in a prostitute’s quarter, amongst the carriers and dice players” (16)? What does Govinda’s response reveal about Siddhartha’s meaning?
7. How do you make sense of the apparent paradox “knowledge has no worse enemy than the man of knowledge, than learning” (19) ?
8. What do you suppose Siddhartha means when he says about the Buddha’s teachings “I believe in my heart that we have already tasted the best fruit of it” (23)?

“Gotama”
9. What contradictory images or descriptions characterize the first encounter with the Buddha?
   - Why does Siddhartha choose not to join the order of the Illustrious One?
   - What, if anything, do you think is the Buddha’s opinion of Siddhartha at their parting?

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10. What has the Buddha stolen from Siddhartha? What has he given in return? What do you think the literal answers to these questions signify? How might the concept of the "twins" offer one interpretation here?

“Awakening”
11. To what realization does Siddhartha "awaken"? Why is his sense of isolation called “the last shudder of his awakening” (42)?

12. What does Part One seem to suggest about the purpose, advantages, and disadvantages of education?

13. Track Siddhartha’s progress through Part One. In terms of Hindu or Buddhist understanding, what path or paths has Siddhartha been traveling? On what path, if any, do we find him at the end of Part One?

“Kamala”

15. Does your opinion of Siddhartha change after he encounters Kamala? In what ways, and for what reasons?

   • Do you agree with Siddhartha’s assessment of his new life when he says: “Now everything is easy … I require clothes and money, that is all. These are easy goals which do not disturb one’s sleep.” Explain.

“Amongst the People”
16. When Kamaswami says that Siddhartha has lived on the possessions of others, Siddhartha replies that merchants also live on the possessions of others? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer

   • What problem does Kamaswami find in Siddhartha when he first becomes a merchant? How does he intend to solve this problem?

“Samsara”
17. Explain the simile of the potter’s wheel and that of the dying tree trunk.

18. Describe Siddhartha’s dream about the songbird. What do you think it means?

“By the River”
19. What one word awakens Siddhartha from his destructive reverie beneath the Cocoanut tree? Why did this word have such an effect?

   • Why does it seem appropriate for Govinda to save him here?

20. Siddhartha says to Govinda that the world is transitory. How does that reflect on his current circumstances?

   • What is the difference between a path going in circles from a path going in spirals? How is it significant to Siddhartha’s journey toward enlightenment?

   • Do you agree that the world of the senses, of the transitory is a wretched thing? Why?

21. By the end of the chapter, how does Siddhartha justify his recent past in Samsara?

“The Ferryman”
22. In the beginning of the chapter, what does Siddhartha sense about the river?

23. What makes Vasudeva a good listener?

   • What do you think the “other thing” is that Vasudeva says Siddhartha will learn from the river?

   • How does Siddhartha change the way he listens?

   • What does he learn from the river?

24. What specifically happens to Kamala?

   • What ironic thought occurs to Siddhartha just after Kamala dies?

“The Son”
25. For what reasons does Siddhartha worry about his son?

   • What does Vasudeva council him to do?

   • What does Siddhartha’s struggle with his son reveal about his own path to knowledge?

   • How does this situation resolve itself in Siddhartha’s mind and heart?

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“Om”

26. What change has taken place in Siddhartha at the beginning of the chapter? What has he realized about wisdom?
   • What realization does he have about Vasudeva and the river as he listens?
   • Why do you think that this allows Siddhartha to heal?

“Govinda”

27. What does Siddhartha tell Govinda about seeking?
   • Does this seem appropriate for Siddhartha to say this considering the journey he has taken?
   • What does he tell Govinda about wisdom? What is the difficulty with words and wisdom?
   • Do you agree or disagree? Why?
   • What does Govinda realize about Siddhartha? What is the evidence for this realization?

28. What are some of the important, specific details that Govinda sees in the face of Siddhartha?
   • Why do you think that the novel end with Govinda’s thoughts about Siddhartha rather than Siddhartha’s thoughts, since through most of the novel we see from Siddhartha’s point of view?

GLOSSARY
Key Terms/Doctrines of Hindu Religion:

1. **Brahma:** Hindu creator “god” or force
2. **Atman or Jiva:** the term for the individual soul
3. **Maya:** doctrine that holds that the material world is illusory—all things will eventually be reabsorbed into primal matter only to reappear again in a never-ending cycle of creation
4. **Samsara:** refers to both the world of material existence and the passing of souls from one life to another cycle of life/death recurs until the soul is released (attains moksha)
5. bondage in the repeating cycles of birth & death
6. **karma:** a later doctrine which hold that an individual’s fate or destiny in the current cycle can be influenced by good or evil actions in the past or can influence future incarnations, The individual reaps the results of his good & bad actions through a series of lives (transmigration of the soul)
7. **dharma:** People guided by this doctrine do not seek their own satisfactions but concentrate on duties and obligations underlies the caste system
8. **sannyasa:** stage of life in which one renounced all ties with society & pursued spiritual liberation
9. **Om:** a sacred word in Hinduism, expresses perfection
10. **Goal:** Liberation from suffering and from the compulsion to rebirth—attainable through elimination of passions and through knowledge of reality ~ finally, union with God