Siddhartha Essay, Research Paper

Siddhartha

Siddhartha is one of Herman Hesse s most finely written books. He wrote it during what some critics call his psychoanalytic period. It addresses the spiritual journey of a man. When Siddhartha is a young man, he and his friend, Govinda, decide to leave their Brahmin community. They go on a quest to obtain wisdom and spiritual knowledge. They believed that Samanic suffering might lead them to the goal they were reaching for. Although Siddhartha and Govinda did the scourge, neither found salvation. They both leave again and encounter Gotama, a righteous teacher. Govinda decides to stay and follow the teachings of Gotama, but Siddhartha yet again moves on. He crosses the river and on the boat ride meets Vasudeva, whom he befriends. After crossing the river, he goes to the city of Samsara, where he meets Kamala, a whore, and Kamaswami, a prosperous businessman. He soon grows weary of this, too, and leaves to live with Vasudeva. While he is being taught by Vasudeva to listen to the river, Kamala comes to him. She soon dies and Siddhartha is left to care for their child. The child soon leaves, because he is not used to this ascetic life. Soon after, Siddhartha realizes the unity of all things and is left by Vasudeva. Siddhartha then encounters Govinda for a final time. After being told of Siddhartha s new principles, Govinda realizes that Siddhartha has attained Nirvana without the formal doctrines of Gotama. This realization leads Govinda his own ultimate enlightenment.

Throughout this novel, many different elements are used to emphasize important points. Among the most crucial elements are setting, characterization, and themes. This essay analyzes each of these essential elements.

Siddhartha takes place during the 1500 s, in India, a Hindu region. This is significant because most Samanas were situated in areas where unchristian religions are dominant. The most important setting of the novel is the river. Rivers have always played an important role in the domestic and religious lives of Indians. It is their source of life and means of spiritual cleansing. It is a symbol to all philosophies that seek timelessness and perfection. For Siddhartha, it separates the polarities of his life. On one side of the river is Kamala, and on the other side is Gotama. He learns from traveling back and forth across the river and listening to it. Eventually, the traveling stops and Siddhartha becomes completely attuned to the voice of the river. Soon, the polarities dissolve into a whole that Siddhartha eagerly embraces. The river serves as both a boundary and a symbol of unity. The many-voiced song of the river echoed softly He could no longer distinguish the different voices- the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world the music of life. (109-110)

The culture is also important to Siddhartha. When the novel opens, Siddhartha is a Brahmin. Brahmins were at the top of the social caste system. They were princes and other figures of authority. Although they had access to all they desired, Siddhartha never felt fulfilled while with them. He was searching to be enlightened and could not find his desires in earthly goods. When he and Govinda join the Samanas, they give up everything to reach their ultimate goal of Nirvana. They travel around without possessions and never have a permanent shelter. When Siddhartha and Govinda encounter Gotama, the ultimate Buddha, Siddhartha still doesn t feel enlightened and decides to completely change the course of his life. He goes to the city Samsara and meets Kamala, who is a whore. This is again relevant to the culture. At that time and in the Hindu religion, it was common for all men, married or not, to have relations with whores. All of these factors show how setting and time period were crucial to the novel as a whole.

The characterization and names of the characters are also vital to Siddhartha. They provide a deeper understanding of the novel to the reader. Each character also affects the novel as a whole by the interaction that takes place between he or she and Siddhartha.

Siddhartha is the main character and the hero of this novel. Siddhartha was the name of a historical Buddha, and roughly translates to he who finds the goal. The story follows him through three stages of his life. The first represents the time of the mind (wandering with the Samanas and listening to Gotama), the second represents the time of the flesh (learning the art of love with Kamala and the art of business with Kamaswami), and the third phase represents the time of his ultimate enlightenment (the time spent in tutorage by the river with Vasudeva). By naming the character Siddhartha and by leading him through three phases of life similar to the historical Buddha, Hesse portrays Siddhartha as a Buddha. Siddhartha is also representative, in some ways, of Hesse. Hesse decided to choose a career different from what his father had wanted, much in the same way Siddhartha decided to choose a different path of life than his father s.

Govinda is Siddhartha s best friend and his shadow. Although he does attain Nirvana, he is slow in doing so. Siddhartha and Govinda part at the meeting of Govinda. This shows Siddhartha s knowledge in attaining Nirvana. Unlike Siddhartha, Govinda doesn t realize that ultimate enlightenment doesn t come from years of study and learning. They are reunited at the river. This is once again significant. Here, Govinda achieves enlightenment. He does this without Gotama. He accomplishes it the only way possible- independently.

Gotama is a righteous teacher. Gotama means Illustrious One and the Buddha. Gotama has the distinguishing feature of a beautiful and peaceful smile, which Siddhartha eventually achieves himself. Although Siddhartha has nothing but love and devotion for Gotama, he decides not to follow him, knowing he needs to become equal to Gotama, not just be a follower.

Kamala is the beautiful whore who teaches Siddhartha the art of love. She trains Siddhartha not only how to love, but also how to find pleasure in things around him. Her name is derived from the Hindu god of love and desire, Kama.

The name Kamaswami translates to master of love. Kamaswami gives Siddhartha all that he needs. However, Siddhartha has no interest in the gains and losses of their business. This causes tension between Kamaswami and Siddhartha. When Siddhartha becomes like Kamaswami in the fact that he is obsessed with wealth, he immediately leaves the Samsarian life.

Siddhartha has a son with Kamala. When Kamala dies, the son is sent to live with Siddhartha at the river. Little Siddhartha ultimately runs away bitterly, departing across the symbolic river. Although the departure of the son is devastating to Siddhartha ( He felt something die in his heart; he saw no more happiness, no goal. (103)), he quickly comes to the realization that he had caused the same hurt in his own father when he had left to travel with the Samanas.

The name Vasudeva is designated as the one who abides in all things and to whom all things abide. Vasudeva was Siddhartha s ultimate teacher. He is the one who twice carries Siddhartha across the symbolic river, once away from Gotama and again away from Samsara. He is kind and all knowing, speaking to Siddhartha exactly what he needs to hear. Vasudeva is so in step with the world that is around him and inside him, that Siddhartha equates him with the very river from which he learns the unity of all things.

One of the themes of the novel is stated clearly on page 32. Meaning and reality were not hidden somewhere behind things, they were in them, in all of them. Siddhartha at first tried to rid himself of all possessions. He thought that they were hindering him in his journey toward transcendence. As he grows in his spiritual walk, it becomes clear to him that his goal could not be reached by not allowing himself to have material possessions or by ignoring that which was around him.

A second theme is that Om or enlightenment cannot be found through other people, but only through yourself. This theme is demonstrated through the character Govinda. He states on page 13, 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. Even when he was traveling with Gotama, the Buddha, Govinda still did not feel he had reached Nirvana. In time, he realizes that Nirvana was not something reached through following someone, but has to be reached autonomously.

A third and final theme is that there is a universal desire and quest for self-realization. In some ways, Siddhartha represents all humankind. Everyone is always searching for their true selves. This quest does not always have to be related to the Hindu religion. People of all races and denominations make this journey.

Siddhartha is a carefully and well-written novel. It tactically approaches issues that people face throughout their entire life journey. Hesse expertly addresses these topics in a philosophical and straightforward manner using elements such as setting, characterization, and themes.