

Siddhartha

Required Background Information

Hinduism and the Origins of Buddhism

Hinduism is based on the *Vedas*, an ancient group of prayers and hymns brought to India by the Aryans in about 1500 B.C. Later, a system of social classes or castes was added. These castes are very strict and hereditary. People are born into a caste and remain there throughout their lives. There are five castes:

1. Brahman - priests who guard the traditions and rites of Hinduism
2. The nobility
3. Those who engage in commerce
4. Servants
5. The untouchables - the lowest class who do dirty jobs like cleaning up human waste

This religion of castes is called *Brahmanism*. The *Upanishads* is an ancient text that explicates the *Vedas* and explains individualism; it teaches about the existence of a universal soul. Individuals must follow their *Karma* (fate) through many lives or reincarnations until they can be united with the universal soul. To do this, they must understand the *Maya* (illusion of time and space). The Hindu religion teaches that the beauty of nature must be ignored because it is an illusion. The Hindu religion is very strict; its practice includes prayers, sacrifices, pilgrimages to sacred places, and bathing in sacred rivers.

Buddhism first appeared in the fifth century B.C., when a wealthy young man (later to be known as Gotama) left his family and their wealth to look for a way to end human suffering.* Through meditation, he learned that the path to *Nirvana* (“nothingness” or the escape from the cycle of endless rebirths) is through breaking away from all ties of love and desire. His followers called him *Buddha*, the Enlightened One. Buddhism differs from Hinduism because it offers its followers a code for living, as well as the promise of eternal salvation.

*Gotama’s family name was Prince Siddhartha

Buddha teaches four Noble Truths:

1. Existence is suffering.
2. Suffering arises from desire.
3. Suffering ends when desire ends.
4. The way to end desire is to follow the Eight-Fold Path.

The Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana includes the following:

- a. Right belief
- b. Right resolve
- c. Right speech
- d. Right conduct
- e. Right occupation
- f. Right effort
- g. Right contemplation
- h. Right ecstasy

Relationship Between Buddhism and the Novel Siddhartha

The novel *Siddhartha* is divided into two parts. Part One has four chapters paralleling the four noble truths defined by Buddha. Part Two has eight chapters, just like the eight-fold path to Nirvana. It is interesting, when reading each chapter, to try to relate the events in the story with Siddhartha's success or failure at accomplishing each step in the eight-fold path.

Since many critics argue that Hesse is not trying to say that Buddhism is the correct path to peace, they reject the premise that the chapters of the book follow the teaching of Buddha. For our purposes, assume that Hesse is merely presenting Buddhism as a framework for his novel and as a clear, logical starting point for individuals seeking inner peace. Look for the melding of ideas from the strict rituals of Hinduism to the clear steps defined in Buddhism; at the end of the novel, determine if, for Hesse, the idea of love as the path to peace is derived from Christianity. Consider if he is presenting his own plan drawn from precepts found in all three religions, which would be a true unity.

Characters in the Novel and the Meaning of Their Names.

Siddhartha - His name means "He who attains his goal." He is named after Gotama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Siddhartha is the protagonist of the novel.

Govinda - His name means "keeper of cows." Since cows are sacred in Hinduism, his name is interpreted as meaning that he has a religious calling. Govinda is Siddhartha's devoted childhood friend.

Gotama Buddha - He is the founder of Buddhism. He has a profound effect on Siddhartha's search for meaning.

Kamala - Her name means "lotus blossom." She represents physical love and serves as Siddhartha's paramour.

Kamaswami - His name is Hesse's hybrid combination of "Kama" (love, desire, passion) and "Svamin" (owner, master). Kamaswami represents materialism.

Vasudeva - His name means "One who abides in all things and in whom all things abide." His name indicates he is a god-figure. In the novel, Vasudeva is the wise ferryman, who helps Siddhartha realize the meaning of om.

Om - This word represents creation, preservation, and destruction, and it allows a person who chants "om" to become totally absorbed "into the nameless, the absolute." (Pg. 48) It is part of a meditative chant which brings peace.

Brief Biography of Hermann Hesse

Herman Hesse was born July 2, 1877, in Germany. His father served as a missionary in India and was a scholar of Indian traditions. Hesse's childhood home was rich with Eastern culture. His parents practiced the Lutheran religion, but in a very strict sense. Interpreting the Bible literally, they rejected dancing, sports, or any activities of this nature. Hesse later rejected his family's wishes that he become a minister in order to pursue his writing career. As a young man, he worked in many bookshops which provided him with the materials necessary to educate himself.

In 1916, Hesse's wife was placed in a mental institution, his son contracted meningitis, and his father died. As a result of these pressures, Hesse entered a sanitarium where he underwent psychoanalysis and became interested in the ideas of Freud and Jung. Some of the characters in *Siddhartha* stem from his study of Jung's theory of the mind. Jung believed there are three parts of the mind: the conscious, the unconscious, and the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious, or the whole of the experiences of the human race, surfaces in *Siddhartha* in the character of the old ferryman, Vasudeva. In addition, some critics believe the character Govinda, often referred to as Siddhartha's shadow, represents a buried aspect of Siddhartha's own personality which conflicts with Siddhartha's outward goals.

In the late 1960's, the hippie movement embraced *Siddhartha* because of its Eastern philosophy and its views against a materialistic society. Unfortunately, Hesse, who died in 1962, was never aware of the wave of popularity that washed over his book. *Siddhartha* overtook a new generation of young people—a generation who, like Hesse, rejected the teaching of their parents in order to seek a better way of life.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press edition of *Siddhartha*, published 2005.

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Terms and Definitions

Allegory - a story that represents abstract ideas or moral qualities. An allegory has both a literal and a symbolic level of meaning. **Example:** *Gulliver's Travels*.

Antagonist - the person or force that is in conflict with, or opposes, the protagonist. **Example:**

Nurse Ratched opposes McMurphy throughout *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Epithet - an adjective or phrase that emphasizes a character's personality by referring to the attributes possessed by another person or thing. These epithets help the reader understand important characteristics of the people. **Example:** "Achilles the invincible." The "*Homeric epithet*" is a phrase, usually a compound adjective, which serves the same purpose and is frequently applied to objects as well as humans. **Examples:** "rosy-fingered Dawn"; "the wine-dark sea."

Foreshadowing - the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come.

Foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense. **Example:** Two small and seemingly inconsequential car accidents predict and hint at the upcoming, important wreck in *The Great Gatsby*.

Generalization About Life - a statement that can apply to humanity at large; a seemingly universal truth. **Examples:** "All men are created equal;" "beauty is truth, truth is beauty."

Inference - the act of drawing a conclusion that is not actually stated by the author. **Example:** In *The Pigman*, John and Lorraine are writing a "memorial epic" about Mr. Pignati. Therefore, the reader may logically assume that Mr. Pignati dies in the book.

Irony - a perception of inconsistency, sometimes humorous, in which the significance and understanding of a statement or event is changed by its context. **Example:** The firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic Irony* - the audience or reader knows more about a character's situation than the character does and knows that the character's understanding is incorrect. **Example:** In *Medea*, Creon asks, "What atrocities could she commit in one day?" The reader, however, knows Medea will destroy her family and Creon's by day's end.
- *Structural Irony* - the use of a naïve hero, whose incorrect perceptions differ from the reader's correct ones. **Example:** Huck Finn.
- *Verbal Irony* - a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. **Example:** A large man whose nickname is "Tiny."

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Oral tradition - the transference of stories, songs, etc., from one generation to another or from one culture to another.

Protagonist - the central or main character in a story around whom the plot centers.

Examples: Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*; David Copperfield in *David Copperfield*.

Quest - a hunt, search, or journey. In literature, a quest story is one in which the hero searches for something, such as an idea, a fulfillment, or a person. The plot of the story revolves around this search. **Example:** *Siddhartha*.

Style - the way an author chooses and uses words, phrases, and sentences to tell the story. For example, in an action/adventure story, the author may use simple words and short, choppy sentences, because this style moves the story along quickly. In a story about a college professor, the same author may choose to use polysyllabic, unfamiliar words, and long, convoluted sentences.

Symbol - an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. **Example:** The sea could be symbolic for “the unknown.” Since the sea is something that is physical and can be seen by the reader, and also has elements that cannot be understood, it can be used symbolically to stand for the abstraction of “mystery,” “obscurity,” or “the unknown.”

Theme - the central or dominant idea behind the story; the most important aspect that emerges from how the book treats its subject. Sometimes theme is easy to see, but, at other times, it may be more difficult. Theme is usually expressed indirectly, as an element the reader must figure out. It is a universal statement about humanity, rather than a simple statement dealing with plot or characters in the story. Themes are generally hinted at through different methods: a phrase or quotation that introduces the novel, a recurring element in the book, or an observation made that is reinforced through plot, dialogue, or characters. It must be emphasized that not all works of literature have themes in them. **Example:** In a story about a man who is diagnosed with cancer and, through medicine and will-power, returns to his former occupation, the theme might be: “Real courage is demonstrated through internal bravery and perseverance.” In a poem about a flower that grows, blooms, and dies, the theme might be: “Youth fades, and death comes to all.”

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Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. infer ideas about characters and events when those ideas are not explicitly stated.
2. comment on the author's use of predictions of future events as a way of foreshadowing and maintaining the reader's interest.
3. cite examples of epithets in the story and discuss how they help to remind the reader of significant character traits.
4. understand the impact the Hindu religion has on the protagonist's early life and be able to define the following terms:
 - Brahmans
 - caste system
 - Samanas
5. define the following elements of Buddhism and discuss how the structure of the book follows these twelve steps to salvation:
 - The Four Noble Truths
 - The Eight-Fold Path
6. support the elements of allegory in this novel:
 - the structure of the novel, which parallels The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path taught by Buddha
 - the names of the characters, which stand for ideas
 - the underlying religious, political, social, or satirical meaning.
7. cite an example of irony in the story by illustrating how the main character becomes seduced by the lure of materialism.
8. define "quest" and prove that this story is an example of a quest narrative.
9. discuss how the author employs the techniques of oral tradition to review the protagonist's progress on his quest for salvation.
10. discuss how the author's style of writing reflects his background as a poet.
11. cite examples of poetic elements evident in the beauty of Hesse's descriptions and in the rhyming quality of the prose.

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12. recognize the following symbols in the story and comment on their meaning:
 - the river
 - the bird in the cage
13. compare the Christian idea that God created the natural world and all of its inhabitants with the concept of the unity of all things that is found in Hinduism and Buddhism.
14. comment on how the novel's protagonist melds the Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist religions to find peace.
15. refer to incidents or comments in the text to support that the following are themes in this novel:
 - People must find their own paths in life. The path to enlightenment must be experienced; it cannot be taught.
 - Everything and everyone in the world is a part of a single unity. Time does not exist; past, present, and future all flow together.
 - Love is the most important thing in the world; the way to peace is through love.
16. cite incidents from the story that support the following generalizations about life which are found in the novel:
 - Nothing is gone forever; everything comes back.
 - All people can reach their goals in life if they think, have patience, and maintain strength of will.
 - A person must give pleasure in order to receive pleasure in return.
 - There is give and take in life.
 - Physical appearance can change and does not accurately reflect the person inside.
 - Gentleness is stronger than severity, water is stronger than rock, and love is stronger than force.
 - Knowledge can be communicated, but wisdom cannot.
17. discuss the aspects of Hesse's personal life which influence the direction of the novel in the following areas:
 - Siddhartha's strict life with the Samanas

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- the overall theme that everything and everyone in the world is part of a single unity

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Notes

The novel *Siddhartha* is written as a quest. The novel's protagonist searches throughout his lifetime for his path to Nirvana—his escape from the cycle of births and rebirths. Siddhartha begins his life practicing Hinduism as a member of the Brahman caste. He leaves this life of luxury to pursue a life of deprivation with the Samanas. Soon, he learns of the existence of a holy man, Gotama. Gotama is the founder of Buddhism and teacher of the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana. Siddhartha travels to meet Gotama. After listening to the holy man, Siddhartha concludes that no one can teach him his path to Nirvana. Continuing his quest, he experiences the pleasures of the senses and the lure of materialism. Hesse combines the doctrines of Hinduism, Buddhism, and, at the end of the story, Christianity in his presentation of Siddhartha's path to Nirvana.

It is essential that students familiarize themselves with the Required Background Information which presents an overview of Hinduism and Buddhism. Also, since Hesse's novels are noted for their autobiographical undertones, it is helpful if students review the brief biography of the author.

The quest, written in the form of an oral tradition, includes repetition of events and epithets. On this quest, Siddhartha shares with the reader the wisdom he acquires.

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