

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Siddhartha

by

Hermann Hesse

Book Information

Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha
Quiz Number: 8672
Bantam Books, 1951
ISBN 0-553-20884-5; LCCN
152 Pages
Book Level: 7.1
Interest Level: UG

In this parable of worldliness and renunciation, a young prince of ancient India rejects his luxurious station to search for the path of enlightenment.

Topics: Character Traits, Self Improvement; Countries/Regions, India; People, Royalty; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Religion, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Gotama Buddha the "Sakyamuni" whom Siddhartha meets and recognizes as one who has achieved Nirvana

Govinda Siddhartha's friend, who follows Siddhartha for a while on his quest

Kamala a courtesan who teaches love as an art and who is the mother of Siddhartha's son

Kamaswami the merchant for whom Siddhartha works in the city to gain worldly goods

Siddhartha the main character of the story, who leaves his family to seek an inner peace

Vasudeva the ferryman who takes Siddhartha across the river and who later helps Siddhartha find happiness and peace

Vocabulary

Atman The essence that is eternal, unchanging, and indistinguishable from the essence of the universe

Brahmin The first of the four Hindu classes, responsible for officiating at religious rites and studying and teaching the sacred texts

courtesan prostitute

ennui listlessness and dissatisfaction resulting from lack of interest; boredom

Nirvana the ineffable ultimate in which one has attained disinterested wisdom and compassion

Om The supreme and most sacred syllable, consisting in Sanskrit of the three sounds (a), (u), and (m), representing various fundamental triads and believed to be the spoken essence of the universe

Synopsis

Siddhartha is a young boy who shows promise of becoming a great Brahmin, a member of the Hindu priestly caste. Govinda, his loyal friend, constantly affirms Siddhartha's great talents. But, despite all of the adulations, Siddhartha is unhappy, for he has not achieved inner peace.

When Samanas, ascetics who renounce all worldly possessions, pass through, Siddhartha joins them after stubbornly obtaining his father's blessing. Not surprisingly, Govinda goes with him.

After living as a Samana for three years, Siddhartha realizes that self-denial is a form of escape and will not lead him to true happiness. So, he and Govinda leave the Samanas to seek answers from the Gotama Buddha.

Siddhartha realizes that Gotama has achieved Nirvana, but feels he can not learn how to achieve it through Gotama's teachings. He knows he must find it for himself.

After leaving Govinda and the Gotama Buddha, Siddhartha experiences an awakening in which he resolves to learn more about himself. His journey toward self-awareness leads him to Vasudeva, a ferryman, who shows Siddhartha great kindness and predicts their paths will cross again.

Siddhartha then meets a beautiful courtesan named Kamala. She agrees to teach him about love if he works to gain wealth to dress himself in fine clothes and shoes. Siddhartha, desirous of Kamala, goes to work for Kamaswami, a rich merchant. Siddhartha

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Siddhartha

by

Hermann Hesse

does attain much wealth and worldly possessions. This, however, does not bring happiness, despite the knowledge and experience in love that Kamala bestows.

Siddhartha then sheds his life of decadence and again meets Vasudeva, the ferryman. Vasudeva is a simple man who helps Siddhartha find peace by introducing him to the wisdom of the river. Siddhartha listens and finds peace.

Discord unfortunately enters Siddhartha's life again as an old man. He discovers he has a son when Kamala travels to the river with young Siddhartha and is bitten by a snake and dies. Siddhartha takes his son in and hopes to influence him by continuing to lead the simple life of a ferryman. Little Siddhartha, who was raised in wealth, rebels and finally leaves. Against Vasudeva's advice, Siddhartha follows, but then realizes he must let his son go.

With a heavy, wounded heart, Siddhartha returns to the river where Vasudeva again advises him to listen to it. As Vasudeva reaches Nirvana, Siddhartha hears how the voices of all of life join in unity.

The story ends with Siddhartha helping his old friend, Govinda, experience the wisdom of the river which brings peace.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How does Kamala change over the course of the story?

Her values change from the material to the spiritual. When she meets Siddhartha, she knows he is different from other men, and she enables him to procure a job so that he might soon come to her. It is she who confronts Siddhartha about his inability to love, and she knows it is her nature, too. The biggest change takes place when she knows Siddhartha has left because of his pilgrim nature. She herself becomes a pilgrim. She gives her pleasure grove to the monks of Gotama Buddha, stops accepting clients, and bears a son. She experiences the ability to love.

Literary Analysis

After reading Siddhartha, how do you think Hesse views suffering?

The passage in the book in which Siddhartha hears the laugh of the river is revealing. Siddhartha is wounded by his son's departure and, in the river, sees the pain of his father when he left to join the Samanas. Hesse comments through Siddhartha that suffering would continue cyclically until it had reached its end and was concluded. Hesse most likely feels there is value in sharing pain and suffering and that there is salvation and healing, as shown by his conversation with Vasudeva.

Inferential Comprehension

Gotama Buddha and Vasudeva are men who are important in Siddhartha's life, yet they never interact in the story. Compare and contrast them.

They are similar in that they both attain Nirvana, have a knowing smile, and are able to effect profound changes in Siddhartha. They are different in some outward respects - Gotama is a preacher, Vasudeva, a listener; Gotama begs for alms, Vasudeva works as a ferryman and is paid for his labor; Gotama has many followers, Vasudeva, just one.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse

Constructing Meaning

Siddhartha speaks of those he envies: Vasudeva, the ferryman, and people crossing the river with their sons and daughters, who are ordinary and yet have a sense of importance with which they lead their lives. Who do you envy? Why? Are you willing to make the sacrifices or changes in your life to be more like them?

People often envy those who possess something that they find lacking in themselves. They may envy someone for their belongings, talents, travels, sense of purpose, or accomplishments. Change is difficult and requires sacrifice and commitment. It often takes study, patience, and practice to change some part of us or learn a new skill.

relate them to other literature they may have read. Do the symbols mean the same thing? How are the themes developed in the other stories? Could these be considered universal themes, or are they separate and distinct?

Comparing and Contrasting Have the students do a biographical sketch of Hermann Hesse's life. What parallels exist between Hesse's and Siddhartha's life journeys? Hesse's works obtained almost cult status among the young in the 1960s and 70s. Why do you think this was the case? What was happening politically and culturally at the time that made Hesse's writings ripe for popularity?

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *Siddhartha* is set in India and reference is made to the Brahmins, or priestly caste. Research the Hindu caste system, its tenets, and laws. Find the meanings of the names used in the text. Does this shed more light on the narrative? Report the findings to the class.

Understanding the Author's Craft

Foreshadowing is directly or indirectly hinting at events that will occur later in the story. *Siddhartha* has many examples of this literary device. Go back through *Siddhartha*, and list the places where foreshadowing occurs and the event later in the story to which it refers. The hints may occur through dreams, interactions, thoughts, names, etc. Comment about the foreshadowing that occurs. Is the foreshadowing obvious or cryptic? What characters are involved? How does this add to the richness of the narrative and its message of transcending time and the unity of life?

Understanding the Author's Craft *Siddhartha* is rich in symbolism and themes. Examples of symbols include the river, the smile, and the shadow, while examples of thematic elements are the prodigal son, the search for identity and enlightenment, and reality versus illusion. Have the students compile a list of symbols and themes and their meanings from the book and