

Identity within and without: hermann hesse' sidhhartha essay sample



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The search for identity is often a perilous journey and a special topic for authors throughout history. Identity is often realized through interaction with society, family, and course of study or occupation. It is not easily achieved and rarely happens without cycles of rejection and acceptance of surrounding values. In that sense the clash and rebellion between the individual and his immediate and greater world can be considered the kiln necessary to fashion identity. Herman Hesse has beautifully illustrated the search and realization of identity common to many in *Siddhartha* .

From the time of his youth Siddhartha's " soul was not at peace"(5) and he began the search to " find the source within one's self" (7). He was of the upper class of India, a Brahmin, and was quick to reject the comforts and privileges of his caste. With his friend Govinda he decides to follow the path of the ascetics and adopt the life of a wanderer in search of the truth, with no worldly possessions beyond simple clothes and a bowl for food. However he must first gain his father's approval and he demonstrates the determination—perhaps wrongheaded—that will mark his life. He forces a showdown with his father, refusing to move until he gains his approval, and he ultimately wins. (12)

Siddhartha quickly adapts to the ascetic way of life of the Samanas, and then he and Govinda are intrigued by rumors of a Buddha incarnate. Siddhartha has taken everything he can from the ascetic wandering, and his power has become greater than the leader of the small band. (23) He and Govinda seek out Gotama, the Buddha, and find him and his word appealing. Govinda joins with the other searchers following Gotama, but Siddhartha cannot: he has found " the flaw" of the wise man's teaching. If the world is universal as the

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wise man proclaims, then how is it there is this “ gap” through which a man must pass to reach wisdom and salvation? (32-33) Now alone, Siddhartha continues his search for truth and identity.

He soon becomes attracted to and ensnared by all the physical and sensual assets of the good life he had been so long without. He becomes enamored of Kamala, a courtesan, and learns of love and wealth. (66) He achieves the riches and position his early determination foreshadowed, yet it is an empty life and he rejects it to once again begin an unmapped journey. He comes close to suicide, and crosses paths with Govinda and an old man of a river ferry who had taken him across the river before. At that time the old man remarked he would be back, and he slowly begins a true awakening and understanding with the help of the old man and the river.

Siddhartha goes through a series of trials under the tutelage of the old man, including the death by snakebite of Kamala and the difficulty of raising the son by Kamala he did not know he had. Ultimately he realizes “ this motionless man was the river itself, that he was God Himself, that he was eternity itself” (133). Finally Siddhartha becomes capable of understanding and fulfilling the old man’s role, and the old man leaves. Siddhartha becomes the ferryman; the story concludes with him encountering Govinda once again. Govinda is transformed by the encounter as he realizes Siddhartha had finally realized his goal and was one with his self.

In his path towards identity and realization Siddhartha must embrace and then reject a variety of external influences. Each collision is painful, yet valuable—and Hesse is making the point that such distressing conflicts must

occur in order that a greater goal be reached. Siddhartha can no longer accept the lifestyle of a Brahmin, an ascetic, a monk of Buddha, or a decadent gambling businessman. However, he had accepted each lifestyle with vigor, and taken everything he could from the encounter.

In his first encounter with the ferryman there is an indication, obvious as well as subconscious, that they will meet again. It is a proper metaphor, the ferryman assisting the ascetic Siddhartha across the river of life. When they are reunited, it is almost with a sense of relief in Siddhartha finally finding a place of wisdom and love and knowledge. This is an encounter he will not reject; like all of his other life experiences he is like a sponge absorbing what the old ferryman can offer. In doing so he makes the ferryman's journey complete; he can now go off to the woods as his mission is accomplished and a new ferryman is capable of helping others on their journey.

Siddhartha speaks for humanity's search for meaning, significance, and identity within the larger world. It details the journey everyone must take if they are willing. It requires a sense of "dual awareness" of self, and self as a part of a larger world. It is the "unity" Gotama spoke of, without the requirement of a gap to transcend the unity for a singular transcendence.

Works Cited

Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. New York: Bantam Books, 1977.