

## Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*: A Spiritual and Psychic Coming of Age?

Hermann Hesse's ("Hesse") creation of the novel *Siddhartha* shortly after World War I with its final publication in 1922, constitutes a Bildungsroman that still transports readers now ninety-seven years later into a place of spiritual introspection. Hesse's search for psychic and spiritual unity in a post-world war apocalyptic Germany, soon to be on the brink of another world war and Nazi occupation is an astonishing masterpiece that circumvented the estrangement and alienation of war and persecution. Hesse's *Siddhartha*, his alter ego or rather alter spiritual guide finds through trial and error in various spiritual incarnations; his true nature. Is *Siddhartha* a spiritual journeyman who comes of age within the realm of peace, serenity and unity that Hermann Hesse searched for as well? Or is this sweet parable just another questionable open-ended story of maturation? If this novel is truly a spiritual coming of age; what spiritual path led Hesse to create *Siddhartha*? It is submitted that a journey down many paths led Hesse and *Siddhartha* to enlightenment and true love.

Hesse's "way within" (Freedman, viii) as Ralph Freedman explains in the novel's introduction was a life-long artistic and psychological process. M.K. Praseeda writes in "The Need of Spiritual Endeavors for an Intellectual Existence: a Re-reading of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*" that "*Siddhartha* fits well both in the genres of the novel of education, and the Bildungsroman" (3). The inner struggle of *Siddhartha* to become enlightened through various manifestations of "ancient wisdom, Upanishad wisdom and the very essence of the experience of the Buddha" (3) are the partial influences upon Hesse. Additionally, Hesse is influenced by weeks of psycho-analysis with Carl Jung's own protégé and also Jung himself in 1921 (Freedman, xx).

Coupled with Hesse's Pious religious upbringing and love for Nietzsche and Goethe, it is understandable to surmise that ultimately many roads lead to spiritual inner peace.

Barry Stephenson ("Stephenson") asserts in his book *Veneration and Revolt*, that Hesse retained much of his familial Swabian Pietism and missionary teachings through Friedrich Oetinger since, Siddhartha's search is for complete spiritual unity and grace (134). Stephenson asserts that while Hesse and Siddhartha twirl around in and out of the forest toying with the meditative states of many religions from India and China, Hesse and Siddhartha land back to their familial indoctrinations to God and a pious life (140-143). Stephenson's claim would make perfect sense, however, a neatly calculated bildungsroman about spiritual maturation would not mesmerize generations for close to one hundred years, if it were only a Protestant allegory.

Hesse dared in his life and literature to reject education in the formal sense of the word and as he writes in *Siddhartha*, "that is why teachings mean nothing to me, they have no hardness, no softness, no colors, no edges, no smell, no taste, and they have nothing but words" (Hesse 127). Siddhartha speaks to his friend and eager disciple Govinda at the end of the novel. Hesse embraces a churchless piety depicted as a many faceted sanctuary that worships unity, love and self-realization. Further, Hesse was a compulsive letter and essay writer in addition to his novels. He wrote thousands of letters and many essays that divulge the golden gems of truth and the variety of experiences that shape Hesse's Siddhartha the character and the novel.

Hesse writes in his 1931 collection of essays, *My Belief: Essays on Life and Art*, ("*My Belief*"), the following in his essay entitled "A Bit about Theology" (191):

In their search for truth, nothing will be so valuable and comforting as the realization that beneath the division in

race, color, language, and culture there lies a unity, that there are not various peoples and minds but only One Humanity, only One Spirit.

Here we see a very prophetic and progressive view of the entire world through the lens of post-war modernism. It is no wonder Hesse draws from a vast array of cultures and beliefs.

Further, Hesse writes in *My Belief* that the lack of a church for his pious upbringing is what is lacking since the roots of his Christianity took many tributaries in various religions. In this regard, Hesse writes in his essay, “My Belief” (180) the following:

And so, in my religious life Christianity plays by no means the only role, but nevertheless, a commanding one, more a Mystic Christianity than an ecclesiastical one, and it lives not without conflict but nevertheless without warfare beside a more Hindu-Asiatic-Colored faith whose single dogma is the concept of unity.

The essay was written in 1931 well after *Siddhartha* was published. It is clear that Hesse thought carefully about his spiritual influences. He had concluded that a spiritual unity of many teachings forms the basis for his works.

The backdrop of mysticism permeates the end of the novel when Siddhartha asks Govinda to kiss his forehead and it is at that moment when all the love and unity of Siddhartha’s entire life passes before Govinda’s third eye. Hesse writes, “Govinda bowed low. Tears ran over his old face, but he was unaware of them; the feeling of deepest love, of humblest veneration burned in his heart like a fire” (132). Thus, the “binary oppositions stand in the single medium of human life” (Kumar 463). All that is in conflict joins at the river and within Siddhartha because love is realized as a sense of internal unification with the universe. At a time of severe deconstruction both nationally and emotionally, such a novel was a prayer for hope.

Hesse's thoughtful message was for humanity to find internal unity and love during the worst persecution that Europe has seen.

Hesse's early letters reveal that from childhood he was prone to wicked rebellious tantrums. He was carted out of private schools, until ultimately, he landed jobs in writing that resulted in numerous publications. He received Nobel Prize recognition in 1946 for his bold humanitarian writings. Stefan Borbely, in "Hermann Hesse's Spiritual Formula", writes that "following Hesse's 1916 nervous breakdown, which entailed his confinement to a mental sanatorium after the sudden death of his father, the writer's style and his character typology gradually changed and diversified" (16). His concepts of "spiritual re-birth" through "paradoxical revelations" (17, 18) lead Siddhartha to his final path of enlightenment. He discovers the love and loss of a son, much like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* late in life and in the novel. Hesse like Siddhartha feels a love for his child and the ultimate rejection of his child is very much like the wound that he must have inflicted upon his own parents due to his tumultuous behavior as a boy and young man.

For example, Siddhartha breaks away from his parents' home to follow the Brahmans and then the Samarian monks. He rejects his father's home and teachings. Later in the novel Siddhartha weary of monastic life and his solitary meditations, again, leaves the forest and Samarian life. He lingers outside the gates of the beautiful courtesan Kamala. Kamala treats him like the dirty little Samarian beggar that he is! She challenges him to prosper and return to her rich and well adorned with gifts. Kamala amused with him provides Siddhartha with reputable contacts. Siddhartha excels and masters the life of abundance within the world. Yet, he finds the financial success meaningless and leaves yet again.

Kamala unbeknownst to Siddhartha has borne his child. Many years later, Siddhartha meets his son when he returns to his mentor Vasudeva who is a Ferryman and assists Siddhartha in finding the inner language of the river that they cross repeatedly. The river is a metaphor for the ever flowing, ever-changing presence of spirit. Kamala comes to the river with her son, Young Siddhartha and is bitten by a snake and dies. Siddhartha finds love for the first time in his heart through his son who rejects his monastic life and runs away.

The turning point in the novel occurs since Siddhartha had never experienced real love before encountering his son and the death of Kamala. Such revelations as: “the feeling of the present and simultaneously permeated him fully, the feeling of eternity” (Hesse 100). He sits at the river on the night Kamala died and encounters the “thought of the oneness” (101). Vasudeva comments on Siddhartha’s enlightenment and states, ““You have experienced sorrow, Siddhartha, but I see that no sadness has entered your heart.’ ‘No, dear friend, why should I be sad? I, who was rich and happy, have now become richer and happier. I have been given my son”” (Hesse 101). The love that Siddhartha had never experienced as well as the complete sense of unity is depicted by Hesse in a simple scene that radiates all of Hesse’s spiritual encounters. Here is where both the bildungsroman and spiritual artistry of Hesse soar to a literary space of hybridity and timelessness. The disconnection in both Hesse and his character has been healed into a humane place worthy of Nobel Prize recognition.

As fate would have it, Young Siddhartha rejects his father. Ironically, Young Siddhartha’s words are reminiscent of the arrogant young Hermann Hesse. Young Siddhartha states, “you want me to be like you, just as pious, just as gentle, just as wise! But listen, to spite you, I’d rather be a highwayman and murderer and go to hell than become like you! I hate you, you’re not my father, even if you were my mother’s lover ten times over!” (Hesse,108). Herein lies the dual coming of

age for Young Siddhartha, young Hermann Hesse and Hermann Hesse. Both have found love and unity coupled with sorrow, yet the knowledge and experience of love and unity remains sufficient for Siddhartha.

Similarly, in the *Soul of the age: Selected letters of Hermann Hesse 1891-1962* (“*Soul of the age*”), in numerous letters, Hesse writes such things to his parents as “Since you’re so conspicuously eager to make sacrifices, may I ask you for 7 marks or a revolver right away? You have caused me such despair that you should now be prepared to help me dispose of it and rid yourself of me in the process. I should have croaked last June” (35). Numerous drama ridden letters of suicidal ideation, institutionalization seem to haunt Hesse as a child and young adult. Thus, in reading Hesse’s own letters, we can understand why Siddhartha states, “‘I have to follow him’, said Siddhartha, who had been trembling since yesterday because of the boy’s abusive words” (Hesse 109). It is his own inner child that he trembles from the very angst and disconnection that he himself had experienced.

How is it then that Hesse has conveyed a true spiritual coming of age with numerous incarnations of soul searching as Siddhartha weaves in and out of monastic life, contemplations by the river and the loss of a son? Hesse himself indicates in *My Belief* that he owes much to Goethe and indicates that *Wilhelm Meister* is “the grandest and obviously the most successful attempt to base a German life of the spirit” (182). Goethe explores in *Wilhelm Meister*, the concept of the “beautiful soul” which as Drew Milne writes in “The Beautiful Soul: From Hegel to Beckett”, “Hegel situates the beautiful soul as a form of Spirit that is certain of itself within the antinomy of the moral view of the world. The beautiful in question is not aesthetic beauty, but the claims of moral self-consciousness to have an inner grace of purity” (Milne 67). Devoid of ego, this ethereal figure is most certainly a deep influence upon Hesse as he writes in *My Beliefs*, “of

all the German poets, Goethe is the one to whom I owe the most” (181). His appreciation to find a spirit and “duality within oneself” (184) in conjunction with an ego-less consciousness is where Hesse leads Siddhartha. Ralph Freedman concurs in *The Lyrical Novel* that “the allegorical form determines the structure in most of Hesse’s novels in a manner akin to Goethe’s Bildungsroman” (76). No one can deny that Siddhartha is a beautiful radiant soul illuminating both Samsara (sorrow) and Nirvana (joy) in one scintilla of a second by the end of the novel.

Yet, how is it that Hesse seems to turn a spiritual axis within himself and run with it throughout many of his later novels? It is submitted as Ralph Freedman opines in *The Lyrical Novel*, that “the moment of reconciliation must be frozen in time. To elicit “magic” from materials of crude experience, Hesse must represent unity within the flow of time. The artist must capture the mystic’s vision through his medium of words” (51). This concept of magic Freedman writes “has been enriched by Jungian, Buddhist, and Taoist thought and is directed more fully toward a penetration of the individual consciousness” (50). Thus, in the chapter “Om”, Siddhartha heard the river laughing and as he is directed by Vasudeva to listen even more closely, he hears the thousands of voices that whisper the teachings of the present moment pressed into Jung’s primordial consciousness (Hesse 118-119).

Siddhartha hears his very own soul and becomes interconnected with the universe. Every voice joined within his being and “he heard the wholeness, the oneness-then the great song of the thousand voices consisted of a single word, which was “om”: perfection” (119). Johannes Malthaner in “Herman Hesse, Siddhartha” defines Om in German as “Vollendung” or completion (108). Hesse writes in *Siddhartha*, “at that moment Siddhartha stopped fighting with destiny, stopped suffering. On his face the serenity of knowledge blossomed, knowledge that no will can resist, that knows perfection, that agrees with the flow of events, with the river of life, full of

compassion, full of shared pleasure, devoted to the flowing, belonging to the oneness” (119). It is this sense of unity and love as expressed in Siddhartha and Govinda at the end of the novel that Hesse’s depiction of humanity is complete.

Hesse writes in *Soul of the age*, what appears to be a response to some critical skepticism as to why Hesse would import Indian beliefs into his novel and he indicates that his work is a culmination of many religions that essentially incorporate “Jesus’ message of love and the Indian idea of Unity” (153-154). He traces his journey through his grandfather’s and mother’s missionary work in India to his own personal spiritual research that spans many roads to God and spiritual peace (153-154).

Hesse writes the following response to Berthli Kappeler in 1923, in *Soul of the Age*, that is very poignant and inciteful into Herman Hesse the writer, human being and the journey of Siddhartha. It is critical to read Hesse’s exact words so that a full understanding of the writer’s intention is as follows:

There is really nothing left for me to say. You yourself write in your letter that you found *Siddhartha* disturbing, that it turned everything inside you “upside down”---all of which suggests, as you yourself realize, that this book has prodded you to discover new things, challenged your soul. I expect that you too will soon begin to recognize the utter vapidness of your colleagues’ questions about the “vogueishness” of Indian books and such trifles.

Yet you still felt you needed to raise a question that makes me feel ashamed and also gives me food for thought: Was I serious about *Siddhartha*, do I stand behind it, mean what I say, or was I just having a bit of fun, passing the time, and writing something for its own sake?

I would ask you, before you read any further, whether you have not already answered this question. Your answer was yes. You understood the serious intent of the book and accepted it as a personal challenge. Of course, you have no way of knowing what I put into the book: three years of hard work, many difficult experiences, and ideas drawn from East Asian traditions, which I have been studying intently for the past twenty years. But you know all this already, you can sense that I am serious and broach these matters with considerable awe. In any case those kinds of personal considerations and notions about literature seem trivial, since *Siddhartha* raises issues that are truly substantive (Hesse, *Soul of the age* 153-154).



Hesse acknowledges the influence of the proverbs in the New Testament and the Lao-tse as well as the Upanishads, Buddha, Confucius, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky (Hesse, *Soul of the age*, 154). All roads lead to a spiritual unity.

The letter continues and is relevant to Hesse's concept of spirituality and just how many years and readings were infused into *Siddhartha*. Hesse took over three years to write the novel, because of the research he felt he had to do. He writes in *Soul of the age* at 153-154:

The one thing you find disturbing: why does the backdrop have to be Indian? That is a harder question, but I shall nevertheless try to answer it, since I can feel these questions mean a lot to you.

What follows is a brief credo (intended as a response to your intimate question, not as material for your colleagues' funny parlor games). There is, of course, only One God, one truth, but each people, each age, and each individual perceive it differently, and there are new forms evolving constantly to express that truth. One of the most beautiful and purest such forms is undoubtedly the New Testament-i.e., the Gospels and, to a lesser extent, the Pauline Epistles. There are some proverbs in the New Testament and in Lao-tse, Buddha, and the Upanishads which rank among the truest, most concise and lively insights that man has ever recognized and articulated. But I could not follow the Christian path to God because of the rigid piety of my upbringing, these ridiculous squabbles in theology, the emptiness and excruciating boredom of the church, etc. So, I looked around for other paths to God, and soon discovered the Indian way, which was natural enough in my family, since my grandfather, father and mother had intimate connections with India, spoke Indian languages, etc. But the most liberating experience of all for me was when I discovered the Chinese way in Lao-tse. Of course, I was also reading Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky, who exposed me to modern experiments and problems, but I found the deepest wisdom in the Upanishads, Buddha, Confucius, and Lao-tse, and eventually in the New Testament, once I had overcome my aversion to the specifically Christian form of truth. Yet I remained faithful to the Indian way, even though I do not consider it superior to Christianity: I was simply disgusted by Christianity's attempt to monopolize God and the truth, beginning with Paul and running right through Christian theology, and felt that the Indian methods of finding truth through yoga, etc., are far more practical, astute, and profound.

That is my answer to your question. While I don't feel that Indian wisdom is superior to what Christianity has to offer, I find it somewhat more spiritual, less intolerant, broader, and freer.

It is evident that Hesse poured his soul into his novels and fused ages of spiritual truths into his characters. *Siddhartha* is a spiritual hybrid of all that Hesse had respected and studied.

As Barry Stephenson opines in *Veneration and Revolt*, the notion of pluralism in beliefs that leads to grace, love and unity is all part of the pious Hesse as well as the mystical Hesse (149).

Stephenson believes that “Hesse’s missionary parents and grandparents sought to convert individuals to the Protestant faith; Hesse, in writing *Siddhartha*, whether intentionally or not, has helped to convert the complex religious traditions of Buddhism into a mystical, romantic Protestantism” (143). This conclusion fails short of the very personal writings of Hesse who believed all roads lead to God and while he acknowledges and honors his Christian upbringing- the spiritual truths of love and unity simply are part of the writer.

Hesse and his character journeyed through years of contemplation to abandon all “teachers” and rest within the confines of their unified soul. Even Siddhartha roams the earth with two different sets of monks, fathers a child and returns to reflect all his experiences-only to find the truth lies in the present metaphorical flow of the ever-changing present moment. Such a notion, sense, experience of inter-being is a culmination of all paths. Siddhartha the character is as fluid as the experiences in Hesse’s life and the changing times of how the novel is perceived from decade to decade. In that regard, the river continues to flow, and the novel retains a vibrancy and spiritual imprint that has subsisted for close to one hundred years.

Geza von Molnar (“Molnar”) in “The Ideological Framework of Hermann Hesse’s “Siddhartha””, affirms that “the river becomes the all-encompassing representation of unity within multiplicity” (84). Molnar indicates that the ultimate unification is when Hesse shows the image of the river as flowing within and outside Siddhartha, in essences his rebirth and death (85). Hesse affirms this vision in the novel and writes, “on many evenings, they sat together at the tree trunk by the bank, silently listening to the water, which was no water for them, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, the voice of eternal Becoming” (Hesse, 95). The river which was originally just a tributary to crossover has now become a metaphor for immersion and eternity with spirit. It flows, it changes and most importantly as Johannes Malthaner writes, “the river just is, for the river there

is no past, no future, no beginning, no end; for the river is only the presence” (Malthaner 108). Once the search into the past or future has concluded, Siddhartha retains a sacred place in the present moment.

Hesse’s tortured letters to his parents as a child and his sensitivities as a writer resulted in him responding to thousands of letters until he was too old to do so. His letters and essays demonstrate a consciousness that spanned the war years of helping refugees and writing spiritual novels that are as relevant as the day they were written. As Hesse writes in *My Beliefs*, in the essay entitled “Concerning the Soul”, “what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Hesse 40). A spiritual metamorphosis is a unique coming of age journey as it brings Siddhartha and Vasudeva closer to death and eternal consciousness as well. The “radiant serenity” (119) that bespeaks a spiritual rebirth in both men or rather beings is a destined connection with the beautiful one-transparency, anger and pain absolved into love and a silence that is only awakened by the “thousand voices of the thousand souls” (Hesse, Siddhartha, 118) who rejoice within the rivers flow. Hesse’s spirituality is an eternal conversation that never ends.

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