

A Summary of Hermann Hesse's  
Siddartha

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Siddartha is the story of a man who spends his entire life in search of truth, self-understanding, and Nirvana. Siddartha was born a Brahmin, most likely somewhere in India. He grew to be a young man under the teachings of his father and the elders of his religion, who revered him as gifted and intelligent, but they were not able to answer all of his questions about God, truth, and life, they were not able to quench the thirst for knowledge and understanding that welled up within him.

Therefore, Siddartha, with Govinda, left his father's house and joined another religious group, the Samana.

The two young men spent several years learning the ways of the Samana. The basis of the Samana teaching was to learn how one fasts, waits, and prays. The Samana saw in Siddartha the unique qualities which the Brahmins had also seen in him. He learned quickly and was very good at those things which he learned. He was revered by the Samana and was on his way to becoming one of their chief leaders, when Siddartha realized that he was unable to quench his thirst through the teachings of the Samana as with those of the Brahmins. There still remained in him doubts and questions, the pressing thirst for knowledge and understanding.

Then one day Govinda and Siddartha hear stories of the Buddha, Gotama, the Perfect One. The stories told of this holy man who had reached Nirvana, the ultimate state of bliss and peacefulness. So the two friends set out to find Gotama, and Siddartha hopes to finally find answers to all his questions. "Every finger of his hand spoke of peace, spoke of completeness,

sought nothing, imitated nothing, reflected a continuous quiet, an unfading light, an invulnerable peace".<sup>1</sup> Govinda finds in Gotama all that he sought and after hearing his teachings Govinda joined the holy men of the Perfect One and followed him the rest of his life. Siddartha also found God in Gotama, but at the same time, he comes to the conclusion that just as Gotama had found his way to Nirvana alone, so he must do the same. Therefore Siddartha leaves his dear friend, he leaves Buddha, he leaves all doctrines, and all teachings, and he sets out to quench his thirst on his own.

It is at this pivotal point in the novel when Siddartha ventures out to reach his goal of salvation alone, through his own experience. He realizes that he has spent his life attempting to destroy his Self. He had been taught that only through destroying the Self is one able to attain knowledge of the unknown innermost, and hence reach Nirvana. But on this day, Siddartha decides that he must instead know Himself. He is filled with peace as he makes this decision to seek after his own Self and be his own guide and teacher. Filled with this peace, he sees the world and nature around him in a new light, as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes, and he decides to never look back. Part one of the novel comes to an end and part two begins as Siddartha ventures on his new journey that will take him to the city, into the "world".

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<sup>1</sup>Hermann Hesse, Siddartha, English Translation by Hilda Rosner, pgs. 27-28.

On the way to the city, he stays in the hut of a friendly ferryman who takes people across the river on his bamboo raft. Here the author foreshadows the return of Siddartha to the river when the ferryman says simply, "I have learned that from the river too; everything comes back. You, too, Samana, will come back"<sup>2</sup>. Siddartha does not take the man seriously but is still touched by his kindness and simplicity. He wishes the ferryman well and continues for the city.

Siddartha's first encounter with the world occurs on the outskirts of the city. It is here that he sees Kamala, the mistress, for the first time. He feels an instant attraction towards Kamala due to her beauty, and he sets out to become her friend and pupil in hopes of learning from her the art of love. Kamala is taken by the uniqueness of the young man but tells him that he must have a good appearance and wealth in order to learn from her. She then helps him to find a job with a wealthy merchant, Kamaswami. In no time, Siddartha learns the ways of the merchant and acquires much wealth. Kamala becomes his best friend, and his lover, and slowly, without knowing it, Siddartha is transformed by the ways of the world.

It is not until Siddartha is an older man that he realizes that the world has given him much experience but no answers. He has arrived in the city as a simple man who owned nothing and possessed only the abilities to think, wait, and fast. But in exchange for the immoral, complicated, and wasteful ways of the

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<sup>2</sup>Siddartha, pg. 49.

world like intoxication, quest for money, wealth and power, and gambling, Siddhartha loses his abilities to think, wait, and fast. "Slowly, like moisture entering the dying tree trunk, slowly filling and rotting it, so did the world and inertia creep into Siddhartha's soul; it slowly filled his soul, made it heavy, made it tired, sent it to sleep. But on the other hand his senses became more awakened, they learned a great deal, experienced a great deal."<sup>3</sup>

He finally leaves one day, lonely and empty, leaving behind all his wealth and riches, and Kamala, who is not surprised by his departure. Stumbling through the forest, Siddhartha feels like his heart is dead and he wishes nothing more than to die. He comes upon the river that he had crossed so many years before on his way to the city. And as he looks into the river at this reflection of a man that he now hates, he hears, out of the depth of the river, out of the depth of his soul, a faint sound, the holy Om. "It was one word, one syllable which without thinking he spoke indistinctly, the ancient beginning and ending of all Brahmin prayers, the holy Om, which had the meaning of the 'Perfect One' or 'Perfection'. At that moment, when the sound of Om reached Siddhartha's ears, his slumbering soul is suddenly awakened and recognized the folly of his actions."<sup>4</sup>

His soul is renewed and remembers all that it had forgotten while in the world. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, he sinks to the ground and falls asleep. When he awakens, Siddhartha lifts his

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<sup>3</sup>pgs. 76-77

<sup>4</sup>pg. 89

eyes to find none other than his dear old friend Govinda sitting before him in the yellow robe of Buddha's disciples, watching over him so as to protect him from snakes or animals, but unaware that it is in fact Siddartha. As Govinda is about to depart, having done his duty, Siddartha thanks the disciple by name. In shock Govinda turns around only to be told that this rich man before him is his old friend who had left him so many years before. Curious and confused by Siddartha's rich attire, Siddartha explains to Govinda that he was once a rich man, as he had once been a Samana, and before that a Brahmin, but at present, he is on a pilgrimage with no destination. Siddartha explains that, "The wheel of appearances changes quickly, Govinda. The transitory soon changes."<sup>5</sup> Govinda takes leave of his dear friend, the two are unsure whether they will ever see each other again.

After Govinda leaves, Siddartha sits beside the river contemplating his life, and in his contemplation he realizes that his life is just like the river, in which everything comes back. He, an old man, is once more a child, born anew, knowing nothing, possessing nothing, having no where to go. He only knows that he does not want to leave the river for he feels that it has something more to tell him, more to teach him. So Siddartha departs along the river for the ferryman's hut at which he had once stayed so many years before. Upon arrival, he finds the same ferryman still rowing his bamboo boat across the river for

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<sup>5</sup>pg. 94

those who need to cross. Siddartha reminds the man, Vasudeva, of their first encounter and asks him if he could become his apprentice and learn how to ferry the boat.

Vasudeva kindly invites Siddartha for the night and that same evening Siddartha sits beside Vasudeva relating the story of his entire life. Vasudeva listens for hours, and he is very attentive as Siddartha tells how he fell asleep by the river and felt as if the river had spoken to him. When Siddartha finishes speaking, Vasudeva asks Siddartha to be his apprentice because he has seen the river calling Siddartha as it had always called himself. "It is as I thought [Siddartha]; the river has spoken to you. It is friendly towards you too."<sup>6</sup>

The two men live together in Vasudeva's little hut next to the river. They grow their own food, and ferry people across the river, but most importantly they spent many hours sitting by the river, just listening. "Above all Siddartha learned from the river how to listen, to listen with a still heart, with a waiting, open soul, without passion, without desire, without judgments, without opinions."<sup>7</sup>

Siddartha also learns from the river that there is no time, all is in the present for the river. "The river is everywhere at the same time...the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, or the shadow of the future."<sup>8</sup> He also learns that the

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<sup>6</sup>pgs. 104-105

<sup>7</sup>pg. 106

<sup>8</sup>pg. 107

river contains the voices of all that is created. And when it speaks all the voices of creation at once, the blessed Om is heard by those who listen.

Nobody counted the years that passed as Siddartha and Vasudeva lived together beside the river. Then one day a group of Buddha's disciples come in a rush, needing to be taken across the river. News has spread that Gotama is dying and flocks of people are on their way to rest one last look upon the "Illustrious One". One of these devout followers was none other than Kamala, who had long since retired and had given her pleasure garden to the followers of Buddha, becoming one of the benefactresses attached to the pilgrims. But Kamala does not travel alone on her journey, she travels with her young son, little Siddartha, the result of Siddartha's and Kamala's last encounter. During the journey, Kamala is bitten by a deadly snake, not far from the ferrymen's hut. The young boy cries for help, and as Vasudeva carries the woman into the hut, Siddartha recognizes Kamala, and realizes that the young boy is in fact his own son. Kamala dies there in the small hut, happy to have once more gazed into the eyes of her lover and father of her child. She is filled with peace just to see the peace in Siddartha's eyes that he had sought after for so long. She is buried next to Vasudeva's former wife, leaving Siddartha with his only son.

Little Siddartha had been raised in the city, within the walls of Kamala's rich pleasure garden, and this is the only life he knows. The life of a poor and simple ferryman does not please him, and even though Siddartha tries to give his son everything

he wants. The river just laughs at this folly for the boy had not left the city in search of salvation as had Siddartha, he had been forced to leave against his own will, and all he wanted was to return to that which he knew.

Letting the boy go to his own fate is a hard trial for Siddartha to face, and it almost takes him away from the river and his dear friend Vasudeva. But in the end, Siddartha gives the boy over to his own fate, as much as he wanted to protect him from his own mistakes. "If you were to die ten times for him, you would not alter his destiny in the slightest."<sup>9</sup> This wisdom from Vasudeva is hard to hear, but Siddartha knows in his heart that it is true. Nevertheless he cannot take his son to the city, to his own fate, so fate does it for him, and one day the boy runs away. Siddartha follows after him to the city, but stops at it's edge where he relives within his mind his experiences there, knowing that he should not pursue the boy. And as much as Siddartha loved the boy and hurt at his defiance, he knew that he must let him go.

Vasudeva, his dear friend, came that same evening and the two returned to the river, to their own fate. And what Siddartha learned from his pain was that he was not so different from all the rest, that he too was very human, although he had always considered himself so different, set apart. He too felt love, happiness, and pain. "There was the blind love of a mother for her child, the blind foolish pride of a fond father for his only

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<sup>9</sup>pg. 121

son, the blind eager strivings of a young vain woman for ornament and the admiration of men. All these simple, foolish, but tremendously strong, vital, passionate urges and desires no longer seemed trivial to Siddartha."<sup>10</sup>

A while later Vasudeva also leaves Siddartha when he departs into the forest to die. But before he goes, the two men sit one last time next to the river together. Vasudeva asks Siddartha what he hears, and for the first time Siddartha hears the whole, the unity, and Siddartha feels his thirst being quenched as he feels his Self finally being merged into the unity. Vasudeva has taught him everything he had hoped to and this allows him to depart and die in peace. "From that hour Siddartha ceased to fight against his destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with conflict of desires, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life, full of sympathy and compassion, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things."<sup>11</sup>

Siddartha continues his life on the river as a ferryman, when one day his old friend Govinda appears before him and asks to be taken across. Govinda hopes to find answers from this legendary ferryman of whom he has heard stories. Once again, he does not recognize his old friend Siddartha. Siddartha simply challenges Govinda by asking the old man if he maybe sought too much and is bound by this goal, unable to see anything else.

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<sup>10</sup>pg. 130

<sup>11</sup>pg. 136.

After revealing his identity Siddartha then invites his dear old friend to be his guest for the night. Govinda asked Siddartha many questions that night and Siddartha related many stories from his life. But before Govinda leaves in the morning he is pressed to ask a few more questions about Siddartha's beliefs. Siddartha then tells his friend what he believes, he tells his friend that he is in love with all that is around him, whether it be a rock, a person, or the river. Everything is of his own nature and therefore he loves all that he sees. He no longer lives his life by teachings, thoughts, or words, for these things he cannot love. He is no knows time for this too is an illusion and for him everything is in the present. He explains to Govinda that he does not love another for his thoughts or his teachings, but rather for his deeds and his life. "I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be bale to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect."<sup>12</sup>

Govinda is confused by these words, finding them strange and ridiculous, but Govinda cannot deny the effect that Siddartha's person has on him. He feels that before him sits a holy man, one so filled with peace that he reminds him of Gotama, the "Perfect One". In one last attempt to also have such peace, in one last attempt to find salvation, Govinda asks his friend for the answer. Siddartha simply asks Govinda to kiss his forehead, and in doing so Govinda sees in this old, wrinkled face agelessness,

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<sup>12</sup>pg. 147

he sees unity, the unity of all things. "He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces-hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddartha."<sup>13</sup> Time no longer existed, but peace, unity and salvation were there in the present.

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<sup>13</sup>pg. 150