



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Hermann Hesse's

Siddhartha

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Siddhartha*

SIDDHARTHA IS A NOVEL about the son of a Hindu Brahmin who searches for enlightenment. The novel contains elements of both the **Bildungsroman** (novel of formation) and the **allegorical novel**.

All novels rely on certain conventional elements, including **plot** (Siddhartha leaves his family in search of enlightenment and existential answers. He adopts an ascetic lifestyle, but soon decides to dedicate his life to developing an awareness of his senses. He turns to hedonistic pleasures and a materialistic city lifestyle. Ultimately, Siddhartha finds peace and enlightenment as a ferryman) and **character** (Siddhartha is the main character in the novel. His development stands at the core of the novel. Siddhartha can be considered a **dynamic character**, because he changes over the course of the novel as a result of his experiences outlined in the plot. Other characters with whom Siddhartha interacts include his friend Govinda, the Buddha Gotama, the courtesan Kamala, and the ferryman Vasudeva).

Another significant element of the novel is **setting**, or time and place. (*Siddhartha* is not a historical novel, so determining a definite timeframe is difficult. Based on the novel's **characters**, we can generally assume that *Siddhartha* is set in India around 500 B.C.E., the time during which the historical Buddha lived and taught.) The **point of view** from which a novel is told determines the **style** and **tone** of the text. (*Siddhartha* is told from the perspective of a third-person narrator. This third-person narrator conveys the plot from Siddhartha's perspective.) The **style** and **tone** of a novel are further established through word choice and sentence structure. (The sentence structure and word choice of *Siddhartha* produce a lyrical effect. The novel is, therefore, often referred to as a lyrical novel.)

Novels often convey one or more **themes** (Some of the significant themes in *Siddhartha* are the search for enlightenment, the meaning of time, the role of teachers, etc.) Several elements of a **Bildungsroman** are present in *Siddhartha*. A Bildungsroman usually involves the main character's long and strenuous development from **childhood or ignorance to adulthood or experience and maturity**. (Siddhartha begins his quest as a young man. He undergoes a number of experiences throughout his life that teach him how to seek and ultimately find enlightenment. In his old age, he eventually finds solace and contentment as a ferryman.) The development of the main character often focuses on his or her psychological, social, and personal development.

In a typical **Bildungsroman**, the hero embarks on a **journey** that will lead him away from his familiar surroundings in his quest for experience because he is disillusioned or dissatisfied with the life he has known thus far. (Siddhartha leaves the home of his father and mother in order to find his own place in the world. He does not consider the life of a Brahmin to be a satisfactory route to enlightenment.)

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Siddhartha*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISMS are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lay in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work in search of archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining Siddhartha's Motivations for Leaving Home

1. Have students examine Chapter I, “The Son of the Brahmin.”
2. Divide the class into pairs. Each pair should generate a list of Siddhartha’s motivations for leaving his home. The list should include a consideration of the extent to which the following aspects of his life effected his decision to leave:
 - Siddhartha’s relationships with his mother, father, and Govinda
 - The Brahmins and teachers
 - Sacrifices to the gods
 - The existence of the gods and of Atman
 - The importance of knowledge
 - The importance of language
 - Happiness
3. Reconvene the class and use the following questions to generate a discussion about Siddhartha’s motivations for leaving his home:
 - What aspects of the mythological hero are exemplified through Siddhartha’s motivations for leaving his home?
 - Why does Chapter I, “The Son of the Brahmin,” contain so many questions?
 - What general truths about the human condition might be illustrated in Siddhartha’s decision to leave home?
 - How and why do Siddhartha’s motivations and subsequent decisions turn him into a loner or outcast?
 - What does Siddhartha’s disobedience to his father reveal about his role as a hero?

New Historicism Applied to *Siddhartha*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in and/or set in a past or foreign culture, is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as it is presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history are hardly ever heard. A culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any worldview. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change in certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Examining the Text for Clues to the Historical Figure of the Buddha

1. Copy and distribute the Fact Sheet and Activity Sheet that follow.
2. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) study the actual history of Gautama Buddha (also known as Siddhartha Gautama).
3. Have students fill in the three-column chart on their activity sheets: one column should contain information relating to the historical Buddha, the second column should contain information relating to the character of Gotama from *Siddhartha*, and the third column should contain information relating to the character of Siddhartha from *Siddhartha*.
4. Then have students answer the following questions:
 - To what extent do the characters Gotama and Siddhartha represent the historical Buddha?
 - Why did Hesse choose to create two characters whose names, actions, and beliefs relate to the historical figure of the Buddha?
 - Why did Hesse not include a clear reference to a particular time period or geographical region?
 - In order to reach his intended audience or achieve his intended goal, what changes might Hesse have had to make with regard to the historical Buddha and why?

Psychoanalytical/Freudian Criticism Applied to *Siddhartha*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” and “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother; the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention; the daughter's desire for her father; the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining the Connection Between Desire, the Id, and Siddhartha's Attitude Toward the Childlike People and Childlike Behavior

1. Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Assign one of the following chapters to each pair or group. Students should note all references to Siddhartha's attitude toward childlike behavior and the behavior of the childlike people:
 - Chapter "Kamala"
 - Chapter "With the Childlike People"
 - Chapter "Samsara"
 - Chapter "Om"
2. Then, students should generate two lists: one list should include negative ideas associated with childlike behavior or the childlike people expressed by Siddhartha. The other list should include positive ideas associated with childlike behavior or the childlike people expressed by Siddhartha. Note that some notions expressed by Siddhartha may qualify for both lists, as his attitude changes over time.
3. Use the information gathered on the lists and the following questions to generate a classroom discussion on the connection between Siddhartha's attitude toward childlike behavior and the childlike people and his attempt to come to terms with the psychological struggle between his id, superego, and ego.
 - What are the negative ideas Siddhartha associates with childlike behavior and the childlike people?
 - What is the connection between children and the Freudian notion of the id?
 - What is the connection between society at large and the Freudian notion of the superego and the ego?
 - Why is Siddhartha often critical of childlike behavior and the childlike people?
 - When and how does Siddhartha himself engage in the behavior of the childlike people or in other childlike behavior?
 - When and why does Siddhartha come to consider the behavior of the childlike people, or his own childlike behavior, to be acceptable?
 - What does Siddhartha's initial negative attitude toward the childlike people reveal about his inner fears and desires? About his growth as a human being?
 - What does Siddhartha's positive attitude toward the childlike people reveal about his inner fears and desires? About his growth as a human being?