

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Siddhartha

by Herman Hesse

written by Virginia Pleasants

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INTRODUCTION

The Author

1. Learning to summarize information in a fact-filled paragraph is a skill that will benefit all students. Try practicing your skill at doing this. After reading the section called “The Author,” write a paragraph which includes the following information:
 - A. Who Herman Hesse’s parents were, his birth date, and birthplace.
 - B. What kind of education he had and what work he did when he was young.
 - C. What his successful novel *Demian* represented.
 - D. What caused his death and the year in which he died.
 - E. What year he received the Nobel Prize in Literature and the name of the novel for which he received it.

The Novel

2. For such a short novel, you probably will find that *Siddhartha* is philosophically powerful. The great Eastern religions and their unfamiliar words are a vital part of the novel. Imagine you are asked to write a definition for the following words needed to understand the novel. Copy down the following list and write the meanings beside the words.
 1. Brahmanism
 2. Brahman
 3. Hinduism
 4. Polytheistic
 5. Vedic
 6. Upanishads
 7. Vishnu
 8. Siddhartha Gautama

PART ONE

The Son of the Brahman

3. A novelist takes you into new worlds shaped from his or her imagination. You may find the world you are reading about in *Siddhartha* to be fascinating, but strange. This may be because it is set in the Asian country of India 2,500 years ago. It might be interesting for you to know what was happening in other countries around the world back then (around 500 B.C.). Most encyclopedias or world history books have timelines summarizing major events in world history. Research this, and then make a list (using complete sentences) of one major thing going on in the following countries in 500 BC:

China Ireland United States Peru Egypt

4. Siddhartha is described as unhappy even though he seems to have everything a young person could want. Many young people even today feel discontented and restless without understanding completely why they feel that way.

Thinking about these kinds of inner feelings, complete the following conversation two young people today might have about this:

First friend: Reading about all the things Siddhartha is thinking about makes me think that there are a few things bothering me too.

Second friend: Funny you should say that. I thought it was just me. What bothers you the most?

First friend: It's hard to put into words, but...

Siddhartha

5. As you will recall, in the section about Hermann Hesse, the written style of *Siddhartha* is described as “a highly poetic style reminiscent of ancient scriptures.” Leaf through the present chapter, “The Son of the Brahman” looking for sentences or phrases that sound poetic to you. Although they will not be written in poetic form, they can be poetic nevertheless. Jot down at least six sentences or phrases, and put the page number beside each one. Below is an example that might be considered poetic:

“with his gleaming brow, with his kindly eyes, with his narrow hips.”

6. Siddhartha is a young person from a fairly rich family living in India in 500 B.C. You are a young person living in the United States in 2004 A.D. Fill in the chart below with similarities and differences between your lives.

Siddhartha

Me

Friendship:

Religious feelings:

Obeying parent:

Contentment:

Stubbornness:

Response Journal

With the Samanas

7. The “Samanas” of this section are wandering ascetics. The dictionary defines an ascetic as one who practices great self-denial and abstains from worldly comforts and pleasures for religious reasons. Throughout religious history, there have been a number of famous people or groups who have practiced one form or another of asceticism. Choose one of the names of practitioners of asceticism below to research. Then, write a one-page report that would be suitable to deliver to your class. Assume that the class knows nothing of your chosen person or group. You may need to ask your school librarian for help. Checking on the Internet at www.google.com may be helpful as well.

Saint Anthony of Thebes
The Desert Fathers
Stylites

Mahavira (Vardhamana)
Simone Weil

8. In this section, you will find a vivid paragraph which begins “Instructed by the samana elder...” It describes Siddhartha as he practiced “denial of” himself as a person. Think about a young person doing this over a period of time as Siddhartha did. Imagine you keep a journal in which you write about your innermost feelings. Date your journal entry. Then write an entry about whether you think you could possibly do what Siddhartha did. Finish your entry with your feelings about asceticism in general.
9. Even after his dedicated practices of asceticism and his friend Govinda’s seeing him as a saint, Siddhartha again shows his discontent with his life. Imagine that you are the samana elder who is guiding Siddhartha’s spiritual life. When the elder learns that Siddhartha is going to leave the samanas, he is described as flying into a rage. The author, Hermann Hesse, does not tell us what the elder said in his rage. Now is the time for you to play author. Write either:

A. A paragraph about the elder’s rage at Siddhartha

OR

B. The dialogue the angry samana might have said to Siddhartha

Siddhartha

10. In this section, we learn about the news which is spreading throughout the land about Gotama, the Buddha. That news is good and bad, as well as “in praise and in revilement.” Other historical figures have also been praised and reviled. Choose one of the historical figures below to research. Imagine you are a writer for the *New York Times*. Write an article about the person you have researched which includes both good and bad things about that person. Also include the praise and revilement that swirled about your chosen person when he or she lived.

Mohandas Gandhi
Eleanor Roosevelt
Dr. Martin Luther King
Abraham Lincoln
Jesus
Nelson Mandela

G o t a m a

11. It is interesting to read of the manner in which the homeless ascetics in 500 B.C., obtained their food. They stood at the door of a home and begged in silence. Think about the homeless in America today. They are not ascetics, but, nevertheless, many of them may be hungry at times. Write about your feelings about the homeless in America today in a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. You could begin your letter as follows:

Letter to the Editor:

Perhaps we should think more today about the homeless and hungry in our country than we do. It seems to me...