

Humanist Masterpieces No 34

Siddhartha

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WHEN Hermann Hesse won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946, Anders Österling of the Swedish Academy said that the award “honours a poetic achievement which presents throughout the image of a good man in his struggle, following his calling with rare faithfulness, who in a tragic epoch succeeded in bearing the arms of true humanism”. This seems to be contradicted by Hesse himself who stated in a letter in 1930 that a religious impulse was decisive for his life and works. Yet, as we shall see, his conception of religion was more closely connected to spirituality than to any belief in a god or an afterlife.

Hermann Hesse was born in Calw in Württemberg in 1877, the son of a pietistic Estonian pastor and church historian. His mother was the daughter of a French-Swiss missionary, who had married Stuttgart missionary Hermann Gundert in India. Gundert, who later managed a publishing house in Calw, was also a doctor of Philosophy and he encouraged his grandson to read widely from his library. It was filled with books of world literature, including Indian philosophy, and from all these various influences young Hermann developed a strong sense of being a world citizen. It was this background that, as he says, formed “the basis of an isolation and a resistance to any sort of nationalism that so defined my life”.

Young Hesse, however, was headstrong and self-willed and had frequent rows with his parents. He was sent to a seminary at 14, but in 1892 he ran away, attempted suicide and was even placed in a mental institution for a time. By the end of the year, though, he attended a gymnasium in Cannstadt, where in 1893 he passed the examination that concluded his schooling. He worked briefly as an apprentice in a clock tower factor in Calw and then as an apprentice with a bookseller in Tübingen. Here he read avidly in his spare time and began writing poetry. His first small volume, *Romantic Songs*, was published in 1896. His first novel, *Peter Camenzind*, about a failed writer, was published in 1904 and in the same year he married Maria Bernoulli. The couple settled down in Gaienhofen on Lake Constance, and there he wrote his second novel, *Beneath the Wheel*, published in 1906.

It was at this period that he started reading the German philosophers Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The latter



Portrait of a 28 year-old Hermann Hesse by Ernst Würtenberger.

placed the intellectual and moral accomplishments of ancient Indian thinkers, specifically the Buddha, on a par with those of Western figures like Immanuel Kant or Jesus. In 1911 Hesse visited Sri Lanka and other Asian countries. On his return he lived in Switzerland, moving in 1919 to the small town of Montagnola, where he lived for the rest of his life. He acquired Swiss citizenship in 1923.

In 1916 his father's death, along with the illnesses of his son Martin and his wife, forced Hesse to seek refuge in a Lucerne sanatorium. He had several sessions with a psychologist, J. B. Lang, who was a disciple of Jung. In 1919 he published *Demian* under the pseudonym of Emil Sinclair, who is also the narrator and youthful subject of the work, which makes use of Jungian psychology to explore the

‘two worlds’ of yin and yang in the chief character. The novel, which contains hints of bisexuality, incest and the oedipus complex, was a great success especially among young Germans who welcomed the call for a journey into themselves, and of course *Demian* was partly autobiographical: Hesse was taking a ‘hellish journey’ into the turmoil of his own youth.

Over the next three years he worked on *Siddhartha*, his ninth novel, which was written in German and published in 1922 but was not translated into English until 1951. The title is made up of two words in Sanskrit: *siddha* or ‘achieved’ and *artha* or ‘that which was searched for’. So it is “he who has achieved his goals’ or, more spiritually, “he who has found the meaning of life”. The novel is set in the time of the Buddha, whose own name was Siddhartha Gautama, though he features in the novel as Gotama.

Siddhartha grows up among the Brahmanic caste in an ancient Indian town. He is strong, handsome and intelligent and he makes everybody happy. His best friend Govinda loves and idolises him and wants to follow him wherever he goes. But Siddhartha feels that the love of his parents and his best friend will not make him happy because his intellect is not satisfied and his soul is not at peace. There are so many unanswered questions. In particular, where can he find his innermost self?

He decides to leave and join the Samanas, a group of wandering ascetics who once passed through the →

town and who practise self-denial. His father reluctantly lets him go and Govinda decides to join him. Siddhartha thinks that maybe when the self is conquered and dead, then the innermost of being will awaken. For three years he and Govinda travel along the path of self-denial through pain, hunger, thirst and meditation. Yet Siddhartha has not attained enlightenment: “we learn tricks with which to deceive ourselves, but the essential thing – the way – we do not find”. Govinda persuades him that they should seek out the Buddha, a man of reportedly great wisdom who has attained Nirvana and who is travelling through the country. Siddhartha is sceptical: “I have become distrustful of teachings and learnings”, he says. But he agrees to give it a go.

Govinda is enchanted by Gotama’s teaching of spiritual release from worldly existence and its suffering and joins his community. But Siddhartha knows that he can never attain salvation by submitting himself to the teachings of another. He addresses the Buddha, praising his knowledge of cause and effect but indicating that it breaks down in one place: the doctrine of salvation, of the individual rising above the world. Moreover, he cannot explain how he himself has been able to achieve enlightenment where others have failed. After Gotama leaves, Siddhartha reflects that the Buddha has robbed him of his friend, “but he has given to me, Siddhartha, myself”.

He departs and comes to a river where he asks a ferryman to take him across on his bamboo raft. “One can learn much from a river”, says the ferryman. At the other side, Siddhartha explains that he cannot pay him, whereupon the ferryman replies that he did not expect any payment but that he will give it to him some other time because, as the river teaches, everything comes back.

Siddhartha arrives at a large town where he meets a beautiful woman, Kamala, a courtesan. Earlier he had been tempted by another woman but had resisted. Now he is smitten, so he gets his beard removed and his hair cut and oiled, and goes to meet her again the next day. He asks her to be his friend and teacher, but she tells him that he must have fine clothes and shoes and plenty of money and presents. She tells him to call on Kamaswami, the town’s richest merchant, who is beginning to grow old and lazy and needs someone to help with the business. Soon he is able to give Kamala presents and become her lover. As the years pass, he becomes rich, owns his own house and servants and drinks and gambles a lot. He has acquired the vice he had always scorned – acquisitiveness. Suddenly, he realises that he cannot play this game any more. Had he left his father, Govinda and Gotama to become a Kamaswami? That night he leaves, never to return.

He thinks of suicide, but realises that it is an evasion, not an answer. He decides to live and work with Vasudeva the ferryman. Years later, Kamala, travelling with her and Siddhartha’s son in search of the dying Buddha, is bitten by a poisonous snake near Siddhartha’s home. She dies and Siddhartha takes in his son, but the boy runs back to the city. Siddhartha has a spiritual vision and realises that loving the boy means letting him go. Finally, Govinda and Siddhartha, now old men, meet again, and Siddhartha explains how he has found peace through love and unity with the universe and all living things.

HESSE’S masterpiece is a parable about one man’s quest for spiritual enlightenment. That man is called Siddhartha but he is really Hermann Hesse and the novel is his confession of belief, though that is not quite the right word. Hesse rejected the orthodox Christianity of his parents and sought a spirituality which he felt lacking in Europe’s intellectual culture. He also realised that religion has been used to manipulate the mass of people and suppress individuality. The novel is thus an onslaught on blind adherence to any religion, philosophy, or system of belief. Siddhartha rejects conventional doctrines, believing that wisdom cannot be taught but must be experienced by the individual seeking his own path. Teachers may help along the way and impart knowledge but only the individual can find his or her own truth.

During his life Siddhartha comes into contact with Brahmanism, asceticism and Buddhism, but rejects all three. As an adult he tries two extremes of living. First, he tries self-denying deprivation, then he goes to the other extreme of hedonistic materialism. But he finds that both are unsatisfactory, not least because they ignore concern for the natural world around them. Instead he comes to a kind of middle way between these polarities where caring for nature leads us also to care for ourselves. If we seize hold of the reality of each moment and

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flow with ‘the river of life’, we are able to experience what Romain Rolland called the ‘oceanic feeling’ – our oneness and solidarity with the whole human race and the natural world. As Siddhartha avers to Govinda: “I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect”.

Siddhartha is written in a simple, lyrical style that flows as smoothly as the river which provides the metaphor of Siddhartha’s enlightened state. If there is a weakness, it is in the novel’s message which can be seen as itself too passive. We cannot leave the world as it is. Yes, we need love and we need spirituality, but we also need to confront the unloving and materialistic nature of the world as much of it is. We cannot just passively accept the sufferings of humanity; we need to overcome them. How do we deal with poverty, sickness, injustice, exploitation, discrimination, ruination of the natural world?

Hermann Hesse wrote other masterpieces, notably *Steppenwolf* (1927) and *The Glass Bead Game* (1943). Like *Siddhartha*, they are concerned with the quest for the meaning of life. For Hesse, the answer is always within ourselves, but really that is only the starting point. □