

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016  
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Level III Honors Award

Dear Hermann Hesse,

I can remember at the age of four my mother instructed me in the grand theory of "The Golden Rule": treat others the way you want to be treated. Ever since I have strove to align my moral compass to this proverb, for even to my young mind it made perfect sense. Being nice to others will make others nice to you and the whole world will be a better place. Simple.

Then at the age of five I walked into my first class at Solomon Schechter Day School. There I was taught the names of the Jewish holidays and their accompanying traditions, the meaning of the Star of David, and the hallowed name of God, "Adonai", but ultimately no religion. As I faithfully chanted the Hebrew prayers, my eyes strayed to the English translations, and there I did not find the empathy for my fellow human beings my mother had taught me. Instead, I found words that praised a God who smites those that dare oppose Him, and ritualistic adherence to outdated practices that just didn't mean anything to me. I struggled for years, tearing through the volumes of the Torah, trying to find what I knew to be true – divinity is in kindness to others but at the end of nine years I left Solomon Schechter with nothing but the tenants of latkes, dreidels, and Purim festivals. I felt utterly lost and confused. I felt my life had no meaning.

That was when I picked up *Siddhartha* (May I say that you have truly crafted a masterpiece). Despite the miles of ocean and centuries of time between me and Siddhartha, I had never seen my struggles reflected so perfectly as they were in that restless Brahmin. His pursuits, failures, and perpetual inner turmoil mimicked my own and I idolized him for it. I drank in every word of your novel like holy wine, hoping the universe would unfold before me – that Siddhartha's journey would culminate in some massive existential revelation that I would read and suddenly be enlightened with. As you probably can guess, I did not find this, (I've been told your quest for instant enlightenment bore no fruit either), but nonetheless I encountered something that rocked my perspective to its core: "When someone seeks," said Siddhartha, "then it easily happens that his eyes see only the thing that he seeks, and he is able to find nothing, to take in nothing because he always thinks only about the thing he is seeking, because he has one goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, having no goal" (Hesse 107). My entire childhood I had searched for a prescribed religious panacea to my need for wisdom, but you told me this was all wrong. Morality does not come from without but within, and no ancient compendium of rites and rules can hold a candle to one's own intuition. This is not to say tradition holds no value, for just as Siddhartha garnered wisdom from the Hinduism of his youth, I too find guidance in the laws of Judaism. But sanctity lies within each of us in a unique form and is therefore a discovery each of us has to make. It will not be revealed through purposeful effort, however; the uncovering of truth stems from experience. We must listen to the world around us.

I don't know why I'm going on about these insights, clearly you already understand them. I guess I just wanted to say that you have truly changed my life. *Siddhartha* did not present me with the answers I sought, which would have contradicted the message of the book, but it gave me a new outlook. The lessons one can learn from your novel are universal, yet beg to be interpreted on an individual level to foster personal appreciation. Finding balance between greed and abnegation, allowing those we love most to slip away, and discovering from whom we should accept guidance are extremely difficult undertakings we all must face. You, however, have armed me with a powerful weapon with which I can now confront these challenges: confidence in myself. I may not always know what is right and what is wrong, and I will most certainly make some mistakes, but I will learn, and I will grow, and those mistakes will grant me the experience to form my own beliefs and create my own wisdom. As you once said, "The truth is lived, not taught".

I am eager to see where my new disposition will take me. What better way to learn could there possibly be than having an open mind and the world as your teacher? I have no more plans for how find my own religion, but I hold on to my fundamental ideals. I now walk through life unsure yet unperturbed, treating others the way I want to be treated.

So thank you for giving my life meaning and teaching me the wisdom of indirection.

My best to you,

*Sarah*

Sarah  
Sharon  
Grade 11

P.S. The plot twist with the son was complete craziness.