

The Son

By Hermann Hesse

Directions: Read the short story. Answer the questions. Refer to the text to check your answers when appropriate.

Timid and weeping, the boy had attended his mother's funeral; gloomy and shy, he had listened to Siddhartha, who greeted him as his son and welcomed him at his place in Vasudeva's hut. Pale, he sat for many days by the hill of the dead, did not want to eat, gave no open look, did not open his heart, met his fate with resistance and denial.

Siddhartha spared him and let him do as he pleased, he honoured his mourning. Siddhartha understood that his son did not know him, that he could not love him like a father. Slowly, he also saw and understood that the eleven-year-old was a pampered boy, a mother's boy, and that he had grown up in the habits of rich people, accustomed to finer food, to a soft bed, accustomed to giving orders to servants. Siddhartha understood that the mourning, pampered child could not suddenly and willingly be content with a life among strangers and in poverty. He did not force him, he did many a chore for him, always picked the best piece of the meal for him. Slowly, he hoped to win him over, by friendly patience.

Rich and happy, he had called himself, when the boy had come to him. Since time had passed on in the meantime, and the boy remained a stranger and in a gloomy **disposition**¹, since he displayed a proud and stubbornly disobedient heart, did not want to do any work, did not pay his respect to the old men, stole from Vasudeva's fruit-trees, then Siddhartha began to understand that his son had not brought him happiness and peace, but suffering and worry. But he loved him, and he preferred the suffering and worries of love over happiness and joy without the boy. Since young Siddhartha was in the hut, the old men had split the work. Vasudeva had again taken on the job of the **ferryman**² all by himself, and Siddhartha, in order to be with his son, did the work in the hut and the field.

For a long time, for long months, Siddhartha waited for his son to understand him, to accept his love, to perhaps **reciprocate**³ it. For long months, Vasudeva waited, watching, waited and said nothing. One day, when Siddhartha the younger had once again tormented his father very much with spite and an unsteadiness in his wishes and had broken both of his rice-bowls, Vasudeva took his friend aside in the evening and talked to him.

"Pardon me." he said, "from a friendly heart, I'm talking to you. I'm seeing that you are tormenting yourself, I'm seeing that you're in grief. Your son, my friend, is worrying you, and he is also worrying me. That young bird is accustomed to a different life, to a different nest. He has not, like you, ran away from riches and the city, being disgusted and fed up with it; against his will, he had to leave all this behind. I asked the river, oh friend, many times I have asked it. But the river laughs, it laughs at me, it laughs at you and me, and is shaking with laughter at our foolishness. Water wants to join water, youth wants to join youth, your son is not in the place where he can prosper. You too should ask the river; you too should listen to it!"

Troubled, Siddhartha looked into his friendly face, in the many wrinkles of which there was **incessant**⁴ cheerfulness.

"How could I part with him?" he said quietly, ashamed. "Give me some more time, my friend! See, I'm fighting for him, I'm seeking to win his heart, with love and with friendly patience I intend to capture it. One day, the river shall also talk to him, he also is called upon."

Vasudeva's smile flourished more warmly. "Oh yes, he too is called upon, he too is of the eternal life. But do we, you and me, know what he is called upon to do, what path to take, what actions to perform, what pain to endure? Not a small one, his pain will be; after all, his heart is proud and hard, people like this have to suffer a lot, err a lot, do much injustice, burden themselves with much sin. Tell me, my friend: you're not taking control of your son's upbringing? You don't force him? You don't beat him? You don't punish him?"

"No, Vasudeva, I don't do anything of this."

"I knew it. You don't force him, don't beat him, don't give him orders, because you know that 'soft' is stronger than 'hard', Water stronger than rocks, love stronger than force. Very good, I praise you. But aren't you mistaken in thinking that you wouldn't force him, wouldn't punish him? Don't you shackle him with your love? Don't you make him feel inferior every day, and don't you make it even harder on him with your kindness and patience? Don't you force him, the arrogant and pampered boy, to live in a hut with two old banana-eaters, to whom even rice is a delicacy, whose thoughts can't be his, whose hearts are old and quiet and beat in a different pace than his? Isn't forced, isn't he punished by all this?"

Troubled, Siddhartha looked to the ground. Quietly, he asked: "What do you think should I do?"

Quoth Vasudeva: "Bring him into the city, bring him into his mother's house, there'll still be servants around, give him to them. And when they aren't any around any more, bring him to a teacher, not for the teachings' sake, but so that he shall be among other boys, and among girls, and in the world which is his own. Have you never thought of this?"

"You're seeing into my heart," Siddhartha spoke sadly. "Often, I have thought of this. But look, how shall I put him, who had no tender heart anyhow, into this world? Won't he become **exuberant**⁵, won't he lose himself to pleasure and power, won't he repeat all of his father's mistakes, won't he perhaps get entirely lost in Sansara?"

Vocabulary

1. **disposition**: mood
2. **ferryman**: carries people across a river or body of water in a boat
3. **reciprocate**: to give something in return or response
4. **incessant**: without pause; unending, to the point of annoyance
5. **exuberant**: high-spirited; extremely energetic and enthusiastic

Brightly, the ferryman's smile lit up; softly, he touched Siddhartha's arm and said: "Ask the river about it, my friend! Hear it laugh about it! Would you actually believe that you had committed your foolish acts in order to spare your son from committing them too? And could you in any way protect your son from **Sansara**⁶? How could you? By means of teachings, prayer, admonition? My friend, have you entirely forgotten that story, that story containing so many lessons, that story about Siddhartha, a Brahman's son? Who has kept the Samana Siddhartha safe from Sansara, from sin, from greed, from foolishness? Were his father's religious devotion, his teachers warnings, his own knowledge, his own search able to keep him safe? Which father, which teacher had been able to protect him from living his life for himself, from soiling himself with life, from burdening himself with guilt, from drinking the bitter drink for himself, from finding his path for himself? Would you think, my dear friend, anybody might perhaps be spared from taking this path? That perhaps your little son would be spared, because you love him, because you would like to keep him from suffering and pain and disappointment? But even if you would die ten times for him, you would not be able to take the slightest part of his destiny upon yourself."

Never before, Vasudeva had spoken so many words. Kindly, Siddhartha thanked him, went troubled into the hut, could not sleep for a long time. Vasudeva had told him nothing that he had not already thought and known for himself. But this was a knowledge he could not act upon, stronger than the knowledge was his love for the boy, stronger was his tenderness, his fear to lose him. Had he ever lost his heart so much to something, had he ever loved any person thus, thus blindly, thus sufferingly, thus unsuccessfully, and yet thus happily?

Siddhartha could not heed his friend's advice, he could not give up the boy. He let the boy give him orders, he let him disregard him. He said nothing and waited; daily, he began the mute struggle of friendliness, the silent war of patience. Vasudeva also said nothing and waited, friendly, knowing, patient. They were both masters of patience.

At one time, when the boy's face reminded him very much of Kamala, Siddhartha suddenly had to think of a line which Kamala a long time ago, in the days of their youth, had once said to him. "You cannot love," she had said to him, and he had agreed with her and had compared himself with a star, while comparing the childlike people with falling leaves, and nevertheless he had also sensed an accusation in that line. Indeed, he had never been able to lose or devote himself completely to another person, to forget himself, to commit foolish acts for the love of another person; never he had been able to do this, and this was, as it had seemed to him at that time, the great distinction which set him apart from the childlike people. But now, since his son was here, now he, Siddhartha, had also become completely a childlike person, suffering for the sake of another person, loving another person, lost to a love, having become a fool on account of love. Now he too felt, late, once in his lifetime, this strongest and strangest of all passions, suffered from it, suffered miserably, and was nevertheless in bliss, was nevertheless renewed in one respect, enriched by one thing.

He did sense very well that this love, this blind love for his son, was a passion, something very human, that it was Sansara, a murky source, dark waters. Nevertheless, he felt at the same time, it was not worthless, it was necessary, came from the essence of his own being. This pleasure also had to be **atoned**⁷ for, this pain also had to be endured, these foolish acts also had to be committed.

Through all this, the son let him commit his foolish acts, let him court for his affection, let him humiliate himself every day by giving in to his moods. This father had nothing which would have delighted him and nothing which he would have feared. He was a good man, this father, a good, kind, soft man, perhaps a very **devout**⁸ man, perhaps a saint, none of these were attributes which could win the boy over. He was bored by this father, who kept him prisoner here in this miserable hut of his, he was bored by him, and for him to answer every naughtiness with a smile, every insult with friendliness, every viciousness with kindness, this very thing was the hated trick of this old sneak. Much more the boy would have liked it if he had been threatened by him, if he had been abused by him.

A day came, when what young Siddhartha had on his mind came bursting forth, and he openly turned against his father. The latter had given him a task, he had told him to gather brushwood. But the boy did not leave the hut, in stubborn disobedience and rage he stayed where he was, thumped on the ground with his feet, clenched his fists, and screamed in a powerful outburst his hatred and **contempt**⁹ into his father's face.

"Get the brushwood for yourself!" he shouted foaming at the mouth, "I'm not your servant. I do know, that you won't hit me, you don't dare; I do know, that you constantly want to punish me and put me down with your religious devotion and your **indulgence**¹⁰. You want me to become like you, just as devout, just as soft, just as wise! But I, listen up, just to make you suffer, I rather want to become a highway-robber and murderer, and go to hell, than to become like you! I hate you, you're not my father!"

Rage and grief boiled over in him, foamed at the father in a hundred savage and evil words. Then the boy ran away and only returned late at night.

But the next morning, he had disappeared. What had also disappeared was a small basket, woven out of **bast** of two colours, in which the ferrymen kept those copper and silver coins which they received as a fare. The boat had also disappeared, Siddhartha saw it lying by the opposite bank. The boy had ran away.

"I must follow him," said Siddhartha, who had been shivering with grief since those ranting speeches, the boy had made yesterday. "A child can't go through the forest all alone. He'll perish. We must build a raft, Vasudeva, to get over the water."

Vocabulary

6. **Sansara**: chasing power and pleasure

7. **atone**: to make amends

8. **devout**: warmly devoted; hearty; sincere; earnest

9. **indulgence**: tolerance; catering to someone's every desire

10. **bast**: a fibrous rope or cord

"We will build a raft," said Vasudeva, "to get our boat back, which the boy has taken away. But him, you shall let run along, my friend, he is no child any more, he knows how to get around. He's looking for the path to the city, and he is right, don't forget that. He's doing what you've failed to do yourself. He's taking care of himself, he's taking his course. Alas, Siddhartha, I see you suffering, but you're suffering a pain at which one would like to laugh, at which you'll soon laugh for yourself."

Siddhartha did not answer. He already held the axe in his hands and began to make a raft of bamboo, and Vasudeva helped him tie the canes together with ropes of grass. Then they crossed over, drifted far off their course, pulled the raft upriver on the opposite bank.

"Why did you take the axe along?" asked Siddhartha.

Vasudeva said: "It might have been possible that the oar of our boat got lost."

But Siddhartha knew what his friend was thinking. He thought, the boy would have thrown away or broken the oar in order to get even and in order to keep them from following him. And in fact, there was no oar left in the boat. Vasudeva pointed to the bottom of the boat and looked at his friend with a smile, as if he wanted to say: "Don't you see what your son is trying to tell you? Don't you see that he doesn't want to be followed?" But he did not say this in words. He started making a new oar. But Siddhartha bid his farewell, to look for the run-away. Vasudeva did not stop him.

When Siddhartha had already been walking through the forest for a long time, the thought occurred to him that his search was useless. Either, so he thought, the boy was far ahead and had already reached the city, or, if he should still be on his way, he would conceal himself from him, the pursuer. As he continued thinking, he also found that he, on his part, was not worried for his son, he knew deep inside that he had neither perished nor was in any danger in the forest. Nevertheless, he ran without stopping, no longer to save him, just to satisfy his desire, just to perhaps see him one more time. And he ran up to just outside of the city.

When, near the city, he reached a wide road, he stopped, by the entrance of the beautiful pleasure-garden, which used to belong to Kamala, where he had seen her for the first time in her sedan-chair. The past rose up in his soul, again he saw himself standing there, young, bearded, hair full of dust. For a long time, Siddhartha stood there and looked through the open gate into the garden, seeing monks in yellow robes walking among the beautiful trees.

For a long time, he stood there, pondering, seeing images, listening to the story of his life. For a long time, he stood there, looked at the monks, saw young Siddhartha in their place, saw young Kamala walking among the high trees. Clearly, he saw himself being served food and drink by Kamala, receiving his first kiss from her, looking proudly and disdainfully back on his **Brahmanism**¹¹, beginning proudly and full of desire his worldly life. He saw the servants, the gamblers with the dice, the musicians, saw

Kamala's song-bird in the cage, lived through all this once again, breathed Sansara, was once again old and tired, felt once again disgust, felt once again the wish to annihilate himself, was once again healed by the holy **Om**¹².

After having been standing by the gate of the garden for a long time, Siddhartha realised that his desire was foolish, which had made him go up to this place, that he could not help his son, that he was not allowed to cling him. Deeply, following the runaway son, there was now emptiness. Sadly, he sat down, felt something dying in his heart, experienced emptiness, saw no joy any more, no goal. He sat lost in thought and waited. This he had learned by the river, this one thing: waiting, having patience, listening attentively. And he sat and listened, in the dust of the road, listened to his heart, beating tiredly and sadly,

That this wound did not blossom yet, did not shine yet, at this hour, made him sad. Instead of the desired goal, which had drawn him here following the runaway son, there was now emptiness. Sadly, he sat down, felt something dying in his heart, experienced emptiness, saw no joy any more, no goal. He sat lost in thought and waited. This he had learned by the river, this one thing: waiting, having patience, listening attentively. And he sat and listened, in the dust of the road, listened to his heart, beating tiredly and sadly, waited for a voice. Many an hour he crouched, listening, saw no images any more, fell into emptiness, let himself fall, without seeing a path. And when he felt the wound burning, he silently spoke the Om, filled himself with Om. The monks in the garden saw him, and since he crouched for many hours, and dust was gathering on his gray hair, one of them came to him and placed two bananas in front of him. The old man did not see him.

From this **petrified**¹³ state, he was awoken by a hand touching his shoulder. Instantly, he recognised this touch, this tender, bashful touch, and regained his senses. He rose and greeted Vasudeva, who had followed him. And when he looked into Vasudeva's friendly face, into the small wrinkles, which were as if they were filled with nothing but his smile, into the happy eyes, then he smiled too. Now he saw the bananas lying in front of him, picked them up, gave one to the ferryman, ate the other one himself. After this, he silently went back into the forest with Vasudeva, returned home to the ferry. Neither one talked about what had happened today, neither one mentioned the boy's name, neither one spoke about him running away, neither one spoke about the wound. In the hut, Siddhartha lay down on his bed, and when after a while Vasudeva came to him, to offer him a bowl of coconut-milk, he already found him asleep.

Vocabulary

11. **Brahmanism**: aspects of Hinduism as practiced by the Brahmin caste of India

12. **Om**: a sacred, mystical syllable used in prayer and meditation

13. **petrify**: to become very rigid; to become like stone

The Son | Reading Quiz

- Which statement is **false**?
 - Siddhartha is poor and lives in a hut the woods.
 - The boy's mother has passed away.
 - The boy grew up in a wealthy home with servants.
 - Siddhartha has raised his son since infancy.
- Which best describes how Siddhartha treats his son?
 - He is firm but loving.
 - He is understanding and kind.
 - He is impatient and demanding.
 - He is too busy working to give his son attention.
- Which best describes Vesduva's position on the boy?
 - The boy needs discipline, so Siddhartha should treat him more firmly.
 - The boy doesn't work and he steals, so he should be sent to live elsewhere.
 - The boy has to experience life for himself, so Siddhartha should let him go.
 - The boy needs an education to succeed, so he should be sent to a teacher.
- Which statement about the boy is **false**?
 - He is afraid of Vasudeva.
 - He makes Siddhartha happy.
 - He is disrespectful and ungrateful.
 - He is spoiled and troublesome.
- What effect does Siddhartha's approach have on the boy?
 - It makes the boy laugh at his father's weakness.
 - It makes the boy angry with his father.
 - It makes the boy sad about the way that he acted.
 - It makes the boy concerned for his father's health.
- Which character trait does **not** apply to Vesduva?
 - possessive
 - patient
 - tactful
 - clever
- Which is the correct sequence of events?
 - The boy runs away; Siddhartha stands by the garden and thinks; Vesduva tells his friend to listen to the river
 - Vesduva makes an oar for the boat; the boy runs away; the boy yells at his father
 - The boy yells at his father; the boy steals the boat; Siddhartha stands by the garden and thinks
 - The boy steals the boat; Vesduva tells his friend to listen to the river; the boy runs away
- Which figurative language technique is used in the following?
"Your son is worrying you, and he is also worrying me. That young bird is accustomed to a different life, to a different nest."
 - Simile
 - Metaphor
 - Personification
 - Hyperbole
- Which statement about Siddhartha is **false**?
 - He learns that he cannot protect his son.
 - Siddhartha learns that love can be selfish.
 - He learns that children bring suffering and worry.
 - He learns that children need structure and rules.
- Based on how the story concludes, which would be most likely to occur next if the story were to continue?
 - Siddhartha would take his anger and grief out on Vesduva.
 - Siddhartha and Vesduva would continue living as they once did.
 - Siddhartha would search for his son with greater intensity.
 - Siddhartha and Vesduva would establish a list of rules for their hut in the woods.

Extended Response: Answer the following question in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

What is a theme, message, or lesson that the author of this text is trying to communicate to the reader?

Put it into your own words and explain how this story attempts to teach this theme, message, or lesson to readers. Support your argument with two examples from the text. Explain your argument completely.