Sample Student Essay Notes

The Search for Knowledge

The quest for enlightenment is often a long arduous journey with many obstacles, as seen in Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse and Oedipus the King by Sophocles. Siddhartha and Oedipus have mirroring journeys in which they go from the home of their parents through a long period of independence and ignorance to ultimately discover enlightenment. They are very similar men with great determination and a need for autonomy. Siddhartha goes from place to place because he is unsatisfied with his community’s teachings, while Oedipus will not rest until he finds out what happened with his parents. Both men eventually come across a wise man who teaches them truths: Siddhartha finds Vasudeva, and Oedipus finds Tiresias. While the teachings are valid, both men are not satisfied until going off on their own and finding these truths for themselves, which shows that real knowledge must be found and cannot be taught.

In both stories, the main character’s background creates his lasting need for independence. Siddhartha is raised in the Hindu religion as a Brahmin, and soon becomes dissatisfied with its teachings. Hesse explains that Siddhartha, “had begun to suspect that his worthy father and his other teachers, the wise Brahmins, had already passed on to him the bulk and the best of their wisdom, that they had already poured the sum total of their knowledge into his waiting vessel; and the vessel was not full, his intellect was not satisfied, his soul was not at peace, his heart was not still” (Hesse 5). Siddhartha comes to realize that the oldest people in his village have not achieved enlightenment, and this gives him the desire to go out on his own to find enlightenment, as he realizes he does not need others to reach his goal. This leads Siddhartha to a deeper realization about his quest for enlightenment. The narrator questions, “Was Atman then not within him? Was not then the source within his own heart? One must find the source within one’s own Self, one must possess it. Everything else was seeking—a detour, error” (Hesse 7). Siddhartha’s independent journey eventually becomes successful as he lives by the river and becomes at one with the world, finding peace and harmony and discovering enlightenment. Oedipus, on the other hand, did not choose to go out on his own; he was forced to. Upon his birth a prophet predicted that Oedipus would grow up to kill his parents, which led them to abandon their child. After growing up on his own, Oedipus solves a riddle to become king, and ends up with a very successful life without the help of his parents. However, Oedipus was not successful in staying away from his parents, and eventually the prophecy came true, as he unknowingly slayed his father and wed his mother. This proves that one cannot avoid his true fate, a valuable lesson that comes back to haunt Oedipus in the end. While the path to independence was very different for Siddhartha and Oedipus, they both traveled through life alone and left their families behind.

Along their journeys, both Siddhartha and Oedipus meet a wise man who knows a lot more than they do, but they are not able to easily receive the knowledge and must discover it for themselves.
When Siddhartha returns to Vasudeva, 20 years after their first encounter, he envies the man's quiet serenity living by the river, and he thinks he can help him become enlightened. Siddhartha decides to live with the ferryman, but instead of teaching Siddhartha the truths that he has learned from living by the river, Vasudeva makes Siddhartha experience them for himself. Siddhartha learns his first truth from the river and shares it with Vasudeva: “Have you also learned that secret from the river; that there is no such thing as time?” (Hesse 106). Siddhartha has learned from watching the flow of the river that time is irrelevant and, like the water in the river, it keeps flowing and changing but always appears the same. If Vasudeva had tried to explain this to Siddhartha when he arrived, Siddhartha wouldn’t have fully understood it the way he does now that he has learned it for himself, sitting by the river.

Oedipus also meets a man who knows much more than him, the blind prophet Tiresias. While Tiresias is blind, he can symbolically see because he is wise and knows the truth. When he arrives, he complains, “How terrible—to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees! I knew it well, but I put it from my mind, else I never would have come” (Sophocles 176). Tiresias is saying that he may be able to see the truth, but he envies Oedipus because he doesn’t have to bear the pain that comes along with knowing the truth. Eventually, after the two men argue, Tiresias becomes frustrated and tells Oedipus the truth, that he (Oedipus) is the murderer of Laius, his father, and that he also is married to his own mother. Oedipus, however, does not believe the blind prophet, and becomes infuriated at the prophet’s accusations. Oedipus then goes on a mad search for the truth, and when he discovers that the prophet was right, he gouges his eyes out. Once he learns the truth he is no longer blind, and what he sees haunts him, just as Tiresias predicted, so he removes his eyes in attempt to return to his former blindness. Oedipus could have done this much earlier when Tiresias had told him the truth, but just as Siddhartha could not learn enlightenment from someone else, Oedipus had to discover the truth for himself.

In different ways, each story shows that real knowledge must be learned through experience and cannot be taught. Siddhartha has spent his life traveling from place to place trying to learn from enlightened people, only to discover that he must find it on his own. He clearly illustrates this point when he talks to Gotama and, telling him he is leaving, he explains, “You have done so by your own seeking, in your own way, through thought, through meditation, through knowledge, through enlightenment. You have learned nothing through teachings, and so I think, O Illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment” (Hesse 33). This realization that Siddhartha makes is the central theme of the novel and is his first major step to attaining enlightenment. For Oedipus, it is a matter of not wanting to believe what the wise man said, and having to see the truth with his own eyes to believe it. When Oedipus learns that he
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was the baby who was predicted to kill his parents, he shouts, “O god—all come true, all burst to light! O light—now let me look my last on you! I stand revealed at last—cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage, cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands” (Sophocles 232). Here, Oedipus learns that what the blind prophet said was completely true, and now he believes it because he has gone searching and discovered the answer himself, rather than believing what another man says.

In both stories, the main character eventually finds the knowledge that he has been seeking, but the outcome for each man is very different. Siddhartha becomes spiritually enlightened and lives peacefully by the river, as he had always hoped to do. Oedipus, after he learns that he has killed his father and married his mother, gouges his eyes out so he doesn’t have to see the truth, and lives in misery and despair. While their outcomes were different, both men went on a very similar journey of becoming independent from their parents, seeking the truth, and eventually learning that true knowledge cannot be imparted from man to man but must be learned through experience. This principle shows the true value of experience and seeing life through one’s own eyes. It is what makes many people in life decide to travel on their own spiritual journeys to find themselves, and it is what guides both Siddhartha and Oedipus on their quests to find knowledge.