Dessa J. Shapiro

Humanities

Mr. Weller

28 April 2023

Life of Pi Paper

Life of Pi by Yann Martel is a book with many layers; some dive into its deeper purpose, finding within it the goal of religious persuasion, while others are happy to enjoy the fantastical adventure. Regardless of the viewpoint one chooses to take while reading the text, the broader themes and messages are undeniable. There are many instances when Yann Martel uses the text as an allegory for sociological or psychological phenomena. The character Pi is often used as a medium to deliver these deeper messages. Through the progression of the text, Pi is caught in a dichotomy between animalistic and humanistic tendencies, shifting between them as his journey progresses. Further demonstrating the conflict between faith and instinctual logic.

The author of Life of Pie breaks the book into 3 separate parts, each highlighting a different aspect of his journey. In the first, the reader explores Pi’s history and belief system, learning his morals such as a desire to be a vegetarian and never kill another living being. Religion is also a significant aspect of Pi’s identity. “ ‘Religion will save us,’ I said…’Religion?’ Mr. Kumar grinned broadly. ‘I don't believe in religion. Religion is darkness.’... Darkness is the last thing that religion is. Religion is light.”(Martel 27) When Pi is confronted with a contradicting perspective about religion he is perplexed by the concept of a negative in religion, in faith; for he only sees the light and hopes it brings. As the book commences and Pi has been stranded at sea for months there is an unconscious shift in his viewpoint. Externally he still relies on religion to guide him and provide a sense of hope, but on occasion, he diverges from this core belief. “Only death consistently excites your emotions, whether contemplating it when life is safe and stale, or fleeing it when life is threatened and precious.” (Martel 217) There are several passages throughout the latter section of part two where Pi displays an uncharacteristic alteration. In this passage, he plays with the notion of death. Claiming an inverse relationship between longing and fear, shifting his previous mindset seen at the beginning. Instead of detesting death as darkness, he has found a way to see it as light; as a topic of interest when life is safe, and a reason to live when life is threatened. As he survives difficult circumstances at sea, he finds some truth in Mr. Kumar's statement. Although religion and death are outwardly separate, they share the same moral outlook in Pi’s mind. Before, Pi often acquainted the concept of death and killing with evil and sin. Pi’s opinions diverge from a clear black-and-white to a gray area, where his instincts take control over his faith-centered moral guidelines. He depends more on feelings and personal experience to decide his mind rather than an idealistic ideology of objective truth.

Pi is displayed as a self-actualized character, someone who has deep insight and is a master of observation. He is presented as knowledgeable and almost worldly despite living a relatively sheltered life. His life is centered around the family zoo, his experiences are primarily based around animal behavior. He has a heightened perspective of an animistic mindset. “All living things contain a measure of madness that moves them in strange, sometimes inexplicable ways. This madness can be saved, it is part and parcel of the ability to adapt. Without it, no species would survive” (Martel 41) As Pi reflects on the nature of animistic survival, he understands the unpredictability of survival and life; even when he has no point of reference to such a necessity in the beginning. So he relies upon his faith and observational skills to understand the inexplicable. He longs for some type of understanding and finds it through religious exploration whether it is Hinduism, Christianity, and Muslim. He does not desire to restrict himself to a single religion because he is attracted to the idea and understanding religion gives him, rather than a specific system. The more paths of belief available, the less can be rendered to the unknown. But as Pi is stranded at sea he experiences a madness of his own. “You may be astonished that in such a short period, I could go from weeping over the muffled killing of a flying fish to gleefully bludgeoning to death a dorado… But in point of fact, the explanation lies elsewhere. It is simple and brutal: a person can get used to anything, even to killing.” (Martel 185) When Pi is stranded at sea, he is forced to face his mind and beliefs, he has to decide between survival and principles. He decided to betray his morals and beliefs for survival, he accepted the madness he used to observe in animals into himself. When he kills his first fish, he is distraught, sobbing and praying for the life he has taken, giving in to the madness of hunger, both literal hunger and the representational hunger to live. After that first kill, he goes through a mental transition, he detaches from the human, faithful side and starts to rely on animalistic, instinctual tendencies. He gets used to killing, a concept that doesn't align with his previous, and sometimes still existent morals. When Pi does fall to his survival instinct he isn't suffering through each animal, he finds himself joyous to kill, demonstrating how thin the line between animal and human presents.

As the story progresses, and Pi spends more time stranded at sea Pi’s character displays another shift. He begins to turn back to God and use that connection to keep moving. “Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out. It was beyond expression. I thank God it always passed…The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving” (Martel 209) In this moment of Pi’s life at sea, he has learned how to survive, created a daily routine, and had a strategy of how to live harmoniously with Richard Parker. Since he has now experienced what it is like to give up his humanity to survive, he once again turns to his thoughts. He embraces his actions, accepting the part of him that keeps him alive, the instinctual, animalist part. As he starts accepting this, he shifts towards God and religion. Although he never gave up his attachment to faith, he lost sight of it in the frenzy for survival, Unconsciously slipping farther away from it and losing sight of the bigger picture. Now, he continues to suffer from fear, hunger, and despair; but he begins to think, and find meaning by turning to god, turning to humanity. By the end of the book, he has developed his silkie, growing into new perspectives. “The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?” (Martel 302) When Pi is accosted by the reporters as they claim his words are false, a mere fairy tale; he responds with great insight. He equates life itself to a story, as something that can never be comforted in reality, a subjective idea. Much like the concept of religion, Pi finds his journey to be something to believe in. He is so connected to the different aspects of life that he combines them. He realizes that people cannot be truly defined as animalistic or humanistic, instinctual or faithful. Human nature is linked to change and the ability to understand the conflicting parts of ourselves. Pi can synchronize himself, and better understand his and others' nature through his past mental changes.

In this story, religion is more of a symbol of humanization than a symbol of Gods, deities, or faith itself. Pi is most strongly connected with religion when he is stable, healthy, and more internally focused, as demonstrated in part 1, the end of part 2, and throughout part 3. On the contrary, when Pi is focused on survival he shifts away from his religion and inhibits animistic qualities. It is as if Pi has multiple personalities when observing the duality between the two natures. This theme demonstrated in the text demonstrates a broader idea of situationism theory, how people's changes in behaviors, actions, and even thoughts are factors of the situation rather than personal traits. People generally tend to judge other people's actions based on personal traits, rarely taking into account situational factors. Life of Pie examines this in a deeper, more personal nature. As the reader observes Pi they can experience the reality of his personality changes, understanding how much of his actions are influenced by his situation. This causes readers to feel more empathetic towards Pi since they understand his action and behaviors, and no longer have grounds for personal judgment. It is important to recognize how situational factors affect people, and not depend on your automatic processing to judge and label others.

Reference Page

Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Mary Glasgow Magazines, 2014

i