**Survival: a dominant trait of the human condition**

Survival of the fittest, and the will to live and endure, has always been one of the

most distinctive and perseverant traits of the human condition. While all organisms

possess this inherent function, humans interact and relate to it most formidably and

uniquely, even under the most radical situations. Humans have been known to lie, harm,

and even kill in order to stay alive[[1]](#footnote-2). This perpetual characteristic of humans is

demonstrated most effectively in the texts *Not wanted on the Voyage* by Timothy Findley

and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. Findley’s discombobulated retelling of Noah’s ark and

Martel’s tale of pathos and necessity both entwine and parallel each other in the sense

that they both deal with that elusive, intrinsic trait of the human condition; survival under

all odds. The use of religion as a fanatical form of faith and justification, the need to

adapt and change either willingly or out of necessity, and the relationship between

humans, animals and other humans attest to nature of the survival instinct inherent in the

human condition.

Religion is intrinsically a paradoxical concept, with many of its subdivided hierarchies

contradicting one another[[2]](#footnote-3). It is also a driving motif of the human race, and one that has

lasted – and will continue to last – throughout the ages; it grants reason and hope, both of

which are essential to survive. Martel’s life-affirming protagonist Pi is a shining example

of this: He has survived 227 days in the Pacific with an adult Bengal tiger, a feat that is

not easily produced, and very much impossible without faith in God or a greater entity.

To attest to this, he says “*To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing*

*immobility as a means of transportation*” (Martel, 31), as life is an overwhelming

struggle, and without belief in himself or a greater entity, the man who does so *“is not*

*merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life*” (Einstein, 1934) .

Pi continues, unrelenting in his faith even in the direst of situations, and he states:

*“I will beat the odds, as great as they are. I have survived so far, miraculously.*

*Now I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day. I will put in all*

*the hard work necessary. Yes, so long as God is with me, I will not die. Amen” (Martel,*

*163).*

This quote signifies Pi’s defiance of death, and his continuous struggle to combat what

fate had dealt him, and the fact that he had a 300 pound Bengal tiger with him (Ibid, 110),

yet he believes in God until the very end, though with occasional lapses (Ibid, 231).

Conversely, Findley’s Noah has fanatical belief in God, obstinately refusing any other

logical explanations (Findley, 21), and uses his belief to the extreme, sacrificing

countless animals *“…for having spared us*” (Ibid, 125). In Noah’s mind, God (Or

Yaweh[[3]](#footnote-4)), is above all others, except himself (Ibid, 25), and whatever could be done to

please him *was* done, up to and including injuring his son Ham (Ibid, 27) and mutilating

Emma (Japeth’s 12 year old wife) in a sadistically disturbing event (Ibid, 264)[[4]](#footnote-5).

Yet even Noah begins to have doubt in his God:

*“His earlier suspicions that Yaweh was tired and had gone to Nod was turning to*

*the disturbing thought that more could be wrong than mere exhaustion. What if Yaweh*

*were ill? Truly ill. Could Yaweh die? It was inconceivable. Yet, the flood itself had been*

*inconceivable. But here it was: entire.” (Ibid, 241)*

Gradually, Noah’s faith in God begins to wane, and after scrutinizing this doubt with

trivial ‘miracles’ (Ibid, 315), he finally convinces himself that Yaweh had abandoned

humanity with a post-diluvian world and an ark full of animals (Ibid, 351).

Consequently, Noah’s faith begins to turn towards the future of not only him, but the

others as well; the olive branch that the final raven delivers is symbolic of a new

beginning, and a new faith, demonstrated in the following excerpt: “*And Noah said; “you*

*see?” “Yes,” said Lucy. “We do.”*” (Ibid, 352).

Similarly, Pi Patel’s belief in himself and his future stems from his devout belief in God,

albeit not as radically, and he describes the individual soul as “*touching upon the world*

*soul like a well reaches for the water table. That which sustains the universe beyond*

*thought and language, and that which is at the core of us and struggle for expression is*

*the same thing*” (Martel, 53); individualism stems from belief in God, and their

interconnectedness, tantamount to Yaweh’s edict and Noah’s ark.

Thus, the utilization of faith as a incentive to survive, or a bifurcated belief in oneself and

in God is shown prominently in both Pi Patel and Noah Noyes, in which both characters

seek help from God, have dubiety in Him, and yet ineluctably leading to the salvation of

both. It also reinforces the notion that Man’s perception of Religion is exactly that: a

perception, and not a truth.

*“In the beginning there was nothing and God said, “Let there be light,” and there was*

*still nothing but everybody could see it*” (Thomas), shows that Man’s view of God is

arbitrary, sometimes leading to a source of justification for sanctimonious deeds (in the

case of Noah), or continuous self-reinforcement (in the case of Pi), but whatever the case

may be, recognition of God ends ultimately in salvation; a most fitting ‘reward’ of the

human condition.

While God provides reason and salvation, a more apparent trait in the human

condition is seen in how humans adapt and change to fit their respective situations.

Whether out of willpower or necessity, the most fundamental aspect of human survival is

the ability to acclimate in any surrounding. This characteristic is ubiquitous and not mere

happenstance as Pi Patel observes in the simple act of moving:

*“People move because of the wear and tear of anxiety. Because of the growing*

*feeling that no matter how hard they work, their efforts will yield nothing; that what they*

*build in one year will be torn down in one day by others, because of the impression that*

*the future is blacked up, that they might do all right, but not their children. Because of the*

*feeling that nothing will change, that happiness and prosperity are only possible*

*elsewhere” (*Martel, *87)*

Thus, in order to survive, people must change, either willingly or out of necessity, as Pi

soon realizes that his old life had dissipated, and that *“there was nothing. Only rain,*

*marauding waves of black ocean, and the flotsam of tragedy”* (Ibid, 118), forced to

fabricate a new life for himself out of necessity:

*“I would be in the direst of dire straits, facing a bleak future, when some small*

*thing, some detail, would transform itself and appear in my mind in a new light. It would*

*no longer be the small thing it was before, but the most important thing in the world, the*

*thing that would save my life. How true it is that necessity is the mother of invention, how*

*very true” (Ibid, 154)*

Both alike and contrary to Pi’s ordeal, the characters on Noah’s ark had changed both out

of necessity and willingly. The foremost cause for change and the pathos of the tale was

also the central event, however catastrophic and climactic:

*“And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his son’s wives with him into*

*the ark, because of the waters of the flood…” (Genesis 7:7)*

Yaweh’s unquestionable edict served two unadulterated purposes; it dictated the mass

annihilation of all things tainted and corrupt (all animals except Noah & his entourage),

and it signified that *“the Lord God Father of All Creation had consented to His own*

*death[[5]](#footnote-6)”* (Findley, 112), flooding the world as an atonement for their sins.

In doing so, the few survivors of the catastrophe (i.e. Noah and his family), must deal

with the situation the only way possible: adaptation.

Although inherently, all characters possess a metamorphic nature, certain individuals

exemplify this more noticeably than others. The character of Japeth Noyes is one that is

that has evolved through imitation and idolism; his initial attitude and appearance

transforms from innocently gullible to vigorously machismo following his encounter with

the Ruffian King[[6]](#footnote-7) (Ibid, 76) and his idealistic worship of Michael Archangelis [[7]](#footnote-8)(Ibid, 75).

He chose to change in order to intimidate others and to satisfy his desire to be feared; his

characterization later in the novel shows that his goal was attained, but at a cost (that

being his innocence):

*“But Japeth was no longer the gauche and awkward warrior boy who, months*

*before, had mistaken his lantern for a sword. Since his battles with the Pirates and*

*slaying of the Unicorn, he had become an efficient warlord and accomplished butcher.”*

*(Ibid, 291)*

Similarly, Pi Patel evolves from a naïve, prospective student to a wise, resourceful

hunter. He upholds the social Darwinist philosophy, stating that “It was simple and

brutal: a person can get used to anything, even killing” (Martel, 205), affirming the

distinguished axiom (that people could adapt to anything), and further reflecting that “*I*

*descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible*” (Ibid, 218), which directly

contrasts with his earlier ideology in which he claims that animals *“are too set in their*

*ways to reconstruct their subjective worlds and adapt to a new environment”* (Ibid, 44), a

thought now undermined after his ordeal in the Pacific.

Hence, the central aspect of survival, that humans possess the ability to adapt in any

given situation, either willingly in Japeth’s character or out of necessity in the life of Pi,

remains vital to the metaphysical nature of humans, and is omnipresent in all walks of

life.

Yet humans cannot sufficiently adapt in an environment without establishing –

and maintaining – a holistic relationship with its inhabitants (both animals and other

humans). The interaction and co-existence between homogenous and heterogeneous

species is also inherent in instinctual survival. Often times, this interaction is

dichotomous and represents a give-and-take relationship, as Pi Patel demonstrates with

his heterogeneous companion Richard Parker[[8]](#footnote-9). Initially, Pi reacts – as most people would

- quite unfavorably and vehemently when the issue of Richard Parker first came into

actualization (Ibid, 110), and even contemplates killing him (Ibid, 174), but finally comes

to the conclusion that he would have to settle into a state of harmonious symbiosis with

him in order to survive. Dichotomy presents itself once again; Pi has a love-hate

relationship with Richard Parker, of which he says: “*He pushed me to go on living. I*

*hated him for it, yet at the same time I was grateful*” (Ibid, 182), and yet Pi struggles with

a dilemma, as “*The only choice left to me was death by water or death by animal. I chose*

*death by animal”* (Ibid, 251). Eventually Richard Parker’s anthropomorphic nature and

Pi’s erratic habits lead him to the realization that he was becoming increasingly attached

to Richard Parker, emulating him (Ibid, 250), and even loving him (Ibid, 262), all the

while advancing their dualistic give-and-take co-existence (Pi offers Richard Parker food

and sustenance in return for safety and survival).

In comparison, the relationships found aboard Noah’s ark are not as binary, though it

retains some semblance of it. The social hierarchy found aboard Noah’s refuge is much

more oppressive, with Noah Noyes relegating the ‘lower orders’ (consisting of Mrs.

Noyes, Lucy and Ham) to the lower deck (Findley, 208), and thereby associating himself

with his two hyper-macho sons (Shem and Japeth) and obedient daughter-in-law Hannah.

This close association is done to Noah’s advantage; so that he is under the guard of loyal

and capable subordinates should he be attacked in some way, shape or form. Indeed, he

admits to his vulnerabilities and flaws, and his need to be protected:

*“He was lonely. For the sun. For everything that had been and was no*

*more. His body ached in its great and terrible age. All his bones were as brittle as candy*

*now. His feet were stones and pebbles inside his slippers and his robe was impossibly*

*heavy, weighted down with all its many layers and its damp.” (Ibid, 241)*

Still, although he is the male elect of the dominant race, he sees himself threatened and

intimidated by Hannah’s presence[[9]](#footnote-10). Hannah Noyes is yet another example, perhaps the

paragon of acquiescent adaptation. She manages to escape the bonds that had subjugated

and denigrated women in order to rise up in the social hierarchy, but at a cost[[10]](#footnote-11). She

knows when to speak, and when to hold her tongue, and retains her calmness in the

presence of high authority figures such as Noah and Yaweh. This works quite favorably

for her, as she receives Yaweh’s respect*; “as Hannah rose, Yaweh offered her His hand,*

*and He helped her to her feet. This was unheard of and Hannah blushed.”* (Ibid, 69), and

attains the privileges of being in Noah’s upper social hierarchy, acting as a sympathizer

and religious assistant. Mrs.Noyes expresses her dismay and dissatisfaction at Hannah’s

‘promotion’ and her subsequent demotion:

*“Why Sister Hannah had been offered the privilege of being quartered there was*

*not explained – and what was worse – far worse- was the definite impression that no*

*explanation was thought necessary. Hannah had been elevated and Mrs. Noyes demoted.*

*Period.”* (Ibid, 211)

Hannah had effectively molded herself to suit her needs and thereby gained a decisive

advantage over the lower orders, but as a result of playing to people’s wants and needs,

had sacrificed her child in doing so, and would never express her inner turmoil; she

characterizes herself solely on her outer demeanor (Ibid, 267).

The dualistic co-existence between Pi and Richard Parker, the structural barrier of Noah’s

existence and Hannah’s amorphous demeanor all constitute a single underlying theme of

the human condition: actively maintaining a relationship with members of the same or

different species. Doing so gives a decisive advantage in the race to flourish, prosper, and

most importantly, to survive.

The father of natural selection, Charles Darwin, once stated that “*It is not the*

*strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that*

*is most adaptable to change*” (Darwin). In the novels *Life of Pi* and *Not wanted on the*

*Voyage*, this principle is affirmed and verified repeatedly throughout the novel. The

instinct to survive, so immanent in the human condition, is revealed throughout by the

subjective use of Religion, both as a means of justification for Noah Noyes, and acting as

an incentive for Pi Patel to pursue life and overcome despair. It is also shown through

accommodation and adaptation to unfamiliar environments, as Pi learns to do following

the ruination of his former life, and as Japeth decides to do, seeking to gain power and

influence. Lastly, the relationships maintained throughout propels the characters to

survive, as Pi had done to protect himself from Richard Parker in a give-and-take

dualism, and as Hannah and Noah had accomplished, to elevate oneself and to protect

oneself from possible threats.

Survival, like all instincts, is integrated into the cognition of humans, and as a result of

that, becomes all the more necessary to comprehend and realize how and why, and other

such metaphysical questions in order to gain a greater understanding of the human

condition. Anthropomorphism[[11]](#footnote-12) and other stereotypically applied human attributes are

diversified from this condition, and soon it may become known as the ‘natural condition’

rather than the ‘human condition’, for such a word is so idiosyncratic of humans and

anthropocentric in nature that it may require additional pondering, for the instinct to

survive is as multitudinous as life itself.

1. *Lord of the Flies* is a fascinating example of this, as are other stories of being stranded or cannibalism in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Christianity splits itself into several branches (protestant, Roman Catholic, etc), which all essentially preserve the same ideals but has altered versions of how each ideal is reached. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Tetragrammaton, or Yaweh, is the Hebrew name of God [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is interesting to note that Emma’s raping by the unicorn caused the unicorn to die; it is such a pure creature that when it commits any malicious deed, it harms itself in doing so. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Findley’s decision to kill God is an answer to anti-creationists who would inevitable ask the question ‘where is God today?’ had Findley not had its inclusion. It also follows the ideology of God possessing ‘mortal’ consequences such as death. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The Ruffian King was the main cause of Japeth’s fear, and presumably an example of the kind of fear Japeth wanted to inspire in people, hence his decision to change. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. A warrior angel, servant of Yaweh, and brother of Lucifer, who was the only opponent Michael never truly defeated. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Richard Parker is a 450 pound adult Bengal Tiger [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Noah is jealous of Yaweh’s disposition towards Hannah, but is also fairly impressed by her outwardly pleasing and submissive conduct, a trait that his wife never had. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Hannah had to sacrifice her child as a penalty of being in Noah’s favor and attending to him all the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Attribution of stereotypical human features & characteristics to inanimate objects or animals [↑](#footnote-ref-12)