

How are humans' perceptions of reality portrayed in the novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel?

Le Jardin Academy

IB Candidate Number -

Spring 2014

Abstract

Through this essay, possible solutions to the question, “How are humans’ perceptions of truth shown in the novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel?” were examined. This question was inspired by my initial reading of the novel; the characters, the plot, the philosophy, and the ambiguous conclusion were very intriguing and sparked the essay. Each ending has certain implications about its readers, which are supported by textual evidence. Many different aspects contribute to the shaping of the final section of the story, the section in which the reader is presented with a new mindset about Pi and his journey; the naming of characters, the dichotomy of science and religion, and the concept of truth all combine to create the final moments. *Life of Pi* takes its readers on two simultaneous journeys; one is with a boy and his unlikely companion, and the other is into themselves. As the reader becomes attached to Piscine and Richard Parker, they begin to feel the emotions, the anguish, and the ultimatums of the journey as if they were incessantly drifting along in the same lifeboat. After examining each of the aspects that make this novel so unique, philosophical, and overall astonishing, I reached the conclusion that a god, one of whichever religion the reader follows, is the author of the first story, while mankind and atheism are the authors of the second.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Significance Behind the Name “P”	4
Pi’s Religious Affiliations	4
Pi’s Scientific Affiliations	7
The “Better” (Animal) Story	8
Why Does This Story Make You Believe in God	11
Perception Versus Truth	13
Conclusion	13
Works Cited	15

I. Introduction

Can science and religion play equally-vital roles in the shaping of a life? Are our predicaments the work of a higher power or of man? The readers' perspectives shape the journey and the metaphors, characterization, and meanings present within the text. The juxtaposition of religion and science in *Life of Pi* illustrates a harmonious balance which shapes the way we, as humans, perceive our individual realities.

II. Significance Behind the Name "Pi"

Piscine Molitor Patel is the name given to the novel's human protagonist after one of the best pools in the world (according to his uncle). After being teased mercilessly in school by both students and teachers, the abbreviation "Pi" was chosen by him to be his nickname. Pi originally chooses this name as a form of salvation from his grueling torture of being called "pissing" by his ravenous classmates. By writing his name on each chalkboard and giving his classmates a symbol to know him by, he becomes successful in escaping his past nickname: "And so, in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge," (Martel 30) Pi reminisces. This irrational number is used by mathematicians as an unquantifiable, infinite amount to rationalize their understanding of the universe. Religion follows the same concept. We choose to believe in stories to reach a coherent understanding of the universe.

III. Pi's Religious Affiliations

Based on karma, the sum of a person's actions in their present and previous lives is viewed as deciding their futures. Hinduism is based on individual theologies and philosophies. One aspect of a Hindu's belief is the idea of Dharma (Dasa). Dharma refers to the law that explains the reality of the universe. Within the core of Hinduism, the juxtaposition of reality and religion is prominent. Of the

religions present in *Life of Pi*, Hinduism is the oldest and only polytheistic, which allows it to be relevant in many more situations than both Christianity and Islam. For example, when Pi finally catches a fish, he gives his thanks to, “Lord Vishnu. [...] Once you have saved the world by taking the form of a fish. Now you have saved me by taking the form of a fish,” (233).

Jesus, on the other hand, the son of God, is believed by Christians to have sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity. By believing in Jesus Christ, “The Savior,” sinful people are given salvation and welcomed into Heaven (“Religion: Christianity”). Pi, like other Christians, aims to make sense of his suffering by trying to understand the strange ways in which God works. Christianity, however, is the most popular of these three religions which allows more people, both in and out of the text, to try to sympathize with Piscine. One main difference between Christianity and Hinduism is that Christianity is based on the life and ideas of Jesus Christ, while Hindus believe in karma and believe that everything is based off what you choose to do.

Islam is very similar to Christianity when looking at the big picture. It is only a few centuries younger than Christianity and is monotheistic as well (“Islam: Empire of Faith”). Just as followers of the Christian religion accept Jesus Christ into every aspect of their lives, devout Muslims allow Allah, their god, into their lives. “Islam” translates to “surrender” or “submission” which refers to completely opening to everything that Allah wishes them to do. Something unique about Islam that sets it apart from the other two religions, however, is its tie to a “hometown.” When Hindus and Christians pray, they pray wherever they happen to be when they wish to send a message to their Gods. Muslims, however, face their holy city: Mecca. Mecca serves as the destination of their hopes and prayers. Throughout Pi’s journey, his idea of Mecca shifts away from a city and becomes any solid land.

The logistics of the juxtaposition of religions in Pi's life interests not only Pi, but everyone around him:

“The pandit spoke first. ‘Mr. Patel, Piscine’s piety is admirable. In these troubled times it’s good to see a boy so keen on God. We all agree on that.’ The imam and the priest nodded. ‘But he can’t be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim. It’s impossible. He must choose.’ ‘I don’t think it’s a crime, but I suppose you’re right,’ Father replied. The three murmured in agreement and looked heavenward, as did Father, whence they felt the decision must come. ... ‘Bapu Gandhi said, “All religions are true.” I just want to love God’” (87).

Via implicit characterization, Martel’s word choice helps the reader infer what Pi is like. Because religion plays such a vital role in Pi’s life, he decides to major in it in college. Mr. Kumar, the Islamic teacher, influences Pi’s love of religion by helping Pi understand the ideas of religion.

After asking for a baptism and a prayer rug, Piscine talks to his mother about his religious zeal. When she tells him that it is impossible to follow so many religions, he brings up the idea of passports. His uncle, whom he calls Mamaji, has two passports from such distinctive countries: France and India. The narrative continues, “how many nations are there in the sky?” She thought for a second. ‘One. That’s the point. One nation, one passport’” (93). Pi uses “the sky” to refer to the location of each god in the three contrasting religions. He wonders why he is only being allowed, in essence, a third of the passport he wants. Because he has already chosen the heavenly nation of religion, Pi believes that he should be able to travel freely. “If you look at religion, what’s remarkable is how the mystics of each religion speak the same language... which is a language of a personal relationship with god and a language of love, where God is love,” (Conversation: *Life of Pi*). The liberty Pi feels when he finally

receives his prayer rug and baptism elevate his infatuation with the idea of religions. It is this infatuation, his character's motivation, that leads him to major in religion during his years in college and what allows him to persevere on his lamentable expedition across the sea.

IV. Pi's Scientific Affiliations

Surrounded by the animals enclosed in his father's zoo, Pi takes interest in zoology. The study of animals interests Pi because of the influences of both his father and his biology teacher. Animals are also often symbols of importance in religious works. For example, Noah was to save two of each kind of animal with his wooden ark. Pi's entire ordeal with Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, caused a sense curiosity and of connection to animals. Zoologists study animals and the way they interact with each other and the world around them. On his 227-day struggle, Pi connects to Richard Parker. He laments,

"I wish I had said to him then – yes, I know, to a tiger, but still – I wish I had said, 'Richard Parker, it's over. We have survived. Can you believe it? I owe you more gratitude than I can express I couldn't have done it without you. I would like to say it formally: Richard Parker, thank you. Thank you for saving my life. And now go where you must. You have known the confined freedom of a zoo most of your life; now you will know the confinement of a jungle. I wish you all the best with it...'” (361).

Pi describes his internal conflict to the audience by explaining that he felt there was no end to his journey. Yes, Pi reached his destination, land, but he felt lonelier than he had at sea. Once Pi reached land, Richard Parker left him without even glancing back to his companion. Lying on the sand, Piscine was expecting Richard Parker to turn around so they could gain a sense of fulfillment and completion. Richard Parker, Pi's "animal instincts," if you will, was Pi's key to success. Upon hitting land, the

animalistic behavior humans attempt to distance themselves from vanished into the jungle. This heart-breaking conclusion to their oceanic conflicts was not something Pi was expecting. After studying, training, and becoming one with the animal, Pi felt as if part of him had simply vanished inexplicably.

Pi's biology teacher, also named Mr. Kumar, is, by contrast, an atheist. As someone who frequents Pi's father's zoo often, he is very interested in zoology. Consequently, Pi begins to admire the animals greatly and therefore double majors in religion and zoology. Pi explains, "Mr. and Mr. Kumar were the prophets of my Indian youth" (78).

Martel further blends the line between science and religion with his authorial choices. Religion and science harmoniously appear in the novel not only in Pi's mind, but in Martel's naming of the influential teachers of Piscine's early life. Martel plays with intentional ambiguity in the naming of his characters. By naming them both Mr. Kumar, they can be mixed up just as an attempt to form perfection necessitates a mixture of both science and religion. In the novel, when Pi is explaining what he had learned that day from Mr. Kumar, it was always ambiguous which mentor he was referring to. Mr. Kumar and Mr. Kumar had such contradictory characters, and yet the interwoven advice from both is what makes Piscine the inquisitive boy he is. The scientific Mr. Kumar's full name is Satish Kumar. Satish, a name meaning "Lord of Sati", has religious background ("Satish"). Sati is a Hindu goddess which gives another peek at the combination of believing in science and in religion (Trover and Kissane, "Sati: Goddess and Practice").

V. The "Better" (Animal) Story

It is hard to believe that Pi lived on a small lifeboat for 227 days with a 450-pound Bengal tiger. The more unbelievable aspects of his story are his findings of another sailor and salvation in the form of

a carnivorous island flooded with meerkats. After all of the storms and perils that Pi experiences on his journey, it is unbelievable he lived at all. Once the details are added in, the believability plummets. An island with nocturnal acidity not only houses Pi and a plethora of meerkats, but Richard Parker as well who “becomes the embodiment of Pi’s hopes,” (Stephens). Richard Parker, a 450-pound tiger, is used symbolically to represent Pi’s faith. “Approaches to reading survivor narratives have until recently privileged the notion of a single, stable identity that the survivor seeks to recover by telling – and hence reliving – the traumatic experience,” (Duncan). Pi’s story slowly reveals to the readers the kind of person he is and is used to envelop its readers. Martel also utilizes the idea of verisimilitude throughout the novel to keep the readers thinking. How much of Pi’s story could be real and how much of it was hallucinated or created by Pi’s mind in his slow descent to insanity? The reader can choose to suspend their disbelief and follow Pi on his journey with the animal story or with the human story in mind. This story, of the two, is full of unbelievable details in an otherwise believable, physical setting (such as Richard Parker having a humanistic personality) which brings in yet another aspect to the novel – magical realism.

We believe in the unbelievable as a form of salvation; we try to understand the impossible with simple explanations, just as mathematicians use pi. Jesus was sent down to Earth as a complete human and was murdered on the cross to suffer for the sins committed by humankind. Three days after his crucifixion, he miraculously returns to life. As Apostle Paul, one of the earliest missionaries, wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins,” (“1 Corinthians 15:17”). So much faith is placed in an idea of some sort that the world makes sense. These ideas are portrayed using stories of mystical beings and an intertwinement of life which sound unrealistic and yet are followed wholeheartedly. Why, then, can we not accept a story about a child on a boat with a tiger?

Religion allows for an explanation of otherwise natural phenomena ("Intelligent"). The reason behind, for example, death, is that it is by God's hand and that He has higher purposes for everyone which involves their deaths. Why, then, in the case of Pi, is the unbelievable story of Pi and Richard Parker rejected as an answer to his epic? People give reason to natural disasters by turning to God and blaming Him for doing what He does. Why is the story of a tangible boy in a boat with a physical tiger more unbelievable than a 50 foot tall tsunami caused by a metaphysical being?

Food and water are necessities; that fact is a scientific given. The methods of obtaining said materials are dependent upon the theology of the receiver. Pi, after wrestling a dorado aboard his raft, falls back to his religious beliefs. He cries his thanks to Lord Vishnu for saving him in the form of a fish. Matsya, or an avatar of Vishnu, literally translates to "fish" ("The Story of Matsya"). This Hindu god supposedly saved the first man, Manu, from a flood that was destined to destroy the world. She warns him of the impending danger and suggests he preserve animal species, as well as food, in a boat just like Noah and his ark or Pi and Richard Parker. Why is anthropomorphism a cause of a believable story and yet so much of religion is based off the idea that all creatures are equal? Why, then, would Vishnu come in the form of a fish to warn man of a worldwide flood and to rescue different animal species? Why do humans believe animals are saviors in religion, yet beasts when facing them? "The idea of a religious boy in a lifeboat with a wild animal struck me as a perfect metaphor for the human condition," Martel explains. "Humans aspire to really high things [yet] at the same time, we're rooted in our human, animal condition," (Conversation: *Life of Pi*).

The non-fictitiousness of either, depending on the reader's choosing, is incredible either way. Martel blends the line between fiction and nonfiction by introducing elements from both sides into the same harmonious story. It is precisely this mixing that makes for the best story of all just as a balance

between science and religion is needed to allow the world to function as an ideal place. In the words of Mark Twain “Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities, truth isn’t.”

VI. Why Does This Story Make You Believe in God

We search for a reason within the unreasonable way the universe functions. But, our way of making sense of the nonsensical is to adopt ludicrous stories about our past that also make no sense. People intrinsically search for the most entertaining path. The “better” of Pi’s two stories, the one involving action and life-threatening beasts, is the more fun and yet it is the harder to believe. “Reality isn’t just out there; it’s how we interpret it. And to me, that’s what religion is about, isn’t it? An interpretation of reality,” (Conversation: *Life of Pi*). Martel inquires, “we believe what we see.’... What do you do when you’re in the dark?” (Martel 371).

Religion, although it is hard to accept in the beginning, in the end, is a more interesting story. In the moments before death, it gives us hope. In times of anguish, it allows us to find solace. In life, religious people have a higher tendency to be happy (Routledge). Religion serves as a tie that bonds people together. Although it is often thought of as personal, religion is a link that can connect you with society. It is an antidote for loneliness.

Often times, however, this novel’s religious readers hypocritically choose to accept the story of the people instead of the animal story. They say the story of the animals is unbelievable. How can they so readily accept religious tales, with Gods taking the forms of animals and being born after death, reject the possibility that one boy was in a life raft with one animal? Many Christians believe that a man named Noah built an entire ark out of wood with his own hands to hold two of every kind of animal in the world. Islamic followers also believe that a prophet named Noah was sent to Earth to build an ark to

protect the good in the world as the evil perished in the myth of the deluge. Coincidentally, Hindus believe that the god Matsya gave instructions to the first man to build an ark to sail over a plethora of water which came all of a sudden. In all of these stories, a man is on a boat with multiple animals to save all of mankind (Stacey). These stories share a basis with Piscine Molitor as he journeys across the Atlantic Ocean. Why are all three of these stories perceived as “the truth” whereas in Pi’s story the animals are seen as metaphors for his own fear? The truth, when no one is there to contradict it, can be anything. Pi’s “true” story could be different than what was happening around him. From whose perspective is the “real truth” given? From God’s? From any one man’s? Because Piscine was alone with what he believed to be animals, who can tell him that it is false? Why should Pi fear more than each of the prophets in the three religious stories? All of them have a multitude of animals, while Pi can focus on Richard Parker.

The motif of a human on a boat with animals is prominent in Christianity and Hinduism as well as the story *Life of Pi*. Because of this, many readers who believe in either Christ or Vishnu also believe the animalistic story over the human story. As many religious readers of the novel are already accepting of mystical stories as explanations, they are more accepting of the animal-centric story of the novel. “An essential component of a story that makes us believe in God is that it de-centers human beings,” (Stephens).

The second story, the one of psychotic cooks and injured sailors, is the more believable of the two. Many of those who believe this story are atheistic and therefore show a trend of believing what they can accept. They do not accept the possibility that a plethora of gods can be living above us all, just as they cannot accept the possibility of a boy on a boat with a tiger.

VII. Perception Versus Truth

Martel writes, “He had a knack for looking at an animal and guessing what was on its mind” (Martel 50). This perception of what the animals are truly thinking is just that, a perception. The truth will never be known about what said animals are, in fact, thinking about. Humans depict and relay their perceptions of events, people, or ideas. In our minds, our perceptions are bona fide. But, to Pi’s father, there is an animal even more dangerous than humans, “the redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes... It is an animal that is ‘cute’, ‘friendly’, ‘loving’, ‘devoted’, ‘merry’, ‘understanding’” (39). As explained by Santosh Patel, Pi’s father, in the film adaptation of the novel, “the tiger is not your friend. When you look into the eyes of a tiger all you see is your own emotions reflected back at you” (*Life of Pi*).

The dichotomy of Pi’s stories allows its readers to perceive what they will from the events which were described throughout the course of the novel. Pi, being the only human survivor, is the sole holder of the true story. Which story does Pi grow to believe? If all of the wild animals in the lifeboat with him were, in fact, humans portrayed through their emotions and actions, does Pi trick himself into perceiving the ordeal differently? Can the chaos of clashing beliefs affect Pi’s perception of his own situation, thus leaving the truth behind at sea?

VIII. Conclusion

The whole novel *Life of Pi* is interesting because we indulge ourselves in the entertaining perceptions of reality instead of determining the truth, albeit the truth is occasionally impossible to figure out. *Life of Pi* is such a “page-turner” because of the story Pi experienced or invented based on which story the reader chooses to be “true.” If the original story had been the one of vicious, selfish humans, the novel would have lost its meaning of believing the unbelievable. The story concludes with Pi’s voice:

“So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can’t prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?”” (398). “Martel notes, ‘The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story,’” (Stephens).

Word Count: 3,537

Works Cited

- Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*. New York: Harcourt, 2001. Print.
- Dasa, Shukavak N. "What Is Dharma? ." *What Is Dharma?* N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Dec. 2013.
- "Religion: Christianity." *BBC News*. BBC, n.d. Web. 07 Dec. 2013.
- "Islam: Empire of Faith." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 09 Dec. 2013.
- Duncan, Rebecca. "Life of Pi as Postmodern Survivor Narrative." *Mosaic (Winnipeg)*41.2 (2008): n. pag. Print.
- "Intelligent People Have 'Unnatural' Preferences and Values That Are Novel in Human Evolution." *Phys.org* (2010): n. pag. 24 Feb. 2010. Web.
- "Conversation: *Life of Pi*." Interview by Ray Suarez. *PBS Newshour*. PBS, 11 Nov. 2002. Web. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec02/martel_11-11.html>.
- Life of Pi*. Dir. Ang Lee. Perf. Suraj Sharma. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2012. Film.
- "Satish - Meaning Of Satish, What Does Satish Mean?" *Satish - Meaning Of Satish, What Does Satish Mean?* N.p., n.d. Web. 20 May 2013.
- Stacey, Aisha. "The Story of Noah (part 2 of 3): Noah Builds the Ark." - *The Religion of Islam*. The Religion of Islam, 14 Apr. 2008. Web. 17 May 2013.
- Stephens, Gregory. "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and "the Better Story" in *Life of Pi*." *Intertexts* 14.1 (2010): 41-59. Print.

"The Story of Matsya." *The Story of Matsya*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2013.

Trover, Florence, and Erin Kissane. "Sati: Goddess and Practice." *Sati: Goddess and Practice*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 May 2013.

"1 Corinthians 15:17." *The Holy Bible*. New York: American Bible Society, 1992. N. pag. Print.

Routledge, Clay. "Are Religious People Happier Than Non-Religious People?" *Psychology Today*. N.p., 5 Dec. 2012. Web.