

The religious symbolism and metaphors in the life of pi



Religious Allegories in Life of Pi

Religion is a subject that has always been prevalent in literature. The most popular book of all time, and the first ever printed, is the Bible, which is comprised of many stories of faith. In *Life of Pi*, Pi is an Indian boy whose faith is his life. He is lost at sea after his family's ship to Canada sinks. He is alone on a lifeboat in the Pacific ocean, save for a Bengal tiger. The story of his survival is a story of perseverance by faith in the face of overwhelming adversity. Authors have always used religious allusions and metaphors to hint at the overall allegorical meaning of their story, and in *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel does just that. Martel symbolizes the ocean and the island to represent life with and without religion, and he uses Pi's experiences to draw contrasts between them.

Yann Martel uses Pi's journey as an allegory for the spiritual journey of finding faith, and his encounter with the island represents the doubt that one must overcome. Before Pi comes to the island, he is alone with Richard Parker on the Pacific ocean, and he has only his faith to motivate him. Once he's been on the island for a while, he believes that he has all the essentials for a happy life. "What reason could I have to leave the island? Were my physical needs not met here? Was there not more fresh water than I could drink in my entire lifetime? More algae than I could eat? And when I yearned for variety, more meerkats and fish than I could ever desire? If the island floated and moved, might it not move in the right direction? Might it not turn out to be a vegetable ship that brought me to land? In the meantime, did I not have these delightful meerkats to keep me company?" (Martel 279). This quote is used to illustrate how the island meets all the requirements for a

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healthy life exceptionally. While Pi is at the island, he makes no mention of God, but once he decides to leave the island in search of humanity, he returns to his faith. Earlier in the book, Pi says that doubt is necessary for everyone, and in order for your faith to be strong, at some point you must question it. Pi looks to the meerkats for company while on the island, in place of the humans he longs for. Later, Pi decides to leave the island in search of humankind again. “ By the time the morning came, my grim decision was taken. I preferred to set off and perish in search of my own kind than to live a lonely half-life of physical comfort and spiritual death on this murderous island.” (Martel 283). The quote embodies the thesis. Yann Martel uses it to demonstrate the atheistic qualities of the island, and show that Pi has realized that life on the island would not be a life worth living. While he has all the necessities on the island to sustain his life (the physical comfort) , is it worth living without any human interaction (the spiritual death) ? Is it worth living a life with no higher purpose whatsoever, save survival? Yann Martel uses this doubt to compare Pi’s lonely life on the island to atheism, and life without religion.

Yann Martel uses Pi’s descension from human to animal while on the island to prove that the only real difference between humans and animals is religion. When Pi first encounters the meerkats on the island, he sees Richard Parker running through the crowds of meerkats and killing as many as he could. Pi remarks that this is the very definition of animals, killing without necessity. “ He killed without need. He killed meerkats that he did not eat. In animals, the urge to kill is separate from the urge to eat. To go so long without prey and suddenly have so many- his pent-up hunting instinct

was lashing out with a vengeance. He was far away. There was no danger to me.” (Martel 269). Before the ship sunk, Pi was a vegetarian. Once necessity in the form of hunger drove him to compromise that particular moral value, he could hardly bring himself to kill the fish that he had caught, and once he had, he was beside himself with guilt. Now he witnesses Richard Parker killing all of these meerkats, and his only thought is of his own safety. This shows the psychological progression of Pi’s descension from man to animal. A few weeks later, after Pi has been living on the island for a considerable amount of time, he kills meerkats to attempt to ease the pain of his foot, which was burned by the acidic island. “ I took the knife and killed two meerkats and tried to soothe the pain with their blood and innards.” (Martel 281). Yann Martel uses this quote to demonstrate that Pi has become an animal by his own definition. He kills without need for nourishment, but simply to attempt to ease the pain of his foot. These quotes lend credence to the observation because as Pi lives longer on the island, he loses his religion and moral character, and becomes more and more animalistic by the day. In this way, Yann Martel contrasts the versions of Pi on the ocean and on the island, and proves that religion is what separates humans from becoming animals. Without a higher purpose to live for, man becomes predator.

In *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel uses Pi’s experiences with the ocean and the island to represent life with faith, and life without faith. Pi’s experience with the island is an allegory to the inner struggle with doubt on the spiritual journey of finding religion, and the ocean represents life with religion, where Pi is only able to persevere by faith alone. The island takes away Pi’s humanity, and with it he loses his faith. Without these defining traits, Pi descends into

an animalistic existence. Yann Martel makes this particular theme of the book abundantly clear: without religion, we are no more than animals. If you take away all of the technological advances that we have made, all of the governments, societies, and communities that we have made for ourselves, we are just animals without faith.