

Life of Pi: Imagination, Belief, and the Literary Theories of Northrop Frye
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For Professor Lovewell
ACS 100
Nov. 28th, 2003
1381 words

“To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.” (page 31)

How do we support our beliefs about events that take place in life? What evidence is there that anything we think about or remember actually happened? The relationship between the individual and the ‘objective’ world is complex. There is no doubt that when we perceive events, our point of view colours what we claim to know about those events. But to what extent does this happen? The human imagination is an extremely powerful tool, and there remain few answers to many of the fundamental questions about creativity and imagination. In Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, we are presented with a recount of events that seems oddly familiar. The story is definitely unique, but the pattern is common: A protagonist is lost metaphorically and literally, and strives to regain his identity. The decidedly unbelievable events that occur leading to the conclusion make us question the reality of what we’re hearing. Belief plays a major role in this book - Pi’s beliefs, the beliefs of the Japanese investigators sent to find the ‘truth’, and finally our beliefs as readers. The theme of beliefs is explored by the literary theorist Northrop Frye in *The Educated Imagination*. Frye’s book explores the nature of literature and creativity, as well as the role that imagination plays in how we view the world. By viewing *Life of Pi* in the context of Frye’s theories, much can be learned about the novel and about how imagination shapes our world.

At the beginning of *Life of Pi*, there is no question about the believability of Pi’s adventures. It’s not unheard of to be a member of three religions simultaneously, and growing up in a zoo takes no stretch of the imagination to swallow. Throughout the story, though, Pi experiences things which seem utterly unbelievable. An island of algae? Peaceful cohabitation with a Bengal tiger? The story becomes firmly rooted in myth. This combination of wistful imagination and fact (bananas really do float - I tried) is appealing because it requires no leap of faith in the reader. The fiction is what makes the story so interesting.

At the end of the book when two Japanese investigators assess Pi’s fantastic story, there is an alternative explanation for the unbelievable results of his journey. Acting as a foil, this alternative story brings out the incredible elements of the novel, and underscores the purpose of the book. Martel intends to show us that every event can be seen as a story, every experience as a fabrication. Categorizing things as true or untrue removes the brilliance and imagination from our daily lives. The alternative telling of events, as Pi says, is “...a flat story. An immobile story. ...dry, yeastless factuality” (page 336). We are not meant to see this as an account of

‘what really happened’, but as a gruesome, too-real opposite to the first story. With both versions of the story, we are presented with a dilemma: do we go with the implausible but beautiful, or the plausible and ugly? For these reasons, if I were one of the Japanese investigators, my view of reality would be altered in the way Martel suggests. What actually happened wasn’t important, what we need to take from this book is a new understanding of what we view as ‘stories’ versus ‘truth’. “Isn’t telling about something - using words, English or Japanese - already something of an invention? Isn’t just looking upon this world already something of an invention?” (page 335). What ‘actually happened’ on the lifeboat is no more relevant than whether the boat itself was twenty-six feet long or twenty-five.

In reading *Life of Pi* in the context of Northrop Frye’s theories of literature, much can be understood about Martel’s novel. One of his theories holds that literature exists as a whole, and not just a collection of individual stories. As said by Frye in *The Educated Imagination*, “This story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework for all literature” (page 21). *Life of Pi* fits into this body of works as a story about being literally lost at sea. Martel’s character loses his identity when the ship sinks, and the majority of the book is spent on the lifeboat trying to reclaim it. The “basic story in Western literature” (page 21) that Frye talks about is like a package that encloses Martel’s story. Pi’s relationship with animals, in particular tigers, evolves over the course of the story and helps to define his character. The imaginative connotations of Richard Parker’s place in the story enforce the fantastic, mythical aspects of the book. In these ways, *Life of Pi* fits Frye’s description of literature as relying on all that has come before.

Frye’s observations about the nature of literature apply in other ways to *Life of Pi*. As discussed, the events of Pi’s ocean journey are not meant to be taken literally. As Frye says, “The poet’s job is not to tell you what happened but what happens” (page 63). The events in *Life of Pi* are representative of the ‘universal’ experiences that are common among everyone, not just Martel’s character. I’m sure that everyone has felt ‘lost at sea’, deprived of their identity and fighting to survive emotionally. The imagination that Martel encourages us to use will help understand our own experiences better by letting us see this concise, engaging symbol of human struggle as an allegory for human experience. By reading the novel, events in our lives that may have not previously made much sense can be viewed in the context of the story. In this way, Frye’s view of the extrinsic nature of literature helps the reader understand how Pi’s adventures are not just his own, but represent patterns in our own experience that can be understood in new

ways.

Northrop Frye's theories about literature extend to the nature of human creativity and the relationship between the individual and the world. This relationship, he said, changes when we have different opinions about the world around us. When we feel in harmony with the world, there is a 'oneness' with the universe and there is therefore no need for imagination. When the world around us is less than ideal, we start to create a new situation in our minds. This separation, between the world as it is and the world as it should be, is the essence of art and science (page 28-29).

Martel's novel urges us to use our creativity to view everything as a story, because our perception by itself colours the events of our lives (page 335). The fantastic nature of *Life of Pi* is a tribute to the ability of imagination to bring meaning to our lives through creativity. We don't know what 'really happened' on the lifeboat, and I doubt Martel knows, either. Pi's journey is an imaginative adventure, and without imagination it would lose the literary characteristics that Frye talked about. When Pi and Richard Parker landed on the algae island, the actual composition of the island might really have been dirt and rocks. Because Pi needed to make sense of whatever was really happening (whatever that might have been) he created those magical attributes for the island. It would be going too far to claim that the final version of the story for the Japanese investigators was the real one, but we can never know how much of Pi's story was mental fabrication. The blurring of Frye's line between reality and creativity is what makes *Life of Pi* so interesting.

Where would this book be without the imaginative, fantastic aspects of its story? Would we enjoy it as much if it were a simple retelling of the 'facts'? As Pi says of the investigators, "You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or differently" (page 336). And reading *Life of Pi*, we almost pity the investigators for lacking the creative vision that Frye worshipped. The lesson learned from these two authors is an important one. Whatever happens in a lifetime, we can make sense of it by applying our imagination and sharing our experiences in the form of literature.

Works Cited

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