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by

Rebecca Grudzina

Prestwick House

General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Life of Pi*

*L*IFE OF PI is a novel by Canadian author Yann Martel. The protagonist is an Indian boy and man named Piscine "Pi" Molitor Patel, originally from the province of Pondicherry. Pi is deeply spiritual and practices three of the world's primary religions: Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The bulk of the novel describes Pi's ordeal as he survives 227 days on a life boat in the Pacific Ocean.

Life of Pi is virtually impossible to classify in any given genre. It can be characterized as a postcolonial novel because of its setting in post-Independence India and its Canadian authorship. Like many postcolonial novels, *Life of Pi* can also be considered an example of magical realism, a literary genre in which fantastical elements—like animals with human personalities or an island with carnivorous trees—appear in an otherwise realistic setting.

The novel is also something of a *bildungsroman*, an adventure story that follows the physical and emotional coming of age of its protagonist. Finally, the novel presents itself as non-fiction. The **Author's Note** suggests that Pi's tale is a true story the author heard while traveling through India. The tone and structure of Pi's account is reminiscent of a memoir, and the interview transcripts, allegedly mailed to the author a year after his meetings with Patel, lend further verisimilitude to the story. Due to this blending of fiction, fantasy, and nonfiction, when the truth of Pi's incredible story is questioned, the reader is led to question the nature of truth itself.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Life of Pi*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested" ("The Problem of Types in Poetry" 1923). He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining the Island as A Perversion of the Garden

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Life of Pi* Archetypal Activity Three and review the story of the Creation of the Garden and the Expulsion from Eden with students.

    • Focus especially on any imagery and the availability of food on the Garden.

2. Have students, alone or in pairs or small groups, peruse Chapter 92 focusing on imagery describing the plantlife and the ready availability of food and fresh water.

3. Have groups discuss the context of this episode in the novel, specifically what has happened to Pi, or what Pi has done immediately prior to the episode on the island.

4. Review with students the introductory lecture notes about the archetypal significance of the Garden.

5. With the full class, discuss the possibility of this Island's representing the opposite of Paradise. Consider the significance of the following from this viewpoint:

    • Pi's bath in the freshwater pool
    • the meerkats' lack of fear, and unawareness of predators
    • the location of the one "fruit-bearing" tree
    • the nature of the "fruit"
    • Pi's decision and actions upon his discovery of the "fruit"

6. Finally, discuss the extent to which this episode from *Life of Pi* can be satisfactorily interpreted as a perversion of the Eden story. What would be the theme or point of such a story?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Life of Pi*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

The terms *"psychological,"* or *"psychoanalytical,"* or "Freudian Theory" seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Richard Parker as Id and Pi as Ego

1. Review with the class Freud's theory of the personality: the id, ego, and superego.

2. Divide the class into two groups—or an even number of small groups.

3. Assign each, or allow each to choose, either Richard Parker/Id or Pi/Ego.

4. Request students to accept for the sake of argument the idea that their assigned character does indeed represent his designated personality aspect. Then have each group peruse the book and note evidence to support this reading.

NOTE: if any students truly protest this reading, allow them to form a group and have them (1) articulate their objections to this reading and (2) peruse the book for support for their position.

5. Reconvene the class and have each group report back its findings—*including* the group(s) who rejected the id/ego interpretation.

6. Discuss with the class: If Richard Parker can be read to represent the Id, and Pi can be read to represent the Ego, who or what might represent the Superego, the constraints of social convention? (NOTE: keep in mind the notes on the *bildungsroman* in which part of the conflict might be between the individual and the society—and the various ways "society" can be defined.)

Formalist Approach Applied to *Life of Pi*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

T*he formalist approach to literature* was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called "New Critics," and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining the Impact of the Novel's Multiple Narrative Voices

1. With the class, list the three narrative voices and narrative points of view present in the novel.

2. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—identify where each narrative point of view is encountered and how each is presented in the book.

3. Divide the class into three groups—or a number of groups divisible by three.

4. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the three narrative voices.

5. Have each group peruse the book, examining the portions that include its assigned narrative voice and answer the following questions:

   • What significant *exposition* is provided by this viewpoint?

   • What facts do we already know that this viewpoint clarifies?

   • What key plot events are presented from this viewpoint?

   • What already-revealed plot events does this viewpoint clarify?

   • What character information is provided by this viewpoint?

   • What already-established character information does this viewpoint clarify?

   • What editorial or authorial commentary is provided by this viewpoint?

   • What philosophical, theological, or thematic concepts are introduced by this viewpoint?

   • What already-established philosophical, theological, or thematic concepts are *clarified* by this viewpoint?

   • What already-established philosophical, theological, or thematic concepts are *challenged or refuted* by this viewpoint?