

'At the rate you're going, if you go to temple on Thursday, mosque on Friday, synagogue on Saturday and church on Sunday; you only need to convert to three more religions to be on holiday for the rest of your life.'
According to the Life of Pi, religions and zoos are both steeped in illusion.

Discuss the impact of the illusions that this book presents.

Understanding the true significance and meaning behind symbols, motifs and cryptic situations is a constant pursuit of humanity. Throughout *Life of Pi*, author Yann Martel explores the positive and negative impacts of eluding the truth through the creation of narrative illusion, as well as the subtle dispelling of social theories. Martel's true contention is often effectively conveyed through the use imagery and allegory, which serve as representations of a deeper, broader message. Several illusions are presented throughout the text, both as aspects of Martel's storytelling and as the creations of the characters within the novel.

On several occasions within the text, Martel subtly dismissed the socially accepted 'illusion' that religions cannot exist harmoniously in the presence of one another. Martel utilises the split faith of central character, Piscine Patel (Pi), to highlight this message, the impact of which is to inspire a desire for peace. Pi actively follows three, separate belief methods in his consistent pursuit of understanding and his desire to "love God". The fact that a young child is able to, within himself, accommodate the faiths of Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, implies Martel's idea of a peaceful co-existence amongst the three. Whilst Pi is here presented as a personification of the desire for religious harmony, his actions in adopting three faiths are both misunderstood and condemned. Directly paralleling society, Pi's family and religious leaders cannot fathom how these three, seemingly opposing faiths can function congruently. Pi's brother Ravi proceeds to make fun of Pi's outlook, claiming that he need only "convert to three more religions to be on holiday for the rest of his life". Through the contradiction of such a widely held belief, Martel is able to sweep away the illusion that all religions must contest one another, and preach a message of harmony.

Pi himself feels the need to create a complex illusion in order to justify his brutal, violent actions. The introduction of animals into the crowded lifeboat setting serves as symbolism for the more horrid actual events. A primary example of this anthropomorphism is the creation of Richard Parker, the adult Bengal Tiger. Richard Parker is presented by Martel as the physical manifestation of Pi's animalistic nature. Pi is well aware of the necessity of possessing such primitive instincts in order to ensure his survival. However, in order to preserve his morals and ethics, he separates himself from these instincts through the development of an alternate entity. This allows him to coat the actual happenings on "tame costumes of (his) imagination" and, in turn, provides justification for Pi's brutal acts of "murder" and "cannibalism". Through presenting himself with an illusion, rather than confronting the more extreme, real events, Pi is able to ensure both his spiritual and physical survival.

Life of Pi

Throughout the text, Martel conveys his message through the development and use of physical symbols. For instance the algae island, which itself serves as a representation of Pi's descent into an animal. The previously established balance between aggression and passivity is disturbed upon Pi's arrival on the island, shifting towards his primitive instincts and away from the ethical aspects of his personality. The demise of his spirituality is evidenced through Richard Parker's, and subsequently Pi's, "pent up hunting instinct... lashing out with a vengeance," resulting in the killing and devouring of dozens of native meerkats. It is only following a moment of clarity and the realisation of the hazardous nature of the island, that Pi is able to comprehend the danger of allowing his primitive instincts to take control of his entire character. Consequently, he leaves the island and thus restores the necessary balance to his personality. The use of illusion here allows Martel to explore the consequences of upsetting the balance between compassion and animalism.

Martel, over the course of the novel, creates a sense of believability, despite the absurdity of the entire tale. Upon reflection, one realises the unlikelihood of the story. However, through the use of extremely descriptive first-person narrative encourages readers to suspend their disbelief and accept the account of Pi's survival as possible. Hence, the readers are able to believe the concept that one stranded survivor might run into another whilst floating on the Pacific ocean, the concept of a mysterious island made entirely of green algae and the concept of a young boy surviving for two-hundred and twenty-seven days in a lifeboat with a large array of predatory zoo animals. Only when the likelihood of these events come into question do we, as readers, realise that in fact, "these things don't exist", and we are subsequently challenged to disregard the 'facts' and simply accept the "better story". Martel proves, through the use of illusion, that most people are able to "take an imaginative leap", in spite of incredibly circumstantial occurrences.

The use of illusion within *Life of Pi* is key in conveying the author's hidden messages to the reader. Whether dispelling a widely held social opinion as false or creating an alternate world with which to test the readers imaginative ability, Martel consistently aims to challenge conventional thought through the use of false circumstances and physical representations of emotive ideas. Although deep analysis is often required to understand the symbolism, the reward is a complex, meaningful narrative that, if the goal of the illusion is reached, "will make you believe in God."