

The Heroic Pattern in *Life of Pi*

Hui-Fen Hsu

Applied English Department
National Taichung University of Science and Technology
Lecturer

Abstract

This paper examines the universal structure of a mythological hero's adventure in *Life of Pi*. The theory is based on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which illustrated and distilled heroic patterns from various cultures. The hero's journey has three stages: separation, initiation, and return. Answering a call to adventure, the hero departs from his familiar world and ventures into a region of supernatural wonder. Miraculous forces are encountered there and a decisive victory is won. He then returns from this mysterious land, bringing an elixir to benefit his fellow men. Through this journey of trials, the hero transforms his former self and achieves spiritual growth. Such heroes range from monster slayers to spiritual leaders such as the Buddha and Christ.

Life of Pi is a fantasy adventure novel about an Indian boy who survives a shipwreck by drifting on a lifeboat with a tiger. His adventure fits Joseph Campbell's hero archetype. Similar to the mythological hero, Pi departs from his familiar land of India, answering the call for adventure to a new country. Protected by the supernatural powers of Hinduism, Catholicism, and Islam, he penetrates the dangerous and mysterious realm of the Pacific Ocean. After experiencing harsh ordeals, he returns to the human world with a life-enhancing boon to share.

In this study, Campbell's insights on the heroic pattern are appropriated as an analytical tool to deepen the meaning of the novel and reveal the common mode of the heroic quest. As enlightening today as in the last century, Campbell's book continues to inspire artistic creations instead of becoming fossilized. The contents of this paper are divided into three parts corresponding to the



Corresponding Author: Hui-Fen Hsu, E-mail: oscar@nutc.edu.tw
Manuscript received: Feb. 16, 2014; Revised: Jul. 7, 2014; Accepted: Jul. 17, 2014
doi: 10.6210/JNTNULL.2015.60(1).04

hero's three stages of adventure. This study proved that Pi's journey is profound in that it reflects universal human suffering and enlightenment. Examined from the perspective of the hero archetype, *Life of Pi* is a perfect testimony to faith and divinity instead of an ordinary survival story.

Keywords: adventure, faith, hero, pattern, religion

The Heroic Pattern in *Life of Pi*

Yann Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*, won the 2002 Man Booker Prize, and was adapted into a 3D film by director Ang Lee in 2012. Both the novel and the film got international acclaim with the touching theme of faith and spiritual growth. In an interview, Martel himself emphasized the importance of faith. Even in period of want, he insisted that people be driven by art and religion, which are the engines of our life (Martel 2010).

Pi was a 16-year-old Indian boy embracing three religions: Hinduism, Catholicism and Islam. He changed his name from Piscine to Pi to avoid his schoolmates' teasing of the similarity between "Piscine" and "pissing." The name also has symbolic meanings. For one thing, Pi is the 16th letter of the Greek alphabet, which corresponds to Pi's age. It's also a mathematical term for 3.14 or $22/7$, and 227 is the period his ordeals last. Political turmoil forced his family to leave India for Canada. The cargo ship sank on the Pacific and Pi was the sole survivor together with a zebra, hyena, orangutan and tiger, which were to be sold to foreign zoos. The hyena quickly devoured the zebra and orangutan, and was in turn eaten by the tiger. Pi was left alone with the tiger named Richard Parker. Dominating it was the only way he could survive. And he did succeed in controlling Richard Parker by offering it food and water, establishing himself as a circus master to tame the wild animal. A subtle relationship thus developed between him and the tiger, one that was made up of love and fear. Pi's lifeboat finally landed on the Mexican coast. He was rescued and Richard Parker disappeared into the forest.

Pi's struggle for life is the main focus of this novel. Scientific perspectives of the Japanese investigators invalidated some parts of his story. For example, the taming of the tiger was regarded "incredible" (Martel 2002, 372); the meeting of two blind people in two separate lifeboats were "unlikely" (Martel 2002, 376) and "extremely hard to believe" (Martel 2002, 377); the isolated island with carnivorous trees, fish-eating algae and tree-dwelling meerkats was "botanically impossible" (Martel 2002, 371). Yet, as Pi argued, he was justified to make up his stories since reason could not account for them: "Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, what is the purpose of reason? Is it no more than to shine at practicalities—the getting of food, clothing and shelter? Why can't reason give greater answers?" (Martel 2002, 122) The critic James Wood (2002) considered *Life of Pi* a "delegate for magic realism" to make readers believe in God. Despite the grand theme of faith, he argued, it is a commonplace story full of shipwreck conventions. Wood is not the only critic

to give *Life of Pi* a lukewarm evaluation. It is regarded as a “fishy tale” offering practical advice in shipwreck (Adams 2002). Another critic labelled it an “edge-of-seat” adventure with survival tips (Jordan 1984). While the critics centered on the style and subject, this research tries to unveil some other significant aspects of the novel ignored by them. Analyzing *Life of Pi* as a mythological hero’s adventure, this paper highlights it as a mirror reflecting universal human conditions. Put in the framework of hero archetype theorized by Campbell, Pi is a hero who undergoes the departure, initiation and return cycle. The Pacific Ocean is not merely the site where the shipwreck happened and left him an orphan. It will be illustrated as the magic realm where the hero experiences trials and finally becomes enlightened. His drifting on the sea, while scientifically implausible, is psychologically valid and realistic. Pi’s story proclaims Martel’s idea of fiction in the author’s note; that is, what fiction is about is the twisting of reality to “bring out its essence” (Martel 2002, vi).

Hero Archetype

Recognized as a leading authority on mythology, Joseph Campbell is best known for writing *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In this major work, he identifies the general pattern of adventures that most heroes undergo: departure from the everyday world, initiation into a dark and mysterious state of awareness through trials and ordeals, and a triumphant return in which the gifts of this experience are bestowed upon humanity. Examples of this heroic cycle may be found in the wealth of knowledge that Buddha brought to the Orient, the commandments that Moses brought back to the Occident, and the fire that Prometheus stole from Heaven to the Greeks. The three main stages of separation-initiation-return are further elaborated as follows.

For the stage of departure, a dilemma occurs in the hero’s life and causes stress. Then, something crucial happens, forcing the hero to face the change. Fearing the unknown, the hero tries to flee the adventure, however briefly. According to Campbell (1968, 62), the refusal to take the adventure is essentially the hero’s refusal to give up his own interest. It means his unwillingness to forego his present system of ideals, virtues and goals. Yet, this attempt to fix and secure the old values turns out futile. Later, some spiritual guide will appear, giving the hero equipment or advice that will help on the journey. Or the hero reaches within to a source of courage and wisdom. Fully prepared, the hero now commits to leaving the ordinary world and entering a new region or condition with unfamiliar rules and values.

The second stage is the hero’s initiation. This is the part when the hero enters a wonder world and confronts death or faces his greatest fear: “Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves

in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials” (Campbell 1968, 97). Aided by the supernatural helper he meets before his entrance into the region, he survives the threat of death and comes to a new life: “the agonies of the ordeal are readily borne; the world is no longer a vale of tears but a bliss-yielding, perpetual manifestation of the Presence” (Campbell 1968, 148).

The last stage is hero’s return. He may have a magic flight from a deadly threat, then cross the return threshold by assistance from without, and return with elixir, something valuable to transform the world: “At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread. The boon he brings restores the world” (Campbell 1968, 5). The Orient, in Campbell’s perception, has been blessed by the boon brought back by Gautama Buddha—his wonderful teaching of the Good Law, just as the Occident has been by Moses’ Decalogue (Campbell 1968, 35).

Overall, the adventure of the hero represents the moment in life when illumination is achieved. The hero answers the call to adventure, ventures into the mysterious realm, fights the terrible battle and gains a decisive victory. His triumph lies in the bringing back of the life-uplifting elixir to benefit his society.

Pi’s Adventure as Hero’s Journey

Departure

Like a mythological hero, Pi set forth from his ordinary world of India to the unknown land of Canada. Though unwillingly at first, he succumbed to the fate and voluntarily proceeded to the threshold of adventure. Before embarking on this journey, he met his spiritual guide, which was manifested in the three religions he embraced. He was blessed with spiritual uplifting every time he visited the church or prayed with a Muslim mystic. Farther Martin told him the message that “God is love” (Martel 2002, 70). Satish Kumar, a Muslim mystic, helped him develop a personal and loving relationship with God (Martel 2002, 77). Hinduism taught him his place in the universe (Martel 2002, 62). On the point of his departure, he was well prepared with the wisdom from his spiritual guides. The religious feeling was both intense and blissful, a “paradoxical mix of pulsing energy and profound peace” (Martel 2002, 78). According to Campbell (1968, 92), the hero’s passage into a temple denotes a life-renewing act: “The devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis. His secular character remains without; he sheds it, as a snake its slough”. Once

into a temple, the hero undergoes a form of “self-annihilation,” quickened by the recollection of who and what he is (Campbell 1968, 91). Pi is such a hero transformed by the lofty ideals of different religions: “I owe to Hinduism the original landscape of my religious imagination—define who and why we are. I first heard of the tremendous, cosmic might of loving kindness in this Hindu land.... And in his wisdom and perfect love, Lord Krishna led me to meet one man—Jesus Christ” (Martel 2002, 63). The awareness of “who and why we are” leads to Pi’s faith in three religions, all of which emphasize God’s love and redemption of human sins. It’s this strong faith in God that protects Pi throughout the adventure, giving him courage and wisdom to fight off the threat of death.

Of the three religions, Hinduism plays the most crucial role in his departure for adventure. The Hindu cosmology and caste system serve as his ideological fortress against the cruel reality. Hindu cosmology is made up of three main forces—Brahma creates, Vishnu protects, and Shiva destroys, each representing activity, light and darkness (Smith 2003, 139-140). Vishnu is the cohesive principle tending toward light and center while Shiva is the centrifugal principle fleeing the center and moving toward darkness. Brahma is the equilibrium of these two opposing forces. Like Trinity in Christianity, Hinduism features the three main gods with the attempt to define the universal laws of existence. Pi’s better story is grounded in this cosmological framework. The tiger is the dark force of Shiva, challenging the human and light part of Vishnu, the great deity Pi worships. The two opposing forces wage a persistent war during his hardships. The beastly power of cannibalism poses a serious threat to the rational side of humanity. If Vishnu and Shiva are the irreconcilable opposites in Hindu cosmology, the coexistence of him and the tiger is justifiable. The two must achieve the state of harmonious equilibrium. Caste system, another feature of Hinduism, forarms Pi’s mindset for later ordeals. According to Louis Dumont’s sociological study, caste system springs from the opposition between pure and impure. The pure and impure must be kept separate and this separation is the framework that decides the social structure (Smith 2003, 83). The individual must submit and conform to the hierarchy of society. Pi is well adapted into the hierarchical Indian society where each individual has his own place. Such an ideology is reflected in his animal story. The pure and the impure occupy the different positions on the lifeboat. He, the rational human being, is the acknowledged alpha master while the tiger, the impure beast, occupies the lower position. But still, each creature in his place must contribute to the structural universe: “The animal in front of you must know where it stands, whether above you or below you. Social rank is central to how it leads its life” (Martel 2002, 55). Pi’s story is bound up with his utopian value where the social order is maintained and cosmological harmony is achieved. He and the tiger symbolize not only the light and dark force of the universe but also the proper position of each individual in the hierarchical society.

The call of hero's adventure happened in the 1970s when India went through political turmoil. Pi's father decided to leave India for Canada because he thought India was going to collapse under Mrs. Gandhi's dictatorial leadership. Bad politics posed threat to his zoo business, therefore he wanted to emigrate to a better place. As a dilemma in hero's life beckons him to take the adventure, so the political change in India forces Pi to seek a better life abroad: "Why enter this jungle of foreignness where everything is new, strange and difficult? The answer is the same the world over: people move in the hope of a better life" (Martel 2002, 198) The hero's refusal to the call of adventure is temporary. Despite the yearning to follow regular paths in India, Pi ended up leaving for Canada excitedly. He is the mythological hero who answers the call positively and comes under the protection of the supernatural power. The three religions will provide him with the shields to fight against the onslaught of ordeals in the dark land: "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure... who provides the adventurer with amulets against dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 1968, 69).

Initiation

During the stage of initiation, the typical hero is severely tested, confronting the threat of death and facing his own fear. He has to cross the threshold of the old world into the unknown zone, like the desert, jungle, or sea where he experiences danger and gains his rebirth (Campbell 1968, 58). In a deeper sense, the regions of the unknown are the fields for the projection of human unconsciousness (Campbell 1968, 79). Pi is the hero that undergoes such ordeals on the Pacific Ocean, suffering physically and mentally. Yet, with the supernatural aid, he overcomes the challenges from without and within and wins the treasure on the journey: "Beyond the threshold, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers)... When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward" (Campbell 1968, 246). Pi's reward is the typical hero's, that of "an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, and freedom)" (Campbell 1968, 246).

Leap of faith

Pi is the typical hero who crosses the threshold of the old world into the unknown zone of the sea, where he experiences trials and gains his rebirth. The trials are significant in that they reflect the universal sufferings in human world. They fit the Buddhist teaching on the eight principal categories of human suffering: sufferings because of sickness, death, separation from loved ones, an undesirable

confrontation with another person or thing, and denial of one's desires (Shen n.d.). Of the eight universal types of sufferings, Pi experienced five. Hunger and thirst, unpleasant sensations of heat and cold weakened him, making him sick and blind. Bereft of his beloved family, he was tormented by the inevitability of death, when the hope of being saved by a passing ship was shattered:

Oncoming death is terrible enough, but worse still is oncoming death with time to spare, time in which all the happiness that might have been yours becomes clear to you. You see with utter lucidity all that you are losing. The sight brings on an oppressive sadness that no car about to hit you or water about to drown you can match. (Martel 2002, 186)

The existence of the tiger on the lifeboat symbolizes the undesirable confrontation with one's enemy, including the dark self. Extreme hunger elicited the bestiality of his personality when his physical necessities were denied by Nature. He was in perpetual lack of water and food, oppressed by a "fickle existence": "It was frightening, the extent to which a fully belly made for a good mood. The one would follow the other measure for measure. So much food and water, so much good mood. It was such a terribly fickle existence. I was at the mercy of turtle meat for smiles" (Martel 2002, 269). He suffered from this degenerate state of being, torn between the awareness of human dignity and beastly desire to survive.

Allegorically speaking, his drifting on the sea represents the journey of life imbued with trials and tribulations: "Time became distance for me in the way it is for all mortals—I travelled down the road of life" (Martel 2002, 244). Pi told the writer / reporter of his story that his traveling was nothing less than the journey of life. Distance is to a survivor as time is to every human being. To lose his beloved ones dealt a more serious blow to him than physical pain. Yet, he didn't turn away from God in his great distress, nor did he give up life. Endowed with the spiritual power begotten in India, he trusted God and His ultimate purpose: "Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love—but sometimes it was so hard to love. Sometimes my heart was sinking so fast with anger, desolation and weariness" (Martel 2002, 263). The intertwining of hope and despair constitutes not only Pi's adventure but the average human life. Sunshine and shade, light and blackness, faith and despair came to him by turns: "Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out.... The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving" (Martel 2002, 264). Suffering strengthened his faith to God. Praying became an essential part of the daily schedule on the lifeboat. From sunrise to night, he kept praying to God, for, as he pondered, "The lower you are, the higher your mind will want to soar. It

was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God” (Martel 2002, 358).

Before Pi embarked on the journey, he had heard of God’s message through his spiritual mentors. During the adventure, he witnessed the manifestation of divinity. A majestic scene on the sea stunned him and strengthened his belief in God: “For two, perhaps three seconds, a gigantic, blinding white shard of glass from a broken cosmic window danced in the sky, insubstantial yet overwhelmingly powerful. Ten thousand trumpets and twenty thousand drums could not have made as much noise as that bolt of lightning” (Martel 2002, 293). Seeing the miraculous sight, Pi exclaimed, “This is a miracle. This is an outbreak of divinity.... I could not find what it was, this thing so vast and fantastic” (Martel 2002, 294). Impressed by the divinity exhibited in the thunderbolt, Pi extolled “Praise be to Allah, Lord of All Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Ruler of Judgment Day!” (Martel 2002, 294) The supernatural power that protected him was embodied in three gods: “Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me,” Pi cried out shortly after he found himself in the lifeboat (Martel 2002, 122). It was also Vishnu that saved him from starving on the sea: “Thank you, Lord Vishna, thank you” Pi shouted, “Once you saved the world by taking the form of a fish. Now you have saved me by taking the form of a fish” (Martel 2002, 233). Pi may well be claimed the modern counterpart of Job with a strong faith in God’s mysterious ways. Despite all the harsh and relentless blows, both Pi and Job never abandoned their faith. Job once repented in dust and ashes, acknowledging his ignorance and frailty. Similarly, our hero confessed his weakness in his struggling for life. But still, he drifted on the ocean, sticking to life and his Gods, waiting for redemption. Both were well rewarded after their trials.

Materialism vs. divinity

To achieve initiation, a hero must penetrate into the dark and mysterious land. In Pi’s adventure, the darkness means his degeneration into cannibalism, a synonym for human savagery and cruelty. Pi discovered the inborn evil in himself when he accused the French cook of eating human flesh: “He [cook] was such an evil man. Worse still, he met evil in me—selfishness, anger, ruthlessness, I must live with that” (Martel 2002, 391). Corrupted by the cook’s evil, Pi consumed more than his share of the rations on the lifeboat. Like the cook, Pi began to kill and eat raw meat, aware of his existence as degenerate as an animal:

If I got to be so indiscriminate about what I ate, it was not simply because of appalling hunger, it was also plain rush. It came as an unmistakable indication to me of how low I had

sunk the day I noticed, with a pinching of the heart, that I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way Richard Parker ate. (Martel 2002, 284)

He also admitted the crime of cannibalism in both versions of his story, with the French cook being the victim: “I stabbed him repeatedly. His blood soothed my chapped hands. His heart was a struggle—all those tubes that connected it. I managed to get it out. It tasted delicious, far better than turtle. I ate his liver. I cut off great pieces of his flesh” (Martel 2002, 391). This is the second version of Pi’s “human” story. But in the first version of “animal” story, Pi stated that he met a blind French castaway near the end of his journey. By then, both were blind, and the French man tried to murder him to eat his organs. But he was instead killed and eaten by Richard Parker, and Pi confessed that he also ate a few small pieces of his flesh: “This was the terrible cost of Richard Parker. He gave me a life, my own but at the expense of taking one. He ripped the flesh off the man’s frame and cracked his bones. The smell of blood filled my nose. Something in me died then that has never come back to life” (Martel 2002, 321). Comparing the two stories, it’s easy to judge that Pi is the tiger, Richard Parker,¹ and the French castaway is the French cook on the cargo ship. Both versions involve cannibalism, with Pi / Richard Parker killing a Frenchman to quench the hunger. The “something” that has never come back to Pi’s life implies the eternal loss of childhood innocence: “Lord, to think that I am a strict vegetarian. To think that when I was a child, I always shuddered when I snapped open a banana because it sounded to me like the breaking of an animal’s neck. I descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible” (Martel 2002, 249).

The tiger plays an important role in Pi’s adventure. As he reflected, “it was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose” (Martel 2002, 204). He even claimed that without Richard Parker, he wouldn’t be alive to tell his story (Martel 2002, 207). The tiger kept him from thinking too much about his tragic circumstances and pushed him going on living. His mind was

¹ The choice of the name “Richard Parker,” according to Yann Martel, is the result of a triple coincidence. One is the 1884 lifeboat case in England. It’s about a cabin boy killed and eaten by three other survivors during a shipwreck, who fed on his body and blood until a ship appeared and rescued them. The case went to the court and the captain was found guilty, for cannibalism is immoral, an improper way for human beings to treat one another (Sandel 2009, 31-33). Another is a novel written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1837. It’s about a shipwreck and the two survivors ate a third man called Richard Parker. The other also involved a foundered ship in 1846, on which there were deaths and cannibalism, one of the victims being Richard Parker. Martel concluded by saying that “So many victimized Richard Parkers had to mean something. My tiger found his name. He’s a victim, too, or is he?” (Martel 2003)

busy as he was always fighting for his authority over the tiger, and it was this busyness that made him survive. The tiger and the boy, two aspects of human consciousness, waged a terrible battle for power and status throughout this adventure. The overlapping of Pi and tiger's identity is implied in Pi's confession of how he ate like Richard Parker. The way Richard Parker "opened his maw and the squealing rat disappeared into it" parallels Pi's eating crabs alive: "Every time they [crabs] appeared, I popped them one after another into my mouth like candy" (Martel 2002, 249). There are still some other clues from the novel to prove that Richard Parker is Pi's alter ego. Throughout the journey, Pi is all alone without a tiger aboard. Here is the proof: "I looked out at the empty horizon. There was so much water. And I was all alone. All *alone* [emphasis added]" (Martel 2002, 212). The two words "all alone" reveal the fact that the tiger is an imaginary creature. Pi once called himself the "top tiger," who claimed his territory by splashing his urine on the tarpaulin. And he later smelt a sharp, musky smell of urine coming from the tiger. Here, Pi and the tiger are one and the same. Being gluttons for anything resembling food, both became constipated. Altogether, they killed a man and ate his organs. Near the end of the journey, they became blind simultaneously.

Being Pi's dark ego, the tiger corresponds to the role of herald or announcer in the mythological hero's adventure. Emerging as a frog or serpent in myth, the herald is dark, loathsome and terrifying. Yet, the beastly herald represents the "unconscious deep wherein are hoarded all of the rejected, unadmitted, unrecognized factors and elements of existence" (Campbell 1968, 53). Richard Parker is the rejected yet indispensable herald to usher Pi into the dark land of savageness and cruelty. To avenge his mother's death, he killed the French cook and ate his organs. The killing of the cook was the crucial moment when the tiger appeared as Pi's substitute. The ferocious and beastly power, once released, cannot be stopped: "A knife has a horrible, dynamic power; once in motion, it's hard to stop. I stabbed him repeatedly" (Martel 2002, 391). Pi acknowledged that his ruthless killing resulted from the cook's influence. The tiger, long dormant in his psyche, waited for a release switch to roam the world. The cook's butchering of his mother released our hero's veiled ego. Pi's adventure turned a new course with the approach of this terrifying herald, the "unconscious deep" symbolized by the tiger.

During this stage of adventure, supernatural aid continued. If Pi was tormented by committing cannibalism, he felt the existence of God to forgive it. Herein lies the mythological hero's "supreme initiation": "God is love. He can be, and is to be, loved, and that all without exception are his children" (Campbell 1968, 158). God not only forgave, but also responded to Pi's efforts to mend the rift and tame the tiger. The rift represents the external hardships to be overcome while the tiger symbolizes the darkness of heart. Pi fulfills the whole sense of hero's deeds, that is, the "exploration

of the dimension of gods” (Campbell 1968, 217). During his ordeals, his incessant praying leads him to witness the manifestation of divinity, first in the form of the thunderbolt, second in that of fish. Dwelling in solitude, eating but little and engaged in meditation and concentration, Pi enacts certain traits of a mythological saint hero like Buddha. He finally becomes one with the energy of the universe, known in religion as the power of God.

To feel the existence of divinity is the highest achievement of Pi’s adventure. A symbol of divinity is hidden in the name of the ship, “Tsimtsum,” a Hebrew word meaning “God’s constriction”² when He created the world (Horan 2012). The very concept was developed by Isaac Luria, a 16th century Jewish mystic, who happened to be the subject of Pi’s bachelor’s thesis at the University of Toronto (Martel 2002, 5). The connection implied Pi’s religious belief in divine energy. According to Luria, God filled the earth with energy, but the material vessels of the world were not strong enough to hold them, and therefore they shattered. Since the time of creation, humans have labored to repair the broken vessels and overcome the separation between divinity and materiality (Stratton 2004, 14). On the way to Canada, the ship “Tsimtsum” sank. In a sense, the sinking symbolizes the incapability of the material vessel to hold the divine energy. What was left of the shattered vessel was a lifeboat, another vessel too vulnerable to determine its course. The lifeboat and Pi, adrift on the ocean together, are one and the same thing—the broken vessel waiting to be redeemed by God’s love. “Tsimtsum” then implies the world God created and He afterwards hid Himself. The ship is the place where ordeals and chaos abound, leaving Pi with two choices: to view the world as a random, cruel place of suffering, or to see the “better story,” a world of meaning, love and miracles (Horan 2012). Our hero ended up choosing the latter.

The essential part of Pi’s initiation lies in the creation of a miraculous state where the beast and human coexist with mutual dependency. Pi’s lifeboat is a perfect circus ring where he learns to tame the fierce tiger into his companion and balance the love / hatred complex towards his enemy / savior. The creation of the tiger in this “better” story heals the pain of the factual cannibalism happening in the other human story. But why is his animal companion the tiger instead of the other fierce animals in his father’s zoo? The answer may lie in Shiva, the Hindu God whose image is a “yogi-ascetic clad in a tiger skin” (Smith 2003, 141). Hindu theology elevates the tiger into a symbol of divinity. As

² Theologians throughout time have tried to understand how God, who is infinite, could create a finite world. According to Kabbalistic thought, in order for God to create a finite world, He had to constrict His infinite essence, creating a seeming vacuum wherein something separate from Him could exist. The world was born in this vacuum. This set the stage where God is completely hidden. Were He to be revealed, we would cease to exist, melting back into the infinite Oneness of His essence, like a small candle before the sun (Horan 2012).

Shiva adopts contradictory roles of being ascetic and erotic, so Pi sees his double entity of humanity and bestiality through the tiger.

Return

When the hero finishes his quest, the norm of myth requires that he should labor to bring the boon to the kingdom of humanity. But this responsibility is often refused, or unwillingly taken. Even Buddha Himself doubted the communicability of his message gotten from the enlightenment, and saints often cut themselves from the world while in extreme ecstasy (Campbell 1968, 193). Not surprisingly, then, heroes are often seduced to take residence forever in some blessed land and forget their task of homecoming. The hero's refusal of return has more to do with his temptation than his indolence. It's not that he steers away from the correct route deliberately to enjoy worldly pleasures, but that the temptation emerges unexpectedly, seducing him away from the correct route of homecoming. This trial is universal, symbolizing the human instinct of seeking happiness by avoiding danger and uncertainty.

The poisonous island Pi landed near the end of his journey represents this trial. The island provided him with fresh water and enough food. The worldly comforts once allured him to take eternal residence there: "Nothing, I thought, could ever push me to return to the lifeboat and to the suffering and deprivation I had endured on it—nothing! 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 all my lifetime? The thought of leaving the island had not crossed my mind once I visited the island" (Martel 2002, 353). Despite the temporary physical well-being the island offered, Pi escaped in alarm after he found the remains of some unknown visitor: human tooth wrapped in layers of leaves. The tooth reminded him of the barren and solitary life on this seemingly peaceful island. Therefore, he left immediately, confronting the danger on the sea instead of waiting for death on the island: "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 2002, 357). This is another boon of the hero's quest: the awareness that physical comfort equals spiritual death.

As Campbell (1968, 190) indicates, "the agony of breaking through personal limitation is the agony of spiritual growth". Pi, like the mythological hero, Odysseus, rejects the temptation of physical comfort on an isolated island so that he can seek a meaningful life among mankind. His determination to flee the island is a courageous act, a breakthrough of his physical inclination to avoid danger. The island symbolizes human desire for materialistic comfort, as it is omnivorous and insatiable, consuming everything that comes near its sphere. Moreover, it exhibits the most

secular and materialistic form of human existence, where freedom and individuality are eliminated (Stratton 2004, 15). Meerkats, the main creatures on the island, were either “nibbling at the algae” or “staring into the ponds” to bring ashore dead fish (Martel 2002, 337). They spent all their days consuming foods collectively: “Meerkats were jumping up and down in a state of great ferment. Suddenly, by the hundreds, they began diving into the pond. There was much pushing and shoving as the meerkats behind vied to reach the pond’s edge. The frenzy was collective” (Martel 2002, 336-337). Besides eating, they take the upright stance collectively, standing in a huddle and gazing in the same direction. In Florence Stratton’s opinion, this massive and frantic consumption reflects the commodification of the modern society with the non-stop supply of goods and consumption. It is the spirit of consumerism that urges people to work hard, aim high, win and succeed. The devotion to work and a higher standard of living has become a religion, calling for sacrifice through long hours of work and offering its blessings through commodities (Hochschild 2003, 24). Meerkats embody the capitalist craze for production and consumption, implying the evil of greed and gluttony.

As a symbol of human corruption, this mysterious island is the modern counterpart of Odysseus’ lotus island. The lotus eaters, who seemingly do no harm to Odysseus’ crew, seduce them to stay there forever. Both islands are rich in food supply and soulless inhabitants. Either the Lotus eaters or meerkats live a meaningless life of material gratification. The promise of sufficient food was nothing but a trap to confine the travelers to a slow death. As Pi pondered, “How long does it take for a broken spirit to kill a body that has food, water and shelter” (Martel 2002, 356). The carnivorous island attracted fish as it did the travelers in the beginning. The algae was delicious food in the daytime but poisonous at night. It corroded the travellers’ body and spirit in the long run, paralyzing them to a life of ease and idleness instead of seeking a challenging life outside. Without finding a whole set of human teeth wrapped in layers of leaves, Pi wouldn’t have left the island. Horrified by the solitary and wasted life on the island, Pi fled without hesitation. Soothing in a physical sense, the island may corrupt the hero’s willpower to return back to human world. But Pi is a sober hero to resist such temptation.

Once the hero returns back to the old world, he has an ultimate difficult task to perform: “how render back into light-world language the speech-defying pronouncement of the dark!—revelations that shatter into meaninglessness every attempt to define the pairs of opposites? How communicate to people who insist on the exclusive evidence of their senses the message of the all generating void?” (Campbell 1968, 218) After his returning, Pi has the very demanding task to perform. The “speech-defying” pronouncement is his narration of survival, which debunks the pairs of opposites. His assertion of the construction of truth is the final boon a hero brings back to the normal world.

The incapability of language to convey truth debunks the reason / imagination and fiction / truth binary hierarchy. The Japanese official, Mr. Okamoto, represents the “light-world” where “pairs of opposites” dominate. His world is the modern society emphasizing scientific principles and privileging reason over imagination, science over religion. Therefore, he rejects Pi’s first story of animals in the lifeboat. From his scientific perspective, a starving tiger won’t spare the life of a human boy and an orangutan can’t possibly float on an island of bananas. Mr. Okamoto exemplifies the modern worldview based on the Enlightenment ideals of objective truth, reason and science. But Pi challenges his mindset. What is truth after all? In Pi’s view, it’s something of an invention: “Doesn’t the telling of something always become a story? 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?” (Martel 2002, 380) Pi’s rejection of the transcendental reason endorses postmodern³ thinking. Like postmodern philosophers, Pi is skeptical about the objectivity of truth. When he emphasizes the word, “invention,” he echoes postmodern aversion to essentialism or totality. The rationalist demand for the legitimation of truth is replaced by his language game, a narration or storytelling. For Pi as for the postmodern thinkers, language is socially conditioned; either Japanese or English is a social construct. Truth exists only within specific linguistic contexts which we construct to share with others. Therefore, what we perceive as objective and transcendental truth is nothing more than a metaphor, or an illusion of our individual perception expressed through specific language.

Pi’s narration of his ordeals has dual status: the events that actually happened and the facts that were constituted by his later narration. In postmodern theory, even an eye-witness account can only offer one limited interpretation of what happened. Another account by a different witness can be different because of the background knowledge and angle of vision of that witness (Hutchen 2002, 77). As the son of a zoo keeper and a devoutly religious person, Pi gives a unique interpretation of his tragic accident. The real event is given meaning through his representation. Language, a form of representation like photography, can offer us no direct access to the past brute event. The so-called

³ Postmodern philosophy owes its rise to Nietzsche’s anti-Enlightenment critique. Nietzsche denounces the truth-oriented way of thinking initiated by Socrates and Plato, whose method of argument tries to “eliminate conflict through the gradual convergence of all parties on a single, stable point of view” (Lovibond 1990, 165). As soon as humanity is caught up in this Platonic ideals of truth, reason and morality, the hierarchical binary opposition emerges, leading to the domination of the center. Nietzsche’s assertion of the fictionality of truth and reason inspires a lot of thinkers such as Althusser, Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. All these thinkers question the modernist belief in absolute truth based on reason and objectivism. Postmodern worldview emphasizes the relativity of all concepts, dethroning the self from the center of objective reality and thereby debunking the belief in absolute and transcendental truth.

reality must be a representation or replacement and it is constructed as fiction is. By asserting that language is an invention, Pi problematizes the objectivity of narration because of its interpretative and evaluative nature. He can be labeled as a postmodern hero who echoes Fredric Jameson's (1984, viii) critique of the "crisis of representation." Mr. Okamoto's insistence on objective truth manifests what Jameson perceives as "an essentially realist epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it—whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy and Truth itself" (Jameson 1984, viii). Like Jameson, Pi interrogates such transcendental epistemology, which equals scientific truth with absolute truth. Something is true for him only because it fits his individual perceptions about the world, not because it corresponds to some absolute reality existing in the world. As there are limits to our reasoning ability and knowledge, we are not justified to claim the superiority of reality over fiction. Real facts and fictional stories, objective reason and subjective imagination—all these are social constructs expressed through languages. Whereas God's existence is fictional and imaginary from the scientific view, it is validated as a kind of reality in the eyes of the devoutly religious person like Pi. Scientific methods, after all, are insufficient in discovering absolute truth: "Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater" (Martel 2002, 375).

Pi's assertion implicitly endorses the validity of New Historicism by offering two different stories about the same event—the ship sank and he survived on the lifeboat after 227 days of drifting on the Pacific Ocean. Pi is the sole survivor to give an eye-witness account of the incident. Like a historian, he depicts the event as is constructed by his ideology. What he encountered during the shipwreck is like a fragment of history, which can no longer be experienced except through language. The real event becomes a kind of narrative reflecting the narrator's mode of thought. Therefore, Pi's stories cannot be an objective report of reality but plausible ones, which he processed out of the mess of reality and thereby grants meanings through his interpretation. As Michel Foucault (1977) perceives, discourse or knowledge is associated with power and desire: "Power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1977, 27). Hayden White (1986, 150) also indicates that truth of past experiences can no longer be experienced and that historical knowledge is a construction as much of imagination. Foucault and White may well be claimed as Pi's spiritual ally. History is not an integrated story about the old world; instead, it is comprehensible as ways of knowing the world, as

successive forms of disclosure (Davis 1986, 106). The academic terminology of New Historicism finds full expression in Pi's simple words: "The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it. And in understanding something we bring something to it. Doesn't that make life a story?" (Martel 2002, 380)

Pi's two stories convey the sense of history as a construction bound up with ideological values. Like a fictional narrative, history comes out of an "origin" that is foreign to it and exists in a dialogue with the "foreign" other that can never be controlled (Davis 1986, 107). The real event is the very "origin" that once having happened, is gone forever. The later reminiscence or narration, like historiography, is an attempt to comprehend and master the "origin" by composing an order on it. And the multiple perspectives in historiography make final closure of meaning impossible. Therefore, reality should be apprehended as "multiple," "complex," and "antagonistic," (White 1986, 156). By offering a verbal account of his survival, Pi enacts the role of a historian to impose an order on the brute past reality. The supreme wisdom begotten from Pi's adventure is his postmodern view on the relativity of truth as well as the New Historicist insight on the construction of reality. This is the final boon our hero brings back to his fellow people.

It's not far-fetched that a sixteen-year-old boy utters the postmodern critique. The grandeur of nature teaches him that the present moment is always different from the previous one. The sea and the sky, for example, are never fixed entities. The sea has diverse sounds just as the sky has different sights. For example, the sea "roared like a tiger," "whispered in your ear," "clinked like small change in a pocket," "thundered like avalanches," and "hissed like sandpaper," while sometimes it became "dead silent" (Martel 2002, 272). Similarly, the sky is characterized by majestic sights: "heavy, suffocating blanket of grey cloud," "dappled with small, white, fleecy clouds," and "featureless milky haze" (Martel 2002, 271-272). Pi's solitary soul perceives that all natural phenomena are subject to change and dissolution. Everything is transitory and lacking an intrinsic essence. While Pi reflected on his ordeal, he remarked that he would sometimes be visited by the most extraordinary thoughts and sensations. The realization of the unfixed nature of things, including the inaccessibility of truth, is one of these wise thoughts begotten from his meditation and solitude.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Life of Pi* in the framework of Campbell's hero archetype illuminates the idea of monomyth; namely, at the heart of all myths and legends lies one story with the underlying structure of departure, initiation and return. A survival story in the 21st century, *Life of Pi* has the universal

pattern of a hero's quest. It highlights the traits of a hero as someone who has not only physical valor but mental enlightenment. The hero's journey is a cycle that includes a departure and return full of challenges and the supernatural aid is an indispensable force to help the hero out. The journey makes him move beyond the former world of binary opposites to a state of divine knowledge, love and bliss. The mythological heroes never die; their deeds survive into modern times. As long as there is something lacking or taken away from the old world, the heroic quest occurs. Not merely a demonstration of physical valor, heroic acts can be a kind of mental training, the self-discipline involving the control of fear and despair as embodied in Pi's adventure. A hero's battlefield is not necessarily a real geographical site where two opposing forces encounter and manage to destroy each other.

Each of us can be the mighty hero of extraordinary powers, not in the sense of slaying dragons or hunting treasures, but in the exploration of the divine self, the releasing of the imperishable soul that is one with God. To achieve this state, we must experience the typical hero's miraculous realms where we descend into the night of the psyche and return back to the light world with a rich boon to share. The light world is the world dominated by the ideal of reason and materialism, rejecting the existence of God and miracles. Without any sword or shield, Pi accomplishes the hero's great deed. The rich boon he brings back is also the world-reviving elixir—the debunking of reality / fiction binarism and the leap of faith. As Campbell (1986) remarks, all religions are true but none are literal. Through Pi, Martel succeeds in conveying his religious truth.

Acknowledgement

This is the first time I submitted my research paper to the academic journal and had the chance to publish it after some corrections. I appreciate the reviewers' suggestions for improving this paper so that it fits the academic standard. I know there is still much room for improvement after I revised it to clarify and condense my points. I want to express my gratitude for the second reviewer's detailed reading of my paper. The errors, big or small, are listed one by one for me to check and correct. For an inexperienced researcher like me, this is a great help I can't thank enough. The third reviewer's positive response gave me confidence to go on writing research papers. I also learned from the first reviewer to focus on the major point without much digression.

A research career can be compared to a mythological hero's journey. I have embarked on the journey, answering the call for adventure. Hopefully, with the aid of the supernatural force like that in *Life of Pi*, I can explore the magic land of literature again and gain some enlightenment in the end.

The path may be long and hard, and my strength and eyesight may fade day by day. But still, I would follow the way of Odysseus in his old age: to strive, to seek, to find, and never to yield.

References

- Adams, Tim. "A Fishy Tale." *The Observer* (26 May 2002, accessed 30 June 2014); available from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/may/26/fiction.features2>
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).
- Davis, R. Con, ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (New York, NY: Longman, 1986).
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punishment*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (London, UK: Allen Lane, 1977).
- Hochschild, Arlie R. *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley, CA: University of California P., 2003).
- Horan, Rabbi G. "The Kabbalistic Life of Pi" (24 November 2012, accessed 20 August 2013); available from <http://www.aish.com/ci/a/Life-of-Pi.html>
- Hutchen, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).
- Jameson, Fredric. "Foreword," in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), vii-xxi.
- Jordan, Justine. "Animal Magnetism." *The Guardian* (25 May 2002, accessed 1 July 2014); available from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/may/25/fiction.reviews1>
- Lovibond, Sabina. "Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism and Society*, eds. Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi (London, UK: Macmillan, 1990), 154-186.
- Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi* (Toronto, Canada: Vintage, 2002).
- . "How Richard Parker Came to Get His Name." *Amazon* (9 December, 2003., accessed 30 May 2013); available from <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/309590/104-4043985-5498364>
- . "Yann Martel Interview." [YouTube] (13 May 2010, accessed 30 July 2013); available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B29tigyBJIQ>
- Sandel, Michael. *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).
- Shen, Chia-Theng "Buddhism in Our Daily Life." *China Academic Lectures* (n.d., accessed 5 September 2013); available from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tib/drshen4.htm>
- Smith, David. *Hinduism and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

Stratton, Florence. "Hollow at the Core: Deconstructing Yann Martel's *Martel, Life of Pi*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 29.2 (2004): 5-21.

White, Hayden. "Getting out of History," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Davis. (New York, NY: Longman, 1986), 146-160.

Wood, James. "Credulity," *London Review of Books*, 24.22 (2002): 24-25.

《少年Pi的奇幻漂流》中的英雄行徑

許惠芬

國立臺中科技大學
應用英語系
講師

摘要

本文主要探討《少年Pi的奇幻漂流》符合神話英雄的冒險行徑。理論是根據神話學大師坎伯所著的《千面英雄》。此書蒐羅世界各文化的神話傳說，歸納出英雄冒險的相似軌跡分成三部分：啟程、啟蒙及回歸。英雄得到某種外在的召喚，離開熟悉的家鄉出發前往陌生的領域，在此期間他必須經歷各種磨難考驗，所幸有外在的神祕力量保護而生存下來，並得到心靈的成長。最後英雄通過試煉回返家園，把冒險得來的智慧分享給世人。此類英雄的範圍，包含屠龍的勇士甚至如佛陀及基督之類的智者。

《少年Pi的奇幻漂流》是Yann Martel（楊·馬特爾）所寫的奇幻小說，內容敘述16歲的印度少年Pi，在舉家移民加拿大的途中遭遇船難。他靠著信仰，在救生艇上漂流227天後奇蹟生還，唯一的同伴是原先動物園內飼養的老虎。Pi的故事吻合神話英雄的三階段冒險。搭船前往加拿大，是英雄的啟程，他所信仰的三個宗教是外在的助力，他的啟蒙及帶給世人的禮物，是對神更堅定的信仰及推翻科學的客觀真理。

本文重新發掘坎伯的神話英雄理論，引用它來檢視Pi的冒險，以期增加此小說的深度，同時也證明神話英雄並非過時的理論，它仍然可以啟發無限的創作靈感。全文分三部分書寫，以呼應英雄的三階段冒險。透過神話英雄的角度，可以證明《少年Pi的奇幻漂流》不是一般膚淺的劫後餘生故事，而是反映人類共同的苦難及藉由信仰而開悟的成長小說。

關鍵詞：冒險、信仰、英雄、結構、宗教

通訊作者：許惠芬，Email: oscar@nutc.edu.tw

收稿日期：2014/02/16；修正日期：2014/07/07；接受日期：2014/07/17。

doi: 10.6210/JNTNULL.2015.60(1).04