

Essay-Wettbewerb 2019/20

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Word count statement: This essay is “slightly” longer than the minimum word count of 900. Partly, this is due to my joy when it comes to writing, but it is also because I see no reason to try to shorten myself, or leave out certain ideas and thoughts, just not to write too much. I am of the opinion that arguments work the best when you can express them without someone or something interrupting you. Therefore, I wrote what I thought expressed my opinion on this topic the best. I am undeniably *thrilled* to be working on a creative assignment for once, especially about a topic I am passionate about and had a lot of enjoyment working on it.

Yann Martel

Every author has a different story how it came to their first published book. Some had it fairly easy, some struggled for years, with the very unlucky having their works only become a success when they were already dead. What ties all of them though is that thrill of eventually, word for word, telling a story; a story, that they are passionate about and proud of.

Literature has been a big part of our species for ages and there have been many respectable books along the way, thrilling the readers with their tales. Some, however, go further and manage to make you ponder over their story, until the message they tried to convey becomes clear. Yann Martel approached this kind of writing – so let us talk about him.

Biography

Yann Martel was in fact born in Spain, not Canada. His family, which was definitely Canadian, was staying in Spain during the time of his birth due to the doctoral studies of his father. Martel lived in various locations during his childhood, including Alaska, Costa Rica, France, Mexico, the Canadian provinces of Ontario and, last but not least, British Columbia (see URL 01). Though that already seems like an awful lot to most people, he took it upon himself to travel to Iran, Turkey and India once he was an adult. At first glance it seems like he had a pretty chaotic life and at second glance this assumption only receives validation. While he studied Philosophy, Martel worked as a tree planter, dish washer, scissor cleaner, as well as a security guard. Basically, he tried a lot before deciding to be an author. Nevertheless, though his first work “The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios” was received very well, he flopped badly with his second book “Self”, to which seemingly no attention was paid. With “Life of Pi”, he had his breakthrough in 2001, after he spent six months in India for research purposes and taking another two years to write the book.

Yann Martel seems to be not afraid to try new things and speak about controversial topics, as, for example, he talks about sexual orientation and identity in his flopped book “Self”, which was released before the wave of acceptance emerged, and religion in “The Life of Pi”. (see URL 02)

Once upon a tiger...

When giving people the blurb of “Life of Pi” to read in a spontaneous manner, you might see reactions such as rolling eyes and groans of “Oh, yet again.” The story of a boy of the name Piscine Molitor, who, after his ship sinks as his family tries to migrate to Canada, is stuck on a lifeboat with nothing but wild animals from the zoo his father owned, including a zebra, orangutan, spotted hyena and... a vicious tiger of the name Richard Parker. This certainly sounds like a pleasant start to Pi’s robinsonade! With the animals being bound to their natural instinct, the hyena ends up killing and devouring both the zebra and the orangutan, only to be subsequently eaten by Richard Parker once he has regained his strength. Pi has no choice but to save himself on a raft, connected to the lifeboat with only a rope. He spends his time trying to tame the tiger by feeding him fish he catches. In order not to meet the same fate the hyena did, he uses Richard Parker’s seasickness to his advantages, shaking the boat until the tiger gets sick once he shows aggression. Through Pi’s taming, he and Richard become dependent on one another, though both unable to stop each other from becoming weaker and frailer as the days pass. After months, they meet another shipwrecked; a Frenchman, who tells them that he had killed a woman and man. Pi, seemingly in a very unwise decision, allows him to climb into his boat, only to be attacked by the Frenchman – who then gets mauled and eaten by Richard Parker. (see URL 03)

Subsequently, they get stranded on an island of algae. It turns out to be some sort of paradise for the two, as Pi can eat the sweet algae full of freshwater and Richard Parker can consume the meerkats, which are inhabiting the landmass. However, once it turns night, the ecstasy turns into a nightmare, as the algae change into carnivorous plants. Pi flees the island, taking Richard Parker with him.

After a devastating 227 days stranded in the boundless ocean, they run ashore/wash ashore on the coast of Mexico. Richard Parker disappears into the jungle and Piscine gets taken to the hospital. He gets questioned by two officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport, who want to look further into the shipwreck. They do not believe Pi’s story when he tells them, as they do not think it adds up. As a retort, Pi asks them, what they are living for if everything they believe has to be fully logical, and states that in the end every recounting turns into a story. Still, he tells them a second version, in which he got stranded on the lifeboat with his mother, a sailor with a broken leg and cook. The cook subsequently murdered both the sailor and Pi’s mother for nourishment, until he himself was feasted on by Pi, who killed him in a fight. (see URL 04)

The story leaves it up to the reader which one is the truthful or “better” one. Which is not up to question though, is that everything just read undoubtedly sounds like something out of a fever dream... and an unkind one, as it seems. Life of Pi sounds like it would be boring or even borderline frustrating to read through. The obvious question now is though, why so many people would beg to differ on this statement.

This piece of literature can definitely pride itself with a very on the nose message to battle the current rise of atheism and everlasting interrogations towards religion. It justifies the belief with its thousand years of age in this modern and enlightened area, where it seems that most everything has to be verified. Life of Pi puts its stance out pretty strongly and clearly, even claiming that if one does not believe, what do they even live for? Everything about this book seems to serve as a 500-page setup for this one message. With this, I will leave it up to you whether you would consider this something worth reading.

Personal Statement

Literature and writing equally hold a special place in my heart. Having grown up surrounded with both things, I have often taken it upon myself to thoroughly work out my attitudes on some points in relation. The question “what does literature have to say today?” is one that inevitably makes me chuckle – if the answers are of such a high number, that one cannot finish counting them, why not approach it from a different angle? What does literature *not* have to say today?

I am absolutely astonished if you found yourself having an answer to this question. When it comes to me personally, I cannot think of anything out of bounds. Even if the media of display are slowly changing with e-readers and whatnot, literature will never stop to be the pillar of communication and so much more. Literature is not just about giving you a very obvious message; sometimes it does not even have to be about a message at all. Reading and writing can simply be enjoyed for what they are, so there is no need to be ashamed when you grab that Twilight book out of the bookshelf – go for it! Enjoy yourself!

It is perfectly fine to read and write for pure amusement and pleasure. Nevertheless, books that end up giving us a significant message are on a whole different level. There is a special art to wrap up a memorandum into a compelling story; this is also where “Life of Pi” lacks in my eyes.

Let me help you to understand my point of view by giving you an example of another story following a robinsonade. William Goldings “Lord of the Flies” was a book we read in school and I tell you one thing – I absolutely detested it. I found the chapters lacking action to be painstakingly boring and the action ripped my heart out with the realistic cruelty it displayed. However, my teacher spoke so fondly of the book when we went over it in class and it surely annoyed me to realize that maybe I just did not understand it. So, stubborn as

always, I picked it up again and read with more care. That was when the subtle messages within the story hit me, the deep meaning behind every character, action, even object (see URL 05). It was not obvious what the book tried to convey, so it completely slipped on me the first read. Though I still hold a certain grudge towards this work, I have discussed and examined it hours upon hours... and that speaks for itself. The message has reached me.

Life of Pi on the other hand ends up being... pointless. There is no need to read through all those pages for the revelation at the end, because you could either not see it coming over the depicted plot or already saw it from miles away. I think I would take less issue with this if it was not such a long story for such a short and simple message. Yann Martel showed a special case of drive and inspiration with his way to write the book, but sadly the concept itself seemed to be flawed at the core.

In conclusion, I want to say that there is no need to ask yourself the question what the meaning of literature is. Even in the digital era, words do not lose their power, but maybe just grow further in strength.

Used sources:

URL 01. (05. 02 2020). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yann_Martel

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URL 03. (05. 02 2020). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_of_Pi

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URL 05. (06. 03 2020). <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/flies/plot-analysis/>