Student Sample (first three paragraphs)

ENG2400

Differences between Film and Text: *Life of Pi*

            Empathy is a trait many of us are very familiar with. It is a feeling that comes to us quite easily but it is not so easy for most of us to define. It can be defined as the capacity to feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference. The key phrase here is “from within their frame of reference.” Without this subjectivity, one is merely sympathetic, capable of understanding another but perhaps not necessarily feeling what they do. On the contrary, showing compassion is a result of one experiencing empathic feelings to the point of being moved by them. Life of Pi is a story of empathy but also ethics. The depth of the empathy and ethics is lessened by the movie. The book explores these themes more thoroughly by going into more detail about Pi’s religious teachings as a child and his connection to heaven as he navigates ordeals on Earth. The exemption of these elements in the film serves to maintain a more simple narrative flow, which has less space than the text. While it seems that empathy is simply in Pi’s nature, this trait was reinforced during his childhood through the deities he worshipped and the animals he admired.

In Yann Martel’s Life of Pi, Pi is a man who, from a young age, has feelings of empathy and grows to hone them through his religious teachings and ultimately, a 227-day ordeal at sea. However, in Life of Pi directed by Ang Lee, Pi only very occasionally displays empathy. Martel’s Pi enjoys reading, praying and questioning. In a sense, he is following a sort of virtue ethics where he is discovering what sort of person he should be. While his family and religious teachers tell him to choose a religion, his heart’s curiosity pulls him towards an interfaith belief system of his own. After the event on the esplanade, Pi touches on the ethics by which he chooses to live, “For evil in the open is but evil from within that has been let out. The main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart.” The virtue ethics are apparent by the fact that Pi believes one’s focus should be to better themselves. However, there is some overlap with other types of ethics as well. It is a sort of utilitarianism because this is for the outcome of a greater good, that being more faith in his community and a closer connection to God. Finally, we can assume Pi to be a sort of deontologist as he is certainly following rules laid out by these religions, even if he is not following all of them. During his journey of discovery, Pi rushes to the Hindu temple in Munnar to thank Lord Krishna for introducing him to “Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity [he] found so compelling.” Humanity is another term that is closely related to empathy, so it is clear that these are traits that Pi values in others and himself.

The omission of this scene — and others like it — with dialogue like, “I just want to love God,” are a disservice to Pi’s character. In the film, he is less unique. He is dared into the church by his brother instead of curiously inspecting it. He has a crush on a girl, which did not seem like a relevant inclusion, and he is defended by his mother instead of defending himself when confronted about his faiths. This all adds up to a, while very expressive, somewhat predictable character, with much less on his mind. A good example of Pi’s lessened empathy in the film is the scene when he is first in the life boat and attempts to save Richard Parker with the lifebuoy. In the film, he doesn’t realize who it is until the distance closes and upon identifying Richard Parker, he changes his mind and tries to shoo him away. In the text, his initial instinct is to save the tiger, and only after reconsidering being on lifeboat with a large cat does he change his mind….