The Imagination of Happiness

The reality of working with a text is that the reader is always looking for a resolution—we are inherently conditioned to search for the moral of the story. But we often forget that a story is just as likely to have no moral at all as it is to impart some clear-cut lesson. Sometimes, the only moral of the story to be found is the one you create yourself: this is something Peter Matthiessen realizes in his memoir *The Snow Leopard*. This realization holds enhanced meaning when viewed in the context of existentialism: the philosophy that life is inherently meaningless, but humans must still choose to find meaning in their actions. Existentialism is particularly relevant to Matthiessen’s journey because he sets out with two main motivations: the hope of achieving enlightenment, and the hope of seeing a snow leopard. Thus, the fact that he neither sees the snow leopard nor ever achieves a clear degree of enlightenment renders his journey meaningless in the same way existentialism purports life to be meaningless. However, existentially it does not matter whether Matthiessen sees the snow leopard or not—it does not even matter whether he achieves enlightenment or not. The fact that his story has no resolution is exactly what gives it meaning. By accepting his journey’s meaninglessness and still choosing to find the significance in his story in spite of this, Matthiessen ensures his own personal happiness.

Matthiessen idealizes his journey from the very start, framing it as an expedition that will only have meaning if he attains his original goals: achieving enlightenment and seeing the snow leopard. Matthiessen initially explains the rarity of snow leopards and then writes, “the hope of
glimpsing this near-mythic beast in the snow mountains was reason enough for the entire journey” (Matthiessen 3). By framing the sight of the snow leopard as “reason enough for the entire journey,” Matthiessen hinges the significance of his expedition almost solely on the sight of the snow leopard. Without this sighting, his journey is meaningless. Matthiessen further romanticizes, “to close that distance, to go step by step across the greatest range on earth to somewhere called the Crystal Mountain, was a true pilgrimage, a journey of the heart” (Matthiessen 3). Matthiessen’s use of the word “pilgrimage” formulates an expectation that his journey will mean something, for it evokes a sense of a knight going on some valiant quest—a clear instance of idealization. Matthiessen also seems certain that his journey will result in a realization of enlightenment, describing his assurance that he and George Schaller will partake in a rare Tibetan spiritual encounter (Matthiessen 4).

The Lama of Shey, the most revered of all rinpoches, the “precious ones,” in Dolpo, had remained in seclusion when a scholar of Tibetan religions reached the Crystal Monastery seventeen years ago, but surely our own luck would be better.

Matthiessen once again romanticizes his journey in spite of evidence that it may not turn out the way he expects it to. He idealizes the Lama as “the most revered of all,” creating an expectation of spiritual power that may not be met. He somewhat arrogantly assumes that he will find success meeting with the Lama where others have failed. And once again, in the event that Matthiessen does not meet the Lama, his journey is meaningless because so much emphasis was placed on this spiritual awakening and realization of enlightenment. By creating these expectations of meaning, Matthiessen sets himself up for failure, for without the sighting of the snow leopard, the meeting of the Lama of Shey, and the subsequent transformation of being he believes will result from these encounters, Matthiessen’s journey is meaningless: it has no resolution.
This realization of meaninglessness is one of the basic tenets of existentialism. However, as Albert Camus addresses in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, if one has the courage to make the decision to find meaning in life despite knowing that it is meaningless, it is still possible to achieve happiness. Camus explains this argument by alluding to Sisyphus, a character from Greek mythology who offends the gods and earns eternal punishment in the Underworld. Sisyphus’s punishment is that he is eternally bound to push an enormous rock up a hill, only for it to roll back down so that he must start the process all over again. Camus acknowledges the meaninglessness of Sisyphus’s task but argues that this is precisely what makes Sisyphus admirable, for despite knowing that his rock will forever roll back down the hill, he still finds the courage to push it forward again and again (Camus 121).

I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

It is Sisyphus’s “consciousness” that makes him a true hero: he is aware of the meaninglessness of his task but still turns back to completing it again and again. And it is not when he ascends the hill that this decision occurs, as one would expect, but rather it is when he travels back down that Sisyphus’s courage is evident. It is during this descent that Sisyphus chooses to find meaning in his struggle, and in that there is much to be admired.

Matthiessen, too, manages to discover significance in his inherently insignificant journey simply by making the choice to do so. Upon his failure to see the snow leopard, Matthiessen does not succumb to sorrow but instead decides to practice a “wholehearted acceptance of what is.” He writes, “Have you seen the snow leopard? No! Isn’t that wonderful?” (Matthiessen 246). Matthiessen acknowledges the meaninglessness of his journey: “No!” he exclaims with utter
certainty. In spite of this, Matthiessen makes the decision to find the “wonder” in his story in the same manner in which Sisyphus makes the decision to push his rock up the hill each time he turns around. Thus, Matthiessen is also “stronger than his rock.” Furthermore, Matthiessen even goes so far as to display courage in the face of meaninglessness, as evinced by his joyful, assured tone as he asks “Isn’t that wonderful?” Thus, Matthiessen uses the knowledge of his journey’s meaningless to create meaning. As Camus puts it, “the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (Camus 121). Matthiessen’s scorn is indeed a mark of his newfound journey on the path toward acceptance of the expectations of his journey not being met. However, his statements are also laced with his trademark arrogance and a naïve belief that he has undoubtedly achieved the purpose of his journey. In reality, Matthiessen’s acceptance of his journey’s insignificance and subsequent to decision to create meaning in his story in spite of this is much more nuanced. However, at this point in the journey he is well on his way to embodying the existentialist ideals exemplified so well by Sisyphus.

There is no question that Matthiessen’s journey possesses both high points and low points. Like Camus says of Sisyphus, “If the descent is thus performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy” (Camus 121). There are times when Matthiessen views his journey as being both pointless and tragic, such as when he begins his journey home, with all the physical and emotional loss of altitude that descent entails. Matthiessen bemoans, “I feel mutilated, murderous: I am in a fury of dark energies, with no control at all on my short temper” (Matthiessen 298). The word “mutilated” reveals the deeply wrought emotional pain Matthiessen feels at this point in his journey, knowing that he will not achieve his original goal of seeing the
snow leopard. At this point, Matthiessen’s metaphorical descent down the mountain back toward his rock is undoubtedly “performed in sorrow.”

However, just like Sisyphus, Matthiessen also has the capacity to perform his descent “in joy,” simply by making the decision to do so. Merely a day after his previous melancholy outburst, Matthiessen writes of his subsequent decision to find happiness in his journey (Matthiessen 301).

I leave the tragic sense of things behind; I begin to smile, infused with a sense of my own foolishness, with an acceptance of the failures of this journey as well as of its wonders, acceptance of all that I might meet upon my path. I know that this transcendence will be fleeting, but while it lasts, I spring along the path as if set free.

The active form of the verb “leave” evinces Matthiessen’s voluntary decision to set aside his sorrow in favor of joy. His “acceptance” of the meaninglessness of his journey, with all the disappointments and delights it entails, allows him to become “stronger than his rock” and achieve happiness as he is “set free” from his previous worries.

However, despite Matthiessen’s decision to find happiness in his story rather than regret, he still struggles to maintain this sense of acceptance on a consistent basis. He explains how “between clinging and letting go, I feel a terrific struggle,” and laments the fact that near the conclusion of his journey, nothing has “changed; I am still beset by the same old lusts and ego and emotions” (Matthiessen 148, 298). Despite realizing the meaninglessness of his journey and choosing to find significance and happiness in spite of it, Matthiessen still struggles to let go of his earlier idealization of his story. He is disappointed by his failure to achieve enlightenment and overcome his “ego and emotions.” On some level, he is still obsessed with the idea of making “a true pilgrimage, a journey of the heart,” and this conflict between how he wants his story to play out and how it actually plays out persists throughout much of the text. In a way, this
consistent struggle between acceptance of meaninglessness and naïve idealization mirrors the up-
and-down trajectory of Sisyphus’s task. Just like Sisyphus, Matthiessen must push his “rock” up
the hill again and again—he must continue on his journey with all the romantic notions it entails.
And also just like Sisyphus, Matthiessen must descend back down the “hill” and realize the
meaninglessness of his journey again and again. Sisyphus’s decision to find meaning in that
which is meaningless is the same decision faced by Matthiessen—and as his journey draws to a
close, he finally approaches the achievement of this realization.

This realization that Matthiessen must eventually come to is that his story matters
whether it is an exemplification of meaninglessness or a heroic narrative. This is because the
significance of a story is not determined by the events that occur over its course but rather by
how an individual chooses to react to those events. This principle is exemplified in S.E. Hinton’s
novel *Tex*. One of the main themes of this novel is that “there are people who go places and
people who stay” (Hinton). The people who go are the ones who set off into the world in pursuit
of their dreams, and the people who stay are the ones who are content remaining where they are,
still dreaming but not choosing to pursue their dreams. Tex, the protagonist of the novel, is one
who stays, and he is glorified for this decision. Indeed, in a conversation about the novel, Hinton
stated that one of her main objectives in writing the book was to illustrate that “the people who
stay are as valuable as the people who go” (Hinton). By directly equating the value of the people
who stay with that of the people who go, Hinton typifies the principle that it doesn’t matter
whether a person goes or stays, so long as he or she finds meaning and happiness in whichever
path he or she chooses.

Matthiessen is clearly one who goes—if nothing else, his journey through Tibet proves
that. But in the end, it does not matter whether Matthiessen acts actively, like one who goes, or
passively, like one who stays. It does not matter if his journey ends grandly or with no resolution at all. Both states of mind provide equal opportunity for happiness, so long as Matthiessen chooses to believe that such joy is possible. And it seems that he does, in the end—for when he sets out to meet up with Tukten after the expedition concludes only to realize the Sherpa is nowhere to be found, Matthiessen does not react with horror, or sadness, or anger. He simply accepts that the story has concluded. He writes, “I get on my bicycle again and return along gray December roads to Kathmandu,” ending his story with the only real resolution it could possibly have: acceptance that there is no resolution at all (Matthiessen 321).

And so Matthiessen’s story is one that puzzles readers everywhere, because it is one in which the moral is nowhere to be found. The only thing that gives the journey any significance at all is that fact that Matthiessen chooses to believe that it does—he chooses to keep going. He returns to the “real world,” and he keeps living. In that struggle as in Sisyphus’s, there is much to be admired. By acting with this insurmountable courage, Matthiessen ensures his own personal happiness. In the same manner in which each and every human being makes the decision to struggle onward in spite of the awareness of the meaninglessness of existence, Matthiessen decides to struggle onward too—and “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (Camus 123). Camus writes, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 123). One must imagine Matthiessen happy too, because in that imagination, there is hope.

*children rescuing worms from the rain—*

*meaningless—*

*but gives hope*
Works Cited


