



Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

By Robert M. Pirsig
ISBN: 9780688002305

Plot Summary

A narration of a summer motorcycle trip undertaken by a father and his son, the book becomes a personal and philosophical odyssey into fundamental questions of how to live. The narrator's relationship with his son leads to a powerful self-reckoning; the craft of motorcycle maintenance leads to an austere beautiful process for reconciling science, religion, and humanism.

Topics for Discussion

1. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is at once the story of a motorcycle journey across the country; a meditation on values and the concept of Quality; and an allegorical tale of a man coming to terms with his past. Discuss which aspects of the novel you found most compelling, and why.
2. Discuss Pirsig's Author's Note. What does he mean when he says "much has been changed for rhetorical purposes?" Is he saying the book is fact or fiction? How does his use of a first-person narrator make this a complex question? What is the relationship between author and narrator?
3. Discuss ZMM's epigraph: *And what is good, Phaedrus, And what is not good -- Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?* How does this query resemble a Buddhist *koan* -- a paradoxical or nonsensical question that emphasizes the process of meditating on the question rather than the answer? Why do you think Pirsig chose this excerpt to introduce the book?
4. At the beginning of their trip, the narrator and John have a conversation in which the narrator refers to education as "mass hypnosis," citing as an example the fact that Newton's law of gravity is nothing more than a human invention, as are laws of logic, mathematics, and ghosts. Why does this dialogue take place at the outset of the novel, as opposed to somewhere in the middle or the end of the trip? How is Pirsig preparing the reader for the novel's future scenes?
5. In setting out the topic for his Chautauqua, Pirsig compares the current consciousness to a stream overflowing its channels, causing destruction and havoc as it searches for new ones: *"There are eras of human history in which the channels of thought have been too deeply cut and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and 'best' was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now. Now the stream of our common consciousness seems to be obliterating its own banks, losing its central direction and purpose. . . . Some channel deepening seems called for."* (p. 16). Can you explain this metaphor? What sorts of change is he referring to? What does he mean by "channel deepening?"
6. As a writer of technical manuals, the narrator decries the current situation in which the idea of who a man *is* has become separated from what he *does*. He claims that in this separation are clues to "what the hell has gone wrong with the twentieth century." How does this concept fit in to what you know of Zen Buddhism, which celebrates the oneness of the universe? Do you feel at one with your occupation? Explain why or why not. If not, what is keeping you from feeling connected to what you do for a living? Would you feel more satisfied, or be a better worker, if you did feel that connection?
7. The narrator divides human understanding into two categories: romantic and classical. Discuss the distinction between the two. How do you fit into either of these dichotomies? Give examples that illustrate the tendencies that make you, personally, either classical or romantic.
8. How does Pirsig introduce and develop the character of Phaedrus? Can you rely on the narrator to offer an accurate picture of Phaedrus's insanity? Do you think Phaedrus really was insane?
9. What do you think of the narrator's son, Chris? Does he seem troubled, or merely a typical boy impatient with his father's behavior? Who do you think is a better father to Chris -- Phaedrus or the narrator?
10. Why do you think the narrator refuses to complete the trek up the mountain, despite Chris's disappointment that they won't be reaching the top? Is the threat of a rock slide real? Is he afraid to "meet" Phaedrus? Is he making a statement about ego relative to Zen philosophy? What is happening in the Chautauqua at this point in the book?
11. Discuss the climactic scene -- a confrontation between Chris and the narrator that takes place on a foggy cliff overlooking the ocean. Where is Phaedrus? What does this scene reveal about all three characters? How does this scene change your interpretations of the events that have lead up to it? What is the significance of Chris and his father removing their helmets for the remainder of the journey?