

## IV SEMESTER BCOM - ENGLISH

### **Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach**

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is different from the other birds in his Flock. Most gulls only know the “simplest facts of flight,” and use flight as a utilitarian mode of transportation and as a way to get food. Jonathan, however, loves practicing airborne acrobatics and testing the limits of his speed and form. He struggles with being different—he is sad to disappoint his parents, and he briefly considers trying hard to be just another member of the Flock. After he experiences a breakthrough in flight, though, and successfully executes a complicated dive from a height of five thousand feet, he is more determined than ever to devote his life to studying flight.

That night, when Jonathan rejoins his Flock up on the beach, he is called into the center of a Council meeting and singled out for Shame by the Elder Gull before being Outcast and banished to the distant Far Cliffs. Jonathan had hoped to share his new flight methods with the Flock, and show them how different methods of flight would make it even easier to find fruitful food sources in the ocean, but resignedly accepts that he will be a loner for the rest of his life. After many years pass, Jonathan has lived a long but solitary life. He is flanked in flight one evening by two gleaming gulls who invite him to ascend with them to a higher plane of existence.

Up in what he believes to be heaven, Jonathan finds that his body gleams in the moonlight, too—his new body flies more surely than his old body ever did, and with half the effort, though it still does have some limits. In this new world, there are a handful of gulls who believe the same things Jonathan does, and long to perfect their innovative methods of flight. Jonathan trains with an instructor named Sullivan, who admires Jonathan’s skill, speed, and self-possession, and tells Jonathan he is the best pupil he’s ever had. In his conversations with the Elder Gull of this new Flock, Chiang, Jonathan learns that there are ways to transcend even the physical limits of his body, if only he comes to realize that perfection comes from being present in the understanding that his true nature lives “everywhere at once across space and time.” Eventually, Jonathan masters instantaneous teleportation, impressing even Chiang and becoming Chiang’s special pupil. As Jonathan learns more and more, he cannot stop thinking about the world he left behind on earth—he longs to return and teach the gulls the truths he has learned in this new realm. Jonathan returns to earth and approaches a recently Outcast gull from his own Flock named Fletcher Lynd Seagull—admiring Fletcher’s flight, Jonathan offers to take Fletcher on as a pupil on the condition that one day they will return to their Flock and spread the things they have learned together. Fletcher agrees, and the two begin lessons.

After three months, Jonathan has amassed a small group of six special pupils, whom he trains in flight techniques and mental exercises to help them break the chains of their bodies. One day, Jonathan tells his students that the time has come to return to their Flock and share their knowledge. His students are doubtful, but agree nonetheless to follow him back to their old shore. The Flock shuns Jonathan and his pupils as they demonstrate their feats of flight over

the water just beyond the shore, but slowly, some curious gulls from the Flock begin approaching Jonathan and his group and asking to learn to fly. Even the nervous Terrence Lowell Gull and the lame Kirk Maynard Gull exhibit bravery in joining Jonathan's group, and soon hundreds and hundreds of gulls gather every day to listen to Jonathan's musings on the glory of freedom and the rituals, superstitions, and limitations that stand in the way of true freedom. Jonathan is soon rumored to be a Divine bird—perhaps even the Son of the Great Gull himself, though Jonathan laments the fact that the others cannot simply see him as one of them. After Fletcher crashes into a cliff and has a near-death experience, which he returns to life from, the others begin to hail Fletcher, too, as a Divine gull. Jonathan tells Fletcher that it is time for him to ascend, and leave Fletcher behind to continue his legacy. Though Fletcher begs Jonathan to stay, Jonathan begins to shimmer, and then ascends into the sky. Fletcher, distraught but determined to carry on Jonathan's teachings, assumes his new role as instructor of Jonathan's old pupils.

In the years following Jonathan's departure from earth, Fletcher and his new Flock of pupils travel up and down the coastline, spreading their messages to new Flocks, and as more and more gulls take up Jonathan's message, a golden age of flight and innovation commences. Fletcher becomes an icon in his own right, though Jonathan, in his absence, has become downright holy. As Jonathan's adherents grow in numbers, they begin ignoring his original teachings and focusing on the hagiography of Jonathan and his original pupils. As Jonathan's original students begin to die, their graves become shrines where devotees drop pebbles in order to seem more holy. Groups gather weekly to obsessively recount the miracles of Jonathan's making, but after two centuries, hardly any flying is done any more, and Jonathan's teachings are only discussed in the abstract. Many gulls begin to resist these rituals and sermons, and in trying something "new" by practicing flying, actually end up circling back to Jonathan's original desire for his Flock, and for all others—expanding the self through pushing one's physical limitations in flight. A young gull called Anthony Seagull feels he is surrounded by hypocrisy and empty ritual, and seeks to end his life by dive-bombing out of the sky. On the way down to the water, though, he is approached by a gleaming gull who compliments him on his style and form. When Anthony asks the gull his name, the gull introduces himself as "Jon."

### **Chapter-wise Analysis - Part One**

It is morning, and the sun is sparking across the calm sea. A mile from shore, a fishing boat trawls through the water, and a crowd of a thousand seagulls comes to pick and fight for bits of food. Far away from all the action, however, Jonathan Livingston Seagull practices his flight skills by himself. Most gulls only learn the "simplest facts of flight," and use the mechanics of flying only in pursuit of food. Jonathan Livingston Seagull, however, is different—he loves to fly "more than anything else."

**From the very first lines of the novel, author Richard Bach establishes his protagonist, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, as a loner who wants to push the boundaries of what "most gulls" can do and push himself to the limits of what his body can do.**

Because of how different he is from the other birds, Jonathan Livingston Seagull is not popular among his flock, and even his parents are disappointed by his preoccupation with flight. His mother and father beg him to be like the rest of the flock—they want him to stop flying and eat more, as he has grown thin and wan. Despite their warnings that winter will come soon, and food will be harder to come by—not to mention that the only reason to fly is to eat—Jonathan cannot manage to behave like the others, try as he might. Every time he joins the flock in searching for food, he can't stop himself from thinking that he is wasting time he could be using to perfect his flight skills.

**By choosing to show how Jonathan is not even motivated by food—most gulls' main directive in life—Bach also establishes his protagonist as unusually strong-willed, and completely dedicated to his pursuit of innovation through flight.**

Jonathan is practicing “blazing steep power-dives,” gathering speed as he plunges towards the ocean. With each dive, however, he finds that he loses control right as he reaches a high speed. Each time, his left wing stalls, causing him to fall into a “wild tumbling spin.” After ten failed attempts, Jonathan decides to try a new technique, and hold his wings still at high speeds. He tries once more to dive from a height of two thousand feet, and though his new technique takes tremendous strength, it works—in just ten seconds he reaches a speed of ninety miles an hour, and is proud that he has set a “world speed record for seagulls.”

**The careful attention to detail in this scene demonstrates not only Jonathan's prowess, but also the author's knowledge and love of flying. Bach uses excellence in flight as a marker of reaching the pinnacle of physical triumph—for gulls as it is for humans, flight is difficult and taxing, and accomplishing major feats of flight is a mark of success and specialness.**

Jonathan's pride in his victory, however, is short-lived; as soon as he begins his pullout from the dive, he “snap[s]” into the uncontrollable disaster of a tumble, and smashes out of the sky into the “brick-hard” ocean. When Jonathan regains consciousness, he finds himself floating in moonlight on the ocean's surface. He feels like a failure and wishes that he would drown. At the depth of his misery, he tells himself that he is “limited by [his] nature,” and is not meant to learn about flying after all. He decides to fly home to his flock and try to be content, knowing that attempting normalcy will make everybody else happy. He pushes out of the water and flies low and slow back to shore, promising himself that he will, from now on, fly like every other seagull.

### **Jonathan Seagull - Part Two – Analysis**

As Jonathan joins the two other gulls and flies up to heaven, he realizes that his body is growing bright and gleaming, too. His new body feels the same, but flies much more easily and more surely than his old body ever did—with half the effort, and twice the speed. As he pushes himself to new speeds, he is sad to realize that this body, too, has limits to what it can do. In heaven, Jonathan thinks, there should not be any limits at all.

Jonathan wants to be limitless. When he is given this new body, he believes it will allow him to transcend the limitations of his old one—but it does not. Jonathan does not yet realize that transcendence depends on the unification of mind, body, and spirit.

As the clouds break apart, Jonathan's guides wish him "happy landings," and then disappear. Jonathan is now flying over the sea toward a jagged shoreline. He can see a few seagulls up ahead, but he is stunned by how few gulls there are around. He thinks heaven ought to be full of gulls. Jonathan also notices that he is feeling very tired—he knows that gulls in heaven are never supposed to be tired. As he proceeds closer to the shoreline, he feels his memories of life on earth blurring and falling away. The other gulls come in to meet Jonathan, and help him land on the beach. As soon as he gets to the shore, Jonathan falls straight to sleep.

**Jonathan is entering a new realm of being. Doing so is evidently taxing and disorienting for him, as he falls asleep almost immediately upon arrival. Although Jonathan doesn't know where he is, what's certain is that he is one of just a few gulls in this realm. This suggests that Jonathan is even more special than he previously realized.**

As the days go by, Jonathan realizes that there is as much to learn about flight in this place as there had been on earth—but things are slightly different. All around him are gulls who think the same way he does; the most important thing to each of them is to "reach out and touch perfection" in flight. All of the other gulls here spend every hour of the day practicing flight. As Jonathan joins the other gulls, he finds himself at times forgetting completely about his old life and his old Flock, remembering them all only now and then and only just for a moment.

**Jonathan is overjoyed to be in a place where he is at last accepted for who he is and is surrounded by likeminded gulls who support and challenge him. This demonstrates that Jonathan, despite his loner tendencies, never really wanted to be on his own—he always wanted to just be a welcome part of a loving, supportive whole, but his old Flock couldn't provide that.**

One afternoon, Jonathan asks Sullivan, his instructor, why there aren't more gulls in this heaven. Sullivan replies that Jonathan is a "one-in-a-million bird," and that most of the gulls in this heaven came to it very slowly. Sullivan believes that every bird in this heaven has perhaps gone through many lives before they realized that there was more to life than eating, fighting, and gaining power in their Flocks. He believes each bird here has lived ten thousand lives, and that the birds will now choose their next world through the things they learn in this one. Sullivan reveals that he believes that Jonathan learned so much so quickly back on Earth, that he only had to live his one life.

**Sullivan has seen a lot of birds come to this realm, but feels his new pupil, Jonathan, is something special. In explaining to Jonathan that it often takes a lot of time for gulls to reach this plane, Sullivan lets Jonathan know just how far his inquisitive nature, individuality, and self-determination have taken him. However, back home on Earth, these qualities all seemed like immeasurable burdens that rendered Jonathan Outcast and alone.**

One night, up on the shore, Jonathan approaches Chiang, the Elder Gull of his new Flock. Whereas on Earth, the Elder Gull of the flock was “enfeebled by age,” Chiang has only grown stronger and more capable as he advances and ages. Jonathan confesses to Chiang that he suspects this world is not actually heaven. The elder smiles, and congratulates Jonathan for learning. Jonathan asks if there is no such place as heaven, and Chiang tells him that there is not. Heaven, he says, is not a place or a time—“heaven is being perfect.”

Just as Jonathan was different from the other gulls back on Earth, Chiang, too, is shown to be a different kind of leader. Chiang’s confession that Jonathan and the rest of the gulls in this realm are not actually in heaven makes Jonathan realize that he has yet to achieve perfection. However, for a gull like Jonathan, who enjoys setting goals and pushing himself to new limits, it’s likely comforting to know that he still has work to do and things to learn.

Chiang says that Jonathan will at last begin to touch heaven in the moment that he touches perfect speed. Perfect speed, however, is not flying at a certain numerical speed—numbers are limits, and perfection has no limits. Perfect speed, Chiang says, is just “being there.” Chiang then vanishes and reappears fifty feet away in an instant. In another millisecond, he reappears beside Jonathan, commenting that perfect speed is “kind of fun.”

**Jonathan’s ideas about achieving new “goals” in speed and aerobatics are shown to be not exactly right in this passage. Chiang insists that perfect speed is not actually about perfection, or beating a record, or becoming the best—it is about approaching one’s goals holistically and calmly, with the state of mind that one has already accomplished perfection and unity.**

Jonathan is “dazzled” completely by Chiang’s skill, and asks how far Chiang can go. Chiang replies that he has been “everywhere and everywhen.” Jonathan asks if Chiang can teach him how to fly like that, and Chiang agrees, saying that the two can start practicing now, if Jonathan wants to. He tells Jonathan that to fly as fast as thought, Jonathan must first know that he has already arrived. Jonathan must stop seeing himself as trapped in a limited body, and instead must realize that his true nature lives “everywhere at once across space and time.”

**Chiang’s doctrine is not one of training hard in pursuit of a goal. Instead, it is one of teaching oneself, however slowly, to accept that the goal is within reach, and always has been. This Zen or transcendental approach to the world reflects popular cultural touchstones of Bach’s time, and demonstrates his preoccupation with the metaphysical aspects of life.**

As the days go by, Jonathan tries very hard to learn to fly like Chiang, but cannot move even an inch from the spot where he stands. Chiang reminds Jonathan that he doesn’t need any special kind of faith—he needs simply to understand. One day, Jonathan realizes “in a flash” that he is a perfect gull—he closes his eyes, and when he opens them, he has traveled alongside Chiang to a completely different shore. Chiang comments that Jonathan needs some “control,” but has at last done it.

**The key to instantaneous transportation flight is the self-assured realization that one is “perfect” already. It is not about meeting the goal of accomplishing a certain kind of flight, but rather trusting that one has had the ability to do so all along. This speaks to Bach’s interest in the synchronicity of mind, body, and spirit, as well as the idea that through such unity, all things are possible.**

When Jonathan returns to the original shore with Chiang, the other gulls congratulate him. Jonathan demurs, though, insisting that he has much more to learn. Sullivan, however, congratulates Jonathan on having “less fear of learning” than any gull in ten thousand years. Chiang offers to help teach Jonathan how to fly to the past and to the future. After Jonathan masters time, Chiang says, he will be ready to fly up and at last know the true meaning of kindness and love.

**This passage establishes that it is not Jonathan’s skill or talent that makes him special, but his lack of fear and his dogged determination. He is just like any other gull in terms of his physical abilities, but he is also able to turn away from fear and determinedly pursue innovation at any cost, and despite any obstacles.**

A month or so passes, and Jonathan learns at a “tremendous rate.” As the special student of Chiang the Elder, Jonathan takes in completes new ideas as fast as a “computer.” One day, however, Chiang vanishes into thin air—his last words to Jonathan are “Keep working on love.”

**Jonathan is special, and as he quickly learns complicated skills, he proves just how determined he is. Chiang is proud of his pupil, but his final words do not concern technique, skill, or triumph, but rather love and empathy.**

As the days go by, Jonathan cannot stop thinking about Earth. As Jonathan learns more about love and kindness, he yearns to go back home. He knows at last that he was born to be an instructor, and to pass on the truths he has learned to other gulls—especially gulls who might have been made Outcast for “speaking [their] truth.” Sullivan, however, has his doubts. He asks Jonathan why he thinks that the others would suddenly listen to him. He implores Jonathan to see that he should focus on helping the gulls in this new realm rather than trying to go back and influence his old Flock. Jonathan heeds Sullivan’s advice for a while, but even as he trains new birds who come to this world, he continues longing for Earth.

**This passage shows how Jonathan’s goal is not—and never has been—betterment only of his own self, and achieving perfection for perfection’s sake. Chiang’s final words about love are also shown to have affected him greatly. He wants to share what he has learned with his Flock; even though they have Outcast him, he still loves them, and he wants to help improve their lives, too. Jonathan shows himself to be truly selfless here, and more interested in the good of the collective than he previously seemed to be.**

At last, Jonathan tells Sullivan that he feels he must go back to Earth. Sullivan tells Jonathan that he will miss him, but Jonathan replies that their friendship should not depend on their proximity to one another in space and time, but rather their feelings for one another. Sullivan

bids Jonathan goodbye, and Jonathan reassures his friend that the two of them will one day meet again.

**Jonathan is enlightened now, so he knows space and time cannot hold him—he has transcended the physical by achieving unity of his mind, body, and spirit, and he is able to traverse the realms of being and consciousness with ease and confidence.**

Back on Earth, a gull named Fletcher Lynd Seagull has just been Outcast to the Far Cliffs. As he flies, he thinks how unjust his Flock has been—he knows there must be more to life than flapping around from place to place. Fletcher laments that the other gulls cannot see the glory of flight. A voice appears within Fletcher's own head, warning him not to be too harsh on the other gulls—in casting Fletcher out, the voice says, the gulls have only hurt themselves; one day, they will know this. The voice urges Fletcher to forgive his Flock.

**Fletcher's worldview and experiences seem to parallel Jonathan's pre-enlightenment days with the Flock. Fletcher has been Outcast for his curiosity, and as such is angry and ashamed—but still, he is determined to strike out on his own and discover “more” than the narrow life he has been leading.**

Fletcher sees a brilliant white gull appear at his wing—he wonders what is happening, and whether he is dead. The gull asks Fletcher if he wants to fly; Fletcher replies that he does. The voice asks Fletcher if he wants to fly badly enough to forgive his Flock, and one day return to them with the intent of helping them “know.” Fletcher softly says that he does. The “bright creature” next to him—who is Jonathan, returned to Earth—tells him that their lessons will begin right away.

### **Jonathan Seagull – Part Three - Analysis**

Jonathan circles the Far Cliffs, watching as his new pupil, Fletcher, flies through the air. Fletcher is strong, light, quick, and best of all, determined. Despite all of his fire, however, Fletcher struggles and often falls and tumbles through the air. Fletcher gets down on himself easily, wondering whether he'll ever learn how to fly as well as he wants to—Jonathan is a good teacher, though, and reassures Fletcher that with enough practice, he'll be great.

Jonathan is helping Fletcher to be his truest self, and embrace his individuality and drive towards innovation. Jonathan's singular goal is to help share the things he has learned up in the other realm with curious, motivated gulls back on Earth. In this passage, Jonathan seems to finally be achieving that goal.

Three months have gone by, and now Jonathan has six other students—all Outcasts. Jonathan explains to his pupils that flying is a tool the gulls can use to grow closer to expressing their true nature and putting aside their own personal limits. Jonathan tries to teach his students that in breaking the chains of their thoughts, they can break the chains of their bodies, but his students are easily exhausted, and unable to break through.

**Jonathan now has exactly what he wants—a group of curious but lonely pupils whose individuality he can nurture and whose self-determination he can help to foster.**

A month later, despite his students' slow progress, Jonathan tells them all that the time has come to return to the Flock. One of his pupils, Henry Calvin Seagull, insists that they are no longer welcome among the Flock—they are Outcast, and cannot force themselves back into the group at home. Jonathan insists that each of the gulls, however, is free to go where they wish and be who they want to be. With that, he takes to the sky and begins flying toward the Flock's home grounds.

**Jonathan believes in his students—and in the message that they have collectively committed to—even though his students do not have faith in themselves. Like Chiang, Jonathan does not ask his students to have faith—he simply asks them to recognize that they are already free, capable, and perfect despite their perceptions of their shortcomings.**

Jonathan's students watch him fly away, in turmoil over whether or not they should accompany him. They ultimately decide that if they are not a part of the Flock, they do not have to obey the laws which keep them from it. Moreover, they want to be able to help Jonathan if there is a flight upon his return. Together, the eight students take to the skies and follow Jonathan eastward.

**Jonathan's students no longer feel any allegiance to the Flock they came from—the allegiance they feel is to Jonathan. They are united in this emotion, and fly off in support of him and his vision in spite of their trepidation.**

The birds, led by Jonathan, fly speedily and beautifully to the shore where their old Flock is gathered. They land on the sand in front of the Flock, and see a thousand beady eyes staring at them. Jonathan begins critiquing his pupils' flight, knowing full well his old Flock is watching him intently. Some of the younger gulls of the Flock whisper among themselves admiringly about the Outcast gulls' flying, but the Elder Gull sends a message throughout the crowd: "any gull who speaks to an Outcast is himself Outcast."

**Jonathan and his pupils show up on the shore of their old Flock's territory, prepared to confidently, shamelessly bring their innovative ways of thinking to the reluctant birds. The Elder, sensing the threat to their Flock's tradition, tries to ensure that his Flock will remain true by threatening them with being Outcast—the greatest threat to a gull, despite the freedom it offers.**

The Flock begins turning their backs on Jonathan, but he does not seem to notice, and instead begins training his own pupils directly over the beach, encouraging them to fly as quickly and as deftly as they can. Pupils who'd never shone before give standout performances. Fletcher Seagull conquers a complicated slow roll, and the following day, as the public practice continues, manages a triple cartwheel through the air. Jonathan catapults through the air with his students, guiding and encouraging them, while the rest of their flock is "huddled miserably" on the sand.

**In the face of being shunned outright, Jonathan continues on with his teaching as if nothing strange at all is going on. He is so committed to spreading his message to the**



**Flock, however reluctant they are to hear it, that he ignores their desire to turn away from him and instead focuses only on improving his pupils' flight.**

After the flying is done, Jonathan and his students gather together on the shore, and he lectures them about his ideas. In the night, a circle forms around his circle of students—other curious gulls from the Flock, shy and nervous to deviate from the norm but helplessly curious as to what Jonathan has to say.

**Jonathan's message finally begins to get through to the Flock, despite the Elder's attempts to shield them from Jonathan's new and radical ideas.**

Jonathan and his pupils have been back for a month when the first gull from the Flock approaches their group and asks in earnest to learn how to fly. His name is Terrence Lowell Gull, and though he knows he is already rendering himself Outcast in just speaking to Jonathan and his group, he joins them. Kirk Maynard Gull joins their group the following night, helplessly showing a broken wing to Jonathan and asking how he can ever learn to fly with such an impediment. Jonathan insists that with his group, Kirk Maynard is free to be himself, and that nothing will stand in his way. Jonathan proclaims him a free gull, and with that, Kirk Maynard spreads his wings effortlessly and takes to the sky, surprised and delighted by his own triumph.

**In this passage, Jonathan is shown to perform miracles which seem divine. In reality, he is just showing the gulls how to believe in themselves, and how to transcend the physical through unity of the mind, the spirit, and the body. Jonathan's ideas—crazy as they may seem—are shown to work on even the most self-deprecating of gulls, and this “triumph” must appear to the rest of the Flock as incredible, nothing short of magical.**

By sunrise, a thousand gulls have positioned themselves apart from the greater Flock, listening to Jonathan as he speaks of the nature of being, the glory of freedom, and the poisonous rituals, superstitions, and limitations that stand in the way of true liberation. The other gulls are afraid of abandoning the Law of the Flock, and some express concerns that they'll never be able to fly like the “gifted and divine” Jonathan. In response, Jonathan insists that he and his pupils are no more special than the others. The only difference between the two groups is that Jonathan's pupils “have begun to understand what they really are and have begun to practice it.” With each passing day, the crowd of gulls who gather to question, idolize, and scorn Jonathan and his pupils grows.

**More and more members of the Flock are attracted to Jonathan's message because they have seen the physical results of his doctrine take hold. Though some are afraid to break with tradition and go against the grain of the Flock, Jonathan allows his method to speak for itself. He becomes a controversial figure—as beloved as he is hated—but has succeeded, just by getting the other gulls riled up, in his mission of bringing innovation and other ways of thinking to the traditional, stunted Flock.**

One morning, Fletcher reports to Jonathan that the word in the Flock is that Jonathan is perhaps the Son of the Great Gull himself—either that, or he is “a thousand years” ahead of

his time. Jonathan sighs, realizing that to the Flock, he is being set up to be either the devil or god. Fletcher muses that Jonathan and his pupils are merely ahead of the fashion.

**Jonathan has grown more humble as time has gone by. He does not want his message to be misinterpreted or glorified—he just wants to spread knowledge to those who want it.**

One morning, during flight practice, Fletcher narrowly misses striking a young bird on its first flight. To avoid slamming into the youngster at two hundred miles per hour, he diverts his path—into a solid cliff of granite. The rock is, to Fletcher, “a giant hard door into another world.” When he awakens, he is adrift in a strange sky. The voice within, the one he heard on the first day he met Jonathan, speaks to him. He realizes that the voice is Jonathan. Fletcher is surprised that he hasn’t died, and the voice answers that all Fletcher did was “change [his] level of consciousness.”

**Fletcher, in this passage, has a near-death experience—and, simultaneously, an experience of his mind and body, united, transcending his physical form. The fact that it is Jonathan’s voice who guides him through the experience seems to imply that it is because of Jonathan’s tutelage that Fletcher has been able to transcend the physical and enter this metaphysical space at all.**

The voice tells Fletcher that he has a choice: he can either stay on this new level, which is “quite a bit higher” than the one he left, or he can return to the Flock and keep working with them. Fletcher says that he wants to go back to the Flock. The voice tells Fletcher he can go, and urges him to remember that one’s body is “nothing more than thought itself.”

**Like Jonathan, Fletcher makes the choice to return to his earthly Flock and complete the duties he feels toward them rather than ascend on by himself. This suggests that Fletcher may go on to one day fill Jonathan’s shoes.**

When Fletcher awakes back on the shore, a crowd has gathered around him. Some proclaim him the Son of the Great Gull—others say he is a devil who has come to break up the Flock, and try to peck at him and harm him. Jonathan appears over Fletcher and asks if he would like to leave the squawking Flock, who have quickly seized on the idea that he is a devil and turned against him. Together, Fletcher and Jonathan transport a half-mile away. Jonathan wonders aloud why it is so hard to convince a bird that he is free. Fletcher is astounded by how quickly the two of them moved, and asks Jonathan how he accomplished the shift—Jonathan tells Fletcher that like everything else, the manoeuvre takes only practice.

**Fletcher, having selflessly chosen to come back to Earth, finds a rather hostile welcoming committee upon waking up. This passage serves to show how groupthink functions, and begins to set the stage for a meditation on the misinterpretation of doctrine. In this case, the Flock is split over how to interpret Fletcher’s reanimation, choosing to focus on what it means and assign a value to it rather than simply take in the miracle of the fact that it happened.**

By the morning, the Flock has forgotten its insanity, but Fletcher has not—he asks Jonathan how it will be possible to love the Flock when they so angrily turned against Fletcher himself.

Jonathan tells Fletcher that it takes practice to see the good in each gull, and to help them see it in themselves. Jonathan says that Fletcher has become a leader in his own right—Jonathan wants to leave and allow Fletcher to take over helping the other gulls to see the light. Jonathan tells Fletcher that Fletcher doesn't need him as an instructor anymore. Now, Fletcher must be his own instructor.

**Fletcher's near-death experience has, at least in Jonathan's eyes, prepared him to take the next step in his journey. Jonathan wants his pupil to fly on his own—literally, and figuratively. This conflates Jonathan with his previous teacher, Chiang, who left Jonathan when he was ready to be a leader.**

Jonathan's body begins to shimmer in the air and become transparent. He begs Fletcher not to let the others spread "silly rumors" that he is a god. He urges Fletcher to look with his understanding, not his eyes, in order to see the way to fly. Jonathan vanishes, leaving Fletcher alone on the shore.

**As Jonathan departs the Earth, he makes his wishes for his legacy clear. In the pages that follow, Bach will chart how Jonathan's humble request to be remembered as just another gull will be denied.**

Fletcher reluctantly ascends to the sky and faces his brand-new group of students. He is devastated by Jonathan's disappearance, but begins the lesson anyway. He urges his pupils to understand that "a seagull is an unlimited idea of freedom," and that each gull's body is nothing more than the sum of their thoughts. The birds, who thought they'd be learning about flight, are confused by Fletcher's lesson. Seeing their disappointment, he moves onto the practical part of the lesson, realizing suddenly that Jonathan had never been more divine than Fletcher himself. As Fletcher looks out at his pupils, he sees them all as they really are, and loves what he sees.

**Fletcher never quite believed that Jonathan was divine, but he always saw his mentor as peerless and in some ways untouchable in terms of talent and skill. In this passage, Fletcher realizes that Jonathan was, all along, just a hopeful, sometimes scared gull like him. Fletcher is uncertain at first that he will be as good a teacher as Jonathan was, but this passage implies that his love for his students will allow him to successfully continue what Jonathan started.**

#### **Jonathan Seagull – Part Four – Analysis**

In the years after Jonathan Livingston Seagull's departure, the Flock becomes the "strangest bunch of birds that have ever lived on earth." Many of them begin to understand Jonathan's message—or at least they think they do—and soon gulls practicing wild flight maneuvers become just as common as gulls who refuse to engage with Jonathan's methods and continue flying straight and level out to the fishing boats for their food.

**As Jonathan's "doctrine" takes hold of the Flock, his message of innovation and freedom through flight gets through to more and more gulls, who keep his legacy alive by dedicating themselves to practicing aerobatics.**

Fletcher and Jonathan's other pupils begin making missionary journeys to every flock on the coastline, spreading their instructor's message of freedom and flight. Fletcher is heartened to realize that his pupils are not only free, but also accomplished in their flight maneuvers—many of Fletcher's pupils become so talented and overcome their limits so perfectly that they shimmer and disappear from the face of the earth, just like Jonathan. It is a golden age of flight and innovation.

**Jonathan's message is, in this "golden age," getting through to an extraordinary number of gulls. Not only are they practicing Jonathan's ethos of freedom through flight, but they are succeeding in learning so much that they transcend the physical realm and go on to new planes, to practice even more with the gulls up in the sky.**

Fletcher becomes an icon in his own right, and gulls flock to him just for the chance to touch someone who once touched Jonathan Seagull—who has achieved divine status in the minds of many birds on earth. Fletcher tries to remind the others that Jonathan was a regular gull, just like them, but no one will listen to this message. The gulls continue begging for any tidbit of information they can get about the "Divine Gull Jonathan," his words, and his time on earth. The new pupils want to imitate Jonathan's every move precisely, and though Fletcher continually tries to remind the new recruits that all Jonathan wanted to pass on was the fact that gulls can fly, his flock becomes a cult of personality obsessed with Jonathan rather than a group of pupils training, studying, drawing strength from one another.

**As more and more gulls long to take part in Jonathan's legacy, things start to get out of control. Jonathan is no longer seen as a visionary or an exceptional teacher, but as a kind of religious icon. Fletcher finds himself unwillingly swept up in the mounting mania over remembering and reconstructing Jonathan's every word and every move. Jonathan never wanted to be an icon or a paragon of perfection—he just wanted to spread his message of freedom—but since he has departed Earth, he cannot influence what goes on there in his absence.**

After a few years, hardly any flying is done at all—rather, gulls simply stand on the beach, reciting poems and histories about "the Divine One." Fletcher and Jonathan's other original pupils are puzzled, frightened, and even angry at the change, but are helpless to stop it. Jonathan's original students have also become honored and revered, but no one really listens to them anymore. As one by one, the Original Students die, the Flock seizes upon their bodies and holds great ceremonies over them. Their burial sites become shrines where every gull who wishes for Oneness must drop a pebble and recite some words. No one really understands the concept of Oneness, but it is such a deep concept that anyone who asks about it is rendered a fool.

**This passage is an allegory for the ways in which religious fervor can create confusion and misinterpretation surrounding doctrine and belief. Those who purport to be Jonathan's "followers" are using warped versions of his ideals for their own purposes, and creating empty but rigid new traditions that are directly antithetical to the messages of freedom, individualism, and innovation Jonathan intended to spread.**

Fletcher is the last of the original flock to pass away, during a solitary session of beautiful flying. In the middle of a complex roll, his body vanishes, lost in the perfection of his own flight. As Fletcher leaves no body behind, the rest of the Flock is confused and upset when they realize their de facto leader has vanished. As the Flock comes together in mourning, they begin spinning a story of how the Gull Fletcher was last seen flanked by the other Seven First Students standing on the Rock of Oneness, and that the Great Gull Jonathan Livingston Seagull had descended from the sky dressed in opulent plumes and a crown of pebbles to call Gull Fletcher up to the Beach of Oneness. Fletcher had ascended, the Flock says, surrounded by holy rays and a chorus of gull voices singing.

**In this passage, Bach shows how religious fervor—and the misinterpretation of doctrine it engenders—can grow out of nothing. When Fletcher’s death leaves no concrete answers for his fervently devoted Flock, they begin spinning stories that cast his death in the light they want it to be seen in. They portray him as a divine disciple of their main figurehead, Jonathan, and invent a narrative about his passing that invalidates Fletcher’s truth and serves only the creation of new, stifling traditions, as Bach will show in the following passages.**

The pile of pebbles on the Rock of Oneness, in commemoration of “Gull Fletcher,” grows enormous. Other piles are built in tribute, and Flocks all around the coastline gather weekly at these sites to listen to and recount the miracles of Jonathan Livingston Seagull and his Gifted Divine Students. Hardly any flying is done anymore, and strange trends and customs begin to crop up: more affluent birds carry branches in their beaks, and the longer the branch the better and more progressive a flier that bird is considered—even if he never flies at all.

**In this passage Bach shows how ritual and tradition, though seemingly deep and meaningful, are often empty and hollow at their core. The ritual of dropping pebbles at shrines to the memory of Gull Fletcher ultimately signifies nothing, as the story in which Jonathan Seagull, wearing a crown of pebbles, brought Fletcher up to heaven is a fiction and a falsehood.**

Every Tuesday, all flying stops and recitations begin, and as the “sermons” become increasingly unintelligible, slurred speech and run-on sentences are eventually seen not as mistakes but marks of excellence. Images of Jonathan are pecked into the cliffs all along the coastline, and nearly two hundred years later, every element of Jonathan’s teaching is considered holy—and beyond the aspirations of common gulls.

**This passage depicts how corrupted doctrine and empty pontification overtake the meaningful actions that inspired them in the first place. This leads to doctrine being seen as unapproachable, unchangeable, and unquestionable, and thus inaccessible and irrelevant to the common people.**

Gulls who resist these changes—“thinking gulls”—begin instinctively closing their minds to any mention of Jonathan, purposefully flying routes that allow them to avoid the pebble-laden shrines that have sprung up in dedication to him and ignoring any mention of him. They experiment with flight, but refuse to call it “flight”—they decide they are simply “finding

what's true." They reject the Students, but nonetheless become students themselves; in rejecting Jonathan's name, they are actually practicing the original message he brought to the flock.

**The status quo circles back around in this passage as many gulls grow dissatisfied with the empty traditions that are now an entrenched part of their society. In rebelling against the false misinterpretation of Jonathan's message—which has been accepted as the truth of his "doctrine"—they are actually accomplishing what Jonathan wanted for them all along.**

Some gulls begin questioning the things being taught at the shrines. A gull called Anthony Seagull realizes that all the gulls who come to the shrines each Tuesday and drop a pebble do so in hopes of becoming holy—or otherwise simply because everyone expects them to be there. Gulls like Anthony know there is something to be learned from Jonathan's legacy, but do not know what that is. Anthony begins questioning whether the "Great Gull Jonathan" ever even existed, or performed the "miracles" of flight he is proclaimed to have achieved. He sees the story of Jonathan as a "fairy tale." Anthony decides that he will not listen to what the Officials have to say until he can see a bird demonstrate one of Jonathan's feats—for instance, reaching a speed of two hundred miles per hour.

**Anthony is introduced as a parallel to Jonathan himself. Though he looks upon Jonathan's legacy with scorn and doubt, Anthony is more like Jonathan than he could possibly realize, and this is precisely because of the perversion of Jonathan's message, and of how he has been misrepresented as the years have gone by.**

Many other gulls go the way of Anthony—they reject the ritual and ceremony of Jonathan Seagull, and begin to believe that life is futile. One morning, flying along the sea and contemplating the meaninglessness of life, Anthony decides to die—he sees no reason to prolong his boring life. He heads up to a height of two thousand feet and then dives straight toward the water. Halfway through his dive, he is aware of another seagull passing him in flight. Anthony brakes, and attempts to get a better look at the blur which has passed him by. The blur pulls out of its own dive and completes a long vertical slow roll, and Anthony is amazed by the gull's impressive display. He calls to the other bird, asking it to wait for him to catch up.

**Anthony's suicidal ideation—a lonely, isolated state—represents the apex of hollowness in this new, Jonathan-obsessed world. Anthony is so worn down by the maddening rote repetitions of tradition and the endless posturing towards holiness and "Oneness," that he feels there is no place for him in this social order. Just before he can follow through with the deed, though, Anthony encounters a gull whose flight so inspires him that he momentarily abandons his suicide plot.**

The gull turns back toward Anthony and apologizes for startling him. Anthony expresses his admiration of the bird's flight, but the demure bird insists he was "just messing around." The other bird offers to help teach him how to do such a maneuver. Anthony asks the bird his name. The bird tells Anthony to call him "Jon."

**Jonathan's reappearance to Anthony in the final pages of the novel seems to suggest that Anthony's disbelief in a world of faithful but empty tradition is innovation worthy of Jonathan's praise and attention. It's implied that Jonathan—or "Jon" as he wants to be known, most likely to avoid being conflated with the disdainful idea of him that has seized the Flocks of the world—will take on Anthony as a pupil, and help nurture Anthony's innovative instincts.**

### **Themes : Individualism v/s Collectivism**

The titular character of Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is an independent gull who would rather practice aerodynamic flight techniques than forage for food in the wake of the fishing boats that chug up and down the shoreline of the Flock's home. Jonathan's staunch individualism initially seems in direct opposition to the collectivism of the Flock. The members of the Flock do everything the exact same way, day after day, and never question the rote routines of boring, straightforward flight or the endless pursuit of nothing but food. However, when Jonathan finds himself a part of a mystical new group of seagulls whose self-exile from their home Flocks has rendered them "Outcast," Bach makes the complex and nuanced argument that individualism and collectivism do not have to exist in stark opposition. The individual cannot thrive without a solid, supportive community; likewise, a truly successful collective will be composed of individuals whose independence of thought and action inspires and nourishes those around them.

At the start of the novel, Jonathan is already something of a loner within his Flock—but it is his own drive towards individualism that isolates him, rather than the external derision of his fellow gulls. Jonathan's love of flying outweighs his desire to make himself "popular with the other birds," for example, and even his parents' disappointment is not enough to deter his dreams of testing his limits through flight. He tells his parents that he "just want[s] to know" the extent of what he can do, and as his flight practice allows him to reach new speeds and—quite literally—new heights. Where other gulls are concerned with maintaining the status quo and merely living to eat, Jonathan finds himself thinking only of how he can achieve more and more, and break records the other gulls have never even dreamed of. When Jonathan is "centered for shame by the Elder Gull and the rest of the Council—the governing body of his Flock—he is affronted by the slight and made nervous by the prospect of being "cast out of gull society, banished to a solitary life on the Far Cliffs." Nevertheless, once Jonathan leaves his Flock, his "one sorrow" is not solitude; rather, it is that the collective Flock "refuse to believe the glory of flight." Jonathan's banishment frightens him despite the fact that he has always been a solitary gull. His inability to make his Flock see the "glory" of a different way of life, however, cements in his mind the idea that he is meant to be alone. This reflects his initial conception of a collective group as something restrictive and antithetical to individuality.

Jonathan enjoys his solitude until the fateful day when he finds himself brought up to a new plane of existence, where he encounters a new Flock of mystical seagulls who embrace the ideals, goals, and questions Jonathan has had all his life. In this new realm, Jonathan sees how collectivism can, in fact, allow for the advancement and nurturing of every individual member of a group. The few gulls he finds there have similarly faced hardship and isolation from their Flocks as they moved through their lives. However, now that they have all arrived in this new world, they are free to practice flight and attempt to improve, learn, and grow until they come to an understanding of their own inherent perfection, and the notion that their consciousness exists everywhere at once across space and time. With this new understanding

that collectivism can be a positive thing, Jonathan longs to implement the mutually respectful, inquisitive, and encouraging collectivism he has experienced in this higher realm back on earth.

In the years following his departure from the Earth, Jonathan has become an icon renowned the world over, revered as the “Great Gull Jonathan Livingston Seagull.” A messiah of sorts, Jonathan is seen as a divine being—but his lessons about the joys of flying have been long forgotten or misrepresented as entreaties for other gulls to strive for Oneness—a vague concept that seems to denote a bastardization of the state of collective consciousness. Jonathan initially tried to bring back to earth from the higher plane. Flocks all over the world have recognized Jonathan’s unique vision, but are focusing on the wrong things when it comes to his “doctrine”; gulls who follow Jonathan’s teachings focus too much on remembering or reassembling the exact words he spoke, but they do not seem to care about the meanings behind the words. As a result, the world has been swept up in chaos as the gulls fervently try to reconstruct their idol, all the while ignoring the heart of his message: that flying “fast and free and glorious” in the sky is a way of transcending the physical realm. In this way, collectivism has swung from one kind of exclusionary cadre to another, as the earthly gulls continually aim for a homogenized society organized around a single idea. By neglecting the chance to develop a kind of community that supports one another while still honoring individualism and the virtues of unique beings, the gulls have failed to truly understand, interpret, and disseminate the teachings of the “Divine Gull” they purport to revere and worship.

Bach condemns neither individualism nor collectivism in the pages of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Instead, he uses the world of the gulls as a metaphor for the human world’s readiness to erase individuality and favor a homogenized collective. By using the parable of Jonathan Seagull and his journey to another plane and back again, Bach extolls the virtues of a society in which people—or, in this case, gulls—are allowed to come as they are and be appreciated as individual members of a variegated whole. In doing so, Bach highlights the inequities in our contemporary society and ultimately urges his readers to apply the knowledge Jonathan was unable to share with his Flock within their own lives, social circles, and societies.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is, at its core, a story of how innovation, progress, and self-discovery all require what can often be a painful or difficult break with tradition. Longing to free himself from his Flock’s rigid, boring routines, and convinced that there is more to life than just hunting for food, Jonathan practices increasingly difficult and dangerous flight maneuvers, edging away from not only the Flock’s comfort zone, but also from his own. As he studies and practices flying—a metaphor throughout the book for experimentation and liberation—he realizes that, although breaking with tradition draws the ire of the Flock and renders him an exiled Outcast, these sacrifices are necessary in order to change and grow. Through Jonathan, Bach allegorizes humanity’s tendency to seek comfort in the familiar, or in easy answers, and argues that this impulse is directly at odds with the sacrifice and courage required for genuine innovation.

### **Theme : Innovation v/s Tradition**

Jonathan Seagull longs to break boundaries, change the status quo, go where no gull has gone before and do what no gull has ever done. Speed, for Jonathan, is the means to such innovation. What’s more, it is a road to “power,” “joy,” “and pure beauty.” To this end, Jonathan practices complicated, ground breaking aerodynamics—high speeds, complicated



rolls, and the manipulation of his own wings to achieve the form and velocity he desires. He is disappointed, however, when such moves are seen as offensive to his fellow gulls. In lieu of glory, recognition, and the ability to pass on his knowledge to his Flock, Jonathan is publicly shamed and then Outcast from the Flock altogether. Jonathan fears that he will never be able to share his innovations with others—until he is taken to another realm, a new plane of existence where he is able to practice his flight in peace. Jonathan surprises himself as he achieves even newer, more impressive goals, and grows determined to bring the advancements he has made back to the Flock he loved and left. In allowing Jonathan to achieve transcendence of seagull knowledge only when he travels to another plane (and gets as far away from his Flock as possible), Bach highlights the oppressive, stifling reality of excessive adherence to tradition, and argues that overcoming that oppression requires a courageous if frightening step into the unknown.

Back on earth, though, Jonathan finds that it is still difficult to get through to the other gulls, and must focus instead on improving the lives and flying techniques of only a few devoted, disciple-like pupils. Some other members of the Flock watch as his pupils study and train, but Jonathan is met with questions and doubt just as often as he is met with interest and idolatry. Though Jonathan reaches only a small group of students during his lifetime, he has still managed to achieve his goal of bringing innovation to earth. With this accomplished, Jonathan disappears and ascends to an unknown place, leaving his star pupil Fletcher in charge of keeping his legacy alive. Jonathan has changed his Flock, albeit in a small way, proving that truly devoted innovators can influence even the most staunchly traditional community.

By the end of the novel, however, the innovations Jonathan pioneered—the ideals and practices that were so odious and foreign to his original Flock—have become the status quo, and a tradition in and of themselves. The narrative flashes forward into the future, revealing the world of the gulls to have been completely transformed by Jonathan Seagull's influence. A kind of religion has even cropped up, dedicated to the “Great Gull Jonathan Livingston Seagull.” As the years have gone by though, devotees of the “idol” Jonathan are less interested in practicing his innovative flight methods than they are in hearing bits of “trivia” about the figurehead himself. Even further into the future, a veritable cult has taken the place of the movement, which once simply inspired gulls to fly and experiment with aerodynamics. Eventually, “no flying [is] ever done by anybody,” and all of the movement's teachings become obsessive glorifications of Jonathan's—or the “Divine One's”—every word and movement during his time on earth. In exploring how Jonathan's innovative nature brought change to his community, but then wound up as the genesis for yet another staunch tradition—perhaps even more obsessive and inflexible than the gulls' original way of life—Bach suggests that society longs to seek comfort in familiarity and simplicity, and will always fall back on answers and paths that are easy.

Jonathan's story is a cautionary tale of sorts meant to demonstrate how the line between beneficial innovation and radical overhaul of society is a fine one, and that the stronger a

society adheres to the concept of tradition, the more difficult it will be to gently and intuitively fold innovation into a staunchly-ordered, conservative ecosystem. Through Jonathan's allegorical tale, Bach argues that growth and innovation are a continuous process: one spark of innovation can create a wave of change, but the match that formed the spark in the first place must continually be relit, or society will fall back into its lazy, easy ways.

### **Themes: Self-Determination Through Mind, Body, and Spirit**

Jonathan Livingston Seagull is an ode to self-determination through transcendence of the body and discovery of the limitless nature of the mind and the spirit. Jonathan longs to be in control of his own life and govern himself independently of his hegemonic, small-minded Flock. His experiments in airborne acrobatics begin as a way to distinguish himself from the rest of the group and explore the possibilities of his small life. However, as Jonathan becomes a more serious flier and eventually ascends to a new plane of existence where mystical, gleaming gulls practice flight in peace all day long, he realizes that flight is a means of integrating his mind, body, and spirit as one singular entity. Through Jonathan's journey toward self-discovery and self-determination, Bach uses Jonathan Livingston Seagull to make the controversial argument that the self—the product of mind, body, and spirit in perfect harmony—is a limitless entity that reaches its fullest potential when they are united in harmony with one another. Though the specifics of how to achieve this integration are left vague and intentionally circular (Jonathan achieves transcendence of his physical limitations in the instant that he tells himself he is unlimited and truly believes it), Bach uses Jonathan's journey toward perfection as a means of illustrating the importance of striving to align one's mind, body, and spirit in synchronicity.

At the start of the novel, it seems as if Jonathan's journey will be one simply of learning increasingly complicated aerodynamic tricks. As Jonathan becomes a more accomplished flier, though, he is recruited by a group of gulls on a higher plane of existence who see flight not simply as an athletic or physical pursuit, but a spiritual one as well. Under the tutelage of Chiang, the Elder Gull of the higher plane, Jonathan comes to understand that the fastest kind of flight—transportation from one place, or one time, to another in the blink of an eye—can only be accomplished by understanding that one's body, mind, and spirit are all connected. That “perfect speed,” Chiang the Elder says, “is being there”—when “there” is understood as the borderline holy place where all aspects of the self are united. With Chiang's help, Jonathan begins to understand that he is not “trapped inside a limited body” but instead exists “everywhere at once across space and time.” He then accomplishes feats of flying he'd never dreamed of. Forget mere loop-de-loops, nosedives, or barrel rolls—Jonathan, with the newfound knowledge that his body, mind, and spirit are one unified entity, is able to travel between planets, planes, and spiritual realms with ease. Jonathan's spiritual transformation, and resulting godlike powers, have been seen by Bach's readers as an allegory for the powers of self-help, positive thinking, and even attempts at spiritual and philosophical transcendence.

through meditation. The book's controversial spiritual bent, and its associations with late 1960s and early 1970s "hippie" counterculture, has been seen as facile by many of Bach's critics, but nonetheless speaks to a very real belief many spiritual people hold—that the body, mind, and spirit are all united, and only through realizing this can one's larger goals of happiness, unity, and peace be achieved.

As a novel, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is many things—self-help guidebook, religious parable, and tome advocating for the pursuit of spiritual unity. Bach, who himself had had near-death experiences in his youth and longed to spread a message of peace, gratitude, and the search for higher meaning, created a character whose spiritual self-actualization might serve as an inspiration to others, and as an emblem of the glory that self-determination through unification of the mind, the spirit, and the body might bring.

### **Themes: The Misinterpretation of Doctrine**

The fourth and final section of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* flashes forward nearly two hundred years after Jonathan's disappearance from the face of the earth and supposed ascendance to heaven. In the centuries that have passed, Jonathan's teachings of introspection, self-determination, and the pursuit of one's individual truth have been misinterpreted, warped, and picked apart like so much chum. As the reader works their way through the final pages of the story, an obvious parable emerges: Richard Bach has composed a tale that mirrors the perceived failures of religions and belief systems the world over, and which indicts religious and spiritual movements for their creation of cults of personality and the self-centered search for validation through "holiness." In pointing out the ways in which religious doctrines are often misinterpreted and misused, Bach suggests that religious and spiritual movements must—or at least should—reexamine their roots and return to the simplistic messages of self-discovery, charity and community, pursuit of a greater collective good, and the sacredness not of one figurehead but of each member of the larger community.

In the two hundred years since his departure from earth in a glimmering haze, "nearly every element of Jonathan's teaching [has been] taken out of daily practice by the simple pronouncement that it was Holy, and beyond the aspiration of common gulls." The central ethos of Jonathan's message to his fellow gulls—the use of flight as a way to unify mind, body, and spirit around the goal of self-determination—has been replaced by obsessive rites and rituals that exclude many would-be disciples of Jonathan's message. Jonathan has become an icon, depicted in rich plumage, wearing crowns of shells and other baubles. His likeness has been pecked into the sides of cliff faces from coast to coast, and adherents must place pebbles at his shrines in order to appear holy or in possession of "Oneness." Jonathan's image has been warped and morphed into something unrecognizable, used in pursuit of obscure and esoteric rituals that serve only to make gulls feel superficially pious without forcing them to actually work to expand their mind, test their bodies, or improve their spirits. As a result, the "thinking gulls" who long to shy away from the exclusionary and sacred rites and rituals of the movement eventually "close their minds at the sound of certain words," and

will not even hear anything associated with the concepts of “flight” or the “Great Gull.” They want nothing to do with Jonathan’s legacy, as they see through the sham it has become, and feel depressed by the false devoutness and self-serving shows of piety all around them. This backlash against sacrosanct but obscure rite and ritual in the world of the gulls mirrors the backlash against strict, dogmatic religions that exclude all who do not fit within the bounds of “Holiness.” As atheism and agnosticism grew out of frustration with the growing obscurity of practical applications of religious doctrine—such as seeing “love thy neighbor” being preached but never practiced—so too do the gulls develop a sense of apathy as regards the empty façades of faith which have sprung up all around them.

The gulls who shirk the trappings of the cult of personality that has sprung up around Jonathan’s image are nonetheless curious about his message, and begin experimenting with flight. Though they reject the traditions of the religion, they are still unwittingly practicing the message he originally intended to bring to the Flock—the pursuit of self-knowledge through pushing one’s limits in flight and aerodynamics. This demonstrates how even when doctrine becomes perverted or bastardized, there are still ways for the message to ultimately transcend the figurehead, and live on. The irony of the gulls’ accidental return to the truth of Jonathan’s message shows how false zeal can never overshadow the seed of truth buried beneath it.

Anthony Seagull, the last gull to be introduced in the novel, is a casualty of the ways in which the “doctrine” of Jonathan Livingston Seagull has, in its vast dissemination throughout gull society, strayed from its roots and become something so unrecognizable that it actually engenders pain and confusion in both its followers and dissenters. Anthony Seagull is young, and as a curious youth, he questions the religion all around him. He knows that dropping “a million pebbles” at one of Jonathan’s shrines won’t make him any more holy. Anthony does not believe that Jonathan truly accomplished the great feats of flight he is said to have accomplished, and Anthony himself is disappointed that his own attempts to reach great speeds and heights have failed. Feeling that life is a bore and that the idol that everyone around him worships is a “fairy tale,” Anthony attempts suicide—only to meet, in the middle of his death-driven dive bomb out of the sky, Jonathan himself, who introduces himself to Anthony simply as Jon. As the novel ends abruptly after Jon’s reappearance, the reader must interpret whether he has appeared to Anthony to restore the faith of a lost adherent, whether he knows that Anthony is special because he has so deeply questioned what it means to be “holy,” or because Jonathan longs, through Anthony, reset the entire movement which has flown so far off course. All of this can be read as a metaphor most directly for the ways in which modern Christianity has often been criticized for idolizing its figurehead, Jesus Christ, while shirking the very things he preached: love, understanding, and compassion for fellow human beings no matter their social standing, past sins, or present misfortunes. Jonathan’s return to earth speaks to Bach’s argument that if the figureheads of many world religions were able to see the state of their legacy, they would feel shame and discontent, and would long to return to earth to guide their followers in the direction of their original intentions.

“The forces of rulers and ritual slowly, slowly will kill our freedom to live as we choose,” Richard Bach writes in an afterword to the new edition of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*—the

first edition to include the fourth and final part of the story. In this quotation, he communicates his book's overarching message to his readers: that doctrine, spiritual or religious, will—when misinterpreted—Jonathan Livingston Seagull

## Character Analysis

### Next

#### Fletcher Lynd Seagull

The protagonist of the novel, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, often called Jon by his friends and students, is a bird who is different from all the other members of his Flock of gulls. Obsessed with flight, Jonathan does not see the point in flying slowly and gracelessly only in pursuit of food. As Jonathan studies flight on his own, his aerodynamics, speed, and abilities improve. However, his feats do not impress the other gulls in his Flock—rather, they render him Outcast, and he is banished to the Far Cliffs. Jonathan meets two shimmering gulls, and is transported up to another realm, where special gulls go to train and learn about their place in the world. With the help of Chiang, the Elder Gull, Jonathan begins to see past the limits of his body. As he realizes that his mind, spirit, and body exist across all of space and time, he masters instantaneous transportation. He brings the things he has learned back to earth and gathers a small group of pupils whom he instructs in flight. One day, feeling he has succeeded in his mission but wary of the rumors that he is divine, or even the Son of the mythical Great Gull, Jonathan begins to shimmer and ascends to heaven, leaving his legacy in the hands of his star pupil and friend Fletcher Lynd Seagull. In the years after Jonathan's passing, his methods—against all odds—become revered the world over, and the worshipful cult of personality that crops up around Jonathan feverishly overtakes the earth. Jonathan is humble but ambitious, and his curiosity, drive, and desire to help others above all else—combined with the misinterpretation of his messages and his simultaneous deification—make him an analog and an allegory for the biblical figure of Jesus Christ. “kill” the very freedom it seeks to engender.

#### Fletcher

A young gull who, like [Jonathan](#), is drawn to experiments with flight. When Fletcher is introduced in the narrative, he has just been Outcast from his own Flock, and as he makes his way out to the Far Cliffs, he meets Jonathan, who has just returned from the plane beyond earth to spread the wisdom he has garnered to the earthly Flocks. Fletcher becomes Jonathan's friend and pupil, and is “nearly a perfect flight-student” due to the combination of his strength and dexterity along with his “blazing drive” to learn. When Jonathan departs the earth after rumors of his being divine have started, he leaves his legacy in the hands of Fletcher, his closest confidante, and Fletcher soon bears the burden of having been the closest living gull to Jonathan. Fletcher must contend with his own specific kind of celebrity, then, and even in death, Fletcher is revered as a chosen, special friend of the “divine” Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

Fletcher Lynd Seagull was still quite young, but already he knew that no bird had ever been so harshly treated by any Flock, or with so much injustice.

"I don't care what they say," he thought fiercely, and his vision blurred as he flew out toward the Far Cliffs. "There's so much more to flying than just flapping around from place to place! A... a ... mosquito does that! One little barrel-roll around the Elder Gull, just for fun, and I'm Outcast! Are they blind? Can't they see? Can't they think of the glory that it'll be when we really learn to fly?"

"I don't care what they think. I'll show them what flying is! I'll be pure Outlaw, if that's the way they want it. And I'll make them so sorry [...]."

The voice came inside his own head, and though it was very gentle, it startled him so much that he faltered and stumbled in the air.

"Don't be harsh on them, Fletcher Seagull. In casting you out, the other gulls have only hurt themselves, and one day they will know this, and one day they will see what you see. Forgive them, and help them to understand."

An inch from his right wingtip flew the most brilliant white gull in all the world, gliding effortlessly along, not moving a feather, at what was very nearly Fletcher's top speed.

There was a moment of chaos in the young bird.

"What's going on? Am I mad? Am I dead? What is this?"

Low and calm, the voice went on within his thought, demanding an answer. "Fletcher Lynd Seagull, do you want to fly?"

"YES, I WANT TO FLY!"

### **Pebbles - Symbol Analysis**

In the novel's fourth part, Jonathan Livingston Seagull has departed from the earth, leaving his protégé, Fletcher Lynd Seagull, in charge of training new pupils in flight, aerodynamics, and the transcendence of the physical realm through synchronization of mind, body, and spirit. In the wake of Jonathan's departure, the gull—who was already considered "Divine" during his time on earth—is veritably deified, made into a holy icon who embodied truth and transcendence. Anyone close to Jonathan is given similar status—especially Fletcher. When Fletcher at last dies, he leaves no body behind, simply vanishing into thin air. Confused, the rest of his pupils come together in mourning and begin telling tales of how the Gull Fletcher was brought up to heaven when Jonathan Livingston Seagull descended from heaven in opulent plumes and a crown of pebbles to bring his favorite student up to the "Beach of Oneness." Fletcher's devastated adherents deem the last rock he was seen standing on the "Rock of Oneness," and begin leaving piles of pebbles on the rock in a show of mourning. Soon, the pile grows too large for the rock, and so other piles spring up in tribute all along the coastline. The pebbles are left not only in Fletcher's name, but in the name of all the other deceased pupils of Jonathan, as well as Jonathan Livingston Seagull himself. In time, leaving a pebble at one of these shrines becomes a way to show off one's holiness and "oneness," despite the fact that the gesture is, in fact, empty.

As so much of the fourth part of the novel is an allegory concerned with the misinterpretation of doctrine and the emptiness of religious ritual, pebbles symbolize all the misguided ways in

which not only the gulls of the novel but the people of the real world choose empty gestures and meaningless symbols to stand in for actual kindness, love, education, and goodness to others. Pebbles symbolize how, throughout the centuries, Jonathan's actual legacy has morphed into something unrecognizable—Jonathan wanted other gulls to use his teachings to connect with one another, test their own limits, and achieve self-possession; he had no interest in glory, hagiography, or being revered. The pebbles left at Jonathan's shrines symbolize how the flocks of the world have missed the point of Jonathan's teachings, or otherwise perverted them for their own cloudy ideas about creating and asserting status.

When Fletcher didn't show up on the beach in the next week, when he vanished without leaving a note, the Flock was in brief consternation. But then they gathered together, and thought, and decided what must have happened. It was announced that Gull Fletcher had been seen, surrounded by the other Seven First Students, standing on what would henceforth be known as the Rock of Oneness, and then the clouds had parted and the Great Gull Jonathan Livingston Seagull himself, clad in royal plumes and golden shells, with a crown of precious pebbles upon his brow, pointing symbolically to sky and sea and wind and earth, had called him up to the Beach of Oneness and

Fletcher had magically risen, surrounded by holy rays, and the clouds had closed again over the scene to a great chorus of gull-voices singing.

And so the pile of pebbles on the Rock of Oneness, in sacred memory of Gull Fletcher, was the biggest pile of pebbles on any coastline anywhere on earth. Other piles were built everywhere in replica, and each Tuesday afternoon the Flock walked over to stand around the pebbles and hear the miracles of Jonathan Livingston Seagull and his Gifted Divine Students.

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