

# Jonathan Livingston Seagull



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD BACH

Richard Bach was born in the 1936 in Oak Park, Illinois. After his first airplane trip at the age of fifteen, Bach's life was forever changed, and he became obsessed with the freeing phenomenon of flight. As a young man, Bach served in the United States Navy and the National Guard as a fighter pilot. After his time in the service, he continued working as a writer and editor for flight-centric publications and aircraft companies. In 1970, Bach's life changed again when he sold the manuscript for a novel called *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* to Macmillan Publishers. The book became a bestseller, and sold over a million copies in the year 1972 alone. Bach's further writing explored themes he touched on in *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and in 1977, he published a book called *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*. In 2012, Bach was involved in an accident while landing his aircraft—the near-death experience and his subsequent four-month hospitalization inspired him to retool the unfinished fourth part of his first book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and the new “complete” edition was published in 2013. Bach also wrote a sequel to *Illusions* in the wake of his accident, and the new book incorporated stories from his recovery. As a writer, Bach's work primarily focuses on the freedom of flight and the joys of spiritualism, and his real-life experiences frequently find their way into his novels in one way or another.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was written in the late 1960s and published to widespread success in the early 1970s. Transcendental Meditation, a silent mantra meditation practice and a technique for self-development and getting in touch with one's inner spirit, originated in India in the 1950s. Transcendental Meditation had become vastly popular throughout the 1960s, and came to public prominence through the involvement of celebrities such as the Beatles. Associated hallmarks of the 1960s hippie counterculture—such as use of psychedelics and hallucinogens meant to unite the mind, body, and spirit—ushered in a new age of attempting to connect to one's inner world and transcend the limits of the body. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was written in the heyday of this new era in which people longed to connect with deeper parts of their spirits and test the limits of the connection between the body and the mind. As such, the book features themes of self-determination through connection with mind, body, and spirit. However, the book also speaks to the dangers of too strictly adhering to dogma or doctrine and allowing the teachings of

others to interfere with this search for the self.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was an enormously popular best-seller in the early days of its publication, and over the years has drawn a huge fanbase and reached near-totemic status as a fable that highlights the importance of personal freedom, connection with the self, and the extension of love and kindness to others. By the same token, critics have drawn attention to its “easy” approach to complicated philosophical questions and facile biblical allegories. The book has often been compared to sunnily philosophical texts such as Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Poo*, which frames A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh as a Taoist, and Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, which follows a father and son on a summertime motorcycle excursion. Popular texts which also feature an allegorical Christian undertone include C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* and Joseph Girzone's bestselling novel *Joshua: A Parable for Today*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*
- **When Written:** Late 1960s
- **When Published:** 1970
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction; philosophy
- **Climax:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull departs earth and ascends to heaven, leaving his disciple Fletcher to spread his teachings regarding flight, truth, and individuality throughout the members of a reluctant Flock of gulls.
- **Antagonist:** The Flock
- **Point of View:** Third-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**New Wisdom.** When first published, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* consisted of only the first three parts of the novel, and ended as Jonathan ascends to heaven and leaves Fletcher to spread his teachings. A new edition, published in 2013, includes a fourth part which Bach wrote along with the original manuscript but ultimately decided not to include at the time of its initial publication. Seeing the ways in which freedom of thought and religion have been threatened in the twenty-first century, Bach chose to include the fourth part—which follows the trajectory of Jonathan's teachings two hundred years later and watches as they become widely and wildly misinterpreted—as a parable of sorts against the corruption of messages of truth, self-worth, and freedom.



## PLOT SUMMARY

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.”



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Jonathan Livingston 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.

**Fletcher Lynd Seagull** – 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.

**Chiang** – The Elder Gull of Jonathan’s new Flock in the plane beyond earth. He is an enormously skilled flyer, and has been empowered by his age rather than “enfeebled” by it like most Elder Gulls. It is Chiang who encourages Jonathan to stop seeing himself as “trapped inside a limited body,” and begin to understand that his true nature is—as every gull’s true nature is—“everywhere at once across space and time.” Chiang’s

instruction is instrumental in Jonathan’s evolution and progression, and with Chiang’s help, Jonathan is able to traverse great distances in the blink of an eye.

**Anthony Seagull** – A doubtful bird who lives in the time two hundred years after Jonathan’s departure from earth. Anthony wonders what the meaning of life is, and refuses to believe in the overzealous doctrine which canonizes Jonathan and has overtaken much of seagull life. As Anthony attempts suicide by dive-bombing into the ocean, he is stopped short by a bird who admires his flight skills. The bird introduces himself to Anthony as “Jon.”

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Elder Gull** – The Elder Gull of Jonathan’s original Flock on earth. The Elder Gull proclaims Jonathan Outcast and banishes him to the Far Cliffs as a result of his reckless experimentations with flight.

**Sullivan** – Jonathan’s instructor when he reaches the plane beyond earth. Sullivan encourages Jonathan’s further experimentation with flight techniques and practices, and proclaims Jonathan the most fearless gull he himself has mentored in “ten thousand years.”

**Henry Calvin Gull** – One of Jonathan’s flight students.

**Terrence Lowell Gull** – An Outcast bird who becomes one of Jonathan’s pupils.

**Kirk Maynard Gull** – A lame gull who wants to become one of Jonathan’s pupils despite his wrecked wing. Once Jonathan shows him that he is a free gull, Kirk is seemingly miraculously restored and able to fly.



## THEMES

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### INDIVIDUALISM VS. 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.



## INNOVATION VS. TRADITION

*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.

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, groundbreaking 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.



### 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.



### 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—"kill" the very freedom it seeks to engender.



## PEBBLES

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.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* published in 2014.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

## Part One Quotes

☞ Most gulls don't bother to learn more than the simplest facts of flight—how to get from shore to food and back again. For most gulls, it is not flying that matters, but eating. For this gull, though, it was not eating that mattered, but flight. More than anything else, Jonathan Livingston Seagull loved to fly.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 4

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the opening passages of the novel, the narrator sets up the central problem of the text and offers an introduction to its protagonist. Jonathan Livingston Seagull is different from all the other gulls—he is determined, innovative, and apathetic to the larger concerns of his Flock. These facts render him an outsider. By squeezing the central struggle of the novel's first half into just a few sentences, Bach efficiently primes his readers to root for Jonathan, even though the narrative implies that Jonathan will face severe difficulties as he follows his inner voice and goes against the grain, defying what is expected of “most gulls.”

☞ [Jonathan] felt better for his decision to be just another one of the flock. There would be no ties now to the force that had driven him to learn, there would be no more challenge and no more failure. And it was pretty, just to stop thinking, and fly through the dark, toward the lights above the beach.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 14

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Jonathan experiences crushing failure during his solitary flight practice, he decides with a heavy heart to give up his dreams of excelling in aerodynamics and return to the collective of his Flock. As he flies in a straight, boring line back to shore, he tries to convince himself that he can return to the group and be a part of their traditions. For just a moment, Jonathan—despite his individualistic streak and commitment to innovation—allows himself to take comfort in the easy “prettiness” of routine, demonstrating how, in the face of hardship, it is simpler to fall back on rote routine

rather than push ahead in pursuit of innovation and make a courageous but dangerous leap in the direction of the unknown.

☞ The wind was a monster roar at his head. Seventy miles per hour, ninety, a hundred and twenty and faster still. The wing-strain now at a hundred and forty miles per hour wasn't nearly as hard as it had been before at seventy, and with the faintest twist of his wingtips he eased out of the dive and shot above the waves, a gray cannonball under the moon. He closed his eyes to slits against the wind and rejoiced. A hundred forty miles per hour! And under control! If I dive from five thousand feet instead of two thousand, I wonder how fast [...] His vows of a moment before were forgotten, swept away in that great swift wind. Yet he felt guiltless, breaking the promises he had made himself. Such promises are only for the gulls that accept the ordinary. One who has touched excellence in his learning has no need of that kind of promise.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 15

**Explanation and Analysis**

After experiencing a particularly disheartening failure in flight, Jonathan resigns himself to rejoining his Flock and recommitting himself to a bland life of rote, meaningless tradition. However, in this passage, he is suddenly seized by a brand-new idea for how to improve his aerodynamics. As he tests his theory and finds himself flying faster and smoother than ever before, all of his promises to himself concerning suppressing his instincts for innovation fall away. Jonathan has taken a courageous leap in the direction of innovation, and his faith in himself has been rewarded—the feeling creates such complete elation within him that he makes a new promise to himself to never “accept the ordinary.”

●● He was alive, trembling ever so slightly with delight, proud that his fear was under control. Then without ceremony he hugged in his forewings, extended his short, angled wingtips, and plunged directly toward the sea. By the time he passed four thousand feet he had reached terminal velocity, the wind was a solid beating wall of sound against which he could move no faster. He was flying now straight down, at two hundred fourteen miles per hour. He swallowed, knowing that if his wings unfolded at that speed he'd be blown into a million tiny shreds of seagull. But the speed was power, and the speed was joy, and the speed was pure beauty.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 15-16

### Explanation and Analysis

Having recommitted himself to his goals of developing innovative flight methods, Jonathan finds himself full of restored joy and renewed determination. As he experiments with ways of attaining new speeds, he feels himself transcending the limits of his physical form. Pushing back against the expectations the rest of the Flock had tried to impress upon him, Jonathan feels himself approaching “pure beauty,” and a new “power” he has never known. Jonathan is going against tradition, and in doing so, he is experiencing his first taste of transcending the limits of the body and connecting with the deeper spirit inside of him.

●● "Jonathan Livingston Seagull! Stand to Center!" The Elder's words sounded in a voice of highest ceremony. Stand to Center meant only great shame or great honor. Stand to Center for Honor was the way the gulls' foremost leaders were marked. Of course, he thought, the Breakfast Flock this morning; they saw the Breakthrough! But I want no honors. I have no wish to be leader. I want only to share what I've found, to show those horizons out ahead for us all. He stepped forward.

"Jonathan Livingston Seagull," said the Elder, "Stand to Center for Shame in the sight of your fellow gulls!"

It felt like being hit with a board. His knees went weak, his feathers sagged, there was roaring in his ears. Centered for shame? Impossible! The Breakthrough! They can't understand! They're wrong, they're wrong!

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Elder Gull (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

When Jonathan is called before the Council—the governing force of his tradition-bound Flock—he believes he is going to be lauded and glorified for his advancements in flight. As he is called to Stand to Center, he goes so far as to imagine the “honors” he will receive, and considers that his Flock will even make him their leader. Despite the innovations he has made, he still has trouble framing his life and achievements beyond the ways in which they relate back to his role in the Flock. When he is instead called to Stand to Center for Shame, Jonathan's indignant reaction is palpable. This passage emphasizes Jonathan's pure intentions, as well as the way those intentions are misunderstood by the rest of the Flock. Jonathan only wants to share his knowledge with his peers.

●● Jonathan Seagull spent the rest of his days alone, but he flew way out beyond the Far Cliffs. His one sorrow was not solitude, it was that other gulls refused to believe the glory of flight that awaited them; they refused to open their eyes and see. He learned more each day. He learned that a streamlined high-speed dive could bring him to find the rare and tasty fish that schooled ten feet below the surface of the ocean: he no longer needed fishing boats and stale bread for survival. He learned to sleep in the air, setting a course at night across the offshore wind, covering a hundred miles from sunset to sunrise. With the same inner control, he flew through heavy sea-fogs and climbed above them into dazzling clear skies [...] in the very times when every other gull stood on the ground, knowing nothing but mist and rain. He learned to ride the high winds far inland, to dine there on delicate insects. What he had once hoped for the Flock, he now gained for himself alone; he learned to fly, and was not sorry for the price that he had paid. Jonathan Seagull discovered that boredom and fear and anger are the reasons that a gull's life is so short, and with these gone from his thought, he lived a long fine life indeed.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 25-26

### Explanation and Analysis

After Jonathan is called to Stand to Center for Shame before the Council of his Flock, he is Outcast—banished to

the Far Cliffs well beyond the shore where his Flock makes their home. Jonathan is surprised, but not particularly dismayed. It is almost a relief to him to be sent out into the wilderness to continue flying, innovating, and learning more about himself in peace. As Jonathan lives out his days and acquires a great deal of knowledge, he wishes that he could share his innovations with the Flock, but continually reminds himself that they would never appreciate the knowledge he has gleaned from his years on his own. Eventually, Jonathan is able to push these thoughts from his mind and focus on his own happiness and his own journey towards innovation and self-determination.

## Part Two Quotes

“Do you have any idea how many lives we must have gone through before we even got the first idea that there is more to life than eating, or fighting, or power in the Flock? A thousand lives, Jon, ten thousand! And then another hundred lives until we began to learn that there is such a thing as perfection, and another hundred again to get the idea that our purpose for living is to find that perfection and show it forth. The same rule holds for us now, of course: we choose our next world through what we learn in this one. Learn nothing, and the next world is the same as this one, all the same limitations and lead weights to overcome.”

**Related Characters:** Sullivan (speaker), Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 44

### Explanation and Analysis

Up in the new plane to which he has recently ascended after living out his life on earth, Jonathan finds that he is not in heaven. Instead, he is in another realm, and his entry has been made possibly by the incredible feats of innovation and self-determination he accomplished on earth. Here, Jonathan must learn to surpass a new set of limitations, and seek to attain “perfection” if he wants to move on to the next realm, and the next, and the next. At this point in the novel, Jonathan’s journey transitions from one of physical innovation to spiritual innovation. He has accomplished much in terms of flight, but now must work on acquiring a new kind of knowledge: knowledge of himself, and of his mind and his spirit in addition to his body.

“I want to learn to fly like that,” Jonathan said, and a strange light glowed in his eyes. “Tell me what to do.”

Chiang spoke slowly and watched the younger gull ever so carefully. “To fly as fast as thought, to anywhere that is,” he said, “you must begin by knowing that you have already arrived.” The trick, according to Chiang, was for Jonathan to stop seeing himself as trapped inside a limited body that had a forty-two-inch wingspan and performance that could be plotted on a chart. The trick was to know that his true nature lived, as perfect as an unwritten number, everywhere at once across space and time.

Jonathan kept at it, fiercely, day after day, from before sunrise till past midnight. And for all his effort he moved not a feather-width from his spot.

“Forget about faith!” Chiang said it time and again. “You didn’t need faith to fly, you needed to understand flying. This is just the same. Now try again. [...]”

Then one day Jonathan, standing on the shore, closing his eyes, concentrating, all in a flash knew what Chiang had been telling him. “Why, that’s true! I am a perfect, unlimited gull!” He felt a great shock of joy.

“Good!” said Chiang, and there was victory in his voice. Jonathan opened his eyes. He stood alone with the Elder on a totally different seashore—trees down to the water’s edge, twin yellow suns turning overhead.

**Related Characters:** Chiang, Jonathan Livingston Seagull (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 56-57

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jonathan grows closer with the Elder Gull of his new Flock, Chiang, he learns from the gull all about the perceived restrictions of time and space—and how they can be subverted through careful training. Chiang encourages Jonathan to see that he is “perfect,” and to have not faith but assurance—two very different things. Chiang teaches Jonathan that he can overcome the physical realm by uniting his mind and spirit—this will become a cornerstone of Jonathan’s continued training as he learns more and more about who he is and what he is capable of. Chiang’s patient teaching style in this passage also foreshadows Jonathan’s later role as a teacher, helping a small but committed group of gulls learn how to fly like him.

Jonathan stayed and worked with the new birds coming in, who were all very bright and quick with their lessons. But the old feeling came back, and he couldn't help but think that there might be one or two gulls back on Earth who would be able to learn, too. How much more would he have known by now if Chiang had come to him on the day that he was Outcast!

"Sully, I must go back," [Jonathan] said at last. "Your students are doing well. They can help you bring the newcomers along."

Sullivan sighed, but he did not argue. "I think I'll miss you, Jonathan," was all he said.

"Sully, for shame!" Jonathan said in reproach, "and don't be foolish! What are we trying to practice every day? If our friendship depends on things like space and time, then when we finally overcome space and time, we've destroyed our own brotherhood! But overcome space, and all we have left is Here. Overcome time, and all we have left is Now. And in the middle of Here and Now, don't you think that we might see each other once or twice?"

**Related Characters:** Sullivan, Jonathan Livingston Seagull (speaker), Chiang

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 60-61

### Explanation and Analysis

Despite the overwhelming progress Jonathan has made in this new realm and the praise he has received both from Sullivan and Chiang, he feels that there is more he must do. He longs to return to earth, and share what he has learned with gulls back home. Even if there are only "one or two" who are interested in learning from Jonathan, he feels he owes those gulls the knowledge he has gleaned. In this passage, Jonathan shows that he has surpassed even his own instructor, Sullivan, and has come to realize that the physical realm cannot hold anyone back—there are no limits to what bodies can do once the mind and spirit have been united and recognized as existing across all of space and time.

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!"

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Fletcher Lynd Seagull (speaker), Elder Gull

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

Just as Jonathan once felt indignant, ashamed, and determined to show up the rest of his Flock after being Outcast, the narrative now zeroes in on Fletcher Lynd Seagull, who, despite his youth, has demonstrated stark opposition to his Flock's traditions and marked himself an innovator—and thus a danger. The narrative does not say whether Fletcher was influenced by Jonathan's rebellion, years ago, or whether Fletcher is acting out of his own deeply-held beliefs, but the idea that there is another gull out there who feels the same way about flight as he once did catches Jonathan's eye, and inspires him to take on a pupil. The voice Fletcher hears certainly belongs to Jonathan, urging the young gull to choose love over

animosity.

## Part Three Quotes

☛ It was only a month later that Jonathan said the time had come to return to the Flock.

"We're not ready!" said Henry Calvin Gull. "We're not welcome! We're Outcast! We can't force ourselves to go where we're not welcome, can we?"

"We're free to go where we wish and to be what we are," Jonathan answered, and he lifted from the sand and turned east, toward the home grounds of the Flock.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Henry Calvin Gull (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

After Jonathan returns to earth from the plane beyond, he takes on a small group of pupils—all Outcasts from his old Flock who, like him, were dissatisfied with their day-to-day routine and longed to do more with their lives. As Jonathan prepares to bring his pupils from their far-off training grounds away from the Flock back to shore—in hopes, again, of influencing the rest of the Flock and waking them up from their small, traditional routines—the students question whether there will be consequences to their radical behavior. Jonathan, though, wishes to impress upon his students that their choices to turn against tradition and embrace and pursue innovation have made them absolutely free.

☛ "To begin with," he said heavily, "you've got to understand that a seagull is an unlimited idea of freedom, an image of the Great Gull, and your whole body, from wingtip to wingtip, is nothing more than your thought itself."

The young gulls looked at him quizzically. Hey, man, they thought, this doesn't sound like a rule for a loop.

Fletcher sighed and started over. "Hm. Ah [...] very well," he said, and eyed them critically. "Let's begin with Level Flight." And saying that, he understood all at once that his friend had quite honestly been no more divine than Fletcher himself.

**Related Characters:** Fletcher Lynd Seagull (speaker), Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 91

### Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Jonathan's departure from the Earth, his pupil Fletcher Lynd Seagull somewhat reluctantly takes up the role of leader, and attempts to secure for Jonathan the legacy the "Divine Gull" always wanted. However, as Fletcher takes up Jonathan's role and positions himself as an instructor, he finds—through his struggle to get through to the "young gulls" who entrust their educations to him—that his mentor was never Divine at all. Jonathan, Fletcher realizes, was a regular gull just trying his best to help his fellow gulls achieve their full potential. This realization boosts Fletcher's self-confidence, and he begins his lesson with the knowledge that if Jonathan could do this, he can do it, too.

## Part Four Quotes

☛ 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.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Fletcher Lynd Seagull

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 104

### Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Fletcher Lynd Seagull's death, the mythology and hagiography which had cropped up around Jonathan's legacy is extended to Fletcher's own memory. Throughout his lifetime, Fletcher contended with the burden of being seen as "holy" or "divine" simply because he had been close to Jonathan. Even in death, this passage shows, Fletcher cannot escape the imposed role of "Gifted Divine Student" that he never asked for. Fletcher just wanted to learn from Jonathan, and spread the message of unity of mind, body, and spirit—instead, the other gulls thrust upon Fletcher a legacy that he never consented to, and consequently contributed to the atmosphere of false piety and empty ritual that had already taken such strong hold of Flocks all over the world.

●● In time, the rites and ceremonies that were planted around the name of Jonathan Seagull became obsessive. Any thinking gull altered course in the air so as not to even fly in sight of the cairns, built as they were on the ceremony and superstition of those who preferred excuses for failure instead of hard work and greatness. The thinking gulls, paradoxically, closed their minds at the sound of certain words: "Flight," "Cairn," "Great Gull," "Jonathan." On all other matters they were the most lucid, honest birds since Jonathan himself, but at the mention of his name, or any of the other terms so badly mauled by the Official Local Students, their minds snapped shut with the sound of trap doors closing.

Because they were curious, they began experimenting with flight, though they never used that word. "It's not flight," they'd assure themselves over and again, "It's just a way of finding what's true." So, in rejecting the "students" they became students themselves. In rejecting the name of Jonathan Seagull, they practiced the message he had brought to the Flock.

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 107

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bach shows the circuitous nature of tradition. As the cult around the myth of Jonathan Livingston Seagull has intensified and become more obscure over the years, many gulls honor Jonathan's memory, teachings, and doctrines not through meaningful action or innovation but empty gestures and a return to

obscure, unthinking tradition. The "thinking gulls" who reject this hollow pattern find themselves experimenting with flight in hopes of getting closer to the truth of Jonathan's teachings, but they are so jaded that they do not want to admit they are actually trying to get in touch with that truth. In rejecting tradition and hedging around the status quo, they are inadvertently practicing the very message Jonathan always wanted to bring to his Flock—experimentation with flight, less all of the pseudo-religious brouhaha which sprung up once Jonathan returned to Earth in the first place.

●● "Now look," [Anthony] had told his official Local Student, "the birds who come to hear you every Tuesday come for three reasons, don't they? Because they think they're learning something; because they think that putting another pebble on the Cairn is going to make them holy; or because everybody else expects them to be there. Right?"

"And you have nothing to learn, my nestling?"

"No. There's something to learn, but I don't know what it is. A million pebbles can't make me holy if I don't deserve it, and I don't care what the other gulls think about me."

"And what is your answer, nestling?" ever so slightly shaken by this heresy. "How do you call the miracle of life? The Great-Gull-Jonathan-Holy-Be-His-Name said that flight [...]"

"Life isn't a miracle, Official, it's a bore. Your Great Gull Jonathan is a myth somebody made up a long time ago, a fairy tale that the weak believe because they can't stand to face the world as it is. Imagine! A seagull who could fly two hundred miles per hour! I've tried it, and the fastest I can go is fifty, diving, and even then I'm mostly out of control. There are laws of flight that cannot be broken, and if you don't think so, you go out there and try it! Do you honestly believe—truly, now—that your great Jonathan Seagull flew two hundred miles per hour?"

**Related Characters:** Anthony Seagull (speaker), Jonathan Livingston Seagull

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 110

### Explanation and Analysis

Two hundred years after Jonathan Livingston Seagull's departure from the earth, he has been deified and made into an icon who stands not for Jonathan's teachings about transcending the physical through unification of the

intellectual and the spiritual, but rather for a nebulous idea of “Oneness” that many aspire to but few actually attempt to reach. In other words, Jonathan’s doctrine has been misinterpreted and poorly upheld, and empty gestures towards Oneness and holiness have taken root in society. Anthony questions this shift, and though he knows that

deep underneath the surface of the cult of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, there is “something to learn,” he has no interest in following the routines and customs of his society. Anthony, then, is a parallel for Jonathan himself—another innovator isolated by his divergent beliefs and practices and thirst for something more.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## 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.”

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.

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.”

*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.*



*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.*



*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.

As he flies, Jonathan feels good about his decision to be just another one of the flock. His life will be free of challenges, and he will be able to stop thinking so much about flying and just do the bare minimum to get from place to place. As he powers toward shore, however, a voice inside tells him that seagulls never fly in the dark—if he were meant to fly in the dark, he'd have the wide eyes of an owl and the short wings of a falcon. In an epiphany, Jonathan's resolutions dissolve, as he realizes what he is missing—short wings.

Jonathan flies up once again to two thousand feet, and "without a moment for the thought of failure and death," he burrows his wings close to his body, leaving only the wingtips extended. He then descends into another dive. He climbs to an enormous speed of one hundred and forty miles per hour, but barely feels the effort—he is completely in control. He feels "guiltless" about breaking his promise to himself to rejoin the flock, and renewed in his own belief that he is extraordinary.

At sunup, Jonathan is back to practicing, now flying up to five thousand feet before diving. From such great heights, the swarming Breakfast Flock looks like "a faint cloud of dust motes." As Jonathan plunges through the air, he reaches a speed of two hundred and fourteen miles per hour. He knows that if he loses control and spreads his wings at this speed, he will be blown apart—but it is worth the risk to him. The feeling of speed is "power," "joy," "and pure beauty."

*Jonathan has failed—he thought he was being innovative, and his shame in realizing that he was perhaps just being foolish and wasting time cuts him so deeply that he decides to give it all up. He sacrifices his dreams of thriving as an individual for the resigned reality of living as a drone-like part of the larger collective, and recommits himself to tradition, however boring, unfulfilling, and even ineffective it might be.*



*Jonathan cannot hide his true nature, however hard he tries. He is a seeker and an innovator at heart, and even as he prepares to rejoin the flock, he cannot stop the wheels of his mind from turning and showing him how he can at last achieve his goals.*



*In this passage, Jonathan approaches the novel's theme of self-determination through mind, body, and spirit for the first time as he manipulates his mind to refocus on his goal, his spirit to lighten in the face of failure, and his body to do what he wills it to, and surpass the things it was made for.*



*In this passage, as Jonathan risks his very life in pursuit of a new and exciting goal, readers clearly see that flight is everything to him. Flight gives him life, and if he dies in pursuit of triumph in flight, then so be it—to do so would be to die in the midst of "pure beauty."*



At one thousand feet above the sea, Jonathan pulls out of his dive, but finds that he is about to fly right into the flock of gulls. He cannot stop—he does not know how to navigate at such a high speed—but knows that collision means “instant death.” Jonathan shuts his eyes and prepares for impact, but by some miracle manages to fly directly through the center of the flock, slowing to a hundred and sixty miles per hour, and then twenty. Relieved that he was able to avoid disaster, Jonathan congratulates himself on his triumph of reaching terminal velocity—“the greatest single moment in the history of the Flock.”

Jonathan returns to his lonely practice area and begins practicing diving from eight thousand feet, with the goal of learning to turn. As he experiments with lightly extending one single wingtip feather at a time, he slowly learns how to turn and perform aerobatics—the first of any seagull anywhere in the world to do so. Jonathan flies until the sun goes down, learning loops, slow rolls, and spins, not pausing or taking time to talk to any other members of his Flock.

That night, when Jonathan joins his Flock on the beach, he is dizzy and tired, but delighted. He can’t stop thinking about how the Flock will be “wild with joy” when they hear about his breakthrough. He thinks they will be excited to follow his lead and learn about the joys of flying for themselves. However, as Jonathan approaches the Flock, he sees that they have convened a Council Gathering, and are waiting for him.

The Elder Gull calls Jonathan to Stand to Center—a command which Jonathan knows signals either great shame or great honor. As he takes his place in the Center, he humbly thinks that he does not want to receive any honors; he only wants to share what he has learned. As Jonathan takes his place, the Elder commands him to Stand to Center—for Shame.

Jonathan’s knees go weak, and he feels as if he has been hit by a board. He knows that his fellow gulls do not understand him. As the Elder Gull condemns Jonathan for his “reckless irresponsibility,” and for “violating the dignity and tradition of the Gull Family,” Jonathan know he will be cast out of gull society and banished to live on the Far Cliffs. As a final reminder, the Elder tells Jonathan that the only point to life is to eat, and stay alive as long as one possibly can. Jonathan raises his voice and speaks back to the Council Flock, though such a thing is never done—he begs them to see that he is in fact being responsible, as there is nothing more responsible than seeking a higher purpose in life. The Flock, however, will not hear his words—they turn their backs and cast him out.

*It seems as if Jonathan will fail once again, on an even more lethal scale, but as he defies the odds and succeeds, he congratulates himself on having surpassed even his own old records. He sees himself as an innovator in earnest now—and, more than that, as a being separate from the rest of the Flock, the “greatest” of them to ever exist.*



*Jonathan is not satisfied with simply setting a goal and meeting it. He continues to stretch and challenge himself despite his previous triumphs. This unwavering commitment to innovation isolates him from his fellow gulls, but it also fills him with self-worth and purpose.*



*As Jonathan heads home to his Flock, he is dreaming of glory for himself but is mostly excited by the prospect of being able to include his peers in his joy and triumph, and help them experience how wonderful and liberating flight can be.*



*Though Jonathan has given himself his fair share of praise, as the moment of truth arrives, he realizes he does not want any honor or glory or status. He simply wants to share with his Flock, and bring them into his joy, too.*



*Despite Jonathan’s self-imposed isolation and his repeated rejections of his parents’ attempts to re-integrate him into the Flock, being forced out of the community hits him hard. Jonathan is determined to make his case, and show the others how in exiling him they will be bringing detriment to their own lives. However, the others refuse to listen, underscoring their small-mindedness and their belief that Jonathan is a threat to their status quo. Jonathan is a true loner now and must prove that he can make it on his own without even marginal support from the rest of the Flock.*



Jonathan flies out beyond the Far Cliffs. His sorrow does not come from his newly imposed solitude, but the fact that the other gulls cannot see the glory of flight. He wishes the other would open their eyes and see the things he has seen. He continues to practice diving and flying, learning new things every day, and eventually learns new, more efficient methods for catching the tasty fish that swim several feet below the surface of the ocean. He is able to fend for himself now and no longer has to rely on fishing boats for survival. He learns how to sleep in the air, and how to ride the winds inland to hunt for insects.

Jonathan had hoped he'd be able to help the Flock discover all of these tricks, but he now resigns himself to using and perfecting them alone. He is not sorry for the price he has paid—he realizes, now that he is free, that boredom, fear, and anger are the things that make a gull's life so short. Free of these entrapments, Jonathan goes on to live a long, fine life.

One evening, as Jonathan is gliding peacefully through the sky, two gulls “pure as starlight” appear at his wings. There is a gentle, friendly glow about them, and they fly skillfully, just like Jonathan himself. Noticing their expertise, Jonathan decides to put them to a test—one no gull has ever passed. He drops into a high-speed dive, and the other gulls dive with him. He twists into a roll, and the other gulls roll, too. Pleased with the others' skill, Jonathan slows down, and asks who they are. They respond that they are from his own Flock—they have come to take him higher and take him home.

Jonathan replies that he has no home or Flock because he is an outcast. He also confesses that he is flying at his peak, give or take a few hundred feet, and can lift his “old body” no higher. The other gulls insist, though, that Jonathan can go higher—“one school is finished, and the time has come for another to begin.” Jonathan finally understands—it is indeed, he realizes, time to fly higher and go home. He looks across the sky one last time, and then says aloud that he is ready. He rises with the two other gulls and disappears into the dark sky.

## PART TWO

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 does fine on his own, but he still wishes that the others could share in the joy he has found, emphasizing that he longs for an encouraging community. His old Flock is blind to the joys of flying, though, wrapped up as they are in their narrow-minded tradition. As Jonathan doubles down on his commitment to exploring the limits of what his body can do in flight, he finds many new methods of eating that would actually help his Flock better meet their goals of eating and staying alive as long as possible.*



*Once again, Jonathan wishes sadly that he could share his new knowledge with the Flock, but has at last come to accept that they will never see the world the way he does. Because of this, the Flock will never be able to be free in the way Jonathan has since become free.*



*Jonathan is shocked to encounter two gulls who can fly as gracefully and dexterously as he can. When they say they are from his “Flock,” he can hardly believe it. Bach leaves it up to the reader to decide whether these gulls are from Jonathan's home Flock, and have taken up his tradition in his long absence. Alternatively, these gulls may be speaking about a larger, spiritual Flock, connected by likeminded ideology rather than home, family, and tradition.*



*Though the prospect of moving on is a frightening one, Jonathan's courageous spirit pushes him to take yet another leap into the unknown. This choice suggests that Jonathan's innovative spirit will help him to transcend boundaries he's never even imagined before.*



*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.

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.

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.

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."

*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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 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.”

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.

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.

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’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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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.

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.

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 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.

## PART THREE

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.

*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*Jonathan selects Fletcher as his first pupil—not just because he sees potential in him, but because he sees echoes of his own past in Fletcher’s present. Fletcher is Outcast, indignant, and shamed, but still determined to succeed and express his individuality. This draws Jonathan to him across space and time.*



*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.

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'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.

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."

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.

*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.*



*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 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.*



*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.*



*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 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.

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.

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.

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."

*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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.”

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 maneuver takes only practice.

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.

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.

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.

*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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 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.*



## PART FOUR

In the years after Jonathan Livingston Seagull's departure, the Flock becomes the "strangest bunch of birds that ha[ve] 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.

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.

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.

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.

*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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.

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.

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.

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.

*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.*



*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.*



*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.*



*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.

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.

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.”

*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.*



*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.*



*Jonathan’s reappearance to Anthony in the final pages of the novel seems to suggest that Anthony’s skepticism in a world of staunch 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 lofty 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.*





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