

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU READ:

- a.) In Pirsig's Author's Note he says "much has been changed for rhetorical purposes?" Is he saying the book is fact or fiction? How does his use of a first person narrator make this a complex question? What is your initial view of the relationship between author and narrator?
- b.) At the beginning of their trip, the narrator reports having had a conversation with John in which the former had referred to education as "mass hypnosis." John objects. By way of a rejoinder the author has his narrator reply that Newton's law of gravity is "nothing more than a human invention – like laws of logic, mathematics, and ghosts. What do you think of this argument?
- c.) As you proceed with your reading, think about this episode from time to time. Why does this dialogue take place at the outset of the book, as opposed to somewhere in the middle or the end of the trip? How is Pirsig preparing the reader for the book's future scenes?
- d.) In setting out the topic for his Chautauqua, Pirsig compares the current (circa 1970s) consciousness of his (our) culture to a stream that has gotten out of control and is overflowing its channels, causing destruction and havoc ... "There are eras of human history (he writes) in which the channels of thought were too deeply cut and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and 'best' was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now. Now the stream of our common consciousness seems to be obliterating its own banks, losing its central direction and purpose . . . Some channel deepening seems to be called for" (p. 8). Can you relate to and explain this metaphor? What sorts of change is he referring to? What does he mean by "channel deepening?" Is the image compelling? Do you find merit (value?) in his analysis? (cf. William James: "The stream of consciousness.")
- e.) As a writer of technical manuals, the narrator decries the current situation in which the idea of who a person *is* has become separated from what s/he *does*. He claims that in this separation are clues to "what the hell has gone wrong with the twentieth century." How does this concept strike you? How does it relate to the classical/romantic dichotomy?
- f.) Despite his disclaimers, the title and theme of Pirsig's book clearly reflect the author's interest in Zen Buddhism – a tradition that is notable, among other things, for its celebration of the oneness of the universe and all of life. Here we aim to bring the matter still closer to home: How do you feel about the quality of the relationship between who you are and what you do? Is the person that you are at one with the academic/professional career path that you are following? Explain why or why not. If not, what prevents you from feeling totally identified with what you are training to do for a living? Would you feel more or less satisfied, or be a better/worse student/worker, if you did feel that connection more completely?

g.) The narrator repeatedly divides human understanding into two categories: romantic and classical. Discuss the distinction between the two. How do you relate to this dichotomy? Give examples of any tendencies that make you think of yourself as either a classical or romantic person. Is there any sensible alternative to thinking about people in such *either/or* terms? (Are you familiar with "Aronson's First Law" or what social psychologists call the "ultimate attribution error"?)

h.) Who (what?) is *Phaedrus*? How does Pirsig have his narrator introduce and develop the character of the latter's former self (or *alter ego*)? Can we rely on the narrator (author?) to offer a valid and accurate picture of Phaedrus' "insanity"? Why or why not?

i.) What do you think of the narrator's description of his past and present relationship with his son, Chris? Does Chris seem to you to be a particularly troubled boy? Or is he just a typical kid impatient with his father's behavior? Who do you think was a better father to Chris – *Phaedrus* or the narrator?

NOTE: The length of the foregoing list of questions is partly intended to suggest that you "jigsaw" such big assignments, with each person being responsible for one (or two) of the items.