

Pan's Pipes

Robert Louis Stevenson — Complete Study Guide: Detailed Summary, Analysis and Exam Q&A

Overview

“Pan's Pipes” is a short, lyrical essay by Robert Louis Stevenson (this copy is a 1910 limited edition printed by Houghton Mifflin). In a few pages it asks a large question: how should we understand a world that is at once beautiful and dangerous? Stevenson rejects both the scientific and the conventionally religious or poetic answers, and proposes the Greek myth of Pan as the truest image of human experience. The essay's final lesson is practical: do not let fear of life's dangers keep you from living it.

Detailed Summary, Section by Section

1. The world is a mixture of contradictions

Stevenson begins by noting that poets and philosophers have described the world in very different ways. Some reduce it to formulae and chemical ingredients, while others praise it in grand verse as the handiwork of God. Real experience, he says, is a “mingled tissue” that fits neither account. The thinking mind has to reject a great deal before it can build a tidy theory.

He gives examples of contrasts that cannot be reconciled: dew and thunder, the destroyer Attila and spring lambs. There is something strange and “outlandish” running through the fabric of the world. The finest flower grows out of dung and then decays back into soil; the dust of Caesar, as Hamlet reminds us, ends up as mud pies for children. Even the sun, which gives us summer warmth, is revealed by science to be a roaring furnace hostile to life. Yet we hold our tea-parties and play our fiddles by the light of this great conflagration.

2. Pan as the Greek answer

The Greeks, Stevenson says, pictured Pan, the god of Nature, in two moods: sometimes stamping his foot so terribly that armies scatter, and sometimes sitting by a wood at noon, piping so sweetly that he charms the hearts of ploughmen. In doing so they “uttered the last word of human experience.” Some dry, scientific minds are satisfied by matter, motion, and theories, but for the young and the imaginative, Pan is not dead. Of all the classical gods he alone survives, goat-footed, with a look both glad and angry, as the type of the “shaggy world.” In any wood, if you go in the right spirit, you will hear his pipe.

3. The joyful music of Pan

The world is shaggy, yet studded with gardens: salt seas that receive clear rivers from reeds and lilies, a place fruitful and austere, rustic, sunshiny, lewd, and cruel. Stevenson asks what the birds sing in pairing time, what the rain means on the forest, and what tune the fisherman whistles as he

hauls in his catch. All are airs on Pan's pipe. The coarse laughter of herdsmen, dancing feet in the city, galloping horses, rushing rivers, clear skies, smiles, and the touch of hands are his joyful measures, to which the whole earth dances.

This music puts gladness in every heart. Some people respond naturally and pass their happiness on, like a child who looks lovely because it looks on lovely things. Some join the dance clumsily. Others, like sour spectators at a play, take in the music with an unmoved face and walk like strangers through the rejoicing. But however they pretend, no one is immune when Pan sings out a burst of ecstasy.

4. The darker tune

“Alas, if that were all!” The music often changes. In the screaming night wind that wrecks ships and uproots cedars, in lightning and headlong floods, we see the “dread foundation” of life and the anger in Pan's heart. Earth wages open war on her children and hides claws beneath her softest touch. Cool water invites us to drown, and the family hearth burns down while we sleep. Nothing is good or bad in itself, only according to circumstance.

Even love is not safe. When the universal music has led lovers into confident pleasure, the key suddenly turns minor and death strikes from an ambush beneath the marriage bed. Death can come in a kiss; the dearest kindnesses can be fatal; and in a world where one creature feeds on another, a child often enters life through its mother's death. No wonder, Stevenson says, that the Greeks thought the fear of Pan the most terrible of all fears, since it covers everything. We still keep the word: *panic*.

5. What it means to fear Pan

To count dangers too carefully, to listen too intently for the threat hidden in the world's sweet music, to refuse the rose because of the thorn or life because of death: this is to be afraid of Pan. Stevenson turns to gentle satire. Respectable citizens who avoid both the ecstasies and the agonies, keeping to the safe middle of custom with their hats on straight, would be shocked to learn that mythology calls them cowards who flee Nature because they fear Nature's God. When Pan's pipes sound shrilly, the banker is suddenly found hiding in his bank parlour. To distrust one's impulses is to be disloyal to Pan.

6. Why we need myth as well as science

There are moments, Stevenson says, when the mind will not be satisfied with the theory of evolution and demands a more vivid account of human experience. Sometimes this mood comes from laughter at life's absurdity, as when we imagine travellers hurrying along while the whirling planet carries them backwards through space. Sometimes it comes from delight, sometimes from terror. At such times we refuse the mere “feint of explanation, nicknamed science” and ask for a living image of our condition, something that satisfies reason through art.

Science, he writes, describes the world as if with the cold finger of a starfish. It is all true, but it cannot compare with the reality it describes: hearts beating high in April, death striking, hills trembling in earthquakes, a glamour over everything we see, a thrill in every sound, and Romance herself living among men. So we return to the old myth and hear the goat-footed piper. When a glen invites us, we imagine Pan leading us there with a gracious tremolo; when we quail at the thunder of a waterfall, we tell ourselves he has stamped his hoof in the nearby thicket.

Main Ideas at a Glance

- **The world is contradictory.** Beauty and cruelty, joy and death, come from the same source.
- **Pan is the best symbol** of this double nature: he both delights and terrifies.
- **Fear of life is the real failing.** Avoiding risk means avoiding the rose, love, and life itself.
- **Science is true but incomplete.** Myth and art express what it feels like to live in the world.
- **Live with courage and openness,** answering Pan's music with trust in your own impulses.

Key Quotations

- “What experience supplies is of a mingled tissue.” (the world resists simple theories)
- “Sunshiny, lewd, and cruel.” (nature's contradictory character)
- “To hold back the hand from the rose because of the thorn, and from life because of death: this it is to be afraid of Pan.” (the central moral)
- “Science writes of the world as if with the cold finger of a starfish.” (the limits of science)

Analysis

Central theme: Life is inseparably joyful and terrible, and the right response is to embrace it, not retreat.

Key ideas:

- **Duality of nature:** Beauty and cruelty are intertwined (“sunshiny, lewd, and cruel”).
- **Myth over science:** Science is “all true” but lifeless. Myth is “palpitating” and satisfies the imagination.
- **Courage:** Distrusting your impulses is “to be recreant to Pan.”
- **Irony:** The sun that makes tea-parties possible is a “conflagration.”

Style and devices:

- **Personification:** Pan stands for all of Nature.
- **Antithesis:** Joy against terror, dew against thunder.
- **Allusion:** Hamlet and Caesar's ashes, Attila, Rome, classical myth.

- **Imagery:** The “cold finger of a starfish,” the “shaggy world.”
- **Tone:** It moves from ornate and sweeping to gently satirical (the banker “concealed in the bank parlour”).
- **Structure:** Observation, then myth, then joy, then terror, then moral.

Exam Questions and Answers

Q1. Why does Stevenson choose Pan as his central symbol?

Pan embodies Nature's two faces. He plays joyful music and also inspires terror (the origin of “panic”). The Greeks, Stevenson says, “uttered the last word of human experience” in this figure, since no scientific theory holds both sides at once.

Q2. What does Stevenson mean by “a shaggy world”?

Life is rough, wild, and uneven, not neat or orderly. It contains gardens and thorns, rivers and storms, and no single theory can smooth it out.

Q3. How does Stevenson view science?

He doesn't call it false, but he finds it inadequate. It reduces the world to “formulae and chemical ingredients” and cannot convey how life feels. Art and myth fill that gap.

Q4. What is “fear of Pan”? Who is guilty of it?

It is refusing life's pleasures and responsibilities out of fear of its dangers, “to hold back the hand from the rose because of the thorn.” His targets are timid “respectable citizens” who stick to the safe middle path.

Q5. How does the tone shift in the essay?

It opens with intellectual, almost philosophical reflection, becomes celebratory when describing Pan's joyful music, turns darker (“Alas, if that were all!”) with storms and death, and ends in gentle satire and a reflective conclusion.

Q6. Discuss the essay's message about how to live. (Long answer)

Stevenson's message is that life must be accepted whole. Joy and danger come from the same source, so avoiding risk means avoiding life. He warns against over-calculating dangers and “distrusting one's impulses.” Instead, he urges us to answer Pan's music with courage and receptivity. This fits his wider romantic, adventurous outlook: art and imagination reflect lived experience better than cold analysis.

Q7. Identify two literary devices and explain their effect.

Personification of Nature as Pan makes abstract forces vivid and emotional. *Allusion* (Hamlet, Attila, Rome) gives the ideas historical weight and shows that these contradictions are universal.