

Individual Learning Packet

Advance Placement Teaching Unit

Life of Pi

by Yann Martel

written by Rebecca Grudzina

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the allegorical elements in the novel.
2. trace the development of motifs like the nature of truth, the will to survive, the nature of faith, etc.
3. discuss the intersection of reason and faith in the book.
4. examine the elements of the *bildungsroman* in the novel.
5. explain the significance of Pi's names and nicknames throughout the novel.
6. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. offer a close reading of *Life of Pi* and support all assertions and interpretations

Lecture Notes

Narrative Perspective

Life of Pi is a novel that includes a frame narrative. Piscine “Pi” Molitor Patel, the main character and narrator of the bulk of the novel, is interviewed by the unnamed, fictitious author. This author’s portions of the novel are printed in italics to distinguish them from the sections that are in Pi’s own words.

The issue of narration becomes even more important at the end the novel when the reader is introduced to a third narrative voice, the transcript of Mr. Okamoto’s interview with Pi in the hospital.

The fact that the reader hears two distinctly different accounts of Pi’s experiences—neither of them from Pi directly—emphasizes Martel’s theme of the incomprehensibility of truth and the ephemeral nature of truth.

Themes, motifs, symbols, allusions, and references

Pi—Pi’s name is a shortening of his given name Piscine (after a popular swimming pool in Paris, France). And, as he informs his teachers and classmates in Chapter 5, Pi is also the name of the number used to calculate circumferences and areas of circles π (*pi*).

One of the earliest approximations of pi was 22/7. Pi floated on the ocean for 227 days. While in his lifeboat, Pi is the center of his own circle. He himself calls his gaze “a radius.”

Often noted as 3.14, *pi* has so many decimal places that the human mind cannot accurately comprehend it. It continues on to infinity, a fact that troubles Pi because he prefers closure, symmetry, a book with exactly one hundred chapters.

Richard Parker—The tiger Richard Parker, got his name due to a clerical order when he was shipped to the Pondicherry Zoo. Yann Martel chose this name as a reference to a character in Edgar Allen Poe’s only complete novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). The story tells of four shipwrecked men who, after several days at sea, nearly perish and draw lots to decide which one of them should be killed and eaten. The cabin boy, named Richard Parker, draws the short straw.

Coincidentally, 46 years after Poe’s novel was published, nearly the exact events Poe wrote about actually came to pass. While sailing to Australia, a Captain Dudley and three sailors were stranded in a skiff in the Pacific after their yacht, the *Mignonette*, sank. As in Poe’s novel, they are forced to eat one of their party to survive—a young man named Richard Parker. Yet another Richard Parker died when his ship, named the *Francis Spaight*, sank in January 1846.

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Author's Note

1. What is suggested by the author's comment about fiction being "the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence"?

2. Why did the author go to India?

3. Why does the author mail his manuscript for the book about Portugal to a made-up address in Siberia?

4. Who first tells the author about Mr. Patel's story? How many storytellers does this make in the book so far?

5. What is most significant about the story that the author hears?

PART ONE: Toronto and Pondicherry

CHAPTER 1

1. What is suggested by the fact that the Author's note was set in italics, and Chapter 1 is set in normal text?

2. Who do we assume is the speaker of Chapter 1? What suggests this?

3. Why did the person speaking in Chapter 1 choose to study the sloth?

4. What we can infer about Mr. Patel from his tone?

CHAPTER 4

1. What did Piscine's father do before he became a zookeeper? What comment does Piscine make about the transition from hotel owner to zookeeper?

2. How does Pi feel about growing up in a zoo? In terms of the *Bildungsroman* narrative, what might the zoo symbolize?

3. What is Piscine implying when he says that the only "relentless imperatives" felt by animals is avoiding enemies and securing food and water?

4. What is Piscine implying when he says that "a house is compressed territory, where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely"?

CHAPTER 5

1. What might be significant about the name Pi chooses for himself?

2. What does Pi mean at the end of this chapter when he says, “in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge.”

3. What personal characteristics does Pi exhibit in choosing to change his own name?

CHAPTER 6

1. What does the author’s description of Patel’s kitchen suggest?

CHAPTER 12

1. What does the narrator's saying that Pi Patel "bobs" on the "ocean of memory" foreshadow?

2. Who is Richard Parker who "preys on [Pi Patel's] mind"?

CHAPTER 13

1. Why is Mr. Patel still spending so much time discussing animal behavior and how humans gain "control" over dangerous wild animals?

2. Why is social hierarchy important to animals? What does this have to do with the story Mr. Patel is going to tell the narrator?

CHAPTER 18

1. Compare the ways Pi comes to know Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

2. What first impresses Pi about Islam?

CHAPTER 19

1. Why does Piscine like praying in the mosque?

2. What, then, do each of Pi's three religions give to him?

CHAPTERS 24 - 25

1. Why does Yann Martel make this chapter about Ravi's teasing Pi so short, with so relatively few examples and a general dismissal at the end?

2. What ironies does Pi point out in this chapter?

CHAPTER 26

1. What is the primary conflict in this chapter, represented by Pi, his father, and his mother?

2. What is it that causes Pi's mother to look weary and to sigh, "Good grief" by the end of this chapter?
