

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Life of Pi

by Yann Martel

written by Lisa Burris and Elizabeth Osborne

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Note to Teacher

This book contains some curse words, as well as graphic descriptions of cannibalism and the violent killing of people and animals.

All references come from the Harcourt edition of *Life of Pi*, copyright 2001.

Objectives

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

1. explain what an *allegory* is and how the term applies to this book.
2. discuss the idea of territory, both as it relates to animals and humans, and explain how place shapes Pi's idea of himself.
3. discuss the intersection of science/reason and religion/faith in the book.
4. explain the book's ideas on the value of storytelling, giving examples from the book.
5. discuss the idea of an unreliable narrator and explain why the author may choose to use one.
6. analyze the use of different storytelling structures and points of view in the book.
7. trace Pi's coming-of-age in the story, noting key points in his growth and development.
8. describe the ideas of nature and a natural order presented in the book, especially as contrasted with chaos.
9. explain the animal/human dichotomy and give some examples of things that represent it in the book.
10. understand the importance of details to Pi's physical, mental, and spiritual survival, and to his idea of religion in general.
11. discuss the idea of freedom for both humans and animals and say whether, in the book's final estimate, it is a desirable condition.
12. explain the importance of names in the book, giving relevant examples.
13. describe important failures of communication in the book and explain what theme they contribute to.
14. point to instances of foreshadowing and parallelism in the book.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Compare and contrast the two Mr. Kumars: Mr. Kumar, the devout Muslim, and Mr. Kumar, Pi's teacher.
2. How does Pi change from the beginning of the book to the end? Write an essay in which you explain what has happened to Pi and how those events changed Pi as a person. Be sure to use plenty of examples to support your ideas.
3. Religion plays a major role in this book. Explain how religion affects Pi's life.
4. Pi tells two stories about being shipwrecked. Which of them is the most likely to be true? Summarize both of Pi's stories, then explain which is most likely to be true and why it is most likely to be true.
5. Write a character study of Richard Parker. What are some of his physical and intellectual attributes? How do these attributes affect the story?
6. What are some of the things to which Pi can attribute his survival? Write an essay in which you detail what, physically and mentally, helped Pi to survive the shipwreck.
7. The mysterious island on which Pi and Richard Parker land can be taken as an allegory, or a symbolic representation of something. Explain what the island represents in *Life of Pi*.
8. Pi loses all of his family members in the shipwreck. What was Pi's relationship with his family? Does Pi have a loving family background, or is he estranged from his family? Write an essay in which you describe Pi's relationship with his family.
9. There are many instances in this novel in which Pi compares humans to animals. Using specific examples, explain, from Pi's point of view, how humans compare to animals.
10. Yann Martel says that "fiction is about...the selective transforming of reality." (Pg. VIII) Explain why this is true and how a novelist goes about "transforming...reality" to create good fiction.
11. From the very beginning of *Life of Pi*, the main character stresses that one only need look to nature to find evidence that God exists. As Pi Patel, write a speech in which you explain how nature proves the existence of God.
12. Throughout the novel, Martel shifts viewpoints back and forth. Describe these shifts in viewpoint and explain how they help to enhance the story.

Life of Pi

Author's Note

VOCABULARY

crux – a central point
fiasco – a disaster
illogical – defying reason
obscurely – vaguely
purveyors – suppliers or sellers of something

1. Who is the first speaker in the book? What kind of person does he seem to be? How can you tell?

2. Do you believe everything the narrator says in the “Author’s Note”? How reliable do you think he is? Why?

3. Why did the author go to India?

CHAPTER 4

VOCABULARY

aviary – an area in which birds are kept
benevolent – kind and thoughtful
context – the circumstances surrounding an event
convey – transfer
depraved – perverted
discordant – harsh- or unpleasant-sounding
exalted – glorified or praised
founder – fail
hierarchy – power structure; an ordering of people or animals based on authority
incessant – without cease; continual
lasciviousness – lewdness
luxuriant – lush; opulent
Maharaja – a Hindu prince
piously – reverently
profusion – abundance
proximity – nearness
punctuated – interrupted
saunter – stroll
spatial – relating to space or position

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, according to Piscine, did his father feel about running the zoo? How did Pi feel about living there?

CHAPTER 16

VOCABULARY

Bhajan – a Hindu devotional song
Brahman – In Hinduism, the fundamental power of the universe
finite – having an end or limit
fundamentalists – people who strictly adhere to principles or rules
Nadaswaram – wind instrument used in Indian classical music
Quebecoise – a woman from Quebec, Canada
reverent – showing respect or honor
Samskara – in Hinduism, a sense impression that forms a bridge to consciousness
sanctified – made holy
Sultriness – humidity and heat
weft – a filling of thread, as used in weaving

1. Pi begins his discussion of religion with an examination of Hinduism, the first religion he practiced. Using Pi's explanation as a basis, describe, in your own words, the concept of Brahman nirguna.

2. As opposed to Brahman nirguna, what is Brahman saguna?

3. Pi tells us that “we are all born like Catholics,” by which he means we have no religious bent, but are in a kind of Limbo. What does Pi say made him a Hindu?

4. Pi tells us a story about Krishna and a group of milkmaids. What happens in this story, and how does it warn us about?

CHAPTER 30

VOCABULARY

conjugal – relating to marriage
icons – religious images and figures
nemesis – someone who exacts revenge; enemy

1. What is the surprise that Pi has for the writer at his home?

2. Why would Pi keep this surprise secret?

3. What does Pi's wife do for a living?

CHAPTER 43

VOCABULARY

aversion – avoidance
cataleptic – paralyzed
catholicity – generalness
confines – limits
edibles – things that can be eaten
eliciting – drawing out
inconceivable – unbelievable
indiscriminate – not picky; choosing all
preceding – coming before
prototype – model
receding – shrinking
stupor – stunned state; daze
tedious – repetitious; tiring
virulent – disease-causing

1. At this point, does Pi think he will be rescued? Why or why not?

2. What is the last remnant of the ship that Pi sees?

3. What does Pi think is wrong with Orange Juice?

CHAPTER 59

VOCABULARY

disconsolate – deeply sorrowful; unable to be comforted
dregs – the last bits of something
evanescent – vanishing like a vapor
luminescence – the emission of light; glowing
mien – appearance
splayed – spread apart
tremulously – as if experiencing tremors; shaking

1. What is so important about the fact that the raft can be used to anchor the lifeboat?

2. What does Pi consider “good news wearing a foul dress” and what does it mean to Pi?

3. What is a solar still and how does it work?
