
Life of Pi

Croydon Maroondah College
Year 12 Notes and Quotes for –

- Characters
 - Themes
 - Interpretations
 - Language Structures, Features and Conventions
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Themes of the Text:

Survival/ Life as a journey.

“Time became distance for me in the way it is for all mortals – I travelled down the road of life”.
Pg 193-194

Pi comes closer to god through his experience and is able to maintain his optimism by believing that god is guiding him.

“Faith in god is opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love”. Pg 208

It is possible to see the novel as an allegory; all creatures on earth are on a lifeboat trying to survive together, like Noah’s Ark.

Pi and Richard Parker help each other to survive

“I could not abandon Richard Parker. To leave him would mean to kill him. He would not survive the first night.” Pg 283

“I couldn’t have done it without you”. Pg 286

“Thank you for saving my life”. Pg 286

Religion helped Pi survive

“Religion will save us”. Pg 27

“A lifetime of peaceful vegetarianism stood between me and the willful beheading of a fish” pg 183

“I wept heartily over his poor little deceased soul. It was the first sentient being I had ever killed”. Pg 183

Science vs. Religion

The theme encompasses two aspects of life explored by Pi throughout the course of the novel; The first being science- introduced to Pi by Mr. Kumar (his primary school biology teacher) and the second; religion or faith, a phenomenon which is considered 'cultural necessity' in the protagonist's home town of Pondicherry.

-Science

The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experimentation.

-Religion

Belief in or worship of a superhuman controlling power.

(Faith) Strong belief in a God or religion based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof.

Later on in life- Pi studied both Zoology and Religious studies.

p.g. 26 "To his ears, when an animal felt the urge to mate, it said 'Gregor Mendel', recalling the father of genetics, and when it was time to show its mettle, 'Charles Darwin', the father of natural selection".

p.g. 26 "Each (animal) to him was a triumph of logic and mechanics, and nature as a whole was an exceptionally fine illustration of science".

p.g.27 "Religion will save us...Religion?...I don't believe in religion, religion is darkness. There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience".

*A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bash. God does not exist.

Upon witnessing lightning (Pg 233)

“ The effect on me was completely opposite. It was something to pull me out of my limited mortal ways and thrust me into a state of exalted wonder”

Here Pi talks about lightning- an act that can be described through methods of science- in terms of religions works. This is towards the end of his journey- highlighting his shift away from religion and towards a truth more ‘realistic’ and ‘scientific’ in nature. But then he praises Allah for the second lightning strike- he claims it is “an outbreak of divinity” “a miracle”- which further reinforces that in ‘Life of Pi’- Religion and science co-exist.

The search for ‘Truth’ (What is the Truth)

The truth is a pivotal part of the novel. What is the truth? It is entirely up to the interpretation of the reader. Pi initially searches for meaning in religion, in which he embraces three. ‘Hinduism, Muslim and Christianity’ With all religions giving him satisfying spiritual experiences. The next journey is an allegorical search for meaning both in the world and within himself. This journey is another struggle with meaning and purpose, as he finds his own animal side taking over his personality. Pi acknowledges his journey in search of meaning took him within himself when confessing his love for Richard Parker. He often questions meaning to Richard Parker. Then when he talks about the alternative story to the Japanese Officials, he once again just tells them to believe what they want because the truth is what you make of it. One possible interpretation would be that, only the individual can decide what the truth actually is. There is no right or wrong answer, it is what you believe in that matters.

“The individual soul touches upon the world soul like a well reaches for the water table”- we tend to look outside of ourselves rather than looking within ourselves to find meaning and purpose.

“That which sustains the universe beyond thought and language, and which is at the core of us and struggles for expression, is the same thing”- the power within ourselves is undecipherable and powerful beyond words.

“the truth of life is that Brahman is no different from Atman, the spiritual force within us, what you might call the soul”

The entire story questions what is real and what is fantasy, it questions the absolute nature of truth within the novel. Pi is flexible in his interpretation of the truth. After telling the Japanese Officials the alternative story, Pi asks them “which story do you prefer?”, “which is the better story? Truth to Pi can take many forms, he sees the perspective of those who insist there must only be one truth, however story two, the story with the animals, is the story Pi quite obviously prefers so this is the story he tells the officials. They then question Pi’s recollection of events and ask him to tell them “what really happened?” after doing so Pi asks the officials “is that better?” “Anything you would like me to change? (311): suggesting to us that Pi is an unreliable narrator, willingly changing parts of the story to make it seem more believable or improve his fanciful tale.

Chapter 92- When Pi is about to tell the story of the island

“I made an exceptional botanical discovery...there will be many who disbelieve...I give it to you now because it is part of the story and it happened to me”

Here, Pi highlights that it is his story-it is his truth.

Appearance vs. Reality

- The novel distinguishes between the subjective nature of the truth and deceptive appearances.
- Pi is flexible in his interpretation of the truth, which shows he is an unreliable narrator.
- He is taken in by false appearances, he sees what is apparently harmless and accepts the appearance of harmlessness, but later finds what appears to be harmless is in fact dangerous.
- Pi tells of the man giving him extra food during the night and admits that when the fishing was going well, “at such times I looked at his eyes -yes- with tenderness. With love. I imagine that we were fast friends.” Page 309
- This is reinforced with the algae island, Pi and Richard Parker eat and drink and return to full health in an apparent paradise. They have no reason to leave. Pi feels shocked and betrayed when he finds out that the nurturing island is in fact carnivorous. “Bitterness welled up in me. The radiant promise it offered during the day was replaced in my heart by all the treachery it delivered at night.” Page 282

“What reason could I have to leave the island? Were my physical needs not met here? Was there not more fresh water than I could drink in all my lifetime? More algae that I could eat? And when I yearned for variety more meerkats and fish that I could ever desire?” page 279

Interpretations of the Text-

Bildungsroman

A genre of a novel, which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood, change is therefore important. Further characterised with numerous formal, topical and thematic features. Pi overcame massive adversity on his journey in the boat can be expressed as being similar to a boat journey. Pi's survival changed him immensely. His transition from the gentle, religious, vegetarian Pi to the savage, carnivorous, even cannibalistic hunter is the indication of his major swing from elation to despair. However, Pi retains his spiritual faith.

- “Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love.” (pg 208).
- “Time became distance for me in the way it is for all mortals – I travelled down the road of life.” (pg 193-194).
- “With time and experience I became a better hunter.” (pg 195).
- “At moments of wonder, it is easy to avoid small thinking, to entertain thoughts that span the universe.” (pg 233). This indicateds him maturing with experience.

Post Modernist

- Any of a number of trends or movements in the arts and literature developing in the 1970's in reaction to or rejection of the dogma principles or practices of established modernism especially a movement in architecture and the decorative arts running counter to the practice and influence of the international style and encouraging the use of elements from historical vernacular styles and often playful illusion, decoration, and complexity.
- A reaction to ‘modernism’ in art, music and literature. Its style is sometimes fragmented, sometimes playful and questions the absolute nature of truth.

Evidence to back up that this novel is a post modernist novel is:

- That the story is fragmented, it fragments the absolute nature of truth.
- The novel questions religion – it questions the absolute nature of truth. Life/God.

“Exploring the nature of faith.”

Life of Pi is a post modernist book composed of several elements such as magic realism, Bildungsroman and post colonialism inter-linked. It combines each of these elements and crop bits and pieces out of each and they are then put together in a form of a collage (post modern interpretation).

All these pieces put together make up the ideal interpretation of this novel, in terms of post modernism.

This interpretation suggests that Pi Patel becomes so desperate for food that he resorts to cannibalism after drifting across the Pacific for 277 days. After committing the most heinous sin ever imaginable, Pi justifies his sins by ‘morphing’ himself into a tiger. Pi Patel is an extremely religious boy, who cannot bare to admit to committing such an unspeakable crime therefore in order to protect himself, he tells a fanciful tale of a tiger (Pi’s alternative personality), the orangutan (Pi’s mother), the zebra (the Chinese sailor), the hyena (French cook). In the battle of survival the tiger eats the other animals.

“The world isn’t the way it is. It is the way we understand it”.

“Doesn’t that make life a story?”

Interpretation- A Psychological Novel

Psychological novels examine the human experience and workings of the mind. The novel is psychological due to Pi finding himself on the island, he finds meerkats that are only found in South Africa, and the island location was near Mexico, which is nowhere near Southern Africa. “But it was the Meerkats that impressed themselves most indelibly on my mind.” (P.265)

The carnivorous nature of the island also shows that this is a psychological novel.

“The island was carnivorous” (P. 281)

“It wasn’t proper sleep, but a state of semi- consciousness in which daydreams and reality were nearly indistinguishable” (P. 239)

“I would rate the day I went blind as the day my extreme suffering began”. (P.242)

Pi’s is suffering mental fatigue.

Magic Realism

– a literary or artistic genre in which magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere in order to access a deeper understanding of reality.

- Life of Pi is a story within a story within a story.

- Pi on the boat with animals can be seen as a true story, or as a fantastical delusion which Pi has created to deal with the loss of his family, particularly his mother, and his cannibalistic acts.
- **The carnivorous island:**
 1. To believe in Story 1 the carnivorous island has to be seen as true, rather than magical, as it is the only key evidence that he hasn't gone mad (meerkat bones) and was not hallucinating.
 2. A hallucination which kept his spirits high enough to survive and reveals that he has gone mad and therefore adding weight and credibility to the second story.
- *"It wasn't proper sleep, but a state of semi-consciousness in which daydreams and reality were nearly indistinguishable." (239)*

A Psychological Novel

Psychological novels examine the human experience and workings of the mind. The novel is psychological due to Pi finding himself on the island in Chapter 92. Pi had been at sea for a long time, he had just 'met' the blind Frenchman and then he discovers land. On the island, he finds meerkats. Meerkats are only found in South Africa, not on an island in the Pacific near Mexico, which is nowhere near Southern Africa. "But it was the Meerkats that impressed themselves most indelibly on my mind." (P.265)

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"The island was carnivorous" (P. 281)

"It wasn't proper sleep, but a state of semi-consciousness in which daydreams and reality were nearly indistinguishable" (P. 239)

"I would rate the day I went blind as the day my extreme suffering began". (P.242)

Pi is suffering mental fatigue. The incidents with the blind Frenchman and the carnivorous island show that Pi's mental state is poor. Pi's mind tells him that he met a fellow ship wreck victim at sea and then Richard Parker killed and consumed him. This is Pi attempting to reinvent the truth—that he killed the French cook, he consumed the flesh of the French man and that the entire incident in Chapter 91 is a creation of the mind to justify to himself the act of murder and cannibalism. The island is a construct of the mind as well. It is his mind telling him that he can

survive at sea (he can eat the green matter, Richard Parker can eat the meerkats, but eventually, staying on the island (at sea) will consume him.

Characters of the Text

Pi

- Piscine Molitor Patel, known as Pi, is a 16 year old Indian boy. He was named after Mamaji's favourite pool in France. He, along with family, are moving from India to Canada when the ship they were in, unfortunately sunk. Subsequently, Pi ends up of a lifeboat for 227 days. He later goes on to study zoology and religion and later goes on to start a family.
- "I was fourteen years old – and a well content Hindu on holidays – when I met Jesus Christ"
- "So it went the first time I saw a Muslim Pray-quick, necessary, physical, muttered, striking."
- "I picked up a piece of chalk and said as I wrote: My name is Piscine Molitor Patel, known to all as Pi Patel. For good measure I added:
 - $\pi = 3.14$ "
- "How I had failed to notice for two and a half days a 450-pound Bengal Tiger in a lifeboat twenty-six feet long was a conundrum."
- "He's a good Hindu boy. I see him all the time at the temple coming for darshan and performing puja."
"Normally I'm a sound sleeper. Normally I would have gone back to sleep. I don't know why I got up that night"
- "Richard Parker has stayed with me. I've never forgotten him. Dare I say I missed him?"
- Pi's journey for truth has expanded and grown over time. His experience as a castaway changes his life in many ways, although his later life shows that his basic instincts remain as they were in childhood. He initially has predominant interests; religion and animal; including their behaviour. After the journey he experiences, he then goes on to study zoology and religion. He learnt a lot about animals in the Pondicherry Zoo because his

father was the owner. However, his religious tendencies did not come from his father. He was initially a Hindu (because of his Aunt), then when he was 14, he found Christianity. Not long after, he finds Islam. His religious devotion helps him to survive, in his lowest periods on the boat, he prays. His knowledge of animals also helps him survive. His survival did however, change him in some ways; becoming obsessed with survival and he even cannibalises, thus developing survival skills. However, the Pi illustrated at 40 is again a vegetarian, as he was when he was a teenager. Although, his interest of food remains with him, which he converted into an interest of cooking. He also stocked up on food, which was a result of his treacherous journey.

- “The universe makes sense to me through Hindu eyes” (p.48)
“To me, it was paradise on earth. I have nothing but the fondest memories of growing up in a zoo.” (p.14)

Richard Parker

- “All those Richard Parker’s had to mean something” – Yann Martel.

A 450 pound (204kg) Royal Bengal Tiger who is Pi’s companion throughout his ordeal on the lifeboat. As he was captured as a cub and grew up in the zoo (accustomed to life in captivity – being fed by humans).

Richard Parker symbolises Pi’s most animalistic instincts. Pi begins to eat like Richard Parker.

Though Richard Parker is quite fearsome, ironically his presence helps Pi survive.

Richard Parker is a version of Pi and he is invented to make the story more plausible, both to himself and his audience.

The brutality of his mother’s death and his own act of shocking revenge (story 2) are too much for Pi to deal with and he finds it easier to imagine the carnivorous Tiger as the killer rather than himself (a vegetarian) in that role.

Richard Parker tires below the tarpaulin, eats the other animals (besides the zebra & Orange Juice as he was seasick), he is trained by Pi through the use of an orange survival whistle, thrown fish and fed by Pi, doesn’t kill Pi as he was raised by humans, eats meerkats for survival when they eventually reach the carnivorous island and abandons Pi when they reach the coast of Mexico.

- “The day I noticed, with a punching of the heart, that I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way Richard Parker ate.” (pg 225).

- “I love you, Richard Parker. If I didn’t have you now, I don’t know what I would do...I would die of hopelessness. Don’t give up Richard Parker, don’t give up” (pg 236).

Richard Parker is the inner Pi – the Pi that Pi wants to be – the pragmatic survivor.

Mother – ‘Gita Patel’ and ‘Orange-Juice’

Pi’s mother is presented as having the usually mothers tenderness; she is nervous of Pi being taught to swim, “*he nearly drowned you*”, and anxious at Pi’s father teaching Pi and Ravi a lesson by having them watch a tiger kill a goat. She does not understand Pi’s religious feelings, as he had a “*Hindu upbringing and a Baptist education*”. Pi is devoted to his mother and admits to the writer “*to lose your mother, well, that’s like losing the sun above you*”.

Pi constantly refers to the animals or a boat as having human qualities “*the poor dear looked so humanly sick*” suggesting that a possible interpretation could be that the ‘animals’ are actually humans but Pi creates these identities by morphing these humans into animals to make it easier to comprehend or rather justify his wrong doing after resorting to cannibalism in the battle for survival.

While apes and human have a lot in common, Pi states that they react differently to big black spiders. Orange-Juice does not crush the spiders, suggesting that she is actually Pi’s mother.

“A chimpanzee shudders and grimaces when it touches a big black spider, like you and I would do, before it squashes it angrily with its knuckles, not something you and I would do.” Page 100

“It was Orange-Juice... surrounded by a mass of black spiders that crawled around her like malevolent worshippers.” Page 112

Orange-Juice is a mother with two sons, just like Gita Patel.

“... zoo star and mother of two fine boys...” page 111-112

Language Structures, Features and Conventions

Narrative Structure:

The novel applies flashbacks to Pi's early life in India, journey on the lifeboat and time in Mexico, as well as shows Pi's current life in Canada.

Present tense:

"He shows me family memorabilia" page 86 – Pi shows the 'author' around his house
"I am sitting in a downtown café, after, thinknig." Page 63 – The 'author' sits in a café

Past tense:

"At Pondicherry we were relatively fortunate." Page 30 – Pi talks about life back in Pondicherry
"I was cold. It was a distracted observation, as if it didn't concern me." Page 119

Multimodal- multiple perspectives, multiple periods- flashback, flash forward, multiple styles,

Narrative Voice:

Life of Pi is a novel written from multiple perspectives. Applying a Post-Modernist interpretation, the entire novel, including the multiple perspectives (in first person) of Pi and Martel, the author, as a part of the story, is a construct in order to question the theme of truth or faith.

Pi:

"I was named after a swimming pool." Page 8 – Pi talks about the origin of his name
"I loved my prayer rug. Ordinary in quality though it was, it glowed with beauty in my eyes. I'm sorry I lost it." Page 76 – Pi talks about his prayer rug

The 'author'

"I would settle in a hill station and write my novel" page X – The 'author' plans his novel
"Will it make me believe in God?" page XII

Allegory- a story in which the characters and events represent or symbolise an underlying meaning.

Analogy

- A partial likeness between two things that are compared.

“One is called Roseville. It’s right next to the rose garden”- This could be an analogy to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden (There are no thorns or weeds in the Garden of Eden yet the name of the place is called ‘Roseville’ which is a rose garden and there are thorns on roses. This is more evidence in the questioning of the ultimate truth in life. Refers back to religion vs. science- especially as ‘Zootown’ is a place right next to the rose garden (p.g. XIII). ‘Zootown’ could be referring to science and ‘Roseville’ could be referring to Religion.

Rhetorical questions

“What reason could I have to leave the island? Were my physical needs not met here? Was there not more fresh water than I could drink in all my lifetime? More algae than I could eat? And when I yearned for variety, more meerkats and fish than I could ever desire?” (p.g. 279)

Foreshadowing

“Zoo star and mother of two fine boys.” (pg 111) (Pi)

“ I am not one given to projecting human traits and emotions onto animals” pg 4).

“ I have a story that will make you believe in God.” (XII).

“ Behind every door, on every shelf stand mountains of neatly stacked cans and packages.” (pg 25) there is a slight hint here that perhaps at one time Pi was very short of food.

“consider the case of the female black leopard that escaped from the Zurich zoo in the winter of 1933....The discovery that a wild carnivore was free in their mist created an up roar.... Traps were set and hunting dogs were let loose...Not a trace of the leopard was found for ten weeks” (pg 42)

Orange juice – Gita page 111

“She came floating on an island of bananas in a halo of eight, as lovely as the virgin Mary. The rising sun was behind her. Her flaming hair looked stunning. I cried, “Oh blessed **great mother**, Pondicherry fertility goddess, provider of milk and love, wondrous arm spread of comfort, terror of tricks, picker up of crying ones are you to witness this tragedy too? It’s not right that gentleness meet horror. **Better that you had died right away**. ... you bring joy and pain in equal measure. Joy because you are with me, but pain because it won’t be for long”. (III) (Pi)

“ life goes on and you don’t touch tigers” (pg 39)

“ if you took the city of Tokyo and turned it upside down and shook it, you would be amazed at the animals that would fall out...And they expected to find – Ha! In the middle of a Mexican

tropical Jingle, imagine! Ha! Ha! It's laughable, simply laughable. What were they thinking? (pg 44)

“ So you see if you fall into a lion's pit, the reason the lion will tear you into pieces is not because it is hungry – be assured, zoo animals are amply fed – or because it's blood thirsty but because you have invaded it's territory. As an aside, that is why a circus trainer must always enter the lion ring first, and in full sight of the lions. In doing so he establishes the ring as his territory, not theirs a notion reinforced by stomping about, by snapping his whip, shouting. Notice how they come in with their tails low and they move to the edge of the ring. They are in the presence of an alpha male... and they must submit to his dominance rituals. “ the animal in front of you must know where it stands.”

Personification (anthropomorphism)

“ we commonly say in the trade that the most dangerous animal in a zoo is man” (pg 29” man is dangerous because of his deliberate cruelty, but also because of anthropomorphism.

Juxtaposition

- The Story- Which Is the better one?
- Science vs. Religion

“ You want dry, yeast-less factuality.”

“You want a story without animals.”

“Since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals.”

“ Thunder and tinkle, thick and thin, the near and the far.” (pg. 233)

After Pi witnesses the lightning- he feels that it is “divinity”, “ a miracle... Praise be to Allah”
The lightning- Brings him closer to his religious beliefs, but ultimately he knows it can be explained by science.

Mr. Kumar's both have the same name- therefore they both are Mr. Kumar.

Juxtaposing science and religion “My majors were religious studies and Zoology.

Allusions

- The whole novel is an allusion, talking about faith, belief and truth. He never actually mentions the search for truth although the constant allusion of stories, indicates the never-ending journey for truth.

Religious- “ the three wise men pulled away with stiff, grudging smiles on their faces” (69)

Unreliable Narrator

Pi is considered to be an unreliable narrator because he is extremely flexible in his interpretation of the truth. “Are there any parts you would like me to change?” suggesting that he simply alters parts of the story to please different interpretations of the ‘ultimate truth’. A reliable narrator provides one story and does not tailor it to suit people needs or beliefs such as Pi does. For Pi, each story sheds some sort of light on the truth. They are all means of illustrating the truth “the world isn't the way it is, It is the way we understand it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?”

“I would like to say in my own defence that though I may have anthropomorphised the animals till they speak fluent English...” Pg 34

“I am not one given to projecting human traits and emotions onto animals..” Pg 4

Recurring Motifs-

Hunger and Thirst-

Numbers-

Orange-