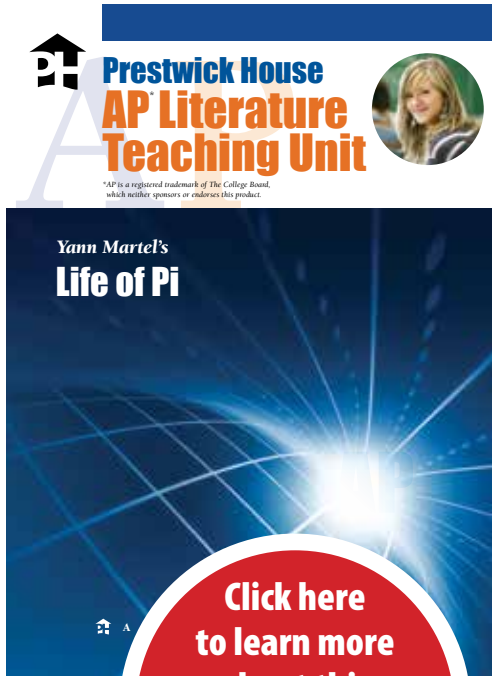




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Teaching Unit

**Life of Pi**

by Yann Martel

written by Rebecca Grudzina



**Prestwick House**

Item No. 302787

# Life of Pi

## 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  $\pi$  (*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.

## 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?

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

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

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

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## Part Two: The Pacific Ocean

### Chapters 37 – 38

1. How does Yann Martel begin this section of the novel on a surprising and suspenseful note?

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2. What important part of the plot does Chapter 38 provide?

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3. What does Pi mean when he says, “the ship vanished into a pinprick hole on my map”?

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4. How does Martel manage to provide a note of humor even during this tense and suspenseful episode?

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### Chapters 39 – 40

1. How is Pi’s survival more an act of Providence than human action?

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2. How does Pi’s survival illustrate his belief in the triumph of faith over reason?

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## Chapter 99

1. What point about how people live their lives does Pi make when Okamoto asks why no one else has ever seen the island of algae?

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2. Thematically, what is the significance of the rapid and witty exchange between Pi and Mr. Okamoto about the truth of Pi's story? What viewpoints are represented by Pi and the interviewers?

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3. How does Pi defend the story of his survival when Mr. Okamoto challenges it as unbelievable? What is his response when Mr. Okamoto protests that he believes only what he sees?

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4. If we accept the Richard Parker story as an allegorical account of the factual, literal story, what do each of the characters in the allegory represent?

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5. Why do Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba say they think the story with the animals is the better story, even though they admit they do not believe it?

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6. What is ironic about the presence of the interviewers in this novel? Why did Martel include them?

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