Brief Plot Summary & Organizational Patterns

*Life of Pi* follows the story of Piscine Molitor Patel, known to all as Pi—a deeply religious boy who grows up with his zoo-keeping family in India. The first part of the book is anecdotal in nature—it discusses Pi’s devotion to Hinduism, his conversion to Islam and Christianity, his defense of zoos and his fascination with animals, the origin of his name and so forth. It ends with political unrest in India, which influences Pi’s parents’ decision to emigrate to Canada with their zoo animals. The first half of the novel is a preparatory half—without it, the plot would not stay afloat in part two. Part two is Pi’s ocean survival story: the ship bearing his family to Canada sinks and Pi must survive in a life-boat with only a male Bengal tiger named Richard Parker for company.

This novel has exactly one hundred chapters of varying lengths. Thirty-six chapters are in part one, and the remainder are in part two. The chapters, for the
most part, are relatively short as the book is just over three hundred pages long (about three pages a chapter). Because the novel is language dense and must have readers with both stamina and maturity, it places at a Grade 11 level.

**The Big Question or Enduring Issue**

*Life of Pi* addresses many somewhat didactic opinions on life, religion, and attitude. Pi must survive 227 days without any human company, and yet somehow he is able to grow from his suffering and “write” this novel. Pi himself is constantly considering the meaning that his mortal life has. And so a good question to pair with this novel is: What makes life meaningful?

**Background Knowledge**

The novel is set in French India during the 1970’s. That in and of itself presents a different and considerably difficult cultural disconnect from what students might be used to. Many tier-three vocabulary words are part of this novel—words that might require some student research and explaining because they are Indian foods, Gods, customs, etc. There are also many illusions to people like Ghandi, Krishna, and Muhammad and to places like Mecca, Jerusalem, Madras and Toronto. Part one of the novel, especially, could become a foreign people-word-place overload. However, if these places and people and religions are made into a part of the novel study (grade eleven includes some serious inquiry instruction), it can turn from being a difficulty to a very effective learning vehicle.

More specifically, students would need to know the background of Islam and Hindu religions, and what is sacred to those religions. Students would need to know a brief summary of what the political climate was like in French India in the 1970’s. Students who are unfamiliar with Christianity would need to have a brief rundown of the importance of the virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and who the twelve apostles are. A fun way to pair this text would be to have student read a myth or legend from the Hindu faith as a background to the novel (perhaps one of Lord Krishna’s many births).

There are also small sections that mention things that students may not be familiar with. For example, Pi is a swimmer, and he speaks briefly about swimming, and butterfly stroke. Perhaps letting students see a video of the butterfly stroke will help them understand why it is so difficult for Pi to complete.
Theme(s): What is/are the central theme(s) of this novel?

Themes:

• The limits of human endurance
  - Page 240 “I will die today. I die. This was my last entry. I went on from there, but without noting it. Do you see these invisible spirals on the margins of the page? I thought I would run out of paper. It was the pens that ran out.”
• Tolerance of cultures and religions
  - Page 50 “Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat wearing Muslims.”
• Depravity and civility in human instinct
  - All of pages 304-310
• Finding purpose and quality in life
  - Page 64 “I can well imagine an atheist’s last words… and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeastless factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, “Possibly a f-f-failing of oxygenation of the b-brain,” and, to very end, lack imagination and miss the better story.”
• Finding purpose in terrible experiences
  - Page 209 “Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out. It was a hell beyond expression. I thank God it always passed. A school of fish appeared around the net or a knot cried out to be reknotted. Or I thought of my family, of how they were spared this terrible agony. The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving.”

Setting

The novel has two major places of setting: Pi’s hometown of Pondicherry, and the lifeboat on board which Pi survives. A knowledge of these setting is not crucial to the understanding of the novel—but the larger setting of India is helpful. As previously stated, a brief lesson or inquiry project on Indian peoples, religions, and politics would add a lot more depth to a reading of this novel, although an astute reader would be confident even without this background knowledge.
**Point of View/Narrative Voice**

The majority of the chapters are told in the first person with Pi as the narrator. There are occasional chapters written in the first person, but the tense and font changes, allowing the reader to know that we are hearing someone else. These chapters act as introductions for a new theme or thread that hasn’t been addressed yet in the story. Also, the final chapter is a written account of a tape recording—and takes the form of a script.

**Characterization**

**Piscine Molitor Patel:** Known to all (and to the reader) as Pi. Pi is the speaker, the survivor, the victim and the scholar. Pi is proud, deeply religious, vegetarian, and the youngest in his small family. Pi grows up in zoo, and eventually ends up double majoring in Zoology and Religion when he goes to university. He is born in India, and relocated to Canada at seventeen, and is devoutly faithful in Islam, Hindu and Christianity, and accepting of almost all other faiths. Pi is sensitive about his name, which is why he prefers Pi above his given name, since he was relentlessly teased about it in grade school.

Page 69: “‘Bapu Ghandi said, “All religions are true.”’ I just want to love God,’ I blurted out, red in the face.”

**Richard Parker:** The Bengal tiger that survives with Pi in the life-boat. He really is the other major character, but is simply a tiger in behaviors and characterizations. His purpose is to act as an object onto which Pi can project the weaker, less human side of himself.

**Ravi:** Pi’s older brother. Captain of the cricket team, athletic and mischeivious. Only a minor character. Dies in shipwreck.

**Gita:** Pi’s mother. Soft-hearted and obedient. Only a minor character. Dies in shipwreck or killed by ship cook.

**Santosh:** Pi’s father. Teaches Pi the lesson about tigers. Zookeeper. Worrier. Only a minor character. Dies in shipwreck.

Pi has a host of other mentors, including the people who teach him both science and religion, but they only flit in and out of the story momentarily and provide fodder for our one major character: Pi.

Other Literary Terms taught in 6th-12th grades
allegory— as discovered at the end of the novel, the entire second half is a allegory—a story representing something else

allusion—the author makes many religious and cultural allusions, such allusions to Judas Iscariot, Rama, and Mecca.

analogy—the author uses many analogies to help readers understand religions and animals, found extensively on pages 16-18

irony: situational, verbal, dramatic, climatic – apparent throughout

symbol: symbols are found throughout, particularity extended metaphors like all of part two of the novel, the symbolism found in Pi’s multiple religions, and the symbolic connections between the zoo themes and the religion themes

theme: the novel would be nothing without the running theme that life is to be lived for the things that bring us the most joy—we should never choose to believe in something that makes our lives mean less.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

- Getting along with family
  - Pi’s brother Ravi is constantly teasing him
  - Pi’s parents do not understand his religious fervour
    - Page 75 “A muslim! A devout Hindu, alright, I can understand. A Christian in addition, it’s getting a bit strange but I can stretch my mind... But Muslim? It’s totally foreign to our tradition. They’re outsiders.”
  - Pi seeks to find his own niche in his family even though is very different from them. Students with close friends and siblings could be taught that you do not need to lose your individuality in order to gain acceptance from others, even your family is only part of your identity.

- Loneliness/solitude
  - Pi is alone on the boat without any company for over half a year.
  - Students who struggle with being alone can learn that there are figurative “survival tactics” to help deal with extreme loneliness.
    - Chapter 90 is an imaginary conversation that occurs inside Pi’s mind because of his extreme hunger and loneliness. Perhaps students can identify ways that we do similar things during hard times in order to cope.
• Loss/grief
  o Pi loses his entire family in the shipwreck and he loses Richard Parker.
    ▪ Page 6 “Richard Parker stayed with me. I’ve never forgotten him. Dare I say I miss him? I do. I miss him. Is till see him in my dreams. They are nightmares mostly, but nightmares tinged with love. I still cannot understand how he could abandon me so unceremoniously, without any sort of goodbye, without looking back even once. The pain is like an axe that chops through my heart.”

• Fitting in
  o Early in the novel, Pi is persecuted mercilessly because of his name. He endures the torment with good form, ignoring his attackers and eventually decided to “put down Satan” by using his resourcefulness to change the name by which people know him. (Chapter 5).
  o This challenge would be an excellent way to show to students that one can use his own merits to rise above his environment and gain respect without losing identity.

Vocabulary Issues

One of the reasons *Life of Pi* is such a beautiful novel is that the author has beautiful command over language. Every description is alive with beauty and with precise words that pack powerful meanings. Using this novel to model paragraphing and sentences, and the importance of choosing the right word could be very effective.

One of the before mentioned problems with students understanding this novel is the high number of foreign words—both in meaning and sound. As an extreme example, consider this passage from Chapter 16:

  o “I am a Hindu because of sculpted cones of red *kumkum* powder and baskets of yellow *turmeric* nuggets, because of garlands of flowers and pieces of broken coconut, because of the clanging bells to announce one’s arrival to God, because of the whine of the reedy *nadaswaram* and the beating of drums, because of the patter of bare feet against stone floors down dark corridors pierced by shafts of sunlight, because
of the fragrance of incense, because of flames of arati lamps circling in the darkness, because of bhajans being sweetly sung...."

Passages like the one above could be used as an exercise in inferring the meaning of a word by using the context of that word in the sentence. For example, because a bhajan is sung, we can infer it is some type of song or chant, probably related to the Hindu religion, since it is stated as a reason for Pi being a Hindu.

The above passage would also be a very good example of using parallel structure to emphasize meaning. Students could model after the structure of this sentence using one of their own labels (i.e. “I am an American because...”).

This novel has a very wide word bank. Words of the same difficulty as the following are used effectively and well throughout:

- callisthenic
- exalted
- imperceptible
- obituary
- strenuous
- fundamentalist
- guttural

It would be effective to have students, in each reading assigned, come to class with five words from the assigned reading that they did not know. These could be compiled into a single document. The class together would eventually have created a word bank “cheat sheet” to keep with them that defines the foreign words or other tier one two words that are hard to remember—expanding understanding and vocabulary at the same time.

Fortunately, there is no slang language or dialectic dialogue in this novel. However, it is richly bathed in the English language, and will need some frequent direct negotiation with word content by and between both teacher and student.

An exemplary passage to consider:

“These biscuits were amazingly good. They were savoury and delicate to the palate, neither too sweet nor to salty. They broke up under the teeth with a delightful crunching sound. Mixed with saliva, they made a granular paste that was enchantment to the tongue and mouth. And when I swallowed, my stomach had only one thing to say: Hallelujah!” (Page 144)

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

*Life of Pi* is a novel that lends itself very easily to culturally different students. Pi himself is someone who is culturally different from what is normally
considered to be the “average” American. The fact that he supports three very different cultural religions and travels between many countries (India, Mexico and Canada) is testament to this novel's versatility when it comes to the cultures present in the classroom.

African American and Latin American students should be able to connect with Pi—and understand why his parents and religious leaders have a difficult time accepting that he embraces “foreign” customs. Pi’s parents leave India because they want to stay true to their Indian identity, and feel like the country might be losing its roots. Pi is forever displaced from his native country, and still has to fight to preserve his customs:

“The first time I went to an Indian restaurant in Canada I used my fingers. The waiter looked at me critically and said, “Fresh off the boat, are you?” (Page 7)

This short quotation shows how Pi has become the cultural other. It would be important to discuss how come it is so easy for Pi to see the good in other people’s cultures and beliefs. Why is this understanding so important to valuing life? What brings meaning into the lives of others? Whose meanings are more important? What life has more value? Are all humans the same, when it comes down to the bare bones of life? Would ever human have been able to survive what Pi survived? *Life of Pi*, in discussing Pi’s life, essentially discusses all human lives, and what it really means to live.

Students with special needs, especially students who need specific reading plans and lighter reading work, can also benefit from this text because, as previously stated, the first half of the novel is a series of structured anecdotes. Students who are dyslexic or who need pictures and visuals can do alternate assignments where they listen to selected chapters and either draw what happened, or make a collage. Students who are autistic might find it easier to do a report on tigers, or one of the other animals in the zoo, than to analyze character development.

**Gender Issues**

*Life of Pi* only has two major characters—Richard Parker and Pi. Gender isn’t a huge topic in the novel, although Pi’s mother is a very strong woman, as readers discover by the end of the novel. But, he character is more a reflection on human nature in general, and not a reflection on her gender. *Life of Pi* is a discussion of life, and what makes life meaningful, and not a discussion of gender or racial prejudice.
Research Issues/Project Ideas

This novel opens dozens of opportunities for inquiry. Inquiry and presentation of information gathered is very important at this grade level.

- Students could write an informational text/expositional text on zoos, tigers, Hindu mythology, Islam prayer customs, French India, tea estates, politics in India in the 1970’s, or guidelines to surviving the ocean. This could be in the form of a travel brochure, a chapter from a history textbook, an informational video (modelling a documentary). It could also take a creative spin—a how-to book, a series of blog posts from the persona of a teenage who grew up Muslim etc.
- Students could write a letter to Pi from either the perspective of a Muslim or of a Hindu about his experiences.
- Have students map/diagram what they think the green island looks like.
- Students could present a story in pictures detailing the major events of Pi’s life.
- Students could rewrite chapter 53 from Richard Parker’s point of view. This could be especially powerful if students know that Richard Parker is symbolic of Pi’s own animalistic side. This would require significant understanding of the metaphor present in the novel and it would also require a close reading of Pi. Abilities to summarize, synthesize and analyze are all used to maximum potential in this assignment.
- Students could draw and illustrate a map and timeline of Pi’s ocean journey from Japan to Mexico, places significant events on the timeline.
- If students are more morally inclined, they could even write a response to the author’s thesis (a response to this question: Is it really better to believe in “the better story” rather than seek for which one is really true? Why or why not?”)
- Students could create a short trailer for the novel, as if it were going to be a movie.
- Students could write a newspaper article detailing finding Pi and his lifeboat on the Mexican coast.
- Students should be able to write short response regarding what in Pi’s life his experiences meaning and made his life meaningful?
**TEXT SETS and Enrichment Resources**

- “Tiger, Tiger” by William Blake (poem)
  - Celebrates the beauty and the terror of Richard Parker, supplements Pi’s view of him
- “Tiger on a Tree” by Anushka Ravishankar (picture book)
  - Shows how these people find meaning in life through their experiences with the tiger
- “Friends: True Stories of Extraordinary Animal Friendships” by Catherine Thimmesh (non-fiction picture book)
  - Pairs well with Pi’s zoo upbringing and will add informational texts to the unit
- “117 Days Adrift” by Maurice Bailey (non-fiction book)
  - Puts Pi’s suffering in context with a real-event story
- “To Build a Fire” by Jack London (short story)
  - Man vs. nature conflict
- “Open Boat” by Stephen Crane (short story)
  - Man vs. nature conflict, the great power of the ocean and the constant battle against it