

# **Life of Pi Study Guide**

**Created by TDF Education**

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## **A Playwright's Peril**

### **The adaptation of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* to the stage**

A boat. A boy. A tiger. The sea. All of these elements seem fairly simple to manage on their own. However, bringing these four elements together to create a realistic atmosphere can be daunting. In fact, when approached by British producer Simon Friend, playwright/actress Lolita Chakrabarti had never adapted for the stage before. However, like Pi, Chakrabarti faced the challenges by diving right into the text.

"I cut the book up and put it in different sections, under headings of "God," "Family Zoo," "Philosophy," "Shipwreck," and then I structured it. The story's quite straightforward: this boy is happy, his family emigrates, they all die in a shipwreck but he survives. Within that, I had to find a dramatic thrust with all of Yann Martel's amazing elements. It was complicated, but I enjoyed it."

Released in 2001, the novel came about due to Martel's love of India, even though he had only traveled to the country once before returning to do research for the book. When pressed on why India, he said, "India is a place where all stories are possible. You forget that the imagination can take hold of anything and contemplate it and love it and describe it."

#### **Create:**

- Choose a chapter from a book you love.
- Select your favorite paragraph from that chapter. What about this paragraph can be dramatized?
- Rewrite the paragraph as a dialogue between characters in a play of that book.
- Include setting, time, and stage directions.
- Pick a partner to share your adaptation with the class.

## **Character and Settings: Port and Passengers**

**Pi:** Piscine Molitor Patel, narrator and main character in the play, a teenager

**Father:** Pi's father and owner of the zoo in Pondicherry, teaches Pi to respect animals

**Amma (Mother)(Nurse):** Pi's loving mother, also plays the nurse

**Nurse:** A kindly woman who cares for Pi at the hospital after his rescue

**Rani (Sister):** Pi's studious and smart sister

**Uncle (Mamaji):** Pi's uncle and friend, taught Pi to swim, gave Pi his name

**Auntie (Mrs. Biology Kumar):** Pi's aunt and friend, inspired Pi's love of zoology

**Religious leaders:** various ensemble members Pi seeks out for religious advice

**Sailors:** Many sailors and crew aboard the ship, including the captain, played by ensemble

**Cook:** A nasty crew member on the ship who is vile and dirty

**Orange Juice:** The gentle orangutan from the zoo who swims to Pi's lifeboat

**Richard Parker:** A wild Bengal tiger trapped on the lifeboat with Pi

*Design note: sidebar text block: "I wanted an Indian animal. At first I had an adolescent Indian elephant. But that was too comical. Then a rhino, but rhinos are herbivores and didn't see how I could keep a herbivore alive for 227 days in the Pacific. So finally I settled on what now seems the natural choice, a tiger."- Yann Martel*

**Zebra:** A gentle zoo animal that broke its leg jumping into the lifeboat

**Hyena:** A violent and possessive zoo animal on the lifeboat

## **Setting 1970's-1980's**

Pondicherry, India, where Pi and his family live and run The Pondicherry Zoo

Aboard a cargo ship setting sail for Canada

On a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean

A hospital room in Mexico

## **Pondicherry to Canada, with a detour**

Life at The Pondicherry Zoo was, “paradise on Earth” to young Pi, and he loved and adored his life and his home. However, India in the mid 1970’s was in political and religious turmoil. The Prime Minister’s declaration of a state of emergency made day to day life in Pondicherry more restrictive and less tolerant. Pi’s father and mother decide that the family and zoo must move to Canada.

In the novel *Life of Pi*, Pi explains, “People move because of the wear and tear of anxiety... Because of the feeling that nothing will change, that happiness and prosperity are possible only somewhere else.” “People move in the hope of a better life.”

*DESIGN IDEA—A MAP OF PONDICHERRY TO INDIA, WITH A BIG DOT IN THE OCEAN MARKING THE LIFEBOAT*

### **Consider:**

- Can you think of any current examples of people relocating in the hope of a better life?
- Why do they leave and what do they hope for in the other place?
- What challenges and restrictions prompt them to leave?
- If you were leaving your beloved home, what would you want to take with you?

### **Create:**

- Gather items, or photos of items, objects, and talismans that are representative of what you consider to be your home.
- From these items, what would be the one that you would take with you on a lifeboat?
- Share this item with your class, explain its significance and why it represents home.

## **Puppetry: A time tested form of storytelling**

Puppetry is a form of the performing arts as old as theatre itself. Many cultures have invented their own forms of puppetry that are still in existence today. There are a wide variety of puppets, from puppets controlled by rods, strings, by hand and with the human body (or several humans). Puppets range in size from objects the size of a finger to large animals. They can be realistic, abstract or even in the form of shadows. Puppets can represent objects, as well as humans and animals.

Central to the puppet is the puppeteer. Puppeteers are essentially actors in disguise. While the attention is on the puppet during the performance, it is the actor who embodies the puppet, bringing it to life through action, motivation and physical gesture. The puppet and the human actor are one.

## Shadow Puppetry

Shadow puppetry is one of the oldest forms of puppetry in the world, originating in China and Indonesia. Flat images are moved against a transparent screen by puppeteers while a bright light is lit from behind. The puppets are often colorfully painted and made of a malleable material. In Indonesia and China, shadow puppetry is an important part of traditional culture. Many plays are based on folk tales or religious epics in which there is a struggle between good and evil. Shadow puppetry is also prevalent in Turkey and Greece. In Western Europe, shadow puppetry was popular during the 1800's when the art of cutting silhouettes out of paper was in vogue.



### Consider:

- In Life of Pi, where do you see shadow puppets?
- How are projections used in the show?

### Create:

**Shadow Theatre:** You will need a cliplight or flashlight, a sheet or opaque surface on which to project your shadow (shadow puppet screen).

**Shadow Hand puppets:** In small groups, be creative and practice making animals with hands. Put up a shadow puppet screen and ask one or two volunteers from each group to make their shadow puppet

**Shadow Theatre:** In the same groups, quickly create three shadow puppets with their hands and bodies.

- Boat
- Ocean
- Wind
- Orangutan
- Tiger

- Zebra
- Goat
- Sea turtle

### **Shadow Puppet Zoo:**

- Create your animal puppets by finding outlines and images on the internet or in magazines, books, etc., to trace. Look for the animals in Life of Pi. Cut them out on stiff cardboard, paper plates or manilla folders. Use bendable straws taped together for the rods. If you would like to create moveable arms or legs, use metal brads to join pieces together.
- Choose your favorite moment from the play involving the animals.
- Storyboard the moments and images that you wish your audience to see. Remember that in shadow puppetry it is easy to overcrowd your “screen,” so be clear about the key moment in each scene.
- Once you’ve choreographed your puppetry, you can experiment with sound effects, soundscapes and music to create mood, atmosphere and emotion for your performance.
- Present your puppet show to the class.

## **Bunraku**

Bunraku is a traditional form of Japanese puppet theatre. It started as popular entertainment during the Edo Period (1603-1868) in Osaka, Japan and evolved into artistic theater during the late 17th century. Bunraku puppets are generally about half the size of a human. Each puppet is operated by three performers: a principal and two assistants. The puppeteers are in full view of the audience, but are often dressed in black and are considered invisible. The puppeteers work together to animate the puppet and manipulate arms, legs, body and mouths of the puppets, creating life-like actions and facial expressions.



## **Rod and Hand Puppets**

A **HAND** puppet is one of the simplest and oldest forms of puppetry. Hand puppets are prevalent in cultures all around the world. The **GLOVE** puppet, known as a “marionnette à gaine” or “sheath” puppet originated in France. The puppet resembles a glove. The fingers of the puppeteer enter the head and arms of the puppet, while the arm and hand of the puppeteer form the body beneath.

A **ROD** puppet is a puppet or object with wooden or metal rods and manipulated by a puppeteer from below. Rod puppets are seen in many world cultures, including Europe and America.

*DESIGN NOTE: IMAGES OF HAND, GLOVE AND ROD PUPPETS*

## **Life of Pi: Starting the process**

Finn Caldwell, the Puppetry and Movement Director of Life of Pi, explains, “When we start looking at a show that will use puppets Nick (Nick Barnes, Co-Designer) and I will work out what the puppet will need to do in the show and crucially, how it contributes to the narrative. The puppet must have a strong sense of character.”

With Richard Parker, Finn and Nick needed to identify all the different movements that the puppet would need to do to convey the character of a tiger. This includes jumping, swimming, existing within the boat, attacking the goat and climbing.

Richard Parker needs to be scary. In Western performance, puppets don't tend to be scary, but this puppet needs to communicate a tiger's strength, weight and power. He needs to be frightening both for Pi, and for the audience. There are moments where he is relaxed, and there are moments when he is tense and powerful.

“The novel gave us a lot of information, including what people felt and thought about the tiger. That was our starting point.”

Nick Barnes explains, “We used Plastozote to construct the puppets. Richard Parker is made to look weather beaten and like driftwood, but the audience will consistently see the form of the tiger. The armatures are made from aluminum, so they're lightweight, and the joints have bungees which provide resistance and pull the limb back to its starting point after a movement. The puppets are made of laminates of layered plywood and aluminum: they need to be hard wearing, but lightweight.”

The orangutan is more like a traditional Japanese Bunraku puppet with a flexible nylon rod creating its rib cage. It's a complicated structure so it needs strength and support. The puppet is operated by three people. The hyena has two people inside it to operate it, while the giraffe only needs one operator. The operation of the giraffe is more like object puppetry, while Richard Parker and the orangutan are operated by three people and are the most complex puppets in the show.

## The Rules of Puppetry

Finn says, “The most important thing to remember is that the audience needs to believe the puppet is alive. If that doesn’t happen, everything else is lost. Puppets appeal to the audience’s sense of play, and there is a silent contract between the audience and the puppeteers to suspend all disbelief. It’s the same as two children agreeing to play with a toy. There’s an unspoken agreement that the object is alive.”

Three important rules of puppetry include:

- **Breath:** Being able to see and hear a puppet breathing allows the audience to believe the animal is taking oxygen. We need to see their lungs inflating and deflating. Breath also tells us about emotions: fast breathing communicates tension or fear, whilst slow breathing tells us the character is relaxed and comfortable.
- **Focus:** It needs to be clear what the puppet is looking at – where its eye line is. It needs to be as precise as the way humans observe and focus on things. The audience stops believing in intention and thoughts if the eyeline is not clear. When it’s successful, we start to believe in the puppet’s thoughts, desires and intentions.
- **Weight:** The body of the puppet is just as important as the spirit and the mind of the puppet character. We need to convince the audience that this constructed object is actually a tiger, for example. The puppeteers must convey muscularity, weight, and gravity.

A specific example of this would be when Richard Parker jumps. The puppeteers could just lift and throw it! However, to help the audience to believe in it we have to include the preparation for the movement (bending or squatting down, for example) before releasing into the air. When an animal lands on a hard surface, the muscles will compensate by bending. Our puppets need to do that too. Its preparation and recovery, as well as the action of being in the air that’s important.

## Performing as a Puppeteer

The majority of the performers in this production operate at least one puppet during the performance. When you are watching the production, consider the following points:

- In the same way that an actor uses their body, a puppeteer does too. Not only do they move the puppet, but they also amplify what the puppet is doing.
- Puppeteers need strong vocal and breath skills. Each animal in Life of Pi has its own set of vocalizations, which have been created in rehearsal and based on considerable research.
- Without breath, the puppet cannot be animated and will not encourage the audience to suspend their disbelief. Where there is more than one operator for each puppet, they all need to coordinate with each other in their breath and sound.
- Successful puppeteering requires a performer to have a responsive body, which is strong and flexible. The performer must use their physical ability to communicate character and story – it is not simply about manipulating an inanimate object.
- It can be helpful for puppeteers to have a background in physicality, whether through acrobatics, dance training or even martial arts – it all helps them understand the precision that's needed.
- All of the jobs in the show are physically difficult – head, heart and hind. Six puppeteers in the show cover all the puppets. Pretty much every actor in the show does some kind of puppetry.

## Create

**Animal Walks:** Have the whole class move in an empty space, moving in a large circle. Call out the following instructions: move normally, move fast, slow, ½ speed, lead by different parts of your body (nose, belly, feet, etc.) and see what animal it most makes you feel like. Animate your animal with sound and gesture. Next, pick an animal from the Life of Pi and animate it as a whole group. Volunteers take turns going into the center of the circle and performing their animal.

- Orangutan
- Tiger
- Zebra
- Goat
- Sea turtle
- Giraffe

## Animal Ensembles:

- Small groups.
- Decide on one animal to create as a group. One person makes a shape with their body to create one part of the animal. Another person finds a way of adding themselves into the

existing shape in any way they like. One at a time, other members become part of the group shape. Ask people to think about how their shape compliments or contrasts with existing shapes. Encourage the use of different levels: low, medium and high.

- Remember the rules of puppetry: each shape needs breath, focus and weight.
- On a given signal, the animal moves across the room, working together for about 5-10 seconds. Have them experiment with different movements, such as a crouch, a jump, an attack, sleeping, eating.

## **Create: Object Puppets**

Puppetry is the process of animating an inanimate object. You can therefore create fantastic effects with everyday objects such as books, shoes, toys, pieces of clothing and even pieces of paper. The most important thing is to commit to making the object live. For example:

### **Flocks of birds**

Individually: Find a mixture of books – hardback, paperback, notebooks, various different colors and sizes etc. Open a book near its center point and try to simulate the flapping of bird wings through manipulating the book. Working individually, experiment with creating a ‘flight path’ for your bird. Consider what type of bird you are trying to create. Is it a delicate one, or a strong and intimidating bird of prey?

### **Flocking with “Bird Books”**

- Have students stand in a group, all facing the same direction, in a triangular formation. They should all hold their “bird books.” The person at the front leads the group in controlled flight. The object of the activity is for the group to look like they are moving as one. All movement should be improvised. This activity can be done with or without music. As a group, be mindful of breath, focus and weight.
- Actors: what did you observe working together as a group?
- Audience: What did you observe?

## **Survival and Resilience**

Pi spends eight months at sea and is determined to survive. He is also determined to challenge the preconceptions and assumptions made by Mr. Okamoto in the hospital room in Mexico. Throughout his journey on the lifeboat, he starts to experience visions of those who have taught him in the past. Pi “sees” his teacher who tells him, “Use logic and maths, Pi, use everything you have and defy the odds”. Pi also imagines being instructed through a survival guide he finds in a supply box. He is also treated to visions of his family, with his sister encouraging him to dig deep and remember math problems they’ve worked on together.

Moreover, Pi uses what he has at his disposal to create tools and a raft to keep both he and Richard Parker alive.

### **Consider:**

- What are important life lessons everyone should know?
- What do you feel are the most important skills you have at your disposal? For example: How to charge your phone? How to change a tire? How to look for clean water?

### **Create:**

Write a survival guide for someone who is new to your

- school
- Neighborhood
- or place of employment

Be sure to include

- The environment (for example, the bathroom is here, the coffee is free, etc. The unspoken laws of the land...)
- Who are the predators?
- Who are the prey?

### **Create:**

Look around the room you are in.

- What tools/objects could you use to create a raft?
- Write a description of or draw what your raft would look like? (Remember: These objects must float)

## **Survival instinct**

Father tells Pi, “Don’t think any animal is harmless. Life will defend itself no matter how small it is. This world is dangerous. It’s a mistake to be complacent.”

Early in the play, we learn that Mamaji is teaching Pi to swim, and this becomes a metaphor for his ability to survive. Shortly before the Patel’s leave for Canada, Mamaji tells Pi, “not too much thinking, just keep moving forward” and that Pi must, “conquer open water.” We might assume that this foreshadows Pi’s need to cling to life and deal with the trauma and loss that he endures along the way.

### **Consider:**

- What challenges have you faced, and how have you overcome them?

### **Create:**

Write a journal entry from the perspective of Pi.



## **Morality**

In the beginning of the play, Pi is a vegetarian who believes animals should be cared for and loved, not eaten. Yet, in order to survive on the lifeboat, Pi must eat animals to survive, which puts his moral beliefs in conflict. His views on morality shift as he learns how to survive in the wild.

Pi tells his story through the lens of animal characters. In Pi's version, Richard Parker is a tiger who occupies the boat with him and takes on human qualities at times, including a speaking voice. Animals can maim or kill because of their natural instincts, excusing them from any of the human burden of morality. It is suggested later, however, that the "real" story may be much darker and that there were actually no animals at all on the boat, only humans committing the violent acts.

### **Consider:**

In small groups, discuss a situation in which breaking a grave moral code could be justified? In breaking the code, is there a larger "greater good?" Should the person be held accountable for a moral failing in the end or do the circumstances define what morality is. Is there any situation in which breaking a moral code would never be justified?

## **Freedom v. Captivity**

Pi's family owns a zoo in India. Pi comments early in the play that many people think zoos are cruel. The animals are confined in cages in the zoo and again in transport boxes on the ship. However, Pi contends that animals in zoos have their needs taken care of and are, in a sense, more free than animals in the wild.

Later in the play, Pi finds himself trapped on a lifeboat with a tiger. He must fight to stay alive, find food and water.

### **Consider:**

- How do you feel about zoos? Are they cruel to animals?
- What about claims that zoos protect endangered species or injured animals?
- Should zoos be allowed to exist? Why or why not?
- What moments in the play show the concept of freedom or escape in an unexpected way?
- What moments in the play show the concept of captivity?

### **Create:**

- Write about one moment in your life when you felt free emotionally and physically.
- What led up to that moment?
- How did the feeling of freedom affect you and your sense of self?

## Spirituality and Religion: How does Pi's faith survive?

"Life of Pi' was to understand faith. Faith is a leap into the unknown. It makes you suspend your disbelief..." -Yann Martel, author Life of Pi novel

Pi is a young man when he begins his explorations into Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. He celebrates and embraces all three, finding beauty and comfort in each. He is unique in the way he is able to weave meaning and gather strength from each religion's teachings, and we see Pi develop as a devout, if unorthodox, believer in the beauty and mystery of "God." Many times in the show we see Pi call on God, and deepen and test his faith. Pi BELIEVES in a higher power, a bigger goodness that has reason and guides him.

### Consider:

- Do you think Pi could have survived his ordeal without the conviction of his faith?
- How does Pi borrow from religion to tell his own story?
- What do you think the final words of the play, "So it is with God" mean?
- Is Life of Pi a parable?

***Parable:** A parable is a story, often with a moral context, that is told to teach or enforce an idea or moral code. Prophets in all religions use parables, storytelling, as a way to instruct and reinforce meaning.*

### Create:

- What is something that is of moral value to YOU? Respect for your family? A love of living things? Perhaps you, like Pi, are vegetarian, or vegan? What is an idea you value and wish to embody in your day to day life?
- Brainstorm a list of "moral values" you have.
- Pick one of these values, the one you feel most passionately about.
- WHY is this important?
- Write a short story—one in which you are using your chosen moral value as the main idea, in the form of a parable. It doesn't matter if the story is true, or even plausible, what matters is the IDEA of it. You'll want to include:
  - A beginning, middle, end
  - An example of what happens when this value is misused or ignored
  - An example of what happens when this value is honored
  - Share this parable with your class and combine them to create a book of values for your class.
  - What are the themes and ideas that emerge?

## **The Art of Storytelling**

Storytelling is as old as humanity itself—from cave paintings that depict the hunt, to mythologies from different countries, and even today in the narratives and imaginations of popular culture—we tell stories to each other. We entertain. We create, we break hearts, open minds, and find truth and longevity in stories.

Pi chooses to tell a story, a fabulous act of imagination and creativity, that conveys his tale of trauma. Pi's story is compelling and intense, and he could have just as easily reported it out as facts and be done with it—but he chose instead to weave a tale.

### **Consider:**

- Why do you think this is?
- Why do stories have lasting power?
- What other stories of survival do you know of?

### **Create:**

- Choose a newsworthy story from popular culture—consider how you can tell this story as Pi does, as an act of imagination. Some techniques to consider:
  - Change the setting to someplace modern, or old fashioned.
  - Change the characters names or species.
  - Think about the MEANING you want to convey and consider how you can do that creatively and theatrically.
  - Can this story be told with puppets? with music? with images?
  - Share your tale with classmates and friends!