Life of Pi by Yann Martel
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Organizational Patterns

Life of Pi is divided into three parts with a total of 100 chapters. Part 1 consists of chapters one to thirty-six and tells of the author’s initial meeting with Piscine Molitor Patel, also known as Pi. Pi retells his life in India before his family’s departure to Canada when Pi is sixteen years old. Part two tells of Pi’s experience being stranded along the Pacific Equatorial counter-current trail. This experience lasts approximately seven months. Part 3 details Pi’s experience in relating his tale back to two Japanese investigators, who don’t believe his story.

The chapters are kept relatively short, especially throughout Part 1. They are told and written like short individuals stories presented in a series.

This would be an excellent book for students who were either juniors or seniors in high school as it uses very advanced language and literary devices. Students of younger age or grade may not understand the concept of the story.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Theme(s)

Higher Power- Throughout the novel, a common idea presented is the idea of a higher power watching over and being near to everyone. In Life of Pi, Pi follows three main religions—Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. He repeatedly explains that his only desire is to “love God” and he will do so in whatever way he feels comfortable. During his time at sea, Pi relies heavily on God to give him strength. In Chapter 63 where he explains his typical day on the boat, he describes praying five times throughout the day (pgs 190-191). This is evidence that Pi, even during probably the hardest trial of his life, still put his faith in God.

Belief in oneself- In this text, Pi relies on himself in order to stay alive. He frequently finds himself becoming discouraged and must put aside the thoughts. He does what he deems necessary so that he might be able to live to tell his tale. When he is being investigated by the Japanese men, no matter how much they criticize his story and demean him, he does not allow them to convince him otherwise. He has firm and unwavering belief in himself (pgs 290-318).
Setting

The novel takes place in India, the Pacific Ocean, and Mexico. However, it is important to mention that the author is being told the story at Pi’s home in Canada. While not much is described of this area, the author does detail the appearance of Pi’s home there. In Pondicherry, India Pi’s father runs a zoo. During the uprisings of the 1970s, Pi’s father chooses to move the family to Canada. It is during their travel aboard a Japanese shipping boat, that Pi’s journey while lost at sea begins. He spends roughly 7½ months at sea and then finds himself on a Mexico beach. He is found and taken to a Mexican hospital where he remains for the final duration of the story.

Point of View/Narrative Voice

The novel is told through the first person, with Pi narrating his story to the author. Throughout the first part there are multiple chapters told from the author’s perspective. In Part two, the story is told solely through the eyes of Pi as he recount his experience on the lifeboat with Richard Parker. Part three contains the perspectives of Pi, the Japanese Investigator, and the author.

The various narrative voices provide an added element to the story allowing us to hear what the author sees in Pi before he even hears his story. We are given more glimpses of Pi the man, while the story recounts the tale of Pi the boy. By including the thoughts and words of the Japanese investigator, we are given a skeptical view, perhaps one that a reader may already have. All of these various voices allow us to delve deeper into the stories and the characters.

Literary Terms

Personification

In the novel, Pi tells of the multiple animals he has watched and eventually befriended during his multiple adventures with the zoo animals. They have become some of his closest confidantes and friends. As he retells his stories to Martel, he frequently tells the stories of the animals as though they are humans.
Metaphor and Simile

Pi, a very intellectual individual, continually makes comparisons among his experiences. By doing so, Pi and Martel create a very visual scene. An example of simile would be found on page 132 where Pi says: “His paws were like volumes of Encyclopaedia Brittanica.” In order to give readers a sense of just how big Richard Parker’s paws are, Pi uses the comparison of a volume of an Encyclopedia, a very large and thick book. Further, an example of metaphor is found on page 192. It reads: “Time is an illusion that only makes us pant.” In order to give the reader a real understanding of how unnecessary and empty time is, he calls it an illusion, something unreal and unseen.

Foreshadowing

The author and Pi create a great sense of foreshadowing throughout Part I. In chapter eight, readers are presented with the question “Do you know which is the most dangerous animal in the zoo?” Shortly after being given this question, readers are told of Pi’s experience as his father tries to show how dangerous animals can be if humans are first careless. He convinces a worker to lock one of the zoo’s tigers up for three days in a small cage without food. When the tiger is revealed to the family the tiger is angry, hungry, and appears ready to pounce. In order to demonstrate how dangerous a tiger really can be, Pi’s father forces the children to watch as the tiger attacks an innocent goat in a connecting cage (pgs. 31-36). It can be assumed, at this point in the story, that Pi will more than likely have an encounter with a hungry and angry tiger later in the story, which he does.

Another instance of foreshadowing is found on page 91. Pi says, “Things didn’t turn out the way they were supposed to, but what can you do? You must take life the way it comes at you and make the best of it.” From this quote readers can assume that Pi will experience a life-altering experience that forces him to realize that he must do what needs to be done and make the best of his situation.

Foreshadowing is effectively used through this text to give readers a sense of suspense. Foreshadowing leaves readers wanting more. It also helps readers, especially young readers, to make inferences about what they predict is going to happen later in the text.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Peer-Acceptance

Readers will connect easily with the issue of peer-acceptance found in the text. On page 42, Pi explains that “escaped zoo animals are not dangerous absconding criminals but simply wild creatures seeking to fit in.” This is relatable as humans are just like this. Individuals are not irrational,
they are just doing whatever they find is necessary to fit in and be a part of the group. Later, Pi explains “When two creatures meet, the one that is able to intimidate its opponent is recognized as socially superior, so that a social decision does not always depend on a fight; an encounter in some circumstances may be enough” (pg. 44). Each of these are areas that readers can relate to and would make excellent discussion topics.

**Belief of a Higher Power**

In this novel, the search and belief in a form of higher power is evident and clear. In chapter 15, the author explains the various religious idols surrounding Pi’s home. Chapters 16-20 describe Pi’s path into Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. He embraces all three religions desiring to just “love God” (p. 69). Readers can find connection involving their own quest for some sort of theology to believe.

**Vocabulary Issues**

Life of Pi contains mostly understandable and easy language. However, as Pi and Martel are very educated and intelligent individuals, there are some words that students may need further assistance with. A vocabulary list, already prepared, would help student’s understanding of the story and provide a helpful resource if they did not understand.

Throughout the novel, typical “East Indian” words are scattered. It would be beneficial for students to be given a list of these words ahead of time as a reference to use during their reading. Teachers should prepare this list previous to beginning the text.

**Background Knowledge**

An important tool that students would need to use previous to their reading of the text would be the preface. In this, Martel gives a detailed account of how he was lead to Pi Patel and his experience finding him. The preface allows students to see the author’s attitude previous to his meeting with Pi and gives an interesting perspective as we see particular commentaries throughout the novel, where it is evident the author is connecting with Pi’s tale.

Throughout the novel, many religions and religious beliefs are focused on such as Christianity, Muslim, and Islam. Before reading the novel it would be important for teachers or students to gather materials on the various religions and study and discuss their differences. This would allow them to see the controversy that surrounds Pi as he chooses all three religions.

As Pi spends seven months of his life, and roughly 2/3 of the book living on a lifeboat with a tiger, it would help if students were familiar with the basic practices and habits of this creature. It would enlighten them as to Pi’s behavior with Richard Parker, the tiger, and his reactions in return.
Implications for Students of Diversity

Students of diversity may find interest in Pi retelling his experiences when he had first arrived in Canada. He explains, “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?’ I blanched. My fingers, which a second before had been taste buds savoring the food a little ahead of my mouth, became dirty under his gaze” (pg. 7). It may be helpful to the multicultural students and also for the majority culture students to hear from the students who are not native to this country to hear the experiences that those who immigrated here had that embarrassed them or made them feel ashamed of their particular beliefs or practices.

Gender Issues

Throughout this text, there are few gender issues. One considerable element, however, is Pi’s father’s dominance over his wife. In a particular scene in which his father wishes to teach his sons about the danger of wild animals, his mother expresses her distaste with his method of education. He, however, quickly scolds her and ignores her, continuing with his preferred routine (pg. 32).

Central Question/Enduring Issue

The enduring issue throughout this book is the idea of a Higher Power watching out for us and that through that heavenly concern we are able to do extraordinary tasks. This is evident as Pi, still stranded on his lifeboat, constantly prays to God and has confidence that God will protect him (pgs. 185, 190-191).

Research Issues/ Project Ideas

There are many great chances for excellent learning opportunities for students. While many of these are time-consuming projects, there are many chances for shorter and more meaningful activities. One of these would go along with Pi’s description of his neighborhood. Using the prompts that are given by Pi (ex. I lived the life of… My alarm clock was…Breakfast was...
punctuated by...). In this way students are given the chance to write about their home and neighborhood and the meaningful elements to them. Another assignment would correlate with Pi’s description of how he was given the name Piscine Molitor Patel. Students would have to write about their name, how it was chosen, and if they enjoy it or would enjoy another name. Later, as Pi develops the nickname of “Pi” students would continue writing about nicknames they have developed and their origination.

A longer more work-intensive assignment would be the task of researching the events of 1970s India that gave Pi’s father the idea to move his family to Northern America.

**Informative/Functional Texts**

Some further texts that would enlighten students and answer possible questions are:

- Pictures of the pools mentioned by Mamaji on pg. 10-12
- Pictures of animals mentioned throughout text
- Information on instances where animals have attacked humans
- Information on various religions mentioned
- Map of India
- Map of Pacific Ocean
- Books about India
- Books of various zoo animals with information on typical habits of each animal