

EDUCATION & RESOURCES PACK

LIFE OF PI



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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THEMES FOR DISCUSSION



Photo by Johan Persson

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.

Mamaji prays that “may these challenging times make us stronger”. As he starts to experience visions, Pi sees Mrs Biology Kumar who tells him, “Use logic and maths, Pi, use everything you have and defy the odds”. Although he is no longer surrounded by his family, Pi uses what they have taught him in his bid to survive.

Mr Okamoto closes the play with the words, “This is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of unimaginable difficulty...”

Family

In order for us to understand the weight of Pi’s grief, we need to see the family interact before the Tsimtsum sinks. Amma is very strongly associated with home, as Pi’s father tells him “Amma is making home away from home” when they board the Tsimtsum, and she also brings a Tiffin tin of food to help sustain them. Pi has a typically fractious relationship with his sister but the love and loyalty between them is very clear.

Grief

When we first meet Pi in the hospital room, he is clearly deeply traumatised by the loss of his family. It is difficult to reconcile Mr Okamoto's constant questioning with Pi's need to recover from the trauma he has experienced. We might also consider the pairings between the animals and the humans in the story. One interpretation is that Pi uses the animals in order to process what has happened – as a method of understanding the extreme circumstances in which he and his family found themselves.

The human 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." Mamaji is teaching Pi to swim, and this becomes a metaphor for his ability to survive. Shortly before they 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.

Reality vs. fantasy

Towards the end of the play, Mr Okamoto expresses disbelief at Pi's ability to survive in a lifeboat with a tiger. Pi tells him, "Life is hard to believe. God is hard to believe...I applied reason and logic at every moment. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bath water." Here the two characters are struggling to understand each other's perspectives.

It is up to the audience to consider what they believe in, and what they believe truly happened during Pi's time at sea. Yann Martel and Lolita Chakrabati both wish us to consider our relationship with truth and with fantasy. When Mr Okamoto tells Pi, "A story has an element of invention. We don't want invention. We want facts" Pi responds, "You want a story that confirms what you already know. You want dry, yeast-less factuality. A story without animals." However, the audience is never told which version to believe.

Individuality

Pi is only 17 years old, and yet is self-assured when he interacts with Mr Okamoto. Pi tells him, "We're all children, Mr Okamoto". When Mr Okamoto becomes frustrated that Pi will not, or cannot, provide the information he requires, Pi retorts, "If these are not the answers you want Mr Okamoto, then you must ask different questions". Pi is keen to assert his own beliefs, despite his vulnerability and trauma.

Morality

There are two parallel stories in *Life of Pi*, one with animals, and one without. Although Yann Martel and Lolita Chakrabati are keen for the audience to create their own interpretations, the concept of who gets to take the life of another being (animal or otherwise) is key to the story. One interpretation is that Richard Parker is a parallel character to Pi, who must take drastic action to survive and to avenge the murder of his loved ones (Orangutan representing his mother, for example).

Civilisation

When he is forced to eat the turtle, Pi is conflicted. Commander Grant Jones tells him, “Never forget above all you are a gentleman. Civilisation is the only thing that separates man from beast. Remember the definition of a gentleman is he who uses a butter knife even when dining alone.”

Throughout the story, Pi is forced to make decisions that would be considered uncivilised, or even morally wrong, and one interpretation of the story is that Pi must invent the animals to distance himself from those actions that he finds abhorrent, despite the fact that he had no option if he were to survive.

Faith & Religion

Religion is mentioned very early on in the play. Pi challenges Mr Okamoto by saying, “I will tell you everything...because my story will make you believe in God”. He mentions later, “Many of us lose God along life’s way”

Mr Okamoto and Pi have a number of exchanges about religion. Mr Okamoto tells Pi, “I didn’t lose God. I have never been a believer. Religion is a habit rather than a truth. A crutch in time of need.” Pi also exchanges views with several religious leaders when they meet in Pondicherry Market and compete for Pi’s loyalty. He eventually tells them, “You’re just asking me to choose the better story”.

Pi also tells Mr Okamoto, “choosing doubt as a philosophy of life is like choosing immobility as a mode of transport”.

Migration

Pi and his family board the Tsimtsum in order to travel to Canada. They are leaving India because of the political tensions which make it dangerous and unpredictable to live there any longer.

IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Page numbers relate to the 2018 Canongate Books edition of *Life of Pi*.

Creative Writing

“The ship sank”

Yann Martel highlights that in his novel, the sinking of the Tsimtsum is communicated in just three words: “The ship sank”. Although there is a brief description of the immediate aftermath, the narrative swiftly moves on to Pi. (This moment can be found on p.97)

In the film and theatre version, the storytelling requires the sinking of the ship to be presented in a visual way. Martel comments that the film version of *Life of Pi* depicts the sinking in a richly visual, extended and very dramatic scene.

TASK: In exactly 100 words, re-write a prose description of the ship that could easily be turned into a film or theatre scene. Focus on using strong visual imagery in your writing, and aim to use at least three of the following techniques:

- Alliteration
- Parallelism
- Simile or metaphor
- Personification
- Onomatopoeia
- Anaphora
- Epistrophe
- Focus on the five senses

Describing Richard Parker

“I wish I could describe what happened next, not as I saw it...but as I felt it” (p. 151)

In this paragraph, Pi describes Richard Parker in great detail. Yann Martel considered this an easy passage of description to write, because most people are familiar with the basic appearance of a tiger and therefore he did not have to “work too hard” to create a convincing description of the tiger. Tigers all have unique faces, and Martel compares their appearance to the beautiful make up worn in traditional Chinese theatre.

Discussion task:

- Why do you think this description is so successful? What are your favourite words and phrases in this paragraph?
- How does Martel combine a sense of awe and wonder at Richard Parker’s appearance, and the sense of fear that Pi feels at his presence?

Writing task:

Choose an animal and describe it using some of the same methods that you have discussed regarding Richard Parker. This could be a domestic animal, or it could be an exotic or rare animal. You may need to do some research in order to be as accurate as possible. Remember that Yann Martel did a huge amount of zoological research for the novel.

Dictionary and vocabulary tasks:

“They speak a funny English in India. They like words like bamboozle”

In the Author’s Note, the (fictional) author of the book discusses the richness of the language and its sound. During his research, Yann Martel spent time in India and listened carefully to the way in which English is spoken there.

- Compile a list of your class’s favourite words. Make sure you find out why they are people’s favourite. It can be the way that they sound, how they are spelt, the word might remind us of a particular person or place, for example. Do you notice a pattern? Are the words generally nouns, or verbs, for example?
- Now compile a list of your class’s least favourite words. Again, find out why. Do you notice any patterns to why people like or dislike certain words? (Make sure you remain polite and respectful when having this discussion!)
- Is it possible to make a complete story from all of the class’s favourite words?

Adapting Texts

There has been a strong demand for adaptations of novels into plays for several centuries. Adaptations of Charles Dickens's works were often already being staged even before he had finished publishing the serialisations!

Research task:

Look at local, regional and national theatre programmes for the next six months. How many of the productions on offer are adaptations? Is there a pattern to the choice of text, for example, a particular author or genre? Does there seem to be an interest in a particular time period in which the original novels were written? Can you see any patterns in terms of stylistic choices being made in performance (for example, the use of puppets, ensemble and multi-roling)? Is there a connection between the texts that are studied at GCSE and A level, and the adaptations that are available in theatres?

Written or Spoken Task:

Choose a novel that you have enjoyed reading. Write a persuasive letter or speech to a theatre producer (see Pack One for information on the producer's role in our interview with Simon Friend) proposing an adaptation of your chosen novel.

You should include:

- Why you think it's a successful novel, and which elements you think would translate well to theatre performance.
- Why it is relevant to 21st century theatre goers.
- Include suggestions for two or three key scenes that could be adapted (you could include a short script for one of those scenes, too)
- If the author of your chosen novel has written a number of novels, why do you think this novel should be prioritised for adaptation?
- Anticipate any challenges that the story holds (for example, is there a strong fantasy element that would be difficult to stage in front of a live audience?) and how you might deal with those challenges.

Using words carefully

“Stream your sea anchor...”

Life of Pi has been translated into 55 different languages. Translation poses particular problems when specific words don't have a direct equivalent. One particular word that caused difficulty was 'anchor': Yann Martel had to work hard to ensure one of the translators could easily imagine what an anchor is, and how to explain it in their own language.

Work in pairs. Person A should think of an object that is not necessarily an everyday, easily identifiable object. They then have two minutes to describe that object, but without naming it. Instead they should focus on shape, size, what it's made of, colour, function/use etc. Person B has 3 guesses to identify that object.

The pair can then swap over and Person B describes an unusual object.

Extension: To make this job harder, teachers can prohibit the use of certain words or phrases!

Research task:

“The shipping clerk mixed up the hunter's name with the tiger's name”

Pi's full name is Piscine Molitor Patel. Piscine is French for swimming pool and Pi is named after “the finest swimming pool in Paris”. He shortens his name to Pi, which is also a word with mathematical connotations.

What does your name mean, and why were you given that name? Does it have cultural significance, for example, or is it a name that is passed down through your family? How have nicknames been created for you or members of your family? Why do you think names are important?

Writing to argue

“A story has an element of invention. We don't want invention, we want facts”.

In Life of Pi Father says, *“Man is the most dangerous animal in the zoo”.*

Write an article for a newspaper which argues that man is more dangerous than any animal.

You should pay close attention to form, audience and purpose, and ensure that you plan your answer before you start writing. Marks are awarded for content and technical accuracy.

You might like to think about:

- Humans and their impact on the environment (the planet and/or endangered species)
- Humans and their ability to commit crime
- Whether our obsession with progress and technology is doing more harm than good

IN THE DRAMA STUDIO

Page numbers relate to the 2018 Canongate Books edition of *Life of Pi*.

Creating the Animals

In the early days of the Research and Development (R&D) process it wasn't always a given that the animals would be represented by puppets.

Max Webster says, "anything is stageable. I think it would be incredibly exciting to explore different ways to create those characters on stage"

Physicalising the animals task:

Choose one of the key animals that are important to *Life of Pi*. It could be:

- The goat
- The hyena
- Richard Parker (tiger)
- The giraffe
- The orangutan
- The zebra

It's now important to research those animals: their appearance, their physicality and the vocalisations that they use. You can create that research by:

- Watching wildlife videos (including in slow motion so that you can notice walking patterns and rhythms, where their centre of gravity lies, how they move from sitting to standing etc)
- Listening to recordings of their natural habitat
- Looking carefully at photographs

Now you can work individually, or with a partner who can observe and give feedback, to create the movements for that animal, using your own body. Once you have had the opportunity to work individually and become confident with what you have discovered and created, you can now create a series of sequences just as Max, Finn and the team worked on sequences with the puppets in this production. Initially this will be improvised, but then refined. Max describes it as 'writing the scene'. Although no physical writing takes place, you might wish to narrate the key moments of the interaction. For example;

- The goat enters the enclosure and explores
- The tiger sees the goat
- The tiger follows the goat with its eyes and begins to stalk it
- The tiger prepares to pounce
- The tiger pounces
- The tiger pins the goat to the floor
- The goat struggles

Inhabiting the character.

It may feel a little uncomfortable trying to simply imitate an animal. Instead, it may help to consider how you communicate the essence of the character. For example, a tiger is elegant, stealthy, strong and lithe. How can you use your own body (and facial expression?) to communicate these qualities? Remember that these are not harmless cartoon animals – we do not need to stay loyal to their roles in the story and the behaviours that they demonstrate!

However you choose to depict the character, Max's advice is, "be BOLD! Commit to communicating it in an exciting way. It's your imagination and the audience's, that carries it"

Vocalising the character

Part of your research was to discover the ways in which animals use sound to communicate. In the play, Pi's father tells him,

"Tigers make many sounds Piscine. A full-throated aaah-oooh during the mating season. A threatening growl when they charge. Prusten is the quietest of calls, a puff through the nose expressing friendliness and harmless intentions."

In a show where the experiences of the animals are just as important as the humans', it's important that the performers can convey feelings to the audience without using spoken language. A great deal of time was spent in rehearsals finding and using those vocalisations.

Listen carefully to recordings of the sounds you have found for your animal. It may help to do this with earphones on. How can you use your breath, your mouth and voice to recreate those sounds, or the essence of them?

Once you have practised and refined a few of those sounds, replay the physical sequence you have created, and try to incorporate those sounds.

What happens if one person creates the physicality of the animal but another creates the sounds? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this shared approach?

Masks

In Pack 2 you were invited to design masks based on Yann Martel's descriptions of the animals in the novel. How can you use those masks to help you create and sustain the performance of these characters?

Rehearsing and Performing a Monologue: A Plan for Teachers

This lesson plan by Guildford School of Acting facilitates the rehearsal of a monologue from the play. The speech is taken from Act Two, when Pi narrates his arrival on the shore of Mexico. The text can be found at the end of this lesson plan.

It is recommended that students in Key Stage 4 or 5 memorise the monologue in order to make the most of the opportunities to develop performance skills, without being inhibited by holding the script

Activity:

Retell the story of the Life of Pi as a story of several units. Explain that the units are not set in stone and can be defined any way the group wishes. It could be defined by the entrance of a new character, by a new location, by a change of emotion, by a change of energy and tempo, etc.

This activity can be completed as a group:

- Create a timeline of the play from one corner of the space to the other. Each student represents a moment through an individual tableau
- In a circle play 'One Word Story' using a ball/bean bag to retell the story

Speaking the Text

Activity:

Scaffold the class to speak the monologue out loud. This can be done by one student, or by sharing the text sentence by sentence amongst the class, or all students can speak the text out loud simultaneously

The Given Circumstances

Discussion: Introduce the concept of the Given Circumstances as the 'who, where, what, why, how and when' of a narrative

Activity:

Establish the given circumstances of the monologue.

Begin this activity as a private reflection with independent bullet point notes being made. Then place students into pairs or small groups so they can share their reflections and discuss further. You can then develop the exercise to a whole class discussion where thoughts are shared and noted on a whiteboard/ screen.

Rhythm and Tempo – Mining the Text

Discussion:

Consider the rhythmic journey of the text, highlighting the visual clues on the page such as punctuation, lengths of sentences and sentence structure. Point out the following that may require a pause as a new thought:

- New paragraphs
- Pauses
- Full stops

These uses of punctuation may require a momentary pause, but not as much as the above

- Commas
- Dashes, semi colons and colons

Note how the student as actor might approach the following:

- Long sentences with a continued throughline of sustained thought
- Moments of alliteration
- Simile and metaphor
- Short snappy phrases
- Prompt the students to reflect on why the writer has structured the text in this way.

These are all clues to the actor – what do they mean?

Highlighters may be useful for some students as part of this exercise to bring out the punctuation on the page.

To scaffold the approach, you may wish to work through the text as a class first to collectively identify and agree the tempo for each section of the text in response to the clues within the writing. Alternatively, you may allow students to find their own understanding of the rhythms in the text and to determine their own approach.

Activity:

Ask students to speak the text out loud whilst walking around the space. On each of the following, ask them to stop walking and change their direction of travel:

- New paragraphs
- Pauses
- Full stops

Reflect on how this helps to break the text into different thoughts.

Activity:

Ask students to sit on a chair and to begin to speak the text out loud. On each of the following, ask them to move from sitting to standing/standing to sitting:

- New paragraphs
- Pauses
- Full stops

Reflect on how this helps them to further identify the different thoughts within the text.

Range and Feeling – Mining the Text

Activity:

Ask the students to stand in a line down the middle of the room (you may need two well-spaced lines depending on the size of your studio and cohorts). They should all face the same way. Identify one side of the studio as ‘warmth’ and one as ‘cold’.

Instruct students to speak the text out loud. If they feel the section of thought is moving toward warmth, ask them to physically move toward the warm side. If they feel the section of thought is moving toward cold, ask them to physically step back toward the cold side. Point out that they may respond to the text differently to their classmates so not to follow others and to make their own choices responding to what the text gives them personally.

Uniting the Text

Activity:

Retell the monologue as a story of several units in the students’ own words. As with the introductory task, explain that the units are not set in stone and can be defined any way the group wishes. It could be defined by a new sentence, by a new paragraph, by a change of emotion, by a change of energy and tempo, etc.

The teacher should note the agreed units generated by the class visually on a board or screen.

From Published Text to Owning the Text

Activity:

Give each student a piece of paper and ask them to write their name at the top. Then ask them to rewrite the first ‘unit’ or section of the monologue in their own words. This is a timed activity and students have a limited timeframe to complete this. Once it is done ask the students to make a paper aeroplane with the paper and fly it across the room, or to screw it into a ball and for all students to have a snowball fight with them. The students should each rescue a piece of paper and then write the next line of the monologue in their own words, picking up where the last writer finished. Continue until the monologue is completed.

Process Over Product

Discussion:

Divide the class into pairs and ask the students to compare and contrast what they felt was most helpful to them as an actor and a learner in this lesson with their partners

You may wish to pre-prepare a reflective scaffolding worksheet or list of prompt questions to hand out to the students or display to support this discussion. Prompts might include:

- Which activity did I enjoy the most?
- Which activity felt too embarrassing for me to enjoy?
- Which activity pushed me to understand the script?

Which activity made the script make sense?

Pi's Monologue

PI:

I was so happy I could've stayed there forever. A few nights later, I saw something bobbing in the lake, it looked like a dead shark. It dissolved in the water and I thought I must've dreamt it. And then wonder of wonders I found fruit - fragrant, juicy, ripe fruit, at the top of a tall tree. I clambered up, plucked that fruit and took an enormous bite. It was the best thing I'd ever tasted, dripping down my chin, sticky and sweet, but there was something hard inside it and when I took it out of my mouth, I saw it was a human tooth. I tore open another fruit, there was a molar in it and then another, it was the same. It was almost dark, the air was thick with scent, I was getting drowsy again but I knew I had to get to the boat. I ran. The ground burned my feet and that's when I understood - that island was carnivorous. It lured me in with fresh water by day then deadened my senses at night turning to acid, digesting any flesh it could find.

That was a shark I'd seen in the water.
That's why the meerkats slept in the trees!
They were trying to warn me.

Frantic squealing of meerkats.

I had to leave, I ran for the boat but I could hear Richard Parker howling in pain.

RICHARD PARKER howls.

I couldn't leave him. He'd saved my life.
I blew my whistle, I roared and shouted
and finally, he came out of the trees,
jumped in the boat and we went back out to sea...