Concept Analysis
For Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli
Little Brown and Company (New York: 1999)

Plot Summary
Jeffrey Magee lived in Bridgeport with his parents until the age of three when both of his parents were killed in a trolley crash. His Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan, who lived in Hollidaysburg Pennsylvania, took him in. His aunt and uncle hated each other, and although they lived in the same house never spoke. Eventually, at the age of eleven, Jeffrey could not take the silence anymore and he ran away, never to live with them again.

One year later, Jeffrey walks into the racially divided town of Two Mills. Jeffrey receives the name of “Maniac” because he does amazing feats throughout town, like intercepting a football pass during the varsity’s practice, saving a child from Finsterwald’s backyard, and hit a home run off of John McNab, the biggest and toughest little league pitcher around. Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee does not understand racism and does not realize that the town is divided into East end (Blacks) and West end (whites) of town. He wanders into the East end of town and runs into trouble with the bully, Mars Bar, on that side of town, but is rescued by Amanda Beale.

Jeffrey lives with the Beale family on the East side of town not understanding why everyone had race problems between blacks and whites because all he sees are people. He begins to feel racial pressure when an older black man points out that whites don’t belong in their side of town; he feels it further when someone graffiti on the Beale’s home, and finally leaves town after someone destroys one of Amanda’s beloved books.

Jeffrey runs away and makes friends with an older man named Grayson. Maniac teaches Grayson how to read, and Grayson talks to Maniac about baseball and life. Once Maniac finally feels like he has a family in the man, Grayson dies and Maniac is once again left alone. He ends up back in town living in the West end with the McNab family, one of the more racist white families in the town. John McNab and his friends are building a bunker in the house for the “invasion of the blacks;” Maniac cannot stand by and watch so he leaves the house and chooses to sleep in the park. The younger McNab brothers, Piper and Russell, find Jeffery and ask him to come to Piper’s birthday party. Maniac agrees as long as he can bring a friend. He brings Mars Bar hoping that it will teach both the McNabs and Mars Bar that racism is not acceptable; his plan backfires and he ends up dragging Mars Bar out of the house to avoid a fight with John McNab.

Eventually, Maniac and Mars Bar begin to run together and learn respect for one another. Mars Bar rescues Russell McNab from the trolley trestle where Jeffrey’s parents were killed. Mars Bar becomes a hero to the two white boys. At the end of the story Mars Bar and Amanda Beale convince Jeffery “Maniac” Magee to come live with the Beales again. As he heads to the Beale’s house Jeffery finally feels like he is headed home.

Organizational Patterns
Maniac Magee is divided up into three separate parts, and each part marks the progression of Jeffrey’s experiences in Two Mills.
Part I (pages 5-76) is where Maniac moves into Two Mills and is ignorant of the racism. In this section of the book he begins to understand what racism is, and the effect it can have on people. He learns about the ugly reality of racism and the taint it has on the town.

In Part II (pages 79-118) Maniac meets Grayson, a janitor at the zoo and an old minor league baseball player, and the two teach each other about life. Maniac teaches Grayson how to read and Grayson teaches Maniac about life. Part II is where Jeffery begins to “grow up” and understand a little more about racism, and is learning how to combat racism.

In Part III (pages 121-184) Maniac comes back Two Mills and is confronted with racism again, but this time he meets it head on and faces the problem of racism, and the ill treatment of people based on appearances. Each part of Maniac Magee shows the evolution of Jeffery’s understanding and learning to overcome and fight against racism.

**The Big Question**

Can we acknowledge and accept differences in other people?

**Background Knowledge**

The book never specifies the time period, but based on events in the book it is probably taking place in the 1960’s. Giving background to students about the division between the races at this time, and showing pictures of the separate drinking fountains and the ways towns were divided can give a clearer picture to students about racism in America at this time. Giving students more information about the racism at this time in American history can help with the background for this time period.

**Issues Related to this Study of Literature**

**Theme**

As the big question represents, at its core Maniac Magee is about acknowledging the humanity in everyone. By setting up characters in binaries, with similar tendencies seen in characters from both East End and West End (Mars Bar vs. John McNab, or the Beales and the Pickwells), Spinelli shows that at their core, humans share the same basic traits regardless of color or money. Maniac, with his lack of being aware of racial segregation, manages to illuminate this fact to the residents of Twin Mills, embodying the themes presented. At its root, Maniac Magee’s focus lies in the acceptance of people, whether white or black, benevolent or cruel. Within this goal, there are two pervading subthemes.

1. **Race**: Issues pertaining to race are the most obvious in Maniac Magee. Maniac bridges the gap between East End and West End, and serves as the brunt of two different types of racial anger. In East End, he is rejected because of his skin color, while he is rejected in the West End because of his sympathies towards East End. There is a lack of understanding about similarities, as exhibited when Grayson asks Maniac if black people eat potatoes and cake (pg. 87-88). West End also initially reject Maniac because of his lack of social status, which leads into the second issue.

2. **Ideas of Home and Family**: Maniac’s transient nature and quest for normalcy is a huge theme throughout the book. It begins with his parents’ death and his life in a broken, hate-filled home. The book follows Maniac as he deals with homelessness, coming ever closer to finding an address and acceptance. As the book shows with his
relationship with the Beales and especially with Grayson, family does not always fit the conventional pattern, but extends to any place that offers love and acceptance.

**Setting**
The entire story takes place in Pennsylvania. It begins in Bridgeport, where his parents are killed in the Schuylkill River. Maniac lives with his aunt and uncle in Hollidaysburg, and then most of the rest takes place in Twin Mills, Pa. It might be good for students to see a map of the area that the book takes place in. The story also has a brief section about Maniac in Gettysburg. Having the students find out more information about the state of Pennsylvania, and about the history of the area might be helpful when reading the book. But students will still have a good understanding of the book if they are not aware of all of the history around the area. The background knowledge about racism during the 1960’s is more important for background information for the book than the knowledge of Pennsylvania history.

**Point of View**
Maniac Magee is told from an omniscient viewpoint, with some unseen and all-knowing narrator providing the story. The narrator’s voice echoes that of a child telling a good tall tale–the points are focused into the general legend, and then focus into a specific telling of events. It’s interesting to note that at some points the narrator seems completely removed (more common earlier in the novel), while at others, Spinelli craftily makes the voice privy to emotion and intimate detail, but weaves that focus into the narrative flawlessly.

**Characterization**
- **Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee**: The title character and protagonist, Maniac is a young boy who is looking for a home. He is infinitely resourceful, and good at practically anything, as proved by his unusual prowess at all sports, at untying knots, and especially at running. He is “a scraggly little kid jogging …, the soles of both sneakers hanging by their hinges and flopping open like dog tongues each time they came up from the pavement” (9).
- **Amanda Beale**: Maniac’s first friend and the daughter in the first home that takes him in. Amanda is a young, smart black girl who values her family, her friends, but especially her books. She will defend her books to her life, and will let all her copious amounts of sass come out to protect them. “Amanda was suspicious. … But Amanda was also friendly” (10).
- **Mars Bar Thompson**: The meanest kid in the East End, Mars Bar begins as an enemy of Maniac (based solely on racial barriers) and initially torments him. Towards the end, Mars Bar’s competitive natural drive him to become a running partner and then unlikely friend to Maniac. “Mars Bar was confused. Who was this kid? What was this kid? As usual, when Mars Bar got confused, he got mad” (35).
- **John McNab**: The most ruthless Little League pitcher in West End, John McNab is another initial enemy of Maniac’s that turns into an unlikely ally. Because of his little brothers, John allows Maniac to stay at his house, which is as dirty and ill-kept as possible. John’s family spends their time building a bunker against the impending uprising (or so they think) by the African-American population. “McNab was a giant. He stood five feet eight and was said to weigh over a hundred and seventy pounds…The point is, the rest of the league was no match for McNab” (22).
Grayson: An old man who works as the grounds worker for the local park. He saves Maniac from starvation in the buffalo pen, and he and Maniac form an unlikely family in the band shell. Grayson takes care of Maniac and tells him stories about his minor league baseball days, and Maniac teaches Grayson to read. Eventually, Grayson dies and Maniac is left alone again. “‘Wait—’ called Maniac. ‘What did you want to grow up to be when you were a kid?’” Grayson paused in the doorway. He looked out into the night. ‘A baseball player,’ he said” (90).

**Literary Terms Related to the Work**
- climax
- falling action
- imagery
- metaphor
- plot
- resolution
- rising action
- setting
- simile
- allusion
- theme
- hero

The literary terms that we will be focusing on are: rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. All these terms are text features that are included in any good story. Maniac Magee is unique, in that it is broken into three distinct parts, each with its own rising action (Chapters 19, 31, 44) and climax (Chapters 21, 32, 44). But the falling action and resolution of those three parts of the book does not come together until the end of the novel (Chapter 46). In the first two parts of the book the climax is the ending point of both of the parts; the reader is left unsettled, and then the book just picks up a little bit later. This book will be a good way to teach seventh graders about the elements of a story; the rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution are all easily recognizable features in this book.

**Affective Issues**

The reason Maniac Magee is a great novel for seventh grade, is that they can so readily identify with Maniac. He is their age, participates in activities that most kids partake in, and has similar tastes and ideals. Yet in this novel, Maniac handles issues like racism, death, and homelessness that most of your students will never have to face. You can discuss Maniac’s interaction with Mars Bar on two planes, both the wide scale of racism and the smaller, more identifiable scale of people being bullied simply for being different. Grayson’s death can introduce concepts of mourning and mortality, and can be connected to students who have had grandparents die (etc.). Finally, bringing in Maniac’s regular kid tastes for candy and running around can be used as an agent to ask the students to imagine how they would cope with not having a home or family.

Cowan and Richins, 2011
Vocabulary Issues

The vocabulary issues related to this novel relate more to dialect than defining and adding new words to our students’ speech and writing. Some of these words and phrases, like Mars Bar’s use of “fishbelly,” should be addressed at the beginning of the unit when the students are given some background knowledge. The rest of these words and phrases can be defined as the students move along in the novel, like defining “Uzi’s” and “pillboxes” when those are encountered with the McNabs. Most of the racist terms that are used in this novel are similar to terms used today, but care should be taken when discussing the terms to the class. Racism and prejudice are some of the main issues in this book and some of the vocabulary in this novel will help students break down these issues.

Implications for Students of Diversity

The big question for this book is: Can we acknowledge and accept differences in other people? This question ties in perfectly with students of diversity; especially when accepting differences between people of different races is at the center of this novel. Looking at how racism ties into the idea of acknowledging and accepting differences in an important topic for our students of diversity. There are so many aspects of racism that can tie to our students; things like looking past the color of someone’s skin to who they really are, or accepting everyone for their differences. Teaching students that everyone is equal no matter their skin color, nationality, or disability is an important aspect that can be taught using this novel. Students with special needs can benefit from the novel by focusing on accepting everyone for their differences, and looking past how people look on the outside to who they really are on the inside. Teaching that our differences make us unique can be beneficial to students with disabilities. This novel has a great message for our students of diversity.

Research Issues/ Project Ideas

- In-class Venn diagram and paragraph write. Students will used a Venn diagram to compare themselves to Jeffery “Maniac” Magee. They will list similarities and differences between themselves and this character. After they have about five to ten similarities and differences they will turn the graphic organizer over and write two paragraphs. In these paragraphs they will discuss how they are both similar and different to Maniac Magee.

- Jump-rope rhyme. In the book, Maniac Magee is partially introduced with a skipping rhyme that girls sing about him. Students could compose their own rhyme (using the book as an example) before the book and about themselves, as it would integrate ideas of legend and traits that are passed down. Another option is having them create one at the end of the book, but about one of the supporting characters. This will help students synthesize information and characterization.

- After finishing reading Maniac Magee, read One Families Path to Homelessness, and have students write a letter to the editor about homelessness. Have them discuss what it means to have a home or not have a home, and the effect homelessness can have on someone. Have students look at what other people their age do to fight against homelessness.
• In groups, have students research about the author of Maniac Magee, Jerry Spinelli. Have them find interesting facts about his life and other books he has written. Have each group put together a poster about interesting things in his life, and one other book by Jerry Spinelli they might want to read.
• Have students write their own myth about their own self or a friend. What heroic things does their character do? Have them add pictures to their myth that help tell the story.

Enrichment Resources
• American Born Chinese can be a good enrichment resource; it looks at issues of acknowledging and accepting people for who they are and not what their nationality is, and looking past our own prejudice. It also looks at stereotypes of different races and overcoming those stereotypes.
• Tall Tales: A study of how legends can arise can help students understand the mythos behind Maniac. We would suggest an American bias, introducing students and helping them understand concepts of legend by examining Johnny Appleseed or Paul Bunyan. Johnny Appleseed would be especially helpful, since he traces back to an actual person with an actual history (much like Maniac Magee). http://www.writingfix.com/Chapter_Book_Prompts/Maniac3.htm
• Mythology: This would be a good companion piece for myths in general, as it puts the story-telling conventions into a modern light.
• Martin Luther King Jr. “I Have a Dream” is a good example of showing what people were doing to combat racism at this time. This could be used with other racial responses, like Malcolm X or Rosa Parks. http://www.mlkonline.net/video-i-have-a-dream-speech.html
• This book could also be used as part of a race unit, or in literary circles, complimented with novels like Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor or The Watsons go to Birmingham- 1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis.
• Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting is a picture book that depicts a little boy and his father who are homeless and living in an airport. This might be a good supplementary book when discussing Jeffery’s homelessness throughout the novel. http://www.carolhurst.com/titles/maniacmagee.html
• Another resource for helping students understand child homelessness could be to use clips from Oliver Twist, Empire of the Sun, or August Rush, where children are portrayed as on the streets and fending for themselves. This can offer a visual picture of how Maniac could be living.