Maniac Magee
Concept Analysis

Literary Text: Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli (Little Brown and Company, 1990)

Summary
Jeffrey Lionel Magee was three when his parents were in a tragic train accident and Jeffrey became an orphan. Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan took possession of him when he was three years old, but their silent and detached lives led Jeffrey to run away eight years later. And he ran to Two Mills, across the river from where he was born. He soon became a legend – Maniac Magee – as he made appearances all over town, making town history on his first day: for instance, he dared to sit right down on the Finsterwald’s front porch and read a book, a porch that had been avoided for years by all children in town. As he searches for a family to really belong to, Maniac also leaves his own mark on the segregated town and people of Two Mills.

Organizational Patterns
Maniac Magee is organized into parts and chapters. There is a Before the Story section that is only a couple of pages long. Then, Part I includes 21 chapters, chapters 22 – 32 comprise Part II and 33 – 46 make up part III. The Before the Story section is an introduction to the legend of Maniac Magee, which would be fascinating as an introduction AND a conclusion to the story. The new knowledge and ideas gained throughout the story are highlighted and provide impressive significance to the themes of the story. The three parts separate Maniac’s struggle to find a family into his three experiences in three different family situations.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRAlMsgLlns&feature=related

According to Jerry Spinelli, the enduring issue of Maniac Magee is childhood recollection (A youtube link to his interview on this novel is listed above). Although, he affirms, “almost no one ever gets this.” Jerry iterates, “Everyone has an experience of going back to a hometown or childhood place and finding that what they thought was huge and grotesque turns out to be kind of insignificant and small.” Maniac Magee has a very mythical quality to it to emphasize the fancifulness that comes with most childhood memories. Even when seen through the filter of childhood, what impact and importance do our childhood memories have in our lives?

What role do your childhood memories play in your life? Maniac's life is portrayed here as a heroic tall tale of sorts. If Maniac is looking back at his life and telling us the story, how might what really happened be different from what we are reading here? It is pretty common to have many versions of one childhood story depending on who is telling the story. Maniac is faced with bullies who back down and become friends after being faced with Maniac's radiating cheerfulness and welcoming attitude. Maniac's many daring feats that are accomplished without him showing the least inclination of fear, let alone a sense of danger, show a confidence rivaled only by superheros in comic books. Would these character traits and this story take on a different feel if told from a different point of view?
What impact do your childhood memories have on your decisions and life today? The lighthearted telling of Maniac's struggle through homelessness, racist issues and the search for a family and a home combine to give a story of happiness and hope despite the consequently traumatic occurrences in Maniac's life: losing his parents, living in a stressful environment, living on the streets, being the brunt of racist actions, losing a dear friend to death, and being “hunted” by larger and meaner kids. These are a lot for a 12 or 13 year old to handle and yet Maniac comes through these circumstances with a bright outlook and a patient acceptance of the world before him. He gives an inspirational view of the beauty the world can hold if we look for it as well as an insight into the resiliency of spirit.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Theme

Racism – Although this story is set in Two Mills, Pennsylvania (a fictitious recreation of Norristown, PA), rather than a more stereotypical Southern United States town, the segregation between black and white citizens of the town is strictly adhered to. Maniac chooses to ignore the strict lines drawn between the white and black population, making his first friend in Amanda Beale, a young black girl. He then lives with the Beale family although no white person had ever been that far into the east end of town. As Maniac is subjected to racist actions from some of the black townspeople who feel that a “whitey” has no business being in their end of town, he leaves the family to protect them from further harm. He is then stunned to find that the white population (for the most part) has never interacted with the black population. He then generates circumstances that allow him to begin to create a bridge between the two communities, by inviting the two races to begin to interact with one another and making friends himself with more than one black family.

Homelessness – Due to running, racism and death, Maniac spends various portions of this story living on the streets. He sneaks into the local zoo to sleep and eat, relying totally on himself to live. The story remains lighthearted throughout this trying time for Maniac, even slipping once into the point of view of the zoo's buffalo in order to distance the reader (I feel) from the harsh reality that Maniac is cold, alone, dirty and starving. Although this mythical tale does not provide a bleak outcome from so much time spent living on the streets, the fact that Maniac does live on the streets several times provides a background to a discussion about the realities present when one is homeless.

Family – From the moment he starts running in Hollidaysburg, Maniac is looking for a family. He encounters a few different versions of what it means to be a family. The Beale family are a loving traditional nuclear family unit. They immediately accept Maniac into the family and the family seems to function even better with Maniac in their home. This idyllic situation doesn't last long before racist actions drive Maniac to search out another place to live in order to protect his family. Maniac next meets Grayson, an old gentleman who works at the zoo, who takes Maniac into his version of home and the two create a great little life for themselves. Although they live in a shed, with only the bare necessities of life, they have each other and that is enough. When Grayson dies, Maniac is forced to begin yet another search for family. He runs into Piper and Russell McNab who take him into their version of a family. The mean and drunk father barely recognizes another mouth to feed in the crumbling, cockroach-infested house, yet Maniac
continues to stay and do all he can to get the young boys to go to school. However, when the McNabs build an anti-black barricade in the home, he decides it is better at the zoo and there he stays until he is invited/forced to “return home” by Amanda Beale. This novel provides an ingenious look at the dynamics in a few different types of families. What does the traditional family look like? This could provide a good discussion on the nurture required to raise healthy children. What is required in a family unit in order to call it a family?

Other Themes – Friendship, importance of school, reading, illiteracy.

Setting
Two Mills, Pennsylvania is a fictional re-creation of Norristown, Pennsylvania, Jerry Spinelli’s hometown. The segregated town and the street that was divided in the middle come from nearby Pennsylvania towns. While Two Mills is fictional, the surrounding towns are real Pennsylvania towns: Norristown sits across the Schuylkill River from Bridgeport. Conshohocken, Jeffersonville and Worcester are all neighboring towns of Norristown. While the setting is basically “Small Town America”, there are a few landmarks and foods that are specific to Norristown (Valley Forge, Elmwood Park Zoo, Butterscotch Krimpets, Zeps) and/or surrounding areas that would make a small amount of background, perhaps even a satellite view, of the town helpful to the reader. GoogleEarth would be a good resource for a discussion of the actual region being described. A discussion of the weather one would experience in the summer and the winter could prove helpful as Maniac finds himself homeless during the winter and the story mentions that he runs to keep warm.

Conflict
Internal: Jeffrey's/Maniac's initial conflict comes when he begins yelling at his aunt and uncle during the school play. His “Talk, Talk, Talk!” (p. 7) represents the conflict he feels in the home of his aunt and uncle. He is stifled by their angry silence and finds a chance to express his feelings at the school play. His naturally sunny attitude is dimmed when he finds that he is bringing suffering upon his new family just by being a “Whitey” (p. 60). His running away shows that he is feeling the conflict that he thinks he has created. In fact, his running at all indicates a conflict. He runs again when Grayson dies. His constant running when he is living with the McNab family perhaps shows his dissatisfaction with his current living arrangements.

External: Maniac continually runs into conflict starting from his first day. He infuriates Big John McNab by hitting all of John's usual strike-out pitches. “John McNab had never in his life met a kid he couldn't strike out. Until the runt” (p. 30). Maniac encounters several others who feel that he is operating outside of socially accepted behavior. Mars Bar feels that Maniac doesn’t belong in his neighborhood and is the loudest voice for the black community in the book. He challenges Maniac's right to live with the Beale family. Maniac's greatest conflict is in finding a home, a family that wants him as much as he wants them. He does fit in exceptionally well with the Beale family, but it takes a while for Maniac to realize that it is worth the external conflicts (for both Maniac and for the Beales) in order to be a family together. “He knew that finally, truly, at long last, someone was calling him home” (p. 184).

Point of View, Narrative Voice
Maniac Magee is told in the third person, as most legends and tall tales are. Except for a small portion of chapter 18 where Amanda is out looking for Maniac after he has run away and chapter 22 where the point of view is a young buffalo and then Grayson – while Maniac is passed out on the ground from lack of food and
shelter – the narrator sticks with Maniac's experiences and thoughts. Yet, there is not much emphasis on Maniac’s feelings, allowing readers to decipher – from his words and actions – what he might be feeling at any particular moment. For instance, after a harsh comment from Amanda, Maniac's “eyes said, Why did you say that? Her eyes couldn't answer” (p. 66). Or perhaps the small amount of emotion provided in the book allows serious subjects like racism, homelessness and being an orphan to be treated in a more light-hearted manner. An example is when Maniac is at his lowest point, starving and living in the zoo, the point of view becomes a baby buffalo: “If you were the baby buffalo at the...zoo...it would have gone something like this...you wake up. You have breakfast...a strange new animal [is] there...munching on a carrot...one morning the stranger falls...and lies on the ground” (p. 79). Although in “reality,” this is a heart-wrenching depiction of Maniac passing out because of lack of food and shelter, the buffalo’s point of view is one of just calmly reporting what is happening. This easy-going description allows Maniac to again take on heroic characteristics as he stoically turns the worst of circumstances into something that works for himself and others around him.

Literary Terms
Students would be able to discuss genre, as this is a novel, but also with elements of a mythical story. Foreshadowing plays a role as the narrator states that Maniac refused to see the difference between black and white, “Maniac couldn’t see it. And then all of a sudden, he could” (p. 58).

The plot, setting, themes, tone, voice, rising action, falling action, resolution and other aspects of a novel can all be well-addressed in this novel. The symbolism in this novel is more subtle, but can be addressed. What is significant about Maniac getting run out of town by both sides of the divided street, “an ugly, snarling black and white escort for the kid in the middle” (p. 76)? What symbolism is there in the fact that his “best Thanksgiving dinner [he] ever had” (p. 107) is in a bandshell equipment room? What is the symbolism of Maniac being able to untie any knot, even the infamous Cobble’s knot, “like some fairytale tailor” (p. 73)?

Affective Issues Related to the Work
Maniac Magee’s life seems so different from what “normal” students would go through that it might be hard at first to find a connection to the character. However, he is still Jeffrey Magee, a young boy who wants to be a part of a family and a community. Some students might have lived homeless for a while and could relate to that, some students may love to run and can relate to the thrill of running faster than anyone they know, some students may have stayed in a Beale-type house and felt love and acceptance there regardless of the differences between each family member, some may have spent time in a McNab-style environment and wondered if they would drown in the oppressiveness of the environment. The other major characters might also have a lot to relate to students. Has a student ever carried precious possessions with them everywhere to avoid destruction from a younger sibling? Has a tough student ever been beat by a kid younger and scrawnier than themselves and known the potential dislike that can come along with that? Has a student ever been saved from the machinations of much older kids like the forgettable Arnold Jones (p. 16-19)?

Vocabulary Issues
I have listed several “enrichment resources” that deal with the vocabulary in Maniac Magee for younger students. However, the vocabulary in the novel seems that it should be easily accessible to Middle High/Junior High students with the exception of food that is local to Maniac Magee’s part of Pennsylvania, vocabulary specific to train bridges and the bandshell equipment room. I discovered a photo of Butterscotch Krimpets and a description of a zep (a type of hoagie...
sandwich particular to Norristown) on the internet. There are also pictures of train bridges in Norristown on Google Images. Not knowing the exact definition of any of the vocabulary words does not destroy the flow of the story, but could definitely assist in comprehension.

Background Knowledge
As with the vocabulary, there are parts of the story that will be enriched with background knowledge of the town, its people and the food. Knowing that Two Mills is based on Jerry Spinelli’s childhood Norristown can produce actual photos of what Maniac Magee saw when he walked down a street in Two Mills. There actually was a Hector Street in a nearby town that had a definite division in the middle for blacks and whites. And the Krimpets that Maniac loves are specific to that area of the country. Students should be able to enhance their understanding of Maniac and his contemporaries with a small amount of background in the world that Maniac is living in. His safety in living on the street vs. a student’s safety if a 12 year old tried living on the street today. The Pickwell family welcoming almost anyone into their home for a meal vs. what would happen today if you brought a stranger home for dinner.

Implications for Student Diversity
Since Maniac Magee deals with the immense issue of racism and understanding between the races, it would be a perfect segue for any ethnicity to compare and contrast how they are treated in different areas of life. Almost anyone should be able to compare how they react when they meet someone who is different from them with how Maniac is treated by several different types of people in the town. Diversity is very well treated by Maniac’s choice of family based on how well he fits into their family, not on their colors, which are not one color, anyway; he found seven different colors when inspecting his skin. Again the light-hearted treatment of race and racism can be a perfect background to dealing with sensitive issues in a sensitive and non-threatening way.

Gender Issues
The only gender issues that arise in Maniac Magee are not really treated as such in the story. Amanda does seem to rescue Maniac from some sticky situations, like relieving him of blame when Mars Bar tears her book (that was in Maniac’s possession) and providing Maniac the option of becoming a town hero by untying Cobble’s knot. Mrs. Beale is also always scrubbing the house with a brush and bucket, or doing the menial housework chores. However, I feel that Mrs. Beale is seen as the traditional woman at the time this book was set and Amanda’s forthrightness and assertiveness is perhaps just an allusion to the women of the coming generation. I don’t see an issue with the gender roles, unless it brings a discussion of traditional gender roles compared to today’s gender roles.

Project Ideas
If technology is plentiful in the school, students could make a trailer for the book, NOT the movie, the book. They would use key elements from the story to hook a reader and make them want to read the book and find out what happens. 
http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=111714&title=Maniac_Magee_Book_Trailer This site is an example of a trailer for the book!

Students can create a replica of the town of Two Mills. They would use key characters, key places in the story and could use maps of Norristown as a starting point to re-create what Two Mills looked like and then describe (in essay form) why each site on their map is important.
A slightly different version of the replica of the town would be to create a collage of the important parts of the story and then the essay would address why each picture was chosen and what it represents in the overall theme of the story.

Students could watch select parts or the entire Nickelodeon movie. Then, they would present the differences in the film and the book, addressing the significance of the changes, how it changes the story, and perhaps combining the best of both for their own presentation. Perhaps even combining with creating a trailer, they could re-create a scene from the movie that more closely follows the book and then describe their decisions and the rationale behind their changes. Maniac Magee Complete Nickelodeon Movie. http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=3454F28073955F08&search_query=maniac+magee+full+movie

Creating Connections

Students can compare a re-creation of Two Mills (see above project) to the town where they spent their childhood. This can then lead to their own childhood stories and memories, tying into the overall theme of childhood recollection.

Students can create a correspondence between characters in the book, like Maniac writing in a journal like he is writing to Grayson after he has moved back in with the Beale’s. What issues will he still have to deal with? How does the story continue? How does the story move forward if Maniac decided to run to a student’s childhood town? What issues would he encounter?

Based on the mythical quality of the novel, students can create a myth of their own childhood. Based on their memory, memories of others that were present, what parts can be considered myth and what parts are letting “the facts get mixed up with the truth”?

More Enrichment Activities and Projects

☒ Teacher Vision website that provides more ideas for questions, activities, vocabulary study and other resources for teaching and interacting with Maniac Magee http://www.teachervision.fen.com/literature/activity/8976.html#activities

☒ Website of Vocabulary words, printable questions, and activities that follow the book chapter by chapter. http://www.mce.k12tn.net/reading47/maniac_magee.htm

☒ This website has journal pdf files, book report files, quizzes, vocabulary and crosswords for the three split up into the three sections of the book. Looks like an amazing help for teaching the book and getting ideas! http://www.edhelper.com/books/Maniac_Magee.htm?gelid=C1vx7f2eyl8CFQtfagodwGmDSA

☒ This website discusses themes and how to treat these themes in a classroom in activities. It also provides links for related/connected readings. http://www.classzone.com/novelguides/litcons/maniac/guide.cfm
Comparisons between books listed here: