Literary Text: Whirligig by Paul Fleischman

Organizational Patterns:

Brent, a typical teenager trying to fit in at his new private school in Chicago, is the protagonist of Whirligig. After getting drunk at a party and making a fool of himself, he drives home and attempts to kill himself, but instead, kills a girl named Lea. As restitution, Lea’s mother requires him to travel to Maine, Florida, California, and Washington and leave behind four whirligigs as monuments of Lea. The novel contains nine chapters which alternate between Brent’s experiences in the four states and four different people in those states who are somehow influenced by the whirligigs he leaves behind.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature:

Theme:

Belonging: Because his father received a promotion, Brent and his family have just moved to Chicago from Atlanta when the story begins. He struggles trying to fit in at a new private school for a higher class of people than Brent is used to. Brent is searching for ways to fit in at his new school. The host of the party, Chaz, makes fun of Brent. To top it all off, when Brent talks to a girl he finds attractive, she rejects and embarrasses him in front of everyone.

Guilt: Brent wants to be punished because of his feeling of guilt for killing Lea. In place of the detention center as his punishment, the judge sentences Brent to probation. Brent struggles with this, even though most kids would be relieved to not have to serve time in the detention center. When Brent meets Lea’s mother, he sobs and, despite his long
rehearsed apology, all he can say is, “I’m sorry.” During his trip around the United States, Brent deals with his guilt by building the whirligigs, spending time alone, and serving Lea’s mother.

Forgiveness: After the accident, Brent believes he will never be able to forgive himself. He feels that he will always be a bad person and begins to separate himself from others. Throughout the journey around the country, he learns something about forgiveness and begins to forgive himself and stops isolating himself so much. The story ends before Brent returns home to show Lea’s mother the photographs of the whirligigs, but the reader expects that Lea’s mother will be pleased with Brent’s work and hopefully begin to forgive him as well. Even the fact that Lea’s mother sent Brent on the journey suggests that she understood that she wanted to help Brent, and was even more ready to forgive Brent than he was ready to forgive himself in the beginning.

Self-discovery and Coming of Age: Because of the accident, Brent is forced to learn that he can have a lasting impact on others for good or bad. On his journey, Brent becomes aware of his place in society and in his family. He discovers that he has responsibilities to impact the world for good.

Setting:

The story begins in metropolitan Chicago, but most of Brent’s time is spent on campgrounds and in the bus, crossing the country. He spends most of his time alone, with occasional and brief interactions with other people. Both his solitude and the people he meets help him discover himself and learn to forgive himself.

Point of View/Narrative Voice:

The story is told from Brent’s point of view in the third person narrative. The second, fourth, sixth, and eighth chapters are told in the first person narrative from the point of view of four different people, who are strangers to Brent. Although Brent never meets them, his whirligigs influence their lives in some way.

Tone:
The tone is mostly melancholy. The reader relates to Brent, but gets the feeling that Brent is painfully alone and depressed for most of the novel. The sentences are simple. The dialogue is written in slang at times.

**Affective Issues Related to this Work:**

Drinking and Driving: Brent’s is a real-life situation. Many students have been affected by drunk driving, and some may have a problem with it themselves. This is an issue all students will be able to relate to because all are affected by it in some way or other.

Guilt and Depression: Brent’s struggle with guilt and depression are real issues in the lives of most young people at some point in their adolescence.

Restitution and Forgiveness: All students deal with conflict in their families, among their peers, and others. Although many will not have problems to the extent that Brent has, they all can relate to the struggles to forgive themselves and to find restitution with others they have hurt.

**Vocabulary Issues:**

The vocabulary in this book should not be a problem for most adolescent readers, but an interesting word here and there will keep them on their toes. Although most of the vocabulary words will probably be easily understood through context, the students may need some help with a few of them.

**Background Knowledge:**

Whirligig, the title of the novel itself, may be a word the students are not familiar with. They will need the teacher to help them understand this before beginning of the novel. Other than this, the novel’s setting and content are familiar with junior high and high school students in the United States. Students may benefit from some help in understanding Brent’s struggle with himself and with the society he lives in (man vs. self and man vs. society).

**Implications for Students of Diversity:**

Since Brent has just moved from Atlanta to Chicago, he struggles to fit in with his peers. Students of diversity may be able to relate to Brent’s moving to a new place and struggling to fit in. English language learners will need some extra help with some of the vocabulary words in the novel as well.

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue:**
This story is about forgiveness. It is about being clean again after doing something horrible. It is about a boy who thinks his life is over because he has taken the life of another. He truly sees himself as a bad person who can never fit into a society full of good people who have never killed anyone. But as he builds the four whirligigs, he begins to rebuild, in a way, what he has destroyed. He realizes that he can be a part of a good society and that he is a good person. When he tells the woman he meets what he had done, she does not judge him, but forgives him and respects him as a good person. He realizes that forgiveness is possible, and begins to forgive himself.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:

Make Your Own Whirligig: Students do a writing assignment about something they or someone else did that was hurtful and how they were able to learn to forgive themselves. They can then make whirligigs in class representing something in their writing assignment.

What happen to the Whirligigs? Have the students brainstorm about possible things that could have happen to the whirligigs. Have them choose one of the whirligigs that Brent made and the person in the book that was influenced by the whirligig. How did they benefit from the whirligig? Have students elaborate on the characters from the book that were influenced by the whirligigs or have them think of another story about someone who was influenced by one of Brent’s whirligigs. They could also possibly write about the next whirligig Brent will create, where he will put it, and who will benefit from it.

How to Make a Whirligig: Brent left his whirligig instruction book on the bus on the way to Maine. What happened to the book? Who picked it up? What did that person do with the book? What other whirligigs were made as a result? Brainstorm with the class and then have them write their own story.

Informational/Functional Texts:

Get to know the author: Paul Fleischman has an official website. Students can learn about some of the experiences in his life that influenced Whirligig, like when he took a bicycle and train trip across the country and then lived in a 200-year-old house in New Hampshire. Also, the question-answer section is interesting because they are real questions, many of them from young adult readers, and his personal answers to those questions. The site address is: http://www.paulfleischman.net/index.htm

There are also a few websites on whirligigs with pictures so students can get an idea of what a whirligig is, or how they will make their own: http://www.newenglanddirect.com/GD3125_B.html?gclid=CImfyvbEkIwCFRoTLgod6X5c7w