A River Runs Through It
CONCEPT/VOCABULARY ANALYSIS

Literary Text: *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean

Organizational Patterns:
*A River Runs Through It* is a novella about fly-fishing and life, told from the first-person perspective of author and major character Norman Maclean. Barely over one hundred pages, the story is not divided by chapters or sections, but is one continuous narrative, moving from one episode of fishing to another without stark separation. The experiences are told chronologically, but, as they are told in hindsight, the various events of the story gain continuity as Maclean looks back to them to gain closure on his brother’s death. The story begins in Norman’s childhood, highlights a few weeks of a fishing trip with family, then ends in Norman’s old age.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature:
- **THEME:**
  - FAMILY: A dominant theme in *A River Runs Through It* is family: both family relationships and responsibilities.
  - Relationships: Because the novel focuses on character-development rather than plot-development, much attention is given to the relationships Maclean has with each of his family members. He captures the fluidity and fragility of family relationships as he portrays his with his wife, his brother-in-law, his parents, and especially, his brother Paul. Maclean explores the fears, concerns, and faults encountered in family relationships.
  - Responsibility: As the events of the novel unfold, Maclean develops the question of what one’s responsibility is to his/her family. Maclean’s wife sends her brother (Neal) with Norman and Paul on a fishing trip, in the hopes that they will be able to cure Neal of his foolish and failing nature. As Neal quickly ruins the fishing trip with a series of poor choices (including drinking and immorality), the Maclean brothers raise the question of family responsibility: Is a person responsible for helping his/her family members? Even if help is unsolicited? What if no help is possible? As Paul’s drinking and gambling addictions are unfolded, these questions of responsibility are further explored. Maclean and his parents make attempts to help Paul, but ultimately are unable to.

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o **SETTING:** *A River Runs Through It* takes place in western Montana, “at the junction of great trout rivers”, in the early 1900’s. The story’s action takes place in Missoula, Montana, beginning in Norman’s childhood, following the Maclean brothers on fishing trips to the Big Blackfoot River, and finally ending with Norman, as an old man, once again fishing that river. Much of the text of the novel is spent describing the beautiful surroundings of the Montanan landscape, especially the river.

o **POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE:** The story is told from the first-person perspective of Norman Maclean. He tells the story looking back, so it has a ponderous, remembering tone. As a narrator, Maclean is trustworthy and honest. The audience believes his account of the events of the story because he is upfront about his personal failing, misgivings, and fears.

o **METAPHOR (extended and simple):** Maclean uses beautiful and frequent simple similes and metaphors to describe fishing and life. These metaphors give insight into the lens through which Maclean sees the world. One a grander scale, the entire novel is an extended metaphor between fly-fishing and salvation. From the first line of the novel, Maclean establishes this metaphor: “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing” (1). Fly-fishing is how the Maclean boys understand and access God and their own salvation. Throughout the novel, Maclean draws upon this metaphor to give greater insight into both fly-fishing and their religious beliefs.

o **CHARACTERIZATION:** Because the action of the novel is driven by the development of the characters, Maclean pays careful attention to characterizing each fully. Maclean uses vivid images to describe Paul, his father, his mother, and other minor characters, and students can benefit from analyzing the ways in which Maclean uses characterization to progress the story and paint full pictures of his characters.

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Affective Issues Related to the Work:
Students will be especially able to relate to Norman Maclean because of two chief struggles he faces in the novel: addiction (exhibited by Paul) and how to help those we love when they face struggles (such as addiction).

- **ADDITION**: Maclean’s impetus for telling the story is Paul’s struggle through addictions with gambling and alcohol, which eventually lead to his tragic and violent death. The novel shows the destructive power—for the individual, the family unit, and for the community—of addiction. Paul’s addictions present opportunities for students to meditate upon and discuss the causes, effects, and tragedies of addiction.

- **HELPING STRUGGLING LOVED ONES**: Paul is characterized as stubborn and independent, never accepting help from others. Norman recognizes his brother’s desperate need of help, but struggles knowing how to reach out to him. He raises the concerns and fears of knowing a loved one needs help, but not knowing what to do. He also brings up the idea that perhaps, at times, nothing can be done at all. This theme will be of particular note to students, as they undoubtedly have friends and family members, or are even struggling themselves, with various destructive behaviors, whether that be addictions, abuse, depression, or the other host of problems faced by so many.

Vocabulary Issues:
In *A River Runs Through It*, certain unique vocabularies are used. One of them is the vocabulary of fly-fishing, including terms for equipment and techniques. For example: “casting hand” (2), “rod” (2), “line” (3), “fly” (3), “leader” (3), “check-cast” (4), “shellacked” (86), “cast” (42), etc. A second vocabulary includes colloquialisms from the Montana region, especially relating to the river (the animals, landscape, and various aspects of the river). Examples are “sucker” (38), “squaw fish” (38), “bull elk” (41), “osiers” (41), “bend” (46), and so forth.

Another vocabulary issue that may be of note for middle- and high-school students is that the novel is sprinkled with foul language, echoing the rough landscape and, at times, rough lives of the characters of the story.

**Background Knowledge:**
Since the events of the novel center around fly-fishing some background knowledge of the sport will be useful to students. Some students may have previous knowledge of bait-fishing, which will support learning about fly-fishing.

It may be beneficial to begin the novel with an introduction to the sport of fly-fishing: what it looks like, how it’s different from bait-fishing (which the Macleans despise:}

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Norman’s father tells the boys, “Izaak Walton...is not a respectable writer. He was...a bait fisherman” (5), how the actual fishing is done, the art behind tying flies, etc. This knowledge will help students better understand the passion and reverence the Maclean boys have for fly-fishing.

A second discussion that may be beneficial to students would focus on the landscape and culture of Montana. Such knowledge of the natural beauty and “outdoors” quality of the Montana landscape will give students a context for reading the story, as the land is portrayed as a refuge. (Norman's father “was anxious to be on the hills where he could restore his soul and be filled again to overflowing” (1).)

Additionally, there are frequent references to Native Americans, which were an important cultural aspect of life in Montana. Norman frequently mentions Native American culture: “In those days, Indians who did not live on reservations had to live out by the city limits and generally they pitched camp near either the slaughterhouse of the city dump” (27), etc. For a full reading of the text, the importance of Native American culture in Montana should not be disregarded.

Finally, prior knowledge of gambling and poker may support students’ understanding of the events of violence that seemingly characterize Paul’s life. Paul gets into a fight at a bar, about which the police sergeant comments, “He’s behind in the big stud poker game at Hot Springs. It’s not healthy to be behind in the big game at Hot Springs.” (23) The politics of the gambling world eventually lead to Paul’s violent death, being “beaten to death by the butt of a revolver...and dumped in an alley” (102). Understanding the risks and stakes involved with the big poker games, readers of the novel will better understand the violence threaded throughout Paul’s life.

**Implications for Students of Diversity:**

Students of diversity may be especially aware of the ways in which ethnicity is portrayed in *A River Runs Through It*. The Macleans are Scottish, and Norman frequently attributes their actions and viewpoints to this ethnic heritage. When he and Paul have gotten into a bit of trouble with Neal, all three men are dreading facing the three Scottish women who face them at home. Norman says, “I...didn't know what Scottish women look like when they struggle to keep their pride and haven’t much reason left to keep it. In case you have any doubts, they keep it” (73). When Paul dies, the father, “like many Scottish ministers before him,...had to derive what comfort he could from the faith that his son had dies fighting” (103). Such descriptions characterize the Scottish people by a certain national pride, stubbornness, and solidarity.
Additionally, as the story takes place in the early 1900’s, Native American culture is still a predominant aspect of life in Montana. Maclean’s frequently acknowledges the Native American people, the way they were viewed and treated at the time the novel takes place, and the importance of their culture in shaping his views of life and nature. For example, Norman tells how “Indians used to make baskets out of the red branches of osiers, so there was no chance the branches would break” (43), and how “Indians build their sweat baths on the banks of rivers. After they become drenched with sweat they immediately jump into the cold water outside, and, it may be added, sometimes they immediately die” (49). Though the Macleans honor and respect the Native Americans in the story, Norman tells of incidents where the Native Americans were treated racially and discriminated against, like when someone yells “Wahoo!” at Paul’s Native American girlfriend (24).

The attention that the novel calls to race and the subsequent culture and value systems that follow one’s ethnic background should be interesting and of worth to both majority and diversity students.

**Gender Issues:**

Though not a dominating theme of the novel, gender issues definitely play into Maclean’s narrative. According to Maclean, women don’t understand fly-fishing or men. The woman’s role is to take care of men and their passions even though the women can never be a part of them (“Mother had to find most of the [fishing] things for [Father]. She knew nothing about fishing or fishing tackle, but she knew how to find things, even when she did not know what they looked like.” (82)).

On the other hand, the definition of manliness if extensively explored. The masculinity of Norman, Paul, and their father is contrasted with the femininity and weakness of Neal, Norman’s brother-in-law. Looking at these themes will open the door for students to explore gender definitions and stereotypes.

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue:**

Through experiences with Neal (Norman’s brother-in-law) and through Paul’s struggles and eventual tragic death, Norman seems to be asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The internal struggle he faces centers on this very issue. How much responsibility can a person take for another’s poor choices and eventual downfall? Should a person feel guilty if they were unable to help their loved ones out of their struggles? How much of the problems of one’s “brother” (literally in this story) is each person responsible for? Do we have an obligation to each other?
Research Issues/Project Ideas:

- FLY-FISHING: To give students an appreciation (or at least an understanding) of fly-fishing, invite an expert fly-fisherman to speak to the class. Approach the sport as an art, as it is portrayed in the novel. After this introduction to the sport, have the expert take the students outside to teach the basics of fly-fishing, on the four-count rhythm (as Maclean speaks of in the novel). This will be a fun activity that will open the world of fly-fishing to the students, giving them at least a small context for understanding the story.

- FISHING AS A LITERARY MOTIF: Depending on the other literature studied as a class, students can research how fishing has been used as a common motif throughout literary history, including stories such as *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and themes of fishing throughout the Bible. Students will discover common themes and styles throughout these texts, and will therefore be able to place *A River Runs Through It* within its genre.

Information/Functional Texts:

- Biographies on Norman Maclean:

- Fly-fishing Resources:
  - Hipwader.com: This website has links for fly tying instructions, articles from fly-fishing enthusiasts, fly-fishing destinations, and so on.
  - Fly fishing guides, as well as instruction books for fly-tying will also prove helpful in giving students a context for understanding the novel.

- Montana Resources:
  - Montana travel brochures will be beneficial in better understanding the setting of the novel’s beautiful landscape.
  - Montana’s Official State Travel Information Site (http://www.visitmt.com/) offers free travel brochures, as well as interesting links to pictures and article about the state.