In the Time of the Butterflies
By Julia Alvaraz

Concept Analysis
By Jessie Jensen
Organizational Patterns:

_In the Time of the Butterflies_ is organized into three parts—Part I, Part II, and Part III. These parts are followed by an Epilogue critical to the story. Each part of the book consists of four chapters, each chapter is told by a different narrator. The narrators are the four Mirabal sisters (aka the butterflies), Dede, Minerva, Maria Teresa, and Patria. As each chapter changes narrators, bits and pieces of the story are revealed as each different personality finds different facts important. Dede, Minerva, and Patria all use a standard narration, but Maria’s narration is related through her journal: she includes drawings, dates, pictures, and more trivial and personal experiences of her days. Maria’s chapters add something a little unique and therefore contribute to the creativity and interest of the story.

Narrator:

Dede is the leading character as she is the only sister who is not claimed by the martyrdom. The narration begins in second person with Dede in her current time (1994), relating the story of the butterflies by going back in time. Each sister then begins taking her turn, rotating chapters, narrating in first person. With Dede, Minerva, Patria, and Maria all taking a turn by chapter, each girl’s distinct personality and voice adds variety and excitement to the book. The story then does well to validate a large audience who will most likely find some of themselves in a particular sister, or in the sisters combined.

Themes:

Sacrifice – The central theme of this book is sacrifice; sacrificing oneself for the greater good, for others, and for one’s country. Throughout the entire novel the Mirabal sisters are exemplars of this as they sacrifice of their time, energy, and hearts to help not only the ones they love, but the many strangers about them who are suffering political injustice and violence. Minerva, who becomes a political icon and some sort of a hero because of her fighting spirit and call to action, consistently sacrifices herself in her combat of injustice, and expects the same of those around her. Her sisters follow her lead in sacrificing themselves through her persuasion and passion for what is right.

Political Control – The book resonates with political chains and injustice. All people in the Dominican Republic in this time period, the early and middle 1900’s, lived in constant fear of the way they spoke and the way they lived. The dictator of the time—Trujillo—had planted spies and technology within hearing range of most public homes. If for any reason Trujillo was to suspect a person or family of political disloyalty the suspects would disappear, being sent to either prison or their death. Throughout the book superficiality and fear are continually exhibited through the public who are forced to worship and praise a bloodthirsty dictator or fear for their lives.

Loyalty – Many different forms of loyalty are addressed in the book through those fighting for freedom and those fighting for power. The Mirabal family displays strong loyalty and love as they do not allow a political system to tear them apart. At all costs they fight for one another and prove the importance of family, devotion, and forgiveness. The opposing side also displays a different kind of loyalty as loyalty is forced through fear. The superficial loyalty of the government stands in stark contrast to the chosen loyalty of friends and family members.
Identity - There is a strong sense of identity throughout the book as each Mirabal sisters’ personality and value system is related in the different chapters. There is an obvious struggle in each sister as she must determine who she is, which side she is on, and what she will stand for. Detailed and intimate conflicts are related as each girl interacts with the people around her, and decides the kind of life she will lead. Choosing the course that is best for all and contributes to the greater good, rather than focusing on just the individual, is stressed. Each sister succeeds in finding a strong and accomplishing individuality through the help and encouragement of each other. Regret and inner battles are something each girl deals with immensely as she struggles to choose the right course for herself, and her conscience. High contribution and expectation are placed upon each sister as they succeed in living up to a strong sense of purpose and identity.

Setting:
The setting of the book takes place in the Dominican Republic. Because the book relates two different time periods as Dede gives the present view and the relation of the story by going back in time, the time periods and situations do change. When Dede goes back in time the years are 1938-1960 where dictator Trujillo has control of the country. In this setting the political unrest and fear of the people are very high. The Mirabals begin as a regular family who then gradually become famous in this time period through their noncompliance with the government and “radical” political views. Dede also relates her present circumstances in the year 1994 throughout the book. In this time period the effect and fame of the Mirabals are related as current political icons and martyrs in a now free Dominican Republic. The two different settings accomplish cause and effect. The cause of the Mirabals is related in the first setting and time period of the book, and the effect of their action is displayed in the second and current time period for Dede.

Tone:
The tone of the book is one of action and enjoyment. As the Mirabal sisters choose a dangerous and outspoken course the book becomes very high spirited. Through many adventures, love stories, relationships, and sorrows, reader is called to a more active lifestyle with high expectation. While the book deals with very dangerous situations ultimately resulting in death, somehow it is also able to keep a tone of love, loyalty, and pleasure through the optimism and energy of the sisters. A tone of willpower definitely comes forth, most highly exemplified through the character of Minerva.

Foreshadowing:
As the main narrator Dede relates the story of the butterflies through a second person narration as a moment in history, and because she is relating history she knows where the story will go and how it ends. This being the case, there are many moments of foreshadowing through flashbacks as Dede remembers certain parts of the story. Following are a few examples of Dede’s foreshadowing:

Chapter 1
-Dede’s garden (year 1994) foreshadows the ending of her sisters, or “the butterflies”, when she realizes she has accidentally, “snipped her prize butterfly orchid” (5).
A foreshadowing of the history Dede experienced when she hears a car door slam and jumps, “Any Dominican of a certain generation would have jumped at that gunshot sound” (5).

Foreshadowed is the inability to freely express oneself in the historical time period to be told, “Words repeated, distorted, words recreated by those who might bear them a grudge, words stitched to words until they are the winding sheet the family will be buried in when their bodies are found dumped in a ditch, their tongues cut off for speaking too much” (10).

The sisters all take part in foreshadowing their future martyrdom as political unrest and their involvement proceed:
- Maria comments in her journal early on of her most radical sister Minerva, “I swear my older sister will be the death of me!” (39) Minerva does end up swaying Maria into the underground fight that ultimately does result in her death.
- After the first couple encounters with the dangerous Trujillo, Minerva writes of her family, “We sit silently, listening to the rain on the thatched roof, a numb, damp, fatalistic feeling among us. Something has started none of us can stop” (116).
- As Dede scolds her niece (Minerva’s daughter) at the present time about being on the road at night, she thinks, “If their mothers had only waited until the next morning to drive back over that deserted mountain road, they might still be alive to scold their own daughters about the dangers of driving at night” (173).
- And Minerva as she is feeling the end near, “Certainly there was something suspicious in his granting us these privileges. But all I felt was numb, resigned, sitting in that stuffy office. Not only was there nothing in the world we could do to save the men, there was nothing in the world we could do to save ourselves either” (283). The sisters are murdered the next month.

Affective Issues Related to the Work:
Peer Pressure - There are ample amounts of peer pressure as these sisters face a highly energized time where every person must choose a side. Minerva is the sister that gives the most pressure to her other sisters as she works at persuading them to be strong and join her cause. The most inner conflict is seen in the character of Dede as she is torn by what her husband believes and what Minerva believes. Both are fighting for her loyalty. Dede wants to please everyone but finds that it is an impossible task. She is continually swayed back and forth as she battles her conscience about what side she should join. She feels she must be loyal to her husband and his opinion to stay out of the political issues, but then she feels a call morally to join her sister Minerva who is fighting against evil. She never quite finds the solution or a single path to follow, but ends up finding a good in between for herself. This is the more realistic case in most people’s world, and therefore brings a strong sense of humanness as Dede experiences the power of influence, and the power of inner conscience. Most secondary students are dealing with the same issues and can relate to the pressures of pleasing both ourselves and others.

Right and Wrong - There are many examples of people having to choose in quick moments between what is right and wrong. Minerva has an extremely strong sense of what is right and wrong and is continually fighting for fairness and truth. Patria is extremely religious and is guided always by her inner devotion to God. Maria is timid but consistently chooses a good path, and notices in others when they make bad or wrong choices. Dede also fights the same battle within to make choices that are right. All four girls are extremely guided by religion and doing what is right. Their complications and inner struggles are very real and relatable as each person ultimately chooses at some point the path they will choose. There are many good examples in the book of when one
needs to stand up for what is right. All secondary students are battling with this same thing in their lives as they make decisions that will affect their character for the rest of their lives, and as they decide whether they will stand for what is right, or for what is wrong.

Self Discovery - Because each sister is able to have her turn at narrating, there is a strong sense of self discovery as very personal details of their lives are included. Each girl explains her childhood and the many paths that were before them, and the reasons why they chose the paths they did. The strongest example of self discovery would lie in the character of Patria as she feels an extreme devotion to God as a young child. Because of her extremely large heart and faith she is sent to a religious school where she can be guided in becoming a nun if that is the path she would choose. She is extremely devoted to God and continues to be devoted as she experiences puberty and all things that come with it. Very personally, but not graphically, she relates her desire to be touched as stronger than her desire to become a nun. She chooses to love a man instead of becoming a nun, gets married to her love, and begins having children. She remains extremely faithful religiously and never regrets the path she chooses as she discovers the things she really wants from life.

Vocabulary Issues:
The book is fairly easy to read on terms of vocabulary; however Spanish is consistently mixed in throughout the book. The story does take place in the Dominican Republic, where the standard language is Spanish, so often Spanish expressions and words are used by the characters. Reader does not need to understand these words to understand the novel by any means, however understanding the few Spanish words would be helpful. It might be nice as a class to either go over the Spanish words together after each reading, or simply have a list typed of all the Spanish used in the book, with English translations for students to refer to as they read. There are a few words that are used repetitively and so should be addressed in the beginning. Males are often referred to as macho—the Spanish word for male. Also the butterflies are referred to as las mariposas—the Spanish word for butterflies.

Background Knowledge:
Author Julia Alvarez does a fantastic job at explaining the state of political unrest and depicting the power of a government run by a dictator in this historical novel. While background knowledge is not necessary because the book contains good recounting of the history in question with much explanation, background information could still be helpful. One’s interest may be peaked upon learning of the butterflies, the underground political system, Trujillo and his government etc... and their actual role in history. Because the historical facts are so interesting it could be very fun to give a build up lesson or two teaching about dictators and government in general and the power they have successfully gained in the past. Followed by this general outline of government, the specific time period of the book could then be searched and taught about. The characters themselves would be very interesting to study and to learn of in a more historical and brief way before the book is read. This book offers many outside lessons as it deals with actual history, social problems, and real people. Many doors are opened for outside lessons to understand the novel more clearly.

Implications for Students of Diversity:
This is a great book for students of diversity as it takes place in a different country, with darker colored people, who speak a different language. The book is an experience that the majority of
students in the class will be unfamiliar with. Because the majority of minorities in the United States right now are Spanish speakers, this book will be of more interest to them as the characters use Spanish throughout the book and are living in a Spanish culture. It is fun to read this book as a minority because these girls are heroines of a different ethnicity. It would also be helpful to have some of the Spanish speaking students in the class contribute in translating some of the words or explaining the culture for the class if they are acquainted with some of the traditions. This will be a good opportunity for these students of diversity to better acquaint themselves and their background with their classmates. It will also be a good opportunity for the majority of the class to experience and learn about a history and lifestyle other than their own.

Gender Issues:
Gender issues are addressed strongly throughout the book mainly because the main characters in the story are women. Not only are they women, they are women experiencing the mid 1900’s, they are outspoken, and they are extremely active in areas that women were not usually active in. Minerva time and time again undermines the authority of Trujillo, not just a male but also the leading dictator. The father of the Mirabal girls passionately loves his daughters, but often references to wishing he had sons as they are the preferred gender. Men are shown at their worst often in the story sometimes exuding a feministic tone. Maria continually includes in her journal how she hates men, as she has reason, having seen adultery committed by the men closest to her. Each sister is extremely independent often undermining any kind of authority their husbands “should” have. The sisters are extremely ahead of their time when it comes to the woman question, and it is referenced again and again throughout the novel. While there are hints of feminism throughout the novel, there is also an extreme devotion of the Mirabal sisters to their father and husbands. Forgiveness plays a key role in the relationships as it should in most relationships, and therefore does not truly exhibit negativity towards men or these relationships. The girls are strong, but still extremely loyal and loving of their male counterparts.

The Central Question or Enduring Issue:
The central question or enduring issue of this novel would have to do with choice. Each person chooses his or her path. Each person decides their own fate according to what is inside of them, and what the outside circumstances would require. In more of a question form perhaps, when does one act? When does one stand up and manifest who they are? Every person has agency and practices it each day. The Mirabal sisters chose a higher route. They used their agency to battle the fight against evil. They chose to make something of themselves bit by bit in every little decision they made that led to the big decisions in the end. Humans everywhere settle for mediocrity, but a better question might be, when is mediocrity not enough? When does one use his or her agency to accomplish something greater? The battle of right and wrong is everywhere, and the Mirabal sisters chose the path for right.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:
Because of the historical richness of the novel there are many opportunities for research papers. Students could research the dictator Trujillo, the history of government in the Dominican Republic, the time period, specific characters, the accuracy of the novel in comparison to the facts, the effect of the Mirabal sisters, whether the legend lives on etc... Projects might include expressions of art using the theme of butterflies, or using the different personalities of each sister, characterization in the form of art or a paper on a favorite sister. Other options for papers are
available in the form of a compare and contrast essay between the student and a chosen character, or two characters form the novel, a creative writing paper including a new character or an expansion of the chapters on one of the sisters, a paper on a chosen theme or issue, social problems could be studied, feminism could be written about, the relationships between the men and women could be written about etc... The topics go on and on in this novel. Because of its perfect blend of characterization, plot, history, and social issues the opportunities seem endless!

**Informational/Functional Texts:**


This site gives a brief introduction to the government, history, and culture of the Dominican Republic to familiarize with the students: [http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107475.html](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107475.html)

This is a good picture of a map to help students see where the Dominican Republic is located and how close it is to the United States: [http://www.islandbrides.com/maps/loc_dominican_republic.gif](http://www.islandbrides.com/maps/loc_dominican_republic.gif)

This site gives a wonderful introduction to *In the Time of the Butterflies* historically, followed by facts about Trujillo’s bloody reign. The facts are both graphic and eye opening as the destruction one man caused is related. This makes the Mirabal sisters even more admirable as the ruthlessness of Trujillo is accessed here: [http://gbs.glenbrook.k12.il.us/Academics/gbseng2/ButterfliesAlvarez/trujillobutterflies.htm](http://gbs.glenbrook.k12.il.us/Academics/gbseng2/ButterfliesAlvarez/trujillobutterflies.htm)

This is a wonderful site that contains pictures of the Mirabal sisters, explains their lives, and their martyrdoms. There is also a picture of their murderer available—Trujillo. There is an English and Spanish option to read and learn more about the lives of the heroines: [http://www.learntoquestion.com/seevak/groups/2000/sites/mirabal/mainpage.html](http://www.learntoquestion.com/seevak/groups/2000/sites/mirabal/mainpage.html)