**THE PIGMAN**

**Concept/Vocabulary Analysis**

**Literary Text**: The Pigman by Paul Zindel  
New York: Harper Trophy, 2005

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### Summary

High school is hard enough without added family and self-identity issues. John Conlan comes from parents who do not understand him nor care to try, while Lorraine Jensen comes from a fatherless home and a mother who has developed a hate for all men. Both struggle with their own insecurities, but make it through for the most part by getting into trouble and laughing with each other. One of their trouble-making activities includes prank calling, which leads them to call a lonely old man named Mr. Pignati, whom they convince to donate $10 to their made-up, L&J charity fund. Through a series of unforeseen circumstances, they fall in love with this old man and make important adult realizations about what life is really about.

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### Organizational Patterns

The Pigman is a fascinating read, largely due to the point of view from which it comes. Instead of reading about these personal events from a 3rd person’s point of view, the entire novel comes directly from John and Lorraine, who take turns telling the story of how they met Mr. Pignati and their adventures with him. It is important then, to keep track of who is talking. It is not hard to follow, as it switches narrators consistently each chapter, one told by John, then Lorraine, and they continue to take turns throughout the novel.

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### The Central Question or Enduring Issue

What is friendship? The Pigman follows the growing friendship between the three main characters, John, Lorraine, and Mr. Pignati. Mr. Pignati trusts John and Lorraine as they begin to befriend him, but when they betray his trust, it literally breaks his heart. They learn an important lesson about loyalty and true friendship, which changes their lives.
Readers are forced to question what it means to be a friend, and when it is necessary to give up selfish desires for the benefit of that friend.

**Who is in control of my life?** Both John and Lorraine are young and have to go through some eye-opening experiences before they realize that they are in charge of their own futures. John blames much of his unhappiness on his dysfunctional family, or the lack of understanding that his parents show towards him. Lorraine feels somewhat victimized by the belittling comments from her mother about her physical appearance, as well as the poverty that she is forced to live in because her dad walked out on them. However, when they both realize that the death of Mr. Pignati could have been prevented had they made some better choices, they begin to understand that they are the captains of their own souls.

**Issues Related to this Study of Literature:**

**Themes**

**Growing up/Getting old**- *The Pigman* follows the lives of two teenagers, John and Lorraine, who come from broken families and therefore tend to blame their problems on their upbringing. To make up for the lack of fulfillment that they feel, they spend their time pulling pranks and telling jokes. However, as they come to know and love Mr. Pignati, they learn that life is made up of choices, and that they are in charge of those choices. By the end of the novel, they have made an important step in “growing-up” in that they realize that they are in control of themselves, and no one else. They also realize, as they witness the death of Mr. Pignati, following the death of his wife, that life does not last forever. Everyone grows old, and our choices will effect how we enjoy the short time that we have.

**The Generation Gap**- John and Lorraine did not know what they were entering into when they began to befriend Mr. Pignati, but they quickly realize that it was a world that they did not know how to navigate. Their teenage imaginations catch a glimpse of a world they do not understand, both the world of their parents and that of Mr. Pignati who has lived his life and is nearing the end of it. Similarly, through the developing
friendship which Mr. Pignati forms with the children, he once again enters the world of his childhood. John and Lorraine begin to realize that they will never understand these other worlds until they get there, yet they certainly make connections as to what it can be like, provided they make the right choices.

Love vs. superficiality - Neither John nor Lorraine have had positive examples of what love is in their lives, or what makes up a good relationship. Lorraine’s mother has developed a hatred for all men after her husband walked out on them for another woman. John’s parents rarely interact with each other except on business terms. As they get to know Mr. Pignati and listen to him talk about his beloved wife, they learn what love can be, and more importantly, they learn that it is possible. “She loved me...We loved each other. We didn’t need anyone else. She did everything for me. We were each other’s life” (103). Mr. Pignati helps them to understand what real love can be like. Their friendship takes a turn unexpectedly when they pretend to be Mr. Pignati and his wife Conchetta, and realize that love might actually be something to strive for.

Fate/Destiny vs. choice - Both John and Lorraine blame their familial circumstances for the problems that they face in their lives. Throughout the novel we are forced to ask ourselves, how much of life is coincidental, and how much of it is based on the way in which we have interacted with what is going on around us? How much of it is simply based on what we have chosen to make of our circumstances? Lorraine is especially preoccupied with different omens pointing toward sadness or death, while John tends to be more likely to accept the reality of what their own choices have caused. With the culminating death of Mr. Pignati, they realize that they are indeed in control of their own lives, or their destiny: “Our life would be what we made of it—nothing more, nothing less” (166).

Conflict

Internal: Both protagonists John and Lorraine struggle inwardly with who they are and what they want. Lorraine is the moral compass, usually trying to do the right thing. Though she is not perfect, she tries to make good decisions. Lorraine especially struggles with basic teenage self-consciousness. Her mother comments about her weight and lack of beauty, which she tries to shrug off, but can’t help thinking.
about it often. John wishes that his parents would treat him like an adult, as well as accept his personal aspirations of being an actor.

**External:** The greatest external conflict would be the parents and friends with whom John and Lorraine associate. The parents place restrictions on them so that they cannot visit Mr. Pignati or feel any sense of freedom. Their friends, especially Norton, cause problems in the end, especially when they have a party in Mr. Pignati’s house and Norton destroys many of Mr. Pignati’s valuables.

### Setting

**The Pigman** takes place in 1968 New York, on Staten Island. John and Lorraine live and go to school there as high school sophomores. They come from different lifestyles, John’s parents being fairly well off, while Lorraine and her mother barely have what they need. These class distinctions are typical for the 1960’s New York setting. Another important aspect of the 1960’s was that it was during the post-World War II baby boom. In other words, it was an age of youth, when young people wanted to change and break the patterns of previous generations. They wanted to be different. This connects well with John’s desire to be different from his parents.

### Point of View/Narrative Voice

As noted previously, this novel is a quick read due to the personal level in which the story is told. We get to hear the events as they happened, directly from the main characters, John and Lorraine. As they take turns telling the story as well as commenting on how the other accurately or inaccurately portrayed the previous storytelling, we get a sense of how they compliment each other. We get two different points of view, which proves helpful to the reader.

From John, we get the more practical and cynical view of how the events occurred. “I don’t happen to buy all of Lorraine’s stuff about omens” (60). He is a regular teenage boy who sometimes has difficulty reading people as well as what is going on around him. Loraine on the other hand gives us the more sentimental point of view and we get a chance to feel what they were feeling, seeing the events with our minds as well as feeling what they must have felt. “There was something about the glaze in his eyes when he laughed that disturbed me because I could tell he didn’t really believe his own laughter” (75). She has a great sense
of intuition. All in all, the reader will enjoy relating to their 15-year-old perspectives and feeling along with them the pains and challenges of growing up. They balance each other very well, making an intriguing narrative team.

**Prominent Literary Devices**

This novel will be most effective when taught to 7th or 8th graders, touching especially on the following literary elements:

**Foreshadowing:** foreshadowing of death as seen throughout the whole novel: “Bobo? Bobo? Bobo died last week” (157). Mr. Pignati finds out that his best friend, a gorilla from the zoo, has died. Mr. Pignati dies shortly after.

**Narration:** The story is told from the point of view of two teenagers, both perspectives balancing the novel by helping us to see the practical and sentimental side of events.

**Theme:** As previously noted

**Irony:** Pay attention to the many double standards which both John and Lorraine live. For instance, John expects to be treated as an adult, but he behaves as a child when he pulls pranks, lies to his parents and to Mr. Pignati, when he describes what is happening around him.

**Symbolism:**

**The Three Monkeys:** They represent the three main characters, Mr. Piaget, Lorrain, and John. They all cling to each other for support and make a good team.

**Baboon Cages:** “Baboons. They build their own cages, we could almost hear the Pigman whisper, as he took his children with him” (166). The cage can represent the walls we put up for ourselves that prevent us from loving life. For John and Lorraine, one of those walls might be not taking responsibility for their actions, which causes them to feel like victims instead of leaders of their own lives. For Lorraine’s mother, one wall may be the hate of men, which causes her to have a pessimistic view about life, and prevents her from forming meaningful relationships.

**The Oath:** The oath that Lorrain and John take at the end of the novel can represent their gradual transition into maturity and out of...
selfishness. “There was no one else to blame anymore. No Bores or Old Ladies or Norton, or Assassins waiting at the bridge. And there was no place to hide—(166). As they dedicate this book to Mr. Piaget, they do so remembering the lessons that they learned while being his friend, lessons which help them grow a little out of their adolescence.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

Students will easily relate to both John and Lorraine, especially in recognizing the discomfort of growing up and searching for identity. As they read from John’s perspective, they will understand what it means to be misunderstood and how it feels to thirst for attention and validation. They will find themselves wondering how they themselves have found or are searching for their identity. This is a painful process that all teenagers go through at some point while in their adolescent years. They will also relate to John’s desire to break away from the family pattern and follow his own desires. Instead of working in business, John wants to be an actor. Teens will recognize how it feels to be on the opposite wavelength as their parents.

Students, especially girls, will also understand Lorraine and her natural insecurities about her looks. Most teens experience some kind of discomfort as they get used to their changing bodies and try to be normal. Lorraine also has a sense of right that will tend to get the reader rooting for her. All in all, students will enjoy asking themselves with each new event, “whose side am I on? How would I react to this situation?”

**Vocabulary Issues**

The Pigman uses simple language relatable to the adolescent world. In the beginning of the novel, John explains that instead of cursing, he uses the symbol @#$%. This is easy to remember throughout the novel because it is the only symbol used. The complexity will arise not in the vocabulary of the text, but in the thick use of sarcasm: “The way her old lady talks you’d think Lorraine needed internal plastic surgery and seventeen body braces, but if you ask me, all she needs is a little confidence” (18). As students get used to the characters however, they should find it easier to pick up on it, as this type of sarcasm is normal in today’s culture.

**Background knowledge**

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Because this text has a familiar high school setting, students will have an easy time relating to all aspects of the novel, and will not need much background set up beforehand. It may be interesting to talk about the 1960s New York setting, but may end up taking away from more important meanings of the text. The author does not include much about the setting or culture so as to focus on the greater themes. It may be beneficial instead of talking about setting and time, to lead a class discussion on how one finds his or her identity, or what one is willing to do to find his or herself.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

The Pigman does not ever refer to ethnic diversity, but it does indirectly address economic diversity. John is not rich, but he is well enough off and has what he needs without having to struggle for it. Lorraine on the other hand, lives with just her mother, who works as a nurse all day to provide for herself and for her daughter. They have to make great sacrifices just to make ends meet. We also see how Mr. Pignati is well off and able to splurge on John and Lorraine. Overall, this book is an informative and thought provoking read for anyone, regardless of race, physical and mental abilities, or economic status, because it simply focuses on two people who try to find themselves.

**Gender Issues**

The typical male and female stereotypes certainly exist in this novel, but they are not prominent. John’s mother does the housework while his dad works, as would have been the case in many American homes during that time period. Lorraine’s mother speaks about men as if they are all “pigs,” which is an unfair assumption. This topic would make for an interesting class discussion in order to analyze how John and Lorraine think a relationship should be, and how their perspectives are changed by the perceptions they were given from their parents. As part of the discussion, students could discuss how gender roles or attitudes have changed since the 1960’s, from traditional to more liberal.

**Project Ideas**

**Multi-Genre Project**- The Pigman focuses on the growth and development of two teenagers who come to know themselves while coming to understand more of life’s realities. Have students write about what kinds of circumstances or events in their lives have influenced

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how they think about life, the attitudes they portray, and the kinds of goals that they have. They can choose to write this essay style, poetry, or other ways that they can think of. Then, put them into groups of about 3 students each, and have them share this first part of the project with their peers. After they have done this, have them add to their project a reflection on how their view of life has changed, having spoken to others and learned about their backgrounds and challenges. They can include similarities between their thoughts and those of their peers or differences. This would be a great beginning of the year project to help students develop a love for writing because it is more opinion based, and would also promote class unity. The project is not too difficult, but at the same time it would force them to think about mature and difficult issues. As a final part of the project, students can choose to interview a grandparent or a friend who is elderly, and ask them questions that they have prepared, that are geared towards specific questions that they have about life. In the end, they can choose to record their findings by way of writing, movie, PowerPoint, poetry, etc., choosing more than one so that there is variety.

**Literary Elements Essay**- The Pigman is full of fantastic literary devices, such as foreshadowing and irony. Have students pick one or two, and write about how these elements help to support one of the major themes, giving plenty of examples. For instance, they can write about how the foreshadowing of death as seen in Lorraine’s nightmare and the monkey’s screams, helps to develop the theme of fatalism.

**Make a Movie:** Have students pick an important scene from the movie, act it out, and write a one-page reflection on why they chose that scene. Look on Utube for examples of student-made movies on for The Pigman.

**Enrichment Resources**

http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade60.html

This website gives some great information about the 1960's which will help students grasp the time period a little bit better before reading the novel.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwLkJFFn9U&feature=related
This is a youtube clip put together as a preview of “The Pigman.” It could be used as part of an introduction to the novel so that students get excited to read it!

**Other Books by Paul Zindel:**

- My Darling, My Hamburger (1969)
- I Never Loved Your Mind (1970)
- The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds (1970)
- Mrs. Beneker (1970)
- Up The Sandbox (1972)
- I Love My Mother (1975)
- Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball (1976)
- Confessions of a Teenage Baboon (1977)
- The Undertaker's Gone Bananas (1978)
- A Star for the Latecomer (1980) (with Bonnie Zindel)
- The Pigman's Legacy (1980)
- The Girl Who Wanted a Boy (1981)
- To Take a Dare (1982) (with Crescent Dragonwagon)
- Compromising Positions (1982)
- When a Darkness Falls (1984)
- Harry and Hortense at Hormone High (1984)
- The Amazing and Death-Defying Diary of Eugene Dingman (1987)
- A Begonia for Miss Applebaum (1989)
- David and Della (1993)
- Fifth Grade Safari (1993)
- Attack of the Killer Fishsticks (1993)
- Loch (1994)
- The Doom Stone (1995)
- Reef of Death (1997)
- Raptor (1998)
- Amulets Against the Dragon Forces (1998)
- Rats (1999)
- Every 17 Minutes the Crowd Goes Crazy! (2000)
- Bats (2000)
The Gadget (2001)
Night of the Bat (2001)