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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Whirligig

by Paul Fleischman

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Whirligig

Background Notes

Paul Fleischman is the Newbery Award winning author of *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. As the son of Sid Fleischman, also a Newbery Award winner, Paul grew up surrounded by stories and words.

In *Whirligig*, Fleischman tells the story of Brent Bishop, a teenager who is always the new kid in school because his family moves often. With each move, Brent feels the need to create a new identity, one that conforms to the styles and behaviors of the popular kids.

Driving drunk after a party, Brent gets into an accident and kills another driver: 18-year-old Lea Zamora. At a court-ordered meeting, Lea's mother asks Brent to create four wooden whirligigs in Lea's image and place them in four corners of the country. Accepting this penance sets Brent on a journey to honor Lea's life and rebuild his own.

Interwoven with Brent's story are the stories of four individuals whose lives are altered after seeing Brent's whirligigs. Although Brent may never know how his creations affect others, he will come to understand that all life is connected and works together like the parts in his whirligigs.

All references come from the Random House, Inc., Random House Children's Books, Dell Laurel-Leaf edition of *Whirligig*, copyright 1998, by Paul Fleischman.

Whirligig

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify and cite examples from the text of the following literary terms:
 - allusion
 - coming-of-age
 - first-person narration
 - metaphor
 - motif
 - simile
 - symbol
 - theme
 - third-person narration
2. explain the similarities between Brent's story and the stories of those who encounter his whirligigs.
3. identify the stages by which Brent gradually finds his place in society.
4. discuss, using examples from the text, the development of the following motifs:
 - teaching/learning
 - journeys
 - identity
 - penance
5. understand and discuss the difference between retribution and restitution.
6. identify the following allusions in the novel, and explain their contribution to character development, conflict, or theme.
 - the River Styx
 - the Labors of Hercules
 - "the breath of life"
 - Cain
7. trace Brent's changing sense of identity, and discuss what the stories he creates about himself reveal about his perceived place in society.

Whirligig

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does the chess game in the first chapter symbolize Brent's understanding of his life?
2. As Brent sits in the bus on his way to the place where he will build his first whirligig, he observes that he is "lodged in his own chrysalis but [has] no idea what he [is] turning into." Describe some of the different identities Brent adopts throughout the novel. Who does he select as role models? What does he discover about himself?
3. What purpose does it serve for the author to change the narration from third-person for Brent's story to first-person for the stories of those who have seen his whirligigs? Why would the author choose not to have Brent tell his own story?
4. Each whirligig has a unique appearance and a unique effect on the person who observes it. Describe each whirligig, and discuss how it met the needs of the observer.
5. When talking to the cyclist in "The Afterlife," Brent is reminded of a concept he read about in the novel *Cat's Cradle*, by Kurt Vonnegut: *karass*, "a term for a disparate group of people linked together without their knowledge." Identify the members of Brent's *karass*, explain what links them, and determine whether the connection is a beneficial or harmful relationship.
6. During the court-ordered meeting to discuss Brent's restitution to Lea's family, Mrs. Zamora states that she does not believe in retribution. Explain the difference between restitution and retribution. If Lea's family had sought retribution, what might they have asked for?
7. Follow Brent's growth in terms of
 - a loss or feeling of discontent that takes the character away from home and family.
 - the character's needs repeatedly conflicting with the expectations of society.
 - the character beginning to adapt to and accept the norms of society.
 - the character taking a new place in society.
8. The coming-of-age story, a story of an individual's journey to maturity, has also been described as an "apprenticeship to life" and a "search for meaningful existence within society." Discuss how these ideas apply to *Whirligig*.

Party Time

Vocabulary

adept – able to do well
adherence – a following or commitment to
affected – pretended; copied
annotated – commented on; added to
borne – carried or transmitted
burin – a steel rod used for engraving
caustic – severely critical or sarcastic; bitter
ceased – ended; stopped
complied – agreed with; went along
conspicuous – attracting special attention; easily noticed
de facto – [*Latin*] in fact
deprivations – something needed but withheld
discerning – recognizing; picking out
discreetly – not drawing attention
famine – an extreme and widespread food shortage
guffawing – laughing loudly and without control
inopportunistly – at a bad time; not convenient
labyrinth – a maze
perennial – reoccurring in a predictable manner
reconnoitered – observed in order to gain information
shaman – a medicine man or healer
steamed – moved angrily
tirade – a long, emotional speech
turreted – decorated with small towers on the corners
vital – necessary; extremely important
wincing – flinched or pulled away from

- As the family eats dinner, Brent's father quickly changes the TV channel when news of a famine comes on, but pauses to watch all of a commercial for Jaguar. From this and Brent's thoughts following the commercial, what can you infer about the values of the family in general and of Brent in particular?

3. What reasons might Brent have for wanting a punishment?

4. Brent's father is more than willing to give monetary restitution, but he objects to the idea of Brent making the whirligigs. When he says "This is crazy... That's not the kind of thing you ask for," what does he mean? Is this reaction in keeping with his character so far?

5. Describe Brent's attitude going in to and during the restitution meeting. What motivates him to agree to the whirligig project?

6. What does Brent realize about himself during the bus ride to Seattle?

7. What is wrong with Seattle as a location for the whirligig?

8. As Brent approaches the cyclist, he feels like a "stray dog begging scraps." What does this thought say about Brent's self-esteem, and what has happened at the campground to make him feel this way?

Bellevue, Washington

Vocabulary

pizzicato – a method of playing the violin
specifically – clearly defined
virtuoso – an expert or genius

1. Describe the narrator in this chapter.

2. Why do Tony's parents pressure him to succeed in music and school but do not have the same expectations of his sister?

3. Describe the pledge that Tony breaks when he throws a rock at the harp player. What influence does this pledge have on Tony's behavior and sense of self?

4. Cite and explain one sports metaphor Tony uses in this chapter to describe his life. How does the use of sports references contribute to the story?
