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REVIEW

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## Death and Drama of [The Pigman](#)

[Larry Russick](#)

They're all dead: Pigman's wife, Lorraine's father, John's Aunt Ahra, the Master sons, Lorraine's mother's patients, Bobo, and the Pigman himself. All the while, the living move about like baboons in cages they've made for themselves.

Why?

That's the big question. The answer is central to understanding [Paul Zindel's \*The Pigman\*](#). We and our students can address this problem, all the while gaining insight into literature and the makeup of the novel. This article provides activities to acquaint students with literary elements, while building up to a dramatic presentation. During this process, the students can experience the dilemmas presented in [The Pigman](#) and come to an understanding of the main characters and themselves.

### The Story

[The Pigman](#) is a story about John and Lorraine, high school sophomores who, not getting what they need from their families, must surreptitiously seek love, reassurance, and meaning on the outside. In each other and Mr. Pignati (the Pigman), owner of a porcelain pig collection, they find love and reassurance; the meaning they find in themselves, in the unfolding of their relationship with Mr. Pignati and the drama leading to his death.

John, a handsome and wild boy, drinks and smokes excessively; and, as Lorraine points out, only his good looks have kept him out of reform school. Lorraine, a shy girl John's own age, has low self-esteem and mild paranoia. John becomes attracted to her because he sees in her the same spontaneous, crazy quality that he has and no one else seems to share.

John and Lorraine meet Mr. Pignati via a phone game to see who can keep a stranger on the line the longest. They get a \$10.00 donation for a bogus charity and feel guilty about it, since they perceive how lonely the Pigman is. To make up for taking the money, they take Pigman to feed his only friend in the world, Bobo, an incredibly bad-tempered baboon.

Mr. Pignati, as he shows them his pig collection that once belonged to his deceased wife, gives John and Lorraine the run of his house. Soon, Lorraine and John become close friends with the Pigman, who takes them to Beekman's, a large department store, where he buys them roller skates and gourmet food. They play games together. They are like the three monkeys that they see in the pet department at Beekman's, hugging each other to be loved, and all the while the cold, indifferent world goes about its business ignoring them.

One day during a game of roller skate tag in his house, Mr. Pignati has a heart attack while chasing John up the stairs. He is taken to the hospital, and in his absence John and Lorraine use the house to throw a wild party. Mr. Pignati returns unexpectedly at the height of the commotion. John and Lorraine are taken home by the police; the Pigman cries alone in his room.

John and Lorraine feel remorseful for betraying Pigman's friendship and for the destruction of his precious pigs by their uninvited friend, Norton, a thief, looking for money. To smooth things over, they convince Mr. Pignati to join them to see Bobo at the zoo the next day. But Bobo is dead. Poor Mr. Pignati cannot take the heartbreak. His wife is dead. The pigs are destroyed. His best friend Bobo is dead. Mr. Pignati dies, too.

John and Lorraine know they are partly to blame for his death. They know now they are also responsible for what happens in their lives.

### **Dramatizing [The Pigman](#) in the Classroom**

John's and Lorraine's insights are important to share with teenagers. Since [Zindel](#) writes [The Pigman](#) in first person, the story lends itself well to dramatization. Drama can be an effective means for students to internalize these insights. In the following discussion, I will describe how [The Pigman](#) can be used to create a collaborative dramatic end product.

Dramatizing [The Pigman](#) by turning the novel into a play could be a gargantuan and tedious task if what was planned was putting on a full-scale production. Instead, combining Reader's Theater (a stage production where formally dressed actors energetically read their parts while seated in chairs, facing the audience) with a few selected scenes acted out. A narrator introduces the readings and ties the scenes into the overall story of *The pigman*.

The readings are excerpts from the book; the scenes and narration are developed by the students. In the activities that follow, students read the book and develop skills appropriate for putting on an oral production while learning about elements of literature. To be successful, this class project necessitates comprehension, understanding, and preparation by the students to enable them to get inside the characters and as a result learn more about themselves.

### **Activity One: Introducing [The Pigman](#)**

Students can be introduced to the book by showing the jacket, reading the title and the oath

(which establishes John and Lorraine as its fictional authors), then reading an excerpt from the book such as Chapter 3, pgs. 14-18. These four pages give a sense of what John and Lorraine are about and what may take place in the rest of the novel. The passage ends with a real attention-grabbing paragraph:

Now Lorraine can blame all the other things on me, but she was the one who picked out the Pigman's phone number. If you ask me, I think he would have died anyway. Maybe we speeded things up a little, but you really can't say we murdered him.

Not murdered him.

Next the students should suggest questions they believe the book will answer, and the teacher should record these questions using dry markers on large sheets of paper taped to the wall.

An example of possible questions students might supply are the following:

- a) Who is the Pigman?
- b) Did John and Lorraine murder him?
- c) Why did John and Lorraine do the crazy things they did?
- d) What happens to John and Lorraine after the Pigman dies?
- e) Do John and Lorraine fall in love?

### Activity Two: Predicting What Will Happen in *The Pigman*

Taking the questions generated by Activity One, the students should be asked to predict the answers. Their answers should be written along with the questions in a matrix as in Figure 1.

As the students read the book, they'll focus on their questions and predictions to determine whether their predictions come true. This process will aid comprehension, prompt reflection, stimulate discussion, and motivate students to read the book.

Questions	Name - Predictions	Answers from Book
a) Who is the Pigman?	Jennifer - "A pig farmer."	A man with a porcelain pig collection.
b) Did John & Lorraine murder him?	Joe - "Yes"	
c) Why did John and Lorraine do the crazy things they did?	Terri - "They were bored."	

Figure 1

### Activity Three: Initiating the

#### Play

The teacher should then say to students, "Let's turn *The Pigman* into a play that we can write and produce -- and let's keep it under 45 minutes. What do you think we should do?"

Brainstorming with the class and writing their ideas on the board could result in these possible student answers:

- \* "Write a play from it."
- \* "Just do part of the book."
- \* "Let's just read it having a boy read what John wrote and a girl read what Lorraine wrote."
- \* "Tell the story."
- \* "Do pantomime."
- \* "Make a scene from the party and get a band."

After an adequate amount of ideas surface, the teacher should help steer a discussion about the merits and disadvantages of the ideas. For instance, the teacher might say, "Let's use a lot of readings directly from the book; then we will not have to write the whole thing ourselves." The teacher might also say, "If we just read part of the book, how will people know what's going on? Should we use a narrator, perhaps?"

#### **Activity Four: Focusing on Major Components**

Once the class has decided on the basic form of the show, it's time to create the script. "What do we want to communicate about [The Pigman](#) through our show?" The discussion should focus on the largest areas of concern, both for producing the show and also for understanding literature. Depending on the sophistication of the students, they can discuss imagery, style, mode, figures of speech, and other more subtle literary aspects. I recommend focusing on five major components: Plot, Setting, Characterization, Theme, and Symbolism.

The class can then make five columns on the blackboard headed by these literary components. After they have defined "Plot," students can consider which scenes in [The Pigman](#) are the most important for understanding the characters and delivering [Zindel's](#) message. These answers should be written in the first column under "Plot." And lines drawn under each idea are extended horizontally across the board to form a matrix.

Brainstorming should continue with the students, taking each component in turn. For instance, after defining "Setting," the students' answers should be written for the settings of each scene they listed under plot. See Figure 2 for an example of how the final process might look. Once the matrix is complete, the students can be divided into cooperative learning groups, with each group exploring one category in respect to the eventual dramatic production.

#### **Activity Five: Developing the Play through Cooperative Groups**

In Activity Five, I offer suggestions for groups to use in their separate discussions to enable them to delve deeper. I give students a handout for their topics, listing my suggestions as an aid to facilitate and direct them. Also they can refer back to the completed matrix on the blackboard and the definitions.

The teacher's role during group work is to circulate, help stimulate the exploration of topics, and keep the students on task. The teacher should also be available to clarify any issues, for instance, "Is there a difference between theme and the author's message?"

### Plot

Questions to guide the group working on plot might include: What are the most important parts of the story that need to be included in the drama? Which part should be developed into a narrative summary (a summary of the plot that bridges the readings and scenes, provides the introduction and the ending)? Which parts of the book should be read? Which scenes should be acted out? Why these selections? What is important about them and what are we trying to communicate? The teacher should point out to the students that [Zindel's](#) choice of plot (though it may seem so) was not a haphazard undertaking and neither should theirs be if they want to convey what took place in the book.

### Setting

Some questions to guide the group dealing with setting would be the following: What are the settings in the book? What time and season does it take place? When do Lorraine and John write their "Epic"? What was the tenor of the times? How should we communicate setting in our drama? Through scenery? music? lighting? Which settings are crucial to communicating the mood of [The Pigman](#) in our production? What else should be communicated through choice of setting? Draw sketches of each of the settings. As they explore these components for producing the drama, they are learning not only what Plot, Setting, Theme, etc. are but also how integral they are to a piece of literature.

**MATRIX OF STUDENT SUGGESTIONS: IMPORTANT THINGS TO INCLUDE IN PLAY**

J=John L=Lorraine P=Pigman

PLOT	SETTING	CHARACTER	THEME	SYMBOLISM
Plan of action	Location, place and time	People	Central concepts	Things that stand for something
J and parents have dinner	J's house	J and Mom and Dad	Alienation	Whipped cream – fake or real
L and mother	L's house	L and mother	Mother vs. daughter	Bathrobe
J and L meet Pignati	P's house	J, L, and P	Loneliness	Assumed identity; pigs
J, L & P go shopping	Beekman's	J, L and P	Child-likeness	3 monkeys
Roller skating scene	P's house	J, L and P	Youth and age	Roller skates – license or freedom
J and Norton in cemetery	Cemetery	J and Norton	Good vs. evil	The Masterson-mausoleum
J & L alone: costume spaghetti dinner	P's house	J and L	Love	Costumes
Party scene	P's house	J, L, Norton and friends	Fun vs. responsibility	Smashed pigs
Police bring L home from party	L's house	Two policemen, L and mother	Misunderstanding between parent and child	L's costume
Pigman dies	Zoo	John and Lorraine and Pigman, zoo attendants, patrons, medics	Grief and death	Monkey house is tomb

Figure 2

### Characterization

To understand the characters well enough to portray them in their drama, students need to know them. Students in the Character Group should explore the main characters of [The Pigman](#) by first listing their attributes; focusing on John, Lorraine, and Mr. Pignati; and then creating a Venn diagram in Figure 3 to compare them.

The diagram brings out the differences and similarities between the three of the characters. Students might be asked the following questions: What are the relationships that develop between these characters? All three characters are needy in some way. What is it that they need to be whole? What do they get from each other?

Filling in the diagram and answering questions like these will help students get to the essence of these characters, advancing students' ability to understand the characters and hence portray them.

### ***Theme***

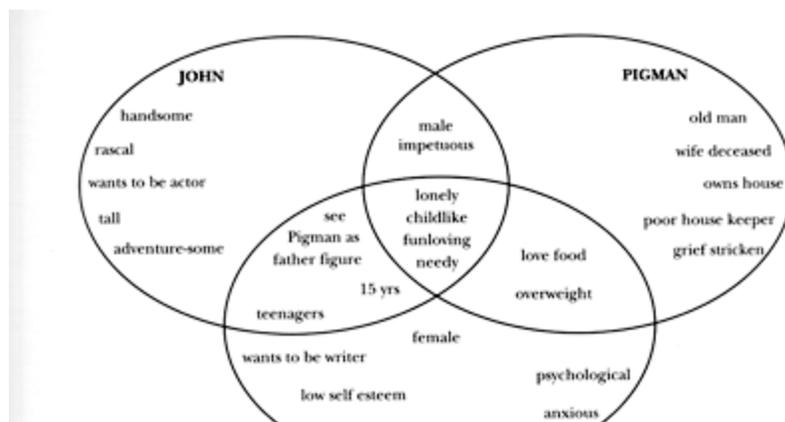
Because theme is integral to a literary work, students need to explore this concept. Students of this group might be told: "We are studying theme so that we can understand and then communicate the author's meaning to the audience." Some questions for the Theme Group to ponder are: What is theme? What is [Zindel](#) saying about life and death? What is [Zindel](#) saying about childhood vs. adulthood? Is this a "coming-of-age" novel? If so, what make the novel fit that category? Even though they are living physically, who does John think is dead? Why? What does it mean to be alive? Free? Dead? What are the thematic elements of [The Pigman](#)? How will we communicate theme in our production?

Students might consider the following: the "living" are baboons trapped incages; the "dead" are those we will all eventually join. Is there a way to escape this fate, pacing back and forth between the walls of our fears, struggling to stay within the parameters of what we know, cursing our ignorantly chosen fates? Is this what it means to become an adult?

### ***Symbolism***

Animals and death constantly surface in [The Pigman](#) until at the end of the book the pigs are smashed, Bobo the baboon dies, and so does the Pigman. In literature symbols help writers get across multiple meanings. They add depth and a kind of hidden, interlocking/underlying reality to the work. Being able to perceive symbols, their meaning, and purpose in a literary work enhances its understanding and enjoyment.

The teacher should ask students in the Symbol Group to find all the references to death, dying, cemeteries, and tombs, and find references to animals, specifically monkeys, baboons and pigs; and then consider these questions: What do these animals represent? What does the pig room have in common with the mausoleum and why does the evil Norton smash the pigs? Is he looking for money? What do they hold for Mr. Pignati? For Lorraine? What does their destruction mean to Mr. Pignati, the Pigman?" The task for the Symbol Group is to locate the symbols that [Zindel](#) uses, to discuss what they might mean, and to decide how the symbols can be used in the production to enhance its impact.





## Activity Six: General

### Discussion

As the teacher circulates from group to group to stimulate discussion and make suggestions like those above, he or she should ascertain when enough headway has been made. Once everyone is ready, each group should explain its topic and report its insights. The topic should then be opened up to the class for general discussion. During the explanations and discussion, the teacher should have a few students record on large sheets of paper the ideas generated in each category.

### Activity Seven: Role Playing

At this point it is time for some role playing. The class should use the sheets that record the suggestions for scene selection. Volunteers can then act out the scenes in an improvisational way, using their own words but trying to portray the characters as convincingly as possible. Role playing will give the students a direct internal experience of the characters and their lives. For example, role playing the scenes between Lorraine and her mother (when she is brought home by the police) will give the students insight not only into how Lorraine acts but why (through the impact of her mother's neuroses) Lorraine feels the way she does.

### Activity Eight: Guidelines for Writing the Show

Next, having a good sense of the novel and a taste of drama, the students should regroup and, using the large sheets already prepared, organize their topic and create guidelines for interpretation. Copies made of the students' interpretations of characterization, plot, etc. should be passed out to everyone. The show can now be written using these guidelines.

### Activity Nine: Writing and Producing the Show

- a) Choose a number of volunteers to write the scenes to be acted out. These scenes should be delineated in the plot guidelines.
- b) Choose students to play the characters in the scenes. I suggest that the teacher choose those who evidenced a knack for it during the role playing, use the same actors for the same characters in all the scenes, and have these actors rehearse with the direction of their respective scene writers.
- c) Find one volunteer per chapter (boys for John's chapters, girls for Lorraine's) to read the excerpts. They should work with one other person who will write the narrative that provides a framework for the readings from that chapter.
- d) Select one boy and one girl to read the oath in unison at the beginning.
- e) The student who desires to be the narrator (I recommend there to be only one narrator) will have the responsibility to oversee the writing of the narrative. That student should also be the one who edits the narrative for continuity of style.
- f) Encourage an enthusiastic and organized person to be general editor. This person's responsibility will be to see that the guidelines for plot as well as those created for characterization, setting, theme, and symbolism are followed. Adhering to the vision outlined in these guidelines will help deliver a cohesive artistic product.

g) Other assignments and technical aspects, such as director and stage manager, or music, lighting, props and scenery, can be left to the teacher's discretion.

These suggestions focus on how assignments can be divided so that everyone has something interesting and challenging to do. Just as students will have had their own ideas about plotting, interpretation, and emphasis, they'll also have ideas about staging and the way the show should go on. It is important to heed these suggestions; the students should create and own the production themselves as much as possible.

### **In the End**

Through these exercises in understanding [The Pigman](#), followed by role playing, writing, and finally a production, an answer to the opening question of this article will be realized. Death and conformity can seem to be the stifling aftermath of becoming an adult; yet the price one pays for childishness in an adult world is also death. The only answer is in moving on; doing, not escaping; following your dreams and taking responsibility for their outcome, just as Lorraine and John do in the act of writing "The Memorial Epic of the Pigman."

### **Reference**

Zindel, Paul. *The Pigman*. Bantam, 1968.

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*Larry Russick, after years as a professional clown and owner of a cleaning service, is now working as a teacher. He is currently a master's degree student at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut.*

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[Table of Contents for this Issue](#) | [ALAN Home Page](#)



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image  
base

journals

news

online class  
materials

special  
collections

virginia tech home

contact dla

university libraries

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