The House of the Scorpion
Nancy Farmer
Hardcover - Sep 1, 2002

Concept Analysis

Organizational Patterns

The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer is organized into five main sections:

- Youth: 0 to 6,
- Middle Age: 7 to 11,
- Old Age: 12 to 14,
- Age 14,
- La Vida Nueva.

Within these five sections are a total of 38 chapters, outlining Matteo Alacran’s physical and symbolic journey. At each stage, Matt changes and develops as he learns more about himself and about others. By calling such young ages of Matt’s life “middle age” and “old age” the author parallels El Patron’s old age and emphasizes the fact that Matt experiences two different lives: from birth to age 14, and beyond. This division also calls attention to the fact that at each stage Matt progresses until he is finally able to recognize himself as a unique individual capable of positive actions which can influence others. A cast of characters as well as a family tree are also provided at the beginning of the novel to facilitate comprehension.
Themes

The Importance of Developing a Sense of Identity

As a clone, Matt has difficulty establishing a sense of identity and personal worth. Most people shun him, thinking of him as being “dirty”, and those who do choose to associate with him generally think of him as inferior minded. He does not feel like a true individual because society sees him as just a copy of someone else, harvested instead of born, as treats him accordingly. He also feels pressure from El Patron, the infamous drug lord who created him, to adopt his manner of living, which is selfish and sinister. As Matt comes to recognize himself as a true individual capable of unique thoughts, emotions and actions, though, he is ultimately liberated from his oppressed state and becomes a leader who can effect positive changes. Perhaps one of the most important moments for Matt comes after he returns to Opium and a man calls him “sir”. The acknowledgement of being called “sir” helps Matt transition into his new role at the Alacran estate, and to establish his sense of worth. After these transitions, Matt takes the feelings of others more into considerations and notes that Tam Lin could have made his own decision to not die in the end.

The Impact of Friendship

Those who choose to befriend Matt, such as Celia, Tam Lin and Maria, often treat him as an inferior being; however, their association gives him hope and helps him to rise above his situation. He looks forward to visiting with them, and through them learns how to have positive interactions with others. Without these friendships, Matt would have no examples of functional relationships. He would most likely have remained completely suppressed like he is at the beginning of the novel when Rosa keeps him locked up and treats him like a mindless beast. However, these friendships allow Matt to experience a more human aspect of life and keep him from being treated entirely as an outcast.
The Value of Life

Because of the prevalent topic of cloning, The House of the Scorpion presents an interesting commentary on the sanctity of life. It raises questions surrounding the ethics of cloning and whether or not the lives of these clones are valuable, and presents the problem of the ethics of cloning for the purpose of extending one’s life, as El Patron does. The value of life is also addressed with the lives the Opium slaves lead. Because of a computer chip imbedded in their brains that forces them to behave and think as animals, as well as the large numbers of them these slaves are trodden under and treated as if they have no really worth. Matt notices early on that these slaves do not even perform simple, life essential actions such as drinking water without permission from a master. Their lives are completely in the hands of others who abuse their power. The novel addresses the ethics of these situations and allows readers to question their own beliefs.

The Impact of Our Decisions on Others

The decisions of various characters in the book clearly affect the lives of others. El Patron’s selfish desires for life and power lead to the death and oppression of hundreds, and influence Matt’s actions, sometimes leading him to behave selfishly or even cruelly towards those he values the most. The decisions of Celia and Maria to befriend Matt ultimately help him to develop a sense of identity and purpose, and Tam Lin’s decision to help Matt escape ultimately grants Matt the gift of life. Through Matt’s personal experiences as well as the actions he observes in other (such as El Patron’s decision to die with his household) the novel portrays the important concept that our actions are not isolated in their impact but can have far-reaching implications.

The Hypothetical Outcomes of War and Drugs

The setting (treated more fully below) of the novel automatically addresses the ideas of war and drugs. Opium, the territory where Matt grows up, does present an alternative to war, but it is anything but peaceful. The desire for power and the need for drugs leads to thousands of people and animals being transformed...
into eejits—mindless slaves—and causes the rest of the population to live in fear. The novel raises questions concerning the outcome of a border war with Mexico and poses the question of what would happen if drug trafficking and production were not only legalized but became a way of life. It also questions the idea of how the government should handle border patrol.

The Role of Religion

Many of the characters in the novel seem religious. They pray to saints, light candles, and say prayers. However, when it comes to the physical world, the man they are required to “worship” is El Patron. For individuals such as Celia, religion is a comfort and source of strength within a desperate and hopeless world. Additionally, religion is treated by the fact that Matt ultimately finds peace and hope in the cathedral at the end of the book when he finally finds Esperanza. At first, when we approaches the convent he feels dirty or unworthy, but once he enters, he learns of his potential: he is no longer a “clone” because of El Patron’s death, he was always human in the first place, and now he can help the eejits and others back in Opium.

Setting

The primary setting for the novel is Opium, a hypothetical land of poppy fields created as a compromise between the United States and the former country of Mexico, now called Aztlan. Within this land lies the Alacran Estate, home of the feared El Patron and his household where Matt grows up. During his earliest years, Matt lives a sheltered, naïve life with Celia is a little cottage outside the estate, but when he meets Maria and Emilia and the fateful markings on his foot are discovered, Matt moves to the actual estate after an unsettling sojourn in a room full of straw, cockroaches and chicken bones. Later, after Matt runs away, he also lives at a plankton factory before his final escape to safety at the cathedral.
These settings are symbolic of his journey to maturity. The simple cottage parallels his simple, sheltered upbringing, and the “prison room” he is kept in by Rosa mirrors what people see as his wild, untamed nature. The estate marks his exposure to power and his many changes of mindsets that ensue, while the plankton factory represents his introduction to the “real” world and his reaction to it. Finally, the cathedral can be viewed as a sanctuary where he finally establishes his identity and resolves to changed life back in Opium.

**Point of View**

The novel is told in 3rd person limited, from the point of view of Matteo Alacran. It explores his emotions and portrays the action from his perspective. As a result, readers explore Matt’s unique world from a very personal point of view as they become acquainted with him.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

**Individuality**

One concept students can explore is individuality. As they read about Matt’s progression to a functional individual who can make big changes in the world, when he inherits El Patron’s position, students will be able to consider their own individuality and the factors have shaped them to be who they are today. They will also be able to reflect on personal choices verses the influence of others.

**Drugs**

The novel also addresses the idea of drugs, including the legalization of drugs, the influence of drugs on those who use them, and the power-chains that can ensue from these types of practice. Students will be able to discuss the influence of drugs of society and individuals today.

Stephens – BYU - 2008
**Friendship**

Students can consider the idea true friends analyzing the actions of Tam Lin, Celia, Maria, El Patron and others. Some characters, such as Tam Lin could be considered true friends because they help Matt even when it is dangerous to do so, and they want the best possible outcomes for him. Students have probably had experiences with both good and bad friends to which they can relate. Students can also discuss the placement of friends as role models and how our friends can influence our behaviors, just as El Patron negatively influences Matt whenever he is around. They can also consider the influence they have on their friends and other associates.

**Stereotypes**

Matt is a clear victim to the stereotypes of his society, and as a result, he has a hard time living a typical life. He is shunned or even abhorred by many, and treated as a pet or wild animal by others. Even those who treat him sympathetically at first often turn on him once they discover his true identity. Students will be able to discuss the stereotypes we have in our society today, and how our perception of people changes sometimes because of common stereotypes.

**Peer Pressure**

In the novel, Matt feels pressure from El Patron to behave as the drug master does: selfishly. Matt looks up to El Patron and feels he must behave a certain way to please him, even if it means being unkind to those to whom he is closest. Matt also feels pressure from society to behave as clones usually do—without intelligence. By the end, though, Matt realizes the impact of this pressure, and even notes the Tam Lin “could have said no” when El Patron demands that he die with him. Students can explore the idea of people pressuring them to be things they are not, and can discuss how to respond to negative types of peer pressure.
Transitions of Adolescent Maturation

Another issue students will be able to relate to is the signs of puberty Matt experiences. After his job at the plankton factory, Matt has terrible acne, something other readers his age may understand. He also learns what it means to have a crush and at times has difficulty knowing what to say around Maria. He also has moments when he is not certain how he should behave, since he is treated as an adult by some (El Patron) as a child by others (Celia) and as an animal by many others. He does, however, receive positive reactions to these changes he is experiencing when Celia tells him that he is getting tall, and that he shouldn’t worry about the acne since it will go away in time. More importantly, as the novel progresses, she acknowledges him for who he is, not just for the outward changes he is experiencing.

Vocabulary Issues

The language of the novel is simple, making it ideal for focusing on themes and other concepts rather hurling a language barrier. One word study that might be interesting for students, though, is on the names on the characters in the novel since many of the names are Spanish and have meanings that support the role of the character they name. Students could discuss how these choices of the author reflect some points the author may want to highlight about certain characters. Examples include not only that the name choices give the novel a Mexican flavor, but that reflects character personalities, such as Esperanza — hope — who provides Matt with the support he needs to restore order at the end of the novel. Another example is Celia — heavenly — who is Matt’s nurse. She is religious and, in a sense, his guardian angel.

Background Knowledge

Border Control

One topic students would need some background information on is border control. Many students will already have some opinions about the problem and
how it should be managed, but reading a few clips from newspaper or magazine articles, or even watching some news clips online should help everyone get on the same page and spur a discussion. Students will then be prepared to discuss the hypothetical border patrol situation portrayed by the book and compare it with their own reactions to the issue.

**Cloning**

Students would also need to know a little about the current debate surrounding the ethics of cloning. Learning a little about cloning research and arguments for/against it will prepare them to read and respond to the issues confronted by the text.

![cloning](image)

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

The novel deals with some issues regarding race which can be addressed using the text. The way the author weaves in the Hispanic culture and language could serve as a basis for discussion, especially when comparing specific cultural practices of the characters in the novel with the cultural practices of various students in the class.

**The Central Question or Enduring Issue**

While the novel deals with several main issues, one of the most prevalent is the question, “Who am I, and what is my place in the world?” Matt struggles to find his place in his society and never seems to quite fit in how he would like to. However, once he establishes his place at the end of the novel, his sense of identity is established. One important thing to note, though, is that while Matt does find his place in the world, he does not find it how he thought he would, and his place ends up being much different from how he had previously anticipated. The author successfully—and fairly realistically--portrays Matt’s journey to self-confidence in a manner he probably would not have anticipated but which will serve many people in the end.

Stephens – BYU - 2008
**Research Issues/Project Ideas**

One concept that students could write a short response paper about is the idea of power, and how that would react to a sudden transformation of power as Matt receives at the end of the story. They would need to select and describe a change they would like the write about, what they would have power over, how they would react to the change, and what they think the outcome would be. Possible topics could include national issues such as the war in Iraq or border control, or local issues, even concerning their own education. Another topic for a short paper could be a response to how students would deal with the border crisis in general, comparing their solution to the solution in the book, Matt’s solution in the end, and the solutions posed by politicians today.

One idea focused on in by the form and the content the text is the idea of turning points and change. Based on this idea, students could create personal narratives, describing a significant turning point in their own lives, leading to a change in mindset or “power” as Matt experiences. Students could even organize their essays similarly to the novel (“The Middle Years”, etc.), and would need to focus on events and ideas that may have influenced the turning point, even years before. Students would need to address the significance of the change and how it influences their outlook on life today.

**Information/Functional Texts**

To aid students in their comprehension of the novel, the following texts could be used:

- News/magazine articles regarding border control or cloning
- Name dictionaries
- Maps (showing the US and Mexico)
- Online articles on the nature of the real Aztlan
- Websites