***Maniac Magee***

***Chapter 1***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Brief Summary***

Jeffrey’s story begins at the age of three when a high-speed trolley accident kills his parents and leaves young Jeffrey orphaned. He is then sent 200 miles away to live with his aunt and uncle, who have grown to dislike each other greatly but due to their religious convictions, refuse to get a divorce. During the next eight years, Jeffrey’s aunt and uncle create a house divided, living separately underneath the same roof. Eventually there is two of everything in the house as the two adults refuse to share anything. Unfortunately there are not two of Jeffrey so he remains the last thing that must be shared. As such, Jeffrey gets thrust in the middle of this divided house. Forced to split his time evenly between the two adults who never talk or interact with one another, Jeffrey soon grows weary of the arrangement. During the school’s Spring Musical, Jeffrey breaks, becoming hysterical during the program and finally taking off and running away from home.

***Analysis:***

The narration of [Maniac Magee](https://www.gradesaver.com/maniac-magee) starts off strongly in third person, making it clear that not only are we seeing Jeffery and others through the eye of a narrator, but that this is a story formed through myth and hearsay. Readers must keep this in mind while reading, understanding that some of what is seen may be exaggerated through amazement and retelling. During this section, we learn a lot about Jeffery's past, especially his family. Jeffery was orphaned when his parents died in a trolley accident, which the reader must keep in mind as a traumatic event for him (foreshadowing for the climax of the story). The narrator makes it clear that Jeffery is not supposed to represent an orphan who grew up poor or living on the street, but a middle-class, white kid who is put in a difficult situation. This is important to the reading of the story because Jeffery comes to see a lot of different kinds of houses, families, and lifestyles, and adapts to all of them though he is not used to having very little.

However, readers should also keep in mind the role of *choice* when Jeffrey becomes an orphan. Spinelli describes Jeffery's aunt and uncle in a way that is somewhat humorous but almost believable. Instead of getting divorced, [Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan](https://www.gradesaver.com/maniac-magee/study-guide/character-list#aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan) have made things incredibly difficult for themselves and for Jeffery by splitting or doubling everything they own so that they will not have to interact at all. The fact that Jeffery runs away from them, even when he wants a family so desperately, shows that he does not think simply living in the same house is what defines family.

***Summary part 1:***

[Maniac Magee](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) wasn’t born in a dump. He was actually born in an ordinary house, across the river from Two Mills, in Bridgeport. He also had an ordinary mother and father. One day, however, his parents left him with a babysitter. They were killed during the famous crash of the P & W high-speed trolley, when its drunken motorman drove the trolley off the trestle into the Schuylkill River below. Maniac was suddenly orphaned at three years old. But he wasn’t called Maniac back then—he was Jeffrey Lionel Magee.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Though much is legendary about Maniac Magee, certain facts of his biography can be established—including one that’s especially significant for his development as a character: he’s an orphan. Maniac lost his original family and home at a very young age, and he’ll always be searching for another.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Jeffrey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) went to live with his [Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan), in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania. Dot and Dan hated each other but refused to get a divorce. By the time Jeffrey came along, they were neither speaking nor sharing. His aunt and uncle had two bathrooms, two refrigerators, even two toasters. For eight years, they even tried to “share” Jeffrey, eating dinner with him on alternating nights.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Jeffrey’s childhood experience of home is marked not by love and security, but by division and hostility—things he will hate and resist later in life.

***Summary Part 3:***

Then, one spring, [Jeffrey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) was in the spring musicale at his school. Since there was only one show, [Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan) had to attend together, but they sat on opposite sides of the auditorium. During “Talk to the Animals,” Jeffrey, who was in the chorus, began screaming. At first, nobody noticed. The song ended, and Jeffrey kept screaming. Everyone stared as he pointed to his aunt and uncle and yelled, “Talk, will ya! Talk!” Then he sprang down from the risers, off the stage, out the door, and into the night. He never returned to school.

***Analysis Part 3:***

After years of being trapped in the middle of his aunt and uncle’s silence and pointless division, Jeffrey finally can’t stand it anymore and flees. The song “Talk to the Animals” is also a wry reference to the fact that Jeffrey is later more comfortable living among animals than with people who won’t communicate.

***Theme:***

***Myth, Reality and Heroism:***

Maniac Magee is the story of an orphaned kid to whom ordinary rules don’t seem to apply: Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee doesn’t have parents, runs away from his gloomy adoptive home, and doesn’t go to school.

***Quotes and their explanations:***

***Quote 1:***

"One day his parents left him with a sitter and took the P&W high-speed trolley into the city. On the way back home, they were on board when the P&W had its famous crash, when the motorman was drunk and took the high trestle over the Schuykill River at sixty miles an hour, and the whole kaboodle took a swan dive into the water." (1.3)

***Explanation:***

The first abandonment. Is it harsh to say Maniac's parents abandoned him, when there was nothing they could have done about it? Maybe. But that doesn't change the fact that one day Maniac had parents, and the next, he didn't.

***Quote 2:***

"Maniac Magee was not born in a dump. He was born in a house, a pretty ordinary house, right across the river from here, in Bridgeport. And he had regular parents, a mother and a father." (1.5)

***Explanation:***

Well, this doesn't sound much like the start of a legend to us. How would Maniac's life have been different had his parents lived? Would he have been able to learn as much about life and love as he does?

***Quote 3:***

"Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan hated each other, but because they were strict Catholics, they wouldn't get a divorce. Around the time Jeffrey arrived, they stopped talking to each other. Then they stopped sharing." (1.7)

***Explanation:***

So Maniac's first memories of family life are of hatred. Awesome! Not the first thing that most of think of when we think of family, thankfully. No wonder Maniac feels trapped: he's surrounded by two of everything. Anything, even homelessness, sounds preferable than being confined in two homes smushed into one.

***Quote 4:***

And that's when the running started. Three springy steps down from the risers—girls in pastel dresses screaming, the music director lunging—a leap from the stage, out the side door and into the starry, sweet, onion-grass-smelling night. (1.13-14)

***Explanation:***

Okay, we love Maniac, but really: why does Maniac think his only option here is to run? Maybe he should have tried harder to talk to someone first. Sometimes talking does help.

***Quote 5:***

Maniac Magee was not born in a dump. He was born in a house, a pretty ordinary house, right across the river from here, in Bridgeport. And he had regular parents, a mother and a father. (1.1)

***Explanation:***

Okay, but is Maniac really normal to start? He has a normal family, but we still think that there must be something special about him.

***Quote 6:***

Then the giggling stopped, and eyes started to shift and heads started to turn, because now everybody could see that this wasn't part of the show at all, that little Jeffrey Magee wasn't supposed to be up there on the risers, pointing to his aunt and uncle, bellowing out from the midst of the chorus: "Talk! Talk, will ya! Talk! Talk! Talk!" (1.11-12)

***Explanation:***

We still think Maniac could have handled this better, but it does show his innocence: he says—screams—what he's thinking. There's no adult deception and silence in this one.