

Wyoming High School Book Rationale

Title: Pachinko

Author: Min Jin Lee

❖ Intended Audience:

- Junior / Senior Students

❖ Brief Summary and Educational Significance:

- It is important to note that Pachinko has been widely celebrated as a contemporary masterpiece and was named a finalist for the National Book Award, a New York Times Top Ten Book of the Year, and was selected for numerous prestigious lists. The novel has been praised by critics and fellow authors for its ambition, emotional power, and its illumination of a largely unknown history. It is increasingly taught in high schools and colleges as an essential work of contemporary literature and has been adapted into a critically acclaimed television series, demonstrating its cultural impact and accessibility.
- Pachinko is an epic multigenerational saga that follows a Korean family across four generations, beginning in early twentieth-century Korea under Japanese occupation and continuing through Japan in the aftermath of World War II and into the 1980s. The novel opens with Sunja, a young Korean woman who becomes pregnant by a married man and is rescued from shame by a kind Christian minister who marries her and takes her to Japan. The narrative traces Sunja's family as they navigate life as ethnic Koreans in Japan—a community known as Zainichi Koreans—facing systemic discrimination, economic hardship, and the constant challenge of maintaining identity while seeking belonging in a country that treats them as perpetual outsiders.
- This novel offers exceptional educational value for our AP Literature curriculum. Lee's ambitious narrative structure, spanning nearly eighty years and multiple viewpoints while maintaining thematic cohesion, provides students with an exemplary model of the contemporary historical novel. The work demonstrates sophisticated

control of pacing, character development, and the balance between intimate family drama and sweeping historical forces. Lee's prose is deceptively simple—clear and accessible—yet emotionally powerful and thematically complex, showing students that literary excellence does not require ornate language but rather precision, authenticity, and deep human insight.

- Pachinko enriches our curriculum by introducing students to East Asian history and literature, perspectives that are often underrepresented in American high school curricula. The novel illuminates the Korean experience of Japanese colonialism, the Korean diaspora, and the particular challenges faced by Zainichi Koreans—topics rarely addressed in American education. As a work that explores questions of identity, belonging, discrimination, and resilience, it provides essential perspectives on immigration, prejudice, and what it means to be labeled as "other" in one's own homeland. The novel's examination of how systemic discrimination shapes individual lives across generations offers powerful parallels to American experiences of racism and xenophobia, helping students understand these issues in a global context.
- The title's reference to pachinko—a form of legal gambling in Japan historically associated with Korean immigrants—functions as a central metaphor for chance, fate, and the ways that societal constraints limit opportunities for marginalized communities. This sophisticated use of extended metaphor provides excellent material for literary analysis. Additionally, the novel's exploration of Christianity's role in Korean identity, the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation, and the various strategies individuals employ to survive and thrive under oppression offers rich thematic material for advanced study.

❖ **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used:**

- The novel will be used to develop the college-level critical thinking, literary analysis and composition skills necessary for the AP Literature and Composition Exam. The book provides students with a rich text

that uses a wide range of literary strategies (motif, allusion, non-linear structure, etc.) that can be used to successfully answer any literary analysis free response question.

❖ **Potential Problems:**

- Pachinko contains mature content appropriate for our junior and senior students but which requires thoughtful preparation. The novel depicts sexual content, including Sunja's relationship with Hansu (which results in her pregnancy), arranged marriage, and other sexual relationships throughout the narrative. While not graphically explicit, these references are central to the plot. The text addresses extramarital affairs and complex, morally ambiguous relationships that continue across decades.
- The novel includes depictions of discrimination and racism, showing how Koreans are systematically marginalized, insulted with ethnic slurs, and denied opportunities in Japan. There are scenes of violence, including physical abuse and the aftermath of war. The text addresses suicide—a major character takes his own life—and the profound grief that follows. There are references to sex work and the novel portrays the pachinko and gambling industry, which some may view as promoting vice.
- The novel depicts poverty and its harsh realities, including hunger, dangerous working conditions, and the exploitation of vulnerable people. There are scenes involving serious illness and death, including tuberculosis and cancer. The text addresses issues of shame and "honor," particularly regarding pregnancy outside marriage and family reputation, which drive much of the plot.
- The novel's large cast of characters across four generations, and cultural unfamiliarity—including Korean and Japanese names, cultural practices, and historical contexts that may be new to many American students—may present initial challenges. The novel also includes some Korean and Japanese words and phrases, though context usually makes meaning clear.

❖ **Addressing Potential Problems:**

- While reading the novel, students explore Korean history, Japanese colonialism in Korea, the Korean diaspora, and the specific situation of Zainichi Koreans in Japan. Students will use maps, timelines, and historical materials to understand the geographical and temporal scope of the narrative.
- Students will create a character guide with family trees to help students track relationships across generations. We will also create a glossary of Korean and Japanese terms, cultural practices, and historical references to support comprehension. This scaffolding helps ensure that cultural unfamiliarity enhances rather than impedes students' engagement with the text.
- Regarding sexual content, we will contextualize these elements as part of the characters' lived experiences and essential to understanding their choices and circumstances. The novel treats sexuality with maturity and restraint, not gratuitously, and sexual relationships often reflect broader issues of power, survival, and human connection. Classroom discussions will maintain an analytical focus on how these relationships drive plot, reveal character, and illuminate themes rather than dwelling on explicit details.
- To address the portrayal of discrimination and racism, we will examine how Lee avoids portraying her Korean characters as simply victims, instead showing their agency, moral complexity, and varied responses to oppression.
- We will prepare students for the suicide in the novel by discussing how Lee portrays this tragedy with sensitivity and how it reflects both the intense pressure of shame in the cultural context and the character's mental health struggles. We will discuss how the novel shows the devastating impact of this death on surviving family members and how it explores questions of honor, shame, and the unbearable weight of societal judgment. This provides an opportunity to discuss mental health, the importance of seeking

help, and how cultural contexts shape but do not justify the stigmatization of those who struggle.

- Regarding the portrayal of sex work and the pachinko industry, we will contextualize these elements within the novel's examination of morally complex survival strategies. We will discuss how Lee portrays these industries without romanticizing or condemning the individuals involved, but instead uses the pachinko industry as a central metaphor for the novel—representing both marginalization (as one of few industries open to Koreans) and agency (as a space where some characters find success and self-determination). Students will analyze how this ambiguity enriches the novel's thematic complexity.
- We will address the novel's treatment of Christianity thoughtfully, explaining that Lee portrays faith as it functions in characters' lives—sometimes as genuine comfort and community, sometimes as tool for survival, sometimes as a source of tension. The novel shows how Christianity became intertwined with Korean identity and resistance during Japanese occupation, providing important historical context. We will discuss how different characters relate to faith differently, just as in real life, and how the novel neither fully endorses nor dismisses religious belief but rather examines it as one element of human experience.

Prizes/ Awards / Honors:

- National Book Award for Fiction (Finalist, 2017)
- Dayton Literary Peace Prize (Runner-up, 2018)
- Named one of the "10 Best Books of 2017" by *The New York Times*
- Listed as #15 on *The New York Times*' list of the 100 Best Books of the 21st Century

Professional Review:

Min Jin Lee's novel is a "sweeping historical saga" of a Korean family's experience as "forever foreigners" in 20th-century Japan. An [NPR review](#) commends the

"honest, unadorned writing" that makes the vast, ambitious narrative feel intimate, comparing it to Thomas Mann's classic *Buddenbrooks*.