

In Defense of Adolescent Literature: A Critical Look at *The Chocolate War*

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“They murdered him. As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach” (Cormier 1). These are the opening lines of *The Chocolate War*, and already we are sucked into Jerry Renault’s world, which seems to be exploding around him. It takes a moment for the reader to orient to the swiftly moving, changing, pitching imagery as Jerry is “murdered” on the football field. The reader feels every crushing blow, spinning tackle, and suffocating pile that Jerry endures as he pours every last ounce of strength into the play because he wants so badly to be part of the team—one of the boys—and one of the accepted.

As Jerry is knocked down from behind, he tries to squelch the pain and stuff it down deep, hoping the others won’t see it. He wants them to think he’s tough—that he’s got guts.

As he struggles to his feet, he is struck by how distorted and grotesque the players look in their uniforms. The helmeted players appear to him as alien and strange. Suddenly, he is immobilized by emotion. Loneliness enshrouds him, blinding him from feeling the presence of the others. The machismo mind-set swiftly drains from his body, and he is left feeling vulnerable, helpless, and abandoned.

Perhaps this is Jerry’s first inclination that to be one of them—one of the conformed—a shapeless, figureless, colorless part of the crowd is not what he wants. Perhaps from this small seedling, this feeling, a desire to be free, to be an individual emerges. Never the less, Jerry is unable to recognize it as he is gripped in emotion. Nor does he pinpoint it when these unconscious desires for individuality and freedom manifest themselves as he inexplicably goes against the grain and refuses to sell the chocolates. Even then he has no way of knowing the forces that he is up against: conforming masses, school politics, power plays, and ego trips.

Eventually, every single character, consciously and not becomes Jerry’s adversary—pushing and prodding him to give in and follow the crowd so that things will be smooth and unruffled as they have always been. Change is the enemy because it is neither smooth nor is it easy. People dislike change—they dislike disorder. Jerry, by refusing to sell the chocolates is causing both, and his classmates as well as Brother Leon scramble like mad to squash his rebellion.

As the plot careens upwards, turning sickeningly this way and that—only to plummet gut-wrenchingly back down, the dirty secret is uncovered. *They*—the faceless pawns, the power hungry manipulators, and the mindless henchmen all have it out for Jerry, and they attempt to “murder” him in an act of spiritual homicide. They wield the powerful knives of conformity that slice his reputation into the billowing shreds of an outcast, vulnerable to the shifting, changing currents of the wind.

In Jerry’s struggle for an identity, every reader can see a bit of himself or herself: a memory here, a memory there. That is to say that the reader is an adult, which is appropriate

because Cormier's themes are far reaching and ring with a truth that is universal. An adolescent novel with that much scope and breadth is no small feat, and it is not one that can be easily dismissed.

Although adolescents may not be able to sift through the imagery and metaphors to discover the weighty themes underlying the story, they can surely identify with Jerry's struggle, the indecisive conflict of choosing whether to lead, follow, or to simply walk alone. This is to say nothing of Cormier's wonderful methods of conveying the themes and the story.

First we will examine the sleeping giants of the novel—the themes that give shape and flavor to the story, and then our focus will shift to some of the literary devices Cormier uses to facilitate the flow of plot and the style that sets him apart as a novelist of adolescent literature.

The broadest of all the themes that give the novel shape is that of good versus evil. Cormier seems fascinated by this idea, and he deals with the nature of human confrontation with evil by portraying three main villains: Archie, Brother Leon, and Emile, who are powerful but harbor faults within themselves. Both Archie and Brother Leon are enamored with their propensity to manipulate, but all three villains are, rather ironically, able to be manipulated themselves.

Leon puts himself into a precarious position by overextending the school's funds because of his overreaching ambition. Archie sees Leon as "riddled with cracks and crevices—running scared—open to invasion," yet fears the power that Leon has over him as the school's headmaster. Also, Archie is insecure in his position as head of the Vigils as he is pressured to think up ever more imaginative assignments. His domination is dependent on his ability to continually top himself in the creation of new assignments. There is also the black box—a nemesis over which Archie is powerless.

The nature of Emile's weakness is his idiocy; he is easily conned by Archie into believing in an imaginary photograph that he uses as blackmail and Emile unwittingly becomes his pawn. It is debatable whether the photograph's existence truly matters to Emile, as he seems to derive pleasure from tormenting Jerry. As a villain, Emile is clearly black-hearted through and through.

The idea that none of these villains is implacable or unconquerable, is one that offers hope—especially in the ending, which some critics have labeled as depressing. As for the other characters, none are illustrated with the level of maliciousness and taint of evil like the aforementioned three villains. Instead, they are depicted as sheep that blindly allow others to control them, and because of their, they are part of the problem—more bricks in the wall that Jerry finds himself up against.

A narrower, less prolific theme of the novel is to view the book as an examination of tyranny. Seen in this way, there are three structures of misused power: the school as headed by Brother Leon; the athletic department as headed by the coach; and the mob, as headed by Archie. Each has a passive assistant to tyranny—characters that have decent impulses but are ineffectual because they lack the courage or the knowledge to realize what is happening around them. Obie is Archie's reluctant stooge; Carter sympathizes with the coach's approval of violence; and Brother Jacques despises Leon but condones his actions by not opposing.

Perhaps the latter is yet another—and still narrower theme. It seems as if Cormier is making a statement about life and society: if you are not part of the solution, you are then part of the problem. The other boys dread the roll call for chocolate sales because they feel the underlying discomfort and thick tension in the air as Jerry responds to his name being called

by saying “no” that he has not and will not sell chocolates. This rebellion is almost *painful* for them to witness because it is human nature to want to avoid conflict and maintain order. So instead, they try to goad Jerry into relenting by first asking him to give in and then when that fails, they systematically alienate him to force his surrender, thus becoming part of the conflict.

Before becoming part of the problem as pawns of the Vigils, and at the midpoint of the sale, the students convey a flippant attitude about the sale. At this point they have the attitude of each doing his own thing and no one felt very motivated to sell the chocolates. Their reasons are negative, however, because they are tired of selling chocolates and this call for individuality is selfish. When the Vigils became involved, the idea of individuality vanishes with their own individuality, and Jerry stands alone.

In this we find Cormier’s meaning. As one critic has written, “Jerry’s defeat is unimportant. What is important is that he made the choice and he stood firm for his convictions.” This is a valid point regardless of the fact that Jerry’s understanding of his own motivations, eludes him. In real life it isn’t always possible to pinpoint our motivations and like Jerry, one may find them in the hippie across the street or on a simple poster that poses the question: “Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?” Inevitably, this is a question we must all face.

The final theme of the book—one that is the most vague and misleading is Cormier’s use of Christian symbolism. It is important to clarify that the author did not intend the school to be a part of this symbolism. It is not an attack on parochial schools or the Catholic Church. The fact that Trinity is a Catholic school is as irrelevant to the meaning of the story as that fact is to the characters. Cormier does, however, use Christian symbolism to convey the cosmic implications of the events that he relates in the story. When Jerry first refuses to sell the chocolates, the language suggests the Book of Revelation: “Cities fell. Earth opened. Planets tilted. Stars plummeted.”

In the first chapter the goal posts remind Obie of empty crucifixes and in the last chapter, after Jerry’s martyrdom, they again remind him of something he can’t quite put his finger on.

When Jerry encounters the hippie, as the man looks across his van Jerry sees only his disembodied head. This image is reminiscent of John the Baptist who is beheaded by Herod after he cried in the wilderness to announce the coming of Christ.

The character Archie’s name has a myriad of meanings attached to it—its root “arch” suggesting a reference to the Archangel who fell from heaven to be the Fallen Angel better known as Lucifer.

The Vigils, Cormier admits, stems from the word *vigilante* which resonates with religious meaning. The candles placed before an altar in supplication are vigil candles, and a vigil is a watch on the night preceding a religious holiday.

All of these themes are enigmatic in themselves, but the way in which Cormier illustrates them is what makes him a true mastermind and creative genius. He implements driving, staccato rhythms and brief but forceful sentences. He uses dialogue to drive the action and to establish character and setting in broad, deft strokes. Metaphors, similes, allusions and personifications are pervasive throughout his work. They are eloquent and unusual such as, “his voice curled into a question mark” and “he poured himself liquid through the sunrise streets”. His metaphors are often designed to bear the brunt of the emotion he is projecting.

The imagery Cormier uses is not always pleasant and he has been criticized for it. This is no cause for denigration because he uses images to set the mood and foreshadow conflict. An example, “the sun bleeding low in the sky and spurting its veins” conveys a foreboding tone and signals to the reader that there is conflict lurking in the coming pages.

Cormier also builds tension with a series of escalating events instead of forcing the reader to wait for the one immense climax at the end. He also employs dialogue and symbolic events to make his philosophical and psychological points and to give them a visual quality. He does this instead of commenting on the events directly in a verbal aside, which is not as poignant or affective. All of these devices and methods culminate into a truly forceful tale that does not need to spell out its fundamental, as well as secondary messages.

Despite all of these wonderful, compelling components, which make up this masterful work, it has fallen under much criticism and is the subject of much controversy due to its status as adolescent literature. Some of the book's content has been deemed inappropriate for adolescents and the ending has been labeled as too depressing.

Betsy Hearne, a children's book editor, wrote in an article in a magazine immediately after the book's release in 1974, that the book followed the "trend of didactic negativity" in books for young people. She acknowledged Cormier's power as a writer but stated that he used it to portray "a book that looks with adult-bitterness at the inherent evil of human nature and the way that young people can be dehumanized into power-hungry, blood-thirsty adults....Cormier is good at building and playing on dread. With a powerfully stacked plot and see-through characters he manipulates readers into believing how rotten things are by loading the dice while pretending to play fair. See these regular old dice? Whammo, you lose."

She was not alone in her opinions and many reviewers missed the point completely. *Publishers Weekly*, often hailed as "the bible of the book industry," warned that the novel was "bound to cause controversy and no little resentment, especially among Catholics....Its impact is weakened by the author's excessive bitterness."

As noted before, *The Chocolate War* is not a commentary on Catholicism and as for the issue of bitterness that resurfaced repeatedly in criticisms, one may argue that critics are mistaking bitterness for reality.

Also, a few reviewers faulted Cormier for his lack of character development, such as Betsy Hearne, not realizing that it was an integral part of his scheme. Cormier deliberately left out background information of the characters so that the reader would hold them responsible for their actions alone and not justify them by giving them an unhappy home-life and such. This allowed him to make his point about people either being part of the solution or part of the problem all the more clear.

In yet another review, the English children's book review magazine, *Junior Bookshelf*, stated that the book "may be brilliantly written tour de force but despite the publisher's claim it is no more a children's book than is *The Exorcist*....".

This is perhaps where the most controversy lies. The age at which this book is appropriate is open for debate. A few amateur critics acted in a manner much like censors. They were disturbed by the book, but did not have the objectivity to analyze *why* it disturbed them. They justified their attack with vague references to violence, sex, and "bad language."

A rebuttal to this attack can be illustrated in the testimony of two freshman boys who protested the removal of the book from a Massachusetts high school curriculum. In their testimony presented to the school board they stated: "A high school student does not have to a book to read far worse things than *The Chocolate War*. Any trip to a public restroom will expose him to far more obscene written material. The book has a good story to tell. The supposed immoral statements are there to tell part of the story. We do not think *The Chocolate*

War could possibly make us challenge the authority of our parents and teachers. The students who are disrespectful toward parents and teachers did not get that way reading a book such as The Chocolate War.”

In the end, the audience and the school board gave overwhelming support to keep the book in the classroom. There is a postscript to this piece of history. When the incident was occurring, the students in the classroom where all the controversy began decided to circulate a petition to allow them to continue studying the book. One student stood up and said: “Everyone in this class should sign the petition.” Then another student stood and said: “Wait. If we insist that everybody signs this petition, then we’d be doing what happens in The Chocolate War. Let’s not pressure anybody to sign.” The teacher was elated to hear this and she felt it made all the controversy worthwhile because the students had learned something from the novel and translated it into action.

Just as there are scores of reviews that are negative and critical, there are a plethora of reviews that have wonderful, positive things to say about this complex and highly controversial work. Every shallow assessment of the piece has been debunked in one positive analysis or another. Most of the complaints concern themselves with the dark aspects of the novel. One reviewer stated that in the book “only the ugly is presented” and in response another reviewer rebutted by saying that “Literary realism is not journalistic reporting” and that “novelists...choose particular elements of the world—distill, concentrate, and juxtapose them in such a manner as to illuminate a particular facet of the human condition...If Cormier chooses to concentrate on the ‘worse world’ he is exercising a literary privilege claimed by many major writers since Sophocles.”

This is an accurate assessment about Cormier and all literature. The Chocolate War is not about futility and hopelessness, but rather it is a shining example of realism—a lesson about life, a truth. If you are not part of the solution, then you are most certainly a part of the problem. This is applicable to good and evil. All of the students who failed to join Jerry in his boycott could have helped bring down the very people who were grappling for power and orchestrating their conformity.

Through the years The Chocolate War has been contested time and again, but its literary value is simply undeniable. The story goes beyond simple entertainment and laughs in the face of predictability or the “happily ever after” ending of a fairy tale. Cormier is a master at painting vibrant, vital images and creating poignant symbols. He brilliantly illustrates tone and mood, deftly evoking emotions from the reader. The blunt reality of the story is what sets the novel apart from most others, and the beauty of it is that we can all relate to the themes within. We all go through adolescence and struggle with identity and conformity. One may argue that it is a rite of passage into adulthood.

The struggle of good versus evil, tyranny over democracy, and individuality versus conformity is a part of the human condition and it is neither too bitter nor too bleak for young readers. The hope in the novel lies in Jerry’s rebellion. There are many instances in the book where Jerry feels he cannot endure any more and was ready to give in—but still he resists. Therefore, even though in the end it seemed as if his struggle was in vain and the evil had indeed triumphed, the reader carries on that hope—that Jerry will continue to resist, even if he says that he is ready to give up.