

# Cormier's the chocolate war as aristotelian trageded essay



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## y Chocolate War EssaysCormier's The Chocolate War as Aristotelian Tragedy

I teach a university course in young adult literature each semester, and every single term *The Chocolate War* provokes more controversy among the students in the class than any of the other twelve novels I teach. The objections are always the same: the language, the sexual references, the violence. Most of all, the students object to the depressing ending; specifically many students criticize Cormier for not making Jerry a "more positive role model" at the end. Class discussion usually reveals that they think Jerry is not "positive" because he is beaten in the climactic fight and he seems to give up. One student griped, "Jerry loses the fight. This was mean and sad. Why couldn't Cormier make Jerry a real hero?" Another complained, "The aspect which was . . . most disturbing to me was that Jerry, after all his conviction about being his own person, and not following the orders of either the Vigils or Brother Leon, was badly beaten in spirit as well as in body." To gain these students' approval, apparently, Jerry either should not lose the unfair boxing match or should not give up emotionally, despite having been physically battered into unconsciousness. The reasons my students cite for their disapproval reflect the general controversies that have surrounded the novel since its publication, most notably the charge in articles by Norma Bagnall and by Elizabeth G. Knudson that it shows only the dark side of life (Bagnall 214, Knudson in Campbell 61). The novel has had its fervid defenders as well, such as Betty Carter and Karen Harris, who justify the brutal conclusion of the story as "realism," by which they mean Cormier's refusal to provide a happy ending to the story.

Of all the criticisms that my students bring up about *The Chocolate War*, their focus on the importance of “role models” in adolescent fiction, and their assessment of Jerry’s “failure” to be a positive role model, interest me most, for I believe these objections contain the heart of their resistance to the experience of reading the book. Readers’ negative reactions to *The Chocolate War* clearly reflect their ideological assumptions about what fiction for adolescents should or shouldn’t do; these assumptions reflect current social ideals about the nature of adolescents. Anne Scott MacLeod notes “the unwritten rule” that adults expect adolescent literature to follow: “however sternly realistic the narrative material, it must offer some portion of hope, must end with at least some affirmative message” (74). Clearly, *The Chocolate War* breaks this “rule.” Critics who attack *The Chocolate War* do so explicitly to defend adolescent readers whom they define as vulnerable: Bagnall worries that the book is unsuitable for teenaged readers because:

We know from the work of Abraham Maslow that people need a firmly based, high evaluation of themselves for their own self-respect and for the respect of others. We know they need positive experiences as well to mature wisely and well. There are no positive experiences in this book. We know also from the work of Curt Richter and Martin Seligman that we can teach hopelessness to our young if they are taught that no matter how hard they struggle they cannot win. This story teaches that hopelessness. (217)

Note the assumptions about adolescents that underlie Bagnall’s evaluation: teen readers are very malleable; thus, they will be adversely affected because the novel does not provide them with positive models. Note also her concession of the novel’s power, for her fear rests on the assumption that it

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will affect the reader—and that the effect will inevitably be negative. My students' reactions parallel these critics' fears: one recent student wrote that she “ would be skeptical about teaching it because of the cruelty displayed be the gang and even the headmaster Leon. I would not want them to reinact sic these events.” Another argued, “ Cormier's message to his young readers appears to be, life goes on and you have little or no effect on its outcome. That is a sad thing to tell a child, and while it may be true in some respects it is not something I would teach in one of my classes. I think they would be better prepared by building their hopes and self-esteem and having the tools to deal with the defeats that will come later in life.” Like Bagnall, both of these students seem to recognize the power and even truth inherent in Cormier's novel, but they do not trust young readers' ability to grapple with a complex truth.

Other critics' analyses suggest that the novel's conclusion violates cultural ideologies that most readers expect young adult literature to follow.

MacLeod observes that *The Chocolate War* violates the deeply held American myth of “ the triumphant lonely hero” (76) ; Sylvia Patterson Iskander extends the point:

Powerful American stereotypes insist that the good nonconformist must, in fiction, win at least a qualified victory. Cormier's testing of Jerry seems to prepare the way for a conventional reversal; readers anticipate a stunning last-minute victory by the hero. But when the hero is crushed and brutally beaten, his very survival in question, many readers feel betrayed and disoriented. The overthrow of the nonconformist protagonist at the close . . .

violates the anticipated outcome of the action; within the myth, the <https://assignbuster.com/cormiers-the-chocolate-war-as-aristotelian-traged-essay/>

validation of nonconformity is victory. When readers complain about Cormier's hopeless pessimism, they mean that the novel's close defies their expectations. (12)

This view is reflected in the statement of the student I quoted earlier, that Cormier does not allow Jerry to be " a real hero," since " a real hero" would win the fight. Another student is able to acknowledge Cormier's general point yet still finds the lure of the myth more appealing:

This is not the right ending for the story. There should be a moral to the end of the story. Archie, the villain, should have paid a price for all of his pranks he played on the other boys, teachers, and the school. . . . I am not sure why the author put such a twisted ending in his story. . . . A possible statement the author was trying to make was the good guys don't always win the battle. I think Jerry should have defeated the whole school and Archie.

The violation of genre- and audience-based expectations is one of the main stumbling blocks to understanding and appreciating the novel for many readers. Because *The Chocolate War* violates their sense of appropriate reading for teenagers, my students resist the book; their previous reading strategies don't offer them a way of making the book fit into their pre-determined schema of " appropriate reading for adolescents," sometimes even after class discussion of how the novel fits the demands of the genre of " realistic" fiction.

The issue of genre may offer a solution for how to approach the book.

Generally, teachers and critics assess *The Chocolate War* as realistic fiction, but I would argue that it should be taught as tragedy. Although tragedy is <https://assignbuster.com/cormiers-the-chocolate-war-as-aristotelian-tragedy-essay/>

usually not a genre adults consider appropriate for children's or adolescent literature (an issue I will discuss further below), readers who re-view the action of the novel through the lens of tragic conventions often overcome some of the resistance they felt during the reading experience because they now can fit the novel into a genre whose conventions they do accept.

Aristotle defined the purpose of tragedy as the arousal of pity and fear in the audience to produce a catharsis of these emotions. He says that pity:

is aroused by unmerited fortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves . . . There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error. (55)

Aristotle's formulation suggests that successful tragedy depends on the audience's close identification with the hero of the tragedy: true fear must be vicarious, and we cannot feel fear for him if we do not see a close connection between ourselves and him. Nor will we feel pity if the mistake results from too deep a character flaw. Hamartia is not so much a "tragic flaw," as Aristotle's original Greek term is frequently translated, implying a fundamental flaw in character, as it is a mistake in action. Aristotle says that "character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse" (52).

If we analyze Jerry's character and action in light of the definition of tragedy, we see that as the hero, Jerry is an admirable person of high character—the only really admirable character of the novel. Despite Bagnall's assertion that the novel contains no positive experiences, throughout the novel Jerry is a

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positive model in his resistance to social oppression. The reader identifies with Jerry more than any other character in the book, and not only because his point of view dominates. As readers we like him because he's a decent, moral kid trying "to do the right thing" against high odds. He's the sort of person we would like ourselves to be.

Yet Jerry is human and fallible: he makes some mistakes, one of which turns out to be fatal. In anger and desire for revenge he agrees to the fight with Janza when Archie suggests it to him; waiting in the ring, Jerry realizes that his pride has gotten him into an unwinnable situation:

He knew now that it had been a mistake coming here, that Archie had faked him out, tricked him. For a few moments while Archie's voice whispered enticingly of sweet revenge, suggesting the fight as a way of ending it all, Jerry had actually believed it was possible, possible to beat Janza and the school and even Archie. . . . Now, standing here, one leg half asleep, nausea threatening his stomach, the night chilling his flesh, Jerry wondered if he hadn't lost the moment he had said okay. (171-2)

Jerry's agreement to fight Janza is an Aristotelian hamartian error. When Archie pressures him, Jerry, under the influence of weeks of emotional strain, makes an error of judgment: he fails to see that Archie is manipulating him for his own ends and agrees to Archie's proposal. Once in front of the school, pride forbids him to back down when he realizes how he has been betrayed both by Archie and his own desire for revenge. Hamartia, and thus true tragedy, always results from the action of the protagonist: he is not merely the victim of circumstances. In his discussion of the dialectic of tragedy,

Kenneth Burke makes a distinction that is useful here: there is a difference between a victim of circumstance and a tragic hero. "Sheer victimization is not an assertion . . . . The victimizing circumstances, or accidents, seem arbitrary and exorbitant, even 'silly.' But at the moment of tragic vision, the fatal accidents are felt to bear fully upon the act, while the act itself is felt to have summed up the character of the agent" (39). Nancy Veglahn has noted that "the protagonists of Cormier's novels are never simply victims; they achieve something like tragic stature in their courage and resistance" (16). Jerry is to some degree the victim of implacable social pressures, but he must also bear some responsibility for his situation: his own actions help bring it about.

Yet *The Chocolate War* does not represent a pure Aristotelian tragedy: like most twentieth-century tragedy, it is domestic, dealing with the lives of ordinary people rather than those of high rank. The implacable universe against which Jerry rebels and struggles is primarily social, though Cormier employs cosmic language on occasion as a metaphor to describe the impact of Jerry's defiance, as when Jerry makes his first stand against it refusing to sell the chocolates for the Vigils or Trinity: "Cities fell. Earth opened. Planets tilted. Stars plummeted" (89). Jerry does not have to bear the main blame for his fate, as Oedipus does: Archie acts a near Shakespearean villain, seducing Jerry into the fight in a manner similar to how Iago seduces Othello. Archie is even gleefully self-aware of his Shakespearean status, adapting a quotation from *Henry V* to describe himself just before he calls Jerry: "the call to Renault had required the right moves, resourcefulness and a little touch of Archie in the night. Shakespeare yet, Archie chuckled" (169).



The strongest argument for interpreting *The Chocolate War* as tragedy lies in the catharsis of the conclusion. Jerry's fate clearly arouses both pity and fear in the novel's audience—pity and fear that are so strong, in fact, that many of my students argue that it is unfit for adolescents. They fear how closely the reader identifies with Jerry, and thus the tragic conclusion of the novel, which may mirror the reader's own potential fate. In classical theory, the tragic hero seems admirable and noble in the dignity he musters to meet his fate, but Jerry seems to meet the end of the novel lying broken in a puddle of blood and despair. He fights with dignity until the end, when events and his own emotions overwhelm him. This is what bothers these students—they criticize him for not keeping up his resistance, for giving up, even though Jerry would have to be superhuman to continue to struggle in these circumstances. Jerry's state of mind, his despair as the novel ends, is realistic given the circumstances. It is also true tragedy, which always ends with the hero at the lowest point of his fortunes: Oedipus is blind; Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet are all dead.

My students' resistance to the ending brings us back to the issue of how *The Chocolate War* challenges their preconception of adolescent literature. Our society does not think of tragedy as an appropriate genre for children or young adults: the dissociation of audience and form is so complete that it is almost impossible even to find articles on the subject in current literary criticism. There are two reasons for this reaction: the first was articulated by Bagnall in her comment I quoted earlier: most adults wish adolescents to have an optimistic view of the world and fear that literature that exposes younger readers to the darker side of life will taint that hopefulness. But the

second reason that underlies this separation of audience and genre reflects a fundamental assumption about the purpose of young adult literature. Most adults see its purpose as essentially didactic: it serves as a means of providing positive psychological support for its intended audience. Rather than viewing young adult literature as having a primarily aesthetic and humanistic value, they see it only as a psychological tool, and thus in their view the success or failure of the work depends on how well it reflects the psychological and ideological precepts that they wish to promulgate. Even Cormier's supporters reveal this assumption as the basis of their defense: Campbell tries to vindicate *The Chocolate War* by arguing that "many critics over-reacted and saw only bleak hopelessness where Cormier had intended an uncompromising but therapeutic honesty" (55, emphasis mine).

Yet adults often do not require that works of "great literature" pass the same kind of didactic psychological litmus test: "great literature" is usually judged more on aesthetic grounds. Tragedy takes first place among the modes of literature: most of the "greatest" works of Western literature are tragedies, works that portray human striving and aspiration at its noblest and most difficult; even if their heroes do not prevail, they have at least striven to do so. Many of these tragedies are required reading in secondary schools: *Oedipus Rex*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, just to name the ones that I read in my own high school English classes, and that many teachers still currently use. We don't insist that the protagonists of the tragedies of "great literature"—the canonized tragedies—provide good role models: *Oedipus*, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and especially *Macbeth* certainly don't qualify as good role models! They

commit incest or suicide, or abuse their children, or kill their spouses, parents, or political leaders. Despite their protagonists' actions—or more likely perhaps because of them—the plays are usually judged great because of the artistic inevitability, the aesthetic rightness, of their tragic endings.

Oddly, the future teachers in my classes seem to have no qualms about teaching tragedy as a genre in these plays to junior high and high school students. Their attitude no doubt derives in part from the authority of the canon: everyone knows these plays are “ great literature” and therefore everyone should read them (although admittedly even they have sometimes come under attack by would-be censors). But my students do not seem worried about whether or not these protagonists make good role models. Instead, the problems they worry about are “ translating” the archaic language, getting their students to identify with the characters, and thus making the plays seem relevant to teenagers. Tragedy in these plays is apparently okay to teach, because the teachers believe its relevance is not obvious to the readers.

And this is the great irony in teaching *The Chocolate War*: my students fear the tragedy of *The Chocolate War* because its relevance is obvious; as a successful tragedy, it arouses fear and pity in them because it hits so close to home. Readers identify with Jerry because he is, in Aristotle's words, “ a man like ourselves.” What happens to Jerry is terrifying because they can see that it might happen to them or the students they are responsible for; the events at Trinity might occur—perhaps do occur—in their own schools. One student freely admitted that this was her problem with the book: “ This was another depressing story for me to read. But this one was just a little scarier  
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as it hit closer to home. This story makes me glad I took my daughter out of private school and that I didn't send my son." Another conceded, " I would not want to teach this novel. Although this scenario may really exist, I still would not want to present it." The fear and pity aroused are so strong that some readers react by simply going into a state of complete denial, which often leads to censorship. For such adults, apparently, tragedy is only safe for adolescents when viewed darkly through a glass of cultural and historical distance.

The shared assumption here—that young readers are incapable of handling tragic literature –is open to question. No one can deny that many children experience devastating events every day; such children must learn to handle tragic events first-hand. Robert Coles, who has studied children who have dealt with real-life tragedy in their own lives, asserts that children share in a universal human response to tragic circumstances:

Most children, I believe, are simply asserting their essential humanity when they ask their why's, lament what has taken place, try to explain its significance. . . . There is, too, in all of us old enough to use language, the continuing urge to understand the meaning of this life, with its trials and disappointments and heavy burdens—or if such understanding is not possible, at least to speculate, to reason with the universe. I think children come to books prepared by their membership in our species to appreciate this life's ironies, paradoxes, puzzling inconsistencies, and contradictions. (5)

Coles suggests that age makes no difference in the need to make sense of the devastating events of life, that such experience is inevitable and not

limited to adults, and, most importantly, that these difficult experiences that all children have in some degree or other make them capable of handling literature that addresses difficult and complex human experience. Adults who try to protect children from literature that deals with these experiences are reacting with what I have long privately called "the ostrich syndrome": they believe that the children they wish to protect will be safe if they do not see the troublesome issues of life in the literature they read. *The Chocolate War* is not a book for ostriches: it does its readers the compliment of assuming their humanity and thus their need and ability to grapple with true tragedy.

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