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Beyond the Problem Novel: Robert Cormier's Vision and the World of Adolescent Tragedy

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Beyond the Problem Novel:

Robert Cormier's Vision and the World of Adolescent Tragedy

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BY

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Abstract

Robert Cormier is "the premier writer for adolescents in the United States" according to The Handbook of American Popular Literature and dozens of literary critics. Although his novels have won numerous awards from the American Library Association (ALA), his novels have also generated controversy from critics who believe his novels are excessively dark and disturbing. Adolescents in Robert Cormier's world are by no means the average teenagers one may expect to find at a local high school. Instead, the adolescent world is shown to be more complex and dangerous, where evil preys on the good, where loneliness and isolation are not occasional occurrences but commonplace, and where anyone who dares to be different is doomed to failure. Cormier's fiction suggests a nihilistic view of society and also implies a dystopia, with almost every present force (government, schools, and religion) mounting together to crush caring individuals. Cormier shows even those who are in power and control (antagonists) find no more happiness than their victims.

While Cormier's adolescent novels (which include The Chocolate War, I am the Cheese, The Bumblebee Flies Anyway, Beyond the Chocolate War, We All Fall Down, Tunes for Bears to Dance to, In the Middle of the Night, and Tenderness) belong to the "problem novel" sub-genre of realistic fiction, they also philosophically differ from the typical problem novel, as represented by such writers as Avi, Judy Blume, Glendon Swarthout, and Paul Zindel. It helps to understand Cormier's fiction by placing it in the context of naturalism, which emphasizes the impotence of individuals because

of forces within nature and society. Cormier's vision of adolescents is unusual within the context of adolescent literature because it seems to undermine the concept of the individual, showing adolescents as unable to escape from the problems that encompass them, in part because the problems are difficult, but mainly because the culture of adolescents in conjunction with adult culture ultimately punishes those who attempt to be different, unique, or (especially) good.

Cormier's world is one devoid of hope, which contradicts the setting of most problem novels. Additionally, Cormier's novels undermine a common theme in adolescent literature, the "rite of passage" that develops teens into adults. Instead of treating adolescence as a rite of passage, Cormier shows it to be a period where no transition is needed or can occur since both adults and teenagers are shown to be equally brutal to people who wish to be good or independent.

Finally, Cormier's intense focus on characterization makes him unique from most problem novel authors, which usually focus on the "problems" instead of the characters or relationships. Cormier seems to hint that the problems that surround his characters are arbitrary, and most of the actual harm (both physical and psychological) that occurs to adolescents who try to be different from their peers come from the majority of seemingly ordinary adolescents who are shown to be brutal to anyone who wishes or dares to be different. Thus, I conclude that Cormier exposes the dark side of human nature, and his vision of the adolescent world is one where evil triumphs over good and where individuals who dare disturb the universe are crushed.

Thanks to my thesis director, Dr. John David Moore
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And a special thanks to
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and
Molly.

Beyond the Problem Novel:
Robert Cormier's Vision and the World of Adolescent Tragedy

Near the conclusion of Robert Cormier's The Chocolate War, the protagonist is severely injured in a brutal attack orchestrated by his peers, and he whispers, "Don't disturb the universe. Otherwise, they'll murder you" (187). This is not just figurative language, however; not a metaphor or an hyperbole. Adolescents in Robert Cormier's world are by no means the average teenagers one may expect to find at a local high school. Instead, the adolescent world is shown to be more complex and dangerous, a place where evil preys on the good, where loneliness and isolation are not occasional occurrences but commonplace, and where anyone who dares to be different is doomed. Robert Cormier's characters are physically and psychologically plagued by problems and difficulties, all as a result of being individuals. Only in Robert Cormier's world can an adolescent who chooses to be different meet endless defeats. Only in Cormier's world can society become a dystopia, with almost every present force mounting together to crush caring individuals and even those in power shown to be utterly unhappy. And only in Cormier's society can an evil serial killer be shown as less sinister and more successful than a good adolescent who chooses to make an individual decision.

It is probable that Cormier's choice to write about grim events is linked with his career before being an author. Cormier is first and foremost a journalist. Robert Cormier was born and raised in Massachusetts and chooses to set most of his novels in the same state. He began his journalism career at WTAG Radio in Worcester, Massachusetts, before finding his first newspaper job. In 1948, Cormier was hired as a member of the night staff of the Leomister bureau of the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*. Seven years later, he was hired by the *Fitchburg Sentinel*, working as a reporter before becoming a wire editor (Campbell 21). It is likely Cormier was exposed to many of the current tragedies in the news while he read the Associated Press (AP) wire each evening.

Yet, the award winning newspaper journalist Robert Cormier, who dedicated thirty years to reporting and editing for small-town Massachusetts papers, is quite different than novelist Robert Cormier. While most of his newspaper writing focused on human interest news stories and columns, the novels are significantly darker. A Cormier biographer, Patricia J. Campbell, comments, "Some have observed that there seems to be almost a schizophrenic split in his vision of the world. He himself has acknowledged this duality" (35).

Cormier has written novels since 1960 and written novels for adolescents since 1974, when The Chocolate War was published In the past twenty-four years his vision of adolescence has been highly respected. The Handbook of American Popular Literature notes "Robert Cormier is the premier writer for adolescents in the United States" (Nilsen 360). Several of his novels have received the

distinction of being ALA Best Books for Young Adults, an award given by the American Library Association to quality novels written for young people. His novel The Chocolate War won multiple awards, including recognition as an ALA Notable Children Book, a Best of the Best Book for Young Adults award, a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year award, and a *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year honor. The Bumblebee Flies Anyway and In the Middle of the Night both received the ALA. Best Book for Young Adults distinction.

In published interviews, Cormier sounds like he would write novels where good triumphs over evil. He admits that

> I cry at sad novels, long for happy endings, delight in atrocious puns, pause to gather branches of bittersweet at the side of a highway. I am shamelessly sentimental--I always make a wish when I blow out the candles of my birthday cake, and I dread the day when there may be no one there to say 'Bless you' when I sneeze. . . . I hesitate to kill a fly. . . (qtd. in Campbell 8)

Cormier claims to be optimistic, but his novels are utterly realistic and pessimistic, making Cormier one of the most controversial writers of contemporary adolescent fiction, a fiction that falls into the "problem novel" sub-genre of adolescent literature.

Problem novels are a sub-genre of realistic novels, but with key differences. The problems in problem novels are specifically focused. Theorist Sheila Egoff notes the conflict in problem novels "is specific rather than universal, and narrow in its significance rather

than far-reaching" (357). Egoff defines the problem novel as one characterized by several elements.

Problem novels "have to do with externals, with how things look rather than how things are . . . as if the writers had begun with the problems rather than with a plot or characters" (357). Thus the problems tend to dominate the novel, the protagonists in problem novels often having numerous problems and complaints. They are frequently alienated from adults, although they also usually find assistance from an "unconventional adult" who is not a family member (357).

But although problems in "problem novels" tend to be quite diverse and numerous, the majority of these novels blame parents for the difficulties their children face:

> The greatest problems in problem novels are adults, usually parents, who contribute to them, frequently abuse them, but rarely offer a believable or loving solution. Parents--the main alienating presence in these books, which are essentially about alienation--are often viewed as "the enemy." (360)

Finally, problem novels typically have endings that are only partially resolved or not resolved whatsoever. Egoff traces this to the way some teenagers think pessimistically about the future:

> Reflecting the fatalism and resignation of adolescents who see their lives as compounded of one "problem" after another, none of them with any hope of resolution, some of these novels are almost existential in not having a conclusion. . . . In novels for older children, the

> conclusions suggest that the long road to recovery has not even started, or is only just beginning. (363-364)

Thus, problem novels run against the typical young adult novel framework, where a problem occurs or a conflict exists at the beginning of the novel but is resolved before the novel ends. Instead, the problems in problem novels are rarely fixed easily and sometimes are only partially solved. This change in adolescent literature occurred in the late 1960s, according to Alleen Pace Nilsen and Ken Donelson, who have traced the history of fiction for young people. These new novels:

> describe a world that adolescent readers recognized as real, not a perfect world nor the world many adults had described, but a real world. Protagonists. . . . used language that shocked some adults but rarely fazed adolescents. Protagonists sought what adolescents really wanted--acceptance, love, honesty--most of all, honesty. (359)

Egoff, Nilsen, and Donelson all describe what is known as "The Problem Novel," and although Egoff admits that problem novel writers "show hostility" towards adults, none discuss the theme of violence as a unique trait or essential characteristic of the problem novel.

The adolescent problem novels of Robert Cormier are unusual within the context of adolescent literature because they seem to undermine the concept of the individual, showing adolescents as unable to escape from the problems that encompass them, in part because the problems are difficult, but mainly because the culture of

adolescents in conjunction with adult culture ultimately punishes those who attempt to be different, unique, or (especially) good. The works of Robert Cormier differ philosophically from the typical problem novel, as represented by such writers as Avi, Judy Blume, Glendon Swarthout, Ursula Le Guin, and Paul Zindel, and have contributed to new directions in the evolution of the problem novel. It helps to understand Cormier's fiction by placing it in the context of naturalism, which emphasizes the impotence of individuals because of forces within nature and society. Cormier's world is violent, a place where parents abandon or ignore their children, where adolescents are unable to establish friendships or relationships with their peers, where adolescents do not find a "rite of passage" into adulthood because corruption exists, and where adolescents learn that being an individual is detrimental to their survival.

Although problem novels can and frequently do contain "problems" without showing characters that commit violent acts, the works of Robert Cormier do not. Cormier's world is filled with murders, psychological terrors, terminal illnesses, and continual threats. Violence in books for young people is common, and critic Carl Tomlinson notes that, "Violence, like a thin but noticeable thread, runs through every inch of the fabric of children's literature" (39). But Cormier's use of violence in the problem novel setting paints a distorted image of the adolescent world. While it is not realistic to portray every problem as having a timely and simple solution, Cormier's fiction seems to portray problems on the opposite extreme, as if every problem teenagers encounter has no solution. Cormier's vision of adolescents is excessively negative, and he shows

that adult culture and adolescent culture terrorize the few individuals who choose to make their own decisions. Instead of understanding or respecting others, most adults and teens refuse to accept differences and turn violent when they are around the few nice or innocent people that live in their dark world.

Most of the problems Cormier's protagonists face involve some elements of violence. Some literary critics believe Cormier's portrayal of violence can "provide opportunities for teenage readers to face certain unpleasant realities of modern life" (Gallo 160). Learning to live life after a tragedy occurs is also an important element in fiction, since "literary tragedy for children does not sweep calamities under the rug but can help the young to face life's dark experiences by showing heroes who meet fears, loss, and death with inner strength." (Kingston 3) However, Cormier's fiction is extreme in showing that *no* problems can be solved peacefully by today's adolescents, and Cormier's world is extreme in showing that violent people and violent acts are omnipresent. While Cormier shows characters who meet "fears, loss, and death," the "inner strength" of the characters is non-existent and the violence is overwhelming.

Violence is a theme prevalent in Cormier's world. Although the setting of his novel We All Fall Down is a peaceful suburb, acts of violence occur frequently in the book. The novel opens with a graphic description of teenage vandals destroying (simply because they are bored and looking for a good time) a random house on a quiet street:

> They entered the house at 9:02 p.m. on the evening of April Fool's Day. In the next forty-nine minutes, they

> shit on the floors and pissed on the walls and trashed their way through the seven-room Cape Cod cottage. They overturned furniture, smashed the picture tubes in three television sets. . . . they managed to invade every room in the house, damaging everything they touched. (1-2)

The function of violence in adolescent literature is complex. Violence in problem novels can help portray reality and familiarize youths with the dangers of the world we live in.

Adolescent psychologist Mary Pipher believes violence is an ever-present reality today for teenagers and especially for young women, whom she writes about in Reviving Ophelia:

> Traditionally parents have wondered what their teens were doing, but now teens are much more likely to be doing things that can get them killed. . . . Adolescence has always been hard, but it's harder now because of cultural changes in the last decade. The protected place in space and time that we once called childhood has grown shorter. (28)

Thus, one would argue Cormier's novels may simply be darker than previous problem novels because he is reflecting a change in society.

Many adolescent novelists have written about violent events precisely because violence is ever-present in our society. In fact, studies have shown that historically children's and adolescent literature seems to emphasize bleak events. Literary critic Lillian H. Smith notes:

> The short history of children's literature has shown that many of the worst features of an era are accented in the children's books of each period. . . . Our own time, with its awakened concern for . . . social injustice, has not been unwilling to burden children's books with what Anne Carroll Moore has called "lifeless stories with too much background and too many problems." Such books are too often applauded by adults because they reflect a sincere concern for social problems, rather than because the theme is a natural interest of childhood. (34)

The "worst features of an era" are certainly accented in Cormier's novels. Moreover, the social problems reflected in his novels are so numerous that his novels could be designed to introduce adolescents to the sinister problems of the twentieth-century.

However, by having protagonist after protagonist crumble under the social evils of society, it is unclear what useful message Cormier is giving to today's adolescents. While it is clear that most of the violence is disheartening and has negative effects on the protagonists of his stories, the appropriateness of violence in adolescent literature is often debated. Literary critic Carl Tomlinson believes violence in children's and adolescent literature, unless grotesque or gratuitous, is often warranted:

> The issue is not whether violence has a place in children's literature, because history has shown that it has. The issue is whether violence in a children's books can be justified. . . .Some violence in children's books can be justified in terms of the deeper understanding it provides

> of past events and present conditions, just as institutional violence may be justified in terms of the worthy social and political goals it helps to achieve. (40)

According to Tomlinson, critic Nicola Bardola justifies violence in realistic novels for young people because it helps them adapt to their world. He asserts that it is good that authors address violence in novels for young people, since:

> Violence (as no one needs to be reminded today) is an almost daily part of children's lives, either directly--through war, civil unrest, or abuse at home--or through the all-pervasive media. . . . They (children) need children's books that help them cope with the circumstances of their lives and the images in the media. (qtd. in Tomlinson 47-48)

Cormier seems to reinforce this idea to some extent in Tenderness and In the Middle of the Night, both of which condemn the media as responsible for intensifying conflicts or creating atmospheres conducive to violence. In the Middle of the Night follows a family which can never escape from the tragedy of a theater fire because every year the newspapers remember the anniversary of the event. Although Denny's family moves almost yearly to avoid being harassed, the newspapers almost always are able to track them down when they report on the anniversary of the fire. At one point in the novel Denny's mother complains that it is, "A sin . . . bringing all this up again. Why can't they just write about the poor children, make it a tribute to them?" (165). The media are partly to blame for

the problems of a good family, since reporters continually harass the family.

The media are also linked to the bizarre obsession of a lonely teenager in Tenderness. In the novel, Lori becomes obsessed with a serial killer she sees on television who is about to be freed because he is reaching his eighteenth birthday:

> But the television intrudes now, a face flashing on the screen that brings me back to here and now . . .
>
> I see his eyes, eyes that I remember, and the way his lips curl into a smile but a smile like no other smile in the world . . .
>
> Now his face is on the screen again, close up, those eyes staring at the camera as if staring at nobody and nothing and then breaking into a sudden smile. . . . I hear a small moan and know immediately that it is me who has moaned because I am fixated again, on him . . . (26-28)

Lori, who admits in the novel's opening line "Me, I get fixated on something and I can't help myself" is shown to become fixated on topics that are ever-present in the media. Lori's two major fixations in the novel are shown to be enhanced through popular music lyrics from CD's she listens to and the mesmerizing television newscast that brings her images of a serial killer that she becomes obsessed with and tracks down. Thus, Cormier shows the media helps create an environment that promotes violence and harms adolescents.

According to some critics, violence is used in literature in order for people to help better appreciate life without violence. These

critics believe that violence in adolescent literature helps adolescents realize the negative effects that violence has in their lives. By showing adolescents how destructive violence is, adolescents will be turned off from violence. While admitting that the violence in We All Fall Down is "realistic, graphic, even degrading," (121) and "Cormier's book is devastating in its graphic portrayal of violence, never backing off from a realism which is terrifying" (119), Michael A. Grimm believes that adolescents are in essence taught the evils of violence. Grimm argues violence will help make adolescents realize that peaceful solutions are possible: "Because it (the violence) is portrayed in exactly those ways it causes revulsion rather than the desire to participate in such actions" (121) Other critics agree, as Campbell notes:

> Millicent Lenz has made an elaborate argument for the theory that Cormier is depicting a dark, tragic world in order to imply the opposite-- a bright, happy world. His books, she maintains, are "ironic" in that they are meant to instruct readers how not to act, so that their world will be the opposite of the world his characters have brought on themselves. She says "so desolate a vision calls up a counter-vision of a possible better world--the world that lies within human will and choice to realize". (36)

Thus, adolescents might learn from the mistakes of the protagonists and antagonists and vow never to repeat them, thus avoiding for themselves and their peers the doomed fates so frequently relegated to the characters in Cormier's novels.

Although it is possible that this is Cormier's intention, most of the textual evidence in Cormier's work show adolescents do not even need to make mistakes in order to suffer traumatic events. Blaming victims for poor choices is an argument that could be made for situations like those portrayed in Paul Zindel's The Pigman, where adolescents eventually abuse their friendship with Mr. Pignati and learn to cope with the loss by reflecting on the choices they made while he was living. However, in Cormier's world the majority of the "bad" things that happen to the adolescent victims occur because of situations beyond their immediate control. In several of the novels, adolescents are faced with grim situations not because of their choices but simply because of fate.

Denny is nearly killed for an accident that is unfairly blamed on his father and has nothing to do with him in the novel In the Middle of the Night. Barney Snow is born with an incurable disease in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway. Adam Farmer is left an orphan in I am the Cheese when the government fails to protect his family after his father testifies for the government. Almost all of Cormier's protagonists--with the exception of Jerry Renault in The Chocolate War and Lori in Tenderness--do not suffer as a result of their choices but are left in situations that they cannot control.

Furthermore, even if Cormier's violence is meant to alert readers to the dangers of violence, the victims of violence never learn this lesson. The main characters in Cormier's novels are not troubled youths who are at risk of committing crimes. Instead, most of his characters are utterly *normal,* albeit frequently depressed youths. Cormier also seems to send more of an alarming message to

teenage readers: violence can and will happen to you and *you* are to blame. This suggests some adolescents are doomed because they are pre-determined to suffer based on heredity or the social environment around them.

Thus, Robert Cormier's fiction often embraces naturalism. Like realism, naturalism attempts to portray life as it is. However, naturalism makes use of biological and socioeconomic factors to show how the environment can create scenarios for the actions of the characters. Typically, characters in naturalistic novels are members of the middle class who "play out predetermined roles in an atmosphere of depravity, sordidness, and violence" (Morner 145-146).

Although naturalism is not a term frequently used by critics to describe adolescent literature, Cormier's novels typically show elements of naturalism. According to M. H. Abrams, characters in novels where naturalism is present struggle with "social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which" they are born (175). Furthermore, naturalist authors:

> try to present their subjects with scientific objectivity and with elaborate documentation, sometimes including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions . . . They tend to choose characters . . . who are victims both of glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without. (175)

Cormier, too, writes with "frankness" when he reports what happens to his protagonists. Cormier's writing style is similar to that of a journalist who is describing the events of a tragic accident. This

reporting of the events that harm adolescents is similar to the naturalist style of recording observations about the problems that overwhelm most people. Many of Cormier's characters do not do anything wrong but still fail to succeed because of the hostile adolescents or adults around them. Tragic events, according to Cormier, happen because all adolescents are somehow guilty. The victims in Cormier's fiction are sometimes implicated for the violence that occurs to them. Many teens in Cormier's fiction accept this guilt, although a few actually see the harm it can cause.

The theme of guilt concludes Beyond the Chocolate War, when the evil manipulative headmaster of Trinity High School, Brother Leon, blames the entire school body for a suicide that he, himself, helped cause. After listening to Leon's speech, a Trinity student voices his skepticism, as Cormier states:

> Henry Malloran wondered what the hell Brother Leon meant when he said everybody was guilty. And should be ashamed. I'm not guilty, he thought, I didn't even know the kid. Never even said hello to him in my life. He was tired of Brother Leon, as tired of him as he was tired of cafeteria food. Why should Leon try to make everybody feel rotten all the time. *You should hang your heads in shame.* (272)

While Malloran rejects the guilt placed on him by Brother Leon, the rest of the student body and the rest of Cormier's protagonists are unable to free themselves from this guilt. In fact, the guilt placed on adolescents creates anxiety and anger in some of Cormier's protagonists, although Cormier typically shows adolescents who feel

guilt for actions they do not even commit. Thus, adolescents are guilty simply because they are adolescents and tragedies occur because they are predestined to occur. Cormier's use of naturalism shows an adolescent environment where adolescents can fail not because of their own actions or choices but simply because the environment around them is harsh.

It should be noted, however, that while some of Cormier's novels use naturalism to show how some adolescents are predestined to suffer, other Cormier novels show that improper decision making by the protagonist creates difficult situations for them. Most teenagers in Cormier's world are violent and hostile so they justifiably have something to feel guilty about. Nancy Veglahn comments that "Robert Cormier is one of the few writers of realistic fiction for young adults who creates genuinely evil characters" (12).

In We All Fall Down, suburban teens are shown to be brutal when they destroy a Cape Cod house just because they are bored. After members of a group of boys vandalize a house and nearly rape a teenage girl (eventually pushing her down the stairs where she sprawls an the bottom of the floor motionless), they act like nothing serious has happened. After exiting the house, the boys are seemingly unaffected, and their only conversation that night is about restaurant condiments, as Cormier writes:

> Later, in the car, driving from Burnside to Wickburg, Marty and Randy discussed the merits of ketchup and mustard on hamburgers and hot dogs. Marty insisted that ketchup should never be used on hot dogs while

> Randy said that ketchup could be used on anything because it had an American taste. (12)

With the exception of Buddy, who is shown to be remorseful the entire novel, the other teens act as if they have done no wrong. Cormier's bored suburban teenagers exhibit pure evil because of the culture around them. This idea reinforces naturalism, since Cormier shows suburban America as capable of creating a situation where boredom leads to horrific crimes. Although no traumatic event signals the breakdown of order, such as a plane crash that strands adolescents on an island in William Golding Lord of the Flies, Cormier's characters conduct violent acts based on what they observe from their suburban environment.

Cormier's fiction also suggests naturalism by implying that teenagers can also be "born" guilty. He creates the amoral character in the same novel, a character named "The Avenger," who witnesses the vandalism and attack but does nothing. As an eleven year old child, The Avenger carefully plans to murder a fellow fifth-grader because he is a bully. Cormier describes the result of this planning: "From the book bag he removed the revolver he had stolen from his grandfather. Kneeling, he held the revolver with both hands and pressed the trigger. The lower half of Vaughn's face exploded in bone and blood as the bullet struck" (19-20). The guilty boy even wipes his prints off the gun to make it look like a suicide. When his grandfather begins to get suspicious, The Avenger murders his grandfather by pushing him off a balcony and planning an attack:

> Like a puppet whose strings were cut, like a tree branch taken by the wind. Down he went, all arms and legs

> thrashing the air. At the last moment, The Avenger took his eyes away from his grandfather's downward flight. . . . Then he went into the apartment and picked up the telephone, paused a moment. . . . he punched 911 and told whoever answered to please send an ambulance, his poor old Gramps had fallen off his balcony. (74)

The Avenger succeeds at these two murders and years later attempts to murder the novel's second protagonist, Jane Jerome, because she unknowingly was dating one of the people who vandalized her house and The Avenger proves to be some kind of demented "protector" who hopes to kill all the vandals. Grimm hints that The Avenger is "shocking" but still realistic in the novel because "there are cases of children even younger than The Avenger using guns to deliberately shoot someone" (120). Nevertheless, the violence in We All Fall Down is exaggerated and extraordinary, and Cormier's use of The Avenger is yet another example of showing a grim view of adolescents. Statistically, there are very few fifth graders who have murdered a peer in cold-blood, successfully covered up the crime, and murdered a family member. Yet, Cormier uses the violence to show that children today *can* commit violent or amoral acts because they are born corrupted, and this reinforces naturalism.

Egoff believes death in adolescent novels, while common, misrepresents reality since "The preponderance of deaths (though not death scenes) is astonishing, considering that ninety-five per cent of us reach adulthood without experiencing a family death" (364). Cormier also differs from most problem novel writers, since

typically death in problem novels involves "an older eccentric outside the family with whom the child has had a close relationship" (365). This accurately describes Paul Zindel's The Pigman. However, death in Cormier's works strikes much closer to the protagonist and sometimes involves the protagonist contemplating his or her own death as when Barney Snow witnesses his friends die one by one from terminal illnesses and then discovers he, too, will die. Cormier seems to find the most extreme tragic situations possible and paint it as commonplace by establishing horrifying scenarios in suburban America. Yet violence is not the only worry for Cormier's characters.

While the adolescents in problem novels typically have few friends, Cormier shows a world where nice or good adolescents are so uncommon that they cannot find *any* friends or establish meaningful relationships. This is different from many problem novels, where the relationships themselves create problems for the protagonist. For example, in Katherine Paterson's Bridge to Terabithia, two adolescents (Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke) become friends and are practically inseparable, until Leslie dies unexpectedly. While the biggest "problem" in the novel is Jess' reaction to the loss of his friend, he is able to overcome his isolation and loneliness by extending his secret world (Terabithia) to his sister:

> And when he finished, he put flowers in her hair and led her across the bridge--the great bridge to Terabithia--which might look to someone with no magic in him like a few planks across a nearly dry gully. . . . "Can't you see um?" he whispered. "All the Terabithians standing on

> tiptoe to see you. . . . There's a rumor going around that the beautiful girl arriving today might be the queen they've been waiting for". (128)

While sharing the secret world of Terabithia will not necessarily help Jess get over his loss, friendship will help him recover emotionally from the shock of dealing with death. Similarly, the character Davey in Judy Blume's problem novel Tiger Eyes is able to adjust to living without her father after she meets two friends, Jane (who is struggling with alcoholism) and Wolf, (who is also going through the loss of his father). Through her interactions with other adolescents, she is able to gain confidence and overcome her fears from her father's death. Finally, she buries the clothes that she wore the day her father was killed, which symbolizes her new outlook on life:

> I fold the jeans and the halter and place them inside the cave . . . I build a pyramid of rocks over them, until there is nothing left to see. Nothing but rocks. *Goodbye, Daddy. I love you. I'll always love you. . . . But from now on I'm going to remember the good times. From now on I'm going to remember you full of life and full of love.* (189-190)

Although the friendship only lasts a few months, since she is only visiting with her Aunt and Uncle for one school year while her mother recovers from her father's death, her interaction with her peers allows her to overcome the grief. While Blume's novel is ultimately about the tragedy of losing a loved one, Blume allows her lead character Davey to achieve a level of intimacy with her friends.

Cormier's fiction also seems different from most other problem novels because his characters fail to achieve any intimacy whatsoever. Intimacy sometimes creates additional problems in problem novels (the topics of relationship building or ending, pregnancy, and sexual orientation are frequently explored) but also is used positively in other problem novels. But in Cormier's world, intimacy (defined here as a serious friendship) simply cannot occur to Cormier's adolescent characters.

Almost none of Cormier's characters find even the minimal amount of the affection they are seeking, and most find no affection at all. Ironically, even Cormier's antagonists, who are typically surrounded by cronies and friends, fail to reach a level of intimacy. While they lead by fear, when they are alone they exhibit weaknesses. In Beyond the Chocolate War, the powerful leader of the Vigils, Archie, begins to show weakness after a friend begins spending most of his time dating instead of talking with him:

> Once in a while he expressed his thoughts to Obie. Obie was the only person he allowed into his privacy. But not recently. He and Obie had grown apart. . . . They had been pulled apart for that girl, all that nonsense of Obie being in love. Love, for crissakes. . . . Although he hated to admit it to himself, Archie missed the talks with Obie. (39)

Although he has virtual control over the entire student population at Trinity High School, Archie exhibits a weakness by not being able to have a decent friendship. By holding a position of leadership, Archie

believes he must always show his authority, and this prevents him from making any true friends.

Likewise, Lulu, the mysterious antagonist in In the Middle of the Night, is also shown to be unhappy. When she was sixteen, she was crippled by a balcony collapsing at a theater that was officially ruled an "accident." Although she has no evidence and believes it was a "cover-up," she blames and stalks an innocent usher, John Paul Colbert, who was standing on the empty balcony when it fell on top of several rows of children. In revenge, she eventually lures his son, Denny, to her apartment in order to kill him. Although she orchestrates a complex plan to kill Denny and has a brother who helps take care of her, her bitterness about past events prevent her from becoming friends with anyone, including her brother. Even when Lulu is in control of her plan to get revenge, she still is preoccupied with anger, and Cormier hints that even exacting revenge will not make her happy. She dismisses her brother's love and her brother's advice to let the past end and appreciate what she still has to live for, and Dave becomes increasingly worried about his sister:

> I see what is flashing in her eyes, the mischief there. More than mischief: malice. . . . She only stares at me with those terrible eyes filled with something I can't describe, her mouth a cruel slash and her cheeks taut. Her face like a mask that hides the real Lulu. . . . That Lulu is gone. And this new Lulu makes me lie awake at night . . . (130-132)

Even when she captures Denny and prepares to kill him--the point in many novels where the villain gloats with happiness--she is too bitter to enjoy the moment. When Denny comments to Lulu that his father did not cause the accident that crippled Lulu when she was young, Lulu loses her sanity and complains about a cover up: "You weren't there. You didn't hear the screams. You didn't feel the pain. You didn't die the way I did" (170). Lulu not only becomes angry and bitter but also unravels, insisting that she "died" the night of the accident. Lulu no longer seems the brilliant planner that she is. After all, she successfully stalks Denny's family for twenty years. It proves to be exceedingly difficult since Denny's family moves frequently and takes several precautions. Yet Lulu's sanity is suddenly called into question since she cannot follow through with her plan to kill Denny without being distracted by her problems. Hence the villains in Cormier's fiction are not happy because they cannot or will not communicate effectively with anyone else. Furthermore, this inability to communicate with others harms both Archie and Lulu.

In addition to being continually alone, most of Cormier's protagonists fail to reach a satisfactory level of intimacy. While this theme runs throughout his works, it is best shown in Tenderness, which follows two characters who struggle unsuccessfully to find compassion. In the novel, a fifteen year old girl becomes obsessed with an eighteen year old serial killer. Unlike in most Cormier novels, there are no teens in the novel who are completely "good." Stephanie Zvirin notes that Lori, who is certainly the nicer of the two characters, is still a fifteen year old runaway who

> blatantly and aggressively uses her sexuality to get what she wants. Like Eric, she is obsessed with a search for genuine affection, and she's every bit as committed to pursuing it. . . . Lori is a complicated blend--at once a selfish, vulnerable child; a sexy tease; and an intuitive young woman. (935)

Although Lori uses manipulation to achieve her goals, she is still innocent and acts childish around Eric Poole, a serial killer who manipulates everyone around him. Despite killing his mother, step-father, and three young women, Poole never shows remorse for the crimes, and Zvirin acknowledges that "certainly he's a monster" (935).

Both Lori and Poole seek different types of "tenderness" but never are able to find the compassion they seek. Lori frequently becomes obsessed with people she sees on television but always feels unfulfilled. While struggling to feel affection she states, "But I think affection is also sad, especially when a person wants more than affection, wants love and can't have it" (176). Poole does not find the affection he seeks, either. Although he tells himself he enjoys the brief moment of "tenderness" when he takes his victims' lives, the feeling is always short-lived and sometimes does not come at all, forcing him to continue to plan more murders.

Thus, Lori and Poole, like almost all protagonists in Cormier's works, are never able to achieve intimacy, tenderness, or a feeling of attachment. Cormier's protagonists are "utterly alone," and therefore cannot possibly establish relationships. Critic Barbara Harrison believes that Cormier's attempt to investigate relationships and his

lack of follow-through in Tenderness is a shortcoming of the novel. She notes, "[T]he basic premise--that there will be a serious exploration of tenderness--is unfulfilled" (qtd. in Book Review Digest 1997 430). Cormier's vision of adolescence is of a world where good individuals cannot find happiness or establish relationships. Cormier contrives situations to emphasize the isolation that adolescents face. His creation of a hospital filled with terminally ill and lonely children in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway suggests Cormier uses exaggeration to intensify the awareness that the world is rotten to the core.

In addition to not establishing relationships with peers, adolescents cannot ever interact meaningfully with their parents or guardians in Cormier's novels. The relationships (or lack thereof) between Cormier's characters and the adults in their lives show that teens have difficulty communicating with *any* adult. Cormier's portrayal of adolescents suggests also that family is either the source of trouble for them or that family members are never present and their absence inevitably harms the adolescents.

Cormier's problem novels are therefore similar to some more mainstream problem novels where family members are sometimes unavailable to talk with the teenagers or simply not present at all. But there are also numerous problem novels that suggest that a lack of presence by parents is not a significant problem for adolescents. Author Ursula Le Guin's problem novels typically contain protagonists who are not aided by parents, but the protagonists manage to remain positive. In Very Far Away From Anywhere Else, for example, seventeen year old Owen Griffith, who is frequently lonely, admits:

> It was not my parents' fault. If this seems to be one of those books about how everything is the older generation's fault , and even some psychologists have written books like that by the way, then I haven't said it right. It wasn't their fault. All right, so they lived partly in the fog all the time, and accepted a lot of lies without trying to get at the truth--so what? It doesn't mean they liked it any better than I did. (76)

Owen is neither sarcastic or cynical when he describes his aloof parents. While his parents may not offer him physical assistance, he doesn't see their lack of presence as a contributing factor to his difficulties.

However, some novels about adolescents feature substantial problems but show how a strong family can help alleviate some of the pain that is suffered by the adolescent. Mildred Taylor uses family as a source of strength in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry and Let the Circle Be Unbroken. At the end of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry the Logan siblings are shocked when T.J., a family friend, becomes involved with other adolescent troublemakers. When Cassie and Stacey ask their father if T.J. could die after he was accused of robbing a store and killing a white man who owned a store, Taylor writes, "Papa put a strong hand on each of us and watched us closely. 'I ain't never lied to y'all, y'all know that . . . . Well, I ... I wish I could lie to y'all now" (209). While the news is tragic to his children, since they only then begin to realize how difficult it is when a black person is accused of committing a crime against a white person in the South in the 1930's, a close-knit family

helps the Logan children gain knowledge and confidence. Despite the struggles they face, at least some comfort is given by a caring family environment. No such comfort is given in Cormier's works. Unlike Le Guin, Cormier shows lack of family attention as a decisive element in the protagonists' failure; unlike Taylor, Cormier shows that even the families that seem strong cannot provide any assistance to the protagonists when problems arise.

The divided modern family is evident in numerous novels by Cormier. One of the most disturbed protagonists in his novels is Buddy in We All Fall Down, who helps a group of teens vandalize a house and later falls in love with a girl who lived there. Although Buddy is compassionate and caring (unlike the other "trashers" who vandalize houses) Buddy joins them on one occasion because he is simply tired of being alone. At first Buddy's anger is manifested towards his parents, who are in the process of divorcing. Buddy comments:

> *Notice the formality here: calling them Mother and Father, not Mom and Dad. No more Hi Mom, Hi Dad, how did things go today?* . . . Not only didn't call them Mom or Dad anymore. Did not call them anything at all. Not even *hey*. (28)

In addition to his inability to communicate with his parents, Buddy is like most other adolescents. While his outward behavior is filled with anger, he also shows he is emotional and feels abandoned. The source of his loneliness is clear, as he ponders the fates of himself and his sister: "And suddenly he, too, felt like crying. Because he saw himself and Addy for what they were: two kids whose parents

were divorcing, living in a house where nobody loved anybody else anymore" (32).

In fact, although the book is filled with sinister characters, critic Betsy Hearne notes that the strongest attack in the novel seems to be on the fathers:

> The real villains here seem to be fathers: Buddy's father, who deserts his family and neglects his embittered son; the father whose disappearance seems to have left The Avenger a psychotic killer; gang leader Harry's father, who, by paying all the damages his son inflicts, buys off publicity... (qtd. in Book Review Digest 1992 417)

Yet, although Cormier may cite a lack of strong fathers as one possibility for the traumatized adolescents who inflict violence and spread discontent, he never suggests a good family life would have prevented the events from happening. In fact, the family whose house is destroyed by the vandals is shown to be close-knit and fully functional. Furthermore, the family struggles emotionally after the crime takes place. Jane notes that only "at times" does her little brother resemble his former self and he even stops playing video games, something he always loved to do (136). Suspicion also is ever present in the family, and Jane finally asks her parents, "Don't you trust me?" (137). This suggests that even close-knit families cannot fully recover after experiencing a tragedy.

Other problem novel writers that portray broken families still show that some family structure and guidance is still possible. Cynthia Voigt's novel Homecoming follows four adolescents who journey to find a grandmother they have never seen before after

their mother abandons them. In Dicey's Song, the sequel to the novel, Dicey learns to cope with the new atmosphere but recognizes the value of family, as she states: "*So. So they were going to live here, on the rundown farm, with Gram--Dicey's heart danced again, inside her, to say it to herself like that.* Home" (ii). Thus, Voigt's problem novels show that even shattered families can try to piece together some semblance of a life. Cormier's broken families, however, remain broken.

Cormier also shows that parents frequently show little interest in their children. This lack of interest is experienced firsthand by the adolescents in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway. The novel follows characters who have terminal illnesses and are housed in a special testing hospital that is isolated from the outside world. Although the patients in the children's ward in this experimental hospital are all there because they volunteered, visitors to the facility are extremely rare. With the exception of one character's sister's visit, the dying adolescents describe their family members as too uncomfortable to visit them. Campbell explains that Cormier himself admitted that religious leaders or family members visiting the patients could not be present in the novel because it would disturb his writing style:

> that would mean acknowledging that the world outside was aware and concerned (and Cormier said): "the families would be dropping in . . . and the do-gooders would be stopping by with fruit--'" and then the Complex is no longer an island apart--the literary framework is gone (134)

But although it might disturb the "literary framework" of the novel, the absence of family is significant. Cormier admits he does not want "families" or "do-gooders" dropping by to help the adolescents who are about to die of terrible illnesses. Thus, the setting of his novel--an experimental hospital--may as well be called an orphanage. While Cormier vividly paints the a picture of the desolate atmosphere of a hospital for the terminally ill, the idea that dozens of families would not visit their dying children or teenagers seems unrealistic and even contrived.

James B. Hoyme notes that psychologists believe all parents experience a time when they wish to abandon their children. He notes that the term *abandoning impulse* "implies that all parents sometimes experience the wish to be free from the burdens and constraints of childhood and that they are therefore (naturally) inclined to resent the child whose living presence frustrates that wish" (33). But while most parents do not act on such an impulse, it is the normal behavior in Cormier's fiction.

Furthermore, Barney Snow (the novel's protagonist) learns his friend Mazzo's family is wealthy but his mother still does not visit him. Although it is true that Mazzo does not want his mother to visit him (because he blames her for divorcing his father), it is extremely unrealistic that caring parents would let their children die without visiting them. Instead, Cormier portrays Mazzo's mother as a person who "made a substantial donation" to the hospital (99). Nevertheless, she has abandoned her child. But even when parents *are* present, Cormier shows them to be ignorant of the problems of their children.

At the beginning on the novel In the Middle of the Night, Denny mutters "I am not my father," which suggests that parents are not role models in Cormier's works. (15). Although John Paul, his father, is not sinister or abusive, he cannot effectively communicate with his son, as Denny complains:

> His father. Behind the newspaper. *Hiding* behind the newspaper, especially this morning. Was he really reading the paper? He never discussed what he read in the paper. Did not react. The Red Sox lose another ball game, blowing it in the final inning? No reaction. Another senseless death on the streets over Boston? A beating? A drive-by-shooting? A gang rape? No reaction. . . His father ruffled the paper to show that he had not finished reading it. If he lowered the newspaper, he would encounter his son, his wife. (19)

Cormier cites only the *negative* actions of society in the newspaper--the gang rapes, beatings, and shootings--in order to paint his dark vision. Furthermore, he portrays Denny's father as someone who cannot possibly contribute to his family. Even families that are united (which is a rarity in Cormier's novels, since most of his novels feature families that are divorced or adolescents that are orphaned) and are seemingly happy have extreme difficulties communicating. Cormier portrays "normal" functional families as something completely mythical, as Denny states, "That's what someone would see, peeking in the window: a regular family. Breakfast time. Mother at the stove. Father reading the newspaper. Son dutifully eating the dreaded shredded wheat because his mother said it was

good for him" (19). Thus, although Denny's family is one of the happiest families present in all of Cormier's fiction, it still is attacked. While it is true that Denny learns to respect his father by the end of the novel (one of the few positive elements in all of Cormier's conclusions) and "dared to do what he had never done before" by hugging him, Denny himself makes all the effort (165). His parents provide no comfort or assistance to Denny throughout the novel and Cormier implies that even seemingly-perfect families are not able to function properly.

The attack on family continues in Beyond the Chocolate War, where parents are shown to trivialize the problems their children face. Because it takes The Goober a long time to recover from watching Jerry Renault get beaten nearly to death by a bully, The Goober switches schools. Despite his uneasiness, his father's only comments to him include "You see, Roland. Time heals all things" (20). The Goober's father does not realize his son is forever changed by the events that have occurred. Cormier's parents, even when present, do not fully realize the true dangers that their children face daily.

One of the best models of a strong family is Adam's family in I am the Cheese. Although the necessity of being enrolled in a witness relocation program creates an atmosphere of secrecy within the family, Adam still earns respect for his parents and is respected by them. Yet, despite the fact that the family remains close-knit, the family is destroyed when Adam's parents are killed. As a result of their murder, Adam is taken to a government facility. A good family

life does Adam no good, and until Adam is put to death he will be alone.

Thus, without any hopes of developing friendships with their peers and without any chance of effectively communicating with their parents, Cormier's protagonists have two strikes against them when they venture into the violent world Cormier creates. Within that world, Cormier shows his protagonists have difficulty because the culture of adults and the culture of teenagers allows little deviation from the norms of society. Furthermore, the norms of society frequently revolve around evil and malice. Dangers lurk behind every corner, suggesting Cormier holds a nihilistic view of society and in his fiction creates a society that is a dystopia--where no one is or ever can be truly happy.

Cormier, unlike most adolescent fiction writers, seems to draw sinister, pessimistic, and even nihilistic conclusions about the culture of adolescents. He presents the adolescent as suspicious of the ruling order of things including the modern (divided) family, adolescent gangs and cliques, teachers and schools, and a corrupt government. Critic Rebecca Lukens describes the nihilism present in Cormier's world:

> The world is rotten: the honest people flee; those who remain are corrupt; the government is ineffectual but controlling; organized violence is ubiquitous. There is no hope . . . the pervasive forces of the unseen and the sinister are in control. Hope is gone; despair remains. (8)

Not only does Cormier portray the world as rotten, but his novels attack the government, the school system, and organized religion.

Cormier's first problem novel shows his nihilistic view of society when he implicates the (U.S.) government in I am the Cheese. At one point in the novel, Adam Farmer perceives that he is talking to a gas station attendant. The man that Adam encounters seems to accurately describe Cormier's vision of the world:

> It's a terrible world out there. Murders and assassinations. Nobody's safe on the streets. And you don't even know who to trust anymore. Do you know who the bad guys are?. . .
>
> Of course you don't. Because you can't tell the good guys from the bad guys anymore. Nobody knows these days. Nobody. No privacy, either. Next time you use a phone, you listen. Listen close. You might hear a click. And if you do, then somebody's listening. Even if you don't hear a click, somebody might be listening anyway. (24)

While this doubt of the government may seem to be an exaggeration, it is actually born out by the rest of Cormier's novel. The suspicion of the government is ever present for the Farmer family, since their lives are entrusted to the government after Mr. Farmer testifies for the government in exchange for protection.

The suspicion of the government helps Cormier show how a family is terrorized psychologically in the novel. After learning that the family's identity must forever remain a secret, Adam's mother discusses the terrifying implications of how ordinary events can generate suspicion and sheer terror. Because of this fear, which affects both Mrs. Farmer and Adam, the family members must

change their lives and identities. Thus, the Farmers pays a tremendous price in order to tell the truth and assist the government:

> And always, Adam, there are the Never Knows. Never knowing who can be trusted. Never knowing who that stranger in town might be. The phone rings and I think, Is this the call I've always been afraid of? Have we been discovered? A woman I've never seen before glances at me in the supermarket. And I worry. Because you never know. (165)

Yet, although the family makes a sacrifice in order to assist the government, Cormier shows such an action, while noble, is more harmful than good. This is because the government fails to follow through with their promise and may even play a role in the murder of Adam's parents. Unlike most problem novel settings, where "[p]artial or temporary relief from anxieties is received from an association with an unconventional adult outside the family" (357), no such person is found in I am the Cheese. Although a man from the government (Mr. Gray) provides protection for the family, no one actually trusts him. Mrs. Farmer is the most vocal in her distrust of him, finally commenting to Adam: "Even Grey. I'm afraid to look at him sometimes. I avoid him, in fact. Because we are at his mercy. He could snap his fingers tomorrow and our lives could change completely again" (165).

Her suspicions become accurate as the novel progresses, as Adam recalls the suppressed memory of his parents' murder and remembers "Gray pants. Him. Hearing his voice again" (209). Mr.

Gray's presence presents at least circumstantial evidence that Gray was involved with the plot to kill Adam's parents. But even if the evidence is only circumstantial that Gray killed Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, the government is clearly implicated at the novel's conclusion, where Cormier's judgment of the government cannot be mistaken:

> Since Subject A is final linkage between Witness #599-6 and File Data 865-01, it is advised that (a) pending revision of Agency Basic Procedures (Refer: Policy 979) Subject A's confinement be continued until termination procedures are approved; or (b) Subject A's condition be sustained until Subject A obliterates. (220)

Adam, too, will be killed by the government or left a prisoner in a facility where he will be drugged and unhappy--only because he is the "final linkage" between his father and the agency that was supposed to protect him. Although a few authors have showed the government as corrupt in problem novels, most writers create characters that are able to at least gain small victories. Such is the case in Glendon Swarthout's Bless the Beasts and Children, where a state-sponsored buffalo hunt is shown for what it truly is: a slaughter of animals for the benefit of hunters. In the novel, a group of camp misfits sets out on a journey to free the buffaloes. Although they succeed at the end of the novel, one adolescent is killed when a pickup truck plummets off a cliff. But despite the tragedy, the characters feel they have achieved a victory. The novel ends with the adolescents "bunched up bawling in their sorrow and jeering in their triumph" of freeing the buffalo (172). Cormier's characters, however, can never celebrate even the slightest victory. Yet, the

government is not the only entity that is shown to be corrupt in Cormier's world. The school system is shown to be corrupt in Cormier's The Chocolate War and Beyond the Chocolate War.

Trinity High School, the setting for these novels, is an example of an institution that is filled with corruption. The leader of the school, Brother Leon, is shown to be evil and immoral and a person who cares more about the school's chocolate sale and his position of power than the students he has pledged to mentor and guide. He eventually blackmails students in order to acquire the information he needs, even threatening David Caroni (an A student) with an "F" grade if he does not cooperate. As a result of Brother Leon's corruption, Caroni becomes physically ill and begins to look at the world with suspicious eyes:

> A headache began to assert itself above his right eye, the pain digging into his flesh--migraine. His stomach lurched sickeningly. Were teachers like everyone else, then? Were teachers as corrupt as the villains you read about in books or saw in movies and television? The pain grew in intensity, throbbing in his forehead. (85)

Caroni reaches the conclusion that every good-hearted character in Cormier's novels seems to reach when he laments that "life was rotten, that there were no heroes, really, and that you couldn't trust anybody, not even yourself" (87). By sensing dishonesty in Brother Leon, who is supposed to be the moral leader at Trinity High and a role model, Caroni becomes disillusioned; he is unable to look optimistically at the world and finds it difficult to succeed at the school. Still remembering the blackmail by Brother Leon, Caroni

commits suicide in Cormier's sequel to the novel, entitled Beyond the Chocolate War.

Agitated at Jerry Renault for not selling chocolates to support the school, Brother Leon is so corrupt that he almost allows Renault to be killed by other students. After the Vigils set up a death-trap for Renault, he is nearly beaten to death on the football field in a boxing match that was designed to beat Renault to a bloody pulp. The only thing that saves Renault is another teacher who finally realizes what is happening and turns off the lights on the field, essentially ending the fight. Right before this, however, one student discovers the truth: that Brother Leon is watching the fight and does nothing to stop it:

> Obie would never forget that face. A moment before the lights went out, he [Obie] turned away from the platform, disgusted with the scene, the kid Renault being pummeled by Janza . . . A movement caught Obie's eye. That's when he saw the face of Brother Leon. Leon stood at the top of the hill, a black coat draped around his shoulders. In the reflection of the stadium's lights, his face was like a gleaming coin. The bastard, Obie thought. He's been there all the time, I'll bet, watching it all. (184)

The novel ends with Archie, the leader of the Vigils, and Leon, the administrator of the school, both in power and command. Cormier even suggests evil and corruption will continue at the school, despite the fact that a student nearly dies, when Archie is assured that he will not be punished for setting up the fight that leaves Renault nearly dead. After dismissing the attack by saying "Boys will be

boys," (188), it becomes clear that Leon is not even disturbed at the fact that one of his students might die. Cormier writes, "Archie smiled inside. . . Leon was on his side. Beautiful. Leon and The Vigils and Archie. What a great year it was going to be" (189).

While several problem novel authors show how competition in schools can be detrimental, many suggest that some companionship can be found to make the school structure bearable. Such is the case in Glendon Swarthout's Bless the Beasts & Children, where a summer camp's structure is highly competitive and rewards athletes to the point where "The message is clear: win at all costs" (Walker 183). In that novel, six boys foster friendships in their opposition to the camp's activities, eventually leaving the camp to pursue a common goal. Thus, they form a community of misfits. Even in a harsh environment, adolescents who are different and harmed by the camp's structure find some relief. No such relief is found in Cormier's works.

Another institution, a hospital for children with chronic diseases, is shown to be corrupt in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway. The chief doctor, nicknamed the Handyman "sometimes looks like a mechanical doll, with hard, cold eyes even when he smiles" (Campbell 130). He refuses to become emotionally attached to the children dying in the hospital and refuses to show compassion towards them. The novel concludes with Barney Snow and his friend Mazzo plummeting off the roof of the institution, presumably to their death, in a model car that Barney helped assemble. Some critics have called this Cormier's most affirmative novel because of the novel's end. Anthony Horowitz states, "a mood of magnificent

optimism prevails, soaring from the terrible mundanity of pain and suffering to the inspiring and poetic victory of the unbroken human spirit" (qtd. in Book Review Digest 1984 324). Yet, although the characters do achieve a victory, since they have secretly constructed the car for several weeks and are dying on their own terms and not from their diseases, the ending shows that there is no hope possible for those who are terminally ill. Instead of finding peace through family, religious guidance, or personal meditation, they find peace by flying off the roof of the hospital. This implies that the world is so dark and difficult to live in that death on your own terms is a better option than seeking any form of comfort whatsoever.

In addition to attacking the state (government) and school system (especially the parochial school system), Cormier also implies that religion creates considerable problems in our society. The idea that organized religions can co-exist peacefully is shattered both literally and figuratively in Tunes for Bears to Dance to. In this novel, an adolescent named Henry attempts to raise money for his family by working at The Corner Market, a grocery store in his new neighborhood in Wickburg, MA, after moving from Frenchtown in Monument, MA. His ultimate goal is to purchase a tombstone for his older brother's cemetery plot, but because the cost of the tombstone is enormous, Henry is unable to purchase it quickly. Finally, the grocery store owner offers to buy Henry the tombstone if he breaks a miniature wood village (recreating an old Jewish town destroyed by the Nazis) designed by an old Holocaust survivor whom Henry has befriended.

The display, created by the elderly man, Mr. Levine, represents religious tolerance and acceptance. As a friend of the man says, "The village . . . will be a reminder to everybody about what happened during the war. But also about survival. And how good can overcome evil. That's what this village symbolizes" (64). It also represents an attempt to achieve unity among the classes and religions in Wickburg. Levine carves his village in an arts-and-craft center that is designed for artists or people who do not have enough money to take craft lessons. It is a place where all people are accepted for who they are.

After Henry shatters the village, he asks the shop owner why he had to do it, and the reply was simply, "He's a Jew" (93). The village, the symbol of "how good can overcome evil" is destroyed one day before it is to be unveiled to the public. Therefore the very image that represents religious tolerance is shattered, along with an old man's dream and the confidence of the protagonist, who will be faced with guilt the rest of his life (100). After Henry destroys the craft display in that building, the safety and sanctity of the facility are undermined. Furthermore, Henry's family, which had previously moved away from Frenchtown--a Roman Catholic centered neighborhood--returns to Frenchtown at the end of the novel. It is there that Henry can pray for forgiveness of his action. This seems to imply that religious beliefs are somehow regionalized. Interaction among religions causes only distress in Cormier's world. Hence, Henry retreats to his religious and class surroundings in order to seek forgiveness and live more comfortably; his attempt to unite

socially and religiously with others different from him results in a complete failure.

In addition to the corruptness of institutions, such as the government and the school system, the leaders of those systems are corrupt. Nancy Veglahn notes that the powerful adults in Cormier's novels create the most difficulties for the adolescent protagonists:

> That is what makes them so menacing, and so memorable. They play roles that are usually associated with helping the young: parent, teacher, counselor, physician, government official, friend. . . . They are adversaries who cannot lose because the contest is unequal, villains who inevitably prevail. (13)

The contest is more than "unequal." The leaders and society's institutions band together to menace the few adolescents who try to make a difference or who refuse to adhere to corrupt rules and rulers.

While Cormier's vision of society is nihilistic, it also suggests a dystopia, since *no one* is truly happy although the society itself fully functions. M. Keith Booker defines dystopian literature as literature that

> constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions. . . .

> [D]ystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural or inevitable. (3-4)

Examples of dystopian literature include William Golding's The Lord of the Flies, which shows a group of schoolboys that are stranded on an island and create their own society. The boys soon "descend into savagery, painting their faces, engaging in chants, dances, and other rituals (Booker 102-103). Although they are hostile towards each other, the society they create still functions. The book suggests the main flaw in society is in the "proclivity for violence and aggression that lies at the heart of human nature" (103). Thus, the good individuals on the island--Piggy and Ralph--are hunted down. Piggy is executed and Ralph escapes only when an adult finally reaches the island. While the society is violent, it functions for the majority. Most of the schoolboys *do* survive the island because of the structure of the society they form. However, no one is truly happy.

Likewise, the defeated protagonists in Cormier's works are downtrodden and left hopeless (if they are lucky enough to even survive) and even the antagonists and the characters in power in Cormier's world have difficulty enjoying life. All the elements of society function--the government, schools, and religion--but individuality is sacrificed.

Archie, who is the powerful leader of the school-gang Vigils in The Chocolate War, cannot truly be happy. As Archie watches one of his many stunts (the destruction of a classroom), Cormier notes, "A sweetness gathered in his breast as he saw the room being turned

into shambles, a sweet moment of triumph that compensated for all the other lousy things, his terrible marks..." (58). Archie creates disasters around the school in order to make his own life seem better, but in reality he admits his life is full of "lousy things." Another mastermind of the project (which involved loosening every nut and bolt so that all desks and chairs in the room would collapse when students tried to sit down) feels guilt, possibly because one of the few good teachers, Brother Eugene, suffers a nervous breakdown because of the incident and leaves the school. Although he feels he has to assist in the prank that causes Brother Eugene's medical difficulties, since orders given from Archie must always be followed, The Goober questions if he will ever be the same again. Cormier writes:

> The Goober wondered whether he himself would ever be in a good mood again. And he was puzzled . . . Fellows even volunteered for the job. Then, why this terrible guilt? Because of Brother Eugene? Probably. Whenever Goober walked by Room Nineteen now, he couldn't resist glancing in. (65)

The Goober begins to show cynicism by being unable to enjoy anything at the school, and he realizes his outlook on Trinity High and society has changed.

The evil character Archie is shown to be just as cynical about human nature. In Beyond the Chocolate War, Cormier shows that even a leader of a gang of students (someone who seemingly has more power than even the headmaster of the school) is not without troubles or fears. Archie is not able to fully enjoy his rule over the

students in the school because of his nihilistic outlook. Although most people believe Archie is confident and afraid of nothing, in reality:

> Archie always envisioned lurkers, predators, watchers in the shadows or around corners, peeking out of windows, waiting behind closed doors. . . . It was a rotten world, full of treachery and evil, and you had to be on your toes at all times, ready for combat, to outfox, outwit, outdeal everybody else. (40)

The power of The Vigils at Trinity High seem to reinforce the idea of a dystopia. Cormier establishes the concept that violence is necessary in order to stop violence, noting the school leaders knew about The Vigils but chose to ignore the organization, since The Vigils, "kept peace at Trinity during a time when unrest and violence were sweeping the nation's schools and colleges" (33).

Thus, Cormier's outlook on society shows nihilism and hints at a dystopia which occurs because adults and adolescents are corrupt and the very fabric of society--the government, the schools, and religions--are the sources for the corruption that harm adolescents.

Because of the countless difficulties surrounding adolescents in a hostile society, Cormier's fiction is unique because it suggests that there are no clear markers that distinguish childhood from adulthood. Most serious fiction for young adult centers on a rite of passage, a transitional test, task, or lesson that helps adolescents symbolically pass from childhood to adulthood. The rite of passage could occur in the form of a specified event (such as a religious ceremony like a bar mitzvah in Judaism, which is sometimes

considered a rite of passage); other times a rite of passage is a moment in time where an adolescent seemingly grows up. Some authors suggest this occurs during an epiphany, as in James Joyce's short story "Araby," where the narrator sees how the bazaar truly is and discovers that Araby really is not the magical place he envisioned. In attempts to define young adult literature, Alleen Pace Nilsen and Ken Donelson describe the typical adolescent fiction formula and note that adolescent fiction almost always contains such a rite of passage:

> This common story pattern resembles the formal initiations that some cultures have for making a young person's passage from childhood to adulthood. The young and innocent person is separated from the nurturing love of family and friends. During the separation he or she undergoes a test of courage and stamina that may be either physical, mental, or emotional. After passing the test, the person is reunited with family and friends but in a new role with increased respect. (353)

Yet in the few works where Cormier includes "tests," the protagonists do not pass them or have any reason to do so, since the culture of adults is equally disturbing and nihilistic.

In I am the Cheese, Adam Farmer is continually searching his memory for clues that will reveal his own identity and clarify the feelings of the past. His rite of passage appears as twofold: he plans on delivering his father a gift while taking a bike ride and he also is trying to remember what happened to his parents. He fails to reach a satisfactory solution in both of these tests. This is because the

event of his bike ride occurs mainly in his imagination and he already knows (at the end of the novel) that his father is dead. Adam admits "The doctor's face is sad; his face is always sad when we talk about my father and I find out again that he is dead" (215). Adam never accurately completes his rite of passage because his memory is simply not good enough and "again" and "again" he will get on his bike but learn the same fact about his father. The conclusion of the novel places Adam in a grave situation, since he is slated to die without ever realizing that he is in danger. Adam Farmer not only fails his rite of passage, he cannot even recognize what or where it is.

Likewise, Cormier's most praised novel, The Chocolate War, firmly rejects the notion of a rite of passage. Jerry Renault tries to take a stand for what he believes is right by not selling chocolates and by refusing to heed the requests from the Vigils, a group of students with all the power in the school. Yet, ultimately Renault does not succeed *and* does not gain anything from his experience. He even doubts his own decision and warns his friend that one should *not* take a stand or dare to be unique. As he lies bloody and half unconscious, Jerry knows it "won't" be all right and wants to tell The Goober "to do whatever they wanted you to do. . . . Don't disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say" (187).

It can be argued, perhaps, that if a rite of passage *does* exist in Cormier's fiction it exists only in the fact that in a few of his novels the characters seem to realize that corruption is ever-present. Cormier's protagonists, then, recognize there is no escape from adolescence because adults are equally corrupt and uncaring. After

a student commits suicide at the conclusion of Beyond the Chocolate War because of Brother Leon's own actions, Leon instead lectures the adolescents sitting before him and convinces them that the entire school body is to blame. Considering this novel is about a high school that is supposed to make boys into men, the featured grown male figure is just as corrupt as most of the students in the school. After Brother Leon destroys a student's confidence by giving him an "F" instead of an "A" in an attempt to blackmail him, it is clear that Brother Leon is the villain. Yet, he manages to turn the situation around and blame the school, accepting no responsibility and hiding the truth, all the time prevailing and never once losing power or prestige. In Cormier's world no transition into adulthood can occur, with the possible exception that students begin to reflect more--and often practice--the evil deeds that they observe in the adult world.

Cormier's absence of a rite of passage is important since it shapes his fiction. According to theorist Peter Hunt, no work of literature is free from the influence of the author's ideology:

> [C]hildren's literature cannot escape, even if some of its practitioners would wish it to, from ideology, past or present. Because the text is intended for supposedly 'innocent' readers, it can scarcely be expected to be innocent of itself. Therefore, fundamental questions have to be faced. What exactly is being controlled in a text? (14)

In Cormier's case, characters cannot possibly experience a successful rite of passage into the adult world because it would undermine his views of the world. Cormier continually paints the "adult" world as

one where evil thrives. An adult preaches religious intolerance in Tunes For Bears To Dance To. An adult allows boys to destroy themselves in The Chocolate War and Beyond the Chocolate War. An adult fools a boy into believing he does not have a terminal illness in The Bumblebee Flies Away.

Showing the adult world as corrupt is not new; other authors have done so. But Cormier's adolescents are equally corrupt. An eleven year old kills his grandfather and a classmate in We All Fall Down. Adolescents become bored and vandalize houses and attempt to rape a girl in the same novel. A teenage serial killer is a protagonist in Tenderness. A rite of passage cannot occur in Cormier's fiction since there is no distinguishable difference between children and adults; both cultures are equal and praise hostility and intolerance.

If there is one common thread that connects all Cormier's problem novels, it is a continual attack on adolescents who try to be different. Adolescents who make individual decisions--typically decisions that are moral--are abused, mocked, and almost always defeated. Most of his protagonists experience physical or emotional trauma. Veglahn, who argues that the evil characters in Cormier's novels "present the appearance of harmlessness," also calls Cormier's protagonists heroic, despite the fact that they seemingly gain little:

> In contrast with the evil characters, Cormier's young protagonist take on heroic dimensions even as they are forced to yield. . . . they persist stubbornly in being who they are in spite of everything that is done to them. . . . Cormier gives each of his young heroes a kind of spiritual

> triumph that prevents these books from being totally negative. (17)

While it is true that Cormier's characters persist stubbornly, it is difficult to find protagonists in Cormier's works that earn even a little "spiritual triumph." If anything, most of the characters in his works resemble Jerry Renault at the end of The Chocolate War or The Goober at the end of Beyond the Chocolate War, both of whom are more depressed and disillusioned at the end of the novels than they were at the beginning.

The ending of The Chocolate War leaves Renault so battered it is uncertain that even if he lives he will be able to fully function again. Why is Renault being punished? It stems from his decision *not* to sell chocolates in an optional chocolate sale at his high school. While he was "instructed" by the Vigils, a powerful group of students that runs the school, not to sell chocolates for the first ten days of the sale, Renault chooses not to sell chocolates even after ten days. After becoming sick of the hatred shown by Brother Leon and after realizing the corruption and power of the Vigils, Renault chooses to take a stand. Leon soon blames Renault for the chocolate sale's struggles, since Renault is the only student in the 400-student school who refuses to sell chocolates and is setting a bad example. Even when he is pressured to sell the chocolates by the Vigils, who enter a partnership with Leon, Renault chooses not to yield to the pressure.

Renault knows this decision is dangerous and makes him isolated from the rest of the school, as Cormier notes, "He was swept with sadness, a sadness deep and penetrating, leaving him desolate like someone washed up on the beach, a lone survivor in a world full

of strangers" (98). Soon Renault's art project is stolen (and he is told he will get an "F" for the semester), he is threatened with physical harm, receives harassing phone calls, and finally is severely beaten, all because of his refusal to sell chocolates. While some students congratulate him for his refusal to sell chocolates, Renault's defeat at the end of the novel is clear. When waiting for an ambulance a student tries to comfort Renault and whispers "It'll be all right, Jerry," but Renault knows otherwise, and thinks:

> "No it won't." He recognized Goober's voice and it was important to share the discovery with Goober . . . They tell you to do your own thing but they don't mean it. They don't want you do your thing . . . (187)

The protagonist lies defeated at the end of the novel. Sylvia Patterson Iskander hypothesizes that precisely because of this defeat some critics and readers dislike Cormier's novels. She notes, "When readers complain about hopeless pessimism, they mean that the novel's close defies their expectations. It is this deviation from narrative convention that repels some readers" (12). Therefore, some readers may dislike it that Cormier "chooses not to follow the literary norm of the happy ending" (18). However, by attacking the individual and leaving nothing but death and sadness, Cormier is presenting a world just as distorted as a novelist who continually manufactures works with happily-ever-after endings. Iskander acknowledges:

> The almost universal distress about Cormier's work springs directly from the power and consistency of his imagined world, which convinces readers that it bears a

> recognizable relationship to the 'real world' and yet appears to leave no room for anything but pessimism about the survival of Cormier's protagonists. (7)

Thus, while Cormier justifies the violence in his novels and believes he is accurately portraying the hard reality of growing up in the late twentieth century, he over-emphasizes gloom and doom, skewing reality in the process.

The ending of the novel is where Cormier differs from most problem novel writers. While many problem novel writers feature protagonists who make individual decisions that are unpopular and detrimental to their health, most earn at least *some* respect from their decisions or leave, as Egoff suggests, the ending unresolved.

Unlike the ending of Cormier's The Chocolate War, where the individual meets with disaster at the end of the novel, Avi's protagonist in Nothing But the Truth earns some respect for his stand. After humming the national anthem two consecutive days in homeroom in protest of the school rule that calls for complete silence during the national anthem, Philip is suspended for creating a disturbance. Yet, Philip has other motives for his actions, since he blames the homeroom teacher for a "D" grade that prevents him from participating in his favorite sport, track. Soon the school is attacked by the media for being unpatriotic, and the school's best teacher (who sends Philip to the principal's office for breaking a rule) is pressured to take an administrative leave for the year, even though she insists she has done nothing wrong (194). In Avi's novel, Philip realizes he is partly responsible for the chaos at school. The ending of the novel places Philip in a private school after he refuses

to attend the public school because he feels some students have turned against him since a "fair" teacher was in trouble. He has to live with the consequences of his choice.

Although the confused adolescent, Adam Farmer, tells the government all he knows about the night his parents were killed, he is still slated to die at the hands of the government in the conclusion of I am the Cheese. Adam is not a person who realistically can ever implicate the government. While he remembers seeing a government agent after the murder of his parents, he cannot link the two together. Yet, no matter how much information Adam can recall, there is no chance of survival for the individual that survived the terror of seeing his mother die and knowing his father was also likely dead. Therefore, "the effect upon the reader is not merely fear, but often sheer terror . . . the forces of evil prevail and despair is the winner" and the novel shows there "is no hope for the honest citizen in today's society" (Lukens 11). Adam Farmer stands alone at the end of the novel, and individuals like Adam suffer from being alone.

Cormier's adolescent problem novels are most different from other contemporary problem-novel writers because of Cormier's intense focus on characterization. This is atypical of the majority of problem novels, which usually focus more on problems and less on characters (Egoff 357). Yet, the characters are essential to Cormier's works, and it seems he develops his characters in order to destroy them. Thus the "problems in Cormier's works," (which according to Egoff are the *raison d'être* of problem novels) are arbitrary, and most of the actual harm (both physical and psychological) that occurs

to adolescents who try to be different from their peers comes from the majority of seemingly ordinary adolescents who are shown to be brutal to anyone who wishes or dares to be different. Unlike most problem novel writers, Cormier shows the interaction among the characters (as opposed to the interaction between the characters and the "problems") is pivotal to the novel. Cormier's protagonists meet defeats not simply because they cannot handle the potential problem at hand, but also because they are unable to interact with the adolescents and adults around them. These additional characters and relationships complicate the "problem" and leave Cormier's protagonists defeated.

Cormier's adolescent characters who are terminally ill are offered no hope in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway. Although the media sometimes exposes the one-in-a-million unexplained miracle, the chief experimenter (the doctor nicknamed The Handyman) refuses to acknowledge such possibilities. When Barney asks "How about a miracle . . . Or some kind of hope, some kind of long shot," The Handyman responds, "I have never witnessed a miracle. . . . Nobody here is looking for such a thing. Or even a cure. This is the last place in the world to come for that" (39).

All forces crush Henry, the protagonist of Tunes for Bears to Dance to. In the novel, Henry is pressured into making a decision he knows is wrong. The protagonist is overwhelmed with what will happen if he defies the orders of the grocery store owner, Mr. Hairston. If Henry does not destroy the miniature village created by a Holocaust survivor, he will lose his job (that helps support the family), he will be blacklisted by other shop owners in town, he will

not be able to purchase a gravestone for his brother's tomb, and Mr. Hairston will tell his friend who owns the diner where his mother works to fire his mother. Henry is backed into a corner. Although he eventually gives in to Mr. Hairston's demand and destroys the miniature village, his conscience makes him quit his job at the store. He is left with only remorse; he has no job, no permanent gravestone, and no pride. Furthermore, he loses his friendship with the old man, Mr. Levine. Cormier's ending leaves Henry despondent. When Mr. Levine (not realizing Henry destroyed his village) gives Henry a figure that is carved to resemble him (Henry), he notes: "He would keep this figure for the rest of his life and look at it sometimes and remember this summer. Someday, perhaps, he would be able to look at it and return the smile" (100). The guilt will last a long time.

What is more disturbing is that Cormier hints that abuse is unresolved in the text. Henry notices an ugly bruise on the cheek of Doris, the daughter of shop owner Mr. Hairston. At the end of the novel, as Henry gets ready to move back to Frenchtown, Doris "stepped back, looking fearfully over his (Henry's) shoulder, and he knew she was looking to see if her father had followed her" (98). In addition to physically abusing Doris because she is clumsy, Doris' father verbally abuses his wife and calls her degrading names. With fingers trembling, Doris returns to the store and her father's abuse at the novel's end. Not only does the protagonist, Henry, fail by choosing poorly when he gives in to Mr. Hairston's order to destroy Mr. Levine's village, he also fails to befriend Doris or to provide any assistance to her despite the abuse that exists in her household. Henry learns that one individual cannot make a difference.

Individuality is also discouraged in Beyond the Chocolate War. In the novel, Obie is driven mad by all the harm Archie and the Vigils have caused at Trinity High:

> Obie flung his hand in the air, the gesture encompassing all the rotten things that had occurred under Archie's command, at Archie's direction. The ruined kids, the capsized hopes. Renault last fall and poor Tubs Casper and all the others, including even the faculty. Like Brother Eugene. (263)

After continually becoming ill at all the evil deeds Archie completes, Obie finally attempts to take a stand against Archie and sabotage a guillotine magic trick so that it actually kills Archie. This shows that a good adolescent cannot remain untainted and will ultimately become evil, matching the rest of society. Although Obie's attempt to kill Archie fails because of a safety mechanism on the guillotine, Obie discovers that *he* has become just as evil as every one else in the school. Archie even taunts him "Don't feel bad, Obie. You've just joined the human race" (264). This idea reflects naturalism. Characters in novels where naturalism is present must find some way to survive, even if they begin to reflect the evils around them. Cormier's works sound like Stephen Crane's naturalistic novel The Red Badge of Courage, which:

> depicts . . . protagonists in conflict with both his fellow man and the elements and has him emerge from battle with a new-found confidence in his manhood only after behaving consistently with the law of the jungle rather than the laws of society. (Liberman 76-77)

Although Cormier's characters do not always find the "new-found confidence" that Crane's characters find, Cormier shows that the adolescents who become violent or corrupt are simply learning to survive in a harsh world. Therefore, both Henry (Tunes for Bears To Dance To) and Obie (Beyond the Chocolate War) are good characters who become corrupted by the evil around them. Cormier suggests this evil is only "human"; the characters' attempts to be different or unique fail. In some cases this occurs because adolescents choose poorly, while in other cases this occurs because the environment around them creates the harmful situations.

However, the most troubling indictment of individuality occurs in Tenderness. The novel follows two youths: a teenage serial killer and a fifteen year old girl who becomes obsessed with and falls in love with him. In the novel, the act of "tenderness," a metaphor for the moment when Eric Poole takes his victims' lives, is seemingly celebrated. Poole is described as a teenager who seeks to be free from his step father (whom he hates) and his mother. Poole is never shown to have real concerns about his own health or welfare and instead only has a more sinister reason to be free from his parents. He also studies the law before he commits his murder in order to better prepare his defense:

> He'd also carry out a long-range plan. The plan evolved from news stories in which he learned that the state allowed kids to be tried as juveniles when they committed serious crimes, even murder, if there was evidence of child abuse. Which meant freedom after reaching the age of eighteen . . .

> Eric saw the logic of carrying out the murders as soon as possible, before the laws could be changed. He'd be sacrificing about three years for fifty or sixty years later when he'd be free to do as he pleased. *What a bargain*, he sang to himself . . . (65)

Although money is a contributing motive for killing his parents, his ultimate goal is freedom from rules and regulations. Although he attempts to earn this freedom by killing his parents, he has no specific reasons why he kills the three young women. The women Poole kills do not stand in his way of achieving the freedom he desires.

Yet, although Poole is a serial killer, by the end of the novel Cormier seems to sympathize with him. In her review of the book, Zvirin responds to this and states, "Certainly he's a monster, but he's also cast as a victim and, finally, as a hero of sorts" (935).

The novel ends with Poole nearly killing but temporarily deciding not to kill, a female admirer, Lori, the other featured character in the novel. Although it is unclear if Poole will kill Lori if the two stay together, Lori dies in a freak canoeing accident and Poole is convicted of a murder he does not commit. Yet, the "monster" inside Eric Poole is affected as he sits in a jail cell during the novel's conclusion, when Cormier writes, "Eric touched his cheek, finding moisture there--was this what crying was like? Later, in the deepest heart of the night, the monster also cried" (229). Thus, the serial killer who openly discusses his graphic killings is meant to draw sympathy at the end since the one person that might be able to

help him stop committing murder ends up dying in a freak accident and he is blamed for her death.

The quest for individuality is also experienced by the second protagonist in Tenderness, a character who is quite different but ultimately dies from her choices. From time to time Lori, a fifteen year old girl, runs away from her suburban home. Also like Poole, who doesn't have a compelling reason to kills his parents, Lori does not have a compelling reason to run away. She likes her mother but runs away anyway, saying only, "I left my mother a note. Not a long one. *Going away for a while, Mom. Don't worry. I'll be staying with my friends in Wickburg, Martha and George*" (12). But not only are Martha and George fictional (she chooses the names because her favorite historical figures are Martha and George Washington) Cormier implies that Lori's mother may even know that they don't exist (or she doesn't know but doesn't care) and still does nothing to discover where her daughter disappears to for weeks at a time, as Lori questions:

> There are no friends in Wickburg. I made them up. She actually believes they exist, that I visit them when I take off. I wonder if she only pretends to believe and this eases her conscience for letting me go and not calling the cops to find me. (13)

Lori's fixation with meeting Eric Poole is beyond the ordinary adolescent "crush." She not only runs away from home in order to meet Poole when he is released from prison when he turns eighteen, but she waits outside of his house for weeks while he avoids the media and protesters and remains indoors. Eventually, she hides in

his minivan as he drives out of town and is almost killed by him when they stay in a hotel that night, but she still would prefer dying than giving up her choice to be with a serial killer:

> As he raised the pillow, her eyes flew open and she looked directly up at him.
>
> Then: her eyes wide with fear, her mouth open as if she was silently screaming.
>
> They stared at each other--he didn't know how long.
>
> Her face suddenly softened.
>
> "Don't you know I love you?" she said, as if that would stop him, could solve everything.
>
> Closing her eyes, she sighed. "Go ahead, then. Do it."
>
> He lowered the pillow, stood uncertainly beside her bed . . . . He let the pillow drop to the floor. . . .
>
> "Were you really going to do it?" she asked.
>
> "Yes," he said. (189)

Even though she survives this incident, she is destined to die in Cormier's adolescent world. After standing on board a canoe and losing her balance, she falls into a lake. Despite Poole's efforts to rescue her (a rare attempt to save a life instead of taking one), Lori drowns. Thus, for choosing to leave a safe environment for the company of a serial killer, Lori dies.

While it may seem ironic that Lori dies from an accident and not as a result of being killed by the serial killer, it reinforces Cormier's theme of punishing individuality. Instead of becoming a victim of another's actions, *her own* action leads to her death. It is a

final and clear indictment of individualism on Cormier's part. Not even a serial killer's lethal behavior can compare to the dangers of being an adolescent who chooses to be different, who chooses to be an individual.

At the conclusion of I am the Cheese, Adam Farmer finally reaches the final verse of a song he has been singing throughout the novel. Cormier writes, "I keep singing, I keep singing. *The cheese stands alone, / The cheese stands alone, / Heigh-ho, the merry-o, / The cheese stands alone* " (216). Indeed, like Adam Farmer, Cormier's protagonists all become their own type of cheese, since they learn that the world is brutal and it is safest to be alone. Additionally, in the problem novel sub-genre of adolescent literature, Robert Cormier *is* the cheese. He has written some of the most-celebrated adolescent novels of the past thirty years.

Furthermore, Cormier's novels stand apart from the fiction of problem novel authors Avi, Judy Blume, Ursula Le Guin, Paul Zindel and Glendon Swarthout because they call into question the role of the individual and suggests physical and psychological trauma will occur to adolescents who make their own decisions. Cormier's nihilistic view of both adult and adolescent culture shows teenagers who struggle to be different, unique, or good will meet with defeat. Therefore, protagonists in Cormier's novels are doomed from the beginning. Trapped in a violent society, they are unable to make friends or establish relationships, they are unable to communicate with any adults and their parents in particular, and they are unable to find a marker that signals a transition from the "adolescent" world

to the "adult" world, most likely because both worlds are shown to be equally corrupt.

Cormier's insists that "I'm terrified half the time. The strange thing is, basically I'm an optimistic person" (Campbell 8). While the fear seems to carry through to Cormier's writing, the optimism does not. While Cormier should be praised for showing adolescents that conflicts do not always have happy endings, his fiction consistently ends in tragedy or violence. While some of his characters are destroyed because of the choices they make, others fail simply because they are adolescents and the environment around them is forever hostile. By continually suggesting that adolescents will meet numerous defeats and cannot escape their difficulties, Cormier's fiction paints a distorted picture of adolescent life. In a banquet address where he discussed defending his books from censors and book editors, Robert Cormier once said, "I am one of those fortunate writers who have people coming to my rescue all the time" (I, Too Am the Cheese 37). Unfortunately, there is no one to rescue Cormier's doomed protagonists.

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