

Caren Stelson
Packet 4: Critical Essay
May 8, 2007

**Making the Terrible Choice:
*The Intersection Between Plot and Theme in Fiction***

Designing a profluent plot, writes John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, "is the hardest job a writer does" (165). A fiction writer steps out of her daily life to set a world of her own making into motion. The act of creating such a world, as John Gardner suggests, is daunting. Unlike a life, a writer's story must be well constructed, with no unnecessary parts, organically held together by a strong narrative voice and liquid prose. From her imagination, a writer binds together a set of intriguing characters and sets them in a place and time. Then she spins her characters, world, commanding them to participate in a series of unfolding events that will eventually alter the life of the principal characters, forever. Hard as a plot is to create, the writer still has more work to do. At the end of the day, her characters cannot simply say good night and go to bed. They must find themselves in a resolution that reinforces the story's theme with lingering images and an undertow of universal meaning. Small wonder so many novels are left in drawers, unfinished.

To begin a novel, the writer must ask herself dozens of questions. Of the protagonist, she asks: What is the yearning? The ache? What is it that this character wants or needs? How will the character meet the challenge? Will this character succeed, or not? What will be the series of events and rising tension? What will happen at the climax? How will it end? The long list of questions whirl in the writer's head as she tries to keep

her eye on plot and theme. With so many questions, is there one that penetrates the essence of the novel and guides the writer through the initial storm? Writer Emily Herman, in an unpublished article, "The Writer's Toolbox," suggests one. The question is: *What is the terrible choice?* Herman writes, "...it is through the terrible choice that we best understand who the main character is or is becoming and what the story really is about" (8). The response to the "terrible choice" is like a flash of light cutting through the murkiness of novel making. Inside the "terrible choice" a writer can see what it is the character hungers for. She can sense the crisis and climax as the choice is made, catch a glimpse of the ending, and feel the thematic pull as the "terrible choice" plays out. The question of "terrible choice" is the intersection of plot and theme. It is a question that cuts to the essence of a fictional story and lights a path as the writer begins her task of creation.

John Gardner writes, "All meaning, in the best fiction, comes from- as Faulkner says -- the heart in conflict with itself" (187). The words "terrible" and "choice" imply just that. The "terrible choice," however, need not be horrible to the extreme or life threatening, although "terrible choice" assumes danger of some kind. "Terrible choice" means that the choice is consequential. It matters. Whatever the choice, the result will change the character's life, or deepen it. If a writer, starting a new novel, can identify the "terrible choice" moment, then she has found the crack in the plot where the light comes in. Sitting at the apex of the "terrible choice," the writer can turn her head and see the beginning of the story from where the "terrible choice" germinates, then turn and see the end of the story where the seeds of the choice come to rest. The "terrible choice" forms the plot, underscores theme, and keeps the writer on track.

Identifying the "terrible choice" in published fictional works provides a writer practice in analyzing the power of the "terrible choice" and its effect on plot and theme in other writers' works, before committing to her own story. And writers need practice simply because there are no rules to follow. As John Gardner explains: "...there can be no firm rules, no limits, no restrictions. Whatever works is good. He [the writer] must develop an eye for what -by his own carefully informed standards -works" (16). This is an axiom for all writers, whether they write for adults or for children

The picture book *Brave Irene* by William Steig, the middle grade novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo, and the young adult novel *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel, all fictional works for children and teens, spring from a similar theme: the child's need for unconditional, parental love. Although these stories may have a common theme, they unfold along different plot lines, their "terrible choices" are embedded at different moments in the plot, and result of the choices have different outcomes. These differences should not come as a surprise. The surprise comes in the analysis and the questions asked: Do "the terrible choices" work? And if so, why?

William Steig's picture book, *Brave Irene*, takes readers to a fairyland world where duchesses still swish in beautiful, pink gowns on ballroom floors. Irene's mother, Mrs. Bobbin, an expert seamstress, has just sewn the last stitch in the duchess's new gown, and barely in time. Mrs. Bobbin is coming down with the flu. The story's problem grows from there. No one can deliver the gown to the palace that evening in time for the ball. To make matters worse, a blizzard is brewing. Nevertheless, out of love for her mother, brave Irene volunteers for the job. But taking the gown to the duchess does not constitute the "terrible choice" for Irene. Why? John Gardner explains:

Certain forces, within and without the character, must press him towards a certain course of action, while other forces, both within and outside, must exert strong pressure against that course of action. Both pressures must come not only from outside the character but also from within him, because otherwise the conflict involves no doubt, no moral choice, and as a result can have no profound meaning (187).

Irene's initial choice is simply a favor to her mother, not the "terrible choice." Then what is Irene's "terrible choice"? The plot must put Irene in danger and test her beyond her mental and physical abilities. In short, the reader must see what Irene is made of. That's exactly what happens. Just as an exhausted Irene glimpses the glow of the palace through the blizzard, Steig throws Irene in a ditch, buries her in snow, and makes her question her very existence:

Even if she could call for help, no one would hear her. Her body shook. Her teeth chattered. Why not freeze to death, she thought, and let all these troubles end. Why not? She was already buried.

Now in danger, Irene is ripe for the "terrible choice." She must decide to live or freeze to death. What will Irene do? Donald Maas' s *Writing the Breakout Novel* sums up what Steig and Irene must do next to underscore the theme of the story:

...a commitment to a high principle is most effectively tested at a dramatic high point -or. ..low point. If a heroine's conviction can be passionately and lyrically conveyed at such a time, in a way that is both

natural to the situation and understated in its poetry, that passage can become a powerful defining statement, the protagonist's declaration of purpose (240).

Emboldened by her mother's love, Irene finds new strength, declares her purpose, as Donald Maas suggests, and takes action.

And never see her mother's face again? Her good mother who smelled like fresh-baked bread? In an explosion of fury, she flung her body about to free herself and was finally able to climb up on her knees and look around.

Irene rescues herself and the gown, which had blown out of the box, and accomplishes her difficult mission with a flourish. The reader closes the picture book with satisfaction.

The reader may close the book, but the writer opens it again. She wonders: What if William Steig had set the "terrible choice" earlier in the plot, say before Irene spots the glow of the palace light? That placement certainly would have ramped up the tension, thrown sweet little Irene into a darker situation, made the "terrible choice" more acute, and heightened the theme. But creating a *dark* and "terrible choice" might have been too troubling for young readers. Using his own instinct for "what works," Steig provides Irene with a glimmer of light first before pushing her into the ditch. The light adds a gentle touch without dulling the edginess of the "terrible choice," or diminishing the strength of the theme. In short, the placement works; the story is a success.

Steig's brave Irene is lucky to have a mother; Kate DiCamillo's Opal Buloni is not. DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie* is a tenderly written middle grade novel about

love, loss, hope, and community. The theme runs like an underground stream through each chapter. Opal Buloni is a lonely ten-year old girl with a hole in her heart. She has just moved to the small, Florida town of Naorni with her daddy, the preacher. At the beginning of the story , neither Opal nor the preacher is able to replenish the love Opal's mother took with her when she left. Readers meet Opal in the grocery store just as an ugly stray dog with a wagging tail and a wide smile creates chaos in the fresh vegetable aisle. The stray turns out to be Winn-Dixie, the dog that changes Opal's life. Together the girl and the dog knit a southern town of eccentric lonely-hearts into a community of friends.

A writer could read *Because of Winn-Dixie* as a reader, close the book, and sit back with satisfaction. Or, a writer could read the book and sit back and ask: What is the "terrible choice" in this novel? How does the 'terrible choice' point to the climax? Does the "terrible choice" underscore the theme?

Is there a "terrible choice" in *Because of Winn-Dixie*? It's more difficult to detect than in *Brave Irene*. Except for a few thunderstorms, which cause dog hysteria, the reader does not feel the ramped-up tension of a plot about to explode. Instead, the plot wanders like a stream, bringing the characters together in its flow. But there is a "terrible choice," and it sets the course of the novel. The "terrible choice" comes unusually early in the story, when Opal talks to Winn-Dixie about her mother:

"I think the preacher thinks about my mama all the time, too. He's still in love with her; I know that because I heard the ladies at the church in Watley talking about him. They said he's still hoping she'll come back. But he doesn't

tell me that. He won't talk to me about her at all. I want to know more about her. But I'm afraid to ask the preacher; I'm afraid he'll get mad at me (22).

I'm afraid he'll get mad at me. Anyone who has been in this position as a child knows this small sentence carries heavy baggage. Presumably Opal has never asked the preacher for this information. It takes courage to ask about something as important as a missing mother, particularly when her disappearance hides a secret. The scene has all the markings of a "terrible choice" moment.

Fortunately for Opal, the preacher understands his daughter's need. He lovingly acknowledges Opal's request and tells her ten things about her mother --the color of her hair, her green thumb, her poor cooking, and her love of story. The preacher does not fail to deliver. He gives his daughter the difficult facts, too. Opal's mother hated being a preacher's wife, and she had a drinking problem. The preacher ends with what Opal needs to hear most: Opal's mother never stopped loving her .

The preacher's response gives Opal a great deal to take in. Another child might have been overwhelmed. But Opal slides off the couch and quietly says, "Thank you very much for telling me." Opal writes down each of her mother's characteristics, memorizes them by heart, and consciously or subconsciously begins the search for surrogate love in her new hometown. The "terrible choice" moment produces a poignant scene. It also sets the plot into motion and points to the theme. With her mother's secret revealed, Opal is released to look for love in her new hometown. With the help of Winn-Dixie, she finds love and friendship nearly everywhere, particularly in the garden of Gloria Dump, an ex-alcoholic earth mother. In the end, Gloria Dump heals Opal's heart and opens her garden

to Opal's community of friends. All ends happily.

But what if Opal had made another "terrible choice." Perhaps she was too frightened to ask about her mother's disappearance, and she stalled. The "terrible choice" scene would have held more tension. It would have made readers see more clearly what was at stake. Readers might not have thought, "Well, if it was that easy for Opal to ask about her mother, why hadn't she done so earlier?"

What if the preacher had refused Opal's request? Worse still, what if the preacher had become angry, as Opal had feared. It would have changed the story dramatically, shifting the story's plot and theme. A negative response would have triggered conflict between daughter and father rather than fostering a relationship between them.

A writer could ask another question: What if DiCamillo had placed the "terrible choice" later in the novel? That would have been a writer's mistake. Given the story, Opal would have spent too many chapters looking for love in all the wrong places. Even though Opal's "terrible choice" comes early in the plot, it arrives at the right moment - for that story. As Janet Burroway writes in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*: "Plotting is a matter of finding the decision points that lead to the final choice and choosing the best scenes through which to dramatize them" (35).

Paul Zindel's edgy young-adult novel, *The Pigman*, has a more complex plot than either *Brave Irene* or *Because of Winn-Dixie*. It should since the novel's target audience is older, but the concept of the "terrible choice" plays the same role in the plot's structure as it does in the previous works. Zindel's novel is about two disaffected high school sophomores who make a string of terrible choices. Told in first person by both characters in alternating chapters, the novel quickly makes clear that Lorraine Jenson and John

Conlan have grown up in loveless, dysfunctional families.

Early in the novel, the two teens play a telephone game that connects them with the eccentric Mr. Angelo Pignati, a widower who has recently lost his wife. The large collection of ceramic pigs, a focal point in the story, is a testament to the loving Pignati marriage. Although John and Lorraine originally play a prank on Pignati, the three characters become friends, much to the teens' surprise. But when Pignati has a heart attack and is hospitalized, the two teens find themselves in Pignati's house alone. It is at this point that John and Lorraine make *the* "terrible choice" of the novel. Should they fall back into their earlier destructive behavior and throw a party in Pignati's home for their delinquent friends, or take a step towards maturity and call the party off?

"John, what are you doing?"

"Is there any more beer in the icebox?"

"What's going on?"

He opened the refrigerator himself and counted about nine loose cans of beer. Then he slammed the door and went into the living room to the telephone.

"We're going to have a few friends over for drinks tonight."

"Are you crazy?"

"Just a few intimate friends for a quiet little drink. Don't you think Mr. Pignati wants us to have a social life?" He smiled, his great big eyes glowing (130).

Lorraine and John make their "terrible choice," Mr. Pignati's house is ransacked, the pig collection is smashed, and the genuine friendship between the teens and Pignati is

destroyed. The stress of the teens' disastrous decision is too much for Pignati. Later he has a fatal heart attack and dies,

The ending stuns a reader. The ending stuns the writer as well, but she doesn't stop there. Instead she asks: What can I learn from the "terrible choice" in this novel? As in *Brave Irene*, the "terrible choice" in *The Pigman* comes at the apex of the crisis moment. But unlike *Brave Irene* and *Because of Winn-Dixie*, the "terrible choice" in *The Pigman* has a negative outcome. The writer asks: What if Lorraine and John had chosen to clean up Mr .Pignati' s house, instead of destroying it? The novel would have ended sweetly. Would a positive "terrible choice" have made a better novel? Paul Zindel uses his writer's judgment and his knowledge of adolescent readers. By having his characters make a poor decision, he gives the ending the power to linger longer in the reader's mind. The theme lingers as well: Without love, life is a cruel thing.

John Gardner admonishes, "No one can hope to write really well if he has not learned how to analyze fiction -how to recognize a symbol when it jumps at him, how to make out theme in a literary work, how to account for a writer's selection and organization of fictional details" (13). For a writer, recognizing the "terrible choice" is part of the important analysis. Plot and theme hinge on it. For a writer, once the "terrible choice is clear, the structure of a novel also becomes clear, whether the writer is reading the book --or writing one.

Works Cited

- Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. New York: Longman, 2003.
- DiCamillo, Kate. *Because of Winn-Dixie*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2000.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.
- Hemlan, Emily. "*The Writer's Toolbox*." Unpublished manuscript, 2006.
- Maas, Donald. *Writing the Breakout Novel*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2001.
- Zindel, Paul. *The Pigman*. New York: Harper-Collins Publisher, 1968

Conflict and order make plot. The author creates the conflict by describing one of the following types of interactions. Person-against-self: Tom Sawyer's fear of Injun Joe and guilt, can't sleep, fear of talking in sleep, ties mouth shut, struggle with moral responsibility even in the face of danger. A Wizard of Earthsea, Ursula K. Le Guin. Ged struggles against the flaws in himself, as the shadow, must make himself whole. "a man who, knows his whole true self cannot be used or possessed by any owner other than himself." Theme is the main idea that weaves the story together, the why, the underlying ideas of what happens in the piece of literature, often a statement about society or human nature. Explicit theme is when the writer states the theme openly and clearly. Charlotte's Web: friendship. Adjective: Fictional. Made up (never down). Make-believe. Fake. False. Noun: Fiction. A fabrication. Fib. Lie. Synonym: Yarns. Wayward threads hanging out, with their ends lost in the middle of a many-colored ball of strings attached to what might be important to think about. Antonym: News story. Cite. Fiction focuses on the plot, settings, and characters created from the imagination, while nonfiction refers to realistic stories focused on actual events and people. However, the difference between them sometimes unclear. Cite. 1 Recommendation. Give your characters a terrible time, make them suffer. Make awful things happen to them. One of my instructors used to say give them two choices, sucky and suckier. Have the nurse for the car crash victim not only turn out to be married but be pregnant. This depends largely on the writer. I have the basic plot structure mapped out before I start. I know where I'll be at the end, and I'll know the major plot points along the way - but the journey is mine to take as I write between points. Maybe between Chicago and Austin you'll find an amazing highway off the interstate full of small towns rich with history and culture, and you'll want to explore them a while. Maybe by the time you get to Vegas all you want to do is press on, keep up your momentum and push straight through to the finish line. Characters in fiction must go through a series of actions or incidents that make up a story. Writers can write a plot chronologically, from beginning to end. They can also use flashbacks. Flashbacks are interruptions that tell about an earlier episode or scene. Still let's consider the choice of words at first. The tone may be identified by means of descriptive adjectives and phrases. Look through the list of Louise's emotions and arrange in order she experiences them. Now bear in mind the choice of words, the situation described, events, the characters and try to define the tone of the story. Is it serious, objective, sympathetic, ironic, understanding, sad, bitter, etc.? 8. Theme. Authors usually write stories because they have something to say about life. Conflict is the essence of fiction. It creates plot. The conflicts we encounter can usually be identified as one of four kinds. Mood The climate of feeling in a literary work. The choice of setting, objects, details, images, and words all contribute towards creating a specific mood. For example, an author may create a mood of mystery around a character or setting but may treat that character or setting in an ironic, serious, or humorous tone. SYMBOLISM. It is important to recognize the difference between the theme of a literary work and the subject of a literary work. The subject is the topic on which an author has chosen to write. The theme, however, makes some statement about or expresses some opinion on that topic.