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### Sample MonkeyNotes

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# *The Chocolate War*

by

**Robert Cormier**



MonkeyNotes by Laurie Lahey

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## Key Literary Elements

### Setting

While it is not explicitly stated, it seems that the plot is contemporaneous with the publishing of the novel, 1974. The setting is, predominantly, Trinity School. Trinity is an all boys Catholic high school.

### List of Characters

#### Major Characters

**Jerry Renault** - Jerry is the protagonist and main character of this story. He is fourteen years old and a freshman at Trinity. His mother died the spring before the novel begins. He now lives alone with his father. Jerry refuses to sell chocolates for the school fundraiser.

**Archie Costello** - Archie is The Assigner for The Vigils, an underground organization of students at Trinity. He is maniacal and a villain. He tells Brother Leon he will help with the chocolate sale and harasses Jerry.

#### Minor Characters

**Brother Leon** - The Assistant Head Master of Trinity. He appears to be a pale, ingratiating pushover. However, in the class room Brother Leon is hawk- like, suspicious, and completely in control. He has misused the school's funds and will stop at nothing to make sure the chocolates are sold.

**Obie** - Obie is Archie's flunky. Obie is also a member of The Vigils and must do whatever Archie asks; even bring him Hershey's candy. Obie hates Archie.

**John Carter** - The president of The Vigils, president of the Boxing Club, and the "big, beefy varsity guard" of the football team. He tries to show that he has the real power of The Vigils—even though it is .....

### Conflict

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character, who traditionally, undergoes some sort of change. He or She must usually overcome some opposing force. In this story, the protagonist and main character is Jerry Renault. Jerry, who has recently become motherless, must discover what he.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the character that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. In this novel, the antagonist is Archie Costello. Archie creates various obstacles to cause Jerry to .....

**Climax** - The climax of a story is the major turning point that determines the outcome of the plot. It is the point to which the rising action leads. Sometimes, as in this case, the author will create an explosive.....

**Outcome** - The outcome is also known as the resolution or denouement, this is the place in the plot where the action is resolved or clarified. The outcome of this novel is unusual. Typically, the protagonist prevails and the antagonist suffers: the good guy wins and the bad guy loses. In this case, Jerry's decision to .....

### Short Plot Summary (Synopsis)

Jerry Renault has just lost his mother to cancer and is beginning his freshman year at Trinity school, an all boys Catholic school. He is trying out for the football team.

The Assistant Head Master of Trinity, Brother Leon, has doubled the quota and selling price of the annual chocolate sale, designed to raise money for the school. He asks Archie Costello, an important member of The Vigils, an underground but very influential student organization, to assist in the sale. Archie is concerned about his grade in Leon's class, so he agrees.

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Archie's job as the "Assigner" for The Vigils is to pick students to perform absurd tasks. Because the group is so powerful everyone always does what The Vigils demand. Archie chooses Jerry Renault for an assignment refusing to sell chocolates for ten days. The Vigils have a black box which holds five white marbles and one black marble. Archie must choose a marble after each assignment. If he chooses the black marble, he must perform the task himself. He has never chosen black.

After ten days of refusing to sell chocolates Jerry continues to refuse because he does not agree with the sale, which is supposedly voluntary. His actions inspire other students to do the same, as most students never wanted to sell the chocolates to begin with. Sales are doing very poorly and Leon says that Archie better do something about it because he promised the support of The Vigils.

Archie and The Vigils transform the chocolate sale into something popular in the school and soon everyone becomes involved. Archie secretly terrorizes Jerry by calling him at all hours and laughing on the phone. He then makes Emile Janza call Jerry queer and beat him up. Emile brought some friends with him to hurt Jerry as well. Jerry is hurt very badly after the fight.

Archie calls Jerry and tells him there is a way he can get even with Emile and that he should come to the football field that night. When Jerry arrives, the entire school has also come. They are told there.....

## **Themes**

### **Major Theme**

***The destructive potential of unchecked authority*** - Cormier creates a metaphor for a government in this novel. Trinity is a microcosm of a nation. Leon, the leader, is completely corrupt. The students are the nation's citizens who are coming of age and realizing that authority does not have all the answers and is.....

### **Minor Themes**

***Guilt*** - Cormier compares the unfounded guilt (for not selling chocolates) with guilt placed on Catholics by the teaching of the Church. It is a common criticism of the Catholic Church (with which Cormier .....

***War/Battle*** - Sports in general, and aggressive sports such as football in particular, are often used as a metaphor for battle or war. Cormier has several chapters, which are dedicated entirely to.....

### **Mood**

The mood, or tone, of this novel is serious bordering on disturbing. Because it is geared toward teens, the disturbing nature of the novel is not overly emphasized; however, characters such as .....

## **Background Information - Biography**

Robert Cormier was born, lived, and died in the small town of Leominster, Massachusetts. He was born the second of eight children in 1925. By the time he was in seventh grade, Cormier realized that he was a writer, and was declared so by his teacher, Sr. Catherine. However, not all of Cormier's Catholic School experiences were so positive. A year after "becoming a writer," in the eighth grade, Cormier saw his own house burning from his classroom window and was not allowed to see that his family was safe until his prayers were said. This event created a lasting impression on Cormier and can be seen in his many of his novels.

Cormier continued writing throughout his youth and eventually became a professional writer. His first paying piece was a story he wrote while attending Fitchburg State College. A teacher secretly typed a short story that Cormier had shown her (written in pencil) and submitted it to a magazine; he was paid seventy-five dollars.

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After college, Cormier wrote ads for radio and, eventually, became a journalist. In 1948 he married. Cormier and his wife raised four children. He worked as a writer and editor, earning numerous..... j

## **Literary/ Historical Information**

This novel was published in 1974, which is very important to its overall theme of corruption and the destructive potential of unchecked authority. The 1960s were a particularly tumultuous decade in American history when many people began to distrust government. For many Americans in this time period, it was the first time they questioned the honesty of authority. The Vietnam War and Watergate were two major factors that made many Americans lose faith in the integrity of their leaders.

The Vietnam War was the longest and probably most unpopular war the United States ever fought; 58,000 Americans died in the war. Students, and other activists, throughout the nation protested the war. The United States became involved in the war in 1955 and stayed in until 1973. Many Americans believed the.....

## **Chapter Summaries with Notes / Analysis**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Summary**

In this opening chapter we meet the main character of the story: Jerry Renault. He is 5'9", 145 pounds, and trying out for his high school's football team. He is repeatedly hit and knocked down. He experiences grueling pain. The coach asks him why he wants to play football and tells him he is too skinny. The coach says he should not try out for quarter back because he would make a better end.

The coach tells him to show up the next day. As Jerry walks back to the school, his whole body is consumed by pain. He thinks about his mother right before she died, and how she did not recognize anyone. When he reaches the school bathroom, he vomits.

#### **Notes**

In this chapter is the exposition of the novel. The exposition of a plot is the place where the reader is introduced to the main character and any important information to understand what is presently occurring. Jerry Renault is the novel's main character. He is a high school student and concerned with making the football team. His mother is dead.

Making the football team is obviously very important to Jerry. He appears to be enduring immense pain. Furthermore he says that he does not care what position he plays as long as he is on the team.

### **Chapter 2**

#### **Summary**

In this chapter the reader is introduced to two new characters: Archie and Obie. They are sitting on the bleachers at the football field watching the tryouts. Obie both admires and despises Archie. They are seniors at the high school, Trinity. Archie is deciding on ten guys to give "assignments" to. Obie must stay and write down the names and assignments. Obie is growing restless because he has to get to work. Archie says that Obie hates his job so if he loses it he should not be concerned.

Looking at the field, Archie makes his selections. Their group, The Vigils, has a more complete record of the students than the actual school files. They find Jerry and see that he is a freshman; his father is a pharmacist; his mother died last spring. Archie decides that Jerry's assignment will be "chocolates."

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## Notes

In this chapter we are introduced to Archie Costello who seems to be an evil or at least manipulative person. Although he and Obie are part of the same group, The Vigils, they do not appear to be close friends. Obie loathes Arching; although, at the same time he is in awe of him. Obie is startled that Archie can sense so much about him - how he hates his job, how on Saturday nights he would rather be out with his friends.

Archie seems removed from the other high school kids- almost non-human. He mentions the canteen the other kids go to, as though it is something for children that he is above. Although Archie has immense power, we learn he is not even the president of the organization. The president tells Obie he must keep Archie happy in order to keep everyone happy.

## Chapter 3

### Summary

At the opening of this chapter, Jerry looks briefly at a *Playboy* magazine in the drugstore, afraid the owner will see him. He remembers how he once bought a girlie magazine but was so afraid it would be discovered in his room that he threw it away. He worried that a girl might never love him, or that he might never get to intimately experience a girl before he died.

As Jerry waits at the bus stop he notices the group of people across the street- hippies. They always yell at passersby. Jerry notices the contrast between the shirt and tie he is required to wear to school and the carefree clothing of the group of people. A man from the group calls to Jerry, asking why he stares at them everyday. Although he really does stare, Jerry pretends he does not. The man calls him square and tells him to get on his bus. He tells Jerry he is sub-human because Jerry is already caught in a routine everyday- wearing a tie and doing his work. Jerry sees *Why?* written on a blank advertisement space; underneath, he sees *Why not?*

## Notes

Keeping in mind that this novel was published in 1974, hippies were a much more prevalent subculture than they are today. In the 1960s and 1970s many Americans were becoming disillusioned with the power and integrity of authority. The Vietnam War and Watergate challenged the idyllic version of American that many believed was possible in the 1950s (the 1950s were by no means tranquil for everyone, especially minorities). In this section the hippies are setting up an important theme for this novel: challenging authority. The hippies contrast Jerry's school, Trinity. In the upcoming chapters we will see how Trinity is a strict school built on discipline and conformity. When Jerry sees the "Why" and "Why not" on the advertising blank, his conflict in the story is foreshadowed. Jerry will have to decide where he fits in between the hippies and.....

## Overall Analyses

### Character Analysis

**Jerry Renault** - Jerry is the main character and protagonist of this novel. He is engaged in a battle with himself and with the outside world. He, upon entering high school, is virtually independent: his mother is dead and his father is emotionally absent. He wants to "disturb the universe", yet he is not sure how to do it. Jerry does not know if he should reject his father's way of life: suit and tie, working 9 to 5; still, he does not.....

**Archie Costello** - Archie is the antagonist of this story. He believes that people are essentially animals, and he treats them that way. He believes there are the victims the victimized (the hunters and the prey). He .....

### Plot Structure Analysis

*The Chocolate War* is a very cleverly constructed tale about how authority is not always honest and how when you stand up for what you believe, you should be prepared to face the consequences. Jerry Renault, the main

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character, is in search of his way of "disturbing the universe". At Trinity school, he is no longer a child and learns one of the tough lessons of young adulthood: the good guys do not always win.

**Exposition** - The exposition of a plot is the place where the reader is introduced to the main character and any important information to understand what is presently occurring. The exposition of this novel occurs in .....

**Rising Action** - The rising action of this novel began in chapter twenty-seven, where Obie .....

**Climax** - The climax of a story is the major turning point that determines the outcome of the plot. It is the point to which the rising action leads. Sometimes, as in this case, the author will create.....

**Outcome** - The outcome is also known as the resolution or denouement, this is the place in the plot where the action is resolved or clarified. The outcome of this particular novel is unusual. Typically, the protagonist prevails and the antagonist suffers: the good guy wins and the bad guy loses. In this case,.....

## Themes – Theme Analysis

**The destructive potential of unchecked authority** - The major theme of this novel is that authority, when unchecked, can be very destructive. Despite the efforts of Brother Jacques and the black box, both Archie and Brother Leon are able to do whatever they want, with terrible consequences. Furthermore, each .....

## Point of View

This novel is written in the limited omniscient point of view. The narrator is a detached voice that has access to the thoughts of only certain characters. The novel is in the past tense.

## Quotations – Important Quotes and Analysis

1. **“It doesn’t take nerve, Obie. When you march down to the rail, you’re receiving the body. Me, I’m just chewing a wafer they buy by the pound in Worcester.”**- Archie, pg.8.

This is one of the first things Archie says in this book. He is responding to Obie’s disgust of him receiving communion.

2. **“Square boy. Middle aged at fourteen, fifteen. Already caught in a routine. Wow”** - A hippie, pg. 20.

One of the hippies says this to Jerry as he waits for his bus. The hippies are a contrast to Trinity High School, which demands absolute discipline and conformity. Jerry is caught between the two schools of thought and is trying to decide what is right.....

Edition used: Dell Laurel–Leaf Press, 2000

## Symbolism / Motifs / Imagery / Metaphors / Symbols

**The black box**- The black box represents that which keeps power in check. This box is appropriate for the world in which Cormier wrote *The Chocolate War*. The United States Constitution has .....

**The chocolates**- The chocolates that Leon wants the boys to sell are also from the previous spring—they are Mother’s Day chocolates and he wants the “Mother” ripped off. This is symbolic because it.....

## Important Key Facts/ Summary

**Title:** *The Chocolate War*

**Author:** Robert Cormier

**Date Published:** 1974

**Meaning of the Title:** The Chocolate War refers to the battle between Trinity School (represented by Brother Leon and The Vigils) and Jerry Renault. It is called the Chocolate War because the school wants Jerry to sell the chocolates and he refuses. The battle really has nothing to do with the chocolates; the real.....

**Setting:** Trinity School, modern times (circa 1974)

**Genre:** Fiction, Young Adult

**Protagonist:** Jerry Renault

**Antagonist:** Archie Costello

**Mood:** The mood, or tone, of this novel is serious, bordering on disturbing.....

### **Study Questions – Multiple Choice Quiz**

- 1 What holiday were the chocolates originally intended for?
  - A. Mother's Day
  - B. Flag Day
  - C. Christmas
  
2. Jerry tries out for what team
  - A. Basketball
  - B. Soccer
  - C. Football.....

### **Essay Topics / Book Report Ideas**

1. Explain the meaning of the title *The Chocolate War*.
  
2. Compare John Carter, Emile Janza, Archie Costello and Brother Leon. What is the difference between a plotting villain and an animalistic villain?.....

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