

**The Inseparability of Sweetness and Sadness in Life: A Study on Kate DiCamillo's
Because of Winn-Dixie**

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Abstract

Kate DiCamillo is the author of several books for children. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has been the winner of Newbery Medal twice. She has also received many other awards for her books. The Library of Congress has appointed her as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature for the term 2014-2015. All her novels apart from entertaining the readers instill hope in them and motivate to spread love no matter whatever tough situations they are through. Her debut novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* is one such novel that spreads positivity right from the beginning till its end. India Opal Buloni, the ten year old child protagonist of the novel feels lonely as she has moved to a new town with her preacher father. Her mother has left her when she was just three years old. She very much longs for her mama. As a young adult she slowly learns the truths of life, one among which is that both sweetness and sadness are part and parcel of life. Kate DiCamillo's works include *The Tiger Rising*, *The Tale of Despereaux*, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, *Flora and Ulysses* and many more.

Key Words: Sweetness, Inseparability, Sadness

Many writers, down the ages, have weaved their stories with one particular truth which is universally accepted, that life is a combination of both sweetness and sadness. It is hard to separate one from the other. Life can neither be full of sweetness alone nor sadness. It is like the ebb and flow of tides, inseparably mingled together. This reality of life is better understood by people as they grow mature and older after gaining so many experiences in their life's journey. Even to such people it is hard to accept this reality when they happen to go through a difficult situation. For children it is even more difficult to come out of the sadness and accept the harsh realities of life. To make children understand the world, stories come to the aid. Children's literature plays a vital role in shaping the growth and characters of children and therefore their future. One among the many children's writers in America, whose works are popularly read across the world, is Kate DiCamillo. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has been the winner of Newbery Medal twice. She has also received many other awards for her books. The Library of Congress has appointed her as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature for the term 2014-2015. She has authored several books for children. All her novels apart from entertaining the readers instill hope in them and motivate them to spread love no matter what tough situations they are through. Her debut novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* is one such novel that spreads positivity right from the beginning till its end.

India Opal Buloni is the ten year old protagonist of Kate DiCamillo's first novel *Because of Winn-Dixie*. She has just moved from Watley to Naomi, Florida. Her father is a preacher and he is

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going to work at the Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi. They choose to live in an all-adult trailer park named Friendly Corners Trailer Park. Opal's mother has left her when she was just three years old. From then on, Opal has been having a strong feeling for her mama. Now in a new town, she does not have any friend and she terribly misses her mother. She feels lonely. Her father being a preacher works almost all time preparing his sermons. He always prefers to keep his head in his "old turtle shell" (143). He never wishes to let it out. This shows how he does not want to show up his emotions out. So Opal does not really know how much she is loved by her father in her mother's absence. The absence of her mother is felt greatly and frequently. One day when she was sent by her father to buy some groceries Opal meets a stray dog in the grocery store. The dog mistakenly or unmistakably has entered the store and has been making a mess. Opal, who does not want the dog to be harmed, declares that the dog belongs to her and names him after the grocery store as Winn-Dixie. She is such a kind hearted girl that she takes care of a stray dog and owns it. She eventually gets permission from her preacher father to have the dog in their house who at first refused to let in the dog. She convinces him that Winn-Dixie is a less fortunate who needs help. In the meantime, she takes good care of Winn-Dixie that brown fur has started growing on his bald spots and has begun to look good. Moreover, the preacher also likes him because of his smile wherein he shows all his teeth. One day Opal asks her father to tell her ten things about her mama which she can memorize to know them by heart. If in case she happens to meet her mama, she would identify her with those ten things. In the course of time she gets the friendship of an old lady named Miss Franny Block to whose library she makes visits often. This old lady is Opal's first friend in Naomi. Then she gets the acquaintance of a little girl named Sweetie Pie Thomas when she returns from Gertrude's Pets. Sweetie Pie Thomas invites Opal to her upcoming birthday party. And Opal who has gone to the pet shop to buy a collar and a leash for Winn-Dixie negotiates to get a job in the same store. Because she had Winn-Dixie, she could win friends and get a job even. As soon as she realizes this, she feels that she is no more feeling lonely. But it does not in any way take away her feelings for her mama. This sadness could not be erased from her memories. She is just ten years old and to understand the world is not that easy. Opal befriends another old woman named Gloria Dump. Going to her place and conversing with her give Opal some comfort and solace. Among the friends she has won, Opal finds Gloria Dump the best. She visits her everyday and tells stories to her. She has shared even her life's story with her. She learns a lot of life lessons from both Miss Gloria Dump and Miss Franny. And these lessons help her see the world through a different lens.

It is in one such occasion that she learns one of the important lessons of life. It has not only been learnt by Opal but also by every reader of the novel *Because of Winn-Dixie*. The lesson is that both sweetness and sadness are part of human life. Opal learns it when she visits the Herman W. Block Memorial Library to borrow some books for Gloria Dump. She reads book to Gloria Dump to help her keep away her old memories from haunting her. Miss Franny Block has suggested her to take *Gone With the Wind* and tells that it is about the Civil War. As they talk about it, Miss Franny begins to tell the story of her great-grandfather Littmus. He wanted to enrol himself to go to war though he was only fourteen years old. Since he looked like a big boy, he eventually went to the war. He did not know about the difficulties of war until he involved in it. It was not as easy as he thought. He could not even get food when he was hungry. Both summer and winter were very terrible at the warfront. He even got shot but he lived. He was all changed. He was no more the boy he used to be. He headed back towards his home from Virginia to Georgia. Upon arriving he found nothing in the place where his home used to be; it had been burnt to the ground by the Yankees. His sisters and his mother were all dead because of typhoid. And his father has already died at the battlefield. Littmus was left an orphan. But he lived.

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Now, India Opal wants to listen closely to know how Littmus managed to live his life in spite of his losses. He was taken away from him everything he had – his father, mother, sisters and even his house where he could stay in. Littmus, after crying all he could, had a sensation which was completely strange. He wanted to have something that tasted sweet, like a candy. It has been years since he last had a candy. It was then he made a decision. He figured that “the world was a sorry affair and that it had enough ugly things in it and what he was going to do was concentrate on putting something sweet in it” (96).

Then he planned for a candy factory as he started walking to Florida and he built it on Fairville Road. It is now an old building but it was the place where Littmus manufactured the candy which was once popular all over the world known as Littmus Lozenge. It is no more made now. But Miss Franny keeps some in store in her desk. She gave one to Opal, another to Amanda and even to Winn Dixie to taste it. To Opal “it tasted like root beer and strawberry and something else I didn't have a name for, something that made me feel kind of sad. I looked over at Amanda. She was sucking on her candy and thinking hard” (99). Amanda said, “it makes me think of things I feel sad about” (99). Miss Franny opens up about the fact of a secret ingredient present in the candy and it is nothing but sorrow. She adds that children cannot easily find that there is this secret ingredient in the candy. However the grownups can recognize its presence, even the young adults too.

Opal gets from Miss Franny as many Littmus Lozenges as to fill her pocket. After hearing the story of Littmus and the Civil War, she begins to have a different opinion towards Dunlap and Stevie; she does not judge them too hard as she used to do. She meets Gloria Dump and gives her a Littmus Lozenge. Gloria Dump said “it taste sorrowful but sweet...like people leaving” (104). Then Opal surprises her with the book she has taken from the library and reads her the first chapter. On the same day at night, Opal gives her father a Littmus Lozenge to taste. Saying that “it has a peculiar flavour”, he adds that “it almost tastes a little melancholy” (106). It made him think of his wife. When he is of the opinion that the candy must have been from a bad batch, Opal tells him that it is actually how the candy is supposed to taste and tells him the sad story of Littmus. Lying on the bed, Opal realizes how both life and Littmus Lozenge are same: “I lay there and thought how life was like a Littmus Lozenge, how the sweet and the sad were all mixed up together and how hard it was to separate them out. It was confusing” (109-110).

This is the most important of all lessons which Opal has learnt so far. She is now very clear that sadness like sweetness is also part of life. She is not the only one who feels lonely and sad; there are many others too, who have their own reasons to be sad in their lives. Opal herself says “sometimes it seemed like everybody in the world was lonely” (115) after hearing Otis' story when he has tasted a Littmus Lozenge which she gave him. But like Littmus who continued to lead his life successfully, despite having lost everything, people have to live on to fulfil their purpose of life.

With the story of Littmus, Opal must have come to the conclusion that life has to be lived in spite of the many worst things that come on and off in the way. When Opal and her father go in search of Winn Dixie, Opal realizes the truth that her father loves her mother, his wife the same way as she does. She understands the feelings of her father which he has for her mother. There she remembers what Gloria Dump once told her that, “you can't hold on to anything. That you can only love what you've got while you've got it” (145). However this does not mean that she is going to forget her mother forever and concentrate on the life which she has got. Opal stands before the bottles hung tree in the yard of Gloria Dump looking at the sky up and begins to speak:

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“Mama”, I said, just like she was standing right beside me, “I know ten things about you, and that’s not enough, that’s not near enough. But Daddy is going to tell me more; I know he will, now that he knows you’re not coming back. He misses you and I miss you, but my heart doesn’t feel the empty any more. It’s full all the way up. I’ll still think about you, I promise. But probably not as much as I did this summer.” (154-155)

Thus Opal is no more going to drown deep into sadness and think that she is the only person to undergo such incidents. She, rather, learns to walk triumphantly in the life’s path giving a place to what she misses sadly at her heart, and not allowing it to overwhelm her sweet phases of her life.

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