# CHARACTER AND PLOT NODES:
# WRITING FICTION WITH CONCEPT MAPS

*Linda H. Straubel, Ph.D.*
*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, USA*
*Email: straue75@erau.edu*

**Abstract:** Using literary analysis as a starting point, my creative writing students begin by "reverse engineering," or "disassembling," stories to analyze how their "parts," i.e. plot, character, setting and language, fit together structurally. Reading and constructing concept maps of these structures gradually deepen student understanding of both the form and the content of fiction. Midway through this process, we play constructivist "freeze-frame" games with the film *As Good As It Gets*, for example, to demonstrate to the students how much they already know about story and its character and plot structure. Finally, creative writing students are invited to complete scaffold maps for their own and their peers' nascent stories to complicate their characterization and plot structures. While this work establishes that literature and writing also have their domain, content and structure, despite the misapprehensions of many, it also enhances our students' ability to weave a convincing tale from the "characters" and incidents of their own lives.

## 1    Introduction

An old text of mine, *Reading poetry: an introduction* (1996) juxtaposes philosopher Immanuel Kant's distinction between *Kunst* (art) and *Wissenschaft* (science) with the poet William Wordsworth's claim "we murder to dissect" (qtd. in Furniss & Bath, p. 26). In fact, this very old philosophical schism between art and science, and Wordsworth's very dire Romantic reaffirmation of it, thrives everywhere in our Western culture still. This includes my recent research into the uses of concept mapping in academic studies. Rather than repeating the meta-analysis discussed in a separate paper[1], let me just summarize. An amazing array of researchers' dissertation abstracts discussed and affirmed the rigorous structure of concept mapping in such famously "content-oriented" domains as math and science, while far fewer researchers explored the structural uses of concept mapping in such infamously "non-content" domains as literature and writing. Focusing on the inspiration aspect of writing, even those in my own domain, in other words, tend to ignore the matter of structure. After all, if you have no concepts to teach, to learn, to inspire, you need no such structural device as a concept map. In fact, there are still those Wordsworthian Romantics among us who believe emphasis on structure to be anathema to the inspiring Muses of literature.

Yet, another famous poet, William Carlos Williams, bridged this theoretical gap between content needing structure and non-content needing none, when he wrote, "A poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words" (1969, p. 256). For him, as for me, writing deals with both content and structure. Teaching at a very technically-oriented university, I find myself in a unique position to "sell" this idea to my budding math- and science-oriented creative writing students in the form of reverse engineering story, for instance, as inspiration to their own creative writing endeavors.

## 2    From Literary Analysis to Creative Writing

My content is the structural arrangement of fiction devices such as plot, character, setting and language. After a general introduction to these concepts, students apply them in creating their own concept maps based on specific sample stories assigned as readings. However, fiction is not, to paraphrase another poet, criticism in reverse (Matthews, qtd. in *The practice of poetry*, 1992, p. 18). Students, therefore, need further concept mapping practice to segue from reverse engineering to applying these lessons to their own stories.

### 2.1    *Literary Film Analysis as Reverse Engineering of Characterization*

Recognizing the efficacy of contrasting characters in the stories of professional writers can help students to re-think and expand their own limited cast of characters to help them start, at least, to think like real writers. Moreover, a literary analysis of the contrasting characters in *As Good As It Gets* helps students to see the structural logic of such devices as character foils. See Figure 1, below for the following discussion of character and using these insights to add new characters to original fiction. Reorganizing the linear story-telling of the film helps to clarify character foils by demonstrating graphically both the opposing and similar aspects of the two main characters, Carol the

waitress and Melvin the writer. Such maps make it clear to students that the concept of foils is both more complex and more interesting than the simple binary oppositions they often assume.
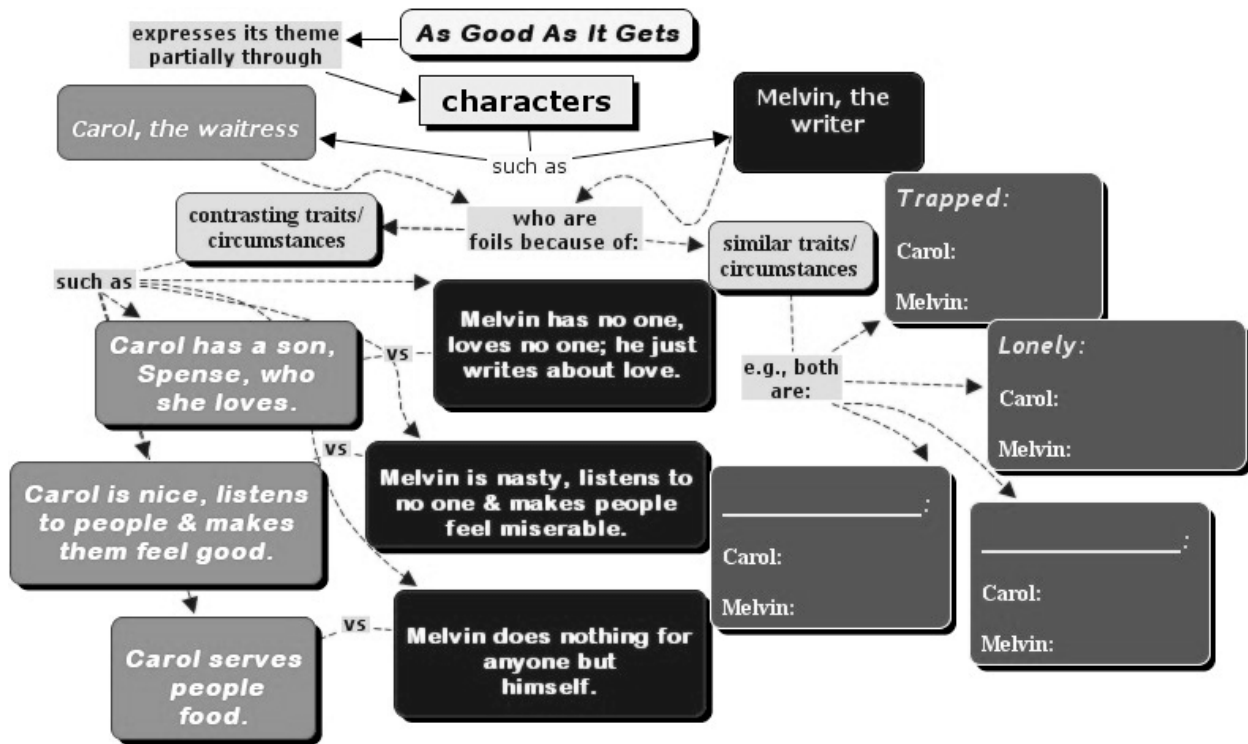


**Figure 1.** This map stresses the creation of successful foils through shared and contrasting qualities and circumstances, while leaving blanks for group discussion and completion.

For instance, without anything at all in common, Carol and Melvin would never meet. Beyond the obvious factor that both must make a living and both must eat, the characters have their common "entrapment" to bring them together, i.e. because she has no money, Carol works as a waitress in a busy Manhattan coffee-shop; because he has OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), Melvin must eat at this same coffee-house, always. This puts each in the other's way. What's more, it helps to emphasize the poignant and ironic loneliness each feels amidst the insanely crowded city bustle. Note also that the blanks left in some of the concept boxes allow the students to collaborate on their completion. This helps the class segue from teacher-generated, instructional maps to student-completed scaffold maps. It also prepares them to apply these concepts to the creation of their own characters. Good fiction, despite the preconceived notions of new writers, starts not with plot, but with the structure of characters and the wants and needs which bring them together, as well as those that pull them apart.

Figure 2, which follows, adds a few simple plot elements to the mix. Note also that these maps deal with destiny, a concept which many students, especially young Americans, ignore. By neglecting fate in the form of all the ungovernable givens we're born into, family, wealth or lack thereof, intelligence or lack thereof, and nationality, for instance, students limit the trouble they can create for their characters. Showing them these aspects in an extant story can start them thinking about creating more interesting characters from the raw material of their lives by considering the intersecting network of choice and chance we all represent for each other. Reversing the "chance" and "choice" concepts for Carol and Melvin, furthermore, subtly implies that the balance of chance and choice is not equal for all, rendering character interplay more realistic and opening up more opportunities for trouble – no trouble, no story – and for conflict. Finally, the map answers one question that has come up in teaching this film as character/plot analysis; why doesn't Carol do something about her life instead of just staying stuck? Such graphic inclusions as concept boxes on choice and chance inspire students to create more credible problems for their characters to overcome, compensating for their tendency to "rush" toward an easy ending for flat characters with insufficient conflict.
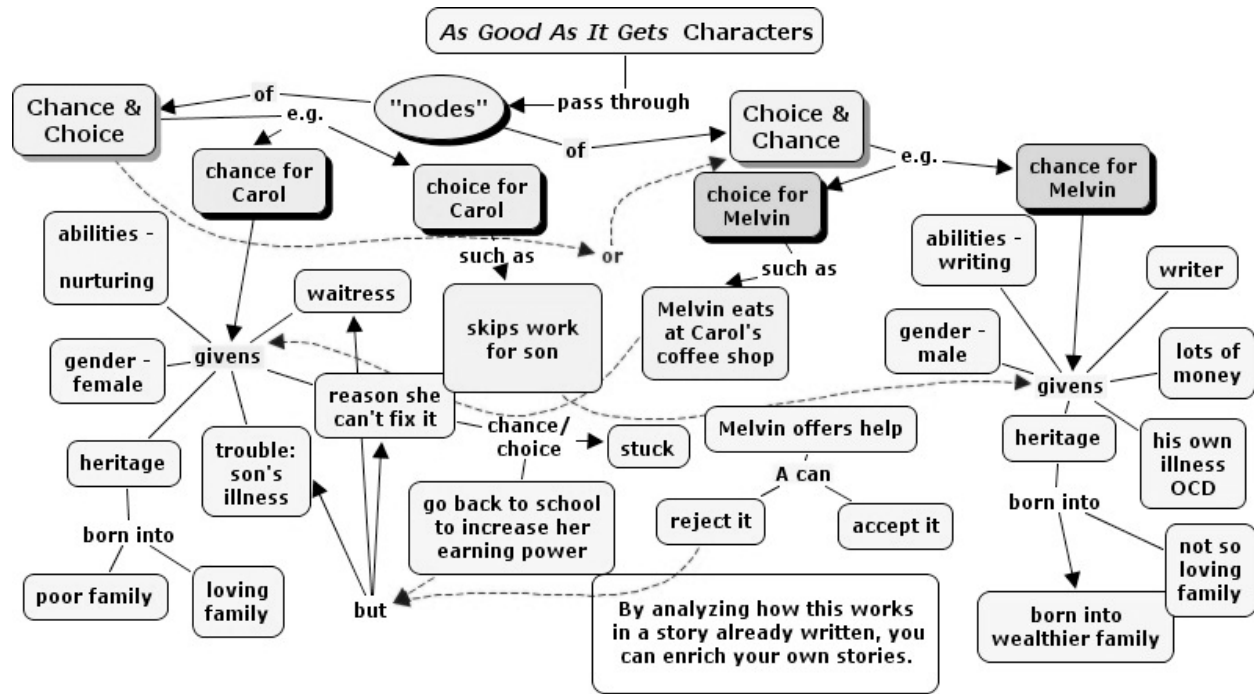
As Good As It Gets Characters

Chance & Choice — of — "nodes" — pass through — Choice & Chance

"nodes" — e.g. → chance for Carol
"nodes" — of → choice for Carol
Choice & Chance — e.g. → chance for Melvin
→ choice for Melvin

chance for Carol — such as → ... or
choice for Melvin — such as → Melvin eats at Carol's coffee shop

abilities - nurturing — givens
gender - female — givens
waitress — givens
reason she can't fix it
heritage — born into → poor family
trouble: son's illness — loving family
givens — trouble: son's illness

skips work for son

reason she can't fix it — chance/ choice → stuck
go back to school to increase her earning power — but

Melvin offers help — A can → reject it / accept it

By analyzing how this works in a story already written, you can enrich your own stories.

abilities - writing — givens
gender - male — givens
writer — givens
lots of money — givens
heritage — born into → born into wealthier family
his own illness OCD
not so loving family

chance for Melvin

**Figure 2.** This teacher-generated map incorporates plot into character discussion by including concepts of chance and choice

## 2.2 More on Intersections of Character and Plot Structure

However, the reverse engineering of fiction already invented, because it starts with the foregone conclusion of a completed plot and completed characters, can, for some student writers, close down possibility in creative writing. At the same time, reverse engineering a story with a foregone conclusion can preclude consideration of real choice as the characters move through their own fictive lives. Ignoring choice also limits our belief in the characters' humanity, which, in turn, impedes our creation of a real bond of empathy. Rather than putting themselves in the place of these characters, students may stand apart, looking down from the height of their youthful egotism, condemning characters for their stupid mistakes. This makes sense, in a way. There is a tendency in this culture of individualism to blame the victims for their own suffering. After all, if they brought it all on themselves, all one needs do is avoid making such idiotic mistakes and nothing bad will ever happen to you. At least, this is one way to explain the lack of empathy in some students' responses. While it is understandable at a certain level, it is hardly in the humanistic spirit of communication through fiction and literature in general. If one fails to identify with characters in their fictive world, where are Aristotle's terror and the pity? Where is the catharsis? Part of teaching is recognizing our students' misconceptions, then helping them to see, and, thus, overcome them. In the spirit of constructivism, we must expose what our students believe or think they already know about life to fit new ideas and modes of experience, such as empathy, into their knowledge schemas.

As such, manifesting choice and chance in such concept maps truly helps raise the discussion to a more objective, literary level, while helping to alleviate a more important problem created by this lack of empathy in the students' own creative endeavors. Without the ability to empathize with **all** their characters, students fail to grant them, especially those characters representing "bad guys," any convincing motivation or interiority.

Figure 3, below, introduces another plot element for the students' consideration, that of genre, such as redemption story and romantic comedy, to the discussion of character and characterization. Note also that characters are shown to have interdependent assets and needs that help to draw them together, while, at the same time, causing them to come into conflict with each other.
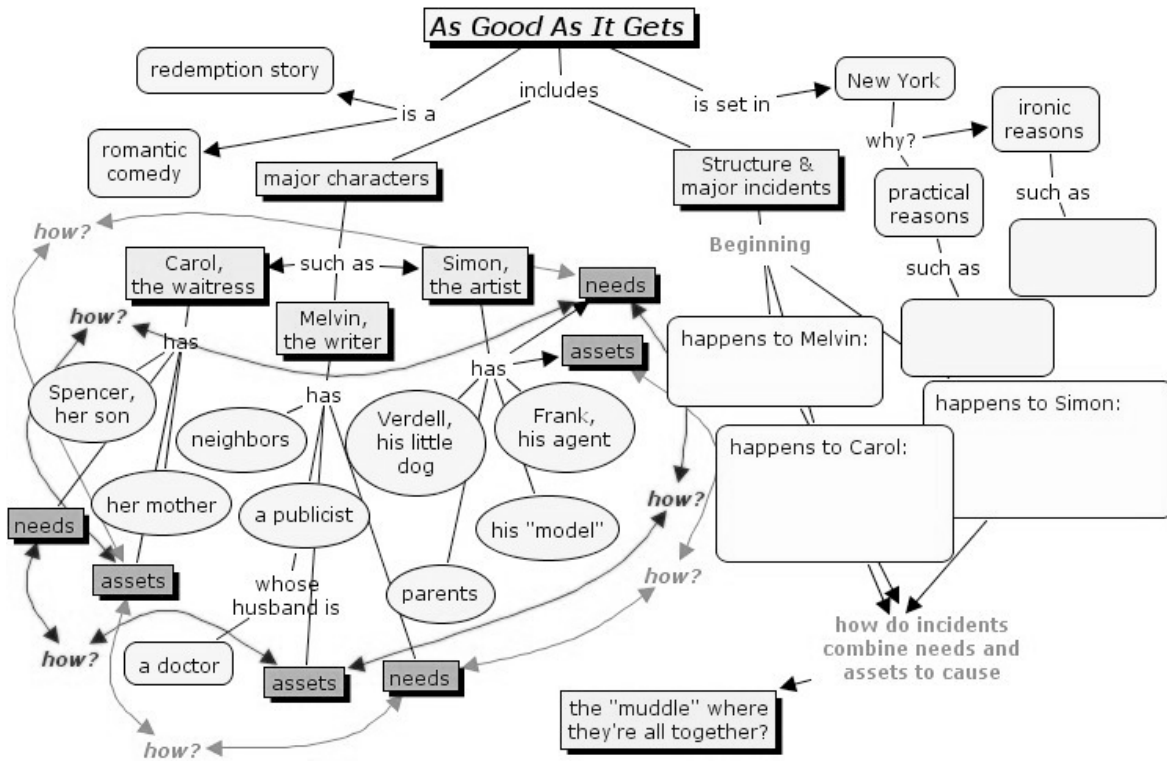
**As Good As It Gets**

redemption story

romantic comedy

is a

includes

is set in

New York

why?

ironic reasons

such as

major characters

Structure & major incidents

practical reasons

such as

Beginning

how?

Carol, the waitress — such as → Simon, the artist

needs

how?

Melvin, the writer

has

happens to Melvin:

happens to Simon:

Spencer, her son

has

assets

neighbors

Verdell, his little dog

Frank, his agent

how?

happens to Carol:

needs

her mother

a publicist

his "model"

how?

assets

whose husband is

parents

how do incidents combine needs and assets to cause

how?

a doctor

assets

needs

the "muddle" where they're all together?

**Figure 3.** Teacher-generated map showing some intersections of character and plot with blanks for group discussion and completion

*2.3    Node Heuristic of Plot Analysis and Creation*

Working with creative writing concept maps helps to bridge the gap between analysis and creativity, between showing students how to reverse engineer and write about a story and to learn, from these same stories, plots and characters, how to transform their own experiences into fiction.

Adapting literature concept maps for use in creative writing classes revealed one possible way to help students make the leap from analysis to creative plot construction by highlighting real, creativity-blocking problems with the way we discuss literature. For instance, in discussing plot in literary analysis, we tend to focus on such terms as "turning points." However, concept mapping practice reveals a more complex pattern. For instance, those points in time where fate and character interact to force choice and change look more like "nodes" than turning points, since each character faces choices at these points and different choices for each at each node would move the plot in a different direction. The implications of this conceptual change are far more meaningful and interesting, especially in terms of teaching creativity, than they may, at first, seem. The concept of "turning points" implies a few cataclysmic events. It also suggests merely plot-driven stories where one or two events cause an inevitable, although eventual, conclusion. On the other hand, emphasis on structural nodes in a story's plot implies the many, possibly small, character-driven choices leading to other nodes and other choices, which altogether form a "neural network" of possibility. Rather than inevitability and the foregone conclusions of pure genre work, therefore, we have the more creative and humanistic series of choices that can support the construction of believable stories. In my classroom experience, this moves creative writing students toward a more carefully constructed convergence of circumstance, character and choice. In other words, nodes can act as a more open-ended system than the closed and limited concept of **the** turning point or points in a story, since they suggest a myriad of shifting, alternative possibilities

## 3    Moving Beyond Reverse Engineering

Once students have accepted the convergence of choice and chance, character and happenstance, in a successful story such as *As Good As It Gets*, they seem to feel freer to "play" more with the elements of their own
lives that they always wish to transform into stories.  This is fine; it gives them a place to start.  However, by sharing with them these "tricks of the trade," as it were, we can give them the structural wherewithal to go on from there rather than settle for the rather formless reality of real-life.  As Mark Twain wrote, fiction is harder than real life; fiction has to make sense.  This is where the structure of concept mapping helps.  In Figure 4, below, students are presented with a similar scaffold of choice and chance, with blanks for their own characters.  This map can be used separately or in conjunction with other character maps.  (See Figure 5, for example.)
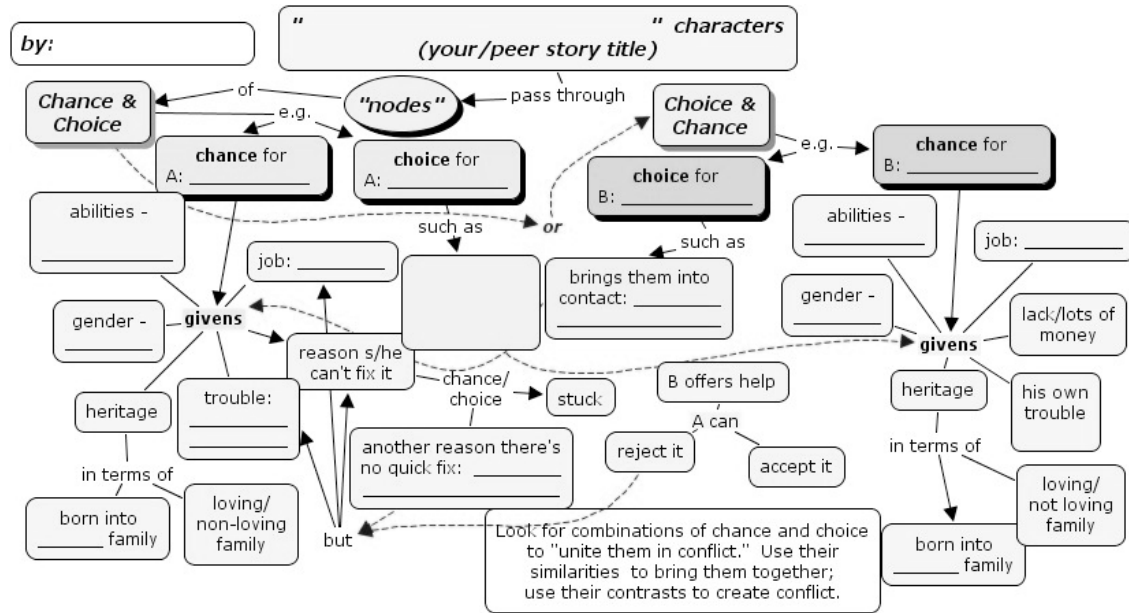


**Figure 4.**  Scaffold map for student completion to add character and/or incidents to peer or their own stories

Using maps, students can play with extant plots, and then transform that same play into an analysis of their own life-stories to unearth alternative possibilities along the nodes of change.  Furthermore, finding the nodes of plot and character that make a real-life story mundane or too predictable, for instance, can help a student's creativity break free of its real--life bonds.   Looking at these same nodes also helps them to add new and contrasting characters that lift the plot from the foregone happy ending of their own survived conflicts to some less predictable, and, undoubtedly, more interesting, conclusion.  Naturally, at the same time, our studies in genre will help steer students clear of the Scylla and Charybdis of tedium and melodrama.

### 3.1    Teacher- to Student-Generated Concept Maps – Scaffolds to Structural Creativity

The following exercise combines literary plot and film analysis of *As Good As It Gets* with concept mapping and "what if" games.  As unlikely a romantic couple as Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt might be, the acting is superb and the dialog is crisp and witty, and, most important of all, Nicholson's character, Melvin the writer, is an hysterically, nasty-mouthed man, who the students love, in a convincing redemption story.  All of this keeps the students' interest while giving the story the palpably "mappable" structure, in terms of both plot and character, necessary for a heuristically useful concept map.

After screening enough of the film to establish the main characters and their problems, I like to stop at an important "chance/choice" node and ask what happens next.  For instance, I like to stop the film right after Melvin has offered Carol help with her son's illness and ask, "OK, help has been offered . . . will she accept?"   Almost invariably, whether they've seen the film or not, students answer, "Yes, she does."   Asking why effectively

combines the Socratic method of teaching with constructivism, since their own answers tend to prove how much they already know about story and its likely structures. Inevitably, a student will glibly point out that this movie will have a happy ending, which creates a perfect opportunity to talk about genre and plot. Such questions also help students to create their own schema from their extant story knowledge, although they need guidance, which the maps provide, to see how these disparate factoids fit into an overall pattern. It also creates the opportunity, in both literature and creative writing classes, to discuss alternative choices, to follow a new path thus created from that same node to discuss further possibilities and transformed plots. If she had not accepted his help, for instance, mightn't her son die? Wouldn't this demonstrate how character and choice create plot? We discuss alternative possibilities to see what sort of ending, and therefore, what sort of genre, they might lead to. It can also be shown through concept mapping of both extant and new fiction that each choice can influence future choices, making comic or tragic outcomes more possible, plausible or seemingly inevitable. Finally, it's also a good way to remind creative writing students that one character's entrapment creates more opportunity for interaction, thus producing more fruitful choice/chance plot nodes to enrich their stories.

Nodes can also represent places in the plot where a character's choices are severely limited. Carol, for instance, has reached a point in her life where it is virtually impossible for her to change her socioeconomic status by going back to school, for instance, to earn a college degree. For her, the more plausible possibilities for change must come from outside, i.e. a new element is needed to add choice to her "no-choice" circumstances. Melvin started coming into her coffee shop; Carol had no choice about this. After that first time, even Melvin's choices were severely limited by his OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). Such nodes for Carol include not only the accept-or-reject help choices, but also include the "destiny nodes" of Melvin walking into her workplace for food. (See Figure 2.) When Melvin is asked to drive Simon, the artist, to Connecticut for a "big sweaty wad" of his father's cash, this is another destiny/choice node. (Notice, here, that Carol already has some input into his decision, concisely summarizing his "dilemma" as something she'd welcome. "I want your life for five minutes," she tells him, "where my biggest problem is accepting a convertible so I can get out of the city for a week-end.") This, in turn, creates a further choice-node for Carol in considering whether to join them and thus "save" Melvin from Simon's advances. Discussing such intertwining actions and reactions inspires more intricate and more interesting character and plot interactions in the students' own stories.

Alternatively, one can choose a specific scene and adapt the mapping technique to analyze character interplay, such as the three-person dynamic that develops among Carol, Simon and Melvin on their car trip. (By the way, this scene also demonstrates to students that putting two or three people together on a trip is a classic way to create character dynamics.) The characters share life stories and, in discussing such stories, one may introduce more character-driven genres. One may start with the obvious; Melvin and Carol must make their decisions within the framework of a romantic comedy, for instance. One may also discuss Melvin's trajectory as a redemption story and Carol's as a *bildungsroman*, (coming of age story), since she is, after all, young and sensitive and still learning about love and life. While the romantic comedy plot rather limits how characters may behave and what choices we can expect from them, discussion of other plot aspects, such as redemption and *bildungs* stories, can show writing students how to work within a genre, yet still avoid re-hashing one-dimensional clichés. Drawing maps that include elements of all three genres, romantic comedy, *bildungsroman*, and redemption, can help students understand what they have in common and how they differ, and how character traits and plot trajectory interact. For instance, to write their own redemption stories, students will now know that the character to be redeemed, like Melvin, must start out pretty low or there could be no redemption plot - there would be no "upward" for the upward trajectory that redemption stories must trace. One of the most necessary functions of constructivist teaching is disrupting students' simplistic schemas and revealing opportunities to enrich these structures. This allows them to reconstruct that knowledge into more fruitful, more open-minded and more openhearted ways of seeing character and plot; the sheer graphic structure of the maps does that better than a teachers' moral suasion, alone, ever could.

Returning to the plot factor in this story, Melvin's behavior can also demonstrate how a redemption story, to be convincing, must also be gradual. Beginning writing students tend to rush through to the end of the plot, flattening the complexities of human behavior into one, headlong and unconvincing progress. Concept maps using this node method can help them to see human actions and reactions, progress and "backsliding" in a fuller, more satisfying and more convincingly human, conflict-filled picture. Then they can understand that Melvin's wrong moves are as necessary to the plot as the right ones. Each node, furthermore, with its various possibilities for reactions, can free the students' minds from their lock-step progress of oversimplified plots.

For instance, I'll stop the film just after Melvin pays Carol a tremendous compliment (comprised of both self-disclosure, an act of intimacy; and a true compliment, an act of kindness), which is a very right move. Most students have absorbed more story knowledge than they know, as stated previously. This is a good time to let the students demonstrate that to themselves, then translate that knowledge into their "what if" exercise. When I pause the film, then ask the class as a whole, "What will happen now?" someone will always call out, "Now, he'll blow it."

By speculating together in small groups as to how he might do that, students move from reverse engineering to creative writing. In true constructivist-learning mode, fitting this odd bit of simple old knowledge into a concept map helps them to rework their ideas into a more successful creative writing character-plot schema.

### 3.2   Character Choice – Plot, Action-Reaction Planning with Scaffold Maps

The last in this series of concept maps replaces all the major specifics discussed in *As Good As It Gets* with blank concept boxes for student completion. Using this map can complicate their ready-made, real life, albeit overly simple, characters and incidents into a structurally satisfying story, at once more complex, more structured, and, ironically, more convincing, than reality. Notice that the map attempts to demonstrate the interaction between character and plot, as well as the ongoing network of actions and reactions that a good, character-driven story can create. See Figure 5 below.
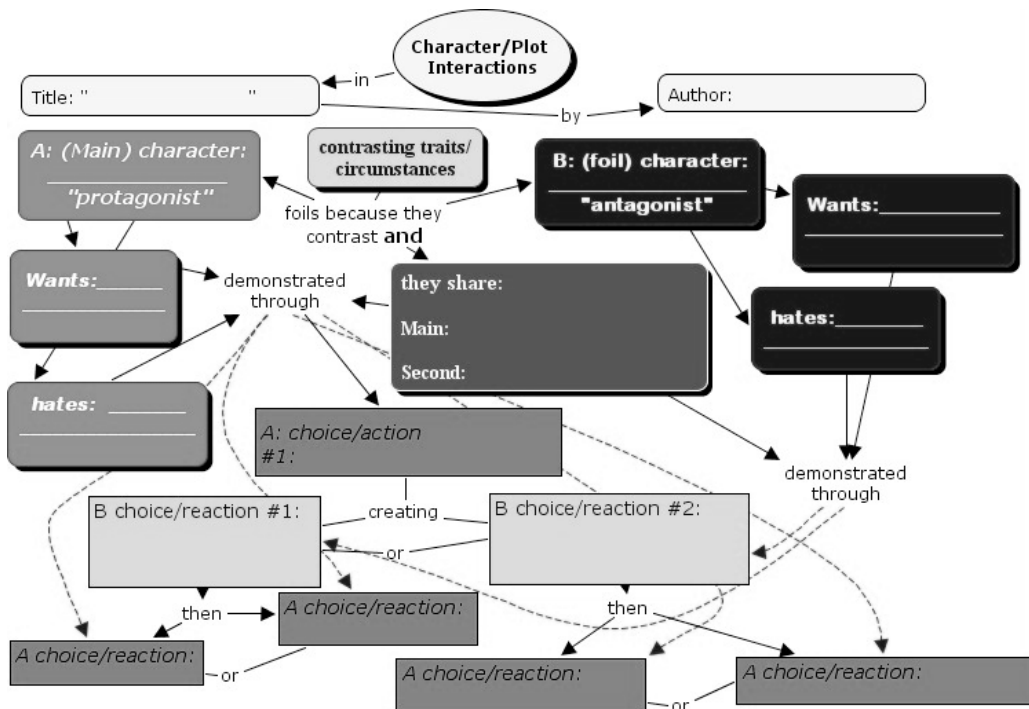


**Figure 5.**   Scaffold map to clarify that plot is a nexus of Character A-action and Character B-reaction nodes

## 4   Summary

Through practice, my concept maps have evolved from literary analysis through reverse engineering to structures that help students transform their own incidents and "characters" into more complex and more structured stories than they had been writing before. Moving from teacher-generated to student-completed scaffold maps helps students to imagine new characters and new plots. In other words, mapping story structure helps students to refine their half-formed notions about story into structures that gets them "unstuck" from the pure, unadulterated factoids of their lives and into real creativity.

## 5 Notes

1. The meta-analysis discussed in "Creative concept mapping: From reverse engineering to writing inspiration" includes the results of 211 abstracts revealing an overall 84% approval rating. Of these, almost half (49%) were in the fields of math and science and most of the remaining included real-world, data reduction or other applications. Less than 2% applied the technique to literature or other endeavors requiring writing. None of the abstracts discussed concept mapping in creative writing.

2. Due to space limitations, only a small sample of dissertation abstracts reviewed is included in this list; the entire list is available upon request.

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