An old proverb states, "Character is what you are in the dark, and it is in the darkest of times that who we are sometimes shines through." Nelson Mandela, Stephen Hawking, Lance Armstrong; our society loves to hear of a man who triumphs through adversity. But would these talents and achievements have arisen anyway — or — if there had been no adversity? Possibly, but I agree with the Roman poet Horace in that adversity has a way of rousing talent from slumber. Adversity can stimulate, force, and sharpen a person in ways prosperity cannot — there is no value in hardship.

Biology teaches us that a stimulus will elicit a response. Newton taught us that one force provokes another, in opposition to it. While various life experiences might "elicit" a response, adversity may analogize better with physics than biology. It does not simply request a response — it demands it. Otherwise, the adversity will never be lifted and hardship will prevail. Hamlet's tragic
How was indecision, and Shakespeare
no doubt understood that those in adversity
must learn to be capable of a response
if they are to survive,
Survival, of course, is a powerful
motivator. Evolution runs on it; in this
sense every organism on the planet
works due to adversity. This
survival imperative is so powerful, it
has been used beyond the biological
creatures; it is hard-coded into computers
now make use of genetic
algorithms, where competing solutions to
a problem—say, the correct shape of
an aircraft wing—are selected, mathematically
"bred" and mutated into a new generation.
Adversity, it seems, elicits talents in
more than humans.
Prosperity, on the other hand, does
not always engender growth. The prosperous
man has no pressing needs or emergencies
that require him to develop talents to
counter. Brave New World provides a
literary example. The people in this
"utopia" are always fed. They are always
happy. There is infinite entertainment, in all imaginable forms. But there is no growth. When the leader of this society asks an outsider if he truly wants pain, death, and hardship, the "savage" simply replied "I claim them all," and took with him all the good things the "prosperous" lacked—love, family, Shakespeare, and much more.

In fiction, a character often ends a story realizing far more than he did when he began. The conflicts and resolutions he has been through have forced it on him. Character development is not merely a literary construct—it exists in life. We cannot live and we cannot grow without the realization that we are not living perfectly and that we have ideals to grow towards, and revealing these is the true value of adversity.