

RRL for *The Outsiders*

Summary

The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton is a story of a family of three brothers (14 through 20 years old) who struggle to stay together as they face social and economic challenges.

We meet Ponyboy Curtis as he leaves a movie theatre and we learn that he is facing danger as he walks home at night. There are rich boys who prey on the poor for reasons not always clear to this teenager. But he thinks about his friends who would protect him if they were with him. Friends who are always looking for a good fight. They think of themselves as Greasers, because they like their hair long and slicked back with some oil. The rich boys are looking for a fight as well; they are Socs because in the community they have a higher social status.

That same evening, walking home, Ponyboy is jumped by roving Socs. When he calls out, his friends come to the rescue. This provides an introduction to the personalities and stories of each. Brothers Darry and Sodapop fiercely protect their little brother, Ponyboy. The latter has been moved up a grade and is taking advanced classes in high school. Their parents have recently died in a car accident. Darry has given up a college football scholarship to work and keep the family together instead of sending Soda and Ponyboy to foster homes. Soda has dropped out of high school and now works at a gas station nearby to pay the bills. The family keep their door unlocked to welcome their friends who are in an out of jail or school, struggling to be respected at some level. Two-Bit and Dally are Darry's contemporaries. Each survives a lack of family and education by committing small crimes. Steve is a close friend of Soda's and does not like Ponyboy; he sees him as a tagalong little brother. Johnny is sixteen and has recently endured much violence at the hands of a group of Socs, especially one who wears a lot of rings. Johnny goes home to parents who cannot show love for him. The friends look out for Johnny, they make sure he knows that they are his family. Johnny has taken to carrying a switchblade for protection.

The main character describes an evening out the following night. He, Johnny and Dally sneak into a drive in movie even though they have the money to pay for a ticket. On the grass with other viewers, they meet Sherri Valance, who goes by Cherry, and her friend, Marcia. After Dally flirts rudely with the girls, Johnny who is usually quiet about things tells Dally to stop. Dally who is older and used to being respected by the boys, stomps off to find other action. It turns out that Marcia and Cherry came to the movies with their boyfriends but did not want to drink alcohol; the boys left them and the girls stayed to watch the movie. By the way they dress and talk, Marcia and Cherry are Socs. Their boyfriends are Socs who have preyed on the Greasers. Johnny and Ponyboy are invited to sit with the girls and they talk. At the end of the evening the boys walk the girls to a car where Two Bit can drive them home. They are spotted by the boyfriends who stop and apologize to their dates. Cherry's boyfriend, Bob, wears a lot of rings. It becomes clear that he is the one who seriously beat up Johnny. Not wanting any trouble the girls accept a ride home with their boyfriends.

Not long after, the Socs return with friends to beat up the boys because they made a move on their girlfriends. When Johnny and Ponyboy are caught alone with the Socs, things do not go well. While Bob tries to drown Ponyboy in the fountain, Johnny stabs him. As the Socs run to

their cars, leaving Bob behind, Ponyboy and Johnny decide what to do. Johnny has killed Bob. Ponyboy goes home only to have Darry rail him about being late. Pony never explains the earlier fight or the death of a Soc; instead he decides to run away with Johnny.

Here the story takes the two Greasers who have always been in the city out to the country to hide in a church with a friend's (Dally) gun and money. After Johnny buys some food in the nearby town, the boys cut their hair and successfully hide for a week. Johnny, usually a passive and protected member of the gang has emerged as a leader as he takes care of Ponyboy. When Dally arrives they all go into town to eat something besides baloney sandwiches. When they return to the church it is on fire and there is a picnicking group of adults and children surrounding the site. Pony rushes in when he realizes that four children are missing and may be hiding inside the church in an area where Johnny and he had slept over the nights. Finding them, he begins to help them out a window. Johnny is right behind him. When the last child is out, Johnny pushes Pony through the window. Dally hits Pony whose jacket is on fire in an attempt to put it out then he rushes in to save a trapped Johnny. With everyone but the two out, the ceiling collapses. Johnny and Dally are injured enough to be hospitalized. The three are called heroes.

The story describes Ponyboy's perspective about his gang's reactions to the events and how Randy, a friend of the Bob (the Soc who was killed), has decided to change because he has hurt his father. A big rumble is planned. Although the Greasers win this battle, there is tragedy that evening as Johnny dies in the hospital and close friend, Dally, provokes police into killing him.

By the end of the story Johnny has developed from a quiet and nervous sixteen year old to a young man who has come to the aid of Cherry and her friend, intervened when a friend was in danger, cared for Ponyboy when they are both away from home for the first time, and saved some children from a fire. He has shown pride in his actions before he dies. In the end his thoughtful gesture of a letter in a book will help the teenager to heal.

Signposts

There are signposts throughout that invite the reader to better moments in the story.

Tough questions are buried in the text. Why would Cherry say that Socs have it just as bad as Greasers? The reader needs to look for the answers in what Randy has to say later about how sometimes they have too much and need limits. This information may help Pony to better understand and appreciate the limits that Darry puts on him. These same limits and Darry's commitment will enable the judge to see these three orphaned brothers as what they are, a family, and let them stay together. Darry's limits have saved them; Bob's parents lack of limits caused them to lose their son.

Memory moments. Ponyboy recalls his older brother, Soda's love of rodeo, injury, and loss of a favorite horse that he felt was his own. He called it Mickey Mouse. It belonged to a neighbor. But Soda visited it every day. Then the neighbor sold the horse. Pony doesn't share about how much Soda cried about it. (This may foreshadow other losses that Soda will underplay in his good-natured way). Nor does he admit that someday he would like to buy Soda his own horse.

There are *contrasts and contradictions*. Pony describes the meeting of Darry and Paul on p.142 and the realization that Darry had to make a choice not to go to college because he needed to work to keep his family together or he might have had the same advantages as Paul.

Aha moment. Pony describes an epiphany of Two-Bit and Steve, kids in the gang that Ponyboy didn't think liked him very much, who seem worried when he holds back a group of Socs with a bottle that he breaks. Pony describes that they seem relieved when he begins to pick up the glass from the broken bottle saying, "I didn't want anyone to get a flat tire." (p.171-172).

Again and again: Repetition of the physical differences between Socs and Greasers act as reminders to the narrator that there are differences between the groups, but are there fundamental similarities among the? When he considers that Darry could have been a Soc, he looks for the reasons. Haircut? Education? Are Socs and Greasers really so different.

Words of the wiser: Soda feels like "the middleman in a tug of war," (p.175). They are wise words from the brother who thinks he is dumb. His importance to the dynamics of the family is to be the middleman. But Pony and Darry need to respect his importance and not make him chose sides or sit on the sideline while they battle. All need to be kinder and more level headed or he will have to leave the picture. And no one wants that.

Thoughts about the story

I wish that there had been a little less description that made it clear that the characters were mostly white. And the reference to Johnny's mother seemed to aim at being racist. Ponyboy remembers his mom "beautiful and golden like Soda." I just wonder if that use of golden, expressed elsewhere as a transitional color to green might be objectionable to those with pallors a variety of browns. How to discuss this may be difficult. On the other hand I found that the lack of sex and language allowed for the book to stay focused and to make the point about socioeconomics, morality, and the very real threats upon the lives of many who have very little by those who seem to have a lot. The mention of suicide early on and the simple argument against it between Johnny and Ponyboy can provide discussion as well. Dally's sad end as he threatens police is worth talking about as it may be very close to some students' experiences. I wonder why the author took that character out of the picture.

I liked the description of the particulars of breakfast and dinner. For someone experiencing the reality of poverty, it would be a good example of the importance of distributing responsibilities, fixing a meal, eating together, and cleaning up. I would love to have cake for breakfast each morning; what a happy thing. How the boys, who wanted to appear rough and without sensitivity, looked out for each other when someone was sick, always having the door unlocked for needy friends. Johnny knew he was always welcome. Why didn't he just move in?

Novel in the classroom

There are issues in the story with which parents may be uncomfortable. References to smoking, petty crime and violence for entertainment should be talked about. Smoking and health concerns must be brought up. Introduction to materials about how to deal with violence and places that can help a victim of violence should be made available. Using the character, whose attraction to danger leads to sad results, can initiate discussion.

The rumble and the description of preparation, acrobatics, and conversations during it seemed out of movies. But the continual need to meet and fight seemed based in a culture of not forgetting and getting even which was downplayed in the book. In *Absolutely true diary of a part time Indian* by Sherman Alexie the character is surprised that the white bully at the new school does not meet him after classes to thrash it out. He describes how boys on the reservation remember everything and fight about it often. Acts of violence, while not condoned, can lead to understandings of the cause and opportunities to bring those affected by it into a conversation.

Reviewing the story from a literature perspective, it is a great first person telling of a story. It has examples of flashback. It doesn't tell the reader what to think, but allows the reader to see what the narrator describes and like or dislike a character; naturally the more we know of the gang members and their small kindnesses, the more we come to like them. Delving into how the writer told the story may help model a good writing technique that can be used by students in their own writing.

Appreciation of human condition

The *Outsiders* helps different socioeconomic groups understand that all share challenges and lack benefits. Johnny with no family, had a family; Pony with caring brothers, felt that they did not care enough about him; Randy wished he didn't beat up Greasers because it hurt his dad's feelings; etc. Writing about importance of a certain aspect of family may lead to deeper understandings of the people that the reader calls family.