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18 November 2020

The Outsiders

S. E. Hinton (Susan Eloise Hinton) wrote *The Outsiders* in 1967, and its essential messages and themes of social class, masculinity, and stereotypes have remained relevant. The novel deals with the intersecting lives of the "greasers" and the "Socs," two groups of young men whose mutual animosity sparks controversy. The main character, Ponyboy, projects a tough exterior yet grapples with prejudice and acceptance from both the other greasers and society, Reviewers found him to be a relatable and "likeable" character (Chaston). The story also sheds light on the vulnerable side of these male characters, surprising many many due to the authors gender and age at the time. As one review put it, the book was "written with distinctive style by a teen-ager" (Jacobs 609). The novel's portrayal of a rough and unsettling America is often attributed to Hinton's youth when she wrote it. The greasers, much like the marginalized teenagers of the 1960s, are not seen as upstanding citizens, facing labels such as gang members, degenerates, and hoodlums. The desire for acceptance by mainstream society is a recurring theme. They did not choose the life they were living; that is just what life dealt them. This book sparked conversations in 1967, again in the 1990s, and thirty years later in 2017. Susan Eloise Hinton's *The Outsiders* addresses several important emotional, social, and mental issues that have been key in reviews of the book and must be addressed for the benefit of the readership.

When *The Outsiders* was first published in 1967, it was unique because it confronted "class hostilities," a topic of discussion that fiction books shied away from (Gerhardt 609). L. N. Gerhardt, a book reviewer, stated this was a novel which "difficult-to-serve kids at the culturally

detached bottom of society" could respond to (609). The benefit of the novel focusing "on disaffected, underclass teen-agers" makes it relatable to this neglected audience (Solomon). Teenagers relate to Ponyboy the most because he is the only greaser who "does not drink, is not naturally violent and is embarrassed when his friend swears" (Hemma). Nevertheless, despite his separation from the characteristics of the other greasers, Ponyboy is still classified as one. These attributes, combined with the poor conditions the greasers live in, lead many of the affluent characters to judge the greasers at face value. The same is mirrored in reality, where gang members are bad based solely on who they are and where they come from. However, one moment within the novel stands out to contradict this notion. When Ponyboy, Johnny, and Dallas notice the church they are hiding in is on fire, with schoolchildren trapped inside, they jump into action and save the kids (Hinton 100-01). While the cause of the fire is never defined, Ponyboy believes that they were the ones who started it and decides to put himself in harms-way to atone for what he believes he has done. "The three greasers present a poignant example that there are other ways to achieve recognition and honor" (Pearlman 223)—the greasers' image changes when those around them consider them heroes. Unlike the greasers who, through an act of heroism, change how society looks at them, the Socs do terrible things to the greasers throughout the novel, and it does not deface their societal image. Mainstream society in the 1960s favored the rich, so the Socs were the good guys because they were at the top of the food chain. They had money and status to protect them from any wrongdoings. Status plays a vital role in this novel and determines winners and losers. It makes "the reader challenge any pre-conceived ideas they have about what a 'bad' person is" by making a societal *bad guy* the main character (Hemma). *The Outsiders* highlights society's often misplaced tendency to emphasize a particular group's

status and the associated perception that comes with that. The idea of status and preconceived notions continued in reviews for *The Outsiders* in 2017, when Hayley Krischer quoted English education professor Jennifer Buehler from St. Louis University. Krischer said that Buehler believed "the 'greasers' experience, and their need to be seen as human, is similar to what many marginalized groups today are also trying to claim." Even though this is a quote from 2017, it still pertains to life in 1967 and the 1990s.

During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was just coming to a close, but the assault on African Americans did not stop with it. In *The Outsiders*, there is not one main or secondary African American character (Tensley). None of the reviews mention the lack of diversity in the novel. While it does take place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the population of Caucasians to African Americans was steep. Readers should keep in mind that this novel was written by a sixteen-year-old Caucasian girl whose goals for this novel, while groundbreaking, were not based on racial discrepancies. There were laws set up to outlaw public segregation, but discrimination against African Americans was still going on. Although not African American, there is still a moment within the novel where Ponyboy's actions are taken out of context, and the treatment he receives is not much different from the discrimination a person of color might expect. While in biology class dissecting a worm, he first uses the razor provided, but it is too dull to cut, so Ponyboy pulls out his pocketknife, and his lab partner calls him a "hood" for doing so (Hinton 24). This remark is a verbal assault on Ponyboy's character and upbringing. His partner interprets his use of the pocketknife as negative because it is not *proper* or *socially acceptable*. Ponyboy's initial use of the proper cutting tool is overshadowed by his blatant disregard for proper lab etiquette.

Taking phrases or actions out of context is something that has been done many times to African Americans. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech at Stanford University, stating, "a riot is the language of the unheard" (Dicker). Out of context, it looks like Dr. King was endorsing and justifying riots, but what he actually stated was that riots only existed because America "failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years" (Dicker). Thomas Fleming's 1967 review of *The Outsiders* states, "the poor guys don't beat up the rich guys" (609). Hinton's writing of her story is the opposite of how Fleming spent his teenage years. By this, he means that when he was growing up, it was the rich guys who beat up the poor guys. In a situation where the rich live blissfully in posh neighborhoods, they have little to worry about in life. Whereas people experiencing poverty live on the streets and are barely scraping by. When the rich meet the poor, the rich have the means to win a fight, while the poor have nothing left to lose. In much the same way, actions taken by certain *out-group* members, while demonized by those of the *in-group*, are simply the only course they have available.

The Socs and greasers, just like those of us in the real world, are not that different from each other. The greasers are also human and have problems that are easy for the readers to connect with. Towards the end of the book, there seems to be "an easing of tensions and a growth toward maturity" between the greasers and the Socs (Jacobs 609). Being people from opposite sides of the tracks, the two groups begin to recognize that they are not so different from one another. Cherry Valance, a Soc, and Ponyboy share a moment where they both love literature and sunsets (Hinton 48). Ponyboy wonders to himself, "[m]aybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different," after all, they both see the same sunset (Hinton 49). This moment transcends the divisions that feed the feud between their respective groups. At that moment,

Ponyboy understands that despite coming from two separate worlds economically, they are all equal when they look at the sunset.

The Outsiders places great emphasis on socioeconomic status. The book's premise is about a bitter rivalry between two groups of teenagers and the conflict that stems from their socioeconomic differences. Hinton shows the difference in status within the book's writing in the way she writes the words greaser and Soc. The word greaser is always seen with a lowercase 'g,' symbolizing the negative connotations associated with the group throughout the book. Soc is short for social, and to show their status, Hinton capitalizes the 'S.' A review of the novel published in 1994, from the *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*, dove into the socioeconomic status of the characters and how specifically Ponyboy connected to young lower-class readers (Chaston). Throughout the book, readers learn "that even 'greasers' of low [socioeconomic status] can be respected by the community for their heroism" (Pearlman 223). Being heroic is out of the norm for greasers such as Johnny and Dallas, yet they still risk their lives and go into the burning church (Hinton 100). Even though Ponyboy is a greaser, the need to help comes naturally to him. When he sees the burning church, he immediately jumps to "[w]e started it," which is out of the norm for a greaser (Hinton 99). Having this thought sets him apart from the other greasers. Ponyboy is a greaser who is more sensitive, kind, and insightful.

The male characters are flawed and emotional, which was unheard of in the 1960s. The idea that young boys could cry freely in front of their friends was astonishing because, as everyone knew, men should not cry or show emotions. While this was society's idea at the time, it did not stop Hinton's book from showing society and men that they do not have to act this way. This conversation did not start until 2017 when Daniel Kraus mentioned it in his review of *The*

Outsiders. He stated that "Hinton's portrait of boys is shockingly sensitive" and that it was difficult to find a portrayal like this in 2017 (Kraus 80). Since the book is about grief, it seems logical why "the boys are so frequently emotional, whether that emotion is anguish or anger" (Kraus 80). In 2017, *The New York Times* reviewer Hayley Krischer pointed out how "remarkable" it was that the greasers had the "ability to show great affection and emotion despite the masculine-dominated cultural norm of the 1960s." It is true that "in almost every chapter, someone is crying or on the verge of tears" (Krischer). Krischer is the only reviewer to point out the "masculine-dominated" culture of the 1960s when *The Outsiders* first came out. *The Outsiders* was a book that broke the stigma surrounding boys not showing emotion.

The Vietnam War was arguably one of the most controversial events in American history, and it still is. Many men wanted to show their support and patriotism for America by voluntarily joining the army. Others feared the day their birthday would be called out, so they would try to evade the draft by not registering with the Selective Service System or by fleeing, though it was "an immoral colonialist adventure" (Ireland). America's concept of masculinity— previously held in the 1960s as "the ideal of the citizen soldier"—was disassembled (Ireland). The concept of American Masculinity and its associated adverse effects are on display in the book. While the greasers keep up a good façade ninety percent of the time, the other ten percent they are crying. An excellent example is when Darry, Ponyboy's older brother, is found crying in the corner of Sodapop's hospital room.

> Suddenly, I realized, horrified, that Darry was crying. He didn't make a sound, but tears were running down his cheeks. I hadn't seen him cry in years, not even when Mom and the country. These men who said 'No' to war were praised by the Democrats who Dad had

> been killed. (I remembered the funeral. I had sobbed in spite of myself; Soda had broken down and bawled like a baby; but Darry had only stood there, his fists in his pockets and that look on his face, the same helpless, pleading look that he was wearing now.) (Hinton 106)

Ponyboy's horrification at the sight of Darry crying proves that men, boys, and teenagers do not cry as much as they should. Darry's ability to not make a sound is his will not to be seen as weak. Ponyboy then tells the reader he was mad at himself for crying at his parents' funeral. He was a kid, yet he already had it ingrained in his DNA that he had to be a man; therefore, he always had to be strong and not show sadness or fear.

Because the book is centered around two groups of young adults, it is easy for readers to relate since the target demographic is teenagers and young adults. The greasers share many qualities of teenagers in the sixties, nineties, and today. A review from 2017 states, "what likely captured teens' attention 50 years ago still does today" (Kraus 80). Just like the greasers, teenagers and young adults feel the need to fit in and "be part of a group," while they also want to be their own "individual" (Hemma). This need to fit in and stand out comes from *The Guardian's* 2015 review of *The Outsiders*. On top of that is their "struggle to figure out who [they] are within the restrictions set by society, friends, peers, and family" (Hemma). There is also the "pressure of parental expectations," which young adults can relate to in any generation (Hemma). Young adult readers can relate to aspects of the characters from both sides of the class divide, making them realize that they are not so different after all. It is comforting for readers to read about authentic characters such as Johnny Cade and Sodapop Curtis, who sound like real young adults whose journeys toward adulthood somewhat mirror their own.

All of the characters within *The Outsiders* come into contact with alcohol and cigarettes many times because it is portrayed as part of everyday life. While these issues are seen throughout the novel, Hinton does not preach to the readers about the negative consequences. Smoking and underage drinking were big things within the teen culture in the 1960s. This was due to peer pressure and their need to be accepted. While readers never see a character verbally peer-pressure someone into smoking, just the act of being around those who do smoke can make someone want to smoke as well. Jerry Wood tells Ponyboy that he should not smoke (Hinton 83). This surprises Ponyboy because no one has ever told him this, "[e]veryone in our neighborhood, even the girls, smoked" (Hinton 105). His reasoning is based on experience and the people he is in close contact with. Because he spends his time with smokers, he does not know any better or have access to better influences.

The same goes for teenagers in the 1990s. Their actions were based on their environment and the people they hung out with. Peer pressure affects teenagers' actions, and it can be hard not to follow the leader. Teens are like lemmings. If one jumps off a bridge, the rest will jump off a bridge; if one teen smokes, the rest will smoke. This kind of mindless following is seen with the older greasers. They are all already set in their ways, but Ponyboy still has a chance to make something of himself at fourteen. Throughout their stay in the church, Ponyboy recites Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" to Johnny. In chapter nine of *The Outsiders*, Johnny lies dying in the hospital, and he tells Ponyboy to "[s]tay gold" (Hinton 157). Johnny is referring to the innocence of youth that Ponyboy still has, later saying in a letter to Ponyboy, "[w]hen you're a kid everything is new, dawn" (Hinton 186-87). He knows that it is too late for himself, stating, "[i] t's just when you get used to everything that it's day" (Hinton 187). Johnny became set in his

ways. He takes this from the line "Nothing gold can stay" in Robert Frost's poem. When Frost wrote this line, he was saying that all good things—golden things—must come to an end. This message of innocence is woven throughout the novel, and it is all young readers of this book want: to stay gold.

In addition to the connection that young readers may have with the characters, there are also many issues that the book tackles that are important to them. These issues include “prejudice and the struggle to maintain innocence and hope in an often corrupt world" (Chaston). These issues have remained relevant to readers over the years, but what this "says about [the United States] is up for debate" (Kraus 80). In an edited version of Joel D. Chaston's 1994 review, he states, "*The Outsiders* has often been identified as one of the 'groundbreaking' young adult books which helped usher in an era of realistic ... books about teenagers and their problems." He goes on to say that this book "provides a believable and likeable narrator who wrestles with the very real problems of prejudice and acceptance faced by many young adults" (Chaston). The book is still popular because the topics it explores have continued to be important to young adults.

In the mid-1960s, young adults became increasingly aware of social issues such as the Vietnam War. In 1969, young people attempted to find their voice and express their opinions. In addition to the draft of the Vietnam War being an assault on masculinity, it was also a conflict that many young people vehemently opposed. This was also the civil rights movement era, a period of great unrest and protest. Even though Hinton does not directly refer to any historical or political events in her work, the novel seeks to promote public awareness of marginalized groups and validate young people's voices and experiences. In 2017, "*The Washington Post* estimated

that more than 5 million people may have attended 653 marches" in cities across the United States, rivaling that of the Vietnam War protests in the 1960s (History.com, ”2017 Events").

There has been a resurgence in many political issues amongst young adults, such as immigration, abortion, gun violence, and the Black Lives Matter movement. There are multiple organizations run by teenagers and young adults on both sides of the political spectrum, organizing protests and walk-outs. One of the biggest protests organized by young adults was March for Our Lives on March 24, 2018, in Washington, D.C. According to *Vox*, it "was one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam War" (Lopez). The total number is contested, but the protest "drew anywhere from 200,000 to 800,000 people" (Lopez). This march was in support of gun control and in response to the "Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 [people]" (Lopez). This shooting inspired the students who survived to launch a movement to convince "lawmakers to address the issue of gun violence and, in particular, school shootings" (Lopez). Students were so adamant about their beliefs that they could organize a march so large that it was compared to protests of the Vietnam War.

The social, mental, and emotional issues portrayed in *The Outsiders* needed to be addressed for the benefit of its readers because they were key in the reviews of this novel. The reviews help readers realize that socioeconomic status and masculinity are two big takeaways from this novel. Aside from forging a connection between opposite groups of teenage boys, readers learn the importance of letting their thoughts and feelings be known to those around them because, chances are, their peers feel the same way.

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