"The Outsiders" Annotated Edition[1]

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SECTION A: Introduction

Part One: Rebel With a Cause

The year was 1965; the place, Will Rogers High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. At this high school, two rival gangs ran rampant: the Socials, the upper crusts of society with nice cars, nice clothes, and endless cash flow from daddy's wallet. And then there were the Greasers, society's rejects: slick-haired and dangerous, but with hearts of gold. For the bookish sixteen-year-old Susan Eloise Hinton, this is the adolescent experience. What is more, Hinton fit in better with the Greasers; she looked at them with a great deal of empathy, quickly finding the diamonds in the rough (Smith).

Hinton was also an avid bookworm, but in the 1960s, young-adult fiction had a problem. It was a relatively new genre, meaning few writers catered to young adults. Worse yet, these writers can hardly be described as "relating" to the teenage experience. Virtually all writers of YA at this time are well into middle age, if not older - hardly the target demographic - and moreover, the stories they are writing seem to fall into one of two categories. They are either cautionary tales about stepping "out of line," about conforming with society - else they are so devoid of authentic experiences that they could have been ripped straight from a Mickey Rooney/Julie Garland musical (Michaud). Hinton would come to see this as inherently problematic; not only is there a demographic yearning to see themselves represented authentically in literature, but what does a forty-year-old know about the rough-and-tumble world of adolescence? How can they possibly know what a sixteen-year-old feels?

So, Hinton sits down and begins writing.

[1] It is important to note that this submission represents an excerpt from a much larger "critical annotated edition" for S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and as such it is somewhat different from a traditional analytical essay. The project is divided into two sections: the first, the "Introduction", is a critical examination of the novel's history, influence, and scholarly aspects, with the second being a close reading of a passage from the text. To conform to the word count guidelines, certain passages have been shortened or removed; as well, due to the nature of this assignment, I have included footnotes in the word count.

This project - which she finished at just sixteen years old - becomes the centrepiece of Hinton's literary canon, *The Outsiders*, the story of a gang of teenage boys in a world that has seemingly given up on them. The manuscript changed hands until it wound up on the desk of Puffin Books in 1967 (Smith, n.p.). Nothing like it had ever crossed their desks, and they were set to publish; accept, they had one request. There was a nagging worry that, in a book primarily targeted towards teenage boys, a woman's name on the cover would disgruntle the target demographic. As such, they ask Hinton to use her initials to sound gender-neutral; thus, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* hit store shelves (Smith).

Though *The Outsiders* became an instant smash hit, Hinton wrote many other notable works, including *Rumble Fish*, later adapted into a film starring *Outsiders* alum Matt Dillon, and *That Was Then, This is Now*, among other works. The connecting thread between these works was that they would firmly cement Hinton as an icon in Young Adult Fiction, a genre that, while fledgling at the time *The Outsiders* was published, instantly became synonymous with Hinton. As such, Hinton has emerged as a titan in YA literary canon, with Hinton often given the honorific title as the "founder of modern YA" (Michaud, n.p.). Partly, such a label arose from her impressive achievement *as a young adult*, but, as we will explore in the following sections, the sheer success of *The Outsiders* has left Hinton's influence on the genre unable to be ignored. Indeed, even if *The Outsiders* was not the first YA novel, and Hinton not the first YA writer, she certainly transformed the genre into what it is today.

Part Two: Tuff or Tough - Violence and Emotionality in The Outsiders

Perhaps it is no coincidence that because violence is so prevalent in challenges towards *The Outsiders*, much scholarly work has been done around such themes. However, to reduce the text's violence to simple bloodsport seems reductive, for as many scholars have noted, the violence in *The Outsiders* is often a byproduct of an emotional reaction. As such, we will explore the work of two scholars - one who focuses primarily on violence, the other on emotion theory - to glean a greater insight into the theme of violence within this timeless novel.

In her work, Linda Morgan sees violence within *The Outsiders* as far more than a glorification of teenage brutality, as has often been the claim of detractors. More broadly, she ignores the physical violence of the text to focus on the emotional, reckoning that the very name "Greaser" is symptomatic of a particular form of adolescent cruelty: name calling (Morgan, 57). Morgan essentially views this system of name-calling as a particularly vicious form of cruelty

where "inner humiliation becomes public." (57). With the "Greaser" name, the Socs are not necessarily ridiculing an individual but an entire group. Morgan argues that the Greasers are ridiculed because "they are outside the American ideal." (57). In other words, there is not necessarily a distinct physical disability perceived in the Greasers, but rather a socio-economic one that creates a culture of groupthink and scapegoating. Morgan likens this group victimisation to Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, highlighting similar themes of victimising and scapegoating across both novels. In particular, Morgan takes specific aim at the cruel tactics employed by the Vigils in order to carry out the chocolate-selling scheme and the various ways that the Vigils psychologically and physically torture those who dare to disturb the universe (58).

Indeed, we can see groupthink evident in both the Greasers and the Socs. However, in connecting the plight of the Greasers to those at the hands of the Vigils, Morgan seems to leave out a key piece to the puzzle. The Vigils are carrying out their violence precisely because characters are trying to disturb the universe, whereas no such aspect motivates the violence towards the Greasers. For instance, Ponyboy walking home from a movie is not a disturbance of the universe; instead, the Socs see jumping him, as they had done with Johnny, as a crime of opportunity. I would then posit that Morgan's assumption that the Socs motivation is to prevent the universe from being disturbed is not the case; instead, it seems the Socs use their violence to enforce some power dynamic, in other words, to fuel the emotional response of the Greasers (that being fear). They do not jump Ponyboy to stop him from climbing the social ladder but merely to make him afraid, keep him on edge, and emotionally and physically target Ponyboy.

Tied closely to the idea of violence, as is particularly evident in *The Outsiders*, is the idea of emotions; therefore, it seems logical that Lydia Wistisen's work in emotion and affect theory seems perfectly apt to be applied, for, as she notes, YA novels are used "as tools for emotional socialisation, enculturation, political persuasion, and moral or ethical education." (Wistisen). There is a suggestion on her part towards a "subversive potential" of *The Outsiders*, which seems appropriate given the subversiveness that met the novel upon publication. To Wistisen, emotionality is portrayed as a narrative engine, influencing decisions and relationships throughout the novel - especially in the case of Ponyboy, who runs the gamut of "alienation, love, and fear." (Wistisen). Wistisen argues that this concept of emotions maintains the social hierarchy by attaching them to class: Greasers are depicted as more emotional than the Socs. This idea of normative emotionality is explored in great depth once Wistisen moves away from the social

hierarchy of Greasers and Socials to discuss post-war masculinity. Wistisen highlights the post-war economic order and how the hyperfocus on juvenile delinquency was a reaction to a crisis in masculinity, arguing that delinquency represents autonomy and control and comes in direct conflict with traditional norms of masculinity - in other words, a disturbance to the universe.

Wistisen moves to examine the themes of fear and love throughout the novel. She argues that fear, represented through emotional vulnerability and physical sensations, is a signature feeling throughout the narrative, challenging traditional norms of manhood. Wistisen also explores the representation of love, particularly in the Greaser community; she argues that, due to an absence of parental figures, it is upon the shoulders of the Greasers to teach each other how to feel and express affection. Furthermore, Wistisen explores the sunset motif in connection with masculinity and emotion. According to Wistisen, the sunrise symbolises Pony's vulnerability and estrangement, emphasising his emotional depth. In the same scene, wherein Ponyboy and Johnny watch the sunrise, Wistisen examines the poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and Johnny's interpretation of it: rather than taking the traditional interpretation of preserving innocence, Wistisen argues that Johnny is suggesting a subversive rejection of societal norms and a return to emotional authenticity. In this sense, "golden" is associated with innocence and the ability to feel profoundly and appreciate life's simple pleasures, such as watching sunsets.

Unsurprisingly, with a topic as broad as emotions, there is much to unpack with Wistisen's work. However, Ponyboy's subjectivity is inherently linked with the emotionality discussed by Wistisen. Whereas violence in *The Outsiders* is often used as a means to an end, Ponyboy's emotionality helps define his subjectivity throughout the novel. It is evident early on that Ponyboy is not like the other Greasers; he is deeply emotional, self-conscious, and highly aware of how the world sees him. Though he has many admirable qualities that make him more emotionally reflective than his peers, Ponyboy often finds his subjectivity when comparing himself to others, negatively so in many instances. He is disgusted that he resembles his older brother, Darry, and is envious of Sodapop's good looks (Hinton, 9). However, these are hardly superficial comparisons, but ones rooted in deep emotionality, primarily through Ponyboy's insecurities and emotional relationships with his brothers. Darry is perceived as cold and demanding by Ponyboy, shaping his understanding of his older brother and, therefore, his subjectivity towards him. The opposite is true of Sodapop; he looks up to him, which in turn informs his subjectivity that he ought to be more like Sodapop (Hinton, 15-16).

That all being said, Ponyboy's inherent emotionality further influences his subjectivity as he finds a place in the world. He is presented to the reader as artistically inclined; he watches sunsets, quotes poetry, loves movies, and, by the end of the novel, has an aptitude for writing. These talents are often linked closely to a more emotionally driven personality, especially in the context of Ponyboy's fellow gang members. In many ways, this seems to confirm Wistisen's theory that emotionality in YA literature can be used as a subversive act; Ponyboy is subverting the traditional notion of what a Greaser ought to be, not because he does anything outwardly different, but because of his emotional depth. Johnny notices this, declaring Ponyboy ought to "stay gold." At the same time, similar to Wistisen's assertion that Johnny is advocating that Ponyboy return to a state of emotional authenticity, I argue that Ponyboy has demonstrated such qualities already throughout the text. Instead, Johnny encourages Ponyboy to remain in touch with his feelings and emotions, to “stay gold.”

SECTION B: Close Reading

Passage 1, Pages 63-64

Randy swore at us and stepped closer. Bob was eyeing Johnny. “Nup, pal, yer the ones who’d better watch it. Next time you want a broad, pick up yer own kind - dirt.”[2]

I was getting mad. I was hating them enough to lose my head.

“You know what a greaser is?” Bob asked. “White trash with long hair.”[3]

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[2] “Broad” is an often used derogatory term to describe either a prostitute or a woman of low moral character, as well as to alienate. Interestingly, Bob decides to use this harsh word against his girlfriend. As explored by our two scholars, language plays a vital role as a conduit for violence against young characters; in this case, Bob is degrading Cherry to the level of a prostitute to scold her for associating with Ponyboy, a Greaser.

Name-calling within *The Outsiders*, as noted by our scholars, is used as a particularly potent form of violence. In this instance, referring to Cherry as a “broad” is a double-edged sword. First and foremost is how the Socs view the Greasers: through all of their insults, one of the most prominent themes is that the Greasers are somehow unclean. While we can interpret this lack of cleanliness in several ways, we only need, for this particular instance, to consider them as generally unclean. Because the Greasers are unclean, everyone who associates with them is equally so, including Cherry. To use the term “broad” is to imply, therefore, that Cherry too is somehow unclean; that even associating with the Greasers, even for a brief moment, is to somehow “taint” Cherry to the point that she is undesirable to Bob, enough to alienate her. Johnny notices this possibility after he and Ponyboy meet Cherry at the movies: “We could have hurt her reputation.” (56).

[3] This, and the previous line, showcase that while Ponyboy has always shown contempt for the Socs, it is important to consider that, in previous interactions with them, he has never described himself as getting angry. When he is jumped, walking home from the movie theatre, he describes how he was “scared so bad,” and despite being held at knife-edge, his only emotional reaction is fear (13). In a way, this seems to suggest that the physical violence the Socs inflict on him are less stinging then the verbal violence, thus connecting back to the emotionality of Ponyboy. He feels more pain through emotional slights than through physical bruises.

I felt the blood draining from my face. I've been cussed out and sworn at, but nothing ever hit me like that did. Johnnycake made a kind of gasp and his eyes were smouldering.

"You know what a Soc is?" I said, my voice shaking with rage. "White trash with Mustangs and madras."[4] And then, because I couldn't think of anything bad enough to call them, I spit at them.

Bob shook his head, smiling slowly. "You could use a bath, greaser. And a good working over. And we've got all night to do it. Give the kid a bath, David."

Because of this aversion to verbal ridicule, it becomes no surprise that he grows even angrier at the mention of his hair. In the opening of the novel, we are made plainly aware that Ponyboy is self conscious about the way he looks (a recurring theme in much young-adult literature), but in particular takes a great deal of pride in his hair. "My hair is longer than a lot of boys wear theirs, squared off in the back and long at the front and sides, but I am a greaser and most of my neighbourhood rarely bothers to get a haircut. Besides, I look better with long hair." (9). As such, his pride in his hair forms a part of who he is, informing his subjectivity. Despite this pride, Ponyboy's knee-jerk reaction to Bob insulting his hair perhaps betrays a more mixed feeling about his hair. He wears it long *because* he is a Greaser; it almost becomes a physical mark that he is different, that he is an outcast. This sentiment is echoed later in the text, when he and Johnny try to change their hair so as to remain anonymous in the wake of Bob's death. "I'm gonna cut mine too, and wash the grease out." (80). Herein seems to be a double meaning; not only would Johnny and Ponyboy *literally* be washing the grease out of their hair, but they would be effectively washing away what identifies them as Greasers in the first place, and in the case of Ponyboy, washing away what makes him a subjective individual.

[4] The exchange between Bob and Ponyboy in this scene is a powerful example of how language can be used as a weapon, cutting just as deep as any physical blow. While both characters use the term "white trash" to insult each other, it is interesting to note how the insult affects them differently. For Ponyboy, being called "white trash" does not have the same impact as being insulted for his hair. He is acutely aware of the poverty and hardships of living in his neighbourhood, but he takes pride in his appearance and sees his hair as a defining characteristic. The insult directed at his hair strikes at his sense of self (or his subjectivity, if you will), making him feel vulnerable and exposed. In contrast, the insult of being called "white trash" is far more damaging for Bob. As a member of the wealthy and privileged Socs, Bob's identity is deeply tied to his social status and material possessions. The insult of being reduced to the level of "white trash" is an insult to his entire way of life, and he cannot bear the thought of being seen as no better than a Greaser.

Through this exchange, Hinton reveals the deep-seated insecurities that both Bob and Ponyboy carry. Despite coming from vastly different backgrounds, both characters struggle to find subjectivity apart from their group identities. The exchange also highlights the power dynamics between the Socs and the Greasers. While the Socs may have wealth and privilege on their side, they are just as prone to insecurity and vulnerability.

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