

A GUIDE TO The Outsiders

S. E. Hinton

*“Maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren’t so different.
We saw the same sunset.”*

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Outsiders is a popular young adult novel about gang conflicts, the tragedy caused by violence, and the struggle for personal identity. The novel is enormously popular with students and has become something of a contemporary classic.

Point of View: First-person narration.

Setting: Oklahoma town during the 1960s.

Protagonist: Ponyboy Curtis, the youngest of three orphaned brothers; member of a gang called the Greasers.

Conflicts: Internal conflicts within Ponyboy in relation to his brothers, to gang violence, and to his own identity; external conflicts between the Greasers and the Socs, a rival gang, and between the Greasers and the police.

Resolution: After three boys have died, one heroically, Ponyboy Curtis comes to see the pointlessness of violence, to appreciate his older brothers, and to realize that he *can* control his own life. External conflicts are resolved in a series of violent events.

Themes: It is not only the circumstances of life that determine one’s path or define one’s identity. Answering violence with violence does not resolve problems.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The teenagers smoke cigarettes but a cigarette is referred to as a “cancer stick” (page 71), and older characters attempt to restrict the smoking of the young narrator.

Violence runs through the novel, although the major character, who is a Greaser, and a boy in a rival gang both come to realize that violence serves no purpose. A central element of the plot is a killing done in self-defense. Most students will find the struggles with violence in this popular novel applicable to today. The ending of the novel suggests a better future for the narrator and for at least one other character.

Although all of the major characters are male, one girl, Cherry, emerges as a rounded, sympathetic character.

BACKGROUND

Students may need help with a few elements of the 1960s setting. Smoking was permitted almost everywhere at that time, even in most parts of hospitals. The meanings of the slang can be deduced from context; for example, *hood* (hoodlum), *fuzz* (police), *tough* (rough, mean), *tuff* (cool, sharp), *heater* (gun), *weed* (cigarette), *rumble* (all-out gang fight), *JD* (juvenile delinquent). Popular-culture references include Paul Newman (movies); the Beatles, Elvis Presley, and Hank Williams (music); Perry Mason (television series); and several cars: the Corvair, the Ford Mustang and Thunderbird (T-bird), and the Corvette Sting Ray. Literary references include Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*, Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind*, and Robert Frost’s poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Ponyboy Curtis, fourteen, the first-person narrator, a member of a gang called the Greasers. He enjoys movies and books, and is an A student and distance runner.

Darrel (Darry) Curtis, twenty, Ponyboy’s brother, a star football player who had to abandon college plans in order to support himself and his brothers when their parents were killed in an auto accident.

Sodapop Curtis, sixteen, Ponyboy’s happy-go-lucky brother, a high school dropout who works at a gas station. He likes drag races, poker, and fighting.

Greasers, a working-class East Side gang; the members wear their hair long and slick it back with oil.

Socs (Socials), well-dressed, neatly barbered, wealthy West Side gang.

Dallas (Dally) Winston, seventeen, the toughest Greaser; cold, mean, and wild; from New York.

Two-Bit (Keith) Mathews, eighteen, the oldest Greaser; treats life as a joke. He is famous for shoplifting and for owning a black-handled switchblade knife that he never uses. He likes fights and girls and attends school for kicks.

Johnny (Johnnycake) Cade, sixteen, small, dark, quiet, and soft-spoken. He is the youngest Greaser except for his best friend, Ponyboy.

Marcia, a dark-haired Soc girl with a sense of humor.

Cherry Valance, a redheaded Soc girl, a cheerleader, who tries to see more than one point of view.

Randy Adderson and **Bob Sheldon**, Marcia's and Cherry's boyfriends. They are Soc boys who tend to attack Greasers when their own group is larger. Bob is killed; Randy chooses to get out of a life of violence.

PLOT

Chapter 1. As Ponyboy Curtis is walking home from a movie, five members of a gang called the Socs pull up in a Corvair and jump him. He is rescued by his brothers and members of his own gang, the Greasers. With this opener, the **first-person narrator**, Ponyboy, introduces us to the **characters** and their **setting**. We learn who the Greasers and Socs are. We also learn that Ponyboy loves movies and books and that he feels close to his middle brother, Sodapop, but believes he cannot please his big brother, Darry. We notice hints of **conflicts** and problems to come: The Socs have already beaten up a younger member of the Greasers, Johnny Cade, and the orphaned Curtis brothers will be allowed to stay together only as long as they do not get into trouble.

Chapter 2. We learn more about the **characters** and the gangs. Dally, Johnny, and Ponyboy sneak into the section of a drive-in movie theater reserved for people who have not arrived in cars. Dally harasses two Soc girls who are sitting there because they refused to stay with their drunken Soc boyfriends. Eventually Dally leaves. Ponyboy and Johnny strike up conversations with the girls, Marcia and Cherry, and Two-Bit joins them. In a **flashback** we learn that Johnny is habitually scared because his father beats him and because four Socs driving a blue Mustang left him seriously injured four months earlier.

Chapter 3. **Suspense** builds when Soc boys in a blue Mustang confront Two-Bit, Johnny, and Ponyboy, who are walking Marcia and Cherry to Two-Bit's house so that he can drive the girls home, across town. We find out that Bob is the Soc who beat up Johnny four months earlier. A fight is averted when Cherry and Marcia agree to let the Soc boys drive them home. Ponyboy and Johnny stay out so late that when Ponyboy gets home, his brother Darry slaps him. Believing that Darry hates him, Ponyboy runs back outside to Johnny.

Chapter 4. The Greaser-Soc **conflict** escalates to **crisis**. In the middle of the night in the town park, the Soc boys again confront Johnny and Ponyboy. A tall boy holds Ponyboy's head in the cold park fountain so long that he almost drowns. Then Ponyboy finds himself gasping on the pavement, and the Socs gone except for Bob, who lies dead. Fearing for Ponyboy's life, Johnny

has stabbed Bob. Ponyboy and Johnny go to Dally Winston for money, a gun, and a plan. At Dally's direction, they hop a freight train to the next town and walk to an abandoned church that Dally has told them about. On reaching the church, Ponyboy has a premonition, a creepy feeling about the church that **foreshadows** more trouble.

Chapter 5. Johnny buys supplies in the nearby town, and he and Ponyboy disguise themselves by cutting their hair and bleaching Ponyboy's. For four days they eat bread and baloney, play poker, read the novel *Gone with the Wind*, enjoy the view and the sunrise, and talk about Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Dally Winston, who has tricked the police into thinking that the boys are headed for Texas, arrives on the fifth day. He brings a letter from Sodapop Curtis that speaks about Darry's concern for Ponyboy. Dally takes the boys into town for a full meal and tells them about the **complications** that have arisen from the killing: All-out Soc-Greaser warfare is developing, and Cherry Valance is acting as a spy among the Socs on behalf of the Greasers because she feels the killing was her fault.

Chapter 6. Johnny proposes turning himself in, since Cherry and Ponyboy will testify that he acted in self-defense. Dally, worried that jail time will harden Johnny, tries to dissuade him. The story reaches a **climax** when the trio return to the hide-out. They find the old church ablaze; several eight-year-olds who were attending a school picnic are trapped inside. Believing they may have started the fire by leaving a cigarette burning, Ponyboy and Johnny break a window, locate the children, and drop them through another window to safety. As the roof of the church caves in, Ponyboy escapes but Dally burns his arm reaching into the building to drag out the badly injured Johnny. In the ambulance, the schoolteacher, Jerry Wood, is impressed with the three of them and asks Ponyboy if they are "professional heroes." In the hospital, Ponyboy awakens to see his brother Darry crying. Ponyboy realizes that Darry's frequent scolding is his way of expressing his love.

Chapter 7. Reporters interview the Curtis brothers and the headline says of Johnny, Ponyboy, and Dally, "Juvenile Delinquents Turn Heroes." Dally is expected to recover from his arm burns, but Johnny remains in critical condition with a broken spine, third-degree burns, and severe shock. Ponyboy is released from the hospital and goes home with his brothers. A rumble, or gang fight, between the Socs and the Greasers is planned for the next night. In the morning his brothers go to work and Ponyboy spends the day with Two-Bit. They run into the Soc boy Randy Adderson, who tells Ponyboy he is tired of all the fighting and plans to leave town. Randy describes the dead boy, Bob, as his best friend, and as someone so spoiled that all he really wanted was someone to say "No" to him. Ponyboy at last understands what Cherry meant when she said earlier, "Things are rough all over."

Chapter 8. Two-Bit and Ponyboy visit the hospital. They find Johnny in bad shape, but Dally recovering. Dally's concern for Johnny and the fact that he asks Two-Bit for his prized jet-handled switchblade **fore-shadows** trouble. Cherry, waiting by the vacant lot in her Corvette, tells Two-Bit and Ponyboy that the Socs will play fair at the rumble, using no weapons, as requested by the Greasers. She and Ponyboy quarrel, but make up; they realize that they see the same sunset.

Chapter 9. **Suspense** builds. The Curtis brothers spruce up, Sodapop and Ponyboy grease their hair for the rumble, and the brothers joke around with other gang members. Even Ponyboy is more excited than afraid. At the vacant lot they are joined by two other gangs, their allies in this fight. Feeling the tension, Ponyboy takes a clear look at his gang's allies and thinks, "We're greasers, but not hoods, and we don't belong with this bunch of future convicts." The clean-shaven Socs arrive. Darry Curtis for the Greasers and Paul Holden for the Socs, once football buddies, circle each other. The rumble begins just as Dally Winston, who has left the hospital, runs up. Ponyboy, still sick from the effects of the fire, is stunned by a kick in the head. The rumble ends, the Socs run, and Dally drags Ponyboy to the hospital to see Johnny. They make it just in time to see him die. Dally, who has already been raving, is devastated by Johnny's death. He disappears from the hospital, leaving Ponyboy behind.

Chapter 10. Ponyboy wanders the streets, dazed, until a stranger drives him home to his brothers and his gang. Dally calls: He has just robbed a grocery store and is evading the police. Ponyboy staggers along behind the gang to the vacant lot, where Dally and the police arrive at the same time. Dally deliberately provokes police fire by pulling a gun that Ponyboy knows is not loaded. Dally dies with a grin, wanting to be dead, since Johnny meant everything to him. Ponyboy faints. He wakes up a few days later to discover that he has been very ill.

Chapter 11. Still in bed recovering from a concussion and fever, Ponyboy pages through a yearbook and begins to see Bob, the dead Soc, as a real person. Randy Adderson comes by and explains that at the hearing the next day he will tell the truth about Bob's death. Ponyboy starts raving, claiming to have killed Bob himself, saying that Johnny had nothing to do with it and that Johnny is still alive.

Chapter 12. The various plot lines **resolve**. Before the hearing, Ponyboy's doctor has a long talk with the judge. During the hearing, the Socs and the Curtis brothers tell the truth, except that Ponyboy can't understand why everyone says Johnny killed Bob. The judge, apparently warned that Ponyboy is out of touch with reality, asks Ponyboy only about school and life with his brothers. The judge dismisses the case and lets the brothers continue to live together. Ponyboy returns to school but is unable to concentrate and begins to fail

English. His teacher offers him the chance to improve his grade by writing a personal-experience essay. One day some Socs approach Ponyboy at school, but he drives them off with a broken Pepsi bottle. He feels empty inside and works hard to continue feeling nothing. He does not realize how worried his brothers are about him and how much his arguments with Darry tear apart their middle brother, Sodapop—until the day he recognizes that Sodapop has problems of his own. After that, he can admit to himself that Johnny is dead and that it was Johnny who killed Bob. Opening the copy of *Gone with the Wind* that Johnny left to him, Ponyboy finds a note in which Johnny explains that he now truly understands Robert Frost's poem: "He meant you're gold when you're a kid, like green." Johnny wants Ponyboy to know that he still has time to become whatever he wants. At last Ponyboy is able to write a paper based on his own experience—a theme that begins with the opening words of this novel: "When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness . . ."

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is **characterization**. Conflicts are directly related to the personality of each character and to the characters' relationships with one another. You may wish to have students complete one or more of the following activities.

1. Exploring Literary References

- At one point in the novel, Ponyboy feels a certain kinship with the character Pip in *Great Expectations*. A small group of good readers could read the Dickens novel and discuss the similarities between *Great Expectations* and *The Outsiders* in terms of narrators, plots, and theme. Could the novels' titles be interchanged?
- Ponyboy and Johnny discuss the meaning of *gold* in Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Students working alone or in a group could write a short essay in which they explain *gold* in terms of its meaning in the original work and in terms of the way Ponyboy and Johnny interpret it. You might encourage students to give an oral presentation of their essays, along with a reading of the poem.

2. Extending the Novel

A group of students could compare the movie version of *The Outsiders* (rated PG) with the musical *West Side Story* (both are available on videotape):

- How can they tell that *The Outsiders* and *West Side Story* are set during approximately the same period?
- How does each movie approach the problem of teenage crime? What does each movie say about causes? Does either movie suggest any solutions?
- What does each movie say about individual responsibility? about honor? about loyalty?
- In what ways do these movies relate or fail to relate to the problems teenagers face today?

3. Creating Female Roles

Ask students to imagine that they are preparing a remake of *The Outsiders*, keeping the same basic roles but recasting at least two parts for females. Which roles would they cast as female instead of male? Why would they choose these particular roles? What kinds of changes would they have to make in the plot?

4. News Writing

Students working alone or in a group could write the news story that the local paper carried about Johnny, Ponyboy, Dally, and the rescue of the children. Be sure that they include the “how” of news reporting and all the W’s: who, what, where, when, why. Have them make up details that are not given in the novel.

5. Creative Writing

Have the students experiment with this novel’s point of view, as if they were S. E. Hinton deciding how to tell the story. They could rewrite the first paragraph of the story three times, once from each of the following points of view:

- an omniscient narrator
- Sodapop Curtis
- one of the Socs who jumped Ponyboy

On the basis of their experiment, ask them about how the story would be different if Hinton had used a different point of view. Which point of view do they think works best? Why?

MEET THE WRITER

Susan Eloise Hinton (1950–) was disappointed as a teenager that so few aspects of teen life appeared in literature. To help remedy the situation, she wrote *The Outsiders* (1967) when she was sixteen. It is based loosely on the lifestyles of her classmates in a high

school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Although some parents objected to the book’s violence, critics and young people applauded the book. It received several awards, and its success enabled Hinton to attend the University of Oklahoma. Hinton wrote more books about alienated teenagers, and during the 1980s three of the books were made into movies: *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*, and *That Was Then, This Is Now*. In the movie version of *The Outsiders*, Hinton played a cameo role as a nurse. She is also the author of *Taming the Star Runner*. The American Library Association gave Hinton its first Margaret A. Edwards Award. This award honors authors whose books help young people grow in understanding of themselves and their role in society.

READ ON

S. E. Hinton, *That Was Then, This Is Now*. Novel about a delinquent boy who clings to his adoptive brother, until the older boy takes a girlfriend and the younger boy perceives her as a threat. ***Rumble Fish*.** Novel about an alienated teenager who lives in his older brother’s shadow.

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. Play about a bitter feud between two families that results in the death of four young people caught up in the mindless violence.

Langston Hughes, “Thank You, M’am.” Short story about a boy who is given a lesson in generosity that might save him from a life of crime.

Judith Ortiz Cofer, “American History.” Short story set in the 1960s, dealing with a teenager who experiences the difficulties of being different.

Hugo Martinez-Serros, “Distillation.” Short story about a son recognizing the strength of his father’s love.

Copyright © by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system.

Printed in the United States of America