“OUSTING SOCIAL ORTHODOXY AND INSTITUTING TEENAGER CONTROL”: THE YOUNG ADULT COUP D’ETAT FOR REPRESENTATION IN HINTON’S MODERN CLASSIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper follows Ponyboy Curtis’ deconstruction of identity in S.E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders* and asks the question "what does it mean to be an outsider?” The teenagers of *The Outsiders* are split into “haves” and “have-nots”—each group an outsider to the experience of the other. This “haves”/”have-not” binary is heralded by the orthodoxy of the community—adults—and perpetuated by teenagers who do not necessarily agree with the binary, but who do not know how to break free. Hinton presents a model for teenagers to follow in order to practically create representation and justice for themselves. Teenagers must reject the false impositions of identity and teenage reality projected by orthodoxy, and then teenagers must take responsibility for their own reality. The impact of *The Outsiders* on literary history is an example of success using Hinton’s model. Initially labeled an outsider by literary elites because of its adolescent story and teenage authorship, Hinton’s confidence in her novel’s attitude and message led to widespread popularity, awards, and eventual acceptance and representation of young adults in canonical literature.
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Dedicated to my loving family. I know who I am, because of you three. And I thank God for that everyday.

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My brother, my heartstring. We were perfectly made for each other. Never go too far from me. I could not bear it. As for me, I’ll always be here for you. I’ll always be your bird.

Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don’t know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them—we can love completely without complete understanding.

— A River Runs Through It
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BOOK SUMMARY

The Outsiders is a modern classic of literary juvenilia. S.E. Hinton wrote The Outsiders in 1965 at the age of 15, but the novel wasn’t published until Hinton was 18 in 1967.

Characters

Ponyboy Curtis, the protagonist, relates the story from first-person perspective. Ponyboy belongs to a gang of lower-class adolescent boys who are called “greasers,” because of their greasy hair. The gang is made up of seven boys, including Ponyboy’s two brothers, Darrel “Darry” Curtis, the oldest brother at 20, and Sodapop Curtis, the middle brother at 16-almost-17. At 14, Ponyboy is both the youngest brother and gang member. Their rival group, the “Socials” or “Socs,” live on the opposite, wealthier side of town. Cherry Valance, who befriends Ponyboy, is a girlfriend of the Soc gang member that is killed. Eventually, Cherry becomes a spy for the greasers. Randy Adderson is a member of the Soc gang who becomes an unofficial leader.

Ponyboy’s parents were killed in a car accident eight months ago, and Darry is now Ponyboy and Sodapop’s legal guardian. Darry works too much, but wishes he could’ve gone to college. Sodapop is a handsome high-school dropout who works at the local gas station and is universally admired for his easygoing personality. Ponyboy feels misunderstood by everyone, even Sodapop who tries to understand him. Later, he recognizes he can share his sensitive self—the self that enjoys school and likes poetry and sunsets—with Johnny Cade. Johnny is 16 and is physically abused at home, but is the gang’s pet. Johnny is the only other
sensitive—soft-hearted and emotionally perceptive—member of the gang besides Ponyboy, while Dallas, nicknamed Dally by the gang, a 17-year-old street hood from New York with a criminal record, is the hardest member of the gang and the most emotionally detached. In spite of this difference, Johnny is Dally’s favorite, and Dally is Johnny’s “hero.”

**Plot**

Ponyboy is walking home from a movie when he is attacked by a group of Socs. His gang shows up and scares the Socs before the Socs’ threat of slitting Ponyboy’s throat is carried out. Dally invites Ponyboy and Johnny to a movie the next night, during which he flirts and harasses two girls they are sitting behind, Cherry and her friend, Marcia. After Dally stops and leaves, Ponyboy and Johnny apologize to the girls, and Ponyboy and Cherry start a friendship. The boys begin to walk the girls home, but are interrupted when the girls’ boyfriends drunkenly drive up next to the sidewalk. To prevent a fight, the girls go home with their boyfriends. That night, Ponyboy and Johnny fall asleep outside, and Ponyboy comes home past his curfew, causing Darry to yell at Ponyboy. Ponyboy, who is usually too scared of Darry to fight back, is fed up with Darry’s constant scrutiny and yells in return. Darry then slaps Ponyboy, and Ponyboy runs away.

Ponyboy runs into Johnny and they go to the park. Socs drive up to the park, and Ponyboy recognizes Cherry and Marcia’s boyfriends. Ponyboy and Johnny try to stay cool, but the Socs push for a fight, with one holding Ponyboy’s head under water until Ponyboy loses consciousness. Johnny, who was almost killed by the Socs before, kills the Soc that is drowning Ponyboy. When Ponyboy comes to consciousness, the Soc’s corpse lying alongside him.
Scared, Ponyboy and Johnny find Dally and ask him for help. Dally gives the boys money and a gun, along with directions to a hideaway—an abandoned church in a nearby town. Once at the church, the boys disguise themselves by cutting and bleaching their hair, and they only leave the church when in need of supplies. They read Gone with the Wind and poetry and smoke cigarettes to pass the time. After a week, Dally surprises the pair and takes them out to eat, telling them of how relations with the Socs have become increasingly tense since the Soc was killed, and the two rival groups are planning a “rumble” for the next night, for which Cherry has become a spy for the greasers. Johnny, wanting to prevent the rumble, declares that he will turn himself in. As Dally takes Ponyboy and Johnny back home, they spot the church, which has caught on fire. Ponyboy and Johnny suspect that they had started the fire and run into the burning church to save a group of children that are caught inside.

Dally runs in to save Johnny, who is taken to the hospital in critical condition from burns on his back. Ponyboy and Dally are minimally hurt. Darry and Sodapop meet Ponyboy at the hospital, and Darry and Ponyboy apologize to one another. Ponyboy and Johnny are called heroes in the newspaper, but Johnny is being charged with manslaughter for the Soc’s death.

The day of the rumble, Ponyboy visits Johnny and Dally in the hospital. Johnny is very weak, while Dally seems physically strong but emotionally distraught over Johnny’s condition. Dally escapes from the hospital that night and meets the gang at the rumble. The greasers beat the Socs. After the rumble, Ponyboy and Dally go back to the hospital to check on Johnny. Johnny dies and Dally can’t control his grief, running from the hospital to rob a grocery store. The greasers try to find Dally before the cops catch him, but the police find him at the same time. Dally raises his gun to the police, but the police do not know that Dally always keeps his gun unloaded, so the police kill Dally while the gang watches.
After several days, Ponyboy is acquitted for the Soc’s death. He writes the greasers’ story for an essay assignment, and *The Outsiders* is revealed to be a frame narrative, written by Ponyboy.
INTRODUCTION
Steps to Deconstruct and Reject Young Adult "Outsider" Identity

Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?

—Virginia Woolf

Hinton’s Purpose: Bucking orthodoxy’s despotic control over teenage identity

Shortly but surely not sweetly, S.E. Hinton’s novel The Outsiders radically refuses the trustworthiness of mainstream, accepted teenage identity. Hinton’s act of creating and publishing the novel is a direct offensive against two groups of humanity-threatening orthodoxy—both of which exploit their established nature to enforce a have versus have-not hierarchy within their communities.

The first group is the literary elites who dismiss young adult fiction as having no artistic or social value. Teenagers are Hinton’s main audience. She wrote The Outsiders out of frustration at having no realistic teenage fiction that she could relate to. When The Outsiders was published in 1967, Hinton remembers, “there was no young-adult market” (Michaud). At first, her book was labeled an outsider by the literary world, dismissing it to be sold as a “drugstore paperback”; but, against the authority of literary bigwigs, one group began buying it: young adults (Michaud). The Outsiders was able to succeed as an outsider in the literary community, because it shares in Hinton’s self-professed lack of the “need-to-belong gene” (Hinton, “The Insider Outsider”)—her book
is unabashedly self-assured and was not written with any worry of insider condemnation. The nature of her book and its success against elite scrutiny reflects the message she heralds within: in the face of scorn, teenagers can retain dignity by exerting power over one’s self-image. A seventeen-year-old author, Hinton became a voice for teenage outsiders, an interiority that some readers may not have had access to before. Through this particular perspective, Hinton shows readers who are not teenaged outsiders what it is like to be one, and shows readers who are teenaged outsiders how to create justice for themselves.

Most important to my reading is the second group Hinton targets: the social elites who hold the power to crudely define identities of individuals. As characters are split into haves and have-nots, Hinton presents the “insider” versus “outsider” binary that is enforced by society. “Insiders” push “outsiders” to suppress their individual identities in exchange for socially constructed ones through internalization— the process by which society’s values and beliefs determine how individuals define their self-identity (Wallis & Poulton 1).

Hinton carries the torch of a more positive message: Individuals, specifically teenagers, can free themselves from a fate of conformity. To reject orthodoxy’s established nature and show readers how to reclaim their self-image, Hinton pushes readers to deconstruct the term “outsider” alongside her protagonist, Ponyboy Curtis. This deconstruction exposes reigning social attitudes and the group in power—both made to seem established by the orthodox—as they actually are: fleeting and unreliable, constructed from many diverse perceptions and not the one perspective that is imposed as singularly correct. Orthodoxy is vulnerable. Thus, orthodoxy’s projection
of an individual’s identity and further, orthodoxy’s values are only true, if the individual accepts them as true. Orthodoxy is not established as believed, and cannot be objectively trusted to create true and beneficial identities for individuals. Harmful social labels, like “outsider,” are diminished to irrelevance, without stigmatization. Ultimately, the refusal of orthodoxy empowers teenagers—Hinton herself, representing capable teenage authors, Hinton’s readers, representing hungry teenage minds, and Hinton’s characters, representing complex teenage identities—to change how they see themselves and how they see the world. In this way, Hinton hopes that readers can change the world they are growing into for the better.

**The orthodox enforces inequity through an insider versus outsider binary**

Superficially, *The Outsiders* presents an anywhere-in-America town, in which the definition of “outsider”—“outsider” represented as the term “greaser” in the novel—is established and accepted by society and by those who aspire to become accepted by society. In Ponyboy’s words, “greaser” “is used to class all us boys on the East Side” (Hinton 2). Opposite the “greasers” in social position are the “insiders” or “Socs”—“the abbreviation for the Socials, the jet-set, the West Side rich kids” (Hinton 2). Hinton breaks characters into haves and have-nots in order to suggest that social categorization depends on unstated, but understood, entitlements: money, status, power, confidence, age. People who are in possession of such entitlements are likely to create social norms and to be labeled “insiders”—Socs. Those without such entitlements fall to the periphery of social groupings and are labeled “outsiders”—greasers. Society-at-large—the entitled Socs—attempt to establish social norms to two ends. First, to support their social and economic power by imposing a system of social governance that sanctions insider beliefs of what is morally right
or wrong and socially accepted or unaccepted, as universal and true; then, enforcing such beliefs across the larger scale of the community. Secondly, but more immediately influential on the community, to covertly define people different from the norms—the disenfranchised “outsiders”—as abnormal in identity, and even wrong in their existence.

A study published in 1965, two years before The Outsiders was published, looks at the community dynamics of the small, Dutch town of Winston Parva. In Winston Parva, three groups exist—one established, and two recently settled. Although the community is small, social scientist Norbert Elias finds a “universal theme” in the relationships of the groups: “established-outsider figuration” (xv). This theme is the same as Hinton’s “insider” and “outsider” binary. Elias found the established group to be the “norm-setting section,” like the Socs in The Outsiders (xix). And due to the “uneven balance of power” favoring the established, like the Socs’ entitlements, the established group was able to stigmatize the newer groups as “outsiders”—the same exploitative process through which the greasers are labeled outsiders (Elias xx).

Elias’s findings affirm the true-to-life tension between the Socs and greasers and justify the struggles of Ponyboy in internalizing such tension. The merit of Hinton’s story lies in its ability to grasp reality as closely as possible, even the reality that orthodoxy tries to suppress (the orthodox is against any reality that takes authority away from them, such as the teenager reality of developing into the adulthood and becoming a source of authority for oneself). The Outsiders’ realness keenly commiserates with those who are downtrodden by a more powerful group, but it doesn’t coddle: it rallies those who are seen as “lesser” to reject orthodoxy and empower themselves, instead. Readers are able to project personal experiences in their own lives on Ponyboy’s realistic breakdown of judgment and
internalization. In Ponyboy’s journey from “outsider” to someone who rejects orthodoxy’s labels, Hinton pushes readers to see that such cycles of judgment can be stopped, especially when we open up communication with those unlike ourselves. I will show that Ponyboy’s convictions about his sense of self become stronger when he recognizes his ability to define others, specifically Cherry Valance, through judgment, and then freeing others from his judgment. Just like Cherry for Ponyboy, readers can use the authentic feelings and struggles of groups in *The Outsiders* that readers might not understand or relate to personally, to awaken and sharpen their own sense of self. Ponyboy’s community and the town of Winston Parva alike expose the need for individuals to stop judging one other, and instead, try to understand and dissolve the tensions created from disparate identities. Throughout this paper, I will use the resemblance of Winston Parva’s “established-outsider figuration” to the have, have-not power dynamics of Ponyboy’s community, to aid practical explanation and give real-life authenticity to the mechanisms of orthodoxy that Hinton rejects (Elias xv).

**The orthodox justifies authority over teenage identity through distorted morals**

The orthodox is concerned with the longevity of its established nature. To reach such “strategic objectives,” it labels those in its community with positively or negatively connoted definitions, such as “outsider,” bolstering its position in society through targeting and identifying others as socially weak (lacking authority, power, respect, entitlements) (Haidt xxi). The elite “haves” of *The Outsiders* whose entitlements—particularly age or wealth—determine and ensure that their views are accepted, sanctioned, and forced onto others, obscures and excuses its hypocrisy and inequity by hiding behind a veil of virtue. Those in power, such as the Socs, impose a distorted perception of morality on their community to further their social and economic goals. Put another way by positive and moral
psychologist Jonathon Haidt, “moral reasoning” is a “skill we humans evolved to further our social agendas—to justify our own actions and to defend the teams we belong to” (xx). High society implies that the entitled are moral, using their riches and power wrongly as “post hoc” moralizing factors to disguise their inadequacies and vulnerabilities (Haidt, xxi), and they demonize the disenfranchised as abnormal, criminal, corrupting.

Each group, whether Soc versus greaser or adult versus teenager, defines the identity of the other without allowing the other group to project an identity for themselves. Haidt explains that “people bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds” (xxiii). Socs who have or are able to obtain what society values, but who are blind to the struggles of the greasers, label those who are disadvantaged as “have-nots” and “white trash” (Hinton 55), because the greaser values of a “reputation”—how “tough” one is known to be—and “long hair” (Hinton 132) do not align with what orthodoxy determines one should be proud of: money, higher education, job opportunities, and respect from society. The greasers are forced, though, to create such skewed values—skewed from society’s perspective—out of an inability to access what is valued by society. Such misunderstanding leads to fear between the two groups. In fear, the identity of the opposing group becomes reduced to what is seen as threatening, and the actual worth, morality, and identity of that group remains unknown. Out of the need to fill their fear of the unknown, Socs create a greaser identity, but such an identity is imaginary. The identity is simply how the Socs want the greasers to seem (ignorant and violent), in order to cast themselves as more socially important and morally upstanding. For instance, all greasers are perceived by the
community’s society as “no good” “juvenile delinquent(s)” in contrast to Ponyboy’s claim that the only “hood” in his gang is Dally Winston (Hinton 136). Although “the self-image of the” Socs “tends to be modeled on its exemplary”—“the minority of its ‘best’ members,” the Socs attribute all greasers with “the ‘bad’ characteristics of” their “‘worst’ section”— the minority of Dally (Elias, xix).

The Socs enforce their own bankrupt values, which Ponyboy realizes he does not share, to define morality for the entire community. In doing so, the Socs self-confirm and justify their faux importance. Insiders can force the disenfranchised to appear however the insiders wish to see the disenfranchised. To manipulate public perception, insiders exploit society’s fears. Elias tells that “there is always some evidence to show that one’s group is ‘good’ and the other is ‘bad’,,” and the Socs’ choice of evidence is socioeconomic status (xix). Although socioeconomic status has no relation to an individual’s inward value, Socs use it as an external indicator of greaser self-worth and morality.

_The Outsiders_ shows fault in equating morality with a certain set of values and further, with identity. Knowing that greasers are less privileged than themselves, and falsely moralizing socioeconomic status, Socs label the greasers as a corrupting influence in their community. On its own, the economics of each side does not imply one is more morally correct than the other. What one can afford does not impart morality. But Ponyboy’s society values money, and those who are of higher socioeconomic status are given more value as an individual. In turn, the Socs are highly valued and the greasers are not valued at all. Unlike morality, many people, especially teenagers are not in control of their
socioeconomic status and thus, when socioeconomic status is applied to defining identity, it strips the agency of self-determination from the identified.

The language Ponyboy uses to describe the difference between the insider and outsider groups oozes with the importance of location and socioeconomics. Greasers live on the East Side, because it is the poor side; Socs live on the West Side because it is the rich side. The groups become protective over their home turf. If Socs are in greaser territory, greasers want to defend it and vice versa. Because orthodoxy’s values are what determine whether a group are labeled insiders or outsiders, and because orthodoxy defines money as a part of an individual's value and worth, each group's home turf becomes an extension of their socially determined identities. The Socs protect their turf to guard themselves from association with those who are of little value to society. The greasers protect their turf to guard themselves from harm by those who do not value their humanity. And because Socs hold all social power, they are able to overpower, delimit, define, and confine what threatens them—greasers—through means more visceral and public than the unentitled greasers are able to wield.

Resting in their entitlements, which the community accepts as symbols of authority, the social elite can establish such self-serving norms and this twisted sense of morality as orthodox. And as I will show in the body of this paper, through the motif of heat that Hinton creates to follow Ponyboy’s internalization of his identity as a greaser—the less entitled in the community, the disenfranchised usually unconsciously accept such norms and internalize their social labels. Claiming power to reject social labels is hard: It is difficult to break the cycle of haves and have-nots, it is scary to step outside social norms, and it is hard to relinquish aspirations of becoming the entitled.
Teenagers internalize the have versus have-not hierarchy

Teenage Socs assume the justification for their privileged self-absorption from the adults in their circle, who previously adopted the cycle of social conditioning from the adults before them. Elias asserts, “This is the normal self-image of groups who in terms of their power ratio are securely superior to other interdependent groups” (xv). In Ponyboy’s community, it is expected that this cycle of superiority and stigmatization will continue indefinitely: Randy Adderson, a Soc, tells Ponyboy, “You can’t win, even when you whip us. You’ll still be where you were before—at the bottom. And we’ll still be the lucky ones with all the breaks” (Hinton 117). The observations of Winston Parva agree with Randy’s conclusion, modeling that as long as the orthodox are established in positions of power from which “the stigmatized group is excluded,” “the stigma to collective disgrace attached to the outsiders can be made to stick” (Elias xx). And so, the “tension” between the teenager Socs and the teenager greasers is shown to be inherited from the “uneven balance of power” in the adult relations of the two groups, which teenagers are exposed to, inundated in, and expected to perpetuate (Elias xx).

Adult Socs in The Outsiders push a singular idea of teenage identity onto all teenagers in the community, regardless of circumstance, personality, and other individualistic factors. When teenagers willingly do not or are unable to assume this constructed identity, such teenagers are seen by the community as intrinsically flawed, and are thus ostracized. Such ostracizing victimizes the powerless greasers most, who are unable to buy into or refuse to accept society’s values; still, some Socs, such as Cherry Valance and Randy Adderson, who express more open-minded values and beliefs than their parents or their like-minded friends, are forced to deny and repress their dissenting views, specifically disagreeing with
the “taboo” on social contact with the greasers (Elias xvi). For Cherry and Randy, publicly acting on such views risks being cutoff by their parents and their society, which assumedly maintains “social control” through the power to create and ruin reputations through “praise-gossip about those who” observe society’s values and “blame-gossip against suspected offenders” (Elias xvi). The Socs Cherry and Randy, along with all of the greasers, demonstrate that teenagers internalize such ostracizing as personal shortcomings and begin to see their own identities negatively as society does: flawed and “inferior in human terms” (Elias xvi).

While elite society is concerned with propping themselves up and dehumanizing those unlike them, Hinton explores how those “outside” privilege accept or internalize society’s definitions, in order to model how to free oneself from the confining effects of stigmatization. The orthodoxy of social division supported by the powerful or the established in a society has effects: the less socially powerful, such as lower socioeconomic classes, are subjected to an identity, such as “greasers,” that is not of their choosing and will dictate how others perceive their identity; they are subjected to a social position in society that will most likely limit their future social and economic positions; and they are subjected to a constrained access to friends, jobs, and opportunities to have their voice heard.

The town in The Outsiders thrusts onto its youth an idea of what a teenager should be that is oppressive in its limitations and distorted in its simplicity. Although many critics and fans agree that the represented town is S.E. Hinton’s home of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the town is actually unnamed in the novel. If the town goes unnamed, the story is able to take place anywhere—a device that aids universality of connection with readers’ own lives. In this community, all the normative social structures enforce that a teenager should resemble and
aspire to be an adult Soc. In other words, teenagers should dress like Socs—traditionally and respectably—talk like Socs—traditionally and respectably—and act like Socs—traditionally and respectably. Traditionally and respectably as the Socs define it, that is: no slang, no cuss words, no unkempt clothes, no bad grades, no friends who use slang and have unkempt clothes and get bad grades.

But by emphasizing only what people see, and disregarding anything that escapes general regard, insiders expose their own hypocrisy. If a Soc teenager fails to meet expectations of the enforced teenage identity, such failure will be hidden away from the public eye. The reputation of Soc teenager and his or her parents will not be harmed, and the Soc can still be accepted and praised in front of society to perpetuate the façade that Socs are always morally “good.” For instance, the teenaged Soc gang is violent and attacks greasers unprovoked, but keeps that unscrupulous behavior outside of public, or adult, view, hiding their “bad” morals in teenager-dominated environments like drive-in movie theaters. The Socs’ adept hypocrisy in hiding their violence means the community sees only the greasers as violent, and in turn, a corrupting influence over the Socs. One privilege of the Socs is that the orthodoxy—those with the power to manipulate the social stigma of certain groups—is on their side. The image of Socs as “good” and greasers as “bad” will continue to be regarded as true, regardless of Soc teenagers’ contradictory actions. If a teenager does not follow the public standards, does not have the means to follow such standards, or does not have the protection of those who seemingly uphold the standards, then he or she is judged according to norms that the Socs can more easily circumvent.

*The Outsiders* suggests that the effect of social labels does not lie in inequity alone, but also in the inclination of those easily sacrificed to such norms to internalize them. A
greaser, such as Ponyboy (who does not fit the stereotypical, perceived greaser mold because he gets good grades and is polite) might begin to believe that the negative greaser identity—“victim of environment, underprivileged, rotten no-count hood” (Hinton 136)—given to him by society is who he truly is.

*The Outsiders* also suggests there’s a way to steer clear of internalization. Unwanted social labels are only effective if so-called outsiders allow that label to define how they see themselves. In other words, no matter how society defines outsider, as long as the outsider retains agency over how they perceive their own identity, then they can render orthodoxy ineffective. Those outside orthodoxy’s inner circle—greaser and dissenting Soc teenagers—must refuse to accept external definitions. For instance, Ponyboy relates to Pip’s feeling of being “marked lousy” in *Great Expectations* (Hinton 15). To Ponyboy’s understanding, Pip shares in his melancholy of being an outsider to society, because both see themselves negatively, led to believe by the entitled that their failing to meet the expectations of the social elite—for Ponyboy, the Socs; for Pip, the gentlemen class—is an inherent fault of their own character. In reality, it is the socially elite’s fault for imposing such impossible expectations in the first place. To release himself from society’s power, Ponyboy must and can refuse fault. Hinton asserts that, although society might dictate public definitions of popularity and social standing, and thereby constrain an individual’s supposed worth through a crude understanding of that individual, the disenfranchised do not have to surrender their dignity (dignity, here, means the agency to define one’s own value and to believe in that worth, regardless of how others try to define one) in the face of scorn and misunderstanding.
Orthodoxy can be undermined and “outsider” labels can be rejected

Rather than simply exposing the have-not’s subjection to the injustice of the haves’ privilege and entitlement, *The Outsiders* ultimately refuses the values of the haves. Orthodoxy’s Achilles’ heel becomes the nature of perception, which is exposed as fluid and subjective—not universal, essential, and unchanging as those in power try to make it seem. Through Ponyboy, Hinton’s novel shows that society’s norms and definitions can be rejected as fallible, not inhering in some unchanging idea, but constructed by human perception. *The Outsiders* recognizes that an “insider” versus “outsider” binary exists in society from particular vantage points, but it also asserts that changing those vantage points can change how one sees the world. Hinton knows some orthodoxy is firmly rooted, but also believes that new experiences can change an individual’s perception.

We experience *The Outsiders* through Ponyboy’s first-person perspective, which is influenced by his particular biases and experiences. He has a different perspective than the other members of his group, because he is an outsider among outsiders—he does not fit completely within his group. For example, Ponyboy feels distanced from his gang because he is more sensitive and partial to education than his greaser peers. Ponyboy is also distanced in age, as the youngest member of his gang, which might be why Hinton represents him with a more sensitive nature that is often connoted as childish. As I will explore further in the body of this paper, his distance influences his perception of his friends’ identities in a way that his friends might not see themselves. At the beginning of the novel, Ponyboy dislikes Darry, his older brother, because Darry does not properly fit Ponyboy’s perception of who Darry should be: a compassionate and loving father figure. Ponyboy acts as a member of society when
judging Darry’s identity, and, feeling threatened by Darry’s cold exterior, Ponyboy strips Darry of his humanity—“Darry love me? I thought of those hard, pale eyes. Soda was wrong for once, I though. Darry doesn’t love anyone or anything, except maybe Soda. I didn’t hardly think of him as human” (Hinton 18). Later, Ponyboy takes on a softer perspective toward Darry, realizing that Darry’s identity is complex and cannot be contained within how Ponyboy sees him. At the beginning, Ponyboy is limited by his vantage point. Later, Ponyboy is able to face his misunderstanding to change his perception and see Darry more clearly.

Hinton reveals that society tries to claim social norms as true and unchanging, although social norms are only the limited perspective of a group that wants to see itself as an important authority. Orthodoxy appears to establish one accepted standard on everyone, like how the adults in The Outsiders confine all teenagers within a single teenage identity. However, Hinton shows that even such norms are seen and realized differently by different people, exemplified in the division of how Socs and greasers understand and realize the teenage identity differently. If everyone understands norms differently, than the established nature of orthodoxy is vulnerable.

According to The Outsiders, social norms, while branded as such for their established nature, do not have ingrained definitions, but fluid ones. Elias’s study of Winston Parva shows no hope to break the cycle of haves and have-nots:

In the third year of the research the delinquency differentials between the two larger neighborhoods (which had supported the local idea that one of them was the delinquency area) practically disappeared. What did not disappear was the image that the older neighbourhoods had of the newer neighbourhood with the
formerly higher delinquency rate. The older neighbourhoods persisted in stigmatizing the latter as a neighbourhood where delinquency was rampant. (xi) Unlike Elias, Hinton asserts and evidentially justifies that we might and should hope for better understanding, better relations, and a better world, because we have the power to change how we see the world. The conflict of identity Ponyboy struggles with, sparked by the changes he is forced to make with his hair, lead Ponyboy to notice that his brother Darry, has never worn his hair like a greaser—as both the Socs and the greasers expect him to wear it. This instance is one of many in *The Outsiders* that shows social norms are only established for as long as people believe in them—whether they are true or not is irrelevant.

As an individual’s perception and understanding are malleable and changing, so is orthodoxy malleable and changing. For example and as I further detail later, Ponyboy spurns orthodoxy by ultimately rejecting the Soc Cherry Valance’s social label, as he realized Cherry’s social label isn’t comprehensive enough of Cherry’s identity to be true. In turn, orthodoxy is not established as believed, and cannot be objectively trusted. Hinton embraces the shifty nature of perception to examine what it truly means to be an “outsider” in society: Nobody...or somebody—you choose. Due to flawed and changing perceptions, generally accepted beliefs are vulnerable, liable to become un-established as soon as society discounts old conventions and accepts new, and the agency to change convention lies in the individual power of self-identity.
The disenfranchised can reclaim how they see their identity by violently breaking from orthodoxy

Hinton refuses society’s assertion of authority and exposes the false morality of the norms of entitlement. Her book brims with the optimism that even a minor investigation into society’s merits and motives will show outsiders—that is, the rest of us—society’s hypocrisy. Once the relative nature of so-called truth is realized, we do not have to let society and social norms define us. Just as *The Outsiders*’ publication itself succeeded as an “outsider” within the constructed categories of the literary elites, Ponyboy might not be able to immediately stop society from labeling him as an outsider, but he can free himself from society’s and his outsider label’s confining expectations of his abilities. And *The Outsiders*’ eventual acceptance as a critical work in literary history gives us hope that others might eventually accept and try to understand the identities we create for ourselves. The *Outsiders* exposes the lack of any essential and enduring “insider” position: the entitled are resting on the security of such privilege to be an “insider”—their power does not rest with essential merit, but only depends upon their entitlements. Insiders’ supposed moral excellence is a mirage, and with the exposure of emptiness comes the collapse of their importance.

Convention will not go down easy, though. It is often a comfortable situation that most do not want to interrupt, even those who do not benefit from it. The disenfranchised seem to internalize and “accept with a kind of puzzled resignation that they belong[…] to a group of lesser virtue and respectability” (Elias xvi). Seemingly, a false definition is better than no definition at all, especially because even an outsider definition affords insider status by other outsiders. Giving up a definition is giving up the feeling of belonging. Cherry Valance, a Soc, does not believe in all Soc values, and in turn, does not agree with the
identity she must uphold as a Soc teenager, specifically the judgment and divide perpetuated between Socs and greasers. Yet at first, Cherry is not willing to act against Soc values, and uphold her own, in public. She befriends Ponyboy and shares her own values of nonjudgmental understanding with him, but after their conversation, she remembers to uphold the expectations of convention and to hide her overstep, saying, “if I see you in the hall at school or someplace and don’t say hi, well, it’s not personal or anything” (Hinton 45). Hinton shows that even if people don’t want to perpetuate division, people often want to belong. People aspire to an “insider” position, accepting insider standards in an aspiration to be seen: simply to be recognized by those in power.

In people’s, like Cherry’s, determination to be seen by the “insiders,” however, they forget that they would prefer to be seen rightly—according to the standards in which they truly believe, not the bankrupt ones imposed on them. Although Hinton rejects the supposedly universal standards upheld by the orthodox, she does not reject standards altogether. Instead, she believes individuals should be able to determine standards for themselves. While orthodoxy values the material or circumstantial—such as money or age, Hinton values morality that betters oneself and the world: Self-assurance—not self importance, emotional honesty, an eye that is not afraid to see the world as it is, including its corruption, fiery spirit to combat injustice, and a willingness to engage in open communication that maximizes understanding between individuals and groups by arming oneself with a more objective scope. Her values can be summed up succinctly in the six words, “Let’s all quit judging each other” (Krischer). Unlike orthodoxy’s values that are created to ensure that only certain groups can obtain them and that those who cannot are excluded from society, Hinton’s values can be obtained
by anyone, as they manifest from the self, and do not favor some personalities more than others. On behalf of unsatisfied teenagers, Hinton levels the playing field: In her model of the world, the orthodox must rely on their own merit of compassion and tolerance, instead of their entitlements, to be given authority and respect in society—same as the outsiders.

Refusing the orthodox isn’t a trivial act. To turn away from society, to turn away from having a socially sanctioned role, to turn away from the hope of becoming an “insider,” is difficult, but as I will show in the body of my paper, with Ponyboy, it must be done in order to reject society’s pernicious definitions and replace them with one’s own, which are more true to the individual’s self, and therefore, more kind and tolerant.

Breaking from social convention is not clean and easy, but a violent act. Whenever an identity is in the process of being rejected in *The Outsiders*, Hinton includes violence. With the rejection of Ponyboy’s constructed identity by Darry, comes a physical slap. With the rejection of Ponyboy’s social label, Ponyboy is almost killed, but instead a Soc who is blindly against Ponyboy is killed. Hinton suggests that rejection of constructed identities creates turbulence within a community, within relationships, and within the mind of the individual who is rejecting the identity. Like a suppressed colony declaring grievances of injustice on behalf of the colonizing power, the individual is declaring grievances of injustice on behalf of society. And grievances lead to war. This broken relationship between an unjust “mother” or “fatherland” country and their disenfranchised, colonized “children,” is especially insightful to the plight of suppressed teenage identity at the power of adults.

A study by Kenneth Levy that investigated teenager and adult relations and concepts of authority can help throw light on why the betrayal of parents’ value systems by their
children is met with violence. As children become teenagers, they begin to question their parents’ and other adults’ authority: “logical and abstract reasoning skills increase, and there is a greater tendency to question authority” (Levy 333). The teenagers “seek an adult identity” and “independence from parents” (Levy 333), suggesting that not only do teenagers begin to question their parents’ authority, but they begin to see themselves as a source of authority, instead. This results in tension and a struggle for power in the relationship. Levy observes that “parents may react with anger or feelings of rejection,” and that “reciprocal feelings of rejection also may be experienced by the adolescent” (333). Such feelings display the violence of emotions. When emotions are suppressed, like within the greaser and Soc communities, the violence can become physical.

**Hinton is a hero for teenagers and the Young Adult genre**

Hinton’s young age and youthful material initially led literary elites to label Hinton’s novel as an outsider to canonical works of literature. Literature with seemingly adolescent themes, characters, or audiences has a history of being dismissed by some literary critics. In a 1956 review, Edmund Wilson calls J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* “juvenile trash.” Wilson further condemns adults who enjoy Tolkien’s book, confounded by how readily such adults “revert to the mental phase” of a child when “confronted with the pre-teen-age” novel: “they bubble, they squeal, they coo.” Yet, it is exactly Hinton’s adolescence that placed *The Outsiders* in literary history. The book’s 50th birthday last year marked over 15 million copies of the novel being sold. It is consistently taught in schools, “and has been translated into 30 languages” (Krischer). By writing *The Outsiders*, Hinton heroically took a stand, and continues to stand, for representation in literary society on behalf of all young adults. Her act shows all teenagers that those who retain their dignity in the face of social
mistreatment are heroic. Heroism does not have to be the supernatural of the *Iliad* or the great public acts of *The Scarlet Letter*. Heroism is more practical when relocated from old, accepted works of literature to the context of our contemporary world: Sarah Herz, teacher and classroom researcher, observed that “the questions *Who am I?* and *Where do I fit in?* plague most adolescents throughout their formative years. As developing readers, many students cannot find answers to these questions in such wonderful classics as *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Tom Jones*, *Green Dolphin Street*, *Moby Dick*, *Babbitt*, or *Hamlet* … yet” (xv). Her included qualifier of “yet,” introduces her argument that Young Adult novels, among which she includes *The Outsiders*, often share the same complex literary themes as the classics, but framed in the “complex world of today” (Herz xv). Herz sees Young Adult novels as being more immediately beneficial in sculpting how teenagers might see themselves and the world than classics of generations past. In her modern classic, Hinton relocates heroism to enduring the everyday experience of being unpopular, and Hinton’s characters are heroic by the end of the book for not letting their unpopularity define them.

The success of *The Outsiders* forced the creation of a “Young Adult” literary genre. In a 1967 piece Hinton wrote for the *New York Times* (“Teen-agers are for Real”), she recognized the inadequacy of adults to write from the teenage perspective: “The trouble is, grownups write about teen-agers from their own memories, or else write about teen-agers from a stand-off, I’m-a-little-scared-to-get-close-they’re-hairy view.” Although adults once were teenagers, they are, in their adult status, now separated from the teenage experience, especially since the teenage experience changes generationally. Adults no longer have the ability to see adolescence rightly, but use their authority to assert how they imagine, or how they want, adolescence to look, as teenage reality—an attempt that Hinton mocks in her
sardonic description of young adult novels written by such disillusioned adults: “Mary Jane’s big date with the football hero” (“Teen-agers are for Real”). More than anything, Hinton asserts, and the success of *The Outsiders* affirms, that teenagers want authenticity—“Teen-agers should not be written down to; anyone can tell when his intelligence is being underestimated” (“Teen-agers are for Real”). Teenagers do not want to read about an idealized world in which teenage problems are trivialized, and Hinton set out to change that.

Hinton’s writing style demonstrates her confidence that teenagers deserve to be insiders in the literary world. Teenagers themselves are growing into the adult world, beginning “to seek an adult identity” and “question authority” (Levy 333). In this time of in-between—neither child, nor adult—teenagers can claim both insider and outsider status in both stages of development. And if they choose to claim some adult authority, Hinton urges established adults to respect that self-image, because it is likely that teenagers are experiencing adult issues—“sex and drugs and alcohol are teenage problems, too” (“Teen-agers are for Real”). This new adult identity of teenagers includes their literary inclinations. As Dale Peck of the *New York Times* so thoroughly details in his piece, “’The Outsiders’: 40 Years Later,” Hinton fills her novel with “derivative” allusions to “popular literature of its time.” She borrows writing style from Shirley Jackson’s “We Have Always Lived in the Castle” and J.D. Salinger’s “The Catcher and The Rye” (Peck). By doing so, she is able to demonstrate the scope of teenager ability to understand canonical literature, to “soften the challenging nature of the book’s subject matter by wrapping it in references, tropes and language familiar to its adolescent readers,” and to “alleviate the fears of those readers’ tooearnest parents” (Peck). To insert *The Outsiders* in the literary canon, Hinton borrowed references from the canon itself, meaning teenagers are not the only group that can relate to
the novel, but adults as well, facilitating communication across the teenager-adult divide both in everyday life and in the writing and selling of literary works geared toward young adults.

Today, some still debate the value of young adult literature. Although Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series continues to be an overwhelming international success, fresh critiques debase its adolescent inclinations: Philip Pullman, also a Young Adult novelist, calls it “trivial,” and Peter Godman in the London Review of Books calls it an “entertaining diversion for pre-teenage children” (Sandbrook). In a review titled “Against YA,” critic Ruth Graham attempts to shame adults from reading any literature intended for a younger audience, writing “you should feel embarrassed when what you’re reading was written for children.” Graham notes that she read a novel intended for an adult audience recently that was “very literary,” suggesting that in contrast, Young Adult novels do not hold literary value. But Hinton’s eventual acceptance by the literary elite has helped to drown out the negation of teenage experience. In 1988, *The Outsiders* received “the first Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults” (Krischer). And in 1991, Hinton received the Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers’ Literature. Through writing and publishing *The Outsiders*, Hinton rejected society’s constructed identity of teenagers, on behalf of all teenagers. She redefined the nature of canonical literature to include works by teenagers and for teenagers. Although first labeled an outsider, Hinton’s adolescent inclination to buck authority is exactly what makes her novel akin to great, diverse works of literature, like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, and Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*. In the body of this paper, I will even argue that writing exudes an adolescent nature, the same that Hinton harnessed to write *The Outsiders.*
I.

Framing Devices:
Hinton Prepares the Reader to Empathize with Ponyboy’s Struggles
CHAPTER ONE
Framing devices in *The Outsiders* that create a relationship between the reader and Ponyboy

**The title**

Through the title, Hinton creates a framework at the beginning of the novel to prepare her readers for the deconstruction of “outsider” to come, which exposes reigning social attitudes and the group in power as not emphatically correct, in order to empower individuals to create justice for their own self-images. It is ideal that readers begin deconstruction at the same starting point as Ponyboy, so that the readers might follow Ponyboy’s internal journey more personally, wrestling with their own ideas while empathizing with him or accepting his realizations as their own.

Before the reader has a chance to peek inside the book’s binding, Hinton uses the title on the cover—on the outside—to prepare her readers for a journey of deconstruction of internal beliefs and biases. The title, much like the presence of *The Outsiders* in the history of the Young Adult literary genre, engages in metadiscourse, probing the relationship between insiders and outsiders, who are respectively termed “Socs” and “greasers” in the novel. The term “outsider” is never used within the novel—only in the title; yet, Hinton’s titular introduction of the novel’s characters permeates the reader’s impressions of the characters’ identities within the pages. As Hinton’s main audience is teenagers, teenaged insiders will most likely bring a negative connotation to the word “outsider” into the novel and will initially define her characters negatively, because of teenager desire to be popular. In an outside piece she wrote, Hinton details the desperation of this need:
Most kids nowadays date for status. There are cliques and classes and you date so you can say you had a date with so-and-so, the president of the student council. You may loathe him, but personal likes and dislikes don’t matter anymore. […] And you are so cool, so scared someone is going to think you’re not “In,” that you don’t have time to think about another person” (“Teen-agers are for Real”).

In the desperation to be seen as an insider, the term “outsider,” regardless of application, is negative to teenagers. Teenaged outsiders might immediately connect with the term “outsider,” but they will do so negatively, due to their personal experiences as outsiders. At the beginning of the novel, Ponyboy, too, sees “outsider” as a negative term, and in turn, identities with himself negatively.

Hinton applies society’s divide-creating stigmatization in “The Outsiders” to identify her multitude of characters, diminishing the complexity of the book’s diverse personalities down to an impersonal, negatively connotated descriptor. The individuality of her characters is lost in the collective of society, mirroring the function of social labels—society-made personas that stand in place of individual identities. Her characters have no voice outside of the text inside the book, and the title lies beyond their stories. In shrewdly recognizing the readers’ common inclination to accept social labels, Hinton has stripped her characters of the agency to initially define themselves. Readers are armed with a first impression of Hinton’s characters that fails to encapsulate the characters’ identities, so that Hinton may carry the reader on a journey to deconstruct such false social labels throughout her novel, and ideally, in readers’ own lives. Given this context, any readers who are teenaged insiders will hopefully deconstruct their negative bias toward the term “outsider” and stop trying to define others—those marginalized by society—negatively. Instead, Hinton hopes they will use their
position of power to advocate for the marginalized to reclaim individual identity. Similarly, readers who are teenaged outsiders will hopefully also deconstruct their negative bias toward the term “outsider,” but will further reject the entitled’s definitions of their individual identity, in order to reclaim agency over their self-image. Ultimately, teenaged insiders and outsiders will work toward a kinder and more tolerant community, without harmful popular and unpopular definitions and cliques. *The Outsiders* doesn’t explicitly show the Soc and greaser cliques dissolving as an effect of Ponyboy’s and other characters’ realizations about orthodoxy and identity in the community, but the reader is led to believe that the community of teenagers becomes more understanding toward one another. For example, toward the end of the book, Cherry Valance, a Soc, helps the greasers by testifying in court on behalf of Ponyboy, using the weight of her social reputation to aid Ponyboy in being released without charges.

The title, unlike most social labels, though, suggests a fluidity of definition. It is actually a plural, impersonal descriptor. Because it is unparticular in its labeling, the title assumes *all* of Hinton’s characters as outsiders. It includes those that society—composed of the “haves” as opposed to the “have-nots”—labels as outsiders, but also those that it does not.

At first, the title seems simply a label of the characters within. Yet as the reader moves further into Ponyboy’s story and into his journey of deconstruction, it becomes apparent that social labels are unreliable. After the reader has finished the novel, the title, also being placed on the outside of the story, becomes a symbol of distance from the connotations and obligations of social labels that characters inside the novel are subjected to. Initially, the title imparts a bias unto the reader toward Hinton’s characters: the reader sees
them as “outsiders,” whatever the reader’s definition of that may be. After deconstruction, readers will recognize the title as a message that we are all “outsiders” to one another in our capacities to fully know the inside worlds, or identities, of each other. There in the title, Hinton already includes the ultimate goal of her book: to expose that it is unfair and untrue to label others and to let others label us. Just as the title is fluid, neither existing completely outside the novel or completely inside the novel, so too is identity fluid, neither existing completely outside in society or completely inside an individual. For instance, Cherry Valance is not fully Soc, as society has labeled her, because she has created her own set of moral values disparate from those that Socs abide by; yet, Cherry is also not completely immune to how others see her—she might be able to create her own, separate beliefs and create an identity from them, but she still exists in society as Cherry, the Soc. Ultimately, there’s an overlap between Cherry the individual and Cherry the Soc in such a way that the two blend together in the same person, which neutralizes the orthodox’s claim that one identity, their definition of Cherry as a Soc, is more “correct” or a better “fit” than the other. In generalizing the term, Hinton makes the definition and society’s authority over identity, irrelevant.

**Essay format**

“When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home.”

S.E. Hinton, *The Outsiders, 1967*

This statement both begins and ends *The Outsiders*—with one catch. At the end, Hinton amends another contextual phrase to the start of the sentence: “And I finally began *like this: When I stepped out into the bright sunlight...*” (180). In doing so, Hinton frames the
novel as an essay assignment written by the main character, Ponyboy Curtis. Superficially, the “I” refers to Ponyboy. When examined closer, the reader might also infer that the “I” is autobiographical for Hinton herself, as Hinton did begin her novel just as Ponyboy asserts he began his essay. Hinton’s own life, with autobiographical details placed in the novel, does not linger on the periphery of the story, though. Rather, Hinton fills *The Outsiders* with her exploration of what it means to be an “outsider” more generally in her world—the world of any teenaged outsider.

The framing of the story itself plainly complicates the “outsider” definition: An “outsider”—Ponyboy Curtis—gives a first-person, “insider” perspective to his teacher, who is an “outsider” to the world which Ponyboy experiences. Similarly, Hinton is an “outsider” to adult publishing, as well as an “outsider” to the adult perspective because of her teenaged feelings, and is further an “outsider” to the popular teenaged society. So through *The Outsiders*, Hinton gives a teenager’s “insider” perspective to other teenagers who, like Hinton, identify as “outsiders” to society, but “insiders” to Hinton’s situation; or to other teenagers who are “insiders” to society, but “outsiders” to Hinton’s situation. Hinton’s an “outsider” giving an “insider” perspective on another layer too—She informs the adult population who are “outsiders” to the teenager experience, and she informs the literary world that teenagers are capable, ready, and worthy for realistic reading material. Like Hinton, Ponyboy is an outsider and an insider on multiple levels, which I will detail in the next section. In short, Hinton asserts that being an outsider or an insider is not a dichotomy—people are not either/or, but both. Cherry Valance can create an individual identity outside of the Soc status quo and act on that identity, such as aiding the greasers, while still being publically identified as an “insider,” a Soc. Like Cherry, readers at the end of the novel,
might realize that although society sees them confined to one, static definition, readers are able to exist in a socially constructed definition while not allowing it to hinder them from creating their own identity and belief system. People are only outsiders as long as they accept their perceived “outsider” identities projected onto them by others—the importance is in how the individual views their own self-image.
II.

Ponyboy Curtis: Liberating Self-Identity
CHAPTER TWO
Who is Ponyboy Curtis? Refusing Orthodoxy to create our own Self-Image

Ponyboy internalizes his social label of greaser, outsider

Hinton begins deconstructing an “outsider” by introducing one. Ponyboy Curtis, her protagonist, walks onto the street alone, after seeing a movie alone, thinking to himself that he is “the only person in the world” that “digs movies and books” the way he does (Hinton 2). Ponyboy feels to himself and appears to his surroundings isolated from everyone. Hinton further distances Pony from society-at-large and those that he identifies with, in his past-tense narration, through which he is temporally removed from the events in the story and becomes both an outsider in the world of the story and an outsider to the story itself. Shortly after the first scene, Ponyboy is publicly accosted by the Socs, who are the popular, opposing gang to the unpopular greasers’ gang (Ponyboy’s gang, given his poverty). Before Ponyboy is physically harmed, his gang comes to his rescue. In this short, introductory moment, Hinton shows the complexity of the term “outsider”: it is based on one’s shifting vantage point. Although Hinton presents Ponyboy as a distanced loner, he can also be seen as a member of a close-knit gang and an insider to the recounted events he exclusively experienced.

The complexity of perception and identity is lost on Ponyboy here, and likely, on a first-time reader of The Outsiders as well. The reader is at the beginning of Ponyboy’s journey of deconstruction, when Ponyboy lacks unorthodox realizations. He has internalized the social label given him of “greaser” and “outsider,” and is unequipped with the confidence
and independent agency to challenge this constructed identity. Likewise, readers are left unequipped to argue against their own bias, as Ponyboy’s realizations (or lack thereof) stand in place of their own, leading them initially to agree with Ponyboy’s identification as an outsider. In fact, to notice the nuances of Ponyboy’s social label and inner identity, the reader must look past appearances without initial overt prompting from the novel, as Hinton chooses to leave initial bias explicitly unchallenged. Her choice puts the reader in the company of the elite society, perceiving only what is on the surface and believing what is generally accepted, or orthodox. Through (and in spite of) Ponyboy’s first-person perspective, Hinton allows orthodoxy and the reader’s initial bias to go unchallenged, as Ponyboy himself seems to accept “the way things are” and fails to question the social label he has been given (Hinton 3). When Ponyboy thinks, “I’m not saying that either Socs or greasers are better” (Hinton 3), the reader is led to take the statement at face value: Pony isn’t taking a stand for or against himself; rather, he is living in the world created for him and believing that he is an outsider, as he is told.

At this point, society acts as a mirror for Ponyboy and the other greasers. Webster’s New College Dictionary defines a mirror as “something that gives a true representation.” The mirror is the acting agent over the creation of an individual’s reflection, while the individual is passive in the creation of his or her reflection. Individuals can never see their own face but through the mediating mirror. Hinton’s characters have not yet moved from being passive objects of reflection to actors in their own story—they are not yet ready to redefine or reject the orthodox, society, and their “outsider” identity. With no other perspective to ground their self-image in besides society’s reflection of their identity, the greasers, including Ponyboy, accept the identity of “outsider” projected onto them by the Socs, and the larger community’s
surface-level assumptions go unchallenged by everyone, including the greasers, and outside the novel, the reader—at least, at the beginning of the novel.

Ponyboy also feels like an outsider within his own gang. While identifying as a greaser at the beginning of The Outsiders—“I am a greaser” (Hinton 1)—he “loned it” (Hinton 2). He admits, “I’m not like them” (Hinton 2), although he is labeled one of the gang by society. Ponyboy enjoys books and movies, while his brother “Darry, works too long and hard to be interested in a story or drawing a picture” and his brother Soda, “never cracks a book at all” (Hinton 2). Ponyboy “gets put into A classes” where there are “a lot of Socs” (Hinton 15). He likes “other girls”—not like his brother Soda’s girlfriend who is, in his words, “our kind—greaser” (Hinton 15). When Ponyboy speaks generally about greasers, he uses the pronoun “we” and the possessive “our”: “Greasers are almost like hoods; we steal things and drive old souped-up cars and hold up gas stations and have a gang fight once in a while” (Hinton 3), “We wear our hair long and dress in blue jeans and T-shirts, or leave our shirttails out and wear leather jackets and tennis shoes or boots” (Hinton 3). Then, Ponyboy presents himself contradicting the characteristic greaser description as well individualizing and distancing himself: “I don’t mean I do things like that. […] I only mean that most greasers do things like that” (Hinton 3).

Ponyboy’s membership in the gang is also qualified. He comments, “they accepted me, even though I was younger, because I was Darry and Soda’s kid brother” (Hinton 9). Ponyboy’s acceptance is not based on his worth as an individual, but instead, it must be justified due to his shortcomings of fitting the greaser description—here, his age is the shortcoming because the gang wouldn’t have accepted Ponyboy as a 14-year-old if his older brothers were not already members. For instance, SodaPop’s best friend Steve does not like
Ponyboy, because he sees him as a “tagalong and a kid” (Hinton 9). Ponyboy internalizes what he sees as failing to fulfill the greaser identity, which, at the time, he accepts as his own identity. Ponyboy often aspires to be more similar to the stereotypical greaser: “I wish I looked like Paul Newman—he looks tough, and I don’t” (Hinton 1). Out of the disparity between Ponyboy’s personal character and the identity the greaser gang constructs for him—a false imposition—comes Ponyboy’s sense of wrongness and shame, shown through his repeatedly turning from his friends when he “wanted to start bawling, but you just don’t say that” (Hinton 7). Here, his public and private identities have tension with one another, because Ponyboy doesn’t have power over their balance: His private identity is suppressed as society manipulates him, through stigmatization of socioeconomic status, age, other social values, to accept the greaser identity exclusively as his person. Ponyboy is an outsider even to his outsider identity.

Moral psychologist’s Jonathon Haidt’s research suggests social Darwinism is the most precise way to explain Ponyboy’s outsider identity within a group of which he’s an insider. The competition between outsiders and insiders, greasers and Socs, might be taken for granted due to its ingrained nature in America’s social conscience, because “human nature was […] shaped as groups competed with other groups” (Haidt xxii). However, “individuals compete with individuals within every group,” and the individuals that rise to the top of the group’s hierarchy are those that put “on a show of virtue” to fool the others (Haidt xxii). Virtues that the greasers uphold include acting and looking “tough” (Hinton 1), having common sense over good grades (Hinton 13), and being involved in the “tight-knit” greaser community (Hinton 3). Ponyboy fails on all three counts: he’s too young to seem or look tough; he doesn’t ever “think,” “at home or anywhere when it counts” (Hinton 13); and
he exists on the periphery of the greaser gang. In turn, he falls to the bottom of his group’s hierarchy.

At the top of the hierarchy, Ponyboy places his eldest brother Darry. Ponyboy thinks Darry “looks older than twenty—tough, cool, and smart” (Hinton 6). “Darry’s hard and firm and rarely grins at all” (Hinton 2). He’s “rough with [Ponyboy] without meaning to be” (Hinton 6). Ponyboy’s parents died and Darry, at twenty, became the guardian of Ponyboy and Ponyboy’s middle brother, Soda. Hinton uses Darry as the adult figure in Ponyboy’s life that is unable to understand Ponyboy’s teenager experience. Darry is no longer a teenager and possibly was only ever a teenager in age, not in experience—“Darry’s gone through a lot in his twenty years, grown up too fast” (Hinton 2). In turn, Ponyboy feels misunderstood by Darry. Given that misunderstanding, Darry reprimands Ponyboy for what Darry believes are flaws, but which actually constitute Ponyboy’s essential person: “Me and Darry just didn’t dig each other. I never could please him” (Hinton 13). Darry believes Ponyboy “should be studying” “if [he] was playing football,” “and if [he] was reading, [he] should be out playing football” (Hinton 13). These contradictory expectations are unattainable, and Ponyboy becomes increasingly hurt by an identity that creates shame toward his own character. Further, Darry “never hollered at Sodapop,” only at Ponyboy (Hinton 13), making Ponyboy feel solely misunderstood and isolated in his shame.

Through the relationship between Ponyboy as the child and Darry as his father figure, Hinton concedes that the tension between teenager and adult is created by hardened misunderstanding on both sides, not only by adults. Just as Darry cannot understand Ponyboy, Ponyboy cannot understand Darry, stating that “I didn’t hardly think of him as being human” (Hinton 18). Each is an outsider to the other’s experience. And yet, Ponyboy
cannot fully reject the identity the father figure imposes on him. Ponyboy tries to convince himself, “I don’t care about Darry,” attempting to reject Darry’s authority, but Ponyboy admits: “But I was still lying and I knew it. I lie to myself all the time. But I never believe me” (Hinton 18). Ponyboy has not yet realized how to undermine Darry’s authority and create his own sense of identity. In Ponyboy’s statement of not believing himself, he exposes his lack of agency concerning his own identity: He does not realize his power to change how he sees himself. At the moment, Ponyboy can only see himself by internalizing other’s perceptions of him. While he is stuck in this state of internalization, he will continue to feel misunderstood. Even at this stage of the novel and Ponyboy’s dawning realizations, Hinton’s teenager audiences who feel misunderstood by adults—but don’t yet see a way out of that—have already found a hero in Ponyboy, one whom to sympathize with and rally behind.

**Ponyboy rejects Darry’s authority over how he sees himself**

By internalizing an identity—greaser—that is in opposition to his character—sensitive, studious, soft-spoken—Ponyboy compounds his feelings of being an outsider. Superficially, he is a greaser. In terms of his inner conflict about the discord between others’ views of him and how he feels inside, he is neither greaser nor Soc. Hinton suggests that identity is ambivalent—neither fully defined nor fully free to be created. In other words, people do not have one true, dictated model of selfhood, or a sense of self that is completely fluid and constantly open to interpretation. Human identity is not really a binary, though it often seems to be. In turn, selfhood’s evasive nature of full determination negates orthodoxy’s claim of power to define, constrain, and distort individual identity. Ponyboy must realize the shifty nature of the society’s perspective to release himself from the binary of greaser versus Socs. Ponyboy must also realize the
fluidity of his own identity to release himself from the one constructed for him by other individuals, such as Darry. Ponyboy’s first step in deconstructing his identity as an outsider is rejecting other’s definitions of him.

An act of physical force pushes Ponyboy’s journey forward—out of his conventional thoughts and into the mind of a nonconformist. At the beginning of the novel, Ponyboy saw not only his brothers as family, but his greaser gang as well: “We’re almost as close as brothers” (Hinton 3). And Ponyboy believed the idealistic thought that family is always supposed to be loving and protective: “You take up for you buddies, no matter what they do. When you’re a gang, you stick up for the members. If you don’t stick up for them, stick together, make like brothers, it isn’t a gang any more. It’s a pack” (Hinton 26). But the greasers focused on protecting their physical selves in fights, unconscious that one another’s identities—the unseeable—needs protecting, too—from outsiders to their gang, but also from each other. Love to the greasers mostly manifests itself physically, not emotionally. When Darry hits Ponyboy, he betrays Ponyboy’s trust in the love and protection of family, finally jarring him to begin to recognize the destructiveness of Darry’s idea of him. Darry yells at Ponyboy, “I didn’t think! I forgot! That’s all I hear out of you! Can’t you think of anything?” (Hinton 50), reducing Ponyboy’s image to only Ponyboy’s shortcomings. Darry even attacks Ponyboy’s love for literature as less valuable than the practical traits Darry esteems, saying “You must think at school, with all those good grades you bring home, and you’ve always got your nose in a book, but do you use your head for common sense? No sirree, bub” (Hinton 13). In such identity reduction, the characteristics that Ponyboy likes in himself are invalidated. Still, in the face of misunderstanding, Ponyboy does not stand up for himself.
In the midst of the verbal fight, Ponyboy continues to identify with how Darry sees him. Ponyboy still wants to believe in Darry’s authority, because Ponyboy has yet to uncover the vulnerabilities of Darry’s authority. Ponyboy does not see Darry as human, saying, “I didn’t hardly think of him as human” (Hinton 18). Ponyboy’s view of Darry is further distanced from faulty human nature, through the established nature of Darry as superhuman in greaser society, who have nicknamed Darry “Superman.” In elevating Darry’s humanity, Ponyboy cannot see Darry’s authority as flawed. Any failure that Ponyboy may feel by his inability to fit Darry’s expectations for who Ponyboy should be—not a sense of self that Ponyboy would create on his own—Ponyboy takes upon himself as shame. Darry’s projections and Ponyboy’s shame create a vicious cycle into which Ponyboy falls back, here and throughout the relationship between the two brothers: Darry misunderstands Ponyboy, Darry projects an identity he can understand onto Ponyboy, Ponyboy fails to live up to Darry’s expectations, Darry reprimands Ponyboy for Ponyboy’s failures, Ponyboy feels shame, and the cycle starts over. Ponyboy feels that he is wrong for this identity—he does not yet realize that the identity is wrong for him. Ponyboy needs Darry to forsake Ponyboy’s trust of external safety, before Ponyboy can become conscious of what is truly at stake if left in Darry’s hands: Ponyboy’s sense of self.

Though Ponyboy cannot initially see past normative views to protect himself, he can protect another. Ponyboy’s empathy for others means the he can stand up for his brother Soda. Soda begins to speak on behalf of Ponyboy, and Darry yells at Soda to “keep your trap shut” (Hinton 50). Soda “takes up for” Ponyboy against Darry as a routine, and Darry normally lets Ponyboy alone “when Sodapop tells him to” (Hinton 13). This harmless routine seemingly affirms Ponyboy’s belief that Darry “should never yell at Soda” (Hinton 50).
When Darry breaks the routine and harms Soda, Ponyboy clearly recognizes that Darry harms people by sacrificing them to his limited model of what they should be. Ponyboy reacts: “I exploded” (Hinton 50). Ponyboy becomes conflicted, “feeling hot tears of anger and frustration” (Hinton 50), about the authority he has trusted to Darry—an authority Ponyboy has trusted to love and protect, what he believed was his identity and what were his own values. In this moment, Ponyboy’s identity bursts the container Darry has created for Ponyboy. Before this moment, Ponyboy would have “just as soon tease[d] a full-grown grizzly” compared to Darry, and now, Ponyboy lashes out at Darry to protect this realization. And Darry, as Hinton’s symbol for adult authority, reacts violently, with “anger or feelings of rejection” (Levy 333), to Ponyboy’s showing of self-confidence, slapping Ponyboy.

The act of violence is a direct attack against Ponyboy’s sensitive nature. After the slap, “suddenly it was deathly quiet” (my emphasis, Hinton 50). Darry’s authority over Ponyboy’s identity has instantly died, along with Darry’s sense of Ponyboy that Ponyboy, out of love and trust, has internalized. The slap becomes a catalyst for Ponyboy’s self-awareness. He immediately runs away, thinking, “It was plain to me that Darry didn’t want me around. And I wouldn’t stay if he did.” (Hinton 50). Ponyboy no longer aspires to fulfill Darry’s expectations. Darry’s authority, which Ponyboy granted due to Darry’s assumed virtues of familial love and protection, has been undermined—Ponyboy can see the foolishness of such virtues and the broken nature of authority. Ponyboy rejects Darry’s blindness toward who Ponyboy really is and with it, rejects the authority of other individuals in determining how he sees his own identity—“He wasn’t ever going to hit me again” (Hinton 50).
Ponyboy rejects orthodoxy’s authority over how he sees himself

Ponyboy rejects Darry’s expectations of his identity to be practical, forget the imaginary world of books, and hide sensitive emotion. But freeing himself from those expectations disorients him. At this stage in the novel, grasping for an identity to hold onto, he identifies more fully with his social label—a greaser, a bad kid in contrast to the good Socs. In turn, how he sees himself continues to be unclear, clouded by the distorted identity he assumes in identifying as a greaser and outsider. His social label becomes a threat, not only to how he sees his identity, but also to his life.

Ponyboy and Johnny, who is the only other sensitive member of the gang, walk around the children’s park in the greaser neighborhood, when five of the Socs’ gang appears. All that Ponyboy feels secure in at this moment is what his social label affords him: a hive-minded hate for the Socs (Haidt xxii)—“I was hating them enough to lose my head—and a need to protect greaser territory—“‘You’re outa your territory. […] You better watch it’” (Hinton 55). The two sides begin verbally slurring each other, using the term “greaser” and “Soc,” instead of names. The fight is between Socs and greasers, not individuals. In this fight, Hinton uses the dilution of individual characteristics into two social groups that each assert a “self-righteous” rightness to their communal values, to reveal that using a binary of have and have-nots to define the world, keeps both sides fighting an endless battle (Haidt xxiii). Although it might seem that the haves win out, the battle continues with no resolution and the haves never reap any reward.

Within the greasers, this same pernicious absolutism applies. Ponyboy has traded Darry’s view of him for another just the same: Membership in a gang in which those who are most like greasers—“tough” (Hinton 1), and having common sense (Hinton 13)—are at the
top of the hierarchy and those who exhibit traits less like greasers, fall to the periphery of the group. Ponyboy internalizes that hierarchy when he takes pride in some of the characteristics of his label. Ponyboy has “been cussed out and sworn at, but nothing ever hit [him]” like one of the Socs’ comments that greasers are simply “white trash with long hair” (Hinton 55). This superficial attack on a group’s (not an individual’s) outward appearance (not their inner worth) demonstrates that society’s insights are only skin deep. Society cannot rightly determine what might constitute Ponyboy’s identity—his inner thoughts, motivations, and morals—but can only extrapolate what they see on the outside into Ponyboy’s identity.

Society’s value on the superficial shows that their values are superficial and hypocritical to hide their vulnerability and bolster their position of power. This worth placed on the superficial has become a social norm, and Ponyboy accepts it. Ponyboy might not fit many characteristics of his greaser label, but one that he does is his hair, what he calls “my pride” (71). Now, what he thought was tough within his group, apparently isn’t within the larger group of society. So when the Soc attacks greaser-styled hair, Ponyboy “felt the blood draining from [his] face,” in shame, emphasizing the hold orthodoxy—the popular kids—still has over how Ponyboy sees himself (Hinton 55).

While Hinton uses the figurative death of silence to symbolize Ponyboy’s rejection of Darry’s destructive sense of who Ponyboy should be, she uses an actual death as a catalyst for Ponyboy’s rejection of society’s view of his identity. One of the Socs almost kills Ponyboy: “I couldn’t hold my breath any longer. I fought again desperately but only sucked in water. I’m drowning, I thought” (Hinton 56). Before Ponyboy dies, though, Johnny saves him, by killing “the handsome Soc”: “I killed him, he said slowly. I killed that boy” (Hinton 56). The act of killing is in opposition to Johnny’s character—“quiet, soft-spoken”
(Hinton 62)—and Ponyboy is in shock that “little Johnny, who wouldn’t hurt a living thing on purpose” and who later, remarks that he “couldn’t shoot anybody,” “had taken a human life” (Hinton 62). The act wasn’t of hatred or rivalry, it was one of survival. Johnny killed the society that was killing them.

Every act of rejection or self-acceptance by an individual against society exposes society’s vulnerabilities. In turn, rejecting a constructed identity is rebellion, and with any rebellion of ideals comes a betrayal of one body to another, resulting in the violent death of the Soc. Ponyboy is breaking away from the social body, like a remote country revolting from its homeland. The rejection is taken personally, like a son betraying his father—the authority figure; Or, the father betraying the son—the son who trusted the authority figure. In internalizing his social label, Ponyboy put trust in society to see him rightly. But society failed him and realizing that his trust was broken, Ponyboy turns away from society. With its vulnerability laid bare, society reacts, asserting its power over Ponyboy in an attempt to force Ponyboy to see it as an authority once more. Yet Ponyboy, even as his mind is readying to black out, is conscious of society’s twisted morals: finally, he can see through norms and reject them. Ponyboy, through the loss of physical consciousness, gains inner conviction in his values of empathy, compassion, and understanding, hazily thinking, “they’ve gone too far” (Hinton 56).

With the help of Johnny, Ponyboy rejects these morals, and rejects society’s authority over his identity. After Johnny kills the boy, Ponyboy begins to scream, but “hadn’t realized it” (Hinton 57), losing control over his mind and body. Ponyboy has rejected all labels projected on him and becomes disoriented with himself. After Ponyboy begins to reject his social label, he becomes an outsider to his own story, having to run away from society and
into the country. And although it seems that Ponyboy is finally fulfilling the “greaser” identity society has branded him with, “running away, with the police after [him] for murder and a loaded gun by [his] side” (Hinton 62), Ponyboy realizes that he isn’t an outsider to society, but an outsider to the identity society has given him. He’s an outsider to the stereotype of greaser, and begins to slowly let go of it. Johnny and Ponyboy sleep in a train, and Ponyboy feels unnatural in “a hoodlum’s jacket, with a gun lying next to [his] hand” (Hinton 62). Now Ponyboy must, as Johnny says, “get ahold of [him]self” by reclaiming his agency (Hinton 57).
III.

Cherry Valance:
Liberating Others from Our Confining Expectations
CHAPTER THREE
Who is Cherry Valance? Refusing to Judge and Define Others

An overview of Ponyboy’s journey to stop defining those around him

As an outsider, whom Hinton portrays feeling so singularly misconstrued in the eyes of others, it would seem that Ponyboy would try to understand, or at the least try to not distort, the identities of others. Instead, it is as if he continuously misunderstands those around him. In the beginning of the novel, He takes for granted the social identities of those he interacts with, and whenever he can’t understand the actions of another, he defaults to their social identity as an explanation. Cherry Valance works as Hinton’s qualification of her argument. She acts as a catalyst for Ponyboy’s dawning realization that people are complex, with inner and outer worlds. Hinton recognizes that Ponyboy, as a representation of teenagers and a member of lower socioeconomic status, is not only a victim of society’s warped morals and social categorization, but participates in the perpetuation of such conventions toward those in other groups—Cherry representing Socs.

Orthodox society is an outsider to Ponyboy’s inner world that reaches beyond his failures to meet society’s expectations, preventing society from understanding Ponyboy’s true worth and stunting Ponyboy’s confidence in his worth until he rejects society’s expectations and claims agency over how he sees his identity. Likewise, every individual does not have access to any other individual’s vision of his or her own personal identity and self-worth. The social identities given to individuals by orthodox beliefs or established members of society, although perhaps reaching for and understanding some of the truth, will
always be incomplete and ill informed. In turn, Hinton asserts that individuals should recognize that they are outsiders to their identities given by society, which although projected as the truth, are imposed. Individuals must defamiliarize themselves from how society sees them in order to change how they see themselves and how they understand others’ identities as true. *The Outsiders* shows that an identity is only true if the agency to create or claim the identity rests with the individual. Hinton shows a solution for a better, more inclusive world: Once people try to understand the identity claimed by an individual instead of imposing an identity onto an individual, than people will begin to understand each other better. Cherry Valance pushes Ponyboy to continuously reconsider his judgments of their identities, as her fluidity to slip in and out of society’s expectations of her motives and actions challenges Ponyboy’s inclination to defer to individual’s social labels and confine people’s complexity.

At the end of the novel, Ponyboy stops judging people’s characters before their complexities have come to light. Freeing others from the confines of his own vision, Ponyboy gives people the space and his understanding to change and grow within the identity they have claimed. 

**Ponyboy exerts power over Cherry’s identity and defines her as an insider**

Ponyboy recognizes Cherry as a Soc, because society has labeled her as such, not because of any personality or character trademarks of her own. Ponyboy meets Cherry Valance when Dally approaches and verbally harasses her. Ponyboy’s first impression of her and her friend is that they are “tuff-looking girls – dressed sharp and really good looking” (Hinton 21). Based on outward appearance, how he sees Cherry leads him to create judgments on her inner character, concluding, “those two girls weren’t our kind” (Hinton 21). At this time, perpetuated by the community’s social labels, Ponyboy categorizes people into a binary: “our kind”—greasers and other outsiders—and “their kind”—Socs and other
insiders. Ponyboy categorizes her as the later, a Soc, even though Cherry can’t be defined so simply, even on their first meeting.

Externally, Cherry might look like a common Soc teenager, but internally, her thoughts and motivations cannot be contained within such a structured identity. When Cherry asks Ponyboy his name, she does not have the usual responses of “‘You’re Kidding!’ or ‘That’s your real name?’” (Hinton 22). Although Ponyboy “personally” likes his name, he “hate[s] to tell people [it] for the first time” (Hinton 22), because their reactions question his name’s validity, as if such a name cannot exist within the society he lives in. Since he does exist with the name Ponyboy in his community, his community makes him feel uncomfortable with that relationship so that he will know he is different and an outsider. Such reactions make him feel abnormal and wrong, not unique. In contrast, Cherry smiles and replies without questioning the validity of his name, “that’s an original and lovely name” (Hinton 22). Cherry’s positive reaction to Ponyboy’s unique name, conflicts with what the reader sees is her acceptance of her own society-given nickname that is based on her external appearance, which expresses Cherry’s inner conflict between her own set of values and the values of conformity that her group wants her to perpetuate to prop up their sense of their society’s importance.

Unlike what Hinton does with the other Soc members, the author actually fleshes out Cherry’s character to give her moral complexity. Cherry seems to have her own set of values, specifically concerning how to interact with other people, especially those outside of the Soc circle. She attempts to suppress such values, though. If she does not continue to act like a Soc, she might be rejected by her society, which does not favor fluidity of identity. So, when Cherry introduces herself, she uses the name society has given her: “My name’s Sherri,
but I’m called Cherry because of my hair. Cherry Valance” (Hinton 22). A nickname, while appearing to extend insider status to Cherry, replaces her name with one that constrains her within how society literally sees her: “Cherry” is based on external appearance, not any inner character traits. Cherry’s nickname mimics the use of a social label, as Cherry seems to give up her identity to internalize one constructed for her. In basing her internal worth on her external circumstances, Cherry’s society creates an identity for her that is empty of self-worth and suppresses her natural identity. She’s an outsider to her label, even while accepting it.

Cherry shows Ponyboy her complexity and the complexity of social groups. She is able to zoom out of the insider versus outsider binary to see the bigger picture: groups are made up of individuals, and all social labels are a generalization that cannot express every individual’s identity fully within such a label. She tells Ponyboy “‘All Socs aren’t like that,’ she said. ‘You have to believe me, Ponyboy. Not all of us are like that’” (Hinton 34). But she doesn’t only recognize the complexity of the people she groups herself with, but also those with whom Ponyboy is defined: “‘That’s like saying all you greasers are like Dallas Winston’” (Hinton 34). Ponyboy “digested that,” realizing “it was true,” and accepting, “not all of us were that bad” (Hinton 34). Cherry presents a different view of society than the view society itself creates, upholds, and manipulates people to see. Instead of society’s truth that the elite are morally right and the disenfranchised are morally wrong, Cherry tells Ponyboy that some people are good and some people are bad, regardless of their social entitlements. Cherry asserts that “things are rough all over,” planting a seed of understanding that others’ identities might reach beyond the confines of how society, people, and Ponyboy himself sees them, in Ponyboy’s mind; but still, he “couldn’t see what Socs had to sweat about—good
grades, good cars, good girls, madras and Mustangs and Corvairs—Man, I thought, if I had worries like that I’d consider myself lucky” (Hinton 35, 36).

Enacting Jonathon Haidt’s assertion that humans bond together based on similar moralities, Cherry rejects society and Ponyboy’s suggestion that money is what separates Socs from greasers. Instead, she more rightly—or, more rightly according to Hinton’s beliefs—asserts that values separate them: “It’s not just the money. […] You greasers have a different set of values” (Hinton 38). Although Ponyboy is receptive to Cherry’s rejection of society’s moral value based on wealth and privilege—adding himself, “it’s not the money, its feeling—you don’t feel anything and we feel too violently” (Hinton 38)—Ponyboy continues to feel the pressures of society’s disparities and enforced social positions. He qualifies Cherry’s transparency as circumstantial. To him, Cherry’s open-minded thoughts are merely a byproduct of her being conscious that she holds the power in the conversation (he is less entitled than her in socioeconomics and age), and can say what she wishes without being reprimanded: “probably because I was a greaser, and younger; she didn’t have to keep her guard up with me” (Hinton 38). Confirming Ponyboy’s continued defining of her as a Soc, Cherry tells Ponyboy, “if I see you in the hall at school or someplace and don’t say hi, well, it’s not personal or anything” (Hinton 45). Cherry might have her own set of values, but she has yet to take action on them in public. Her claim that “it’s not personal” is true, because when Cherry is in society, she acts as society’s Cherry—not her more-true-because-self-determined, inner, hidden identity, but an amalgamation of what society’s beliefs, morals, and values dictate Cherry should be. In turn, regardless of her socially open-minded thought, Ponyboy still sees Cherry as a Soc and himself as a greaser—rather than two individuals, emphasized through the depersonalized use of the second person pronouns “you,” referring
to the Socs, and “we,” referring to the greasers, to replace Cherry and Ponyboy as two distinct people in society, with the groups and labels that represent them.

**Ponyboy begins to understand the fluid nature of identity**

Once Cherry’s actions begin to match her socially suppressed thoughts and values that she shares with Ponyboy, Ponyboy sees through the face she puts on for the world to see the real Cherry hidden behind it. He no longer sees her as confined solely within her Soc label. When Dally visits Ponyboy and Johnny in the abandoned church, Dally tells Ponyboy that Cherry has become the greasers’ spy. At first shocked, Ponyboy reverts to Cherry’s socially constructed identity to define her, blurting out, “Cherry?” “The Soc?” (Hinton 85). Dally also related that Cherry felt that the “whole mess” of Johnny killing the Soc and Ponyboy and Johnny running away “was her fault” (Hinton 86). Cherry’s act of taking part in the blame, pushes past social norms established by the rich and privileged: due to their social monopoly on power, society blames the greasers for the Socs’ death regardless of where the real blame might fall. They manipulate their social power to make the greasers seem emphatically bad and the Socs to seem unimpeachably good.

Ponyboy rejects all of the labels he has given Cherry—“the cheerleader, Bob’s girl, the Soc”—recognizing their inability to define her, and admitting her complexity: “No, it wasn’t Cherry the Soc who was helping us, it was Cherry the dreamer who watched sunsets and couldn’t stand fights” (Hinton 86). To Ponyboy, the Cherry that is helping the greasers and the Cherry the Soc are still two distinct people—both exist, but must exist separately. Ponyboy and Cherry had earlier concluded that greasers and Socs are separated by their values, leaving Ponyboy to conclude now that Cherry’s two different value systems cannot exist at the same time in the same person. To Ponyboy, Cherry, the friend of the greasers, is
an outsider to Cherry, the Soc, and vice versa. Ponyboy recognizes Cherry’s complexity, but has yet to understand her fluidity of identity.

**Ponyboy rejects his authority to define Cherry**

It is not necessary for Cherry to reject her identity in order for Ponyboy to free her from his own understanding of her identity. After the church has burned and before the rumble between the Socs and greasers, Ponyboy talks to another Soc, Randy. Like Cherry, Hinton also gives Randy a complexity of character, but not as much. Hinton uses Randy as a device for Ponyboy to understand the nature of Cherry’s identity, which can’t be contained by any social definition, more deeply. Randy’s slight-but-not-quite moral complexity gives Ponyboy the opportunity to teach Randy a lesson about identity, applying Cherry’s teachings of how social definitions are destructive to all groups, the disenfranchised as well as the entitled. Randy recognizes that a hierarchy exists and is enforced—“You can’t win, even if you whip us. You’ll still be where you were—at the bottom. And we’ll still be the lucky ones with all the breaks.” (Hinton 117). But, Randy also recognizes that the hierarchy is unfair, telling Ponyboy, “it doesn’t prove a thing” (Hinton 117). What Randy doesn’t recognize is his power over the decision to live within or outside society’s hierarchy. Ponyboy, through Cherry’s values, helps Randy to harness his individual power.

Randy complains that he has “a little money,” so he is defined as a Soc, and then “the whole hates” him. Ponyboy calls on Cherry’s lesson that people must assume responsibility over how they see their identity and their world, to reply: “No, [...] you hate the whole world” (Hinton 117). Ponyboy remembers Cherry’s words that “things are rough all over.” If “things are rough all over,” then no hierarchies exist, and the assertions of the entitled that all power is theirs are negated. Ponyboy realizes “what [Cherry] meant”: people have the power
to see the world as they want to see it—society does not have any special virtues that afford it moral high ground to dictate the world for them (Hinton 117). Ponyboy sees the Socs in power—both socially and over his sense of self—because he gives them that power. Society might assert control of Ponyboy’s definition, but Ponyboy likewise has the ability to define society. In fact, the orthodox relies on being defined by their socially governed, only remaining established as long as people identify orthodox as a source of power and authority. Similarly, Ponyboy has the ability to define Cherry, Randy, and others how he wishes to see them: Wielding the same destructive limitations that Darry imposed on Ponyboy, or choosing to not define them at all. Up until now, Ponyboy did not realize his power in defining others; but upon realizing, he assumes responsibility over his hypocrisy. Before, he trivialized Soc hardship—“I couldn’t see what Socs had to sweat about—good grades, good cars, good girls, madras and Mustangs and Corvairs—Man, I thought, if I had worries like that I’d consider myself lucky” (Hinton 35, 36).

Now, he sees that, due to individual experience and distinct value systems between Socs and greasers, he cannot understand Soc hardship and has no right to claim that Cherry’s feelings of being misunderstood are not justified. Cherry slips in and out of society’s constructed binary, ineffectually labeled by both “Soc” and “greaser.” Ponyboy now sees his power to exploit her ambivalence and confine her to one definition, but he also sees his responsibility to be compassionate and try to understand without labeling her.

When confronted with Cherry, though, Ponyboy is conflicted about whether to revert back to his absolutist vision of her—just Soc—or whether to allow Cherry to maintain her fluid self-image and full ability to define herself. Upset because her values do not match his, Ponyboy lashes out at Cherry, isolating her from belonging to any group: “You’re a traitor to
your own kind and not loyal to us” (Hinton 129). To Cherry’s plea that she “was only trying to help,” Ponyboy felt “ashamed” in his blatant misunderstanding of Cherry’s motives and character (Hinton 129). Although Ponyboy and Cherry have differences, Ponyboy sees that they have similarities too; for example, Ponyboy lives on the East Side and Cherry lives on the West-side, but they both can see the sunset “real good” (Hinton 129). Cherry’s identity might be contradictory, but it is an identity she has created to exist in the world created for her. Ponyboy might be an outsider to her world, and thus, cannot understand her identity, but Cherry moves him to realize he doesn’t have to understand another’s identity, categorize it and label it, in order to understand another’s humanity. This is the moment of epiphany in the book. Refusing to label Cherry, Ponyboy can see her as an individual.
IV.

Imagery:
Taking Responsibility Over our Identities
CHAPTER FOUR
Hinton’s Imagery of Agency

Heat motif and exerting power over how we see ourselves

Throughout Ponyboy’s deconstruction of his outsider identity, Hinton uses a hot versus cold motif to symbolize Ponyboy’s agency. When Ponyboy is stripped of agency, or doesn’t hold an active role in how he sees himself, Ponyboy feels cold or acts “cool”—distant—toward those around him. For instance, after Ponyboy fights with Darry and runs into Johnny, Ponyboy tells Johnny that if they walk to the park and back, then he might be “cooled off enough to go home” (Hinton 52). Ponyboy just freed himself from Darry’s expectations of his identity; however, to go home, would be constraining himself within those expectations once again, cooling his rejection of Darry’s authority over his self-image and reverting to self-identity-destructive habits of thought. This reversion doesn’t happen, but his reclamation of agency is delayed when confronted with the Socs’ appearance at the park. Ponyboy quickly relapses into being seen as just a greaser again—constrained within a constructed identity—in this case, to protect himself. He internalizes his social label of greaser and hardens his sensitivity, remarking, “a cool deadly bluff could sometimes shake them off,” and then staring “at the Socs coolly” (Hinton 54).

In contrast, when Ponyboy refuses to internalize others’ projections of himself and reclaims agency over his identity, Ponyboy wishes to be warm, is warm, or the environment is warm. Earlier in the night that Ponyboy runs away from home, he “was freezing” (Hinton 47). Before rejecting both Darry’s and society’s identities projected on him, Ponyboy is
distant from himself, in that he has no agency over how he sees himself. At this time in the novel, Ponyboy transfers his rightful control over his self-image to society and those who he trusts to protect it, such as Darry. When both society and those he trusts give Ponyboy an identity that does not align with Ponyboy’s values of compassion, understanding, and a love of learning, Ponyboy internalizes it anyway. As we will see, in Ponyboy’s brief wondering “what it was like inside a burning ember” (Hinton 47), Hinton foreshadows the catalyst for Ponyboy’s assumption of responsibility over his identity, which the hot motif hinges on: A burning church that Ponyboy runs into. The wondering here, early in Ponyboy’s conscious realizations about his agency, does not express the obtained control that is foreshadowed, but Ponyboy’s current wanting to be in control.

Ponyboy and Johnny hid in an abandoned church in another town, where Dally told them to hide out. The church became a place for the pair to hide from society—“You could see the front from the road […] So we stayed in the very back” (Hinton 76)—and from their own gang—only Dally knew where they were. Ponyboy is conscious of his agency to change his state of hiding, a symbol for hiding of identity in society’s and other’s definitions of him: Ponyboy was “smoking a lot more than [he] usually did,” but he was “careful” with his cigarettes, noting “if that church ever caught fire there’d be no stopping it” (Hinton 79).

Dally visited Johnny and Ponyboy, taking them out to lunch. On the way back to the church, Johnny decided to turn himself in so that he could live honest and Ponyboy didn’t have to live as a fugitive, asking Dally, “Would you rather have me living in hide-outs for the rest of my life, always on the run?” (Hinton 90). Ponyboy knows that “if Dally had said yes, Johnny would have gone back to the church without hesitation. He figured Dally knew more than he did, and Dally’s word was law” (Hinton 90). Johnny gave power to Dally to define
his identity and situation, in the same way that Ponyboy gave Darry power over him. Before Dally could answer, though, they saw that “the church was on fire!” (Hinton 90). The church in flames was Johnny’s answer. Ponyboy and Johnny need to stop hiding how they see themselves behind the constructed identity of greaser and take responsibility over their self-image, instead of transferring that responsibility to others who will abuse it. Ponyboy and Johnny are both “different” from the gang, perceptive and observant: “I couldn’t tell Two-Bit or Steve or even Darry about the sunrise and clouds and stuff, I couldn’t even remember that poem around them. I mean, they just don’t dig” (Hinton 78). The church is literally a hiding place from the outside world for Ponyboy and Johnny, but it’s symbolically a hiding place of identity. As it burns, Ponyboy and Johnny are forced to take control over their identities and take a stand to see themselves as they wish to be seen.

Ponyboy repeats to himself, “We started it. We started it. We started it!” (Hinton 91), taking responsibility for the situation. Ponyboy and Johnny unconsciously torch their own hiding place. And with nowhere left to hide, Ponyboy takes control over how he sees himself. Immediately, Ponyboy and Johnny shrug off the burden of others’ expectations and begin acting without thinking about whether their action is accepted by society for their constructed identity. Leaving no space for their own thought, society’s thoughts, or other’s thoughts, like Dally’s “forget those blasted kids!” (Hinton 93), Ponyboy and Johnny begin acting honestly to themselves. Johnny takes control of the situation. Through the “falling embers,” Johnny was grinning at Ponyboy. Johnny’s usual “defeated, suspicious look in his eyes” disappears along with society’s expectations, replaced by a new sense of himself: “Johnny wasn’t behaving at all like his old self” (Hinton 92).
Ponyboy’s vision is tinged by a “red glow” (Hinton 92). Red in his vision, created by the heat of the fire, this glow represents control over his identity. The past tense narration lends itself to the sense that time has slowed down in the story, and that Ponyboy is able to observe himself from a distance, granting him more objectivity for a clearer view of himself. Ponyboy’s thinking becomes clear—“I remember wondering what it was like in a burning ember, and I thought: Now I know, it’s a red hell” (Hinton 92). The question harks the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. Earlier in the story, when Ponyboy “was freezing,” he “wondered what it was like to be inside a burning ember” (Hinton 47). Then, he was on the outskirts of society, but now he’s helping the insiders—those he shouldn’t be comfortable around. Yet, Ponyboy is comfortable, asking in reaction to his realization of the “hell”: “Why aren’t I scared?” (Hinton 92). Face-to-face with himself, Ponyboy is experiencing cognitive dissonance as he becomes acquainted with his natural instincts and identity, breaking down the barriers between insiders and outsiders within his own mind. Ponyboy has taken responsibility over how he sees his personal identity and how he sees himself in society. This agency allows Ponyboy to act outside of the confines of his social labels and how others expect him to act. While greasers turn away from society and cause trouble, Ponyboy and Johnny run into the flames to save children left in the church.

None of the adults are “about to go through that flaming door,” and they also cannot fit through the window that Ponyboy and Johnny break open (Hinton 91). The adults’ inaction highlights the limits and inadequacies of authority. Adults in their supposed authority would actually place Ponyboy and Johnny outside of society’s worth, marking them wrong and useless within the workings of constructed social order. Turning orthodoxy on its head, Hinton makes authority—the insiders—useless, and those who are labeled “wrong” by
society—the outsiders—essentially helpful. In their bravery to be themselves, no one but Ponyboy and Johnny can save the children.

The perceptive loners Ponyboy and Johnny blurred the lines between insiders and outsiders, simultaneously, blurring the limited understanding of their value held by the outside world. One of the adults called Ponyboy, Johnny, and Dally, who went into the church to save Johnny, “the bravest kids,” and thought they “were sent straight from heaven” (Hinton 95). Ponyboy noticed that “he didn’t seem to mind our being hoods,” and kept calling them “heroes” (Hinton 96, 97). Yet while “heroes” connotes acceptance, even idealization, the label is simply on the opposite side of the spectrum from their outsider label and distances the pair from society by elevating them. Before, they were not living up to expectations, and now they have exceeded expectations. Ponyboy and Johnny have escaped one constructed identity and fallen into another, with newspapers linking both identities by displaying the headline “JUVENILE DELINQUINTS TURN HEROES” (Hinton 107). By taking responsibility over his identity, Ponyboy made it difficult to contain his identity in one extreme, so society had to create another. Ponyboy doesn’t allow society to control his view of himself, though, determined to maintain freedom of agency. When asked, “Are you just professional heroes or something,” Ponyboy answers, “No, we’re greasers” (Hinton 95). At this point, society no longer sees him as fully greaser, but Ponyboy calls himself one, because he identifies as one. As one of the greaser gang members notes, “Y’all were heroes from the beginning. You just didn’t ‘turn’ all of a sudden” (Hinton 107).

Hidden in the limited identities that society created for them, the pair’s confidence in their personalities and gifts was stunted at the beginning of the novel, aiding no one. Because of their experiences with Cherry and Randy, and their rising to the needs of the emergency
that presents itself, they claim agency over how they see themselves, which positively
impacts their own identities and lives and the world around them. Ponyboy and Johnny are
essential to humanity simply by being themselves. Hinton stresses that what makes one
different should not be curbed, but should be cultivated as uniquely useful to oneself and to
one’s community. Although the privileged elite portrays social labels as helpful tools that let
people know what is expected of them in thought, action, and personality, Hinton exposes the
hypocrisy of such linear orthodoxy. Social labels are not just unhelpful, but harmful. When
individuals exert power over how they see themselves, and act accordingly with that vision,
everyone is better for this kind of unabashed, brave individuality.

**Ponyboy’s hair and taking control of our fluid identities**

Hinton uses Ponyboy’s hair as an external representation of Ponyboy’s own thoughts
about identity. Ponyboy’s deconstruction of outsider can be seen in his hairstyle changes and
his feelings toward such changes throughout the novel. At the beginning, Ponyboy feels
generally misunderstood by his greaser gang, mostly because he doesn’t share in what the
greasers value—his young age stops him from seeming tough and he doesn’t have the
common sense that is necessary for fights. Ponyboy’s hair seems to be the only way Ponyboy
explicitly takes pride in his identification as a greaser. He takes pride in his hair as an
indication of his acceptance in the greaser community—“but I am a greaser and most of my
neighborhood rarely bothers to get a haircut” (Hinton 1). Additionally, his hair symbolizes
his unique personal identity, shown when he moves from describing the plural group to his
individual self—“Besides, I look better with long hair” (Hinton 1). He calls his hair “our
trademark,” “the one thing we were proud of” (Hinton 71). And when the Soc calls greasers
as a group, not Ponyboy individually, “white trash with long hair” (Hinton 55), Ponyboy feels personally attacked.

Unlike the “Corvairs or madras shirts” of the Socs, which do not originate with the individual, but must be bought, the greasers “could have hair” to be proud of—something naturally theirs’ (Hinton 36, 71). Hair is a part of greaser identity that they have created against society’s values and against suppression of greaser agency. For the greasers, their long hair represents a benign way to express greaser identity amidst a society that morally condemns them. When the Soc makes Ponyboy feel like an outsider because of his hair, Ponyboy is ashamed. The greaser community might value long hair, but the more powerful members of society do not. Ponyboy’s hair starkly identifies him as an outsider. Although Ponyboy continues to defend greaser identity against the Soc’s scrutiny, his admission of insider status within greaser community does not cushion the negative view he holds of himself due to society’s definition of him as an outsider.

Ponyboy’s next hairstyle creates an identity crisis. It results in Ponyboy seeing his identity as malleable, changing, fluid. Just as Cherry slipped between social groups—accepted by the Socs but spying on behalf of the greasers—Ponyboy recognizes the ambivalence of his identity to be constrained within a single social definition. Ponyboy at first loathes the idea of not fully belonging, but he then realizes the power being an outsider to society gives him to see himself as he wishes—outside of the imposed confines of society.

While he and Johnny hide in the church, Ponyboy must cut and bleach his hair. Ponyboy knows that society favors short hair more than long hair, since “the first thing the judge does is make you get a haircut” (Hinton 71). Still, Ponyboy fights against cutting his hair. He recognizes the injustice of judging one’s moral identity on outward appearance,
saying that “Dally could just as easily mug somebody with short hair” (Hinton 71). Whether one has long or short hair does not determine whether one is “good” or “bad.” Yet, Ponyboy’s defiance seems less a fight to not conform, than a fight against changing his identity and giving up insider status through the greaser definition he has internalized. Eventually, Johnny convinces Ponyboy that they must disguise their identities so that they do not match their descriptions in the newspaper. While they strip themselves from one of the core values of greaser society—good hair, Ponyboy and Johnny simultaneously and unconsciously disguise the ill-fitting greaser identity from themselves.

After Ponyboy’s hair is cut and lightened, Ponyboy looks into an “old cracked mirror” (Hinton 72). If the mirror represents society, Ponyboy looks into it for confirmation of the only identity he has ever known: greaser. Inadequate to encapsulate one’s identity due to the nature of appearances as irrelevant to the worth of the internal self, the mirror is only able to provide a flawed and imperfect reflection of Ponyboy. The crack might represent such inadequacy of external reflection—society’s projections—to define an individual, but it might also represent Ponyboy’s broken relationship with society. The terms in which Ponyboy once defined himself—society’s terms—have changed. At this time, Ponyboy has begun to reject his social labels of greaser and outsider as trustworthy and self-confirming definitions. In turn, the mirror is unable to show Ponyboy the greaser identity he has internalized so far: “It just didn’t look like me.” He doesn’t look “tuff” anymore, and he looks “younger and scareder” too (Hinton 72). He no longer looks like a greaser, nor a Soc, and he becomes “miserable” in this ambivalence of identity (Hinton 73). Without a definition, Ponyboy has no hope of eventually being accepted as an insider by any group, whether by his old greaser gang or, hinted in his middle-class tastes and aspirations—Socs.
By changing his hair, Ponyboy blurs his identity and more broadly, the confines of such have/have-not hierarchies. In this fluidity, though, Ponyboy doesn’t see freedom: He sees himself as an outsider to all.

Feeling a lack of agency in the forced necessity of the act, Ponyboy calls his haircut a “Halloween costume [he] can’t get out of” (Hinton 73). In this description, Ponyboy denies the nature of hair: changing and malleable and constantly growing—a nature identity shares. Ponyboy confines himself within an identity that rests in his hair, similar to society’s confining his identity in socioeconomic status. Ponyboy recognizes that short or long hair cannot determine one’s identity, but he has a hard time letting go of how he has seen himself for so long: through the lens of others.

After the church burns and Ponyboy is in the hospital, his brothers visit and SodaPop says, “Oh, Ponyboy, your hair…your tuff, tuff hair…” (Hinton 97). Ponyboy’s hair was his external indicator of being a greaser, recognized by other greasers. Rather than replying to SodaPop, which is expected after his adverse reaction to the Soc that almost killed him and after his reaction to cutting it, Ponyboy does not acknowledge SodaPop’s comment. Instead, he allows Darry to begin “stroking [his] hair” (Hinton 98). This act of affection bestowed on his new identity gives Ponyboy the sense that he is “finally home” (Hinton 99). In other words, Ponyboy begins to feel at ease and in control of his identity, refusing to be defined and confined within a social group. With the thought, “What kind of world is it where all I have to be proud of is a reputation for being a hood, and greasy hair?” (Hinton 132). Ponyboy becomes aware of his conflict over his outsider label. He doesn’t “want to be a hood,” so “why should [he] be proud of it?” (Hinton 132)—“it” referring to greasers’ long hair. Further, Ponyboy questions how beneficial social labeling, categorization, and
expectations are, when individuals internalize and perpetuate values that they might not inherently agree with: “why should [he] even pretend to be proud of it?” (Hinton 132). Ponyboy begins to see through orthodoxy’s veil of invulnerability, understanding the selfish cycle of social conditioning that enforces values to perpetuate social inequity. In Ponyboy’s internalization of his greaser label, he thought that his long hair was something to take pride in; now, rejecting that orthodoxy, Ponyboy has discovered the empty value and morality of such labels, and the false identities they project.

Ponyboy notices that his older brother and guardian Darry, the unspoken leader of the gang, “never went in for the long hair. His was short and clean all the time” (Hinton 132). In his adolescent growth, Ponyboy has become a source of authority for himself, which has created tension between himself and Darry, who strains to be Ponyboy’s parental authority (Levy 333). Blind to the value of Darry’s humanity before—“I didn’t hardly think of him as human” (Hinton 18), Ponyboy now sees that Darry lives outside of society’s constrictive binaries and labels. In cutting his hair against the social norm for greasers, Darry has removed himself from the “rat race” of society’s cycle of social categorization (Hinton 38). Ponyboy sees that Darry could be a Soc if he wanted to, but Darry has chosen to be a greaser of his own volition in the interest of protecting those weaker than he, specifically his brothers. His conscious choice to affiliate with the greasers constitutes a heroic act. Darry’s heroism is emphasized in his nickname, “Superman,” through which Hinton suggests that Darry is a hero for rejecting orthodoxy’s influence over his identity, and choosing a life that champions the fight against orthodoxy’s confinement of others. The fluidity that made Ponyboy “miserable” is that in which Darry habituates (Hinton 73). For Ponyboy’s construction of his self-identity moving forward, Darry becomes a role model. Now that
Ponyboy has deconstructed and rejected orthodoxy’s values and his outsider identity, he is able to claim agency over how he sees himself and his fluidity, rather than accepting and internalizing what confines his fluidity.
Hinton:
The Worthiness of an Adolescent Attitude in Young Adult Novels and Canonical Literature
CHAPTER FIVE
The fight for Real Teenage Representation in Literary History and the Adolescence of Canonical Literature

In 1967, S.E. Hinton wrote her novel, The Outsiders, into a canon of nonconformists. The have/have-not binary is standard in literature, seen in Romeo and Juliet's haves of incompetent adults and have-nots of doomed star-crossed lovers; Great Expectation's have of the gentlemen class and have-nots of Pip and Joe Gargery; The Stranger's have of society-at-large and have-not of the misunderstood Mersault; The Catcher in the Rye's have of adult society and have-not of the confined Holden Caulfield; To Kill a Mockingbird's haves of whites and the justice system and have-nots of African-Americans and those whose voices are not represented in government; Slaughterhouse-Five's haves of those with authority to start and perpetuate war and have-nots of those who are at war's mercy, and many more. Sarah Herz, a Young Adult genre critic-turned-advocate, even connects themes The Outsiders shares with accepted work of canonical literature, such as the theme of "choosing to reject the hypocrisy of one's community" and "surviving under extreme circumstances (acting with grace under fire)" seen when "Sodapop, Ponyboy, and Darry prove they can survive as 'outsiders' in their community" (Herz 60). Although her young age and young story topic is what led literary elites initially to label The Outsiders as an outsider to such accepted, canonical works of literature, it is exactly Hinton's adolescent attitude of refusal that shows kinship between her writing and the writing of established authors in literary society.
Hinton’s plea for a more realistic representation of teenagers in literature was heard, because she made it heard, redefining canonical literature in the process to include young adults. In fact, the nature of writing itself—born of great feeling that the topic of writing needs to be understood—trumpets the attitude of adolescence.

Similar to Ponyboy’s realization of the hypocrisy of social elites, Hinton exposes the hypocrisy of literary elites: labeling Hinton as an outsider to literary society goes against the values of writers included in the literary elite circle who demand representation for their topics of writing. The purpose of writing and the value of literature to broaden human understanding of one another and the world is insulted by the literary elite’s dismissal of Young Adult books as having no literary value. To grow into an adult that is accepted by orthodoxy, Hinton shows that teenagers learn through social conditioning—the haves’ attitudes toward the have-nots. She shows them conforming to society but asserts that they are actually relinquishing their power to assert their own identities. Hinton especially condemns such relinquishing by exposing that such social conditioning bears no fruit other than protecting the interests of social elites: when they conform, individual teenagers-turned-adults lose a sense of self worth and pride, while society-at-large loses a unique perspective to sharpen the consciousness of society. The same process of social conditioning can be applied to the action of the literary elites. By condemning the Young Adult genre as without value, the literary elites attempt to silence distinct adolescent voices, making their own imaginations of teenage life and identity the seeming reality. But, its not the reality: Now, 50 years since *The Outsiders* was written, even Hinton judges that she couldn’t write *The Outsiders* today, because she no longer sees the world or experiences emotions as a teenager does, explaining that she does not “get suicidal over a bad haircut anymore” (Michaud).
Not the professed Hinton of now, but Hinton-the-sixteen-year-old-author, harnesses the particularly adolescent feeling of being misunderstood to quarrel with self-righteous convention of literary elites. Hinton uses adolescence in tense relationship with adulthood. Regardless of their differences, adults and adolescents alike must fight back against the force of orthodoxy that confines their identities and lives. The central need of Hinton’s characters, extrapolated to young adults in society and young adult representation in literature, to “be seen as human,” is a universal desire; in fact, it is similar to the dignity that “marginalized groups today are also trying to claim” (Krischer). Hinton, though, unlike the majority of adults who conform and perpetuate the cycle of elitism and stigmatization, is not jaded in her power to change how she sees herself, how she sees the world, and how she is seen by the world. Although adults might label Hinton’s hope for a better society as adolescent naiveté, Hinton uses it to heroically take a stand on behalf of downtrodden teenagers everywhere, and *The Outsider’s* popularity suggests some success.

Hinton’s view of authority is central to the conflict of *The Outsiders*: Authority, specifically that of adults’ and social elites, is inadequate to understand her, and thus, unable to govern her fairly. Psychologically, Hinton’s view of authority is particular to the human development stage of adolescence: “As the child enters adolescence, logical and abstract reasoning skills increase, and there is a greater tendency to question authority” (Levy 333). During adolescence, teenagers begin “to seek an adult identity”, which involves gradually establishing emotional independence from parents” and consequently, independence from the parents’ beliefs and values. The very nature of teenagers exists in tension with the very nature of adults, compounded by the tension between the parents’ established belief system and the teenager’s developing belief system. In turn, teenagers have a hard time seeing
authority as trustworthy and reliable, but something which confines through
misunderstanding. Even though such ambivalence and tension toward authority are claimed
to be particular to teenagers’ developmental stage, adult writers of great, accepted
literature—Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harper Lee, J.D. Salinger, Albert
Camus—display and use a similar adolescent view of authority and adolescent spirit of
feeling misunderstood to demand understanding from an inadequate, but powerful authority.
Such writers even seem to share in Hinton’s seeming youthful naiveté: In exposing the
misunderstanding and corruption of authority, they are pushing readers to take action against
misunderstanding in their own lives, hoping that individuals will change their immediate
worlds for the better. It is this adolescent view of the fluidity of orthodoxy and the ability of
individuals to create a better world that gives a branch of the literary anti-establishment tree
to Hinton and The Outsiders. The attempted segregation of teenager reality from canonical
literature can no longer be disguised behind a concern for literary value. Due to Hinton’s
efforts, teenagers are outsiders no more.
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