

The Outsiders - Session 1

Author: Susan Eloise Hinton (July 22, 1948)
Written in: 1964/5
Published in: 1967
Genre: Young Adult Fiction, Coming-of-age
Setting: 1960s Oklahoma, USA

- **What did you think to the book?**
- **Did you enjoy the book?**

Teenagers

The term 'teenager' first entered the English language a bit before WWII, but it only really started to enter common usage in the later 1940s. By the 1950s, people were then starting to question what it actually meant to be a teenager.

Prior to this time, you were either a child or an adult. As soon as you stopped being a child, you would wear the clothes of an adult, be given adult responsibilities and expected to behave as an adult.

People had always known the time when one was a teenager was a time of change and self-discovery, as can be seen in say the characters of Romeo and Juliet, but there wasn't a teenage culture as such.

- **So what changed?**
 - **More staying in education longer** - In the US: after WWII many more high schools (for 14-18 years) were being built, and the curriculum shifted towards education for life rather than just as preparation for college. This took high school enrolment and graduate numbers right up. In the UK: in 1947, 15 became the compulsory school age. With teenagers hanging around each other and away from the rest of society, school and school culture became a sub-group [a smaller subdivision] of society.
 - **Film** - where teenagers and young adults were becoming the subject of films, influencing behaviour, language and fashions. E.g. Rebel without a Cause (1955).
 - **Music** - music being made by teenagers and young adults for teenagers and young adults. Elvis Presley and rock n' roll completely changed music forever. While bands like The Beatles were also changing fan behaviour forever - Beatlemania.
 - **Post war economic prosperity** - leading to more jobs, and higher spending power for this age group than previous generations of teenagers.
 - **The motor car** - It gave teenagers freedom to go where they wanted, when they wanted.
 - **Population boom** - making a disproportionately large teenage/young adult generation - In the US in 1960, half of the population was under 18.

Subcultures

A subculture is a group of society who share similar styles, behaviours and interests.

School subculture, teenage subcultures and music subcultures often overlap as most teenagers are still in some form of formal education, and most groups are formed around shared interests (or rejections of an interest, e.g. anti-school groups).

- **How many school/teenage sub-cultures can you name?**

(US) Jocks - sporty kids

Nerds/geeks - academic kids

Goths/punk/emo/metalheads

Hippies

Skaters

'The Cool group'

Social butterflies.

1960s Beatniks

(UK) 1960/70s Mods (vespas, tailored suit, loafer shoe or Chelsea boot, skinny tie) and Rockers (leather jackets, jeans, motorbikes)

Social Conditioning

Through out the 1950s, 60s and 70s, "mental hygiene films" were shown in American schools to teach young people how to behave according to the social expectations of the day (as determined by the adult population). They were short films that covered topics from going to school, how to date, how to respect you parents, how to be a good citizen, etc.

Watch:

Your Junior High Days - [www.youtube.com/watch?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBPfLrjZTiM&list=PLXOInCaUuD6iHxw1055wDy_AzvBI9H9Xj&index=64)

[v=uBPfLrjZTiM&list=PLXOInCaUuD6iHxw1055wDy_AzvBI9H9Xj&index=64](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBPfLrjZTiM&list=PLXOInCaUuD6iHxw1055wDy_AzvBI9H9Xj&index=64)

- **How would you react to being shown that in school?**
- **How do you think a young person from the 1960s would have reacted?**
- **How do you think someone who didn't fit in or have a group of friends would feel after watching that?** (victim blaming)
- **What messages was it giving?** (be yourself, but only if you are like everyone else, be a grown up, and take all the responsibility that comes with adulthood, you are on your own)
- **How do you think this reflected adult attitudes toward young people?**

In *The Outsiders* we meet a **subculture** called **Greasers**.

The name 'greaser' goes right back into the 1800s, where it appears to have been used as a derogatory term directed at Mexicans and American Mexicans.

It may have been referring to "the practice of Mexican labourers in the Southwest greasing their backs to facilitate the unloading of hides and cargo," (Steven, Bender (2003-01-01). *Greasers and gringos : Latinos, law, and the American imagination*. New York University Press.), possibly their skin colour, or presumptions about their hygiene.

Gradually, it started to become associated with machine work and mechanics (again in a pejorative way), and by the 1950s/60s young, white lower/working class men and teenagers, who dressed in denim, leather jackets and had greased back hair.

Greasers are one of the first kinds of US street gangs.

Hoods were poor, often ill-educated, white young adult/teen males, that hung out in neighbourhoods (hence the term), and were notoriously violent and often caught up in organised crime. They dressed similarly to Greasers so superficially the two could be grouped together.

The **Socs** or **Socials**, is just the name used for the middle-class kids in the book, but groups under different names were like them all over America. They were young adult/teen males (and females) from the more affluent families, looking at going to Ivy League colleges after high school. In the mid-60s, many of the males wore the expensive madras shirts (checked/plaid) that were popular at the time, chinos, brown jackets, and other items that were popular apparel for middle-class adults in the US.

• **Why do you think S.E.Hinton chose to write a story about these two groups?**

Watch:

S.E. Hinton Celebrates 'The Outsiders' Celebrates 50th Anniversary (2017) - www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvQ4GIYihzg (5mins)

• **Why do you think this book is still being read in not only American schools, but all over the world?**

The themes remain universal:

- Family
- Social problems
- Societal divides - inequality
- 'Big' society
- Self-sacrifice
- Empathy
- Preserving the beauty and innocence of childhood
- Honour
- Toxic masculinity
- Not belonging - being on the outside even of your outcast group - everyone feels

and outsider at times

• **Why do you think the majority of characters are male?**

- In those times, females were not given as great a freedom as males, so the story could not have played out in the same way
- Hinton was inspired by an act of violence against a male - social inequality wasn't expressed in the same way in female culture - so it would not have fitted what she experienced.
- Hinton was a tomboy, so possibly didn't relate to females in the same way, and found it easier to write about males.
- Books with male leads tended to sell more, so it may have never been published if it was about females.

• **Why is there also an absence of adults**

Hinton said she didn't know much about adults, how they thought or why, so felt she couldn't write an adult character realistically, and consequently just left them out.

• **Can you remember any of the cultural references used within the book?**

(<https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/the-outsiders/analysis/allusions>)

Gone With The Wind, Margaret Mitchell (1936 novel, 1939 film) — the book P is reading to J.

Great Expectations, Charles Dickens (1860/61) — comparison to Pip, another outsider, looked down on by others. A major theme behind the story.

Jack London (1876 - 1916) — the tension building before the rumble, like in a JL story.

Nothing Gold Can Stay - Robert Frost (1874-1963) 1923 — Poem P recites, and J understands. A major theme behind the story.

Sleeping Beauty — Dally calls P that when he wakes him up in the church.

The Carpetbaggers, Harold Robbins (1961, film 1964) — a popular book belonging to D that P had read, and both thought the content was too adult for him. Passing remark.

The Readers Digest (well known and popular lifestyle magazine) — sarcastic off-hand remark about how Soda's comment was so funny it should be sent into the RD.

Elvis Presley (making music 1954 - 1973) — Greasers like Elvis, Socs don't.

Hank Williams (1923 - 1953, a country and western singer) — Buck Merrill liked Hank Williams, a quick way of expressing how unlikable (by the narrator) this guy was.

Mickey Mouse (cartoon/comic strip 1928 -) — they like watching it - ultimately, they are all still kids.

Perry Mason (TV Criminal defence lawyer 1957 - 1966) — passing comment about thinking law courts worked like on the show.

The Beatles (making music 1960 - 1970) — Socs like The Beatles, Greasers don't. Socs' 'semi-Beatle' haircuts.

The Hustler (1961) — Paul Newman, lead actor - coming out of film, pretending to be Paul Newman.

Will Rogers (1879 - 1935, American actor from Oklahoma) — a friend reminds P of Will Rogers, the smile.

Other references that pin point a time/place/tastes etc.

Language:

'tuff', 'fuzz', 'rumble', 'heaters', 'hoods', 'kiddo', 'hoodlum', 'you dig?', 'beefs', 'bugged'

Clothing:

Madras shirt, Madras ski jacket (madras = checkered)

Car:

Mustang, Chevrolet Corvair, T-bird

• **What is the point of all these references?**

- Brings the setting to life, giving a sense of authenticity to the story
- Brings authenticity to the character - what teenager doesn't make cultural references all the time?
- If the reference is known and understood, it can cut out a big long explanation of something
- It creates a bond between the reader and the narrator/author, if they share the same references
 - a sense of being in the same group

BUT...

- If the reader doesn't understand the references, or disagrees with them (e.g. if they are a huge Hank Williams fan). it can create a divide between author/narrator and reader.
- They can date a book
- References can be obsolete very quickly if they are not cultural references that can hold the test of time - it needs to be pop culture that is so huge, it won't be forgotten in a hurry.

- **Do you like or dislike all these references?**
- **Does it help you relate to the characters, setting or story in any way?**

Great literature often comes during times of great change, as the authors have something to say about the society they live in. This literature acts as a social commentary of the time. SE Hinton was wanting to write a book about her world and her people, for her generation - a book that she wanted to read.

- **How do you think people reacted to her book when it was first published?**
 - Shock at teenage drinking, smoking, and violence, particularly as this book was aimed at the young adult market, and not the adult market.
 - It has sold more copies than any other book of this genre.
- **Why do you think the author went by her initials rather than her full name?**

Influences

SE Hinton was influenced by many books and films, and although this comes out in the references used within the book, it also comes out in the text and story line themselves.

E.g.

Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)

"I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had."

Chp1 Para1, *The Outsiders*

"I have light-brown, almost-red hair and greenish-gray eyes. I wish they were more gray, because I hate most guys that have green eyes, but I have to be content with what I have."

Rebel without a Cause (1955)

Watch:

Trailer - www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXRgAXU1-T4 (2mins)

- Kids not fitting in
- Caught in fights when not looking for one
- Honour
- Toxic masculinity [a way of perceiving or expressing masculinity through behaviours and attitudes that have a negative impact on the individuals involved and society as a whole, e.g. fighting]
- Absence of adults in helping to solve problems
- Friends are more family than family
- A teen in crisis being 'taken out' by the police
- A character being pulled apart by the fighting of two other characters
- Teens looking for parental love, and getting rejected
- Not knowing how to deal with the accidental death of another teen, and being encouraged to run away from responsibility by others

West Side Story (1961)

Read:

Handout 1 - Extract from Chp9 of The Outsiders, P162/3 of 216

Watch:

West Side Story - Gee Officer Krupke! (1961) HD - www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7TT4jnnWys (4mins) - Laughing at own situation but really mocking those in authority.

• **Can you see any similarities between The Outsiders extract and Gee Officer Krupke!?**

• **What other parallels are there with West Side Story?**

• Two gangs - one is seen as inferior to the other; Sharks underdogs (both financially and in terms of social status), Jets run the town, with support from racist policemen [Socs have power from parent's status and respectability.]

• Both start with an introduction to the two gangs

• Both start with a member of the underdog group being jumped on by the more dominant group, but all their friends coming to the rescue

• Both look at the social problems of inequality

• Both depict toxic masculinity

• Weaker gang members protected by stronger ones - family, belonging

• A couple who are trying to better themselves and want to get out of the cycle (they live with their family, everyone else is from a more dysfunctional family.

Tony - a dreamer, wanting more - hope and aspiration for something better

Riff - lives with Tony's family, because he hates living with his uncle.

Ponyboy - a dreamer, doesn't enjoy fighting - wants to go somewhere where there is no more gangs and violence.

Johnny - relies on Ponyboy's family as he struggles living with his own.

• Rumbles

• Someone killed by a friend fighting for their friend - Tony and Riff, Johnny and Ponyboy

• Adults try to artificially force integration of groups. WSS: Dance to get the groups to mix. TO: school to get the groups to mix - both failed attempts

• A male and female make a connection from the different gangs which causes violence

• All gangs are troubled teens - failed by parents, state etc.

• Dally 'off on one' after Johnny dies/Tony 'off on one' after he thinks Maria is dead

• Bernados girl wants to help, but is prevented by the Jets - so she gets her own back/ Bobs girl wants to help, and is allowed

• **Does it matter that the book 'shares' elements with other stories?**

• **How much sharing would need to happen for you to consider it plagiarism?**

• **Is this book original?**

- it may share many elements of other stories, but it was the birth of its genre
- it brought elements together in a way other books hadn't
- is very much a product of its time
- equally, it is an age old storyline that at some point all generations of teenagers can relate to, that of feeling an outsider, and being judged for what you are, not who you are.

Many very famous stories are retellings of other tales, Shakespeare is renowned for 'stealing' story lines (and recycling his own).

• **Is this a story worth recycling and telling in another book/place setting/time etc.?**

Homework 1:

If you were to re-write this story, what place, time, etc. would you set it in? Who would your gangs be? How would the key scenes play out for you?

Write up an outline of your story, based on this story. Bullet pointed is fine. Feel free to use elements from any other cultural reference you fancy, including film, TV, music, literature and theatre.

Other links and articles:

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-outsiders>

<https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/the-outsiders>

<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/outside/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/books/review/Peck-t.html>

What Should a Teenager Be? Exploring the Birth of the Teenager in British Newspaper Archive
<https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2020/03/30/birth-of-the-teenager/>

<https://www.history.com/news/1950s-parents-house-parties-training-video>