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Getting Inside S. E. Hinton's
The Outsiders

The Outsiders continues to be relevant to adolescents, opening discussions on acceptance, rejection, and stereotyping. Middle school teacher Joanne S. Gillespie describes her unit on the novel, which includes art projects, blogging, and student-generated questions.

Reading the first sentence, "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," seventh graders at my independent suburban Maryland school are captivated by S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders, the story of lower-class greasers and their feud with the financially well-off Socials (aka Socs). I never tire of teaching this novel because it addresses timeless adolescent issues and students love it.

Getting Started

The Outsiders fits Hazel Rochman's definition of a good story: "A good story is rich with ambiguity, with uncertainty. You sympathize with people of all kinds, and neither side wins" (148). In The Outsiders, Randy, a Soc, puts down Ponyboy, a greaser, when he says, "You can't win, even if you whip us. You'll still be where you were before—at the bottom... Greasers will still be greasers and Socs will still be Socs" (117). The difficult struggle of Ponyboy and his friends has a powerful impact on my students.

The harmful effects of stereotyping are woven throughout the novel. Before I distribute the book, students talk about labeling. Using socioeconomic status, clothing, music, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth, students think of names to describe people. Within minutes, they generate long lists to share.

Next, they write a personal anecdote about a time when they were labeled and a brief explanation of how they felt. They are eager to share their stories. One boy remembered his first week at a new school: "I was still shy and was looking for a friend. Two girls were sitting on the ground and I was just walking by when they called out, 'Hi, Buddha!' They said it in a very sweet voice but I was very confused. I was like, what? Then they said they called me that because I was fat. I felt so bad. I was so ashamed. I felt self-conscious and I moped around for weeks." A thirteen-year-old girl recalled hugging her girlfriend to comfort her when some boys called them lesbians. She commented, "I hug my friend all the time, what's the big deal? All girls hug other girls! It's what we do to make each other feel better or just be friendly."

"To develop, students need to learn about each other's lives as well as reflect on their own. When they hear personal stories, classmates become real instead of cardboard stereotypes" (Christensen 7). It quickly becomes apparent that most names are hurtful (even jack has negative connotations), which leads to a discussion of their divisiveness. Students recognize that stereotyping often hinders communication and causes conflicts, and this is a perfect segue into The Outsiders.

The first chapter of the book is compelling. Although I do not think that teachers need to share biographical information about an author prior to reading a book, Hinton's reasons for writing this story warrant mentioning. In an interview published in Seventeen in 1967 Hinton said, "The Outsiders, like most of the things I write, is written from a boy's point of view. That's why I'm listed as S. E. Hinton rather than Susan on the book; since my subject was gang fights I figured most boys would look at the book and think, 'What can a
chick know about stuff like that?" She continued, "The custom . . . of driving by a shabby boy and screaming 'Greaser!' at him always made me boil. But it was the cold-blooded beating of a friend of mine that gave me the idea of writing a book; I wanted to do something that would change people's opinion of greasers" (133). This short introduction usually interests students without bogging them down with historical information about the 1960s, the time when the story takes place.

Reading for the Main Idea

Standard 3 in Standards for the English Language Arts states that students should "apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts" (NCTE and IRA 31). As Walter Dean Myers recently wrote in English Journal, "It is only when readers have the ability to fully absorb the material being read that the process becomes pleasurable and a lifelong reader is created" (36). I do not want to diminish students' enjoyment of the story by giving quizzes and tests, which they abhor. Instead, I ask them to write a title for each chapter to help me determine if they can identify significant events. Students quickly learn to summarize using only a few words. When sharing, they hear how the same information can be expressed in a variety of ways. I often notice that students who initially wrote dull titles start exhibiting more creativity and originality (NCTE/IRA Standard 11; 44) as we continue reading.

Analyzing Characters

One reason to read is to gain an understanding of people: "A great novel heightens your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil" (Nafisi 133). My students engage in diverse artistic activities that promote their thinking about characters. My hope is that they will recognize that "once you see someone as a person—their meanness and their courage—then you've reached beyond stereotype" (Rochman 147).

One quick art activity that enables students to share their insights is based on similes and metaphors. Students compare a character in The Outsiders to a tool and explain why the tool is appropriate. Almost instantly they think of creative responses, such as, "Dally is a Swiss army knife because he is useful in many ways but dangerous when mishandled." After sharing comparisons to tools, students think of metaphors or similes based on foods, household items, or other objects. Then they illustrate them for display in the classroom. Interestingly, students often point out both positive and negative traits as they describe characters in the story, confirming that the book "has . . . much to say about the inherent good in teens" (Seay 69).

Another activity is to construct a "body biography" (O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky) for a character in the novel. The first step is to sketch a large figure (one that fills a sheet of poster board) and draw the character's distinctive physical features and clothing. For instance, Johnny, a greaser, would have long, oily hair; his nemesis, Bob, would wear madras shorts. Next, students add words and symbols to convey information about the character's behavior, interests, fears, ambitions, and struggles. These are strategically placed on the poster. For example, one boy illustrated Ponyboy holding Gone with the Wind, a book that he treasured. A flaming church was in the background along with other items that played a significant role in the story. Placed over Ponyboy's heart were the words "stay gold," a reminder of Johnny's message to Ponyboy right before Johnny died (148).

The value of designing body biographies is that students think beyond stereotypes to illustrate the true personality of a character. When evaluating their visual portrayals, I do not grade artistic skill, but I look for accuracy, thoroughness, and insight.

Another artistic activity is to compose a "geometric story" that symbolically shows a character's traits and his or her relationship to other characters. Students cut out geometric shapes to represent characters in the novel, place them on backgrounds (like frames in a comic strip), and write captions to explain what is "picted." Colors and shapes suggest
personalities. Sizes and the way the shapes are grouped symbolize how characters relate to one another. For instance, one boy slightly overlapped a green circle and a yellow circle that were the same size. The caption read: "Johnny is good friends with Ponyboy." He explained that Johnny was green because he was "down to earth" and that Ponyboy was yellow because he had the potential to shine.

The caption on the second frame was "Johnny kills Bob." Bob was represented by a brown square with red (blood) seeping out, and the green circle (Johnny) had a splotch of red on it. Additional frames traced Johnny's journey, from hiding in the church to saving the entrapped children to telling Ponyboy to "stay gold." The final frame had a red X over a green circle and bore the caption, "Johnny dies."

These symbolic representations enable students (especially those who are not good writers) to demonstrate their ability to think analytically. When we look at all of the "geometric stories," it becomes apparent that the characters made sacrifices and forged bonds to overcome problems.

**Linking the Movie and the Novel**

There is a movie version of *The Outsiders*, featuring Matt Dillon, Patrick Swayze, and Tom Cruise, that always captures the attention of my seventh graders. Standard 6 in *Standards for the English Language Arts* states: "Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts" (NCTE and IRA 36). After viewing a film, students often write formal reviews or comparison-contrast essays. I offer other alternatives.

Sometimes the class writes brief, yet poignant, statements that we call "Bottom Line," patterned after the technique used in *People* magazine. In a few words, they express their opinions using language from the story or puns. Last year, one student who did not like the movie wrote, "The *fuzz* should arrest the producers," but most were enthusiastic, with comments such as "a *tuff* film" and "a *rumbling* good time" (italics added). We place the "bottom-line reviews" on the whiteboard in a continuum (from least to most laudatory) to display the range of opinions.

In our local newspaper, the *Washington Post*, there is a weekly column called "Family Filmgoer," which provides brief reviews of current films, including information about their appropriateness for family audiences. Using current columns as models, students write reviews of the movie version of *The Outsiders*. Most praise the film but advise parents that it is only appropriate for "mature 10–12 year olds," noting that it "contains sexual references and profanity." One girl cautioned, "There is a huge amount of blood shed throughout the entire movie and a flashback of a horrifying train accident."

After students view the movie, another option is to rewrite a scene using a contemporary setting or a different historical period. Rewriting provides a creative means to explore ways that tolerance and communication can prevent tragedy.

**Making Connections to Our Lives**

One reason to read is "to discover how literature can capture the richness and complexity of human life" (NCTE and IRA 15). To encourage this, I ask everyone to find articles in newspapers or magazines that connect to *The Outsiders*. After summarizing, students explain how their articles relate to the story. Many are about dysfunctional families, cliques, or gang warfare, showing how the incidents in a book written almost forty years ago are contemporary. This "current event" activity leads to animated discussions about issues in the world, the community, and the students' lives.

**Asking Essential Questions**

When planning curriculum, teachers at my school think in terms of *essential questions*. These are questions that probe for deeper meaning and foster the development of critical-thinking skills (Jacobs 25–33). Over the years, I have stopped writing questions. Instead, students compose open-ended discussion questions and choose the ones they want to discuss. I do not think I could write a list of questions as thought-provoking as theirs. The following is a partial list:

> Is one gang (greasers or Socials) better than the other? Explain.
Do you think that it was right for Johnny to kill Bob? Why?

Do you think this would have been an interesting book if it were written from a Soc's point of view?

Discuss Dally’s death. Would you label it a suicide?

How are the problems in the book similar to today’s problems?

Why does loyalty matter in a gang?

What did Johnny mean when he told Ponyboy to “stay gold”?

What are the pros and cons of being a greaser or a Soc?

Which character do you compare yourself to? Explain.

How would you feel if you lost a close friend?

Many of the questions encourage students to stretch beyond thinking cognitively about the book and to address social-emotional issues. “Students who explore the moral and ethical dimensions of literature see that reading can deepen their understanding of the complexities of human life, often affirming their own experiences or casting them in a new light” (NCTE and IRA 30).

Answering Essential Questions

The class used to gather in literature circles to discuss novels. Because of the availability of computers in our classrooms, we are now conversing via blogs (Holmes). Our computer teacher set up a free Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) on Nicenet (http://www.nicenet.org). Students register at the site and then write questions and answers that can be read only by seventh graders at our school.

Using a blog is interactive. One major benefit is that everyone participates. Another is that students correspond with one another and not just the teacher. Most become passionate as they engage in literary debates. When I asked my students to evaluate their blogging experiences, one boy wrote, “You can’t convey emotion through the computer. I think discussing something orally is better,” and a few thought that blogging slowed down the pace of our literary discussions. (This was somewhat true because I required them to write their responses in a word-processing program, edit them, and send them through spell check before submitting them to the blog.) However, most welcomed the opportunity to share their ideas with students in other seventh-grade classes, and those who were often quiet in class participated actively. In his reflection, one boy commented, “Blogging benefits me specifically because I don’t participate in class as much as I explain things through writing. My comfort level is higher using the blog.” The amount of writing certainly did not seem overwhelming. In fact, one student made a constructive suggestion: “It seems that we could answer the posed blogging questions as homework and then we could spend class time having oral discussion, not virtual ones.”

More Ways to Promote Thoughtful Discussions

Another way to generate thoughtful classroom conversation is to have each student select a passage from the novel that captures his or her attention because it is inspirational, puzzling, offensive, provocative, and so forth. After reading the passage aloud, the student explains why it was chosen and
then invites others to share their impressions. This idea-centered approach encourages students to focus on conceptual ideas and to use facts to support their understandings (Erickson 51).

Young adult author Laurence Yep writes, “I think the theme of the outsider appeals to them [readers of his books]. By definition, adolescence is a period of feeling like an outsider. Teenagers are literally outsiders in their bodies because they are unable to stop or control the physical changes that are happening. They are also starting to develop their separate identities as individuals” (53). Examining quotations from The Outsiders provides opportunities to think deeply about relationships. Early in the story, Ponyboy contemplates, “Maybe the two different worlds we [Socs and greasers] lived in weren’t so different. We saw the same sunset” (41). At a later point, he comments, “I’d rather have anybody’s hate than their pity” (162). Using the Think, Pair, Share technique (Gunter, Estes, and Schwab 279–80), students explore the meaning of significant quotes and discuss how they apply to their lives.

Let’s Get Musical

A good resource for lesson plans based on themes of friendship and social ostracism and their connection to music from the 1960s (including such classics as “Heartbreak Hotel” by Elvis Presley and “The Night Before” by John Lennon and Paul McCartney) is the “For Teachers” link at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum Web site (http://www.rockhall.com/programs/plans.asp?id= 950). We do not do a thorough study of music and The Outsiders, but we sometimes end with a musical celebration. In the film, Stevie Wonder sings “Stay Gold” (lyrics are available at http://azlyrics.com), a song that resembles the poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost, which is cited in the book.

For a culminating activity, students work with a partner or in small groups to write original lyrics for a song or rap (NCTE/IRA Standard 4; 33–34) based on a theme, character, scene, or relationship in the novel. After rehearsals, the class gathers together to perform. This collaborative activity encourages students to think creatively and use their musical talent as they reflect on the meaning of the story. Also, it’s festive and fun!

The Value of The Outsiders

The Outsiders is an exciting story that seventh graders enjoy reading. The characters have tough exteriors, but Hinton reveals that they are sensitive individuals facing difficult situations. As middle school students discuss the social dynamics between the Socs and greasers and people within their own groups, they learn to make sense of their lives. Although many good young adult novels are available, I keep returning to The Outsiders because its message is ageless. The story inspires adolescents to think about acceptance and rejection and the value of each individual.

Works Cited


Joanne S. Gillespie has been teaching seventh- and eighth-grade language arts at Green Acres School in Rockville, Maryland, since 1986. This is her fifth English Journal article. She thanks her teachers in the MAT program at Webster University for encouraging her to write for professional journals. email: joanneg@greenacres.org.