

## **'The Outsiders' by S.E. Hinton**

### **Revision – plot, characters and themes**

We first meet our narrator, fourteen-year-old Ponyboy, as he's walking home from the movies—alone, which is something he's not supposed to be doing. Ponyboy lives in a dangerous area. His East Side neighbourhood is patrolled by bullying Socials, rich kids from the West Side of town. Pony's a Greaser and defenceless Greasers are the Socials' favourite targets. Ponyboy is attacked by a group of Socials when he's in a vacant lot, just minutes from his home.

Luckily his older brother, Darry and Sodapop, and the rest of his gang, Steve, Two-Bit, Johnny, and Dalla, come to his rescue and chase away the Socials. We learn that Ponyboy and his brothers lost their parents recently in a car accident.

The next night (Saturday), Pony and Johnny go to the drive-in with Dallas. Two Socials girls are there watching the movie too. Dallas begins harassing them, but Johnny tells him to stop. Dallas does, but leaves in a huff. So the girls, Cherry Valance and Marcia, ask Pony and Johnny to sit with them and watch the movie. The girls are sitting alone because their boyfriends were drinking, and Cherry didn't want to be around drunk guys. Soon Two-Bit shows up and seems to hit it off with Marcia. Meanwhile, Pony tells Cherry about the horrific beating Johnny got from a gang of Socials last spring, a beating that's left him in a constant state of fear.

After the movies, Pony, Johnny, and Two-Bit begin walking with the girls to Two-Bit's house. He plans to drive the girls home but their boyfriends, Bob and Randy, intervene and the girls leave with them instead.

Later, Ponyboy and Johnny fall asleep in the vacant lot. When they wake up it is 2 a.m. Darry is furious when Pony gets home and they argue. Darry slaps Ponyboy, who then runs back to Johnny. They walk to the park and a gang of Socials, including Randy and Bob, attack them. One of the Socials, a guy named David, tries to drown Ponyboy in the fountain, and Ponyboy passes out. When he wakes up, he learns that Johnny stabbed Bob and Bob is dead.

Ponyboy and Johnny go see Dallas, who tells them to jump a train out of town and hide out in an abandoned church. He gives them some money. The two boys follow his instructions and spend five days in the church. Dallas shows up on the fifth day, and takes them out to eat. When they get back to the church, it's on fire, and a group of school children are trapped inside. Pony and Johnny rush in and save all the little kids. But a piece of burning timber falls on Johnny, and Pony is knocked unconscious by Dallas (who was putting out the fire on his back).

When Pony wakes up, he's on the way to the hospital. At the hospital, he's reunited with his brothers. He discovers that Dallas is okay, but Johnny is in critical condition and might die.

The next day is a big Greasers vs. Socials rumble. Cherry Valance has helped ensure that both gangs will fight fairly, and that neither will bring weapons. The Greasers win, and Pony and Dallas, who got out of the hospital in time for the fight, rush to the hospital to tell Johnny.

While they're with Johnny, though, their feelings of triumph quickly fade—Johnny dies. Dallas runs off, and Pony wanders the streets in a daze until a kind man offers him a ride

and takes him home. Back at home, Pony and the rest of the gang learn that Dallas has robbed a grocery store, that the cops are chasing him, and that he wants the gang to meet him at the vacant lot. The cops come to the lot and Dallas shows them his gun. They shoot and kill Dallas.

Soon after, a hearing is held on whether Ponyboy will face charges for running away, and whether he and Soda will be able to stay with their big brother Darry. The judge acts in the Curtis boys' favour, and life goes back to usual.

Except that it doesn't. Pony seems to be losing his mind, his balance, and his good grades. When his English teacher tells him to write an essay, one from the heart, about something meaningful to him, he realizes that he can share the story of the three dead boys with the world, and maybe make a difference in the lives of others. So, turns out, the story we've been reading is really Ponyboy's English homework.

### **Setting**

The setting is based on Hinton's hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she was living when she wrote the story as a high school student.

So why is *Ponyboy* so vague about time and place? Maybe because he's trying to both *represent* and *reach out to* the "hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities, boys [...] who jump [...] at their shadows" (12.65). The vague setting helps make the book relevant for people in other places and times. It isn't just about Tulsa; it could be about your hometown, too.

The bulk of the novel's action takes place over a week one autumn.

- Friday: The action begins on a Friday afternoon when Ponyboy gets attacked by the Socs as he's walking home from the movies.
- Saturday: At night Pony goes to the movies, and there's more violence, culminating in Bob's death.
- Sunday: Pony and Johnny are hiding at the church on top of Jay Mountain, where they stay for five more days.
- Friday: The fire.
- Saturday: The rumble, along with the deaths of Johnny and Dallas.
- The rest of the novel takes place from the following Tuesday until Ponyboy starts writing, some time during that semester.

### **East Side, West Side**

Ponyboy presents his city as split into two zones, the East Side and the West Side. These two zones are divided by economics. In this case, East Siders don't have enough money; West Siders have plenty. In *The Outsiders*, East Side and West Side function almost like symbols—symbols to represent the economic divide.

### **Country and City**

When Ponyboy and Johnny run off to hide in Windrixville, the story takes a turn for the pastoral. Pastorals often feature a contrast between the country and the city. Ponyboy and Johnny flee to the country and return to the city as changed young men. They discover the

hero inside, but even before the fire, Johnny in particular is altered. He's still desperate, but he's made the decision to face up to the killing of Bob when he returns home. He's also discovered the beauty and comfort in nature, and even in poems and books, as a result of hanging out with Ponyboy.

The "country" in *The Outsiders* also operates symbolically. It might represent that place in Johnny and Pony's imagination where divisions like Social and Greaser don't exist. When Pony and Johnny are talking about the country before they fall asleep in the vacant lot, Johnny says, "It seems like there's gotta be someplace without greasers or Socs, with just people. Plain, ordinary people". Then Pony says,

*"Out of the big towns [...]. In the country..."* (3.84)

Sure enough, in the country nobody seems to know they are Greasers or think these boys are different. In the ambulance, when Ponyboy tells Jerry he's a Greaser, Jerry has no idea what he's talking about. He accepts Pony, Johnny, and Dallas at face value, based on their heroism. He doesn't think they *look* like hoods.

### **The Church**

The church is in the middle of that pastoral setting, situated at the top of a hill. Ponyboy and Johnny can feast their eyes on the countryside stretching out beneath them. Yet, they're still isolated and outside of society, just like this church. It presents a gloomy contrast to the brightness of nature around them. Pony tells us,

*It was a small church, real old and spooky and spiderwebby. It gave me the creeps.*

Interestingly, Pony pretty much abandoned going to church since his parents died, mostly because his gang won't behave there.

Like other elements in the setting, we see some symbolic action here. Pony and Johnny are, in a sense, worshiping in this church—they're worshiping nature and friendship. They're also taking refuge and engaging in meditation. The church becomes a site of redemption for them when they rescue the schoolchildren from it and discover that they're courageous and bold in a way that makes a big difference in the lives of many people.

### **Society and Class**

Much of the action in *The Outsiders* is driven by class conflict. Fourteen-year-old narrator Ponyboy's gang, the Greasers, hail from the economically struggling East Side, while the rival gang, the Socials, come from the wealthy West Side.

As author S.E. Hinton tells us that the "Soc vs. Greaser conflict" was inspired by similar rivalries in her own high school. *The Outsiders* is concerned with internal conflict and with its characters' inner lives, but most of the action and conflict is framed by interactions within and between groups.

1. From Pony's perspective, what advantages do the wealthier Socials have that he doesn't? Why are these important?
2. At the rumble, Ponyboy thinks that Darry would be a Social if he didn't have Pony, Soda, and the gang holding him back. What do you think Pony means by this? Is it a compliment, or an insult?

3. What might motivate Bob and his friends to beat up kids who have less money? What would the story be like if it was told by Bob's point of view, or by one of Bob's friends?

### Loyalty

Loyalty is a point of pride, honour, and principle for Ponyboy Curtis. He doesn't like some of the people in his gang, especially dangerous Dallas Winston, but he would still do anything for Dallas and would defend him from danger if possible.

Loyalty, according to Ponyboy, is the thread that holds his gang together. It cuts across their differences. They're loyal to each other because they know each other well, have grown up together, and have faced hard times together. In the case of the Curtis boys, their loyalty is because they are brothers, and orphaned brothers at that. The novel explores what happens when Ponyboy and his oldest brother begin to lose this loyalty for one another, under the strain of their lives.

### **Questions About Loyalty**

1. Why does Ponyboy consider loyalty such an important quality for group members to have? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
2. What are some displays of loyalty seen in the novel?
3. Does Darry decide to raise Pony and Soda out of loyalty, love, a combination of the two, or some other factor entirely?
4. After Bob gets killed, the other boys flee the park. Does this speak to their loyalties? What might it say about them? Would Pony or any member of his gang ever leave a man behind, dead or alive?

### Love

*The Outsiders* features hints of romance, but that isn't the main event. Our narrator, Ponyboy, is most interested in showing us the love between gang members and challenging family relationships. Ponyboy loves his brother Darrel, but since the loss of their parents, Darrel has become different.

He's suddenly raising his two teenage brothers, and has taken on all of the responsibilities of a parent. Darrel is only twenty years old. Coming to terms with Darrel's position, and seeing the love behind it, is a big part of Ponyboy's growth in the novel. *The Outsiders* also looks at how, in the case of Johnny Cade, lack of love and support at home can have tragic repercussions.

1. Soda wanted to marry Sandy in spite of the fact that she became pregnant with another guy's child. Does his decision tell us anything about his love for her, or about his ideas about love in general?
2. What are some of the reasons Pony finds Soda so easy to love?
3. Why does Pony begin to doubt Darry's love?
4. Is Pony romantically interested in Cherry?
5. Why is Cherry afraid to fall in love with Dallas? Why is she attracted to him in the first place?

6. Why doesn't Darry have a love life?
7. What impact does the lack of love in Johnny's home have on him? Why isn't the love he gets from the gang enough to counteract the non-love his parents dole out?
8. Why do Dallas and Johnny love each other so much? What makes them so close?

## Violence

*The Outsiders* is a very violent book. Gang violence, child abuse, stabbings, shootings all drive the action. The novel explores the impact of living in a place where a teenager can't even walk home by himself and where fear is the predominant emotion, as is the case for recently orphaned Ponyboy Curtis and his friends.

While Ponyboy hates the violence and bullying in his neighbourhood, he recognises the positive benefits of friendly sparring between boys, and even "rumbles," so long as weapons aren't used and everybody plays fair. Such activities, he claims, help teenage boys release their endless supplies of energy and pent-up aggression.

1. Randy suggests that Bob is violent because his parents never told him "no" or gave him any boundaries. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. How does it make you feel when Darry slaps Ponyboy? Would you consider him abusive? Johnny gets hit at home – does that make Darry like Johnny's parents?
3. Will the Socials still terrorize Greasers after the story ends? Why or why not?
4. Did Bob deserve to die for the bad things he did?
5. Was it right or wrong for Johnny to kill Bob, considering the circumstances? Why or why not?

## Isolation

At the beginning of *The Outsiders*, young narrator Ponyboy Curtis feels isolated from the members of his gang, his brothers, and society at large. His intellectualism and his love of movies, books, and nature aren't really appreciated by the gang, or so he thinks. Pony's status as a Greaser also makes him feel like an outsider, locked out of opportunities that wealthier kids enjoy, and unfairly judged by teachers and other authority figures. Things are looking grim for Ponyboy and the other guys in his gang.

However, as the story progresses, Ponyboy becomes more aware of connections between Greasers and Socials and between his friends and loved ones. In the process of writing down his story, he learns the powerful sense of connection that can come from reaching out to other "outsiders," and from bringing their struggles to light.

### **Questions About Isolation**

1. What isolates Ponyboy the most? In what ways is Ponyboy an "outsider"?
2. Who is the most isolated character? Why?
3. Are the Socials isolated by their wealth?
4. What, if anything, do Pony and Johnny learn during the week they hide out in the church, away from society?

## Appearance

With a narrator as obsessed with his hair as *The Outsiders*' Ponyboy Curtis is, it's no surprise that the other characters' looks are also important to him. Clothing and hairstyles might seem like superficial markers, but they're also the means by which people express their public identities. Ponyboy and his gang don't have the cash for designer clothes, but they still manage to develop a distinctive style, which identifies them as Greasers.

Pony also spends a lot of time on faces. Dallas Winston has "dangerous" and "hardened" written all over his face. Johnny Cade's eyes show that he's a victimized, hungry, frightened kid. Of course, both Johnny and Dallas are also much more than this, as Pony comes to see. Pony learns he's misread both of his brothers too, because he hasn't been looking at life from their perspectives and has been fooled by their appearances.

### **Questions about Appearances**

1. How does Pony see himself at the beginning of the story? Does this change? If so, in what ways?
2. What does Ponyboy's hair mean to him? What does he think it says about himself? Why does he agree to let Johnny cut and dye his hair?

## Education

*The Outsiders* is what's known as a *Bildungsroman*. This literary term refers to the main character's journey toward self-discovery, and discovery of his or her place in society. Ponyboy Curtis, our protagonist, definitely fits this bill.

The novel also examines inequities in educational opportunities due to social and economic factors. Both of Ponyboy's older brothers have had to limit their educations in order to work and support their family. But it's not all bad. Ponyboy's English teacher, Mr. Syme, doesn't see things in "Greasers" vs. "Socials." He recognizes Pony's talent and takes into account all the trauma his student has been subjected to and how this might impact his performance in school.

### **Questions about Education**

1. Pony gets good grades, but he thinks it's easier for Socials to do the same. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Do teachers treat Greasers differently than Socials? Since we don't get to see inside a classroom in the book, consider your own experiences in school. Does one's outside-of-school environment have anything to do with school success?
2. Why does Ponyboy have trouble writing for his English class after Dallas and Johnny die?
3. What are a few things Pony learns about himself? What are some things he learns about others? What is the most important thing Pony learns, and why is it important?

## Choices

In the *The Outsiders* many factors limit the choices of Ponyboy and his friends, including lack of money and fear of violence. For example, Ponyboy wants to spend more time alone, in quiet contemplation and artistic musings. But that's not exactly an option—he has to stay with his gang for protection.

Even though Darrel did well in school and sports and earned a scholarship, college was outside of his financial range. However, over the course of the novel, Ponyboy starts feeling less trapped as he learns more about the choices that he does have—including choices of violence vs. nonviolence—and begins exercising them.

### Questions about Choices

1. Why does Ponyboy walk home alone, even though he knows it's not safe? Is he just making a stupid decision? Is he trying to assert his right to walk home alone?
2. Does Johnny make the right decision when he fatally stabs Bob? If he hadn't stabbed Bob, do you think Ponyboy would have died? Did Johnny have any other options besides violence?
3. Why does Darry choose to raise his brothers, rather than pursue his own dream of going to college?
4. Do you agree with Ponyboy that Dallas committed suicide? Why or why not? If so, why do you think he made that choice?
5. Randy tells Pony that he wouldn't have gone into the burning church to save the children. Do you believe him?

## Character Analysis

### Ponyboy

Ponyboy is fourteen and is the narrator of this tale. Writing his story becomes a way for Ponyboy to deal with the grief he has experienced. When we meet Ponyboy, both of his parents have already died in a car accident and he's being raised by his brothers.

We can empathise with Ponyboy's moodiness, forgetfulness, and confusion.

These attitudes and behaviours only increase after Johnny and Dallas die. Ponyboy barely knows where he is or what he's doing. *I wasn't scared. It was the oddest feeling in the world. I didn't feel anything – scared, mad, or anything. Just zero.*

The world is a hostile place he can't cope with. He's slipping away, and he's doing things that aren't in his best interest, almost against his will. At the end of the novel Ponyboy finds a way to live in the world again through writing, self-expression, and reaching out to his teachers and peers: *Suddenly it wasn't only a personal thing to me. I could picture hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities. [...] Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better.*

*I'm supposed to be smart; I make good grades and have a high IQ and everything, but I don't use my head. Besides, I like walking. (1.6)*

Ponyboy gets straight A's, excels at both sports and art, and is an impressive writer. Pony's interested in everything from books and movies to the intricacies of nature. Pony's interests isolate him from his friends and family. Numerous times he tells us he's "different" and misunderstood. He implies that Greasers are unfairly judged by teachers and other authority figures because of their financial status and their distinctive way of styling their hair, dressing, speaking, and acting.

Luckily, Mr. Syme, Pony's English teacher, understands what Pony's going through and encourages Ponyboy to write about his life. When Pony asks what his writing assignment is, Mr. Syme says, "*Anything you think is important enough to write about. And this isn't a reference theme [research paper]; I want your own ideas and your own experiences.*" By the end of the book, Pony's interests are no longer isolating. Part of Pony's coming-of-age happens because he sees that his talents and interest can actually connect him with people everywhere: *And I decided I could tell people, beginning with my English teacher.*

Ponyboy is not perfect, he is human and therefore makes mistakes. His biggest flaw might be that he is judgmental. At the beginning of the novel, he doesn't really like anybody except Johnny, Soda, and Two-Bit. It takes him a long time to understand that Darry actually loves him. And while he is loyal to the rest of the gang, he often doesn't approve of their behaviour or approve of the girls that they date: *They were the only kind of girls that would look at us, I thought. Tough, loud girls who wore too much eye makeup and giggled and swore too much.*

Through these judgments Ponyboy defines his ideas about right and wrong. He's learning to judge character, and is using judgment to just help make sense of the world. But, he also makes lots of hasty generalisations—some of which are resolved at the end of the book. For example, he realized that all Socials are not the same, and that they're all people. He learns to separate group identity from personal identity.

## **Johnny Cade**

According to Ponyboy, sixteen-year-old Johnny looks like "a little dark puppy that has been kicked too many times and is lost in a crowd of strangers." When his parents aren't physically and or verbally abusing him, they're ignoring him. Johnny can stay away from home for long periods of time and nobody seems to care or notice, in sharp contrast to Pony's situation. Johnny was also brutally beaten by the Socs last spring and now lives in a constant state of fear: *I had never been jumped, but I had seen Johnny after the four Socs got hold of him, and it wasn't pretty. Johnny was scared of his own shadow after that. He was sixteen then.*

Johnny also doesn't seem to be given enough to eat, he often sleeps outdoors, and he even contemplates suicide. The gang makes up Johnny's entire support system, but since they're struggling kids themselves, this support is far from sufficient.

Despite his difficult home situation, Johnny endeavours to always treat people with understanding and kindness. He even challenges his idol, Dallas, when he sees how uncomfortable Dallas is making Cherry and Marcia at the movies.



Just before he dies, Johnny tells Pony to "Stay gold" At the time, Pony has no idea what he's talking about. This is a reference to the Robert Frost poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay," that Pony recited when he and Johnny watched the sun rise on top of Jay Mountain. In the poem, the speaker suggests that the sunrise (gold) is the most innocent, pure part of the day. As the day goes on, it loses that innocence, just as human beings lose a lot of their innocence and purity when they grow up. Johnny explains that Pony's love of nature is part of his innocence, and that by holding on to this love, Pony can "stay gold."

Johnny saved the children from the burning building because it was the right thing to do, *Listen, I don't mind dying now. It's worth it. It's worth saving their kids. Their lives are worth more than mine, they have more to live for. Some of their parents came by to thank me and I know it was worth it.* However Johnny's words show us a case of deep self-esteem problems; he doesn't think that his life is worth as much as the kids.

Even as a hero, Johnny doesn't really feel worthy of life. He's been kicked around, ignored, and abused all his life. Outside of his gang of friends, he's been told over and over that he has no value. Physical and emotional strain, plus guilt over killing Bob, make it even worse. When Johnny writes "Some of their parents came by to thank me and I know it was worth it," he reveals his belief that a person like him, whose own parents don't love him, can't be worth much. Johnny doesn't realise that his parents' abuse really had little to do with who he is, and more to do with who his parents are.

Johnny seems also to be saying that he's come to terms with his death, because death was the price he had to pay to regain some of the innocence he'd lost. Rescuing the children was a selfless action that Johnny performed willingly and performed well. After being involved in so much violence, it probably made him feel clean and new, at least to some degree.

### **Dallas (Dally) Winston**

The rough, rugged and haunted Dallas fascinates Ponyboy. Even before Ponyboy becomes a writer, Dallas acts as his muse, or inspiration. Ponyboy says, *I used to like to draw his picture when he was in a dangerous mood, for then, I could get his personality down in a few lines.* Notice the "used to." This is some subtle foreshadowing. Ponyboy no longer sketches Dally because Dally's already dead when Pony's writing. His death is one of his reasons Ponyboy's writing this piece in the first place.

Pony makes it clear early on that Dally really is a criminal. He's been to jail and was even involved in serious gang activity in New York City. Pony says, *[...] he got drunk, he rode in rodeos, lied, cheated, stole, rolled drunks, jumped small kids—he did everything. I didn't like him, but I had to respect him.* His character is often presented in an unfavourable light. His aggressive behaviour is demonstrated in his escape from the hospital. We read that he escaped from hospital by holding a knife to a nurse's throat.

However, Dallas is much more than just a criminal and thug. Ponyboy never condones the things Dallas does, but he shows us another side of Dally's complex personality. Dally doesn't have any interest in saving the little children from the fire, but he doesn't hesitate to try to save Johnny. In fact, Johnny's life is so valuable to him that he doesn't think he can live without Johnny. Ponyboy deals with his grief over Johnny's death by pretending Johnny isn't dead, but Dally's response is to embark on a suicide mission. Dally robs a grocery store,

waves an unloaded gun at armed police officer, and is killed in blaze of gunfire, *He was dead before he hit the ground. But I knew that was what he wanted, even as the lot echoed with the cracks of the shots, even as I begged silently – Please not him [...] I knew he would be dead because Dallas Winston wanted to be dead and he always got what he wanted.* Dallas was smart, and he knew what would happen if he showed the cops his gun: they would shoot him and he would die. Pony's analysis seems right on. We can imagine that Dallas was overcome with guilt, and this guilt is probably what drove him to seek out the cops' bullets. Dally might have been thinking that if he hadn't helped Johnny and Pony hide, then none of this would have happened. He might have thought that if he'd been there to protect Johnny in the park, Johnny wouldn't have killed Bob. He might have been thinking that if he'd gone into the church to help Johnny and Pony, then perhaps they would've gotten out sooner, and Johnny wouldn't have been fatally injured by the burning timbers.

### **Darrel (Darry) Curtis**

At twenty, Darry is the eldest member of the gang. He's the oldest of the Curtis brothers. He's strong, principled, very serious, often grumpy, and can get violently angry. Pony tells us that before their parents died, Darry "had been real popular in high school; he was captain of the football team and he had been voted Boy of the Year". Due to his physical prowess, the gang calls him "Superman" and "Muscles". Ponyboy tells us, *one time Steve made the mistake of referring to him as "all brawn and no brain" and Darry nearly shattered his jaw. [...] Darry had never really gotten over not going to college.*

When the Curtis parents died, Darry took on the responsibility of raising his two teenage brothers. Darry works all the time at two jobs, one of which is roofing. He doesn't have much of a life outside of work, the gym, and his responsibilities at home.

Ponyboy's feelings toward Darry are conflicted and complicated: they struggle to understand each other. Darry is hard on Pony because he sees Pony's potential and is afraid that if he isn't hard on Pony, then Pony won't reach that potential. It also must be noted that Darry is still very young and it is natural that he would struggle with his new role as parent. His little brother's safety is all in his hands, and there's danger lurking around every corner. When Pony doesn't take care of himself or act responsibly, Darry feels frustrated and angry. He has pressure from all sides, and is always on the verge of exploding. According to Pony, Darry *wasn't* like this before their parents died.

Darry loses his temper in a moment of frustration and worry and slaps Ponyboy, "Darry wheeled around and slapped me so hard it knocked him against the wall". For Pony, who had never before been hit at home, the act is unforgivable, even though he hears Darry's apology. In his eyes the violence that plagues him on the street has now seeped into his own home. For Darry, it's the beginning of a lot of guilt. If Ponyboy hadn't run off that night, Pony and Johnny wouldn't have walked to the park and Bob would not have been killed.

It's only when Ponyboy realizes that Darry loves him that we witness a softer side to Darry. Pony comes to see that Darry is little more than a child himself, and one who has chosen to care for his brothers and give them a good life, rather than lead the relatively free and easy life of most twenty-year-olds.

## Sodapop Curtis

Seventeen-year-old Sodapop is Ponyboy's energetic, relatively carefree and handsome older brother. He is also smart, athletic, and hardworking. In contrast to Ponyboy's conflicted emotions regarding Darry, Pony's feelings for Soda are entirely positive. He idolises and loves his older brother and acknowledges how smart he is.

Pony's only problem with Soda is that Soda dropped out of high school. He dropped out because he wasn't excelling in school, and because he needs to work to help support the family. But, for Pony, this is still a source of shame, and probably guilt as well. On a conscious or subconscious level, Pony feels that if Soda didn't have to help provide for him, his brother might still be in school. His shame is also due to the social stigma of dropping out of high school: *"Dropout" made me think of some poor dumb-looking hoodlum wandering the streets breaking out lights – it didn't fit my happy-go-lucky brother at all.* Pony later learns that, although Sodapop doesn't want Pony to drop out of high school, he's happy with his own choice to do so. He likes his work at the gas station, and says he wasn't getting anything out of school.

Sodapop is always cheery, in sharp contrast to brooding and moody Ponyboy and Darry. He takes his role as middle brother seriously, and is constantly the in-between for Pony and Darry, acting as a buffer against their constant clashes.

Both brothers have been taking him for granted, in part because they're too wrapped up in their own dramas, and in part because Soda waits a long time to tell them how he really feels. Only at the very end of the novel do Sodapop's layers start to emerge. We learn lots of important things that deepen his complexity as a character. First, we learn that his brothers' fighting is really hard on Soda, *"It's just... I can't stand to hear y'all fight... Sometimes I have to get out or... It's like a middleman in a tug o' war and I'm being split in half... We're all we've got left. We ought to be able to stick together against anything. If we don't have each other, we don't have anything."* This also lets us know that Soda's role as peacemaker isn't just superficial, but is related to his core values and his way of looking at family. We see just how much he values peace and his brothers.

We also learn that Soda has been having hard times with his girlfriend Sandy. Ponyboy had no idea. He knew Soda was in love with Sandy and planned to marry her, but Pony sure didn't know she was pregnant with another guy's child. He also had no idea that Sandy had left town to raise the baby, even though Soda wanted to marry her and raise the child as his own. This tells us a lot about his character as his deep rooted loyalty to those he loves is revealed. He loves Sandy completely, and can look past the fact that she cheated on him. He's willing to breach social conventions and be a father to a child that isn't his, taking on even more responsibility. But all that goodness comes to nothing. It's pretty clear that Sandy's parents rejected Sodapop as son-in-law material.

## Cherry Valance

Sherri "Cherry" Valance, a girl from a wealthy family and the girlfriend of a Soc named Bob, is the biggest female character in *The Outsiders*. Cherry is a unifying agent in the novel. When she meets Ponyboy, she has already formed the idea that Greasers and Socials are

connected through basic human struggle and through nature. Her willingness to *try* to connect has a big influence on Ponyboy.

Although Cherry's a connective force in the novel, she's also a dividing one. She's aware of the realities of the social climate in which she lives and she accepts them, at least at first. After hanging out with Pony, she tells him, "[...] if I see you in the hall and don't say hi, well, it's not personal or anything. [...] We couldn't let our parents see us with you all." Understandably, this makes Pony feel like trash. Cherry is a cheerleader and is very popular, and she values these roles. She's living in the same violent pressure zone as Ponyboy, and her boyfriend Bob is one of the people largely responsible for this pressure.

Her role as connector between Socials and Greasers becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses. After Johnny kills Bob, Cherry can't stand to visit Johnny in the hospital. Although she was Bob's girlfriend, she does publicly state that Bob was drunk, violent, in the wrong, and probably the aggressor in his fight with Johnny. She also mediates between the Greasers and the Socials to make sure that the rumble is fair, and that neither side brings weapons. She's committed to nonviolence and has a vision of social equality. She's trying to do the right thing and make things better for those around her.

### **Randy Adderson**

Randy is Marcia's boyfriend, as well as Bob's best friend. He probably participated in the beating of Johnny, and certainly in the violence against other Greasers. When Bob is stabbed by Johnny in the park, Randy runs off with his friends, leaving Bob's bleeding body behind. However, Bob's death does have an impact on Randy. Like Cherry, he tells the truth about what happened that night, and he makes several efforts to communicate with Ponyboy. Randy's not a major character, but he does have an impact on the events and the outcome of the story. By telling the truth, Randy shows support for Ponyboy, and he helps keep Pony's life from getting any harder. He also gains some much-needed integrity.

### **Bob Sheldon**

Bob is Cherry's boyfriend. He's the hard-drinking ringleader of the Socials terrorizing Greasers. Bob is one of the Socs who beat up Johnny so violently that it drastically affected Johnny's ability to relax in social situations, *Johnny was breathing heavily and I noticed he was staring at the Soc's hand. He was wearing three heavy rings.*

Bob is the Soc who orders David to "give [Pony] a bath" in the fountain in the park. This act ultimately leads to his death. We aren't sure exactly what happens while Pony is being drowned, but we imagine that Bob approaches Johnny. Interestingly, Johnny says he killed Bob to stop David from drowning Pony. So maybe he went after David with the knife and stabbed Bob when Bob tried to stop him.

Most readers have difficulty mustering sympathy for Bob, even though he gets killed in the novel. We aren't shown any of his good qualities. Cherry's doesn't even offer any justification for her love for him, other than that he's good-looking and charismatic.

Randy doesn't try to justify why he cared for Bob, but he does offer some explanations for Bob's behaviour, *"They [Bob's parents] spoiled him rotten. He kept trying to make someone tell him "No" and they never did. [...] That was what he wanted. [...] To have somebody lay*

*down the law, set the limits, give him something really solid to stand on.*" Randy believes that Bob was so out of control because he didn't have enough discipline or boundaries at home. He says, *"If his old man had belted him—just once, he might still be alive."* Randy seems to be suggesting that if Bob's father had been more violent toward him then Bob, in turn, would have been less violent.