



Existence and Transformation: Innocence, Identity, and Existential Choice in the Outsiders

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ABSTRACT

This Paper investigates the existential topics of purity, selfhood, and decision in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. The work of existential philosophy is about how young characters cope with the vulnerable condition of innocence in the times of social upheaval and internal conflict. It reveals the identity breakdowns that the characters face when they encounter the reality that is ingrained with the problems of class differences and violence. Concentrating on some moments of existential decision, the paper discusses these choices' role in the development of personality and experience in the story. The public finally points out that Hinton's *The Outsiders* is more than just the novel of a boy becoming a man; it is about the Human Condition—the conflict of being and becoming that is so important in the process of formation of the person.

Keywords: Existentialism, Innocence, Identity crisis, Existential choice, *The Outsiders*.

1.Introduction

S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* is a classic book in the young adult literature field, which is well-known for its honest and heartfelt depiction of the teenage years while dealing with the local communities' problems (Hinton, 1967). The story was set on the background of the class war and got violent thus the novel tackled the delicate innocence of the youth from the perspective of their journey of figuring out who they are in a divided society. Hinton, through the characters of Ponyboy Curtis and his friends, gives a detailed story that is not just a simple coming-of-age tale but also deeply questioning what being and becoming really mean. This paper looks into the subjects of innocence, identity, and choice in *The Outsiders* and focuses on the ways in which the characters decide their way of life while the society's social pressures, and their own inner conflicts are present. By concentrating on some existential decisions, the paper illustrates the characters' deep transformation in personal growth while facing the realities of life. To sum up, the author is very much of the opinion that *The Outsiders* is full of the human condition depiction and it accentuates the tension between being and becoming which is the main thrust of the identity formation journey.

1.1 Background of the study

Since 1967 S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* was a groundbreaking novel that highlighted the harsh life of teenage people from especially working class families. From that time it became the focus of American young adult books. Results are definitely thanks to Hinton, a girl who was only sixteen years old when she wrote the novel. It became a kind of milestone for an authentic voice and no shame portrayal of adolescent identity, class conflict, and emotional vulnerabilities (Cart, 2010). The setting for the story of the rivalry between the clash and the Greasers is still very similar period of social unrest in 1960s America, one where the wealth gap and cultural shifts were at the forefront of youth indifference and alienation (Blasingame, 2005).

As well as it has become a social realist novel, it also still has agitated and questioned philosophical issues and in particular those that concerned the existentialism doctrine. The narrator of the story, Ponyboy Curtis, is a lot of times unsure about his identity and the place he holds in the world. Additionally, he has to deal with moral confusion, death, and the loss of innocence, topics that are very often referred in the existentialist movement emphasizing authenticity, individual choice, and the quest for meaning in a world gone mad (Flynn, 2006). Those hidden ideas imply that *The Outsiders* is not just a journey of a young boy but a saga full of existential questions.

Much of this has enabled an interpretation of the characters and especially the figure of Ponyboy to be considered from the viewpoint of personal decisions and existential issues. Thus, it makes the reading of the novel a philosophical and critical one.

1.2 Importance of *The Outsiders* in Literature

The Outsiders, S.E. Hinton's revolutionary novel, is known as one of the best in American literature and the young adult (YA) genre. The teen literature of the time did not honestly and emotionally cover the lives of young people. Hinton's piece of art has been highly praised for its very lively presentation of kids' lives with no barriers, that opened the problems of the socioeconomic gulf, the gangs, the failure of the emotions, and the identity crisis (Cart, 2010). Hinton thus did some reshaping of the young adults literature scene, allowing other writers to venture into the difficult topics of real life in future times.

The book's lingering popularity is a clear indication of its literary value and emotional power. It has become a must-have in school curricula throughout the world and is often hailed as the spark that ignited the contemporary YA genre (Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). Its simple vocabulary and characters that can be easily related to make it not only instructive but also convergence for readers, mainly adolescents who are confused about where they belong and who they really are.

Besides this, The Outsiders got known for its literary merit by dealing with the themes that are also featured in philosophical and psychological discourse. Several writers have pointed out that the struggle of identity formation, moral development, and existential crisis in the book is the same as in "serious" literature (Blasingame, 2005). The novel's knack for mixing literary storytelling and emotional realism is what makes it not only culturally important but also philosophically engaging.

1.3 Purpose and Scope of the Paper

The goal of the Paper is to investigate The Outsiders novel as the work of existential philosophy, mainly dealing with the topics of innocence, identity, and personal choice. The novel has been widely praised for its emotional depth and social relevance, but the research is directed to the exploration of characters—especially of Ponyboy Curtis—who are trying to solve essential existential problems of identity: "Who am I?", "What kind of person should I be?", and "What does it mean to grow up in a world filled with violence and loss?" The last set of issues is very important for existential philosophy because it states that the individual has to come up with meaning in a world which seems to be indifferent or full of confusion (Flynn, 2006).

The Paper focuses on the main characters' psychological and philosophical development and is limited to the moments when the characters are forced to make difficult moral decisions. Besides this, it takes into account the facts that the class division, social expectations, and personal traumas in the times of the crisis of the characters' sense of self are actually affecting their fight for retaining innocence (Erikson, 1968). Picking out the narrative events that are the most representative of the characters' struggle—Johnny's sacrifice, Dally's despair, and Ponyboy's reflection—allows us to see existential choice as a door-opener to each character's coming to terms with the new self.

1.4 Thesis Statement

This paper contends that S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders is beyond a teenage drama about gang rivalry—it is a subtly figurative work of existential transformation. The novel, through the delicate innocence of its young protagonists, reveals how identity is not a static object but formed by pivotal decisions made in the face of pain, violence, and bereavement. Using existentialist philosophy, this paper argues that the novel's profound significance is still its depiction of the transition from being to becoming—an inner struggle that is metaphorically depicted as the human condition (Flynn, 2006).

2. Literature Review

S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders has been the subject of many discussions due to its depiction of adolescent troubles, class division, and social alienation. Initially, it was seen as a major step in the young adult fiction genre, with Hinton praised for giving teenagers a voice that was unheard by the adult world (Cart, 2010). Those who reviewed the book still frequently emphasize the novel's very positive and authentic depiction of the emotional lives of the working-class youth, especially when the violence and loyalty within the gang culture are explored (Blasingame, 2005).

However, new research directions have altered the interpretation of The Outsiders. The novel is now seen through a psychological and philosophical lens to a greater extent. Erikson's identity crisis theory has been extensively applied to the characters of Ponyboy and Johnny's, to clarify how they get caught up in the transition from adolescence to adulthood and face an inner struggle (Erikson, 1968). These guys are going through what Erikson names "identity versus role confusion" especially in the light of their moral crisis and trauma.

Some of the more recent academic works choose to analyze The Outsiders in terms of the existential philosophy. According to these authors, the novel's constant stress on power of choice, freedom, and calcification of the initial good nature follows the main ideas in existential philosophy – especially in the works of prominent philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Viktor Frankl (Flynn, 2006; Frankl, 1985). The existential crisis that they are facing is not only due to their locality but because they are caught in the philosophical situation of being required to make a decision concerning their characters, thereby they lose oneself in this act of moral ambiguity.

This Paper tries to follow the course outlined by various literary, psychological, and philosophical views to investigate how the play represents the transformations during the characters' existential states. Besides that, the paper supports and extends the argument presented in The Outsiders that personal identity is a process of formation and reformation induced by the crisis of choices rather than being the default state or inherited condition.

2.1 Studies on Innocence, Identity, and Existentialism in Literature

Literary scholars have long been fascinated by innocence, identity, and existential crisis. Innocence usually correlated with youth and moral purity is a constant theme in works, which deal with the process of growing up. In literature, the loss of innocence is usually a turning point where the characters are forced to deal with the moral ambiguity of the grown-up world (Kidd, 2004). The deepest it's in coming-of-age stories, where the main characters, through hard life experience, decision, or social pressure, make psychological and emotional progress.

Identity, as a literary theme, has been approached from various theoretical perspectives. Scholars of postmodern and psychoanalysis have given the greatest importance to identity being a fluid and fragmented from the internal desire, many modern and contemporary novels, especially young adult literature, are able to explore how characters reinvent themselves through crucial existential experiences by fusing these topics. *The Outsiders* by Hinton definitely follows this line of work when it comes to telling the story of a gang of lads whose personalities were shaped by violent acts, grief, and the search for rationale in the turbulent world.

2.2 Gap in Research That This Paper Addresses

Though *The Outsiders* has been mined for sociological, psychological, and literary viewpoints, it is hardly touched in the context of its existential themes, particularly its investigation of the identity development through the existential decision and the insignificance of the purity due to the violence in the society. A majority of the current studies focus on class conflict, teenage rebellion, or the identity crisis in a general sense (Cart, 2010; Blasingame, 2005), but fail to cover the full spectrum of philosophical analysis based on existential theory.

In addition, while Erikson's psychosocial model has been utilized to describe Ponyboy's character, the importance of existential freedom and responsibilities in those identities formation is hardly addressed (Erikson, 1968). At the same time, there are few research works that analyze the decisions and phenomena of moral in *The Outsiders* as the points of turning in existentiality — the stages at which characters decide their paths without being sure or they have given up.

The objective of this paper is to narrow these chasms in the research on *The Outsiders* by incorporating the existential philosophy into the novel's literary analysis. It focuses on the fact that Hinton's book not only illustrates the social condition of the kids who are in conflicts but also reveals the ineffable nature of human existence and continuous change. Hence, it broadens the novel's interpretive scope and proposes the fresh angles for its persistent popularity and validity.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes existential philosophy as its conceptual foundation to delve into a novel *The Outsiders* by highlighting the major existential notions of existence preceding essence, freedom, choice, alienation, and authenticity. Existentialism emanating from thinkers like Sartre and Frankl lays emphasis that human beings have no predetermined essential nature or identity but they become the result of their actions and choices (Sartre, 1943/2007).

The core principle of freedom and choice is at the very center of existential thinking. Even though the external conditions or society may have an impact on us, it is up to us to create who we really are through the exercise of our moral freedom (Flynn, 2006). Yet, this freedom is not without its negative sides such as fear and the need to take responsibility, especially when the issues of moral choice and uncertainty arise.

The motif of alienation runs through the idea of the self that gets lost, thus relationless to the others, the world (d'Eaubonne, 1974). The story of *The Outsiders* is vividly highlighted to the point that it mirrors a nightmare (e.g., socioeconomic), while the characters (Ponyboy) are mostly those alienated individuals who feel estranged from society due to class divisions and, moreover, internally, as they find it hard to grasp the concept of their own identities (Camus, 1942/1991).

To conclude the last idea of the existentialism is the ideal of authenticity, which means being oneself by receiving freedom and accepting the process of making conscious and significant decisions. The story is a quite vivid description of human nature in this light—the characters' journeys of self-realisation are often marked by experiences of loss, suffering, and the revelation of previous false beliefs (Frankl, 1985). Utilizing such existential ideas, this essay represents that *The Outsiders* dramatizes the vulnerable process of identity construction during a violent and disturbed society, thus focusing on the characters' repeated struggle for self-definition through the exercise of their existential freedom.

3. Innocence and Its Fragility

In *The Outsiders*, innocence depicts the untarnished condition of youth, which is susceptible to the tough world of life. Ponyboy Curtis, the novel's main character, typifies the vulnerable innocence that is severely affected by violence, loss, and social division that Hinton has approved through his words and the symbolic impartation of Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (Hinton, 1967). On several occasions, innocence, which is therefore the main theme of the book, has been explicated through the imagery of the poem, slow disappearance of youth as being and the ever-changing world.

The loss of innocence is most clearly demonstrated when Pony boy is dealing with the thuggish world made of gangs and the inevitable social divide. His experience of death, suffering, and betrayal makes him admit that his simplistic vision of the world is far from the complex moral world he must

learn from adults. This struggle between the new and the old is essentially the human experience, in which having one's innocence stripped is a painful but indispensable stage to reaching self-knowledge and adulthood (Kidd, 2004).

Additionally, the novel has it that innocence is the character of not just personal states but also of societies. The Greasers' lower position in society is a major factor that leads to tragic loss of their innocence as they are treated with prejudice and violence not only by their peers but also by the authorities. The condition of innocences' fragile social presence points the novel's emphasis on the institutional oppression that takes away the youth and their sense of home (Cart, 2010).

3.1 Identity Crisis and Social Challenges

In *The Outsiders*, identity crisis is present as a main theme and is the depiction of the conflict between adolescent characters' need to define themselves and the social forces that are at war with each other. Ponyboy and his friends deal with a problem of maintaining a stable concept of their own nature among the forces of gang loyalty, class division, and family dysfunction. This tension makes us aware of the social conditions as a source for the development of identity and the subsequent complications (Erikson, 1968).

The rift that divides society into Greasers and the Socs carries with itself not only class division, but also two opposing identity narratives. The Greasers are often depicted as a group of troublemakers and delinquents, whereas the Socs are seen as the privileged ones and generally accepted by the society. This division of society into two opposite camps causes characters to fall into very narrow roles that may be totally different from what their inner selves are and what they value, thus leading to the growth of alienation and the lack of self-confidence (Cart, 2010).

Ponyboy's reflective character further deepens his identity problem as well. He is deeply involved in his thinking and thus he questions the equality of two groups of Greasers and Socs, he even admits that they were more alike than different people who only went by the different names of the social groups. Reflecting his skepticism about fixed identities, he emphasizes the idea of an omnipresent and complicated identity which is his opinion while discussing existential accounts of the never-ending transformation process (Flynn, 2006).

Besides this, in the book it is shown how harsh experiences of violence act as a firing powder of the identity crisis. The passing away of Johnny and Dallas makes Ponyboy's existential thoughts a lot stronger and together they enable him to understand the true meaning of loyalty, justice, and personal responsibility. Their nature points out the difficulty of getting an honest identity in a broken and hostile world (Kidd, 2004).

In general, *The Outsiders* depicts an identity crisis as a situation deeply entangled with social problems, enabling us to see the characters' struggles to define their unique personality and at the same time dealing with those who want to identify or restrict them.

3.2 Existential Choice and Transformation

In *The Outsiders*, the theme of existential choice had a significant impact on the characters that changed the course of their lives, especially Ponyboy, as the characters faced moral uncertainties and community pressures. An existential viewpoint on the subject of character explains that the individuals are delineated by the decisions they make, which are the proof of their liberty and their duty of forming their own identity, however, they are affected by the environment (Sartre, 1943/2007).

Ponyboy direction to exemplify this principle. In the course of the novel, he undergoes significant moments that call for deliberate actions — whether to accept violence and be misunderstood or to seek understanding, to comply with social stereotypes or to contradict them. At the end of the novel, his decision to narrate his story stands for an active participation in the process of self-definition, thus his pain and bewilderment being turned into purpose and development (Hinton, 1967).

Referring to the novel, the change in the characters is correlated to their decision to accept the fact that human nature is a complicated thing. The fans of identity theory are convinced that the self-identity that we have is not permanent but is rather an evolution through life experiences and free will. This process, which is continuous, perfectly corresponds to the existentialist point of view where “becoming” instead of “being” is stressed as the endless creation of self by means of decisions made during life (Flynn, 2006).

The moral improvement of the characters like Johnny and Dallas is a good example of how existential choice is featured during the process of self-discovery when dealing with existential anxiety, obligation, and, occasionally, the need to give up something. Their acts, though tragic, are the signs of their attempts to be true to themselves and to find the meaning of life in a disorderly world (Frankl, 1985).

Therefore, *The Outsiders* shows that the change comes as a result of existential choice — the voluntary act of the self's definition in front of the hardships, which is finally the deeper knowledge of identity and human nature.

4. Conclusion

The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton is a novel that deeply engages the themes of innocence, identity, and the existential choice as a plot of teenage years and social conflicts. This essay has emphasized the vulnerability of innocence which makes the characters be exposed to the harsh world, thus, they are compelled to deal with a crisis of self that is formed not only by the inner struggles but also external influences. The social problems which Ponyboy and

his friends encountered significantly reveal thus the complexities of identity creation in a society divided into two parts, where stereotypes and class divisions are a great threat to personal growth.

In addition, the novel's depiction of the existential choice relation provides a compelling case for the transformative power of the conscious decision. The characters' moral and existential problems are the examples, that identity is not a fixed nature, but it is a developing process that is influenced by the freedom, responsibility, and the courage of going through the difficulties. Ponyboy's final choice of being the narrator of his story stands for the feasibility of self-identification by means of reflection and agency.

To sum up, *The Outsiders* is a novel that takes the coming-of-age narration and extends it to the universal issues that human existence is faced, i.e. the conflict between the being and the becoming. One can see clearly the path from innocence to experience, and from confusion to self-awareness as a basic trait of human nature. This work makes possible to obtain a new insight into the novel's philosophical parts and to confirm its still active presence in the literary and existential discussions.

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