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Positive and Negative Role Models in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the idea of role models and how a literary text can be used to think about and discuss the idea with young adult readers. Using S.E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders*, this paper proposes a four-stage process in which role modelling takes place. It considers the element of choice on the part of an observer of the modelled internal workings or external behaviour. The paper considers the protagonist, Ponyboy, and the role models in his life. It considers how his character develops over the course of the novel as a result of his observation and evaluation of other characters and their choices.

Keywords: young adult, choice, identity, behaviour, role model.

The importance of role models has often been talked about while discussing the holistic development of children and young adults. These youngsters are believed to be exposed to the "wrong sort" of messages in the media, leading to the "wrong sort" of behaviour – impulsiveness, disrespectfulness and a general inability to conform to the rules set by the generation before them.

The literature these youngsters are exposed to has the potential to greatly influence how they see themselves and how they would like to develop as people. If characters can be analysed in terms of their behaviour and the motivations behind their behaviour, readers can reflect on what qualities they would like to imbibe in themselves and what qualities they hope to avoid ever imbibing.

Role models can be thought of as falling under two categories – positive role models and negative role models – in the process of observing and reflecting on the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of others. Positive role models are those who emulate the behaviour and internal functioning that one sees as desirable, and hopes to inculcate in oneself. Negative role models are those who display precisely the sort of behaviour and internal functioning that one sees as undesirable, perhaps even destructive.

In discussing the idea of role models, one must be aware of the fact that modelling is not a form of coercion. It does not necessarily force one who observes the model of a certain behaviour or internal functioning, to copy it. What is often forgotten is that the observer has the power of choice. This paper proposes that role modelling consists of four stages – (i) the role model displaying a certain trait or behaviour; (ii) the observer observing the trait or behaviour; (iii) the observer deciding whether or not it is a desirable quality to have in himself/ herself; and then (iv) deciding whether or not to pursue the process of imbibing it.

As the above four stages suggest, much of the effectiveness of a role model lies not with the role model, but with the observer of the trait or behaviour being modelled. An important feature of the above suggestion is that it focusses on desirable or undesirable (as decided by the observer) traits or behaviour, not the person displaying them. This is because a person disliked by the observer may still possess physical, mental, emotional or spiritual

qualities that the observer values and would like to imbibe, while still comfortably continuing to dislike the possessor of those qualities.

This division between the model and the (positively or negatively) modelled traits has been made to emphasise the power of choice that is held by the observer of the modelled traits. In S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, the observer is the protagonist, Ponyboy. Ponyboy is a young boy of fourteen, born to a family with two older brothers, a loving mother and a father who was present and involved. When his parents are killed in a car accident, Ponyboy is raised primarily by his oldest brother Darry who is all of twenty, and his second brother Sodapop who is sixteen. They are not of the privileged class, which puts them in the category of 'Greasers', constantly pitted against the 'Socs', the "West-side rich kids" who are born to a position of financial advantage.

Ponyboy is part of a gang which he says are "almost like hoods". This gang consists of Ponyboy's brothers Darry and Sodapop, Steve, Two-Bit, Dally and Johnny. Both Darry and Soda had their academic paths interrupted, the former due to unfortunate circumstances and the latter by choice; Steve barely tolerates Ponyboy almost throughout the entire novel, seeing him as Soda's annoying little tagalong brother; Two-bit is known for being the shoplifting wisecracker of the group because he enjoys stealing and having the group in splits; Dally is "tougher, colder, meaner" than the rest of the gang; and Johnny, who is largely seen as a nervous, timid character whom everybody else in the gang sees as a little brother who needs to be protected because he cannot protect himself, either at home or against the Socs.

While Ponyboy has had all of the Greasers to observe and learn from, his two biggest influences in terms of role models are Dally and Johnny. At first, neither seems like a likely role model for Ponyboy, who is the narrator of the story. However, as the novel progresses, Ponyboy acquires a deeper understanding of both Dally and Johnny, and even grows to respect them.

When the novel begins, Ponyboy introduces the reader to the gang and what each member is known for. He says, "I didn't like [Dally], but he was smart and you had to respect him." There is a hardness to Dally that scares Ponyboy until Ponyboy and Johnny are hiding out in a church in Windrixville, discussing *Gone with the Wind*. Johnny tells Pony that the gallant Southern gentlemen described in the novel remind him of Dally. Pony considers this and realises that he prefers the heroes out of works of fiction, which is why he likes Soda, Darry and Two-bit – he likes "Soda's understanding", "Two-Bit's Humour" and "Darry's superman qualities". He realises that he finds Dally too real, "so real that he scared me." Pony has, up to this point in the novel, observed Dally's fondness of violence that stems from his having had to live on the streets and fend for himself from a very young age. He has not found it the least bit desirable and has therefore never wanted to imbibe it. After his conversation with Johnny, Pony's eyes are opened to see another side to Dally, where he appreciates the risk Dally has taken to help Pony and Johnny get away, even giving them a gun.

Johnny's love for his neglectful, abusive parents is something that Pony understands while he is with Johnny and Dally. He feels terrible when Johnny hopefully asks Dally if his parents had asked about him, and Dally replies that they did not. Johnny is so hurt that Pony almost feels his pain. This causes Pony to think about his own family and the difference between Johnny and Dally – "Dally was of the breed that could take anything, because he was hard and tough, and when he wasn't, he could turn hard and tough. Johnny was a good

fighter and could play it cool, but he was sensitive and that isn't a good way to be when you're a greaser." Pony thinks about his own family and realises that he does have something to be grateful for – his brothers who love him and, despite the frequent fights at home, take care of him to the best of their abilities. He realises that even though his parents are gone, he has his brothers. Johnny's only real family in that sense is made up of the rest of the Greasers who understand the pain Johnny's parents cause him, and try to protect him from it as best they can. When Johnny tells Dally that he intends to turn himself in, Dally reveals his love and concern for Johnny when he pleads with Johnny to reconsider – "Oh, blast it, Johnny...you get hardened in jail. I don't want that to happen to you. Like it happened to me."

Pony understands that Dally's tough exterior masks a softness that he does not often reveal. This makes Dally more human to Pony. The only thing that Pony hadn't liked about Dally up to this point had been Dally's aggression and enjoyment of violence, making these undesirable traits and therefore making Dally an undesirable role model. After Pony gains this new insight into Dally, he becomes more balanced in Pony's eyes – an angry, aggressive young man who possesses the ability to love and care about somebody other than himself. Since Pony already thinks of himself as soft, this balance would be desirable to him, making him want to emulate it. At the end of the novel, there occurs a tense moment when Pony, Two-Bit and Steve are faced with a group of Socs outside a grocery store. Pony threatens them with a bottle he breaks and Two-Bit and Steve worry that Pony might harden like them – something they do not wish to see happen. After the Socs leave, Pony picks up the broken bottle pieces so that nobody gets a flat tire, showing that he is still considerate and not hardened by all that happened over the course of the story. This shows that he has learnt to balance an external aggression with an underlying, hidden concern for others. This means that Pony has imbibed Dally's outwardly violent behaviour while keeping his own concern for others intact.

Johnny's character develops over the course of the novel. At first, he is introduced to the reader as a shy, frightened sixteen year old who looks no older than fourteen. He has parents who do not care about him, while all he wants is for them to miss him when he does not come home for the night. Johnny shows uncharacteristic strength in times of danger, as is seen when Ponyboy narrates to us after Johnny has accidentally killed a soc, "I was trembling, and it wasn't all from cold. But Johnny, except for the fact that his hands were twitching, looked as cool as Darry ever had." Johnny, despite his neglectful upbringing, displays a strong sense of conscience on two occasions – when he decides to confess to his crime, and when he runs into the burning church to save the children trapped inside. He regards Pony's life as more important than his own, which is seen when he pushes Pony out the church window, just before it collapses on Johnny. On his deathbed, Johnny recalls the Robert Frost poem that he and Pony had read while hiding in the church in Windrixville, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, and tells Ponyboy to "Stay gold, Ponyboy...Stay gold."

Johnny demonstrates his own innocence in advising Ponyboy to stay innocent, as all of the other Greasers have had to grow up as a result of their circumstances; only one who truly is still innocent, would fully appreciate innocence in a life as harsh as theirs. Pony understands Johnny, whom he now admires for his bravery and integrity. The reader sees that he has decided to follow Johnny's advice and imbibe it towards the end of the novel in the encounter with the Socs outside the grocery store. After the Socs leave, Pony picks up the broken bottle pieces so that nobody gets a flat tire, showing that he is still considerate and has not been hardened by all that happened – he has chosen to "stay gold" instead of resorting to violence when it was not completely necessary.

In terms of negative role models, Ponyboy is aware of his brother Darry's intelligence, even telling readers that "the only reason Darry couldn't be a Soc was us." Pony is aware that Darry is good looking, athletic and intelligent, which means that he could have gone to college on at least an athletic scholarship if not on merit, if his family's situation had not demanded that he stay at home and provide for his two brothers. Pony has observed this, and feels bad for Darry, and guilty on his own part – he feels partly responsible for Darry having had to forego his bright future.

While Pony's other brother Sodapop claims to Pony that he dropped out of school because he was not smart enough, it is possible that he dropped out because his girlfriend had gotten pregnant, or because he wanted to help Darry out with providing for their family after their parents had been killed. While this was a bold choice for him to make, Pony does not seem to want to follow this path. However, Soda does model sensitivity for Pony, without ever seeming unmanly for it. Of his two older brothers, Soda is the one with whom Pony gets along better. Soda listens to Ponyboy when he is going through a difficult time, and often finds himself caught in fights between Pony and Darry. He does not like to take either brother's side because it tears him apart. Pony admires this quality of Soda's – good looking enough to be manly, but not afraid to be in touch with his emotions. Pony displays this quality in himself while he talks to Cherry about the moon and their feelings about being Socs and Greasers.

At the end of the book, Pony takes his English assignment seriously (reflecting Darry's intelligence and unfulfilled wish to go to college), is not afraid to stand up to the Socs (imitating Dally's fierceness) but doesn't follow through on his threat, valuing life and preserving his innocent, simple approach to life, unsullied by any bitterness from past events (following Johnny's request to "stay gold"), and keeps his sensitive side when he reminds Cherry that they both see the same sun from the East and West (displaying Soda's sensitivity).

In conclusion, this paper has shown that Ponyboy, who has had positive and negative role models in his life, has observed the people around him and chosen to adopt certain traits of theirs. The biggest influences on his character have been Dally and Johnny, two characters who seemed the most contrasting, yet had something to offer Pony in terms of role modelling. The proposed four stages of role modelling can be seen primarily in his interactions with Dally and Johnny, as well as in his interactions with other characters in the novel.

Works Cited:

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