
MORBIDITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY IN THE OUTSIDERS

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Abstract

The inevitable and universal nature of death has made it a popular topic in Young Adult literature. While death recurs in these stories however, death in young adult novels is much darker and more complex. In this light, this paper discusses why is the issue of death in Young Adult fiction is still a safe place to discuss from the novel "The Outsiders". It argues that the young adults find themselves in a state of morbid fear and realize that what for them is the site of joy and peace is a place of horror to the adults.

Keywords: *Morbidity, Jouissance, Janus Faced, Young Adults*

S.E. Hinton's magnum opus *The Outsiders* (1967) revolves around three linked deaths of young adults that change the relationship between Curtis brothers, the Greasers and the Socs hoodlums. "I don't mind dying now" (Hinton 577), at the climax of the novel Johnny Cade knew that he wasn't going to stay longer. All the time he was trying to find an imaginary land where he felt protected and did not have to carry a switch blade. An ethics of the Real "examines the movements beyond the pleasure barrier and the barrier of anxiety, towards all types of morbidity" (Jaanus 1). The Soc, Bob Sheldon dies first. When Ponyboy and Johnny flee after Darry hit Ponyboy, they run into their rivals Bob and his best friend Randy Anderson. Bob takes Pony and starts drowning him until Johnny gets his switch blade out and kills Bob. After a series of events, Johnny dies and later Dally is shot who feels so depressed by Johnny's death, by pulling an unloaded gun in front of a police. The young adults find themselves in a state of morbid fear and realize that what for them is the site of "Jouissance" is a place of horror to the adults.

Johnny Cade is a teenage boy, the family takes him as a burden. He hates his parents because they don't care him. They kick him out of the house and he usually sleeps in the vacant parking lot, "A little dark puppy that had been kicked too many times and is lost in a crowd of strangers" (149). He gets love from the gang members of the greasers. Pony boy's parents die in a car accident when he was young. So his elder brother Darry takes care of him. Darry for Pony is a "helicopter parent" who is not more than a nosy parker. So, Pony thinks that Darry yells at him no matter what he does. Darry doesn't yell at Soda, even when he quits high school.

The characters in *The Outsiders* are unable to cope healthily with death. Some find comfort in literature and movies whereas others find comfort in denying them. As a whole death is taken by young adults seriously whether they are grieving or curious about death. So, young adult are morbidly obsessed with death. The series of events like the Socs ganging up on Ponyboy and threatening to slit his throat, Bob's death, death of Ponyboy's parents in a car accident, Johnnie's

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man slaughtering and rushing into the inferno to save the children, Dally's long criminal record, death of Johnnie and finally gunning down of Dally by policemen are the death anxieties in *The Outsiders*.

In order to substantiate the argument in the paper, the researcher will take help of the ideas of Sigmund Freud on "Death anxiety" or "Thanato phobia" and the effect of popular culture of the 60's which shaped the idea to the young adults to "live fast and die young and have a good looking corpse" (Motley 16). The morbid fear of this world leads young adults to create an imaginary land where they experiment with style, fashion and more ever idolize their favorite actor. The research, will link a general movement of the youths to look fashionable (like the Greasers) which was known as "Dandyism" where it denies the bourgeois capitalist domination of wealth. The movies created the artificial persona through dress and action for the actors which the young adults seem to inculcate in them and lastly the existential angst of the young adults choose to die rather than life will be located in *The Outsiders*.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud argues that the death drives opposes Eros, the tendency towards surviving and other creative, life-producing drives. Johnnie and Dally cannot force their death drives towards more productive outlet but rather delve deeper into it. The drive is defined by Freud as a force "whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death" (Freud 311). Ponyboy's will to take recourse in movies and poetry was a way to manifest his drive into more creative phenomenon. Freud believes that if one is able to discharge a tension in a playful manner like the child's play one can repress death drive. Freud contends,

In the case of children's play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could be merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strength the mastery they are in search of. Nor can children have their pleasurable experiences repeated often enough. And they are inexorable in their insistence that the repetition shall be an identical one. (65)

For Freud the death drive is opposed to the life drive. Mind is intrinsically connected to the material world for Freud. He contends that we harbor within us the seed of our own destruction. Ponyboy cannot condone his parent's death in a car accident. It happened as a blow to his psyche. As a young adult growing up in the 60's, he was fascinated with Paul Newman's movie. The exact movie which Ponyboy sees in *The Outsiders* is not given but the researcher connects it with 1967 Paul Newman movie "Cool Hand Luke" based on the time that this novel was published. In this movie Newman's character endures "physical punishment, psychological cruelty hopelessness and equal parts of sadism and masochism" (Dimare 37). Newman's character Duke, is a decorated war veteran who is sentenced to serve two years in a Florida rural prison for cutting the heads off of parking meters. His influence over the prison mates and the torture that he endures is compared to that of Jesus. Ponyboy wishes he looked like Paul Newman. He says he's got "greenish gray eyes" (501). As he is a Greaser most them (Greasers) doesn't bother to get a haircut. Ponyboy takes recourse to movies, books and art. They make him feel different from other guys he knows, including his brothers Soda and Darry. He prefers to go to the movies alone so he can "get into them and live them with the actors" (501). Just like Newman in the movies, the Greasers steal, rob gas stations and "have a gang fight once in a while" (502). For Pony, Dallas Winston, called Dally is the most striking "character of the gang" (504). Dally is tougher, colder

and meaner so Pony feared him. Pony says, "I didn't like him, but he was smart and you had to respect him" (504). This uncanny features of Dally was abjected by Ponyboy. Lacan argues that the image of strange object makes us so naïve that we do not know how to distinguish bad and good, pleasure from displeasure:

The same image which seduces the subject trapping him in the narcissistic impasse, many suddenly, by a contingency, show that it is dependent on something, some hidden object, and so the subject may grasp at the same time that he is not autonomous. (Royle 29)

Uncanny elements are perceived as threatening by our super-ego ridden with guilt as it fears symbolic castration by punishment from societal norms. As a young adult Ponyboy is naïve as he thinks Paul Newman, James Dean and Marlon Brando are the youth icons and one has to be like them in order to exist in the world, "I was wishing I looked like Paul Newman- he looks tough and I don't" (501).

In order to stand out among the crowd, young adults like to dress in a bizarre way. Oscar Wilde said one can never be overdressed or overeducated. Young adults always feel that adults have completely abused their authority and to revolt against their imposed authority young adults give importance upon their attire, refined languages and pursued with the appearance of nonchalance in a "cult of self" (Baudelaire 3). The Socs and the Greasers were different by the manner they dressed. The Greasers had long hair which was greased. They loved to wear denims, leather jackets and smoke cigarettes. Besides monetary differences between the Socs and the Greasers, the fashion that the Greasers did was the fashion of the time. After the movie at the drive in, Ponyboy has a discussion with Cherry Valence about the difference between Greasers and Socs. Pony thinks that they are quite similar and all teenagers are with similar interests:

They liked the Beatles and thought Elvis was tuff but that seemed the only difference to me. Of course greasy girls would have acted a lot tougher, but there was a basic sameness. I thought maybe it was money that separated us. (517)

The young adults don't understand social class as for the adults they are merely a "clothes wearing man" (Carlyle 82). Their notion toward young adults relegates them in the state of morbid fear of an unwanted class. But, for the young adults they understand the world better as the old fashioned ways are way outdated. Here the researcher would like to focus on the dandy movement by Baudelaire who uplifted the notion of cloth wearing man to a more metaphysical phase. Baudelaire contends that, "Dandyism in certain respect comes close to spirituality and to stoicism" and "These beings have no other status, but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking" (Baudelaire 4). The linkage of clothing with political protest had become a particularly English characteristic during the 18th century. Baudelaire argues paradoxically, "the dandy required an audience" (6) as they can shift the focus of the adults towards them by their bizarre and outrageous acts. If they fail to do so, they don't succumb to the adult world but rather choose to die or become indifferent.

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 Socials, come from the wealthy West side. *The Outsiders* is concerned with internal conflict and with it

characters' inner lives, but most of the actions and conflicts are framed by interactions within and between groups:

Cherry no longer looked sick, only sad "I'll bet you think the Socs have it made. The rich kids, the West-side Socs. I'll tell you something, Ponyboy, and it may come as a surprise. We have troubles you've never even heard of. You want to know something?" She looked me straight in the eye. "Things are rough all over." (516)

The Outsiders argue that violence and criminal acts can not be isolated from the lower economic classes, but that people in the lower economic classes are punished more often and more severely for any crime they commit. Gang violence, Child abuse, stabbings, shootings are common threats to human life. Fear is the predominant emotion as the impact of living in a place where a teenager can't even walk home by himself. When Ponyboy is returning from the theater few blocks from home he notices some Socs following him in a "red corvair" (507). Five Socs come out of the car and surrounded him. One of the Socs tells the narrator he wants to cut his hair, and pulls out a knife. They push Pony to the ground and one guy sits on his chest and punches him. A Socs keep a knife to the narrator's throat threatening to cut him with it. This is the angst Ponyboy faces on a daily basis. Sartre in *Being and nothingness* (1956) argues that born into the material reality of one's body, in a material universe, one finds oneself inserted into being. Consciousness has the ability to conceptualize possibilities, and to make them appear, or to annihilate them:

We need to experience "death consciousness" so as to wake up ourselves as to what is really important; the authentic in our lives which is life experience, not knowledge. Death draws the final point when we as beings cease to live for ourselves and permanently becomes objects that exist only for the outside world. (62)

Human consciousness for mortality has for centuries given the impetus for reflection on the causes, meaning and nature of existence. Death is the ultimate existential dilemma which arouses terrible anxiety as it offers an avenue toward authentic self-discovery. Johnny's death has symbolic implication as his journey into solipsism, escape, alienation and ultimately with the sources of meaning and the creation of literature itself.

Ponyboy's contemplation towards Johnny's and Dally's death leads him to an understanding of personal identity and provides him an imminent meaning to life. "Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold...." (565) Johnny urges Ponyboy to remain gold, or innocent. Johnny senses in his death bed that fighting in life is useless. He thinks Ponyboy is better than the average hoodlum and wants him to hold into the golden qualities that set him apart from his companions. The idyllic interlude at the church solidifies the relation of Pony and Johnny. The boys have morbid fear of the consequences of the murder the boys must face. When Johnny dies, Ponyboy's face contracts in agony:

"Damnit, Jonnny...." he begged, slamming one fist against the wall, hammering it to make it obey his will. "Oh, damnit, Jonnny, don't die, please don't die...." He suddenly bolted through the door and down the hall. (565)

Pony is in denial about Johnny's death and keeps repeating that he isn't dead. For Dally, Johnnie's death is traumatic and he wants to die to get his wish fulfilled. The police gun him down.

My argument that morbidity is a recurring theme to generate a sense of renewed relation revolves round who is an insider and who is an outsider in *The Outsiders*. Ponyboy says, "Two friends of mine had died that night; one a hero, the other a hoodlum." (577) this statement gives rise to the question who is the hero and who is the hoodlum?

Johnny did save children from the burning church, but he would never have been there in the first place if he hadn't been on the run. His killing of Bob to save Pony and himself was the birth of self-fulfilling prophecy. Johnny always wanted to feel important like the characters in *Gone with the Wind* (1936). The Southern gentlemen faced certain death in their battle which made them important. Dally's dying in a circle of light is symbolic as light is connected with enlightenment. He wanted to die in order to live in the hearts of his friends forever.

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