

Choose Wisely

The most exciting books and movies focus on the difficult decisions characters make and the results of those choices. In *The Outsiders*, S. E. Hinton demonstrates how both good and bad decisions have a direct influence on one's quality of life. In fact, the value of a good decision is one of the most important themes in this coming-of-age novel. Hinton focuses most closely on the lives of three characters—Ponyboy, Johnny, and Dally—who show how split decisions can change an entire life for better or worse. The novel suggests that within the violent, poverty-stricken world of the greasers, being able to make wise, careful decisions is key to survival.

At the beginning of the novel, Ponyboy makes one poor decision after another. The novel begins with him walking home alone from the movies. Ponyboy himself points out that this decision is not smart; then he is promptly attacked by Socs and must be rescued by his friends. Next, Ponyboy makes another foolish decision when he argues with Darry and runs away from home. This time, his poor choice involves someone other than himself—Johnny decides to go with him. Once again, Ponyboy points out the obvious: The two of them together are not much better at defending themselves than Ponyboy is by himself. And once again, because of Ponyboy's poor decisions, the two find themselves in a fight with four Socs. This time, though, the other greasers aren't around to save them, and Johnny kills a Soc to save Ponyboy's life.

Ponyboy's poor choices continue when the two boys flee the murder scene and hide out in an abandoned church. In fact, Ponyboy's choices don't improve until he is faced with saving the children from the fire. From this point on in the novel, Ponyboy's choices slowly begin to improve as he learns to base decision-making on facts rather than on knee-jerk reactions. At the end of the novel, Ponyboy's home life is still the same poverty-stricken, dangerous situation it was at the beginning of the story. However, Ponyboy has learned a valuable lesson—that choices in life can either make you or break you.

Similar to Ponyboy, Johnny also makes poor decisions throughout the first part of the novel. While Ponyboy's decisions are more willful, Johnny's decisions are more about going along with his friends. For example, when Ponyboy runs away from home, Johnny decides to go with him. And after Johnny kills the Soc, he immediately turns to Dally, expecting him to tell them where to hide and what to do. While some may see this as Johnny not making a choice, he is, in fact, making a decision—he's choosing to follow the crowd and do what others tell him. The results of Johnny's easy-going choices are just as devastating for him as are Ponyboy's more independent decisions.

Like his best friend, Johnny also faces the choice of whether to help the children escape from the burning church. This decision is a turning point in Johnny's life. When Ponyboy sees Johnny's face in the burning church, he realizes that Johnny no longer has a defeated look about him. Ponyboy also notes that as Johnny is saving the children, "He looked like he was having the time of his life." Later in the hospital, Johnny struggles with the fact that he will die from his injuries, but he eventually comes to terms with the consequences of his decision. He writes to Ponyboy: "I don't mind dying. . . . It's worth saving those kids." This shows that Johnny has learned the value of making wise decisions—even when those decisions lead to painful, sometimes fatal, consequences.

The last character Hinton uses to show the value of making wise choices is the negative example of Dallas Winston. This character has led a difficult life, is often more rebellious than the other characters, and has spent time in jail because of his poor choices. Dally is also one of the characters who changes the least throughout the novel. Ponyboy, as the narrator, presents a grim picture of Dally. His parents are dead or gone, he became bitter at an early age, and he is firmly entrenched in his beliefs that having a hardened heart is the only way to live. Ponyboy says of Dally, "It would be a miracle if Dally loved anything."

At the beginning of the novel, Dally is rude to Cherry Valence, shows little sympathy for anyone other than his pet, Johnny, and is portrayed as a hot-headed person. Later in the novel, he makes no effort to save the children from the fire. Rather, he tries to stop Ponyboy and Johnny from entering the inflamed church. Although an argument can be made that Dally tries to stop the rescue because he cares for his friends, this action only shows that his choices are based on selfish reasoning—he doesn't want to lose friends because it might affect him. This selfishness also influences Dally's decisions after Johnny dies. Rather than deal with the grief of losing a friend, he decides instead to commit suicide by forcing the police to shoot him. In the end, Dally's negative choices lead to a less-than-heroic end for him: By taking his own life, he leaves yet another hole in the lives of his friends.

Some may argue that these three characters have very little room to make positive choices. After all, they are poor, have unstable, even toxic, home lives, and are belittled and discriminated against by the majority of society. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, this is Ponyboy's view. His attitude is that he and his friends are trapped in this environment with no hope of escape. But by the end of the novel, Ponyboy begins to understand that even in the most difficult circumstances, people have a choice: They can choose how to look at life—positively or negatively, how to live life—generously or selfishly, and how to treat others—respectfully or disrespectfully.

Throughout *The Outsiders*, S. E. Hinton uses the development of three characters to show the value of making good choices vs. the ill effects of making poor ones. While both Ponyboy and Johnny learn from their mistakes, Dally does not. As a result, both Ponyboy and Johnny come to terms with their lives, while Dally spirals into despair that leads to suicide. Hinton's theme is clear: Make smart decisions and find peace; make foolish decisions and find hopelessness. Hinton's novel, written more than 50 years ago, still applies to teens today: Think carefully about the decisions you make.