

Rethinking Class within the Classics

Abstract

The Outsiders (1967) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) are two books for young adults that are purportedly about community identity, but closer examinations demonstrate that the protagonist of each novel, Ponyboy and Junior respectively, display a dangerous strain of rugged individualism that sets them apart from the communities they seek to laud. This process leads to undertones of internalized classism within the narratives of each text. It makes sense that as protagonists, Ponyboy and Junior would be seen as exceptional within their communities, but the novels offer little hope for those unexceptional members of their communities. Upward social mobility is a bad goal, but a desire for social mobility on the personal level with little attention given to institutional barriers furthers the mythos of a bootstraps mentality that so many impoverished individuals internalize leading to feelings of inferiority. Ponyboy and Junior ask for empathy for themselves and make attempts to have the reader empathize with their communities, but both make assertions that they are better than the other members of those communities. This puts the reader in the position of making unfair value judgments on minor characters who are not shown as having the same opportunities as Ponyboy and Junior. *The Outsiders* and *Part-Time Indian* are considered classics in part because of their explorations of identity, but their protagonists have fractious relationships to their own identities that betray a lack of empathy and an unwillingness to engage in activism.