

THE OUTSIDERS

Directed by Francis Coppola
Produced by Gary Frederickson and Fred Roos
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1983

Classifying people is a futile exercise. In *The Outsiders* poor rough kids don't brawl with other poor rough kids, they tackle the wealthy preps from across town, who writhe in the mud of battle with equal abandon. The individual is his own. Each man decides for himself how he will live. In a pack of jolly hooligans, three boys face hard truths. The young Johnny kills one of the wealthy Southsiders to save the life of Ponyboy. Dallas, several years older than the two of them, helps them escape the reach of the law, directing them to an abandoned church way out in the country. For nearly a week these two friends relax and reflect. It is the first time Johnny has left Tulsa.

Almost a week later Dallas comes to retrieve them. Receiving word that the law might be in their favor, and missing his family of friends, Johnny opts to return. But in their brief absence to get food, the church catches fire. Ponyboy goes in first, after some school kids who are trapped inside. Johnny follows soon after. They wonder why the male teacher there is doing nothing. One by one they pluck the kids out, Dallas conveying them to safety. Johnny is struck by a flaming timber and the building collapses.

The fire may have been started by Dallas when he was smoking earlier. But the kids are just there, with no explanation. It's purposely random for a reason, demonstrating that some tragedies can neither be overcome nor prevented. The teacher is surprised that a Greaser would risk his life for some kids. So is Randy, a conscientious Southsider.

Johnny is in bad shape, burned horribly and paralyzed. He thought of suicide many times before, trying to escape his terrible home life. Now he doesn't want to die.

Still, the Southsiders and the Greasers go ahead with a huge rumble. It's an ugly, sprawling mess of blind rage. The Greasers win out, but Johnny doesn't want to hear the 'good news.' Having lost the fight that counts, he expires, sending Dallas over the edge. The last things Johnny says are "Fighting ain't no good," and "Ponyboy, stay gold."

Dallas doesn't understand the sacrifice Johnny made for the children. Not even desiring the money, he holds up a store and is gunned down after targeting the police as well. In his guilt or his rage, he decides to get himself killed.

Ponyboy finds a letter from Johnny with words of encouragement for Dallas, but they come too late. Ponyboy is deeply affected by this final testament and the memory of those poignant days at the abandoned church.

It was there they, two, pondered a sunset and Ponyboy recalled a Robert Frost poem:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

Ponyboy didn't understand the poem, but Johnny gave it a meaning: a child sees the world as fresh and new, but with age that vibrancy is made dull. Ponyboy always saw the world as a child would, and he showed Johnny the beauty of life. But Dallas doesn't understand and prefers destruction to the pain of helplessness. He dislikes kids but, pointedly, doesn't know why. If he did know, he'd realize what he's missing. In the rumble there was no victory. Johnny did not care. The fight was supposed to be about him, but it was about nothing, maybe about hate—fight and escape the pain. Once Dallas realizes that in violence no succor exists, he fully succumbs to it. It's all he understands. He lived by the sword. He dies by the sword.

But Ponyboy learned before his time had passed. Being tough and apathetic can insulate a man from pain, but his life contributes nothing to others. It is, therefore, worth nothing. In more ways than one, sacrifice is necessary to survive. Through his writings, he can help others to understand the hard lessons he's learned firsthand. And the hair he dyed to escape the law becomes his trademark. He'd always stood out before, and the blond hair is a symbol of that distinction. Escaping death by Johnny's blade, the pair had almost a week of quiet to rethink their lives. The real outsiders are Johnny and Ponyboy, and Johnny doesn't want his best friend to go back to what he was, there on the road to ruin. Ponyboy is now a new creature, and by Johnny's sacrifice and uncommon wisdom, so changed, he will remain.

Ponyboy will never be young again, but he now understands that if he's corrupted, it's his own doing. He is his own man, and so empowered, his circumstances and sad past cannot prevent the victory that, as unavoidable as that fire, awaits.