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**Discussion Questions for *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)**

**Contextualizing *Rebel Without a Cause***

1. Why does Plato shoot puppies? What could this represent? How is his behavior similar or different to what Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did at the Columbine High School in 1999? What contributes to psychopathic or sociopathic behavior seen in teens in American society in 1955? Today?
2. Despite the title, the rebels in this film do have causes. Plato, Judy, and Jim come from dysfunctional families, and this results in their particular "causes" for rebellion. Trace the patterns of "dysfunction" in each character's family. To what might these dysfunctions have been attributed to in the 1950s? What is the relationship between the ways in which each character's rebellion expresses itself (e.g., Plato's puppy-killing, Judy's makeup- wearing, Jim's pathological fear of being called "chicken") and the patterns of their family’s dysfunction in each case?
3. *Rebel Without a Cause* was distinctive among juvenile delinquency films, because it dealt with the delinquency of middle class kids, rather than of working class kids as in *The Wild One* (1953) or *Blackboard Jungle* (1956). Discuss the class issues that came out in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Why would the rebellion of middle class youth be so threatening?
4. What do you think the knife fight at the planetarium and the chickie run represent in the film? Do you see any similar behaviors in young people in Iowa? America? What do you think causes this destructive type of behavior in 1955 and in American society today?
5. Comment on what the Griffith Park Observatory sequence means to you. What is the meaning of our existence in the universe? How does this question plague teens in 1955 and today? What is the view of The State (as represented by the various police presences throughout the film and the school scene) presented in the film? Does The State help or hinder teenagers’ problems?
6. Although many parents feared that their children would become juvenile delinquents if they watched it, *Rebel Without a Cause* is in actuality a call for a return to a more "traditional" family structure. Discuss the ways in which the children in this film attempt to remake the world in a pre-World War II mold. What does the abandoned mansion represent in the film? What does the mansion mean to Plato, Judy and Jim? What do they do there?
7. What do Plato’s mismatched socks represent about his family life? How do they contribute to our understanding of Plato and the film? Why do you think Plato died at the end of the film?
8. In the film, several characters undergo transformations (Jim and Judy become "grown- ups," Jim's father reestablishes his masculinity) while others do not transform; the lack of resolution in several of the situations is important. What is the film saying about the possibility of resolving the "causes" of teenage rebellion? Is it obviously a bad thing to have people in society like Jim Stark or Buzz Gunderson and his pals Crunch, Gene, Chick, and Moose, or characters like Plato Crawford? What can be done about this? Does the film suggest a solution to the problem of juvenile delinquency?
9. Discuss how the film explores the theme of masculinity. Is there a homosexual motif in the film? If there is, please explain how it is explored.

**Comment on the following quotations by some of the characters in the film: Jim:** You’re tearing me apart!

**Jim:** If he had guts to knock Mom cold once, then maybe she’d be happy and then she’d stop pickin’ on him, because they make mush out of him.

**Judy’s mother:** She’ll outgrow it dear, it’s just the age…It’s just the age when nothing fits.

**Jim’s father:** Listen, you’re at a wonderful age. In ten years you’ll look back on this…and then wish that…

**Plato:** Hey, you want to come home with me? I mean there’s nobody home at my house and heck, I’m not tired. Are you? See, I don’t have too many people I can talk to…If you want to come, we could talk, and in the morning, we could have breakfast like my dad used to. Gee, if only you could have been my dad.

**Comment on the following quotations by some movie critics: (Choose one)**

* 1. “The drama and dialogue feel clunky now, but the movie’s plea for dads to talk to their children – what we now call emotional literacy – is valid enough.” Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*
	2. *“Rebel Without a Cause* has as much to say today as it did in the 1950s.” Chris Wood, *Senses of Cinema*
	3. *“Rebel* really belongs entirely to Dean and his iconic red windbreaker.” Don Willmott, Film Critic

Sources:

<http://alinihatekenblog.wordpress.com/2007/10/03/for-teachers-and-students-9-> discussion-questions-for-rebel-without-a-cause-nicholas-ray-1950/

<http://honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/film04.html>

**Writing Assignment for *Rebel:***

You are a filmmaker who been given a budget of $25 million to make a film about the problems that teenagers face in modern America. What societal problem would you choose to explore in your film and why? Discuss the plot of your film and how you will portray the problem on the screen. What message about this problem do you want to convey to your target movie going audience who you want to see your work?

General to Specific Introduction – Explain why you selected this problem or problems above all others. Is the problem worth a $25 million budget for the film?

Body Paragraph One - Tell the reader why this problem is important to address in society today.

Body Paragraph Two – Describe the plot of your film/the storyline – What happens in the film to highlight the problem?

Body Paragraph Three – What type of message or tone do you want your film to express to the audience? Explain it. What perspective on the problem will you take? Will you offer solutions to the problem? Provide insight on why it exists? (Ask yourself: Who is my target audience? Am I meeting the expectations of that target audience? )

Concluding Paragraph - Summarize why your film is work making and the contribution it will make to modern American society.