

Rebel Without a Cause

"You're tearing me apart! You say one thing, he says another, and everybody changes back again." James Dean Shout these words in an Anguished howl that seems to owe more to acting class than to his character, the rebellious and causeless Jim Stark in *Rebel without a Cause*. Because he died in a car crash a month before the movie opened in 1955, the performance took an eerie kind of fame: it was the posthumous complaint of an actor widely expected to have a long and famous career.

The film has not aged well, and Dean's performance seems more like marked-down Brando than the birth of an important talent. But *Rebel without a Cause* was enormously influential at the time, a milestone in the creation of a new idea about young people. Marlon Brando as a surly motorcycle gang leader in *The Wild One* (1953), James Dean in 1955, and the emergence of Elvis Presley in 1956: these three role models decisively altered the way young men could be seen in popular culture.

"What can you do when you have to be a man?" Jim Stark asks his father, the emaciated Frank Stark (Jim Backus). But his father doesn't know, and in one grotesque scene, wears a frilly apron over his business suit while cleaning up spilled food. Jim comes from a household ruled by his overbearing mother (Ann Doran) and her mother (Virginia Brissac). Early in the film, he regards his father and tells a juvenile officer: "If he had guts to knock Mom cold once, then maybe she'd be happy, and she'd stop picking on him."

The movie is based on a 1944 book of the same name by Robert Lindner, and reflected concern about "juvenile delinquency", a term then much in use: its more immediate inspiration may have been the now-forgotten 1943 book *A Generation of Vipers*, by Philip Wyle, which coined the term "Momism" and blamed an ascendant female dominance for much of what was wrong with modern America. "She eats him alive, and he takes it," Jim Stark tells the cop about his father.

Like Hamlet's disgust at his mother's betrayal of his father, Jim's feelings mask a deeper malaise, a feeling that life is a pointless choice between being and not being. In France at the time, that was called existentialism, but in Jim's Los Angeles, rebels were not so articulate.

In addition, the dialogue often seems to be making plot points that the director, Nicholas Ray, and the writer, Irving Shulman, may not be fully intended. Or perhaps they did, and guessed that some of the film's implications would not be fully recognized by 1955 audiences. Seen today, *Rebel without a Cause* plays like a Todd Solondz movie, in which characters with bizarre problems perform a charade of normal behavior.

Because of the way weirdness seems to bubble just beneath the surface of the melodramatic plot, because of the oddness of Dean's mannered acting and Mineo's narcissistic self-pity, because of the cluelessness of the hero's father, because of all these apparent flaws, *Rebel without a Cause* has a greater interest than if it had been tidier and more sensible. You can sense an energy trying to break through emotions unexamined but urgent.

Like its hero, *Rebel without a Cause* desperately wants to say something and doesn't know what it is. If it did know, it would lose its fascination. More perhaps than it realized, it is a subversive document of its time.

Roger Ebert, 2005

Text B – Rebel Without a Cause

The following statements are either true or false. Tick [✓] the correct option, then justify it using words as they appear in the text. Both parts are required for [1 mark].

1. Dean's performance in *Rebel without a Cause* marked the birth of a great actor.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Justification:

2. Presley, Dean and Brando hardly affected the perception of young men in pop culture.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Justification:

3. Robert Lindner's book is titled *Rebel without a Cause*.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Justification:

4. *A Generation of Vipers* attributed the problems in modern America to female emancipation.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Justification:

5. Jim's abhorrence of his mother is more profound than that of Hamlet.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Justification:

6. Jim represents existentialist ideas.

- ☐ True
☐ False

Justification:

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Based on the information that appears between lines 29 and 42 in the text, choose an appropriate word(s) from the list that completes each gap in the following text.

The [- 7 -] and director of *Rebel without a Cause* [- 8 -] that the film may not be understood by the 1950's audience. The characters in the film are best described as [- 9 -] human beings with strange problems. The film is best described as [- 10 -] and full of [- 11 -] flaws; however, the film's inability to communicate the message lurking behind it adds to its [- 12 -]

- | | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 7. [- 7 -] | ☐ | A. anticipated |
| 8. [- 8 -] | ☐ | B. ostensible |
| 9. [- 9 -] | ☐ | C. appeal |
| 10. [- 10 -] | ☐ | D. producer |
| 11. [- 11 -] | ☐ | E. irrational |
| 12. [- 12 -] | ☐ | F. sensible |
| | | G. knew |
| | | H. typical |
| | | I. non-existent |
| | | J. unusual |
| | | K. obscurity |
| | | L. writer |