

Rebel Without a Cause Film Summary

Rebel Without a Cause by Nicholas Ray

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Context

Rebel Without a Cause tells the story of teenager Jim Stark and his friends, Judy and Plato. Jim moves to a new town where he proceeds to get into trouble. His mother is overbearing while his father is passive, and Jim has no respect for either of them. Judy also has problems with her parents since her father is a cold man who lords over her weak mother, and poor Plato has no father at all. One sorrowful night, these three lonely people end up connecting.

When Jim plays chicken with Buzz Gunderson, the head honcho at his school, Buzz runs his car off a cliff. After Buzz dies, Jim, Judy, and Plato retreat to an abandoned mansion. Buzz's friends find them there, and Plato kills one of them. Plato runs to hide in the nearby observatory, but when they try to get him to come out safely, he attempts to flee and is shot by the police.

Although *Rebel Without a Cause* is Nicholas Ray's best known feature, he also made several other noteworthy films including *Lovers of the Night* (1945), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *Bigger Than Life* (1956). He was once voted the 36th greatest director of all time by *Entertainment Weekly*. His work on *Rebel Without a Cause* made it the dramatic and memorable classic it has come to be known as.

James Dean only performed in a few films. *Rebel Without a Cause* is definitely his best known performance although he gave exceptional performances in *East of Eden* (1955) and *Giant* (1956). He died in a terrible car crash in late September 1955 just as the filming of *Giant* was ending. Though he did not have a long career, he has become one of the most famous film stars of all time. He is a timeless sex symbol and was voted one of the 100 Sexiest Stars of All Time by *Empire* magazine.

Natalie Wood was first known for her portrayal of a little girl in *Miracle on 34th Street*. This child actor went on to have a wonderful career as an adult actress. At 17, she played the role of Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause*, a part that helped her make her name as an adult actress. Natalie received numerous Academy Award nominations during her long career, which ended with her mysterious drowning in 1981.

Sal Mineo began his acting career when he was caught stealing at the age of 10. He had the choice of going to juvenile detention or attending professional acting school. From there, his career was launched. He first played the role of the young boy in *The King and I*. Later, he appeared in *Six Bridges to Cross* (1955). His career was cemented with his exceptional performance in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and he went on to perform both in film and on stage for many years.

Rebel Without a Cause was nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Sal Mineo; Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Natalie Wood; and Best Writing, Motion Picture Story for Nicholas Ray.



Summary and Analysis

As *Rebel Without a Cause* begins, Jim Stark lies on the floor playing with a toy. The police take the disheveled young man to the station for drunkenness. A girl named Judy also sits in the station as she waits to be called back to an office. She is crying because her father doesn't love her and has called her a "dirty tramp." Earlier in the night, her father rubbed all of the makeup off of her face, so she ran out of the house and spent the night wandering the streets. The investigator at the station asks if she is looking for companionship, but she says she isn't. He then asks if she believes that she's trying to get back at her dad, and they offer to call him. She finally gives them the number rather than stay at the station. When the investigator returns and tells her that her mother is coming to pick her up. She begins to cry and says that her father was supposed to come.

Also at the police station, a boy named Plato is being questioned about killing some puppies. The social worker tells the investigator that the boy's mother left on his birthday, and that he's never seen a psychiatrist before. Meanwhile, Jim's father, Frank, tries to stand up for his son, but is angered when Jim becomes sultry. The investigator talks to Jim alone and Jim reveals to him that his parents fight constantly. Jim tells him that if he ever felt a sense of belonging, things would be better. The man invites him to come in and talk anytime, especially if it will keep him from mischief.

Jim later watches out of his house window as Judy is on her way to the first day of school. Before he leaves the house, Jim tells his family that maybe they'll stay for awhile. Jim hurries to leave before he has to listen to his mother and grandmother argue anymore. Jim then approaches Judy and asks her if everything is going better now, and they set out for school. Judy joins a group of friends, while Jim goes back to get his car.

At school, Jim arrives late to the auditorium in the planetarium. There, he learns about the world and how the Earth and the people on it are of little consequence. In the big scheme of things, it seems people would not be missed. Jim makes enemies with Judy's friends, the most popular people in school. Before Jim and his friends can leave for a nearby mansion, the popular kids confront him. Jim remains upstairs on a balcony while the guys slash his tires. One of the guys calls him a chicken, and then Jim asks Judy's opinion. He asks her why she hangs out with such bad company. Buzz Gunderson, Judy's boyfriend, throws a blade at Jim, but Jim throws the blade away. Someone finally gives Jim a knife, and the two young men begin to fight. Finally, a security guard spots them just as Jim knocks the guy's knife from his hand and leans him over a railing. The two decide to play chicken with their cars later that night.

That evening, Jim arrives home to find his father taking dinner to his mother. His father has accidentally dropped the tray, and he scurries to clean it up, scared that she may see the mess. Jim is frustrated and angry that his father is so intimidated by his mother. At home, Judy kisses her father, but he tells her she should no longer do that. He explains that he doesn't want her to behave that way now that she's grown. When she tries to kiss him again, he yells at her and she runs from the room.



Jim's father enters the room and they talk. Jim asks his father what he would do if he knew his son was going to do something dangerous for honor. His father tells him not to make a hasty decision. When he turns on the light, he spots blood on Jim's shirt.

Later, Jim leaves to play "chicky" against Buzz and the other guys. At the race, Plato tells Judy how wonderful Jim is and how much he enjoys being around him. Plato seems to be looking for a father figure, but he is also somewhat in love with Jim. Buzz tells Jim that he likes him, but that there's nothing else to do. Everyone prepares for the race. The two drive towards the cliff, but Jim jumps out of the car before it runs over the edge. Realizing Jim is safe, Plato breathes a sigh of relief. However, Buzz doesn't make it out of his car, and Judy just stands alone at the edge of the cliff. Jim checks on Judy and then heads home.

As they are leaving, Plato invites Jim home to talk to him. Plato says, "If only you could've been my dad!" Jim tells him that he'll just see him the next morning. Judy arrives home, and her younger brother Beau gives her a big hug, but her father sends him to bed. Jim's mother comes downstairs when he arrives home, and he says that he needs to talk to she and his father. Jim explains to them what has happened and that he wants to tell the police. His parents say that he shouldn't since he wasn't the only one involved. His dad tells him that the fact that he knows he did something wrong is enough. His mother starts bossing them around, and Jim asks his father to stand up for him. Jim picks him up and almost strangles him before his mother pulls him off. Now frustrated, Jim leaves.

Jim goes to the police station and asks to see a detective named Ray, but no one pays any attention to him. He calls Judy from the station, but her father hangs up the phone. Judy waits for Jim to return home, where she asks him about Plato. On the radio, a song plays that Buzz had dedicated to Jim. Judy says she is simply numb from the accident. Jim tells her that the first thing he saw this morning was her, and as a result, he knew then that it would be a wonderful day. She apologizes for being mean to him, and he kisses her on the forehead.

The two decide that they will never return to their homes. Jim takes her up to the old deserted mansion he saw earlier. On the other side of town, the gang finds and attacks Plato. They try to force him to talk, but Plato's housekeeper kicks them out of the house. Plato finds a check upstairs for his upkeep and retrieves the gun hidden in the bed. The housekeeper tries to stop him from leaving, but he leaves and chases after the guys. The gang goes to Jim's house and leaves a chicken hanging in front of the door. They ask Jim's father where Jim is, but he says he doesn't know. The guys leave, and Plato arrives. Plato runs off to find Jim.

Jim, Judy, and Plato's families call the police. Plato finds Jim and Judy at the old mansion. He lights some candles and shows them around the house. He then takes them to an empty pool as they imitate a couple looking for a summer home. He tells them they could keep annoying children there. Plato says he has come to the mansion a million times before, but he has never had fun because he is always alone. He used to go there to run away, but now he wishes he hadn't since he no longer has a mom and



dad. Plato tells them that his father was a hero but is now dead. Jim calls him on his bluff, but adds that the man might as well be dead. Plato falls asleep, and Jim and Judy explore the rooms in the mansion. Before they leave, they notice that Plato is wearing one black sock and one red sock.

Finally, the gang spots Jim's car and breaks into the house. In one of the rooms, Jim and Judy cuddle and talk about what it's like to love someone. Judy explains what she wants in a man, completely describing Jim. He tells her that they will never be lonely again, and she says she loves somebody. She says she loves Jim, and he says, "Well, I mean it." Then, they kiss tenderly and passionately.

Downstairs, the gang finds Plato and begins chasing him, but he hides. The police arrive to find the cars at the mansion, and they call for help to be sent. Plato holds his gun and cries, saying, "Save me. Save me." He shoots one of the guys in the gang who comes towards him, and then he aims at Jim when he approaches. Plato is angry that he ran out on him, leaving him alone. Plato starts yelling, "You're not my father! You're not my father!" Plato runs outside, and the police call to him. He runs away and begins shooting at them. Jim and Judy follow, and Jim tells her that they need to help him. He kisses her, and she feels safer. She tells Jim that Plato was talking about him earlier like he was a hero. He tells her that Plato was trying to make them like his family.

Plato finally runs back into the planetarium to hide. The policeman tells him to come out quietly, but he just keeps shooting. Other police cars pull up, and Jim and Judy hide. Jim's parents go with the detective to find Jim, but they are told they have to find some other kids in trouble first. Little do they know that Jim is one of them. Plato's maid tells the police that her boy left with a gun earlier.

The police start calling to Plato, but they spot Jim and Judy who hurry inside to find him. Jim tries to calm him. Finally, Plato stands up and asks why they ran out on him. Jim reassures him that they were coming right back and tries to convince him to leave, but he refuses. Jim gives him his jacket to keep warm, and Plato asks if he can keep it. Plato rubs the jacket, and Jim convinces him to handover the gun. Jim quietly removes the bullets and returns it to him.

Jim tells Plato that a lot of people outside want him to be safe. He says they're allowing him to bring Plato outside, and they walk to the door of the auditorium together. Judy meets them there, but Plato says it's too bright. Jim says he'll fix it, and he calls to Ray, who he convinces to turn off the lights on the cars. Jim then brings Plato and Judy outside. Plato, now scared, asks Jim to make them go away. Jim asks Ray to keep the guys back, but Plato runs away. The police shoot and kill Plato. Jim screams, "I've got the bullets! Look!" Jim's father runs up in a panic, but is relieved to find that his son is alive. As Jim weeps over Plato's dead body, his red sock is shown once again. Jim asks his father for help, and his father reassures him that they will face everything together. He tells him that from now on they will be strong and stand up together.



Before they take Plato away, Jim zips up the jacket so Plato won't be cold. Jim introduces Judy to his parents, and they comfort one another. Jim's parents also embrace. The cars drive away and the film ends.



Characters

Jim Stark, played by James Dean

Description

Jim Stark is a young man who has recently moved into town. He despises his parents—his mother for her manipulative and overbearing attitude, and his father for his passivity. Jim does not know how to fit into his new environment, but he meets Judy who he finds very attractive.

He also meets Buzz Gunderson who challenges him to a game of chicken, during which Buzz dies. Jim is also kind to a loner named Plato who no one else likes. He treats him kindly and after Plato kills someone, he tries to protect him but fails.

Analysis

Jim is disappointed with everyone in his life, especially his family. He cannot respect his parents or his grandmother because of the way they behave. In addition, he is bitter about being sent to a new school where he doesn't know anyone.

Jim ends up becoming friends with Plato and Judy, and he tries to take care of them. When Plato is murdered by the police, Jim feels a profound sense of failure because he could not protect his friend. Now that he has experienced such sorrow, his family comes together in an effort to protect and comfort him.

Judy, played by Natalie Wood

Description

Judy is a bitter young woman who is dating Buzz. Her father considers her to be a tramp and treats her as such. Judy does poorly in school, and she is present when Buzz dies. Thereafter, Jim and Judy begin dating, and she begins to find happiness. Although Plato's death hurts her terribly, her parents begin to treat her better and they try to comfort and care for her.

Analysis

Judy feels that she is not good enough for anyone, and her father treats her as if she is less than human. Because Judy has poor self-esteem, she becomes a big partier at school. When she spends time with Jim, she begins to have a better sense of self-worth.



John "Plato" Crawford, played by Sal Mineo

Description

Plato is a lonely young man who does not seem to fit in with everyone else. Jim takes him under his wing and protects him. Plato ends up killing a guy who attacks him, and then he is killed by the police when he tries to escape.

Analysis

Plato has never had any friends, so when Jim takes him in, Plato admires and almost seems to be in love with him. Plato is treated cruelly by many people, and he feels badly about himself. He starts to lose control after he kills one of Buzz's friends, and he is eventually killed by the police for trying to escape.

Frank Stark, played by Jim Backus

Description

Frank is Jim's father.

Analysis

Frank is a passive man who does everything his wife, Carol, tells him to do. He does not have enough self-respect to stand up to her, and Jim despises him for it. At the end of the film, Frank finally learns to speak up for himself and cares for his son after Plato's death.

Mrs. Carol Stark, played by Ann Doran

Description

Carol is Jim's mother.

Analysis

Carol is a manipulative woman who controls her husband and tries to control her son as well. Jim hates her for her condescending, controlling manner. In the end, she comes through for him after Plato's death.



Buzz Gunderson, played by Corey Allen

Description

Buzz Gunderson is a cocky, rude teenager who is dating Judy when Jim arrives in town. Buzz becomes jealous of Jim and challenges him to a game of chicken. When they compete, Buzz ends up running his car off the cliff.

Analysis

Buzz is cocky and condescending. When he tries to prove that he is better than Jim during a game of chicken, he runs off a cliff and dies.

Judy's Father, played by William Harper

Description

Judy's father is an angry, confused man.

Analysis

Judy's father believes that Judy is a tramp, and he treats her harshly because of his belief.

Judy's Mother, played by Rochelle Hudson

Description

Judy's mother is a mother and wife.

Analysis

Judy's mother remains subordinate to her father even when he treats Judy harshly. She is the stereotypical wife from the 50's television shows.



Themes

Finding Friendship

When Jim first moves to the new town, he is a complete loner, constantly out drinking and partying. Jim has no close relationships with anyone, including his parents. They believe that he is a troublemaker, but they try to protect him, and their reputations, from harm by bailing him out of jail as quickly as possible.

When Jim meets Plato and Judy, however, he discovers true friendship. Although his relationship with Judy is more difficult because of Buzz and his subsequent death, Jim finally finds people that he can talk to and truly be himself around.

Both Plato and Judy are looking for friendship as well, and they find that Jim is a wonderful friend. Plato is a loner who is neglected by everyone else in the school while Judy is popular but lonely. This odd threesome forms a friendship that makes their life a little more bearable even when things go sour. Forming strong friendships is important for everyone as it means the difference between living a life of joy and a life of neglect.

Creating Positive Relationships

Jim realizes the importance of creating positive relationships. His parents who have a terrible relationship, with his mother dominating and his father cowering, have set a poor example for him. Jim decides that he will never be like them, and he sets out to create a positive system of relationships for himself.

When Jim meets Judy and Plato, he realizes that they have the same types of problems that he has to deal with. Since they can understand each other, Jim is finally able to open up about his own life. As he gets involved in these positive relationships, Jim sees that life is more fulfilling.

Buzz and his friends, on the other hand, create negative relationships for themselves. They constantly seek fights with other people, and are always putting each other and everyone else down. Buzz ends up dying because he has created negative relationships and his friends do not attempt to stop him from doing foolish things like challenging Jim. Creating positive relationships can keep people out of harm's way and make life a happier journey.

Love and Sorrow are Intermingled

Love and sorrow are often intermingled in life. Most great loves are mixed with great sorrows. One never seems to occur without the other. Jim and Judy discover this. The two finally begin to find a type of love together when suddenly their world is torn apart

by Plato's death. They are thrown from happiness into despair as Plato is shot and killed by the police.

In addition, Plato had just found people who cared for him and loved him as he was. Judy and Jim expected nothing from him other than that he be himself. However, when he finds himself alone in the mansion when Jim and Judy go upstairs, Plato believes that he has once again been abandoned. Although this is not true, he doesn't realize that and ultimately kills one of Buzz's friends.

Plato dies because he is sad and scared. Rather than listening to Jim and the police, he tries to run away and is killed. Plato loses his life just as his life was beginning to be more bearable. Love and sorrow are often connected, and this is apparent in *Rebel Without a Cause*, as the characters find both love and sorrow in the same night.

Style and Cinematography

Rebel Without a Cause presents the difficulties and challenges that teens faced in the 1950s and continue to face today. The film appeals to so many audiences because it is applicable across generations. Even teenagers growing up in the 21st century can understand the feelings of rebellion and isolation that were experienced by the teenagers in the film.

Most films and television shows in the 1950s showed a picture of the perfect family, one with completely understanding parents and perfectly obedient children. Many families felt that they had to live up to this ideal when that was simply not possible. *Rebel Without a Cause* finally showed the reality of family life. James Dean portrays a normal teenager who gets into trouble through the influence and actions of others. Additionally, we see the real strife between family members as Jim becomes angry with his father for his lack of strength and his mother for her controlling nature. The imperfection of life was portrayed in this realistic movie, which is much of the reason for its great success both at the time of its release and through the years.

One impressive part of the film is the performances of the actors and actresses. James Dean is immortalized in his amazing portrayal of Jim Stark, a troubled teen who is terribly hurt by those around him. Although the film is relatively short, the characters are well-developed and realistic. Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo help round out the film with their performances. These characters portray teenage angst without making the reasoning seem trite. Without the memorable performances of these actors, the themes of the film would not be so vivid and powerful.



Motifs

Teenage Angst

Teenage angst helps to tell the story in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Every teenager goes through changes, and generally, they are not easy to deal with. This film reached teenagers simply because it showed the realities of this time in life during an era when both teenagers and their families were expected to be perfect. *Rebel Without a Cause* uses the drama of these teenage years to reveal the truth.

Jim's and Judy's families put on a façade of being perfect, happy families, but behind closed doors nothing could be further from the truth. Jim's mother dominates his father while Judy's father dominates her whole family and despises her. The spouses of these demanding individuals take a backseat while failing to consider their children's emotions.

Only the teenagers in these families are willing to confront the reality that nothing is perfect and that the only way to bring change is simply to admit this fact. The teenagers' attitudes and actions help to break down the barriers of denial in their families and reveal the truth on a public level so that the families can begin to heal.

Competition

Competition is a major focus in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The story is told through a series of competitions. The first competition in the film occurs when both Jim and Judy fight with their parents. Each set of parents simply wants to live a perfect life before the community and when their children expose the truth at the police station, the competition begins.

Secondly, Jim competes with Buzz to show that he is just as brave and confident. Buzz's desire to compete and dominate ends up costing him his life. Although he felt that he was simply being brave and manly, he was truly being foolish and childish.

Later, Jim, Judy, and Plato compete with Buzz's cronies as they try to escape from them at the mansion. Plato ends up "winning" in one respect because he kills one of the men. However, he loses his life when he tries to hide from the police. All the competition in the film amplifies the other themes and the difficulties of being a teenager.

Running Away

Most people have run away from something in their lives. If they haven't run away physically, then they've run away mentally. Every character in the film runs from something. The parents are running away from the truth about their children and their own misgivings as parents. They are painfully reminded of what they see as their



failures every time they have to get their children out of trouble, so they mentally check out.

Before his death, Buzz is also trying to run away from the fact that Jim is the first person who has contradicted him in a very long time. Jim, Judy, and Plato run away from the reality of Buzz's death. They want to tell the police, but they are fearful. Instead, they hide at the mansion until they are confronted by Buzz's friends, the police, and their families.

After Plato kills someone, he physically runs away so the police won't catch him. At this point, Jim and Judy give up hiding, both mentally and physically, so that they can try to help Plato. They do their best to get Plato to surrender to the police, even to the point of tricking him. Although they don't succeed, they have come to face reality, and finally, their parents do as well.

Symbols

Playing Chicken

As the teenagers play chicken, we see the restlessness and defiance of youth. Buzz and Jim play chicken to determine who is the strongest and bravest of the two. After an earlier fight, Buzz's reputation has been tarnished, and he wants to regain his status. He has always been the top guy in school, and he refuses to be toppled by a new kid in town.

Playing chicken symbolizes the egos of the characters. The only reason to play is to prove something, and both young men are vying to be the strongest and bravest in school. Jim acquiesces to the competition because he's the new guy in town, but he also gets a rush from the excitement of such a daring act.

Playing chicken also symbolizes the teenagers' desperation. They are miserable at home, and they are desperate for diversion from their depressing lives. Playing chicken gives them brief satisfaction during which they believe that they are actually doing something substantially meaningful. They do not acknowledge that they are carelessly risking their lives. These types of ego games help the teenagers feel that they have something to live for.

Empty Mansion

Sal takes Jim and Judy to an empty mansion that he often visits. Sal's father left and his mother is too busy for him. To add to his pain, he is also ridiculed by everyone at school, especially Buzz and his friends. He is alone, so he visits an empty mansion to escape his reality.

After Buzz dies, Sal brings Jim and Judy to the mansion to hide. As they explore, there are debris from broken items on the floor. The empty house is symbolic of the voids in their own lives. Each of the students has been seeking pleasure by partying and drinking their sorrows away. After they find one another, though, they begin to gain fulfillment.

The empty mansion symbolizes the loss that Jim and Judy feel when Sal is killed. A strong bond has been formed, and Sal brings them to his favorite spot, but the happiness of these moments is cut short when Sal accidentally kills someone and then is killed by the police.

Perfect Homes

There are many shows like *Leave It to Beaver* in which families appear flawless and utterly content. In the 1950s, people thrived on watching these perfect families living their lives and solving problems within a thirty minute episode.

Jim and Judy's families try to put forth this same façade of perfection. They want everyone to think they are wonderful parents with perfect children. However, Jim and Judy are constantly getting into trouble and destroying this illusion. As their families try to hide the truth by bailing them out, the teens rebel even more.

These "perfect" homes are symbolic of impossible expectations. Jim and Judy act out so their parents will have to take a realistic look at life and realize that neither life nor people are perfect. At one point, Jim simply begs his father to get to know him for who he is. The "perfect" homes ended up destroying any possibility of perfection because no one could live up to the expectations.



Essay Questions

How does Jim meet Judy?

What are Jim's feelings toward his parents?

Why do Jim and Buzz get into a fight?

What is Judy's father's problem with her?

What happens to Buzz?

How does Jim and Judy's relationship develop throughout the film?

Why does Plato become violent?

How does the film resolve?

How was this film different from most other films at the time?

Why does this film appeal to teenagers of all generations?