

Authority and self-expression in 'rebel without a cause' and 'shadowboxing'



"Rebel Without A Cause", a 1955 film directed by Nicholas Ray and Shadowboxing, an autobiographical fiction by Tony Birch, depict the lives of teenagers as they attempt to find their place in the world. Despite the differing settings, 1950s middle-class America, and the lower class society of 1960s Melbourne respectively, both texts explore the conflict between authority and self-expression. Both texts discuss the role of school, suggesting its seeming irrelevance to teenagers and depicting teachers' failed attempts at maintaining authority. Police authority is depicted in Shadowboxing as uncaring and out of touch with the needs of the lower classes while "Rebel Without a Cause" suggests that police authority is important to some extent. While in both texts, misguided attempts to express oneself, in the cases of Buzz and Charlie, lead to tragic outcomes, it is questionable whether adherence to authority would have offered a sustainable alternative. By the end of both texts, the two protagonists, Jim and Michael, have found, what seems to be portrayed as acceptable ways of expressing themselves. For Jim, this involves adherence to higher moral motives such as courage and honesty. Michael is portrayed in a less heroic light, but Birch suggests that Michael is expressing himself in the best way when he is caring for those around him. Both texts contend that using self-expression to discover principles you believe in, such as bravery and honour in the case of "Rebel without a Cause", and compassion and empathy in the case of Shadowboxing, and incorporating these traits into your character, is far more important than adhering to traditional authority. Both texts discuss school's irrelevance and its connection to disrespect of school authority. In "Rebel Without a Cause", during the excursion scene, the monotone voice of the planetarium presenter provides a contrasting backdrop to the excited <https://assignbuster.com/authority-and-self-expression-in-rebel-without-a-cause-and-shadowboxing/>

expression and sudden movements of Plato as he sees Jim, the relaxed voice of Buzz, as he mimics “ a crab”, and the general animation of the characters, as Jim embarrasses himself by “ mooing”. This contrast gives the impression that the teenage protagonists are preoccupied with objects of more immediate interest and relevance than the “ planet Earth and its demise”. It seems that the school’s inability to provide relevant content for the students is responsible for the teachers’ difficulty in commanding respect. Directly after the presentation, the students walk out while their female teacher repeatedly begs, “ Can I have your attention please”. This teacher is then made the butt of a joke, by exclaiming, “ oh, what the heck”, suggesting that Ray intends for the audience to sympathise with the teenager’s perspective, rather than the teacher’s. Michael’s treatment of the deputy principal in *Shadowboxing* is similarly disrespectful. When refusing to watch the moon landing Michael yells “ F*** the moon”, and rides away. Similar to Ray’s treatment of educational authority, Birch does not condemn Michael’s actions. Rather, Birch precedes this account with Michael’s miserable return to school which was “ like the return of the dead”, in which “ even the teachers” spoke to him in “ hushed voices”. The teachers’ inability to help Michael through the loss of the accident, or to empathise with his trauma, as represented by his “ drowning” dreams, is not necessarily blamed for Michael’s disconnection, as it is in “ *Rebel Without a Cause*”. Michael seems to appreciate his teachers’ efforts, “ occasionally faking interest for the benefit of Mr Crow”. However, the incompatibility of school and Michael’s traumatic and criminal history is clear, and it is seemingly this incompatibility that leads him to miss the moon landing, and chase “ a 1964 Ford Falcon down the river”. In these ways, “ *Rebel Without a Cause*” and <https://assignbuster.com/authority-and-self-expression-in-rebel-without-a-cause-and-shadowboxing/>

Shadow Boxing both suggests that it is unreasonable to expect teenagers to adhere to an authority that does not consider the needs and preoccupations of the individuals over whom it intends to assert itself. Buzz's and Charlie's attempts at self-expression both lead to tragic outcomes, however, this acts to undermine the authorities they chose to ignore. Charlie expresses the fact that he is "in-love with cars", and therefore expresses himself by car theft. Reflecting on his death Michael acknowledges "I knew I couldn't have stopped him...he loved stealing cars". While it might be said that adherence to police authority could have saved Charlie, Birch causes readers to question why those from a poorer class would respect the police. Michael relates that the "copper laughed when he told me that the insurance company would sue my parents". Such a lack of empathy for "you commission house kids" suggests why Michael and Charlie might have had such a disrespect for the law in the first place. Given his social class, Buzz has no such excuse for disregarding the law, his defence for his dangerous behaviour being "You've gotta do something right?". However, the phrase "do something" is also connotative of a career, and by extension an identity, that authorities in his world cannot provide him. Buzz was so intent on forming a satisfactory identity, that he died proving that he was not "a chicken". While these characters display the folly of misguided self-expression, they also suggest the uselessness of the types of authority on offer to them, further emphasising the responsibility for authority to help others by acknowledging their needs. By the end of both texts, Jim and Michael seem to have found their place in the world, and their respective means of doing this, shed light on Ray's and Birch's views on self-expression and authority. In his early teenage years, Michael does not seem focused on <https://assignbuster.com/authority-and-self-expression-in-rebel-without-a-cause-and-shadowboxing/>

self-expression. He admits that he “loved stealing cars”, but acknowledges that his main reason for stealing the Mercedes was to stop Charlie nagging him. Much of his life seems to be drifting with those around him, as is suggested metaphorically, by the days spent drifting down the river with Charlie. In contrast, Jim is concerned with how he is viewed, as demonstrated by the fact that he can be convinced to do most things if called a “chicken”. As Michael ages, he realises the importance of family and loyalty, reflecting on his mother saying “I felt so awful for all I had put her through”. Eventually, Micheal accepts this duty of caring for his family, despite the challenges, as exemplified in his care for his father in “The Haircut”. This act of loyalty and compassion is depicted as Michael’s most worthwhile self-expression. But it is not through any authority that this has been achieved, but rather, through trial and error, and the love of his mother, of Katie, his Grandmother, and Jack. Likewise, it is not until Jim realises the importance of compassion, honesty and bravery, egged on by his horror at Buzz’s death and the realisation that “we were all involved” and his sympathy for Plato, that the way Jim expresses himself begins to be portrayed as excellent or heroic. In the final conservatory scene, Jim is depicted as the in control hero. It is he who orders the police to “turn the lights down” and he who reasons with Plato to come out of the conservatory. In this heroic light, he is depicted as more knowledgeable and effective than the police (normally, a source of authority). Shadowboxing contends that expressing yourself, in order to discover what most matters to you, such as loyalty and compassion, is far more important than any artificial authority. In a Hollywoodised, whitewashed version of this, *Rebel without a Cause*” seems to suggest that developing principles such as bravery and honesty should be the ultimate

<https://assignbuster.com/authority-and-self-expression-in-rebel-without-a-cause-and-shadowboxing/>

goal of self-expression, and allows you, to some extent, to create your own authority." "Rebel Without a Cause" and Shadowboxing both contend that self-expression is more important than authority. Both texts suggest that authorities are only worthwhile if they protect the interests of, and are relevant to the lives of those they have authority over. However, both texts imply that ultimately, expressing oneself will lead to more worthwhile behaviour modification than authority. Shadowboxing focuses on self-expression as a means to discover values that are important to you and your loved ones and act upon them whether this is in line with authority or not. Displaying its difference in ideology, "Rebel Without a Cause", seems to suggest that self-expression is only worthwhile in as far as it encourages individuals to adhere to moral principles such as compassion, bravery and honesty and that this adherence is most useful when done irrespective of authority.