

# THIRTEEN REASONS DIE: ANALYZING THE GLORIFICATION OF ADOLESCENT SUICIDE IN 13 REASONS WHY

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# LITERATURE REVIEW

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- Teen suicide is an under-discussed, extremely controversial issue that impacts millions of people on a global level. Most of the literature on this subject focuses on prevention and noticing signs of people who may be thinking about suicide.
- Another significant element of the literature is discussing statistics. A majority of literature on teen suicide reference that suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest cause of death among teens, however the articles rarely talk about concrete prevention strategies.
- The literature on this subject does not address what measures can be taken to prevent teen suicide, while some articles say that it is to be expected due to undiagnosed mental illnesses in teens and due to societal conditions that cannot be changed.

# CONTEXT FOR THE BOOK

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- The book *13 Reasons Why* was written in 2007 by Jay Asher as a way to address teen suicide, as a friend of his in high school killed herself. Since its release, it has become a required book in several school English classes.
- The book is intended as a preventative measure against teen suicide by highlighting how destroyed and emotionally distraught suicide leaves people. It also attempts to show how suicide is not an answer to life's problems.
- However, the book actually romanticizes suicide by portraying Hannah's death as more of a petty attempt to get back at the bullies in Hannah's lives rather than as a tragedy committed by a girl with mental illnesses.
- The book also focuses on how the community around Hannah was at fault and not Hannah's decisions or her reactions to her surroundings.

# CONTEXT FOR THE SHOW

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- The show also romanticizes suicide by depicting Hannah's suicide as an attempt for revenge and designed to leave the maximum emotional impact through leaving 13 tapes telling everyone involved in her suicide exactly how terrible they are.
- This element is present in the book, however the show develops this for more emotional impact due to transferring from a book to a TV show.
- The show also depicts several troubling images and themes. One such example is showing Hannah killing herself by slicing her wrists with a razor blade. Other examples include the rapes and making shrines to Hannah as a memorial.

# PURPOSE OF PROJECT

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- The main purpose of this project was to assess how the media portrays teen suicide.
- This led to a focus on the show and book *13 Reasons Why* due to its recent release and the extreme controversy and media coverage it has received over its 2 seasons on Netflix.

# CATEGORIES USED

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- Data was collected using 6 different categories. These include:
- Deviations from the original source material. This category was removed when analyzing the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, as it was produced entirely by Netflix since the ending of the book corresponds with the ending of the 1<sup>st</sup> season.
- Sexual assault/harassment
- Psychopathology
- Physical violence
- Bullying
- Suicidal thoughts/ideologies

# DESCRIPTION OF CATEGORIES

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- Book deviations refers to anything that occurs in the show that either happens differently in the book or does not happen at all.
- Suicidal thoughts/actions refer to anything implying that someone is thinking of killing themselves or acting on suicidal thoughts.
- Sexual assault/harassment refers to instances of sexual assault/harassment.
- Bullying refers to instances of bullying and harassment that is outside normal high school behavior.
- Physical violence refers to instances of physical violence.
- Psychopathology refers to instances of mental illness or symptoms that could lead to a diagnosis if tested further.

# TABLE

Season 1	Season 2	Total
Book deviations- 119	Book deviations- N/A	Book deviations- 119
Suicidal thoughts/actions- 15	Suicidal thoughts/actions- 8	Suicidal thoughts/actions- 23
Sexual assault/harassment- 17	Sexual assault/harassment- 36	Sexual assault/harassment- 53
Bullying- 17	Bullying- 31	Bullying- 48
Physical violence- 12	Physical violence- 10	Physical violence- 22
Psychopathology- 36	Psychopathology- 60	Psychopathology- 96

# STATISTICS ON TEEN SUICIDE

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- According to the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS),” 17.7% of high school students reported seriously considering suicide during the prior 12 months, and nearly 9% of those students had attempted suicide during that same period.” (Onieal 14).
- Suicide prevention programs only exist in 77% of schools, which leaves certain populations more vulnerable.
- According to the CDC, teen suicide “ranks as the second leading cause of death of youths ages 10 to 24.”
- In 2015, 23,600 people aged 10-24 died by suicide, making it the second-leading cause of death among U.S. youth.

# STATISTICS CONT.

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- 68% of those who have seriously considered suicide first thought about it in high school, or even earlier.
- Over half of college students have thought about suicide in their lifetime, and approximately 18% have seriously considered it.
- 60% knew someone who had attempted suicide (about half were close friends or relatives), and 47% knew someone who had died by suicide (34% were close friends or relatives). Nearly half of those who have thought seriously about suicide chose not to tell anyone about their suicidal thoughts. (Becker 18).
- In 2015, the suicide rate for individuals aged 15 to 24 was 12.5 per 100,000. It is estimated that for every successful suicide there are 25 attempts, and studies show that suicide planning has risen from 10.9% to 14.6% between 2009 and 2015. (Schaffer 2).

# STATISTICS SPECIFICALLY RELATING TO 13 REASONS WHY

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- The month following the premiere of 13 Reasons Why, the rate of suicide among people aged 10-17 increased by 28.9%.
- There were also 195 more youth suicides than expected in the 9 months following the premiere of 13 Reasons Why.
- This highlights a principle known as the Werther Effect, AKA suicide contagion. This “occurs when a publicized suicide is correlated with an increase in suicides.” (Schaffer 1).
- Also according to Schaffer, “Google searches for “How to kill yourself” significantly increased after the release of 13 Reasons Why.”

# ROMANTICIZING OF TEEN SUICIDE

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- 13 Reasons Why spends a great deal of time romanticizing teenage suicide while also showing how the community failed Hannah. According to Dr. Sansea Jacobson, 13 Reasons Why “focuses on blaming others, as opposed to recognizing that greater than 90 percent of individuals who complete suicide actually struggled with mental illness.”
- Hannah is also portrayed as a character who is consistently the victim of circumstance, and the show downplays any element of responsibility she has. According to the show, her character is never responsible for any of her actions, but all the blame is put on the community around her.

# ROMANTICIZING CONT.

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- The show also focuses on “the depiction of teenagers leading secret lives that adults were unaware of and did not appear to care about.” (Poland and Thakker 60). This makes parents appear incompetent at best and deliberately uncaring at worse.
- Countless times, adults in the show are portrayed as apathetic to their children’s lives (Justin’s parents) or not portrayed at all (Bryce’s parents). Parents attempting to be helpful, like Clay’s and Hannah’s parents, were shut out at every opportunity. Clay even tells his mom there is nothing she can do to help him. (Poland and Thakker 60).

# ROMANTICIZING CONT.

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- The show teaches teens that parents will not comprehend their struggles and because of this, the teens in the show do not open up to anyone. This makes them even more isolated and less willing to trust support systems.
- 13 Reasons Why also shows Hannah's suicide on screen, which further adds to romanticizing of teen suicide.

# PSYCHOPATHOLOGIES OF VARIOUS MAIN CHARACTERS

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- Clay Jensen could easily be diagnosed with schizophrenia and PTSD brought on by Hannah's suicide. He avoids social contact with most people, sees Hannah's "ghost" for the entire second season and has conversations with her.
- He also appears to have triggers, as he starts to break down when a song he and Hannah danced to starts playing. Any mention of Hannah's sex life that does not include him results in extreme agitation and bursts of anger, which could be another trigger.
- He also has some suicidal tendencies, as seen by him holding a gun to his head and wanting to jump off a cliff.

# PSYCHOPATHOLOGIES CONT.

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- Jessica Davis, another main character also appears to have PTSD spawning from her rape. She cannot look at her rapist, shudders at his name being spoken, and even starts binge-drinking early in the series to cope. She also has some amnesia and issues socializing with boys as she cannot date or even flirt with other boys after her rape.
- Justin Foley is also abused by his mother's live in boyfriend, who happens to be a drug dealer. Justin's mom is also a heroin addict, and Justin later becomes one as well.
- Tony Padilla also appears to have aggression problems, possibly intermittent explosive disorder. This can be seen as he is easily provoked to physical violence on multiple occasions throughout the show's run.

# PSYCHOPATHOLOGIES CONT.

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- Bryce Walker, the series main antagonist, appears to have conduct disorder childhood-onset subtype. This can be seen by his completely unemotional behavior, cruelty and aggression to people, and a seemingly complete lack of remorse for any of his actions.
- He also displays an extreme desire to take what he wants. This can be seen with the fact that he is a serial rapist, having raped at least 3 girls on screen during the show's 2 seasons. This desire extends to childhood when he befriended Justin by stealing twinkies simply because he wanted them. Bryce also showed no remorse for any of these incidents.

# WARNING SIGNS

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- Some warning signs to look for in people who may be contemplating suicide include:
- Drastic changes in appearance
- Drastic changes in mood
- Self-harm
- Loss of interest in activities
- Fatigue
- Depressed mood

# DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

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- 13 Reasons Why does bring attention to the issue of teen suicide, which is commendable. However, the show and the book go about it in all the wrong ways. They show the suicide on screen, change how Hannah kills herself from the book, and show Hannah's death as "the ultimate revenge..." (D'Addario I).
- The show also sensationalizes Hannah's suicide as a promotion event, and several memorials are made seemingly in her honor. This includes her locker being made into a shrine and a magazine issue is published as a living memorial.
- This study only contains data from the first 2 seasons and the book. With Netflix's announcement of a 3<sup>rd</sup> season being released later in 2019, further research on suicide rates and attempts following its release and completion will need to be conducted.
- While the show tackles a controversial and under-discussed issue, it does this by doing everything wrong and ends up doing more harm than good.

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