

Yorkey, Brian, creator, *13 Reasons Why*. Netflix, 2017.

By Patrick Osborne, Florida State University, USA

1 While apprehensively preparing to listen to his own tape, Clay Jensen asks his best friend, Tony, the pivotal question presented throughout Brain Yorkey's *13 Reasons Why*: "Did I kill Hannah Baker?" ("Tape 5, Side B"). The answer to this question is never blatantly stated in the series. However, the series regularly implies, as Alex Standall suggests, that "we all killed Hannah Baker" (Tape 2, Side A). As a show depicting the horrific consequences of slut-shaming, bullying, sexual assault, and the ineptitude of mental health awareness, *13 Reasons Why* provides an interesting commentary concerning the hardships many young women face in a sexist high school environment and delineates such strains as a catalyst for adolescent suicide. Based on Jay Asher's best-selling novel of the same name, the series begins in the wake of Hannah Baker's completed suicide. While much of the school is struggling to comprehend the motivations behind the tragic event, Clay mysteriously receives a box of cassette tapes on his front porch that Hannah recorded prior to her death. The cassettes, each addressed to a different classmate, delineate the thirteen reasons Hannah took her own life and ultimately reveal the truth behind various rumors spread to defame her character. The show thus takes the form of a mystery, as Clay becomes an avenging detective gradually uncovering the motivations behind Hannah's suicide while simultaneously revealing his classmates' transgressions and finally his own.

2 From a purely entertainment standpoint, the show is compelling and commands the audience's attention because of its suspenseful action, numerous cliffhangers, and the desire to understand Hannah's actions. In fact, the series became the most tweeted about series of 2017 and was highly discussed via social media among adolescents making it one of the most talked about shows of the year (Becker 17). In terms of style, the series resembles a more serious and darker teen drama than those that have preceded it and the previously unknown actors/actresses that make up its cast do an excellent job portraying their characters—especially, Katherine Langford who brilliantly expresses Hannah's pain and suffering throughout all thirteen episodes. The series can be difficult to watch at times because the writers do not shy away from depicting terrifying events such as suicide and rape with grim verisimilitude. In fact, following its initial release, the show added trigger warnings before its opening titles following complaints from concerned parents, school officials and mental health professionals regarding the series' graphic

depiction of Hannah's rape and suicide (Andrews). Yet, regardless of the show's bleak subject matter, *13 Reasons Why* is enjoyable to watch and a viewer could easily find themselves in a Netflix-binge over a weekend as they, much like Clay, search for answers concerning Hannah's untimely death.

3 From an academic/critical standpoint, the series is much more problematic: while the series regularly succeeds in its portrayal of male sexual entitlement and gender relations, its depiction of suicide is highly questionable. In delineating the motives behind Hannah's death, *13 Reasons Why* ultimately presents suicide in Durkheimian terms: individuals that struggle to achieve societal goals or are affected by noxious stimuli take or attempt to take their own life due to their anomic condition. Throughout the series, Hannah is consistently bullied by her peers and is slut-shamed following a date with Justin Foley in the first episode. Later in the series, she is deemed "Best-Ass" by Alex Standall on a best-of list thus making it "open season on Hannah" to be groped and gazed upon by her male peers ("Tape 2, Side A"). This negative reputation leads others to falsely view Hannah as sexually promiscuous which ultimately culminates in her rape at the hands of Bryce Walker during a private party. Hannah claims concerning the thirteen reasons behind her suicide that Jessica and Justin "broke [her] heart . . . Alex, Tyler, Courtney, Marcus . . . each helped destroy [her] reputation . . . Zach and Ryan . . . broke [her] spirit," and "Bryce Walker . . . broke [her] soul" ("Tape 7, Side A"). *13 Reasons Why's* depiction of suicide as a response to feelings of anomie is accurate and admirable, however, by presenting Hannah's tapes as a source of revenge, the series heedlessly romanticizes suicide and implies that others are to blame for her suicidal behavior; often overlooking Hannah's agency in her own death. Will Toledo, who contributed to the show's soundtrack, suggests the series irresponsibly tells "kids how to turn their miserable and hopeless lives into a thrilling and cathartic suicide mission" (Trapp). Many viewers maintain a similar sentiment, and, for this reason, *13 Reasons Why* has amassed criticism by mental health professionals that perceive the glamorization of suicide in the series as a possible catalyst of a Werther effect. Indeed, suicide-related searches increased 19% following the release of the show and psychiatrists began seeing suicide attempts in which the individual claimed to be emulating Hannah Baker (Schrobsdorff 1). Accordingly, the series presentation of suicide as a revenge narrative serves better for creating suspense and therefore should be watched with a critical eye instead of being accepted as an accurate depiction of teen suicide.

4 While the series depiction of suicide is indeed suspect, *13 Reasons Why* portrayal of rape culture, toxic masculinity and male entitlement over women's bodies is both enlightening and decisive. Following the release of Hannah's tapes, the male jocks of Liberty High strive to maintain a sense of normalcy by attempting to "control the narrative" and protect Bryce from accusations of rape ("Tape 6, Side B"). In striving to achieve this aim, the male students foster a culture of entitlement, silence and protection that Michael Kimmel argues is the underlying cause of male violence in American society: "By upholding the culture of silence, guys implicitly support the criminals in their midst who take that silence as tacit approval. And not only does that silence support them, it also protects them" (55-64). This culture of protection extends to the school administrators and counselors, as Mr. Porter questions the legitimacy of Hannah's rape—inadvertently blaming the victim—and suggests there is nothing she can do legally to achieve justice if she won't identify her attacker. This final reason, Porter's negligence and overall dismissal of rape culture, crushes Hannah's spirit and compels her to complete suicide. Accordingly, *13 Reasons Why* breaks the silence surrounding rape culture by powerfully illustrating how every single act of sexual harassment and eventual assault negatively affects Hannah's mental health leading to her eventual suicide. This is a crucial topic for discussion and *13 Reasons Why* should be commended for shedding light on topics such as sexual consent and rape for its teenage audience. While it may be both unfair and irresponsible to blame someone for another's suicide, it is clear by the conclusion of *13 Reasons Why* that Hannah's suicide is ultimately a response to a patriarchal high school environment that reinforces male entitlement over female bodies and allows such provocations to remain unchallenged. Yorkey's series successfully challenges such provocations, and, in doing so, successfully provides an impetus for important conversations concerning toxic masculinity and teen suicide.

Works Cited

- Andrew, Travis M. "Netflix's '13 Reasons Why' Gets More Trigger Warnings. Critics Say It Glamorizes Teen Suicide." *The Washington Post*. Web. 22 October 2017.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/05/02/netflixs-13-reasons-why-gets-more-trigger-warnings-critics-say-it-glamorizes-teen-suicide/?utm_term=.0ba41ee48113
- Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Harper, 2008

Swanbrow Becker, Marty. "Why Schools Need to Step Up Suicide Prevention Efforts."

Education Digest, vol. 83 no. 2, 2017, pp. 17-20.

Schrobsdorff, Susanna. "'13 Reasons Why' Caused a Spike in Google Searches About Suicide."

Time. Web. <http://time.com/4880712/netflix-13-reasons-why-suicide-internet-search/>

Trapp, Philip. "Car Seat Headrest's Will Toledo Blasts '13 Reasons Why' For Suicide

Glorification." *Alternative Press*. Web. 22 October 2017.

https://www.altpress.com/news/entry/car_seat_headrest_will_toledo_13_reasons_why_suicide_glorification.

Yorkey, Brian, creator, *13 Reasons Why*. Netflix, 2017.