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The “Good Story Problem”

How Traditional Storytelling Structures Muddle Thirteen Reasons Why’s Mental Health Message

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Abstract

Teenage depression has long been a significant yet underreported and therefore undertreated disease. In recent years depression-centric narratives like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and *All the Bright Places* have garnered both attention and controversy in print, film, and even Broadway, bringing the conversation around teenage mental health into the spotlight. While some of these depictions have been praised for promoting empathy and understanding, others have been criticized for including graphic or even sensationalized representations of teen depression and suicide. These depictions, fictional as they may be, contribute to the larger societal discourse on teen mental health. This paper examines one of the most influential works concerning adolescent mental health in recent years: Netflix’s *Thirteen Reasons Why*, with the aim of exploring how its status of both an “activist” work of art and a product affect its depiction of depression and anxiety — and how these depictions might affect a population that, in the wake of the pandemic, reports higher rates of depression and anxiety than ever.

I. Introduction

Once an afterthought in the American psyche, mental health — especially for young adults — has, in the wake of the pandemic’s isolation and uncertainty, now come to the forefront of our collective psyche. A recent New York Times article found that American teenagers reported a 60 percent increase in depressive episodes from 2007. The US Surgeon General released a statement warning of a “devastating mental health crisis.” And in 2020, the National Institute of Mental Health reported that 17 percent of young adults reported a major depressive episode — by far the greatest of any age group.

Of course, depression and anxiety have long been significant, yet underreported and therefore undertreated illnesses among Americans — the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that, as recently as 2017, a total of [17.3 million Americans reported at least one major depressive episode](#). Yet of those affected by depression, over 35 percent reported receiving no treatment. The likely culprit, of course, is our long-standing societal taboo around mental illness — for too long, these conditions have been outright denied, downplayed, or relegated to hushed tones and social ostracization.

But, in recent years the conversation around mental illness has changed significantly. The ongoing pandemic, of course, has played a large role in this, as the cataclysmic emotional toll and upheaval of societal norms caused [more to seek mental health treatment than ever before](#), but the growing acceptance of these disorders can be traced further back than that. In the social media age, depression and anxiety are more normalized —and therefore more visible — than ever, in the bright pastels of mental health awareness Instagram infographics, in celebrity and athlete testimonials, and, of course, in fiction. And so it follows that, in recent years, depression-centric narratives for young adults have garnered attention and acclaim across the silver and streaming screens. Netflix’s *Thirteen Reasons Why*, for example, garnered over [476 million viewing hours in its first month of release alone](#). For many adolescents, seeing stories like these across their screens may be the first time they’ve engaged with this type of subject matter.

Still, the framing of youth depression within the format of a television show or movie presents a complex set of issues. Stories, of course, can have tremendous impact — they allow us to enter another’s shoes, creating empathy and helping to normalize mental health conditions. They create a collective societal understanding of these issues — [a recent study from the National Mental Health Association](#) found that 70 percent of Americans form opinions on mental health through watching TV. And, for those youth that struggle with depression, seeing themselves represented on screen can be a tremendous source of both comfort and empowerment, giving validity to conditions that still are too often stigmatized as simple byproducts of teenage angst.

Yet there is also danger to the misrepresentation of depression in these stories. Too often, these stories oversimplify, exaggerate, or even romanticize these conditions, creating stereotypes and alienating those who see experiences depicted that are far from their own. Some depictions have even been criticized for their potential to intensify feelings of self-harm or suicidal ideation. When we consider telling stories aimed at, and about a population as vulnerable as adolescents suffering from depression, there is a need for great care to be taken.

Art, of course, does not have a moral obligation. Nor does it have an obligation to have a message or lesson. It exists for its own sake. Yet we cannot talk about art as if it exists within a vacuum, because art does not exist within a vacuum — it exists in the real world. Art affects and is affected by public perception. It influences policy. It shapes the lives of individuals. There are consequences. And so, while there should not be allowances on what should or should not be depicted in fiction, we do have to consider the way in which art moves through the world. Because art has the ability to cause harm. Because, in the depictions of adolescent depression, it has.

Therefore, this research paper will explore how adolescent depression is represented in fiction through the lens of one of some of the most popular recent depictions of it: Netflix's *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

II. Art, Capitalism, and Story Structure

Firstly, when we consider these works, we must do so through the lens that these are products just as much as they are works of art. In a capitalist society, for a television show or movie to appear on your screen, it does so based on the assumption by its financiers of its ability to make a profit. This is a simple fact of life; it is also one that is fundamentally at odds with the principles of artistic expression — especially in mass-market mediums, like TV shows and movies. To produce a story at a major studio is also to make concessions in order to ensure the greatest possible audience.

Practically, this means there are certain structural elements that a majority of mainstream screenplays abide by. Much of these ideas can be traced back to Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Scriptwriting*, a book [considered formative in Hollywood's widespread adoption of the Three-Act structure](#). Field's Three Act Structure consists first of a first act set-up, which "establishes character, launches the dramatic premise" and "illustrates the situation", followed by a second act of confrontation, where "the main character encounters obstacle after obstacle that keeps him/her from achieving his/her dramatic need", and ending with a third act that is "the unit of action that resolves the story." (Field 21-26) On its face, it's easy to see why this structure is useful — building tension keeps the audience's engagement, until a cathartic release/ending that satisfyingly resolves the central point of conflict one way or another.

There is an argument that this Hollywood structure emerges from a certain universality of storytelling — Field, for example, cites Aristotle's "three unities of dramatic action": time, place, and action. We might see something similar in Freytag's Pyramid, which charts a story as a function of tension — a series of escalating actions leading up to a central climax. Likewise, this structure bears similarities to Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth or "Hero's Journey": a call to adventure, several increasing challenges that lead to an "innermost cave", and a return after being transformed. Some, like Christopher Vogler, have argued that the three-act structure emerges out of the "universal elements" of the Campbellic monomyth. As Vogler writes in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*: "All stories consist of a few common structural elements found universal in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and more." (Vogler 12)

However, this argument for the presence of universal structural elements in storytelling is one that remains firmly rooted in a Western-centric, deeply individualistic perspective of the world. Matthew Salesses notes in *Craft in the Real World* that central to the Western model of storytelling is the notion that stories are organized as “a string of causation in which the protagonist’s desires move the plot forward”, which “can often be boiled down to A wants B and C gets in the way of it.” But as Salesses writes, story structure can often differ wildly in Eastern cultures — he cites, for example, the “kishotenketsu” structure, where “the twist is not confrontation but surprise, something that reconfigures what its audience thinks the story is “about.” (Salesses 28) There are no universal structures within storytelling, Salesses says; there are only expectations.

Yet for the purpose of this exploration, what is important is the fact that the highly structured format is one that Western audiences have become accustomed to — and, as a result, it is one few works stray from. But the need for this standardized structure (and narrative functions that its elements serve) in the typical Hollywood story structure comes at odds with accurately portraying the reality of adolescent depression. Within subject matter as sensitive and fraught as mental illness, the clash between creating a marketable product and the need for ethical representation can have disastrous consequences. Nowhere is this more clear than in *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

III. *Thirteen Reasons Why* and the Fallacy of Narrative

The first season of the Netflix original series, based on the novel of the same name by Jay Asher, centers around the suicide of high school student Hannah Baker, who, before her death, recorded thirteen tapes that detail the reasons why she chose to take her life. And from a purely dramatic standpoint, the premise is an intriguing one. According to Sandra de Castro Buffington, the director of Hollywood, Health, and Desire Program, the large amounts of conflict present within mental health narratives [is one reason why these kinds of stories are interesting to so many](#) — as Syd Field writes, “All drama is conflict.”

We see the story through the eyes of Hannah’s classmate Clay Jensen as he digs through the tapes and subsequent web of events that surrounded Hannah’s life in her final days. The show, in essence, functions almost like a kind of reverse murder mystery: Who killed Hannah Baker? Was it Justin Foley, the fling who spread inappropriate photos of her? Was it Clay, the quiet, well-meaning protagonist who still inadvertently hurt her? Was it Bryce Walker, the rich football player who raped her?

This structure has two functions: first, the way the series spaces out each tape over the course of the season unfolds its central mystery slowly, encouraging its audience to continue watching each subsequent episode. It is highly engaging, bingeable — an aspect highly prized for a company [whose business model depends on keeping viewers watching for extended periods of time](#).

But this organization also provides a clear, linear path through Hannah’s downfall for the audience to follow. Though the story is told as a series of flashbacks, it’s quite easy to map her story upon the traditional three-act structure — Hannah’s story begins with her having just moved to the town; her desire is much the same as any other newcomer: to fit in and find a sense of belonging. But a series of

incidents derails this desire, which steadily increase in their intensity, first beginning with rumors that destroy her friendship with new friend Jessica, then escalating to events like inadvertently causing the death of fellow classmate and a graphic depiction of sexual assault. As the pressure and pain builds to its climax, Hannah takes her own life.

But the issue with this structure, however, according to the National Association of School Psychologists, is that it is an inaccurate reflection of the typical causes of suicide. In [an article released soon after the show's release](#), the organization stated that “the series does not emphasize that common among most suicide deaths is the presence of treatable mental illnesses. Suicide is **not** the simple consequence of stressors or coping challenges, but rather, it is most typically a combined result of treatable mental illnesses and overwhelming or intolerable stressors.” Framing suicidal ideation entirely as a result of interpersonal conflict, [mental health advocate Mark Henick writes](#), may make for a simple and easy-to-follow story, but “putting it in the context of Hollywood plot line,” he writes, “is rarely, if ever, the way that suicides really happen.”

Here, we see the conflict between the conventions of mass-market storytelling and the reality of portraying adolescent mental illness. Absent from the show's portrayal of a person's life leading up to their suicide, is any real mention of depression, anxiety, or any one of the mental illnesses that are associated with the overwhelming majority of suicide attempts. Hannah at times exhibits depression-like symptoms, but the story frames her death entirely as caused by the cruelty of others. It is a simple explanation, one that fulfills our desire for a clear resolution within stories, neatly divided into thirteen cassette tapes for those Hannah has left behind to listen to. But causes for depression and suicide are not simple; it is an irrational act, with risk factors that include the [presence of other mental health conditions, social environment, financial state, race, and family history](#). The story of a person's depression cannot be easily categorized into a fixed, linear structure because depression is not a linear disease. Those suffering from [clinical depression often experience peaks and valleys with the severity of their condition](#); others experience it seasonally or as a temporary response to stressful periods. In simplifying the narrative in this way, *Thirteen Reasons Why* minimizes the lived experience of those that suffer from depression and suicidal ideation. As [crisis hotline worker and video essayist Tim Hickson puts it](#), “The climax is the highest point of tension in the story, so we might think to use the worst suicidal episode a character has ever had...the reality is that the worst suicidal episode someone has is almost definitely in the middle of their mental illness, not the end.”

Likewise, the recontextualizing the irrationality of suicide into a logical, linear plotline also makes Hannah's decision seem like the only real choice. Throughout the course of the season, we see the reasons pile up, until at last Hannah goes to see the school's guidance counselor, Mr. Porter, in one last-ditch attempt to find a reason to keep going. But Mr. Porter dismisses her concerns, even insinuating that her sexual assault was her own fault. To Hannah, (and the viewer), the message is clear: she has nowhere left to turn. Suicide is the only option.

It goes without saying, of course, that this isn't true. Yet the show presents Hannah's perspective without any sense of alternative perspective. We are meant to feel her pain, to understand her reasoning — though the frame narrative is of Clay listening to the tapes, the tapes themselves are

narrated by Hannah in the first person. As such, the show's narrative structure is designed entirely around Hannah giving her reasons for suicide — the title of the show is *Thirteen Reasons Why*, after all. There is no counter argument here, no alternative option here — to be sure, the show does not shy away from showing how devastating the consequence of a person's suicide can be on the people around them — as evidenced by the multitude of sections that focus on Hannah's grieving, heartbroken parents. But consider how *Thirteen Reasons Why's* beyond-the-grave structure affords Hannah power she never had in her tumultuous life — to tell her story, to expose those who wronged her, to control her own narrative at last. For the show, the tape-based structure is not simply a convenient way to add a macabre soap-opera tension to the proceedings, but also narratively is presented as the only way for Hannah to be truly able to express her pain.

Mike Cadden writes of the dangers of singular perspectives in adolescent fiction in his article [“The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel.”](#) The use of first-person, Cadden writes, makes it easy to “intentionally communicate to the individual reader a single and limited awareness of the world that the novelist knows to be incomplete and insufficient” — in this case, the view of suicide as a reasonable remedy to Hannah's problems.

Of course, representation does not equal endorsement, but there does exist an inherent irony in the voice of an adult masquerading as the voice of an adolescent — the writer possesses some implicit authority over the adolescent viewer by virtue of the fact that their work is professional and published and sold as a product. Without an alternative perspective, Cadden argues that the prevailing narrative becomes “dominant and didactic.” *Thirteen Reasons Why* structures itself both narratively and rhetorically to validate Hannah's argument for suicide. For most, this argument will not be convincing — death is never a solution, after all. But for the portion *Thirteen Reason Why's* intended audience (teenage viewers) who may struggle with suicidal ideation or similar issues themselves, the message created by the show — and lack of effective pushback against them — can very easily be seen as affirming these harmful ideas.

IV. Sensationalism and Suicide

But above all, there is one scene for which *Thirteen Reasons Why* has become infamous. It occurs midway through the season's final episode. In it, Hannah Baker takes her life. In the interest of safety, I will refrain from describing the scene in detail; what is important to note is how visceral, detailed, and extended the scene is. The scene plays out the step-by-step process of Hannah committing suicide in full detail; the camera lingers on the gruesome images so long it almost comes across as self-indulgent.

There are no real plot-related reasons why this scene exists — the series itself is predicated on the fact that Hannah Baker has already died by suicide. The method of doing so is irrelevant; what is important is the fact that she has killed herself. Nor is there a reason for the scene to be so detailed, so lengthy — perhaps that morbid side of our brain is curious about the method used, but that still doesn't explain how horrifically graphic the scene is. A single shot of razor blade would convey the same information to the audience. The reason why the scene exists, therefore, is simple: to be shocking, cinematic, entertaining. After all, that is the function of a television show above all else: to be a good story.

But as as Brit Trogen [writes in *The Atlantic*](#):

“One complicating factor when it comes to creating art about suicide is the fact that many of the features that make for a ‘good story’ are also those known to contribute to suicidal behaviors: heightened emotions, heroic or sentimental portrayals of suicidal characters, and, above all, depiction of the suicide itself.”

[In a statement defending the scene](#), series showrunner Brian Yorkey said “Our creative intent in portraying the ugly, painful reality of suicide in such graphic detail in season one was to tell the truth about the horror of such an act and make sure no one would ever wish to emulate it.” Yet, this excuse conveys at best a deeply uninformed notion of the social nature of suicide, and at worst, a willful ignorance of potential harm in the service of peddling made-for-sharing shock value to a young, social-media savvy audience.

Suicide is socially contagious. And [vast amounts of research](#) has shown that graphic depictions of suicide heightens this effect. So it’s no surprise, then, that after the release of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, [there was a corresponding increase in suicidal ideation among adolescents](#). [Experts have also worried about the possibility of the show catering to the “revenge fantasy” of suicide](#) — that the the show might further encourage the idea that taking one’s own life (and blaming those perceived to have hurt them) will give some sort of retribution. Netflix added graphic content warnings to the show and included a suicide prevention PSA in text at the end of the series. But against the way the series brings us inside the mind of a person considering suicide (and the way the story fails to push back on the reasoning behind Hannah taking her own life), these warnings seem like little more than a weak, legal liability-clearing afterthought.

Furthermore, the powers that be at Netflix were indeed well aware of the possible negative effects of the suicide scene — and the show as a whole. Dan Reidenberg, a psychologist and director of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, [claimed that he was consulted by Netflix on the show](#) and told them to not release the series due to its potential for harm, in particular singling out the scene as a potential catalyst. The company released it anyway.

Did Netflix choose to include the scene out of some principle of commitment to Yorkey’s artistic vision? That argument seems unlikely, given the financial incentives at play here. There is no doubt that *Thirteen Reasons Why* would have failed garnered as much public interest — and therefore views — without the highly controversial suicide scene. However, it is impossible to know whether or not Netflix decided the number of streams the provocative scene would generate was worth the outrage it would cause. But as the PR adage goes: there’s no such thing as bad publicity. And so, after years of public criticism, Netflix finally removed the scene in 2019, far after the controversy (and public attention that followed) had faded.

Later seasons of the show support the notion that *Thirteen Reasons Why* includes reckless depictions of sensitive subject matter simply to provoke its audience, to generate viewers interested in the controversy. The first season of the show follows the plot of the novel to its conclusion; the three subsequent seasons shift the focus to exploring the lives of many of the characters from Hannah’s tapes

in Season 1. Asher's original novel is a standalone and the original novel is a completed story which involves the death of its most important character — the existence of the later seasons of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, therefore, exist solely in an attempt to continue to profit off the original series's popularity.

These later seasons continue to depict hot-button societal issues. There is a graphic rape scene. Multiple seasons involve active shooter situations. One undocumented character has his entire family deported by ICE. Yet there is no attempt by the show to explore these issues beyond showing how traumatizing they are — indeed, the visceral depictions have [drew more controversy for how triggering they may be to survivors of sexual assault](#).

The deportation scene in Season 3, for example, comes not as an attempt to explore the injustices of being undocumented, but as a result of a personal conflict between characters — the family is reported by Bryce Walker's parents as payback for the son Tony's role in getting Bryce tried for sexual assault. Instead, the topics that the show claims to explore are used simply for their dramatic value, to use the issue du jour (suicide, mass shootings, and even AIDS) as a way to heighten the stakes of the story and attract more viewers through the show's supposed social relevance. The presence of these misrepresentations retroactively makes the first season all the more insincere; what may have seemed originally like a misguided but potentially genuine attempt to explore adolescent mental health is now just another storyline within a standard teenage drama. Over and over again, *Thirteen Reasons Why* shows its willingness to forgo ethical representations of sensitive topics in search of viewership.

V. Conclusion

Much of the discussion within this essay centers around ethics: the question of accurate depiction versus narrative function, the question of potential harm caused by art versus profit.

But it is important to note, too, that representations of depression that are both entertaining and ethical can and do exist. Shows like *Bojack Horseman* and *Fleabag* succeed in accurately showing the reality of mental illness precisely because they tackle head on the notion that living with mental illness resists confinement to traditional narrative structure — they are incredibly messy, convoluted, and at times self-contradictory. These shows stand out from *Thirteen Reasons Why* also because of the fact they show the lives of those suffering from depression extend beyond simply trauma and suffering — there is hope, humor, and characters that grow past their relationship to depression.

Important to note, too, is the fact that these works found [immense viewership](#) on the same streaming platforms that *Thirteen Reasons Why* is hosted on. While *Bojack* and *Fleabag* are intended for a more mature audience, their existence shows that the successful depression-centric narrative is possible and profitable. And as the conversation around mental illness becomes more and more normalized, there is hope that stories like these — stories that take the time and care to get it right, building empathy and understanding not through their portrayal of darkness but through in spite of it — become just as common.

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