

13 Reasons Why: The unhappiness of youth

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10 May 2017

The new Netflix drama series *13 Reasons Why*, based on the best-selling books by Jay Asher, is set in contemporary America. It provides the background to the decision by Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), a high school student in a more or less average suburb, to kill herself...and its consequences.

When the story begins, Hannah has already died. Her friend Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette), returning home from a grieving high school, finds a shoebox containing seven double-sided cassette tapes on his doorstep.

The tapes are from Hannah, who explains on the first one, “I’m about to tell you the story of my life, more specifically why my life ended,” and then adds, setting up the framework for the rest of the series, “If you are listening to this tape, you are one of the reasons why.” Every “reason” is a person in her life who has done something, she asserts, to contribute to her demise.

The episodes jump back and forth between past and the present, telling Hannah’s story leading up to her death, as well as the drama that unfolds in its aftermath. The show is quite dark at times and contains a number of graphic scenes of physical assault, rape and Hannah’s suicide. Despite (or possibly because of) its grim plot, *13 Reasons Why* has become the most popular series on social media since its launch March 30. It has recently garnered the title of the “most tweeted about” series thus far in 2017.

The show’s main appeal is that it honestly depicts the reality of life, or aspects of life, for youth in America today. Each “reason” Hannah gives on her tapes highlights a moment when one character makes a mistake, some more severe than others and with varying degrees of malice or ignorance. The characters are complex and sensitive. What comes through very strongly as the story unravels is the life-situation in which each of these characters finds him or herself and how that contributes to his or her actions.

The series portrays the characters’ mistakes and

misdeeds not as the product of some inherent “evil,” but as the consequence of their previous experience, or lack of experience, and the difficulties in their lives. The range of issues with which these adolescents contend includes drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, unstable family lives, academic pressures, depression, extreme poverty, and absent or abusive parents.

In one episode (“Tape 5, Side B”), for example, which perhaps has less of a social context than some of the others, Hannah’s friend Sheri (Ajiona Alexus) knocks over a stop sign with her car while giving Hannah a ride home from a party. Sheri is too scared to call the police. Later that night, another student dies in an accident as a result of the missing stop sign. What Hannah does not see before she dies, however, is the devastating impact this event subsequently has on her friend.

The issue of rape and sexual assault is a major theme throughout the series. Although this may be slightly over-represented, it is dealt with thoughtfully. The show suggests that many social and cultural factors—immaturity, alcoholism, general confusion and youthful naïveté surrounding sex—play a destructive role in these situations.

Justin (Brandon Flynn), who appears twice on the tapes, is a boy whom Hannah kissed once on a date. After he spreads rumors that they had done more, Hannah gains a reputation for being “easy,” which leads to a number of unwanted advances from some of her male classmates.

Yet Justin is the most tragic character in the series. The basketball star lives in poverty. His father is absent, and his mother dates a drug dealer who occasionally beats Justin. He reappears on the tapes when he is unable, and partly unwilling, to stop his girlfriend from being raped by his wealthy friend Bryce (Justin Prentice) at a party, while she is unconscious

from too much alcohol.

This experience destroys Justin over the course of the next few weeks. His degeneration is heartbreaking. In the very last episode, after begging his girlfriend for forgiveness, he buys a 40-ounce beer at a local corner store and walks off with a gun in his bag. He presumably comes to a sad end.

So who or what is to blame for Hannah Baker's death? The show's answer is the same as the one given by Hannah: each of her classmates, and the guidance counselor. In one particularly dramatic scene, Clay, who at this point has not yet listened to his own tape, demands to know, "Did I kill Hannah?," to which his friend replies, "I guess we all killed Hannah."

This weak conclusion is at odds with the thrust of the series as a whole. After 13 episodes outlining the immensely complicated set of conditions that conspired and combined to lead to the terrible outcome, the creators lazily accommodate themselves to the "personal responsibility" argument and blame 11 troubled teens and one school official for Hannah's suicide.

If Justin had not spread a false rumor, or had Sheri called the police, would things have turned out differently? Perhaps, but not fundamentally. The general state of life would have been the same. It is dishonest, and untruthful, to lay the blame for the death on one or another individual or his or her personal failings.

Suicide, particularly among youth, is one of the most tragic symptoms of a diseased and terminally decayed social order. This is a society in which a healthy teenage girl cannot see a way forward for her life after only 17 years of existence. Youth should be a time filled with hope, optimism and idealism. Yet the reality of life today for many has turned it into a period of despair.

13 Reasons Why presents a reasonably accurate portrayal of life for high school students. This generation will live shorter lives, enjoy fewer job opportunities and experience more debt than their parents' generation. American teenagers today have lived every day of their lives with the US carrying out bloody military operations in some corner of the globe.

It is distressing but hardly incomprehensible that the overall suicide rate in the US has risen by 25 percent since 1999 for every age group under 75. One of the

more shocking spikes has taken place among girls between the ages of 10 and 14, whose suicide rate has tripled over the last 15 years.

The series is limited in its social critique, but there is a definite acknowledgment of forces greater than the characters' immediate circumstances. At one point, Hannah's parents consider using her college savings to pay the bills for their struggling small business, which has been unable to compete with the new corporate "megaplex." Another scene shows the school system failing to help Hannah during a last-ditch visit to the guidance counselor. In a secondary strand of the drama, school officials are preoccupied with covering up any wrongdoing in Hannah's death for fear of a lawsuit and loss of funding.

The show's makers seem themselves at a loss as to whom to blame. There is a recognition that something is seriously wrong. Hints and suggestions are dropped: Economic hardship? Some misguided or perverse ideology? Failing institutions? Yet nothing concrete is said. Instead, the audience is left with the meager and futile message that we all must be nicer to one another.

A great Marxist, Leon Trotsky, once noted that, "fortunately," even under the most dire economic conditions, only a tiny percentage of the population were driven to ending their own lives. "But peoples never resort to suicide," he pointed out. "When their burdens are intolerable they seek a way out through revolution."



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