

Examining the Theme of Violence in *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher

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Abstract: This discussion delves into the themes and pivotal events in the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, with a primary focus on the pervasive theme of violence. The conversation explores the multifaceted aspects of violence depicted in the novel, encompassing both direct and cultural forms. The characters' experiences, including sexual assault, bullying, and emotional trauma, are examined in the context of how violence contributes to their psychological well-being and the broader narrative. The role of various characters, such as Mr. Porter, in the protagonist Hannah Baker's suicide is also discussed. The conversation underscores the novel's poignant exploration of the consequences of actions and interactions, shedding light on the importance of recognizing signs of distress and the need for mental health support, particularly in a high school environment.

Abstract: Direct violence, Cultural violence, Structural Violence, Bullying

Thirteen Reasons Why authored by Jay Asher (2013) is a stimulating work of fiction belonging to the young adult literary genre. The novel undertakes an intricate examination of multifaceted challenges encountered by adolescents, encompassing a spectrum of thematic dimensions including internal struggles, intricate social dynamics, and the consequential repercussions of individual actions. The narrative orbits around Hannah Baker, an adolescent who tragically opts for self-termination, leaving behind a sequence of audiocassette tapes. Each tape is meticulously dedicated to an individual who contributed to her grievous resolution, elucidating the causal connections between their actions and her despondency.

A central thematic underpinning of the narrative is the portrayal of adolescent tribulations. The text lucidly accentuates the tumultuous journey from childhood to adulthood, marred by an assemblage of adversities encompassing personal insecurities, and the intricacies associated with forging meaningful interpersonal bonds. Hannah's experiential trajectory serves as a microcosm of the intricate challenges confronted by contemporary youth as they grapple with these predicaments in their quest for identity within a shifting milieu.

The novel navigates the convoluted milieu of social interactions among teenagers. It adeptly elucidates the resonance of rumors, gossip, and hierarchies within the social strata upon the impressionable psyches of young individuals. The characters portrayed within the novel often act under the impetus of their yearning for affirmation and inclusion, a propensity that frequently culminates in deleterious behaviors and the perpetuation of prejudicial stereotypes. This discordant milieu compounds Hannah's feelings of solitude and despair, accentuating the toxic environment engendered by such dynamics. The narrative candidly confronts sensitive and intricate subjects, notably bullying, sexual assault, and mental health, with an unswerving veracity. Through the prism of Hannah's perspective, the narrative candidly exposes the anguish and trauma stemming from these experiences. The narrative treatment of these subjects is characterized by its meticulous discretion, with an emphasis on the exigency of transparent dialogues and robust support systems to alleviate the predicaments faced by individuals grappling with such challenges.

The novel delves into the principle of causality and its far-reaching consequences. The novel's architectural framework, which interlinks each tape with a specific individual and their actions, reinforces the notion that ostensibly trifling actions possess the potential for profound ramifications. This structure underscores the reality that the magnitude of an event in one person's purview may harbor an entirely different significance for another, thereby inviting a collective societal commitment to approach interpersonal interactions with compassion and mindfulness. The narrative also underscores the pivotal role of interpersonal relationships in shaping the psychological well-being of adolescents. It perceptively illustrates how acts of benevolence or malevolence can indelibly mold an individual's self-perception and their conception of their role in the broader societal spectrum.

The novel's exposition of Hannah Baker's (2007) tragic chronicle and the intricate interconnections binding the characters together propounds a stirring narrative that spotlights the expansive ramifications of actions and relational dynamics on the emotional welfare of young individuals. Violence, manifested in its multifaceted manifestations, assumes a pivotal and intricate role within the narrative framework of the mentioned novel. Its significance surpasses the realm of mere plot devices, instead assuming a thematic profundity that invites a rigorous and comprehensive scholarly investigation. Embedded within the narrative tapestry, acts of violence, whether overt or subtle, function as catalytic agents precipitating a chain of events that culminate in the tragic decision undertaken by Hannah Baker (2007). The palpable tension between aggressive inclinations and inherent vulnerability serves to underscore the intricate symbiosis between dynamics of power and the delicate nature of emotional fragility within the landscape of adolescence.

This evocative depiction precipitates a nuanced and rigorous inquiry into the socio-psychological reverberations of violence upon impressionable and developing cognitive frameworks. This, in turn, necessitates a meticulous and thorough analysis of the novel's substantial contribution to the broader discourse concerning phenomena such as bullying, emotional trauma, and their concomitant reverberations. It is particularly noteworthy that instances of explicit physical violence manifest as symbolic representations of the profound psychological wounds endured by the characters. This narrative technique effectively establishes a parallelism between externalized acts of violence and the internalized anguish borne by the individuals, thereby illuminating the profound connections between outward manifestations of aggression and the corresponding internal afflictions.

As such, this paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted dimensions of violence as depicted within the chosen novel. Scholars have posited distinct typologies of violence, one of which is direct violence—a category encompassing deliberate physical actions or behaviors aimed at inflicting harm, injury, or damage upon individuals or objects. Direct violence is characterized by explicit physical confrontations, acrimonious verbal exchanges, and intimidating behaviors. It predominantly entails overt physical manifestations, encompassing intentional behaviors directed at inflicting harm or lethal injury upon individuals. In this vein, Zizek (2008) contends that violence, owing to its salient placement within our cognitive schema, is

readily linked with overt manifestations including criminal deeds, acts of terrorism, societal turbulence, and global conflicts. This conventional paradigm of violence enjoys extensive adoption and validation due to its conspicuous and readily identifiable attributes, thus facilitating its unequivocal recognition.

The text delineates numerous occurrences of direct violence. To exemplify, during a social gathering, protagonists Hannah and Jessica endure an incident of sexual assault perpetrated by Bryce Walker. This traumatizing incident constitutes a stark and unambiguous demonstration of violence, bearing significant implications that reverberate throughout the trajectories of both young women. Within the story, a pivotal juncture unfolds at a social event, where the characters Hannah and Jessica become victims of an incident marked by its distinct characteristics of direct violence. This event precipitates a transgression of personal boundaries, leading to their sexual assault at the hands of Bryce Walker (Asher, 2013, p. 239, 264). The gravity of this occurrence lies in its explicit manifestation as an act of violence, encompassing deliberate actions aimed at causing physical and emotional harm. The ensuing trauma has profound impact on the lives of both individuals involved. This particular event not only serves as an illustration of direct violence but also underscores the broader themes of vulnerability, power dynamics, and the far-reaching consequences of such actions within the narrative context.

Another pivotal event entails the act of suicide carried out by the central protagonist herself. This somber denouement serves as a thematic culmination, encapsulating the culmination of her internal struggles and the complex interplay of various thematic elements. The act itself is laden with multifaceted implications, echoing the convergence of emotional distress, psychological turmoil, and the intricate influences of external factors that ultimately converge into this irrevocable decision. As the central focus of the narrative, Hannah's self-inflicted demise not only underscores the gravity of her emotional tribulations but also echoes the broader narrative's exploration of the multifarious manifestations of violence, both explicit and insidious, within the sphere of adolescent existence.

An additional salient dimension of violence extensively depicted in the narrative pertains to cultural violence. Cultural violence, by definition, encompasses a manifestation of harm that becomes intricately entrenched within the foundational tenets of a society or culture, including its belief systems, values, norms, and behavioral practices. This variant of violence operates on a nuanced and subtler stratum within the fabric of societal interactions and dynamics. Gultang and Fischer (2013) define it as the operational presence of culture in situations where it serves as a legitimizing force for both direct and structural violence. This legitimization process is characterized by its dual nature, encompassing elements of both indirect and direct influence, thus giving rise to the concept of indirect-direct/indirect cultural violence (p. 35).

Cultural Violence can be delineated as a variant of harm deeply ingrained within the belief systems, values, norms, and practices inherent to a given society or culture. Its mode of operation is characterized by subtlety and nuance. Cultural Violence becomes evident through the perpetuation of prejudicial stereotypes, inherent biases, and the perpetuation of normative constructs that facilitate the continued existence of discrimination and marginalization within a given society. In accordance with Galtung's framework, cultural violence is defined as "those facets within the domain of culture, the symbolic realm of our existence, which can be harnessed to justify instances of direct or structural violence" (1990, p. 291). It is crucial to emphasize that Galtung's conceptualization pertains to specific elements within cultures, rather than making a blanket assessment of entire cultural systems.

The novel vividly portrays instances of cultural violence, prominently exemplified by the prevalence of bullying and harassment. Within the school milieu, there is a distressing normalization of such deleterious behaviors, wherein Hannah becomes the unfortunate recipient of injurious rumors, derogatory epithets, and disparaging communications. As an illustrative example, Justin disseminates unverified rumors concerning Hannah, embellishing an ostensibly minor encounter—a mere kiss in a park—leading to the unjust vilification of Hannah's social standing within their peer cohort (Asher, 2007). This deleterious effect profoundly compromises Hannah's societal standing and emotional equilibrium, ultimately culminating in her tragic decision to end her own life. Thus, the narrative delineates the normalization of rumors and gossip, frequently disseminated without due verification of their veracity. This ingrained cultural tolerance of detrimental conduct notably intensifies her

emotional distress, thereby underscoring the profound and ubiquitous impact of cultural violence on her psychological equilibrium.

Secondly, the narrative features instances of the objectification of women and incidents of sexual harassment. These include inappropriate comments and actions directed at the protagonist, Hannah. An instance of this is when Hannah becomes subject to physical assault by Justin, manifested in an act of unwarranted physical contact—specifically, a slap on her bottom within a store setting. Justin, in response to this action, seeks to justify his behavior by asserting that he is “only playing”. However, Hannah interprets Justin as saying “your ass is my play-toy. You might think you have final say over what happens to your ass, but you don’t. At least as long as “I’m only playing” (Asher, 2007, p. 172). From her perspective, this incident conveys a demeaning message: that her body is objectified and she lacks ultimate agency over it, framed within the context of Justin’s assertion that his actions are merely playful, thereby undermining her autonomy and dignity. These occurrences serve as manifestations of a culture that not only tolerates but also normalizes such behaviors, thereby perpetuating a deleterious environment.

Thirdly, there is a conspicuous manifestation of the bystander effect within the narrative. This phenomenon becomes apparent in situations where characters bear witness to acts of cruelty or harassment yet refrain from intervening or taking action. Lastly, the story highlights the conspicuous absence of emotional support mechanisms and the presence of cultural stigma concerning mental health issues, particularly when the characters are in dire need of such support. Hannah seeks help from Mrs. Bradley at one point in the story, but her interaction with the counselor is largely unhelpful. Mrs. Bradley doesn’t fully grasp the extent of Hannah’s struggles and dismisses her concerns, attributing them to typical teenage issues. This interaction leaves Hannah feeling unheard and unsupported (Asher, 2007). While Mrs. Bradley’s response may not directly cause Hannah’s suicide, it reflects a larger problem within the school system: the lack of proper mental health support and the failure to recognize the signs of distress in students. Hannah’s feeling of isolation and the inability to find someone to turn to for help contribute to her sense of hopelessness.

So, Mrs. Bradley's role in Hannah's story is more about illustrating the inadequacies in the system rather than being a direct cause of her suicide. The novel uses her character to shed light on the importance of recognizing and addressing the mental health needs of students and the consequences of failing to do so. These instances serve as illustrative demonstrations of how prevailing cultural norms, behaviors, and attitudes within the school setting significantly contribute to the emergence of emotional distress, psychological trauma, and social isolation among the affected individuals.

Structural violence pertains to the systemic mechanisms by which social, economic, and political structures engender prolonged harm and suffering, often by exerting disproportionate impact upon specific demographic groups. Bandy X. Lee's delineation of structural violence aligns with this perspective, defining it as the avoidable constraints imposed by society on specific demographic groups, hindering their ability to fulfill fundamental needs and attain a quality of life commensurate with their potential. These constraints typically originate within authoritative institutions exercising power over these groups. Importantly, these limitations are ingrained within societal structures and are often normalized, rendering them inconspicuous as individuals navigate their daily lives (Lee, 2019). A conspicuous illustration of structural violence is discernible through the existence of a hierarchical social framework within Liberty High School. Within this school environment, individuals enjoying popularity wield significant influence and favor, including leniency from school authorities. Consequently, these favored individuals are capable of subjecting Hannah Baker to acts of bullying and mistreatment with impunity, exemplifying the systemic injustice embedded within the institution.

Furthermore, within the educational institution, a notable manifestation of structural violence lies in the administration's apparent lack of sensitivity towards students' mental health concerns. This is exemplified through the conduct of Mr. Porter, who serves as the school's guidance counselor and declines to provide assistance when Hannah Baker seeks help during a critical juncture. This systemic insensitivity reflects the deficiency in the school system's provision of requisite support and intervention mechanisms for students grappling with emotional and psychological challenges.

The narrative underscores the theme of economic inequality and its repercussions on the lives of the characters. The novel illustrates how financial hardships manifest as a source of vulnerability and isolation for Hannah. Additionally, the story delves into the consequences of economic disparities on characters like Tyler, whose inability to acquire a decent camera contributes to a diminished self-esteem. Moreover, Alex's frustration stemming from financial limitations significantly impacts his social standing within the narrative. These instances underscore the intricate interplay between economic disparities and the characters' personal experiences and social dynamics.

Aside from these, the novel elucidates the theme of gender-based violence and discrimination, evident through various instances. For example, the character of Justin is portrayed as manipulating and objectifying women, reflecting elements of gender-based violence. Moreover, the traumatic experiences of characters Jessica and Hannah, specifically in the context of sexual assault, fall within the purview of this category, highlighting the presence of gender-based violence and discrimination as salient thematic elements within the narrative.

The portrayal of various forms of violence highlights the complex interplay between individual actions and systemic failures. The characters' experiences with bullying, harassment, neglect and emotional distress underscore the impact of structural violence – the indirect harm that results from inadequate support systems, cultural norms, and institutional shortcomings. Through the lens of the characters' stories, the novel prompts us to reflect on how societal and institutional factors contribute to their struggles.

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