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THE IRONY OF 13 REASONS WHY: Perpetuating the Very Problems It Claims to Help Solve

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Two weeks after the suicide of Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), friend and classmate Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette) finds a box of tapes on his front porch. Mourning the loss of his friend, the last thing Clay expects to hear when he pops the first tape into his boom box is Hannah's voice, "live and in stereo." Clay stands transfixed by a voice he never expected to hear again, while Hannah begins her first of many monologues: "Get a snack. Settle in. Because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why."

13 Reasons Why is based on the 2007 novel by Jay Asher chronicling the story of Hannah Baker, who kills herself and leaves behind thirteen cassette tapes. Each tape addresses a specific person at her school, explaining why they're one of the reasons she committed suicide.

The storyline follows a nonlinear narrative moving between the present day, where Hannah's peers are tormented by her tapes, and the past, where Hannah is alive and the audience learns about the events leading to her suicide. Like most dramas in our postmodern culture, *13 Reasons Why* relies on narrative empathy: "The sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition."¹ While narrative empathy is an integral part of any good story, articles like this are necessary because narrative is also a teacher. Stories contain worldview perspectives and assumptions that are either in line, or at odds, with the Christian worldview.

Philosopher James K. A. Smith observes, "We have moral muscles that are trained in the same way our biological muscles are trained when we practice a golf swing or piano scales."² As such, viewers of shows like *13 Reasons Why* must use their moral muscles to consider and reflect on the narrative to avoid subconsciously adopting unbiblical perspectives. This hopeless show's moral perspective celebrates revenge, glamorizes suicide, and presents no viable alternative to ending one's life. While

proclaiming to strike a blow against suicide, *13 Reasons Why* ends up perpetuating the very problems it claims to help solve.

CELEBRATING REVENGE

Producer Selena Gomez commented that the show “is uncomfortable for people to talk about, but it is happening, and hopefully it opened the door for people to actually accept what’s happening and actually go and change it, talk about it.”³ The irony is that while the producer explains that one of the show’s main purposes is to reveal the horror of suicide and create awareness about how damaging verbal and emotional abuse can be, the actions and intentions of Hannah Baker are the antithesis of that goal. In her first monologue, Hannah tells her peers that they must listen to every tape so that they will understand what everyone else did that led to her suicide. Hannah says vindictively, “In case you’re tempted to break the rules, understand I did make a copy of these tapes and I left them with a trusted individual, who, if this package doesn’t make it through all of you, will release those copies in a very public manner.”

Hannah’s actions clearly come from deep pain. She uses hurt to justify her revenge. With Hannah positioned as the protagonist, it is tempting for viewers to cheer for her revenge, especially given how horribly her peers treated her. Hannah experienced the darkest parts of high school: gossip, slut-shaming, betrayal, verbal objectification, stalking, violation of privacy, lies, assault, theft, and rape. Though the producers target positive change, Hannah winds up exhibiting the same emotional bullying and violence that drove her to suicide.

In Jesus’ teachings, we find a radically different standard of living. Jesus says, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39 NIV) and, “As I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34 ESV). The theological explanation of these commands can be found at the beginning of the Christian story — in Genesis. Scripture teaches that humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and have value because they bear the image and likeness of their Creator. For this reason, we are called to treat fellow image-bearers according to their eternal value.

While *13 Reasons Why* was produced to illustrate the relationship between bullying and suicide⁴ (the second leading cause of death in 2015 amongst persons aged fifteen to thirty-four⁵), it fails to educate viewers on how best to address hurting people and create a culture of life and love. We know the only way to do this is to point people to Him who is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses...who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15 ESV).

GLAMORIZING SUICIDE

Between the godlike power exhibited by Hannah after her death and the graphically depicted suicide, where she slits her wrists with box cutters, *13 Reasons Why* does more to glamorize suicide than it does to discourage it.

Regarding Hannah's suicide scene, creator Brian Yorkey said, "We worked very hard not to be gratuitous, but we did want it to be painful to watch because we wanted it to be very clear that there is nothing, in any way, worthwhile about suicide."⁶ While I don't doubt their intentions, the production team's passion for the show outweighed their expertise on teen suicide.

The "Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide," suggestions developed by suicide prevention experts for media outlets, warns that "risk of additional suicides increases when a story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage sensationalizes or glamorizes a death."⁷ This scenario is called suicide contagion or "copycat suicide." It frequently occurs "when one or more suicides are reported in a way that contributes to another suicide."⁸ Sadly, there have been reports of suicide attempts related to the show,⁹ and while we may not be able to prove causation between the show and a rise in suicide attempts, we do know that ideas have consequences.

The way that *13 Reasons Why* tells the story of Hannah Baker makes her suicide seem like a small price to pay for the control and power she wields in death. As Gia Dalfonzo, editor of Breakpoint.org, points out in her article entitled *13 Reasons Why: A World without Hope*, "What has particularly bothered many parents and educators about the show is that Hannah's voice floating above all these stories gives us the impression that she lives on after death — moreover, that death gave her a power she never had in life."¹⁰

For the thousands of impressionable teenagers struggling with suicidal tendencies, the message that you can finally get back at everyone who hurt you and get attention and concern from others after death is very dangerous. The missing piece in this "solution," as Dalfonzo reminds us, is that "Hannah is not actually around to exercise and enjoy that power."¹¹ As such, the glamorization of Hannah's suicide creates an unrealistic fantasy of revenge, recognition, and release after suicide. *13 Reasons Why* overportrays the anguish and pain that those with suicidal tendencies already fantasize others will endure in their absence, and so glamorizes the very act the creators are seeking to discourage.

NO VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

The last way *13 Reasons Why* failed to live up to its producer's goal to discourage teen suicide is its dominant story arc toward suicide. As the show begins after Hannah's death, the nonlinear narrative crescendos toward her fatalistic death in the final episode.

In response to the show's release, the New Zealand Office of Film and Literature created a new censorship category by "issuing an immediate restriction on the show to those aged under 18, unless accompanied by an adult."¹² In its public statements regarding censorship and their concern over the show, the Office of Film and Literature observed that Hannah's "death is represented at times as not only a logical, but an

unavoidable outcome of the events that follow. Suicide should not be presented to anyone as being the result of clear headed thinking.”¹³

For a show aiming to discourage teen suicide, it is shocking that at every turn where Hannah could have asked for help, shared her struggles with her parents, or encountered someone who would help her, the writers chose to present the worst possible scenario.

Hannah’s friends, parents, and teachers are all unaware of her struggle with suicidal tendencies because she intentionally keeps them in the dark. The one time Hannah gives life “one more try” and seeks out a school counselor, the counselor “questions her in ways that make it seem like the issues she’s dealing with — including multiple instances of sexual assault — are her fault.”¹⁴ The writers make the school counselor look like an unprepared, staggering fool. Phyllis Alongi, clinical director of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, responded to this particular scene saying, “I think the depiction of Mr. Porter was a big disservice to the mission and the quality of school counseling....It looks like a dead end for someone who’s struggling, like, *Oh yeah, that’s what happens when you go to a counselor.* Which is not true. School counselors spend a bulk of their education and their time with their finger on the pulse of what’s going on with adolescents” (emphasis in original).¹⁵ Sadly, *13 Reasons Why* more successfully portrays suicide as a viable option to the pain and anguish of life than as a non-option.

Because the creators of *13 Reasons Why* may not know the hope found in the gospel of Jesus, the show can only seek to accomplish its goal: to discourage suicide and make it a non-option. However, the show reaches heights of irony in that failed attempt. As the New Zealand Office of Film and Literature states, “This is a nuanced show that asks a lot of questions, and raises a lot of issues, but often fails to either answer or fully address them.”¹⁶ It is at these times where the church ought to be the voice of hope that the world cannot be.

In *13 Reasons Why*, evil is returned with evil. In the gospel story, Jesus takes the full punishment reserved for evil-doers, cancels “the record of the charges against us,” and takes “it away by nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14 NLT). In *13 Reasons Why*, death is a means of punishing others and escaping life. In the gospel, Jesus accepts His death as the punishment we deserve (Heb. 12:2), and, through His resurrection, conquers death so that we can “take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Tim. 6:19 NIV).

In the story of *13 Reasons Why*, death is a viable option to the pain and trauma inflicted on us by others. In the gospel story, Jesus “render[s] powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14 NASB) and promises “He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Rev. 21:4 NASB). While we cannot control the messages and moral perspectives of the world, we can respond to them by telling a better story — indeed, the best story ever told.

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NOTES

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