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Suffering in Jay Asher's Novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the protagonist's suffering in Jay Asher's novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*, focusing on the types of suffering and their effects on Hannah Baker's life. A descriptive qualitative method is employed. Data are drawn from the novel's narration, dialogue, and the protagonist's inner thoughts and are analyzed using Quilao's (2018) typology of suffering: physical, psychological, social, existential, and ethical. The analysis reveals that Hannah primarily experiences three types of suffering: psychological, social, and ethical. Psychological suffering appears through anxiety, loneliness, and unresolved trauma; social suffering emerges from isolation, neglect, and betrayal by peers; ethical suffering is manifested in dehumanization, stigma, and loss of dignity. These forms of suffering have a profound negative effect on her life, leading to feelings of regret, disappointment, despair, suicidal ideation, and a negative attitude toward life. Hannah's inability to cope with these overwhelming emotions ultimately drives her to take her own life. The findings highlight the severe consequences of unresolved suffering and emphasize the importance of emotional support and intervention in preventing similar tragedies.

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1. Introduction

Jay Asher, an American novelist born in Arcadia, California, on September 30, 1975, is widely known for his ability to draw story ideas from personal experience and true stories he has heard. His powerful and emotional works, such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *The Future of Us*, and *What Light*, reflect his ability to express human experience in depth. In literature, such works do not merely tell stories; they also depict deep ideas, feelings, and thoughts about life.

Among Asher's works, *Thirteen Reasons Why* stands out as a masterpiece that has received many prestigious awards. The novel received a five-star rating from the Teen Book Review, an award as the best book from the Association of Booksellers for Children, and recognition from the American Library Association as the best book for young adults. It was also included in Barnes & Noble's list of the 10 best young adult books and received the Best of the Best Books award from the Chicago Public Library. These awards show the huge impact *Thirteen Reasons Why* has had in youth literature, both in narrative and theme.

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker, the protagonist, experiences suffering. She is portrayed as a teenage girl who struggles with the mental and emotional burdens inflicted by her environment. She represents the silent victims of bullying, isolation, and misunderstanding. She is a complex character whose vulnerability and pain are deeply explored throughout the narrative. Her suffering is revealed through a series of tapes she leaves behind, which show how other people's actions and words can have a huge impact on a person's feelings and mental state, especially for those facing emotional difficulties.

Previous studies have examined bullying and suicide dynamics in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Kimura et al. (2022), for example, show that adults in the series fail to respond adequately to school bullying, while Hadhna Djohar et al. (2024) highlight bullying, harassment, and social isolation as contributing factors to the protagonist's suicidal crisis. However, these studies do not systematically classify Hannah Baker's suffering using Quilao's (2018) typology. Therefore, this study fills this gap by identifying the types of suffering Hannah experiences and explaining how those forms of suffering affect her life.

According to Cassel (2004), suffering is a condition that a person feels when important aspects of his existence, such as health, freedom, or identity, are threatened or damaged. Suffering is not only about physical pain; it also involves emotional and spiritual dimensions. Suffering occurs in human life in numerous ways. This study focuses on suffering because it encapsulates the central theme of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The theme reflects the psychological and emotional challenges faced by Hannah Baker and examines how these experiences resonate with readers, particularly young adults. By focusing on suffering, this study aims to highlight its multifaceted nature—emotional, social, and psychological—and its profound impact on decision-making and interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, this study addresses two questions: (1) What types of suffering does Hannah Baker experience? (2) How do these forms of suffering affect her life? This focus not only directs attention to the main issues in the novel but also emphasizes the broader significance of understanding suffering as a critical aspect of human experience.

2. Literature Review

Back (2015) states that suffering can lead to feelings of frustration and a desire to withdraw from social life. When individuals feel there is no way out of the suffering they experience, frustration sets in and they may begin to withdraw from social interactions, worsening their feelings about the world and themselves. Suffering is a very personal experience, where sufferers often feel isolated from their social environment and friends **(Tate & Pearlman, 2019).** This suffering is not only felt within the individual but can also cause a feeling of isolation from the outside world, worsening their psychological condition. This isolated condition makes sufferers feel more alone and neglected in their struggle.

Johnson (2023) reveals that suffering can also disappear from view, which means that someone who suffers is sometimes unable to express or identify the pain they feel, either to others or themselves. The inability to express suffering can worsen the condition because the sufferer feels not understood.

Quilao (2018) states that there are five types of suffering: physical, psychological, social, existential, and ethical suffering. Physical suffering is a condition that arises as a result of the pain experienced by a person, which, if not handled properly, can worsen physical and mental conditions. Psychological suffering is related to a person's mental and emotional condition. Quilao (2018) emphasizes that this type of suffering arises from feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, or stress, often stemming from life events such as loss, trauma, or unresolved inner conflicts. Quilao (2018) describes social suffering as arising from feelings of isolation, exclusion, or the breakdown of community support. In other words, social suffering is deeply influenced by societal structures and cultural norms, making it a collective phenomenon as much as an individual experience. Quilao (2018) defines existential suffering as the distress experienced when individuals question their purpose, autonomy, and the meaning of their existence. This suffering is often linked to circumstances where individuals feel powerless or trapped in a situation that undermines their sense of self-worth. Ethical suffering, meanwhile, can lead to a crisis of faith, with some individuals questioning the purpose of their suffering and feeling betrayed by a higher power.

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Recent studies on adolescent victimisation support the view that suffering is cumulative. Bohle (2025) reports that continuous victimisation is associated with greater risks of depression and low self-esteem during the transition to adulthood. In the context of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Kimura et al. (2022) further show that adults' failure to intervene in school bullying contributes to the escalation of adolescent suffering. Hadhna Djohar et al. (2024) also identify bullying, harassment, and social isolation as part of the suicidal crisis depicted in the novel. These findings suggest that psychological, social, and ethical suffering do not occur separately; they interact and reinforce one another. This study therefore uses Quilao's (2018) typology not merely to label Hannah's suffering, but to explain how different forms of suffering accumulate and shape her decisions.

These previous studies indicate that suffering is multidimensional: it affects emotional, social, and ethical life. This study extends that discussion by applying Quilao's (2018) typology to a literary character and by showing how psychological, social, and ethical suffering interact in Hannah Baker's life.

3. Research Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the suffering experienced by the protagonist in the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), the descriptive approach in qualitative research allows researchers to process data with limited interpretation, categorize information into certain themes, and provide a more in-depth explanation of the data. The data source is Jay Asher's novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007). The data consist of narration, dialogue, and the protagonist's inner thoughts that indicate psychological, social, and ethical suffering. Data collection is carried out by close reading, identifying relevant quotations, and classifying them based on Quilao's (2018) typology. Data analysis follows three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To maintain dependability, the researcher repeatedly checks the quotations against the novel and discusses them with the research questions and theoretical framework.

4. Discussion

The suffering has been experienced by Hannah Baker, the protagonist in the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. Using Quilao's (2018) theory of five types of suffering, the study finds that only three types are clearly present in Hannah's life: psychological, social, and ethical suffering. These three types are discussed below.

4.1 Psychological Suffering

Psychological suffering refers to the emotional and mental stress experienced by individuals due to various factors, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and unresolved inner conflicts. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker experiences deep psychological suffering due to various events that give rise to feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness. One of the main factors that exacerbates her suffering is her inability to overcome the traumatic experiences that continue to burden her emotionally, as reflected in the quotation: "A rumor based on a kiss started a chain reaction that ruined my reputation" (Asher, 2007, p. 17). The quotation describes the beginning of Hannah's psychological suffering; it shows how one small event, namely "a rumor about a kiss," can trigger a series of negative events that slowly destroy her self-esteem and cause deep suffering. In the novel, this rumor stems from Justin Foley, who claims that he and Hannah did more than just kiss. As a result, Hannah's reputation begins to be tarnished, and she becomes the target of slander and verbal harassment from her peers, and she feels there is no room to correct the misunderstandings that exist in the surrounding community.

The quotation "I hope you're ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended" (Asher, 2007, p. 1) is the culmination of the psychological suffering that Hannah experiences. After struggling with deep emotional pain without adequate support, Hannah feels that she has no other way out but to end her life. Her decision to reveal her life story through a tape she previously recorded illustrates how disconnected she feels from the world and how she feels that her suffering will never be fully understood. This reflects the end point of a process of increasingly intense and unbearable psychological suffering, ultimately leading to a tragic act.

4.2 Social Suffering

Social suffering occurs when someone experiences isolation, exclusion, or loss of social support. This suffering is often caused by someone's rejection, abandonment, or failure to connect with another person. In the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why,* Hannah faces abandonment and indifference from her friends, who fail to understand her emotional state and deepen her suffering. "You know what you did, Hannah. You know what you did. Don't act like you don't" (Asher, 2007, p. 34). Jessica Davis emotionally accuses Hannah. She feels betrayed by what Hannah has done in the events that occurred between them. These words are especially hard for Hannah because they make her feel misunderstood and blamed for something that is actually more complex than it seems. Jessica's accusations exacerbate the feelings of alienation and social isolation that Hannah is already experiencing, making her feel even more distant from her friends and increasingly mired in loneliness and emotional suffering.

Hannah feels neglected when she leaves a party, but no one notices or pays attention, as in the following quotation: "For the longest time, ... it seemed that I was the only one who cared about me" (Asher, 2007, p. 77). This quotation shows Hannah's feeling that she is not cared for or appreciated by the people around her. Even though she is in the middle of a crowd, no one cares or pays attention to her; no one stops, says words of encouragement, or provides emotional support like a hug. In this case, Hannah's friends' indifference reflects social neglect that worsens her emotional state.

4.3 Ethical Suffering

Ethical suffering refers to the emotional and psychological distress that individuals experience when their dignity is violated, which can be caused by dehumanization, social stigma, exclusion, or actions that limit one's self-esteem. In the context of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker experiences deep suffering, especially after a series of humiliations and mistreatment that treat her as an object. As seen in the following quotation: "So congratulations, Bryce. You're the one. I let my reputation catch up with me—I let my reputation become me—with you" (Asher, 2007, p. 142). According to the quotation, Hannah feels she has lost control of her identity and self-esteem. She feels that the bad reputation that has stuck to her is no longer just a social stigma but has become part of herself. This reflects dehumanization, where she no longer sees herself as a valuable individual but only as a figure trapped in the labels given by other people.

Hannah feels betrayed by people she should have trusted, including her friends, people who spread rumors, and even the adults who were supposed to help her. "Betrayal. It's one of the worst feelings" (Asher, 2007, p. 9). Based on the quotation, for Hannah, betrayal is not just emotional pain; it is also ethical suffering that destroys her trust in the world and the people around her. The repeated betrayals she experiences make her feel like she has lost control of her life, which ultimately contributes to her decision to end her life.

Hannah Baker experiences ethical suffering caused by dehumanization, social stigma, and betrayal. All of these factors lead to a loss of dignity and feelings of disrespect, which in

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turn worsen Hannah's psychological and emotional state. This ethical anguish becomes increasingly apparent when those around Hannah fail to support her emotionally or respect her self-worth, leading to the tragic conclusion of her life.

4.4 The Effects of Suffering on Hannah's Life

The three forms of suffering have significant effects on Hannah's life. Psychological suffering leads her to feel worthless and hopeless; social suffering reinforces her sense of isolation and neglect; and ethical suffering destroys her trust and dignity. These effects are reflected in her regret, disappointment, despair, suicidal ideation, and negative attitude toward life. The quotation "I hope you're ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended" (Asher, 2007, p. 1) shows that her accumulated suffering ultimately drives her to end her life. Thus, Hannah's suffering is not merely a collection of painful experiences but a process that gradually erodes her emotional and social resources.

5. Conclusion

Hannah Baker experiences three main forms of suffering: psychological, social, and ethical. Psychological suffering relates to an individual's mental and emotional condition resulting from anxiety, depression, loneliness, or stress, which is often triggered by life events such as loss, trauma, or unresolved inner conflict. Social suffering occurs when someone experiences disruption or loss in social relationships, which causes feelings of alienation, exclusion, or lack of social support from the surrounding environment. Ethical suffering, meanwhile, arises when individuals feel their dignity has been lowered or experience inhumane treatment, for example social stigma, discrimination, or loss of sense of self-worth and honor.

These three forms of suffering have a significant negative effect on Hannah's life, which is reflected in regret, disappointment, despair, suicidal ideation, and a negative attitude toward life. Her emotional struggle is also shown in various quotations in the novel that describe her increasingly deteriorating psychological condition. The findings imply that unresolved suffering requires emotional support and intervention. Future research may compare Hannah's case with other young adult characters or examine how narrative strategies in young adult literature shape readers' understanding of mental health.

These findings imply that unresolved suffering requires emotional support and intervention. As Kimura et al. (2022) show, the failure of adults and school authorities to respond to bullying can intensify adolescent suffering. Hadhna Djohar et al. (2024) further highlight the importance of counselling services in addressing suicidal crises depicted in the novel. Therefore, *Thirteen Reasons Why* can be read not only as a literary work but also as a narrative that invites readers to recognise the need for early emotional intervention.

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