

Hannah, Welcome to Your Tape

13 Reasons Why, Netflix's new series based off the YA novel of the same title, has garnered serious attention since it was released this March. Everyone seems to have a list of thirteen reasons why they love or hate the show, and it became the most tweeted-about Netflix show during its first week of streaming. The show is mature, displaying graphic depictions of self-harm, sexual assault, drinking, violence, and drugs—setting itself far apart from the mostly light-hearted TV shows and movies targeted at teens. *13 Reasons Why* is honest and heart-wrenching and important for many reasons, but it's definitely not perfect. We won't say we love or hate the show, that it's perfect or unredeemable, but it's worth a watch. The suspense and tension is perfectly executed, ensuring that no matter how painful the show gets, you have to keep pressing play. And it tackles high school unflinchingly; although it occasionally misses the mark on slang and banter, sometimes it gets it so, so right. It has flaws, but the discussion that has sprung from it is certainly worth engaging in.

The show centers around Hannah Baker, and is set in the wake of her suicide. She has left behind thirteen tapes, one for each person that she feels are one of the reasons why she killed herself. She sends them off before she dies, making sure that each of her "reasons" has to listen to how they ruined her life. She sends these tapes in the hopes that the tremendous guilt of thinking that they are the reason she killed herself will even the scales of justice a little bit. Thus her death is her revenge. This notion is deeply flawed, and incredibly dangerous. The narrative of the story makes Hannah a martyr, glorifying her suicide as a righteous act of justice and revenge, and the only way to send a message and fix her problems. For viewers out there who have been similarly wronged, and are contemplating ending their own lives, this depiction could have dire consequences. Along with

that, the show graphically depicts Hannah slitting her wrists and bleeding out, which violates the guidelines set out by the American Psychological Association on how to safely portray suicide without inspiring more deaths. Finally, this is a flawed narrative because no one killed Hannah but Hannah. So many times, the characters accuse themselves and each other of “killing Hannah Baker,” but *she killed herself*. Yes, the things that people did to her certainly made her mental illness much harder to bear, but at the end of the day, she was the one who made that decision.

With that said, the show also explores the stigmas and realities of masculinity, mental illness, bullying, sexual assault, friendship, and family in impactful, important ways. The way the show portrays rape is also very realistic in that the rape in both cases is committed by a trusted friend, a surprisingly common occurrence especially in high schools and colleges. These situations reveal the brutal healing process for survivors of sexual assault and the struggles they face afterwards with guilt, slut-shaming, self-blame, and secrecy. This truthful depiction of the crimes as well as the honest portrayal of the rapist himself is helpful in showing students that this can happen to anyone and can be done by people you wouldn't necessarily expect. The construct of masculinity is also called into question, especially over issues of sex and relationships. Different forms of bullying, harassment, complacency, and ostracization are also highlighted. The flaws of victims in addition to bullies are exposed as destructive and snowballing. The show can spark extremely valuable conversation, especially if its flaws are recognized and unpackaged. That's why we think as long as you're engaging the show and taking it with a grain of salt, it's worth a watch.

Now, if you've finished the show, keep reading. But if you haven't and plan to, there will be major plot spoilers past this point. The suspense is one of the best parts of this show and we don't want to ruin anyone's viewing experience, so

you've been warned!

In the same way that this show isn't completely good or bad, there is not one character in it who is completely "good." Hannah is the definition of an unreliable narrator, and in many ways, Clay is too, which keeps you guessing the entire time. Clay is the only one who is trying to hold the people on the tapes accountable to their actions, but also sends out the picture of Tyler that only adds to the negativity and bullying that caused Hannah to take her life in the first place (and may have been a catalyst for the violence that the show hints that Tyler is about to commit). Zach makes Hannah feel unbearably lonely, but also endears the viewer by eating the broccoli off of his little sister's plate. The main characters have done terrible things, and this sends a super important lesson. *No one* in life is good or bad. Especially in high school, when everyone is constantly learning and growing, you can't expect anyone to be a perfect person. We all do hurtful and stupid, selfish things, but the hope is that we learn from it. We're not trying to excuse any of the mistakes that the characters made in the show, but this message of giving people the benefit of the doubt is very relevant when discussing suicide.

Bryce's character is somewhat of an exception to the rule that no one in the story is all good or all bad. Bryce commits heinous, inexcusable crimes against Hannah and Jessica. Rape is among the most unforgivable acts one can do, and Bryce's response when Clay confronts him ("every girl wants to be raped") exposes his entitlement, ignorance, and general awfulness. However, the show does an excellent job of masking Bryce behind a friendly, popular facade, revealing why the girls might be hesitant to come forward and challenge someone with such high social power and proving that rapists can be anyone, even someone you know and trust.

For example, after Skye says something insensitive about Hannah's death, Clay accuses her of "not knowing what was

going on in Hannah's life." And Tony sagely responds, "You don't know what's going on in hers." No one knows how a person is suffering, and this is part of the reason why Hannah felt the need to end her life. Although some of the things that happened to her were little and seemingly insignificant, it was because she was already suffering so deeply that they hurt so badly. Treating someone poorly is never okay, but it's doubly important to be kind when knowing that there are people out there who in so much pain already that it doesn't take much to push them over the edge.

One of the other huge red flags in the show, though, was Mr. Porter. Hannah was obviously hinting that she was about to kill herself, and the fact that Mr. Porter ignored that is, again, dangerous. Counselors and psychologists are legally required to report it if a student is saying anything that suggests that they might be a danger to themselves or others. However, Mr. Porter didn't do this, as most counselors would, thus the show paints an unrealistic picture and makes people think that they can't get help from anyone. Mr. Porter's poor handling of the situation is supposedly the last straw for Hannah, and the way the story is framed makes it seem like the only next logical step for her is to take her own life. For suicidal viewers, this is an extremely harmful narrative. Counselors need to be portrayed as resources for individuals who are suffering, otherwise suicidal teens might skip a conversation that could save their life.

Though the suicidal aspect of Hannah's conversation with Mr. Porter was flawed, one aspect of it was emblematic of the ugly truth behind those who come forward about sexual assault. The way that he told Hannah to "move on" from her assault was very accurate to the way that people in our society treat rape survivors. He used somewhat belittling language, jumped to conclusions, and instead of offering personal, moral support, immediately pressured her into pressing charges or telling others about what happened. All of these things, though

seemingly helpful, were not what Hannah, or any other rape survivor needs to hear while recounting their trauma.

After watching the show, our question is this: why can't everyone involved share some guilt and responsibility for Hannah's death (including her) while not shouldering the entirety of the blame? Every character did something wrong, everyone could have helped her in some way. But all of the characters took a pretty extreme stance on the tapes; while some rejected them entirely and dismissed Hannah as a vengeful liar, others such as Clay and Alex internalized her guilt tripping extensively and to their own detriment. There ought to be a more nuanced, middle of the road level of acceptance. Most of students involved should be held accountable and should recognize their part in making Hannah's life worse, but many of them did not deserve the sheer torment of the tapes. At the end of the day, Hannah chose to take her own life. Of course, that decision was in large part due to the rape, trauma, depression, and social isolation she faced, and the individuals responsible for bullying and harming her must be held accountable, but she also was suffering from untreated depression. Hannah was abused, but she also abused others.