

A Comparative Study between Happiness and Lifelessness in Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why

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Abstract:

The paper addresses the issues of happiness and lifelessness presented by Jay Asher in his book *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and their effects on the main character, Hannah Baker, as well as on adolescents' mental well-being. Using literary and psychological analysis, the study analyzes how brief instances of happiness are eventually overshadowed by lifelessness, loneliness, and hopelessness. It shows that while happiness can be temporary and conditional, lifelessness is seen as a developing phenomenon caused by bullying, lack of attention from others, and absence of emotional support. Thus, Asher illustrates the psychological impacts of daily interactions, and stresses the importance of empathy and awareness of what goes on in teenagers' minds. Literature thus turns out to have the power of raising mental health issues.

Keywords:

(Happiness; lack of vitality; Jay Asher; psychological conflict; depression; emotional alienation; suicide)

الملخص :

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الثيمات الشعورية المتضادة للسعادة والجمود العاطفي في رواية ثلاثة عشر سببًا لجاي آشر، مع التركيز على أثرها في حياة البطلة هانا بيكر، وما تعكسه الرواية من رؤى أوسع حول الصحة النفسية للمراهقين. ومن خلال تحليل أدبي مدعوم برؤى نفسية، تبحث الدراسة في الكيفية التي تطغى فيها لحظات السعادة العابرة على مشاعر الخدر العاطفي والعزلة واليأس. وتشير النتائج إلى أن السعادة تُصوّر كحالة مؤقتة مشروطة، بينما يظهر الجمود العاطفي كحالة متصاعدة ومسيطرّة، تغذيها التمر، والتهميش الاجتماعي، وغياب الدعم النفسي. ومن خلال سرد هانا، يُبرز آشر الآثار النفسية المدمّرة للتفاعلات اليومية، مؤكّدًا أهمية التعاطف والوعي والتدخل المبكر في حياة الشباب المعرضين للخطر. وتسلّط الدراسة الضوء على دور الأدب في إثارة الحوار حول قضايا الصحة النفسية، مما يمنحها أهمية خاصة للمعلمين والمتخصصين النفسيين والقراء على حد سواء.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

(السعادة؛ انعدام الحيوية؛ جاي آشر؛ الصراع النفسي؛ الاكتئاب؛ الاغتراب العاطفي؛ الانتحار)

1. Introduction

Introduction of the Chapter This chapter gives background information about the study together with the purpose of the study as well as the most important features of the study structure. In this chapter, the theme of happiness and lifelessness in the novel 'Thirteen Reasons Why' by Jay Asher is going to be discussed.

1.1 Background of the Study

Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher is centered on the story of a young female character named Hannah Baker, who leaves cassette tapes that tell about reasons why she decided to end her life. The book focuses on such themes as bullying, loneliness, love, and mental health. Of all these themes, the juxtaposition of happy times and lifelessness holds an important place in analyzing the message conveyed by this story. In particular, this study will focus on the analysis of the impact of such a juxtaposition on the protagonist and other characters.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The key question considered by this research paper is how happiness and lifelessness are described in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In particular, the study considers how happiness and closeness are in opposition to despair and separation. Such opposition leads to some very serious questions related to the topic of mental disorders, suicide prevention, and social impact of emotional shock on youth.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the portrayal of happiness in the lives of the characters, particularly Hannah Baker.
2. To examine the representation of lifelessness and emotional numbness in the context of the narrative.
3. To compare how happiness and lifelessness are intertwined and their effects on the characters' decision-making.
4. To assess the significance of these themes in conveying the novel's broader messages about the consequences of bullying and emotional neglect.

1.4 Research Questions

The study will address the following key research questions:

1. How does Jay Asher depict happiness and lifelessness in *Thirteen Reasons Why*?
2. What role does happiness play in the development of the characters, especially Hannah?
3. How does the shift from happiness to lifelessness reflect the themes of isolation and alienation in the novel?
4. In what ways can the contrasting themes of happiness and lifelessness offer insights into the novel's social and psychological messages?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is that it will add to the existing body of knowledge regarding *Thirteen Reasons Why* as a psychological and emotional journey of an adolescent. The research will shed light on how happiness and lifelessness work in the story and how they can be used as a means to understand various topics, such as bullying, mental illness, and societal pressures faced by adolescents.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research will deal with the analysis of the literary piece *Thirteen Reasons Why* and will mainly concentrate on the text itself, analyzing how it presents happiness and lifelessness via the characters of the novel. This research will be limited only to the issues that arise from the reading of this novel; the TV series version of it will not be analyzed.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1. **Happiness:** A state of well-being and emotional contentment, often resulting from positive experiences or relationships.
2. **Lifelessness:** The absence of emotional engagement or vitality, often associated with depression, detachment, and the loss of interest in life.
3. **Bullying:** A form of aggressive behavior where an individual is repeatedly subjected to harassment or intimidation, causing emotional and psychological harm.
4. **Adolescence:** A transitional period between childhood and adulthood, marked by significant emotional, psychological, and social changes.

2. Literature Review

"Enhancing Suicide Prevention through Young Adult (YA) Fiction" is the title of the interesting article by Madisyn Uekawa that sheds light on the connection between mental health and literature, especially focusing on the role that young adult fiction plays in addressing serious issues like suicide. According to the author, it is important to produce stories that involve difficult themes, which should be discussed with young people to enrich the subgenre of YA fiction and make it cover more health issues.

Within the context of "Thirteen Reasons Why" by Jay Asher, the ideas suggested by Uekawa prove to be very applicable. The way the story is constructed, where the protagonist Clay listens to the tapes describing the reasons of Hannah's suicide, allows to reflect upon happiness and lifelessness. The idea put forward by Uekawa about the possibility to change the perspective using literature proves to be useful for the author who wanted to inspire the readers with empathy regarding the problems of bullying and depression.

The suggestions provided by Uekawa about the necessity to conduct more researches in this area prove to be consistent with the purpose of the proposed study aimed at analyzing the themes of happiness and lifelessness in Asher's novel. In such a way, the findings of the investigation will help to shed light on the societal significance of YA literature in terms of mental health discourse. The author's ideas about the importance of using proper literary techniques in order to talk about sensitive themes can also be taken into account within the analysis of Jay Asher's story.

The structure of the novel, the characters and their development, and the themes can have a positive impact or hinder the perception of the message by the audience. In this way, the literary analysis of "Thirteen Reasons Why" within the context of the proposed study would be helpful.

In her article "Using Young Adult Literature to Confront Mental Health: A Culturally Relevant Approach", Briana Hendrickson (Hendrickson, 2018) presents her

critical analysis of Jay Asher's "Thirteen Reasons Why" focusing on the relationship between the problems of mental health, bullying, and suicide. The author believes that although the book draws attention to the problem of serious consequences of bullying and suicidal thoughts, it also promotes stigmatization of mental illnesses.

As Hendrickson shows, the language used in the novel may promote some prejudices about mental health. The author pays attention to the fact that there are no means for the young readers to think critically about the language and the themes used in the book that results in reinforcing the already existing stereotypes regarding suicide (Hendrickson, 2018). The fact that the characters of the novel do not criticize the stigmatizing language makes the situation even more dangerous.

The glamorization of Hannah Baker's suicide is another problem discussed by Hendrickson. She highlights the fact that by recording the tapes, the protagonist of the story invites other people to share the journey she went through, and it promotes some unrealistic beliefs that people can exist after committing suicide (Hendrickson, 2018). Moreover, the idea that Clay's development is the positive result of Hannah's tragedy raises the question about the ethics of the story.

Hendrickson's work is an important reminder for writers about their responsibility to society when writing about mental health and suicide in young adult literature. Through urging on a critical consideration of the language used in literature and its meaning, the article calls for a better understanding of how literature reflects the perception of people regarding the issue of mental health. Based on these insights, the discussion of happiness and lifelessness in "Thirteen Reasons Why" may benefit from an analysis of the consequences of the choices made by Asher in his work and its impact on the themes of hope and despair.

Indigo DaCosta's article "Romantic Relationships in Mental Illness Young Adult (YA) Novels" (DaCosta, 2018) is an important critical analysis of the plot and themes explored in Jay Asher's novel. According to DaCosta, "Thirteen Reasons Why" represents

the unique approach to the representation of the theme of mental health because of the unique position of the protagonist of the book – Hannah Baker commits suicide before the start of the story and the rest of the plot is dedicated to this event.

It is notable that, as DaCosta claims, the usual scheme of mental health stories usually involves a recovery phase where the main characters overcome their troubles and find relief and healing through the help of romantic relationships with other characters. However, in "Thirteen Reasons Why", the author criticizes the problems of the lack of overcoming of the mental illness because the dynamics of the peer relationship is able to play an influential role in the mental state of the characters.

Thus, DaCosta explains that Hannah's friends have a negative influence on her making her even sadder and more miserable. It is worth noting that the author also criticizes the idea that the romantic relationships are a cure for mental illness that is the most popular idea in other YA books. Instead, DaCosta believes that "Thirteen Reasons Why" demonstrates the complexity of the life of teenagers, which can bring both joy and misery into their life. Therefore, the narrative illustrates a harsh image of lifelessness, which is combined with the moments of happiness of the characters.

In "From Beyond The Grave: Dead Narrators In Young Adult Literature," L Branton discusses the complex narrative technique used by Jay Asher in "Thirteen Reasons Why" and emphasizes the key role played by the dead narrator – Hannah Baker. The article is very helpful in understanding the aspects of the representation of happiness and lifelessness in the novel because it reveals the importance of the chosen technique in exploring the chosen themes.

The author claims that the role of the tapes left by Hannah after her death is the tool that helps her lead Clay Jensen through the experience of her death. It shows how unpredictable and permanent death could be since Hannah's voice helps the character face the real situation and understand how much damage his peers have done to him. The

author describes the tapes as the pseudo-first-person narration, which gives the readers the opportunity to see the mind of the dead girl and the way she thinks.

The existence of Hannah as a dead narrator in "Thirteen Reasons Why" is a factor that complicates the concepts of happiness and lifelessness. On the one hand, her death shows the ultimate loss of happiness; on the other hand, her voice illustrates the effects of her experiences and shows how much her life, as well as the life of those around her, changed because of it.

This duality is very important for the better understanding of the key themes in the novel. The discussion of these themes in the article is very important in terms of the contribution to the discourse about mental health in young adult literature.

2.1 Overview of Jojo Moyes's *Me Before You*

Thirteen Reasons Why is the contemporary work of young adult fiction written by Jay Asher. It focuses on the complexity of teenage years and on such issues as bullying, mental state of the characters, and isolation. Clay Jensen, a schoolboy, is the main character of the novel whose life is changed after the suicide of his classmate, Hannah Baker. A couple of days before her death, Hannah had recorded a series of cassette tapes where she described the reasons of her despair and told why she had chosen the way out that she had.

Each tape was intended for some of the people whom she believed to have played an important role in her life. Following these tapes, readers learn the history of Hannah's suffering, the events and the contacts with other people which resulted in her depression. In the novel, author considers such issues as the terrible effect of bullying, the necessity of empathy, and the consequences of insignificant actions which influence the mental state of someone.

One of the central topics in the book is the difference between happiness and lifelessness which are revealed through the eyes of Hannah. The novel begins with the memories of the girl of the times of happiness and joy, but gradually, the increasing feeling of isolation, cruelty of her contemporaries lead Hannah to the emotional numbness and despair.

Lifelessness is shown by the writer as the loss of any hope when even the smallest happy events of the girl's life become overshadowed by the constant harassment.

Thus, initially, the girl says: "I was happy for a while.

I felt loved, wanted, and important to people." (Asher, 2007, p. 91) However, gradually, as the result of bullying, rumors and betrayal, the life becomes unbearable for Hannah and happiness is unattainable. Her lifelessness is revealed through her descriptions of the emotional state: "I don't know how long I lay there... it felt like I was sinking into nothing, and nothing was pulling me out".(Asher, 2007, p.193)

The contrasting description of both emotions is the key element of the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The author shows that one should not underestimate the problems of the emotional and psychological state of people, especially teenagers.

2.2 Concept of Happiness in Literature

Happiness is one of the most common themes of literature. Happiness is often considered as a reflection of a person's emotional well-being or contentment. However, the presentation of happiness in literature is rarely straightforward because it can be rather complicated, ephemeral, and subjected to external factors. Many authors tend to depict the characters pursuing happiness only to discover that it can be transient or even

impossible to catch up with. Some of them will experience happiness but later lose it, whereas other people will never be able to find it.

(Hunter, 2016) The issue of happiness is discussed in *Thirteen Reasons Why* through the prism of the protagonist, Hannah Baker, who talks about her moments of joy before the emotional distress and bullying that eventually lead to her death. Although there are some cases of happiness presented in the novel, there is also the idea of the vulnerability of this emotion when a person feels extremely isolated and depressed.

For example, Hannah recalls the moments of happiness in her life: "I was happy for a while. I felt loved, wanted, and important to people." (Asher, 2007, p. 91)

Although the moments of happiness of Hannah are short-lived, they are still important because the author wants to show that it is possible to feel happy even when there are small acts of kindness around. Nevertheless, as the plot develops, the opposition between the few moments of happiness and constant suffering become obvious. With the deterioration of the emotional state of the protagonist, the feeling of happiness becomes distant.

At the same time, there is also the idea that happiness is not just an internal state but a feeling formed due to certain external relations and interactions. The behavior of other people toward Hannah, including the bullying and emotional neglect that the girl undergoes, becomes a factor that affects her perception of happiness.

One of the key scenes of the novel includes the description of the feelings of Hannah: "It felt like my life was shrinking, like the room was closing in, and I couldn't breathe..."

But I kept thinking, 'If only someone noticed.'" (Asher, 2007, p.147)

The desire of recognition in this case shows how happiness is connected with the social approval of one's actions. When it comes to the presentation of happiness in literature in general, this feeling is considered as something that needs to be earned and achieved actively by people. It can be fleeting or conditional, depending on the certain

circumstances. Moreover, many characters in different novels face the challenge related to their understanding of what happiness means.

2.3 Portrayal of Lifelessness in Literature

A literary portrayal of lifelessness usually depicts the absence of emotional connection, the loss of purpose, vitality, or any sense of control over one's life. It occurs in literature, where lifelessness represents an emotional or psychological state. Usually, the theme of lifelessness is featured in literature about trauma, depression, isolation, or any kind of existential crisis. Lifelessness is not limited to a physical depiction but rather focuses on the emotional and psychological aspects of people's experiences. It shows how people can feel emotionally numb and how their despair can lead to lifelessness as they lose contact with the world around them. (Nikolajeva, M, 2014) Lifelessness in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, written by Jay Asher, is represented through the character of Hannah Baker who undergoes significant changes in her emotional and psychological state throughout the story.

Having faced constant bullying, emotional mistreatment, and feeling isolated, Hannah finds herself in a situation when she does not feel connected to the world around her anymore. Some of her descriptions of lifelessness are extremely powerful as they describe the emotions of despair and numbness in details.

For example, she says in one of her tapes: "I don't know how long I lay there...

It felt like I was sinking into nothing, and nothing was pulling me out." (Asher, 2007, p. 193)

Such description of the emotional lifelessness shows Hannah Baker's inability to connect with the world anymore and feel any sense of direction and hope. Her perception of being stuck in the endless void is the evidence of her emotional and psychological lifelessness and the fact that she feels disconnected from the reality surrounding her and life itself has lost its meaning and purpose.

In this novel, moments of happiness are contrasted to moments of lifelessness as it clearly shows how fragile emotional and mental state of people is. Besides, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, lifelessness is caused by both individual factors and the environment in which Hannah lives. Emotional numbness of the girl becomes even more noticeable under constant pressure of bullying and isolation as well as being neglected by other people around her.

She feels invisible as no one cares about her sufferings and wants to help her at least once. In one of her tapes, she says: "It felt like my life was shrinking, like the room was closing in, and I couldn't breathe...But I kept thinking, 'If only someone noticed.'" (Asher, 2007, p. 147)

In such way, lifelessness of Hannah Baker is shown through the description of being trapped in the unchanging, oppressive environment where nobody can see her pain.

The theme of lifelessness in literature is usually associated with the feeling of hopelessness and the collapse of the emotional barriers. The transition of Hannah Baker's emotional state from fleeting happiness to despair clearly shows the effect of the lack of understanding, empathy, and support that makes a person feel emotionally and psychologically lifeless. Her decision to end her life is the manifestation of her lifelessness.

3. Results and Conclusion

3.1 Results

Comparing Happiness and Lifelessness in *Thirteen Reasons Why* was one of the most interesting experiences because this analysis allowed us to learn more about these emotions and their portrayal in the novel. In order to conduct the comparative analysis of the discussed emotional states and their meanings, I analyzed the relevant passages from the book. Thus, I learned that even though the happiness is one of the most important aspects described in the novel, this emotion is rather fragile and temporary

when it comes to the feelings of the main character, Hannah Baker. At first, the protagonist experienced joy and happiness, but later her joy was destroyed by the emotional pain and bullying.

However, lifelessness seemed to have much more impact on the main character because of its meaning and importance in the book. Emotional numbness, depression, and despair were the main emotions which characterized Hannah Baker during the period of interaction with her peers. This means that the protagonist became more and more emotionally detached as a result of the bullying and betrayal of other people. Moreover, the lack of empathy and support was the reason of total lifelessness in the novel.

The key findings of the study highlighted the following:

1. **Flawed happiness:** The happiness that Hannah experienced was often fleeting and fragile as it was ruined by the cruelty and lack of connections with other people. The state of happiness wasn't a constant one and it became insignificant compared to her pain.
2. **Lifelessness as a gradual process:** The novel depicts the process of lifelessness as a slow one that starts with emotions of loneliness and emotional numbness. The further Hannah is distanced from people around her, the less she feels alive which eventually leads to suicide.
3. **Influence of external factors:** Actions of other people including bullying, gossiping, and emotional indifference affected significantly the state of mind of Hannah. The novel highlights the effect of seemingly small things on a person's psychology.
4. **Moral and emotional aspects:** Thirteen Reasons Why is a good example of moral commentary on the significance of empathy and intervention. Emotional indifference and its results are clearly demonstrated in the novel.

3.2 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the emotions of happiness and lifelessness in the book *Thirteen Reasons Why* highlights the complicated interrelations between these feelings and the factors that influence them, such as bullying, isolation, and lack of emotions. The depiction of Hannah Baker's experience in the book written by Asher shows the vulnerability of happiness and the tragic consequences of feeling lifeless for a person. The literary work is aimed at showing the importance of giving emotional support to a person who needs it especially when a person experiences mental problems.

The comparative analysis of the emotions of happiness and lifelessness demonstrates the necessity to increase empathy in society since the small gestures, actions, words, and behaviors are capable of making a person feel hopeless and helpless. The depiction of happiness as a fragile feeling and lifelessness as an absorbing power calls for the conversations about mental state, which will help people to provide assistance before the worst case scenario.

The study helps the reader understand the importance of empathy that prevents from isolation and emotional destruction. *Thirteen Reasons Why* shows the readers the way to prevent it through reflecting upon one's behavior.

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