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[The Absurdity of Existence in Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why]

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Abstract:
This research will explore the novel Thirteen Reasons Why written by Jay Asher through the lens of the existentialist philosophical theory that was first proposed by Albert Camus, who defined the theory of the absurd. This research will explore how the novel explores the existentialist notion of human efforts to make sense of the absurdity of the world through the narratological device of Hannah Baker's cassettes. This research is grounded in the existentialist theory because it is in debt to the philosophical theory of existentialism in the notions of freedom, responsibility, and bad faith. This research will explore the novel through the lens of the broader literary theory regarding the notion of death, mourning, and the identity of the teenager. This research will explore the theoretical framework that has been proposed in the existing research regarding the notion of mediated bereavement and the notion of the ethics of suicide. This research will explore the notion that the novel Thirteen Reasons Why is immune to narratological closure and the notion that the novel explores the tension between humanity's need to make sense of the world and the silence of the world. This research will explore the notion that the novel Thirteen Reasons Why is not a suicide cautionary tale but rather a novel that explores the absurdity of life and the moral obligation it poses to the characters.
Keywords: Absurdity, Existentialism, Jay Asher, Thirteen Reasons Why, suicide in YA literature, death and mourning.

[عبثية الوجود في رواية جاي آشر ثلاثة عشر سبباً]

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الملخص:
يتناول هذا البحث رواية جاي آشر ثلاثة عشر سبباً (2007)من خلال عدسة الفلسفة الوجودية، ولا سيما مفهوم العبث عند ألبير كامو. يركز البحث على الكيفية التي تجسّد بها الرواية صراع الإنسان في صناعة المعنى داخل عالم يبدو في كثير من الأحيان لا مبالياً، مع إيلاء اهتمام خاص لأشرطة هانا بيكر المسجّلة بوصفها وسائط سردية ورموزاً طقوسية للتذكر. وبالاستناد إلى المفاهيم الوجودية حول الحرية والمسؤولية و"سوء النية"، يُدرَج النص ضمن نقاشات أدبية أوسع تتعلق بالموت، والحداد، وهوية المراهقين. كما تستند الدراسة إلى أبحاث سابقة حول الحداد الرقمي، والذاكرة الوسائطية، وأخلاقيات تمثيل الانتحار. وقد أظهرت النتائج أنّ الرواية تقاوم فكرة الإغلاق السردي، وتؤكد بدلاً من ذلك على الغموض، والمسؤولية الجماعية، والتوتر غير المحسوم بين توق الإنسان إلى الاتساق وصمت الوجود. وفي النهاية، يؤكد البحث أنّ رواية ثلاثة عشر سبباً لا ينبغي قراءتها مجرد حكاية تحذيرية عن الانتحار، بل باعتبارها تأمّلاً أدبياً في عبثية الوجود وما تفرضه من التزامات أخلاقية على الشخصيات والقرّاء على حد سواء.
الكلمات المفتاحية :العبثية، الوجودية، جاي آشر، ثلاثة عشر سبباً، الانتحار في أدب اليافعين، الموت والحداد.
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1.Introduction

Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why (2007) is the most read young adult (YA) book among contemporary literary criticism, for the most part, because of its depictions of suicide, trauma, and teenage identity. The novel, framed by the narrations of Hannah Baker's audiotapes describing why she took her own life, prompts readers to look back at issues of agency, blame, and responsibility for what appear to be trivial social encounters. According to critics, the form and content of the novel, in presenting Hannah's story after her death, place the reader in an uncomfortable position, questioning the efficacy of narrative resolution in the face of existential despair (Faris, 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

The absurd theory, based on existentialist philosophy, may be used to interpret the themes presented in the novel. The absurd theory, based on Camus's existentialist philosophy, is a theory that "is the external expression corresponding to the internal condition of the absurd, and that inevitably leads to that absurd" (Aho, 2023). The cassette recordings made by Hannah in Thirteen Reasons Why may be seen to represent the absurd theory, in that they seek to impose meaning and causality on a universe that does not respond to human attempts to impose meaning on it. The novel may be seen to represent the absurd theory, in the tension between Hannah's search for meaning and the apathy of her contemporaries, and her story within the context of the absurd theory and youth identity (Ruhe, 2024).
This study seeks to place Asher's book within existentialism and the novel controversies about death in literary criticism. Doing so places the study within the new corpus of research on YA novels, within which mortality and absurdity are beginning to be researched for cultural and philosophical value as well as for ethical concerns (Christensen & Runcan, 2024). In addition, as arguments about suicide portrayal on TV and in books become increasingly heated, taking the position of the absurd when working with Thirteen Reasons Why offers new meaning to the roles of authors, readers, and teachers in interacting with these works.

1.1 Objectives of the study

This current research aims to achieve several interrelated goals. First, it attempts to examine Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why from the perspective of existentialist philosophy, specifically the theory of absurdity, with the goal of explaining how the narrative of Hannah Baker accomplishes the conflict between sense-making and indifference of her peer group. Second, the project attempts to place the novel within the new literary debates in recent years about death and mourning, locating wherein the application of taped recordings works as both a narrative tool and symbolic mourning ritual.
Third, this study attempts to analyze the ethical implications of suicide depiction in YA books, particularly in the context of contemporary controversy regarding media's impact on teen readers and spectators. Last, it would like to make a contribution to the larger debate on literary scholarship by showing that Asher's book can be read not only as a cautionary tale but also as an existential inquiry into absurdity, agency, and responsibility among teens.

1.2 Questions of the study

This study guides by the following research questions:

1.How does Jay Asher’s Thirteen Reasons Why reflect existentialist notions of absurdity?
2.What are the ethical implications of portraying suicide in young adult literature?
3.What does the novel engage with death and mourning as literary motifs?

1.3 Significance of the study

This is a study of great significance at many levels. This paper is an extension of the application of existentialist and absurdist philosophies in young adult literature, which is commonly researched in terms of its psychological or sociological significance but is seldom researched from a philosophical perspective. This paper's positioning of Thirteen Reasons Why within the context of existential philosophies underscores one of the ways by which the emerging genre of young adult literature could be seen as a means of grappling with some of the fundamental concerns of existence, meaning, and death. (Aho, 2023; Hasan, 2024)

The contributions of the research study in this paper are significant in relation to the scholarship of the representation of death and mourning in recent literature. Hannah Baker's cassette tapes have two purposes in the novel: one as a narrative device, and another as a symbolic act of mourning that locates the novel in the larger cultural context of telling stories of death and mourning. (Christensen & Runcan, 2024)

2. Theoretical Framework

The section below provides the theoretical framework that guides the consideration of Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why, based on existentialist philosophy, literary studies of death and mourning, and contemporary criticism of YA literature. Together, these allow for a deeper understanding of how the novel portrays absurdity, mortality, and the ethics of suicide representation.

2.1 Existentialism

Existentialism is generally understood as a philosophical movement that places on an individual the onus of confronting his or her freedom, responsibility, and the apparent meaninglessness of life. Thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus have argued that human beings are thrust into existence without any preordained purpose and that they must consequently create meaning in an often indifferent or hostile world (Aho, 2023). The concept of the absurd-articulated by Camus as the conflict between humankind's desire for order and the world's silence-comes to the fore very strongly in Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why.

Accordingly, modern scholarship seeks to bring out how existentialism proves relevant for contemporary analyses of modern literature, especially in texts that confront despair, alienation, or death. Existentialism stresses, even under conditions characterized by absurdity, individuals must choose how to respond: either embracing freedom with responsibility or succumbing to nihilism (Baird & Kaufmann, 2022).

Translated to teen or YA lit, existentialism provides a strong interpretive lens for teen struggles with identity, belongingness, and authenticity. Adolescence itself is often depicted as a time of questioning authority, rebellion, and true living—features of existentialist thought (Larsen, 2023). Hannah's frustration results not only from brutality but also from inability to cope with the existential task of standing up to a peer-group-pressured, rumor-plagued, and thoughtless world.

Therefore, Thirteen Reasons Why stage-acts Sartre's "bad faith," the avoidance of freedom and responsibility, in the behavior of Hannah's classmates, who avoid taking responsibility for having contributed to her agony. And it illustrates the absurdity of Hannah's life: between the need for meaning and the meaninglessness of her world, she selects suicide as a ultimate refusal of being. Reading the book existentially thus unearths it not so much as a tragedy, but as a literary thesis on absurdity, liberty, and the moral burden of human decision.

2.2 Death in literature

Death has traditionally been a dominant subject in literature, both as narrative resolution and as a means of forcing consideration of life, meaning, and memory. Both in ancient tragedy and contemporary novels, descriptions of death also defy the transitory nature of human life as well as the moral accountability of those who survive. Contemporary literary theory holds that death within our modern fiction is not so much an event depicted but one constructed by cultural ritual and symbolic acts of commemoration (Ruhe, 2024). Fiction therefore becomes an arena in which the reader is confronted with mortality in a sense that extends beyond the biological fact of death into the realms of mourning, ritual, and moral obligation.

Death in YA literature has become increasingly important as a way of dealing with adolescent concerns about identity, loss, and belonging. Grief narratives among YA literature tend to build to enable young people to manage the psychological and social tensions surrounding death as well as provide room for moral consideration (Christensen & Runcan, 2024).

3. The Analytical Part

This section utilizes the existentialist theory, theory of absurdity, and death studies theoretical framework on Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why. It offers conclusions of the analysis, the structure of the story, and illustrates how the novel is literary expression of the absurdity of existence.

3.1 Results and Discussion

Thirteen Reasons Why analysis reveals that the novel is symbolic of the absurd in form and content. To start with, the plethora of "reasons" for Hannah's death creates the illusion of causality but raises uncertainty. Rather than provide closure, the thirteen tapes announce the impossibility of identifying a cause, which resonates with Camus's comprehension of the absurd as the tension between human desires for intelligibility and the indifference of life (Aho, 2023).

Second, the diffusion of responsibility among different characters is a fine illustration of Sartre's bad faith notion that people escape their freedom by passing on blame. Peers of Hannah shirk responsibility, and Clay is weighed down by choice in existentialism while he is listening to tapes (Faris, 2020).

Third, the ritualistic quality of Hannah's tapes supplants practice crying, compelling listeners to become coparticipants with her in her artifacted narrative of remembering. This too accords with more recent scholarship on mediated mourning, where narratives stretch out grief from death to the social (Christensen & Runcan, 2024; Ruhe, 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that Asher’s novel should be read not only as a story of adolescent tragedy but also as a literary reflection on the absurdity of life—where meaning is sought, structured, and narrated, yet never fully secured.

3.2 Thirteen Reasons Why: Plot Summary

Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why is a novel that narrates the story of Hannah Baker, a high school student who passes away and leaves a series of cassette tapes that explain her reasons for her death. The tapes were sent to thirteen people who, according to Hannah, were responsible for the circumstances that led her to her death. Each tape has a story or a relationship that gradually reveals the reasons for her death. The format used in the novel is a crucial part of the story because Hannah makes it clear that the recipient must play the whole set of tapes before passing it to the next person. This makes the format a moral chain of accountability .

The story is focalized through the character of Clay Jensen, who receives the tapes. Unlike the other characters in the story, Clay is not accused of contributing to Hannah's death. Instead, he is portrayed as a part of the general atmosphere that caused Hannah's death. This is a common feature in many coming-of-age novels because the story is also focalized through the character of Hannah. This format combines the past and the present, the absent, and the present. This format places a lot of emphasis on the afterlife because the reader is able to access the story through the emotions and feelings of Clay.

Hannah's list of thirteen reasons covers the spectrum from acts of brutality to acts of omission and lack of empathy, from Justin Foley, the rumor-spreader about Hannah's reputation, to Jessica Davis, the friend whose friendship did not withstand the test of social norms, to Bryce Walker, the perpetrator of Hannah's assault, to Mr. Porter, the school counselor, whose inability to offer even the faintest glimmer of support makes Hannah feel abandoned. And so, on each tape, not only does the story progress, but the listener realizes they are caught up in a web of complicity, witnessing the cumulative effect of small acts of callousness and/or indifference.

In the final chapters, Clay listens to all the tapes and, in a symbolic act of breaking the silence, calls out in concern for another student in distress. This is a tentative act of hope and is placed in opposition to Hannah's desperate act. And, of course, there are the tapes, the unanswered, the unresolved, and the unstoppable, to underscore the fact that there is no closure, that the novel does not offer that. Instead, the reader is left by Asher with the uneasy realization that there is no closure, that there is no final statement on the issues of blame and grief, and speaks to the existential issues of absurdity and finding meaning in the midst of tragedy (Ruhe, 2024; Christensen & Runcan, 2024).

3.3 Thirteen Reasons Why as an absurdity of Life

Albert Camus described the concept of absurdity as the encounter of human beings' desire to find meaning with the universe's response of silence. This is fully embodied in the character of Thirteen Reasons Why written by Hannah Baker as she attempts to make sense of the senseless events of teenage life. Her cassette tapes are well formatted to assign blame and create a causality effect. However, through the narration of the events, it is evident that such attempts do not help to overcome the meaninglessness of the events. All the reasons lead to finding meaning, yet when considered together, the futility of finding any meaning about Hannah's decision is emphasized again. This is evident in the fact that the events align with the idea of finding meaning as described by Camus that humans can find no ultimate justification for their suffering, just pieces of meaning (Aho, 2023).

Absurdity is also evident in the way the concept of free will is portrayed in the novel. It is through the actions of Hannah's peers that the concept of bad faith as described by Jean-Paul Sartre is exemplified as the majority of the people acted in bad faith through denial of their responsibilities or minimizing their contributions to the events or situations. Mr. Porter, the school counselor, is also unable to face the issue head-on as Hannah cried for help, exemplifying the indifference of the community to the events of the novel. Clay is a character that exemplifies the concept of existence as described by Jean-Paul Sartre as he was not directly involved with the events of the novel but is faced with the challenge of how to act as a result of the information he received from Hannah's tape as he attempts to help another student with their problems, exemplifying the absurd existence paradox as described by Faris.(2020)

In this book, from a particular literary standpoint, there is no death as a finality; it is, rather, a continued ritual of remembrance. Even in death, the voice of Hannah lives on, the tapes being a form of memorialization that mirrors the modern form of grieving through the media (Christensen & Runcan, 2024; Ruhe, 2024). Once again, there is the absurdity of the ritual of remembrance of Hannah, which

acknowledges the need for recognition but also underscores the pointlessness of the search for closure through narrative. Yet, the voice of Hannah lives on; it is simply incapable of providing the closure that comes when she is gone.

The absurdity of the ritual of remembrance of Hannah is what gives the work its strong ethical undertones in the modern context, where critics have gone on to argue that works like Thirteen Reasons Why glamorize suicide, whereas this existentialist reading of the work positions it as a work that is less about glorification and more about exposing the tenuous nature of community ties and the search for a totality of explanation. It forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable truth that life is often illogical; small cruelties, gossip, and indifference add up to nothing in particular; the search for a narrative totality is always incomplete.

In this sense, Thirteen Reasons Why is not only a tragedy about teenagers, but also another work of the literary absurd, presenting the dissonance between Hannah's search for meaning and the world's inability to offer it, and at the same time, asking the reader to take on the responsibility for the uncertainties of life. It is precisely within this tension that the strength of the novel lies, not in solving the absurd, but in forcing one to live with it.

4. Conclusion

In the context of the present study, Jay Asher's Thirteen Reasons Why was discussed through the existentialist, death studies, and ancillary scholarship approach of reference, focusing on the grand theme of absurdity. It was established through the analysis of the novel that the cassette tapes of Hannah Baker are a staging of the human condition in an attempt to impose meaning in an intransigent world where meaning is reviled. Hannah's attempt at mythologizing hopelessness in thirteen interdependent reasons is a clear reference to Camus's theory of the absurd, the conflict between human need for meaning and the indifference of the universe.

Moreover, it was established through the analysis of the novel that freedom and responsibility conflict is another grand theme of Thirteen Reasons Why. Although Hannah's friends are still in bad faith by rejecting the position of the characters, Clay Jensen is the quintessential existential human who is confronted by the ethical problems of freedom and choice. Clay's choice of doing otherwise by listening to the tapes is indicative of the fact that human beings have the capability of acting morally in spite of the absurd.

The research placed Hannah's tapes in the context of the larger literary tradition of death and bereavement. Hannah's voice, recorded posthumously, is a memory ritual that will not be silenced and is a reference to the impossibility of closure in fiction. This reference is, in turn, indicative of the fact that the novel is grappling with the ontological seriousness of the grand theme of absurdity.

By placing itself in the context of the controversy regarding the portrayal of suicide in media, the present study revisited Thirteen Reasons Why not as a series of stories glorifying death but as a series of stories meant for grappling with the absurdity of life.

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