

Th1rteen R3asons Why

About Giving and Reflecting Reasons

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Suicide is an event of human nature which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew.

Goethe: Truth and Poetry, 13th book, p. 507

[Herder] blamed the excess of feeling which overflowed from me more and more at every step. I felt like a man, like a young man: everything was living, true, and present before me. He, considering only the intrinsic contents and form, saw clearly, indeed, that I was over-powered by the subject-matter; and this he would not allow.

Goethe: Truth and Poetry, 10th book, p. 370

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past. The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Marx: The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, p. 9

Thirteen Reasons Why (henceforth *13RW*) is one of Netflix' most successful and controversial productions.² It deals with the suicide of the high school student Hannah Baker. Worldwide, school officials, psy-

¹ I would like to thank Regina Ammicht Quinn, Gero Bauer, Cordula Brand and Leonie Bossert for their critical and constructive comments.

² I completed my analysis of *13RW* long before season 2 was released on May 18, 2018. Thus, I do not discuss new developments there.

chologists, educators, parent associations, film critics, etc. accused *13RW* of glorifying and romanticising suicide. In their view, it showed adolescents the wrong way out of life crises. Even worse, its approach to suicide would inspire susceptible teenagers in their desire to end their lives (Butler 2017, Sinyor 2017, VanNoord 2017).

It does not need to surprise us that *13RW* caused a controversy. At least in Western philosophy, ever since antiquity the moral permissibility of suicide has been contested and maybe culminated in Albert Camus' famous thesis that

[t]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. (Camus 1942)

Yet, neither the series nor its friends and foes engage in this ethical debate. By contrast, they relate to another, currently dominating discourse, framing suicide as a public health issue. It sees adolescents as a vulnerable group in need for protection. The series' critics refer to the *Werther effect* following Johann Wolfgang Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The story of Werther's suicide is alleged to have unleashed a Europe-wide wave of suicides among 18th century readers. Current studies on suicide contagion mainly focus on media reports and draw a more differentiated picture. These reports have a potential to provoke suicides but also to prevent them. Besides, these studies usually do not include works of fiction; so, we know even less about their contagiousness (Niederkrötenhaler et al.

2010, Proctor 2018, Sisask/Värnik 2012). Actual effects of suicide stories are thus not as direct as many critics of *13RW* seem to imply.³

When studying the series' public reception, we feel reminded of what Johann Gottfried Herder said about his student Goethe: most of the critics seem 'overpowered by the subject-matter' and do not sufficiently 'consider content and form'. When considering the latter, the series in fact tells a story of rape, sexual assaults and bodily integrity, while suicide is the magnifier focussing our attention. With this, I do not deny that (as Goethe stated) suicide 'demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew'. I simply claim that we should not stay on the story's surface.

Thus, in this essay, I study *13RW* as a narration that has greatly preoccupied people.⁴ It seems as if the series became a focal point of this recurring discussion about suicide. With that said, I suggest regarding suicides stories as conceptual lenses through which people at all times have aimed to understand the world they lived in and reflected how it should be. This pays also tribute to the fact that suicides are always embedded in stories – and these seem ubiquitous. For instance, high suicide rates in rural India tell us about poverty, gender relations and the dependency on multinational agro-industrial companies (Kumar 2016) or in South European countries about the effects of austerity politics (Stuckler/Basu 2013). Attentive young adults find the issue of suicide everywhere and often in books they read in school

³ With regard to *13RW*, we know so far that on the one hand, there are reports of adolescent suicides referring to the series (Rubin 2017). On the other hand, a media study 'exploring how teens, young adults and parents responded to 13 Reasons Why' produced positive results suggesting 'that such tough topic programming can be of help to teens and young adults around the world as they cope with the stressors in their lives' (Lauricella et al. 2018: 11).

⁴ I am well aware that *13RW* is more than a story. Obviously, it comes to life by its actors. Due to the limited space available in this essay, I cannot discuss the acting, in particular of the series' main actors Dylan Minnette (Clay Jenson) and Katherine Langford (Hannah Baker).

anyway such as *Romeo and Juliet* (William Shakespeare), *Madame Bovary* (Gustave Flaubert) or *Death of a Salesman* (Arthur Miller).

Consequently, instead of shielding students from engaging with the series, educational institutions should provide them with means to analyse and reflect such narrations. In this respect, *narrative ethics* has a great potential. It explores the narrative structure of our moral actions (Haker 2010), and thus the artistic design of moral systems within literary or cinematic works of fiction. At it, narrative ethics takes a twin perspective, first, by contemplating how a narration represents and reflects a moral conflict, and second, by treating a narration as a communicative act that ethics can analyse. The former deals with content and the latter with aesthetic design. Obviously, both are connected and have to be analysed accordingly (Haker 2009: 31-33). This approach allows both looking at the moral world *13RW* unfolds and reflecting if the narration is told in a responsible way.

Below, I will analyse *13RW* as a *work of fiction* and thus, study the narrative structure of Hannah's thirteen reasons. By doing so, I aim to understand and review her reasons and reflect how they contribute to our deliberations on the good life and morally right actions – after all, the central tasks of application-oriented ethics. After introducing the plot, I will discuss the series' narrative structure by contextualising it as a suicide story and as such, as a conceptual lens attracting our attention to the fragile condition of a protagonist in its social context.

Plot

13RW has a peculiar plot. Before her death, Hannah records seven audiocassette tapes. Each of her thirteen reasons why she killed herself covers one side of a tape and blames one person. Justin Foley, the person on the first side of the first tape gets the tapes first. Hannah demands that her audience has to listen to all tapes and then pass

them on to the next person. If the chain were broken (so her threat), a separate copy of the tapes would be revealed in public. Her school-mate Tony Padilla, who is not on the tapes, serves as the guardian of her will. The series starts when no. 10 Clay Jensen gets the tapes. This implies that all other persons (save fellow student Bryce Walker and school councillor Mr Porter) have already listened to Hannah's story.

The series follows two storylines that, for convenience, we name after Hannah and Clay. Sequences of flashbacks tell Hannah's storyline, i.e. her development from a cheerful to a suicidal young woman, after suffering a series of sexual assaults and finally rape (the latter by Bryce). In Clay's storyline, we witness his reaction to the tapes and the dynamics between the students, how Hannah's parents cope with her death and file a lawsuit against the school and finally, how parents and teachers try to engage in conversations with the adolescents.

The dynamics of the series is closely related to Clay's personality and his relation to Hannah. He is a kind but socially awkward student who keeps to himself and is not part of the school's peer groups. In contrast, Hannah is introduced as a self-confident and witty young woman. However, in the course of the story she becomes increasingly depressed and insecure. Clay and Hannah also work together at the local cinema. We learn that he is inexperienced with women, and from the beginning, we know that he is in love with Hannah. In the course of the story, they are about to become lovers.

Discussion

13RW tells a story about the social impact of a story. We come across a narration within a narration and realise how both aesthetically construct their respective communicative intentions. As an attentive and critical audience, we are thus invited to reflect both narratives.

Hannah's storyline

Related to Hannah's storyline, two questions concern students, critics and us as an audience: Does Hannah manipulate and is she a reliable narrator? The answers are relevant if we want to decide whether we can accept her reasons. So, is her story manipulative? We can clearly recognize how Hannah aesthetically constructs her story. First, she elaborately sets the stage for her story (with artfully designed requisites, a script and a production manager). Second, she selects 'the characters of her play', picks some and decided against others. Third, she changes the chronological order of events (in episodes 9-11). Forth, she chooses thirteen reasons, i.e. the unlucky number per se. Fifth, in the end, she even manipulates reality in order to adapt it to her story. When she talks to Mr Porter, he fails to recognise her depressed state of mind. We also get the impression that Hannah sets a trap because she acts uncooperatively and is prepared to record his failure. Therefore, as an audience, we are able to critically relate to her dramatic composition. In doing so, we have to assess ethically its content and its performance as a communicative act. Let's start with the latter. Hannah wants to tell her story and thus explain the reasons why she killed herself. In this vein, she singles out people and accuses them. Obviously, Hannah's ways and means are inappropriate to engage in a communication of equals about their misconducts (in Hannah's view). She acts as prosecutor, judge and executioner in one person. Her 'culprits' do not get the opportunity to answer. In addition, she proceeds by violent means to herself (suicide) and others (intimidation, shaming, the call for physical violence against the school photographer and her stalker Tyler Down, etc.). We have to conclude that she uses 'ethical violence' (Butler 2003) against these people by enmeshing them within a story which they did not chose, to whose rules they have to conform, which morally condemns them and holds them

accountable for actions whose effects on subsequent events they were not always able to foresee. Her story 'weighs like a nightmare on the brain' of her 'culprits'. While we are able to contextualise Hannah's actions, we need to acknowledge that she deeply hurts others. Do her ends then justify these means?

This brings us to the content of Hannah's story. Can we believe her? Do her reasons convince us? The first question addresses the issue of reliability and is for three reasons difficult to answer. First, all narrations are told from a certain (imperfect) perspective and thus, Hannah's is told from hers. This is, for instance, Tony's opinion on the matter. The second reason concerns the focalization of Hannah's storyline. When flashbacks tell her story, we often do not exactly know whose point of view a particular sequence narrates. Sometimes, she comments on events in voiceovers, but often this is not the case. Most of the time, we have reasons to believe that flashbacks are rather Clay's internal engagement with her narrative. For instance, they contain Clay's own experiences or characters in these sequences react to disturbances coming from his storyline. Moreover, we often see Clay as a passive spectator in the story told on the cassette: does Hannah mention him as a bystander or does Clay self-critically locate himself while listening to Hannah's tapes? If we accept that the focalisation is unclear, we need to acknowledge that, as an audience, we only get a mediated version of Hannah's story and thus (for epistemological reasons) cannot decide on her reliability. Third, we know that Hannah begins drafting her story soon after she was raped. In this situation, she is traumatised and has lost her sense of self-esteem. Thus, we cannot expect her to be a disinterested narrator but have to treat her narration as the expression of a deeply hurt and insecure personality. Hence, the critic Stuever misses the point when he complains that *13RW* was in a way 'full of sound and fury signifying noth-

ing' (*Macbeth*) – or in his own words that *13RW* were hard to take ('passive-aggressive', 'mainly about miscommunication') and did not provide any meaningful 'wisdom or insight about depression, bullying and suicide' (Stuever 2017). If we accept that we see the narration of a traumatised girl, perceived and retold by a boy full of self-reproaches, passive-aggressiveness is part of the story's narratology. Nor is the series simply educational material on extra-textual realities. *13RW* is a work of fiction about serious issues told in a complex way. We do not have to enjoy it. At least, we need to develop sufficient critical distance to 'consider its form and content'. Where does this leave us?

Let's take a step back and reflect on the narratological function of suicides. Although suicides always relate to individual life stories, they also have general and comparable patterns and communicative intentions (Piltz 2013, Stack/Bowman 2011). To begin with, we observe a growing miscommunication and estrangement of a protagonist and its social context. Reasons for this vary from story to story but we see how and why both sides lose contact to each other. We also witness a protagonist facing moral codes and social demands it cannot or does not want to fulfil – for whatever reason. In the end, suicide appears (rightly or not) as the last remaining act of autonomy. Thus, suicide stories attract our attention to both failing interpersonal relations and social conditions a protagonist feels unfit to cope with. While on the surface these stories often deal with the (moral permissibility of) suicide, they are equally about a protagonist's (perception of its) fragile place in the world. Thus, with regard to *13RW* we need to ask for the conditions that in Hannah's view made her situation unbearable. Obviously, these are her recurrent experiences of sexual assault and the mental disorder to cope with them. Shortly after being raped, she tries to make sense of what happened to her. Eventually, Hannah tells her

story about structural conditions for sexual violence against women. In order to make her point, she precisely selects these twelve people for the tapes. Evidently, if we actually wanted to explain her suicide, we would have to consider further factors beyond these thirteen reasons, such as her unfulfilled sense of belonging, misused trust or the loss of safe spaces. Besides, we have to allow that Hannah might not have told all reasons and that she was even unaware of others.⁵

In conclusion, if suicide stories are conceptual lenses to look at individual and social conditions of a protagonist, *13RW* is the narrative of particular young woman in a world she experiences as misogynist and sexist and to whose moral norms and role models she feels unable to adapt any longer. This does not imply that Hannah's suicide is inevitable. Yet, in a state of psychological trauma, she drafts this particular, narratively structured line of causation. We can read it as a way of both aiming to reclaim control of her life story and convincing her audience (and probably herself) that her suicide was unavoidable.

On the one hand, we do not need to ask whether her story is true or reliable.⁶ Rather, we retrace the process in which she loses her wish to live and ask ourselves how this came about. On the other hand, in the case of *13RW*, the issue is a bit more difficult. As Hannah accuses twelve persons, we have to deal with the issue of shared responsibility (Young 2006: 122). This does not really mean that we measure to what extent each person actually contributed to her suicide. Neither any individual story (probably not even Bryce's) nor the sum of all stories is sufficient to really explain the decision to end her

⁵ There is a debate to what degree 'modern' communication technologies are another one of Hannah's reasons (Alexander 2018).

⁶ In this context, we must never forget that the question of reliability is not only the narratological puzzle, which I elaborated here. The question also reminds us of the painful experiences of many women dreadfully struggling to be believed after having been (sexually) assaulted.

life. Even in Hannah's own narrative, we recognise potential lifelines but also that she is too traumatised to grasp them. When we ask for responsibility, we look how these twelve persons reflect their own role within Hannah's narrative.

Clay's storyline

In Clay's storyline, we trace how Hannah's social environment individually and collectively copes with her death. Most of the time, we follow Clay's tour through her story and learn how he deals with the tapes. From the beginning, we know that he differs from the other listeners. First, Clay cares about Hannah's story and only listens to one tape at a time, second, he was in love with Hannah and finally, his presence on the tapes is of a different nature. In her view, his failure was to respect her wish to leave her alone at a party, while she actually wanted him to stay. Eventually, this decision set in motion a chain of tragic and unpredictable events (rape, denials of assistance, a fatal hit and run accident). Nevertheless, Clay accuses himself for this after listening to the tapes. Hannah also includes him because she regards him as a positive male personality and potential partner who she was not worth to have (so she believes in her self-devaluation). Clay reacts to his tape with tears, deep remorse and self-accusations. When listening to other tapes, he confronts the respective person and wants to find out what really happened to Hannah. This narrative construction enables the series to go through different ways of assuming responsibility with regard to Hannah's suicide narrative, but also to stimulate debate on (the limits of) individual responsibility in complex systems and situations. In Clay's storyline, characters are held responsible for actions whose consequences they could not foresee, and as an audience, we are invited to reflect that also.

In the end, Clay concludes that everything would improve if people cared more for each other. However, the series invites to an alter-

native interpretation. When Clay confronts his schoolmates, most of them shout at him that he should listen first to all of the tapes – and as an audience, we ask back what difference this would make. On the one hand, with that, they remind Clay that he is on the tapes too. In their view, he has no moral authority to judge them. While this might be true for some, most of them know that Clay is the exception to the rule. On the other hand, they want him to realise that Bryce is in fact to blame. In themselves, some incidents on the tapes are sad, but normal life experiences, while others are criminally relevant. Compared to Bryce, however, their actions seem less relevant. Curiously then, there are at least nine people who have knowledge that Bryce raped two girls (Jessica Parker, Hannah). Yet, all are anxious that Clay stays silent – admittedly, some for other personal reasons. Most of them act towards Bryce as if nothing had happened. In the end, Clay gets Bryce to confess and secretly records this confession on the blank side of the seventh cassette before passing the tapes on to Mr Porter. We do not know what is going to happen to Bryce. Is his confession valid for legal purposes? Will the macho school culture change? We can only guess. Yet, we get the idea that being nice to each other – as Clay suggests – might at best be a starting point. Fighting cultures of discrimination or codes of silence needs much more than this. In this vein, Clay's storyline contemplates on barriers for societies that make stories such as Hannah's increasingly unlikely.

Conclusion

The public debate on *13RW* focussed very much on the permissibility of showing suicide to adolescents. I criticised this approach as insufficient and superficial and suggested a different one by treating suicide stories as narrative strategies that intend to engage an audience with the fragile place of individuals in social contexts.

So, if *13RW* is an invitation for ethicists to reflect on Hannah's reasons, what do we make of it then? Based on these thirteen reasons we cannot really decide why she killed herself – for two reasons. Due to the stories ambiguous focalisation, we have an uncertain decision-making basis, while, at the same time, we have reasons to believe that there might be more reasons. For instance, initially, she had a list with more than these twelve people or it is conspicuous that she spares her parents from blame. However, we know that her experience of rape and the belief that the school culture will protect the habitual rapist Bryce played a substantial role in her decision – whatever, her additional intentions, motivations and reasons for suicide might have been. In the end, she tells this story with thirteen reasons.

From a narrative ethics viewpoint, we realise how Hannah's storyline attracts our attention to forms of 'structural violence' (Galtung 1969), most importantly, to a sexist culture and its morally destructive effects for women *and* men. As a communicative act, Hannah's narration is told in a violent way. With this, I do not refer to the graphic depiction of (sexual) violence and suicide but to what her story does to the people on the tapes. Clay's storyline, in contrast, contemplates on the implications of getting enmeshed in a story and acting responsibly 'under circumstances not chosen by oneself'. It deals with the concept of shared responsibility and raises the question what needs to change in order to produce a society that is more just and creates conditions for succeeding lives. When looking at *13RW* as a communicative act, we are back at its approach to suicide. Leaving aside that our knowledge on suicide contagion is ambiguous, does the series as a narration act responsibly? I would say yes and hope I made my view plausible in this short essay.⁷

⁷ As I am interested in the series' narration, I do not discuss the plenty of additional supporting material that has been produced by Netflix and others.

On a last note, it strikes me as odd how intensely the public debated (the depiction of) suicide in *13RW* and how relatively little sexual assaults, which in reviews and reports of the series were generally subsumed under the show's other tough topics such as depression, bullying or substance abuse. In my opinion, this makes *13RW* very much the show about #MeToo. Curiously enough, for a long time, a combined search on Google of '13 Reasons Why + #MeToo' hardly produced any hits.⁸ Only in the run-up to the second season, we get more and relevant results. We might wonder what this focus on suicide and the low attention to sexual violence tells us about the society we live in. Apparently (and in line with the public health narrative of suicide), we rather tell our kids that it is bad to commit suicide and thus shield them from engaging with the topic, yet, stay silent the various reasons that make their lives unbearable.

In conclusion, we know that not every story goes well with everybody and that suicide prevention saves lives. Yet, we should also have confidence in adolescents and believe in their capacity to cope with suicide stories. In this regard, narrative ethics is a promising approach to engage students both in moral issues of suicide stories telling about the world we live in and want to live in as well as in responsible ways of narrating these stories. After all, this seems to be the issue that 'in every epoch must be discussed anew'.

⁸ At the time, almost all results referred to allegations of sexual harassment against Jay Asher.

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