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‘I am so tired, I wish my life was over’

An analysis of the potential inclusion of the novel 13 Reasons Why in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

The increased usage of media and technology has not only opened new areas for bullies, but also made the visible form of bullying invisible. In addition, movements like ‘me too’ have blossomed showing that sexual harassment is and has been a prevalent issue in the Western world for a long time. Simultaneously, adolescents’ suicide rates have increased. Therefore, selecting a Young Adult (YA) novel like 13 Reasons Why for the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom may work to address these topical issues and possibly help students understand the consequences of bullying and sexual harassment.

Keywords

Bullying, Sexual harassment, Media, Technology, Suicide, EFL classroom, Modern Western Societies, Young adult literature, Upper secondary school

Thanks

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Introduction

I hope you’re ready, because I’m about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you’re listening to these tapes, you’re one of the reasons why... This was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Do not take me for granted... again. (Asher 7, 10)

This quote is from Ray Asher’s novel 13 Reasons Why, which was published in 2007. In 13 Reasons Why, we follow a boy named Clay Jensen and his journey towards uncovering the reasons why his classmate, and crush Hannah Baker killed herself. While Hannah Baker was still alive she recorded thirteen tapes with thirteen reasons for her suicide. These tapes were then sent to twelve people, and they, one by one, had to listen to their story, and the others, before passing them on to the next person. Therefore, in this novel we have two different storylines, one in the present where we get to follow Clay and his journey, and one in the past where we get to hear Hannah’s story. This novel tells the tale of a girl who killed herself, because of what happened to her. People spread rumours about her, she was bullied, she had to endure harassment, and everyone she cared about left her. All these aspects were reasons for Hannah Baker’s suicide. Furthermore, Erik Jan De Wilde, a Professor in Clinical and Health Psychology, points out that adolescents who commit suicide often feel lonely or depressed (254); which can be well connected to Hannah Baker’s suicide. Even though the characters and the events in the novel are fictional, connections can still be drawn from the novel to modern Western societies, or more specifically the school context, and with the evidence just presented this connection is well supported.

The novel 13 Reasons Why illustrates how a girl must endure rape and other forms of sexual harassment, which contributes to the fact that the issue of sexual harassment needs to be addressed in modern Western societies, especially considering recent events. In society today, there are several popular movements that fight to make sexual harassment visible. One of these movements is the ‘me too’ movement, which fights to make people understand how colossal this issue is for women in the Western world. The ‘me too’ movement is built upon the hashtag ‘me too’ (#metoo), which was created and distributed by women on social media. Every woman that had been a victim of sexual harassment wrote #metoo on their social media page, to show how widespread this problem is. This movement started shortly after the famous film producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual abuse. This scandal did not only trigger the ‘me too’ movement, but also many similar allegations against men in
powerful positions in modern Western societies. Thus, raising awareness of sexual harassment in the EFL classroom is crucial to help students understand how immense the issue is.

‘I am so tired, I wish my life was over’. Many might feel these words, many might want to say them; but, no one dares to. In her article, Kristine E. Pytash, an Associate Professor in Teaching, Learning and Curricular studies, mentions that many teachers have, or will be teaching students who have been bullied or have thought about suicide, without even knowing it (470). Furthermore, Young Shin Kim, an Associate Professor of Psychology, and Bennet Leventha, a Professor of Psychology, point out that “The link between school violence, bullying, and suicide is clear; victims of bullying are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and actions” (Kim & Leventha qtd. in Pytash 470-1). That is to say, there is a strong connection between the school environment and students’ psychological health. However, the National Agency for Education in Sweden clearly states that:

No one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment, or to other forms of degrading treatment. (“Curriculum” 4)

Considering this, the connection just mentioned, between the school environment and students’ deteriorating psychological health, should not exist. The World Health Organization points out that suicide is a common global issue, and about 800,000 people commit suicide around the world every year (7). What is more, the Public Health Agency of Sweden points out that suicide is the most common way to die amongst adolescents. In addition, BRIS, which is a Swedish help organization for children and young adults, points out that they received 24,690 calls from children and young adults during 2017 (7). They also mention that the most common reasons for these calls were depression, anxiety or suicidal thoughts; in other words, issues connected to psychological health (38). Even if the school environment might not be the only environment that affects the students, it is, after all, the environment that they spend most of their time in. Even so, the responsibility for creating a safe environment for students does not solely lie on the teachers. Nonetheless, just as Wendy Bishop, a Professor of English, states: “...‘saying what we’re not (not therapists, not counselors, not specialists in affect or dysfunction) is not helping us to understand and prepare to be what we are”’ (Bishop 154 qtd. in Spear 71). Consequently, this essay will display the consequences of bullying and sexual harassment to raise awareness amongst students and teachers.
The aim of this essay is to discuss psychological health amongst students and how it is depicted in Young Adult Literature (YAL). The focus will be on suicide and the reasons behind it, as well as how to prevent it in schools. Therefore, this essay will argue that the novel *13 Reasons Why* can be used in the EFL classroom to discuss students’ psychological health, by using Hannah Baker’s reasons for killing herself as a point of departure to help students understand the consequences of bullying and harassment. An analysis will be made of the novel *13 Reasons Why* with a connection to disability studies and feminism, as well as its pedagogical implications. The chosen aspects will be analysed on a societal level and not on a gender level; for example, sexual harassment and the consequences of it will be seen as a societal issue and not a gender issue throughout this essay. The reasons for doing so will be explained further in the theory section, as well as in the analysis. Furthermore, the chosen method for this analysis is close reading, which is an analytical method where one must devote careful attention to the literary piece. Lastly, this essay will not focus on a specific course within the English subject, since the novel *13 Reasons Why*, as well as the chosen aspects to analyse, can be, and should be, applied on all courses.

**An Interdisciplinary approach**

In the following section the theoretical framework will be presented and discussed; in other words, both disability studies and feminism, as well as the authors and the works that will be used throughout the essay. Since this essay is focused on psychological health amongst students, it is suitable to use disability studies to discuss this topic. In addition, the novel touches many difficult issues, such as sexual harassment. Therefore, when analyzing those parts, feminism will be applied as well. Consequently, by connecting these two theories, one will ensure that all aspects of the novel can be analyzed.

Firstly, when discussing disability studies a few scholars and works will occur in this essay, for instance, Dan Goodley and his book *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction* will be used. Goodley discusses disability studies in different contexts; for example, he mentions society, individuals, and education. Secondly, another work that will be used in this essay is *The disability studies reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis. This book includes a chapter about identity and intersectionality, or more specifically, invisible disabilities and the difficulties that might occur when trying to define mental disability, which suits the topic of this essay. Furthermore, since *13 Reasons Why* touches subjects like mental health and suicide, it is necessary to include works that include or discuss topics like these ones. Pytash wrote an article called “Using YA Literature to Help Preservice Teachers Deal
With Bullying and Suicide”, which touches many topics that are included in this essay; such as suicide and raising awareness of its consequences. Hawton and van Heeringen edited a book called The International Handbook of Suicide and Attempted Suicide that deals with the biological, psychological, as well as the sociological processes related to suicide and suicidal behavior, which could be beneficial to include in this essay.

When it comes to feminism and the usage of this theory in school a few names will be mentioned frequently. For instance, Toril Moi and her book Sex, Gender and the Body: The Student Edition of What Is a Woman will appear, since it brings up the differences between sex and gender; as well as norms about the female sex. What is more, another book that will be mentioned is Third Wave Feminism which is edited by Stacy Gilis, Gilian Howie and Rebecca Munford. Other than these two books several articles will be used as well. For example, “Girls Talk Back: Changing School Culture through Feminist and Service-Learning Pedagogies” written by Jennifer L. Martin and Jane A. Bees will appear. Their article is about a course they started that focuses on harassment towards women. This article will be useful when discussing the topic of sexual harassment in the novel, especially when discussing ways of using this novel in school. Moreover, another article that will be used is “Rethinking Adolescent Peer Sexual Harassment: Contributions of Feminist Theory” written by Nicole E. Conroy. This article will also be used when discussing sexual harassment, since that is the main theme of the article. The sources that have been mentioned will occur several times throughout this essay, however other sources will be added along the way as well.

Disability studies

The word disability is a hard one to define. What is a disability? What do you need to have or be to be disabled? Lennard J. Davis, a Professor of Disability and Human Development, as well as a specialist in disability studies, states that “The word ‘disability’ hints at something missing either fiscally, physically, mentally or legally” (Davis xiii qtd. in Goodley 1). In other words, when having a disability, it means that you are not like everyone else. Already here a connection can be drawn to the fundamental values in school; as mentioned in the introduction, the National Agency for Education points out that no one should be discriminated because of, for instance, their gender, transgender identity, sexual orientation or functional impairment (“Curriculum” 4). However, the explanation of the word itself, that is to say disability, is to some extent an act of discrimination. Furthermore, Goodley, a Professor of Disability Studies and Education, writes:
While we may identify people as having physical, sensory, cognitive or mental health impairments, disability studies place the problems of disability in society. . . . If we locate disability in the person, then we maintain a disabling status quo. In contrast, by viewing disability as a cultural and political phenomenon, we ask serious questions about the social world. Undoubtedly, societies subject people with impairments to discrimination. Disabled people have been hated, made exotic, pitied, patronised and ignored. (xi)

In this quote Goodley is trying to point out that the problems of disability lie within societies and not within the person. That is to say, the problem is not that people have disabilities, but that they are not accepted.

When discussing disabilities many might think of visible disabilities, for instance a problem in body function. However, the invisible ones are easily forgotten. An invisible disability can, for example, be depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses; which are the ones this essay will focus on. Further, invisible disabilities are the hardest ones to identify, as well as define, because when speaking about disabilities, the choice of concepts and words matters as well. Margret Price, an Associate Professor of Writing, states: “Contemporary language available includes psychiatric disability, mental illness, cognitive disability, intellectual disability, mental health service user (or consumer), neurodiversity, neurotypical, psychiatric system survivor, crazy and mad” (289); which proves how hard it is to define a disability that is invisible. Even so, in some cases the focus should not be on the label itself, but on finding ways of helping people who suffer from an invisible disability. Nonetheless, helping someone that suffers from an invisible disability might not be the easiest thing to do. As stated in the introduction, Pytash mentions that teachers might not always feel adequately equipped to handle students that suffer from bullying or suicide-related issues (470). Likewise, Spear, an Assistant Professor of English, states that “. . . teachers often approach trauma-related material with apprehension and a fear of the unknown. This resistance may be because we, as teachers, cannot predict how students will react to and relate with such topics” (53). Thus, by connecting these two statements, it is clear, that issues related to invisible disabilities need to be brought to the surface, to make the unknown known. In accordance to this, Brent et al. and Shaffer et al. state that “Only a minority of adolescents who commit suicide have ever been evaluated by a mental health professional” (Brent et al. and Shaffer et al. qtd. in David Shaffer and Madelyn Gould 651). This may be because the symptoms of depression often go unnoticed in teenagers, which demonstrates how important it is to make the invisible visible.
There might be several factors that affect the development of an invisible disability. For instance, precisely as in *13 Reasons Why*, some of those aspects could be bullying, assault, or even rape. In other words, if one is being exposed to one of these aspects while trying to develop an identity, one could also develop an invisible disability. In an effort to address invisible disabilities, Gourd, a Senior Lecturer who specializes in inclusive education, and Gourd, a Professor in Education, constructed a course focused on using forum theatre to confront bullying; through this course they were:

... particularly interested in preparing all students, including the privileged, to be more than passive bystanders of incidents of bullying. Rather than follow current trends of focusing on individual characteristics of bullies and victims, we sought to connect bullying to the complexities of adolescents’ identity development. (405)

They moved the focus from the involved people to the development of a person’s identity. Consequently, they created a connection between the event and the students’ personal lives, which the National Agency for Education states should be included in all courses within the English teaching in Sweden. Even so, it is crucial to keep in mind that developing an identity is not as easy as it may seem, especially for an adolescent. De Wilde writes that “Adolescents, more than adults, seem particularly susceptible to media influences. Building their own identity, they sometimes seem to be on a permanent lookout for role models to identify with” (253). Similarly, Sharon Lamb et al. mention that “In expressing subject positions in relation to media influence and sexiness, the girls were exclusively drawing from the dominant discourse which portrays media as the main institution that influences the way girls dress and behave” (538). Hence, it is important to consider that students need a strong role model in real life to avoid having to look for them elsewhere. Thus, when touching topics like invisible disabilities in the classroom, the teacher needs to be prepared to be that role model for the students.

**Feminism**

Feminism is a difficult word to use in modern Western societies today. If someone mentions that they are a feminist or even utters the word, they can get into trouble. In fact, when Martin, an Assistant Professor of Education, and Beese, an Associate Professor with expertise in Human Resources, talked to girls about what being a feminist means, one of the girls simply said: “I believe that women and men should have equal rights. Really I never thought of myself as a feminist until I started coming to this school. It’s new to me. I look at it now like, why do we get treated like that?” (220). Similarly, Ellen C. Carillo, an Associate
Professor of English, points out that “In practicing feminist pedagogy outside of women's studies, though, one faces an array of challenges including those that stem both from students’ lack of exposure to these practices and from their exposure to misrepresentations of feminism” (31). By reading these quotes, it is clear, that many believe that by being a feminist one believes that the female sex should be in charge and have more advantages than the male sex. However, Jane Spencer, a specialist in feminist literary history, mentions that feminism is about equal values and rights between women and men (9). In other words, feminists are struggling for a community where women and men are equal, both socially and economically. Even so, this has not always been the case. Feminism came in three waves. The first wave was focused on achieving equality between men and women. The second wave was still focused on achieving equal rights, but on a different level (Spencer 9). While the first wave focused on political rights, the second one focused on reducing inequalities in sexuality, within the family, as well as in the workplace. The third and final wave was focused on individuality (Spencer 9). In other words, the third wave was trying to erase the thought of men and women being different.

Due to these three waves of feminism, modern Western societies have come a long way in achieving equal rights. Even so, one could argue that we are now living and fighting for the fourth wave. Sexual harassment and assault are problems that many must face every day. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention mentions that during 2016, 181,000 people stated that they had been exposed to sexual crimes; which displays how immense this problem is. Even so, adolescents will most likely accept harassment if it means that they get to stay within their social group (Ellen W. deLara qtd. in Conroy 341), which could be one of the reasons why the issue is so prevalent. According to The Swedish National Council for Crime prevention, it is usually adolescent girls that must endure sexual harassment and assault. Similarly, Carolina Engström, the Deputy Secretary of the Swedish organization Friends, mentions that every fifth adolescent girl has been exposed to sexual harassment online (5). All these aspects are reasons to why the fourth wave should focus on combatting issues like these ones. Moreover, Martin and Beese point out that:

Prior to the creation of the course, the female students expressed to the first author not only their hopelessness in combating it, but also the sense that such phenomena were normative and simply what women have to face in the world. (211)

Through this quote we learn that these girls expected to be harassed, because that is what all women must endure every day. Once again it is proven that a fourth wave, focusing on combatting these thoughts and behaviors, is necessary. Similar to this, William Keith Brooks,
a Professor of Biology, points out that “‘Among the higher animals . . . the males are more variable than the females’” (Brooks 326 qtd. in Moi 15) which displays what kind of stereotypes women must live with. Feminism might have come a long way, but it is because of stereotypes like the ones just mentioned, the fight for equal rights is not over.

Not being taken seriously, especially as a woman when reporting acts of harassment may explain why Hannah Baker in the novel 13 Reasons Why did not ask for help. Keddie, a Professor of Education, mentions that:

He assured me that sexual harassment was not a ‘real problem’ in the girls’ Grade Eight class. On pressing him further about the girls’ complaints and insisting that it was a genuine concern for some of the girls, he told me dismissively that often the girls ‘were just over-reacting to the boys’ – he explained: ‘Some of those girls can be real drama queens’. (13)

The man Keddie interviewed for her article stated that a problem like sexual harassment did not exist in the girls’ grade eight class. In fact, his statement demonstrates just how accepted degrading treatment towards women is in modern Western societies. Likewise, a student in Martin and Beese’s class mentions: “I never really paid attention to how much women are degraded on a daily basis by language that’s used nowadays and things that are said and just accepted” (226). By connecting this quote to the earlier one, it is clear, that degrading treatment towards women is a massive problem, a problem that is too immense to ignore.

However, when discussing this problem in the classroom, it is important to remember that one cannot put all the blame on the boys, because if you do, there might be a risk that you enhance the problem instead of preventing it. Graff, an Assistant Professor of English, points out that “The challenge in this generalising discussion is to shift the perspective away from the boys and girls as being deficient qua sex towards pedagogy in general” (57). Consequently, the focus in teaching should not be on specific genders, but instead on issues like sexual harassment in general.

13 Reasons Why in connection to modern Western societies

In the following section the novel 13 Reasons Why will be analysed in connection to the sources presented in the theory section. The analysis has been divided into four different areas, and each area contains events that caused Hannah Baker’s suicide. The areas are presented in the same order as the events happen in the novel. That is to say, the literary analysis follows the same chronological order as the novel does. Firstly, the usage of media and technology will be analysed, as well as the consequences of its usage. Secondly, bullying
and degrading treatment will be investigated, as well as the effects it might have. Thirdly, sexual harassment will be evaluated, along with the repercussions that could occur. Finally, the analysis will end by analysing Hannah Baker’s suicide. Moreover, these four areas will then also be connected to modern Western societies and the norms they contain.

Media and technology

Technology has developed tremendously during the past few years. Because of this development, new areas for bullying started to appear, and while the face to face bullying decreased, the online bullying increased (Engström 5). Further, earlier in this essay two terms where introduced, visible and invisible disabilities, and it was stated that the invisible ones are the toughest ones to spot. These two terms can be applied to bullying as well; seeing that face to face bullying would be the visible one, whilst online bullying would be the invisible one. In her article written for the Swedish organization Friends, Engström points out that every third adolescent have been exposed to online bullying. She also mentions that every fifth adolescent girl has been exposed to sexual harassment online (5). Therefore, it is clear, that invisible bullying is an enormous problem that needs to be addressed. Not only does this issue exist in modern Western societies today, it is also an issue that is well displayed in Asher’s 13 Reasons Why.

In the novel Hannah Baker falls in love with a boy named Justin Foley. He grows feelings for her too and they decide to meet a late night on the playground. The night goes by and as Hannah long longed for they kiss a few times before they part. However, what Hannah did not know was that Justin took a photo of her as she went down the slide, and since she wore a dress that photo was rather revealing. The day after Hannah and Justin met he showed the picture to his friends to brag about the night, and after showing it, Justin’s friend Bryce took the phone and sent out the picture to everyone at school. As stated in the previous paragraph, technology has developed tremendously the past few years and because of that Bryce was able to ruin the memory of Hannah’s first kiss. That photo turned out to be the beginning of Hannah Baker’s end. In one of the audiotapes Hannah says:

*I know what you’re all thinking. Hannah Baker is a slut. Oops. Did you catch that? I said, “Hannah Baker is.” Can’t say that anymore. . . . Wrong. . . . Hannah Baker is not, and never was, a slut. Which begs the question, What have you heard? I simply wanted a kiss. I was a freshman girl who had never been kissed. Never. But I liked a boy, he liked me, and I was going to kiss him. That’s the story – the whole story – right there.* (23-24)
This quote demonstrates how much a picture can destroy. Hannah simply wanted a kiss, but everyone at school including her friends thought that she got much more than that. Conroy, who has a PhD in Child and Family Studies, points out that people will most likely accept harassment and bullying if it means that they get to stay within their social group (341). Connecting this to the novel, one could say that Justin decided to let Bryce send out the picture of Hannah, because he was afraid of being excluded if he did not. Additionally, Robinson, a Professor of Sociology and Social Studies, states that:

Boys from a very early age are aware that accessing hegemonic masculinity privileges them to certain resources and institutionalized power that neither girls nor women will equally share in particular contexts. In schools, boys have learnt that practising sexual harassment does work to gain power. . . . (Robinson 88 qtd. in Keddie 7)

Thus, by connecting this to the event in the novel, one could argue that Justin decided to show the picture to his friends, because he gained power by doing so.

A direct consequence of technological advances is the increased access to media. Lamb et al. point out that mass media often depicts women and adolescent girls as sexual objects (258) and forgets that they are people just like everyone else. Hence, by depicting women in this way media normalises the thought of women being nothing more than a tool for men to use whenever they want. In accordance to this, Moi, a Professor of Literature and Romance Studies, as well as English and Theatre Studies, points out that “Too many forms of contemporary feminism appear unable to understand women who do not conform to their own more or less narrow vision of what a woman is or ought to be” (9) which displays that women are not expected to do or be anything else than what the norm demonstrates. As a result of this, people do not longer know how to treat women in a good manner. In the novel Justin and his friends see Hannah as an object instead of an adolescent girl, just like media views women in modern Western societies. Consequently, the biggest problem might not lie amongst people, or characters in this case, instead the real villain might be the media. Moreover, Hannah says:

I know. I know what you’re thinking. As I was telling the story, I was thinking the same thing myself. A kiss? A rumor based on a kiss made you do this to yourself? No. A rumor based on a kiss ruined a memory that I hoped would be special. A rumor based on a kiss started a reputation that other people believed in and reacted to. And sometimes, a rumor based on a kiss has a snowball effect. A rumor, based on a kiss, is just the beginning. (30-31)
A rumour might not be the end of the world, but it has the power to leave scars on people. This specific rumour left a scar on Hannah Baker, a scar that never went away. The novel *13 Reasons Why* illustrates how a kiss can lead to a picture, which could lead to a rumour that destroys someone’s life.

**Bullying and degrading treatment**

In Sweden, adolescent girls are often told that boys are mean to them because they are in love with them. In other words, teachers and parents usually dismiss bullying by saying that boys mean no harm. In fact, deLara, an Associate Professor who specializes in Childhood bullying, mentions that “. . . ‘If they did (notice it), they wouldn’t do anything about it because they would just see it as flirting’” (deLara 82 qtd. in Conroy 350). What the girl here is trying to say is that even if the teachers did notice that someone was bullied, they ignored it, or said that the one bullying was in love with the victim. On the one hand, this could possibly be connected to the previous statement, that teachers do not feel adequately equipped to deal with issues related to bullying (Pytash 470). On the other hand, that does not mean that the problem can be ignored. Similar to the previous quote, a woman Pytash interviewed for her article points out that:

. . . parents and teachers dismiss the seriousness of bullying by saying “kids will be kids,” or “what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger.” It seems ridiculous that students should have to go to school worrying whether or not they will be terrorized. As teachers we have to be willing to take a strong stance against bullying. (476)

Accordingly, a crucial part of being a teacher is making sure that the students feel safe in the school environment. Nevertheless, a safe school environment for Hannah Baker, was something that the novel *13 Reasons Why* rarely displayed. Hannah was bullied by many, but no one did anything to help her. The reasons for everyone choosing not to help might be that they did not know what they could do to help to prevent the bullying, or they did not even notice it.

There might be several reasons for why people bully others. For instance, they might do it to protect themselves, or because they want to punish their victims. Another reason might be to make sure that they get to stay within their social group (Conroy 341). Nonetheless, that does not mean that it is an accepted behavior. Many adolescents must endure being bullied, which is an issue that the novel *13 Reasons Why* illustrates as well. Hannah says: “Ready for this, everyone? Our sweet little Miss Crimsen told this guy, and whoever else was standing within earshot, that I’ve got a few surprises buried in my dresser
drawers” (114). Little Miss Crimsen or Cortney Crimsen as she is named in the novel, was Hannah’s friend. She stood by Hannah for a while and supported her, but after people started suspecting that Cortney was homosexual, she started a rumour about Hannah to protect herself. Courtney started a rumour because she was afraid of showing everyone who she really was, she was afraid of being herself. Once again Hannah Baker was faced with an untrue rumour, which led to her sinking even lower into the hole that everyone around her dug for her. In their course, Gourd and Gourd fought to:

   . . . enable participants to acknowledge behaviors that hurt individuals and damage the sense of community in the school context, . . . help the group envision changes in behavior that support individuals and the collective good of all members of the community, and . . . provide opportunities to try out strategies that might support improved human relationships within the school community. (405)

In other words, they wanted to help students understand the consequences of bullying. In fact, if Cortney had known what the rumour would do to Hannah, she might have thought twice before starting it. Hence, the novel 13 Reasons Why displays how important it is to address issues like bullying in the school context.

Sexual harassment

   Sexual harassment is, and has been, an everyday experience for many women, for a long time. For many years this has been a problem that no one has dared to talk about, but now the problem has reached the surface, and many have chosen to fight to prevent and remove it. For instance, the ‘me too’ movement, that was mentioned in the introduction, is one of many movements that fight to raise awareness of how immense the issue of sexual harassment is in modern Western societies. Even so, Conroy points out that “Although male and female adolescents may see the serious problem with SH, they also realize that it is difficult to disrupt this performance of gender that is reflective of the larger society’s attitudes” (347). In other words, even though movements like ‘me too’ exist, it is difficult for people to fight for equal rights between men and women, since the norms are too deeply rooted in society. Moreover, Moi states: “Since male and female reproductive organs were not taken to be fundamentally different, anatomical differences were pictured as hierarchical as opposed to complementary. Man was on top and women at the bottom of the same scale of values” (10); which demonstrates how disrupted the norms about men and women are. As mentioned on the previous page, teachers and parents often dismiss bullying by saying that ‘kids will be kids’ (Pytash 476), and that boys who bully others are only flirting (deLara 82
These statements can be connected to the ‘me too’ movement, since it is arguable that men and boys often find themselves in powerful positions, which according to societal norms, gives them a go ahead to treat women and girls badly.

Further, being treated differently because you are a woman is an issue that is also well illustrated in the novel 13 Reasons Why. Hannah says “Statement number one: “I’m only playing, Hannah.” Translation: Your ass is my play-toy. You might think you have final say over what happens to your ass, but you don’t.”” (51). Consequently, by connecting the statements in the previous paragraph, as well as the quote from 13 Reasons Why, to the ‘me too’ movement, one could argue that men in powerful positions often take advantage of women in exposed positions. Additionally, it is also safe to say that sexual harassment is seen as a natural phenomenon. However, sexual harassment has not been nor will ever be a natural phenomenon. Martin and Beese reported a student saying:

It made me see that a woman should not be getting abused. Before I took this class, I thought that women deserved this. Or, I would say things like, “a woman gives a man a reason to hit her.” But when I took the class it made me think differently—that women don’t deserve this. Nobody does. (220)

Clearly, everyone should come to the same conclusion as the girl taking this course did, nevertheless, one should not need to take a course to realize this. Sexual harassment might be seen as a natural phenomenon; even so, the natural phenomenon should be a world without sexual harassment in it.

Sexual harassment is a colossal problem, not only in modern Western societies, but it is also a problem that is well displayed in the novel 13 Reasons Why. Moreover, in the novel Hannah Baker’s friend Alex Standall creates a list where he names her ‘best ass’, which contributed to the fact that everyone saw Hannah Baker as an object, instead of the adolescent girl she was. In one of the audiotapes Hannah says:

But what happens when someone says you have the best ass in the freshman class? Let me tell you, Alex, because you’ll never know. It gives people – some people – to go-ahead to treat you like you’re nothing but that specific body part. (44)

By naming Hannah ‘best ass’ Alex gave everybody permission to treat her badly. Hannah also says: “A cupped hand smacked my ass. And then, he said it. “Best Ass in the Freshman Class, Wally. Standing right here in your store!”” (47-48). This was what Hannah had to face after the list came out, which once again pulled her deeper into the hole that everyone else was digging around her. In her article Keddie states that “The harmful impacts of sexual harassment on girls and women are well established. The enforcement of an appropriately
heterosexualized femininity – regulated through popular understandings about beauty and appearance – objectifies gender performances along highly restrictive and invariably masculinist lines” (2). In other words, even though people might know that sexual abuse hurt women in many ways, it still exists. A few days before Hannah decided to end her life she went to a party, a party that turned out to be her last one. Hannah says: “When you were done, Bryce, I got out of the hot tub and walked two houses away. The night was over. I was done” (266). This quote explains Hannah’s feelings after being raped. Lauren F. Lichty, an Assistant Professor of Psychology, and Rebecca Campbell, a Professor of Psychology, point out that “. . . students who directly experienced SH and students who witnessed the SH of others reported higher levels of psychological distress than those who did not experience or witness SH” (Lichty and Campbell qtd. in Conroy 344). Hence, by connecting this to Hannah’s thoughts after being raped, as well as everything else she had to endure, it is understandable that she was emotionally unstable.

Suicide

When someone chooses to end their life, you must stop and think about where society is headed. As mentioned in the introduction, the World Health organization points out that suicide is a common global issue, and about 800,000 people commit suicide around the world every year. In addition, the Public Health Agency of Sweden points out that suicide is the most common way to die amongst adolescents in Sweden; which shows how immense this problem is. What is more, De Wilde points out that adolescents who commit suicide often feel lonely or depressed (254); which is well illustrated in the novel 13 Reasons Why. Hannah Baker had to endure much, and every single event made her more certain that the only choice for her to find peace was to die. Hannah says:

Let someone take away any sense of privacy or security you might still possess. Then have someone use that insecurity to satisfy their own twisted curiosity. . . . Then come to realize that you’re making mountains out of molehills. Realize how petty you’ve become. Sure, it may feel like you can’t get a grip in this town. It may seem that every time someone offers you a hand up, they just let go and you slip further down. But you must stop being so pessimistic, Hannah, and learn to trust those around you. So I do. One more time. . . . And then . . . well . . . certain thoughts begin creeping around. Will I ever get control of my life? Will I always be shoved back and pushed around by those I trust? . . . Will my life ever go where I want it to? . . . The next day, Marcus, I
decided something. I decided to find out how people at school might react if one of the students never came back. (145)

This quote describes the first time Hannah Baker thought about killing herself, it describes a point in her life where she gave up. Hannah was tired of the rumours, she was tired of how she was treated and most importantly, she was tired, because no one cared.

Many before have stated that sexual harassment is not a problem in modern Western societies. For instance, as previously mentioned on page eight, a man Keddie interviewed stated that sexual harassment was not an issue in his class (13). Similar to this, Conroy mentions that even if people did notice someone being sexually harassed, they would not do anything about it, since it is a behaviour that is too deeply rooted within the norms of society (347). Additionally, many also point out that bullying does not exist. For instance, deLara states that people often dismiss bullying by saying that the one bullying is only flirting (deLara 82 qtd. in Conroy 350). However, with the evidence presented throughout this essay so far, it is clear, that the Western world has a massive problem with both sexual harassment and bullying. Kali Tal, a pioneering scholar in the field of Trauma Studies, points out that “. . . ‘literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it ‘real’ both to the victim and to the community’” (Tal 21 qtd. in Spear 57). Consequently, one could argue that the novel 13 Reasons Why was written to illuminate problems in society, problems that people need to be aware of, and try to prevent.

13 Reasons Why in the EFL Classroom

When deciding to become an upper secondary school teacher in English one might think that grammar will be the hardest part one has to face. Even so, if that were the case one could not be more wrong. In grammar teachers will mostly come across two answers, a right one, and a wrong one; but, when it comes to the students’ psychological health there are millions of different answers, and they must try to find the right one. The National Agency for Education points out that every teacher should notice and support students who struggles, as well as work towards making the school a safe environment for everyone (“Curriculum” 9). Likewise, Tony Booth, a Professor who specializes in inclusion in education, states that “. . . achievements of schools mean nothing if school communities fail to enhance the spirit of all. . . pupils” (Booth qtd. in Goodley 138-9). Nonetheless, when reading the statistics from the Public Health Agency of Sweden and BRIS that were presented in the introduction, it is clear, that teachers and schools fail in this task. Therefore, the following section will analyse how to
incorporate the novel *13 Reasons Why* into the English teaching to help students understand the consequences of bullying and harassment.

**Media and technology**

The increase and development of technology has opened new platforms for bullies. As a result, the bullying moved from being visible to being invisible (Engström 5). Consequently, it is harder for teachers and parents to notice when someone is being bullied, since it often happens in silence. Additionally, when the technology developed, the usage of media increased as well. Lamb et al. state that adolescent girls view media as the largest institution of influence regarding how they should dress and behave (538). In fact, when talking about the usage of media and technology in the EFL classroom it would be interesting to ask the students questions like these ones, since they will then have to think about, as well as question the consequences of the usage of media:

- “How much does media influence your everyday life?”
- “Could you manage to stay off social media sites for a week? Why/why not?”
- “Do you think people would be better off without media’s influence? Why/why not?”

For a long time, modern Western societies have displayed horrendous norms about women. For instance, Moi points out that “. . . the word ’woman’ can never be used in non-ideological ways, that ‘woman’ *must* mean ‘heterosexual, feminine and female’” (43). In other words, according to this quote, a woman can never be anything else than what the norm says. Similarly, Carillo states that “As a female teacher, I am expected to be nurturing. A nurturer does not grade ’harshly.’ In this student’s terms, when I do not live up to the social expectations of a woman, my identity as a . . . teacher is at stake” (31). Also, Spencer states that “The concept ’woman’ seemed too *fragile* to bear the weight of all contents and meanings ascribed to it” (1). Due to this, it is also important to bring up the discussion about societal norms on women, especially how they are display through media, when using the novel *13 Reasons Why* in the classroom. The national Agency for Education points out that students should not be discriminated on the grounds of, for instance, gender, sexual orientation or functional impairment (“Curriculum” 4). Therefore, it is necessary to inform the students how important it is to have courage enough to be yourself, as well as letting people be just that. However, Graff mentions that “When the mainstream focuses only on fit and brave images, it becomes important to show girls’ cautious, delicate or freaky sides. It is difficult to talk about

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1 To access all questions on Media and Technology, see appendix A.
girls without serving old or new stereotypes” (61). Thus, it is critical to remember that by talking about norms in modern Western societies one could easily create new ones. Nonetheless, that does not mean that teachers should not bring up such an important issue as this is in the EFL classroom. Instead, it should be brought to the surface, preferably by using Hannah Baker’s story as a point of departure.

**Bullying and degrading treatment**

As previously mentioned on page eight, bullying has moved from being visible to being invisible, due to the increased usage of technology and media (Engström 5). Therefore, it is harder for teachers to spot bullying, since it often happens either during breaks or after school. Therefore, one might ask oneself ‘How could I help someone if I do not even know, or see the problem?’ This question is hard to answer, even so, a solution to this problem would be to make the invisible visible, which could be done by using literature in the classroom to start a discussion. In accordance to this, Pytash mentions that:

\[\text{... it is difficult to re-create through classroom discussions the emotional turmoil of helping a student deal with bullying or suicide. Reading literature, however, is one effective way ... to live through the experience of someone being bullied or considering suicide. (471)}\]

Consequently, one could argue that by including the novel *13 Reasons Why* into the English teaching, one could help students understand the consequences of bullying. In addition, when discussing bullying and degrading treatment it could be interesting to ask the students to fill in an anonymous questionnaire, where they would be asked questions like ‘what would you do if you saw someone being bullied in the hallway?’ or ‘have you ever bullied someone?’2. After doing so, the teacher could join the answers to show the students statistics on bullying in their class, to raise awareness on the issue. However, when carrying out a questionnaire like this, one must consider that the students might not answer the questions honestly. Even so, by using a questionnaire, the students will hopefully understand how immense the issue of bullying is, which is why one should not refrain from using exercises like this one in the classroom.

The National Agency for Education points out that teaching in all courses in English should be connected to students’ thoughts, feelings, experiences, as well as societal lives. Having this in mind, it might be difficult for some students to discuss topics like bullying and suicide, but it might also turn out to be beneficial. However, Spear states that it is almost

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2 To access all questions connected to the questionnaire, see appendix B.
impossible to map out exactly how trauma leaves its psychological marks on adolescents (61), which adds complexity of including narratives like *13 Reasons Why* into the teaching.

Similarly, Julie Rak, a Professor of English and Film Studies, states that “. . . ‘It is not . . . ethically responsible to try to push a class into crisis, to risk wounding students in order to teach them something about wounding’” (Rak 55 qtd. in Spear 56). Nonetheless, just as Pytash mentions:

> Young adult literature focused on issues considered sensitive, taboo, or provocative, such as bullying and suicide, may offer powerful reading experiences; however, it is necessary to offer a time and a safe place for readers to talk about these issues. (477)

That is to say, if one is willing to put enough time into it to create a safe place in the classroom, the novel *13 Reasons Why* could undoubtedly be a great choice to work with when discussing issues like bullying and degrading treatment.

**Sexual harassment**

The topic of sexual harassment might be tough for some students to discuss in the classroom if they know someone who has been a victim of it, or if they have been a victim themselves. Likewise, Spear states that “For some people, reading or, rather, witnessing this event may be difficult” (53). Nevertheless, if one decides to ignore the problem it will never go away. After Martin and Beese carried out their course focused on sexual harassment they explained that “This caused them to feel a heightened sense of internal motivation. No longer did they feel they had to accept certain actions and sentiments simply because they were female. They now felt more in control over their lives” (224-5). In addition, Martin and Beese also mentions that:

> . . . participants took what they learned in the class and not only applied it to their personal lives, but also attempted to change those around them. When they saw things that were oppressive and wrong, they reacted differently. As stated previously, many participants corrected students in their other classes when they heard demeaning or sexist language or witnessed sexual harassment. They would not allow the user of degrading language to dismiss their behavior as “only a joke.” Because of the strong bonds participants formed, they began to take initiative and responsibility for themselves, for one another, and for the culture of the school. They became more connected and self-possessed. (227)
This shows how important and beneficial it can be to discuss a tough topic like sexual harassment in the classroom, preferably by using the sexual harassments Hannah Baker had to endure as a starting point.

When approaching this subject in school one must do it with cautiousness, considering the difficult issue that it is. Nonetheless, it is too important to ignore. Movements like ‘me too’ have displayed how monumental this issue is all over the world. Therefore, when talking about the novel 13 Reasons Why, and the sexual harassment Hannah Baker had to endure it is important to connect this to the ‘me too’ movement to show that this is a problem that exists in modern Western societies as well. Additionally, when working with this movement it could be interesting to let the students write an argumentative text, where they argue either for or against movements like this one, since they then would have to connect the chosen movement and what it fights for to norms within modern Western societies. However, it is crucial to make sure that you do not create an us versus them mindset between the girls and the boys when discussing this in school. That is to say, even though statistics show that women face many more sexual assaults than men (the Swedish National Council for Crime prevention), it is important to make sure that one does not blame the boys, and therefore also create a conflict in the classroom. As stated on the previous page, when approaching this subject one must do it with cautiousness. Nonetheless, by using the novel 13 Reasons Why and focusing on the outcomes of everything Hannah Baker had to endure, one could help the students understand the consequences of sexual harassment.

**Suicide**

When someone who has their whole life ahead of them decides to end their life, one must ask oneself what needs to be done to prevent this from happening again. For a long time, suicide has been a subject that no one has dared to talk about; that is to say, the subject has long been ignored. Price mentions that the psychiatric system she was connected to repeatedly turned down her request for continued treatment, she stated that “... unless I “actually attempt[ed] suicide,” at which point I would be deemed unwell enough to resume therapy” (Price 300). Nevertheless, if one does not get help before attempting suicide, it might be too late. An English teacher’s main task might be to teach adolescents English, however that is far from the only task a teacher has. Mary Rose O’Reilley, a Professor of English, states that “... ‘Those of us who are teachers of English ... are in the discipline of storytelling. We are like old shamans sitting around the fire scaring people to death, or saving their lives, or healing their hearts’” (O’Reilley 25 qtd. in Spear 68). In accordance to this, the National Agency for
Education points out that teachers should “openly discuss and together with the students analyse different values, views and problems, and the consequences of these” (“Curriculum” 11). Hopefully, by using the novel *13 Reasons Why* in the English teaching students will be given a chance to understand the consequences of bullying and sexual harassment, and therefore also change their behaviour towards each other.

Suicide is a difficult issue to talk about, and exactly as Pytash mentions many teachers might not feel adequately equipped to do it (470). Even so, this is an issue that can no longer be ignored. In fact, when addressing the topic of suicide in the classroom, it could be beneficial to ask the students, after they have read the novel *13 Reasons Why*, to discuss Hannah Baker’s suicide, as well as the reasons for it; since, it might help them understand what bullying, degrading treatment, and sexual harassment can lead to. However, despite that students might need questions as a point of departure to move the discussion forward, they will not receive any for this exercise; because, if they are to be able to understand the consequences of their behaviour, they need to figure it out on their own, or else they might not take it seriously. Nevertheless, when implementing an exercise like this, one must consider that students might not say anything at all. Even so, by letting the students discuss Hannah Baker’s suicide freely, they get a chance to speak from their hearts, which could turn out to be beneficial in the journey towards understanding and healing; because, just as Spear mentions, one should touch upon difficult issues like suicide “... while continually returning to healing” (60). In addition, Shaffer, a Professor of Child Psychiatry and Pediatrics, and Gould, a Professor in Epidemiology in Psychiatry, mention that it could also be beneficial to talk about “warning signs” when discussing suicide in the EFL classroom; since it could encourage and help students identify others at risk (645). Furthermore, Pytash states that “Young adult literature portrays adolescents’ lived experiences ...” (476). In accordance to this, the National Agency for Education claims that teaching in all courses within the English subject should include areas connected to students’ feelings, experiences, and societal lives; which is why the novel *13 Reasons Why* should be incorporated into the English teaching.

**Conclusion**

Bullying, sexual harassment and suicide are widespread issues in modern Western societies. Nearly 800,000 people commit suicide every year, and it is the most common way to die amongst adolescents in Sweden. Thus, the aim of this essay was to discuss psychological health amongst students, with a focus on these issues. Additionally, the essay argued for the inclusion of the novel *13 Reasons Why* in the EFL classroom, and the usage of
Hannah Baker’s reasons for her suicide as a point of departure to help students understand the consequences of bullying and harassment. Students may feel that they must endure bullying and harassment during school hours. Even so, it has been stated above that no one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of, for instance, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation or gender. However, even though it is clearly stated in the Curriculum that no one should have to be exposed to degrading treatment it still occurs on a daily basis, which is why using literature has been proposed as one way of addressing the problem.

The novel *13 Reasons Why* depicts one part of Hannah Baker’s adolescent life. A part where she must endure being sexually harassed, bullied and raped. Hannah had to face many rumours that were not true. Her classmates spread lies about her, and just as in modern Western societies, the fictional characters in the novel used highly developed smart phones, which allowed them to send out a revealing picture of Hannah that destroyed her reputation. In addition, Hannah was voted ‘best ass’ which made everyone see her as an object instead of an adolescent girl, and on top of all this, she was raped; which ended up making her stop believing in life. The issues of sexual harassment and bullying have not been seen as major problems in society, nevertheless, the launch of the ‘me too’ movement, as well as the events the novel *13 Reasons Why* illustrates, clearly proves the opposite. Thus, by incorporating the novel *13 Reasons Why* in connection to movements like this one, students might see that too. Undoubtedly, the areas targeted in this essay deserves a longer essay than this one, perhaps even one each, since they all are massive issues for young people today. In fact, for future research it would be interesting to focus solely on sexual harassment and how it is depicted in YAL.

‘I am so tired, I wish my life was over’. These are words many might feel, but no one dares to say. Talking about issues like bullying, sexual harassment, and suicide has long been taboo, but it is time for that taboo to be removed. No student should have to go to school and be afraid of what they will have to endure. No one should have to worry about whether or not they will be terrorized during the school day. It is time for teachers to take a strong stance against bullying and sexual harassment. It is time to make the invisible visible to help prevent suicide. Because, suicide should never be an option, it should never have to be the only way out. Additionally, by using the novel *13 Reasons Why* in upper secondary school, students might not only understand the consequences of bullying and sexual harassment, they might also realise that it is time for a change. It is time to say no to bullies and sexual offenders.
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Appendix A – Questions to discuss concerning media and technology

If one asks the students a question like “do you think people would be better off without media’s influence? Why/why not?” one puts them in a situation where they have to connect the usage of media to norms within modern Western societies. As a consequence of this, the students might understand the bad influence technology and media can have, if it is not used for a good cause. Furthermore, the questions are framed in a way that does not let the students answer the questions with a simple “yes” or “no”, instead they open up for a discussion focusing on connecting the usage of media and technology to modern Western societies. Moreover, since this essay does not focus on a specific course within the English subject, the questions are constructed so that they can be applied on all courses.

- How much does media influence your everyday life?
- Could you manage to stay off social media sites for a week? Why/why not?
- Do you think people would be better off without media’s influence? Why/why not?
- Do you think that your school should have a strict no phone use during school hours? Why/Why not?
- Do you think a movement like ‘me too’ could change how people use media and technology?
- Do you think that the online bullying would decrease if adolescents did not use social media until they started grade 7?
- What do you think teachers and parents need to do to prevent online bullying?
- Why do you think people bully others, especially online?
Appendix B – Questions connected to the questionnaire

The students will be given a questionnaire where they will be asked to answer a set of questions. After doing so, the questionnaires will be collected, and the answers will be joined together to create statistics on bullying in the class. However, as mentioned in the pedagogical implications, one must consider that the students might not answer the questions honestly. Even so, by including a questionnaire like this one, one could raise awareness of how colossal the issue of bullying is. Additionally, each question will have the answer “no comment”, which the students can choose if they do not want to answer the question.

• What would you have done if you saw someone being bullied in the hallway?
  1. “I would have told a teacher”
  2. “I would have tried to stop it”
  3. “I would have ignored it”
  4. “No comment”

• What do you think your friends would have done if they saw you being bullied?
  1. “They would have tried to stop it”
  2. “They would have gone and talked to a teacher”
  3. “They would have ignored it”
  4. “No comment”

• Have you ever bullied someone?
  1. “Yes, but only once”
  2. “Yes, several times”
  3. “No, never”
  4. “No comment”

• Have you been a victim of bullying?
  1. “Yes, but only a couple of times”
  2. “Yes, on a daily basis”
  3. “No, never”
  4. “No comment”

• Why do you think people bully others?
  1. “Because they want to protect themselves from being bullied”
  2. “Because they are punishing the victim”
  3. “Because of peer pressure”
  4. “No comment/ other option”