



## From Isolation to Collapse: Environmental Contributions to Complex Trauma in Thirteen Reasons Why

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**Abstract:** This study explores the representation of adolescent trauma through the character of Hannah Baker in *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. Using a qualitative descriptive method with a psychological literary analysis approach, the research applies Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the concept of complex trauma to investigate how environmental systems contribute to psychological deterioration. The analysis identifies five levels microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem that each fail to provide the support Hannah needs, ultimately leading to her emotional collapse. Key findings reveal that direct peer betrayal, institutional neglect, weak family-school communication, cultural normalization of victim-blaming, and cumulative unresolved trauma collectively influence the protagonist's declining mental health. The study demonstrates that trauma in adolescence is rarely the result of a single incident but rather the accumulation of systemic failures over time. The findings imply that educational institutions and communities must adopt trauma-informed frameworks and foster empathetic, interconnected support systems to protect vulnerable youth.

**Keywords:** adolescent trauma, Bronfenbrenner, complex trauma, literary analysis, psychological systems

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi trauma remaja melalui tokoh Hannah Baker dalam novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* karya Jay Asher. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan analisis sastra psikologis. Penelitian ini menerapkan Teori Sistem Ekologis Bronfenbrenner serta konsep trauma kompleks untuk menelaah bagaimana sistem lingkungan turut menyebabkan keruntuhan psikologis. Analisis dilakukan pada lima lapisan sistem mikrosistem, mesosistem, eksosistem, makrosistem, dan kronosistem yang seluruhnya gagal memberikan dukungan bagi Hannah hingga akhirnya mengalami kehancuran emosional. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa pengkhianatan teman sebaya, kelalaian institusi, lemahnya komunikasi rumah dan sekolah, normalisasi budaya menyalahkan korban, serta akumulasi trauma yang tidak tertangani menjadi faktor utama penurunan kesehatan mental tokoh utama. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa trauma pada remaja bukan disebabkan oleh satu kejadian tunggal, melainkan oleh kegagalan sistemik yang terus berulang. Temuan ini menyiratkan perlunya kerangka kerja berbasis trauma dan sistem dukungan yang empatik serta saling terhubung di lingkungan sekolah dan masyarakat.

**Kata kunci:** analisis sastra, Bronfenbrenner, psikologi sistem, remaja, trauma kompleks

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a pivotal period marked by rapid emotional, psychological, and social development, during which individuals are particularly vulnerable to external and internal stressors. In recent years, mental health issues among adolescents have garnered increased attention due to rising global prevalence rates. According to the World Health Organization (2023), approximately 14% of adolescents worldwide experience mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral disturbances (WHO, 2023). These challenges are often exacerbated by factors such as academic pressure, social expectations, peer influence, and the pervasive presence of social media. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat

frequently expose adolescents to unrealistic standards of success and beauty, as well as online harassment, fostering a culture of comparison and cyberbullying (Naslund et al., 2020).

In addition to environmental stressors, traumatic experiences significantly contribute to the deterioration of adolescent mental health. Trauma defined as an emotional response to distressing or life-threatening events can take many forms, including sexual abuse, bullying, family neglect, and interpersonal violence. Complex trauma, which involves repeated and prolonged exposure to traumatic events, can severely impair an adolescent's ability to regulate emotions, maintain self-worth, and form healthy relationships (Pfluger et al., 2022). Unfortunately, many adolescents suffering from trauma do not receive adequate support due to systemic failures in schools, families, and mental health infrastructures.

Despite growing awareness, existing literature often underrepresents the intersection between trauma, stress, and institutional neglect in adolescence, particularly through the lens of literary narratives. Previous studies have focused on the psychological impact of trauma in clinical or educational settings, yet few have examined how young adult fiction, such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, reflects and critiques these complex realities. This novel presents a vivid portrayal of a teenage girl's psychological decline in the face of relentless bullying, sexual harassment, and social rejection culminating in her suicide. Her experiences echo real-life cases, including the tragic story of Amanda Todd, a Canadian teenager who took her own life after enduring severe cyberbullying and exploitation. These narratives reveal the urgent need for holistic approaches to trauma-informed care that address both psychological symptoms and the sociocultural contexts in which trauma occurs (Maynard et al., 2019).

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary analysis of adolescent trauma and stress through a combination of literary criticism and psychological theory. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the concept of complex trauma as its analytical framework, the research investigates how systemic failures such as unresponsive school counselors and neglectful family environments compound the protagonist's emotional suffering. Unlike prior studies that isolate psychological conditions from cultural representation, this research bridges the gap between lived adolescent experiences and their depiction in contemporary literature. In doing so, it also brings attention to how narrative texts can serve as both mirrors and critiques of societal neglect.

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze the portrayal of trauma and stress in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, highlighting the interconnectedness of social environments, psychological vulnerability, and the failure of institutional support systems. By examining the

protagonist's journey through a multidisciplinary lens, this study aims to underscore the importance of empathetic and responsive mental health interventions for adolescents. Moreover, it aspires to contribute to ongoing discussions on how literature can inform, shape, and advocate for adolescent mental health awareness and reform.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individual development particularly during adolescence is shaped by multiple layers of environmental influence. Bronfenbrenner proposed that psychological and behavioral outcomes are not only determined by internal dispositions but are also deeply embedded in complex and dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments. His model consists of five interrelated systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem each contributing in unique ways to psychological development and vulnerability to trauma (Zhong et al., 2024).

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the protagonist journey can be understood through this ecological lens. Her microsystem which includes her immediate relationships at home and school fails to provide emotional safety and security. Within her school environment, Hannah faces persistent bullying, sexual harassment, and social exclusion, while her family offers minimal emotional connection or open communication. These environments, which should ideally serve as buffers against external stressors, instead become sources of additional emotional harm. The mesosystem, or the interaction between her microsystems (e.g., school and family), is largely absent. There is no evidence of coordinated adult concern or intervention that might have mitigated her worsening mental health.

The exosystem structures that do not directly involve her but still affect her also plays a detrimental role. Institutional policies, the inaction of school authorities, and the influence of social media culture intensify her emotional distress. The rapid circulation of inappropriate images and lack of protective policies expose her to public shaming and social ostracism. At the macrosystem level, larger cultural norms particularly the objectification of young women and the normalization of victim-blaming amplify her feelings of powerlessness and self-blame. Finally, the chronosystem accounts for the accumulation of traumatic experiences over a relatively short period. The lack of timely support and repeated invalidation of her emotions accelerate her psychological collapse.

Recent psychological literature supports the idea that complex trauma, defined as exposure to multiple, prolonged, and invasive traumatic events, often arises within unsupportive or dysfunctional systems. Kazlauskas et al. (2024) demonstrate that adolescents who experience chronic trauma are more likely to develop serious emotional regulation problems, identity confusion, and social withdrawal. These outcomes are often rooted in environmental failures across various systems, particularly when caregivers and institutions do not respond effectively to signs of psychological distress (Kazlauskas et al., 2024). Similarly, Sanders et al. (2024) emphasize that the absence of trauma-informed approaches in schools combined with ineffective counseling and disciplinary policies leads to the escalation of emotional harm in already vulnerable youth (Sanders et al., 2024).

By employing Bronfenbrenner's theory, this study reframes the main character's experiences not simply as a personal mental health struggle but as the outcome of systemic and intersecting ecological breakdowns. Each layer of her social world contributes to a cumulative trauma that is never properly addressed or interrupted. The novel, while fictional, mirrors real-life failures in addressing adolescent trauma. It underscores how schools, families, and communities often overlook the signs of distress until it is too late. As such, *Thirteen Reasons Why* serves not only as a compelling narrative but also as a critique of the societal neglect that underpins adolescent mental health crises.

This theoretical approach also responds to a gap in the literature: while many studies examine trauma in clinical or developmental terms, few explore how trauma is represented and critiqued through literature, particularly using ecological models. This study contributes to that gap by applying Bronfenbrenner's framework to a literary text to deepen understanding of how adolescent trauma operates within and is exacerbated by failures in environmental systems.

### **3. METHODS**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, using psychological literary analysis as the primary method. The objective is to explore the psychological dimensions of adolescent trauma as reflected on the main character in *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. Rather than treating the novel as mere fiction, this study considers it as a reflective medium through which real-life adolescent struggles such as isolation, systemic neglect, and cumulative trauma are represented and examined.

This study employs a descriptive-analytical design that emphasizes depth of understanding over generalization. The research subject is not a human participant, but the fictional character in the novel, analyzed through purposeful sampling. This sampling method

is widely used in qualitative and interpretive literary research, where subjects are selected based on their symbolic and thematic relevance to the study (Cruz et al., 2022). The main character's experiences represent broader patterns of psychological deterioration in adolescents exposed to cumulative environmental and social trauma.

She is studied as a case reflecting multiple layers of psychosocial stress, including bullying, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, social alienation, and failure of institutional support. Her character arc moving from isolation to emotional collapse embodies the core psychological crisis this research seeks to analyze.

Since this is a literary study, the data source is textual, drawn directly from the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The research instrument is a non-standardized textual analysis framework developed by the researcher. This framework is organized around key emotional and behavioral indicators such as helplessness, fear, shame, emotional withdrawal, and suicidal ideation. The framework is aligned with Bronfenbrenner's five environmental systems microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem and with the classifications of trauma (emotional, psychological, and social).

To maintain validity, the coding structure and thematic categories are cross-referenced with established trauma literature, including the works of (Ahmed, 2024) and (Charles, 2023). Reliability is ensured through repeated readings of the text, consistent theme tracking, and peer debriefing, where interpretations are discussed and revised with other readers to reduce personal bias and enhance objectivity.

The study utilizes a qualitative content analysis model as described by (Mcgill et al., 2023). The process unfolds in the following stages:

- a. Close reading of the entire novel to identify emotionally significant episodes.
- b. Open coding, where initial codes are assigned to patterns of behavior and emotion expressed by the character.
- c. Categorization, where codes are grouped into major trauma categories (emotional abuse, social exclusion, institutional failure).
- d. Thematic interpretation, linking categories to psychological responses (e.g., dissociation, hopelessness, withdrawal) and environmental sources using Bronfenbrenner's EST.
- e. Synthesis of results into broader thematic constructs that connect the fictional case to real-world adolescent trauma patterns.

The interpretive framework enables an in-depth understanding of how trauma develops when multiple social systems fail simultaneously. The character's psychological arc is interpreted within the sociocultural and psychological context, aiming to demonstrate how literature can serve as both a mirror and a critique of adolescent mental health crises.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter discusses the results of a qualitative psychological-literary analysis on *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research identifies environmental factors contributing to the protagonist's complex trauma. Each layer of Hannah Baker's environment is critically analyzed to understand how external failures across family, peers, institutions, and society culminate in psychological collapse. The analysis integrates novel evidence with current trauma psychology literature.

##### **Microsystem: The Breakdown of Direct Relationships**

The microsystem refers to Hannah's immediate environment, particularly interactions with friends, classmates, and school staff. These are the most direct and frequent relationships in her daily life.

Hannah's interactions with her peers begin with trust, especially with her then-boyfriend Justin Foley. However, that trust is shattered when Justin spreads a misleading rumor about a physical encounter. The false narrative paints Hannah as promiscuous, triggering a chain reaction of slut-shaming and objectification by other students. This leads to her being listed in Alex Standall's "Who's Hot/Who's Not" game, where she is sexualized as having the "Best Ass in the Freshman Class." Jessica Davis, her former close friend, believes the rumors and violently distances herself. These experiences isolate Hannah and create an unsafe emotional atmosphere in what should be her supportive microsystem.

This toxic relational dynamic exemplifies a malfunctioning microsystem as defined by Bronfenbrenner where relationships that should nurture instead contribute to psychological damage (Mckim, 2023). Instead of receiving validation or protection, Hannah is exposed to ridicule, exclusion, and character assassination.

Furthermore, Mr. Porter, the school counselor, plays a critical role. When Hannah finally seeks help, disclosing that she has been raped, Mr. Porter responds with apathy, tells her to "move on," and fails to escalate the issue. His passive response violates the fundamental protective role of adults within a student's microsystem. Research by (Rosell-bellot et al., 2025) highlights that adolescents who feel dismissed by authority figures are more likely to internalize trauma and develop long-term emotional dysfunctions.

*“Adolescents rely on adults to validate their emotional pain. When that validation is absent, trauma becomes internalized, distorted, and more damaging.”* ((Rosell-bellot et al., 2025)

Thus, Hannah’s microsystem becomes a primary source of trauma not through a single traumatic event but through accumulated microaggressions, betrayals, and institutional neglect.

### **Mesosystem: The Disconnection Between Systems**

The mesosystem represents the connections between the various elements of Hannah’s microsystem especially between her home life and school environment.

Hannah’s parents are preoccupied with financial stress and are emotionally distant. They remain unaware of her deteriorating emotional state and do not notice warning signs such as skipped meals, social withdrawal, or depressive behaviors. Meanwhile, her school fails to inform them of these signs, despite repeated incidents e.g., Hannah skipping classes, being harassed, and declining academically.

This lack of communication reflects a disconnected mesosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner, healthy adolescent development relies on consistent collaboration between significant institutions such as school and home (Amari & Mahoney, 2021). In Hannah’s case, the absence of communication leads to systemic neglect, wherein no adult intervenes or coordinates care.

Moreover, the peer-school interaction reflects destructive synergy. Peer norms at Liberty High School gossip, hierarchy, and sexualization are not challenged by school authorities. Instead, these harmful norms are normalized, even entertained. Teachers remain passive observers, allowing students to circulate false stories without reprimand.

*“When institutional culture fails to interrupt peer aggression, it becomes complicit in the creation of psychological harm.”* (Downey & Crummy, 2022)

This convergence of harmful peer culture and passive school oversight intensifies Hannah’s trauma, showing how mesosystem failures can multiply the emotional burden when protective systems do not interconnect.

### **Exosystem: The Institutional and Societal Blind Spot**

The exosystem includes systems that indirectly affect Hannah but still hold significant power such as school policies, access to mental health resources, and broader community support structures.

One of the most damaging aspects of Hannah’s exosystem is the absence of structured intervention mechanisms. Liberty High lacks trauma-informed policy, anti-bullying education,

or crisis response teams. When rumors about Hannah become widespread, there is no institutional response. Teachers, administrators, and staff witness her decline, yet no one acts.

During her final conversation with Mr. Porter, Hannah's disclosure of rape and suicidal ideation should have triggered a mandatory reporting protocol, psychological referral, or at least a wellness check. Instead, the counselor offers her no options but to "move on" or confront the rapist alone. This echoes real-world educational environments where adolescent mental health crises are dismissed due to lack of training or systemic structure (Enworo, 2023).

Additionally, the legal system and community protections are completely absent. Hannah never reports the rape, likely due to internalized shame and a lack of trust in institutions. The exosystem's failure thus compounds her trauma, reinforcing a narrative that "no one will help", a common belief among adolescents in crisis (Olf et al., 2025).

### **Macrosystem: Toxic Cultural Scripts and Gendered Oppression**

The macrosystem consists of overarching cultural and ideological structures. In Hannah's environment, the prevailing macrosystem promotes toxic masculinity, victim-blaming, and sexual double standards.

Culturally, Hannah is punished for expressing normal teenage emotions and relationships. While boys are praised for sexual conquests, Hannah is humiliated for being "easy." Her social identity becomes defined not by her character, but by the rumors that circulate many of which are rooted in deeply patriarchal, misogynistic norms.

This reflects the broader cultural belief that female worth is tied to sexual reputation, and that girls who challenge this narrative must be silenced or ridiculed. As (Ahmed, 2024) emphasize, macrosystems that normalize sexual objectification contribute to long-term emotional harm in adolescents.

*"Cultural silence on gendered bullying and harassment allows these behaviors to flourish unchecked, reinforcing emotional alienation in adolescent girls."* (Charles, 2023)

The novel illustrates how such macrosystem forces not only shape Hannah's external treatment but also her internalized shame and loss of identity.

### **Chronosystem: The Cumulative Weight of Untreated Trauma**

The chronosystem reflects the dimension of time how events, transitions, and patterns across a person's life influence their development.



In Hannah's case, her trauma is not caused by a single incident, but by the gradual accumulation of emotional injuries: betrayal, isolation, violence, institutional neglect. This timeline, which spans a single school year, demonstrates how unresolved trauma compounds, eventually breaking her psychological resilience.

She is given no time to recover from one incident before another emerges. The rapid sequence rumors, violence, rape, dismissal leads to cognitive overload, emotional shutdown, and eventually, suicide. As (Mcgill et al., 2023) explain, complex trauma often results from repeated exposures to distressing experiences without space to process or recover.

*"Trauma becomes complex when the individual is continually retraumatized, with no system of healing in place."* (Mckim, 2023)

The chronosystem analysis reveals that time itself becomes an adversary with each week bringing Hannah closer to emotional collapse, and no meaningful intervention to break the cycle.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that adolescent trauma, as illustrated in Thirteen Reasons Why, is not merely an individual psychological issue but the consequence of multi-layered environmental failures. Through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the findings demonstrate that each system microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem contributed cumulatively to the protagonist's emotional deterioration. At the microsystem level, the betrayal and neglect by peers and school staff failed to provide the immediate emotional security Hannah Baker needed. The disconnected mesosystem evident in the absence of communication between school and family worsened her sense of isolation. The exosystem's failure to implement institutional support systems such as mental health protocols or anti-bullying policies contributed to an unsafe school environment. The macrosystem embedded societal norms that normalized sexual objectification and victim-blaming, amplifying internalized shame and worthlessness. Finally, the chronosystem reveals how unaddressed trauma, accumulated over time without intervention, led to Hannah's irreversible psychological collapse.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that educational institutions implement trauma-informed approaches that emphasize early detection, supportive adult engagement, and inter-system collaboration. Schools should also actively work to dismantle toxic cultural scripts through inclusive and anti-misogynistic education. Mental health services must be integrated

more effectively within school environments, ensuring adolescents can access empathetic, trained professionals. This study is limited by its reliance on a single fictional narrative; thus, caution is needed in generalizing the findings to all adolescents. Future research should consider comparative analyses of multiple narratives or empirical case studies involving real-life adolescent trauma to validate and expand the interpretations presented here. Nonetheless, literary texts remain a powerful lens through which social, psychological, and institutional failures can be critically examined.

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