

## How Death in Young Adult Literature Can Teach Us to Live

The value of stories is difficult to measure; in the in the contested realm of literary value, quantities fall short in measuring the quality of a piece. As cliché as the statement is, sometimes questions are more important than answers, and when looking for quality pieces of Young Adult fiction (YA), the questions that the book stimulates within its readers can be very influential in young adults' development of identity and their concepts of the world around them. Two of the most popular YA books in the recent years have been Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) and John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005). Though both books are at least a decade old, they have both remained significant and popular with the critical reception of the recent television adaptation of *Thirteen Reasons Why* and with *Looking for Alaska* being implemented in some school curriculums. The deaths of Hannah Baker and Alaska Young, the main female characters in these stories, communicate larger messages about how to live; through Miles' process of searching for existential answers in the absence of certainty, *Looking for Alaska* suggests that readers should engage in the same exploration. Through Clay's realization that he and Hannah Baker will never have closure, *Thirteen Reasons Why* suggests the importance of being an active participant in life because "everything affects everything."

### **WHY YA?**

Well-written YA literature often acts as the medium between juvenile literature and the university focus on canonical readings, providing a medium through which young adults can process transcending aspects of life on a challenging, yet relatable level. The breadth and complexity of themes do not distinguish the YA novel from adult fiction; rather, it is the niche voice of the speaker that does. I define YA fiction similarly to David Belbin, Senior Lecturer in

English at Nottingham Trent University: “if it’s narrated through a young adult consciousness – even if the narrator is sophisticated, or unreliable – then it’s a Young Adult novel” (Belbin 141). Further, YA literature often contains recognizable characteristics beyond a teenage protagonist, namely “the plot does not have a typical happy ending, and the content is typically a coming of age story” (Cole 49).

YA literature is fairly new, which warrants its exploration. As adolescents and teens explore the ideas presented in the texts, they also are constructing their identity (Kokesh & Sternadori 114). Selecting YA literature for students is a massive responsibility, and the works that young adults are being exposed to should be analyzed for both their value-- what they can do to positively inform the identity and perspective of young people- and literary merit-- to what extent do they accomplish this goal with skill, nuance, and craftsmanship so that students transition into being able to better access traditional adult literature. As a category, YA literature “was only separated from children’s literature in 1957, so it has not yet had time to establish its literary merit among generations of critics” (Rybakova & Roccanti 32). Perhaps one of the main reasons for its lack of association with adult literature is its connection to children's literature. I’m not saying that YA literature and adult literature should be considered the same, rather, that YA literature is just as important in its own right.

In order to explore popular contemporary literature for its value in shaping young adults’ identities, YA literature should at least be considered just as valuable as adult literature. The field has yet to be as extensively explored as classic literature, though the field of secondary education has necessarily been keeping up with YA literature for its value in schools. Treating YA literature as subordinate to traditional adult literature is a disservice to students and adults alike.

The audience is younger, but the content within YA literature is often just as controversial and realistic as adult literature. Increasingly, YA books have been banned in school districts because of sexual content and language, (Goodreads, 2015) as well as challenging authority, violence, and bullying. However, this is not a discussion about whether or not these books should or should not be banned; students will read them anyway. This is an analysis of the merit of two particular books that show protagonists in the process of choosing values that will come to define them.

One way that YA literature is distinct from children's literature is its inclusion of death. In many modern works of YA Literature, death is used as a catalyst to drive the plot. In these works, death is pertinent to all readers, not just the ones who happen to be dealing with death themselves: the proportion of teens experiencing death is a minority, but the prominence of death in YA literature is uncanny. It has to have a deeper purpose, but a close analysis of the characteristics Hannah Baker's and Alaska's deaths on their own would be too narrow a focus; their deaths would just be plot events in fiction novels. Rather, their deaths must mean something. The presence of death in Green and Asher's novels is not coincidence: indeed, death is "the defining factor that distinguishes [YA literature] both from children's and adult literature." (Trites qtd. in James 3) A couple of examples of death in other prominent YA literature include *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, where the climax is finally set in motion once his sister dies, and in *The Book Thief*, in which death itself is the narrator. Between *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Looking for Alaska*, Hannah Baker's and Alaska Young's deaths play similar roles, (though these roles go beyond being mere plot devices) which makes a comparison of the differences between how the characters react to death worthwhile.

Fitting with the niche age range that YA literature is written for, this group of readers has specific interests developmentally that might draw them to read YA literature. Given the preponderance of death in YA fiction, *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Looking for Alaska* are both reliable examples to analyze. Both works have won numerous awards and hold their own in YA literature. *Looking for Alaska* has won the Michael L. Printz award, which is a yearly award given to the best YA book published. *Thirteen Reasons Why* has been recognized by numerous organizations, libraries and states as one of the best YA books recently written, and spent 42 weeks on the New York Times Best Sellers list. The books are very similar, focusing on the death of a troubled female character as the driving force behind the subsequent journey of self-discovery of a male protagonist who was in love with her. The books explore similar themes as well: how someone can live on in people's minds after dying, how to deal with not just the grief of losing a loved one, but how to act when faced with trials and how to forgive. Most importantly, the books show how to live.

### **MILES AND CLAY**

Both books have similar characters, beginning with Miles Halter, the protagonist of *Looking for Alaska*, and Clay Jensen, the protagonist of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Miles and Clay are portrayed as similar high school boys: both reserved, distant, insecure, and awkward. Both boys keep to themselves and appear to be introverts. Our first impression of Miles is that he is the single child of two parents, neither of whom have a complete picture of who he is. He is forced to invite his friends to his going away party (Green 1), showing that because of his lack of interest in seeing people before he leaves, he is not only socially distant from his peers, but his mother doesn't understand him; she is "awash in the delusion that [Miles] had kept his popularity

secret from her all those years” (1). This doesn't mean that the relationship isn't loving, however. They trust Miles, are present as much as they can be, and are understanding. After nearly nobody shows up to his going away party, his mother and father ask why he wants to leave for Culver Creek Boarding School, to which he responds, “I’m going to seek a Great Perhaps” (5), and they embrace on the couch. His relationship with his parents seems strong, and he knows he is loved (6). The philosophical tone of this statement, seen in the choices of words like “seek” and “perhaps” also suggests that Miles will take seriously the nature of human existence.

Clay has a similar relationship with his mother. His mother seeks a relationship with him, and there is a clear trust between them as shown when Clay first listens to the tapes that he received from Hannah Baker, his friend and crush who committed suicide just weeks earlier. His mother startles him while he listens and asks what he is playing. He responds with a “school project” (Asher 8) and explains that he uses the excuse often, and that it works. She kisses him on the forehead and leaves (9). This short interaction conveys the delicate balance of love and distance that many adolescents experience with their parents. Later in the book when speaking to his mother on the phone, Clay mentions that she still makes him sandwiches for lunch, and that “she says it reminds her of when I was younger and needed her” (137). This signifies the natural separation from parents that comes with adolescence and the development of individual identity. Clay has the impression that he is independent while he is also living in his parents’ home. He loves his mother and doesn’t mind her presence (151), but only on his own time.

Regardless of an adolescent’s parental status in relation to Clay and Miles, it is likely that they resonate with the idea that they, like the two boys, can’t confide in an adult, even if they have support. According to *Understanding and Supporting Grieving Adolescents and Young*

*Adults*, “the most important influences in the life of an adolescent are his or her peer group and social relationships. Peer influence can be both good and bad. Adolescents will often tell their peers things they would never tell an adult, even a trusted adult” (Palmer et. al 276). Both authors offer realistic portrayals of parental relationships; both Clay and Miles have parents present, but still seek counsel elsewhere. For Clay, his counsel comes from Tony, and Miles forms friendships at his new school with Alaska, Colonel, and Takumi.

Miles and Clay are portrayed as being similar in demeanor. Both are timid compared to the female love interests, which leaves them particularly vulnerable when the deaths occur. This will force them into a more fragile state, in need of answers about how to live as a response. Miles is skinny and unimposing: near the beginning of the book, we see his physical insecurity when he looks in the mirror at his boarding school: “My skinniness always surprised me: my thin arms didn’t seem to get much bigger as they moved from wrist to shoulder, my chest lacked any hint of either fat or muscle, and I felt embarrassed...” (Green 9). His embarrassment about his physical stature is congruent with his awkward and insecure nature, and is why he is given the playful nickname “Pudge”. Compared to Alaska, he thinks he is uninteresting and inadequate. In contrast with her beauty, he sees himself as gawky. He sees her as active and exciting, like a downpour. He, on the other hand, is a “drizzle...” (Green 88). Green uses Miles’ awkwardness to emphasize his passive nature. Miles’ lack of confidence creates a vacuum for characters like Alaska to take him by the hand; his passiveness allows for the development of other characters around him. Miles clearly isn’t physically unattractive, however, as he is described as being “cute” (Green 21) by Alaska. Although it’s partially patronizing, seeing how Alaska continually

takes interest in him and pursues him physically throughout the novel, I'm led to believe that she does find him attractive, regardless of other motivations she might have for pursuing him.

Similar to Miles, Clay also has a similar timid nature, especially around Hannah Baker. When describing an encounter with Hannah Baker at Kat's party, Clay explains that, "around the opposite sex, especially back then, [his] tongue twisted into knots even a Boy Scout would walk away from" (Asher 17). This plays nicely into the events that unfold later that night, as Hannah Baker has to initiate conversation and physical intimacy with him. Clay, like Miles, is also somewhat of a loner by choice. Hannah Baker describes this, joking in her tape: "Clay Jensen at a party? Unheard of" (203). Clay gives us background saying, "I study on the weekends," which highlights that he isn't excluded, but prioritizes academics. Clay doesn't normally seek social interaction; it takes Hannah Baker to bring him out of his shell. Her action meshes with his inaction, and his inaction at the critical moment when Hannah Baker pushes him away is ultimately why he is so distraught by listening to the tapes.

This relational dynamic is also seen in the juxtaposition of Alaska's dominance and Miles' subservient nature when it comes to romance. After Miles makes a self-deprecating joke about being single, Alaska takes the initiative to get him "laid" (Green 21). As sign of the protagonists' passiveness, both authors emphasize the leading female characters initiate physical intimacy. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles has to be prompted by Alaska to touch Lara (Green 51) and later Lara is the one who asks him "have you ever gotten blowjob?" (Green 126) Clay mirrors this type of behavior as well, as Hannah Baker is the one to initiate the kiss during "their night" (Asher 213). Despite being the protagonist, Clay is a somewhat forgettable character, though it has less to do with physical appearance than it does social awkwardness. Clay doesn't

get much physical description at all, which conveys a sort of average perception of him. At the very least, we know that Hannah Baker finds him attractive. Hannah Baker mentions that Clay looks at her “with the cutest, littlest, boyish smirk” (Asher 213) as she kisses him.

This description of both boys allows for the female characters to lead them through the stories. In Miles’s case, Alaska introduces him to the school, gets him started smoking, shows him porn, gets him drunk, and creates an adventure for him at his new school. Miles doesn’t seek adventure; it finds him. Alaska starts the journey for Miles, but after she dies, Miles takes the initiative to search for the meaning of her death in her absence. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Clay’s loner personality makes it believable that he would stay up all night to listen to the tapes given to him, narrated by the now dead Hannah Baker. The story centers around him being told what has already transpired-- his character basically just experiences the world moving around him-- the only actions he takes involve following instructions given to him. Similar to Miles, this is significant because it sets a precedent that takes effort to be broken. It’s realistic in the fact that the boys don’t find it easy to take action following the deaths of Hannah Baker and Alaska Young.

## **HANNAH BAKER & ALASKA YOUNG**

Hannah Baker’s and Alaska Young’s deaths are the driving force behind the protagonists’ journeys of self discovery in both books, but this is not the only thing they have in common. For example, both girls are love interests for the male characters, and are seen by those around them as promiscuous, whether or not this is actually true. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker exerts control over her environment by using confessional tapes to tell people why they are one of her 13 reasons for committing suicide. Hannah Baker’s life, like Alaska’s could be



characterized by her losing control of the world around her. This begins with the rumors of her and Justin at the park, and the basis of rumors of her promiscuity; the innocent story of their first kiss became a well known rumor, ruinous to her reputation, that she couldn't do anything about. Clay says that "she was so new to school that the rumors overshadowed everything else I knew about her" (31). The stories build upon each other. Hannah is sexualized, left by her friends, and stalked. At this point, she acknowledges that she felt helpless: she says, "will I ever get control of my life?" The way that Hannah Baker copes with this is by creating a set of tapes that the listeners are coerced into listening and keeping secret. She seeks to set the facts straight, albeit after she is dead. She assumes that with the release of the tapes, everything will feel final, or justified; lessons will have been learned from her tragedy. But it doesn't work this way for either of them. Hannah Baker's death, rather than answering questions, leaves loose ends. This is the foundation of Clay's search for meaning; by listening to the tapes, he begins his search on his own.

Miles is immediately attracted to Alaska when he sees her, saying: the hottest girl in human history was standing before me" and then Alaska begins to talk about how a male friend "[honked] her boob" (Green 15). Thus, our first impression of Alaska is confined to her being seen as a sex object. When her male friend who she "has been friends" (15) with since they were kids grabs her sexually without consent, she shakes it off. While this could be some sort of coping mechanism, it could also be seen as a sign that it didn't surprise her, which is consistent with the reputation she has that is revealed to us a bit later. She is very candid about sexual topics, much more than Miles. She says to Miles, "Jake is hung like a horse and a beautiful, sensual lover" (63) While Miles, Alaska and Jake are together. This is beyond forward, to the

point of being uncomfortable; it's more information than anyone needs to know. We see that her character's link to sex is also a reputation she's developed as mentioned by the Colonel when he is talking about a player on the basketball team. He says, "he loves weed like Alaska loves sex" (46); this use of simile points to the fact that sex is part of her identity. This is not a slight on her character; this representation of Alaska raises a question of more external significance. Why is she portrayed this way? It could be to show the motivations of Miles, as he thinks about both of them being intimate nearly the entire first half of the book. Alaska is confusing because Miles loves her, but the reader doesn't necessarily like her. On top of her immaturity, she is hard to read: she says she loves her boyfriend, and proceeds to flirt with Miles (21). In a sort of dramatic irony, the reader can see that Miles is in love with her, while she uses physicality to keep him close. When she and Miles are alone over Thanksgiving break, the two sit close together, and she puts her hand above his knee "making slow, lazy circles that crept toward the inside of [his] thigh." Alaska initiates this, and Miles immediately begins to fantasize about her. He thinks, "God, I wanted her." (81)

Her need to be in control is an important detail for analyzing how Miles and the Colonel process her death. We see this through patterns in her dialogue, as well as her reaction to Miles actually liking Lara. For example, when he tries to walk by her at the basketball game to get to Lara, she "[shoots] him a look" and guilts him into sitting next to her instead. When she calls Miles "sweetie," he makes this important observation as well; he says that it "felt condescending, not romantic, like a boy enduring his first biblical rainstorm couldn't possibly understand her problems" (68). This all comes to a head two days before Alaska dies. As Miles and his friends camp out for the night after pranking the school headmaster, Alaska suggests they play a game

called “Best Day/Worst Day”, which sets the stage for her to take control of the situation, knowing that she has a tragic story to tell to top all of the others’ worst days. If we aren’t sure of her motivations after she explains the rules, it becomes clear that she had planned it after she gives a vague explanation of her best day (115) and reintroduces the story before Miles shares his worst day. She describes in detail how her mother choked and died in front of her as a child, and she did nothing to help (119). This is not evidence of her selfishness. In fact, I hypothesize, like Miles, that her outburst was not a cry for attention, but for help. After that tragic day, she “became impulsive, scared by her inaction into perpetual action” (121). Alaska had to be in control to remedy her paralyzing fear of not being in charge like the day her mother died, Miles becoming her main crutch. Later the next day, after Miles and Lara experiment with foreplay, Alaska breaks from knowing he might not need her and dares Miles to hook up with her. When Miles brings up their significant others, she shushes him and their makeout session gets more intense. After she falls asleep suddenly, Miles finally says to her “I love you, Alaska Young” (131) but never hears an answer back, and never will. Alaska dies early that morning in a car crash. She lived wild and reckless, and she died wild and reckless. She was a mystery, as Alaska once said: “You’ll never get me. That’s the whole point” (54) and her death remains the same because of the odd circumstances of the crash. Because of this, Miles is forced to answer the question that Alaska asked herself in her journal: “how will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?” (158) Miles is thrust into a search for meaning that he wouldn't have had to confront without her death, just as Clay searches for meaning after Hannah Baker’s death.

## **IMPORTANCE OF DEATH**

To understand the implications of death in both works, one has to understand the circumstances of the deaths themselves. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the death of Hannah Baker occurs prior to the first page. Clay, when first listening to the tapes, says “I can’t believe it. Hannah Baker killed herself.” (Asher 7) From the start, it’s clear that Hannah Baker has been gone long enough that things seem back to normal. There is no discussion about wakes or funerals, and nobody brings her up in conversation other than Tony, who is referencing the tapes, and Marcus, who doesn’t seem bothered by Hannah Baker’s death as much as he does about the tapes themselves. We don’t get a picture of grief or mourning on a community level. Clay is forced to deal with it on his own. Along with this, her suicide happened prior to the narration of the book. It’s only at the end of the novel that we can guess how long ago the death happened, as Clay says her desk was “empty for two weeks and for the rest of the year.” (287) This is significant, because from the start we know that Hannah Baker committed suicide. No matter what we learn about her through the tapes, our understanding of who she is is also shaped by the fact that she is permanently gone.

However, the dual narrative nature of the book (Hannah Baker’s narration of her tapes and Clay’s recounting of his reactions to the tapes), makes it seem like Clay is actually interacting with Hannah. In fact, he often speaks to the tapes, creating what seems like an active dialogue. Clay asks her questions, and uses the second person to address Hannah. One example of this is when Hannah admits to doing surveys in teen magazines. She says, “fine, some of the hair and makeup tips were helpful.” To which Clay responds, “You wore makeup?” (120) This interaction, like many others in the book, suspends the reader’s disbelief. In this moment, Hannah Baker is just as alive as she was before committing suicide. Most often, when a person

decides to end their life, they don't leave a note or video behind. In fact, more than two-thirds of those who commit suicide leave no note behind (Callahan & Davis). This interaction allows readers to live out two fantasies: Being able to speak to the dead, and leaving a legacy following one's death. Because of the tapes, it nearly seems like Hannah Baker is alive. This is no accident. The first time that Hannah Baker speaks, Asher brilliantly uses a double entendre to make her come to life; on the first tape, Hannah Baker comes in saying, "Hello boys and girls, Hannah Baker here. Live and in stereo." (7) By saying "live" Asher creates a situation where we have to grapple, along with Clay, with the conflicting nature of listening to the live voice of someone who is no longer living. This method of writing also gives the reader insight into Clay's conscience; as Clay describes what he experiences play-by-play, Asher moves Clay and the reader toward an ending that suggests what death can teach us about how to treat others.

The circumstances of Alaska's death are much different because first, it comes as a surprise, and second, the reader never truly knows what happened to her. This difference contributes to a more realistic journey for Miles, and sets him up for an exploration that engages with existential ideas; as he grieves, he also searches for answers. Alaska's death was extremely sudden. Between the last time Miles saw her and her death, the sun hadn't even risen. The sudden nature of her death is highlighted by her panic before tearing off in her car. The boys wake up to her screaming, "I JUST HAVE TO GO. HELP ME GET OUT OF HERE!" (Green 132) and they do. Her death is imminent, which can be told through the subtle foreshadowing Green adds to Miles' dialogue. Miles says that when he and Colonel said "okay," they were both "equal in [their] guilt" (132). Similarly, we see his hindsight bias when Miles brings up what they did not say, which is not only out of place because of the oddity of bringing up something

that they did not do, but also because the hypothetical “should have” conversations are in italics. Miles says, “we did not say: *Don't drive. You're drunk.* We did not say: *We aren't letting you in that car when you are upset.*” This imaginary dialogue is similar to the way that Clay reacts to Hannah Baker in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The thoughts represent the regret that Alaska is gone, and they might have been able to prevent that. We also see that these italicized thoughts aren't in the moment because he inserts sentimentality into them as well. He thinks, “this can wait until tomorrow. Anything-- everything-- can wait” (132).

We only learn at the end of the novel that Alaska was going to put flowers on her mother's grave for the anniversary of her death when she drove unswervingly into a well-lit police cruiser, (217) but knowing that she was going to her mother's grave this still doesn't reveal to us whether or not her death was purposeful. Prior to Alaska's death, there are many signs that Alaska was troubled, but she didn't display all of the warning signs that come before a suicide. Miles and the Colonel look up the warning signs of suicide, and they find that Alaska only “displayed two of those warning signs.” this is in contrast to Hannah Baker, whose death was full of imminent signs. Miles and the Colonel observe that “She had lost, although not recently, her mother. And her drinking, always pretty steady, had definitely increased in the last month of her life. She did talk about dying, but she always seemed to be at least half kidding” (166). This brings us back to when we first met Alaska, and she grinned to Miles and said, “Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die” (44). It's little hints like these that build Alaska into a sort of human symbol. Alaska is reckless, she is stubborn, she is mysterious, and she is dead. Her character was never meant to make it to the end of the book. Alaska drives the plot because in the first half of the novel, she is a living mystery. Then, in the second half of the book, she

“collapse[s] into the enigma of herself,” (219) leaving the boys trying to wrap their minds around what to do now that she is gone. Following her death, her mystery takes up a new form that will force Miles to face the difficult questions that she never answered, and engage with life in a new way.

## **PURPOSE OF DEATH**

While the circumstances of the deaths in both works are significant, within *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Looking for Alaska*, death is most importantly used as a catalyst for the protagonists to go on their own journey of self discovery, ultimately creating a moral for the reader. With the circumstances of Hannah Baker’s death in *Thirteen Reasons Why* being mostly known other than *how* she did it, the biggest question driving Clay (and the reader) is what reason did he contribute to Hannah’s suicidal decision? Clay is curious, but the natural consequence of the plot (Clay being told what happened) is that for nearly the entire book, Clay is passive. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles and the Colonel have to search for the answers, never receiving the same level of closure as Clay, and have to move forward despite this. This lack of closure is a distinction between the novels that significantly changes the messages they convey about what death can teach us about life.

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker reveals to Clay that he isn’t on the tapes for the same reasons as most of the other recipients, which is a huge relief for Clay, and also forces the reader to move forward with the tapes knowing now that Clay’s place in the tapes wasn’t as negative or damning as they may have initially thought, and that the driving question of *why Clay?* has less to do with what he did, and more with what he did not do. Clay’s tape is essentially a memoir of a party where Clay and Hannah make out, and she ends up pushing him

away, both physically and emotionally. But that isn't all: the tape also opens up a new kind of hurt that Clay has to reconcile- Hannah apologizes to him and he will never have the chance to tell her that he forgives her. The dual narrative as Hannah Baker describes the events that took place creates a sort of meta reading of the book; as she describes how she and Clay only made out at the end of the night. She says, "could you feel what I was going through, Clay? Did you sense it? You must have." Clay responds, revealing Hannah's irrationality and egocentric view of the situation: "No. You hid it. You never told me what it was, Hannah" (215). Of course, this is not a slight on Hannah's character. Rather, Clay's section of the book reveals a shift in how the reader sees Hannah Baker; while earlier in the novel it seemed like she was in control, and her seemingly stable nature throughout is slightly discomforting, now we see where her rationality breaks down, and she is just as vulnerable as any other character. Clay's response shows what the reader may be thinking; that she didn't see beyond her hurt-- she had just given up. In fact, at the end of Clay's chapter, Hannah hatches her plan, and Clay comes to the realization alongside the reader, that "[Hannah's] mind was set. No matter what you say your mind was set" (217). Clay starts to see how Hannah truly felt. Now we can move beyond the curiosity of why he was on the tapes, and look at how his place in the tapes reveals a larger argument about what his reaction to her death can point us to.

Clay listens to Hannah's tape in Tony's car, with whom Hannah entrusted the tapes, and immediately following the tape about himself, Clay starts to see Hannah in a new way; he moves beyond curiosity and into grief. Clay says, "I never really missed her until now" (218). and cries in front of Tony. So much of what Hannah Baker brought up in previous tapes created a sense of closure: she spoke with confidence and candor, even when she was wrong. For example, at the



end of the first cassette tape she assumes that everyone will attend her funeral. She says, “did you notice the scars you left behind? No. Probably not,” to which Clay responds, “because there was no funeral, Hannah” (68). Whether or not her plan played out exactly as she hoped, the way that she guides Clay up to his tape makes it feel as though she covered all of her bases. However following Clay’s tape, we now know it was a story of what could have been. By the end, Clay knows where, when, and how she committed suicide. Her life was over, but to Clay it feels like *they* were not. This begins to suggest something that *Looking For Alaska* also contains as a prominent theme; sometimes we don’t have the answers. Sometimes, we have to look elsewhere for closure and to give purpose to someone’s death.

In *Looking For Alaska*, the motivation behind the death of Alaska is much more uncertain. Rather than having a play-by-play narration of how it all went down with a detailed backstory of why it happened, Alaska dies suddenly and unexpectedly, shocking an entire community and throwing Miles and the Colonel into questions they hadn’t engaged with before. Before entertaining these questions, Miles goes through various stages of grief, creating a realistic progression of coping, and allowing for his recovery process to be both realistic and powerful. Miles first denies that she is dead, which is understandable because he had kissed her just hours before. He says, “She’s not dead. She’s alive somewhere” (141). Miles and the Colonel both blame themselves as well, which is not only apparent when Miles describes the last time they saw Alaska, and what he should have said (132), but when he says to himself, “I had killed her” (141). His thought process is not entirely rational, but feelings of guilt are commonly associated with grief. *Looking For Alaska* doesn’t explore how death can teach life in terms of black and white: there is not a concrete, nor easy way to deal with the death of a close friend. An

example of this is shown as Miles grapples with the idea that Alaska is really gone. He thinks: “this is the fear: that I have lost something important, and I cannot find it, but I need it” (144). Through this thought, Green uses Miles’s thoughts (shown in italics in the novel) to communicate directly to the reader. The fact that he “needs” her is incongruent with the fact that she is gone. This paradox goes beyond sadness- it’s more than just “feeling sick” like both Miles and Clay do- it journeys into difficult conversations and abstract ideas. This thought is an example of metacognition; Miles is engaging with questions he wouldn’t have encountered if it wasn’t for the death of Alaska.

### **LEARNING FROM DEATH**

Back in the car with Tony after his tape, Clay describes the feeling of missing her as being “so cold by itself, but warm when thoughts of her flow through me” (219). Though finally coming to terms with the fact that they would never be together, Clay doesn’t hide from the feelings he is experiencing. In fact, he openly cries in front of Tony, who “doesn’t classify as a close friend” (21). As mentioned earlier, Clay doesn’t include his parents in the process, which is consistent with adolescent and teen behavior. Rather than going to his parents, Tony is the only person who Clay confides in. Part of the reason why Clay confides in Tony is because Tony is the only other person who knows about Hannah’s tapes who wasn’t a perpetrator of Hannah Baker’s death. This is a strange decision on Asher’s part, because it makes it seem like Clay doesn’t have any kind of community support. With this in mind, it does make it easier for Asher to use Tony as a temporary mentor, and to use him as a means to explain how Hannah Baker accomplished making and distributing the tapes. When Tony speaks, the most important thing he shares besides the brief background on Hannah Baker is what might be the message *Thirteen*

*Reasons Why* attempts to communicate about what death can teach us: everyone has the ability to take action when someone is hurting. Tony says, “we’re all to blame ... at least a little” (233). Tony, beyond what he says, also communicates an important message about how to live: that it’s important to have, and be, a friend when experiencing difficulty. As Tony drives away, Clay says, “it feels good knowing someone understands what I’m listening to, what I’m going through. Somehow, it makes it less scary to keep listening” (239), which breaks from his conversation with Tony and with Hannah Baker. Clay is speaking to the reader now, like an aside. After Clay mentions it’s nice to have someone who knows what he is listening to, he applies the logic to a more universal scope so that the reader is able to see that Tony’s nonjudgemental presence, though limited, provided Clay with exactly what he needed.

A nearly identical conversation happens in *Looking for Alaska*. When Miles calls his parents his mother asks what they can do for him and he says, “I just needed you to pick up. I just needed you to answer the phone, and you did” (144). This is a powerful moment of connection between Miles and his parents. He doesn’t need them to answer the questions for him, or even give encouragement. Despite being hundreds of miles away, simply knowing that he has their support is enough. Both authors sought to show the importance of being present, and that sometimes there aren’t the right words to convey how to move forward. This is helpful for parents who seek to help their children cope with tragedy, but also for a wider audience. Though both have similar relationships with their parents, Miles differs from Clay when it comes to peer groups. Nearly everything that Miles does is on the presence of friends, whether it be pranks, smoking, class, traveling, or snooping around the school, Miles was never truly alone until the end the story. Of course, even in close living quarters, Miles had to have had alone time, but his

most important memories, marked by the beginning of each section, were stories of friendship and of knowing he wasn't alone. Green creates an implicit feeling that Miles, noticeably suffering, is in a comfortable and supported place as he processes Alaska's death. Even when Miles breaks down, or has a deep introspective moment, it is within the presence of his friends. This relational dynamic, while allowing for more dialogue and action on Green's part, also helps the reader feel less isolated. As Miles learns, grows, and processes in community, vicariously, so do we.

The portrayal of masculinity through Clay and Miles allow adolescents to connect to the emotional reality that they experience. In *Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction*, Bean and Harper discuss the significance of realistic and diverse male characters in YA literature. They write: "many of the boys mentioned that they wanted to read books which dealt realistically with relationships and problems they experienced in their daily lives" (Bean & Harper 17). Clay and Miles' characteristic similarities are extremely important when it comes to understanding how they react to the tragedies that they encounter. Though both male protagonists have relatable and similar personalities, each book portrays a different response to death, providing adolescents a way to process their own experiences vicariously. The display of the private world lets out the secret: boys hurt, boys cry, boys fear. In doing so, the novels acknowledge, and indeed insist upon, the full range of humanness of their male character (Bean & Harper 23).

### **CLAY FINDING HOW TO LIVE**

In both books, questions are raised that the protagonists wrestle with. These questions help reveal central motives of the books, and ultimately guide the reader to ask the same ones

themselves. In *13 Reasons Why* Clay thinks of the time he witnessed someone dying. He thinks of Hannah, and says, “those people standing around the car, trying to calm the driver, waiting for an ambulance to arrive, could they have done anything at all? Or the people who passed Hannah Baker in the halls, or sat beside her in class, what could they have done? Maybe then, like now, it was already too late” (Asher 87). His comparison is interesting; when thinking of death, it’s likely that the reader would most easily associate it with the image of a car crash that occurred in Asher’s novel. This question forces the reader to consider that dying isn’t always visible. This theme permeates the book as Clay listens to the tapes and he learns that Hannah Baker is slowly giving up on life. As she loses hope, Clay clearly notices: “I’m listening to someone give up. Someone I knew. Someone I liked. I’m listening. But still, I’m too late” (77). Notice the repetition of “too late.” It doesn’t matter how he answers this question in regards to Hannah Baker, but the question still has a more universal application. Though in context Clay is talking about Hannah Baker, the idea of being “too late” comes up several times later in the book as well, as Clay contemplates what he could have said while working with her (95) and at the party (112). The fact that Hannah Baker didn’t say anything, or actively cry for help bothers him, which prompts him to ask another question: “Why did you wait till now?” (112) Clay really couldn’t have done any more than he did that night to try and save Hannah Baker, because he had no idea that he needed to. The night of the party, Hannah pushed him away, and told him to leave. Clay, though he can’t do anything about it, is still haunted by the question that he believes she asks him posthumously: “Then why didn’t you try harder?” (79)

This question suggests to Clay that, as said by Hannah Baker, “everything affects everything” (201). This logic is what gives us insight into the mind of Hannah Baker before she

decides to end her life. At the beginning of several tapes, she mentions that their actions, no matter how small, contributed to her decision. For example, the first tape begins with: “it may seem like a small role now, but it matters. In the end, everything matters” (13), and for Courtney’s tape where she says, “that’s why I put you on these tapes. To let you know that what you do affects others. More specifically, it affected me” (96). Clay learns that his actions matter. Part of this takeaway is given to us by Tony, when he says, “we’re all to blame, at least a little” (233). Clay ultimately learns through a strange paradox that though he can't do anything now, and it wasn't really his fault, everyone is to blame. Small actions matter. Because of this, he also learns to be kind to others and to try harder. Clay’s passive characterization is crucial because when the moment comes that he can finally do something to help someone, he is faced with the challenge of overcoming himself to prevent someone else from potentially killing herself. The day after listening to the tapes he sees that Skye, a girl who he saw on the bus looks like Hannah did before she decided to kill herself. Clay makes a clear comparison between both of them: “Skye’s walking down the same stretch of hall where I watched Hannah slip away two weeks ago” (287). He looks at Hannah Baker’s desk and comments on the permanence of it, that it would be “empty for the rest of the year” (288). This is what drives him to do something about Skye. After listening to the many tapes telling him that if he had said or done something he could have prevented Hannah Baker’s death, he makes a decision to do something this time. So, Clay pushes past his nervousness and want to ignore it (287) and does something. Clay’s act of “hope” (288) is to walk up to her, and say her name. With that, the book ends.

After 280 pages of listening to tapes, Clay finally has the chance to actually take action. This is important because Clay getting one page at the end doesn't suggest as much about his

character as it does about communicating a message to the reader. One of these lessons that the book wishes to teach is that actions have consequences. This is both empowering and intimidating at the same time, because it is simultaneously a call to action, and a warning. The book spends most of its length being told as a warning, creating the impression through Hannah Baker's reasoning that she committed suicide because of the many stressors and trauma that she faced. Hannah emphasizes often that the little things matter, but within context, this could be easily misconstrued as her death being the fault of others. The book fails to consider that Hannah Baker may have had some sort of mental illness. In fact, in the whole book, there is no mention of depression or mental illness. None. The only time the book gets close is when discussing suicide in her peer communications class (153), which would have been an excellent time to incorporate the classroom setting to create a stronger meta-narrative. Rather, the book actually uses this class to solidify the narrative that if only her peers were more kind, she would not have ended her life. Hannah mentions that she left a note in her teacher's bag suggesting that she was thinking about suicide. The class begins a thin discussion that doesn't satisfy Hannah, in response to which she says, "maybe I wanted someone to point a finger at me and say, Hannah. Are you thinking about killing yourself? Please don't do that Hannah. Please?" (173). This thought is totally valid, but much of the book suggests that if someone had said something she wouldn't have killed herself, and that message is harmful. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, "Suicide is *not* the simple consequence of stressors or coping challenges, but rather, it is most typically a combined result of treatable mental illnesses and overwhelming or intolerable stressors" (Brock et.al 1). Asher's book, however, emphasizes the importance of the stressors, but minimizes the discussion about mental health.

It is of utmost importance that a young person displaying warning signs is listened to, and given help by a mental health professional. This, however, is not the primary purpose of the book. It is entirely unrealistic that if a student in a “peer communications class” brought up suicide, the teacher would leave the warning alone. Similarly, Hannah’s discussion with her counselor, Mr. Porter, at the end of the novel is infuriatingly inaccurate. Not only do a majority of high schools have trained school counselors (Bradley University), but most teachers are mandated reporters and are required to report if a student is suspected to be at risk for suicide (childwelfare.gov). Hannah Baker’s trauma should not be ignored, but it is overemphasized while the roles of her teachers and counselor are minimized. Ultimately though, this isn’t just a book about suicide. This is a book that, following Hannah’s death, teaches Clay how to live. Clay, in fear of someone dying again, now must live a life where he looks out for the hurting, as illustrated by him noticing and approaching Skye after she displayed similar signs to Hannah. *Thirteen Reasons Why* is a call to action, and it uses Hannah’s dialogue to give Clay a perspective that he never knew; it’s hard to know someone’s story, so be kind, and keep an eye out for those who might be hurting.

### **ANSWERING ALASKA’S QUESTION**

*Looking for Alaska* also contains questions that have to be reconciled, but it engages with them in a much deeper and more realistic way. The most prominent question, initially brought up by Alaska, is “how will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?” (Green 158) This question is intentionally transcendental: while it applies to Miles and his friends, it also is a question that the reader can apply to themselves. Green uses Dr. Hyde’s class as a means to communicate almost directly to the reader. As Dr. Hyde speaks, the reader has insight as to what



Green's purpose is in writing the book. In his first class, Dr. Hyde says, "we are engaged here in the most important pursuit in history: the search for meaning. What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person?" (33). Although death is a catalyst to Miles taking this question seriously, the reader is exposed to it early. This meta-narrative is apparent when Dr. Hyde says to Miles, "Be present in this class. And then, when it's over, be present out there" (50). Assuming the book is our class, this is a clear call to action, and Green is calling the audience to engage with hard questions both in the book and in life.

Initially, after Alaska's death Miles' biggest concern is grief, anger, and coping with the loss of his friend. But naturally, Miles has to move on; this is where *Looking for Alaska* digs deeper than *Thirteen Reasons Why*. One hundred eighteen days later, Miles says "I didn't know whether to feel angry at her for making me part of her suicide or just to feel angry at myself for letting her go" (212). Miles acknowledges that the process of moving on isn't easy, sometimes isn't intentional, and it happens at different times for people. In a symbolic final gesture, Miles and the Colonel plan to drive through the place where Alaska crashed her car. Takumi and Lara didn't come along because "they were tired of chasing ghosts" (212), illustrating the point that people move on at different paces. The boys speed by the scene, and "POOF we are through the moment of her death. We are driving through the place that she could not drive through, passing onto asphalt she never saw, and we are not dead" (213). This moment is powerful enough on its own, but it's even more significant when considering all of the times that "poof" was used throughout the book. "Poof" is used to represent the moment of Alaska's death several times, on pages 146, 190, and 211. Green also uses "poof" in another way; when describing a Buddhist Koan, he describes it as: "*poof* he reached enlightenment" (195). When the boys drive through

Alaska's place of death, they realize they are truly alive. Though Alaska's answer was to escape the labyrinth "straight and fast" (213), the boys end up in different places. In a powerful moment, Miles and the Colonel switch drivers, embrace, and Miles says that he "just now realized, all the time later, that [he is] still alive" (214). Three days later, Dr. Hyde gives the class their final: "how will you-- you personally-- ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (215) When the boys reach the end of the school year, Alaska is gone, but the question that she asked still remains important. Her death kept the question alive long enough to force them to find an answer to it, and the caveat with the way Dr. Hyde asks the question is that he doesn't include Alaska's answer; we already know how it ends. Rather, he frames it in this way: "what is your cause for hope?" (217)

Before, Miles was stuck searching for an answer for Alaska's death. Twenty days after her death, he says: "You can't just make yourself matter and then die, Alaska, because now I am irretrievably different, and I'm sorry I let you go, yes, but you made the choice. You left me Perhapsless, stuck in your goddamned labyrinth" (172). But after a difficult journey, Miles' answer comes to him after reading Takumi's letter. Miles comes to a sudden realization, and upon running after and being unable to find Takumi, he says: "I did not have time to tell him what I had just now realized: that I forgave him, and that she forgave us, and that we had to forgive to survive in the labyrinth" (218). Miles' answer is a suggestion to all of us. Rather than simply suggesting to be kind, or to try harder, Green uses death to place the reader into a more philosophical place. Green does not suggest a specific belief system, though he does use Dr. Hyde to suggest options, and explains that Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism were all "message[s] of Radical hope" (217). Though he doesn't give a clear answer on what to believe,

Green suggests that we live with hope, though “Suffering is universal” (82). Miles’ journey, catalyzed by Alaska Young’s death, answers Alaska’s question with hope: “We need never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken” (220).

## CONCLUSION

Both *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Looking for Alaska* attempt to use death as a means of showing readers how to live. Both protagonists are strikingly similar; they are both reserved, distant, insecure, and awkward. These traits leave them vulnerable for the tragedies that they experience as their mirroring female love interests die, leaving them to grieve. The thematic similarities lend well to a close analysis of where the books differ. Though similar on the surface, both books offer radically different suggestions about how to live through the way they portray the protagonists’ journeys of self discovery. Jay Asher has Clay go through the experience of listening to Hannah Baker’s suicide note in the form of 13 tapes, where he learns that “everything affects everything,” and Asher communicates the importance of treating others kindly through the dual narrative of Clay and Hannah Baker, as she explains the trauma she’s been through and attempts to justify her decision. Clay provides a listening ear, sometimes chiming in to remind the reader where Hannah was wrong, and that she didn’t need to die. Through Miles’ experience of losing his close friend and love interest, Alaska Young, John Green makes a deeper claim. In their search for a reason behind Alaska’s death and journey to move beyond their grief, Miles and his friends find that in order to escape the universality of suffering, one must find a reason to hope, and live out that hope in seeking their own “great perhaps.”

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