How 13 Reasons Why Built That Heartbreaking Suicide Scene

The story behind Hannah Baker’s final moments, as told by the Netflix hit’s cast and crew.

Hillary Busis  May 5, 2017 10:33 am

Beyond the Reasons

Netflix’s 13 Reasons Why begins at the end. Hannah Baker—smart, sarcastic,
soulful Hannah Baker—is dead; nothing can bring her back. But even though Hannah’s beyond-the-grave explanation of why she killed herself forms the backbone of this series, there’s no way to prepare for actually seeing the act itself: in a harrowing three-minute sequence in the middle of Season 1’s finale, our heroine calmly runs a bath, slits her wrists, and bleeds out. Soon afterward, her horrified parents discover her lifeless body.

There is no moody music swelling to a sad crescendo; there are no quick, artful edits that close up on the razor, the side of the tub, the still-running faucet. Instead, there are only straightforward, unmediated shots of Hannah as she cries out, then breathes heavily until the light gradually drains from her eyes.

The suicide scene is, to put it mildly, a lot to take—which was precisely the point. 13 Reasons Why showrunner Brian Yorkey tells Vanity Fair that his mission was to present suicide as something that’s painful and horrific—and certainly never an easy way out.

Even so, the show—and this scene specifically—have come under fire from mental-health advocates and educators. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends that “vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation” not watch the series at all; the Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology worries that the show “may discourage youth from seeking help or advice” if they’re feeling suicidal.

But the cast, creative team, and mental health consultants behind 13 Reasons Why, a Paramount Television production, stand firm behind their work, saying that to not show Hannah’s suicide—or, worse, to soften it by taking what director Kyle Patrick Alvarez calls the “Douglas Sirkian melodrama” approach—would be dishonest at best and harmful at worst. They arrived at the decision to show Hannah killing herself only after a great deal of thought,
research, and debate. Even if they were granted a do-over, they wouldn’t change a thing.

Yorkey and his writers spent “days and days” trying to decide whether to show Hannah’s suicide at all, as well as how graphic the scene should be. There’s no analogous scene in the young-adult novel on which 13 Reasons Why is based; author Jay Asher never even reveals how Hannah kills herself, though rumor has it that she took an overdose of pills. And while Yorkey may not always have been on board with including the scene—“that’s where I ended up,” the showrunner explains—he eventually came to agree with 13 Reasons writers like Nic Sheff, who eloquently explained his rationale in an op-ed for Vanity Fair. As Yorkey puts it, some people “feel like we’re glamorizing suicide, and I think that it’s the exact opposite. We’re showing suicide as a very horrific thing to endure.”

Everyone was aware that merely showing the act could be dangerous; suicide contagion is a very real phenomenon, especially among the young and impressionable. “We had a pretty long talk about the need to balance fear of contagion with not wanting it to be this mysterious, almost coy thing,” says clinical psychologist Helen Hsu, one of three mental-health experts who served as a consultant on the series. She agreed that keeping the act itself off-screen would undermine the show’s attempt to tackle suicide head-on, even though she also believes that watching this scene could be dangerous “for some people.” Ideally, says Hsu, young people will watch the series only “with a parent or a caregiver.”

Hsu also told Yorkey that if the act were going to be shown, “it has to be really painful and ugly and sad, really show the waste and the pain that it brings, and the anguish to her parents especially.“ Yorkey, who wrote the episode in which Hannah kills herself, took those words to heart, scripting the dialogue-free scene in purposefully plain language: “I remember not being at all poetic
or in any way stylized about it.

He showed the finished script to the show’s consultants, who had one main criticism: “In my original draft, Hannah”—played onscreen by 21-year-old **Katherine Langford**—“was naked,” Yorkey says. “And one of our consultants said, you know, that actually tends not to happen. When people cut their wrists in the bathtub, especially adolescent girls who have been body-shamed, they tend to wear old, ratty clothing. And that’s something I never would have known.” The script was revamped to include a moment where Hannah dresses herself in an old sweatshirt before climbing into the tub.

Kyle Patrick Alvarez directed the fifth and sixth episodes of *13 Reasons Why*—but before he could return to tackle the finale, he had to do some additional research. “We would always say, there’s a thousand ways to shoot this scene wrong, and like one or two ways to shoot it right,” he explains.

Alvarez spent ages watching “every suicide scene I could get my hands on,” especially ones in media aimed at young people, like 2002’s *The Rules of Attraction*. He took note of the tricks they tend to employ—strategic blurring, softened angles, abstract cuts intended to obfuscate what’s really happening on camera. “There’s either a form of censorship or a form of unintended romanticism to those scenes,” he says—two qualities he wanted to avoid at all costs.

So Alvarez “went very deliberate[ly] in the other direction,” using stationary cameras and simply framed shots to create a scene free of romantic flourish. He filmed but ultimately nixed evocative footage of water flowing over the lip of the tub because it “felt counter-intuitive to what this needed to be, which was very matter of fact, very straightforward.” Though he didn’t have Katherine Langford keep silent, he avoided any “big, emotional crying,”
because in real suicide cases, “what’s disturbing about it is how still the experience might be.” And he told Yorkey and the show’s editors that the scene had been designed specifically not to include music, to keep things as stark as possible.

“There was never the intention to shock,” Alvarez says. But if the scene hadn’t pictured the actual moment when Hannah slashes her wrists, in his mind, “you’re sort of saying, oh, well, let’s keep this taboo. Let’s keep this in your mind. And in some ways, that’s worse.”

Though the sequence took up less than a full script page, the production set aside an entire day to film the scene—allowing enough time to make sure the bathtub worked, to set up practical effects, and to ensure that neither Langford nor Kate Walsh and Brian D’Arcy James, who play Hannah’s grief-stricken parents, would feel rushed. Walsh remembers how emotional the cast was when they first gathered for Episode 13’s table read—“we were all bawling our eyes out”—but managed to stay in the moment while filming the scene itself, especially the gut-wrenching moment when Mrs. Baker tries to revive her daughter. As another consultant, Stanford psychiatrist Rona Hu, told Walsh, “there’s a very small percentage of people that go into such a state of shock that they just freeze and do nothing.” For most people, the impulse is to help—even if they know they’re too late.

Alvarez and his crew made a point of trying to make sure Langford was as comfortable as possible—and warm, despite being confined to a full tub for much of the day. They closed the set and kept around a minimal number of crew members; they did what they could to minimize distraction. “At one point,” he remembers, “she goes, ‘I’m O.K. I’m not traumatized; I’m O.K.’ And I said, ‘I think we all are, behind the monitor!’ ”

The scene stuck with Alvarez long after the shoot was complete. “I’ve never
had nightmares from shooting stuff, and I’ve made dark, really dark films before,” he says. “And this was sort of the first time I couldn’t shake it.” It weighs on Walsh as well: this material is “very heavy,” she says. "Heavy to even talk about still.” Perhaps it’s no wonder, then, that Netflix recently responded to the conversation surrounding the show by adding additional trigger warnings to *13 Reasons*. Hsu is in favor of that practice, though she also allows that the streaming service could have done more to ensure this content was presented as sensitively as possible: “Maybe in hindsight, maybe the after show”—*Beyond the Reasons*, which discusses suicide prevention and provides resources for those in crisis—“should have been a pre-show, or maybe we should have put out watching guidelines.” Still, she adds, the series itself “is just one work of fiction. It was never meant to be some kind of guide.”

And either way, Brian Yorkey stands firm. “Is it concerning to me that people find the show triggering, and that vulnerable young people have been troubled by it? That’s absolutely concerning to me,” he says. “But I also think that the alternative to doing the show was not doing this show. We did a show that was honest and was unflinching, and I think that the conversation sometimes seems to be dominated by controversy. And I think that there is a whole other part of the conversation that is people that have been tremendously moved by it.” Alvarez agrees: “If you don’t show the horror of it, then you’re inviting people to conjecture that maybe the act itself isn’t so bad. I think you’re inviting much more trouble.”

Perhaps Yorkey will get a chance to address some of that criticism if the show returns for a second season, which seems likely—though the showrunner indicates his team would not “go out of our way to respond in any way to what’s been said about the show.” Instead, he intends to keep exploring angles of Hannah Baker’s story that have yet to be told, a plan Walsh is in favor of as well: “I think that history is open to interpretation always,” she
says. “So I think that that’s something that, if they go forward for a second season, would be explored more. I like the idea of always playing with perception.”

Just don’t ask the actress to watch the suicide scene, which she still hasn’t seen in its entirety. “It was hard enough to shoot it. I don’t know if I want to watch it.”

Get Vanity Fair’s HWD Newsletter

Sign up for essential industry and award news from Hollywood.

Full Screen10 More Novels That Could Fuel the Teen Movie Comeback