Structures of Suffering: Origins of Teen Violence and Suicide

The GSC series “Structures of Suffering: Origins of Teen Violence and Suicide” was developed by Laura Bates, professor of English at Indiana State University and author of Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard (Sourcebooks, 2013). Supporting resources including the series essay and sample discussion questions were developed in consultation with GSC advisors Maria Sachiko Cecire (Assistant Professor of Literature) and Allison McKim (Assistant Professor of Sociology), both from Bard College, and ALA project administration staff.

The sexualized cyberbullying of teen girls, gun violence among young gang members, LGBTQ suicides, young people’s shrinking job prospects: recent conversations about topics like these have reignited longstanding concerns about the state of teenagers today and the standards to which society holds them. The three books in this series follow the stories of individual youth to explore some of the underlying systems, norms, and emotions that can lead to teens hurting themselves and others. Ned Vizzini’s It’s Kind of a Funny Story (2006) and Jay Asher’s Thirteen Reasons Why (2007) each offer nuanced takes on anxiety, social isolation, and suicidal thoughts in contemporary America, while William Shakespeare’s tragedy Romeo and Juliet (1597; reimagined in graphic novel form in 2008) demonstrates how long people have been concerned about teen violence and suicide. In each case, the protagonists’ feelings and choices are shaped by the actions of others in their social circles and other factors outside their control. Using humor, introspection, and drama, these works ask: How is it that communities and interpersonal relationships are both essential to human self-knowledge, happiness, and ability to function, and can also cause such anxiety, danger, and even self-harm?

Teen violence and suicide are not as prevalent as popular expectations might suggest — violence against and between teens is actually much lower now than it was in the early 1990s — but the numbers are still sobering. About 23% of high schoolers reported being a physical fight in the past year, 16.2% reported carrying a weapon in the past month, and 1 in every 3 or 4 youth reports being bullied. Violence against the self, meanwhile, has increased in recent decades. Teenagers kill themselves less often than adults do, but teen suicide rates have risen over the past ten years, reversing the downward trends of the 1980s and ’90s. In 2015, 3,060 Americans between the ages of 12 and 20 committed suicide, making it the second leading cause of death for this age group. Suicidal thoughts affect many more youth: according to a national survey from 2015, 17.7% of high school students reported having them in the past year. Young people involved in bullying — on both sides — are more likely to engage in suicidal behavior than those who are not, and about 20% of youth experience mental illnesses like substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders, which may also contribute to tendencies towards self-harm.

It is tempting to try to find easy answers to explain these numbers — to point to mental health problems to explain suicide, for instance, or to blame violence on moral failings. But often the origins of these issues are much more complex and based on social structures and identity. For example, teen boys commit suicide at about three times the rate of girls, but girls attempt suicide more often than boys. Native American young people have the highest rate of suicide, followed by white, Asian, Hispanic, and then African American teens. Violence and bullying also vary along social lines: girls are more likely to be bullied than boys, and are also much more likely to experience sexual violence. Yet boys are more often the victims of other kinds of violence and engage in all kinds of violence more than girls. In general, those who have been the victims of violence are more likely to commit violence; socially disadvantaged youth, who are at greater risk of victimization, are also more likely to commit violence.

Belonging to certain communities or social groups can impact whether a person will experience or commit violence, either against themselves or others. In his 1937 book Mind, Self and Society, philosopher George Herbert Mead argues that “the self is a social process.” Mead claims that rather than having a fixed psychological make-up, we develop a self by seeing ourselves through the eyes of others. If we could not anticipate how others see us, Mead argues, action and communication would be impossible; instead, by continually analyzing how others see us and orienting our actions in response, our selves emerge and shift through everyday social interaction. Even if we ultimately want to resist how other people view us, we still must first see ourselves through their eyes.

Social theorists argue that interpersonal violence and suffering reflect larger patterns of power and inequality in societies: what is called “structural violence.” Their work suggests that understanding teen violence and suicide requires understand-
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...ing the social and cultural structures within which people live their lives. For example: have you ever felt suffocated under the weight of everyone else’s eyes – and opinions – on you? Even when nobody else is around, have you watched yourself in the same judgmental way, and made choices about your behavior accordingly? In his book Discipline and Punish (1975) Michel Foucault argues that people today internalize social scrutiny, perpetuating a culture of surveillance and discipline. He claims that we are so constantly observed, evaluated and judged in all manner of environments — schools, hospitals, factories, and prisons — that we begin to internalize outside rules and expectations and seek to regulate ourselves in the same way. This self-surveillance need not always lead to anxiety and violence, but as It’s Kind of a Funny Story demonstrates, the pressure to conform and excel can at times become overwhelming or even unbearable, as they become for the novel’s protagonist, Craig, who also struggles with the added burden of mental illness.

Forces specific to certain groups or social settings can also shape youth experiences of violence. For example, thinkers like Adrienne Rich and Catherine MacKinnon argue that normative heterosexual gender roles create a social structure and hierarchy based on men’s control of women’s sexuality, sexual violence, and women’s economic dependence. Rich and MacKinnon claim that widespread notions of gender can make men feel entitled to sex and limit women’s access to pleasure and solidarity with other women. We see such structural norms at work in the humiliating experiences that the teenage girl Hannah encounters in Thirteen Reasons Why — experiences that ultimately lead to her suicide.

Structural violence such as these gender dynamics suggest the dark side of the process that Mead identifies, in which each person’s self emerges through the viewpoints of others. Power differences in gender mean that women often come to view themselves through what film theorist Laura Mulvey calls “the male gaze” of objectification and sexualization, and thus internalize their subordination (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Screen, 1975). W. E. B. Du Bois described a similar process for African Americans, who must continually see themselves through the hostile eyes of America’s white majority and therefore often experience a “double consciousness” or divided self (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903). Individuals who belong to so-called honor cultures — those that require assertions of power and value status and respect above the law — may likewise come to primarily understand themselves through the lens of outside opinion, and be drawn into violent conflicts even when the outcome will not obviously benefit them. Romeo finds himself in this situation in Romeo and Juliet as a Montague, even though fighting with members of the Capulet family directly conflicts with his feelings for Juliet, a Capulet.

Even though it is an intensely personal decision, suicide is also often affected by social structures. In the late nineteenth century, sociologist Emile Durkheim (Suicide, 1897) famously showed that when groups are individualistic, highly capital-ist, or undergoing rapid change, this can loosen social bonds, isolate people from one another, and leave social expectations unclear — a combination that Durkheim suggested can lead to suicidal actions. On the other hand, social groups with collective rituals, clear moral codes, shared institutions, and defined hierarchies produced tightly-knit communities that gave people purpose and defined roles. making people less likely to kill themselves. Durkheim’s theory suggests that when people are disconnected from others and lack clear guide-lines for how to live they may suffer in ways that can lead to suicide. It is worth noting, however, that Durkheim also argues that societies with excessive regulation and constraining social bonds can also lead to high suicide rates.

The three books in this series each faces teen suicide head-on, delving into the inner lives of young people under enormous pressure and exploring the social contexts that lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. In their conclusions, all three works suggest ways of breaking the cycles of violence and disrupting the structures of suffering that can trap teens. They point towards hopeful visions of how we as individuals can contribute to building accepting communities and creating supportive social bonds.

Book 1 — Success at All Costs: It’s Kind of a Funny Story

Description: “When Craig Gilner gets into Manhattan’s exclusive Executive Pre-Professional High School, it’s the culmination of a year of intense focus and grinding hard work. Now he has to actually attend the school with other equally high-performing students. Oops. And so the unraveling begins, with a depressed Craig spending more time smoking dope and throwing up than studying. Although medication helps his
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depression, he decides to stop taking it. Soon after, he makes another decision: to commit suicide. A call to a suicide hotline gets him into a psychiatric hospital, where he is finally able to face his demons. [...] This book offers hope in a package that readers will find enticing, and that’s the gift it offers.”
— Booklist review (starred, excerpt)

Relation to Theme: Ned Vizzini’s novel serves as a cautionary tale for an age focused on material success, competition, and self-improvement, and also explores how mental illness can play a role in teenage tendencies towards self-harm. The protagonist Craig’s obsession with the need to succeed, as determined by his grades and ability to land a high-paying job after school, quickly spirals into an eating disorder and suicidal thoughts. This novel captures how some teenagers may respond to notion that the entire burden for their future lies upon their shoulders alone, rather than being shared by a larger, supportive society. It also depicts the emptiness and anxiety of a life lived around externally-imposed benchmarks rather than dedicated to personal passions, beliefs, and connections with others. While Craig’s medication helps to re-balance his brain chemistry, the people that he meets in the hospital psychiatric ward expose him to a wide variety of experiences in his own city, open his eyes to the privileges of his upper-middle-class life, and help him to determine his own intrinsic reasons for living.

Book 2 — Gender-Based Violence: Thirteen Reasons Why

Description: “When Clay Jenson plays the cassette tapes he received in a mysterious package, he’s surprised to hear the voice of dead classmate Hannah Baker. He’s one of 13 people who receive Hannah’s story, which details the circumstances that led to her suicide. Clay spends the rest of the day and long into the night listening to Hannah’s voice and going to the locations she wants him to visit. The text alternates, sometimes quickly, between Hannah’s voice (italicized) and Clay’s thoughts as he listens to her words, which illuminate betrayals and secrets that demonstrate the consequences of even small actions. Hannah, herself, is not free from guilt, her own inaction having played a part in an accidental auto death and a rape. The message about how we treat one another, although sometimes heavy, makes for compelling reading.”
— Booklist review

Relation to Theme: In this novel by Jay Asher, the voice of the deceased teenager Hannah tells her own story in a series of cassette tapes that describe her snowballing experiences of gender-based humiliation, bullying, and violence at her new high school. Her hopes to fit in, safely explore romantic and sexual feelings, and maintain her dignity quickly become crushed as classmates and strangers alike map their social and sexual desires onto her body. She addresses thirteen people who contributed to her suffering, and their trespasses range from peer “locker room talk” about her appearance and sex life to violations of her privacy to outright sexual assault. Buffeted by the paradoxical standards that young women are held to — to be both alluring and chaste; both independent and compliant — Hannah gradually loses confidence in herself and others until she feels completely isolated and decides to turn her loathing onto herself. Listening to her story and retracing her steps, Hannah’s classmate and crush Clay seeks to unlock the mystery of Hannah’s suicide. But instead of a single answer he finds a complex web of structural inequalities and everyday cruelties embedded in seemingly normal behavior, and is left to ponder how to live ethically and compassionately towards others in the face of these norms.

Book 3 — Codes of Honor: No Fear Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet graphic novel

Description: “A visually engaging format includes clearly delineated acts and scenes as well as skilled use of dark and light to highlight mood and recurring themes. Many of the images are striking, particularly the white-on-black night scenes describing Queen Mab’s dream appearance and Juliet’s decision to drink poison. Well-drawn characters such as the brash young men, the Nurse, and Friar Lawrence come to life in these panels. This is especially true for Juliet, whose early images of youthful innocence contrast sharply with her distraught face as the story progresses. With the exception of Capulet and Montague, who look more like grandfathers than fathers to such young teens, visual characterizations are accurate. Text for this version comes from an abridgment of the modern English translation found in No Fear Shakespeare (Spark, 2007).”
— School Library Journal review

Relation to Theme: Shakespeare’s tale of star-crossed lovers has long been held up as an example of passionate love and the extreme actions that it can inspire. However it also offers
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striking insights into the dangers and, at times, senselessness of honor culture. The bonds that connect people who belong to particular families, gangs, nations, and other identity-based groups (such as sports fans and religious denominations) can offer support and grounds for rich relationships. At the same time, feuds against other groups and dehumanizing insider/outside attitudes can also lead to misunderstanding or even violence, as with the exchanges of insults and bloody clashes that take place between the Montague and Capulet families in Romeo and Juliet. Primed by gender-based social expectations that they will each fall in love at the Capulets’ party, Romeo and Juliet become besotted with one another before they realize that they belong to rival families. In spite of help from a few friends, the young lovers cannot overcome the prejudice and deep-seated animosities of honor culture to make a safe public space for their relationship. The play’s bloody end captures the terrible price of group loyalty at all costs, and suggests the importance of opening lines of communication between even the strongest of foes.

