

# THE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF “THIRTEEN REASONS WHY”, A NOVEL BY JAY ASHER

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## Abstract

Structure of a literary text especially novel is crucial as it is not merely a summary but a thread that brings together writer’s perspective, critical evaluation, plot and other elements of the story, to make it easy for the readers to grasp the intentions of the writer. Accordingly, this paper attempts to analyze the structure of “Thirteen Reasons Why” a novel by Jay Asher to demonstrate why the writer used certain word orders, or structures to convey his message by examining different literary devices and writing structures. The result is expected to give the reader a better understanding of the genre.

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**Keywords:** Structure, theme, plot, settings, characters

## Introduction

With the massive popularity of media and other technologies literary text, as a piece of art, has developed stupendously. Now it is easily in the reach of the common man, in the form of poetry, novel or fiction because of internet and different media of publication. Even people in remote areas enjoy reading their favorite literature and because of this advancement more and more people are taking interest in the evaluation and interpretation of literature and other forms of discourse.

Fiction is the most popular literary genre. As a source of entertainment it is gaining more and more attention from the public. People develop a personal attachment with the fictional characters and the story. Some people even prefer reading a novel than watching a movie made on it. And they get offended if the director makes certain changes in the plot or settings, this is because of their emotional attachment to the story. They create their own fictional world and don’t like any changes in it. In the view of this increasing attention given to novel reading the focus of this study is the analysis of the structure of the novel “Thirteen Reasons Why” by Jay Asher to show how the specific structure of the novel conveys the message

of the writer to the reader.

## **Review of related literature**

### **The nature of novel**

It is not easy to define the novel. A novel is a long narrative that is usually in the form of prose and describes and presents the characters and events in the form of stories. Many writers have given different definitions of it. According to IP Watt,

“The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of a classical and Renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author's treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience - individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named.”(Watt, 2001: 13)

CN Davidson is of the view that, “The novel is the paradigmatic democratic form. Conflict (of desire, motive, agency, principles) is the basis of fictional form. The novel is not only about conflict as is the case with democracy, without conflict there is no novel.” (Davidson, 2004: 6)

While talking about different works of authors Hale says, “For Bakhtin, the novel's unity lies in the ethical condition of achieved alterity. Lukacs, Jameson, Armstrong, D.A. miller and Edward Said all stress the unity of the ideological mystification performed by the novel. Jane Tompkins believes that the novel can provide a unified “blueprint” for social reform. Girard finds the novel a unified path out of self-blindness and into authentic self-awareness. Johnson, Felmon, and J. Hillis Miller imagine this same dynamic as a unified process of oscillation: the novel moves its reader into insight only to return to her to blindness – and then back again.” (Hale, 2009: 9)

Novel as a genre came into being in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century though the term “novel” was in use since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It has its roots in Greece and Rome and it was famous as medieval romances and novellas. Novel in its early form dealt with the conflict between romances and novellas.

### **Parts of novel**

Almost all the novels have some similar parts. Those are the plot, the

setting, the theme, the characters and language. These parts link the whole work together and give it a unified form. Almost all the novels deal with a conflict that is introduced at the start and most of the story deals with it. The basic message or idea that the writer wanted to convey is called the theme.

The most important part of the novel is the plot. It covers the overall story, conflict is introduced in it and it is logically sequenced. A plot consists of five basic parts:

**Introduction:** It is the beginning of the story where the characters are introduced. It shows the type of characters, their goals and motives. It reveals the most important feature that the audience gets to know, the main character and the main character gets to know his aims and goals.

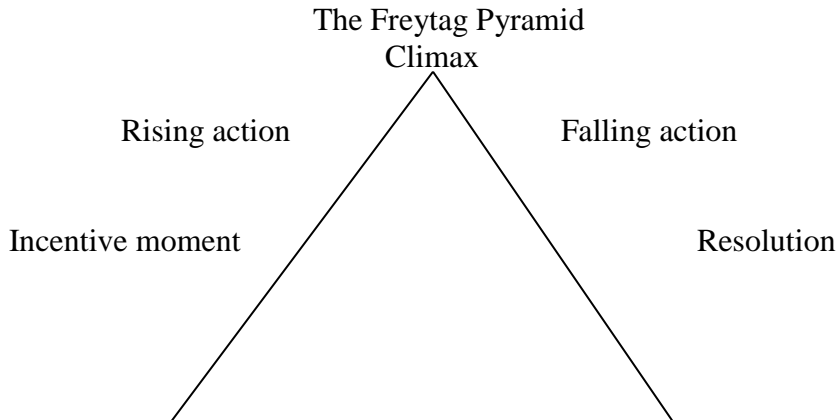
**Rising Action:** Here the things get complicated by the death of a character or by presenting the conflict.

**Climax:** Then comes the climax. It is the highest turning point in the story. Here the character makes a decision that decides the further course of the story and the fate of the characters. It shows a continuous struggle.

**Falling Action:** This part contains greatest tension. Here, it mostly looks like that the evil will triumph over good. The audience tries to understand what will happen next and that whether the conflict will come to an end or not. However, the complications begin to resolve slowly.

**Resolution:** This is the final part. It shows the outcome of all the events.

Gustav Freytag a German novelist presented the plot structure as a pyramid. He used six parts of the plot rather than five.



According to Lavanya there are five basic types of conflict.

**Man versus Wild:** It means the battle within oneself. The battle with a person's own thoughts and feelings. They affect his future actions and his interactions with other characters of the story. That conflict can be present throughout the novel or maybe at some particular time.

**Man versus Society:** These are those types of conflicts where the

characters or protagonists beliefs differ from those of the societies. It can be said that it involves all wrong customs of the society that the character fights against.

**Man versus Man:** These types of conflicts are often used to provide a comic relief to the audience. Here character is usually opposed by the other character or opposes their action and motivations.

**Man versus Nature:** Sometimes Nature creates hindrances in peoples endeavors. These are those types of conflicts where man faces the calamities alone. Like that in *Tess of D'Urberville* where Tess was raped in the lap of nature. Such types of conflicts also involve human triumph at the end.

**Man versus Supernatural:** Supernatural elements are those that are above the understanding of human mind, science or even the laws of nature. This type of setting adds more drama and suspense in the story. ([www.booksoarus.com](http://www.booksoarus.com))

The characters are persons that are involved in the story. Novels usually have minor and major characters. The story revolves around the major characters and minor characters have a small role to play in the story. The major character that solves the problems and faces the complications is called the protagonist. The character that creates problems and complications is called the antagonist.

Setting is the specific condition in which the story takes place and the problem is solved in certain place and time. Nina Munteanu in her blog *Importance of Setting in a Novel* says, there are four types of settings.

**Setting as Character:** She says that usually settings have characters in it but sometimes setting itself can be a character. When a novelist or writer portrays different characters he or she can also find himself making a portrait of a place. This is the example of setting being portrayed as character. The settings play the role of main catalyst and shapes different characters in the story. In this way the setting becomes the central character.

**Setting as Metaphor:** The setting also plays the role as metaphor in the story. In that case its main role becomes to depict the theme of the story.

**Setting & Emotion:** Setting also plays an influential role on the emotions and feelings of the character. It depends on the types of experiences that character is going through, types of moods and their skills to observe their surroundings. In this way setting provides a kind of emotional landscape, it depends on the character how he will use that landscape.

**Setting as weather:** Weather plays a very important role in conveying the mood of both the story and the characters. The writer uses weather not just as a part of a scenery but as a device to convey certain meanings in the plot and overall theme. ([www.scribophile.com](http://www.scribophile.com))

## **Method of Analysis**

Before going further it is necessary to know what structuralism and structural analysis is.

## **Structuralism**

After the emergence of linguistics emerged structuralism. It is an intellectual movement, that begun in France in the 1950s. Hawkes, in his book “Structuralism and semiotics” says that, “structuralism is fundamentally a way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with the perception and description of structures” (Hawkes, 2003: 6). He further adds that, “the world is made up of relationships rather than things, constitutes the first principle of that way of thinking which can properly be called ‘structuralist’. At its simplest, it claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by its relationship to all the other elements involved in that situation. In short, the full significance of any entity or experience cannot be perceived unless and until it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part.” (Hawkes, 2003: 7) The world comprises systems of centralized logic and structures which are accessible through processes of reason. In structuralism individual objects are seen as part of a greater whole. Nothing is observed as an independent entity. Rather a representation of wholistic culture with its identifiable values. The underlying forms/structures are seen as the medium of transmitting meanings. Therefore, these discrete forms/units become the main focus of study rather than the content.

The structuralists believe that language is a system of relation and difference. They adhere meanings from the basic patterns of language and the binary oppositions. They believe that language is the key-process in the creation and communication of meaning. They add that language is a self-referential system. All perceptions and understandings are formed by words.

## **Structural Analysis**

A structuralist analysis involves uncovering the patterns in the text and there meanings. Meanings are attributed by the human mind, no word can be explained in isolation, and therefore structuralism in literature means analyzing literature with reference to its underlying structure of a specific literary genre. Structuralism says that in every text there may be a structure that’s why the experienced readers easily interpret a text than the non-experienced readers. Structural Analysis relates a text to the structure as a whole, which can be of any genre, or a system of recurrent patterns. It deals with the fact that is there any meaning beyond the text? What is the position of individual and position of a person in relation to the culture? P Barry says that the typical structuralist process is “moving from the particular to the

general, placing the individual work within wider structural context. The wider structure might also be found in, for instance, the whole corpus of an author's work; or in the genre" (Barry, 2002: 39).

Structuralists analyze the conventions of a particular genre or a network of inter-textual connections, or a specific model of underline universal text structures. They find out repetitive complex structure patterns. They interpret literature in relation to structures of language. They apply the concept of systematic patterning to the whole field of culture. (Barry, 2002: 41)

Structural analysis is the examination of different elements that form an organization or set of systems to uncover their interrelationships.

### **Methodology**

The selected text for analysis is "Thirteen Reasons Why" a novel by Jay Asher. The novel will be analyzed on the basis of following elements of structural analysis.

The plot

The title

The genre

The setting

Point of view

Active details (symbols and symbolism)

Insights/Theme/motifs

Style (word choice, syntax etc.)

Characters

Results and findings

Plot and Summary

Summary of the novel

Hannah Baker a normal teenage girls experiences some abnormal incidents that totally changed everything for her, even life itself. Having being shift into a new town she hopes to have a new and beautiful life, and wants to enjoy a good reputation, but unfortunately things went quite opposite. False rumors, revenge and treachery by her friends and those around her affected her badly. Hannah tries to show her pain to others but no one noticed her cries for help not even the school guidance counselor, she comes to the point of giving everything up. Before taking her life she records a set of audiotapes to explain the actions which she thought pushed her to the point where she was ready to take her life.

The novel opens as Clay Jensen, the narrator of the novel, sends a mysterious package to a girl named Jenny. The readers soon come to know that the mysterious package is actually the suicide note in the form of audiotapes by Hannah Baker, a girl Clay used to like before she committed

suicide two weeks ago before the story starts.

The package contains total seven cassettes and thirteen different stories. On the first side of the first tape Hannah tells everyone that she considers all those people mentioned in the tape responsible for her suicide, in some way or the other. She says that after listening to the tapes each person must pass it on to the next one on the list, and follow the map given with the tapes to physically experience all the details of the story. And if anyone won't follow the rules the tapes will be made public.

Clay Jensen, who had always liked Hannah is one of the Thirteen people on Hannah's list, who receives the cassettes. He gets shocked after listening to the story that how false the rumors about Hannah was and how they all originated by a boy to whom Hannah didn't give more than a kiss. He gets angrier when he continues listening to the story on the students who treated her very badly and also on himself for not telling Hannah that he liked her. The novel ends with a kind of hopeful note; Clay goes to a girl named Sky Miller to be friends with her who also has a reputation of being strange. Clay was unable to save Hannah but he won't let Sky Miller kill herself.

### **Analysis of the plot**

Keeping in view structure of the plot discussed above plot of "Thirteen Reasons Why" will be analyzed.

### **Introduction**

The main story begins when Clay Jensen receives a strange package of seven audiotapes by Hannah Baker, a girl he liked and who recently committed suicide. The story takes the readers into the minds of the characters, Hannah Baker and Clay Jensen as they recall the events that led Hannah to the decision to commit suicide.

### **Rising Action**

Then the conflict starts in the story. According to Hannah, all the people in the tapes are responsible for her death, Clay is also on the tapes but he does not understand why. To know this he is forced to listen to all the stories in tape. This is the main conflict that stays with him and the readers throughout the book.

The complication in the story comes when Clay finally gets to listen his tape. Before that the thought that he has never done anything bad to her was continuously hindering on him. But when Hannah says that she actually does not blame him for her death, he realizes that it was also his fault that's why he is on the tapes. If he was not so afraid, and didn't bother about the rumors he would have made a positive impact in her life and would have

saved. This thing complicates his views about life.

### **Climax**

All the findings about Hannah's death were hard for Clay to handle. He knows that act was self-destructive; he got angry and frustrated that he didn't do anything. All these emotions finally come out when he gets so angry that he pinches a fence and hurts his hand.

Suspense is left in the story that what was the reaction of other twelve people. What happened to them when they heard about the secrets related to them? For example, what does Jessica do when she heard that she was raped? Was Mr. Porter, the student councilor fired? These questions keep haunting the readers throughout the play even after the play ends.

### **Falling Action**

After hearing everything on the tapes, Clay decides to go to school, though he fears facing those on that like Mr. Porter. But he decides that he will go there and face whatever life has to present.

### **Resolution**

The ending is really moving. Clay liked Hannah and her revealing tapes really affected him but instead of crying in pain he goes out to face the world. Without bothering about his reputation he goes to Sky Miller, to save her from Hannah's fate.

### **The Title**

The title of the novel is very interesting and accurate as it gives a direct hint of the thirteen reasons on Hannah's death. It points towards the thirteen people and thirteen incidents that according to Hannah led to her death. As Hannah says in the starting tape,

"I hope you're ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why"(Asher, 2010: 7)

The title also deals with two important features of the play, guilt and blame. Though she was angry and furious about the chaos in her life but she was also confused and she blamed those thirteen people to make sense out of chaotic situation. As in the start Clay thinks he is not the one to be blamed but when Hannah says, "Clay, honey, your name does not belong on this list" (Asher, 2010: 106). He realizes that though Hannah didn't blame him but he is guilty as he didn't do anything to save her.

The thirteen reason of her decision to take her life, the thirteen people and the thirteen different experiences are following:

- 1) Justin Foley: The boy Hannah first kissed. He exaggerated



that they did more than just a kiss. This little rumor started all the mess.

2) Alex Standall: The boy in Hannah's class. He started a pole and voted Hannah as the hottest girl in the class. This incident gave others the opportunity to do things that they did.

3) Jessica Davis: She was Hannah's first friend in the town. They spent good time together. But she got really angry when she heard that Hannah was on Alex hot list and she was not. She liked Alex, and started the rumor about Hannah and Alex, though she knew Hannah and that previous rumor was false.

4) Tyler Down: A boy who took pictures of Hannah from her window, without her permission. Hannah called him peeping Tom. One night Hannah along with another girl posed for him only to catch him. But before being caught he took more photos of them that gave the snowball more speed.

5) Courtney Crimson: A girl who only pose to be nice. For being voted for the yearbook as the nicest person. She started more rumors that Hannah had some bad things in her room.

6) Marcus: A boy at school who has to take Hannah on date on the Valentine's Day because of a survey. But he came late and tried to misbehave with Hannah.

7) Zach Dempsey: A boy who saw Marcus trying to misbehave with Hannah but didn't help her. Only after he went away Zack approached Hannah and asked if she was okay. He tried to comfort her and got angry because she was unresponsive. For that he took Hannah's encouragement notes. That was the point when all she thought was to commit suicide.

8) Ryan Shaver: Hannah met him in a poetry class and shared her poems with him until he stole her work and published the poem in the school magazine. It let to her more ridicule.

9) Clay Jenson: He does not belong to her list of suicide reasons. Hannah just wanted to confess her feelings for him.

10) Justin Foley: Again, at the party when she was hiding in the closet she say him letting Bryce in to rape Jessica.

11) Jenny Kurtz: A cheerleader, she gave a ride to Hannah, but while driving she was so drunk that she hit the stop sign and it caused an accident and death of a person.

12) Bryce Walker: A boy with bad reputation. At the party he approached her and Hannah for the first time gave up. He is the same boy who raped Jessica.

13) Mr. Porter: The student counselor. Hannah told him everything but he asked her to leave his office.

## **The Genre**

The novel is clearly a tragedy from the start. As the readers come to know from the very first tape that the protagonist of the novel, Hannah Barker is dead. It is also a psychological thriller. From the very moment when Clay pushes the first tape in the tape recorder the reader is pulled into Hannah's gloomy and dark world. Her compelling story forces the reader to see what comes next. It had a psychological impact on the reader's mind that he/she wants to know that is Hannah right in blaming all those people on the tapes. Same is the case with Clay who experiences the same thing but he also wanted to know why his name was on the tapes.

## **The Setting**

Hannah's story is all about settings. She asks everyone on the tapes to visit the places marked on the map to experience the incidents closely. That's why the settings change quite often. And just like the people in Hannah's life the settings are also quite disturbing unlike what Hannah wanted them to be. Some important settings are these:

Eisenhower Park: This is the park where this entire snowball thing started. Hannah planned to get her first kiss from Justin in this park. Instead of being memorable that becomes disastrous as Justin started spreading false rumors about them.

Hannah's first house: Hannah's first house after coming to the town is the same place where that old man came to live who died in the accident because of Jenny's mistake.

Blue Spot Liquor: This is the place where Bryce misbehaved with Hannah when she stopped there to get a candy bar.

Rosie's: A restaurant where Marcus mistreated her and after that Zach insulted her.

The Crestmont Movie Theater: The place where Hannah worked with Clay, the only place that was not marked on Hannah's map.

Different Parties: Hannah marked four stars on her map at the places of parties. Most of the bad events occurred there. Jessica got raped. Courtney betrayed her at a party. Hannah had sex with Bryce at a party. All these settings indicate the drama of high school students.

## **Point of view**

The narrative style of *Three Reasons Why* is very unique. Narration continues to move between Hannah and Clay. The story mixes Hannah Barker's explanation for her suicide in the form of audio tapes and Clay Jensen's reactions to those tapes. Both sides of stories are told in first person by Hannah and Clay.

Most of the narration is in the form of thoughts, what is going on in

characters mind. Hannah's perspective lacks objectivity as she recorded those tapes at the time of total despair, when she was so depressed that she decided to commit suicide. So, she didn't look at things from all angles. And the reader also doesn't come to know what other people have to say to whom Hannah accused. But her story, in the first person makes add high level of emotions that readers cannot get from third person narration.

At some moments Hannah calls her listeners directly by calling their names or saying ("Hey you!") only on those moments she is the second person narrator.

Clay's point of view is however more objective than Hannah's. On many occasions he points out when she is not being fair enough. He also questions her decisions and reasoning. But at the same time he accepts her assumptions about different people and situations, like in the rape scene, the stop sign incident.

The idea of audio recordings is quite unique as it takes the readers into the mind of someone who is not in the world anymore. It also adds the effect of foreshadowing, that Hannah gives lots of hints about what will happen next.

### **Active details (symbolism)**

Symbolism is used in great detail by the author. At the start of the novel the rocket ship symbolises Hannah's innocence and reminds her of her home and her happy days.

The Crossroad, in one of her tapes Hannah mentions a T-shaped road, it represents Hannah's difficulty to decide which way to go in her life.

Rumors as Hannah calls them snow ball, they symbolize Hannah's loss of secrecy and privacy. The day she kissed first boy in her life they started spreading without any stop.

"A rumor based on a kiss ruined a memory that I hoped would be special. A rumor based on a kiss started a reputation that other people believed in and reacted to. And sometimes, a rumor based on a kiss has a snowball effect. A rumor, based on a kiss, is just the beginning."

(Asher, 2010: 30-31)

The scar symbolizes treachery and betrayal. Jessica gave that scar to Hannah when she heard that she was not on Alex' hot list.

The cut on Clay's hand symbolizes pain, the pain Hannah felt emotionally.

In Hannah's class they played a game in which all the students got notes of encouragement. For Hannah those notes were the symbol of hope and when one student stole her notes he actually stole her last sting of hope from her.

Later in the novel Hannah gets a strange haircut. That symbolizes the

drastic change her reputation brought to her personality.

Then the closet in which Hannah hides to avoid the rape scene symbolizes her character flaw. Instead of facing her problems she tries to run away and hide from them and in this way gets herself into unlikely situations.

### **Themes**

One of the main themes in the novel is how one's actions impact others. Throughout the story Hannah blamed those people on her tapes but in a way she gave them the message to rethink how their actions affect others. Another central theme is of death that is present throughout the novel. Guilt and blame that has been discussed in the title section another theme is that of respect and reputation. Respect that Hannah wanted to gain about her bad reputation created by others ruined everything for her. Some other themes are betrayal, sex and love.

### **Style**

Most of the story is in the form of thoughts. The sentences are mostly short and not very complicated and there are a few fragments in the sentences like in this one,

That's why you did it. You wanted your world to collapse around you. You wanted everything to get as dark as possible. And Bryce, you knew, could help you do that. (14.84)

Style is also conversational. In his thoughts Clay is having a conversation with Hannah. The tone is sometimes very direct when Hannah tells people that if they had treated her differently she might be alive now and sometimes it is quite subtle.

### **Characters and characterization**

The main characters of the novel are Clay and Hannah. Clay Jensen is one of the main characters of the novel. He is the narrator and the one who takes the readers into the dark world of Hannah Baker. Most of the story takes place in his thoughts. He is one of the people on Hannah's tapes but later he gets to know that he is not one of the reasons of her death. He liked Hannah but never got courage to tell her because of her reputation that he later regrets. He gets to learn from the tapes that Hannah liked him too. His approach as a narrator is quite objective that makes him an ideal narrator.

Hannah Barker: The readers get to know her from her tapes. Hannah was a normal girl before moving to the new town. She dreamed about love and respect but her high school life turned out to be a disaster for her. Her friends betrayed her, people mistreated her because of her false reputation and no one trusted her that's why she committed suicide and before that

recorded all those incidents on seven tapes.

### **Conclusion**

The structural analysis of any piece of literature focuses on the underlying structures of that work. It involves a detail evaluation of its plot and other elements like settings, themes, characters, symbols, style, narrative point of view to uncover the meanings and message of the story. This study has attempted to explore the underlying structures in the novel “Thirteen Reasons Why” by Jay Asher to help the readers have a better grasp of the story and to understand the writers intentions more accurately.

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