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Desire That Hurts: Gender, Power, and Control in Popular Culture Texts

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Overview

- Central question: How does desire, structured by gender, function as a mechanism of power and control?
- Theoretical framework: Foucault's power/knowledge; power as domination (Connolly, Hartsock, Karlberg, Wartenberg)
- Three popular culture texts examined across different media, demographics, and historical moments
- Each text maps the same dynamics: desire weaponized to control, humiliate, and silence those subordinated by gender
- Argument: Together these texts constitute an urgent popular cultural archive of gendered violence

Theoretical Framework: Power as Domination

Foucault

Power as productive, capillary, interwoven with kinship, family, sexuality — operating at the lowest extremities of the social body

Power as Domination

Continuous, stable control over others (Connolly, Hartsock, Wartenberg). 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something B would not otherwise do'

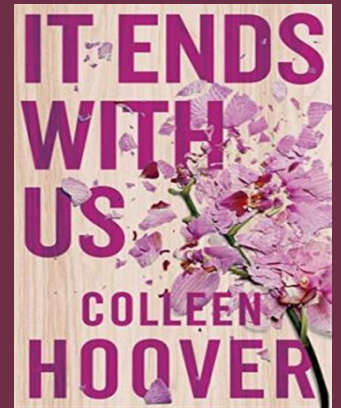
Desire for Power

Rooted in human nature (Baldwin). Desire functions as the engine of domination — the vulnerability that power exploits

PART ONE

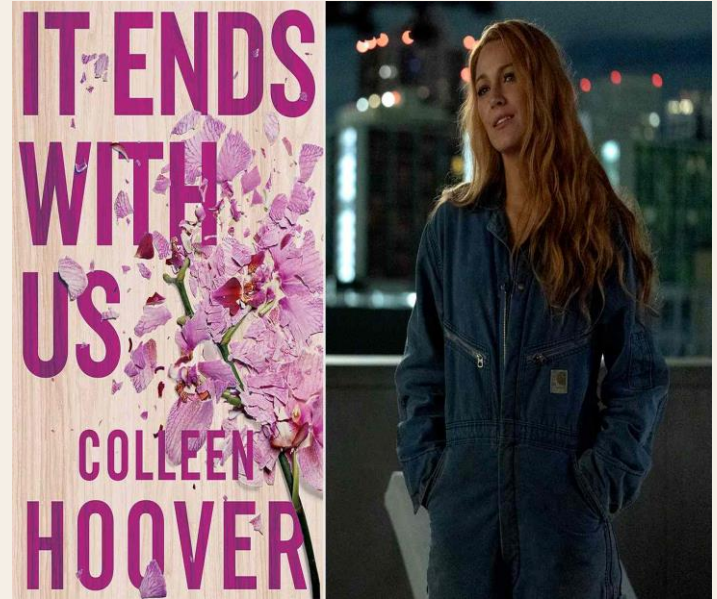
Desire as Weapon:

Interpersonal Violence in
Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*



It Ends with Us (2016) — Context

- Popular romance formula used to address interpersonal violence — rare in the genre
- Narrator-focalizer: Lily Bloom — adult narration + adolescent diary entries ('memory monologues')
- Two cases of domestic violence: Andrew Bloom's over Jenny Bloom; Ryle Kincaid's over Lily Bloom
- Inspired by Hoover's own memories of witnessing domestic violence
- Adapted into a film (2024) starring Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um9ebR0OUxA>



Forms of Interpersonal Violence in *It Ends with Us*

Against Women

- Verbal objectification: name-calling, role-reversal ('You have no idea what I've been through')
- Visual objectification: Ryle's gaze, Lily as locus of male fantasy
- Prescriptive gender stereotyping: yielding, weak, gullible, impressionable
- Emotional blackmail & manipulation: fear of loss, coercive apology cycles
- Intimate partner violence: physical, sexual, psychological — both marriages

Against Children / Young Adults

- Physical child abuse: Lily thrown by father, Atlas burnt by cigarettes
- Parental neglect: Atlas's mother kicks him out
- School bullying (indirect & nonmalign): Katie's treatment of Atlas and Lily
- Three-phase abuse cycle across generations
- Intergenerational transmission: Jenny → Lily repeats patterns

“

My whole life, I knew exactly what I'd do if a man ever treated me the way my father treated my mother. It was simple. I would leave and it would never happen again. But I didn't leave.

— Lily Bloom, *It Ends with Us* (Hoover 242)

The Three-Phase Cycle of Abuse

1

Tension Building

Anxiety, walking on eggshells, minor incidents, fear of the abuser's anger

2

Acute Battering

Physical, sexual or severe psychological violence — the explosion

3

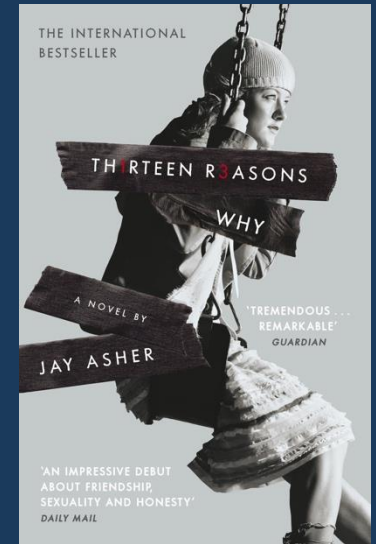
Contrition / Honeymoon

Abuser showers affection, promises change. Victim hopes. Cycle resets.

PART TWO

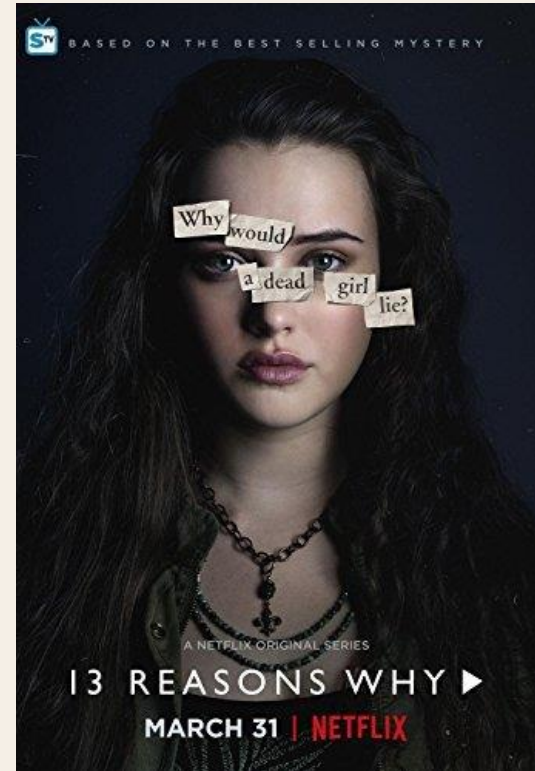
Desire and Hierarchy:

Bullying, Identity, and Power in
Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*



Thirteen Reasons Why (2007) — Context

- YAL genre: protagonists 12–21, adolescent issues, told in the language of young adults
- Hannah Baker records 7 audio tapes for 12 people she holds responsible for her suicide
- Dead Girl confessional mode — gives the narrative its recursive, aural tone (Trites)
- Setting: American high school as 'the ant farm' (King) — a space of hierarchical conservatism
- Idiocultures (Fine): systems of knowledge, beliefs, and customs shared by interacting groups
- Adapted into the Netflix TV series (2017):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuk2y-G68JU>



Teen Boy Identity Performances (*Wiseman, Masterminds and Wingmen*)

The Mastermind — Bryce Walker

Charismatic, controlling, expert manipulator. Rapes Jessica & Hannah. Embodies aggressive-relational bully.

The Associate — Justin Foley

Popularity-dependent on Bryce. Passive bully. Allows Bryce to rape Jessica. His desire to belong outweighs moral obligation.

The Entertainer — Marcus Cooley

Uses social charm to sexually harass Hannah. Calls her a 'tease' in public. Bystander who represses empathy to fit in.

The Champion — Clay Jensen

Empathy, moral compass, resistance to dominant scripts. Authoritative parenting (Mrs. Jensen) enables his agency.

Teen Girl Identity Performances (*Wiseman, Queen Bees and Wannabees*)

The Queen Bee — Courtney Crimsen

- Reigns through charisma, money, looks, social intelligence
- Relational bully: exclusion, manipulation, rumour-spreading
- Controls by making others feel 'anointed' or destroyed with a single word
- 'Fun to hang out with' — coded language implying sexual availability
- Authoritarian parenting echoed in colder, more controlling peer behaviour

The Target — Hannah Baker

- Posthumous narrator — voiceless in life, controls narrative in death
- Does not fit in enough to have a social support system
- 'Snowball effect': cumulative trauma greater than sum of its parts
- Authoritarian/indifferent parenting: parents distracted, trust low, conversations minimal
- Tapes as strategy of posthumous resistance, agency, and self-advocacy

“

A lot of you cared, just not enough. And that... that is what I needed to find out.

— Hannah Baker, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher 280)

PART THREE

Digital Desire and Radicalization:

Power, Gender, and Control in
Adolescence (Netflix, 2025)

Adolescence (2025) — Context

- Netflix 4-episode miniseries; each episode shot in a single continuous take
- 13-year-old Jamie Miller arrested for murdering his classmate Katie Leonard
- Explores: cyberbullying, online radicalization, manosphere ideology, toxic masculinity, failure of societal networks
- Social and digital networks as both instrument and force shaping identity, relationships, self-worth
- Parents, school, friends fail to notice Jamie's radicalization — he was 'safe upstairs'
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wk5OxqtpBR4>



The Manosphere, Incel Culture & the Emoji Code



Red Pill

'I see the truth' — call to action by the manosphere



Dynamite

'Exploding red pill' — identifies someone as an incel



Kidney Bean

Used to identify or self-identify as an incel



100 / 80-20 Rule

'80% of women are attracted to 20% of men. You must trick them.'

Key Terms:

Manosphere = community promoting toxic masculinity, online misogyny, and male rage · Incel = involuntary celibate

The Failure of Societal Networks in *Adolescence*

- Katie's emoji-coded cyberbullying of Jamie: opaque to all adults — parents, teachers, police
- Katie sent a topless photo that a boy spread without consent → she rebuffed Jamie → he murdered her
- Jamie's parents: wanted to keep him safe, but thought he was 'safe upstairs' on his computer
- School system: teachers struggling with unruly students, counsellors overwhelmed
- Friends: either don't care or follow in the same radicalizing footsteps
- The series' argument: digital networks that promise connection produce isolation, self-loathing, and violence



Desire, Gender, and Power: A Comparative View

Text	Site of Violence	Mechanism of Desire	Key Instrument
<i>It Ends with Us</i>	Domestic / intimate	Love weaponized as coercive control	Objectification, abuse cycle, stereotyping
<i>Thirteen Reasons Why</i>	High school / peer	Desire for status & belonging	Bullying, identity performance, shaming
<i>Adolescence</i>	Digital / online	Thwarted desire → misogynistic rage	Manosphere ideology, cyberbullying

Conclusion

- All three texts map the same fundamental dynamics: desire, structured by gender, weaponized as domination
- *It Ends with Us*: love as the vector through which intimate partner violence perpetuates itself generationally
- *Thirteen Reasons Why*: desire for status and belonging as the engine of bullying culture and gendered destruction
- *Adolescence*: desire radicalized by digital ideologies of entitlement and misogyny → murderous rage
- Popular culture as a critical archive: romance, YAL, and TV series make the structures of power visible to those most subject to them
- The most important function of popular culture: to name the mechanisms through which desire hurts — and to open the possibility of resistance

Thank you!
