YOUTH SUICIDE AS TILLICHIAN ANXIETY AND COURAGE: AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF TWO POPULAR AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

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2018

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by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts**

August 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

TABLES OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 4 – ANXIETY AND COURAGE IN *THIRTEEN REASONS WHY*

CHAPTER 5 – ANXIETY AND COURAGE IN *BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS, I'LL BE DEAD*

LIST OF FIGURES

KEJADIAN BUNUH DIRI REMAJA SEBAGAI UNSUR KERESAHAN DAN KEBERANIAN TILLICH: SATU BACAAN EKSISTENTIAL DUA BUAH KARYA NOVEL REMAJA POPULAR AMERIKA

ABSTRAK

Konsep bunuh diri remaja yang sedia ada boleh dihujahkan sebagai tegar dan kurang lengkap kerana mengenepikan mangsa bunuh diri. Pembunuhan diri dilihat sebagai akibat tekanan sosial dan psikologi yang berlebihan, jesteru dipaparkan sebagai sesuatu yang pasif dan mengalah. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka proses memanusiakan mangsa bunuh diri dengan menawarkan konsep alternatif tentang bunuh diri remaja, melalui karya fiksyen sebagai kanta untuk memahami kejadian bunuh diri. Ia mengkaji kes bunuh diri dalam *Thirteen Reasons Why* karya Jay Asher dan *By the time you read this, I'll be dead* karya Julie Ann Peters. Kajian ini menggunakan kerangka dari pemikiran eksistensialisme kerana ia mengutarakan tumpuan yang unik terhadap pengalaman individu sebagai agen yang bebas dalam dunia yang ketandusan makna. Justeru, kajian ini boleh memanusiakan konsep bunuh diri dengan menyediakan pemahaman daripada perspektif subjektif mangsa. Kajian ini menggunapakai eksistentialisme Tillich kerana hujah Tillich yang sistematik menyediakan satu model yang berstruktur dan komprehensif untuk memahami fenomena bunuh diri. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menginterpretasi unsur keresahan Tillich sebagai penyebab bunuh diri dan unsur keberanian Tillich sebagai tujuan bunuh diri dalam dua buah novel yang dipilih. Kajian ini menyiasat bagaimana unsur keresahan mempengaruhi keputusan

watak-watak untuk membunuh diri, dan bagaimana melalui pembunuhan diri mereka berjaya mengatasi keresahan, jesteru menzahirkan bentuk keberanian yang pernah diutarakan oleh Tillich. Melalui suatu bacaan alternatif terhadap kejadian bunuh diri remaja dalam kedua-dua novel, kajian ini menawarkan gambaran yang penting terhadap psiki mangsa bunuh diri.

YOUTH SUICIDE AS TILLICHIAN ANXIETY AND COURAGE:

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ABSTRACT

Current conceptualization of youth suicide can be argued to be limited and incomplete for it alienates the suicidal person. Suicide is seen to be caused by overbearing societal or psychological pressure and it is consequently portrayed in a passive and defeatist light. This study aims to explore the process of humanization of the suicidal person by offering an alternative conceptualization of youth suicide. This is done through the usage of fiction as a lens to understand real life suicide. It studies the suicides that are portrayed in Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Julie Ann Peters' *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead*. The study adopts a framework from the school of existentialism as the philosophy has a unique focus on the individual experience of human as a free self-deterministic agent against a seemingly meaningless universe. It could humanize the concept of suicide by providing understanding from the subjective perspective of the suicidal person. Specifically, the study employs Tillichian existentialism because Tillich's systematic ways of philosophizing can provide a structured and comprehensive model to help understand the suicide phenomenon. Objectives of the study include interpreting Tillichian anxiety as suicide causes and the characters' suicide as Tillichian courage in the two selected novels. It investigates how anxiety figures into the characters' decision to commit suicide and how their suicides

overcome said anxiety, thus constituting them as forms of Tillichian courage. This alternative reading of youth suicide in the two novels offers an invaluable glimpse into the suicidal person's psyche.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

In recent years, a trend that saw a rise was the publication of literature written about and for teenagers. A 2013 article from *Pepperdine University Magazine* noted a phenomenon whereby "after years on the periphery of cultural relevance, novels aimed at teenagers are suddenly front and center of popular fiction". These pleasurable reads are often also a way for adolescents to learn about the diversity of the people and environment around them. In fact, an increasing number of teachers are employing young adults (YA) novels within an educational context, and this is because "YA literature tends to offer students something that the classics cannot: a story to which they can relate to" (EBSCO, 2015). These YA novels discuss pressing contemporary issues like youth suicide. While there aren't hard numbers available documenting the rise of suicide topic in YA novels, there are numerous articles describing its ubiquitous nature. An example would be a 2014 opinion piece written by Diana Hodge in *The Conversation,* an online newsletter attached to the University of South Australia. In it, she talks about how this is a good development because harsh topics in YA literature can be used to educate readers by providing them with inspiration to overcome obstacles, necessary coping skills and exposing them to contemporary social issues. Of course, this development is not without its detractors, the most conspicuous of these coming from Tanith Carey's online article in *The Daily Mail* where she states how this trend has become a disturbing phenomenon, slamming these novels which she dubs as "sick-lit" to

be incredibly mawkish and "inadvertently glamorize[-ing] shocking life-and-death issues" (Carey, 2013). Whether one is for or against it, it is true that death issues in YA literature have grown so much more common that this has become a veritable concern. It is not difficult to discern the relevance between the two, as the prevalence of social issues such as youth suicide opens up the necessity for a new medium within which the issue can be discussed, an observation befitting Campbell (2010)'s proposition that subjects in YA literature serve as "reflection[s] of our perilous times". The proliferation of YA novels makes it possible for the genre to position itself within niche locations like the bestseller's lists, scholarly journals and in the classroom.

Slowly but surely, YA literature is consolidating itself into a viable research interest. Experts adduce that growing interest to "its great potential to address the needs of all its [young adult] readers, including members of minority groups traditionally ignored by the publishing industry" (Andersen, 2015: 1). Therefore, the perception is that YA literature is conducive to discourse on difficult topics related to adolescents, ranging from drug abuse to youth suicide. Micheal Cart (2008), writing for Young Adult Library Services Associations (YALSA), noted YA literature's assets in

> [i]ts capability to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages; its capacity for fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives; [and] its capacity for telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be.

In summary, YA novels are great instruments to understanding real world issues affecting teens. In other words, YA literature is a valuable research material that can be used to investigate youth issues. The two texts selected for the present thesis, *Thirteen*

Reasons Why and *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead* fall under the category of YA literature.

Given the current acceptance of YA literature as a valid source for scholarly study, this project will utilize YA literature as a lens towards understanding youth suicide by examining two major aspects of suicidology: cause and meaning. At present, suicidology has a markedly positivistic, scientific leaning towards these two aspects, which means that research into suicide tends to be specialized according to expertise and fields. This means that the existing perspective into suicide is oftentimes fractured and narrow when in fact there are many angles to the study of the suicidal person, including psychological, societal and cultural. This perhaps has led to an impasse in research progress because understanding human beings in such a sterilized, rationalized manner may not be conducive to research purposes. Van Orden et al. in their study published in 2011 note that risk factors to youth suicide may not be as definitive and straightforward as believed. As Camus (1955) had previously warned in *Myth of Sissyphus,* "there are many causes for a suicide … What sets off the crisis is almost always unverifiable … it is easier to deduce from the act itself the consequences it implies. In a sense … killing yourself amounts to confessing" that life is too much for you. Camus points out that it is difficult to verify what it is exactly that pushes the suicidal individual over the edge; hence, the act of suicide amounts in effect to a confession that one could not bear to continue living.

This study will attempt a philosophical reconceptualization of youth suicide via close reading of two selected YA novels. The theoretical framework employed for this purpose is taken from Paul Tillich's 1952 opus, *The Courage to Be.* Paul Tillich was a

German-American Christian existential philosopher and theologian. His three major writings, *The Courage to Be* (1952), *Dynamics of Faith* (1957) and *Systematic Theology* (1951-63) defined him as the most influential existential thinker and theologian of the twentieth century. However, the perspective taken in this study is mostly philosophical and not religious. In other words, the theoretical framework adopted will not touch upon the religious parts of Tillich's concepts [the justification for that will be provided in the later parts of this chapter]. As a counterbalance to this loss, the study will supplement the theoretical framework with insights from other existentialists, like Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Camus. These supplementary insights will help strengthen and refine the theoretical framework. They add to the parts of Tillich's philosophy that are under-developed and consequently, sharpen the existential perspective utilized in this study.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Researchers in suicidology have noted a lack of efficacy in current suicide prevention models (Van Orden et al., 2011). Rogers & Soyka (2004) have specifically criticized these "[non-]meaning and contextual-based discussion of suicidality… [as] distancing, marginalizing, and stigmatizing". In essence, they cite the lack of understanding behind the suicide phenomenon to be the issue at hand. In other words, these approaches, while accurate and incisive in their scientific study of the suicidal man, fail to see the existentially humane behind the suicidal act. Therefore, Trogan (2015) who notes that current discourse on suicide are "overly reductive" encourages "philosophical and literary approaches to suicide [because they] open valuable avenues

of exploration into issues of freedom and meaning that are otherwise stifled by those in the mental health community before they can even be raised".

The problem statement is the same for readings on youth suicide and current readings on *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *By the Time You Read This, I'll be Dead* of which detailed elaboration will be provided in the chapter on literature review. They expose two disagreeable situations:

1. An entirely positivistic conception of suicide causes.
2. An imbalanced understanding of suicide meanings.

In the first instance, specialized scientific inquiry admittedly leads to more in-depth knowledge on the subject, but this is achieved at the expense of the more encompassing picture. The principle issue is that every single one of these proffers a hypothesis of the universality of Reason, which is assumed to dictate all human life, can be rationally explained, and anticipate the suicidal person. However, the truth is that every person is his or her own exception from the rule, and thus resists description in such neat categories. Essentially, these scientific studies are dealing with abstract categories of humans rather than living, breathing individuals. To use Baechler's definition, suicide should "denote all behavior that seeks and finds the solution to an *existential* problem by making an attempt on the life of the subject… [and] the problems are termed existential in order to indicate that they concern the whole of the subject's situation and are at the same time internal and external" (Baechler, 1979: 11, 13). By relying on overly reductive approaches, current suicidological research presents a lack of emphasis on how obstruction of individual self-fulfillment could lead to suicide.

Therefore, while environmental, emotional, cognitive, behavioral risk factors and bullying are causes for suicide, such a complex matter needs to consider existential risk factors as well in the discussions (Chisholm & Trent, 2012; Hathaway, 2009; Young & Ward, 2011; Richmond, 2014). Existential concerns such as anxiety have been linked to core human issues and emotional problems that could eventually lead to suicidal ideation (Scott & Weems, 2013: 115). Specifically, it has been shown that there is a positive correlation between existential risk factors and suicidal behavior, in that existential anxiety could play a central role in one's suicide (Scott & Weems, 2013; Roberts & Lamont, 2014). Analysis on portrayal of suicide in literature or literary suicide has often supplemented research on real-life suicide in uncovering the mystery of suicide (see Kwatsha, Peter & Kondowe, 2014). Following this tradition, a literary existential reading of youth suicide can help fill the research gap found in general suicidology and existing literature on the two selected texts. None of the current literature on the two texts addresses the existential risk factors in the characters' suicide. As such, this research will hopefully contribute towards a more holistic understanding of suicide causes.

Before proceeding to the second problem, a discussion on the study's distinction between cause and meaning might prove beneficial. In the frame of this analysis, cause is taken as the passive component and meaning as the active component of the decision making sequence. To borrow an example: suicide, viewed in the conventional or psychological perspective has a cause that is psychological, like depression. The suicide meaning in the same perspective will be one of escape or surrender to the overwhelming causes because the patient uses suicide as an escape. In other words, cause refers to the

factors that contribute to the situation while meaning refers to the actor's forward motivation. Since meaning in this case suggests motion, it can also be understood as the goal. Meaning refers to the element that should prescribe agency to suicide, and it is where the power of choice is actualized. Examined from this perspective, it is not difficult to see how the interpretation of suicide meaning could be limited, and how suicide could take on a defeatist light.

A review of current literature in the two selected texts confirms this observation. Youth suicide is rendered void of agency because it is considered the reactive component or response to bullying (see Rybakova, Piotrowski & Harper, 2013; Hathaway, 2009; Young & Ward, 2011; Richmond, 2014; Pytash, Morgan & Batchelor, 2013). Suicide arises as a response to pain of bullying (Richmond, 2014) and as such, lacks power and agency. Chisholm & Trent (2012) attest that suicide does not display transformative agency because it fails to stand up to bullying, conversely, it is overwhelmed by bullying. Phrases like "failure to cope", "self-destructive", "illness", "jeopardy", "self-diminishing", "malicious … downward spiral" found in existing literature on the selected texts that are used to describe Hannah and Daelyn's suicide construct a meaning that is positively passive and defeatist (Young & Ward, 2011; Chisholm & Trent, 2012; Tehseem & Ali, 2015; Richmond, 2014; Hathaway, 2009; Pytash, Morgan & Batchelor, 2013). The suicidal self is not affirmed but defeated via negation. Consequently, suicide is framed in such a way that it lacks self-affirmation. The issue here is that this singular understanding of suicide fails to provide a holistic picture to the phenomenon. Without an excursion into the act of affirmation contained within suicide, it essentially eclipses half of the cause.

This imbalance in the understanding of suicide meaning thereby suggests that this passive impression of suicide is the sole impression that holds today. Majority of current literature in both general suicidology and existing literature on the two selected texts fails to entertain the other possible interpretations of suicide, especially those that point to its proactivity, agency and self-affirmation. Holland once said, "Suicide is still a human act. It embodies a **choice** among alternatives made through the same principles of human motivation as other choices, even though this is a choice to end choice itself" (Holland, 1977: 285). Holland raises a relevant point in pushing for a treatment of suicide that places it as on par with other human choices, because current suicidological research is all factors and little to none motivation. This reluctance to treat suicide as a free choice probably stems from the fact that suicide simply seems un-human or irrational. However, one could argue that suicide's severity gives suicide its characteristics as a choice. Frankly, nobody would voluntarily die for any reason and as such, many human concerns are encapsulated in this choice to end choice itself, as surmised by Baechler (1979), suicide is a very conscious human solution to an existential problem. For the sake of furthering our understanding of suicide, it could be beneficial to perceive suicide as a choice, for it remedies the lack of focus on the meaning of suicide within suicidology. There is but one study in existing literature on *Thirteen Reasons Why* that employs this approach to understanding youth suicide, namely Parton's 2015 study. It suggests revenge as the purpose that is affirmed through Hannah's suicide. Hannah may be portrayed as a harpy but she is one harpy that uses suicide as a means to an end instead of being an end in itself. Exploration of the vengeful affirmation behind Hannah's suicide points to Parton's intention to tackle the

meaning of her suicide. Nevertheless, a reductionist approach to Hannah's characterization mars Parton's study for it leads to an under-developed appreciation of her suicide's overall meaning. Therefore, even with the inclusion of Parton's study, current literature on the selected texts still does not truly address the significance of self-affirmation in the suicides of the two main characters, Hannah and Daelyn. In short, previous studies on these novels fail to consider that suicide could paradoxically be viewed as a form of self-affirmation if its terms of reference encompass the existential realm.

1.2 Research Objectives

The goal of this study is to provide a reconceptualization of youth suicide via existential readings of Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Peters' *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead*. This will be done by achieving the objectives of establishing anxiety as cause for suicide, and concurrently interpreting suicide as Tillichian courage.

The defining feature of Tillich's existentialism, which makes it perfect for the current attempt at reconceptualizing youth suicide, is its sense of system, something that is rare within existentialism. Pattison has noted a consistency throughout Tillich's oeuvre which is his "commitment to the idea that theology [philosophy] has to be systematic, in the sense that every theological [philosophical] statement had to make sense in relation to every other and that this requires theology [philosophy] to develop a specific structure and shape" (Pattison, 2015: 7). Existentialism is a difficult philosophy to define because the idea of an authentic man is different for each existentialist and more often than not, the respective views are contradictory. *The Courage to Be* (1952)

comes much later than most major existential writings and the book itself shows that Tillich's philosophy is greatly inspired by those that precede him. One of the major elements that sets Tillich apart from other existentialists is his philosophy's sense of system. His concepts are arranged and explained in such a structured manner that it is possible for him to mediate the many differing existential perspectives that came before him. Besides being conducive for a streamlined analysis, Tillich's structural way of theorizing allows for easy additions of supplementary inputs from other existentialists. This is possible too because of Tillich's all-encompassing system of philosophy. Ironically, Tillich's broad scope in his philosophical theology is a point that often invites criticism (Grimshaw, 2015: 114-5). In terms of the current thesis, it is Tillichian in the sense that it uses Tillich's philosophy as a framing resource for a more detailed existential analysis of youth suicide in literature.

The first objective of the study is therefore to establish Tillichian anxiety as the cause for the characters' suicide. This approach addresses the problem head-on by acknowledging the existential risk factors in their suicide. After all, feelings of insecurity, guilt and emptiness are common features among stories of suicide victims. Furthermore, both Hannah and Daelyn have exhibited all of these concerns (see Hathaway, 2009; Richmond, 2014). Current study will look at how these affect their suicidal behavior. It treats anxiety as a pertinent cause to one's suicide.

The second objective of this study is to establish the characters' suicide as signs of Tillichian courage. Within the framework of existentialism, suicide is viewed as a courageous expression of self-affirmation in spite of the attendant anxiety. Interpreting suicide as self-affirmation allows a more holistic understanding of suicide meaning. The

aim is to see suicide as a proactive choice aimed at self-affirmation. It is an argument that people are motivated to commit suicide because it affirms their presence, beliefs and worth in the world. It is one perspective that is admittedly unpopular but variations of it have been attempted before to explain non-adolescent fictional suicides (see Adley, 2013; Lopang, 2014; Teixeira, 2014). There is no reason for this perspective to be limited to suicides of a certain age. After all, it would uncover new nuances of meaning to Hannah and Daelyn's suicide. It challenges the current manner in which Hannah and Daelyn's suicide is framed. The introduction of self-affirmation as the meaning of suicide helps rebalance the skewed portrayal of suicide.

1.3 Scope and Limitations

The present study is limited to only two YA novels. There are three justifications behind the choice of the two selected texts. They are their true-to-life portrayals, acclaimed recognition and contemporary relevance.

Both novels are based on real persons and events. Asher constructed his novel around discussions with a close relative of his who had attempted suicide (Asher, 2007) and Peters penned her novel using letters she received from helpless young readers who are subjected to myriad harassments at home and at school (Peters, n.d.). This lends them authenticity, which increases their relatability to readers and reliability as convincing portrayals of youth suicide.

Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* has won awards such as International Reading Association Young Adults' Choice List, Best Books for Young Adults YALSA, and Kirkus Reviews Editors Choice. Other than that, researchers have cited *Thirteen*

Reasons Why's "compelling double narrative, rich use of literary devices, and the multimedia supplements" (Chisholm & Trent, 2012: 76) as well as its "narrative structure … [that allows us] to see suicide from the angle of the deceased as well as those around her" (Hathaway, 2009: 67) as incentives to use Asher's novel to dissect youth suicide. Peters' novel is no less prominent in its achievements, for it is acknowledged through being listed in ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, ALA Popular Paperback for YA and Chicago's Public Library's best of the Best List 2010 (Peters, n.d.). Young & Ward (2011: 91) highlighted *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead*'s plotline as instrumental in its ability to address a serious societal issue because it makes it "easy to understand why she [Daelyn] has decided to give up on life".

Both texts are written in the new millennium, they thus feature a setting that best express the perspective of disillusioned millennials. The texts address issues surrounding suicide that are of immediate relevance to the generation y. As a testament of its popularity and resonance with gen y teens, *Thirteen Reasons Why* has appeared consistently on the New York Times bestsellers list for the past nine years. It even landed a 13-part series rights with Netflix, which is produced by pop star, Selena Gomez. The reception was so positive that the series was in the middle of shooting its second season, highlighting the topic's contemporary relevance. As for *By the Time you Read This, I'll be dead,* while it has done reasonably well on the bestseller's list, it did not reach the same level of popularity as some of Peters' other books or *Thirteen Reasons Why*. This would explain its lack of exposure among the public and in academic study when compared to Asher's text.

Since the current study focuses on youth suicide, the selected texts fall within the genre of YA literature, and this consequently means that the study is limited to investigation of youth suicide. Also important is the fact that both Hannah as well as Daelyn are still in their teen years when they commit suicide. Both of the authors are Americans, where Asher is from California and Peters from New York. The characters are also of American or European backgrounds (Asher, 2007; Peters, 2011). Both main characters, Hannah and Daelyn attend schools with western or specifically American curricula, therefore the picture of youth culture and youth suicide obtained is limited to a western or specifically American worldview. Lastly, the observations on suicide are limited to the ones found in two selected texts.

Figures have shown there is a great discrepancy in the way the two genders approach the problem of suicide. While women are more likely to have and act on suicidal thoughts, the majority of death from suicide is committed by men. This is an unresolved paradox in suicide research known as the "gender paradox of suicidal behavior" (Freeman & Freeman, 2015). Nevertheless, this study will not actually contribute to unraveling the paradox, as the research findings would be limited to the suicides of two female teens in the selected texts.

Since suicide here is defined as the intention to make an attempt on the life of the subject, both attempted and successful suicides will be taken into analysis. There is no need to differentiate the two, as both showcase attempts on the subject's life. While the analytic focus is on suicide, it is never an isolated event. Other factors will be included when necessary as supporting details.

This study is limiting itself to only two types of courage instead of all the three provided by Tillich's theory; namely courage to be as oneself and courage to be as a part. The third form of courage is concept of courage to accept acceptance, which is self-affirmation grounded in the belief of Being i.e. God (Tillich, 1952). The reason for this exclusion is because both texts are not in any sense of the word biblical or ecclesiastical, and none of the characters demonstrates courage to accept acceptance. In other words, this thesis is only focusing on the philosophical aspects of Tillich's philosophical theology. Suicide, as an extreme form of courage, grounds itself in either the twisted machination of self or compulsion of one's group, it does not signify an acceptance that comes from an equilibrium of both poles and "a courage to be which is beyond the threat of nonbeing" (Tillich, 1952: 155). In other words, courage in suicide treats nonbeing in an adversarial light while courage to accept acceptance believes that "being includes nonbeing but nonbeing does not prevail against it… Nonbeing belongs to being; it cannot be separated from it" (Tillich, 1952: 179). Since suicide is never represented in courage to accept acceptance, it is irrelevant to include it here, as it does not contribute towards answering the research objectives.

The concept of being and nonbeing has a long and contentious history within philosophy because being, and by extension, nonbeing is the most vague and hard to define metaphysical term. For example, Sartre defined it in terms of "for-itself", the free consciousness and "in-itself", the world of inert matters; Heidegger defined it through the phenomenological analysis of human existence (Dasien) within the confines of his historical and temporal character (Korab-Karpowicz, n.d.; Wolin, 2018). In Tillich's case, he believed being can be elucidated through the understanding of courage. An

individual with courage knows what among his values to affirm and to negate, and consequently, "courage can show us what being is, and being can show us what courage is" (Tillich, 1952, p. 2). Tillich ultimately related courage to self-affirmation mediated through the power of being-itself, or the "Ground of Being", however, since this thesis doesn't interest itself with the religious aspect of Tillich's philosophy, for the sake of this thesis, being is defined as continuous self-affirmation vis-à-vis courage and anxiety. Anxiety is related to courage because courage is "self-affirmation… in spite of that which tends to prevent the self from affirming itself" (Tillich, 1952, p. 32). If being is described in terms of self-affirmation, nonbeing is thus, the element that tends to prevent the self from affirming itself, and anxiety is the awareness of nonbeing as part of being. Specific to this study, the analysis will look at elements of nonbeing that threaten the characters' self-affirmation to cause suicidal ideation, and how the characters' suicides help overcome their anxiety to affirm the characters' selves.

The last limitation is related to the unique circumstances of the term existentialism especially in relation to its two offshoot sister-philosophies, existential philosophy and existential psychology-psychotherapy, and how this thesis ultimately leans towards a philosophical analysis. First, the demarcation between the two sister-philosophy is more often than not a matter of formality. For example, were one to look at Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, a prime example of existential psychotherapy and Nietzsche's existential philosophy, it is not hard to discern their similarities, not least in the concept of will. Logotherapy centers on the concept of will to meaning, which states that "man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life" (Frankl, 2005: 355), while Nietzsche (1954)'s will speaks of the ability to soar above the abyss of

nothingness through spirited overcoming of the self to beget authenticity. The similarity between the two is the importance of meaningful self-affirmation to the human experience, and that reduplicates itself in Tillich's concept of courage. The line separating the two sister-philosophy is fuzzy because of their shared roots, and the terms are thus used quite interchangeably across both fields (see Roberts & Lamont, 2014, Scott & Weems, 2013). This is even more true for Tillich whose philosophical-theological writings have been noted to show influence of depth psychology and psychoanalysis (Pattison, 2015). Nevertheless, the element that ultimately tips this thesis towards a philosophical leaning is its overall focus. To borrow Robbins' definition, "philosophy asks the question of being. It is a thinking of an indeterminate origin and end" (Robbins, 2015: 161). It differs from psychology and its aim of answering. An aim which Tillich highlights in the following excerpt from *The Courage to Be*, "medicine, above all psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, often claims that healing anxiety is its task because all anxiety is pathological" (Tillich, 1952: 70). In other words, this thesis withholds judgment from the act of suicide since it does not start with the presumption that suicide is a form of societal or psychological sickness. It instead attempts to explore existential dimensions that previously went un-highlighted in discussions of suicide.

1.4 Definition of Terms

The key terms that will be used throughout this study include suicidology, existentialism, being, nonbeing, anxiety and courage. The definitions of these terms are given as follows and they are applied throughout the thesis.

1.4.1 Suicidology

Suicidology, according to the Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary, refers to the scientific study of suicide and suicide prevention. It is an umbrella term that encapsulates many different disciplines and fields. The two primary fields though are sociology and psychology, while other fields include literature, nursing et cetera. Suicidology concerns itself with research topics like suicide prevention, suicide understanding and suicide bereavement. The term, suicidology was coined by the American psychologist, Edwin S. Shneidman, who found the American Association of Suicidology in 1968.

1.4.2 Existentialism

There are many branching and often conflicting schools within existentialism, but the unifying central aspect of the existential philosophical movement has always been a focus on the subjectivity of human existence and a move away from the rationalism and objectivity of human essence (Barrett, 1977). Contrary to philosophical schools like rationalism that precedes it, existentialism has a bottom-up approach, because it believes that philosophical thought begins with the human subject and human condition. Existentialism investigates the interaction between the free agent of man and the meaningless world that accosts him at every turn. It studies the weight of individual choice and consequently one's responsibility towards oneself against a seemingly meaningless universe.

1.4.3 Being

From the perspective of grammar, being simply means a series of to be's, a continuous effort to carve out existence out of emptiness, or to use O'Neill's definition, being is defined at the most basic level as "the inclination to take form" (O'Neill, 2008: 55). This implies dynamicity, and the implication is in accordance with Tillich's view on being, one that is replete with ambiguity and conflict. Tillich's understanding of being differs from other metaphysical conceptualization of being due to the dynamicity that was accorded to it. Existential being is described in terms of conflict because the polarity of being and nonbeing is out of balance (Pattison, 2015: 22). If being is described in terms of a process or becoming, life is thus a constant project of self-affirmation and this is why Tillich (1952, p. 2, 32) believed, being can be elucidated through the mediation on courage because courage is about self-affirmation.

1.4.4 Nonbeing

For Tillich, nonbeing is developed in a dialectical fashion against being. It means while being and non-being are essentially equal, being maintains ontological priority and nonbeing relies on its support to achieve validity, the assertion is that "without being, a concept of nonbeing is meaningless" (O'Neill, 2008: 56). In other words, nonbeing is the limitation to the creative forces of being, and the imbalance between the two is the element that is responsible for the fallen-ness and estrangement of humanity's existence. To expand upon O'Neill's definition once more, being is to be, to take form, thus conversely, nonbeing is "the inclination to resist taking form" (O'Neill, 2008: 55). Nonbeing is therefore being's finitude.

1.4.5 Anxiety

While there are nuances of difference between existential and psychological anxiety, a general definition can be applied to both. For example, psychoanalyst, Karen Horney wrote that, "what characterizes anxiety … [is] a quality of diffuseness and uncertainty" (cited in Hanscomb, 1997), and that is true of both forms of anxiety. The difference between the two is anxiety's focus for it is psychological for psychologists while it is metaphysical for existentialists. The meaning of anxiety for the purpose of this thesis borrows Tillich's (1952, p. 35) definition, "anxiety is finitude, experienced as one's own finitude". In other words, existential anxiety is the awareness of the intrinsic nature of nonbeing as part of being. Nonbeing confronts the individual man and separates him from the comfort of a rationalized, familiar world. This loss of universals throws man into an awareness where everything appears gratuitous and superfluous, "intimidated by the unexpected sight of the opened abyss of human existence, man finds himself lost in a world which dangerously closes in upon him from all sides, and he laments the seeming absurdity of his situation" (Reinhardt, 1952: 9). Tillich (1952, p. 52) identifies three types of anxiety: (a) anxiety of fate and death, which describes the indefiniteness of our existence; (b) anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which describes the lack of ultimate concern and; (c) anxiety of guilt and condemnation, which describes man's burden of responsibility towards oneself.

1.4.6 Courage

Courage, for Tillich is at its core, about self-affirmation. The inspiration behind this central aspect of Tillichian courage can be traced through his referencing of

Spinoza's *Ethics* (cited in Tillich, 1952: 20): "courage to be is … the endeavor, wherewith everything endeavors to persist in its own being … It is its *essential actualis*". Tillich also referred to Nietzsche's virtue of self as courageous life, exemplified in this quote from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* "And this secret spake Life herself unto me. 'Behold,' said she, 'I am that which must ever surpass itself' (cited in Tillich, 1952: 28-9)". Courage then would mean the overcoming of nonbeing, which prevents one from becoming what one desires to be. Courage is self-affirmation in spite of anxiety. Courage, according to Tillich (1952), is possible through power grounded in the collective, oneself or divinity. Courage to be as a part is the act of affirming oneself as a part of an embracing whole; courage to be as oneself is the act of affirming oneself in its individual selfhood; and courage to accept acceptance is the act of affirming oneself grounded in the power of being-itself. It must be noted that in the context of this analysis, courage differs from the conventional courage in the sense that it carries no moral connotation within this study's framework. Meaning that, if the act of suicide by the fictional characters is viewed as an act of courage as a result of the textual analysis, it does not in any way imply that suicide is an admirable act, nor does it suggest that the researcher approves of it.

1.5 Asher and Peters within the YA Genre

Before achieving success with *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Jay Asher worked in bookstores and libraries. His debut novel in 2007 however, propelled him into the literary spotlight as the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* achieved both commercial and critical success. The book racked up multiple awards and was a major hit among the teenage demographic both in America and worldwide. Since then, he has co-written a

book with Printz-Honor winner Carolyn Mackler entitled *The Future of Us,* which has also inspired a silver screen adaptation under Warner Bros, while his third novel, *What Light* was released to bookstores in October 2016 (Asher, n.d.). He is now a much sought-after keynote speaker on topics such as anti-bullying, suicide prevention and creative writing (redbrickagency, n.d.), indicating that his fiction writing has led to him being viewed as something of an authority on such young adult-related issues.

Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* is a YA novel, which details the story of the protagonist, Clay Jensen who one day found a mysterious parcel on his doorstep. Inside were a series of tapes recorded by Hannah Baker, his crush, who committed suicide by overdosing on pills a couple of weeks before he received the parcel. The tapes detailed the reasons for Hannah's suicide and he was one of the recipients because incidentally, he was one of the reasons why. The plot then follows Jensen on an emotional journey through locales around town that were relevant to Hannah's suicide while listening to her describe the reasons for her suicide. Through the tapes, the readers along with Clay are offered a glimpse into Hannah's life before her decision to end it. These include her runs-in with instances of bullying, betrayals, and episodes of sexual coercion. After finishing the tapes, Clay was to pass them on to the next name listed (or the next reason why).

Smileyblondee (2015), *The Guardian*'s children's book site teen reviewer praised *Thirteen Reasons Why* for its poignant portrayal of characters and sensitive handling of controversial issues, like bullying and youth suicide. The fleshed out characters in Asher's book made her "fe[el] connected not just to Clay but to Hannah – I think we all go through certain points in our lives, especially as teenagers, when even

the littlest things matter or get us down" (smileyblondee, 2015). She felt Hannah's plight was understandable and sympathetic. Another reviewer on *The Guardian*, Kathryn Hughes (2010), despite praising Asher's depiction of Hannah to be accurately illustrative of an adolescent female's experience, found Hannah to be not so much a soul in distress as one that is harpy-like and vengeful, a person who "takes pleasure in naming and shaming the people whom she blames for her end". These contradicting readings of Hannah illustrate how closely Asher's characterization of Hannah recreates the complex psyche of a suicidal person.

Similar to Asher, Julie Ann Peters is also a YA literature author, who has also dabbled in writing children's stories. Compared to Asher, her literary oeuvre is more extensive and the spot she occupies in the YA scene is slighty more niched. She is the acclaimed author of numerous LGBT-themed YA novels, with some exceptions interspersed in between her other novels. Her most notable book critically was *Luna*, released in 2004, about a transsexual teen. The book was a National Book Award finalist. Since then, she has become a spokesperson for the LGBT community. Many of her subsequent books feature LGBT characters, and most importantly, as one critic mentions, presents them as "real, multidimensional people–as good, but also as flawed, as any others" (Mombian, 2007). These include among others *Between Mom and Jo* (2006), a story of a child trapped between a divorced lesbian couple and *Lies my Girlfriend Told Me* (2014), a YA romance novel between three gay female teens. In 2010, she published a novel about teen suicide entitled *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead.*

By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead features Daelyn Rice, a teenage girl struggling with suicidal tendencies. The story begins right after her most recent failed

suicide attempt. After being rescued, she comes across a suicide-themed website called Through-the-Light which she believes could help her succeed in committing suicide by providing myriad assistance, such as a detailed review of different suicide methods. As the story progresses, Daelyn's virtual life becomes increasingly entangled within the website, but in real life, she finds herself being pestered by a boy named Santana. As Daelyn reveals more of her past on the website, including episodes of fat camp, bullying and sexual coercion while moving closer towards the assigned date of her suicide, her path becomes inadvertently more intertwined with Santana's in real life. She is eventually led into the knowledge that he has been fighting a daily struggle against a fatal disease. In the end, Peters opts for an open-ended ending to the story of the girl who wished to die, and the boy who wished to live. For the purpose of the analysis in this thesis, the selective interpretation is that Daelyn ended up following through with Through-the-Light, and ends up committing suicide. For the researcher, the last sentence of the book, where she states, "with determination and purpose, I head into the light" (Peters, 2010: 200) implies that Daelyn goes through with Through-the-Light. Furthermore, the final two chapters show that despite all the supposedly positive influences Daelyn had received, she still faced much pressure as she remained "groping in the darkness" (Peters, 2010: 191). This points to suicide as the most logical conclusion. Another textual evidence supporting this interpretation can be found again in the last chapter, in the sentence "there is no more Daelyn Rice" (Peters, 2010: 199) which communicates her desire to erase her life. The most direct argument in support of this reading can be gleaned from the book title itself. *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead* implies that Daelyn did use suicide to end her story. It is worth noting that there

are many parallels between Daelyn's story and real-life digitally assisted suicides that are witnessing a worrisome rising trend (see Luxton, June & Fairall, 2012). One should not discount Through-the-Light's validity and relevance to this issue because despite being a fictional invention, Through-the-Light remains "a compilation of all the information I [Peters] found on the Web about how to commit suicide" (Book Reporter, 2010). Its implication on suicidal ideation could mirror those of its real-life counterparts and this insight should not be overlooked. In this way, this study may also provide invaluable insights into digital technology and the influence that electronic communication can have on suicidal ideation. This imparts additional significance to this part of the analysis, which aims to explore such web-communities as sources of possible suicidal courage to be as a part (applying the Tillichian concept). Lastly, while optimists cite the presence of Santana as an influence that could possibly deter Daelyn from committing suicide, all parties agree that her obsession with Through-the-Light does not coincide with this assumption; if anything, it exacerbates her suicidal ideation. In other words, neither reading invalidates web-communities as possible foundation of suicidal courage to be as a part. Therefore, these reasons both story-wise and research-wise encourage and do not take away from a realistic reading of *By the Time you Read this, I'll be Dead.*

Most reviews of *By the Time you Read This, I'll be Dead* discussed the influence of technology namely, the suicide-themed website Through-the-Light on Daelyn's suicide (Kirkus, 2010; Publishers Weekly, n.d.). However, none of the current literature on this text has investigated the influence of technology on the suicide landscape, an issue that is becoming increasingly pertinent to our society these days (Luxton, June &