

PURPOSELESSNESS IN POVERTY

How to find a purpose in life: an essay on male socialisation and suicidal traits in Jonah Hill's *Mid90s*. Content warning: Suicide, self-harm, domestic violence. By Leo McFaul.



Jonah Hill's *Mid90s* follows the young protagonist Stevie (Sunny Suljic) around Los Angeles as he finds brotherhood and belonging through skateboarding as an escape from his abusive home life. Like many, the boys struggle with finding purpose and making a way for themselves in life. Fourth grade (Ryder McLaughlin) wants to make a movie but is laughed at by his friends, adjusting his dreams to fit what's expected of him - "I'll

probably just work with my dad or something.” Meanwhile, Ray (Na-Kel Smith) wants to be a professional skateboarder, and F*cksh*t† (Olan Prenatt) just wants to have a good time. We see themes like self-harm, abuse, neglect and substance abuse as we watch the boys build their foundation of being within a peer-centred skating community.

Teenage rebellion and social delinquency are standard tropes of American youth films and culture. They often centralise moments of personal crisis and transition, which is exactly what we see in *Mid90s*. The protagonist has escaped a world of abuse and entered a world of acceptance, which he does not realise is bad for his health. As outsiders, we see that the drugs and alcohol heighten his emotions and cause him to make poor decisions, but he thrives from the adrenaline. All of his actions become extreme outbursts of emotion and inner turmoil, making his character both relatable and confusing at the same time. He hits himself, attacks his family, gets drunk and eventually tries to strangle himself with a game controller. It's clear to see that he has grown up viewing violence as a coping mechanism as he experiences physical domestic violence. Not only is he dealing with this abuse, but also suffering the effects of poverty, which all puts him at a higher risk for suicidality (Dupéré, 2009, pp. 1295).

His behaviour also aligns with the warning signs for suicide, along with suicide ideation, substance abuse, purposelessness, anger, a trapped feeling, hopelessness, withdrawal, anxiety, recklessness and mood change (Winstead, 2014, p. 811). Whilst I am focusing on purposelessness, we see practically all of these traits in Stevie.

We see his recklessness and mood changes as he takes great risks in skateboarding, such as when he attempts to cross the gap in the building and falls and hits his head. He sacrifices his body in hopes of gaining respect and encouragement that he lacks in his home life. It's within skating culture to be reckless and careless. Things like drug-taking, tattoos, freedom and thrill-seeking are staples of skate culture.

Their status in the friendship hierarchy seems to depend on skating ability, age and smoker status. However, Ray's character stays true to himself in his kindness and refusal of drugs, and he is rewarded. The film shows us how pointless these things are, as Ray does not crumble under peer pressure and ultimately comes out on top. Meanwhile, Stevie begins rebelling heavily by smoking, drinking and making careless, risky decisions in both skating and sexual advances. He seeks approval. Yet, apparent from the skateboard he uses and how he is treated, he is a child. Not only is the actor for Stevie contrasted to the rest by his small stature, but he exudes innocence, asking questions like "what's a black person?" and believing Ruben (Gio Galicia) when he says that saying 'thankyou' is 'gay'.



The reputation he has built for himself is then damaged by his mother, causing him to be embarrassed and rely even more heavily on these friends in a desperate attempt at independence.

From a personal perspective, I progressed the most in skateboarding when I lost all hope for the future. I was not necessarily suicidal, but right before the breaking point, when life became meaningless, I only wanted to feel something. The pain and hopelessness ultimately become fearlessness because physical pain becomes less of a barrier if you are already numb or in pain. Skateboarding is where many of us find our purpose because it allows us to make progress, motivates us to improve, and encourages friendships, community, and respect. We know that these things are what we need to be healthy as humans. We see this in most psychological theories, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) which explains it well:



A piece of media that I think encapsulates this feeling of carelessness is Ricky Gervais' *Afterlife*. He has no reason to live after his wife dies other than to feed his dog, so he becomes rude to everyone. He says, "If I become an arsehole, and I do and say what the fuck I want for as long as I want, and then when it all gets too much, I can always kill myself." - it's a similar feeling. If I hurt myself skating, it's fine, nothing matters. If things get bad, I'll simply kill myself. If I were dead, I'd have nothing. Therefore I have nothing to lose. It is not necessarily a lack of hopelessness - Stevie wants to progress in skating, as anyone who is working hard at something wants more. However, it's a coping mechanism and a desperate attempt at self-preservation. Everyone craves fulfilment in life, and if there is an off-balance somewhere, like what Stevie is going through, the brain attempts to balance it to cope.

Overall, I looked to find my purpose in writing this essay. The film presents purpose as something that can be found, even for a young, poverty-stricken boy. It's not a romance film where the protagonist finds happiness in a person. There's no crime scene that needs solving or a clear solution that is revealed at the end of the film. Instead, Hill illustrates a lonely and particularly difficult adolescence, and his trauma is his rite of passage. Skating and friendships become his passion and reason to survive. The man that Stevie arguably finds the most hope in, Ray, says to him, "you literally take the hardest hits out of anybody I've seen in my entire life, you know you don't have to do that, right?", but what if he does?

Bibliography

Afterlife (2019) Dir. Ricky Gervais.

Damon, W. (2008) *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life*. New York: Free Press Publishing.

Dupéré, V., Leventhal, T., & Lacourse, É. (2009). 'Neighborhood poverty and suicidal thoughts and attempts in late adolescence', in *Psychological Medicine*, 39(8), pp. 1295-1306.

Marcia, J. E. (1966). 'Development and validation of ego-identity status', in *Journal of Personality and social psychology*, 3(5), pp. 551.

Maslow, A. H. (1943) 'Hierarchy of Needs', in *Psychological Review*, 50, pp. 370-396.

Schmidt, M. P. (2002). 'Coming of age in American cinema: Modern youth films as genre', Available at:
<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/coming-age-american-cinema-modern-youth-films-as/docview/275666442/se-2>
(Accessed 03/06/23).

Winstead, D. K. (2014). 'Suicide in Men: How Men Differ From Women in Expressing Their Distress', *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 203(10), pp. 811.