

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Act One — Scene One

The play opens with Herman Howards ordering a fellow student to “oink.” Why do you think Herman chose to force Susan to “oink” and “squeal” like a pig? By making his victim like an animal, how is Herman mimicking the behavior of his own tormentors? (p. 11)

Lax states that “We’re giving them [kids] a fast-food, short-term, downsized, techno-driven world. It’s cold. And they can’t make any sense of it.” Do you agree with Lax’s comment that society contributes to bullying and “high school terrorism”? (p. 11)

On page 12, Lax says, “They might still allow you a momentary break from the constant assault of ‘Buy this, use that, feel this, and sell that.’ “ Discuss this statement. Do you agree with this description of contemporary culture? Why or why not? Who is “they?”

Lax tells viewers that “we’re going to explore what happens when you disregard human life,” referring to Herman’s massacre of 46 people. Why do you think it was seemingly so easy for Herman to commit such a horrible act of violence? How did the relentless bullying he endured contribute to his decision to murder innocent people? (p. 12)

While being interviewed, Herman’s friend Timmy claims, “Some people are just angry. That’s the way it is.” Do you agree with this idea? Do you think Herman was entitled to his anger? How could he have vented his anger in a healthy way? (p. 13)

In the same interview, the school guard says, “There’s no way someone close to that boy could not have seen this coming. I don’t know what’s wrong with his mother, but it must be something for her not to have seen the signs.” Do you think it is possible to foresee an event such as Herman planned and executed? What might have prevented Herman from going through with his attack on the school? How can you help a student who you know is being bullied? (p. 13)

The school guard continues, claiming, “The kid was going to snap. Anyone with a set of eyes should’ve been able to see that. Those children could have been nicer to that boy, maybe all this wouldn’t have gone down. What is the difference between being *nice* and being *kind*? Why does kindness matter? (p. 14)

In the interview scene with Sheyla Duvall, Gail Howards says that she made her job a “top priority.” Do you think her choices contributed in any way to Herman’s actions? Do you think it is fair to blame a parent for the acts of his/her child? Do you think Herman would have committed his crime regardless of whether his mother was more present in his life? Why do you think people rush to assign blame in the aftermath of tragic events? How is blaming an individual easier than looking at other factors that may have caused the problem? (p. 33)

Herman watched violent movies and played video games that rewarded the player for killing as many people as possible. When asked if video games have “numbed” him to violence, Herman doesn’t understand the question. Later he claims that playing violent games have made him “a good shot.” Do you think that exposure to violent media content (Internet, games, film, television, music) can desensitize a person to real-life violence? Do you think there is a direct link between violent media content and teen violence? (p. 20)

After Lax asks Herman if he had been picked on at school, Herman responds, “Every day. The jocks call me names ‘cause I’m small. They’d yank my underwear up my ass. Push me around. Shit like that.” How did the constant verbal, relational (social isolation, rumor-spreading), and physical abuse perpetrated on Herman slowly chip away at his dignity? How did being bullied cause Herman to become more and more isolated? (p. 19)

During the interview, Herman says, “...there is no way in hell those people weren’t going to get what they deserved.” In your opinion, what do bullies deserve as just consequences for their actions? What makes your suggestions just or right? (p. 26)

## Act Two – Scene One

Why does Herman refer to himself as a “superstar” ? How did the bullying he received at school feed his desire to be noticed and to videotape the massacre of his fellow students and teachers? (p. 32)

## Scene Two

In the exchange between Gail Howards and Sheyla Duvall, the issue of parental responsibility comes into question. Do you think that parental monitoring or forbidding the use of the Internet and other media might prevent kids from committing violent crimes? (p. 32-35)

During an interview session with Lax, Herman says, “When you’re a kid, you have to find the one thing you care about more than anything else and stick to it, ‘cause that’s all you got.” Why do you think Herman would hold this as his personal philosophy? Do you agree or disagree with Herman’s statement? Do you think this a common belief held by many bullied kids? (p. 36)

Herman describes the worst thing that happened to him at school is when two students corner him in the school lavatory and forced his head into the toilet. Mr. Phelps, a teacher, catches the bullies in the act, briefly lectures them, then sends them off to the principal’s office to “tell her what you’ve done.” Do you think the manner in which Mr. Phelps dealt with the bullies was effectual or ineffectual? Why? Could the situation have been handled differently? How do you think the bullies should have been

reprimanded for their behavior? How does Mr. Phelps' comment about Herman being a "nerd" promote the labeling of kids? (p. 38)

Herman is clearly a victim of verbal bullying at the hands of many students. Marsha, the school's "hottest" girl, talks to Herman. Later, a friend calls her away and refers to Herman as "Freakshow." How does verbal abuse whittle away at one's human dignity and self-worth? How does Susan and Marsha's lack of empathy contribute to Herman's eventual breakdown? On this same page, a stage direction reads: *Marsha lingers for a moment, looking helplessly at Herman*. Do you think that Marsha's response to Susan was driven by peer-pressure to conform to the values of her social group (*the popular kids*)? Explain. (p. 42)

Senator John Cox states, "There is a virus in our children. A virus more contagious than we know. This virus is a tendency towards violence as a solution to their problems." Do you agree with this idea of a virus of violence? How is bullying, left unchecked, similar to a virus? (p. 44)

Herman has a recurring nightmare that he describes to Lax: "Those assholes. They come back, and I shoot them again. They come back again. I keep shooting. It's like I have unlimited bullets and they have unlimited lives. We keep going and going, No reason. No goal. We just keep going." How is Herman's dream a metaphor for the experiences he suffered at the hands of bullies, and a preview of what he will eventually do? (p. 47)

Herman explains to Lax that "people needed a lesson." Finally, he concludes that, "Maybe they learned to be a little nice to each other." Do you think massacres that are executed by bullied kids teach society to be "nicer?" What can be done at a school level to teach kids to be kind to one another? Is it possible to teach kindness? Empathy? Whose responsibility is it to teach values to young people? (p. 48)

Herman goes on to say that his actions were "...the only way to get you to pay attention to me." Do you think that if Herman had not been incessantly bullied he would have gone to such extreme measures to make himself noticed? He continues by saying, "I wasn't about to go through life being unnoticed," and " You have to do the unspeakable if you want to be noticed." How did bullies contribute to Herman feeling *invisible*? (p. 49)