Dialed Up Too High: The Aesthetics of Excessive Suffering in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*

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Abstract

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This thesis is interested in examining the rhetorical device of textual excess and how its use in Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 novel *A Little Life* complicates plausibility, insofar as it concerns the genre of trauma fiction. I will specifically tend to the tension between the aesthetic objectives of *A Little Life* and how they conflict with the ethics of representation by defining "aesthetic" interests as those invested in the lavish glamours of the book and contrasting them with the aesthetic of suffering which constitutes Jude St. Francis's being, and consequently bleeds into the rest of the novel. *A Little Life* is both renown and reviled for its famously distressed protagonist and his continuous misfortunes, such that it has joined the chorus of literature that favors pushing fiction past its textual and moral limits—not only was it published in a climate in which the preoccupation around authorial responsibility persists, but its events take this concern to a nearly unprecedented extreme. The result of this aesthetic marriage is both frustrating and urgent, in that Jude's textual treatment subverts the reader's expectations around believability as a spectator to his myriad abuses. Ultimately, even though the novel's aesthetic choices trigger major morality points concerning the text's commitment to describing and prescribing pain, the trigger itself is necessary in that it generates critical questions on representation and therefore what *is* represented is grounds for critiquing the nature and narrative of recovery from physical and psychological trauma.

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A special thanks to Dr. Nicola Nixon, who first picked up on my interest in *A Little Life* during my time as an undergraduate, and whose willingness to engage in many conversations concerning the novel's subject matter propelled my interest in facing the challenges that the novel offers. She is the first professor I had who dared to include this book on a syllabus, and I hope to follow in her footsteps.

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Introduction

"Here and there in the vast expanse of literary texts, one comes upon an isolated play, an exceptional film, an extraordinary novel that is not just incidentally but centrally and uninterruptedly about the nature of bodily pain," writes author and scholar Elaine Scarry in her major treatise on the fundamental ir/repair that art offers when it comes to depicting the experience of bodily pain. Though the aforementioned extraordinary novel has become something of a canon and has already been published a few times under various titles and by different authors, there is no more fitting an entry than Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. Published in 2015 by Doubleday to critical acclaim, the novel is just over 800 pages, and its cover features a man apparently crying. Its back cover vaguely outlines its premise: this is a story of friendships, several of which span several decades and change locations and members—which is true enough. What readers eventually come to discover, though, is that the core person of this group, the center around which everyone else orbits, is so broken that it is a wonder the rest of the circle does not collapse over and over again. Jude St. Francis is arguably the novel's victim of choice; as the years and pages pass, he is presented with laser focus to the reader while remaining foreign to himself. His physical suffering, either self-inflicted or perpetuated by the weapons of others, stems from the abuse he suffered as a child, adolescent, and young adult—all in breathless succession.

Critics and authors alike revelled in how the literary world had seen nothing like *A Little Life* before, while also cautioning against the extreme subject matter. This is not to say that they gloss over it; if anything, they praise how Jude's inescapable misery demonstrates precisely how suffering does not discriminate or show any kind of mercy. Its relentlessness is, after all, true to life as it can be experienced. On the other hand, much has been made of the excessive violence to

which Jude—and, by extension, the reader—is subjected. Trauma theory offers the hope that recantation will offer guidance for and from the damaged individual, and in this case the reader does gain insight into the mind of the ever-tortured protagonist—but such insight is far from rewarding. This does not thwart supposed objectives of trauma fiction such as recollection and transformation of the unfathomable into the realm of tangibility, and only reinforces truths about the nature of trauma, its literary representations, and fiction itself. If the responsibility of trauma fiction is to "offer paradigms for navigating behaviours that typically elude our understanding and awareness in lived situations" (Vickroy 6), then the role of fiction functions in tandem. By using and pulling the tropes of trauma fiction either past their extremes or in completely unexpected directions, Yanagihara creates a textual and affective awareness that challenges her audience's hopes for the lone character who exists solely for the purpose of suffering. Its negative affective impact is what triangulates the decision to render complete distress so acutely, both physically and emotionally and brings the triad of writer, text, and audience to the forefront. It also proposes a specific kind of investigation into fiction's capacities: When are certain boundaries pushed, if not broken? Who decides? I want to argue that the aesthetic choices that Yanagihara uses throughout *A Little Life*, particularly the aesthetic qualities of excess and exaggerated fictionality, come into direct conflict with the audience's expectations around representing trauma and suffering. I will take this argument further and eventually to completion by asserting that the novel's hybrid of realism and unreality allows it to challenge the expectations concerning recovery and individual traumatic experiences. Its intervention in trauma fiction as a genre, as provocative as it is due to the highly graphic descriptions of abuse and the absence of a "real-life" connection (by which we mean an autobiographical component on the author's behalf), highlights a critical perspective on the matter of truth and representation.

Excessive Aesthetics

To delineate the boundaries of trauma fiction and then subsequently understand how they are marred in *A Little Life*, trauma studies and its relationship to textual representation must first be outlined to understand how it informs the genre. While its theoretical beginnings are rooted in the work of thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, the first and second waves of trauma studies will be explored and gestured to more prominently for the sake of brevity and relevance. Compared to trauma theory, trauma studies is a relatively new field that emerged in the late twentieth century which builds upon the foundations of its predecessor and explores the impact of trauma across several disciplines by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance (Balaev 360). The construction of the bridge between trauma studies and literature is owed to the work of Cathy Caruth, a literary critic and cultural theorist known for her multidisciplinary interests. Her investigation into the unspeakability of trauma, and the rifts it causes to psyche and language alike, found an unsurprising ally in the realm of literature. Her research popularized the concept of trauma as an unrepresentable event that revealed the inherent contradictions within language and experience, an event that fragments consciousness and prevents a direct linguistic equivalent. This initial model draws attention to the severity of suffering by suggesting the traumatic experience irreparably damages the psyche, as trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside both normal memory and narrative representation (Balaev 363).

Following in the footsteps of Caruth's blueprint, a second and more pluralistic model of trauma studies has emerged over the last few decades and addresses the desire for a wider lens and more encompassing register. The pluralistic model of trauma challenges the "unspeakable" trope in seeking to understand not only the structural dimensions of trauma that often develop in

terms of its dissociative effects on consciousness and memory, but also the cultural dimensions of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression. Second-wave theorists also critique another set of premises upheld by the first wave, particularly the correlation of the failure of memory in traumatic experience with the deliberate absence of representation in contemporary trauma fiction. Relying on the purported unspeakability of repressed, and then deferred, traumatic events is now seen as a method of avoidance, one that denies ontological validation. Probing at this lack results in the pursuit of new criticisms: questions such as "how, what kind of, and whose trauma is depicted by whom and for whom?" problematize representation in terms of which texts are identified as trauma texts and which are not. Asking "which experiences or events are identified as traumatic and which are not, who is identified as victim, who as perpetrator, and by whom, and who benefits and who do not from these understandings?" distends it even further (Coufalová and Rodi-Rosberg, 110). With the emergence of these questions, the liberty that literature was originally afforded by the first wave of trauma theory loses some of its strength—the Caruthian model maintains its usefulness due to its foundational capacities, but it ultimately proves to be stagnant when it comes to exploring new possibilities for representing trauma through other methods, understandings, further interdisciplinary efforts, and other forms of expression.

Indeed, if part of the plurality model for trauma studies includes representing circumstances which simultaneously fit and disturb the (trauma) narrative, then this is why it is necessary to include *A Little Life*. Although it exemplifies many first-wave characteristics such as recursiveness and psychological fracturing, it also takes up the second wave's concerns with unsettling its predecessor's ideologies which are seemingly irremovable from writing about trauma. Specifically, questions about how trauma is depicted and by whom, for whom

problematize representation on the grounds of authority and what the end can be to such means. Yanagihara's response proves to be challenging: she is portraying a trauma that she has never claimed as her own, one that in spite of taking place virtually all the time, is still entirely a fictionalized account with few to no ties to a direct, firsthand experience or event. Often, readers of trauma fiction must find their bearings "in multiple and conflicted accounts within a narrative and are left with effects that they must sort through and analyze, perhaps without a clear resolution" (Vickroy, 29) and despite the intrinsic lack of cohesiveness that is attributed to traumatic experiences, there is still a preference for (more or less) direct correlation. Yanagihara sets off contradiction after contradiction by deconstructing the typical binaries that pepper trauma fiction: there is no determinate speaker nor temporal framework within which they might find themselves, the victim himself becomes his own tormentor, his witnesses are also his enablers. There are several degrees of complicity that *A Little Life* manages to breach, and in doing so, Yanagihara enforces unto the reader what Jonas Kellermann labels "a form of literary witnessing which, despite its predominant lack of first-person narration, nevertheless manages to convey to the reader the affective incommensurability of Jude's trauma, thus blurring the lines not only between trauma narratives and narratives about trauma, but also between competing theoretical conceptions of literary trauma." (Kellermann 335). In accord with the first wave, the most pivotal device which shapes *A Little Life*'s rhetoric is its staunch rejection of linearity; although its events pass in tandem with its core characters gradually transforming from post-graduate students into middle-aged men, this is one of the book's few aspects that follow a more linear trajectory. Otherwise, the graphing of the novel's other literary techniques is considerably more jagged: it often feels like the scales of the narrative are precariously balanced, with immense wealth weighing down one side indefinitely until the reader encounters episodes of

wildly unimaginable pain which threaten to plunge the mechanism in the other direction. There is no ethical or reasonable ratio that governs how personal tragedy and spurts of success are doled out, and this lack of balance can perhaps be best attributed to how most of the novel's seemingly oppositional qualities are woven together; the excessive glamour and over-the-top suffering take their turns with Jude, but not for the sake of nulling (or even numbing) each other. By focusing on New York as the narrative's socioeconomic locus as well as Jude's decision to become a litigation lawyer, I aim to draw the two together so that they map the collision of the novel's excesses. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that neither aspect of excess belies or influences the other. If anything, *A Little Life* reveals that the promise of luxury does little to alleviate the sense of tragedy that follows Jude and snakes its way throughout the novel; in reality, it aggravates the mis/conception that unlimited wealth, and therefore unlimited resources, are effectively enough to process and then eventually overcome childhood traumas.

Ever-present through *A Little Life*'s 814 pages is New York City, impassively standing as an alpha and omega for the four main characters. It begins as a destination and eventually becomes the site of nostos, with "Yanagihara . . . giving cheerful directions as she maneuvers her characters, tour guide–like, through New York."[1] As the narrative progresses, the city is mapped out in exquisite detail whether it be through extensive descriptions of Jude's walks or entrance into the various homes of his friends, family, and colleagues. Much of what takes place is clearly rooted in a real place, but what is made clear from early on and is consequently conflictual for the casual observer, is the lack of other indicators that are usually particular to a city or country used for a novel's setting. Everyone seems to have a cellphone, but there is no gesturing towards whether we are in the era of the Blackberry or smartphone. The events that take place are

[1] As quoted by Andrea Long Chu in her essay "Hanya's Boys", published by *Vulture* on 12 Jan. 2022

revealed over the duration of fifty years, yet there is no way of knowing whether they are happening in tandem with a major election, or if the characters are inhabiting a post-9/11 world and whether they too are struggling with its ramifications. In this manner, Yanagihara deliberately dismisses the second-wave interest in investigating trauma on the levels of cultural and historical significance; it seems that the only reason why New York City and its whereabouts (but not its happenings, its hows and whens) are selected is because it is famously the place where the aspirational people of the world go to "make it happen". In a way, this sort of free-floating ambiguity suits the project of portraying four young men who have yet to establish themselves as professionals and as people. Willem aptly notes that his rough start is par for the course, that "these were days of self-fulfillment, where settling for something that was not quite your first choice of a life seemed weak-willed and ignoble" (Yanagihara 49). New York will be the place that the reader spends the most time; but for all its details and all those pages dedicated to the meandering about its streets, all it offers is a canvas for which this group of friends can explore their inner dialogues through an exterior environment. All the reader needs to remember is that "New York was populated by the ambitious. It was often the only thing that everyone here had in common" (49). It is unsurprising that the characters conveniently "find" themselves in a place they end up spending most of their adult lives in; perhaps then the lack of temporal location is what (narratively) allows for their lives to be charted in more significant and meaningful ways.

In this vein, it is the dreams and eventual occupations of the four young friends that facilitate a better understanding of the novel's physical and emotional geographies/topographies. In this instance, finding themselves has less to do with the mapping of their mental registers or any sort of fluctuation—while there seems to be plenty of existential pondering, few changes or

arcs arise as the four boys become men and respectively age into their more defining characteristics, for better or worse. Although the group is mutually shaped by their drive for success, the areas in which they seek it differ across their various interests: Willem wants to become an actor, JB is obsessed with proving his talents as a visual artist, Malcolm is desperate to make it as a full-time architect, and Jude wants to seek his fortune as a lawyer. It is easy to see the beginnings of a divide within the group, separating the first two as the more artistically inclined whereas the other two want to pursue what we might view as more pragmatic or practical jobs. This is not written with the intent of claiming that one category is superior to the other; if anything, a meta-commentary is being made on the nature of artistic license and representation. JB is arguably one of the more contentious characters in *A Little Life*, which is saying something given that the novel's cast includes extraordinarily sadistic ex-boyfriends and sex-trafficking, pedophilic members of the clergy. His sense of ego is what alienates him, whether it is indulgence in his own self-confidence that blinds him to the consideration of others or the ongoing struggle with addiction that (even when resolved) still leaves an indelible strain on his friendships with Willem and Jude. His shortcomings are self-justified for the sake of honing and promoting his art, and unfortunately override his insight and intuition (which are rendered poignantly in his work). Such qualities are what lend to the purported beauty of his paintings, and the precise chronicling of his friends' lives over the years (described at various points as "a love letter", "a saga") speaks volumes to the double-sided nature of his love for what he does and the people around him.

It is no coincidence that the more artistically inclined members of the group take up professions that are historically associated with another kind of luxury. Yes, Willem and JB eventually skyrocket into their careers and find massive success in galleries and theatres

respectively, but at the core of their ambition is something more noble: the privilege of losing one's sense of self, of hiding behind a medium while also claiming that there is a grain of reality within either. There is the shared element of vulnerability associated with either profession, and it is commonly assumed that to share your art with the world is to share a part of yourself, to make yourself known and submit your very being to the rigamarole of spectacle. Ironically, the young men take up this common yet paradoxical interest in the nature of art, a practice that encapsulates the desire for achieving both the abstract and representing the realistic. As he matures, it is revealed that Jude shares some of his friends' finer tastes, but also cultivates them in a way that borders on weaponizing his skill. He is artistic, but not an artist—perhaps this quip best describes his aversion to exposing himself for who he truly thinks he is. Whether it is through the lens of a camera, a portrait on a canvas, or though the careless word of mouth through others, Jude makes every desperate effort he can to avoid any sort of representation that has not been approved or carefully orchestrated on his behalf. Prior to the novel's main section of exposition, the other three boys maintain a reluctant, but curiosity-driven distance from their friend's personal life and backstory. There is considerably little give-and-take; the group's economy is one that circulates common interests and goals but is ultimately buoyed by wildly different motivations. Jude can feign reciprocity by indulging his friends with elaborate meals and the like, but finds himself unable to offer more personal aspects of his self that actually provides insight into his behaviours: "They were his friends, his first friends and he understood that friendship was a series of exchanges: of affections, of time, sometimes of money, always of information" (Yanagihara 111). It follows then that Jude has a very different idea of currency and exchange, both financially and interpersonally.

Therefore, his choice to become a litigation lawyer (and a successful one at that) is made in the pursuit of a stability which his friends and peers are already guaranteed. This decision subverts a more general understanding of safety; as more of his backstory is revealed, a great irony is made apparent given how he practices within the same system that barely protects him from those who cause(d) him present and past harm. In addition to the novel's setting, the unfolding of Jude's past traumas and ongoing conditions is what drives the novel's sense of time and location, "moving" forwards and backwards between sections of the narrative and jumping from place to place. This scaling of timelines functions as exposition; in the second chapter of *A Little Life*, JB smugly notes that his friend is a sort of "post"-man. The nickname implies that his existence is one of an uncategorizable identity: "'Like Judy here: we never see him with anyone, we don't know what race he is, we don't know anything about him. Post-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past. . . The post-man. Jude the Postman'" (Yanagihara 107). The secrecy with which Jude attempts to cultivate around his past, his perceived flaws, and actual shortcomings are indeed symptom of the shame he feels around the abuse he suffered and continues to carry. His motivations remain largely unclear, puzzling at best and frustrating at worst—alienating him not only from his friend group, but from those who created and recreate him by interacting with the text. Even his relationship to ambition does not align with the reasons why his friends also seek it, or anyone in the novel for that matter. The promise of financial security that is attached to working as a tireless lawyer is just another way of coping with fear, his way of guaranteeing that he can take care of himself as his physical health deteriorates while also assuaging the guilt that comes with allegedly burdening those closest to him. Of course, it may also come as no surprise that Jude studies law instead of something equally as lucrative; he demonstrates that he has the discipline and the intelligence to pursue anything he sets his sights on (proof of the fact is

ascertained when he completes a second degree in pure mathematics whilst finishing law school). Indeed, it is no coincidence that he spends his time studying a subject which is paradoxically favourable towards and cautious of justice. The overwhelming presence of the law and what it constitutes speaks not only to Jude's interest in the security and straightforwardness it offers but also introduces a baseline morality—a kind of self-determined compass of and access into the novel's ethics. With little to no retributive justice that takes place, the compass's guide is that lawfulness is essentially meaningless due to how it is repeatedly skewed; that much of law's logic is immune to the cruelty that one person can inflict upon another and to how trauma lasts well beyond any sentence or kind of conviction. Even after Brother Luke's death and Dr. Traylor's arrest, Jude is unable to obtain a sense of peace or put any portion of his emotional unease to rest. The success he achieves as a lawyer is barely invested in any facilitation of restorative justice, much to Harold's chagrin. But this choice speaks volumes to how justness is not a concept that applies to the life of someone who has been repeatedly and unfathomably abused by those who are in positions to offer protection to the more vulnerable members of society. Early in their relationship, Jude's professor and eventual adoptive father notes how "Fairness is for happy people, for people who have been lucky enough to have lived a life defined more by certainties than by ambiguities. Right and wrong, however, are for—well, not unhappy people, maybe, but scarred people; scared people" (190). Having addressed the narrative decision to include law and its deceptiveness as part of Jude's design, this ties into how his ongoing pain is his—and consequently the novel's—defining characteristic.

To return briefly to the novel's lack of linearity, there is one chart that displays several factors steadily climbing alongside one another: the older Jude grows, the wealthier and the more physically ill he becomes. Much has been made of how this wealth manifests itself; the writing

takes on a lavish, nearly fantastical tone as Jude explores the world with Willem and ends up purchasing exorbitantly priced apartments in New York, then London and Paris. Rather than using these demonstrations of wealth as markers of a success-story in the personal or psychological sense, the exotic travel spots and many homes can be read as foils to Jude's own tumultuous and impoverished upbringing. The farther he can geographically distance himself from the cesspools he grew up in, and the more he can cement a financial safety net that places a buffer between his current condition and the instability he continuously faced as a child, the more he can maintain some semblance of "normalcy" (vaguely and comparatively speaking). The logic, and Jude's calculations, are far from accidental. Most of the novel's jet-setting is unanticipated and a significant stretch from what Jude could have hoped for; all he wants is the constructions and appearances of a life that does not resemble the rot and disdain that he feels towards himself and what happened to him. More than any trip on the other side of the world, he hopes that "he would someday have enough money to pay someone to take care of him if he needed it, someone who would be kind to him and allow him privacy and dignity" (Yanagihara 275). Jude recognizes the fact that the only way someone as physically and emotionally "broken" as him can literally afford to survive is through a significant income: most of his earnings are secretly budgeted for expensive surgeries, and all his homes after moving away from Lispenard come equipped with more disability-friendly spaces and conveniences. Ultimately, this non-stop accruing of wealth boils down to the price Jude believes he owes, and fears the most: his body betraying him and costing him his independence.

By using New York City as both a physical and emotional geography for mapping Jude's ongoing suffering, along with his position as a talented but nonetheless struggling lawyer, a scene is set in which both aspects of excess can play themselves and ensure their mutuality,

illustrating that the two go together despite being at odds with one another. As the years progress, and Jude's little life both contracts and expands, it becomes clear that financial success and control are the only ways he knows or understands how to "overcome" himself; therefore, he cannot have one without the other. Thus we come back to the scales, wondering if one particular side will prevail over the other—the reader seeks resolution, but *A Little Life* keeps on deferring it. The waiting game is what gives trauma fiction its various twists and turns; it is part of how an audience reads the story and is influential in how they interpret the novel's events. However, this expectation is skewed because it is made known from early on that Jude has a very, very small chance of surviving himself. In spite of the brief episodes that display psychological healing and his upper-class status, Jude's body still gets the better of him. The novel lapses into several recurring scenes where he lies on the doctor's table, anticipating the next blow of disappointment whilst still naively hoping that some previously unknown breakthrough in medicine will heal him, at least externally-speaking. "Healing", in this instance, has less to do with alleviating physical pain and more so with soothing Jude's agony over his perceived differences and inadequacies. There are his skin and its scars, but then there is also his limp, his chronically injured spine and legs, and his compromised immune system. While there is a direct correlation between the various traumas he has faced resurfacing and the ways in which he injures himself to mitigate the humiliation, the other kinds of "harm" (of the life-long, mobility-impairing, and sexually-transmitted variety), flare up without Jude or even abusive villains such as Caleb necessarily inducing them. The throughline of Jude's life, the recurring motif is that his body does not care just how financially safe he is, it will continue to "betray" him; thus, the cruel twist of the knife is rarely the self-mutilating that takes place, instead it is usually how the offered "relief" or happiness end up being anything but. This unspoken contract applies to most, if not all

spheres that exist beyond his corporeal suffering: the love of his friends and adopted family, the support and admiration of his peers, and the unabated medical attention he receives for both his physical and mental health are as ineffective as doing nothing. This argument, in a way, is our introduction to the greater scope of what I want to assert: that pushing believability beyond its confines is the effective means of challenging a reader's ideas concerning trauma's nature and the trajectory of linear, medicalized recovery. Perhaps most importantly, Jude himself cannot believe just how wealthy he becomes, precisely because of his upbringing and childhood abuses; so, beyond (or excluding) Jude's perspective: where does plausibility fit into the novel's architecture?

Much to the audience's frustration, it does not; ultimately, we are not given a pattern which justifies the prescription of punishment, then love, or vice versa; both constituents of the excessive must be pushed past belief and relief in order to demonstrate that beyond coexisting in extremes, they are not supposed to remedy one another. This ultimately ties into troubling the idea of what it means to witness trauma specifically as readers of trauma fiction—it can be said that any kind of artistic language, when striving for the exploration and representation of traumatic experience, shifts the focus from the identification with reality to the methods of how to recount it through the very forms and means of transmission. And although art "can navigate brilliantly the territories of trauma, it should be careful not to succumb to voyeuristic and arrogant spectatorship" (Coufalová and Rodi-Risberg 114), recalling what many critics have been quick to say about *A Little Life*'s great faux pas: how once the novel focuses its attention in Jude for good, it never turns away and the reader becomes onlooker to the arena of every single one of his miseries. "Ethical considerations surrounding the contexts of trauma provide a provocative framework for looking at the relation between text, author, and reader" (Vickroy 26-

27) and in a way, Yanagihara cultivates a complex response to some of the questions posited by the second-wave theorists of trauma studies. Complex in that none of the answers to the who, how, and why are neat nor likeable, and the merits of reading a narrative like Jude's expands one's capacity for empathy also entails (and can easily be outweighed by) an unavoidable element of culpability, as whichever elements of the novel the audience gravitates toward in particular – whether it is mainly the testing of human endurance at the heart of Jude's storyline or something else – can only be the subject of speculation (Kellermann 342). If anything, the purpose here is to shed a light on the failings of certain systems (the law, the church, and the state) through the single focalization of a traumatized individual, while also shedding a light on the fact that the damage caused by these institutions goes far beyond the scope of care that community can offer. Furthermore, understating either would only upset the reader and their own notions of justness or fairness: both a purely miserable sob story or fairytale-like narrative about nearly heroic survival does a disservice to characters (and people) like Jude, the many who do not and cannot get better. His story is not just a matter of convention; though it is fictional, Yanagihara is accurate when she claims that there are plenty of survivors in the world who also "fail" to make their peace. Of course, this does not mean her specific portrayal of this kind of individual is exempt from critical discussion given the complete lawlessness she wields to describe situational extremes; ultimately, the twin currents of excess that run throughout the novel are employed to make a cogent point about how certain institutions fail abuse victims like Jude. Their presence also serves to illustrate how crucial components of trauma fiction and understandings of recovery are further destabilized when subjected to their own metrics—sometimes they do not pass their own tests, and that frustrates us.

The Aesthetic of Suffering

This brings us to a more intimate examination of the aesthetic of excessive sorrow, which offsets *A Little Life*'s more pleasurable excesses and contradicts it, even if both are required to complete the narrative's DNA. The aesthetic of non-stop suffering both overshadows and sheds a light on the rest of the novel's infrastructure; because so much misfortune follows our protagonist, it is almost immediately unbelievable—the torrent of abuses is unrelenting, and because Jude cannot get away from it, neither can we as readers. How does it then avoid figuratively collapsing under the weight of its heavy subject matter? Is the collapse not implied by virtue of its main character finally succumbing to his circumstances via suicide? Yanagihara counteracts the disbelief by balancing (though not matching) the excessively optimistic with the excessively horrific, with plenty of room between to examine which discrepancies might lie in their wake. Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero comes to mind, recalling that the aesthetic quality of tragedy (and for the sake of my argument, fictional depictions of suffering) are dependent on the ethical character of the protagonist, who ultimately is someone who does not exceed either affective extreme of embodying absolute virtue or pure evil (Phelan 5). What exists in this gray zone, overlaying Aristotle's qualities of the "good" character on top of Jude's characterization like a warped projection slide, yields to the following understanding: with Jude as interlocutor, the excesses can only balance themselves if the suffering that takes place is within the realm of redemption (Jude does insist on finding happiness and interpersonal success, to whichever degrees), but said suffering cannot be fully redeemed nor justified (he still blames himself, still self-harms, and still kills himself). This will bring us to conclude that what exists in between these vacillations is a direct challenge to the presupposed path(s) we expect someone

like Jude to follow: which are either that he heals, wholly and committedly, or that he has zero interest in attempting to recover.

The melding of fiction's interest in mimesis with its consequent capacity for both representing and eliciting affect goes as far back as the ancient conventions of tragedy itself. Though he did not make a formal effort to incorporate ethics into his discussion of literature (at least not in the writings we have), Aristotle still insisted on an overlap between the two disciplines such that tragedy was given a moral component whose effectiveness is engaged based on situational and character-driven circumstances. There is an ethics to his definitions of the tragic scene and hero; arousal and pity are stirred to initiate a sense of release, and tragedy carries the hope for these emotions to be purged through collective catharsis (Phelan 5). The great crux of the tragic figure is that which an audience can relate to; such a figure successfully evokes fear due to his likeness (with our likeness) and pity because his misfortune is greater than what his ethical character warrants—the onlookers join the chorus in lamenting Oedipus's fate not because of his fall from grace, but for the humanness of his actions that led to his falling in the first place. Although such a sentiment might be understood as the ethical character being the lynchpin for effectiveness, what is being asserted has more to do with the thoroughness of aesthetic (and in a way, this is the task of narrative). It will be interesting to note how in Jude's case, pity might be difficult to evoke seeing as he does not have much of a personality save for his suffering and many talents, of which do not translate into being a good person or a kind friend. We could then use the good character as a model for believability, which also goes beyond likeability.

So we must ask: aside from the boulder of pain that he carries with him everywhere he goes, why would someone like Jude earn another person's pity? Even the most generous reader

might find themselves struggling to empathize with him given just how set he is on self-destructing, despite his efforts to be less of a burden on his loved ones. Then again—he is not a bad person, and what makes him objectively less insufferable are his genuine efforts to curtail his more destructive habits, almost always for the sake of his loved ones and occasionally for himself. What counters some of the novel's most literal choices to spell out Jude's fate (take a calculated guess as to who is the patron saint of lost causes) is his attempt to thwart his own narrative. After all, Jude is not the first of his kind to be condemned both by his namesake and its connotation with tragedy; Thomas Hardy's Jude Fawley works tirelessly to make his own meaning and to define his destiny despite also being brought into a world that rarely affords people of his birthright any kind of upwards mobility. The tragedy shared between them is not conspiratorial in nature—fate goes by many other names, and that these two characters happen to be situated between the vectors of class and higher education indicates that their authors also share a mutual commentary on how the strictures of society can be as condemning as a prophecy. Despite the 120-year age gap between *A Little Life* and *Jude the Obscure*, both novels yield to and look in the face of inevitability and each evoke tragedy to paint the picture of potential which cannot sustain itself when caught in the clutches of circumstance, societal pressures, and one's own flawed decisions. St. Jude is the icon whom the desperate turn to as a last resort during times of serious despair, which contradictorily makes him the patron saint of hope. Thus his evocation, insofar as his literary counterparts indicate, offers the possibility of redemption amidst unpredictable cruelty and also acknowledges that the narratives' obstacles cannot be so unbearable such that their victims no longer want to improve their conditions (which further cements the argument that in either instance, the death of each Jude is neither their tragedy nor the novels' catharses). Over the course of *A Little Life*, Jude's sense of hope is mentioned several

times, operating as a semi-hidden reserve that supports him even in spite of his worst moments and what his bodily traumas indicate. He harbors it like many of his other secrets, its source even more obfuscated to those around him than the rest: "But what Andy never understood about him was this: he was an optimist. Every month, every week, he chose to open his eyes, to live another day in the world…. He did it when his memories crowded out all other thoughts… to keep himself from raging with despair and shame" (Yanagihara 164). Granted, this line of thinking occurs before Jude's first suicide attempt and is alluded to as the tether that prevents him from bleeding out after accidentally taking it too far during one of his self-harm episodes. . . if all of that reads like a contradiction, we might as well call it such. The impulse, but more so the will to live which resides in most humans, comes across as bizarre only because of the velocity with which Jude seems to flounder between choosing life and choosing death. The paradox is in and under the guise of eventually getting better, and the tension of it all is that Jude cannot value his "being" (which is not the way he views his life) enough to see it as worth carrying out—in life there is potential, but he does not see the same potential in his personality and what he has to offer to others.

Therefore the moments of optimism, hopefulness, and happiness offered in *A Little Life* function similarly to the previously mentioned notions of currency and success; these aspects carry a significantly heavier weight when placed in Jude's hands. The question of whether he is careless with them, or deserving of them, is not what lends importance to their presence—which is to say, the question is irrelevant to the narrative's sense of exchange. "Getting better" is not necessarily a false promise or a reward to be earned, but it is a moving target with many conditions as to how psychological wholeness can be achieved. Just past the halfway point of the novel, the reader begins the section titled "The Happy Years"; although this portion of the

narrative is still peppered with its usual trials and tribulations, it is named after the period in Jude's life during which he finally begins to experience true safety. Given the previous abuse inflicted by the monastery's brothers, Dr. Traylor, then Caleb, it is almost as if the time that Jude and Willem spend as lovers must make up for the lost time and opportunities for happiness and relief. It is also the portion of the novel where he is finally forced to tell Willem about his history in its entirety, not just in snippets that correspond with the various scars on his body. Entertaining emotional intimacy in a romantic context, even if it is with one of his closest friends, proves to be both trying and therapeutic for Jude in its own way. He continues to battle himself and his body's consistent undoing, but now Willem is far more exposed to Jude's daily battles as they take place and although the latter feels all the more exposed for it, he notices that "besides his legs, his feet, his back, he felt fine. He felt — though he hesitated to say this about himself: it seemed so bold a statement — mentally healthy." (Yanagihara 662).

The paradoxical nature of progress per Jude's trauma establishes that many, albeit distorted truths can exist at the same time; in *A Little Life* it operates as a rogue pendulum, moving so fast one moment and then stalling the next that it seems as if Jude himself has hardly moved. Keep in mind that "The Happy Years" is the same section in which Jude must come to terms with losing his legs. Only at this point does he acknowledge to Willem that he has never wanted to admit that he is disabled because it means that Dr. Traylor took something from him that he can never reclaim. Like his friend and confidante, Jude must accept an (even more) imperfect life, which for him means agreeing to the leg amputations that his doctor Andy recommends. Yet even in the face of what he perceives as the realization of his greatest fear, Jude relearns to walk in tandem with his relearning to express vulnerability, to love openly. All of this proves to be greatly beneficial to his mental health, more so than conventional means such as

taking medication or seeing a therapist. This is proof—but of what? Yanagihara's decision to layer trauma after trauma is more interested in succession and how it thwarts expectation rather than implying that there is some sort of consequence attached to Jude's careful constructions of happiness. The reader is dreading the moment when the figurative other shoe will drop and this is because of how the narrative requires and subsequently constructs counteraction. The ticking time bomb is, of course, if and when Jude decides to take his own life; however, with hundreds of pages to leaf through, what happens until that abrupt end (which is not even the end of the text itself) is ripe with chances for him to either avoid or at the very least postpone his fate. The point in doing so is to prolong *A Little Life*'s core tension—in spite of the obsessive love and care that Jude repeatedly inspires from others, even the most sanguine scenes cannot ease the weight of the baggage that he lugs from his past. This is not the totalizing principle of "things get better just for them to become worse once again"; rather, Yanagihara gives it a recognizable name from mathematics which its apt student just happens to take quite literally.

"The Axiom of Equality" take its phrase from the Algebraic principle "that x always equals x", and Jude invokes it to deny the possibility of becoming the person that his family, friends, and peers believe him to be. As the lifelong victim of others' sadism and the adult masochist who carries on their legacy, Jude is both as wound and weapon unto himself. The idea of Jude being a burden is twofold, in that how he sees himself as a burden is more existential than tangible (in most instances)—no amount of cheering on his friends changes how he views himself, which is to say: monstrous, unforgivably and irrevocably so. This belief is regulated by the two extremes of his bodily disabilities, which are always perceived as liabilities, as well as his mental health struggles (Marx 82). In one instance, he wakes up from a series of hellish nightmares and cannot remember where or who he is. Willem describes himself first, then

reminds his partner of who he is: “You are my oldest, dearest friend. . . . You’re the best listener I know. You’re the smartest person I know, in every way. You’re the bravest person I know, in every way. . . . You were treated horribly. You came out on the other end. You were always you.” (Yanagihara 689). Willem’s account, and his understanding of Jude, is of course subjective but also partially correct. T/his version of his lover presents yet another problem that is pervasive throughout *A Little Life*: that it privileges many people’s focalisations, but not Jude’s. Where certain identities are otherwise murky and ambiguous in the novel, one thing is made abundantly clear: everyone, who has any sort of intra- or extratextual proximity to *A Little Life*, is a witness. Despite it holding space in what we might call the greater canon of trauma fiction, where an observer’s presence is non-negotiable within the genre and field alike, the act of witnessing is a few shades more complicated than usual due to the excessive representation of trauma and how the novel’s other, considerably less damaged characters are implicated by trying define (and defy) Jude’s relationship with his abuse when he cannot bring himself to do the same (insofar as a broader understanding of trauma reenactment is concerned). In “Witnessing Trauma”, Kellerman takes up these conventions, as well as the reader-writer positional binary of responsibility, by asking “[if] the novel [can] still be called a ‘trauma narrative’ if it does not present to the reader the unmediated first-person perspective of the traumatized victim, or is it merely a ‘narrative about trauma’ that portrays the victim’s trauma from the view of an external observer instead?” (Kellermann 335). Scarry additionally asserts that the presence of pain is powerful enough to deprive anyone of making their own narrative, as “the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (Scarry 35). Without language and armed only with his distorted self-perceptions, Jude can only ever be his

trauma despite what other characters see and feel. Jude, who craves absoluteness and certainty, finds it in the cold rationality of pure mathematics and therefore has no issue finding truth in the axiom's unchangingness. Applied to himself, Jude substitutes the x-variable with his existence, such that "The person I was will always be the person I am, he realizes. The context may have changed… But fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated." (Yanagihara 386).

There are also his many refusals to speak about what happened to him; if there is anything that governs both the axiom and the happy years with equal measure is Jude's inability to relay the totality of his traumas with anyone (whether it be to Harold, Andy, or any of the core members of his longstanding friend group). As it is proven repeatedly, *A Little Life* is resistant to talk therapy. Whether it is at the behest of his dying social worker Ana or being wielded as a well-intentioned threat by either Andy and/or Willem (sometimes together), the consensus of the chorus is that Jude must disclose what has happened to him so that he can receive proper medical care and tentatively accept a love more powerful than his self-loathing. In a subversion of positionality, his refusal is at times more harmful to him than the abuse he was put through at various points in his life. Any reader can reach the conclusion, and rather unhappily so, that he is his own greatest obstacle. The disgust he has internalized is more vicious than any attack he faces, and consistently gets in the way of his being able to speak truth to the abuse he faced as a child, teenager, then adult. It is in this manner that Jude condemns himself, removing some level of responsibility from the text's logic of "correlation". Yanagihara's vision for the character who never gets better is served perfectly by the paradox in which the medium presents itself in the telling of Jude's story in its entirety, which directly contradicts the first wave belief that writing trauma through textual recollection resolves it in a meaningful or resolute manner. Finally

addressed and spoken aloud to Andy, to Willem, committed to both narrative and textual memory, it is not enough to prevent the compulsions from repeating nor stop him from taking his own life. He tried to live for himself (remember, in his early adulthood he identifies as an optimist), he did his best to live for others while still subjecting himself to a regimen of injury and loathing, and he finally heeds Ana's advice so that he might be able to move more freely with (but not past) his trauma. It was never a given that he might survive others (whether his body or his brain would do him in was up for serious debate), but everyone who has some understanding of his psyche also knew that he would not survive himself and this is how *A Little Life*, while being a prime example of triumphing pain's inexpressibility, also fails it. In this instance, failure can be generative: a common misconception about trauma literature is that its primary goal is to elegize the hardest, most emotionally destructive experiences a person can live through. In other words, most people think trauma fiction is exclusively about trauma. However, the genre reveals as much about the problematics of storytelling as it does actual traumatic events, for it challenges itself with facing the difficulty of representing the truth of an experience so horribly extraordinary that it cannot be contained within the human mind, let alone within the borders of a page. It is about, in the words of Laub, the simultaneous "imperative to tell" and "impossibility of telling."

That Jude evolves into his own abuser seems inescapable—he plays both parts, attacker and attacked, punisher and punished, in a twisted drama of substitutionary atonement—and as a result, readers are forced to redefine the ethics determined by the novel's expectations. Concepts such as victim and perpetrator may enrich our understandings of trauma, but they can also simultaneously undermine the meaningfulness of trauma as a concept, as "any idea of strictly mastering its [trauma's] use and defining its range may be self-defeating" (Coufalová and Rodi-

Risberg 121). *A Little Life*'s representation of suicide is complex: predictable, yet still harrowing, it sheds a light on the intra- and extra-textual positions that are involved in Jude's demise, and how they hold equal weight. The least surprising turn of events ends up being the novel's greatest subversion of representing pain, but to what avail? The "failure" to keep living given the gravity of what Jude has gone through cannot necessarily be condemned as such. After all, he does not see his end as clearly as the reader might; on one occasion, he reminds himself that this is his life. "My life, he will think, my life. But he won't be able to think beyond this, and he will keep repeating the words to himself—part chant, part curse, part reassurance—as he slips into that other world that he visits when he is in such pain. . . : My life." (Yanagihara 177). Thinking "beyond" is something Jude is wholly incapable of, thus (t)his responsibility is thrust onto the reader. The novel's aesthetic of suffering is predicated on the cycle of violence that Jude cannot escape, and this too-muchness is also a symptom of asking Jude to do the impossible: to live (comfortably) despite his trauma and how it impacts him at nearly every narrative turn. To find meaning in this conclusion as a reader is discouraging to say the least, but it does reveal an important truth: that writing about trauma is not equivocal to writing *through* it. That he finally chooses to end his life is perhaps a success of his own choosing for once, an unintentional jab at what a city or society might thrust onto him (and a mockery of what Willem thinks to himself at the beginning of the novel): "Somewhere, surrendering to what seemed to be your fate had changed from being dignified to being a sign of your own cowardice." (48). Though this is a straightforward conclusion to the unparalleled misery that he tried his best to postpone, by extension it is also the author's failure to relieve pain. Given the text's dedication to Jude's suffering, with its prolonged descriptions of havoc wreaked on his being (both physical and spiritual), it seems as if its more mitigatory qualities are being parodied for the sake of exposing

the naivety that comes with believing that there ever was a happy (or healthy) ending to the novel. Scarry argues that the other side to speaking on behalf of those who cannot do so themselves is harmful "when not carefully controlled . . . it can have different effects and can even be intentionally enlisted for the opposite purposes . . . invoked not to assist in the elimination of pain but to assist in its infliction " (Scarry 13). In this instance, Jude's choice to commit suicide asks the reader whether this is the cruellest act that he can endure and whether meaning can be made from his story in spite of his suicide—at the end of the day, who suffers the most from his death? Does death even begin to compare to the pain he faced when he was alive? In a way, what is less surprising is Jude choosing to kill himself, and what is more astonishing is considering the sheer amount of suffering he undergoes and how he nonetheless chooses to wake up every day despite what it may bring. The expectation that the ailing individual can always overcome their misery or see some greater purpose that gives them an airtight reason to keep going is one that toes the line between the realistic (these things do happen) and the unrealistic due to its inhumanness. Thus, labelling Jude's suicide as anything else but complicated (at least from a moral point of view) is immediately coloured by an overarching narrative which maintains the rigidity of recovery's trajectory, and his so-called inability to "outlive" his disposition as a victim of excessive childhood sexual abuse and ongoing physical violence is absurd when it is painted as yet another one of his shortcomings.

Im/plausibility and "Failure" in *A Little Life*

Jude's eventual death, described and pondered over by Harold, is at odds with the narrative's contractual mapping of excess. The gauntlet that has been thrown by the novel's sheer size, both in materiality and affect, and its conclusion provides release only in the sense that the book can finally be put down. By the time the reader has finished the novel, Jude stands before

them like one of Francis Bacon's flayed victims: not a single part of his body nor psyche remains unmarred, or untouched by some extreme act of cruelty. He has been so remorselessly exposed that little sense can initially be made of what has happened; the act of finishing *A Little Life* feels like one of violation (upon him), but also endurance (for the reader). Caught in between these emotions, the text asks us: when does it become un/believable? When does it become un/bearable and what does our threshold reveal about the nature of the narrative and consequently, our relationship to it? Ultimately, Yanagihara's project results in a death that is inevitable, a conclusion which most readers can predict within the first hundred pages. The expansiveness with which pain is treated (as well as the gluttony with which its seemingly indulged in) offers a commentary on the relationship between the textual and the imaginative, and on cycles of violence and visibility. Furthermore, the quantity, and even the quality of suffering, that takes place invites the audience to consider the ending of *A Little Life* as a circle that does not quite close. The physical excess does not necessarily merit its ending, nor does it disavow it; if anything, it reinforces the notion of plausibility and favours a more tragic treatment which encourages readers to critique *A Little Life* as an art/form (as opposed to trauma fiction's more didactic approach). The last section titled "Lispenard Street" will be the thesis's final item of attention, and by analyzing the nature of Jude's written confession along with Harold's feelings of failure to "save" his son, we can shift expectations and realize that *A Little Life*'s commitment is ultimately to affect and pulling on (or aggravating) heart strings rather than "accuracy" or the portrayal of realities outside of Jude's. By exploring the cyclical nature of pain and its visibility, which is rooted within the primary challenge of representing pain, this section will take a closer look at how the narrative challenges the general inability to ameliorate physical and/or psychological suffering through language.

As mentioned previously, Jude's unhappy ending is a thorn in the reader's side for several reasons. The event itself is disturbing, but disturbance is the novel's strong suit and his death is only the finale in title given how much of the narrative is dedicated to describing the constant, tortured unravelling and stitching-himself-back together. The treatment of pain and how its embedded in the text speaks to how it both eludes language and reconstruction in a meaningful, recovery-oriented way. Much of the graphic description that takes place suits the kind of narrative split that Yanagihara favours; in nearly every section, a present-moment scene is interrupted for dozens of pages by elaborate flashbacks, mimicking the way Jude's past irrupts into his present. His present is marred not only by these interruptions, but also by the ways in which he copes with them, bifurcating the nature of how pain is presented as both symptom and cause of his ongoing psychological struggles. Even if the attempt to write (about) woundedness proves near-impossible, the difficulty provides a site where the reader is confronted with how pain's triumph resides "in its ability to create a split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons" (Scarry 4). The body is stuck somewhere in between the unfathomable and the all-too-present; its mutilation is right there on the page and yet the mind cannot immediately comprehend the gravity of the abuse that takes place. What Yanagihara tackles here is mediation, and positionality. What she is saying is that in *A Little Life*'s "present" moment, there is no difference vis-a-vis inexpressibility between the ways in which Jude is harmed and how he harms himself. In many ways, "The body is its pains, a shrill sentience that hurts and is hugely alarmed by its hurt; and the body is its scars, thick and forgetful, unmindful of its hurt, unmindful of anything, mute and insensate" (31). The sensation of experiencing, but not feeling pain is yet another subversion of the Scarry template: to be the subject that is hurting

while also numb to pain is precisely the situation that Jude is in, and the contradictory nature of this stasis also applies to the implications (and application) of woundedness.

It is literature's nature and its duty to first and foremost to *tell*, but there is a tendency to obfuscate more harrowing images and events through some level of formal and/or creative technique. Jude himself is incapable of putting his life's story into words: "he literally doesn't have the language to do so" (Yanagihara 339). He is unwilling to describe both the physical pain that lingers from previous abuses and the injuries he sustains from his time with Caleb, nor the acute damage he has accrued from having been emotional and sexually abused by various members of both the church and foster home he was placed in as a teenager. In a move that is both typical of a writer's credo and a victim who is unable to wholly recreate the events that has traumatized them, Jude gives himself over to his imagination and its metaphors. The memories that haunt him—even the verb used here is replete with comparison, suggesting that trauma is ghostly, inhuman(e)—complete an aggressive menagerie. Snarling hyenas often approach at night, shapeless but nonetheless menacing beasts lurk in the shadows and wait for Jude to lower his guard so that they might finally put an end to his misery once and for all. Such extremities efface the line between accepting fiction at face value and extratextual skepticism; they leave the reader wondering if the pain he has endured is believable (or if it could be believable) without the layers of scar tissue and the burn marks. In a moment of meta self-awareness, Jude makes the following observation: "What he knew, he knew from books, and books lied, they made things prettier" (750). Clearly, *A Little Life* wants to be closer to the truth in service of Jude's experiences and the general caution shrouding the narrative of those who get better. However, "truth" in this instance is complicated by the fact that there is a tenuous relationship between this specific character's fabrication, and the lived experiences of his creator and her imagination.

Though most of the scrutiny Yanagihara faces is concerned with the considerable lack of connection between her experiences and the novel's representation of suffering, the "death" of her authority is what allows there to be such an overwhelming focus on the subject matter in the first place. If we are to suspend belief, that both the identity and the intentions of the author are irrelevant to the way we read a text, only then can we come up with and/or use an analytic framework to assess its qualities (Barthes 50). This is why it is important to observe the depictions of pain as they are given, for Yanagihara is doing what is considered close to the impossible: putting the unrepresentable into words, sentences, paragraphs, a whole book. One key aspect of her pain-writing, however, is that she does so without the intention that speaking or writing about Jude's anguish will somehow resolve it in the ways art is expected to: as a highbrow remedy or palliative for the suffering that already exists in the world. In this regard, suicide proves to be the only solution in spite of everything else the novel offers and though it initially seems like the reader is left with very little to make meaning out of such a dire end, Jude's decision reveals a crucial moment of recognition: it is more painful to consign him to living rather than condemning him to die.

Literary critic Parul Seghal complains that "Unlike the marriage plot, the trauma plot does not direct our curiosity toward the future (*Will they or won't they?*) but back into the past (*What happened to her?*)" (Sehgal). With the belatedness of trauma's arrival in *A Little Life*, both within its story and in the act of receiving and processing said story, it could be argued that the "will they or won't they" does occur. Though the reader wonders whether Jude will define his own odds, we know that he does not even though he finally breaks his silence—but we read on anyways and this presents another set of frustrations. Jude decision to kill himself is the great irony to all of it, the cruel exploitation of fiction's capacity for plurality and possibility. The fixed

norm of Jude's world, as dictated by Yanagihara, is one of perpetual harm. She has made this clear: "Many lives are lived under the radar. A story like Jude's is improbable but certainly possible."[2] We must take her word for it when the author states that even though there was no specific individual on whom Jude is based, there are many Judes who will exist in our lifetime—either at a distance or within uncomfortable proximity. The two truths that accompany the destiny of such a singularly tormented being are not far-fetched either: the victim transforms into a survivor by virtue of their choosing to heal with the aid of whom- and whatever resources they have at their disposal. Alternatively, in spite of everything or nothing, their conditions do not improve. Whereas nonfictional accounts of severe, chronic, and suicidal depression are structurally bound to these fictions of progress and recovery, fictional narratives are not required to adhere to such foundational predictability. The expectation that the ailing individual can always overcome their misery or see some greater purpose that gives them an airtight reason to keep going is one that toes the line between realistic (it does happen) and unrealistic due to its inhumanness.

The neoliberal dream of creating the perfect cocktail for recovery (a diagnosis, medication, therapy, spiritual-soul-searching, and the support of community) is almost fantastical in terms of what it promises—and this is something that the novel is noticeably weary of. It comes as no surprise that neoliberalism is also largely uninterested in collective responsibility, which not only places blame solely on Jude for inability to make better choices for himself but also annihilates the possibility of entering a more collaborative ethics of writing and reading about suffering. While *A Little Life* depicts the pathologization of trauma and the emphasis on self-responsibility for one's recovery, it also gestures to the absence of a meaningful way to live

[2] From an interview with Tim Adams, taken from The Guardian (July 2015)

in a neoliberal world (Rushton 198). In spite of the novel's insularity, felt most potently due to the lack of setting and absence of focus on anyone who is not in physical nor emotional proximity to Jude and his need for consistent care, there is a condemnation of the collective. Which is not to say that Yanagihara is disparaging the benefits of finding community; indeed, there must be a community consisting of caring individuals which exists as a foil to the external institutions who wronged Jude so deeply that the love he receives proves unable to undo the greater traumas he suffered. The abuse he underwent, especially at the hands of the brothers and later while placed within the foster care system, is meant to criticize authority at the institutional level and illustrate how these systems thwart both a historical and narrative understanding of linear recovery. The great irony is how the "instruction" Jude receives as a child while living at the monastery is not followed by any kind of redemption typically promised by monotheistic religion(s); he may be named after a Christian saint, but the truth of the novel's contract is that he lives in a moral universe in which spiritual salvation of this sort does not exist. The failure of the church is ultimately the false promise of protection, and the emphasis on punishment (of the irrational variety, for Jude rarely commits the kind of heinous acts that would warrant the extreme physical and emotional damage which is inflicted upon him) leads Jude to pursuing mathematics and a kind of law that is far removed from any kind of social justice. This choice, though deemed beneath Jude's potential and moral character by Harold, speaks to how little room there is for the former to make decisions that are "best" for him given his circumstances and how they inform his relationship to survival and self-preservation (with a perverse emphasis on self, given how distorted his own perception is).

Similarly, the medical system is another establishment that haunts Jude at every turn—almost as frequently as his own memories, and nearly as threatening. Though much has already

been made of how his extreme financial success permits him unlimited access to several life-saving procedures, there is something to be said about how the same privilege is what lets Jude circumnavigate (and evade) the insidious bureaucracies associated with hospitalization and institutionalization. Of course, he hovers over and around this fine line; despite Andy's love and unwavering commitment to keeping this particular patient alive, he often threatens to throw his friend into the deep end if he cannot keep himself out of trouble like the deeply troubled adult he is. In a way, Andy's own training and the role it plays in his relationship with Jude are a mirror to the kind of treatment the latter might have otherwise received based on preliminary diagnosis alone. In moments of frustration, his friend's fears often mimic Jude's and are more aligned with how outsiders might view his friend's highly self-destructive tendencies: "'You're sick, Jude," he says, in a low, frantic voice. 'You're crazy. This is crazy behavior. This is behavior that could and should get you locked away for years. You're sick, you're sick and you're crazy and you need help.'" (Yanagihara 580). Throughout the duration of their friendship, Andy often functions as the harbinger of difficult truths and his desperation in the face of Jude's ongoing deterioration reflects how "help" is futile—that its more traditional methods and professional approaches are not the kind of care that can save Jude from himself. However, the commitment to getting better is not equivocal with being committed (as an inpatient, as a sick, sick crazy person) and much of the progress that Jude makes, in spite of his multiple suicide attempts, is done so without the aid of typical psychiatric practices. If neoliberal society offers no meaningful, imaginative narrative beyond its narrow confines of self-responsibility, then it is important to ask what incentivizes Jude to postpone his suicide. Of course, society demands that he stay alive but his evident exhaustion and increasing withdrawal demonstrate that societal demands are not justification enough (Rushton 201). Something else is tethering him to living, namely his feelings of

responsibility to his familial community. Towards the end of his life, Jude reflects that although he has never believed his life to be meaningful, he recognizes that if his family and friends "wanted him to stay alive, then he would", that "He hadn't understood why they wanted him to stay alive, only that they had, and so he had done it." (Yanagihara 686–688).

The double-edged nature of Jude's shaky recovery is that while the medical system would only likely subdue him rather than help him to recover in a meaningful way, the ideological and idealistic balm of "healing for others" is just as harmful. The deep misery that follows him until his death once again troubles the nature of his suicide, twisting the notion of what it means to depict his un/happy ending as both a source of incredible hopelessness, but also relief. The paradox is that Jude's relief cannot exist without the shadow of grief, and the sense that his surrender is a kind of capitulation—not to the neoliberal sensibility that dismisses suicide as a cop out, but rather that his own suffering must be passed onto someone else. Whilst communal support and collective responsibility cannot save Jude, it is the experiences of those who witness his struggle—who feel that they have failed him—that receive powerful lessons of the importance of empathy and its potentially transformative political resonances (Rushton 208). The central tension of *A Little Life* is arguably not Jude's traumatic past or his inability to miraculously overcome his demons but that his family cannot fathom a life without Jude, and so continually pressures him into living longer. At the novel's conclusion, Harold admits that his fear of life without Jude prevented him from truly acknowledging Jude's desperation to be released from his painful inner life: "[I]f he killed himself, if he took himself away from me, I knew I would survive, but I knew as well that survival would be a chore . . . because although there had been trial runs for his eventual departure, . . . I was never able to get used to them." (Yanagihara 708). Harold's own fears, of course, are spoken aloud after having read Jude's letter,

which contains the belated confession which he was unable to relay time and time again. Therefore, his biggest "failure" is his inability to reconcile his incomplete image of Jude with the latter's own perception of himself, leaving him to grapple not only with Jude's death but also with the sudden knowledge of what his adopted son lived through. Harold meditates on his own sense of failure because he was never able to give Jude the one thing he wanted: belief that he was a good person who was worthy of love. In some ways, the tragedy is less Jude's suicide than Harold having to live with this knowledge and this coincides with what is at the core of the narrative's belief system: that Jude was, is, and will be his own greatest obstacle. This resistance in the face of representation posits an unfamiliar challenge to the nature of suffering in literature: the reader is continuously being asked to locate the purpose of the pain and with some suspension of (dis)belief, and to ignore what Jude deems to be the obvious source (his own unworthiness).

The urgency for Jude to tell his friends and family about the trauma he endured bookmarks the beginning and end of the novel, and his social worker Ana beseeches him for it, presenting it as a prophecy which can only transform into yet another false promise. Ultimately, the telling of his story is not enough to alleviate his suffering; Harold only finds out about Jude's past after he has died, which contradicts the expectation of talking through or articulating trauma as the means to putting it to rest. Typically, deep-seated psychological unrest can be alleviated more easily through a material process of rendering and retelling; thus, literature becomes "a privileged site for bearing witness to trauma through innovative literary forms that mimic and transmit rather than represent the phenomenon to readers in its literality" and helps to briefly close the chasm between word and wound caused by language's inability to directly represent traumatic experiences (Coufalová and Rodi-Risberg 121). It is within this theoretical tension—

"the first-wave emphasis on the unspeakability of trauma on the one hand, and the second-wave acknowledgment of its narrative presence on the other" (Kellermann 337)—that the novel's portrayal of trauma can be best contextualized: as foil to itself at times, to the point where it seems to follow the manual for trauma fiction so perfectly just so that it may pack an even more devastating punch when it disregards the text.

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