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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOGOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**“The person I was will always be the person I am”:
The Axiom of Equality in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*.**

Treball de Fi de Grau/BA dissertation

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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Abstract

Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* captures the development of multiple childhood traumas as detonators of certain adult-life trajectories and identities. Through Jude, the main character, Yanagihara challenges the limits of trauma portrayal in order to question its nature and the consequences it entails identity-wise. These consequences are isolation, lack of self-esteem, social anxiety, and intimacy issues, among others. Correspondingly, the work exaggerates the extent to which trauma can sculpt a life. In fact, this exaggeration benefits the analysis of trauma in terms of identity contouring. The relation between trauma and identity relies on who the power holder is. Therefore, the actual onset of the person's identity blurs between the traumatic experience and the individual's will. In short, *A Little Life* delves into Jude's traumatic experiences as a set-off of his identity through the metaphorical interpretation of the Axiom of Equality.

Furthermore, the plot exemplifies the devastating aftermath of not approaching male-domestic trauma in identity formation. Jude as a character strives to forcibly introduce hegemonic metanarratives in his identity, such as money, family, or sex. For this reason, this project will analyse three different episodes of Jude's life: his childhood; his relationship with Willem; and his last years before suicide; as well as the novel's narrative manipulation so as to propose that trauma can define and become identity in this novel. With Trauma Studies and Identity Studies as theoretical frameworks, this TFG will argue that, in Yanagihara's novel, Jude's identity is fundamentally constructed around his trauma, mirrored by the Axiom, thus, blocking the growth of his personal true identity.

Keywords: trauma, identity, Axiom of Equality, Jude, *A Little Life*, Hanya Yanagihara.

0. Introduction.

In 2015, Hanya Yanagihara published *A Little Life*, a novel just under 750 pages narrating the life and friendship of four college friends. Starting as a *Bildungsroman* plot, Yanagihara throws the reader into Jude's story, the most heavily traumatised and tragic of the friends that endured a series of childhood violent events that shaped him.¹ Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, *A Little Life* exceeded all expectations when it was not only critically acclaimed by well-recognised critics, newspapers, and magazines, but also by a new adult audience. In fact, the novel became a sensation in social media. The readers' emotional investment in the story relates to its subsequent literary success due to "the way that Yanagihara subjects the reader to Jude's suffering. It is unremitting and it is ghastly" (Preston, 2015). Largely criticised as trauma porn for its explicitness in and exaggeration of abuse and self-harm, *A Little Life* is a constant and unrelenting, yet addicting, submergence into the trauma Jude suffers, which destabilises the natural course of his identity formation.

As Yanagihara has expressed in many of her interviews, she "wanted to write a character who never got better [...] and [...] see what kind of suspense and tension could be made in a book in which the redemption narrative never gets fulfilled" (Yanagihara in Politics and Prose, 2016). To accomplish so, the novel drew from two opposite currents: the fairy tale and the contemporary naturalistic novel. Consequently, "within that sort of chimeric space, [Yanagihara had] a place in which everything was really exaggerated and where every emotion was sort of turned up to maximum" (ibid.). Correspondingly, this authorial plan allowed playing with the relationship between Jude's identity and his trauma. However, the brutality of his childhood neutralises Jude's ability to reconcile

¹ A full summary of the novel is provided in the Appendix.

both. Therefore, Jude's identity is heavily conditioned by the traumatic physical and sexual violence he suffered at a premature age. Yet, this definition is exclusive to Jude due to his reluctance to reveal his trauma, and the reappropriation it requires.

As a result, the reader becomes Jude's only witness to and confidant of his traumas and aftermaths. The extensive time period provides an insight into the intersection between the development of trauma and identity in a contemporary setting. This intersection was the reason I chose this topic since I was interested in arguing whether identity might be completely formed by trauma; whether identity can be a product of trauma and not just the collision between both. Jude, as the primary survivor of trauma, reacts to life and power dynamics with such particular tactics that it gives room to the decadence of identity and the ensuing triumph of trauma.

0.1. A Theoretical Approach to Trauma and Identity Studies.

Before assessing the text itself, it is of importance to introduce previous literature that presents the correlation between trauma and identity. Before, however, it must be mentioned that I had intended to integrate Masculinity Studies into the theoretical framework since Yanagihara's novel is essentially about men. The initial attempt was to study the relationship between domestic trauma and male identity in a non-war context; but, for the sake of concision, Masculinity was disposed of to focus on identity and trauma.² Consequently, the former is mainly conceptualised "to describe the roles, goals, values, and beliefs about the world that people adopt in order to give their lives a sense of direction and purpose" (Berman & Ratner 275). Identity can be multiple and variable. This work will focus on personal identity, solely centred on the individual. The latter is conceived as difficult and unexpected life experiences that challenge and reassess the

² This and other topics of possible research are presented in the section 'Further Research'.

integrity of these purposes (ibid.). The juncture between both is a fairly new area of study still largely unresearched. Added to the contemporality of the main text, some sources were critically selected from book reviews posted in recognised newspapers and magazines. Nonetheless, most of these concluded on the greater part of the same ideas.

Trushkauskaite-Kuneviciene et al. (2020) conducted a study to determine the identity stage college students fostered by maintaining that “in the aftermath of trauma, the identity is constructed through the lens of traumatic experiences, that can shape the understanding of oneself in both negative and positive way” (2). They determined two types of identity: diffused identity, usually associated with the negative effects of sexual and emotional abuse; and coherent identity characterised by less harsh experiences and more positive aftereffects such as more self-esteem and less anxiety. One of their conclusions was that students “exposed to sexual violence or other unwanted sexual experience were more likely to develop *diffused* identity status, [...] demonstrating that sexual violence is an extremely severe traumatic experience, [...] and has been shown to play an important role in the development of adverse effects on identity” (6). Lastly, they recommended the promotion of a positive identity that could lead to post-traumatic growth (PTG): psychological improvement after a traumatic event.

Similar to the previous study, Ruud Ganzevoort (2008) argues for trauma as a threat to identity since “the traumatizing event is completely alien to the identity of the person, and it is traumatizing precisely because it is alien. Traumatization disrupts the life course that forms the basis of our life story and thus undermines our identity” (21). Furthermore, the author describes the possible responses to trauma: resistance and acceptance. The former defies the meddling of trauma into one’s identity while the latter interiorises it with the purpose to overcome it. In addition, Ganzevoort supports the idea that trauma might transpire beyond a role of opposition to identity but actually cultivate an identity

marker. Chiefly, this marker can be traced through bodily scars, theologically interpreted as stigmata which “symbolize the spiritual meaning of the wounds of traumatization” (30). Consequently, Ganzevoort reflects on the relevance of bodily traumatic consequences as the manifestation of identity. Lastly, he supports the transformation that follows PTG as the psychological recovery of the individual after traumatic experiences.

Overall, most of the literature reviewed presents the intersection between trauma and identity with both in a pre-existent condition. That is, both occur separately until they clash; one complements the other and vice versa. However, there is a sustainable lack of research regarding trauma as a trigger of identity itself; the shaping of an individual when identity might be in its initial stages of development. Some of the literature concerns itself with adulthood, with identity at its most solidified period. Nonetheless, an interest in studying how early childhood and adolescent trauma can have a life-long impact until middle or late adulthood is of most significance to comprehend how identity and trauma truly overlap. Complementarily, the possibility of post-traumatic growth not being a reality for some, Jude included, can also be studied.

0.2. Trauma and Identity in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*.

Considering that Jude subordinates to a life-long trauma from early childhood, the gap between identity formation and traumatic implications are notably under-researched. Jude, as an extreme victim of sexual abuse and physical violence, clearly embodies a diffused identity, undefined and uncategorisable. Correspondingly, he neither accepts nor resists trauma as an alien factor in his life;³ they simply coexist in a symbiotic space that

³ Throughout the novel, Jude is referred to as The Postman; that is, post-ethnicity, post-sexuality, post-trauma, post-identity. Hence, he does not conceive trauma as a factor of his identity.

makes them indistinguishable. In fact, Jude conjointly interprets his identity and trauma according to the Axiom of Equality, a mathematical theory which holds that:

“x always equals x: it assumes that if you have a conceptual thing named x, that it must always be equivalent to itself, that it has a uniqueness about it, that it is in possession of something so irreducible that we must assume it is absolutely, unchangeably equivalent to itself for all time, that its very elementalness can never be altered” (Yanagihara 339).

If this axiom is considered to be factual, Jude imagines himself not only as a product of trauma but as trauma personified (Jude = x = trauma; thus, Jude = trauma). Jude’s trauma is reflected in his body, behaviour, and inner thoughts. Then, this project attempts to contemplate the notion that identity might be entirely trauma-based and strictly solidified in a physical and mental state without the possibility of PTG. Therefore, this TFG seeks to trace in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* whether trauma can trigger identity, instead of simply complement it. By analysing Jude, this project centres on the plausibility of the Axiom of Equality to argue if personal identity can be equated to trauma.

This project will be divided into three main sections. Each of them analyses an episode of Jude’s life. They also concentrate on the textual evidence as well as on the narratological and genre-based repercussions to argue the non-conventional resolution of a literary conventional novel. Specifically, Chapter 1, more of a textual basis, focuses on his childhood and adolescence: the foundation of the Axiom at the hands of his perpetrator, Brother Luke; Chapter 2 in his sexual life with his partner Willem: the consolidation of the Axiom; and Chapter 3, of a more discursive nature, in his last years before suicide: the Axiom’s triumph over his identity. This episodic chronology assists in drawing the progressive evolution of trauma as Jude’s identity, which mirrors the three stages of the Axiom of Equality: foundation, consolidation, and triumph. Lastly, a set of conclusions will be presented with consequences this project’s claim might postulate.

Chapter 1.

“Luke’s legacies were in everything he did, in everything he was.”

This first chapter is concerned with Jude’s childhood, specifically his last years with Brother Luke,⁴ in order to analyse the possible foundation of the Axiom of Equality as representative of Jude’s trauma equating to his identity. The reason for choosing this particular episode (pp. 417—423) was principally the extreme effect Brother Luke had on Jude as a child and then, as an adult.⁵ This episode is enclosed within part four of the novel, titled “The Axiom of Equality”.⁶ As previously introduced, this axiom, theorised by the Greek mathematician Euclid, speculates that a conceptual thing (x) will always be equal to itself (x). In simpler terms, $x = x$ and remains elementally unchangeable.

As a mathematician himself, Jude takes this statement to be true and is in constant search to verify it, mainly using his trauma as the object of study. As Antonia Lehnert, writer in *The Daily Free Press*, comments, “Jude St. Francis perceives his life as the embodiment of this axiom. No matter how drastically he changes his surrounding, the demons [...] of his past haunt him forever, reminding him that since he was raised amid suffering, suffering is all he will ever know” (Lehnert, 2021). Moreover, this evaluation is primarily founded on his traumatic upbringing, especially with Brother Luke. As a consequence, the Axiom can be hypothesised to take root in Jude’s identity as a trigger of his trauma. Then, substituting the Axiom’s x for trauma propels the establishment of Jude’s identity succeeding the events of this episode. As a result, the analysis of this episode presents the Axiom so as to justify Jude’s ensuing belief in his personification of

⁴ The Appendix provides a summary of the novel for plot-related questions.

⁵ Even if Jude’s relationship with Brother Luke is considered central in this chapter, it should be mentioned that the monks, the orphanage, and Dr Traylor also contributed to the foundation of the Axiom.

⁶ The novel is actually divided into 7 main parts, which will be relevant for Chapter 2: *Lispenard Street*, *The Postman*, *The Axiom of Equality*, *The Happy Years*, *Dear Comrade*, *Lispenard Street*.

his trauma. And subsequently, to develop the conviction that Jude's trauma and identity might be one and the same.

Walker et al. (2012) consider that childhood sexual abuse "could have serious and lasting detrimental effects on an individual's sense of self and control over one's body" (391). As Jude expresses, his own body and past have reduced him to little more than his traumatic experiences. They are a reminder "of how trapped he is, trapped in a body he hates, with a past he hates, and how he will never be able to change either. [...] He will be reminded that he is nothing, a scooped-out husk in which the fruit has long since mummified and shrunk" (Yanagihara 154). Thus, his pre-formed identity is reduced to his trauma. As he says, he is a husk, emptied out by his trauma at the hands of Brother Luke.

This identity hollowness is a product of not only the sexual abuse but also the influence Brother Luke had on an uncountable number of aspects of Jude's perception of the world.⁷ Luke constantly promised him a normal life after Jude 'retired' from sex work and that "they would be together, the two of them, like a married couple. No longer were they father and son; now they were equals" (420). As an expected behaviour from a sex predator, Luke consistently manipulates Jude. And although "[Jude] had long since learned that the brother's promises were meaningless" (419), he sees the monk as a source of comfort from which to extract a family identity.

Contemplating the vulnerability of the earliest stages of identity formation, it is easier for trauma to corrupt it and appropriate it. In fact,

"The most vulnerable situation is the one in which fear and negative emotions are most intense depending on the type of violence used, the person who actively

⁷ Several of the names in this novel carry obvious religious connotations. Jude refers to Jude the Apostle, "Patron of Hopeless Causes". Brother Luke to Luke the Evangelist, a form of mentor or guide; relevant in Chapter 1.

harms them is the closest to them, protective mechanisms do not work, and the possibility of getting away from the situation is low” (Gonultas 4).

Hence, vulnerability ingrains in Jude a sense of inescapability. He truly imagines himself trapped with Luke, and the life such traumatic circumstances have imagined for him. For a child’s mind, questioning one’s reality comes at a great cost because “initially, Brother Luke appeared to be Jude’s savior, spiriting him away from an institution where he was regularly beaten and sexually assaulted” (Michaud, 2015). Consequently, Jude either deceives himself to believe that “he knew there was no one else who would ever treat him as well as Luke did: even when he did something wrong” (Yanagihara 419), or he searches for an outlet: self-harm.

At the monastery, Jude had resorted to throwing himself at walls because of the monks’ abuse. With Luke, once the rapes worsen, he resumes this “honest pain, clean pain, without shame or filth, and it was a different sensation than he had felt in years” (418). And yet, Luke interferes in Jude’s attempt to manage his own identity, of negating $x = x$, by suggesting cutting since “the clients don’t like seeing [him] all bruised” (ibid.). This physical self-harming, acutely present throughout the novel, will be a significant outcome of Luke’s manipulation of Jude’s identity, which will “sow the seeds of his self-harm and masochistic tendencies in his later life” (Sarikaya-Sen 161).

Chiefly, the fact that Jude self-harms early in his life accounts for trauma starting to replace his identity and the Axiom being established. Obviously, cutting is a release from trauma and a coping mechanism.⁸ As Gonultas (2023) explains, “in this situation, children may feel more helpless, and [...] harming themselves may be viewed as a form of escape” (12). In addition, by cutting himself, Jude finds that “he was draining away the poison,

⁸ It could be argued as well that in cutting Jude resists the Axiom’s appropriation of his identity. In cutting, he retains control over his own body and illustrates his resistance over Luke’s grooming.

the filth, the rage inside him. [...] He wished he was made of metal, of plastic: something that could be hosed down and scrubbed clean” (Yanagihara 419). He negotiates his identity through cutting, even if the person being formed through the abuse is incompatible with the person Jude will seek to be. Therefore, the *in-development* Jude dissipates to give space to a traumatic Jude, who resents the trauma-like identity he is forced to assume. In the end, the theorisation of the Axiom develops from the subsequent control Brother Luke has of Jude’s identity. Even if in those moments “his body is his to do with what he chose” (ibid.), and the self-harm allows him to coexist with the Axiom, “Brother Luke was right: cutting is better” (ibid.). And not only so, but now “he was so dependent on Luke: for his food, for his protection, and now for his razors” (ibid.). As a result, his emotional and physical integrity is dependant as well on Luke’s guidance. Therefore, evidence is accumulating for Luke not only acting as the perpetrator but also as the instigator of the Axiom’s foundation: Jude = trauma.

Narratively, Yanagihara manages to knot Jude’s identity to Brother Luke. After Jude appears to submit to Luke’s crafting of his identity, Yanagihara erases him so as not to halt the story. However, she does stall Jude’s identity as Luke’s suicide is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the identity abuse temporarily ceases. But on the other hand, the experience results traumatic for two main reasons. First, he is witness to the death of the closest person to him. Second, he is left to define his own identity after a too-long period of grooming. Accordingly, Jude embarks on a journey of “strenuous efforts to exert control over his own life [which] are heroic and pitiful for the painful quest for individuation he has taken is self-defeating and leads him to commit suicide” (Sarikaya-Sen 167). Moreover, the futility of this task lies in losing Luke, meaning stalling Jude’s identity formation, and then consolidating trauma (x) as his identity (x).

Conceiving Jude as a victim of Stockholm Syndrome,⁹ Luke's suicide implies that he loses his source of identity programming due to an extensive period of isolation from reality. Actually, "when they are being victimized, survivors of child sexual abuse were isolated from other persons, from other perspectives, and knew only the perspective of the offender. This isolation has persisted into adulthood" (Julich 117). Therefore, the experiences controlled by Luke are ordinary to Jude for the development of his identity. Since the suicide stalls his identity, the Axiom's foundation solidifies even more, and the difference between both fades. For instance, when a doctor questions Jude about the sexual abuse, Jude's first thought is "*Had* he been raped? He had agreed to this, to all of this; it had been his decision, and he had made it" (Yanagihara 422). Additionally, the reaction of the doctor in front of Jude's extremist abuse leads Jude to affirm "for certain that what he had been doing was wrong, and he felt so ashamed, so dirty that he had wanted to die" (ibid.). Consequently, one might extrapolate that the identity that trauma had formed in Jude (i.e., the naturalisation of the abuse) supports the Axiom in assuming that his life was wrong, hence his identity was not valid.

Gonultas (2023) maintains that a "failure to meet the treatment, attention, and surveillance needs of children who have been victimized before may make these children vulnerable to other victimizations, especially sexual abuse" (12). After entering the orphanage, "they knew what he was, they knew what he had done, they knew he was ruined already; and so he wasn't surprised when some of the counselors began doing to him what people had been doing to him for years" (Yanagihara 422). For Jude, these feelings of shame and guilt originated with Brother Luke, and with his death, they became

⁹ Stockholm Syndrome is defined as an "emotional bonding [that] could occur between victims and an offender. It was found that [...] occurred when the four following conditions co-existed: (a) Perceived threat to survival [...]; (b) The captive's perception of some small kindness from the captor [...]; (c) Isolation from perspectives other than those of the captor; and (d) Perceived inability escape" (Julich 112).

part of him. Therefore, Luke stars in his post-Luke life. In his education, Jude applies every knowledge Luke taught him, and when “his teachers asked him who had taught him what he knew, [...] he said his father had” (ibid.). Essentially, he seeks to absolve Luke and justify his own identity, since “he wanted to believe that, through everything, Luke really had loved him, that that part had been real: not a perversion, not a rationalization, but real” (423). Consequently, Jude’s goal throughout his life is to validate that his childhood abuse and trauma, never labelled as such, are admissible as his identity; resulting in the ascertainment of the Axiom: Jude’s identity equals trauma, $x = x$.

In sum, this first chapter has established the Axiom of Equality as a mirror for Jude’s identity. Furthermore, Brother Luke has been denounced as the main perpetrator of trauma in Jude’s identity since he is the most predominant and resounding abuser in the novel. However, as the title of this chapter expresses, Luke’s legacies, the abuse and trauma, are those that last in Jude. That is, Luke’s personification of his trauma is

“in everything he was: his love of reading, of music, of math, of gardening, of languages – those were Luke. His cutting, his hatred, his shame, his fears, his diseases, his inability to have a normal sex life, to be a normal person – those were Luke too. Luke had taught him to find pleasure in life, and he had removed pleasure absolutely” (ibid.).

Lastly, contemplating that “he thought of Luke when the two of them [Jude and Willem] were falling in love, when he was being seduced and had been too much of a child, too naïve, too lonely and desperate for affection to know it” (ibid.), the aim of Chapter 2 will be to track whether the Axiom is maintained in Jude’s adulthood and his relationship with Willem.

Chapter 2.

“Luke had taught him how to find pleasure in life, and he had removed pleasure absolutely.”

Unlike Chapter 1, this second chapter has an adult Jude at its centre. It attempts to trace the consolidation of the Axiom of Equality, detected in the first episode, in order to support this project’s theory: for Jude, his trauma and identity are the same. For this reason, Chapter 2 (pp. 481—490) mainly focuses on Jude’s relationship with Willem, specifically, their sexual relationship. Hence, this episode provides an insight into the deep impact Jude’s trauma has on his social network as a derivation of trauma dictating his identity. In this case, the episode is enclosed in part five of the novel, titled ‘The Happy Years’. The narrative structure, as well as the genres, are highlighted in this chapter due to their relevance in reflecting the identity struggle the main character undergoes. Moreover, the traumatic acts, such as Luke’s or Caleb’s, appear in a reminiscent state. That is, no trauma is inflicted upon Jude in this episode. Retrospectively, this all boils down to remembering and revisiting. Consequently, Jude will be in constant negotiation between a past that practically created him and the person he aspires to be with and for Willem.

Usually, the general consensus is that “the trauma survivor [...] is constructed around a traumatic event inflicted on an individual, rather than being an ascribed identity one is born into” (Findler 338). Yet, in the confrontations between his trauma-based identity and social expectations, Jude appears to have interiorised his trauma into his very self. Therefore, the entanglement of these two factors attests to Jude’s trauma limiting the expansion of his identity. Trauma does not redefine his identity but draws it. Then, the consolidation of the Axiom in this chapter lies in Jude’s “relentless quest for embracing suffering as a form of self-definition” (Sarikaya-Sen 156). In light of this, this chapter will examine Jude’s unsuccessfulness in nullifying the Axiom in his relationship with

Willem. Then, it will discuss the consolidation of the Axiom in the evidence presented for trauma equating to identity.

Before dating Willem, Jude's first sentimental relationship with Caleb represented a wake-up call for him. And even more, it nourished the foundation of the Axiom. In Caleb, he saw an opportunity to test the waters and discern if he could be emotionally and physically involved in a relationship. Yet, given the abuse Caleb inflicts on him, Jude reflects that, because of the Axiom,

“...there was something inevitable, even, in a small way, a relief, about Caleb's hitting him: all along, he had been waiting for some sort of punishment for his arrogance, for thinking he could have what everyone else has, and here—at last—it was. *This is what you get*, said a voice inside his head. *This is what you get for pretending to be someone you know you're not*” (Yanagihara 325).

This conviction follows Jude in his relationship with Willem. Jonas Kellerman (2020) explains that Jude “wavers between stoically defying his traumatic past at times and powerlessly giving in to its hold over him at other time” (338). In defying his past, and thus, the static Axiom in his identity, he pressures himself to have sex with Willem, a person he actually loves and gives his unenthusiastic consent to. On the one hand, since their relationship has evolved from friendship-like to romantic, the conditions are distinct. Sex is culturally expected in relationships, and “he knew that if he wanted to be with Willem, he would have to do it eventually” (Yanagihara 481). But his struggles to recover from his trauma desperately lead him to bargain: having sex with Willem is the currency for keeping him. In effect, “he would never refuse Willem, ever. [...] Willem had sacrificed so much to be with him, and had brought him such peace, that he was determined to try to thank him however he could” (483). Hence, sex implies a not-so-insignificant chore for finally achieving a healthy relationship based on mutual respect.

On the other hand, the sexual acts transport Jude to not only revisiting but also reliving the multiple rapes he suffered as a child and with Caleb. In fact, he discovers that

“when it was over, there was the same shame, the same nausea, the same desire to hurt himself, to scoop out his insides and hurl them against the wall with a bloody thwack” (482). Sharing the act with Willem does not impede trauma from interfering in his identity negotiation. Jude’s self-deception merely accentuates his inescapability from trauma. As much as he forces himself to try over and over again, the experience can only “uncover the traumatic nature of Jude’s past, who himself appears to fully realize and acknowledge the affective reverberations of his childhood only in his later adulthood” (Kellermann 336). In truth, Jude is extremely aware of his trauma’s invasion of his adult life. For instance, to provide further pleasure to Willem even if he does not enjoy the private encounters, “he made himself remember the lessons that Brother Luke taught him, lessons he had spent his adulthood trying to forget” (Yanagihara 483). Ultimately, adult Jude cannot avoid ceding to his childhood trauma. Thus, admitting to trauma being his identity creator.

Additionally, his trauma remains so embedded in his identity that, in the end, trauma dictates his actions. Jude, as its passive victim, is unable to define his own identity without accounting for his traumatic past. Although “Willem was his own version of happiness; [...] a version of happiness he never thought he’d have” (486), Michaud (2015) is adamant that “it does not offer any possibility of redemption and deliverance beyond these tender moments”. Even these are tainted by his trauma to the extent that his mind compares Willem to Brother Luke because “they both want the same thing from [him]. [He is] the same thing to them in the end” (Yanagihara 484). The omnipresence of Luke evinces the rooting of his identity in the traumatic moments shared with him. Therefore, young Jude and older Jude abode in the x. The Axiom does not allow him to reimagine his identity because he is fundamentally a product of his trauma. As a result, “*A Little Life* thus ponders on the essentialist question whether a self that has been systematically

destroyed a seemingly endless amount of times has any chance of rebuilding itself afterwards” (Kellermann 339). His trauma-architected identity is ingrained to such an extreme that all his efforts are futile. As a result, Jude resigns himself to suffer through sex so as to challenge the little control he has over his identity.

Supplementary to Luke’s phantom-like return, the cutting, pivotal since the beginning, progressively worsens and harms the relationship. As maintained in the first chapter, cutting serves Jude as “the expression of a process of dissociation which helps him disengage himself from his traumatic reality” (Sarikaya-Sen 164). But not only so since it also suffices him as a tool for control. When confronted by Willem, a frustrated Jude cannot express “how it was a form of punishment and also of cleansing, [...] how it made him feel like his body, his life, was truly his, and no one else’s” (Yanagihara 490). Nonetheless, this control is merely a phantom limb, which acts as “a form of agency that helps him carry on living, even if in atrocious conditions” (Sarikaya-Sen 173).

Therefore, cutting demonstrates that his trauma completely restrains his identity development. It also gives total control to the Axiom to determine it by trapping him in a past-like present. Objectively, his identity experiences practically the same with Brother Luke and Willem: “now he was forty-five, and it was as if he was eleven once again, waiting for the day when someone—once Brother Luke, now (unfair, unfair) Willem—would tell him ‘That’s it. You’ve fulfilled your duty. No more’” (Yanagihara 486). Even if the intentions are utterly opposite, Jude, just as the Axiom commands, remains the same x, his trauma.

Likewise, the tension between Jude’s past and his identity negotiation is narratively paralleled by the novel. In fact, “the representation of Jude as a wounded hero moving from childhood to adulthood and embracing suffering as a form of mastery over trauma as well as a mechanism for self-definition requires specific writing strategies” (Sarikaya-

Sen 167). First, the novel, structured in seven main blocks, reflects Jude's journey. The title 'The Happy Years' hoaxes the reader into supposing the suffering is finally over when it will aggravate instead. Even more, that "none of Jude's success and well-appointed lifestyle can blot out the shame he has brought with him from those early years" (Anshaw, 2015). Second, it complements the fairy-tale genre Yanagihara attempted to subvert by adding a naturalistic touch. The temporal alternations between past and present interfere with the conventional endings of fairy tales. Yanagihara (2015) herself expressed: "I wanted *A Little Life* to do the reverse: to begin healthy (or appear so), and end sick – both the main character, Jude, and the plot itself". For this very reason, the structure is literarily unreliable and falls into the Anti-Bildungsroman category. In fact, the novel is not about overcoming one's past and growing out of it as the Romantic *bildungsroman* indicates. Actually, "these traumatic experiences drag Jude from disgrace towards self-hatred and self-destruction in his adulthood" (Sarikaya-Sen 157). The reader comes to the tragic realisation that "every time, [Jude] hoped things would be different. Every time, he told himself it would be. The sorrow he felt when he realized that even Willem couldn't save him, that he was irredeemable, that this experience was forever ruined for him, was one of the greatest of his life" (Yanagihara 483).

Admittedly, in its mosaic of genres and "a fragmented narrative, Yanagihara presents the details of how and why Jude developed the physical and psychological wounds that draw the contours of his later harrowing life" (Sarikaya-Sen 161). The persistent temporal fluctuations in fact echo Jude navigating the Axiom and yielding to his trauma governing his identity because "surely his hatred for the act was not a deficiency to be corrected but a simpler matter of preference" (Yanagihara 487). In literary terms, "Yanagihara's narration of Jude's sexual abuse as a child as well as the traumatic reverberations thereof as an adult certainly qualify as such extraordinary moments that overwhelm his sense of

self-possession and often baffle full comprehension” (Kellermann 339). Gradually, the negotiation becomes a justification of the Axiom, of him being the x that equals trauma because resisting “meant losing [Willem], meant being alone forever” (Yanagihara 484).

In short, this chapter has studied the impact Jude’s trauma has on his adult relationship with Willem, leading to the consolidation of the Axiom after Chapter 1. Their sexual encounters primarily push Jude into remembering that Luke “had removed pleasure absolutely” (423). Consequently, Jude strives for an identity bargain so “he could endure it for every morning he woke up next to Willem, for every affection Willem gave him” (488). However, trauma delineates his identity in the confines of Luke’s memories, and everything he taught him, such as sex performances, cutting, and the subsequent feelings of shame and disgust. Therefore, Jude unconsciously reinforces his trauma-based identity to justify that “he wished someone would tell him that he was still a full human being despite his feelings; that there was nothing wrong with who he was” (486). This wistfulness admits to the $x = x$ equation; his trauma being his identity is justifiable because it is who he is at his very core.

Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted the parallelisms between Jude’s futile attempt for self-identity and the structural narration of the novel, acting as a proleptic device for the novel’s tragic ending. Complementarily, this conviction is supported by the genres Yanagihara plays with, which are subverted in order to refute the fairy tale-like ending, the *bildungsroman*, and the expected PTG. Hence, the next and final chapter will focus on the reverberations of Willem’s death in Jude’s identity because “he had promised himself he would work on repairing himself, for Willem’s sake if not his own” (485). Then, with Willem out of the picture, it is crucial to analyse whether the Axiom will finally overpower Jude in his quest for self-definition.

Chapter 3.

“He wished someone would tell him that [...] there was nothing wrong with who he was.”

So far, trauma and Jude have coexisted, one feeding from the other according to the Axiom of Equality ($x = x$). Chapter 1 focused on young Jude and the foundation of the Axiom. Chapter 2 on the consolidation of the equation in adult Jude. Chapter 3 will instead focus on an older Jude after surviving Willem’s death and the ultimate triumph of the Axiom. Enclosed in the sixth section of the novel ‘Dear Comrade’, the episode selected (pp. 692—701) narrates the detrimental final years of Jude’s life; from being a fairly functioning member of society to being guarded by his friends and family in order to prevent the inevitable: his suicide. The Axiom plays a crucial role in this chapter given that Willem’s death supposes the demolition of a possible post-trauma Jude and hence, the absolute appropriation of trauma over Jude’s identity.

In these pages, hopeful Jude disappears to give room to a despairing Jude. Since Willem’s death, Jude has spiralled into depression, suicidal thoughts, and destructive behaviours. Even he realises that,

“Everything has gone so wrong, he thinks; how did everything go so wrong? How has he forgotten so completely who he was when he was with Willem? It is as if that person has died along with Willem, and what he is left with is his elemental self, someone he has never liked, someone so incapable of occupying the life he has, the life he has somehow made for himself, in spite of himself” (Yanagihara 694).

Evidently, the Jude he refers to sought in Willem a reshaping of identity. Willem acted as an impulse for Jude to explore an identity that his death stalled, and even erased. Therefore, his identity is not rewritten but his pre-Willem identity, his elemental traumatised self, is accentuated. That is, any progress he might have accomplished in Willem’s presence is ruined: the Axiom takes predominance, allowing Brother Luke once again to materialise. Therefore, this chapter engages with Willem’s death, primarily in its

effects on Jude's identity, to examine the final stages of his life in which the Axiom and his trauma reign over Jude, neutralising him in negating trauma = Jude.

Curiously, Yanagihara, to maintain the narration, recycles the narrative strategy of killing the character closest to Jude: first Brother Luke, now Willem. This choice opens the door to another Jude, one that has not lost his mentor, but his lover. In his desperation, Jude wants to reproach his custodians: "*Have you forgotten him? Have you forgotten how much I need him? Have you forgotten I don't know how to be alive without him?*" (696). As Kellermann (2020) suggests, "in the quiet moments between Jude and Willem the reader gets a temporary glimpse into an alternate trajectory to that of Jude's failed recovery" (343). Willem's death and its impact on Jude's identity are massive in "Jude's quest for a better life and identity in the context of an established social order" (Sarikaya-Sen 158). Accustomed to being dictated on how to live his life, once the person Jude had consented to pilot it is gone, Jude has no captain at the helm, leaving him to drift away in his trauma.

Additionally, Willem's death is another narrative device used by Yanagihara to exaggerate the distinction between a fairy tale and a naturalistic novel. In combining multiple genres, the expected resolution of a romantic fairy tale or a *bildungsroman* story becomes literarily unattainable because Jude "can't do it again; he can't live once more through those fifteen years, those fifteen years whose half-life have been so long and so resonant, that have determined everything he has become and done" (Yanagihara 693). Certainly, the novel lets neither the reader nor the story escape grim reality through fantasy. In fact, "the more *over the top* and tragic the narrative becomes, the more it becomes impossible to ignore that wanting Jude to continue living is not only wishful fantasy but cruel" (Rushton, 209). Then, the reader is required to redirect their expectations and accept that the text is not optimistic, but of a detrimental nature.

Contemplating this, Willem's death infers, therefore, the destruction of the barrier that kept Brother Luke and the other abusers at bay. Tragically, "self-annihilation becomes a sheltering sanctuary that grants Jude safety from the incessantly returning memories against which he can no longer protect himself otherwise" (Kellermann 338). For instance, Jude "feels his past is a cancer, one he should have treated long ago but instead ignored. And now Brother Luke and Dr Traylor have metastasized, now they are too large and too overwhelming for him to eliminate" (Yanagihara 693). In other words, the traumas they inflicted on Jude were so severe and gruesome, that his dismissal permits them to consolidate in his identity, to form an x which cannot escape the equation $x = x$. They are with Jude, and they are Jude; and his identity can only be eliminated through self-destruction. For this very reason, the narrative does not conclude whether Jude's "experiences in his relationship with Willem would have been able to overcome or at least balance out the impossible nightmare of his past enough to keep on living, had that dream not been cut short by Willem's premature death" (Kellermann 344). In the empty spaces left by Willem, Jude's friends and family try to take on an unavailing project: saving Jude.

In their earnestness to keep Jude alive, they seek to assertively repair his identity. Even Jude perceives that "they had imagined his life for him. They had seen him as something different than he had ever seen himself as; they had allowed him to believe in possibilities that he would never have conceived" (Yanagihara 692). Nonetheless, the consolidation of the Axiom is so far along that redefining himself implies the interference of his family in his identity. Throughout the novel, Jude remains silent about his trauma, keeping both selves separated "as a mechanism of coping with trauma, as opposed to simply being a symptom or consequence of it" (Kellermann 337). Hence, their participation in his identity reformulation connotes that "his life, the only thing that is his, is being possessed: By Harold, who wants to keep him alive, by the demons who scabble

through his body, dangling off his ribs, puncturing his lungs with their talons. By Brother Luke, by Dr Traylor” (Yanagihara 697). Confronting his trauma in order to reappropriate his identity is a process in which Jude does not want to partake. Hence, he returns to the starting point in identity formation: childhood. Expectedly, “he behaves in ways that astonish him, in ways he has never dared before in his life, not even when he was a child, in ways that he would have been beaten for by anyone else. But not by Harold and Julia. [...] they never discipline him” (696). By not punishing his behaviour, Jude can actually fill in the empty spaces previously owned by Luke or Traylor because,

“He saw his life as the axiom of equality, but they [Harold and Julia] saw it as another riddle, one with no name—Jude = x —and they had filled in the x in ways Brother Luke, the counsellors at the home, Dr Traylor had never written for him or encouraged him to write for himself. [...] If he knew how they had solved the proof, he thinks, he would know why to keep on living” (692).

This textual self-denunciation and acceptance of the Axiom’s presence in his identity demonstrates Jude’s passivity in the formation of his identity. Generally, identity is formed unconsciously in the interactions with other selves and experiences. In Jude’s case, these have been malevolently imposed in Jude’s character by trauma and its enforcers. In the unconfined spaces of a child-like behaviour, Jude “cries for everything he has been, for everything he might have been, [...] cries for the shame and joy of finally getting to be a child, [...] of believing that to someone he is special despite all his mistakes and hatefulness, *because* of all his mistakes and hatefulness” (699). The melancholic state seems to finally drive in the nail in Jude’s coffin given that he cannot idealise his childhood. The futility of the novel is ever-present because “Jude’s definition of himself through wounds that seem beyond healing is what constitutes his singularity” (Sarikaya-Sen 171). Therefore, holding on to the person his family envisages appears so distant to Jude that imagining himself as someone else is intrinsically complex. After all, “all those hours he had spent cutting, and hiding the cutting, and beating back his memories, what

would he do instead with all those hours? He would be a better person, he knows. He would be a more loving one” (Yanagihara 700).

Finally, it is Jude’s unconditional love for his family and friends, and not his self-determination for reappropriating his identity, that compel him to “pretend one more time, and this last bout of pretending will change things for him, will make him into the person he might have been” (ibid.). The pretence is vital for comprehending the supplanting of Jude with the Axiom. It is certainly plausible that in pretending Jude surrenders to the Axiom of Jude = trauma since the text provides “a moral universe in which spiritual salvation of this sort does not exist” (Michaud, 2015). Ultimately, he conceives himself as x , as his trauma. The equation $x = x$ is irreversibly resolved as Jude = trauma, and vice versa. Even more, the Axiom has Jude perceiving himself as the perpetrator of the Axiom by playing “his old game of ‘If’ with himself: If I hadn’t followed Brother Luke. If I hadn’t let myself be taken by Dr Traylor. If I hadn’t let Caleb inside” (Yanagihara 700-1). Instead of accepting his survivor status, he assumes full responsibility for the events that provoked his trauma-based identity, and thus, undoubtedly affirming the Axiom as his life rule: his identity is nothing but his trauma; he = trauma. In opting for this measure, “the central tragedy of [*A Little Life*] is arguably *not* Jude’s traumatic past or his inability to miraculously overcome his demons but that his family cannot countenance a life without Jude, so continually pressure him into living longer” (Rushton 209). Eventually, Jude accepts his sentence since “he has never been able to imagine what his life might be; even as a child, even as he dreamed of other places, of other lives, he wasn’t able to visualize what those other places and lives would be” (Yanagihara 692).

In light of this final chapter, it can be maintained that the Axiom emerges triumphant and naturalises in Jude, and that in fact, Jude equals trauma. After losing “someone who had managed to see past who he was, and yet see him completely as well” (700), Jude

shelters himself in an uncharted inner child in order to test the boundaries of his traumatic self so as to stumble on a reason for living. Because “Harold wants him to live, and now Harold is getting his wish” (701), the reconciliation of the Jude he was negotiating and his elemental self, produced by Brother Luke and Dr Traylor, results unmanageable in the engulfing of the Axiom. Not only so, a reimagination of his identity emerges as cruel because “all the most terrifying Ifs involve people. All the good ones do as well” (701). Therefore, Jude resigns himself to his tragic fate. The unconditional love provided by his parents clashes with Jude refusing to reappropriate his identity. As a result, the consequences of Jude’s surrender and the fact that “he had believed everything he had been taught about who he was and what he would become” (692) will be presented in the final section of this project with the overall conclusions of the Axiom’s argument.

4. Conclusions and Consequences.

“He has believed everything he had been taught about who he was and what he would become.”

This TFG is coming to an end and certain conclusions have to be drawn, as well as their possible consequences. Initially, I proposed that in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* identity could be traced entirely as traumatic or trauma-based according to the Axiom of Equality, $x = x$. Appointing Jude as the object of study, I have analysed the Axiom's role when equalising the x 's as Jude (identity) = trauma in three different episodes: his childhood, his relationship with Willem, and his final years before suicide by mirroring them to the Axiom's progression: foundation, consolidation, and triumph. The examination of each chapter has pointed to the consistency of the Axiom in Jude's identity, founded in his childhood, consolidated in his adulthood, triumphant in his death.

In Chapter 1, Brother Luke, as the main perpetrator of Jude's trauma and omnipresent in the rest of the episodes, ploughs heavily through Jude's identity, reshaping it to the extent that Jude “is unclear how to explain himself to himself” (Yanagihara 299). Jude interiorises the identity Brother Luke bestows on him, both his trauma and life interests; thus, the Axiom is grounded in Jude. In Chapter 2, Willem plays a vital role in Jude's attempt to negotiate his identity and refute the Axiom. Their sexual encounters represent an “investment in masochism as a way of achieving mastery over one's traumatic past even if destructive in the long term” (Sarikaya-Sen 173). In both cases, Jude insistently searches for a justification of his identity as valid, after finally solving the x as trauma. In Chapter 3, however, Jude resigns himself to the Axiom because of “an inevitability to this, to his life: that every year he would become worse—more disgusting, more depraved. Every year, his right to humanness diminished; every year, he became less and less of a person. But he didn't care any longer; he couldn't allow himself to” (Yanagihara

540). Consequently, I posit that—despite his attempt to escape it—he becomes a living personification of his trauma. Ultimately,

“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. [...] he knows that x will always equal x , no matter what he does, or how many years he moves away from the monastery, from Brother Luke, no matter how much he earns or how hard he tries to forget. [...] $x = x$, he thinks. $x = x$, $x = x$ ” (340).

As this project has argued, there is a reason behind his gradual deterioration. Yanagihara’s authorial plan allows for the trauma-based identity to become axiomatic *per se*. Jude progressively embodies the underdog. Then, the possibility of a PTG becomes improbable in front of the Axiom due to Yanagihara’s manipulation of genres and narratives. First, the intercalation of Jude’s past with his present forbids the reader from assuming an optimistic approach toward the character. Hence, Jude’s *tragicness* is underlined by the flashbacks and their intrusion into his adulthood. Second, the narrative parallelism between Willem and Brother Luke reverberates in Jude when having sex and in the aftermath of the former’s death. Third, Yanagihara chiefly plays with three different genres: the Fairy tale, the Naturalistic novel, and the Anti-Bildungsroman. In these chimeric spaces, Yanagihara perpetuates her goal of exaggerating the narrative and Jude’s trauma-like identity. Thus, the subversion of all three genres heightens the novel’s extremist narrative, which “assumes the role of a textual body that resembles the role of Jude’s disabled and scarred physical body in the story as a recipient and perpetuator of trauma” (Kellermann 340). As a result, Yanagihara’s narrative foreshadows “the impossibility for amelioration and fulfilment and social integration of a child submitted to an awe-inspiring process of physical and spiritual harassment” (Sarikaya-Sen 173).

In sum, one major consequence of this project is that the novel becomes proleptic in nature. Jude’s deepest wish of “living his little life” (Yanagihara 318) is overshadowed by all the proleptic elements, narratively and plot-wise. A second consequence lies in the

realisation that the Axiom overpowers not only Jude but his family as well. The Axiom eventually permeates his identity despite all his family's support and interventions because "of how hard it is to keep alive someone who doesn't want to stay alive" (709). This points to the third and final consequence: Jude's suicide is actually the final product of the Axiom. When it was first established, Brother Luke had just committed suicide, stalling his identity. It therefore comes full circle when Jude decides to commit suicide as well. Thus, "he died still stubbornly believing everything he was taught about himself—after [Willem], after [Harold], after all of [those] who loved him" (719). But to end on a brighter note, I contend that although the Axiom emerges triumphant in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, Jude did indeed manage to live a life, tragic but certainly not little.

5. Further Research.

The following topics are issues that are relevant to this novel, and broadly to the approach that I have taken. But they were, ultimately, not sufficiently connected to my central argumentative concern. So I list them here, as issues that could be given fuller critical attention in a distinct project or projects.

A Male-Shared Trauma. The four friends built their friendship around their own traumas and project them into their relationships; Willem and neglect, JB and co-dependency, Malcolm and family approval. This is an area that would be of interest, I believe, to Masculinity Studies.

The Family Role in Identity Formation. Jude has multiple parent figures (Monks—specially Luke—, Ana, Harold, Julia, Andy, etc.). They play a role in forming Jude's identity and his relation towards the family unit. The notion of identity and how it is configured is of great interest to post-modern criticism. This aspect of the novel provides considerable literary source material for any such approach.

Friendship vs. Romantic Relationship. In *A Little Life*, there are some instances where friendships and romantic relationships are compared by Jude. It would be interesting to see which type of relationship can offer more to Jude. For instance, his dynamics with Willem vary according to whether they are in a relationship or if they are friends.

Women Writing about Men. I found it very compelling that this novel is mainly about men but is actually written by a woman. It would be interesting to analyse the character development of men written by women and to ascertain the accuracy of description regarding male behaviour described from a gendered perspective.

The Physicality of Trauma. It would be a stimulating topic to discuss how Jude's trauma can be traced through his self-harm and bodily injuries. Furthermore, the effect trauma

has on the mind leads Jude to perpetrate his body. The body as a canvas for the mind in the context of Trauma Studies would be, I believe, a rewarding topic to pursue.

A Little Life and Religion. As he was raised in a monastery, Jude's convictions are usually shaped by religious belief. Even the names—his and Luke's—have religious connotations. As a result, a possible approach to the novel would be to analyse the role of religion in Yanagihara's novel, assessing how it creates an undercurrent of morality (both supportive and restrictive) that influences the critical episode in this narrative.

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Appendix: Summary of *A Little Life*.

A Little Life is the story of four friends: Malcolm, JB, Willem, and Jude. Focusing primarily on Jude, the novel follows their friendship from college until Jude's suicide. At the beginning of the story, Jude is considered an enigmatic character. No one really knows his origins, the reasons for certain behaviours, or his lack of a romantic life. Soon, the reader learns that Jude was abandoned after he was born. A group of monks raised him in a monastery, where he lived a religious secluded life. He was also physically and sexually abused. Brother Luke, a paedophile hiding as a monk, befriended Jude. He convinced Jude to leave the monastery with him. However, Brother Luke's ulterior motive was to groom Jude into prostituting himself for money. Acting as his pimp and rapist, he economically and sexually profits from Jude. When Brother Luke is caught by the authorities, Jude witnesses Luke's suicide. He is sent to an orphanage where instructors rape him, and children bully him. He escapes and hitchhikes by paying for rides with sex. Before reaching his destiny, he is abducted by Dr Traylor, who also rapes him. When trying to escape, Dr Traylor runs him over with his car, leaving Jude with a chronic and painful injury.

When Jude gets into college, he turns out to be a brilliant student, he makes friends and even creates a father-son relationship with a professor, Harold, who ends up adopting him. From then onwards, Jude is forced to accommodate himself into a 'normal' life and create deep emotional bonds. When he starts dating Caleb, Jude is the victim of domestic and sexual violence once again. Later on, he starts dating Willem, his closest friend and confidant. However, because of the trauma he has endured, he refuses to share his childhood and struggles with their sexual life. In general, Jude copes with his trauma through unhealthy mechanisms: he is a workaholic and self-harms daily and repeatedly.

Essentially, the novel deals with Jude trying to navigate experiences that are common for many but because of his childhood, the result is quite catastrophic. Because of his trauma, his relationships with his family and friends are strained due to his self-harm and closeted personality. He also refuses to seek professional help or to open up with his close ones. Despite constantly trying to bridge his past and present, Jude suffers constantly from nightmares, PTSD, and suicidal attempts and thoughts. Additionally, his medical condition deteriorates, and he suffers a double leg amputation. When Willem dies, Jude spirals and the emotional and physical self-harm worsens. Despite all the professional help he receives, Jude commits suicide in his early 50s.