

Navigating the Body-Brain Dichotomy and the Interplay of Trauma, Memory, and Masculinity in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015)



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Abstract

Trauma often manifests in both physical scars and psychological struggles, creating a profound interplay between the body and brain. Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) offers a poignant exploration of this dichotomous dynamic through the life of Jude St. Francis, a character marked by relentless trauma and its impact on his body, mind, and masculinity. This study examines the body-brain dichotomy in Jude's narrative, focusing on how his somatic scars and cerebral struggles shape his identity and destabilize traditional notions of masculinity. The study attempts to explore the underexplored connection between embodied trauma and its cognitive repercussions. The study analyzes the physical and psychological dimensions of Jude's suffering and their narrative representation, using methods of close textual analysis and multidisciplinary theoretical approach grounded in trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and masculinity studies. The study argues how the foregrounding of the inseparability of body and brain in understanding trauma offers a nuanced critique of the social constructs surrounding masculinity and healing.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Masculinity, Body-brain dichotomy, Hanya Yanagihara

1. Introduction

In his pathbreaking work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*, Freud made a significant assertion on traumatic neurosis as "a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli" (Freud, 1984). Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (Yanagihara, 2015) is widely acclaimed for its exploration of trauma, memory, and the construction of identity, unveiling the repercussions of fragile masculinity and its entanglement with psychological and physiological resilience. At its core, the narrative revolves around the protagonist Jude St. Francis, a man whose life is indelibly marked by physical and psychological traumas, presenting readers with an unflinching portrayal of how the traumatic experiences metamorphose his identity and relationships. It is argued that Yanagihara constructs Jude's story not as a triumph over adversity but convincingly as an ongoing tussle between the body and the mind, challenging the traditional paradigms of masculinity and resilience. The present study is an attempt to reconsider the intersections between body and brain as dual but inseparable loci of trauma and memory. Contemporary discussions of masculinity often privilege strength, rationality, and emotional restraint, emphasizing resilience as stoic endurance. Jude, however, subverts these conventions by embodying vulnerability and fragility, and also by breaking the tripartite equation between rationality, emotionality, and corporeality. His instances of self-harm, fragmented memories,

and deep-seated feelings of trauma and shame unravel the insufficiency of traditional frameworks of masculinity. The study investigates the embodied nature of suffering—his physical scars serve as a tangible manifestation of his past abuse, while his psychological wounds remain a haunting undercurrent molding his interactions and self-perception. The novel thus critiques hegemonic masculinity by advocating for a more empathetic, inclusive vision of male identity that validates vulnerability and emotional depth as integral to resilience. While *A Little Life* provides an intimate exploration of Jude's trauma, its themes resonate with Yanagihara's broader literary oeuvre. In her debut novel, *The People in the Trees* (Yanagihara, 2018) Yanagihara similarly interrogates the intersections of power, exploitation, and identity, though through a different lens. The protagonist, Norton Perina, embodies a toxic form of masculinity rooted in entitlement and dominance, contrasting sharply with Jude's fragile masculinity. Together, these works demonstrate Yanagihara's nuanced engagement with the spectrum of male identity, from its destructive potential to its capacity for vulnerability. Yanagihara's exploration of masculinity also aligns with other contemporary novels that interrogate male identity in the context of trauma. For instance, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Vuong, 2019) presents a similarly tender yet harrowing depiction of masculinity shaped by cultural displacement, generational

trauma, and queer identity. The protagonist's letter to his mother becomes a medium for unraveling his fractured self, highlighting the tension between vulnerability and societal expectations of male strength. Likewise, in Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (Stuart, 2020), the eponymous character grapples with societal norms of masculinity while examining the challenges of growing up in poverty and dealing with his mother's addiction. Both novels, like *A Little Life* resist the glorification of stoic endurance, instead embracing the complexities of male identity as fractured and evolving in the face of traumatic circumstances.

Yanagihara's work is further nuanced when situated within the framework of masculinity studies. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity offers a critical lens through which to understand Jude's struggles. Connell identifies dominant masculine ideals—strength, control, and emotional restraint—that deviate alternative masculinities. The inability of Jude to comply with these ideals positions him as a counter-narrative to traditional masculinity, while his relationships with characters like Willem and Harold with whom Jude struggles to redefine his identity. Thematically, the study focalizes the body-brain dichotomy aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on the interconnectedness of physical and psychological suffering. Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" (Caruth, 1996, p.10) finds vivid expression in Jude's fragmented memories and recurring nightmares, trapped in both the mind and the body. The nonlinear narrative structure of the novel mirrors Jude's fragmented psyche represents viscerally his struggles with

memory and identity. Bessel van der Kolk delineates how trauma is encoded in the body and resonates with Jude's self-harm, highlighting a physical manifestation of his inner torment. This intertwining of corporeal and psychological trauma invites a synthetic analysis of "traumatic memories" (Caruth, 1995, p.168) that affect personality and existentiality of the protagonist in a parallel universe. This study seeks to unravel the narrative's layered representation of Jude's trauma, situating it within broader discussions of gender, memory, and the enduring effects of pain.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

The study draws upon the interdisciplinary frameworks (see Figure 1) of trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and masculinity studies to explore the complex interplay of body, mind, and identity in Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. Caruth emphasizes that trauma functions simultaneously as a conscious narrative and an unconscious wound, reverberating through both the mind and the body. This duality is poignantly illustrated in the character of Jude whose physical scars serve as stark reminders of his past abuses, signifying the inescapable nature of his suffering. These scars, imprinted on his body, are not merely physical markers but also the "metaphors of trauma" (Qiu et al., 2022) that disrupt his sense of self. Jude's cognitive struggles, on the other hand, manifest as fragmented memories and self-perceptions, revealing how trauma fractures the coherence of identity, leaving individuals in a state of perpetual negotiation between the past and the present.

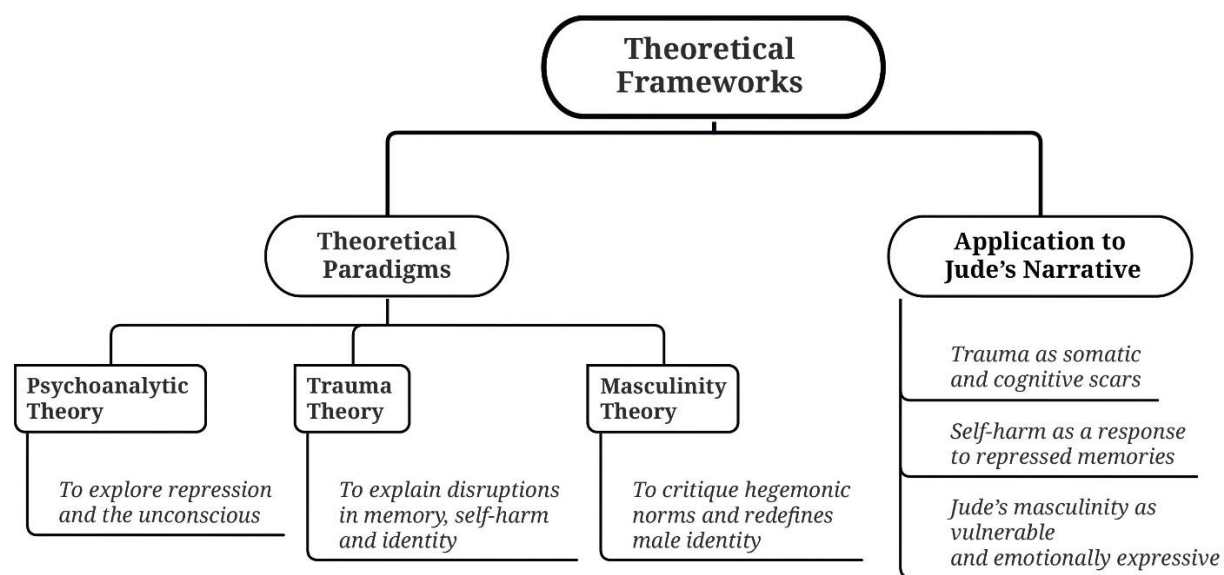


Figure 1. Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

Building upon this foundation, psychoanalytic theories provide further insights into the mechanisms underlying Jude's psychological state.

Freud's exploration of repression and the unconscious offers a lens through which Jude's behaviors can be interpreted (Freud, 1984). His self-

harm and compulsive actions, for instance, emerge as external manifestations of repressed memories and unresolved conflicts. Jude's inability to articulate his trauma highlights the limitations of language in processing and manifesting profound pain. Freud's assertion that traumatic memories are often inaccessible to conscious recall aligns with Jude's fragmented recollections and his struggles to construct a coherent narrative of his life. Judith Herman's work on "complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD)" (Herman, 1997) deepens the understanding of Jude's persistent and multilayered suffering. Herman's framework elucidates how prolonged and repeated exposure to trauma results in enduring psychological, emotional, and relational difficulties. Jude's experiences resonate with the manifestations of C-PTSD, including chronic feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness that recurrently haunt him. His self-imposed isolation and recurring patterns of self-sabotage are indicative of the long-term effects of unprocessed trauma. Masculinity studies, particularly R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, provide another critical dimension to this analysis (Connell, 2020). Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as a social construct that valorizes dominance, control, and emotional stoicism, often marginalizing alternative expressions of male identity. In stark contrast, Jude embodies a fragile masculinity, characterized by vulnerability, emotional depth, and an acute awareness of his own limitations. Yanagihara's portrayal of Jude serves as a counter-narrative to traditional male archetypes, challenging societal norms that equate masculinity with invulnerability and resilience. Through Jude, Yanagihara deconstructs these rigid norms, presenting a more inclusive and humanized vision of masculinity. Jude's struggles with self-acceptance and his reliance on the emotional support of his friends highlight the significance of vulnerability as a component of male identity. In doing so, the narrative critiques the cultural stigmatization of emotional expression in men, advocating for a reimagining of masculinity that embraces both strength and fragility. The intersection of these theoretical paradigms underscores the inseparability of the body and mind in understanding trauma and its implications for identity. Trauma theory illuminates the ways in which trauma disrupts the continuity of selfhood, while psychoanalysis reveals the underlying mechanisms of repression and the unconscious. Meanwhile, masculinity studies provide a sociocultural context for interpreting Jude's experiences, situating his struggles within broader conversations about gender norms and identity. By weaving together these perspectives, Yanagihara's *A*

Little Life offers a nuanced critique of societal constructs surrounding trauma, masculinity, and healing. Through this multidisciplinary lens, the narrative's treatment of Jude's trauma transcends the personal, engaging with larger societal issues about how trauma is recognized, narrated, and responded to. Jude's story serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring impact of trauma, challenging the reader to empathize with the profound complexities of his pain. The theoretical frameworks employed in this study highlight the intricate and multidimensional nature of trauma, revealing its capacity to shape, destabilize, and ultimately redefine human experiences of self and identity.

The analysis focuses on the narrative devices and explores how the novel critiques traditional constructs of masculinity, particularly the ideals of emotional restraint and resilience. Jude's anguish is deconstructed to uncover the conflict between societal expectations and individual vulnerability, emphasizing the interplay between trauma and identity in his character. The study applies theoretical frameworks from psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and masculinity studies to navigate the exploration of the text. Psychoanalytic theory unlocks the unconscious effects of trauma, while trauma theory highlights the connection between corporeal and psychological scars. The theory of masculinity contextualizes Jude's experiences within broader cultural constructs, highlighting how his vulnerability challenges conventional notions of male identity. The analysis links these findings to societal constructs. The study situates Jude's individual experiences within larger discussions of trauma, identity and resilience, demonstrating how Yanagihara's narrative advocates the inseparability of body and brain in understanding trauma and its implications for masculinity.

3. Methodology

The study (see Figure 2) employs qualitative methods focusing on the themes of trauma, memory, and masculinity within the novel. Through a comprehensive examination of the text, the research explores the characters, narrative structure, dialogues, and themes to uncover psychological and emotional complexities. In addition, the study integrates theoretical perspectives from trauma studies and gender theory to contextualize the protagonist's suffering and identity development. This approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of Jude St. Francis's experiences, emphasizing the novel's intricate portrayal of pain, resilience, and masculinity.

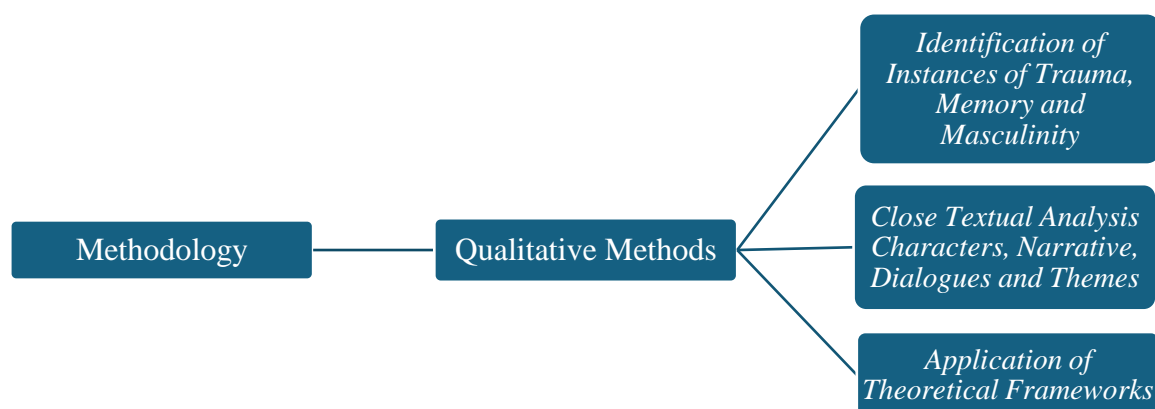


Figure 2. Methodology of the study

4. Discussion

4.1. The Body-Brain Dichotomy in Jude's Narrative

Jude's condition exemplifies the inseparability of physical and psychological trauma, foregrounding the body-brain dichotomy. Yanagihara uses Jude's physical scars as a tangible manifestation of his traumatic past, while his cerebral struggles articulate the lingering psychological toll. The scars, carved into his body through years of abuse in the different phases of his life, do not merely signify past pain but serve as a recurrent metaphor of reminder of his vulnerability. Since trauma, being an "all-inclusive" (Caruth, 1995, p.4), Jude's self-harm bridges this gap, functioning as a somatic expression of his internal torment—a cry from his unconscious that his conscious mind struggles to articulate blurring the boundaries between the corporeal and the cognitive. Freud's psychoanalytic framework on repression helps contextualize Jude's behaviors. For Freud, repressed memories often resurface through bodily symptoms or compulsive actions (Freud, 1922). Jude's compulsive self-harm is not merely a coping mechanism but a physical reenactment of his suppressed pain, turning his body into a site of his psychological suffering (Van der Kolk, 2015). The self-inflicted wounds externalize the internal trauma, creating a cyclical relationship where physical pain provides temporary relief but also reinforces his sense of self-loathing (Pembroke, 2003). Moreover, Yanagihara problematizes the concept of healing by showing that Jude's physical scars remain unhealed, paralleling the unresolved nature of his psychological wounds despite his friends' compassion. This intertwining of the body and brain underscores the limitations of traditional dichotomies that separate the two. Herman argues that the body often becomes the battleground for unprocessed trauma, manifesting as somatic symptoms and maladaptive coping strategies. The somatic characterization of trauma and its

consequences, proposed by Van der Kolk, helps in the analysis of *A Little Life*. One of the instances of physical pain is when Jude's friend Willem finds him in the bathroom:

He had vomited, and some of it had pooled on the ground before him, and some of it was scabbed on his lips and chin, a stippled apricot smear. His eyes were shut and he was sweat, and with one hand he was holding the curved end of his crutch with an intensity that, as Willem would later come to recognize, comes only with extreme discomfort. (Yanagihara, 2015, p.23)

What is equally pertinent in this contest is the reference of the conceptualization of liminality that delineates that the character Jude dwells in "liminality" (Turner & Abrahams, 2017) and becomes a liminar, when his consciousness of the self is ruptured by the aggravated force of the psychopathological traumatic situations. The traumatic yet unstable and unpredictable personality of the protagonist Jude exemplifies the chronic traumatic victim who is unknowingly trapped into the overlapping cycle of traumatic identities: pre-traumatic, traumatic and post-traumatic having a similar notions of preliminal, liminal and the postliminal identities (Van Gennep et al., 2001).

4.2. Trauma and Memory as Shaping Forces

Trauma operates as both an individual and collective phenomenon in *A Little Life*, and memory serves as the conduit through which trauma shapes Jude's identity. Yanagihara employs a fragmented narrative structure that reflects Jude's fractured psyche. The nonlinear timeline reflects the disjointed and repetitive nature of traumatic memory, aligning with Caruth's assertion that "the trauma event is its future" (Caruth, *Trauma*, p.8) and is experienced belatedly, through repeated intrusions rather than linear recollection. Jude's memories are fragmented

and repressed, yet they exert immense power over his present life, dismantling his temporality. His failure to articulate his experiences—both to himself and others—accentuates the limitations of language in capturing or representing the full scope of trauma. This aligns with Dominick LaCapra's notion of "acting out" versus "working through" trauma, where Jude remains trapped in a cycle of reliving his pain rather than processing it (LaCapra, 2001, p.22). Yanagihara uses this struggle to evoke empathy—what LaCapra terms "empathetic unsettlement" (LaCapra, 2001, p.41) inviting readers to grapple with the ineffability of trauma and its robust influence on identity. The role of memory extends beyond Jude's individual narrative, resonating with collective experiences of pain and resilience. His relationships with Willem, Harold, and other characters serve as spaces where memory is shared and recontextualized, offering moments of collective healing. This tension between personal and communal memory highlights the isolating nature of Jude's experiences while gesturing toward the broader societal failure to address trauma meaningfully. At this juncture, LaCapra writes that trauma "threatens to collapse distinctions" and adds further: no genre or discipline 'own' trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it" (LaCapra, 2001, p.96).

4.3. Masculinity and Vulnerability

Jude's story challenges hegemonic masculinity by presenting a protagonist whose vulnerability is central to his identity. R.W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 2020, p.6), which emphasizes dominance, control, and emotional stoicism, contrasts sharply with Jude's character. In Jude, a caricature of counter-narrative, offers a vision of masculinity that embraces vulnerability and emotional openness. Jude's relationships with Willem and Harold, become critical sites for this redefinition of his "masculine self" (Kilmartin, 2010, p.83). Willem embodies compassionate masculinity, prioritizing empathy and care over any sort of dominance. Their bond challenges traditional paradigms of male friendships, which often eschew emotional intimacy. On the one hand, Harold's adoption of Jude symbolizes a paternal love that challenges biological determinism, emphasizing chosen family as a source of healing and belonging. The study discusses the persistent influence of hegemonic masculinity being "the configuration of gender practice" (Connell, 2020, p.6), even as the narrative seeks to deconstruct it. By juxtaposing Jude's fragility as a foil to the masculinity of Willem and Harold, the study argues how traumatic memories of the past result in C-PTSD and makes the masculinity of Jude vulnerable and challenging. The narratives of resilience often celebrate triumph over adversity, signifying healing as a linear and definitive process. In contrast, *A Little Life* does not fit to the

frame of healing, being a complex, incomplete, and often unattainable journey. Jude's inability to overcome his trauma critiques societal expectations of recovery, acknowledging to stay trapped in his brain-body dichotomy. With its non-adherence to contemporary trauma theory, the study challenges any sort of recuperative possibility in the text. In addition to this, Bessel van der Kolk's work on trauma underscores that recovery is less about getting rid of the past and more about integrating it into a livable present (Van der Kolk, 2015). He writes: "Somatic symptoms for which no clear physical basis can be found are ubiquitous in traumatized children and adults" (Van der Kolk, 2015, p.100). The study unveils the vicious socio-cultural constructs that hinder Jude's resilience and raise broader questions about the predicament of the traumatized subjects. The expectation that survivors should recover often invalidates the ongoing nature of their pain, reinforcing stigmatization rather than fostering support. Nevertheless, *A Little Life* tends to urge for the necessity of compassion and understanding in addressing trauma. Moreover, the novel critiques the therapeutic and institutional systems that fail to adequately support survivors just as in the case of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* who dies and becomes one of "the voices of the dead" (Woolf, 2000, p.260). Jude's experiences with medical and legal authorities reveal a lack of accountability and empathy prompting him to "[jump] off the roof" (Yanagihara, 2015, p.720). This critique resonates with broader conversations about the intersection of trauma, justice, and care, calling for a more holistic and inclusive approach to supporting survivors.

5. Conclusion

Through the study of Jude Yanagihara reveals how physical scars and psychological wounds intertwine to shape and distort identity, confronting the complexities of trauma and its enduring effects. Jude's relationships, particularly with Willem and Harold, emphasize care, emotional vulnerability, and support as alternative pathways for understanding male identity. These connections critique societal norms and encourage a more inclusive and compassionate framework for masculinity, while also acknowledging the persistent barriers that make this redefinition difficult for individuals like Jude. Instead, she portrays it as a complex and incomplete process, one that necessitates living with pain rather than erasing it. Beyond individual experiences, the novel critiques systemic failures in addressing trauma. Jude's interactions with medical and legal institutions underscore their inability to provide the empathy and accountability required for meaningful healing. This serves as a broader indictment of societal frameworks that often neglect the needs of trauma survivors, urging a reevaluation

of how care and support are structured. The role of memory in shaping identity is another critical theme. Jude's fragmented and nonlinear memories reflect the destabilizing effects of trauma, while the novel's structure mirrors his disjointed psyche, allowing readers to viscerally experience his struggles. This interplay between memory and identity underscores the challenges of articulating trauma and the importance of narrative in navigating it. The study, thus, argues to rethink the cultural and societal paradigms around vulnerability, resilience, and healing. By defying the institutional support for the traumatized subjects like Jude and the hegemonic masculinity, the novel drastically fails to create personal and institutional spaces that support survivors in their journeys toward self-acceptance and psychopathological restoration.

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