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The Sorrows of Young Jude – Sartre's Concept of Freedom in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*

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Abstract

Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* (2015) is about Jude St Francis, a successful lawyer whose inability to recover from his traumatic childhood causes him to commit suicide. This essay investigates why Jude is able to control and alter certain aspects of his life, but how he still is ultimately and finally dominated by his emotional trauma. By applying the theory on freedom in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), as well as comparing it to other essays with corresponding theory and focus, this essay examines where the depiction of Jude coincides with Sartre's idea of transcendent freedom, and where it does not. It draws the conclusion that Yanagihara depicts the effects of psychological trauma as something impossible to transcend, and hence the portayal of Jude ultimately suggests a deterministic rather than a Sartrerean philosophical outlook on existence.

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Introduction

When Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* was published in 2015, the reactions of readers and reviewers were strong. Jon Michaud of *The New Yorker* reports that the novel can "drive you mad" (Michaud) and Alex Preston of *The Guardian* "had to put the book down several times when [he] was reading it" (Preston). The plot of the novel is indeed bleak: protagonist Jude St Francis is an orphan who is found abandoned on the street as an infant, and he later experiences verbal, physical and sexual abuse throughout his childhood. In his late teens, Jude manages to rid himself of his previous circumstances, and he goes to college, becomes a largely successful lawyer and befriends kind and loving people. However, he is, as an adult, still psychologically tormented by his upbringing. The novel is, apart from various flashbacks to Jude's adolescent years, a tale of a man severely mentally, as well as physically, damaged. His psychological trauma manifests itself partly in his cutting his arms and legs, and he eventually commits suicide.

In an interview in *The Guardian*, Yanagihara reveals that for the novel to strongly affect the reader was her intention: "I wanted there to be something too much about the violence in the book", she says, "but I also wanted there to be an exaggeration of everything, an exaggeration of love, of empathy, of pity, of horror. I wanted everything turned up a little too high" (Adams). Furthermore, she explains how her ambition was for this novel to function as "a parable of adulthood, which begins as something full of social possibility and narrows to something increasingly introspective" (Adams). The fact that nobody close to Jude have the ability to save him does, according to Yanagihara, correlate with many people's experience of adult life. "In the end you are really left on your own", she claims (Adams). She goes on declaring that Jude never can erase his sense of being abandoned, nor his sense of being a powerless object for other people to use as they please (Adams).

This divide will serve as focal point in this essay; how Jude, by action and effort, is able to better so much in his life as an adult, but how he does not seem to be able to psychologically mend and consider himself as someone being worthy of affection. I will aim at answering the following question: Does Yanagihara's portrayal of Jude and his potential freedom coincide with Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of freedom and free will? Sartre is a central figure in Western existential philosophy, and his work is very much concerned with free will, choice and consequence. His theory of freedom is useful in explaining some aspects of Jude's life, but simultaneously not applicable to others. Analyzing where Yanagihara's depiction of Jude and his freedom corresponds with Sartre's views, and where it differs, makes apparent the effects of

trauma and the inevitability of Jude's final demise. I will argue that though Jude puts all his efforts into leaving his traumatic childhood behind and create a new, safe life for himself, what he cannot escape is his psychological pain and his self-loathing, and furthermore that Yanagihara seems to suggest that trauma is one obstacle to one's freedom that is impossible to transcend.

In order to investigate Jude's ability to control certain aspects of his life, and his inability to control others, I will apply Sartre's ideas of freedom presented in his phenomenological essay *Being and Nothingness,* first published in 1943. The key notion in Sartre's theory on freedom is that one is inevitably free. This means that one is not only able to choose, one is obliged to. Freedom is not concerned with constraints – another key point in Sartre's definition of freedom is that it is transcendent. He claims that an inmate in a prison "is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action" (Sartre 622). Hence, the inmate's ability to consider trying to escape is a sign of his freedom, regardless whether he manages to actually do so or not. Is he to instead consider escaping impossible, that, too, is a choice and a manifestation of freedom. Project is the term Satre uses to refer to the "choice of [one's] way of being", in other words, one's current "goal" one aims to achieve (Sartre 806). Furthermore, I will use Sartre's theory of situations. Sartre declares that one "everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which [one] has not created" (Sartre 629). Situations, then, are the set of absolute facts by which one is always and inevitably surrounded. Sartre explains how a situation "is the product of both facticity and the for-itself's way of accepting and acting upon its facticity" (Sartre 806). Situations are simply the different layers of reality one constantly encounters, and against which one's freedom is measured. Sartre declares that there are five situations - past, place, environment, fellowman and death – all of which pose different types of obstacles that one needs to surpass. In this essay, all of these situations will be applied to the depiction of Jude, and I will examine his potential freedom in each one. Lastly, it is also worth noting that I will consider Jude as being for-itself. Being for-itself, Sartre argues, is being aware of oneself and hence being able to change and choose. The opposite of being for-itself - being in-itself - is an object unconscious of itself, and that completely lacks agency.

In the essay "A 'horizon of important questions': Choice, action and identity in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*", Kevin Brown suggest that the character Sonmi-451 in the novel *Cloud Atlas* initially is the definition of being in-itself. She does not realize her oppression and her possible breaking free from it, and can therefore not even fathom herself as free. Her eventual consciousness – her becoming for-itself – will serve as comparison to my interpretation of Jude.

According to Brown, Sonmi-451 is a non-conscious object who then becomes a conscious subject, to whom freedom has no limits. Jude, I will argue, is throughout to be considered conscious of himself and the world in which he exists, but he is still unable to have freedom in every aspect of his life. In the essay "Heathcliff's Freedom in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*", Xiaoyan Tong investigates the character Heathcliff's freedom by examining his existing in Sartre's five situations. Tong showcases how Heathcliff is continuously able to transcend his occasional suffering and constraints, and argues that Sartre's theory on freedom is applicable on the portrayal of the character. This essay too will serve as comparison in my essay.

Lastly, the novel's focus on mathematics will be taken into account when examining Jude's potential freedom. Jude is, besides being a lawyer, a mathematician, and the novel includes his knowledge and thoughts on math in several instances. When Jude endures the most abusive encounter in his adult life, he thinks of himself as a proof of the axiom of equality; an axiom that proposes that *x* always equals *x*. He sees his inability to rid himself of misery as a human representation of the axiom: he was born deserving pain, and this fact will always remain. Jude's defining himself as a mathematical axiom seems to suggest a more deterministic view on life, and more specifically on psychology and trauma. Determinism is the concept that in the Western philosophical tradition opposes free will, or Existentialism, as it suggest that life is controlled by causality beyond the control of the individual. I propose that Yanagihara's portrayal of Jude as someone who is dominated by his trauma suggests that determinism, and not Sartre's theory, is the core philosophical view of the novel. To further emphasize this, I will showcase the resemblance between the depiction of Jude and the plot structure of Classical Greek tragedies. I will make use of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a work on dramatic theory in which Aristotle proposes that Classical tragedies are much concerned with determinism, or causality. By comparing Yanagihara's depiction of Jude – as well as the novel's focus on mathematics – to the deterministic elements of Classical tragedies, my claim that the novel fundamentally opposes Sartre's theory on free will be further supported.

Death, Environment and Place

Though *A Little Life* is a novel in which the protagonist dies, it is not much concerned with death itself – it is, rather, an evaluation of the life Jude leads before his suicide. Sartre claims that death is a fact of existence, as is birth: "it is absurd that we are born; it is absurd that we die" (Sartre 699). Though death might appear to us as absurd, it is a non-negotiable and inevitable fact, as it is "the final boundary of human life" (Sartre 681). Jude, as well as the novel itself, is atheist. For

Jude, death is simply a ceasing to exist. In comparison, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Heathcliff and Catherine are finally united after they both have died, as they then roam the moors together as ghosts. Tong suggests that Heathcliff's ultimate freedom is to be with Catherine, which is only possible were they both to die. This encourages Heathcliff to take his own life (Tong). In *A Little Life*, Jude's suicide is not an action that provides him with freedom. After he has died, he is not a peaceful spirit, finally free - he is no longer at all. According to Sartre, committing suicide is not to be considered an act of freedom. He states that although committing suicide is an act, "it itself requires a meaning which only the future can give to it; but as it is the last act of my life, it is denied this future. Thus it remains totally undetermined" (Sartre 690-691). In these terms, we can dismiss the idea that Jude's suicide is the ultimate proof of his freedom.

One's death is, according to Sartre, something that is dealt with by the people who are still alive. The novel includes several sections which are to be interpreted as letters – written down or just thought out we do not learn – to Willem, conducted by Harold. In these letters, Harold asks questions about Jude – could they have saved him? Had they done enough to protect him while he was still alive? Death being nothing but a nothing is made even clearer as the person to whom the letters are addressed, Willem, is also dead. Yanagihara therefore portrays a view of death that resonates with Sartre's: "To be dead is to be the prey of the living" (Sartre 695). Jude being dead is all the more relevant to his father Harold, for whom Jude's death is an opportunity to seek truths about himself and his relationship to his son.

The obstacles Jude's environment potentially poses for him are generally excluded from the plot, with the exception of how he is limited by his poor physical state. At several instances in the novel, Jude is hindered from attending parties or moving into buildings due to elevators being broken or non-existent. Sartre states that one's environmental situation is "made up of the instrumental things which surround [one]" (Sartre 647) and he explains further that it is through one's project that the weather can appear as good or bad – when on a bicycle ride, the direction the wind is blowing holds the characteristic of being profitable only if I am biking in that same direction (Sartre 648). Hence, the phenomena that surround Jude do not have objective meaning. An elevator breaking down does not, innately, mean anything at all. The meaning appears when it is viewed in the light of Jude's project – reaching the second story of the building. However, Jude having difficulty to enter certain properties, Sartre reminds us, is not to be considered a sign of his not being free. Freedom is not being able to obtain or attain anything one likes, but instead being able to choose (Sartre 648). Jude is still free to choose not to enter, to go someplace else.

He practices this freedom in his choosing not to live in apartments that do not have elevators, and he works profusely hard at making enough money to be able to buy and design a home for himself that is completely adjusted for his specific needs. Hence, one can claim that Jude does showcase freedom in the situation that is his environment, as he transcends the obstacles it poses.

When examining Jude's situation concerning his place, it is most fruitful to analyze the very first places he inhabits. Sartre states that one's "original place will be that in terms of which I shall occupy new places" (Sartre 629). This means that where one begins one's life is the place from which all other places one in the future stem. In "Heathcliff's Freedom in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*", Xiaoyan Tong declares that Heathcliff's original place, or birthplace, has a positive effect on his stride for freedom. However, when investigating Jude's relation to his birthplace and comparing it to Heathcliff's, it is clear that it has rather destructive consequences. Jude and Heathcliff have quite similar backgrounds. Heathcliff's exact birthplace is unknown – he is found living on the street as a child. Jude, too, is found on the street – as an infant he is left in a garbage can next to a dumpster. Being children found on the street is limiting for both of the characters in the sense that they have no parents, no money, and no safety. Heathcliff, however, develops several positive qualities thanks to these restrictions - qualities that eventually will help him practice freedom. Tong exemplifies this by saying that "young Heathcliff has learnt to stand others' blows without blinking or shedding a tear if he thinks it is useless to rebel" (Tong). Jude's birthplace has the opposite effect on his character: it leads to his second place being the monastery, which is his first home and the first place where he experiences misery and abuse. As a consequence, he develops several negative qualities: he begins feeling dirty and worthless, and harms himself for the first time. He begins having tantrums, throwing himself against the monastery walls, and he wades out in a nearby pond in order for leeches to attach to him and cleanse what he believes to be his filthy blood. Yanagihara can then be said to illustrate how the first places Jude inhabits are where a sense of being powerless is established, while Tong argues that in Heathcliff's case, his original place is a place where he acquires abilities that will benefit him in his future as a free agent.

The consequences of having unknown backgrounds also differs between the two boys regarding the ability to imagine where they might have come from. Nelly tells Heathcliff that it is possible that his parents were rich, powerful and important people (Tong), hence, granting him a sense of self-worth. The monks tell Jude nothing of the sort. They reassure him that his parents were nothing, and that he is nothing. The monks are also the ones who tell Jude that he was found in a garbage can – a particularly degrading place to be found – and whether this is true or

not Jude never learns, nor does the reader. When young Jude asks what the reason for being abandoned by his parents might have been, the monks almost all agree that it is most likely because "he was bad, and had been bad from the beginning" (Yanagihara 146). The idea that he is innately bad and deserves maltreatment is something that then stays with Jude for his entire life. When asking additional questions about his background, Jude is told he "mustn't indulge in this tendency to self-mythologize" (Yanagihara 145) – something Heathcliff is explicitly encouraged to do. Heathcliff can clearly benefit from his unknown background, as well as his first real home, whilst both of those places for Jude are exclusively limiting and destructive.

However, Sartre declares that one's place can only be considered as good or bad, enjoyable or limiting, in the light of one's project. That is, one's future, and where one wishes to be in it. Furthermore, one's ability to transcend one's current place and imagine another, future one, is in itself a manifestation of freedom. Only if one imagines another, preferable place in the future can one's current place appear with "characteristics of impotence, of contingency, of weakness, of absurdity" (Sartre 634). Like environment, one's place can only be estimated as good or bad if one compares it to someplace else one possibly could be in. In Jude's case, this means that his imagining being in a nice and safe house in the woods with Brother Luke enables him to view the monastery as a place that he wants to leave. When leaving the monastery, Jude is certain he has escaped something horrible and that he is on his way towards something much better. The fact that Jude bitterly regrets leaving the monastery after he has realized he will never attain the house in the woods supports Sartre's claim that a place only holds certain characteristics when viewed through the light of one's project. After Jude has left the monastery it seems like the preferable place to be, compared to the motels he lives in with Luke, as the possibility of the house in the woods then has vanished and no longer is his thought-out future. As Sartre's puts it: "It is in relation to my dream of seeing New York that it is absurd and painful for me to live at Mont-de-Marsan" (Sartre 635).

Yanagihara's depiction of Jude's time in the motels is, however, a return to contesting the claim that Jude is free to transcend his place and its obstacles. When interviewed in *The Guardian*, Yanagihara reveals that she spent a lot of time living in motels as a child, and that they are a special interest of hers. She states that "[she] sometimes think[s] of America as not so much a collection of states as one long highway punctuated by motels". She claims that motels hold the characteristic of sameness – they are all very similar to each other, regardless of where they are situated. She also suggests that they inhabit a "particular sense of sorrow: they are receptacles people pass through from one place to another, and so, architecturally and aesthetically, they're

not meant to inspire affection" (Adams). This corresponds to Jude being unable to erase his very first image of himself; that he throughout his life experiences that he is worthless and powerless, an idea initiated by the monks in the monastery. He feels that he is nothing but an object to be used by others and that he is not worthy of affection The theme of sameness – that he was born worthless and that he will die worthless – will be further discussed later in this essay.

Past and Fellowman

Early in the novel Yanagihara portrays the difficulties Jude's past, and specifically his socio-economic background, might present for his struggle to achieve freedom, and how he to a large extent surpasses those difficulties. Two of the boys have less fortunate backgrounds economically: Jude and Willem. They have, for example, a difficult time getting an apartment. They are too poor, and have no parents who can sign as guarantor. Jude and Willem are, in this first part of the novel, young adults, and they have not yet had any possibility to alter much in their lives – they do not have careers or money, nor have they had time or opportunity to attain it. This means that their pasts are still very much present in their present. Adult Jude, like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, is however determined to change these things about his life. Sartre states that "the past is integrated with the situation when the for-itself by its choice of future confers on its past facticity a value, a hierarchical order, and an urgency in terms of which this facticity motivates the act and conduct of the for-itself" (Sartre 647). The past displeases both Jude and Heathcliff as they realize they want their futures to be entirely different. However, they have different motivations for regarding their pasts as something that must no longer be relevant in their present and future lives. Equally, the results of their attempts to dismiss their pasts differ. Tong claims that Heathcliff overhearing his beloved Catherine comparing him to the much wealthier Edgar is what triggers him to leave Wuthering Heights in order to become wealthy and respected: "[Heathcliff's] past of being poor and ill-mannered brings him so much misery that he has to overcome it". Hence, Heathcliff's stride to become a rich and powerful man is rooted in psychology; he is humiliated by Catherine, and he then decides he needs to take action (Tong). Jude, too, manages to acquire money and status. He is smart and hard-working, and does very well in college, which he can attend thanks to scholarships. He studies math and law, and eventually becomes a successful corporate lawyer. He feels guilty about this, "defending liars and thieves" and "disavow[ing] what he [knows] [is] right simply because he [is] afraid" (Yanagihara 238). What he fears is being poor again, which would lead to him not being able to have a dignified and endurable life in the future. He is sick and knows he will need to achieve a certain

economic status in order to suffer as little as possible, and, simply, to survive. As an adult, Jude states that "[n]ow he has protected himself: he has [an] apartment with its triple-locked doors, and he has money. He has parents, he has friends. He will never again have to do anything he doesn't want to for food, or transportation, or shelter, or escape" (Yanagihara 302). Hence, one can claim that Jude eventually does overcome a certain aspect of his past as underprivileged – he has enough money and power to keep himself physically safe. It is not, however, a case of psychological growth and freedom, as in Heathcliff's case.

The obstacle connected to Jude's past that is the most difficult for him to overcome in his stride for freedom is, then, the way his past affects his mind and psychological state. Jude proclaims that "his pains, past and present, [are] things he [tries] not to brood about, [are] not questions to which he [spends] his days searching for meaning. He already [knows] why they happened: they happened because he deserved them." (Yanagihara 138). With this quote Yanagihara informs the reader that Jude is not willingly clinging to his past and childhood memories, and it is also obvious that the way he does relate to his past is chillingly troubling: he is certain that he deserved the abuse he was put through. Jude's trauma does not operate in a manner that makes him think back and be saddened by what he remembers. Instead, the psychological and physical violence he experienced seems to have merged with his sense of self, making him believe that he is in fact worthless.

Jude's poor physical state serves as a constant metaphor for his mental health. Yanagihara suggests that the states of the mind and the body are intertwined, and perhaps not at all separate things. Jude's past has impaired his physical health, which largely affects his well-being. He has in his childhood endured horrific physical abuse. He is hit by a car by one of his tormenters, leaving him with a spinal injury that makes him experience pain most days of his adult life. He has also contracted several viruses and infections from sexual abuse. The doctor Jude sees right after he has been run over by a car tells him that "the spine has wonderful reparative qualities" (Yanagihara 100), which his later doctor and friend Andy finds so inaccurate that it is close to laughable. He, and, likely, the reader is aware that spinal injury is rarely curable. I interpret this as Yanagihara using the absurdity of the first doctor's opinion as a way of showing the corresponding inaccuracy it would be to claim that psychologically damaged people, such as Jude, easily could mend their trauma and mental illness. Furthermore, Andy tells Jude that "[a] [spinal] injury like his [is] an insult to the body, and one the body would never recover from completely" (Yanagihara 100). Jude claims that "his body is his in name only, for he could control nothing of it" (Yanagihara 101). Considering that the brain is part of the body, this

supports the interpretation that Yanagihara aims at portraying the mind and the body operating in similar ways, and that they in many aspects actually are not to be considered separate entities. This is, then, an aspect of the depiction of Jude that can be interpreted as a turning away from Sartre's claim that one always is both able and obliged to choose – the effect Jude's past has had on his body Yanagihara clearly portrays as something that dominates him.

The fellowman situation is ultimately concerned with meanings: meanings that stand outside oneself, but that still apply to oneself. Sartre explains how one's fellowman situation consists of three layers. First, there are objects which are charged with a certain meaning before one encounters them, such as works of art or signs in traffic. Second, there are meanings that apply to one self, for example one's ethnicity, one's nationality or one's appearance. The last layer of in one's fellowman situation is the Other. The Other is simply other people, or society, and it is where the meanings of the first and second layers are established (Sartre 654). This means, then, that one is born into a society or environment that is already charged with meaning established by others, meaning one cannot alter or discard.

Brown argues that Sonmi-451 is a character in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* that is oppressed by such meanings. Brown explains that she abides the Unanimity "much as many people live their lives by rules given to them by outside sources", and that she in the beginning of the novel completely lacks identity and agency (Brown 63). Brown suggest that she is "almost an allegory of Sartre's view of existence preceding essence", which means that she exist in-itself rather than for-itself (Brown 62). Hence, she represents a subject who has not yet reflected on its situation, and realized that she both can, and is obliged, to choose. Her becoming a for-itself is then represented by her eventual rebellion, which is rooted in her realizing her individual self and responsibility (Brown 64). Jude, too, transcends the obstacles and oppressive sets of meaning his fellowman situation poses: he escapes from the monastery, he escapes from the home for orphan children, and as an adult he makes active choices that provides him with safety. In this aspect, Jude and Sonmi-451 both are characters who transcend their fellowman situations.

Yanagihara does, however, present the idea that though Jude by action manages to escape his fellowman situation physically, he is never free to choose to rid himself of the psychological trauma it has caused. As already discussed, Jude spent the first years of his life in the monastery. He never left the premises - his entire world was the monastery grounds and the group of brothers who lived there with him. The monastery is the place where Jude is first told that he is worthless, and it is also where he is molested for the first time. His first encounter with sex is in the context of punishment for something bad that he did, namely stealing a comb (Yanagihara

149). This is the starting point of the sexual abuse Jude experience his entire childhood – both while still being in the monastery, and after he has left. Hence, it is an early indicator for him that his body is for others to do what they please, and that intimacy and sex carry meaning of pain and punishment.

This notion is then further established for Jude as it is confirmed and reconfirmed by basically everyone he encounters in his adolescent years. After he has run away with Brother Luke, Luke informs Jude that he needs to start working in order for them to be able to buy food and pay for accommodation. Jude then immediately starts imagining which one of his abilities he will have use for. He knows that he is good at cleaning, cooking and gardening (Yanagihara 397). When he learns that Luke will force him into prostitution, he panics. The men he then meets also contributes to establishing the meaning of sex and the purpose for Jude being in this world. They tell him that "[he] were born for this" as they rape him (Yanagihara 401), and they call him "garbage, trash, dirty, worthless, a nothing" (Yanagihara 420). Yanagihara never sugarcoats Jude's suffering during these years, but instead, as seen above, includes many gruesome details of the physical as well as psychological abuse he experiences. She makes it clear that Jude is repeatedly told and shown that he, to others, is nothing but an object, manifesting how the abuse fixates in Jude as truths about who he is. It becomes more and more obvious to him that regardless of what skills and abilities he acquires, he is by other people firstly a nothing, a body to be used.

The most dominant obstacle related to his fellowman then becomes is his inability to form truly close and intimate relationships with people who in fact are his friends and who love him. Jude, being an orphan, has always longed to have a family and parents. He becomes close with his law school teacher Harold, whom he likes and admires. Despite his liking Harold, Jude is in heavy, psychological pain during the time period in which they form a friendship. He states that "when Harold [is] asking questions, he [feels] smothered by their weight and frequency and inevitability" (Yanagihara 123), fearing that he will accidentally reveal too much about his shameful past. When Harold asks Jude if he and his wife Julia could legally adopt him, Jude is ecstatic. Yet, shortly after accepting their offer, he experiences unbearable anxiety that triggers him to cut himself excessively for several weeks. He is convinced that they would reject him if they learned who he really is, and the thought of that embarrasses and scares Jude to such an extent that he is almost suicidal. Furthermore, Jude expresses that "there [is] something scary and anxiety-inducing about being in a space where nothing [seems] to be forbidden to him, where everything was offered to him and nothing was asked in return" (Yanagihara 132), referring to

Harold and Julias request to to adopt and love him. Sartre suggests that "a word can indeed seem to have a 'life' of its own if one comes upon it in sentences of various epochs. This borrowed life resembles that of an object in a film fantasy; for example, a knife which by itself starts slicing a pear" (Sartre 661). The meaning of actions and words, Sartre then claims, is fluid, and dependent on the situation and who is interpreting them. This supplies an explanation to why Jude interpret words and actions of affection as something threatening – they always were in the first fifteen years of his life.

Sartre does, however, remind us that the fact that we are born into a world charged with meaning which is out of our control is in no way to be considered as a sign of humans not being free. He states that "we are not dealing here with a limit of freedom; rather it is in this world that the for-itself must be free; that is, it must choose itself by taking into account these circumstances" (Sartre 667). In addition, Sartre explains how one's belonging to a certain oppressed group, such as being Jewish, is not a limit to one's freedom: "If, on the contrary, it pleases me to consider anti-Semites as pure objects, then my being-a-jew disappears immediately to give place to the simple consciousness of being a free, unqualifiable transcendence" (Sartre 674). Hence, he again stresses one's ability to choose, and by transcendence and action alter one's perception of oneself. On the contrary, Yanagihara seems to emphasize that Jude is very much without agency in this aspect. Besides the previously mentioned countless instances where the same sort of abuse is repeated in Jude's life, she portrays his childhood and adult life as fundamentally different in several ways. In Jude's childhood, he only encounters men. Once, while driving though a city with Brother Luke, he looks out the window and is astounded to see "a world made of not just men but also of children and women" (Yanagihara 402). As an adult, the majority of Jude's friends are queer. Many of them are artists, and all are politically progressive and modern. The few people who are heterosexual, such as Harold and Julia, are immensely kind and gentle. Yanagihara, then, depicts Jude's childhood as taking place in a violent patriarchy, and his adult life as a sort of LGBT utopia. This sharp contrast seems to further emphasize that Jude is complete without agency in regards of re-evaluating truths his childhood established in him. Though his adult life takes place in a society completely deprived of patriarchal power and abuse, he cannot transcend the meanings the first reality he experienced has taught him. His sense of being worthless and a victim is inevitably set in his psyche.

Mathematics, Determinism and Tragedy

Though Jude majors in law at university, he also studies mathematics on the side. This is to everyone around him a mystery: each one of his friends are active within the arts, and see potential in Jude to do the same. Jude is nonetheless set on math as he is a natural at it, and the novel often include facts from the mathematics classes he takes. We learn that Jude's favorite axiom is the axiom of equality. It states that "if you have a conceptual thing named *x*, that it must always be equivalent to itself" and "that it is in possession of something so irreducible that we must assume it is absolutely, unchangeably equivalent to itself for all time" (Yanagihara 339). That the axiom of equality is crucial in order to understand the character Jude, and *A Little Life* generally, is continuously suggested by Yanagihara. Firstly, the 700-page novel is divided into seven parts, one of which is called *The Axiom of Equality*. Furthermore, a reoccurring tendency of the characters in the novel is that they - consciously or subconsciously - make certain decisions, as well as have certain feelings, based on what they have experienced early in their lives. Jude's adoptive father Harold lost his son Jacob when Jacob was only five years old – if he had survived, he would have been about the same age as Jude is when Harold and Jude first meet. Early in Jude and Harold's friendship, Jude and his friends join Harold and Julia in their summer house in Cape Cod. The narrator being Harold, we are told that watching the young men interact makes him feel that he "[sees] what Jacob might have been" (Yanagihara 156). When Jude accidentally breaks a cup Jacob once made for Harold, Jude feels immensely guilty. Harold then writes Jude a letter to comfort him, claiming that "life rearranges itself to compensate for your loss, sometimes wonderfully" (Yanagihara 134). Hence, it is clearly indicated that Harold's love for Jude is subconsciously motivated by Harold having suffered the loss of a son when he was younger.

Willem is another character whose feelings towards Jude are likely to be subconsciously rooted in the loss of a loved one. Willem was in his childhood very close to his brother Hemming, who suffered from cerebral palsy alongside other health issues. Hemming dies when Willem is in college, and he is devastated. Jude, having a limp from his car injury, as well as being weak and sickly overall, is likely to remind Willem of his lost brother on a subconscious level. This theory is confirmed in the scene where Willem is in a car accident and that kills him. Though Willem and Jude's relationship has developed into them being life partners, the last thing on Willem's mind as he is thrown into the air from the collision is this: "[h]is final thoughts are not of Jude but of Hemming. He sees the house he lived in as a child and, sitting in his wheelchair in the center of the lawn … Hemming, staring at him with a steady, constant gaze"

(Yanagihara 628). Hence, the axiom of equality applies to the way both Harold and Willem love and form relationships: their great loves have already happened – any loves that comes afterwards are, though perhaps deep and sincere, still some sorts of replicas of the loves they have lost.

The axiom of equality is, however, perhaps most fruitful to consider when examining how the character Jude is constructed. Jude is unable to accept love and to believe what his friends and family tells him. When they time after time try to reassure him that he is not worthless, and that he does not deserve what has happened to him, he cannot accept this. When Jude argues with Andy about his fear of being rejected by Harold and Julia due to his past life, Andy tells him that "those things were done to [him]" and that "[he] [has] nothing, nothing to blame [himself] for, not ever, not in any universe" (Yanagihara 193). What Andy says corresponds to what the reader is thinking – for a child to be responsible for being abused is to most people absurd. Jude, however, cannot believe him, as having learnt that he is a useless nothing as a child is something that he cannot change or unlearn.

The axiom of equality is not only applicable when analyzing how Yanagihara has constructed Jude as well as other characters. It is also the principle by which Jude evaluates himself, his life and his freedom. Jude engages in a relationship with Caleb, a violent man with a lot of similar traits as his childhood perpetrators. The horrible crescendo of their relationship is Caleb's final beating of Jude, where he finally ends up pushing Jude down a flight of stairs. As Jude is falling through the air, he, much like Willem, seems to access raw truths about his existence. We are told that in that moment, the axiom of equality is proven to him; he is himself the proof. The fact that he has changed every exterior aspect of his life has not altered who he now certainly knows that he essentially and inevitably is. He may have money, and a career, and friends,

> but fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated. And in that microsecond that he finds himself suspended in the air, between the ecstasy of being aloft and the anticipation of his landing, which he knows will be terrible, 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. It is the last thing he thinks as his shoulder cracks down upon the concrete, and the world, for an instant, jerks blessedly away from beneath him: $x = x$, he thinks,

$x = x$, $x = x$. (Yanagihara 340)

This excruciating quote exhibits Jude's inability the overcome his childhood; he is, according to himself, fundamentally worthless. Hence, the axiom of equality has a meta function in the novel. Firstly, it is a way of explaining the logic of the traumatized. Secondly, it is a way of explaining the actual effects of trauma. $x = x$ - one's trauma is, according to Yanagihara, likely to be something impossible to overcome.

The emphasis on math generally, and on the axiom of equality specifically, opens up for the interpretation that Yanagihara presents a deterministic view of Jude and his life. As she clearly portrays him as someone that has surpassed many of the exterior obstacles his childhood presented, causal determinism seems to apply to her portrayal of psychological trauma. No matter how much money Jude makes, and no matter how many locks he has on his door, his psychological trauma is one threat from which he never can seem to protect himself. Thomas Pink explain how free will and causal determinism are two classical opposites in Western philosophy, and defines causal determinism as "the claim that everything that happens, including our own actions, has already been determined to occur. Everything that happens results from earlier causes" (Pink 13). This applies to the way Jude cannot escape the effects of trauma; he is told from the very beginning of his life that he is worthless, and this statement is something that dominates his mind and life until he dies.

Considering that determinism is a common element in Classical Greek tragedy, one can claim that the depiction of Jude correlates with the plot structure of Classical tragedy. In Aristotle's *Poetics,* his work of dramatic theory, Aristotle defines what elements characterize Classical tragic plays. He explains that "tragedy is the imitation of an action", and that this action is executed by personal agents. It is "by their actions that [the agents] are happy or the reverse". Hence, thus far, Aristotle's view on the structure of the tragic character resembles Sartre's theory of humans as free agents. However, Aristotle goes to claiming that the action a tragic play portrays is one that is whole – it has a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning, according to Aristotle, "does not itself follow anything by causal necessity". The beginning is, then, something that is likely to be independent and random, not connected to any prior event. The middle and the end do not follow this rule of coincidence. On the contrary, Aristotle states that "a middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it" (Aristotle) and the end, he explains, "is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule". He, then, displays the deterministic nature of tragic drama: though driven forward by

action, and beginning with something coincidental, the overall plot follows a string of events that are dependent on the previous one, and the end is what the end is due to causality. This structure corresponds to Yanagihara's portrayal of Jude. He starts off beings a foundling, with unknown parents and background. After he has escaped his childhood tormenters, Jude creates a new life for himself through determination and action – a life filled with possibilities and success. By making Jude prosper in the external aspects of his life, Yanagihara further emphasizes the incurable dominance trauma has over the human mind. Jude is ultimately unable to save himself; such is the nature of abuse and trauma. Regardless of the choices Jude makes, the act of committing suicide is inevitable as it is determined by his previous experiences. The portrayal of Jude, then, is very much similar to the plot structure concerned with causality that Aristotle claims is a crucial element in Classical tragedy plays.

Finally, regarding the focus on mathematics as a way for Yanagihara to suggest trauma's deterministic nature is supported further when considering the following scene and its subject matter. At one of Harold's dinners, Jude is asked to talk about the mathematics he is engaged in. One of the things he then goes on explaining is the concept of a beautiful proof. He says that "in math, when we talk about a beautiful proof, what we're recognizing is the simplicity of the proof, its... elementalness, I suppose: its inevitability" (Yanagihara 125). In other words, a beautiful proof is an answer to a mathematical problem that is simple, clear – and absolutely correct. This correlates with Aristotle's claim that the end of a tragic piece is the result of causality. It also coincides with the interpretation that Jude is someone who, due to previous events, has no possibility to avoid destruction and suicide.

Conclusion

This essay has aimed at exploring whether the portrayal of Jude in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of freedom in his phenomenological essay *Being and Nothingness.* By examining Jude and his thoughts and actions in Sartre's five situations, this essay argues that the depiction of Jude in some instances coincide with Sartre's idea that man is inevitably free. However, Yanagihara emphasizes the incurable damage of trauma. This emphasis, alongside the novel's – and Jude's – interest in mathematics, ultimately suggests a deterministic view of choice and freedom.

The portrayal of Jude's death and environment are two situations that agree with Sartre's theory. Jude's suicide and death are simply his ceasing to exist. It is to the people who knew him, however, something that can be discussed and evaluated. This is obvious when considering

Harold's letters to Willem. In them, he asks questions about Jude and what they might have been able to have done to save him. When analyzing Jude's environment, it is clear how he is able to transcend the obstacles it poses. Jude's poor physical health hinders him from moving freely and when an elevator breaks, he cannot take the stairs and it is then impossible for him to enter that particular building. By making sure he attains a certain education and, eventually, financial status, Jude can then choose to live in places designed to fit his needs. Hence, he showcases freedom in his environment situation.

When examining the depiction of Jude's place situation, Yanagihara deviates from Sartre's theory of transcendent freedom. This becomes clear when comparing Jude to Xiaoyan Tong's analysis of Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights.* Jude and Heathcliff have similar background – they are, for example, both abandoned orphans found on the street. While Heathcliff's early places seems to encourage his tendency to practice freedom, Jude's first places are the starting point of his past's domination over him.

When regarding Jude's past situation, he overcomes the obstacle of being poor as he through thought and action gains wealth and security. His past nonetheless dominates him in the sense that he considers what happened to be something that he deserved, hence setting a sense of worthlessness in his self that he never is able to rid himself of. Jude is also physically impaired due to an accident cause by a past perpetrator, and his bodily defects serve as a metaphor for his psyche being incurably damaged as well. Examining the Jude's fellowman situation and by comparing it to Kevin Brown's analysis of Sonmi-451 in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Yanagihara's again deviates from Sartre's theory on freedom. Sonmi-451 attains the possibility to practice free will by becoming conscious of herself and her situation, and the same could be said for Jude from a certain point of view. He manages to escape constant the oppression of male violence he experienced throughout his childhood. Jude's not being able to truly practice free will in relation to his fellowman situation is clear, however, when considering how his fellowman situations as a child and as an adult fundamentally differs – it is then obvious how he mentally brings his childhood experiences into his adult life.

Lastly, I have taken the continuous focus on mathematics into account. Jude's favorite axiom being the axiom of equality correlates with the overall theme of sameness; several characters manifest a tendency to repeat certain actions as well as feelings. This deterministic outlook on human life opens up for a comparison with what Aristotle claims are the central elements in Classical Greek drama. Considering Jude's suicide as something inevitable due to his previous experiences, the depiction of Jude clearly carries resemblance to the plots of Classical

tragedies. Hence, Yanagihara's portrayal of Jude ultimately seems to propose the dominance of trauma over an otherwise free subject.

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