



Symbolism in Hanya Yanagihara's Novel *A Little Life*: New Criticism

Khatrine Patricia Fernandes¹, Marliza Yeni^{*2}

^{1,2}Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFORMATION

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25077/lingolitera.v2.i2.2026.35-40>
Correspondence :
marlizayeni@hum.unand.ac.id

SUBMISSION TRACK

Submission : January 16, 2026
Final Review : February 20, 2026
Accepted : March 17, 2026
Available online : May 30, 2026

KEYWORDS

Symbols, Trauma, Queer Suffering, Resilience, Organic Unity, New Criticism Theory

ABSTRACT

A Little Life is a novel by Hanya Yanagihara published in 2015. The novel describes how traumatic experiences in the past significantly affect the mental and physical condition of the main character, Jude. This study aims to identify the symbols that form an organic unity in the development of the novel's central themes. This research uses the close reading method with the New Criticism approach introduced by John Crowe Ransom. The results of the analysis show that there are various important symbols in the novel that collectively reinforce the themes and messages conveyed. These include scars, razors, books, mirrors, wheelchairs, ice cream, Willem's presence, blood, the color brown, bathrooms, paintings, long-sleeved clothes, and Jude himself. All these symbols are interconnected and work in concert to build an organic unity in the literary work, which ultimately reinforces the main themes of trauma, resilience, queer suffering, and friendship.

INTRODUCTION

Literary works consist of many elements, one of which is symbolism. Symbolism is an essential literary device used by writers to add deeper levels of meaning to their works by giving particular objects, behaviors, or features symbolic value (Febriyantasari et al., 2024). Symbolism is an essential element that writers use to express their ideas in literary works. Bai (2019) states, in literature, symbolism is a strategy employed when certain things should not be taken literally (p.1). The use of symbolism means that certain elements in a novel should not be interpreted literally but instead carry deeper meanings.

According to Preth (2025), symbols come in various forms. They can appear as colors, objects, characters, or settings. Both Preth (2025) and Cove (2025) emphasize that authors use symbolism to help readers understand and interpret stories on a deeper level. This is because symbols can be used to build themes, create imagery, define characters, and convey meaning. Bai (2019, p. 1) further explains that symbolism provides writers with the freedom to introduce different levels of meaning in their work—both a literal meaning and a deeper interpretation beyond the surface meaning.

Besides being able to provide deep meaning in a literary work, symbolism also showcases the richness and beauty of a literary work (Bai, 2019, p.1). One such work is *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, which was published on March 10, 2015. A novel by Hanya Yanagihara caught my attention with its complex narrative and intricate problems. Her novel *A Little Life*, published in 2015, became one of the best-selling books of that year, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and became a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction in the same year. The main character of this novel is Jude St. Francis, an orphaned boy

who was found when he was a baby next to the trash bin near the monastery. He spends his life dealing with the trauma of his past. It all began when someone he truly trusted, Brother Luke and Dr. Traylor subjected him to physical harm and sexual harassment. This led to trauma that he experienced until he was an adult, which frequently made him feel depressed, anxious, insecure, and wary of other people. He kept it all to himself, and whenever the memories of the physical and sexual abuse came back to haunt him, he would always hurt himself by cutting. The continuous trauma ultimately led him to commit suicide. This ongoing trauma made him finally decide to end his life. Francis' trauma not only damaged him psychologically but also physically. Thus, this research is to analyze the symbolism and the meaning that is used or found in the novel, *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, because it seems that understanding the symbols would bring to a deeper understanding of the novel.

METHOD

Method of this research is qualitative method. As stated in the journal article entitled "Qualitative Research Methods: How to Use Them and How to Judge Them" by Hammberg et al. (2016, p. 499), qualitative research is applied to explore questions of experience, meaning, and perspective, mainly from the participants' point of view. The data collected are not quantifiable or measurable in statistical terms. Common techniques include small-group discussions, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, as well as the analysis of texts and documents. In line with this, I use the qualitative research method because this study analyzes a novel as a literary text. The data consist of words and narratives rather than numbers. Consistent with the characteristics of qualitative research, this study focuses on interpreting the meaning, perspective, and messages embedded in the novel. There are three steps involved in the research process. These include collecting the data, analyzing the data, and presenting the result of the analysis.

To analyze the novel *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, this research applies the New Criticism theory, which means the analysis focuses on the text itself. New Criticism, introduced by John Crowe Ransom in *The New Criticism* (1941) and influenced by I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, focuses on analyzing a literary work based solely on its text and structure, excluding external factors like the author's background. As Cleanth Brooks (1979) explains, its aim is to evaluate the work itself, not the writer. Tyson (2006) and Wellek & Warren also emphasize the distinction between intrinsic (text-based) and extrinsic (context-based) criticism. Overall, New Criticism seeks to deepen understanding of literature by examining how a text's formal elements contribute to its meaning.

To discover a text's meaning, New Criticism focuses on analyzing its formal elements and their organic unity through close reading. Tyson (2006) explains that meaning can be found by examining elements like imagery, symbolism, setting, and plot. Symbols, such as spring or a river, hold both literal and figurative meanings that reveal deeper themes depending on the context. Organic unity, on the other hand, means that all parts of a literary work—its form and content—are interconnected and work together to create one complete and meaningful whole.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The novel *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara is a complex story that presents various problems experienced in life. Analyzing the symbols found in this novel helps readers gain a deeper understanding of its meaning. Several symbols appear throughout the story, each carrying significant meaning in highlighting the novel's central themes. The symbols identified in the novel reveal distinct patterns that demonstrate their interconnection in shaping the major themes. These patterns are classified into three categories: pain and memory, isolation and fragility, and love and survival.

Symbols in *A Little Life*

Scars: Trauma

Scars are marks or traces visible on the body. From a religious perspective, scars can serve as meaningful signs. As discussed in Dickason's article (2025, p. 20), scars were more than just physical wounds in the setting of Western medieval Christianity; they may also become deeply spiritually significant symbols. These wounds served as entryways to more profound theological interpretations because they were bolstered by a strong foundation of religious beliefs and symbolism. As the protagonist, Jude endures

severe childhood trauma, having been sexually exploited and abused by trusted adults. These experiences cause lasting physical injuries and deep psychological pain. Haunted by his past, he suffers from intense shame and self-hatred, often resorting to self-harm that leaves permanent scars. These scars are not merely physical marks but symbolize his enduring trauma. As described by Yanagihara (2015), “the three columns of neat white scars... laddering up his arm” (p. 76) and Andy’s act of checking “for new cuts” (p. 150) reveal how Jude continues to be haunted by the pain of his past.

Razor: Desperate Self-Controlled

Jude engages in self-harm using a razor as a coping mechanism to escape overwhelming negative thoughts and emotions tied to his traumatic past. His self-inflicted injuries often lead him to re-cut old scars, symbolizing his desperate attempt to control his pain. Despite the physical deformities and disgust from his actions, he finds a perverse comfort in the relief that follows, highlighting the entrenched and destructive nature of his coping strategy. This behavior severely compromises his ability to lead a normal life due to the lasting impact of his childhood trauma.

Blood: Life and Death

Blood is an essential element for living beings, including humans. Blood flows as long as the heart pumps it, meaning as long as a person is alive. However, once a person dies, the blood stops flowing. In Jude’s story, blood frequently appears alongside his habit of self-harm. “Willem saw that the dark pattern on Jude’s shirt was blood, and that the towel had become sticky with it, almost varnished, its tiny loops of cotton matted down like wet fur” (Yanagihara, 2015, p. 73).

Blood in this story symbolizes both life and death. It is one of the important elements in Jude’s life. However, because of his traumatic past, he is not truly alive; he has to feel the physical pain and suffering in his life. His life is situated between life and death, which means he is also close to death. His destructive behavior is deliberate because he is close to death. It also reminds the readers how thin the line between life and death is.

Mirror: Self-Hatred

In this story, the mirror represents Jude’s self-hatred rather than a tool for self-recognition. Jude experiences anger and disgust when he confronts his reflection, embodying his belief that he is broken and unworthy of love. This aversion to mirrors symbolizes his trauma and shame, evoking painful memories from his past. His refusal to look at his own image illustrates his struggle to confront his emotional wounds, highlighting a deep-seated rejection of his existence.

Bathroom: Jude’s hiding place

The bathroom symbolizes Jude’s hiding place from the outside world, a private refuge where he conceals his pain. It also becomes a site of self-harm, showing that it is not only a place of escape but also where he releases his suffering. Although usually linked to cleansing, for Jude, it reflects his attempt to purify himself from trauma in isolation.

Those symbols show a recurrent pattern of memory and pain. They constantly illustrate how Jude’s past traumas still influence his habit and feelings now. By using these symbols, memory is shown as an active force that causes suffering in the lives of the characters rather than as something passive.

Paintings: Betrayal and Selfishness

In this novel, JB’s paintings symbolize both betrayal and love. When he paints Jude’s face despite Jude’s objections, the artwork—meant to capture beauty—becomes a source of pain and symbolizes JB’s selfishness, leading to the collapse of their friendship. However, after his friends’ deaths, JB’s later paintings serve as a tribute, showing that the same art that once represented betrayal transforms into an expression of love and remembrance.

Books: Self-affirmation and Self-worth

Books in the story symbolize Jude’s intelligence and deep love for knowledge.

He always carries his books wherever he moves, treating them as precious possessions. His friends admire his brilliance—he tutors in multiple subjects, helps them with assignments, and later becomes a successful lawyer. These moments show that learning and reading are integral parts of Jude’s identity and daily life.

Beyond that, books also represent Jude's struggle for self-worth. Behind his trauma and self-hatred, he uses knowledge to rebuild how others see him. Through intelligence, he seeks acceptance and respect, proving that he is more than his scars. Thus, books become symbols of both comfort and resistance, reflecting Jude's effort to find strength and value within himself.

Willem's presence: A Hope

Willem symbolizes hope and healing in Jude's life. He is the first person who truly loves Jude, treating him with kindness and helping him trust others again.

With Willem by his side, Jude feels safe and begins to see life as something worth living. Willem's presence becomes a source of comfort and strength that helps

Jude endure his pain. However, after Willem's death, Jude's world collapses. He can no longer find meaning in life and eventually gives up, showing that Willem's love is the light that keeps Jude alive—and without it, he loses all hope.

Ice cream: A little Happiness

Ice cream symbolizes the brief happiness Jude experiences in his painful life. It appears in joyful moments with Willem and his friends, representing comfort and warmth. However, like ice cream that melts quickly, Jude's happiness never lasts—every joy is followed by pain and loss. From Brother Luke to Caleb and finally Willem, those who bring him comfort also become sources of suffering. Thus, ice cream reflects the fleeting nature of Jude's joy and the fragility of peace in his life. The symbols of books, Willem, ice cream, and paintings together show Jude's struggle for love and survival. They give him comfort, hope, and brief happiness amid his pain. However, these moments are temporary, and when the sources of his strength disappear, his will to live fades. In *A Little Life*, Jude's story shows that resilience alone cannot fully protect him from the lasting effects of his trauma.

Long Sleeve: Shameful

Jude's long sleeves symbolize his shame and his attempt to hide his past. He always wears them, no matter how hot the weather is, to cover the scars on his body. The sleeves act as a shield that separates his present life from his painful memories. Jude feels disgusted with himself and fears that others might find out the truth. His childhood experiences leave him feeling unworthy and dirty. By hiding his scars, he tries to hide his guilt and trauma as well. The long sleeves show his constant effort to protect himself from judgment and pain.

Wheelchair: Fragility and Weakness

A wheelchair is a device used to assist people who have difficulty walking. They are used when someone's physical condition is so fragile that they can no longer walk. In this story, Jude and Willem's brother, Hemming, use wheelchairs. "Why's Jude in a wheelchair?" Edie asked" (Yanagihara, 2015, p. 233). "He was exhausted; he'd had to use his wheelchair that day because the wound on his right leg hurt so much, and he was so relieved to get home, back to Lispenard Street" (Yanagihara, 2015, p. 257).

According to the passage, Jude only uses the wheelchair when he is in excruciating pain. Jude always makes an effort to appear strong and normal in front of other people. The wheelchair serves as physical evidence of how his past pain still affects him as an adult, as evidenced by his inability to walk. Thus, the wheelchair represents Jude's weakness and fragility.

Brown: Loneliness, Soil, and Horse

Brown in "*A Little Life*" symbolizes deep sadness and loneliness, particularly as experienced by Jude, who associates it with his traumatic past and isolation. Objects in Dr. Taylor's brown kitchen reflect Jude's emotional emptiness, while the metaphor of brown soil illustrates his fragility under pain. Additionally, the color brown can represent strength and a fleeting desire for escape, akin to the symbolic black horse that appears brown due to pigment variation. However, just like the horse, Jude's attempts to flee his trauma are temporary, underscoring his lasting suffering and emotional burden. Overall, brown captures both Jude's sorrow and his enduring struggle for survival amidst profound loneliness and pain.

Jude: Chronic trauma, Resilience, and Queer suffering

Jude, the main character in *A Little Life*, symbolizes chronic trauma, resilience, and queer suffering. His trauma is both physical and emotional—visible through the scars on his arms and his permanent leg

injury, as well as the deep shame that haunts him. These wounds remind him of the abuse he endured in childhood, shaping his identity and damaging his self-worth. Although Jude is intelligent and successful, he constantly feels undeserving of love or care, believing that people will eventually hurt or reject him.

His inability to trust others reflects the depth of his trauma. Even with Harold, his adoptive father, and Willem, his closest friend, Jude struggles to open up about his past. He fears that honesty will destroy the affection they show him. However, Harold's compassion and Willem's patience slowly help him see that love and friendship can exist without harm. Despite his fear, Jude continues to live, work, and care for those around him, showing quiet resilience through small acts of kindness and endurance.

As a gay man, Jude's experiences also represent queer suffering. The abuse he suffered from men as a child shapes his perception of intimacy and safety, making him associate affection with pain. Later in life, his relationship with Caleb repeats this cycle of violence, reinforcing his sense of guilt and hopelessness. Through Jude's story, Yanagihara portrays how unhealed trauma can destroy one's ability to trust and love, yet also reveal the fragile strength of those who keep living despite unbearable pain.

The symbols exhibit clear patterns of fragility and isolation. Jude's emotional vulnerability and alienation are frequently portrayed, and the symbols further emphasize how much he struggles and how alone he feels. These recurring images highlight how deeply his life is dominated by fragility and separation.

Organic Unity

In *A Little Life*, Hanya Yanagihara builds organic unity through the interplay of symbols that reflect the novel's central themes of trauma, resilience, friendship, and queer suffering. The story follows Jude, a man whose life is marked by enduring trauma that shapes his body, emotions, and relationships. Dark symbols such as scars, razors, blood, mirrors, and bathrooms reveal how his pain and memories remain inescapable, emphasizing that trauma is continuous rather than momentary. Despite this darkness, Jude's relationships with Willem, Harold, Julia, Andy, and his friends embody moments of comfort and connection that sustain him, showing that resilience is often nurtured through love and friendship rather than self-reliance.

These symbols also highlight Jude's queer suffering and fragile endurance. His body, wheelchair, long sleeves, and the color brown symbolize his isolation, shame, and struggle to conceal both his identity and pain. As a gay man who faces repeated abuse and rejection, Jude's suffering becomes both physical and existential. Yet, symbols like books, ice cream, paintings, and Willem's presence represent fleeting joy and emotional warmth that balance the novel's despair.

Together, these elements create organic unity by linking form and content—dark and light imagery—into a cohesive portrayal of a life defined by trauma but still punctuated by moments of love, endurance, and fragile hope.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *A Little Life* achieves a powerful organic unity through the use of symbolism that binds its themes and emotions into a deeply meaningful whole. The novel maintains a sorrowful tone centered on Jude's lifelong trauma, which shapes his identity and ultimately leads to his downfall. Yanagihara uses symbols to reflect Jude's pain, resilience, and queer suffering. Scars, razors, blood, mirrors, and the bathroom represent his enduring trauma and self-hatred; books, paintings, ice cream, and Willem's presence symbolize love, friendship, and moments of fragile survival; while the wheelchair, long sleeves, the color brown, and Jude's body signify his isolation and vulnerability as a queer man burdened by shame. Together, these interconnected symbols enrich the novel's emotional depth and reveal the tragic irony of Jude's existence—showing that while love and resilience offer temporary comfort, trauma's impact remains permanent and unhealed. Through this intricate symbolic structure, Yanagihara portrays the painful yet profound reality of endurance, where even the strongest desire to survive can be undone by the weight of past suffering.

REFERENCES

- Abakumov, E., et all. (2024). The Origin and Geography of Brown Forest Soils. Land. 1-10. Abrams, M.H., & Harpham, G.G. (2013). *A Glossary of Literary terms*, Eleventh Edition. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Bai, S. B. R. (2019). Symbolism in Ted Hughes' poetry. *ELK Asia Pacific Journals – Special Issue*. ISBN 978-81-930411-1-6.
- Brooks, C. (1979). The New Criticism. *The Sewanee Review*. *JSTOR*, 87(4), 592–607 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27543619>
- Ciftci, G. (2022). Vulnerable as a Small Pink Mouse: Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. *Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*. 4(1).
- Cove, R. (2025). What is symbolism? Definition & examples. *Scribbr*. Retrieved from <https://www.scribbr.com/rhetoric/what-is-symbolism/>
- Dickason, K. (2022). *Scared Skin: The Religious Significance of Medieval Scars*. New York University, USA. 10(1), 17-47
- Febriyantasari, D. A., & Yulistiyaniti. (2024). Exploring Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' using New Criticism. *INTERFERENCE: Journal of Language, Literature, and Linguistics*, 5(2), 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.26858/interference.v5i2.63779>
- Griffith, Kelley. *Writing Essays About Literature: A Guide and Style Sheet*. 7th ed., Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.
- Gulomovna, J. N. (2022). Signs of Symbolism in Novel "The Sound and The Fuey" By W. Faulkner. *Current Research Journal of Philological Sciences*, 3(11), 64–71.
- Hartemink, A.E., & Budiman, M. (2014). *Towards Digital Soil Morphometrics*. *Geoderma*, 305-317.
- Kenney, W. P. (1966). *How to Analyze Fiction*. Monarch Press.
- Klarer, M. (1988). *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. 3rd revised edition, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Marebi, M.S.A.A. (2023). Exploring Symbolism and Imagery in the Novels of Diana Abu- Jaber: A Critical Analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*. 11(8).
- Mujani, S., & Rahmadiasti, I. (2022). Exploring the impacts of childhood trauma on the main character in Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life*. *University of Pertiwi*, 16(2). Retrieved from <https://jurnal.pertiwi.ac.id/index.php/langue/article/view/216>
- Nicolo, A.M. (2022). *Developmental Ruptures*. Routledge
- Oetomo, D.H., Saraswati, R. (2015). Melinda's Struggle to Overcome Her Sexual Abuse Trauma in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*: A New Criticism Study. *Airlangga University*, 4(2). 39-46.
- Preth, N. (2025). *Symbolism in Literature: Exploring Deep Themes and Motifs*. INCA University.
- Ragatama, R.Y. (2021). *Alina Starkov's Character Development in Leigh Bardugo's Novel Shadow and Bone*. UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya.
- S, K. A. (2020). Diagnosing queer in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. *Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 10(1), 143–148. Retrieved from <https://www.oijrj.org/oijrj/jan-feb2020/20.pdf>
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge.
- Yanagihara, H. (2015). *A Little Life*. Doubleday.
- Zain, H.M. (2021) *The Old Man and the Sea, a Novel by Ernest Hemingway*. Sultan Agung Islamic Univeristy.