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COM 257 Final: Neoliberalism in A Little Life

The economic ideology of neoliberalism emerged as a catalyst that reshaped capitalist dogma in the late 20th century, redefining the role of the bourgeoisie in American society. Formerly at the forefront, capitalism positioned the working man–who is utmost loyal to the company he serves–at the center of labor production, serving the illusion of the American Dream to society–that "*functions to instill hard work in the working classes and to naturalize capitalism's hardships.*" (Sipe, 390) To reach this dream is to embody the working man, demonstrating through perseverance and discernment for his company and continuing the cycle of labor. Neoliberalism challenges this ideal, that instead views work as a reward rather than a precursor to reaching a dream. It also revitalized the mindset of the bourgeoisie to work for themselves–not necessarily meaning to start their own companies, but to be personable; allowing room for creativity and curiosity within professions to reach new heights. This essentially commodifies the laborer in terms of having to sell their personality, exercising emotional labor and other impression management skills in order to advance in the workforce. Through creative professions, neoliberalism ideals have given creatives a chance to essentially 'sell' their feelings, opinions, and overall brain to an audience, whether that comes in art forms such as paintings, movies, television, writing, and more–solidifying their individuality and expression as means for a career. This paper aims to critique the novel "A Little Life" by Hanya Yanagihara for its immaterial and material components, as a means for reflecting neoliberalist ideals through the

commodification of trauma as its selling point–not directly from the author, but through press and society.

To accurately showcase my critique, I must give a short synopsis of the novel; 'A Little Life' follows a group of four friends who met as college roommates–Willem, an actor; JB, an artist; Malcolm, an architect; and Jude, a lawyer–who is the glue that holds them together. The story follows this group around throughout their lives as they build their careers and form deeper relationships, inside and outside of their circle. Jude–whose story is central to the narrative–is a brilliant, compassionate man whose unspeakable trauma faced throughout childhood has ultimately sheltered him into a lifelong battle against his own self, physically and mentally, unwilling to ever fully open up about his struggles to his peers and to allow himself luxuries in life. Yanagihara delves deep into the psychology of Jude and provides beautiful, yet gut-wrenching representations of friendship, adulthood, and society through these four characters as they try to understand themselves in an ever growing fast-paced New York City.

Byung-Chul Han describes neoliberalism as "*a mutant form of capitalism* / *that transforms workers into entrepreneurs*." In contrast to a world with workers serving the company, a neoliberalist world embraces workers serving themselves through passion, which Yanagihara explicitly depicts through her characters. In chapter 2 of the first of seven sections within the novel, we are turned to JB, the artist, whose passion for creating is fueled by the world outside of him and the need to express. At this point, we are following JB along a normal day at his art studio, from his subway commute with thousands of indigenous people going anywhere and everywhere to the interesting creatives he shares a space with, while also depicting different kinds of creatives–the kind that use art as a justification versus passion:

> There, art was something that was just an accessory to a lifestyle. You painted or sculpted or made crappy installation pieces because it justified a wardrobe of washed-soft T-shirts and dirty jeans and a diet of ironic cheap American beers and ironic expensive hand-rolled American cigarettes. Here, however, you made art because it was the only thing you'd ever been good at, the only thing, really, you thought about between shorter bursts of thinking about the things everyone thought about: sex and food and sleep and friends and money and fame. But somewhere inside you, whether you were making out with someone in a bar or having dinner with your friends, was always your canvas, its shapes and possibilities floating embryonically behind your pupils. (pg. 28)

JB's mindset mirrors the neoliberalist entrepreneurial man, as his deep longing and appreciation for societal differences constantly keeps him motivated to innovate. However, this quote doesn't cover the brutalities of art JB faces within his own self and presents vulnerability. A significant connection to neoliberalism in terms of commodified emotions, specifically vulnerability, is represented clearly in chapter 6 of the second section 'The Postman'. JB was offered a spot to showcase his work at an art gallery, in which he took it up and showcased paintings of his friends, titled "The Boys." One painting he included was of Jude depicted after one of his self-harming episodes, where "*he was curled into himself in bed, his eyes open but scarily unseeing, his left hand stretched unnaturally wide, like a ghoul's claw"* (pg. 150). Not only does this showcase Jude in a moment of weakness to many people, but the reference picture was taken without Jude's knowing, and the painting was displayed without Jude's permission, which put a hole in their friendship that was slowly rebuilt throughout the years. JB as the entrepreneurial man essentially sacrificed the integrity of his bond with Jude to showcase his vulnerability in

pursuit of monetary value. We can tell that JB's holds value in his friends, which is why he expresses his love for them through these paintings, but while he is not essentially commodifying his own emotional labor, he takes the approach of the entrepreneurial man as he sacrifices his dignity and dependability within his peers in hopes to further his career. Neoliberalist ideals aren't only prevalent through JB's career, but through each character's walk of life, such as Willem's acting career–as he constantly has to use emotional labor & impression management skills to portray believable and strong performances throughout the roles he plays. Jude, more than anyone, reflects and embraces the self-sufficiency ideal more than anyone, in fear and belief that he is not worthy of help or kindness. He felt he needed to "*be worthy of their friendship / of the opportunities he had been given / of the life that he had been granted.*" However, his work was the only thing in his life in which he felt grounded; a refuge for him to be present in the moment and not dwell on the past:

> His work saved him. His work proved that he existed, that he could contribute, that he was not wholly useless. Without his work, he feared, he would become nothing, just another body, another thing to be thrown away.

This not only showcases the passion Jude carries for his work, but how dependent he is on it; it's how and where he finds his control, reflecting the ethos of neoliberalism. No matter the circumstances, he is constantly hustling and working his way up between law offices, because he loves it and *needs* it. While these representations in the storyline directly connect the fictional society Yanagihara created with these concepts, it is portrayed by the novel itself as a material object, whose impact inflated word-of-mouth marketing that shaped trauma, horror, and devastation as its selling point.

My good friend Evan gifted me this book for my 20th birthday this past June, his reasoning being that he heard a lot of controversy about the book on TikTok, specifically a subculture within the app "BookTok"; a community that shares/recommends pieces of literature and posts discussions about them. As he was about to purchase the book at Barnes & Noble, the cashier told him to "be careful with this book–if you're not in a good headspace, this book will *torture* you." This only piqued his interest, and mine as well. Before I took on the challenge of reading, I first did my research, and tried to find critiques and explanations of the novel on BookTok (of course, without any spoilers). Surprisingly so, most of the videos I saw of people discussing the novel were filled with tears and warnings, with captions/comments such as "DO NOT READ THIS BOOK" and "the saddest book in history", all with hundreds of thousands of likes and comments by users. One video that stood out to me however was one posted in late 2023, of a girl with the book open in her hands crying hysterically. Needless to say, I was intrigued–especially by how the novel was essentially marketed indirectly (without the author's effort) to such a wide audience. However, this is exactly where the problem stems. Additionally, the actual hardcopy of the novel is what's being advertised, with certain videos and websites linking the products listing on Amazon or bookstores; promoting the actual physical body of paper bound to a cover, to ensure a 'full' experience for the audience.

In *Materialist Media Theory* by Grant Bollmer, it is explained that to fully understand media technology and its effects on the body, we must pay attention to the physical infrastructure of the devices we engage with. Books, for example, are essentially ways of interacting with language inscriptions, which can come in many styles and shapes; physical hardcopies, online PDF, audio files–to name a few. No matter which form a reader chooses to engage in, they are

interacting with language, words on a paper or screen or playing aloud that can be instilled into the mind in many different ways.

> Even when a bound codex of paper, you are actively engaging with this book as you read it, participating in the meaning it creates–though you are engaging in a way that is very different than how you would interact online. What would these words say to you if they were encountered online? Would they mean something different than the words you are currently reading? Are these questions about meaning even good enough to describe historical changes in how we communicate? (pg. 9)

In context to the novel, Yanagihara's story could be interpreted and felt in many different ways, depending on the actual material used to read it. In my experience, I always prefer to purchase the hardcopy version of books, because I enjoy the act of flipping through pages and highlighting certain quotes that intrigue me. Picking up an actual book feels like a more intentional and intimate experience, whereas if I would've read this online through a PDF or eBook, it would have felt more artificial and my focus would not have been the same. For me, reading online can be distracting, as I am using the same medium (my computer or iPad) that I would use to play video games, chat with friends, watch television, listen to music, and more. Being able to constantly see each of the application icons through pixels on a screen would only distract me and give me an excuse to procrastinate and not give my full attention (Ironically, as I am writing this paper I am using the eBook version to gather my quotes and information, as the hardcopy gifted to me is being used by my friend Ula who wanted to read the book after me). The actual physical medium gives me an opportunity to admire the front cover, the thickness of the paper

pages, the ink inscribing thousands of words, and of course, to engage with the story in its truest form.

A Little Life deals with various triggering topics, such as self-harm, suicide, sexual assault, abuse, and addiction, mostly embarked on by the character Jude. In a 2016 interview with Politics and Prose, Hanya Yanagihara explains that her purpose for writing the novel was to "write a character that never got better"–It wasn't to create the most gut-wrenchingly devastating fictional story, using these sensitive topics to draw attention and controversy. However, the audience has essentially turned this novel into their own, outside of the author's initial intentions, indirectly promoting neoliberalism by using the novel as a conduit for exploiting others' emotions in effort to share the pain/trauma with each other. The commodification of trauma is only benefiting Yanagihara monetarily, completely indirectly.

One section specifically in the book that was heavily discussed online and frankly stood out to me was #4; The Axiom of Equality. This section is pivotal in the novel, as we start to truly unravel Jude's past and find somewhat of an explanation for his reclusive habits, specifically his time and escape from a group home, alongside an older companion named Brother Luke, whose love for Jude is misconstrued and manipulative as he extorts him in motels for older men to use him for sex at a young age.

> In later years, he would try to remember when exactly it was that he must have realized that the cabin was never going to be built, that the life he had dreamed of would never be his. When he had begun, he had kept track of the number of clients he had seen, thinking that when he reached a certain number–forty? Fifty?–he would surely be done, he would surely be allowed to stop. But then the number grew larger and larger, until one day he

> had looked at it and realized how large it was and had started crying, so scared and sick of what he had done that he had stopped counting. (pg. 351)

In my opinion, it is the most devastating section of the novel, and made me question the extent of Yanagihara's purpose of creating Jude's character and story. This is of course a very extreme quote to pull, and while it doesn't exactly reflect the critiques I set out to explain, it shares a sample of Yanagihara creating Judes story. Out of all the ways she could've built a character with no change, why this way? By depicting gruesome accounts and scenes that contain/lead to trauma to not only the characters embedded in the storyline, but to the readers consuming the writing, is she engaging in neoliberalist propaganda of commodification?

The truth is, creativity has no bounds in any art form. If we were to take away the devastating nature of the human experience from every creative process and output, art would be meaningless–pain is a part of the process. To express pain, or any kind of emotion, we must be personable–which is a central factor of neoliberalism. So, yes, *A Little Life* does reflect neoliberalist ideals throughout its storyline and as an immaterial and material object shaped by society–but doesn't all art forms as well? Every creative profession, object, or hobby is learned to be appreciated and accepted by society if it is personable and/or relatable. Meaning through media is constructed and received through so many ways, whether it's by physically engaging with an object or admiring the collection of pixels displayed on a screen. In whichever way we choose to engage with the media, we must stay aware of its intentions to interact and affect the audience, in this case, through extreme emotional labor.

> But what was happiness but an extravagance, an impossible state to maintain, partly because it was so difficult to articulate? (pg. 80)

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