

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

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.

1.2 Identification of the Problems

Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* is a literary masterpiece with a nuanced and intensely emotional plot. The novel tells the story of a man named Jude, who faces immense struggles throughout his life. From a young age, he experiences sexual and physical abuse, leaving him deeply traumatized and unable to live his days normally. As a result, Jude often harms himself as a way to cope with the overwhelming pain caused by his trauma. He also suffers from several mental health issues, such as insecurity, trust issues, and fear of entering romantic relationships. However, despite all the hardships he endures, Jude still finds small spaces of happiness. He is surrounded by people who genuinely love him, and he possesses remarkable intelligence as well as talent in music,

which allows him to keep going and share kindness with others. Through this complex and layered narrative, Yanagihara employs various literary elements that enrich the depth of the story.

One very interesting element of this highly emotional novel is its wide and significant use of symbolism. Character depictions and the conflicts are reinforced through the usage of symbols. The novel's rich use of symbolism—which includes speech, colors, gestures, objects, and other elements—may not be apparent to many readers. Each symbol has a deeper significance than its literal interpretation. There has been little research specifically exploring symbolism in this highly emotional novel. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the various symbols present in *A Little Life* and examine how these symbols contribute to strengthening the novel's themes.

1.3 Review of Previous Studies

In order to finish this research, I examined a few relevant books from previous studies. The first source is “Vulnerable as a Small Pink Mouse: Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*” by Gulsin Ciftci, published in 2022. This research analyzes the same novel, *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, focusing on the vulnerability of the main character as portrayed in the novel. It finds that vulnerability and trauma are interconnected. The main character experiences trauma from childhood to adulthood, yet the author highlights that despite his trauma, he still tries to connect with others, even though it is difficult. Additionally, vulnerability adds deep emotional intensity to the story. This research provides a valuable perspective by showing that the novel does not solely focus on traumatic experiences but also explores Jude's hopes and desires.

Next source is entitled “Diagnosing Queer in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*” by Krishnaveni A. S., which was published in 2020. This journal uses queer theory to analyze the main character, who is gay. The article examines how the main character, Jude St. Francis, and other characters represent various queer identities, exploring themes such as trauma, sexual identity, and the impact of childhood abuse on adult relationships. The study emphasizes how the novel questions normative definitions of gender and sexuality. I must admit that this journal is not essential to my research's focus. It also applies a different theory to my research. However, it analyzes a novel, *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, which is similar to my research. Therefore, some of the information in this article will be useful for additional information for my research, especially about Jude St. Francis, as the main character.

The third is created by Sahril Mujani and Irvi Rahmadiasti, entitled “Exploring the Impacts of Childhood Trauma on the Main Character in Hanya Yanagihara’s Novel “*A Little Life*” published in November 2022. This research aims to analyze the impacts of trauma on the main character in *A Little Life* novel. It uses a descriptive qualitative method of analysis. The results of this study show that there are two impacts of Francis’s trauma. Those are anxiety and self-destructive behavior. It shows that the anxiety and self-destructive exist because of his past traumatic experience. This study tries to understand the impact of trauma, which can have damaging effects on a person’s relationships and identity. This study uses the same object as my research, *A Little Life*, a novel by Hanya Yanagihara. Yet, the analysis focuses on the impacts of the trauma and does not use a literature theory. It is still useful for my research for additional information, especially the trauma impact on Francis’s personality.

The fourth source is research entitled “Signs of Symbolism in the Novel ‘The Sound and The Fury’ by W. Faulkner” by Jurnaeva Nilufar Gulomovna, published in 2022 by Master Journals. This research examines the symbolic images in the novel, which has trauma as one of its themes. It finds that the symbols in the novel help the reader comprehend the plot. The symbols also make it possible to show the relationship between characters. Moreover, this research demonstrates that symbols in the novel can help readers discover the theme. This study is very helpful because it aligns with this research, which will discuss the symbols in *A Little Life* and how they convey the theme.

The fifth source is a journal article titled “Exploring Symbolism and Imagery in the Novels of Diana Abu-Jaber: A Critical Analysis” by Mohammed Saleh Ali Al Marebi (2023). This research explores the use of symbols and imagery in a novel, emphasizing that symbolism in literary works can convey deep meanings. It illustrates how the author portrays characters' actions and experiences within the story. Symbols can take various forms, such as food, music, and nature. These symbols, along with other literary elements, engage readers and help them gain a deeper understanding of the story. This research shares a similar topic with the thesis but differs in terms of the literary works being analyzed.

Next, "Analysis of Symbols in *The Old Man and the Sea*, a Novel by Ernest Hemingway" is a journal article that was published in 2019. The symbols in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* are examined in this article. It talks about how concepts, characters, things, or abstractions are represented and interpreted using symbols. Symbols can be simple or complicated, and they can have several meanings. They also improve the plot and make it easier for readers to understand the story's

underlying meanings. The characters' strong personalities are also revealed by the symbols. In this article, the novel is analyzed through the use of symbols. Because it examines the significance of symbols in literary works and offers the reader deep insights, it is helpful for this thesis.

The seventh source is a 2024 Journal of Language, Literature, and Linguistics essay by Devinda Aralia Febriyantasari and Yulistiyanti titled "Exploring Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' Using New Criticism." Using the philosophy of New Criticism, this essay examines *The Road Not Taken*, emphasizing themes like symbolism, figurative language, and ambiguity. Since it applies the same theory as this research and examines symbolism as one of its key aspects, it contributes to filling a gap in literary analysis, particularly in poetry, by emphasizing these elements. The article finds that these elements help convey the theme of choices in decision-making in life. Although this research examines a different medium, the article is useful for understanding the application of New Criticism theory and the analysis of symbolism.

Next the article "Alina Starkov's Character Development in Leigh Bardugo's Novel *Shadow and Bone*" by Ravelyan Yulio Ragatama et al., published in 2023 in the *Journal of English Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies*. This article analyzes the novel *Shadow and Bone*, using New Criticism to examine the main character's personality. The authors explore how the protagonist develops from a weak woman into a strong one, highlighting the influence of her teacher on this transformation. This article is useful for my research as it analyzes a novel and focuses on textual analysis, particularly the character's personality, which is also a key aspect of this study. However,

there is a gap between this article and my research. While both examine novels, they analyze different literary works.

The last source is a published article entitled “Melinda’s Struggle to Overcome Her Sexual Abuse Trauma in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*: A New Criticism Study” by Donny Herdiawan Oetomo and Rina Saraswati, which was published in 2015. This article discusses the struggles of a victim of sexual abuse. The article examines the main character, Melinda, who struggles to overcome her sexual trauma by using New Criticism Theory. The author focuses on how the theme is developed through the formal elements of literary works, such as characters, plot, setting, and symbolism. This article finds that the characterization, plot, setting, and symbolism in the story help Melinda overcome her trauma of sexual abuse, which consists of physical and non-physical struggles. This article also uses the New Criticism Theory to examine the trauma of the main character. Because it analyzes the formal elements and concludes that the theme is based on their organic unity, the article is helpful to my research.

1.4 Research Question

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What symbols does the author use to illustrate the themes in *A Little Life* novel?
2. How do they contribute to the novel’s central themes of trauma, survival, and identity?

1.5 Scope of the Research

This research is an intrinsic analysis, which focus on the formal elements of the story. It particularly focuses on the symbols as a formal element much used in the novel and how those symbols build the theme or message as the content of the narrative.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

This research aims to analyze the symbols as one significant formal element mostly used in the story and to examine how Yanagihara utilize those symbols to build the strong theme of trauma, survival and identity.

