Teaching Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's A Little Life

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TEACHING TRAUMA IN HANYA YANAGIHARA’S A LITTLE LIFE

by

KATHLEEN SHUMAN

(Under the Direction of Mary Villeponteaux)

ABSTRACT

Using Hanya Yanagihara’s A Little Life, this thesis outlines how to ethically and effectively teach literature that deals with trauma. My personal teaching philosophy as well as the current pedagogy surrounding trauma literature preface a detailed syllabus, lesson plans, assessments, and activities that would be useful in teaching a course centered around literature that deals with trauma. This thesis highlights the merits of teaching trauma fiction in the literature classroom.

INDEX WORDS: Hanya Yanagihara, A Little Life, Trauma fiction, Trauma pedagogy, Teaching philosophy, Contemporary literature, Transformative literature
TEACHING TRAUMA IN HANYA YANAGIHARA’S A LITTLE LIFE
by
KATHLEEN SHUMAN
B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2018
A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is no way this project could have been completed without the generous help of my thesis director, Dr. Mary Villeponteaux. Her advice and guidance have been invaluable. I am so thankful to have had her as a mentor for both my undergraduate and graduate career. In addition to her patience, encouragement, and guidance, the learning outcomes from my syllabus were adapted from syllabi I received in her classes as well as classes from Dr. Gautam Kundu and Dr. Caren Town.

I am deeply thankful for Dr. Julia Griffin and Dr. Joe Pellegrino who served as members of my thesis committee. In addition to his help with this project, my peer editing worksheet was adapted from a peer editing worksheet I used in my graduate degree at Georgia Southern University created by Dr. Joe Pellegrino. My attendance policy was modeled on multiple attendance policies from classes in my undergraduate career at Georgia Southern University including Dr. Joe Pellegrino, Dr. Dustin Anderson, and Dr. Gautam Kundu.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

My Teaching Philosophy and A Little Life: The Why

The idea of being a third-generation teacher never appealed to me. When family friends asked, “Do you want to teach like your mother?” my answer was always and immediately: no. Despite my protestations, it surprises no one that I find myself an aspiring teacher today. As a future, third-generation educator, I am fortunate to have a plethora of sources available to guide me as I discover more about being a teacher and what I want my classroom to look like. I have many teachers in my family and consulted several of them about their individual teaching philosophies. I was greeted with a wide variety of ideas and advice. To me, the most valuable advice came from an aunt of mine who has been teaching for over twenty-five years: “I want to incite a love of learning and reading . . . a sense of self and an understanding of what you want in life . . . [to foster] an environment of security, caring, love, and acceptance.” Like my aunt, I have a strong desire to share my love of literature and reading with my students. Great literature can transform, inspire, and create compassionate, wise people. To be a part of that process, to inspire students to keep reading, learning, and growing is what I hope to do in my future classroom. I want my classroom to be a place where students learn about themselves and the world around them.

James Kirylo, a national authority on critical pedagogy, explains that “the teacher is the most important element in fostering an energetic, engaging, and inspiring classroom environment where authentic learning can unfold” (17). As an aspiring teacher, it is important that I establish my purpose in teaching as well as what my teaching philosophy will be in my future classroom. Kirylo has several ideas or philosophies about teaching with which I agree. He asserts,
“[E]ducation is about entering into relationships. To state differently, education is about working with human beings and their dreams, goals, and aspirations” (17). The idea of the teacher-student relationship being humans helping humans is appealing and important to me. Working closely with students, having the opportunity to grow their knowledge about themselves and the world around them, would be fulfilling. Teaching students, sharing my passion with them and letting them learn and share their passions with me, could be a beautiful, meaningful exchange.

Matthew Hicks furthers the idea of teaching as an exchange: “Teaching is inherently a reciprocal experience. It provides me the opportunity to connect with others, share our lived experiences, and grow together” (137). I would count myself fortunate to find myself in a career so symbiotic.

In addition to forming relationships and sharing knowledge, I want what is shared in the classroom to be powerful and important. Along with critics such as Arnold Tompkins, I believe that “education is both a physical and spiritual good” (40). I want the benefits that my student and I share in our relationship to go further than academic knowledge. I want my students to gain knowledge that can shape their world view as well—and though I am surely biased, I think that literature is the ideal subject to do just that. In a literature class, students can read stories from different people with vastly different messages and ideas. It is the perfect subject for learning a new perspective and broadening one’s worldview. Sharing deep, powerful messages and forming meaningful connections with my students is something I will strive for in my future career.

I have a strong desire to share my love of literature and reading with my students. Great literature can transform, inspire, and create compassionate, wise people. To be a part of that process, to inspire students to keep reading, learning, and growing is what I hope to do in my future classroom. I want my classroom to be a place where students learn about themselves and the world around them. I agree with Kirylo’s argument that “the chief task of teachers is to
inspire” (18). I want to inspire my students to become knowledge seekers and empathetic citizens while continuing to be both of these things myself.

I want to prepare my students for the roles they will take outside of the classroom—the careers they will have later in life. In addition to teaching valuable life lessons, students learn how to communicate in the English classroom: how to write clearly, speak persuasively, and support their ideas and opinions with evidence. These skills will serve any student in any future career they pursue. An English classroom can provide students with both practical skills as well as valuable life lessons.

Literature has the power to show a reader perspectives that they never could have known otherwise, which is why it is so transformative and important. Still, not every piece of literature encountered in the classroom leaves students with positive, warm feelings. In fact, many pieces of literature contain dark, even traumatic topics. Cathy Caruth, a prominent voice in literary trauma studies, explains that while the Greek trauma, or *wound*, refers to a bodily injury, trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind (3). The goal in teaching literature like this is to expand the mind, not wound it. Literature that deals with trauma is powerful and transformative but requires extra care when being taught. In my own life, I found that when pieces of literature that deal with trauma were brought into the classroom there was little to no preparation done in advance to warn students about the topics that they would be encountering. The way these painful topics are introduced and discussed has an impact on how they are received and what students learn. In being a teacher who wants students to develop a love of learning, it is necessary that I provide a safe space for them to encounter traumatic subjects. In being a teacher who wants to develop relationships with her students, it is imperative that I honor that relationship with them by openly and thoroughly preparing them for the subject matter they will encounter in my classroom.
Despite the hazards, I believe that, if properly handled, reading about and analyzing literature that deals with trauma can be emotionally and spiritually beneficial.

Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* is a novel about trauma, a powerful and transformative text that I want to teach. This book reminds readers that one can never know the life experiences someone else has gone through--and that while there is certainly bad in the world, there is good in the world too. Moments such as the adoption of Jude and the love between Jude and Willem are heartwarming. Still, there are many dark moments in the novel too. Given its often disturbing content, the way in which this text is read is important. In the literature classroom specifically, my purpose as a teacher is to serve as a bridge between the literature and the classroom. Letting students grapple with intense, traumatic literature on their own can be doing them a disservice. As a teacher, my role is to guide, explain, and explore new texts with my students--especially ones like *A Little Life* where there are painful and traumatic topics. Engaging with these tough topics in an intentional and appropriate way would allow students to learn from *A Little Life*.

Engaging with any sort of literature in a scholarly manner is a skill to be learned. Working with literature that contains trauma requires even greater care and skill. As in any English class, I expect students to read and write critically about the works we encounter. It is my responsibility as a teacher to model appropriate discourse around the works we are reading. Being in a class that consistently engages with and discusses difficult, traumatic topics not only prepares students to do the same in other literature classes but also gives them an advantage when encountering difficult texts in the future. My hope in teaching a novel like *A Little Life* is to equip students academically while also helping them develop greater empathy and kindness. As Rachel N. Spear states in “‘Let Me Tell You a Story:’ On Teaching Trauma Narratives, Writing, and Healing,” teaching literature that deals with trauma can “[foster] self-actualization
and social consciousness” (72). Tackling the topic of trauma in a literature classroom, though challenging, has the potential to help students grow in understanding and compassion.

Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (2015) was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award. It has been hailed as “a beautiful tale of love and friendship” (*Los Angeles Times*), “deeply moving” (*NPR*), and “the perfect chronicle of our age” (*The Guardian*). The seven-hundred-page novel details the lives of four friends, recently graduated from the same college and now living in New York City. The lives of Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, JB (Jean-Baptiste) Marion, and Malcolm Irvine are wildly, perhaps unbelievably, successful. Jude, the protagonist of the novel, becomes a rich and renowned lawyer, Willem a famous actor, JB a gifted artist, and Malcolm a talented architect. While *A Little Life* initially seems to be an innocent story of friendship, success, and brotherhood, a much darker story is revealed as the novel progresses.

Yanagihara’s story begins before this quartet has achieved the great successes they will later in life. Post-college, each of the characters is struggling in their own way. Willem, an aspiring actor, is working at a restaurant in hopes of finding a role that will allow him to act full-time. JB is a struggling artist—stuck in a job he does not enjoy in hopes that the connections he makes there will help to establish him as an artist. Malcolm has a low-paying job as an architect and feels ashamed that he is still living with his parents. Jude is working in the U.S. Attorney’s Office, and he is also living with Malcolm and his parents.

Besides establishing each of their careers and life satisfaction, “Lispenard Street,” the first section of the book, reveals much about the background and early life of three of the four young men. Willem was raised by a poor family in Wyoming. His only sibling, Hemming,
suffered from cerebral palsy. Willem spent most of his life taking care of Hemming until he died while Willem was in college. Willem’s parents died shortly after when he was in graduate school. JB comes from a loving, close-knit family that consists of his mother and other important women in his family. Though his father died when he was younger, JB’s family was always financially comfortable. Malcolm also comes from an affluent family, but he does not have the close relationship with his parents that JB does with his family. Malcolm feels as though his father favors his sister over him. As the family life of each of the four main characters is revealed, Jude is left out. Jude is extremely private about his life, and Willem even notes:

But that was part of the deal when you were friends with Jude: he knew it, Andy knew it, they all knew it. You let things slide that your instincts told you not to, you scooted around the edges of your suspicions. You understood that proof of your friendship lay in keeping distance, in accepting what was told you, in turning and walking away when the door was shut in your face instead of trying to force it open again. (84)

As the story continues, Jude’s past is told to the reader in flashbacks throughout the novel. Jude has suffered severe and unrelenting trauma throughout his life. He suffered physical, psychological, and sexual trauma in his childhood that has left him permanently disabled and in a state of constant pain. Beyond the severe physical effects of these traumas, he also struggles with the mental ramifications. Jude often suffers flashbacks to these ghastly events in his life. Unable to move beyond the horrors of his past, he engages in self-harm and struggles with healthy relationships during his adult life.
In an article for *Vulture*, Yanagihara reveals that one of her purposes in writing *A Little Life* was to “create a protagonist who never gets better.” The trauma that Jude suffered in his early life follows him throughout the novel. Still, in spite of his horrendous past, his life is not full of only bad things. In spite of the suffering he endured, there are moments of happiness in the novel. *A Little Life* follows Jude and his closest friends as they navigate life--it is a beautiful and sensitive novel which “demands to be read” (*The Wall Street Journal*).

A book so engaging and powerful would be valuable to teach. Still, with such heavy subject matter, the book can be difficult to read and even more difficult to discuss. As Brigid Delaney points out in “*A Little Life: Why Everyone Should Read this Modern Classic,*” Yanagihara’s novel “forces demands on you that are so immense you need consolation from others” (*The Guardian*). After reading *A Little Life*, I felt similarly to Delaney. I had a need to share the book and discuss it with my friends. In fact, many felt similarly to Delaney and myself. The Instagram page ([https://www.instagram.com/alittlelifebook/](https://www.instagram.com/alittlelifebook/)) dedicated to Yanagihara’s novel has over 26,000 followers (as of August 2021) and shares submissions from readers impacted by *A Little Life*. There are multiple pieces of artwork inspired by the novel that are featured on this page. There are traditional pieces such as paintings, pictures, and sketches, but there are also non-traditional tributes to the book such as tattoos, jewelry, and cross-stitchings. In fact, many posts on this page highlight readers who have made a pilgrimage to Lispenard Street, to see the fictional apartment where Jude and Willem lived together. The following *A Little Life* has gained since it was originally published in 2015 is remarkable. Yanagihara’s story demands community and discussion. I believe it to be the ideal novel for a classroom as it inspires excitement and encourages discussion. Unpacking a novel like this in the classroom allows for a reciprocal teaching experience where all parties involved can share and grow together.
How then could a novel like *A Little Life*, which contains much trauma, make its way into the classroom? I am not the first person to pose such a question. The process requires excellent preparation and understanding. I had to research, learn, and answer several questions before I could even begin planning how I would teach it. The next section of my essay will explore the current discourse on and around teaching literature that deals with trauma. I hope to answer three questions: First, what is the goal in teaching literature that deals with trauma? Next, is it ethical to teach this type of literature? Last, how then does one go about teaching it?
The Pedagogy of Trauma

In my research, I found an abundance of information on the pedagogy of trauma. A question frequently posed was: why do you want to teach this novel? Many warned against teaching anything if the goal in doing so was to shock students or elicit strong emotional responses. Spear warns that before bringing an impactful novel which contains sensitive material into a classroom, it is important to identify your motive: “to move past a product-focused pedagogy and consider [purpose]” (54). Why do you want this book to be taught? My goal in teaching a novel like A Little Life is not to shock students or elicit any particular reaction from them. While these may be effects of teaching this novel, my goal is the same goal I have in teaching any literature: I want students to develop critical thinking and reading skills—to become better communicators and writers, but also to become more empathetic people. Literature is transformative, as I argued earlier. A classroom is a place of learning and transformation, and literature gives people the opportunity to shift perspectives, step into the shoes of another. Throughout time, literature has offered an education in empathy. From William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice to Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist, literature can enlighten a reader about a life different from their own.

Likewise, reading the story of Jude St. Francis reveals to readers a life filled with deep trauma and pain. It teaches empathy and a different life perspective. Further, any English classroom allows students the ability to think critically and communicate as scholars. To warn, as Spear does, against product-driven teaching, is not entirely correct. While I do not hope for gasps and emotional outbursts in my classroom, I do hope for my students to be transformed into more empathetic and kinder people by this book—as I am sure any teacher would hope for any of their students. As Rudine Sims Bishop explains, literature can serve as both a window and a mirror--
allowing people to understand themselves and others. David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano support Bishop’s view in their article, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind.” They argue that reading works of fiction increases personal empathy and “expand[s] our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them” (377). Teaching literature that deals with trauma, teaching a novel like *A Little Life*, is to teach a new perspective and to teach empathy.

While teaching empathy and a new perspective is both noble and necessary, one must then ask: is it ethical? A story with such sensitive subject matter has the potential to trigger any reader. Does the harm that could come from reading *A Little Life* outweigh the benefits? Many have questioned teaching literature that deals with trauma for that very reason. Emily Houlik-Ritchey in “Classroom PSA: Values, Law, and Ethics in ‘The Reeve’s Tale,’” questions teaching literature containing rape in a modern classroom: “How do we teach these moments [depictions of rape] ethically to a student body where up to one in five women will experience sexual assault during her college career?” (93). Houlik-Ritchey poses a good question, but then one must ask: how can we teach S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* when students may have lost loved ones to gang violence, or how can we teach John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* when students may know a loved one who died? Literature is a reflection of life. In stories of sadness, pain, and tragedy, readers can also discover “overwhelming beauty, profound truths, and serious reflection on what it means to be human” (Pellegrino). Literature can portray the most beautiful and most devastating stories. True learning can come from fiction: “Fiction prompts its readers to challenge presuppositions, engage with other perspectives, and check the tendency to form quick and simple verdicts” (Kidd and Castano, 522). Scholars and students of literature must be willing
and able to explore both the good (stories of success, love, happiness, etc.) and the bad (stories of pain, violence, trauma, etc.) in literature and learn from it.

Still, the ethics surrounding the teaching of literature that deals with trauma are much debated. Julie Rak in “Do Witness: Don’t: A Woman’s Word and Trauma as Pedagogy” states: “It is not, in my view, ethically responsible to try to push a class into crisis, to risk wounding students in order to teach them something about wounding” (55). I agree with Rak to an extent. Purposely pushing a class into a crisis seems unethical and manipulative. Still, literature that deals with trauma will likely wound. Some of the texts I hope to cover in my proposed course are simply hard to read; however, these same texts also share beautiful moments and valuable lessons. Spear suggests that when teaching such literature, one should not focus on the damage that could be done, but rather the lessons that can be learned when trauma is unpacked in a safe way.

Along with teaching empathy, bringing literature that deals with trauma to a classroom setting, a group setting, can allow for learning and honest, open discussion. Spear’s reason for teaching literature that deals with trauma is just this: “Relationships create a sense of community, empower, and play roles in restoring agency . . . a group can, indeed, aid in restoring and transforming individuals by recognizing and accepting them as well as their stories” (67). My purpose in teaching a novel with trauma would be to create a safe space for my classroom where we could unpack the trauma of Jude St. Francis, and learn about a life that isn’t ours. The process of reading and unpacking literature that deals with trauma as a group can be powerful and transformative.
If then I have a noble goal in teaching literature that deals with trauma and believe it ethical to do so, I still must tackle the largest issue: how to teach this type of literature. There are seemingly endless things to consider in teaching this subject matter. Alison Gulley, author of “Teaching Rape and Meeting the Challenges of the Twenty-First-Century Classroom,” warns teachers that they “don’t teach in a vacuum—our students bring a variety of experiences to the classroom that necessarily colour their reception and understanding of what they read, in both positive and negative ways” (5). Gulley is correct, and what a joy it is to discuss literature with a classroom full of various students with different perspectives and life experiences. Still, handling such sensitive subject matter must be done carefully.

Gulley’s article specifically focuses on teaching literature that contains depictions of rape. While rape is only one of the traumatic subjects that appears in A Little Life, I found Gulley’s work to be helpful and applicable to my argument. She mentions that “[r]ape as a subject of literary study is a fairly new phenomenon, dating back to the rise of feminist theory and scholarship in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s” (4). Despite this, I had little trouble finding an abundance of resources detailing pedagogical strategies for addressing sensitive topics in the classroom. After poring over these sources, I discovered three central themes that I believe are crucial to teaching literature that deals with trauma. A course with such sensitive topics must include trigger warnings, should ideally incorporate trained counselors, and must use the group setting as safe space to unpack the traumatic topics encountered in the classroom.

Beginning with trigger warnings, Houlik-Ritchey provides an excellent model and explanation for providing them when reading sensitive texts. She begins her article by acknowledging the care a teacher must take when approaching texts that contain traumatic events. In her course specifically, she discusses assault in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Reeve’s
Tale.” She warns students of the content in advance both verbally and in her course syllabus and makes a strong case for providing these warnings:

Content warnings, or trigger warnings, are an urgent and controversial pedagogical topic in academia. I sympathize with frustrated instructors who cannot hope to anticipate all student triggers, and I appreciate the seemingly slippery slope from truly traumatic triggering experiences to topics that merely make students uncomfortable or that they dislike. However, I remain firm in my conviction that it is appropriate, as well as pragmatic, to warn students when material comes up that engages prevalent traumatic events that students may have experienced themselves or with regard to people close to them: various forms of abuse, rape, suicide, and combat. I continue to teach material that I know may be triggering for my students, but I warn them when that material is forthcoming.

(97).

It seems simple enough to warn students that an upcoming text may include substance abuse, self-harm, abuse, etc. Still, there are those who disagree with giving trigger warnings.

Mara Lee Grayson in *Race Talk in the Age of the Trigger Warning* gives several reasons as to why she refuses to use trigger warnings in her classroom. Grayson feels that the use of trigger warnings caters to students' feelings at the expense of their education. She also claims that when teachers use trigger warnings, “they send a message that they themselves aren’t comfortable with the materials they intend to introduce” (xix). Grayson offers what she believes to be practical alternatives to using trigger warnings, such as encouraging students to make the classroom a “‘brave’ [space]’ where difficult and potentially harmful material can be learned and
addressed justly and sensitively” (xxiii). Grayson even provides charts to help teachers combat what she terms the “racial illiteracy” of white students (78). While Grayson’s advice is surely genuine, I am tempted to ask: why can’t teachers do both? I think it would be much wiser to use trigger warnings and encourage my students to make my classroom a brave space. A class can still have thoughtful, intelligent discussion and feel confident in a teacher’s ability while incorporating trigger warnings. While Grayson feels it best to separate trigger warnings from her practices, I think it would be much more valuable to combine them.

Grayson is not the only critic of trigger warnings. Rani Neutill recounts her negative experience teaching a course on sex and film where she issued several trigger warnings before each class. In her article, “My Trigger-warning Disaster: ‘9 1/2 Weeks,’ ‘The Wire’ and How Coddled Young Radicals Got Discomfort All Wrong,” she explains that despite the warnings she offered about what they would be covering in class, some students still became upset and angry at the films she chose to show. She also notes that she was not satisfied with the discussions she had with her students, feeling that despite her best efforts, they were missing the mark and did not understand important issues she hoped they would take away from her class.

While I feel sympathy for Neutill, her article alone evidences many reasons why her class was unsuccessful. Firstly, her exasperation seems to have translated to a lack of respect for her students and their views. Neutill attacks her students for both their age and their political views. She begins by making a poor argument in her article, stating: “When a Duke Student [sic] refuses to read a book because it has lesbian sex in it and students who are liberal, who are activists, also refuse to read and watch things because they see it as triggering, we see the collusion of the right and left wing.” Neutill equates distaste with trauma—her first mistake. Asking a student to read a novel with content they find objectionable is vastly different from
asking a student to read a novel which recounts a traumatic, life-altering experience that they might have personally dealt with. In my classroom, I believe that any step I can take to make students more comfortable and to decrease the risk of triggering them is a step worth taking.

While Jones, et al. “found no evidence that trigger warnings were helpful for trauma survivors” in their research, I, like Houlik-Ritchey, find the idea to be pragmatic. It may not be beneficial for the majority, but it could always be beneficial for the one--perhaps, the one student in my class. I believe that it is important to offer them to all students, even those who have not experienced said trauma firsthand. If students are jarred or shocked by surprise content they encounter, the class loses time learning to deal with this shock. Simply warning students that the reading in our next class will contain a depiction of rape or a depiction of self-harm is a small step I can take that has the potential to make a difference for a student approaching the text for the first time.

Still, those such as Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt object to practices such as trigger warnings. In *The Coddling of the American Mind* they argue that teachers should leave anything dealing with trauma to trained professionals. “[W]ell-meaning friends and professors who work together to hide potential reminders of painful experiences, or who repeatedly warn the student about the possible reminders he or she might encounter, could be impeding the person’s recovery” (74). They base their claim on a study conducted at Harvard University by Richard McNally who explains: “Severe emotional reactions triggered by course material are a signal that students need to prioritize their mental health and obtain evidence-based, cognitive-behavioral therapies that will help them overcome P.T.S.D.” I certainly agree with McNally. Any student severely triggered by my course may be unable to take it and should seek a trained therapist for help in dealing with their trauma. Still, I do not think that it is detrimental to offer trigger
warnings to other students. I would not be, as Lukianoff and Haidt claim, “hid[ing] potential reminders--” that is, in fact, quite the opposite of what I hope to achieve in my class. I want to be able to discuss these traumatic topics with students, and I want them to be able to respond in a healthy and productive way, which they cannot do if they are in a state of shock or reliving a traumatic experience.

Dominick LaCapra explains that “Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (41). My job is not to help students overcome or master their P.T.S.D. I am not a licensed professional who is skilled in that area. That work should be left to trained counselors. This is one of the mistakes that Neutill makes -- overconfidence in her abilities. Her volunteer work with sexual assault survivors and her relationship with a close friend who was sexually assaulted no doubt enhance her knowledge about this traumatic event. Those experiences, however, do not make her a professional counselor. Our job as teachers is to explore texts as literary critics. And though part of my purpose in exploring traumatic subjects as a literary critic is to help my students grow in empathy, my purpose is not to heal their own trauma. There are trained professionals who can do this--which leads to my second step in teaching a course on literature that deals with trauma: incorporating professional counselors into the classroom.

While I, like Neutill, believe I have experiences and connections that will benefit me in teaching a course with traumatic subjects, I acknowledge that I am not a professional counselor. When reading a novel like *A Little Life*, there are several possible scenarios that I am not equipped to handle. In her article, Spear spends much time detailing the steps she takes to teach a course with such sensitive subject matter. She invited speakers from the University Counseling
Center to attend classes when more difficult subjects were discussed. I plan to do the same in my course. Ideally, it would be wonderful to have a counselor attend every class that I teach. Sadly, I know this is not a realistic expectation. My hope then would be to have a counselor come to a class at the height of the novel’s first one or two traumatic events. I would invite this counselor to participate in discussion, answer questions, and serve as another resource to students. While they may be able to attend only one class, introducing them early on and inviting them to sit and talk with my students can help form a connection. After they have left the class, that person would still be a resource to them through the University Counseling Center. Students would have a familiar face, who was familiar with the course, in whom to confide.

Thirdly, it is imperative that when teaching a course with such traumatic topics, the group setting is used as a safe space to unpack the traumatic topics encountered in the classroom. Peter and Maureen Goggin point out: “One key issue to recognize is that the classroom is not a safe place. This is not to say that a classroom is not relatively secure for most students, but rather to say that the classroom is not hermetically sealed off from the world in which it is situated” (39). Of course, there are a variety of reasons that no classroom can be a perfectly safe place. My goal as a teacher is to make it as safe as I am able to.

Like Spear, I hope to make my classroom a safer space by promoting a culture of kindness and empathy: “It is vital to teach trauma narratives with compassion while encouraging classroom participants to practice such. This may be done with verbal affirmations, positive encouragements, and nurturing spirits, as well as through building a respectful classroom community based on love and even empathy” (73). I will have my students assist me in creating appropriate guidelines for our class, a community code under which we all agree to operate within the classroom. This set of rules will hopefully build a sense of trust in the classroom.
It is imperative that students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas with each other in the classroom. Much research has been conducted on the benefits of unpacking literature that deals with trauma as a group. Reading trauma in the classroom setting serves to bond students. Shoshana Felman in her “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” explains that after her class viewed traumatic videos of testimonies from Holocaust survivors, they were greatly impacted and felt set apart from their peers who had not shared the experience of viewing these testimonies. She further explains that her colleagues came to her saying that even in their classes, students would bring up ideas and retell stories from her (Felman’s) class.

Unpacking literature that deals with traumatic events gives students the same opportunity to connect and bond over what they have read and experienced together. To fully understand and respond to literature that deals with trauma in a healthy way, students must bear witness to the atrocities they are reading. Dori Laub, in her book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, explains:

[T]he listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (57-58)

A class will experience trauma together--unpacking, discussing, and learning from it together. While I imagine this class would be relatively small (around 15 students), at times, I would also break it (the class) into smaller groups, of three students, to allow for even more intimate
discussion. Giving students the opportunity to share with both a small group of students and the larger class provides them with another outlet to explore trauma as a community.

Despite having access to a counselor, offering trigger warnings, and building a classroom community to unpack these difficult pieces of literature, there is still potential for a student to be so affected by a traumatic novel that they feel unable to continue reading it. Houlik-Ritchey explains that she has alternative readings and assignments ready for students who are uncomfortable with the selected text. While I agree this step could be taken in other literature classes relatively easily, I do not think it would be possible to offer alternative readings in this class since *A Little Life* is the focal reading for this course. If a student were to have a problem with this text specifically, they would be unable to participate in the majority of the class discussions. There are various steps I will take prior to the start of this course to ensure that students are fully aware of the types of material we will be reading (these steps are detailed in length in my syllabus explanation). Still, if a student found themselves unable to continue with the course, they could choose to withdraw. I would like to teach my course on Literature and Trauma in a Term A (half-semester) format so that if any students needed to drop the course, they could take a different course on a different topic in the second half of the semester. This way, any students in a predicament where they need a certain number of classes for the semester, or who may be close to graduating, would not be affected as greatly by their decision to drop my course.

I am hopeful that by including trigger warnings, incorporating trained counselors, and using groups as safe space to unpack the traumatic topics encountered in the classroom, I can create a class that responds to literature that deals with trauma in both a healthy and scholarly way. These central themes were present in several scholarly articles on teaching trauma, so I
have even greater confidence that they can contribute to a successful class as many of them have already produced positive results in the classroom.
CHAPTER 2

TEACHING A LITTLE LIFE

Course Syllabus

A Survey of Literature and Trauma

Spring 2022

ENGL 5000

Tuesday & Thursday from 9:05 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.

January 10th through March 1st

Purpose: This course will encounter literature that deals with traumatic experiences and their aftermath. Students will explore theoretical approaches to the representation of trauma in literature. Their critical thinking and writing skills will be enhanced through analyzing these literary texts. The topics covered in this class are painful and difficult, but we will explore them as a supportive community. Impacted by these stories, we will grow in understanding and empathy.

Learning Outcomes: Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Analyze plot, character development, literary devices, and thematic elements and demonstrate that analytical ability in assessments and discussions.
2. Situate and interpret texts in their historical, cultural, and literary contexts.
3. Write clearly and coherently about both primary and secondary critical works.
4. Understand and appreciate the relationship between literature and other humanistic disciplines.
5. Understand the significance of literature that deals with trauma by engaging in respectful discourse, showing empathy and kindness.

Expectations:

Important Dates:

Drop / Add Week: January 10th through January 13th

Last Day to Withdraw Without Academic Penalty: February 7th

Attendance Policy: Students are expected to attend all classes. If a student misses more than two classes, their final grade will be dropped 2 points for every subsequent absence.

Assignments & Grading Scale: All assignments should be typed in 12-point Times New Roman font and double-spaced. All assignments should follow the guidelines of the MLA Handbook (9th Edition).

Content Quizzes: 10%
There will be quizzes at the beginning of each week to serve as proof that you are keeping up with your reading. Students who are absent from class will not be allowed to make up missed quizzes. The lowest quiz grade for the course will be dropped.

Participation: 10%

Regular attendance is required to do well in this course. Students should come to class having carefully read any assigned material; students should be ready to ask questions and thoughtfully participate in class discussion.

Weekly Responses: 35%

Students will compose 500-word responses comparing and / or contrasting the current section of *A Little Life* and the other assigned readings for that week. These responses will be due each Thursday. Students may also engage with concepts from assigned secondary readings for that week. Weekly responses will drop a letter grade for every day they are late. Weekly responses will not be accepted after they are three or more days late.

Final Essay Proposal: 10%

Your proposal should be 2 to 3 pages in length. It should name which work(s) you plan to write about and explain your augment and / or thesis. Your proposal should also include two secondary sources that could be used in your Final Essay with an explanation of how they could be used.

Final Essay: 35%

Your final essay should be at least 12 pages in length not including your Works Cited page. Your essay should have a clear thesis statement, strong supporting evidence, and at least five secondary sources. It should be well-organized, properly formatted, and free of grammatical and mechanical errors.

**Required Texts:**

*A Little Life*, Hanya Yanagihara

**Provided Texts:**

Selections from *Beloved*, Toni Morrison

“Gretel in Darkness,” Louise Glück

Selections from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou

Selections from *Night*, Elie Wiesel

**Schedule:**

Homework: “Ways of Reading Trauma in Literary Narratives,” Laurie Vickroy (pp. 1-32)

Thurs. Jan. 13th: Article Discussion

Homework: A Little Life Section One: Lispenard Street (pp. 5-93)

**TW: Self-Harm**

Tues. Jan. 18th: Quiz #1

Homework: Selections from I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (pp. 57-77)

**TW: Death, Pedophilia, Rape, Violence**

Thurs. Jan. 20th: Response #1 Due

Homework: A Little Life Section Two: The Postman (pp. 97-240)

**TW: Death, Self-Harm, Violence**

Tues. Jan. 25th: Quiz #2

Homework: “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” Dori Laub (pp. 57-74)

Thurs. Jan. 27th: Response #2 Due

Homework: A Little Life Section Three: Vanities (pp. 241-320)

**TW: Abuse, Self-Harm**

Tues. Feb. 1st: Quiz #3, Final Essay Proposal Due

Homework: Legacy of Night “Introduction,” Ellen S. Fine (pp. 1-9) & Selections from Night (pp. 54-65)

**TW: Death, Rape, Violence**

Thurs. Feb. 3rd: Response #3 Due

Homework: A Little Life Section Four: The Axiom of Equality (pp. 322-480)

**TW: Abuse, Death, Pedophilia, Prostitution, Rape, Self-Harm, Suicide, Violence**

Tues. Feb. 8th: Quiz #4

Homework: Trauma: Explorations in Memory, Cathy Caruth (pp. 151-157).

Thurs. Feb. 10th: Response #4 Due

Homework: A Little Life Section Five: The Happy Years (pp. 483-608)
TW: Self-Harm, Violence

Tues. Feb. 15th: Quiz #5
  Homework: Selections from *Beloved* (pp.174-178 & 236-247)

TW: Death, Violence

Thurs. Feb. 17th: Response #5 Due
  Homework: *A Little Life* Section Five: The Happy Years (pp. 608-712)

TW: Death, Pedophilia, Prostitution, Rape, Suicide, Violence

Tues. Feb. 22: Quiz #6
  Peer Editing Workshop

Thurs: Feb. 24: Response #6 Due
  Homework: *A Little Life* Sections Six & Seven: Dear Comrade & Lispenard Street (pp. 715-816)

TW: Abuse, Death, Suicide

Tues. March 1: Last Day of Class

Thurs: March 3: Final Paper Due

This syllabus is subject to change.
Explanation of Syllabus

My syllabus is composed as if I would be teaching this class next semester at my school, Georgia Southern University. This class would only take half of a semester to complete—a mini-semester or a quarter class. In total, the course is six weeks long with the seventh week serving as a final examination week. I begin immediately by establishing the purpose of my class. I hope that through reading these difficult and traumatic pieces of literature, we can grow together as a class. In addition to growing students’ empathy and understanding of those around them, I hope that they will gain practical skills that they would in any college-level literature classroom. I want students to gain a better understanding of literary theory while also developing their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. Each of these skills would serve any student well in their future professional or academic careers.

I follow my purpose statement with my learning outcomes, my goals for the class. Several of these goals were adapted from several syllabi I received in my undergraduate degree at Georgia Southern University. The first three are fairly standard for a literature class; students taking classes at this level should be able to analyze, interpret, discuss, and write about literature in a clear and thoughtful way. The other two outcomes are focused more specifically on my course. These final two outcomes are geared towards students' understanding of how the content and ideas we discuss in class affect their world outside of class. With such sensitive subject matter, it is important that students communicate with each other respectfully, choosing their words thoughtfully. I have left the Expectations portion of my syllabus purposefully blank as a first day of class activity, which will be detailed later, is having my students assist me in creating a list of rules and expectations for our class.
Next, I will review important dates in the semester followed by my attendance policy. As I am modeling this course as if it would be taught at my school next semester, I discovered that Georgia Southern University allows professors to set their own attendance policies. My attendance policy was modeled on multiple attendance policies from classes in my undergraduate career at Georgia Southern University. As this course is abbreviated, missing even one class is missing a large portion of the course. If a student misses more than two classes, they are missing over ten percent of the course. For this reason, I would take points off the final average a student receives in my class for any absence after the second.

Next, I will review the Assignments & Grading Scale. Throughout the semester, students will be given brief, short answer content quizzes as motivation to keep up with their reading. These quizzes will be a maximum of five questions. Students will take six of these quizzes during the course, and their lowest quiz grade will be dropped. The other five quizzes will be worth 10% of their final grade. These quizzes are straightforward and not easily answered by reading plot summaries online, but the questions should be memorable for students who have done the reading. An example of Quiz #1 appears in the Appendices.

Students will also have short responses due throughout the course; students will be instructed to write 500-word short responses about the section of *A Little Life* and the additional reading and / or critical article that was assigned that week. This is an assignment where students can compare and / or contrast the texts in any way they find interesting. It is meant to be a creative assignment that inspires a larger idea for the final essay that students will be required to write at the end of the course. These short responses will be worth 35% of their final grade.
Midway through the course, students will submit a proposal for their final essay. They can write on one or more of the works we will cover in the course. Though their essay proposal is short in length, they must also provide at least two secondary sources that could be included in their essay with an explanation as to how those sources could be used. I will review their essay proposals and return them with feedback, questions, suggestions, and the offer to meet with me and discuss their papers, if they choose to do so. This proposal will be worth 10% of their final grade.

Students should have nearly completed a draft of their final essay before the last week of class. We will use that Tuesday, February 22nd, to have a peer editing workshop. Students will be paired in groups of two or three and take time reading each other's essays. The Appendix provides an example of a peer editing worksheet students will use. This activity was adapted from a peer editing worksheet used in my graduate degree at Georgia Southern University. The original assignment was created by Dr. Joe Pellegrino. I plan for this activity to take half of class, leaving the other half to review the assigned reading for the day.

At the end of this course, students will submit a final essay that is worth 35% of their grade. Their essays should be well organized, well argued, and written on a level indicative of a student in an upper-level, collegiate English class. I am requiring a minimum of 12 pages and five secondary sources. During the course, the class will read secondary sources which discuss critical approaches to trauma theory; these sources are detailed below. Their final paper should be informed by at least one of these secondary sources.

From here, I will review our reading list. For this class, the only book I am asking students to purchase is *A Little Life*. As I do not plan on reading any other book in its entirety, I
can provide scanned copies of selections from the other pieces we will read. I divided *A Little Life* into six sections for this course and will supplement those sections with shorter pieces of literature that deal with trauma, as well as scholarly articles. I will briefly review the other pieces of literature the first day of class but will give students more background information on them as we approach each one throughout the semester. We will be reading selections from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1960). Two of these stories were assigned to me in a high school or college class. If given any warning about the traumatic content of these pieces, it was quick and understated. I have taken a different approach with my syllabus by adding Trigger Warnings, “TW,” in writing under each reading. In giving them background information on these pieces, I will also provide them with verbal warnings of the content they will be required to read.

The first scholarly article that students will encounter is Laurie Vickroy’s “Ways of Reading Trauma Narratives.” This article is a phenomenal resource that my class will use all semester. Vickroy excellently covers some of the most popular narrative techniques used by writers of what she terms trauma fiction. In particular, she addresses the fragmented narrative strategy which slowly introduces readers to moments of trauma or moments of background information in literature. This will be helpful in our discussion of *A Little Life* as the backstory of Jude is fragmented throughout the novel. Likewise, details from his friend’s lives before college appear as quick fragments in the larger novel. In comparison, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is told chronologically. This autobiographical novel details the early life of acclaimed poet Maya Angelou. Specifically, they will read about Angelou, at age eight, being raped by her mother’s boyfriend. Angelou remains mute for some time after that incident. My class will discuss the different effects these two narrative strategies have on each of the novels.
Vickroy also goes into detail about the effect first-person narration has on literature that deals with trauma. *A Little Life* is told from various perspectives. Most of the time, third-person narration is used, but certain sections of *A Little Life* are told from the perspective of Jude’s adopted father, Harold. In light of Vickroy’s essay, this choice to give a somewhat peripheral character the only first-person narrative in the book should inspire much conversation. I also want my class to compare the narration styles used in *A Little Life* with those used in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which makes use of first-person narration. While we will use this article primarily in our discussion of *A Little Life* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it is an excellent reference that students could continue to use for the other literature we will encounter later in the semester.

To continue exploring *A Little Life* as well as Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, we will read two more critical articles. Wiesel’s *Night* is another autobiographical novel which tells the story of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel’s time as a prisoner in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. The articles that we will supplement these readings with are Dori Laub’s “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” and the Introduction of Ellen S. Fine’s *Legacy of Night*. Laub’s article gives a detailed overview of the role of a witness to trauma. She begins by explaining how we as readers serve as witnesses to trauma we read. She elaborates that even those to whom the trauma directly happened are witnesses as well. She specifically focuses on witnessing and testimonies from the Holocaust which tie in well with *Night*. Most interestingly to me was Laub’s discussion of the “second Holocaust” (65) or return of trauma that some survivors may face. One major traumatic loss does not protect anyone from experiencing another painful, traumatic loss. This is the case for many survivors whom Laub worked with and is also true for Jude in *A Little Life*. 
In my research, I also came across Ellen S. Fine’s *Legacy of Night* which had an insightful and fitting introduction which I believe my students should read before encountering Wiesel’s novel. Fine elaborates more on the idea of witnessing that Laub explains in her article and expands on the importance of storytelling in literature that deals with trauma. Fine focuses on the survivors’ “imperative to testify” (1) while also acknowledging the “the urge to cry out and the need to remain silent” (9). This struggle is present throughout *Night* and *A Little Life*. Fine details the ways this struggle is seen in *Night*, and as we read through *A Little Life*, my students will see the way storytelling and the need to witness frequently makes its way into the novel in spite of its reserved protagonist. From Jude sharing stories with Harold: “Did I ever tell you about the time we jumped off the roof to the fire escape outside our bedroom” (810) to JB’s painting “Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story” (804) to Willem begging Jude to open up to him: “I hope you’ll tell me anyway, I really do. Whatever it is; whatever it is” (606). Storytelling and the need to witness are common motifs in literature that deals with trauma, and they make their way into both novels.

The final critical article that students will read for my class is a short, introductory piece by Cathy Caruth from *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Caruth begins this article discussing the idea of owning one’s trauma. For many who have suffered a traumatic event, it can feel as though this harsh piece of their history “has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, not in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (153). For this reason, survivors of trauma suffer from various forms of P. T. S. D. such as flashbacks which can express themselves in “intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images” (152). This article will pair with the final sections of *A Little Life* as well as with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *Beloved* is a complex novel, so to ensure that students have a good

understanding of the novel, they will read several sections that share both plot as well as the idea of memory and repetition. Firstly, students will read the chapter where Sethe kills Beloved. Then, they will read the stream of consciousness monologues from Sethe and Denver about the impact Beloved has had on them.

Students can examine the different ways flashbacks affect both Sethe (among other characters from Beloved) as well as Jude from A Little Life. Jude, for example, seems to suffer from intrusive memories. His story is told in short pieces where readers are slowly introduced to the traumas that shaped his life. Beloved uses this tool too, but Morrison’s novel also uses the idea of repetition. In Sethe’s monologue, she repeats the story of her life--from her time as a slave to when she killed Beloved. She repeats phrases as well: “I got close. I got close” (241). Denver’s monologue is full of repetition as well--she shares her fears of living in 124 and constantly repeats the idea of how much better her life will be when her father returns. Sethe and Denver even repeat each other in these monologues by referring to Beloved as “mine” (236,247). Repetition and intruding memories are some of the ways that Yanagihara and Morrison illustrate the trauma of characters in their novels.

In addition to these works and, of course, A Little Life, students will read Louise Glück’s poem “Gretel in Darkness” (1975) which details the ramifications of trauma that Gretel feels after she kills the witch who tried to eat her and her brother, Hansel. As I explain later, this poem is an excellent resource as it serves to open the dialogue on trauma and its effects on the first day of class. Each of the secondary sources the class will read offers a unique and traumatic story. While I have already detailed some of the critical connections that students can make above, I am sure that students will discover even more in their writing; it excites me to think of the endless possibilities that they could bring to the table.
I conclude my syllabus with the disclaimer that this syllabus is a plan--that it could change. Finally, it would be remiss if I failed to mention the many things that are not in my syllabus. As I reviewed several old syllabi from my undergraduate career, I noticed that many professors included policies on plagiarism, disability accommodations, campus resources. These policies are standard at Georgia Southern University, so I would add them verbatim to my syllabus for students to review.
Lesson Plans

Tues. Jan. 11th

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:05-9:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>Students should share their name, year in school, pronouns, and what they hope to gain from this course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-10:15 a.m.</td>
<td>Course Explanation, Syllabus, &amp; Questions</td>
<td>I will reiterate the nature of the course material. I will review the syllabus and take questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15-10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>As this class is almost three hours, I will give students a fifteen-minute break during each class period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-11:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Reading &amp; Course Expectations</td>
<td>As a class, we will read and discuss Louise Glück’s poem “Gretel in Darkness.” Students will help me compose a list of trigger warnings for the class. I will direct students to the “Course Expectations” section, and we will create our own ground rules for the classroom. I will have a list of rules that must be included, but I will only add these if the students do not suggest them themselves.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Learning Outcomes: LO1, LO5

Materials / Resources:
1. Printed Copies of Syllabus
2. Printed Copies of Louise Glück’s poem “Gretel in Darkness”

Assessment: N/A

Homework: “Ways of Reading Trauma in Literary Narratives,” Laurie Vickory (pp. 1-32)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:05-9:15 a.m.</td>
<td>Quiz #3</td>
<td>Students will take a brief, short answer content quiz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:15-10:15 a.m.</td>
<td>Review Quiz &amp; General Discussion</td>
<td>We will review the quiz as a class and read some selections together: (pp. 282-285, 289-294, 299-305, 306-313).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15-10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>As this class is almost three hours, I will give students a fifteen-minute break during each class period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-10:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Writing Warm-Up</td>
<td>Students will use a provided prompt or free write about today’s reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45-11:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Pair &amp; Share</td>
<td>Students will find a partner in class with whom to share their writing exercise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-11:40 a.m.</td>
<td>Review Writing Warm-Up &amp; General Discussion</td>
<td>We will review students’ writing exercises as well as any Pair &amp; Share commentary. We will use these ideas to further our discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:40-11:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Collect Final Essay Proposal</td>
<td>Students will submit their proposals for their Final Essay.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Learning Outcomes:**
- LO1, LO2, LO3, LO4, & LO5

**Materials / Resources:**
- Printed Copies of Quiz 3

**Assessment:**
- Quiz #3

**Homework:**
- *Legacy of Night* “Introduction,” Ellen S. Fine (pp. 1-9) & Selections from *Night* (pp. 54-65)
Explanation of Lesson Plans

Above, I have outlined what I hope to do on both the first day of class as well on February 1st, a later, more typical day in the semester. I have not made a lesson plan for every day in the semester, but I wanted to provide some detail on what a few specific classes could look like. In all of my classes, we will be discussing the specific literary elements that are present in trauma narratives. Specifically, we will look at: the split or fragmented narrative, narrative choice, visceral detailing. Each of these literary elements is detailed in Laurie Vickroy’s “Ways of Reading Trauma Narratives” which students will be given for homework after the first night of class. It will be foundational to our discussions for the rest of the class. While I discuss how the split / fragmented narrative and narrative choice play a role in specific classes below, visceral detailing will not make its way into our class discussions until later in the half-semester. Vickory explains that many authors of trauma narratives incorporate “visceral details of living through traumatic experiences as a way of immersing readers in the character’s states of mind” (3).

Yanagihara certainly does this in *A Little Life*. There are horrid recollections from Jude’s past and even his present is described in harsh detail. One scene that is particularly memorable to me is when Willem finds Jude cutting himself and he (Willem) cuts on his own chest.

And then Willem stood and, without preamble or warning, sliced the razor across his own chest.

He snapped alive, then. “No!” he shouted, and tried to get up, but he didn’t have the strength, and he fell back. “Willem, no!”

“Fuck!” Willem yelled. “Fuck!” But he made a second cut anyway, right under the first. (558)
Willem continues slicing his chest and warns Jude “This isn’t some fucked-up ritual we’re going to share, you know: bandaging each other’s self-inflicted cuts” (558). Yanagihara uses vivid details and does not allow trauma to happen behind the scenes in her novel. This is one of many examples of visceral detailing. These dark and horrid depictions haunt readers. In fact, in my own reading of the novel, Jude’s constant abuse from men made me fearful of the adoptive father Harold’s interest in Jude. Yanagihara’s visceral detailing allows readers to step into the mind of Jude and feel his fears and anxiety. This is just one of the literary elements of trauma fiction used by Yanagihara. The split narrative is addressed in my first class’s lesson plan, and narrative choice in the other.

I have specifically provided a lesson plan for the first day of class. While the first day of class is typically used to set expectations and explain the material the course will cover, I hope that before the first day, students will already be well prepared for my class. Since the subject matter of my class is so serious, I plan to hold an Information Night the semester prior to this class where I encourage students to come, learn about the types of works we will be reading, and share their questions and concerns. Further, over Winter Break, I would email the students registered for my class and again stress the content of my course while allowing them to address any questions and concerns with me. While I am optimistic that by the first day of class, each of my students will be well prepared, there will inevitably be some students that are not prepared. The first day of class then will be a third and final attempt to explain to students the kind of content we will be reviewing in the course.

After reviewing my syllabus and issuing warnings about the content of this course, it is quite important to me to begin building on the idea and ramifications of trauma. I want my students to immediately begin discussing and growing their understanding of trauma. I have
chosen to read and discuss Louise Glück’s poem “Gretel in Darkness.” This poem is written from the perspective of Gretel, from the story “Hansel and Gretel” from *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. This story is one I assume most of my students will be familiar with, and if not, an easy enough story to explain: Hansel and Gretel, purposely lost in the woods by their parents, stumble upon a house made of gingerbread and other sweet pastries. The witch who owns the house takes the two children in and feeds them well, hoping to fatten them up before she eats them herself. Gretel kills the witch by pushing her into her own oven, allowing her (Gretel) and her brother to escape. Glück’s poem details the trauma that Gretel must live with after this horrific incident. “Why do I not forget?” (10) Gretel wonders. While it seems the rest of the world has moved on and forgotten about the near-death experience she and her brother suffered, she remembers.

I am optimistic that this poem can generate a good discussion from students about trauma and its effects. Here we can discuss literary strategies such as the fragmented or split narrative. Stanza One of Glück’s poem begins from a place of safety: “the world we wanted” (1). Though she is safe, Gretel’s narrative splits and she recalls the witch’s cry and her shriveling tongue. In Stanza Two, she is back in the safety of her father’s hut, but by Stanza Three she sees “that gleaming kiln” (18). The splits in Gretel’s narrative are obvious. In addition to the fragmented narrative, the class can discuss the idea of a first-person narrator. Glück’s poem is narrated by Gretel, but what would it look like from a different, outside perspective? How would that change the poem? What would the narration look like if Hansel was the narrator, or their father, or the witch? This discussion will introduce students to some of the concepts in Laurie Vickroy’s “Ways of Reading Trauma in Literary Narratives” which students will be reading for their homework that night.
When we have discussed the poem sufficiently, or as much as time will allow, I will segue into the idea of trigger warnings. Relating to Glück’s poem, I can explain that though both Hansel and Gretel were present the day the witch was killed, that day affected the two differently. This same sentiment will be true in the course I plan to teach. Spear notes that no two people will experience and react to trauma in the same way. For that reason, I have composed a list of possible triggers that will come up in the stories we read in this course. While I already have a list that they can see in the syllabus, I am aware that there are some trigger warnings I could have missed. I will ask the students to assist me in building a list of trigger warnings. Still, before I do that I will take some more time to remind students of the expectations I have for our class as a community. We must bear in mind that just because something does not trigger us, does not mean it may not trigger someone else. I will encourage students to choose every word thoughtfully and, when in doubt if something might be offensive, refrain from saying it. Students can, of course, connect with me before / after class, during office hours to share those thoughts, but should not share something that could possibly hurt another student in the class. I am hopeful that by the time students are in an upper level English class, these rules will be easy to understand and put into practice.

While I want to create a safe environment in my classroom, I know, as Rak states, “[C]lassrooms can never be safe since conditions of power and privilege operate in them, just as they operate in the rest of the world,” (55). As a teacher, all I can do is try to make my classroom the safest space it can be. Concerning trigger warnings specifically, I know that my own life experiences and privileges may shield me from topics that are much more impactful on my students. For this reason, I want their help in creating a list of trigger warnings. This activity will need to be done carefully, placing emphasis on deciding whether a topic is uncomfortable or
truly traumatic--always, of course, airing on the side of care and assuming it could be traumatic. For example, reading about the car accident in *A Little Life* that kills Willem, Malcom, and Sophie is heartbreaking, but for me personally, heartbreaking is all that it is. As I have never personally experienced losing someone in my life in a car accident, this event is not triggering for me. If a student in my classroom has lost someone in this way or has been in a bad car accident themselves, this could be a triggering part of the novel for them to read. While I hope students will open up and share triggers with the class, I am aware that some may not be as open to sharing as others. I will also have options to submit triggers to me anonymously, so that I can be aware of them during the semester. My hope in adding these trigger warnings is that with them, students to be able to respond to the text in an articulate and thoughtful way--not be derailed by painful, traumatic topics. After we have created our list as group, I plan to give students an updated copy of the syllabus, including all trigger warnings, on our second-class meeting.

Lastly, students will assist me in creating our classroom “Expectations,” which is left purposely blank on the syllabus. Together, we will create guidelines for our class, a community code under which we all agree to operate within the classroom. While I want students to take charge of this activity, there are certain rules that, I believe, need to be included in our Community Code. I have listed the rules I think necessary below:

1. Treat contributions made by other members of the class with respect.
2. Keep an open mind. Remember that you are here to be challenged.
3. Respect the diverse opinions and viewpoints of each member of our community.

Differences allow us to learn and grow together; however, remember that
respecting “diverse opinions” does not mean we will tolerate abuse, harassment, or belittling against any members of our community.

4. Contribute regularly to class activities. The contributions of each individual play a role in the collective strength and diversity of our class community.

5. Our class community is restricted to enrolled members of our class in an effort to maintain a safe, trustworthy discussion environment. Please do not share information about other members beyond this class.¹

If students propose these rules organically in our discussion, there will be no need for me to share mine. Any that are not proposed, I will add at the end of our discussion. These rules will also be added to the updated copy of the syllabus that students will receive on our second-class meeting.

In addition to the first day of class, I have also created a lesson plan for a typical day of class. I have picked February 1st. First, students will take a brief, short answer content quiz over the reading assigned to them during the previous class. After they have turned in their quizzes, we will review the answers as a class. These quizzes serve a twofold purpose: first, they prove that the students did the reading that was assigned to them. The purpose of these quizzes is not to trick students or make sure that they studied the material in detail--simply that they completed the reading. I will advise students on all quizzes to, if they do not know the exact answer, share some information that they do remember regarding the question. They may be able to receive partial credit this way. In addition to proving that they read, these quizzes will provide us, as a class, with selections to read and discuss. I, of course, will not be solely responsible for choosing

¹ These ground rules were borrowed and / or adapted from a blog post by Michelle Pacansky-Brock.
what we discuss in class, but these quizzes allow me to direct students to important parts in the reading. I will also ask that for every class session, students have at least two discussion questions prepared in the event that we, as a class, are needing topics to discuss. This will ensure that the discussion is flowing throughout our time together. Some potential quiz questions that could inspire a larger discussion are below:

1. Much to Phillipa’s surprise, Willem asserts that in the future, their family of twelve will need a dining table that sits thirteen people. For what reason do they need this extra seat?
   
   Answer: Willem assumes that Jude will be living with them.

2. Malcolm and Jude have many different ideas about how Jude’s Greene Street apartment should be modeled. This idea in particular appalls Jude, though it is noted that “years later, he will be grateful that Malcolm has prepared for his future” (291):
   
   Answer: Malcolm has designed Jude’s apartment to be ADA compliant making sure rooms are oversized so a wheelchair can move through, that there is a bench seat in the bathtub, there are grab bars around the toilet, etc.

3. This character decided that “success made people boring” (302):
   
   Answer: JB

When reviewing the answers to the quiz questions, the class can also start discussing the parts of the novel that these came from. For Question One, we would read pages 282-285 and discuss the co-dependency that Willem and Jude share in their friendship. For Question Two, we would read pages 289-294 to read about Jude’s attitude toward his own disability and his disagreement with Malcolm in designing his apartment to accommodate his current and future disabilities. For
Question Three, we would read pages 299-305 which enlighten readers to JB’s unhappiness with his life. I would also supplement this part with reading pages 306-313 which elaborate how JB fell into his addiction and his toxic relationship with Jackson. These last two sections enlighten readers about JB’s relationship with Jude. Each of these sections has to do with Jude’s relationship with his three best friends, and, I believe, could lead to interesting discussion about how trauma affects those to whom we are closest.

After our break, students will return to class for a writing warm-up. These activities are not graded, but serve to energize and engage students. Some possible discussion topics for this section are:

1. Dori Laub suggests two reasons for the silence of a trauma survivor: fear of being listened to and fear of listening to themselves. Which of these reasons applies most often to Jude? Find an example from the novel to support your opinion.

2. Laurie Vickroy in “Ways of Reading Trauma in Literary Narratives” asserts that survivors of trauma live with “a tainted and diminished sense of self, and a feeling of alienation from others” (6). Is this assessment relevant to Jude? How? Find an example from the novel to support your opinion.

While I will provide one or two ideas about which the students can write, I want to give them the ability to write on anything that I might interest them. As Rak does in her classroom, I would encourage students to “write about any aspect of the text for the day or they could discuss any of the accompanying readings in their responses” (65-66). Before we began reviewing these questions as a class, I would invite students to Pair & Share, an exercise where they find a
partner in class and share their writing with each other. This activity ensures that everyone has
the chance to share their ideas—even if it is not with the entire class. Thanks to the Pair & Share,
those who do want to share with the entire class will have the opportunity to practice their
response and get feedback from someone else before they share their thoughts with the entire
class.

For the remainder of the class period, I would lead the class in a guided lecture. We
would review the questions I posed as well as discuss some of the literary aspects of *A Little Life.*
We could discuss why Yanagihara bounces from character to character (Willem, Malcolm, JB)
elaborating on Jude’s connection to each one as opposed to having Jude narrate these events
himself. This is another of the literary elements that Vickory emphasizes: narrative choice is
crucial to how we encounter trauma narratives. Whether a story is told from the first, second, or
third-person perspective impacts the way that we as readers receive and understand their trauma,
and Vickroy claims that “[f]irst-person narration provides the deepest sense of felt life in fiction”
(23). This claim might lead students to ask: Why then is Harold the only person in the novel who
uses first-person narration? Yanagihara’s narration choices will be an interesting discussion point
in many sections of the novel—not just this one.

In addition to unique narrative choices, “Vanities” also contains the flashback, or split
narrative. When Jude helps Malcolm pick out a suit, he (Jude) flashes back to Father Gabriel
telling him, “You’ll always be ugly, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be neat” (267). Jude feels
that a suit allows him to look somewhat normal and neat. Here we see a narrative that shifts back
and forth between the past and present: Jude is simultaneously with Malcolm picking out a suit
and hearing Father Gabriel’s words. While these are just a few of the literary elements that
students could pick out in “Vanities,” I think they are both good ideas to encourage discussion and writing during class.

Along with the three specific literary elements provided by Vickroy’s article, there are other literary elements / choices made in A Little Life that could inspire engaging discussion in the classroom. For example, extreme characterization is rife throughout the novel. It seems that a multitude of characters in A Little Life are either unbelievably good or disturbingly bad. Jude encounters several extremely bad characters: Brother Luke who molests, kidnaps, and prostitutes him, Doctor Traylor who physically and sexually abuses him, and Caleb who also physically and sexually abuses him. On the other hand, Jude is also surrounded by characters of extreme goodness: Willem who relentlessly loves and devotes himself to Jude, Andy who freely gives his time and his medical skill whenever Jude is in need, and Harold, who mentors, loves, and becomes a father to Jude. Why does Yanagihara fill her novel with the extreme best and extreme worst characters? Another question that might be posed to my class concerns the chronology and setting in A Little Life. The time period in which the novel is set is vague. There are references to cell phones which likely makes the story set after the 1990s. In contradiction to this, one must ask could a child, such as Jude, be legally “adopted” by a monastery at any time post-1990? This makes the novel seem that it must be set much earlier. In contrast with the lack of an obvious time period in the novel, there are specific places mentioned in the novel: Lispenard Street, Greene Street. Why is Yanagihara so specific about places and so vague about time?

Withholding the time period certainly makes it seem as if the events of the novel could be happening currently; it makes it even easier to step into the shoes of the characters one is reading about. This is yet another interesting discussion that could be had about Yanagihara’s literary choices.
My class is based heavily in discussion and writing; I believe, as Peter and Maureen Goggin state, that “trauma can only be tackled/approached/grappled with discursively; it is not until it is spoken/written that trauma is made present” (31). The exercises that we do in class will truly help unpack and understand the texts we read. These activities ensure that, as a class, we can “move beyond the theme of trauma and embrace links among teaching, writing, trauma, and healing” (Spear, 59). I would conclude this class by assigning their homework for the next class and collecting their final essay proposals.

Bishop explains the importance for children and young adults to see people like them (in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) reflected in literature. Bishop believes that seeing different types of people represented in literature can help readers better understand themselves and others.


Caruth’s work is foundational in literary trauma studies. Her collection of articles explores different facets of trauma including the imperative to testify, the lifelong impact of trauma, how trauma affects a community, among many other ideas. For the purpose of my research, I used her “Introduction” to Part II of the book titled “Recapturing the Past.” Here Caruth discusses the idea of owning one’s trauma. For many who have suffered a traumatic event, it can feel as though this harsh piece of their history fits nowhere in their life. For this reason, survivors of trauma suffer from various forms of P. T. S. D. such as intrusive memories and repetitive images.


Caruth’s work is foundational in literary trauma studies. Caruth believes that “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (3).
This interest in how trauma and literature interact fuels her book, which she dedicates to students of her “Literature, Trauma, and Culture” course. Throughout her work, she explores the ways literature and trauma interact, focusing specifically on language and history. Caruth makes it clear that she believes suffering demands to be heard.


Cha begins this review by highlighting the profound impact the book made on them. Cha summarizes some key plot points while also including details about Yanagihara’s life and other literary works she has written.


Delaney highlights the need for community and discussion during and after reading A Little Life. Delaney also emphasizes (and maybe oversells) the novel as one that perfectly matches the time in which we are living as it touches on harsh realities such as “cutting, binges and childhood sexual abuse) as well as its solaces: friendship, drugs, travel, love affairs and interior design.” Delaney sees Yanagihara’s novel as a real depiction of the world in which we live.

Felman, like Caruth, is a trailblazer in literary trauma theory. This article specifically explores the relationship between trauma and pedagogy by asking important questions such as: “What does literature tell us about testimony?” (13). Felman further explains her course in which students both read and watched pieces that deal with trauma then discuss and write on them in the classroom. She concludes that the classroom can be a place of testimony.


Fine’s *Legacy of Night* is an excellent resource for anyone encountering Elie Wiesel’s novel, *Night*. For the purposes of my research, I focused on the “Introduction” section of her book which had insightful ideas on witnessing and the importance of storytelling in literature that deals with trauma. Fine explains the survivors’ “imperative to testify” (1) while also acknowledging the opposing forces urging them to keep quiet.


Primary Text

Maureen and Peter Goggin, in their article, offer both warning and reward to future teachers of trauma. They explain the dangers of bringing such heavy, impactful subject matter into a classroom full of different and unknown perspectives. Still, they admit that the discourse and understanding gained from discussion of and writing about trauma is rewarding and even crucial for students to unpack in the right setting.


Grayson’s book makes the case against trigger warnings; she focuses on trigger warnings in regard to the context of race. Grayson offers a variety of alternatives to trigger warnings, such as encouraging bravery from her students and combatting misconceptions they might have about race. Grayson warns that the use of trigger warnings can be detrimental to students’ education and make teachers appear uncomfortable with the education material they are teaching.


Primary Text

Gulley’s article serves as the introduction to her longer book which contains several accounts from educators about the challenges that come with teaching literature containing rape and other sexual violence to the modern student. Her article in particular details the history of rape as a literary subject. Gulley also acknowledges the balancing act a teacher must perform to teach these sensitive topics while also being sensitive to the students she teaches.


*Why We Teach Now* is a collection of accounts from K-12 teachers who share their reasons for continuing to teach, despite the challenges that come with the profession. In his contribution to the book, Hicks writes about his experience teaching undocumented students and the challenges he faced in helping them get into college. In the process, he came to know and see his students as more than students, but people, other human beings with their own aspirations, challenges, and fears.


Primary Text

Houlik-Ritchey details a precise plan for how she prepares and warns her students of triggering, upcoming topics in the classroom. She explains how she plans her syllabus and schedule to accommodate students that might be unable to participate in such a heavy, impactful discussion. She even includes the rules by which her classroom operates on days where discussion is centered around sensitive topics, such as rape and sexual violence.


Jones et al, argue that trigger warnings have no impact on the way students who have suffered said trauma will react to it in the classroom. If anything, they believe there could be miniscule adverse effects in using them as trigger warnings could reinforce the trauma that survivors suffer. Still, overall, they found that trigger warnings largely caused no help or harm.


In this initial study, Kidd and Castano perform experiments demonstrating that reading fiction led to better performance on tests of affective Theory of Mind. They assert that reading fiction and engaging with art can make people more empathetic and aware of the feelings of others.

In this follow-up study, Kidd and Castano re-assert that fiction can challenge its readers’ preconceptions, help them better understand other perspectives, and become overall more empathetic people. They perform additional experiments to solidify their previous claim.


Kirylo’s book addresses the importance of an engaging, active teacher in the classroom. He emphasizes what it means to be a good teacher and shares ways to encourage authentic learning.


LaCapra’s book is a staple in the scholarship of literature about trauma, and it has been referenced in many other sources I have read. LaCapra examines trauma through a historical lens, discussing the after effects of trauma on culture and in humankind. He acknowledges the challenge and duty that writers of trauma fiction face in regard to accurately representing trauma.

Laub explains the role that the listener plays in literature that deals with trauma, asserting that any listener is also a co-owner of said trauma. Laub also discusses the role that silence plays in trauma and how it can serve both “a sanctuary and as a place of bondage” (58).


Lukianoff’s and Haidt’s book rejects trigger warnings in the college classroom. Reeking of sarcasm, this pair’s book urges students and teachers to toughen up and value education over the possibility of hurt feelings.


Maloney opens her review by explaining how both Yanagihara and her editor were pleasantly surprised with the success that soon followed the release of *A Little Life*. In an interview with Yanagihara, the author reveals several truths about her novel, such as her desire for a story that deals with adulthood without having a spouse and children. Yanagihara also explains a principle idea of her novel saying, “You won't be able to save another person, even if you want to, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it anyway.”

McNally recaps the recent discourse on trigger warnings; while some in academic are strong proponents of using them, others believe they coddle students. McNally urges that colleges should, rather than employ trigger warnings in their classes, provide students who suffer from P.T.S.D. with access to trained counselors, so they can receive professional help.


Primary Text


In this article, Neutill rants about how their use of trigger warnings in the college classroom was a failure. Neutill found that students were still upset with the content they were shown in class in spite of the trigger warnings offered beforehand.


Pacansky-Brock shared a total list of twelve ground rules that she uses in her classroom. She explains that establishing your ground rules on the first day of class can help set the tone for what kind of experience your students have in your classroom.
As a former student of Dr. Pellegrino’s, I knew his website contained both academic and teaching resources. Using a syllabus from a course he taught in 2015, I was able to read about and utilize ways that he implemented trigger warnings in the classroom.


Powers begins his article by explaining the firm hold Yanagihara’s novel had on him--he admits to dreaming about it. He continues to summarize the plot and ends with praise for A Little Life.


Rak’s article explains how she taught a traumatic novel about incest to her class. She explains how silence, something normally feared in literature classrooms, is part of the process of reading literature that deals with trauma. She gives several examples of how she encourages students to discuss a traumatic novel after she has let them “bear witness” (56) to what they have read through silence.

Spear details the history of teaching traumatic novels, and asks readers: what is your purpose in teaching this novel? She then details the course she taught which explored trauma narratives and trauma as a concept. She also delves into how writing about trauma can serve to be a form of healing.


Tompkins was a trailblazer in educational psychology. His book discusses both methods and aims in teaching. He also discusses morals, values, and enrichment in public education.


This article is a phenomenal resource which covers some of the most popular narrative techniques used by writers of trauma fiction. In particular, Vickroy addresses the fragmented narrative strategy which slowly introduces readers to moments of trauma or moments of background information in literature and the effect first-person narration has on literature that deals with trauma.

Primary Text


Primary Text


In this article, Yanagihara explains the process of writing *A Little Life* and things that inspired her novel. There are various pieces of artwork that she feels permeate subconsciously in the novel, such as Chip Kidd for *The New York Times Magazine*’s “When AIDS Ends” cover and *Boys in the Band* by Geoffrey Chadsey. Yanagihara reveals much about her motives for writing her novel in this article too.
APPENDIX 1

QUIZ #1

1. Aspiring artist JB works as a receptionist. Beneath his desk he keeps black plastic trash bags full of this for his new art project:

   Answer: Hair

2. Which character believes he, unlike his other friends, has the family that he deserves?

   Answer: JB

3. What breaks on the day that Willem and Jude move into their new apartment?

   Answer: The Elevator

4. This character asserts “Ambition is my only religion,” (49):

   Answer: JB

5. During the New Year’s Eve Party, the four friends end up locked on top of the roof and must break in through the window to return to the apartment. This person designed elaborate locks for the windows that make it challenging to get back into their apartment.

   Answer: Jude
### APPENDIX 2

**PEER EDITING WORKSHEET**

**Reviewer:** _____________________________  **Author:** _____________________________

For each item below, indicate strengths and weaknesses by placing a checkmark in the appropriate box. Provide written evidence (on the third page) at least once within each shaded category section, for either an area of strength or of weakness.

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