

# Stigma of dependence: character analysis in three recent novels



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In recent years, the age of maturity in Western cultures has been pushed higher and higher as more education becomes necessary to pursue job opportunities. Crashing economies increasingly force children to rely on their parents after graduation. Despite the practical necessity of taking a few more years to set out entirely on their own, the current generation entering the workforce is criticized for just how long they take to support themselves. This stigma is rooted more deeply in our self-centered culture, and the allure of individual success. To be independent is to be admirable, to be capable of taking care of oneself. Dependency is looked down upon almost universally—even while romantic relationships are encouraged, individuals are still expected to have clear goals and identity outside of their partner. These social patterns are reflected in modern literature. In Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* and Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment* and *My Brilliant Friend*, protagonists struggle to balance the desire to be independent and self-reliant with the fulfillment that relationships can provide. For each, dependence on another becomes a struggle to maintain boundaries and to behave as they've grown used to.

Jude, the protagonist of *A Little Life*, is an incredibly private man who suffered from horrific abuse for the entirety of his childhood and adolescence and thus is incredibly reluctant to trust. His three closest friends are his roommates in college, who learn very quickly that to be close to Jude “You let things slide that your instincts told you not to, you scouted around the edges of your suspicions. You understood that proof of your friendship lay in keeping your distance.” (Yanagihara 84). Jude refuses to comply with any attempt to find out more about his traumatic childhood and adolescence,

because to do so would be to allow someone else to carry the load of what he's been through. He similarly refuses to talk about his self harm, both because the mechanism is essential for him to function as well as because he is ashamed of it and the vulnerability it shows. Here his need to be solitary harms him, as he pushes away opportunity to develop closer relationships in order to maintain the control he believes he has over the small sphere he operates within. His childhood was so unstable that anything he can manage to exert power over is incredibly precious: his cutting, his routine, and the secrets he shares. He is closest with Willem, who he moves in with after they leave college as neither have the means to live on their own and both lack living relatives to rely upon. Both are very aware of the slightly shameful situation they occupy: college roommates still living together at 30, and Willem responds to this shame by claiming a place of his own within their apartment: "The second bedroom, for example, was erected partly out of Willem's fear of being twenty-eight and still sharing a room with his college roommate" (Yanagihara 99). Willem recognizes the shame of nearly being in his thirties and so well out of adolescence and not having the means to live alone. He relies on Jude to supply the other half of their rent, but in having a room of his own can claim some semblance of independence. Career-wise, he has reached a degree of success, but this comes only after he fails to meet his own deadline of leaving his job at a restaurant by thirty. He cannot hold the waitstaff position without shame because he recognizes it as a transition, a resting point after college and before he succeeds as an actor. In the eyes of the public, neither of his jobs may be seen as very impressive, perhaps in part because of the extent to which he is reliant on others for his income; he must be tipped to

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supplement his pay as a waiter and must appeal to the public in his performances and his public image in order to make his way to fame. Willem and Jude both work hard to achieve their goal of independence, pushed by the expectations of society for what an adult should be.

In *The Days of Abandonment*, however, the protagonist begins the novel married with two children, one half of a twenty year partnership. Abruptly, her husband leaves her for a younger woman, and she is left to grasp at the remnants of the life that was torn from her and to cope with her new and unwanted independence. “ From now on it would be like this, responsibilities that had belonged to us both would now be mine alone” (Ferrante 20). Olga has come to expect that she’ll have help in the duties of the house: paying bills, caring for the children, cooking, cleaning. Even on the tasks she did alone she did with the knowledge that Mario was there to ask for help if she needed it. Independence is something distant for her, and returning to it is jarring. She has functioned as half of a pair for two decades, and to suddenly lose that status is to make her reconsider her identity, something she has not had to do since her 20s. Redefining herself is infinitely harder than keeping a house running, and so occupies a great deal of her time. Olga had no expectation of a marriage cut short, and as she married Mario just out of college she grew up with him at her side. Her independence is such a great weakness not because of any particular shortcoming or lack of skill on her own part, but because she never had to exist as an adult without Mario beside her. Her self doubt is crippling at this stage of the novel, and as she recognizes herself spiraling she struggles to stop it. “ If I am exposed to myself, I will fight myself” (Ferrante 58). Through her obsession with her

husband and all that he must be doing with his new girlfriend, Olga drives away all those she could confide in and finds herself alone with her children. Here her independence can only be negative. She is alone and did not chose to be, and cannot handle the sudden weight of introspection she's thrust into when her husband declares that she is no longer good enough. Her descent is painfully slow, and she spirals deeper and deeper into depression while still having two young children reliant upon her. There is a pervasive stigma against single motherhood, both sexist and often racist at its base, and here Olga follows the worst aspects of the stereotype as she is unable to get back on her own two feet, nevermind be financially or emotionally stable enough to support her children.

Of course, there is advantage to independence. One must be able to earn a living, pay for a place to live, see a doctor if sick and interact with others as necessary to ensure they can function within their society. In addition, relationships can take a toll on those within them, as they are always a tradeoff of something or other. Whether giving or receiving love or time or trust, small sacrifices are constantly made in order to maintain a functional relationship. Elena, the young narrator of *My Brilliant Friend*, finds navigating a friendship with the girl she looks up to complicated and at times uncomfortable. When Lila drops her favorite doll down a drain Elena feels “ a violent pain, but I sensed that the pain of quarreling with her would be even stronger. It was as if I was strangled by two agonies, one already happening, the loss of a doll, and one possible, the loss of Lila” (Ferrante 54). Here is a prime example of the concessions friendship can require. Two young girls engage in an odd competition, taking jabs at one another emotionally as a

means of displaying dominance. The power struggle occurring here hardly seems healthy, and it may very well not be. However, Elena does gain self confidence through their friendship, and grows to see herself at a similar level to Lila, a girl she once placed on a pedestal. Jude is made similarly uncomfortable by the back and forth between friends, although for him the most painful aspect of friendship is not cruelty but speaking about himself. For Jude, “ friendship was a series of exchanges: of affections, of time, sometimes of money, always of information. [...] He had nothing to give them, he had nothing to offer” (Yanagihara 111). The strength one draws from friendship is undercut here as Jude points out how much must be given in order to maintain that relationship. For an intensely guarded person such as himself, giving away information is not a fair trade but an admission of vulnerability and in his eyes, guilt for his earlier actions. He is not simply unwilling to share, he is terrified to, and it is not particularly surprising that it takes decades for him to be comfortable telling anyone what has happened to him.

Reliance upon another is considerably more dangerous than struggling to exist on his own, even as he lives with a disability that leaves him crippled with nerve pain daily. To open up to another is to allow someone to see exactly what has made him (as he feels) despicable, with scars both physical and psychological. Romantic relationships are just as scarring, as made evident in *The Days of Abandonment*. Olga shares a memory from her childhood of a situation similar to her own, where a “ man left home for love of a woman in Pescara and no one saw him again. Every night, from this moment on, our neighbour wept [...] a kind of desperate sobbings that broke

through the walls like a battering ram” (Ferrante 15). When this man abandons his wife, she’s left behind as a broken thing. She relies too heavily on him and the support he provided, and without him she’s unable to go on—and so called the *poverella*, poor woman, and is pitied by the community around her. There’s a marked difference between pity and support here. Her husband is not seen negatively, it is rather she, the one who clings onto a relationship that has fallen apart, that becomes pathetic and unable to take care of herself. Here, the shame of an inability to be independent is apparent. Olga’s primary memories of the women become the sound of her crying and her ghastly appearance as she falls apart in the absence of her husband. However, the trials of relationships do not make them less worth pursuing. Through the eyes of a biased and invested narrator, one will always feel the pain of a cheating spouse and the ever so acute betrayal of a friend, because those negative emotions are necessary to cause conflict and propel the plot along.

There is no argument to be made for Mario, Olga’s husband— we see him only through her eyes as he pursues a near-child (which is off-putting enough in and of itself), but have no idea as to any great unhappiness in the marriage beyond what she tells us. Jude is so reluctant to connect with people because of his own mangled self image, and while the audience learns that he is nothing resembling the horrible person he claims to be, the strong emotions he has cannot help but be transferred to the readers. It is inevitable that characters be caught up in their stories— that is the idea of a narrative, after all— but this investment results in narration that is partial to the tone of their own thoughts. The relationships that these characters

accept result in reward once the initial trials are overcome. Jude, for example, comes to find himself at the center of a support system, surrounded by people who would not think twice about their commitment to him and his happiness. He finds a family as well as love, far more than he had ever hoped for, and gradually was able to learn that he could share parts of himself without having to fear it being used against him to reduce his autonomy. He's cared for by Andy, the first person he trusts to see his scars and not flinch too badly, and "he appreciated Andy in many ways, but he appreciated most his unflappability. [...] Andy had made it difficult not to continue seeing him by showing up at the Hood, banging on their door after he had missed two follow-up appointments [... he] resigned himself to the idea that it might not be bad to have a doctor [that he could trust]" (Yanagihara 155). Jude's eventual trust and reliance on Andy results in a positive turnaround for his health. He is by no means healed, and indeed cannot be, but through the relationship he's formed he's ensured that there will always be someone willing to take care of his injuries and illnesses. He later finds friendship with Harold, a professor of his, who takes Jude under his wing and eventually adopts him, much to Jude's surprise as he has never revealed anything to Harold and Harold trusted his goodness anyway. Jude's disbelief at the news is only greater proof of how much having a family means to him: "There's nothing-nothing- I've ever wanted more. My whole life" (Yanagihara 209). For Jude, dependence upon family members has never been an option— he's never had anyone to call family that he could depend on. Harold and Julia's decision to adopt him is one he can hardly comprehend, as they are choosing to stay connected with him in a way more concrete than any of his relationships prior to this point. He's still wary, to be

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sure, but having the stability of parents is a luxury that allows him to open his life (if only just a little bit) to accommodate more love.

Ultimately, Jude is made more complete by the people he allows to surround him, despite his strong belief that he could only live as an individual, distant from everyone around him but secure in his solitude. Olga also finds comfort in the presence of an equal, although she does not enter the relationship as fully as Jude does. She defines their partnership simply: “ We loved each other for a long time, in the days and months to come, quietly” (Ferrante 188). Olga’s final words do not suggest that her new relationship with Carrano has healed her in any way- she has put herself back together on her own. After enduring a near loss of sanity, she finds herself desiring stability more than romance or any great connection, and so she accepts Carrano, her neighbor who has helped her through the ordeal, as someone she can rely upon after relying only on herself and her force of will for so many months. While their relationship is slow to begin as well as to progress, it is a source of strength she is able to draw from if need be. Jude and Olga find themselves in situations they likely could not have predicted, but come to accept the new roles they take on both in their lives and in the lives of those they’ve come to trust. Though they endure independence for different reasons, each benefits from the ability to lean on others after struggling to find stability on their own.