Sentimental Devices and New Domesticities in the Contemporary Novel

by

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In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the by-
stander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines
should be the sentiments of the sufferer.

—Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*
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Introduction

Working against the implicit dismissal of a literary object when someone calls it “sentimental,” this thesis hopes to say more. It asks, *What do you mean?* and takes on some of the burden of providing an answer. What do we mean when we call a novel “sentimental”? What formal properties does this literary object possess beyond the deflective *you-know-it-when-you-see-it*? And importantly, what does the sentimental tell us about our involvement in late capitalism?¹

The word “sentimental,” as it is used now, is mostly pejorative if not ambivalent. Or pejorative, but actually mostly ambivalent. In calling something “sentimental,” we cast a negative judgment on it while recognizing its propensity to charm. We obliquely acknowledge its appeal even while implying its deficiency in aesthetic value. And it is not just aesthetic value that seems to be appraised with the sentimental.² Among numerous other words one might use to describe “sentimental” objects, there are: “mawkish,” “insincere,” “saccharine,” “melodramatic,” “cheesy,”

¹ By “late capitalism,” I mean the rise of financialization and globalization, in which new methods of production based on information and technology rather than heavy industry are dominant. According to Fredric Jameson, in this new global system, “institutions are no longer to be conceived along the lines of machines or the factory, or in terms of what used to be called ‘the state’; communications technology requires us to think of them as informational institutions, perhaps, or immense constructions in cyberspace” (Jameson 110). Along with that, “we not only use technology, we consume it, and we consume its exchange value, its price, along with its purely symbolic overtones” (Jameson 111). In an economy centered not on creation of new value but on the transference of abstract value, the aesthetic realm is matched with a similar growth of abstraction: “the form of the [artistic/cultural] work has become the content; and... what we consume in such works is the form itself... we consume, not the work, but the idea of the work” (Jameson 113-114). I also adopt the “late capitalism” outlined by Sianne Ngai in her *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Under late capitalism, the three main economic processes and modes of social organization—production, circulation, consumption—have become increasingly subsumed by capital and have “also become increasingly intertwined” (Ngai 13), resulting in “hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions” (Ngai 1). Late capitalism as a “culture of informalized, casualized work” (Ngai 30) is thus characterized by “more elastic relations to work and personality” (Ngai 174) in various social formations: “the global multitude and its immaterial labor,” “the mass-mediated postbourgeois public sphere,” and “the private or domestic sphere” (Ngai 238).

² These opening formulations are inspired by Sianne Ngai’s observations on the gimmick in her “Theory of the Gimmick” (2017), which is—as will surely be seen soon—a keystone essay for this thesis. She writes, “gimmicks register as deficient in aesthetic value even when their appeal is obliquely acknowledged” (Ngai 471).
“schmaltzy,” “overemotional,” “sappy,” “kitschy,” “cheap,” and just plain “bad.” Of these few sample synonyms, one is an economic evaluation (“cheap”); two are quasi-moral judgments (“bad,” “insincere”); three are aesthetic terms (“overemotional,” “melodramatic,” “kitschy”); and five evoke “tastes” in consumption (“cheesy,” “mawkish,” “sappy,” “saccharine,” “schmaltzy”). Sentimentality seems to be primarily about consumption that has aesthetic, moral, and economic implications.

How did it come to have these associations?

I. “The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality”

Sentimentality was prominent in the 18th-century novelistic tradition, with the novels of Laurence Sterne, Henry MacKenzie, and Samuel Richardson. These novels are not quite sentimental in our modern pejorative sense; in fact, they often announce themselves in their titles—Sterne’s own *A Sentimental Journey* being a prime example—as sentimental novels. Sentimentality in the 18th century was almost synonymous with “sensibility,”3 which “denoted the receptivity of the sense” and “connoted the operation of the nervous system, the material basis for consciousness” (Barker-Benfield xvii). Furthermore, this kind of bodily, sensory, empirical “consciousness” was a social consciousness; it could be “further sensitized in order to be more acutely responsive to signal from the outside environment and from inside the body” (ibid.). As far as sociability went, sensibility was masculine; indeed, the titular stereotype of MacKenzie’s novel, *The Man of Feeling*, played a part in the rise of the cult of sensibility.4 Because sensibility “sought to capture that quality of sensation that was

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3 The main difference between the two is that sensibility emphasized bodily sensation (physical senses) more than sentimentality. Sentimentality was concerned with the abstraction of the more somatic “sensibility” into mental categories of emotion and morality. Although eventually these two terms diverged further in connotation (for example, “sensibility” today is not used pejoratively), in the 18th century, they were spoken of in the same breath.

4 Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), an epistolary novel featuring a young male protagonist, is one key example from the almost-contemporaneous German Romanticism.
rooted in the physical senses but that represented a detached abstraction from sense experience, the virtuality of emotional experience rather than the actuality of sensible experience” (McKeon 673), it was a complex, ambivalent thing that—as was believed—only certain cultured men possessed through practice. Likewise, the sentimental, as defined by Friedrich Schiller, is “a literary mode constituted at once by ambivalence and reflexivity” in contrast with the naïve, “a simplistic form of sincerity” (Chandler 11). In the face of ambivalence, “the man of real constancy and firmness,” or the cultivated man of feeling, as Adam Smith claims, would “never [dare] to forget for one moment the judgment which the impartial spectator would pass upon his sentiments and conduct” (Smith 169). As it seemed, women were incapable of mixing their primary sexual, reproductive functions with “detached abstraction” and “virtuality”; they were “too deeply rooted in the senses to mediate the subtilized obliquity of sensibility” (McKeon 673). Michael McKeon summarily characterizes the principle for this popular belief as such: “the man of feeling’s affectivity is a withdrawal from the publicness of both aggressively male productivity and excessively female reproductivity” (McKeon 674). Both sentimentality and sensibility referred to “a conscious openness of feelings, and also a conscious consumption of feelings” (Williams 281, my emphases). It took moderated and moderating masculinity and civilized control for the conscious operations of sensibility and sentimentality.

According to John Mullan and Katherine Turner, the sentimental took a turn around the turn of the century: its usage “turned from the approbatory to the pejorative; from ‘exhibiting refined and elevated feelings’ to ‘addicted to indulgence in

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5 In The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), Adam Smith writes that a great man “learns an habitual regard to every circumstance of ordinary behavior, and studies to perform all those small duties with the most exact propriety” (Smith 65, my emphasis).

6 A virtual third person arising from the first person putting himself in the situation of the second person.
superficial emotions” (Mullan 236); it “fell out of favor later in the eighteenth century, as it became associated with excess, insincerity, or oversexed behavior (especially in women)” (Turner 37). The prized ambivalence that sentimentality used to stand for did not hold up; the sentimental was flattened onto what Schiller thought of as its opposite, the naïve. In the long 19th century, on both sides of the Atlantic, sentimentality began to take a shape that resembles our modern conception. It was feminized, infantilized, and popularized; it was “cheapened,” made accessible to a mass public. It grew to signify excess; as an aesthetic mode, it veered close towards melodrama. While earlier it was a matter of habituating oneself (usually a man) to the practice of human sympathy, in the 19th century it was seen more as “the natural property of women, spontaneously originating in the natural love and caretaking of the mother-child bond” (Merish 5). This naturalization of sentimentality went hand in glove with the burgeoning liberal capitalist social order, which prescribed emotional and psychological norms to instate the ideology of female domesticity. In this era, sentimentality and domesticity (supported by the ideology of an inherent female “nature”) were the instruments of female political subjection.

Sentimental novels or domestic fiction of this era were mostly didactic, instructing readers on female conduct. Part of this conduct included having good “taste” in “fashionable clothing and consumer durables,” since good taste in consumer goods “[constituted] both an expression of [one’s] ‘subjectivity’ and symbolizes her class position and that of her family” (Merish 9). As subjects of early capitalism, women’s role in the relations of production was to reproduce life

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7 Others might argue that sentimentality’s downward turn began only later, in the early 19th century. The actual turning point—if there is one—is debatable and insignificant for this project.
8 These implied readers were imagined to be women, though actual readership extended to men as well.
9 Though 19th-century female authors such as Jane Austen and George Eliot satirized the sentimental novel in their own works of domestic fiction, they were exceptions to the rule; the sentimental novels they satirized made up the bulk of what was consumed by the feminized (but not necessarily female) reading masses.
(biological) and personal life (domestic) through the consumption of commercial goods. Women’s “domestic labor (including the labors of consumption)… [secured] the conditions of existence of capitalism” (Merish 9), and feminine consumption “played a key role in the formation and dissemination of capitalist norms of personal life” (Merish 6).

Sentimental fiction’s didacticism was not just about consumption; it was also about social conduct relating to citizenship and belonging. But even in less selfish guises, white middle-class values were still espoused in domestic fiction. Jane Tompkins, who is known for her defense of 19th-century American sentimentalism, writes, “The benevolent rescuers of Arthur Mervyn and the sacrificial mothers of Uncle Tom’s Cabin act out scenarios that teach readers what kinds of behavior to emulate or shun” (Tompkins xvii); and though she argues that these instances “[provided] a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events take place” (ibid.), agents of such “remaking” were still white, religious, middle-class Americans promoting ways of belonging that were limited to their own values. The scenarios provided by Charles Brockden Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe through their “benevolent rescuers” and “sacrificial mothers” were ways of promoting middle-class, usually Christian, moral values: pity towards slaves and the working class. Such values of bourgeois charity, patronage, and paternalism or maternalism emphasized—rather than blurred—class and race divisions. Be that as it may, scholars have argued for the value of such texts, which “serve not as sources of reciprocity or justice, but as magnetizing forms for fantasies of reciprocity and justice whose very impersonality and constitution in an ongoing near future is a source of relief and optimism” for the oppressed (Berlant, The Female Complaint 12). The goal, then, is not for radical transformation—an overhaul of hegemonic structures—but the feeling of belonging through shared promises of a better future.
One can never stop fantasizing about a better future (“an ongoing near future”), hence the subtitle of Lauren Berlant’s book *The Female Complaint*: “the unfinished business of sentimentality.” The sentimental mode of the 19th century lives on in the present because we are still subjects of the capitalist socio-economic order, now intensified and more prevalent in its business-making. In the intervening 20th century, mass culture was turned into a “culture industry,” one which “misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable” (Adorno 99). If Theodor Adorno is correct, nothing but the scale of capitalism has changed since the 19th century: “what parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture” (Adorno 100). Sentimental novels now might look different from its 19th-century precursors, but sentimentalism has not changed at its core; the 20th century, despite its modernist avant-gardisms and postmodern ironies, served only to intensify sentimentality’s “black-market” appeal. Its business-making remains ongoing, unfinished:

People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. (Adorno 103, my emphases)

More than a century after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, we think we know better than to be taken in by sentimentalism’s ideology; even those of us who are not blind to its ruse think we can be cured by a diagnosis (a simple awareness) and the shutting of both

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10 In other words, sentimentality persists in its badness because the world persists in its badness; the persistence of utopian desire (that sentimentality produces) is closely tied with conditions that are not hospitable to it.

11 The term “culture industry” was first coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), but here I cite from Adorno’s later essay, “Culture Industry Reconsidered” (1963).
eyes. Is it still ideology if we “consciously” desire such transparent deception? Taking cues from Adorno, this thesis argues that the contemporary sentimental novel is, in some prominent ways, still stuck in the past, still characterized by some salient features of its 19th-century counterpart: its concern with domesticity, its commodity form, its cheapness and excess, the paternalistic sympathy and benevolence of bourgeois condescension, and critics’ ambivalent if not negative attitude towards its aesthetic value. However, the focus of this thesis is not on tracing the legacies of 19th-century sentimentalism per se, but to show how these shared literary features inform and are informed by the modes of social organization in late capitalism.

II. Sentimental Devices and New Domesticities

In the culture industry, “products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan” (Adorno 98). Because these objects are produced to be consumed according to a plan that ensures “the greatest economy of perceptual effort takes place,” as Viktor Shklovsky writes, “we do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged” (Shklovsky 5). Such fast-foodization and hyper-commodification (the objectification of even something psychological like consumer appeal) is perfectly encapsulated in the gimmick as theorized by Sianne Ngai, which are “bits of business for performing aesthetic operations that we somehow become distracted into regarding as aesthetic objects in their own right” (Ngai, “Gimmick” 466). The doubt that we harbor towards sentimental objects is thus appropriate. That aesthetic objects have come to include things that are “job related,” which “operate” like machines—alienated from their human maker and their audience, whose aesthetic experiences are now being “operated” on, and who are thus made adjacent
extensions of the machines— is unsettling. That the very things which are putatively “instrumental” are turned into (an)aesthetic ends in themselves reminds us that our late-capitalist world consists of means without intrinsic values. “Held accountable for nothing,” our lives “[fade] into nothingness” (Shklovsky 5). In recognizing the appeal of sentimental objects, we acknowledge that they have performed their intended function, and that we are subjects of the meaningless machinery that is the culture industry, surrendering our accountability over our own perceptual processes. Instead of serving as an antidote to Fordist automatization, sentimentality economizes perceptual effort to catalyze readerly sympathy; it does not “enstrange” its objects—or make perception “long and laborious” (Shklovsky 6)—but makes them familiar. The sentimental devices I discuss in this thesis are, like Ngai’s labor-saving gimmicks, the obverses of Shklovsky’s Art as device. While the Art-device “returns sensation to our limbs,” and “makes a stone feel stony” (ibid.), sentimentality serves us ready-made sensations under fresh disguise—19th-century domesticity clad in modernist devices, science-fiction dystopian technology, and neoliberal queerness in three contemporary novels: Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close (2005), Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go (2005), and Hanya Yanagihara’s A Little Life (2015).

These novels are chosen not least because of their popular success; they are accessible reads and are highly rated on Goodreads, the Amazon-owned social network for readers of all backgrounds. Two of them have been released in multiple paperback editions, and some of these editions have covers that proudly display the glossy round badge of honor that says Now A Major Motion Picture. They are happily consumed by many, though not as enthusiastically reviewed by professional critics. They are also novels that I personally found sentimental. These novels had an

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12 The film adaptations for Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close and Never Let Me Go were released in 2011 and 2010 respectively, each featuring all-star casts. It is speculated that A Little Life is currently being adapted as a limited series for online streaming or cable television.
emotional effect on me when I had first read them; but I should add, importantly, that my indulgence was followed by embarrassment. This ambivalence, I think, makes it fair for me to proceed if we go by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s emphasis on the vicariousness of “sentimental” accusations in *The Epistemology of the Closet*. She illustrates the ambivalence of sentimentality by comparison to snobbery: “in Proust the snobbish characters are easy to recognize because they are the only ones who are able to recognize snobbism in others—hence, the only ones who really disapprove of it” (Sedgwick 152). Snob or sentimentalist, it takes one to know one. In yet another’s words, by “publicly proclaiming ourselves unconvincing by, or impervious to, the capitalist device’s claims and attractions,” we also “indirectly acknowledge this power to enchant, as one to which others, if not ourselves, are susceptible” (Ngai 471). We can only know of its power to enchant if some part of ourselves—our Smithian impartial spectator, if you will—has fallen to this power.

Since I have been alluding so much to the affinity between sentimentality and the gimmick, it should come as no surprise that I start by looking at the gimmick as the commodity par excellence in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. In the first chapter, I argue that the gimmick appears in many forms in the novel but is encapsulated in the figure of the child protagonist Oskar Schell. Throughout the novel, the child is the central device of inducing sympathy and tenderness via cuteness (another one of Ngai’s commodity-aesthetic categories). The novel also starts with a gimmick and ends with a gimmick: a familiar device known commonly as the *deus ex machina*, but which, in this novel, appears in the figure of *filius ex machina* (the child as device).

In the second chapter, I look at *Never Let Me Go*, in which the protagonist, Kathy, is the product of extreme commodification (she is cloned for her organs). Working with the novel’s own use of the word “sentimental” (the word appears only once in the novel), I argue that the sentimental arises from the tension between
fictional character-as-narrative function and character-as-real person. The idea of being copied from an original (i.e., a parent) bears a resemblance to the virtuality and abstraction from sense experience inherent in Adam Smith’s 18th-century notion of sympathy. Importantly, the novel’s self-conscious use of character as sentimental device thematizes the inequality of the unnamed bureaucracy—a stand-in for global capitalism expanded to dystopian heights.

In the third chapter, I argue that a similar relation of inequality between reader and character is thematized in *A Little Life*. This inequality is central to the novel’s sentimental effect, and is produced by the narrative device known as free-indirect discourse. Though free-indirect narration began as a defamiliarizing device, it has since become a familiar technique that is used in both popular narratives and “serious” literature. The novel’s free-indirect style turns irony sentimental and invites a brand of “good reading” that implicates the reader in the unequal relationship between character and society, a relationship that insists on an irreconcilable divide between the possessing class and the dispossessed, the deserving and the undeserving.

Beyond commodification, these three novels reproduce another aspect of capitalist social relations whose traces can be found in the 19th-century novel. Though neither overtly didactic nor primarily concerned with marriage, these novels are about the normative, reproductive social unit. The notions of family that these three novels produce are similar to—though prima facie drastically different from—the nuclear family of 19th-century domestic fiction. Even though these novels are concerned with imagining alternative forms of the domesticity and do not feature typical nuclear families, because they do so without radically altering its essential functions, I call the families of these novels “new domesticities.”

The child in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the novel’s central sentimental object, is a legacy of 19th-century sentimentalism; it reproduces the genre in its
feminized, infantilized tradition. The child also restores the stability of the nuclear family, which is sundered by two historical events—World War Two and the 9/11 terrorist attacks—spanning three generations. By the end of the novel, the family is reconciled and the family’s reproductive function is secured and celebrated in the figure of the child who, a caricature of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, is whisked into the future even as he remains nostalgically attached to the ruins of the past.

Though *Never Let Me Go* is also concerned with childhood, the novel complicates the sentimental figure of the child-as-commodity and emphasizes domesticity through the fantasized notion of parenthood from the child’s perspective. In the second chapter, I argue that the sentimental involves the clones’ cruelly optimistic aspirations towards parenthood, be it the hope of having a parent or being a parent. But even without parents, the functions that a conventional family serve are still present and redistributed: reproduction happens through cloning, and the clones themselves give life (renewing life but not producing new life) to humans who get their organs; care is professionalized such that motherly affective labor is displaced onto extra-domestic domains; and additionally, the sodality that family provides is replaced by that of the boarding school where clones are educated and raised by matrons.

In *A Little Life*, the figure of the child is conceived differently from the other two novels, this time with multiple possible domestic arrangements. The protagonist, Jude, is an orphan who is adopted as an adult by his former law professor after a traumatic childhood in a monastery and in foster homes. For Jude, “childhood,” or the condition of being a legitimate child to a parent, is less a phase of life than a status that is attained, strangely, in adulthood. Indeed, the novel presents us with a queer family: Jude falls in love with his best friend, Willem, and because he is adopted, his family is not strictly speaking reproductive (i.e., not a biological but a legal family). However, this queer family is not celebrated but instead falls apart: Jude is unable to
accept the love of his chosen family because he thinks he is undeserving and eventually commits suicide. Though the novel is neither explicitly pro-family nor anti-family, the former is implied. The novel’s drama arises from Jude’s concern with family; moments of heightened pathos occur when Jude feels most distant from the privileged sodality that we are made to think he deserves.

All three novels place prestige on their respective forms of domestic arrangement by presenting these new domesticities as the quintessence of protagonists’ and readers’ aspirations. The novels thus capitalize on the reproductive domestic unit as the site and object of pathos, as the device that manipulates readers’ sympathetic faculties. Beyond literary devices, then, we have the family as a naturalized framework, as an ideological object of aesthetic consumption that is disguised in its fractured forms—missing parents and dead lovers—which augment, rather than dissolve, domestic drama. And if family is important in the consumer’s experience of these effectively sentimental novels, it is because the novel registers our abiding wish for a sense of belonging that we glimpse, if not through the new domesticities, then through the fantasies made possible by them.

Each chapter of this thesis focuses on a different formal aspect of the novel—the form of commodity in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, the form of character-person in Never Let Me Go, and the form of ironic narration in A Little Life—that stands in isomorphic relation with each novel’s form of new domesticity and, more broadly, the social relations and aspirations of belonging in the world that each novel enacts. This thesis aims to demonstrate that these sentimental novels have much to tell us about contemporary modes of reading—and therefore about our status as subject-objects, participant-observers, of this capitalist lifeworld.
1. Toying with Cloying

When I first read Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, I was fourteen. It moved me—the way Pixar’s animated movie *Up* would move me two years later in 2009. It took me four years after my first reading to realize that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is “sentimental.” At fourteen, precocious and clueless, I was—as Michel Faber of the *Guardian* describes the novel’s protagonist Oskar Schell—“an adolescent chatterbox, all artifice and no substance, all cuteness and no grit.” No wonder I did not feel that something was amiss. I must have been too charitable to Oskar’s “extravagant emotions and quirky imaginings that would seem cloying or self-indulgent in a grown-up” (Miller). But what about my impulse, at eighteen, to arraign the novel belatedly by calling it “sentimental” (while also indicting its reader, my fourteen-year-old self)? By that time, I had learned to spot “cheap lit.” My sentiments were aligned with Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*, who writes, “[the novel] feels simultaneously contrived and improvisatory, schematic and haphazard.” In his review of the book for the *New Yorker*, John Updike calls it “overextended and sentimentally watery.” Walter Kirn, too, calls it “a rain of truisms, aphorisms, nuggets of wisdom and deep thoughts tossed off by Oskar and the other characters as if they were trying to corner a market in ironic existentialist greeting cards.”

After Oskar’s father—simply referred to as “Dad”—dies in the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, Oskar finds a key in an envelope left behind by Dad and decides to go on a “Reconnaissance Expedition” around New York City’s five boroughs for the lock that it opens. Alongside this narrative runs another told in epistolary form: letters to Oskar’s father by his grandfather Thomas Sr.—whom Oskar knows only as the “renter” living with his grandmother—and letters written by Grandma to Oskar. They tell of the bombing of Dresden in World War Two, as well
as the love triangle between Thomas Sr., Grandma, and her sister Anna. The novel features love, war, and trauma: three grand themes that make precious novels blockbuster-worthy.

A reviewer for *The Atlantic* jests, “After a while the [novel’s] gimmickry starts to remind one of a clown frantically yanking toys out of his sack: a fatal image” (Myers). So add one more to the cluster of words associated with “sentimental”—cloying, self-indulgent, contrived—gimmicky. The novel’s affinity with these pejorative labels is not incidental, and the novel’s commodity aesthetic reveals more about its sentimentality. In this chapter, I argue that Foer thematizes and literalizes the cute gimmick, using it to produce sentimental effects through the novel’s infantilized rhetoric and the reader’s infantile indulgence in wishful thinking and neat resolution encapsulated in the figure of the child. In the first section, I establish the cute gimmick as the novel’s central aesthetic. In the second section, I pay closer attention to the figure of the child as a narrative device by observing that on the level of discourse, the child completes the novel, and on the level of story, the child completes the family in a new domestic arrangement. In the third section, I argue that the child infantilizes the language of the novel and the reader to produce its sentimental effect.

## I. Cute Gimmick

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is full of stuff, real and imagined. The novel opens with Oskar offering a clutter of invented objects: “What about a teakettle…that reads in Dad’s voice”? Like Rube Goldberg contraptions, Sianne Ngai’s primary visual example of the “gimmick,” these things serve ridiculous functions alongside quotidian ones: a teakettle that sings “the chorus of ‘Yellow Submarine,’” or an anus that is trained to say “Wasn’t me!” whenever its human “made an incredibly bad fart” (1). Indeed, in straining to achieve a comic effect (a fart joke), the opening paragraph
of the novel alone reminds us of the “gimmick,” the commodity par excellence, which is both “a wonder and a trick” (Ngai 469). These imaginary inventions are wonders conveyed with a sense of wonder in Oskar’s precocious voice. The repeated hypotheticals, the what abouts and what ifs, additionally resemble the “what about this” or “what about that” of a desperate salesperson, verbal gestures of the marketing trick that cannot fully conceal its ulterior intentions. Aside from attempting to convince us of Oskar’s breathlessly childish innocence, the novel, in attempting to sell us an emotional experience—feelings of tenderness towards Oskar—is a gimmick, a “[bit] of business for performing aesthetic operations that we somehow become distracted into regarding as [an] aesthetic [object] in [its] own right” (Ngai 466). And in calling the novel “precious,” or “sentimental,” we are pronouncing “a distancing judgment, a way to apotropaically ward off, by publicly proclaiming ourselves unconvinced by, or impervious to, the capitalist device’s claims and attractions” (Ngai 471).

Early in the novel, Oskar introduces us to what he and Dad call “Reconnaissance Expeditions” (8), a dressed-up name for scavenger hunts. The novel itself is a documentation of Oskar’s longest Reconnaissance Expedition yet: it begins more than a year after Dad’s death, when Oskar finds a mystery key; and it ends, finally, a few days after the second anniversary of 9/11, when Oskar finds the rightful owner of the key. These Reconnaissance Expeditions, the stuff that constitute the novel, encapsulate the gimmick’s labor-saving and labor-intensifying ambivalence: for Ngai, that “it seems both to work too hard and work too little” (472) makes the gimmick both charming and irritating. Such expeditions are tedious yet compelling, and can be both labor-saving and labor-intensifying: some are “extremely simple, like when [Dad] told [Oskar] to bring back something from every decade in the 20th century—[Oskar] was clever and brought back a rock—and sometimes they were incredibly complicated and would go on for a couple of weeks” (8). The last one Dad
sends him on starts simply with a map of Central Park and no clues: a gimmick that is labor-saving for a Dad who wants his son to channel his ebullience into something tedious or labor-intensifying—a large enough bone for him to gnaw on.

These clues (even “no clue” is a clue) are objects, much like the little parts of the Rube Goldberg machine that exemplifies the gimmick. The novel-as-Reconnaissance-Expedition really begins when Oskar finds a key in a mysterious envelope addressed to someone named “Black” in a blue vase in Dad’s closet; in other words, when Oskar finds a thing in a thing in a thing in a thing—a Russian doll of sorts. Like the gimmick, the “clue,” as both hint and artifact, is “both an idea and also its thingly materialization” (Ngai 478). The gimmick, importantly, reflects current capitalist methods, whereby “the production of commodities increasingly encompasses the production of the specific way in which they will be consumed”; in other words, “the marketing is to be ‘baked’ into the commodity during the process of production itself” (Ngai 478). The Russian-doll form of the first clue literalizes this simultaneous production and consumption: the production of this clue is in its consumption in another object.

In comparing the novel to the gimmick, we note that it is a commodity, but importantly, that it is a commodity that consists yet again of a multitude of objects, like cogs in the Rube Goldberg machine. Indeed, the novel is not just text; it is full of images, of objects, and of images of objects, a hoard of objects that trail in Oskar’s wake as the novel progresses, a hoard that accumulates into what seems like an archive—of letters, daybook pages, and scrapbook photos. So the “sentimental gimmick” operates on multiple levels: Oskar’s inventions, Reconnaissance Expeditions, countless other commodities in the novel, and Oskar as narrator (more on this later).
Of the scraps or object-motifs that comprise the book, one of them is Thomas Sr.’s written speech-pages, which regularly interrupt and segment his letters and the narrated text. Thomas Sr. becomes mute soon after he arrives in New York; to perform basic communicative functions, he tattoos “YES” and “NO” on his left and right hands (18, and pictured later in Oskar’s scrapbook; see Figure 1) and writes short replies on the pages of notebooks that he carries around. Speech is thingified into written word, onto pages in his notebook and pages in the book we are holding; indeed, even earlier, his mute condition is described as words “lost,” presenting words as something one can “lose” (16), like possessions. Additionally, these brief words are made abstract and interchangeable in various contexts. As Thomas Sr. explains,

> It wasn’t unusual for me to run out of blank pages before the end of the day, so should I have to say something to someone on the street or in the bakery or at the bus stop, the best I could do was flip back through the daybook and find the most fitting page to recycle, if someone asked me, “How are you feeling?” it might be that my best response was to point at, “The regular, please”… (28)

The message is stretched out or distorted to mean various things, based on who is addressed. Whether responding to a barista or an acquaintance, the same abstract “regular” is used; though we can imagine an extent of non-abstraction—that someone…

Fig. 1: Thomas Sr.’s hands
recognizes Thomas Sr. in a crowd of other café customers and knows his regular coffee preferences—this recognition of Thomas Sr.’s individuality is merely superficial, the way we might refer to a background character as that guy. Importantly, these written responses on Thomas Sr.’s notebook pages are short. Their “littleness,” combined with their abstraction and their thingness, make them proto-examples of formally-imprecise cute objects, simple and capable of bending to one’s will. As Ngai observes, cute objects are usually small and infantile, and have “simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or detail” (Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories 64).

We can thus consider the novel-as-gimmick, more particularly, as one that relies on cuteness as its prevailing aesthetic: what else do we expect from a small boy going around a big city gathering a mass of scraps? The opening sentences are not just gimmicky thanks to the child’s inventions, but also thanks to the child himself, as a gimmick whose dominant aesthetic is unmistakably cute: “deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening” (Ngai 59). Even in his most long-drawn sentences, as narrator, Oskar “addresses us as if [he] were our child” (Ngai 60); one’s response “revolves around the fantasy of a commodity addressing its “guardian” in the one-on-one, intimate manner associated with lyric poetry” (Ngai 64). The book, imagined as intimate artifact, as an expanded version of Oskar’s scrapbook titled “Stuff That Happened To Me,” is material evidence of inexhaustible childlike curiosity about random minutiae. It reads like a diary, except it is clearly written for an audience or addressee, at moments taking pains to explicate in-jokes or family traditions like the cutely bloviated “Reconnaissance Expeditions.” As assumed addressee, one cannot but feel protective over Oskar, who, like the cute object, “seems to insist on getting something from us (care, affection, intimacy) that we in turn feel compelled to give” (Ngai 98). Oskar induces tenderness in others, for example, minor characters like Abby Black, whom Oskar meets on his search, and who is charmed by
Oskar’s insatiable curiosity, his forthrightness, and his wacky name card (90-99). Even others who deny affection towards Oskar cannot but betray their susceptibility to the cute sentimentality of his story: for example, Arnold Black, who, upon seeing Oskar and realizing that he is on a scavenger hunt that will make him feel closer to his deceased Dad, gets teary before rejecting such uninvited tenderness and intimacy by closing his door on Oskar (199-200).

Just as the name “Kathy H.” invites scrutiny to the naming conventions in Ishiguro’s novel (as we will see in the next chapter), these uniformly “Black” minor characters, categorized upon arrival and organized in alphabetical order, are objects that draw attention to the system under which they are brought to function. The Blacks, in contrast to Oskar’s “singular, central consciousness,” are each “reduced to a single functional use within the narrative” (Woloch 25); they are each a point or a checkbox in Oskar’s scavenger hunt. Despite the effort to make them seem more like emotionally complex characters, they are each reducible to an abstract trait or insignificant event in the novel such that “the actualization of a human being is denied” (Woloch 25). Some examples include: Albert Black the actor, Alice Black the artist, and Allen Black the doorman who used to be an engineer in his native Eastern European country; Albert, Alice, and Allen appear in this alphabetical sequence, beyond which their significance amounts merely to tautological events—the time Oskar met an actor, the time Oskar met an artist, and the time Oskar met a doorman who is not Stan (his doorman) or Farley (Grandma’s doorman). To be sure, three of the Blacks serve more significant roles: old Mr. Black becomes Oskar’s geriatric companion on his search, and Abby Black reveals important information that leads Oskar to her husband, William Black, who is the last Black Oskar visits. Nonetheless, by virtue of their last names, they are relegated to the marginal (though important) category of people who help Oskar (and the narrative) by being checkpoints on his
scavenger hunt; they are each, at best, “a gear within the narrative machine, at the cost of his or her own free interiority” (Woloch 25). The novel works by accumulating experience through little encounters with these minor characters.\textsuperscript{13} These minor characters can be read as cute objects in their own right. Like the cute object that is reduced and abstracted away from “realist verisimilitude and formal precision,” these characters have “simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or detail”; in fact, “the less formally articulated the commodity, the cuter” (Ngai 64). More importantly, Ngai’s cute object should additionally exhibit the capacity to be distorted or deformed: the cute is “a small, helpless, or deformed object” (Ngai 78) whose “soft contours suggest pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others” (Ngai 64). Without considering this element of distortion, Ngai’s description would merely be a variation of the objectified worker, who is equated with his abstract labor power; by emphasizing distortion, Ngai takes us back to Woloch’s description of the minor character. According to Woloch, novels produce a disjoint between characters’ “personality” and “presence”; they dissociate “the full weight of interior character from its delimited, distorted exterior manifestation” in limiting or distorting full personalities in narrative representation (Woloch 24). To be coherent and present an elaborated “singular, central consciousness,” novels have to “radically delimit and distort the exterior manifestation of ‘roundness and fullness’” (Woloch 24). Beyond the word “distort,” Woloch’s elaboration of the two main symptoms of descriptive distortion resonates with the squishy bobbishness of the cute object: “the engulfing of an interior personality by the delimited signs that express it and the explosion of the suffocated interior being into an unrepresentable, fragmentary, symptomatic form”

\textsuperscript{13} The parade of “Blacks” consists of: Aaron, Abby, Abe, Ada, Agnes, Albert, Alice, Allen, Arnold, Barbara, Barry, Bernie, Chelsea, Don, Eugene, Fo, Georgia, Iris, Jeremy, Kyle, Lori, Mark, Nancy, Ray, Ruth, Peter, and William.
(Woloch 24). Like the cute object that, when poked, either crushes into itself or pops like a balloon, the minor character either “engulfs” or “explodes.”

But if the flatness of minor characters on the one hand reveals their objecthood and on the other speaks of abstractness, the non-sensuous abstractness of this latter aspect is compensated for by the book’s concrete materiality. Indeed, with the material minutiae conveyed in the book, the novel’s cuteness involves drawing our attention to its materiality—its actual objecthood—and thus the general material experience of reading. Like the cute, the book draws attention to the sensuousness of the commodity, inviting us “to ‘grasp’ the commodity as a product of concrete human labor” (Ngai 66). Let us then retrace our steps to where we began with Oskar’s introductory inventions and take another step back: the novel begins not with the text but with the book cover (see Figure 2). The book cover, with its large, red outline of a hand, invites us to hold it. More than an invitation, it demands. How else would we read it? The book also demands us, by interrupting the printed text at regular intervals, to flip through the photos that Oskar takes with his Grandpa’s camera on his city-wide search. Finally, as the book closes, it demands us to flip through the final

Fig. 2: Jacket cover of first US edition published by Houghton Mifflin (left) and movie poster (right)
pages of a man falling from a skyscraper in reverse sequence. The cute object that induces adult observers to coo “seems to have the power to infantilize the language of its infantilizer” (Ngai 87). Likewise, the book exerts a sort of control over its readers; it is “capable of making surprisingly powerful demands” (Ngai 64) on its readers in getting them to do things to the material book: Touch me here, or Flip me, we can imagine it saying, just as some stuffed toys come with tags that say Hug me.

Though one might say that touching and flipping the pages of the book is what one does with other books anyway, that the book is not calling for the reader to do anything involuntary, we should note that the book attempts, in its mimetic materiality, to be those other book objects that it represents. By flipping through the photos of people and things, we are mirroring Oskar’s action in perusing his scrapbook; we are, in reading, automatically placed in Oskar’s position, a physical correlate of our implied sympathy. The book’s material demands are thus particularly significant: the book’s commodity aesthetic is central to its sympathetic function. But beyond sympathizing, we might feel that the book, in forcing such a sympathetic position on us through the physical things we do to it, is trying too hard, like the gimmick. Recall that the gimmick charms and irritates because it is both labor-intensifying and labor-saving: “it seems both to work too hard and work too little” (Ngai 472). While the book forces us to place ourselves in Oskar’s position via mimesis, it does so by using means that come all too easily; as we have already established, holding the book and flipping through its pages are automatic and necessary in the physical act of reading. When we encounter a cute object, we do not have to coo or mimic the cute object’s infantilized speech, though that is what we do on impulse; that we do this without actually being forced to do so speaks to the cute object’s power to compel. Less compelling and without such power of cuteness, the book’s materially sympathetic function does not compel a unique set of mimetic acts.
Instead, it relies on actions that we also do with other books—but with other books, simply holding them does not force us into sympathetic positions. The book’s gimmicky materiality, in this way, does not work hard enough to induce sympathy.

II. **Blunt Modernism**

Speaking of the book’s blunt force (merely on the surface, rather than the true penetrative force of the cute) in contrast with cuteness’s potency, the cute is also noted for its power to retaliate through its self-reification or “hyperintensification of the thingishness of things” (Ngai 105).¹⁴ This is what differentiates the kitsch from the ugly: one is self-aware of its ugliness while the other is in plain bad taste. This is also what characterizes the cuteness of the modernist avant-garde, according to Ngai:

> Based on its smallness (size of audience as well as membership), incompleteness (gap between stated intentions and actual effects), and vulnerability (to institutional ossification), these challenges to the agency of the avant-garde seem especially pronounced in the case of its production of poetry, the literary genre most associated with intimate address (lyric), with unusually small, lapidary, objectlike texts (imagism/ objectivism), and unusually “tender” speech. We can thus see why cuteness might be explicitly mobilized by the poetic avant-garde as a meditation on its own restricted agency, as well as on the fetishization of its texts. (97)

Foer has capitalized on modernist-like techniques and the early-20th century movement’s avant-garde self-awareness to bring us, in the 21st century, “a meditation on its own restricted agency.” But this “meditation,” far from being a mindful process, is very much the central commodity of the novel: imperfect communication is the poignant strategy of Foer’s sentimentality.

For example, Thomas Sr. encourages Grandma to write her own life story on a typewriter; despite initially protesting that “[her] eyes are crummy,” she spends months of waking up at 4 A.M. and “putting all of her life into her life story” to

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¹⁴ The gimmick, too, is a commodity par excellence, pretending to be something other than itself—a genuinely labor-saving device—but not claiming to be more than an object.
produce “two thousand white pages” (124). Blankness is itself a lack of communication that communicates something: “blankness is the story. It always signifies the death’s erasure of language, the speechlessness of grief” (Serpell 278). In other words, “blankness” is the by-now cliché sentiment that one’s thoughts or emotions are overwhelmingly ineffable or beyond expression; or more simply, it is an internal emptiness translated onto page. Whether too much or nothing at all, both clichés yield a nothingness, an absence on the page that can nonetheless be translated into “a legible affective presence” (Serpell 271). Blankness is also a form of miscommunication. Thomas Sr. thinks that the blank pages are his mistake—he had forgotten to replace the typewriter’s ribbon (124); Grandma later reveals to us, however, that the blankness was intentional: “[she] told him [her] eyes were crummy, because [she] wanted him to pay attention to [her]” and also that she merely “pretended to write… [she] hit the space bar again and again,” because her life was full of empty spaces (176). Instead of comprehending the true motivation behind Grandma’s poignant empty spaces, Thomas Sr. feels guilty for failing to provide the ink with which Grandma is to write her life story. When Thomas Sr. refers to the blank sheets in his letter to his son, “I realized your mother couldn’t see the emptiness” (124), we detect great irony: it is he who could not see the emptiness that she was intending to set on the page. But Foer’s solution is conveniently neat: in a way, Thomas Sr.’s guilt is, after all, not misplaced; he does fail to provide the proverbial ink or visible content of Grandma’s life story. Thomas Sr.’s failure to fill Grandma’s emotional void is translated into a logistical failure that has the same written effect of blankness. This miscommunication, paradoxically, successfully communicates Grandma’s intended message of emptiness and guilt. With that, Foer has turned the potential of emptiness’s self-reifying resistance into an empty self-

15 These blank sheets are replicated for us to see in the book, pages 121-123.
reifying indulgence: imperfect communication is something one cannot resolve, and indeed, one that does not need resolving; it resolves itself in magical ways through the literal reading of material emptiness.

In another instance, Thomas Sr. arrives back in New York on the day of his son’s funeral. He calls Grandma from a payphone in the airport, and because he has lost his words, he can only dial his message alphabetically using the numbers that correspond to the alphabets on the alphanumeric keypad. (The book’s most common alphanumeric motif is 2-6-6-2, for “Anna,” Grandma’s sister and Thomas Sr.’s lover before her death in the bombing of Dresden.) Hearing only random-sounding beeps, Grandma suspects it is a prank call—she asks if this is “a joke” (272). On our end, we experience the obverse: we see Thomas Sr.’s intentions, so we understand that it is not a prank; however, when confronted with pages of numbers that do not seem to mean anything, we become victims of a prank indeed. Some of us may try to decipher the first few lines of numbers, but all if not most of us would give up trying by the end of the first page. The numbers pose a riddle that cannot be solved, and in so doing, they overwhelm us and draw us into the circuit of impossible communication. But instead of feeling frustrated by the impossibility of deciphering the numbers, the ridiculousness (some of us might rightfully ask, “Is this a joke?”) of the sprawling numbers (269-271) make it easy for us to resign comfortably to not knowing what those numbers mean—they might as well be the numbers after the first five digits of the mathematical constant $\pi$. As Namwali Serpell observes, “while its pages are often literally illegible, the novel remains readable. It affords skimming and scanning—the elided information scarcely matters” (277). With this wonder-turned-trick, we are released from the heights of the ineffable onto a surface-level amusement at the number-filled pages that turn resistive communication into an all-too-obvious cliché.
This leads us back to the gimmick. The gimmick is a wonder and a trick that achieves its initial goal through an unexpected route (a labor-intensifying one) rather than through a straightforward route (a labor-saving one) suggested by its initial promise. Like the gimmick, the objects in the book that serve as testament to imperfect (or impossible) communicative acts are resolved by neat coincidences and easy explanations; the gaps in communication that could pose questions for “meditations” are closed, or even foreclosed, before any avant-garde potential of cuteness is realized. In hiding behind the name of the modernist avant-garde, Foer commodifies the movement’s prestige into an indulgence in the cute, blunts its potential to resist closed meanings, and cheapens it into an excuse for literariness.

III. Bridge Over Troubled Water

This novel gathers a sort of “family” of Blacks, as mentioned earlier, and it does so through Oskar’s expeditions around the five boroughs of New York City. Some of these Blacks end up unwittingly doing what family does: go to their relative’s school performance—in this case, a rendition of Hamlet, in which Oskar plays Yorick. But this is the closest they get to becoming a family, and moreover, a family that does not actually include Oskar—he is not himself a “Black.” The Blacks, then, draw our attention to the gap in the familial circuit that Oskar needs to fill: “Black,” after all, suggests a general lack, void or cancellation (“blacked out”) that calls out to be filled, replaced, or at least traversed. I want to suggest that Oskar’s role in the novel is similar to the speaker-bridge of the folk lyric. Oskar does it all: he bridges the generational and communicative gaps in the novel, and in so doing, produces a neat solution for a family fragmented by World War Two and 9/11.

Apart from the interjecting pages of photos from Oskar’s scrapbook, the novel’s narrative material or fragments can be categorized into three parts: Oskar’s
narration, Thomas Sr.’s letters to his son (spanning 1963 to 2003), and Grandma’s letters to Oskar (written in 2003). We seem to have three focalizers: Oskar, Thomas Sr. and Grandma; the novel seems to be multiply focalized, “as in epistolary novels, where the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several letter-writing characters” (Genette 190). These parts are neatly arranged such that chapters narrated by Oskar stand as the go-betweens to letters written by Thomas Sr. and Grandma: the first chapter is narrated by Oskar, the second is presented through Thomas Sr.’s perspective, the third through Oskar’s, the fourth through Grandma’s, and so on. As explained in the previous section, Thomas Sr. and Grandma’s relationship is characterized by impossible communication; and so the ball never passes directly from Thomas Sr. to Grandma—it is always mediated and relayed by Oskar. This pattern is quadruplicated, until the narrative rests finally with Oskar in the seventeenth (and last) chapter. But upon further consideration, we may not strictly call Thomas Sr. and Grandma narrators—they never actually narrate—instead, we only get their perspective through their letters. And access through their letters is gained through Oskar as focalizer. So what superficially seems like a multiply focalized narrative is, rather, one that employs a fixed focalization (through Oskar).

Moreover, in Oskar’s narrative, the polyphony of Thomas Sr. and Grandma’s narratives is unified: “the antithetical features of his two grandparents,” which Serpell identifies as letter-writing (Thomas Sr.’s letters to his son) and gaps in hearing or writing (Grandma’s textual gaps) are incorporated into Oskar’s narration—his fan mail and his imperfect eavesdropping (203-207; Serpell 275). Oskar’s is a compromise formation of Thomas Sr. and Grandma’s different styles.

Unsurprisingly, Oskar gets the last word not just discursively but also chronologically, on the level of story: after resolving the mystery of the key, after digging up his father’s grave and filling his coffin with Thomas Sr.’s letters, after
Thomas Sr. and Grandma are reunited at the airport, after all these resolutions, Oskar returns home and gets ready for bed. It is in his narration that the tensions between narrating and narrative, between discourse and story—the temporal disjoints in the three different narratives that animate the novel—are reconciled. But to complicate things, this reconciliation flirts with the idea of negation, threatening to undo the events that lead up to that moment: Oskar sits in bed thinking about what could have been and about time reversal. He wants to go back to the start and to undo his father’s death, in other words, to cancel the problem that the narrative attempts to resolve. He reverses the order of sequential shots of a man falling from a skyscraper (as we are similarly invited to flip through in the pages following Oskar’s last word) such that “the last one was first, and the first was last” (325). To him, this seems like “the man was floating up through the sky” (325)—reversal is tied with transcendence. Indeed, Oskar goes beyond the reversed images and indulges in a fantasy where the disaster unhappens, so to speak: the man “would’ve flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would’ve poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of” (325). His father too, “would’ve taken the elevator to the street and pressed the button for the top floor,” and going forward backwards, “would’ve gone backward through the turnstile, then swiped his Metrocard backward, then walked home backward as he read the *New York Times* from right to left” (326). But this is futile, since we know it is impossible to turn back time (and sentimental to entertain such a fancy), and also because the “problem” of the narrative goes back to before Oskar’s time.

“The last one was first, and the first was last” is the reigning fantasy of the novel. With this tautology presented in such a way that resembles a chiasmus—Last-first-first-last; A-B-B-A—we are reminded of another rhetorical figure, the palindrome: for example, “Anna” and “Dad.” Indeed, both prominent actors in the
novel, Thomas Sr. and Oskar, are moved by the loss of these two absent figures, Anna and Dad. The resolution that the novel achieves must be two-pronged: it is not just Oskar who should be reconciled with the loss of his father, but also Thomas Sr. who has to let go of Anna, for whom Grandma is a mere substitute. The “problem” of the novel thus begins not with the beginning of Oskar’s bedtime story—he imagines his Dad beginning, “Once upon a time…” (326)—but with the story of Anna.

If we go back in time, through Thomas Sr.’s narrative, we see that the problem is raised with the first instance that can be classified as an end—the end of innocence, or the first “death”:

I was in her for only a second before I burst into flames, she whimpered, Mr. Goldberg stomped his foot and let out a cry like a wounded animal, I asked her if she was upset, she shook her head no, I fell onto her, resting my cheek against her chest, and I saw your mother’s face in the second-floor window, “Then why are you crying?” I asked, exhausted and experienced, “War!” Mr. Goldberg said, angry and defeated, his voice trembling: “We go on killing each other to no purpose! It is war waged by humanity against humanity, and it will only end when there’s no one left to fight!” She said, “It hurt.” (127-128)

In this passage, Thomas Sr. recounts the first time he and Anna made love behind the bookshelves while her father and his friend, Goldberg, were having a conversation in the same room about war and the world’s transformation. Thomas Sr.’s transformative “[bursting] into flames” at the moment of orgasm is juxtaposed against the less cathartic, more ambivalent expressions of Anna’s whimper and, in the background, Goldberg’s ejaculation “like a wounded animal.” Sex and war are intermingled, though the latter seems to dominate the former: Anna’s whimper, her sobbing, and her admission that “it hurt,” all suggest a problematic intercourse where one party’s pleasure dominates the other’s pain. Indeed, we find out later that such circumstances are not fortuitous or fruitful: Anna dies, in the Dresden bombings, shortly after she gets pregnant (215). The problem is thus set up: “hours before [Thomas Sr.] lost everything, [he] had everything” (215)—how is he going to recover
his losses? The solution is unwittingly conceived in this same passage; Anna and the “wounded animal” find their substitutes eventually, and we realize this thanks to Grandma’s narrative. Among the participants in the scene described above is Grandma—Thomas Sr. remembers “[seeing her] face in the second-floor window” (127)—whose account is important in putting Oskar-as-solution into perspective. Goldberg’s “wounded animal” cry is almost identical—at least descriptively—to Oskar’s when Dad’s empty coffin is lowered into the ground: according to Grandma, Oskar “let out a noise like an animal... [He was] a wounded animal” (232).16 Grandma remembers and has formed an association between the scene of lovemaking and the noise of a wounded animal; she wants to go back to that scene and relive it: she writes, “The noise is still in my ears. It was what I had spent forty years looking for, what I wanted my life and life story to be” (232).

But Grandma also wants to relive the scene differently. Though Oskar and Goldberg’s “wounded animal” noises are alike, they are also different: Grandma claims, “I had never heard anything like it” (232). Indeed, the solution to the abortive intercourse of sex and war is not more sex and war. After Thomas Sr. marries Anna’s sister, Grandma, they have a child, Oskar’s Dad. But like Anna’s unborn child, Dad dies before Thomas Sr. is reconciled with his loss; in fact, Thomas Sr. estranges himself and never does meet his namesake, Thomas Jr. This means that even when Thomas Jr. was alive, Thomas Sr. and Anna’s sister (Grandma) never fulfilled the expectation of a nuclear family. The word “And”—the second word, we are told, that Thomas Sr. loses (16)—is particularly symbolic in this case. After losing Anna and the word “Anna,” Thomas Sr. loses connectivity to any productive familial unit represented by “And.” “And” is evasive. Neither “Anna” nor “Dad” alone can spell

16 The fact that the “wounded animal” is the nexus at which both Thomas Sr. and Grandma’s narratives converge is particularly relevant to the novel’s sentimental aspect. The “wounded animal” evokes tenderness in the perceiver, just as Oskar, dealing with the loss of Dad, compels and interpellates the earnest reader through the reflexive infantilization of cuteness.
“And”; it takes both, as absent presences in the novel, to spell it out through a retrospective gaze. It takes both Anna and Dad to make Oskar. It takes Anna to raise the problem—the fullness of love and the promise of a happy family that heighten the devastation—and it takes Dad to fill the role of Anna’s unborn child, if not himself, then through Oskar. Only after Anna and Dad’s stories do we get to the novel’s present moment, when Thomas Sr. finds something that resembles a nuclear family: he, Grandma, and Oskar. The solution to the evasive “And” turns out thus to be “Oskar,” something that looks like a stretched-out “Or”: a substitute with a difference, one that recovers a traumatic loss after a protracted duration. Oskar is thus both substitute and bridge, both “Or” and “And.” He is the deferred symbolic resolution of a problem that began with Anna: he fills the void in the nuclear-familial circuit—the “next generation”—left by Anna’s unborn child and Dad. Indeed, in the same letter that Grandma recalls Oskar’s “wounded animal” noise, she writes, “When I looked at you, my life made sense. Even the bad things made sense. They were necessary to make you possible… My parents’ lives made sense. My grandparents’. Even Anna’s life” (232). It is hard to paraphrase this without sounding grandiose, because Grandma’s claim is grandiose: Oskar gives meaning to his family’s existence; he encapsulates his family’s essence.

The prestige endowed upon the “next generation” is compounded by the marked emphasis that the novel places on the figure of the child. If this is a novel about dealing with the trauma of 9/11 while growing out of childhood innocence into young adulthood, Oskar’s final word speaks of both failure and success. That he still imagines a world where “we would have been safe” suggests that he has not, even after his long-drawn exploration, after meeting the diverse characters of New York City, come to terms with the vicissitudes of life. But Foer capitalizes on Oskar’s failure as the novel’s ultimate sentimental moment: failure in individual maturity is met with
success in reconciling familial ties. The family is complete because Oskar is a child, even if this means he remains childlike at the very end. Sentimentality depends on counting this simultaneous success and failure not as contradictory but as complementary; it is ultimately regressive in content—nostalgic for a better past, resolving past conflicts—and infantile in form—the wishful thinking, a combination of innocence and imagination, that is permitted and indulged in a child. It insists that the child as symbol of posterity, in bridging the present and the future, serve also a memorializing role in extending its other hand to bridge the present to the past.

IV. *Filius ex machina*

In this way, the child is alpha and omega, “first” and “last,” beginning and end. Given the child’s association with such abstract totality, we can conceive of the child as *filius ex machina*, a device that resolves the narrative. Oskar as a child-sized variant of *deus ex machina* is much hinted not just through his resolving the familial gaps or absences (of Anna and Dad) but also through Grandma’s narration. As mentioned earlier, Oskar makes everything—his entire familial history—make sense; he fills the gaps in Grandma’s earlier emptiness. In contrast to her earlier (in 1963) life story’s blankness, she now (in 2003) writes:

> The words are coming so easily.  
> The pages are coming easily.  
> At the end of my dream, Eve put the apple back on the branch. The tree went back into the ground. It became a sapling, which became a seed. God brought together the land and the water, the sky and the water, the water and the water, evening and morning, something and nothing. He said, Let there be light. And there was darkness.  
> Oskar. (313)

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17 This variation on *deus ex machina* is inspired in part by Sianne Ngai’s own revision, “*guné ex machina,*” which she uses in her discussion of Helen DeWitt’s *Lightning Rods* in “Theory of the Gimmick.”
The reversion to and reversal of biblical time inflates the scale of Oskar’s importance to not just the level of family, city, or nation, but to all mankind. Oskar has come after everything was lost, but he had also come before everything even was or is. He is the presence to the absence, and here he is also the “absence”—or more strictly speaking, the chaos—from which all presences derive. Grandma’s belief in such hyperbole draws attention not just to the content of her address—the importance of this child—but the form of her address—a letter to a child. In this letter to Oskar, she adopts a form of address characterized by hyperbole, the same kind of rhetoric that operates on a childlike register, and which provides the novel with its title’s “extremely” and “incredibly.” By rendering Oskar godlike, this passage also emphasizes the child’s power (as object) to affect the language of the one (the subject) addressing him. This brings us back yet again to the cute object’s “power to infantilize the language of its infantilizer” (Ngai 87).

But more than just an object, a gimmick is a device that performs a certain function. Oskar’s function as gimmick is to produce sentimental effects through infantilizing readers. We might consider the novel’s cute gimmick in relation to Viktor Shklovsky’s “Art as Device,” in which he claims,

> In order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant. (6)

Foer’s novel, through its mixture of text and material artifacts, through its interposing and juxtaposing of the two, through its attempts to recover text’s material sensuousness, “enstranges” the form of the conventional novel. However, it makes the supposedly trivial artifact quite important: the medium is more interesting than the content; like the gimmick, the novel’s artifactual contents are “bits of business for
performing aesthetic operations that we somehow become distracted into regarding as aesthetic objects in their own right” (Ngai 466). Moreover, instead of making perception “long and laborious,” the novel’s unconventional aspects—the interjection of Oskar’s scrapbook pages, the generous spaces in Grandma’s letters, and the “special effects” in some of Thomas Sr.’s letters—make perception quick and easy. Recall the blank pages and undecipherable numbers: indeed, Serpell notes, the novel’s “visual ‘stuff’ tends to repeat the narrative ‘stuff’… while its pages are often literally illegible, the novel remains readable. It affords skimming and scanning—the elided information scarcely matters” (276-277). This is exactly the kind of “automatized perception” that Shklovsky warns against. In addition, Shklovsky’s art device is decidedly temporal: “The object is perceived not spatially but, as it were, in its temporal continuity” (Shklovsky 12); in contrast, Foer’s post-modernist novel is decidedly spatial: the uniform alternation between different narratives (of Thomas Sr., Grandma, and Oskar; of the past, the near past, and the present) places them on the same discursive plane through Oskar’s focalization. Time is flattened out in this novel and perceived not temporally—through pausing and dwelling in the text (Shklovsky 12)—but spatially, by flipping through the automatically perceivable and comprehensible material contents. In this way, the novel’s gimmick is “a way of speeding things up, even when it participates in the operational aesthetic of calling attention to the process by which it achieves its effect” (Ngai 482). Once again, as with the novel’s reified “meditation” on literature’s restricted agency, Foer has turned the modernist “enstranging” device into a postmodern labor-saving one. Like Ngai’s gimmick, the novel is the obverse of Shklovsky’s device. Instead of making the stone feel stony, this gimmick makes the reader feel like a child. The novel’s material elements are infantilizing: as explained in the first section, by placing our hand on the outline on the book cover, by flipping through the pages of the novel, we are actively
though unwittingly mirroring the act of the child flipping through his scrapbook; we are placed in a position of forced sympathy and equivalence with the child. Furthermore, in holding the book as such—our hands on the outline on the book cover—we mimic not just Oskar’s scrapbook-cradling but also Thomas Sr.’s Yes-and-No hands (see Figures 1 & 2). In so doing, we bring together both child and grandfather, Oskar and Thomas Sr.; we unwittingly complete the family (just as Oskar does) before the first word is even read—the visual gimmick is so labor-saving that we are unaware of any expenditure on our part.

In establishing the novel’s cute gimmickry in the first section, my emphasis has been on the cute object’s power to compel its perceiver to mirror its actions or speech; here, I want to stress the infantilizing aspect of such acts of mirroring. The ease of flipping explained in the previous paragraph is one example. Another sort of flipping happens at the end: the reverse-sequence shots of the falling man encourages us readers to imitate the child amusing himself with a flipbook. But one is likely to repeat the action more than once; one is likely to flip the sequence both backwards and forward to see the man falling and floating down and up. In this way, the man has become another childish plaything: a yoyo. By flipping back and forth the final images, we are activating the yoyo-man; we are infantilizing the falling man, and we are, in performing this yoyo trick, infantilized. Grandma’s claim of the child’s totalizing reach—he is beginning and end—is thus enacted, in this instance, through the infantilizing power of the infantile. Like the automatization that Shklovsky warns would “[eat] away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” (Shklovsky 5), the child-as-device turns everything it touches into mindless participants of the book’s playthings.

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18 I owe this observation to Matthew Garrett, who mentions noticeable discomfort in reading/flippping through the final pages of the book.
The material aspect of books, as implied in these previous examples of infantilization, becomes greatly important to our consideration of the ambivalent figure of the child. On the one hand, the child symbolizes posterity, the “next generation,” the future; on the other hand, the child is backward-looking, regressive, infantile and infantilizing. This ambivalence is brought into focus with concerns of materiality in the final chapter:

I felt in the space between the bed and the wall, and found *Stuff That Happened to Me*. It was completely full. I was going to have to start a new volume soon. I read that it was the paper that kept the towers burning. All of those notepads, and Xeroxes, and printed e-mails, and photographs of kids, and books, and dollar bills in wallets, and documents in files… all of them were fuel. Maybe if we lived in a paperless society, which lots of scientists say we’ll probably live in one day soon, Dad would still be alive. Maybe I shouldn’t start a new volume. (325)

Oskar’s choice to not start a new volume of “Stuff that Happened to Me” could be read as a sign of growing up, of understanding the foolishness of holding on the past by documenting daily life’s insignificant minutiae. But it is not; it reveals an anxiety from the realization that “all of them were fuel”: that printed matter, paper, the material of books, are threats to life. Instead of marching forth into maturity, he retreats back into sheltered timidity. The materiality of books is thus infantilizing yet again; like the cute object that possesses a certain power over its audience, the material book fuelled the fire that killed Dad, and because of that, it poses a threat to Oskar. But more importantly, material considerations provoke the hypothesis that “maybe if we lived in a paperless society, which lots of scientists say we’ll probably live in one day soon, Dad would still be alive.” Such a notion is paradoxical: put in other words, *in the future, we can go back to the way things were*. The temporality that Oskar imagines for material progression—towards a paperless society—is, like the figure of the child, both futuristic and regressive; and in itself, the temporality that Oskar imagines—a future where the past is possible—is also a product of childish fantasy.
The materiality of books—the book as object, as device—thus brings into focus futurity and childishness: in the previous paragraphs, it carries out the function of the child as a device for infantilization; here, it gives rise to a temporal paradox that represents the ambivalent figure of the child and highlights his stubborn fantasy.

With that said, the materiality of books is ultimately subordinate to the device of the child. The child, infantile in itself, is the main infantilizing device of the sentimental novel. We begin with the child, the focalizer of the novel, and follow him through the course of the novel: we view the events—even those mediated through Thomas Sr. and Grandma—through material collected and curated by the child. And we end with the child, by indulging in the fantasy of the floating (and falling) man and by yielding to the flip-book format of the final sequence of images. Throughout the novel, the reader is witness to the infantile and, in enacting the fantasy of the child’s imagination and its material/visual aide, is infantilized. The ending, in thematizing Oskar’s wish for the past, turns the figure of the child as a symbol of posterity into a figure of stubborn, regressive childishness; but instead of lamenting this backward-looking aspect as antithetical to the expectations of a conventional bildungsroman, the novel leaves sentimental readers to sit with and—by flipping the final pages—to enact this poignant fantasy.
2. A “Sentimental” Harvest

In what seems like a double act of confession and transgression, Kathy, the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, begins: “My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years” (3). Kathy is a clone who is raised, along with her best friends Ruth and Tommy, in a boarding school called Hailsham, where “students” are taught a progressive curriculum—one which includes aesthetic appreciation—before their organs are harvested for other “normal” uncloned humans. The novel’s organ harvesting industry depends on clones like Kathy staying in the shadows: “The world didn’t want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked” (264), and if they were reminded, “they tried to convince themselves [that the clones] weren’t really like [them]. That [the clones] were less than human, so it didn’t matter” (263). Hailsham’s success in cultivating clones like Kathy, who are capable of human feelings, is a transgression of the industry’s distancing decorum that eventually leads to its closure. Kathy’s role as a narrator who addresses us readers as if we are her equals is a transgression of that decorum too, and her transgression exposes not just the inhumanity of the novel’s organ harvesting industry, but also the system that hierarchizes clones and uncloned persons, fictional characters and real humans. As Marco Roth of *n+1* writes, “These cloned creatures are also known as characters (pieced together from real life humans), harvested and put through pain mostly for our sake.”

Through its first-person narration, the novel prompts us to recognize man’s simultaneous cruelty and frailty while artfully avoiding excessive tenderness or clichés. We get a glimpse of the inhumane world that, on the one hand, gave our narrator life, and on the other hand, will take it away. We hear from Kathy just a few months before she becomes a full-fledged donor; she looks back on her life, starting with her
days as a student at Hailsham, then a young adult preparing for donation at “the Cottages,” and then as a “carer”—a clone who provides aftercare for mobilized donors—before the final stage of her life. Despite the many ways this novel can be categorized (science fiction, bildungsroman, boarding-school novel, etc.), we are sure of its emotional effect: it is moving, melancholy, or as the current edition’s blurb announces, “devastating.” Nonetheless, the novel’s affective texture is laced with ambivalence: other than Roth’s suggestion that these characters are “put through pain mostly for our sake,” the novel also relies on a “sentimental” ideology that is shared between the novel’s dystopia and the real world.

In this chapter, I look at what the word “sentimental” means in the context of Ishiguro’s novel and how the novel’s grip on readers’ sympathies is an effect of its “sentimental” aspect. I argue that the opposition of part and whole—which is in the first instance driven by the expectation of familial belonging—makes up the “sentimental” relations, and that these “sentimental” relations are cruelly optimistic. Insofar as the “sentimental” indexes futile aspiration, I question the fatalism on which the novel depends for its pathos and emphasize that the “sentimental” relations to which the novel (and its protagonist Kathy) turns a skeptical eye is the very dynamic that drives it. Despite the promising initial transgression of Kathy’s first-person narration, the novel does not transcend the “sentimental” ideology but rather spreads it across concerns of personhood, family, care, and fate.

I. Character and Synecdoche

When explaining “the possibles theory,” one that is “simple” and “didn’t provoke much dispute,” Kathy utters a metaphysical and inadvertently metafictional profundity: “Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her own
life” (139). To go “out there” into what is for us a banal world—“the towns, shopping centres, transport cafés” (139)—is, for the donors, to enter a quasi-parallel universe full of “possibles,” the “normal” people Kathy and her friends were modeled from. And it is not just this that is uncanny. Like the 2005 novel’s “near future” set in the late 1990s, this quasi-parallel universe flirts with temporal contradiction: if you spot your “possible,” you could “glimpse your future” (139). “Out there” is not just full of “possibles” but possibilities, of “who you were deep down” and “what your life held in store” (140). So much for metaphysical questions dialed down to the level of childlike curiosity, of the undisputedly “simple,” of the banal.

Yet this simple description of “the possibles theory” points to, more interestingly, the “possibles theory” that we treat as banal and take for granted when we read sentimental fiction. When we sympathize with a fictional character, we treat her primarily as if she is a person, “a moral freedom endowed with motives and an overdetermination of meanings” rather than as a narrative figure, “an impersonal network of symbols combined under [a] proper name” (Barthes 94). Just as the models are ontologically prior to the donors in the novel, metafictionally, “the category of fictional character depends upon the prior category of human being” (Frow 71). We assume that, like the people we know from real life, fictional characters have individual personalities; or even when aware of the representational medium, we take for granted that they are “representation[s] of autonomous, unified, and self-identical subjects” (Frow 16). In other words, our “possibles theory” is that fictional characters are modeled after possibly real persons. To modify Kathy’s words, there must be, for each fictional character, somewhere out in the real world, a model getting on with his or her own life. If we adopt Adam Smith’s notion of sympathy, we see yet another level of modeling. For us to sympathize with a fictional character, to “enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some
idea of his sensations, and even feel something which… is not altogether unlike them” (Smith 12), our feelings would have to be modeled after those of the character’s, and in turn, the character modeled after a possibly real person. We sympathize despite our real-world convictions that fictional characters are not real human beings; when we read, we are not always conscious that characters are “affective recognition[s] induced in readers or viewers or players by the rhetorical action of texts” (Frow 25). We are all, in this sense, subscribers of the “possibles theory.”

That we assume this naturally—that fictional characters are possibly real persons—is akin to how some donors assume that there would be a “natural” generation between them and their models: they “thought you should be looking for a person twenty to thirty years older than yourself—the sort of age a normal parent would be” (139). According to Kathy, not all donors think this way; some donors call this “sentimental” (139). Calling something “sentimental,” even in the seemingly barefaced tone of Kathy’s narration, does not indicate earnest dismissal. Ruth, who claims it is “stupid to be concerned about possibles at all” (140), is a hopeless romantic searching for her desk-job “possible.” Indeed, Kathy admits, “all the same, whenever we heard reports of a possible—whoever it was for—we couldn’t help getting curious” (140). Like the donors, who cannot but be curious about their models and imagine them as people who are “natural” parents’ age, we cannot but imagine that these characters are possibly real persons, even if a part of us can critically acknowledge the characters’ fictional quality. If we extend the judgment of “sentimental” to our own readerly “possibles theory,” we may see that the “possibles theory” of fictional characters is inherently “sentimental.” In other words, this “sentimental” aspect is built into the form of reading; when we treat fictional characters as if they could be

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19 Interestingly, the use of “sentimental” here—the only occurrence of the word in the novel—invites comparison to the ambivalence of the “gimmick,” described by Sianne Ngai as “a distancing judgment, a way to apotropaically ward off, by publicly proclaiming ourselves unconvincing by, or impervious to [it]” (“Gimmick” 471).
real persons, we channel the donors’ attachment to the possibility of parent-aged models. It is not the objects of “natural” parent-aged model or possibly real person that are “sentimental”; the act of imagining, envisioning, or assuming a “natural” connection between model and clone, person and character, is the very thing that is “sentimental.” We apply the “possibles theory” to characters we sympathize with, and sympathy is predominant in sentimental fiction more than in other genres; but more importantly, the application of the “possibles theory” itself, the act of treating fictional characters as one would possibly real persons, is “sentimental.”

To be sure, such a judgment can be made about any act of reading and sympathizing with a fictional character. That is, after all, the basis of John Frow’s book-length exploration of the imaginative leap we take when we confuse the categories of fictional character and human person. But Ishiguro’s novel makes this a central concern by setting up the human person as a vexed category in itself. The donors are fictional characters, but they are not persons in the context of the novel; they lack the “sense of self” and “capacity for action” (Frow 24) that defines a “normal” uncloned person. Whatever limited “personhood” they are endowed with is severely circumscribed; they exist for the minimal function of keeping their organs alive and healthy for the waves of donations that will end their lives at their prime. The donors are narrative versions of the metafictional “person-shaped figure” (Frow 24) that is the fictional character; they are characters par excellence, insofar as they are copies of persons who are copies of persons, drawing our attention to the cloning that inheres in reading and writing narrative. Before we even think about how fictional characters are narrative functions, fictive personalities delimited by “a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole” (Woloch 14), we see already with the donors their delimited semblances of individuality. The donor does not possess “ownership and control of the self” (Frow 16); while the person is “a moral
freedom endowed with motives and *an overdetermination of meanings*” (Barthes 94, my emphasis), or an individual entity that is greater than the sum of his parts, the donor is nothing more than the sum of her parts.

In this way, the donor is once again the character par excellence, calling our attention to the fictional character as “a product of combinations,” combinations of “semes,” or units of signifiers (Barthes 67, 17). What causes our lapse into readerly “possibles theory,” our imagining or projecting an “excess of character over the formal means of its representation” or “an ideology of the person, one which allows the whole to be perceived as greater than its parts” (Frow 17), in other words, what invites us to attribute a surplus individuality or personality over the narratological function of the character, is the proper name:

What gives the illusion that the sum is supplemented by a precious remainder (something like *individuality*, in that, qualitative and ineffable, it may escape the vulgar bookkeeping of compositional characters) is the Proper Name, the difference completed by what is *proper* to it. The proper name enables the person to exist outside the semes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely. (Barthes 191)

The proper name “enables the person to exist outside the semes.” In the case of our narrator, we are surely invited to imagine a person existing beyond the semes. We are invited to imagine, with the first person narration, a human personality transcending the sum of her objectified body parts, which are cloned for consumption. The novel begins with the identification of our narrator that prompts also an identification with: “My name is Kathy H.” From the get go, we are given a proper name, a position of enunciation, to which we posit other affective content carried by semes as the narrative unfolds (Frow 38–41), “[drawing] the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) tense” (Barthes 67). “Kathy H” gives the character “biographical duration,” signifies the enunciating position as “an object with a destiny,” and gives “a meaning to time” (Barthes 68). Indeed, right after we get the name “Kathy H,” we
get a summative biography behind the “person” speaking: “I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years” (3). This is not a character that is just born on the first sentence at our moment of reading, or at Ishiguro’s moment of writing; this is a “person” with a backstory, a “biographical duration.” Is it not?

What is curious is the “H” that tags along with “Kathy.” Not all fictional characters who have proper names have last names; but we imagine them as persons “[existing] outside the semes” nonetheless. Kathy’s name, however, is a taunt: we get a last name without getting one. Is “H” a single-letter last name (pronounced “aych”), or is it the first letter of a longer last name? A trivial dot, conveniently placed, causes this ambiguity. “My name is Kathy H.” “Kathy H is my name,” or “Kathy H. is my name”? We are uncertain, until Kathy refers to herself in the third-person a few paragraphs later, and until other characters—fellow Hailsham students like “Jenny B.” or “Reggie D.” or “Susie K.”—appear with their last names abbreviated. For the first moments of the novel when identifying a position of enunciation is crucial, however, we get to indulge in the possible fantasy that “H” is Kathy’s bizarre but complete last name. Such speculation is no mere navel gazing; if we look at it more closely we might envisage an umbilical cord. Last names augment the biographical duration that proper names suggest; they imply a familial history, an inheritance by birth. Because of the semblance of a last name, a possible fragment untethered from any realistic (albeit fictional) one, we encounter ambivalence. On one hand, we might imagine a real last name hiding behind the “H.” and attribute a fuller personality to Kathy’s character; on the other hand, the emptiness of the abbreviation, or even the temporary absurdity of a single-letter last name, draws attention to the arbitrariness of affixing a proper name—and thus an individuality—to a fictional character, which is strictly speaking a combination of semes. And indeed, why should clones have real last names? The attempt to give them complete proper names by affixing last initials to
their first names only draws attention to such a contrivance; it emphasizes that they do not have families and that there is no “natural” parent-child generation between them and their models. “My name is Kathy H.” is thus not an innocent formulation; it is self-aware of the tension between character and person, between clone/donor and uncloned person/non-donor. In calling the impulse to attribute personality to character into question, Ishiguro decomposes our assumptions of character as a category that bears an excess of personality and lays bare their status as parts. In this way, we should remember that the taunt of getting a last name without getting one involves “sentimental” application of the “possibles theory” on two levels relating to the narrative categories of *story* and *discourse*: first, the aspiration of the clone towards a “natural” parent or ancestry connoted by the last name; and second, the aspiration of the fictional character towards real personhood.

To tie all the foregoing observations together, we can think of the “sentimental” as the enactment of synecdochic relations, which can be mapped out onto a diagram (see Figure 3 on following page). In the diagram, the boxes and arrows in *red* refer to entities on the level of *story*, and *blue*, to those of *discourse*. Kathy, as donor (and as fictional character), is technically the sum of her parts and nothing more; we nonetheless assume a human individuality beyond her transferable organs (S1) and a personality in excess of her narrative function (S2). Her last name, too, invites readers to imagine something more—a family history, a personality—than the part that is made known to us, that measly “H.” Kathy and her last name “H.” are thus synecdoches, parts that stand in for wholes, albeit—in this case—imaginary wholes. The way Alex Woloch describes the compressed minor character, “as synecdoches, as their outstanding quality is substituted for their entire personality, part for the whole” (Woloch 69), is in this case made literal with Kathy and her “H.” Kathy, as an organ donor living in a world that harvests organs, serves her utilitarian
In the story world of the novel, she is “minor,” along with the other donors with single-letter last names, insofar as she is good only for her organs. She is an expendable entity, made abstract and only phenotypically human rather than a full-fledged “normal” person. On the level of discourse, however, she occupies a central role; but if she does her job as defined on the level of story (i.e. if she does her job of minimizing “agitation” or remaining a donor in the margins, away from her
“normal” human beneficiaries) there would be no discourse (i.e. there would be no novel). In the narrative, as Kathy narrates her biographical past, from Hailsham to the Cottages to her current job as carer, we are invited to sympathize (to engage our moral sentiments) with her (M1); in order to do that, we first have to take her beyond her synecdochic function and treat her as if she is not merely good for her parts (S1), and then metafictionally, we have to take her beyond her narrative function as character, treating her as if she is a possibly real person (S2).

In addition to the synecdochic relations, we have metonymic relations that are distinct from the “sentimental,” since they do not represent optimistic attachments or aspirations to be more “whole,” but rather presume the sameness of parties involved. These metonymic relations are sympathetic relations; just as metonyms operate on contiguity and replacement (a subject taking the place of an adjacent object), when we sympathize with another person, we “enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (Smith 12). This can only happen when we treat the person we sympathize with as an equal (or when we recognize that our object of sympathy is a subject himself); in other words, in sympathetic relations or “fellow feeling,” both parties are of the same kind or of equal subjectivities, and are thus possible substitutes for each other. Particularity of the subject position disappears: when we “become in some measure the same person” as the person we sympathize with, our individuality is confused with that of the person we are sympathizing with. For example, when we imagine ourselves in Kathy’s plight, we suspend our conviction as reader-with-real-personal-background and replace it with that of Kathy-as-possibly-real-person (M1).

Indeed, in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the positions of sympathizing subject and object are confused; the subject cannot be imagined other than as an element in a transaction: “We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we
To give another example of this, one that additionally illustrates that the “sentimental” and the sympathetic are distinct, we may consider the novel’s use of the second-person pronoun. Early in the novel, Kathy insinuates an equality with us readers by addressing us in the second-person, as if we were donors too: “I don’t know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham…” (13). She does it elsewhere in the novel as well, for example, when she says “I don’t know if you had ‘collections’ where you were” (38). This amplifies Kathy’s proximity to us readers. We are to “enter as it were into [her] body,” in this case, without being “sentimental,” since we need not treat her as an uncloned person; Kathy engages our sympathy for what she is—a part, a donor—but by treating us as if we too are donors (M2). This way, the “sentimental” is distinct from the sympathetic; the synecdochic aspiration of part-becoming-whole involves a different directional assertion from that of the metonymic replacement of one subjectivity for another. However, this assumes that readers are fully interpellated by Kathy; that we may feel this proximity to Kathy as eerie is because we cannot totally forsake our position as reader (whole/person) for the position of clone (part/character). Insofar as we are invited to see ourselves as cloned parts, and thus ourselves as only metaphorically persons, the full effect of Kathy’s use of second-person pronoun depends on crossing the threshold of story and discourse, which involves yet again a “sentimental” synecdochic function (S3).

So though they might be analytically distinct, the sympathetic (M2) clings onto the “sentimental” (S3), and the “sentimental”/synecdochic feeds into the sympathetic/metonymic. Indeed, as mentioned before, there would be no narrative and no sympathetic relation between us readers and Kathy if not for the combination of synecdochic and metonymic relations S1 + S2 + M1. Moreover, the act of treating remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavor to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavoring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them… We endeavor to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it” (128–29).
synecdoches—parts serving wholes—as wholes in themselves relates to the anxiety of the novel’s uncloned people. Towards the end of the novel, Hailsham’s retired head guardian Miss Emily reveals to Kathy and Tommy the ugly truth about the world beyond the Hailsham bubble. At one point, she explains why programs that treated their donors more humanely ultimately failed: “It’s one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme. But a generation of created children who’d take their place in society? Children demonstrably superior to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people. They recoiled from that” (264). Kathy and the other Hailsham students are synecdoches, but at the same time, they represent the possibility of becoming metonyms (S1 + M3): if the novel’s infamous scientist James Morningdale’s ambition to create “children with enhanced characteristics” (263) comes to fruition, they might “take [uncloned people’s] place in society” (264). Clones are made to serve, not replace; Kathy’s role as protagonist and not minor character, as a person who we readers treat not as synecdoche but as whole, as an end in herself rather than a means to someone else’s restored health, attests to the potency of her synecdochic aspiration (S1) and actualizes the threat that the uncloned people see in clones as being equal (and maybe even superior) to them (M3). Additionally, the sympathy that guardians of Hailsham have for the donors (M3), the assumption of equal subjectivity that inspires the more humane treatment of clones, is the same metonymic relation that marks a fearful recoil. Therefore, we see that the combination of “sentimental” and sympathetic in S1 + M3 forms a dialectic: it can lead to either the erection of humane institutions or the destruction thereof. On the one hand, it is the combination on which “progressive,” more caring, humane institutions like Hailsham are based; on the other hand, it is also the combination on which the opposing conservative viewpoint of fear is based.
II. Care and Cruel Optimism

I want to suggest that this combination of synecdochic and metonymic relations, in other words, this combination of “sentimental” upward mobility and sympathetic contiguity, is one of two ways to see care as a dialectical relation. To flesh out the other, more pertinent, type of dialectical care—care that is nurturing but also destructive—in greater detail, we should work inductively by looking at what being a “carer” means to Kathy.

We can begin this further investigation by looking at Kathy’s situation, as a part aspiring towards a whole, in another way: we see her as an individual looking for connection to something greater. Remember that the abbreviated last names of Kathy and other Hailsham students betray fantasies of not merely personality but personality tied to family: their last names straddle the practical likelihood of arbitrarily assigned alphabet and the more optimistic possibility of belonging to a “natural” bloodline. Ruth’s search for her “model” complements Kathy’s private fantasy that gives the book its title; both reveal the characters’ attachments to the notion of parenthood—either to have a parent or to be a parent. Its title already suggesting the fragility of the ties that bind, “Never Let Me Go” is a fictional song which seems to have only one important—and importantly ambiguous—line: “Oh baby, baby, never let me go…” We might ask, as Kathy has anticipated, “What was so special about this song?” She explains:

What I’d imagine was a woman who’d been told she couldn’t have babies, who’d really, really wanted them all her life. Then there’s a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: “Baby, never let me go…” partly because she’s so happy, but also because she’s so afraid something will happen, that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her. Even at the time, I realized this couldn’t be right, that this interpretation didn’t fit with the rest of the lyrics. But that wasn’t an issue with me. The song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I got the chance. (70)
Kathy misinterprets the given lyric fragment, the semblance of personhood expressed by the song, and indulges in a fantasy of parenthood. But her agency is curtailed. In her misinterpretation, she grants a miracle to someone in her plight—“a woman who’d been told she couldn’t have babies”—so she can imagine, at best, parental bliss threatened by bodily limitation or by a nameless bureaucracy—“she’s so afraid something will happen, that the baby will get ill or be taken away.”

In some way, we all misinterpret—for instance, we misinterpret character as person—so that we can imagine and temporarily inhabit a world where the rules that govern our world are held in suspension. But in this novel all fantasy is dampened. Our dystopia is one in which characters aspire towards banality: they want to be normal like us. Kathy imagines a world where the “natural” role of parenting applies and extends to her; hers is a fantasy that plays out “not at a grandiose scale but evokes a scene of an entirely imaginable normalcy” (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 163). Moreover, while the ceiling is lowered, the ground is untenable; her fantasy world is not just based on our banal reality but still very much inflected by her sad reality: she cannot completely remove the threats of her bodily limitation or the nameless bureaucracy that will take away her baby, her organs, and her life. Her assertion of her personality through misinterpretation—“the song was about what I said”—is caught in between her familial aspiration and her actual social position; she grants herself a fantasy, but one of narrow straits, somewhere between our banal reality and her bleak one, such that her insistence on a sense of fulfillment through parenting is tamed on arrival.

Ruth, too, fantasizes about normalcy: her wildest dream, as seen in a magazine advertisement, is to work in a “beautifully modern open-plan office with three or four people who worked in it having some kind of joke with each other” (144); she is also thrilled that her “possible” works a desk-bound job in Norfolk. If the “sparkling” and “gleaming” advertisement (144) of bureaucratic drudgery is already a too-ideal
enticement for normal people, for Ruth it is wholly out of reach. And the idea that such banalities are out of reach for Ruth and Kathy but oh-so-normal for us underscores the kind of “sentimental” upward mobility regarding family or career that is delimited, scaled down in the novel.

Indeed, the unnamed bureaucracy of the novel provides Kathy with a position that answers her impulse to care under a looming threat. We should note that her fantasy of domesticity is not necessarily bound to a grandiose fantasy of surpassing her biological limits to childbearing: she relies on “a sort of miracle,” and though the miracle yields a baby, it does not give her the wherewithal to be continually fertile and thus essentially capable of motherhood. The miracle does not allow her to transcend her biological and social situation as donor/clone. For her, the domestic fantasy centers not on reproduction, but on care: the joy of holding a baby and sheltering it from an uncaring world. It makes sense, then, to read Kathy’s introduction—“I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years” (3)—as one that conveys some sense of fulfillment. Her position as carer allows her to enact her quasi-maternal impulse while remaining true to the dictates of her biological and social existence as an organ donor. Her job is to keep her donors “calm,” to prevent them from getting “agitated” (3). She develops a knack for it, knowing “when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it” (ibid.). Her job as carer is to moderate the human emotional impulses of her “agitated” donors, which requires her to synthetically modulate the extent of her sympathy with them as the situation dictates. But when sympathy becomes a profession, the tenderness that she rehearses with each time she listens to “Never Let Me Go” ossifies; it turns from a pure caretaking impulse into an unsympathetic bargain with a world that denies her parenthood. The notion that parenting (or its compromise, caring for donors) is a fulfilling role is illusory in
this novel, where feeling fulfilled sounds uncomfortably close to being “complete,” the term used when a donor dies and is exhausted of her real utilitarian function.

As Bruce Robbins observes, for Kathy, “the best will always be made of a bad situation, with no acknowledgment that the situation will always be bad because the same system has also begotten it” (Robbins 205). Considering the unfair compromise Kathy is forced to make between being a nurturing mother and being a donor, the pride she takes in being a carer is alarming. In explaining her long career as carer, she claims part of her reward, initially modestly, saying “I’m not trying to boast,” and then “Okay, maybe I am boasting now” (3). Boasting rights is a reward; being satisfied enough to say “I do know for a fact they’ve been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too” (3) is a reward; being able to “pick and choose who I look after” (4), a right that normal people take for granted, is a reward. The position of carer upholds the illusion that Kathy’s service has its rewards, that it runs on reciprocity rather than servitude. In this case, Kathy’s “ingratiating consciousness that the reward system is unfair” is set alarmingly “against her breathtaking unconsciousness of the much greater unfairness that underlies it” (Robbins 205). We should be skeptical about Kathy’s (and our own) straightforward assumption of care: “Caring gives a grateful semblance of meaning and legitimacy to the stopgap efforts of every day. How can it not be right to care?” (Robbins 203) Kathy, in expressing satisfaction with the ordinariness of her job, her car, her living situation, and her freedom to choose who she cares for, has fallen prey to the “minor restitutions” of a severely unjust and wholly exploitative system. Her pride in being an effective carer shows her as “cravenly accepting of monstrously limited expectations, dedicated to suppressing all ‘agitation’ at the deep injustice that underlies the system as a whole” (Robbins 205).

In indirectly supporting the system that unjustly prevents her flourishing as a person, an end rather than a means, Kathy is caught in an optimistic relation that is
cruel. As a carer who is blinkered by the illusion of reward, reciprocity, and upward mobility in a system that in actuality regards her as nothing more than commodity, she is, as Lauren Berlant would say, “maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant 24). While Robbins focuses on the unjust system, or the content of the attachment, for Berlant, the emphasis of this cruel optimism—that “the best will always be made of a bad situation” (Robbins 205)—is on the form of the attachment, not its content: “Whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 24). It matters less that Kathy is attached to trivial restitutions from an unjust system than that her optimism is what keeps her alive in the first place: “Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism’s negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unequally, incoherently” (Berlant 14). We may not be totally cynical about Kathy’s blind support for the system at the cost of “negotiated sustenance,” because “the fear is that the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything” (ibid.), which, in Kathy’s case, includes the capacity to have any hopes of removing herself (and other donors) from the claws of the unjust system.

Thus, we have here a dialectics of care. While the earlier dialectic involves the care that Hailsham provides and detractors rescind, one that involves both synecdochic/"sentimental” and metonymic/sympathetic relations (S1 + M3), here we are concerned mainly with the “sentimental” direction of upward mobility (S1), of Kathy’s aspiration towards normalcy and towards performing maternal care. In this sense, we are now dealing with care as a centrally “sentimental” problem. Recall that the word “sentimental” is used in the context of aspiration for a “natural” generation,
hence a family relation that would reinforce one’s individual personality. The word “sentimental” bundles the cluster of concerns relating to family (non-person versus person) and part versus whole, including the directional relation between these poles—synecdochic aspiration, upward mobility, reward, and now, care. Care, in the form of being a carer, is a way for Kathy to uphold the illusion that she is moving along a synecdochic line towards being “whole” (S1), towards the normalcy of her car, her job, her freedom to choose who to care for. Care is thus “sentimental” in the movement that it tracks towards fulfillment, in its illusory status, and in its futile investments. On the one hand, the “sentimental” aspect of care sustains both the donors under Kathy’s care and herself; on the other hand, through the ideology of upward mobility—that care is a reciprocal arrangement with its rewards—it also sustains the system that is set on cancelling her life. Be part of the system or die; or, be part of the system and die. The scene is truly ambivalent, uneven and incoherent.

This sounds bleak—dystopian indeed—but is this false choice not also one we deal with in real life? We, too, do not have “deferrals”—a false rumor that Hailsham couples who can prove their love can get their donations, and transitively their deaths, delayed by two years. More importantly, recall that when Kathy uses the second-person pronoun—“I don’t know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham…” (13)—she is suggesting a sympathetic relation that goes both ways. Just as we are invited to step into her shoes, she is capable of imagining our situation—perhaps because our situation is similar to hers. Indeed, as Robbins claims, “Ishiguro obliges us to wonder whether the freedom on which his uncloned readers pride themselves is anything more than a similarly managed ignorance of what in all probability awaits them, even if the hope and (one can almost say) the happiness that ignorance sometimes brings with it may be hard to give up” (Robbins 201). But we tell ourselves stories in order to live. The “sentimental,” which we have here as cruel optimism, is
thus a way to cope with the narrow straits of Kathy’s and our lives; the “sentimental” is “a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable” (Berlant 14) in our contemporary world, where “the labor of producing life… is also the activity of being worn out by it” (Berlant 28). In what Robbins refers to above as “managed ignorance,” whereby one carves out a space of “happiness” through “ignorance” in an unhappy world, the ideologies which we “rarely remember consenting, at least initially” become ones that “provide a seemingly neutral, reliable framework for enduring in the world,” and is in fact “in us as a structuring condition for apprehending anything” (Berlant 52). We may ask: when does this actually threaten well-being, and when is it productive to cast it off? When can we care unsentimentally and un-ideologically, without threat to ourselves and those under our care?

III. Ideological Closure

Robbins argues that care can be aspirational by inducing anger against the unjust system, and that the care (or love) that Kathy and Miss Lucy—a Hailsham guardian who, frustrated with Hailsham’s lip service to humaneness, eventually leaves—have for Tommy is necessarily un-optimistic and non-“sentimental.” At Hailsham, students are taught to value artistic skills—writing poetry, making decorative art and drawings—for an unknown reason, though the students creatively surmise that all the art they make is for a “Gallery.” The implied recognition that comes with having one’s work chosen for the “Gallery” sustains the students’ sense of fulfillment, though Tommy is—unfortunately or not—excluded from such a myth because of his bad drawings. Instead of comforting him (i.e. caring in the conventional way), both Kathy and Miss Lucy let Tommy think that his art is bad and that it is his fault, and in so doing, they “let him think the absolute worst about his own situation, about what awaits them all, about everything” (Robbins 209). If
genuine care for donors requires a dampening of optimism to set off aspirational anger, then what Hailsham really provides, with its “veiled ignorance, inculcation of aesthetic and ethical sensibilities, and then knowledge of impending doom, softened by those acquired sensibilities” (Palumbo-Liu 115), is a sham-care that is apologetic and ameliorative, rather than critical.

And what about us readers? What does this mean for the care we have for the donors (S1 + S2 + M1, or S3 + M2)? Are we as readers who are inclined to support the humaneness of Hailsham (and even hopeful at some point for Kathy and Tommy’s request to “defer” their donations) complicit in the system that masks its own injustice? As Berlant puts it, “To be made to desire a normativity hangover trains the audience in cruel optimism” (178). Or perhaps all we can do with our sympathy is to continue living our own optimistic lives, “[hoping] that we are not mere victims of bad timing, a slot of possibilities that does not include justice” (Palumbo-Liu 132). Some of us might experience frustration; indeed, in this novel, we are given a closed, determined world. But we can hope, not forgetting the determined world’s one contingency: Kathy’s role as narrator, as subject-object rather than mere object.

For all donors/clones, whose body parts are objectified into “something opposed to their total personality” (Lukács 90), “the reified character of the immediate manifestations of capitalist society receives the most extreme definition possible” (Lukács 166). But the object becomes a self-conscious subject: “the worker can… become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity” (Lukács 168). Indeed, amid total bodily objectification, “precisely [the worker’s] humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities” (Lukács 172). Precisely Kathy’s humanity and soul are not changed into commodities; her proximity to uncloned persons (and us readers) is eerie precisely because she is an object who turns out to also be a subject. And as subject, she is aware of her status as
object. We may consider an earlier episode, Kathy’s explanation of the significance of the song “Never Let Me Go,” in conjunction with a later account by Madame—a pro-Hailsham advocate—who witnesses Kathy’s maternal reverie. While singing and swaying to the song, Kathy imagines “holding an imaginary baby to [her] breast”\(^{21}\) (71); the situation suggests that she is the subject holding the object, the one not letting go rather than the one pleading her addressee to never let her go. Likewise, Madame sees Kathy “holding to her breast the old kind world” (272); at least on the grammatical level she recognizes Kathy as the subject and the “old kind world” as the object: “she [Kathy] was holding it and pleading” (272). On the other hand, she also recognizes Kathy as the object, pleading “the old kind world” (the subject) never to let her (the object) go. Kathy’s bodily gestures confuse the interpretation of the lyrics—she (subject) is holding something (object), pleading it (subject) to never let her (object) go. The imperative “never let me go” is thus a perfect grammatical example of subject-object consciousness, where the speaking subject refers to herself as the object.

David Palumbo-Liu observes in his reading of the novel, “[Kathy’s] is not the voice of the mother asking that the child remain, but rather that of the child, whose existence, in this case, will indeed be set adrift, and whose existence has always already had that fate inscribed in its body” (130, my emphasis); however, “fate” is precisely an ideological function of the novel, which insists on the conclusiveness of the clones/donors’ predicament that we, Tommy, and Kathy—through her misreading of herself as subject, and through the hope for a “deferral”—can only optimistically deny with little effect. Kathy’s fate is not to just be an object; indeed, she turns out to be a subject-object capable of revolutionary consciousness. But she resigns to “fate.” The novel frustrates any elevation of the subject-object; it does not show her

\(^{21}\)She “grabbed a pillow to stand in for the baby” (71): yet another metonymic act, suggesting an upward aspiration from mere servant or synecdoche to one capable of reproducing, having a baby, or—as Miss Emily relates the threat that clones pose—taking the place of uncloned people.
acting up in resistance to her “fate.” Kathy is not self-empowered; she does not
develop “an adequate, correct consciousness” (Lukács 199) that will turn into class-
consciousness; she does not “comprehend the present as a becoming” and she does
not see that she “can make the future” (Lukács 204).

While upward mobility is “sentimental,” so too is the fatalism that underlies an
apologetic rather than critical art. Fate is “sentimental”—it is the same fundamental
naturalized belief in determinism, on which the idea of models and “natural”
generation is based—and the novel amplifies the appeal of this “sentimental”
ideology. Kathy may verbally dismiss the “sentimental” appeal of “natural”
parenthood and its attendant notion that “when you saw the person you were copied
from, you’d get some insight into who you were deep down, and…something of what
your life held in store” (140). She may know the unsentimental “truth” she has to
believe: “Our models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into
the world, nothing more than that” (140). But she is lying; determinism (who your
model is is who you will be) is “sentimental,” and she cannot but fall for its easy
charms and go along with the determinism that the system has mandated.

Determinism as ideology is potent thanks to its misdirections. For one, we get
a hint that the donor system promotes a myth of self-individualization—“It was up to
each of us to make of our lives what we could” (140)—that contradicts the
bureaucracy’s determinism, but which is necessary for its maintenance of cruel
optimism. Additionally, the notion of determinism appears to Kathy in the guise of an
obviously “sentimental” ideology that enters her consciousness not through the
system’s agitprop, but through a myth cooked up by her imaginative Hailsham peers.
“There is nothing we can do” and “there is something we can do” are thus two sides of the
same coin that is the novel’s paralyzing ideology. As Nancy Armstrong puts it:

If we share Madame’s investment in personhood but fancy our own
boundaries capacious enough to include Kathy, we are likely to blame the
market in human tissue, if not Hailsham, for depriving her of the resources she needs to resist a policy designed to wipe out her entire cohort. Pursuing this line of reasoning, however, we will surely find ourselves patronizing Kathy in a manner we reserve for people who lack the resources to take care of themselves. On the other hand, if unwilling to blame the bureaucracy that takes life from one group of people and distributes it to another, then we are likely to run out of patience with Kathy for collaborating with that bureaucracy once she understands its operations—and who better understands those operations than she? (451, my emphases)

Even if there is something the clones can do, it is to be good carers: as Kathy defensively insists when Tommy questions the importance of being a good carer, “Of course it’s important. A good carer makes a big difference to what a donor’s life’s actually like” (282). And for us, even if there is something we can do, it is either to sympathize from a discursive distance (S1 + S2 + M1) or, if we were to immerse ourselves on the level of the story and imagine ourselves as characters, to pity (S3 + M2), to patronize “in a manner we reserve for people who lack the resources to take care of themselves”—which is merely to condescend.

In this way, Ishiguro’s novel is self-aware yet forcefully indulgent about the “sentimental,” about its characters’ aspirations to be whole, to be parent, to be recognized, and to be treated as a person. The word, as it is used in the passage from which we began, faults the object of such judgment for indulging in unrealistic optimism; yet in so doing, the subject, the one uttering the judgment, “indirectly acknowledge[s] this power to enchant, as one to which others, if not [oneself], are susceptible” (Ngai, “Gimmick” 471). Indeed, though described by Michiko Kakutani as a demonstration of Ishiguro’s “masterful narrative control” and “art of withholding,” the novel depends on readers’ susceptibility to the “sentimental”: it builds a closed world in which Kathy, the donors, and us readers, cannot escape falling for the “sentimental” in all its ideological guises—family, carer career, fate. As readers, we are left with our patronizing pity, which is not unlike the condescension held by 19th-century bourgeois readers of sentimentalism.
3. It Doesn’t Get Better

Hanya Yanagihara wrote a book in eighteen months—a “fever dream,” she discloses, in the *New York Magazine*-run website *Vulture*, “I was unable to properly concentrate on anything else”—and called it *A Little Life*. In the same piece, she writes, “One of the things I wanted to do with this book was create a protagonist who never gets better.” As it happens, the 2015 novel casts an ironic light on Dan Savage and husband Terry Miller’s 2010 anti-bullying campaign *It Gets Better*. More ironizing: the book’s cover, a tight silver-grey close-up of a man either in pain or pleasure (it turns out to be the latter—the 80s portrait by Peter Hujar is titled *Orgasmic Man*) has become a recognizable icon—more famous than the original photograph, thanks to the book’s marketing efforts: there is an Instagram account with photos of fans expertly positioning the book over their faces, pretending to be the orgasmic man.

For “[avoiding] the familiar narratives of gay fiction,” Garth Greenwell touts the book as “an astonishing and ambitious chronicle of queer life in America.” But while avoiding the “familiar,” the book’s treatment of queerness also entertains other familiar aspects of gay fiction by “[engaging] with aesthetic modes long coded as queer: melodrama, sentimental fiction, grand opera” (Greenwell). There are two sides (maybe more?) to everything queer: it gets better and it doesn’t get better; it’s pain and it’s pleasure; it’s art and it’s advertisement; it avoids the familiar and it entertains (with) the familiar. As I argue in this chapter, the novel turns irony into its central sentimental device for evoking pathos. That irony is sentimental is itself ironic, since the sentimental mode traditionally relies on unironic moral judgments as instructional tools for audience sympathy. Nonetheless, the novel uses irony to rejoin the sentimental mode with redoubled effort.

22 URL: https://www.instagram.com/alittlelifebook/?hl=en (*A Little Life*)
And indeed, the book entertains the familiar: it is ultimately a novel about the search for belonging in a queer family. Jude, our orphaned protagonist, is raised in a monastery among “brothers” who physically and sexually abuse him before he escapes, is subject to more physical and sexual abuse, and finds his way into an elite northeastern college where he meets JB (who becomes an artist), Malcolm (who becomes an architect), and Willem (who becomes an actor and ultimately, Jude’s lover). Later, as an adult, he is adopted by his law professor Harold and his wife Julia. But Jude is unable to accept the full force of his family’s love because he thinks he is undeserving; when good things happen, he is either in disbelief or sorry for deceiving others into thinking that he deserves their good intentions. In this novel, the prestige of biological family (a domestic unit that one enters as birthright) is subverted, but this subversion is undermined by another ideology of fatalistic given: one’s deserving or undeserving status, based not on deeds but on some inherent and immutable essence.

I. Undeserving/Deserving

JB Marion is an artist raised in Brooklyn by his widowed mother and lesbian aunts. Through a description of the family’s quotidian post-dinner routine, we get the novel’s first reflection on family from his perspective:

At some point in the evening—after dinner but before dessert, while they all rested in the living room, watching television, his mother’s cat lying hotly in his lap—he would look at his women and feel something swell within him. … [He would] feel a warm, watery rush of happiness and thankfulness, as if an ocean were rising up in his chest. I’m lucky, he’d think… I’m the luckiest one of all. But he never thought that he didn’t deserve it, or that he should work harder to express his appreciation; his family was happy when he was happy, and so his only obligation to them was to be happy, to live exactly the life he wanted, on the terms he wanted. (19)

See Sean McCann, “‘I’m So Sorry’: A Little Life and the Socialism of the Rich,” which I discuss later in this chapter.
JB turns out to be the only character in the novel’s post-college quartet whose insecurities do not stem from family issues: Willem’s parents are cold before they are dead, whereas Malcolm worries that he might be overly dependent on his parents (his father is also unapologetic in showing favoritism towards his sister Flora). That none of them deserves the families they have (or do not have) seems to be the consensus. Indeed, the novel is concerned throughout with a feebly negative attitude towards fatalism, an attitude that accesses situations based on how much someone doesn’t deserve what fate apportions: “None of them—not Willem, not Jude, not even Malcolm—had the families they deserved” (19). Except for JB: he has the family that he deserves, and from his deserving attitude we get a smug exceptionalism and an affectionate view of the domestic unit. I want to suggest that sentimentality in this novel relies on a divide between the deserving and the undeserving. More particularly, the sentimental involves the deserving indulging in the pathos of the undeserving; in so doing, the deserving demonstrate their freedom to “live exactly the life [one wants], on the terms [one wants].” This will eventually tell us more about the inherently exceptional and entitled position of readers who freely indulge in “a readerly paradise born of the [character’s] deprivation” (Garrett 99).

From JB’s perspective, we see—not long after this familial scene—another that expands our understanding of the sentimental. This time, the sentimental is transported out of the home, suggesting a more expansive conception of the “domestic”—one that includes nation and city. During his weekday evening commute

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24 The words deserving and undeserving are in themselves inadequate indicators of whether the situation is positive or negative. For example, one can deserve (or not deserve) reward or punishment. For the sake of this argument, I start by taking “deserving” to refer to a positive attitude towards a positive object, and “undeserving” a negative attitude towards a positive object. In other words, the “what”—the object—of who-deserves-what and who-doesn’t-deserve-what is assumed to be positive. Later, these parameters will prove insufficient to describe Jude’s undeserving status (see footnote 28). It should also be noted that deserving/undeserving is an attitude that arises from a subjective judgment, an unreliable self-assessment, on the part of the subject him/herself, and not a judgment made from any fixed or objective moral standards. Deserving/undeserving is therefore merely a preliminary heuristic that illustrates the novel’s concern with allotted fate and characters’ attitudes thereof.
to his studio in Long Island City, JB romanticizes the cosmopolitan variation of the immigrant working class:

He’d board at Canal and watch the train fill and empty at each stop with an ever shifting mix of different peoples and ethnicities, the car’s population reconstituting itself every ten blocks or so into provocative and improbable constellations of Poles, Chinese, Koreans, Senegalese; Senegalese, Dominicans, Indians, Pakistanis; Pakistanis, Irish, Salvadorans, Mexicans; Mexicans, Sri Lankans, Nigerians, and Tibetans—the only thing uniting them being their newness to America and their identical expressions of exhaustion, that blend of determination and resignation that only the immigrant possesses. In these moments, he was both grateful for his own luck and sentimental about his city, neither of which he felt very often. He was not someone who celebrated his hometown as a glorious mosaic, and he made fun of people who did. But he admired—how could you not?—the collective amount of labor, real labor, that his trainmates had no doubt accomplished that day. And yet instead of feeling ashamed of his relative indolence, he was relieved. (30)

To JB, the entitled observer, the parade of commuting drudgery is instead a spectacle of “provocative and improbable constellations,” tiles of a “glorious mosaic,” something he is self-conscious about though unguardedly indulgent in. But despite the foregrounding of differences, what the novel terms the “sentimental” is uniformly shared: “their newness to America and their identical expressions of exhaustion, that blend of determination and resignation that only the immigrant possesses.” In other words, their unassimilated foreignness, their untainted difference, is what they have in common and what makes them—collectively—an easy object of sympathy.

Furthermore, the immigrants’ pronounced difference from JB is characterized by their common attitude towards labor: “determination and resignation,” which surely amounts to an imagined “collective amount of labor, real labor.” Labor, exhaustion, and resignation are “sentimental.” Indeed, while spatially united in the subway car with these laboring masses, “instead of feeling ashamed of his relative indolence,”—suggesting that he ought to feel, at least for a moment, undeserving—JB removes himself with his deserving attitude. He is “relieved”: relieved of the burden that the radically differentiated and distanced immigrant working class has to bear.
To be sure, this “sentimental” laboring attitude is shown elsewhere to transcend the commuting working-class immigrants of JB’s sentimental subway musings. Jude St. Francis, our protagonist, is the novel’s prime figure of determination and resignation. It is easy to see Jude’s determination through the fruits of his unwavering hard work: despite his traumatic childhood, he manages to put himself through college, graduate school in mathematics, and law school, and eventually becomes a famous litigator at a prestigious law firm. Later, when he is promoted as chair of his department, he reflects sentimentally on his labor:

He took satisfaction in seeing what had actually been brought in each year, how his hours and days at the office—his and everyone else’s—had translated themselves into numbers, and then those numbers into cash, and then that cash into the stuff of his colleagues’ lives: their houses and tuitions and vacations and cars. (He didn’t tell Lucien this part. Lucien would think he was being romantic, and there would be a wry, ironic lecture on his tendency toward sentimentalism.) (567-568)

Who would have guessed that mind-numbing number crunching could reveal Jude’s “tendency toward sentimentalism”? “Sentimentalism” in this instance is pleasure taken from a peculiar kind of second-order labor: labor that converts labor time (“hours and days at the office”) into cash, which is then projected as property (“houses and tuitions and vacations and cars”). “Determination” here gains a second meaning: Jude determines how much who earns and what these earnings could buy. Sentimentalism is thus over-determined with both kinds of “determination,” relating to the firm belief in hard work and the transformation of that hard work into some other value. And this translation of labor into reward or earnings touches again on the idea of “deserving”: indeed, it is the very process of determining who-deserves-what, and such a process yields “satisfaction” for Jude—a state that, in turn, comes only to those who think they deserve it. Jude earns and deserves his sentimental pleasure through laboring, through calculating his and others’ labors. By way of contrast,
sentimentalism that is determined through calculation relates differently to Jude’s idea of friendship as transactional:

He understood that friendship was a series of exchanges: of affections, of time, sometimes of money, always of information. And he had no money. He had nothing to give them, he had nothing to offer. He couldn’t loan Willem a sweater, the way Willem let him borrow his, or repay Malcolm the hundred dollars he’d pressed upon him once, or even help JB on move-out day, as JB helped him. (111)

Ironically, the customarily sentimental realm of friendship is made unsentimental through calculation, and the traditionally unsentimental sphere of labor is made sentimental through calculation, or determination. But more importantly, while Jude may feel that he deserves the sweet rewards—material earnings and immaterial satisfaction—of his labors, he feels, at other times, undeserving of friendship. In this case, Jude’s determination leads to a deserving attitude in the domain of his career and an undeserving attitude in the domain of friendship. But his undeserving attitude is nonetheless a cause for sentimentalism: it is a sign of resignation to the haunting notion that he is worthless and unworthy.

Moreover, Jude’s sentimental indulgence in labor and its rewards—a sign of “determination”—is also a sign of resignation. Like the immigrants on JB’s commute, who have no choice but to labor, Jude feels that he has no choice but to labor in order to escape from his past—dishonorable memories that produce sentiments of abject worthlessness. “Occupation” is literal; he occupies himself as a form of distraction, and this strategy of distraction reinforces the fact that there is a past which he has to work around. He is resigned to a life of distractions (baking is a distraction from the urge to cut himself; cutting is a distraction from the psychological harm of sexual abuse) and his job as a lawyer is his primary distraction:

In his life at the firm, he was assessed only by the business he secured, by the work he did: there, he had no past, he had no deficiencies... it was at that office, surrounded by work and people he knew they found almost stultifyingly dull, that he felt at his most human, his most dignified and invulnerable. (568)
Just as Kathy in *Never Let Me Go* uncritically indulges in and resigns fatalistically to the system that provides her with both life and career (thus giving in to the ideology that *this is as good as it gets for someone like me*), Jude’s indulgence in labor stems from the recognition of his limited capacity for a meaningful life (or that he is undeserving of one). Being dedicated to his work is his way of resigning, or relegating himself, to the dull and severely delimited domain in which he feels, ironically, most free. Just as Kathy feels most hopeful and upwardly mobile in her job as carer, Jude feels “most human” and “most dignified and invulnerable” performing Bartlebyan tasks. And just as sentimental, humane meaning is imposed on Bartleby by the lawyer of No.—Wall Street, so Jude (taking on both the roles of lawyer and Bartleby) imposes sentimental meaning onto his own labor: freedom, dignity, and—as mentioned earlier—determination in both senses of the word. Jude’s defining trait, his workaholism, is one that merges determination with resignation—the qualities that make the immigrants on the train capable of producing a sentimental effect—and creates an uncertainty about his status as deserving and undeserving: he deserves the material well-being and satisfaction that comes with labor, but he does not deserve unconditional friendships and a meaningful life outside of work.

Of the many positive things that Jude believes he does not deserve, there is one he cannot help pining for: family. As an orphan, he is raised in a monastery, where he is routinely sodomized by the brothers. After he escapes with Brother Luke, who treats him kindly, Brother Luke coerces him—by promising a beautiful life in a cabin in the woods—to be a child prostitute. With Brother Luke, Jude experiences unspeakable trauma; but it is also with Brother Luke that Jude learns to imagine familial belonging and a life of domestic wholeness. Brother Luke tells him, “I think of you like my own son” (453), and he lies to “clients” that Brother Luke is his father, while privately thinking of “Luke as his father, and he as Luke’s son” (453); later,
when Jude gets older, Luke imagines another familial arrangement: “they would be together, the two of them, like a married couple. No longer were they father and son; now they were equals. When he turned sixteen, they would get married” (476). So Brother Luke is not just brother; he is also father and spouse: a Swiss-army family that leaves Jude badly wounded. Later in his teenage years, an abortive adoption—with a family called the Learys,25 who just want an extra hand on their farm—exacerbates this wound beyond repair, leaving Jude adamant that he does not deserve a family. At thirty-two, when his friend and former law professor Harold and his wife Julia decide to adopt him as their son, Jude finally gets what he wants; but even then, he doubts his own worth: “Who, really, would ever want this? The idea that he could become someone else’s seemed increasingly ludicrous, and if Harold saw him just once more, how could he too not come to the same conclusion?” (213) If early in the novel—with JB’s sentimental reflection on family—we have the notion that none of them have the families they deserve, now Jude has the family that he thinks he does not deserve.

Deserving or not, Jude gets the family he has been waiting for his whole life. But time heals no wounds, and Jude is stubborn in his belief that he is undeserving of good things. He is resigned to bad fate, and considers all bad things a natural consequence of his personal flaws. In the novel’s arguably most brutal chapter,26 “The Axiom of Equality,” he makes this explicit and even escalates such a claim. He dates Caleb Porter, the newly-appointed CEO of a fashion label named “Rothko,” whom he gets to know through a mutual friend. Caleb is intolerant of Jude’s displays of

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25 Flimsy disguise for the adjective “leery,” meaning “doubtful, suspicious” (OED, adj. 2, 1b). Indeed, their inability to make up their minds about whether they would adopt Jude gives him false hope; this augments the disappointment that comes with their ultimate decision not to adopt Jude. “Leary” can also be an allusion to Lear, who casts out the only daughter who deserves and recognizes his paternal love. The “leery” Learys reveal something interesting about Yanagihara’s style: along with the conveniently ironic “brothers” of the monastery, such minor characters seem like objects—characters with single functions—rather than persons.

26 Perhaps the only thing more brutal than this chapter containing what some may call “torture porn” (see next footnote) is the fact that later in the novel, Jude’s first and only real love, Willem, dies shortly after they start living as a couple.
weakness (he gets mad when Jude limps or uses the wheelchair) and performs acts of utter cruelty, both psychological and physical. Jude is unable to extricate himself from this problematic relationship and believes himself no longer merely undeserving of good things but actually deserving punishment:

If he is to admit it to himself, he feels there was something inevitable, even, in a small way, a relief, about Caleb’s hitting him: all along, he had been waiting for some sort of punishment for his arrogance, for thinking he could have what everyone else has, and here—at last—it was. This is what you get, said the voice inside his head. This is what you get for pretending to be someone you know you’re not, for thinking you’re as good as other people… He has always known that if he wanted to be with someone, he would have to make an exchange. And Caleb, he knows, is the best he will ever be able to find. At least Caleb isn’t misshapen, isn’t a sadist. Nothing being done to him now is something that hasn’t been done to him before—he reminds himself of this again and again. (369-370)

The gap between deserving and undeserving is widened: he is so undeserving that he deserves punishment for indulging momentarily in the possibility that he might be deserving of love. Jude thinks that he will always be who he was in the past, that an undeserving person can only get more undeserving. Shortly after Caleb’s first act of physical brutality, we get yet another that drives the point home. A drunken Caleb runs into Jude while the latter is having dinner with Harold; after being driven out of the restaurant, Caleb breaks into Jude’s apartment and accosts Jude when he returns home at the end of the night. Violence ensues and as Jude is sent coasting down the emergency stairwell in his apartment, he invokes his favorite mathematical axiom:

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27 Here is a sample passage that captures the pornographic violence of the scene: “In the apartment, Caleb lets go of his neck, and he falls, his legs unsteady beneath him, and Caleb kicks him in the stomach so hard that he vomits, and then again in his back, and he slides over Malcolm’s lovely, clean floors and into the vomit. His beautiful apartment, he thinks, where he has always been safe. This is happening to him in his beautiful apartment, surrounded by his beautiful things, things that have been given to him in friendship, things that he has bought with the money he has earned. His beautiful apartment, with its doors that lock, where he was meant to be protected from broken elevators and the degradation of pulling himself upstairs on his arms, where he was meant to always feel human and whole” (384-385). The narration is pornographic in its attention to visible action and external, surface detail: even when the focus pans out from the spectacular violence to Jude’s inner speech—“His beautiful apartment, he thinks, where he has always been safe”—the object of Jude’s thoughts are still material and external. We move from torture porn to interior-design porn: “Malcolm’s lovely, clean floors,” “things that have been given to him in friendship,” “its doors that lock,” and so on.
The axiom of equality states that $x$ always equals $x$: it assumes that if you have a conceptual thing named $x$, that it must always be equivalent to itself, that it has a uniqueness about it, that it is in possession of something so irreducible that we must assume it is absolutely, unchangeably equivalent to itself for all time, that its very elementalness can never be altered. But it is impossible to prove. (385)

With Jude the anti-Midas, good things turn bad because things have always been bad: instead of an axiom that celebrates “uniqueness” and elevates the individual, Jude takes the axiom as a reminder of resignation. He is undeserving and will always be undeserving, no matter the material trappings he has earned for himself:

But now he knows for certain how true the axiom is, because he himself—his very life—has proven it. The person I was will always be the person I am, he realizes. The context may have changed: he may be in this apartment, and he may have a job that he enjoys and pays him well, and he may have parents and friends he loves. He may be respected; in court, he may even be feared. But fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated. And in that microsecond that he finds himself suspended in the air, between the ecstasy of being aloft and the anticipation of his landing, which he knows will be terrible, he knows that $x$ will always equal $x$, no matter what he does, or how many years he moves away from the monastery, from Brother Luke, no matter how much he earns or how hard he tries to forget. It is the last thing he thinks as his shoulder cracks down upon the concrete, and the world, for an instant, jerks blessedly away from beneath him: $x = x$, he thinks. $x = x$, $x = x$. (386)

The image of Jude being kicked and “suspended in the air” before the anticipated landing lends itself conveniently to the cliché of the law of gravity: what goes up must come down. Indeed, in Jude’s case, all optimism will sink—and sink doubly, as punishment for the audacity to be optimistic in the first place. There is more to say about the irony of the axiom of equality, but before that, we should bring together the different points in our examination of deserving and undeserving attitudes.

So far we have looked at characters feeling deserving or undeserving of some positive object (except for the final instance). We can summarize the points covered as follows, in the order in which they are discussed:
We started with JB as a figure whose tender reflection on his family relies on the belief that he deserves good and land for a moment with Jude as the primary “sentimental” figure of “determination” and “resignation” who believes that he is undeserving of good. But it sinks further: more than being passively undeserving of good, Jude ends up feeling positively deserving of frightfully bad treatment. The sequence in which we have looked at each point tracks a general trend of descent: from deserving of immaterial good to deserving of the merely material good to undeserving and finally to more than undeserving. Indeed, beyond the points discussed here, the trajectory follows a downward path. Though later in the novel Jude and Willem become a couple (in their forties), their happy years are brief: Willem dies in a car accident and Jude commits suicide (after a botched attempt). 28

28 Alternatively, a path—from “deserving of good” to “deserving of bad”—can be mapped out in a foursquare diagram that reveals the sentimental reader’s position in relation to JB and Jude.

We start with JB’s position “Deserving of Good,” which implies its opposite “Undeserving of Good.” These points orient our discussion on deserving/undeserving statuses (see footnote 24). With this binary there comes yet another binary based on the polarity of the object of the deserving/undeserving attitude: deserving/undeserving good (e.g. reward) suggests, on the other hand, deserving/undeserving bad (e.g. punishment). The downward path that I have tracked goes from JB’s “Deserving of Good” attitude to Jude’s “Deserving of Good” attitude, then down to Jude’s “Undeserving of Good” attitude. But instead of going next from “Undeserving of Good” to the intermediate “Undeserving of Bad,” Jude’s partial self-evaluation short-circuits the track and skips to “Deserving of Bad.” Indeed, “Undeserving of Good” bears an oblique relation to “Deserving of Bad”; likewise, “Deserving of Good” is obliquely related to “Undeserving of Bad.” The sentimental reader’s position is to fill that implied gap that Jude short-circuits, which is situated obliquely from JB’s orienting position: we think Jude is “Undeserving of Bad,” just as JB self-righteously thinks of himself as “Deserving of Good.” Jude’s deserving/undeserving attitude thus toggles between the positions that oppose that of JB and the sentimental reader. Further examination of the narrative’s dynamic movement between these attitudes.
II. Reading Irony

This descending scale leads us to the irony of “the axiom of equality.” The irony is of course, that Jude is not the same undeserving person he believes himself to be, that he should not be on the tail end of the scale especially if JBJ—his supposed equal—gets to decide that he deserves his family (and furthermore, that he deserves to be mawkish about it). Jude misidentifies himself in the first place as “a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated” even during his years in the monastery and with Brother Luke. The axiom of equality is thus not \( x = x \), but instead, \( x' > x \) (Jude is more deserving than he thinks he is) or even \( x' < x \) (Jude is less deserving than he thinks he is). But neither of these latter formulations—relative statements about two variables—convert contingency into inevitability, and Jude needs to cling to the fatalistic given as a source of comfort in the face of unexplainable cruelty. So believe in the axiom he must, and the irony of “the axiom of equality” is that it is actually the axiom of inequality. And inequality is what the novel relies on for its sentimental effect: an exasperated reader might ask, Why should JB feel deserving while Jude punishes himself for indulging in the hopeful feeling that he deserves good?

Such a rhetorical question acknowledges the inequality regarding who is deserving or undeserving of good, and such acknowledgement requires a reader who, at moments of such irony, is capable of reading the shifting dynamics of the novel’s
free-indirect narration. In moments such as the one we began with—JB reflecting on his deserving status—we get narrated inner speech in first-person (albeit without quotation marks), then in third-person: "I’m lucky, he’d think… I’m the luckiest one of all. But he never thought that he didn’t deserve it, or that he should work harder to express his appreciation" (19). The transition from first-person to third-person, from JB’s “I” to the narrator’s “he,” demonstrates a drawing back from the interiority of the self-evaluating character to the omniscient narrator’s objective position. But even when we do get JB’s inner speech—"I’m lucky, he’d think"—it is not delivered in true free-indirect speech: JB does not really “[speak] through the voice of the narrator,” nor does the narrator fully “[take] on the speech of the character” (Genette 174). The words “he’d think” retain the narrator’s voice, debunk the firmness of JB’s judgment, and suggest the partiality of JB’s superficially integrated inner speech against that of the impartial narrator. Where JB’s speech is subordinate to the narrator’s style, it is clear that JB is an inadequate judge of his own deserving status: instead of having his voice merge completely with the narrator’s, his subjective judgment is held at a distance from the narrator’s, thus foregrounding for the reader JB’s partiality and the irony of his judgment.

But the situation is different in Jude’s passage, cited above. For the most part, Jude’s inner speech merges seamlessly with the narrator’s neutral, impersonal voice: “He understood that friendship was a series of exchanges… He had nothing to give them, he had nothing to offer” (111); “In his life at the firm, he was assessed only by the business he secured, by the work he did: there, he had no past, he had no deficiencies” (568); and so on. Whether it is the narrator or Jude speaking through the narrator, such lines are not ironized. But at his most despairing, Jude’s thoughts insinuate themselves into the narrator’s voice in a meaningful way:

But now he knows for certain how true the axiom is, because he himself—his very life—has proven it. The person I was will always be the person I am, he
realizes. The context may have changed: he may be in this apartment, and he may have a job that he enjoys and pays him well, and he may have parents and friends he loves. He may be respected; in court, he may even be feared. But fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated. (386)

Third-person transposed inner speech moves into first-person narrated inner speech, sans quotation marks—"The person I was will always be the person I am, he realizes"—which then shifts back to third-person transposed inner speech, which the narrator "[integrates] into his own speech, and thus expresses… in his own style" (Genette 172). And indeed, the first and last sentences pronounce judgments that seem objectively factual, but that can only be made in Jude’s own head: “now he knows for certain how true the axiom is… fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated.” In this case, what Genette would call transposed inner speech goes along with what Bakhtin terms “pseudo-objective motivation,” where “the logic motivating the sentence seems to belong to the author, i.e., he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact, the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of his characters” (Bakhtin 305). So when the same passage ends with the axiom of equality—“$x = x$, he thinks. $x = x$, $x = x$” (386)—the “he thinks” of Jude and the objective voice of narration are confused, reduced to the rote repetition of the tautology “$x = x$, $x = x$.”

We can say that the narration objectifies Jude’s subjectivity into the fact of the narrative world, rather than the reverse—that Jude’s subjective self-evaluation has insinuated itself into the narrating voice. But the first alternative is weakened when we consider other moments of third-person omniscient narration that present subjective beliefs which are not recognized facts of the narrative world. For example, when we learn about JB’s drug addiction, the narration states matter-of-factly, in recognizable free-indirect style: “JB was not an addict. Yes, he did drugs. Yes, he did a lot of them. But he wasn’t an addict. Other people were addicts” (295). It could be that “JB was
not an addict” is an axiomatic truth of the narrative world; but the clipped style and repeated affirmatives signal a departure from the narration’s stylistic norm. In this case, it is easy to tell that the free-indirect narration is not assuming a factual stance but rather assuming the inner speech of JB (who sounds much like generally disagreeable pop-psychology doxa). To give another example related thematically to Jude’s undeserving attitude: when Jude realizes that he can end all his suffering by committing suicide, his justification—relieving his family and friends of the burden of caring for him—is presented factually in third-person: “He was no good for them, anyway; he was only an extravagant collection of problems, nothing more” (444). A few lines later, however, the narration softens from the factual to the hypothetical: “For a while, they would mourn him, because they were good people… but eventually they would see that their lives were better without him in it. They would see how much time he had stolen from them; they would understand what a thief he had been” (444-445, my emphases). The conditional mood, signaled by repeating “they would…”, frames Jude’s imagined truths—“their lives were better without him in it” or “what a thief he had been.” Rather than objectifying Jude’s subjectivity into the fact of the narrative world, the narration internalizes Jude’s subjectivity for a brief moment before exorcizing it and objectifying it not as a fact of the narrative world but as an object framed by the conditional mood, a series of artifacts of Jude’s sentimental, self-pitying, undeserving status held up for examination.

Whether the narration internalizes Jude’s inner speech or objectifies it, the narration gives Jude’s inner speech the appearance of a fact that has to be tested against the reality of the novel’s social world—do the other characters or figures that populate the novel agree with this seemingly factual account? In the above cases, the answer is unequivocally “No.” The internalized or objectified inner speech is not a statement of fact but merely an expression of character’s wish for something to be
objectively true; in other words, the narration gives in but, in doing so, reveals the irony of a seemingly factual statement. But beyond verifying pseudo-facts against the novel’s other fictional subjectivities, how can we be sure of such irony when the third-person omniscient narration has shown itself to be, in the previous examples, an unreliable touchstone of objective judgment? The narrator is no longer an impartial judge or background observer after whom we as readers can model ourselves; we have to intervene as impartial observers who insist that Jude is not undeserving of good, because the objective distance between narrator and character—through which we could previously detect the character’s partiality—is now reduced.

Just as free-indirect discourse functions as part of the “strange compromise formation which is the process of modern socialization” (Moretti 82), the form of thought represented in the narration is neither completely impersonal nor intimately personal. There is a certain harmonious socialization between narration and character. But whereas in Austen’s novels the heroines “speak of themselves in the third person, as if from the outside” (Moretti 82), in the examples above, the narration speaks as if from the inside of the character; while Austen’s heroines internalize and comport themselves to the social norm in their third-person voice, in Yanagihara’s novel, the narration is the one adjusting in the other direction, shirking social norm for characters’ particularity. This puts the reader in an ambivalent position. Do we take the side of both narration and character so as to attune ourselves to this socialized world that the narrative presents us (in which the narration wins)? Or do we insist on our difference, and therefore insist that Jude is deserving of good, that he and the narration are wrong in thinking that he is undeserving of good? If we take the latter option, we get “good reading,” which Matthew Garrett defines as the “sharpening and sustaining of attention” (Garrett 97), and which, on the level of story, is ironically reading against the social compromise established between narration and character. If
we choose the former, we take the side of anti-social self-pity, which entails giving up the sharpness of “good reading,” a sharpness that we stand to gain from the character’s erroneous and partial self-evaluation. We should note, however, that “good reading” is not necessarily good; it implies taking advantage of characters’ partial readings, as well as a belief in our own readerly exceptionalism (a freedom to read well and be rewarded for it).

But we should look more closely at the relationship between narration and character. We readers find ourselves in this double bind because free-indirect narration in this case is not placed “halfway between social doxa and the individual voice” (Moretti 82)—rather, it collapses on the side of the individual voice of character, merely disguised as “social doxa.” Kent Puckett’s observation on the novelistic site of social mistakes can help us here: on 19th-century realism, he writes, “the novel’s efforts to differentiate structurally and socially between character and narration with the help of the mistake tend to collapse in an identification that gives omniscient narration its own threatened character” (Puckett 7). The passage in question is indeed a site of mistake: Jude misidentifies himself as “a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated” (386), he inappropriately applies a mathematical axiom as a definition of his life, and moreover the “axiom of equality” (given the context of the chapter) is really the axiom of inequality. While narrating this mistake, the narration has collapsed in an almost-undifferentiated identification with Jude, thus annulling its impartiality as a judge of Jude’s deserving/undeserving status. The narration commits a mistake in its narration of Jude’s mistake.

The formal irony of “the axiom of equality” is a split between the narrator and the reader as impartial judges and observers of the characters engaged in the economy of deserving/undeserving; but this split can very well also be internalized by the reader, and we can make the mistake of being partial towards characters’
judgments. As considered earlier, whether the fault lies with us as readers, we still face ambivalence: Do we take the side of both narration and character, or do we insist on our “good reading” and therefore our difference from narration and character? We are free to pick either option, and thus free to exercise our mobility on the scale of deserving and undeserving in a manner of which the characters are incapable. In free-indirect style, the narration’s siding with Jude and not-siding with JB is a model of freedom for us readers; but we are also free to disregard the narration’s “model behavior”—we can choose not to side with Jude even while the narration seems to lead us there. However, this choice to be right or wrong is meaningless without any epistemological or moral standards. The epistemological and moral uncertainty of free-indirect discourse is revealed as a stylistic problem; and since usually the sentimental mode requires firm ground on which moral judgments can be made with certitude (so that it is clear when we should direct our sympathy towards a character), the stylistic problem is also a generic one. But while irony—which might suggest epistemological and moral uncertainty—is typically seen as antithetical to the sentimental mode, the irony of free-indirect discourse in Yanagihara’s novel is a peculiar sort that allows the novel to rejoin the genre more forcefully.

The irony of the third-person narration in those matter-of-fact instances (which provides us the freedom to read with or against the literal factual meaning of those statements) is legible because the narration, on occasion, insists on and reminds us of its omniscience and thus its control over itself, even when it seems to get carried away elsewhere by various characters’ subjective states. In one such case, the narration makes its superior knowledge explicit. Jude and Malcolm are going over the renovation plans for Jude’s new loft on Greene Street and are negotiating over parts of the bathroom that seem to cater to a physically disabled body more than Jude
deems necessary. Finally, Jude gives in and lets Malcolm install grab bars around the toilet, following which the narration comments:

He nods, reluctantly. He won’t know it then, but years later, he will be grateful that Malcolm has prepared for his future, even when he hadn’t wanted to: he will notice that in his apartment, the passages are wider, that the bathroom and kitchen are oversize, so a wheelchair can make a full, clean revolution in them... He’ll feel a sort of bitter wonderment that yet another person in his life—Andy, Willem, Richard, and now Malcolm—had foreseen his future, and knew how inevitable it was. (291)

“He won’t know it then…” The movement into the future tense is disorienting not least because of the words “won’t” and “then,” which point in contrary directions: “won’t” or rather, “will not” points to the future, and “then” points back to the present moment of “He nods, reluctantly.” Grammatically, “then” points to the future in the sentence; contextually, it points to the preceding sentence. As a lure into the past, “then” doubles the readerly tension between narration and character: we instinctively remain with the character in the present while the narration is pushing us forward into the future. “He doesn’t know it now” would be a less ambiguous way of pointing to the present moment; but we should take the future tense of “won’t” seriously, as it is less plastic than the “then” (which could point backward or forward). “He won’t know it then…” would thus seem to say: at some point in the future marked by the word “then,” even Jude himself will not know that “he will be grateful… he’ll feel a sort of bitter wonderment.” “He won’t know it…” but the narration does, and while Jude’s friends “had foreseen his future,” the narration has further foreknowledge of Jude’s own internal state that even Jude himself “won’t know… then.” In this case, the narration shores itself up against the characters’ subjective beliefs using the future tense, demonstrating its authority over the limited and partial point of view of characters. Nonetheless, the narration occasionally indulges in in statements of matter-of-fact untruths (e.g. “JB was not an addict” or “[Jude] was only an extravagant collection of problems, nothing more”); but that we
can recognize these matter-of-fact statements as non-factual suggests that we put our faith in the narration. Even when it seems to lapse into the subjective states of characters who are unreliable judges of their own deserving/undeserving statuses, we trust the narration to know what it is doing. Because the narration insists on its foreknowledge through the future tense, we allow ourselves to assume that there lies in the narration a quality of epistemological and thus moral certainty against which we can read its epistemologically and morally uncertain expressions.

This heart-warming realization of the future is given to us in the present of that moment in the chronological storytelling, which adds another irony: the narration, in insisting on its foreknowledge and objectivity, distances itself from the subjective state of that sentimental moment while bringing that sentimental moment closer to us temporally. With this, the narration demonstrates not only its omniscience but also its appreciation for timely sentimentality. The novel’s omniscient narration demonstrates its foreknowledge in two other moments; but in these two moments, the future tense does not serve to bring the sentimental closer to us in time. When Jude returns to his apartment after one of his long weekend walks, he has exhausted himself to the extent of physical danger; he literally crawls into his room and is incapable of raising himself from the ground to get in bed:

For a while he lies there, everything shifting around him, until he is strong enough to pull the blanket down over him. He will lie there until the sun leaves the sky and the apartment grows dark, and then, finally, he will hoist himself onto his bed with his arms, where he will fall asleep... When he wakes, it will be very early, and he will feel better, but his wound will have wept during the night... He will pant and gasp to keep from shouting... He will turn off the shower and lower himself into the tub and lean his cheek against the tile and wait to feel better... He will be reminded of how trapped he is, trapped in a body he hates, with a past he hates, and how he will never be able to change either... He will be reminded that he is a nothing, a scooped-out husk in which the fruit has long since mummified and shrunk, and now rattles uselessly... My life, he will think, my life... My life. (175-177)
Each sentence in these two pages begins with or contains the refrain “He will” in a way that expresses not character motivation but future occurrence. The specific details in this passage—for example, “He will remember the conversation he had with Andy the last time this happened” (174)—suggest furthermore that these are actual thoughts and occurrences being brought to us from the future, as if we readers are glued to the present moment with Jude, who is stuck on the ground next to his bed: the narrated future of “he will lie there until the sun leaves the sky” pulls away from the present of “for a while he lies there.” In this way, just as the narration can be partial to characters’ inner speech by transposing it in third-person pseudo-objective motivation, we readers, too, can be made to feel stuck with the character in a present moment while the narration moves into the future.

This tension between narration and reader (one seeming to move ahead of the other) is thematized in another passage—the last of the novel’s three that use the future tense. After finding out that Jude had set his own hand on fire—as an alternative to cutting—Willem insists that Jude seek psychiatric assistance. Jude contemplates telling Willem about his traumatic childhood, or what led to his masochism. Their conversation reaches a lull, and their quiet turns to sleep... until Willem hears Jude’s voice speaking to him, and then he wakes, and he listens as Jude talks. It will take hours, because Jude is sometimes unable to continue, and Willem will wait and hold him so tightly that Jude won’t be able to breathe. Twice he will try to wrench himself away, and Willem will pin him to the ground and hold him there until he calms himself. Because they are in the closet, they won’t know what time it is... He will listen to stories that are unimaginable, that are abominable... Finally they will heave themselves from the floor—it will be Saturday afternoon, and they will have been lying in the closet since Thursday night... (606-607)

30 We might be tempted to call this narrative aspect “pseudo-iterative”—the scene is presented as iterative, whereas its “richness and precision of detail ensure that no reader can seriously believe they occur and reoccur in that manner, several times, without any variation” (Genette 121). But an important part of the pseudo-iterative, the scene’s wording in the imperfect, which in English is commonly marked by the auxiliary “would,” is missing here: instead of “he would...” we have “he will...”
In this passage we get a narration of a narration: we are told that Jude is telling Willem his story. Though our knowledge of this story is incomplete, we still know more than Willem and are not ignorant of the elided information that is simply described here as “stories that are unimaginable, that are abominable.” The time of Jude’s act of narration happens in the future tense, leaving us in the present, the suspended moment just before Jude begins telling Willem his story. The narration, Jude, and Willem, move ahead into the future, almost as if there is a screen between them characters and us readers. The narration moves on without us, and we feel backward although it is Willem who is backward—it is he who has to catch up on Jude’s backstory (which we already know). Indeed, once Willem is all caught up with us, we are reconciled to the same present moment:

He is dizzy with what he has heard, with comprehending the enormity of his misconceptions, with stretching his understanding past what is imaginable, with the knowledge that all of his carefully maintained edifices are now destroyed beyond repair. But for now, they are in their bed, in their room, in their apartment, and he reaches over and takes Jude’s hand, holds it gently in his own. “You’ve told me about how you got to Montana,” he hears himself saying. “So tell me: What happened next?” (608)

The future happens in a bubble floating away from us, until Willem’s knowledge matches ours and the bubble pops for him to rejoin a temporality that is not suspended above the present. Alternatively, we are the ones rejoining Jude and Willem in the future, almost as if we have been teleported, without making the same journey. Willem’s “So tell me: What happened next?” are the last words of this section, and since he knows as much about Jude’s story as we do now, these words echo (or incite) our readerly anticipation, urging Jude and the narrator to pick up the story from where they left off. In these three pages, we get present—future—present, where the middle’s long future-tense passage is the metaleptic section splitting us readers from the temporality experienced by Jude and Willem; the temporality of narration is thus thematized as one that is ironic: past events are related in a different
temporality (the future tense), the time of story is incongruous with the time of
discourse, and the time of the reader is incongruous with the time of the narration.

To go back to the problem of the novel’s free-indirect discourse as the
uncertain ground on which the sentimental mode pitches its moral judgments and
thus produce sympathetic relations between readers and characters, we now see that
the problem is overcome by the third-person omniscient narration’s use of future
tense. The future tense establishes superior foreknowledge over the character (and
reader’s) partial perspective, leaves us hanging in a given moment with characters
while moving forward in time, and suspends us in a given moment while moving
forward in time with characters before reuniting all parties with greater force.
Whether by disenfranchising readers from the society of character and narration, or
by aligning readers with characters, the narration’s future tense suggests a power to
coordinate the reader’s temporal positioning and thus our sympathetic relation to or
distance from characters. In this way, irony in content—the split between what a
character believes of himself (as deserving/undeserving) and the social norm (how
other characters in the novel see him as deserving/undeserving), or more generally,
the split between narrated matter-of-fact and factual matter—is realized by irony in
narrative form. We feel at times too close to characters and at other times too distant
from them, such that we both internalize and discern the split between narration and
character. Our recognition of this split is the reading of irony, and our reading of
irony enables us to recognize the inequality that underlies the novel’s pathos.

III. Inequality and Family

The axiom of inequality, or the axiom that things are not immutable (i.e. that
there is no elemental undeserving essence that is inalienable from Jude), is hidden
beneath the veneer of irony but recognizable to the reader who performs a “good
reading” of the axiom of equality. In “good reading,” the reader “experiences a split in consciousness (appearance versus reality)” (Garrett 105). This split is experienced when we readers see characters as both subject and object, or in other words, as “subject[s] that we must both behold as object[s] and through which we must figure ourselves as reading subjects” (Garrett 110-111). Our perception of characters’ oscillation between subject and object in this novel relies on the omniscient narration’s future tense, which manipulates and thus creates a feeling of “instability in the distance of reader from character” (Garrett 110): we find ourselves too close to characters (character-subjects), and subsequently take our distance from them (character-objects); we realize that we are getting too caught up in the partial perspectives of the characters, and recalibrate our distance from them as readers in our armchairs. This dual movement, which begins by moving closer toward character-subjects and then away from them, perceiving them as character-objects, produces a narrative depth through error: irony comes after realizing, Oops, that was too close. After all, as readers, we have the great privilege of being “never in danger, for… the reader’s great freedom is its distance, protection, and irresponsible relationship to the protagonist in the story world” (Garrett 116).

With this distance, we are free and “irresponsible” towards the protagonist, towards Jude. But we are not the only onlookers in Jude’s abortive rags-to-riches: there are first, before us readers, those other characters of the novel who constitute Jude’s chosen family. We might understand the “irresponsibility” of onlookers by considering Sean McCann’s argument about the novel’s “socialism of the rich,” the notion that “lasting membership in the twenty-first century elite depends far less on merit or effort alone than it does on privilege and on the mutual support rendered among the lucky few” (McCann). So the irony that “the axiom of equality turns out to mean that [Jude] will be forever unequal, always cast out of the great privilege he only
appears to have earned" is due to “his inability to finally accept the care and benevolence extended to him by his friends,” his inability to buy into the system that insists “that the fortune and happiness of the privileged depend on the private assistance they graciously extend to each other” (McCann). While it can be well meaning, such a “gift economy of the rich” leaves the unequal scheme under which it operates intact. Jude’s inability to accept the charity of his friends and family is, at root, the result of his self-evaluation as undeserving of good. And charity of this form is mere condescension, one that can even be seen as aggravating Jude’s undeserving status rather than remedying it. Thus we return to the beginning, to our discussion of the sentimental arising from a divide between the deserving and the undeserving.

Now we see that the sentimental is, furthermore, the deserving indulging in a pathos arising from witnessing the undeserving. Indeed, McCann opens his piece by observing, “in brief hopeless moments… privileged people feel bad when they realize that not everyone can be so lucky,” and ends by restating it with the additional consideration of pathos: “The pathos of A Little Life is the sadness with which the fortunate watch the unfortunate falling through the net” (McCann).31 And such exceptionalism is intrinsic to the theory of “good reading,” as suggested by the reading ethic of Benjamin Franklin (the figure of Garrett’s illustrative example): “there are and will be those who work without reward and those who are rewarded, and… we are surely among the latter” (Garrett 119)—the group that is deserving, that is rewarded for their work in sharp and attentive reading.

But surely Jude’s labors are somewhat still rewarded in the society of his friends? Though they remain fortunate onlookers of Jude’s downward descent, surely they are, for him, the family he had always wanted? Jude is a “foundling,” a queer

31 Remember that feeling deserving or undeserving is tied closely to feeling fortunate: in the passage we began with, JB’s contentment and deserving attitude are expressed in the line “I’m lucky, he’d think… I’m the luckiest one of all” (19).
protagonist whose relationship to his personal history entails “on one hand, an exile from sanctioned experience, most often rendered as the experience of participation in family life and the life of communities, and, on the other, a reunion with some ‘people’ or sodality who redeem this exile and surpass the painful limitations of the original ‘home’” (Nealon 2). Such a sodality is, in other words, friendship, “an alternative form of intimacy, a utopian space beyond the constraints of marriage and the family” (Love 76), or “a form of relation that is tied neither to the conjugal couple nor to blood kinship, but nonetheless presents a legible and generally appealing image of caring and intimacy” (Love 79). But though reunion with some sodality is apparent in Jude’s case, redemption does not come, and friendship avails Jude nothing in the way of changing his undeserving status. Rather than these idealized notions of friendship, then, Jude’s friendships are “aporetic, discontinuous, asymmetrical… a community that cannot be realized in the present” (Love 94) because Jude cannot help insisting that “x = x,” that he will always be the undeserving person he was. Jude’s feeling backward, his harboring a problematic attachment to his traumatic past in a way that prevents him from realizing that he is deserving of good, is bound up with “the sort of pleasure that gets regularly excoriated as sentimental, maudlin, nostalgic, self-indulgent, and useless” (Love 161). McCann is right, then, to emphasize the pathos of “falling through the net”; like Lot’s wife, Jude becomes a sentimental object by clinging to a traumatic past instead of embracing the rich sodality that he deserves.
Conclusion

As I hope this these chapters have shown, we reveal more than we think about our relation to an object when we call it “sentimental.” Our ambivalence, even suspicion, is appropriate once we examine the conditions under which these sentimental objects take shape, circulate, and are consumed. The totalizing reach of the commodity’s abstraction, the wishful thinking of sentimental fantasies about the banal, and the irreconcilable difference between the rich and the poor, the fortunate and the unfortunate, the deserving and undeserving, are ways in which the sentimental indexes the imperfections of late capitalism—imperfections that call on the sentimental mode to aestheticize them imperfectly.

We started by looking at how sentimentality is produced in commodity form in Chapter One, with Foer’s cute gimmick. Oskar the child is turned into a device that forces us into a position of sympathetic identification with him. The sentimental thus involved the objectification of the child and his world, as well as the infantilization of the readers drawn into the novel’s world of objects. In Chapter Two, the situation seemed to be reversed and further complicated. Ishiguro’s donor-clones start out not as subjects but as objects; the sentimental arises when these objects are subjectivized as clones who have personalities but are not quite persons. Additionally, the figure of the child in _Never Let Me Go_ is characterized not simply as one who wishes to remain a child, but as one who wishes both to have and be a parent. Chapter Three placed a greater emphasis on the flexible relations between objects by drawing attention to the irony enabled by free-indirect discourse. Rather than drawing the reader inward (as Foer’s novel does), Yanagihara’s novel points outward to the reader and asserts a continuity between the novel’s world and ours. Indeed, the book cover itself has become a potent marketing gimmick whose charms rely on a superficial
continuity between image and reality: one holds the book over one’s face like a mask, angling it such that one is, himself, the orgasmic man of Peter Hujar’s portrait, or Jude, in pleasure or in pain (or both) at having read the book.

To end on the note of hiding faces and the movement outward to the reader of these novels, I will relate something personal (I’m tempted to say, “Here’s your sentimental ending!”). While writing this thesis, I avoided holding these three recognizable sentimental titles in public. There seemed to be something profoundly uncool about writing seriously on books of such dubious literary merit (with the exception of *Never Let Me Go*—part of a recent and much-hyped Nobel-prize-winning oeuvre, which creates another kind of embarrassment). I wrote the bulk of this thesis in the privacy of my room (a new kind of domesticity), anticipating the contempt of others if I were to, say, pore over dog-eared pages of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (“Now A Major Motion Picture!”) in Olin Library while my peers were reading “serious” texts and translating Latin manuscripts in Special Collections. I was holed up with my “special collections,” hoping to preserve not the fragile pages of my three trade paperbacks but my “dignity,” and in doing so, I was refusing the exposure that would prove my point: the form of sentimentality, along with the embarrassment that motivated this project, is historical, political, and social. So why should I be ashamed now?
Works Cited

A Little Life: A Novel (@alittlelifebook) • Instagram Photos and Videos.


