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The Existentialist World of Murakami Haruki:
A Reflection of
Postmodern Japanese Society

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I could not have completed this thesis without Professor Fessler's expertise and unfailing guidance.

I would also like to thank my family, especially my parents, for their encouragement, and my friends for their continued support.

Introduction

Murakami Haruki has bridged cultural boundaries with his fiction, and has gained international fame as a result. In opposition to the homogenous country in which he was born, Murakami reached adulthood with a firm belief in the strength of the individual. His appeal, and yet also his criticism, is this conviction for preserving the individual for the betterment of society. By being an individual, Murakami has ignored the unwritten rules of literary society in Japan, blurring the line between Japanese pure literature, *jun bungaku* (純文学), and mass literature, *taishū bungaku* (大衆文学). To some, his ability to reach an international readership is an indication of his abandonment of his Japanese roots; he is often characterized as an un-Japanese Japanese writer.¹ Others go as far as to accuse Murakami of devaluing Japanese writing because of his lack of cultural specificity in his works. They believe his writing has no cultural identity.²

In order to understand Murakami's writing, it is important to delve deeper into why his works are so often criticized by his Japanese peers. There is no debate that Murakami as a person is un-Japanese in his opinion on individualism and rejection of homogeneity. Even as an adolescent he was a loner and wished to be by himself.³ Then, after college, instead of getting a "real" job in an office as many Japanese men do, he opened a successful jazz club in Tokyo.⁴ This nontraditional tendency within the homogenous Japanese culture reflects his unorthodox use of the Japanese language,⁵ such as frequently using the pronoun "I" whereas other Japanese writers typically avoid pronouns except when necessary for the sake of clarity.⁶ For this reason, some say that Murakami's writing is closer to English than Japanese, and no reader could miss the almost constant references to Western media. However, Matthew Carl Strecher, who has

written several articles and books on Murakami, holds that Murakami's unconventional writing style is actually *not* used to take away from Japanese culture, but to allow the world to be more familiarly acquainted with it. Murakami tries to break the historical isolation of Japan by making his fiction readable internationally.⁷ Another common criticism is that in an effort to reach an international audience, Murakami writes stories that could take place anywhere in the world; to put it simply, they would not have to take place in Japan for the story to make sense.

Indeed, his simple and clear prose is a leap from the obscure and ambiguous language often associated with major contemporary Japanese writers like Ōe Kenzaburō, who stated in his Nobel Prize speech that he wished “to create serious works of literature distinct from those novels which are mere reflections of the vast consumer culture of Tokyo and the subculture of the world at large.”⁸ Murakami takes his writing less seriously, stating that he is just a “fiction writer...I don't want to write messages. I want to write good stories.”⁹ However, Strecher argues that his plain prose, although readable, *is* laced with complex philosophies; his desire to write good stories does not mean there is not a clear message in his fiction.¹⁰ In fact, Strecher maintains, the underlying messages in his work are not only elaborate, but equally serious and as political as Ōe's.

However, Ōe himself has refused to concede this, and has specifically censured Murakami for not fulfilling the responsibility of being a writer, which, in his opinion, is to take an active stance on the issues of contemporary society such as nuclear weapons, hunger, and urbanization. Ōe's concern is that “pure literature” is being replaced by “fiction writing.” Indeed, Strecher points out that Murakami and other Japanese contemporary writers like him are not interested in creating sophisticated literature.¹¹ For

these contemporary writers, the goal of writing is less about creating art and more about decreasing the gap between the “intellectual” and the “common.”¹² However, Murakami’s works are sophisticated in the sense that they are able to reach a wider audience; they mix entertainment with social and political awareness. Even Ōe cannot ignore Murakami’s wide readership, and has grudgingly credited Murakami for bringing international interest to Japanese literature.¹³

There is no question that Murakami does not fit Ōe’s definition of what a typical Japanese writer should be; however, he *is* a Japanese writer, and the issues that he addresses in his novels are indeed Japanese. As Ōe notes, Murakami does not address issues of contemporary industrial societies. What he does focus on is something more domestic, and certainly not less significant: the disillusioned generation of the Japanese of the postmodern era.¹⁴ Murakami’s concern is the crisis of identity occurring in a Japan whose citizens are growing up in a consumerist life that has little meaning.¹⁵ For Murakami, having a people without an identity leads to an increase in violence, suicide, and a “lack of spiritual and ideological” basis in society.¹⁶

In order to understand this identity crisis, it is crucial to understand the history to which Murakami is referring. He himself was a part of the *Zenkyōtō* 全共闘 movement (short for *Zengaku kyōtō kaigi* 全学共闘会議), in which Japanese college students tried to push for liberal change in the 1960s.¹⁷ This generation of college students comprised Japanese born after World War II; a generation often said to be without an identity. The first generation to be born in the postwar period, those students had not experienced the hardship of the war or reconstruction period. Whereas the previous generation had suffered through war and poverty with peace and prosperity as the ultimate goal, this new

generation took affluence for granted.¹⁸ With no real goal with which to associate, that lost generation found that the countercultural movements were a way to identify itself; however, for this reason the movement proved transitory. With the leaders of these movements having no real guiding ideology, and only an emotional desire to identify with *something*, these movements had a short lifespan in contrast to the *Zengakuren* 全学連 movement (short for *Zen Nihon gakusei jichikai sō rengō* 全日本学生自治会総連合) which took place in the late 1940s after World War II, and opposed concrete problems such as the US occupation of Okinawa, and resistance of nuclear weapons.¹⁹

Having personally experienced the brief left-wing college movement of the *Zenkyōtō*, Murakami understood the disillusionment that these fleeting political activities caused.²⁰ The supposed radicals of the 60s abandoned their ideals and joined mainstream society as early as the year following the disbandment of the political movements.²¹ During the 70s the Japanese became less concerned with politics and more consumed by affluence.²² The generation that had found an identity with the countercultural movements therefore lacked an identity once again with their end, and replaced identity with consumerism.²³ In other words, we find a society where people are “evaluated according to their economic and technical usefulness and not according to the essential qualities of their being.”²⁴

The term “postmodern” will be used in reference to the culture that subsequently developed in Japan after the decline of the countercultural movements of the 1960s. In the postmodern era the identity conflict became increasingly internal because there was no longer an outside adversary. Strecher formulates the question plaguing Murakami’s identity-lacking generation: When there is no ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ because a ‘them’ no longer

exists, how is a generation to define ‘us’?²⁵ This is the existentialist question to which Murakami seeks to find the answer. He recognizes that Japan is in an existentialist crisis, similar to the one experienced in the western world after the Second World War.

The type of existentialism that is the focus here is that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who describes existentialism in this way: “‘We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards.’”²⁶ Although Murakami does advocate for man to first understand his existence and to encounter himself, he does differ from Sartre in that he believes there is an essence, a core identity, to every person. This essence is always there, although not always acknowledged. Murakami’s wish for each individual is to find this core identity within one’s subconscious, become acquainted with it, and own it. He is not concerned about finding solutions to global issues; rather, his concern lies in analyzing a person’s subconscious in order to see whether that person will conform or go against homogenous Japanese society.²⁷ For him, the inner self, the subconscious, is the ultimate source for one’s true self.²⁸ Susan Napier points out that in general this “other self” is seen as something positive, as long as there is a balance between the two selves.²⁹ There is a dichotomy between the physical and metaphysical; the physical being the conscious mind and the metaphysical being the unconscious mind.³⁰ In order to find this subconscious “other,” the metaphysical part that is inaccessible to the conscious self, Murakami uses the supernatural. It is the supernatural that allows the subconscious to be tangible.³¹ Strecher indicates that Murakami differs from others writers who use magical realism because he uses it as a tool to *find* an identity, not confirm it.³² Murakami’s characters encounter bizarre situations and

seemingly impossible scenarios to get to their subconscious. Clearly, the main goal is to find one's core identity, one that is not oppressed by the state.³³

The major existentialist crises that his protagonists suffer as a result are alienation from society and the search for one's core identity in order to escape an overbearing homogenous "system." These are important themes to Murakami because they are issues plaguing his own generation of Japanese. For Murakami, individualism is key to surviving the dystopia of the 20th century. In the world of materialism and corruption, the basis for moral authority lies solely with the individual.³⁴ In every fiction Murakami creates, the main goal is to decipher what happens to one's personal identity in a society where one's identity is already pre-constructed with the goal of fitting into society.³⁵ Murakami wishes to reverse the idea that identity comes from participating in materialism and not from overcoming challenges of survival.³⁶ The dominant theme is the battle between one's fight for individual identity and society's imposition of a structured and homogenous identity.³⁷ This controlled society of Japan that emerged after the 1980s, in which the prioritization of wealth became a prerequisite for participation in society, is often referred to by Murakami as "the system." For him, the system is a dangerous machine that controls "mass desire through control of education, the mass media, and industrial production."³⁸ The only way to fight this system, Murakami suggests, is by seeking an identity, one separate from the system. Therefore, individual identity must be preserved, and doing so is a matter of exercising one's will.³⁹

In a speech he gave in 2009 after receiving a literary award in Jerusalem, Murakami describes the fight that each individual must confront in postmodern society:

Each of us is, more or less, an egg. Each of us is a unique, irreplaceable soul enclosed in a fragile shell. This is true of me, and it is true of each of you. And each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, is confronting a high, solid wall. The wall has a name: it is “The System.” The System is supposed to protect us, but sometimes it takes on a life of its own, and then it begins to kill us and cause us to kill others-coldly, efficiently, systematically... We must not allow the System to exploit us. We must now allow the System to take on a life of its own. The System did not make us: we made the System.⁴⁰

This is the battle that every Murakami character must fight. He must find and preserve his core identity, and not allow “the system” to make him forget that he is an individual. These protagonists are often given the choice of living in an already perfect world without an identity, or living in a less perfect world with a clear identity.⁴¹ The heroes of his fiction are everyday people – usually the main character is a boy or a man. They are not your typical heroes, but superfluous ones in that they would rather not be involved with conflicts of society.⁴² They are often self absorbed, alone, and interact little with society because they are living in a materialist society that has caused them to no longer know how to connect with others on a personal level.⁴³ Strecher describes a typical Murakami hero this way: “He is intelligent, but not intellectual; educated, but not pedantic; introverted, but not neurotic.”⁴⁴ There is nothing special about these characters, and yet they are heroes because they are refusing to give into the temptation of simply being a part of the system; instead, they choose to be proactive in finding their identities.⁴⁵

The two novels, *Nejimaki-dori Kuronikuru* ねじまき鳥クロニクル (*The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* 1997), and *Umibe no Kafka* 海辺のカフカ (*Kafka on the Shore* 2002), both focus on this existentialist search for the self. Although the plots of these two works vary greatly, they are both distinctly Murakami novels in that the protagonist is a passive hero, a man of everyday life who is faced with societal conflicts in which he would rather not be included. These are protagonists who interact very little with society; some critics refer to them as *jiheiteki* (自閉的), or autistic.⁴⁶ They are isolated from their surroundings, and also from themselves.

The salient point is that these novels are purely Japanese; they are specific to a generation of Japanese with which Murakami associates. These fictional stories have actual contemporary issues that face Japanese society today such as violence and the advent of *hikikomori* (引きこもり), a social phenomenon that is recognized as a symptom specific to modern Japan. Although many of these contemporary issues affect countries outside of Japan, it is clear in the Murakami narrative that he is addressing his home country.

Murakami's strength is his ability to focus his attention on domestic contemporary issues of Japan in a way that reaches ordinary readers. His writing style is unorthodox to Japanese literature, and he is heavily influenced by Western culture; however, the core issues he addresses pertain specifically to Japan, which indicates that his works do have a cultural identity: Japanese. Whether he falls into the category of *taishū bungaku* or *jun bungaku* is not important. In fact, this type of categorization is exactly what he wishes to avoid. Essentially, Murakami is an individual; he is taking the

same existential journeys that his protagonists are taking by daring to write in a style that he desires, and focus on the issues that *he* believes are crucial to Japanese society.

The Wind-up Bird Chronicle:
A Labyrinth of Existentialist Thought

The Wind-up Bird Chronicle is often described as one of Murakami's most ambitious novels in terms of its intricate and twisting plot line. Murakami, who originally intended the work to be only two volumes, produced a third due to public demand; however, even the completion of the third left readers dissatisfied by the many mysteries it fails to answer.⁴⁷ However, this conscious decision to leave the ending ambiguous stems from Murakami's belief that mysteries are reality, while solutions are illusion.⁴⁸ His novels are not didactical, but an exploration of the problems of postmodern society, the answers to which Murakami, too, is trying to find.⁴⁹ Published as one volume in the United States, it tells of the strange and supernatural experiences of an ordinary Japanese man, Tōru Okada, whose wife, Kumiko, has suddenly gone missing. It is through the difficult search for his wife that Tōru realizes he knows little to nothing about the world that he has supposedly been living in his entire life. The search for Kumiko ultimately becomes a search for his true self; in order to find his missing partner, Tōru must first be reacquainted with the core self that he has failed to uncover in his subconscious.

I. Alienation from Society

Tōru is a typical Murakami protagonist. He is a man with specific tendencies, and desires things to be done the way he wants them. Whether it is his unique way of cooking spaghetti while listening to the music from the opera *The Thieving Magpie*, "which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta,"⁵⁰ or the almost compulsive way in which he irons his clothes when he is stressed, Tōru's world is a small sphere of the way he likes to do things. In other words, he is self-absorbed in the sense that his narrow world consists

of little else than his own idiosyncrasies. His everyday world, or “the daily round of tasks and duties, most of them performed in routine and habitual ways or according to a schedule,”⁵¹ is the only thing with which he associates himself. Despite having distinctive ways in which he does everyday tasks, Tōru is missing a clear identity, which has more to do with the actual self than how one does things. The book itself is filled with ironies, including a man who has millions of tendencies – from his cooking to the way that he irons his clothes – yet has no identity: “A well without water. A bird that can’t fly. An alley with an exit. And-.”⁵² Murakami purposely leaves the ending of this sentence ambiguous, leaving it up to the reader to finish the sentence: and a man without a clear identity. Just as with the other examples he lists, this is unnatural and abnormal.

It is not until Tōru begins to search for the answer as to why Kumiko has left him and where she has gone that he himself begins to perceive just how small the world in which he lives is: “I had rarely entered the ‘outside world’. I had been moving back and forth between the local shops, the swimming pool, and this house...it was a narrow world, a world that was standing still.”⁵³ Perfectly fitting into the mold of the Murakami character, Tōru has little interaction with the outside world. He does not talk to those external to his sphere – which is small to begin with, and this isolation is felt even greater after Kumiko’s disappearance. For the rest of the novel, as he investigates Kumiko’s absence, it is apparent that this is a man who feels great alienation from his society.

Although the awareness of this alienation is clearly rooted in the disappearance of Kumiko, Tōru doubts the depth to which one person can understand another even prior to her leaving. In the original text, the first sentence of the second chapter states, “Is it possible, in the final analysis for one human being to achieve perfect understanding of

another?”⁵⁴ (「ひとりの人間が、他のひとりの人間について十全に理解するというのは果して可能なことなのだろうか。」⁵⁵) It is not only the fact that Kumiko is gone, but also the fact that he has no idea why she has left him that creates a deep hole of confusion within Tōru. He begins to acknowledge that his wife, whom he should know the most intimately, is a stranger. He asks, “In the end, how close can we come to that person’s essence?”⁵⁶

Far from knowing his wife’s true essence, Tōru even fails to know some of Kumiko’s most basic likes and dislikes, as he learns one night after he buys blue tissues and flower pattern toilet paper, and then cooks a beef stir-fry with green peppers, all things that Kumiko cannot stand. “I’m shocked that you could live with me all this time and not be aware of that... You’ve been living with me all this time,’ she says, ‘but you’ve hardly paid any attention to me. The only one you ever think about is yourself.’”⁵⁷ What seems like a trivial mistake causes a large dilemma for Tōru. In Kumiko’s subconscious lies a world that cannot be touched by him, a part of her that is unknown and mysterious to him. This shocking unfamiliarity with his own wife drives Tōru to ask serious existential questions, such as the meaning of life: “What was the point of my life at all if I was spending it in bed with an unknown companion?”⁵⁸

This disconnection from his own wife is a great blow to him also because he does not have many people with whom he is intimate. According to him, neither does Kumiko: “I was reminded how little the two of us had had to do with other people. Apart from a few useful meetings with colleagues, we had had almost no relationships outside the house in the six years since our marriage, but instead had lived a withdrawn sort of life, just Kumiko and me.”⁵⁹ In how Tōru perceived the world, he and Kumiko were each

other's partners in life. This is also in part due to the fact that they had no children. In fact, Kumiko becomes pregnant in their third year of marriage, but has an abortion while Tōru is away on business. Although Tōru tells Kumiko that the decision is hers, he tries to advocate for having the baby, believing that it will widen their narrow world: "I also think that having the baby would expand our world."⁶⁰ (『当時に子供を作ることによって僕らの世界がもっと大きなよろがりを持つんじゃないかと思うこともある。』)

⁶¹) Tateno Hideo notes that with the abortion, Tōru suffers two damages: losing a potential child and therefore losing the potential for a wider world, and losing the right to decide whether to have the baby or not.⁶² The abortion does indeed leave Tōru no choice but to rely even more strongly on Kumiko for intimacy; she is all he has in his narrow world. However, what is perhaps more important is that the recognition of his failure to understand his own wife is also recognition that his perception of the world is skewed.

Unlike Tōru, whose revelation comes mostly with Kumiko's disappearance, Kumiko seems to have a deeper grasp of the concept of human alienation as a fact of life. Her serious understanding of this is made clear on their first date at the aquarium. Upon seeing her favorite jellyfish, she reveals to her future husband her philosophy on human life:

What we see before us is just one tiny part of the world. We get into the habit of thinking, This is the world, but that's not true at all. The real world is in a much darker and deeper place than this, and most of it is occupied by jellyfish and things... Two-thirds of the earth's surface is ocean, and all we can see of it with the naked eye is the surface: the skin. We hardly know anything about what's underneath the skin.⁶³

As if an admonition, Kumiko tells Tōru from the start of their relationship that true understanding of another human being is not just improbable, but impossible. Indeed, what she describes is precisely what happens to Tōru, who realizes that he was only familiar with Kumiko's surface, and never familiar with her internal world, her true self.

In addition, Murakami makes an important point that physical proximity has little to do with emotional proximity, or understanding a person's true essence. In fact, Tōru and Kumiko's first experience with sex, "an attempt at a total sharing of being,"⁶⁴ is one of the least intimate experiences of Tōru's life: "The entire time she was in my arms, I could have sworn that Kumiko was somewhere else, thinking about something else, and the body I was holding was nothing but a temporary substitute."⁶⁵ A physical union that should be one of the most intimate moments of their relationship is in fact something cold and unemotional.

The painful truth that he has been living with a stranger for most of his marriage devastates Tōru and makes him question not only his marriage, but whether human beings can make meaningful connections with one another. If he cannot know his own wife, someone with whom he has shared a bed with for many years, how can he ever hope to know anyone? Murakami shows us through Tōru's character just how disconnected one can be from the outside world in contemporary society. We see that the detached life Tōru led prior to Kumiko's disappearance is one put in place by Tōru himself. He admits, "I rarely suffer lengthy emotional distress from contact with other people...I can distinguish between myself and another as beings of two different realms...I put a freeze on my emotions."⁶⁶ He seems to even take pride in the fact that he has been able to keep his "world in a more or less stable state."⁶⁷ This confession implies

that Tōru is not simply a victim of Japanese society that places emphasis on commercialism rather than personal relationships; he is also an active culprit in his isolation from others.

Tōru's disengagement from the outside world is evident throughout the novel. For example, when listening to the events on the news he states that they "were all events from some other, distant world. The only thing happening in my world was the rain falling in the yard."⁶⁸ Because of his inability to connect with others, the events and tragedies happening to those outside of his world do not interest him or evoke emotion from him. However, this does not mean that Tōru is emotionless or lacks human sensitivities. In fact, he feels intense – almost chronic – loneliness after Kumiko's departure. He describes it as "a violent stab of loneliness. The very water I drank, the very air I breathed, would feel like long, sharp needles."⁶⁹ Furthermore, it seems that his desire to identify with another human being intensifies once he becomes conscious of the fact that he has not made any significant connections his entire life. "I wanted to talk to someone. I wanted someone to talk to me... Call me, somebody, please anybody... I just wanted someone to talk to me."⁷⁰ Strecher recognizes that this melancholia and desperation for human contact stems from his desire to find his identity through receiving acknowledgement of his own existence from someone separate from himself and his narrow world.⁷¹

This theme of loneliness, isolation, and desperation for human contact is not Tōru's alone. It runs through nearly all characters in the novel, including May Kasahara, a young teenage girl who takes risks – even potentially fatal ones – just to feel alive. Most often found alone in her backyard sunbathing, she and Tōru begin an odd

friendship. Despite her youth, May is emotionally mature for her age, especially when it comes to themes such as death and alienation from others. Her character is a testament to the fact that even the generation of Japanese after Murakami's own is also struggling with the same existentialist crisis.⁷² In one of the many letters she writes Tōru towards the end of the novel, she describes how she copes at night when she begins to worry about her future: “When it happens, I try to remind myself that I *am* connected to others – other things and other people. I work as hard as I can to list their names in my head.”⁷³ The fact that she must use all of her effort to list these supposed connections with other people is tragic; yet it is the reality of the postmodern culture.

More importantly, the type of loneliness and alienation that May and Tōru feel is a reflection of their lack of identity because self-identity cannot be created solely from within; self-identity is also developed through one's relationship with others in society.⁷⁴ Although a large portion of identity is created internally, a part of it also incorporates one's connection with others. It is in fact even hard to say whether these characters exist at all because each is so tightly wound up in their own worlds with limited to no interaction with others in society. This concept of identity being linked with others is also prevalent in existentialist thought, in which existence itself cannot be confirmed without “being-with-others,” or communicating with other people. Although existentialism does stress individualism as a virtue, it also acknowledges the fact that man is a social animal.⁷⁵ Without the presence of an external presence that is separate from oneself, it is almost impossible to develop one's self-identity.⁷⁶

However, all human relation does not aid in the development of self-identity. The problem is that many of these connections are – to use an existential term – inauthentic,

and “do not really involve the selves of those who take part in [them]...[they] do not flow from whole selves.”⁷⁷ Macquarrie describes precisely the dilemma in which Tōru finds himself. He has few human relations to begin with, and the one that he believed to be authentic – his intimacy with his wife – is revealed as something in fact inauthentic. Strecher proposes that this world of isolation that Murakami offers is his view of Japanese contemporary society.⁷⁸ Furthermore, he states that through his characters, Murakami is making the point that relationships in the postmodern era seem to develop only through consumerism within Japanese society.⁷⁹ Indeed, the Japanese economic boom of the late 1980s, “one of the world’s great success stories,”⁸⁰ is a story of failure in the eyes of Murakami. Adding the existential element of authenticity and inauthenticity to Strecher’s proposal strengthens this argument in that it makes the distinction that the problem is not so much having no human relations, but having ones that are insincere and shallow.

The consumerism that Murakami is talking about can be seen at several instances in the novel. One character that exemplifies Japanese thinking pre-WWII is Kumiko’s father, who is consumed by elitism and money. For Tōru’s father-in-law, monetary prosperity is what defines a person. “All men are *not* created equal,” he tells Tōru. “...unless you become one of the elite, there was no point in living in this country.”⁸¹ Murakami asserts that it is a mistake to continue thinking in this manner in the postmodern period.⁸² It is because of people like Kumiko’s father who continues to think in this way that Murakami believes his generation is encountering identity issues. Another instance in which monetary security is chosen over personal growth is when Kumiko aborts the baby. She argues that with the baby, there would be no “money for

anything extra”⁸³ and that they wouldn’t be able to do the things that they want to. Of course, without the baby their incomes will steadily increase and they will be able to live a very comfortable life. However, Tateno argues that this “type of happiness can be nothing more than a pre-determined type of harmony” (「予定調和的なささやかな幸せにすぎない」⁸⁴). Tateno recognizes that it is Kumiko who decides that financial security is more important than personal growth. Unfortunately, this focus on finances is how many in the postmodern era make decisions.

Essentially, the people around Tōru are not trying to widen his world, but to keep it smaller. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Tōru has nobody to turn to but himself to find his identity “through free and responsible decisions”⁸⁵; the burden is placed solely on his shoulders. Not only must he try to establish an authentic existence with others, he must build an authentic existence with himself – one that is internally created, and not molded by external influences.⁸⁶ Of course, as Strecher indicates, this is no easy task in a society like Japan’s where a large part of one’s identity comes from one’s economic role within society.⁸⁷

II. Alienation from Oneself/Question of One’s Existence

In the Murakami novel, alienation from others in society coincides with a disconnection from oneself. This alienation from the self is presented as the root of the problem of the former. Tateno describes this alienation as an emptiness, 「空虚」 that one feels within.⁸⁸ The question of one’s existence comes into play first in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* when speaking about Lieutenant Mamiya, who experiences the Japanese takeover of Manchuria. The war scenes that Murakami describes are gruesome and

violent, specifically when Lieutenant Mamiya describes witnessing one of his Japanese comrades being skinned alive after being captured by a demonic Russian man. Although spared death by skinning, Lieutenant Mamiya is thrown into a dark well and left to die. It is during his nights in this well that he describes how he began to lose a hold of his own existence: “The surrounding space is so vast that it becomes more and more difficult to keep a balanced grip on one’s own being.”⁸⁹ However, in addition to this sense of losing oneself, Mamiya also describes how for a few minutes a day, the sun would shine directly into the well. It was during those brief moments that he “experienced a wonderful sense of oneness, and overwhelming sense of unity...the true meaning of life resided in that light that lasted for however many seconds it was, and I felt I *ought to die* right then and there.”⁹⁰ Tōru also decides to go down into the well that is in the back of a vacant neighborhood house in order to try to recreate and experience for himself what Mamiya experienced for those few seconds: the true meaning of life. It becomes clear to Tōru that in order to find himself, he must lose his sense of self first.

However, unlike Mamiya, Tōru questions his existence prior to going into the well. For example, when Noboru Wataya, Kumiko’s older brother and archenemy of Tōru, and Malta Kano, a unique medium whom Kumiko hired to help them find their lost cat, meet at a café to discuss Kumiko’s whereabouts, Noboru Wataya, whom Tōru describes as being “covered over by something slick and artificial,”⁹¹ refuses to acknowledge Tōru’s presence even after he sits down. Wataya, who is there simply to relay a message from Kumiko to Tōru that she no longer wants to see him, treats him as if he is not there. At this point Tōru doubts his own existence: “Noboru Wataya appeared not even to have noticed that I had arrived. In order to make sure that I had not suddenly

turned transparent, I put a hand on the table and watched it as I turned it over a few times.”⁹²

The second time that Tōru checks the existence of his hand to confirm his existence is when he is in the well. “There were my hands and my cheeks. I couldn’t see them in the dark, but they were still here: my body still existed.”⁹³ The darkness of the well swallows visibility of one’s body and therefore swallows one’s grip on existence. Tōru describes how strange it is to confirm something’s existence without being able to see it: “It was the strangest thing not to be able to see my own body with my own eyes, thought I knew it must be there. Staying very still in the darkness, I became less and less convinced of the fact that I existed.”⁹⁴

Another reference to looking at his hands comes after being in the well for a night, completely shut in (which is May Kasahara’s doing). Tōru experiences the supernatural in which he passes through the walls of the well into a labyrinthine hotel. After this experience, he finds that he has a purple mark on his cheek that seems to pulse with a life of its own. This mark on his face is the first visible sign of the subconscious that can be seen in the conscious realm; for Murakami, the subconscious is something organic and alive.⁹⁵ Days after the incident, Tōru states: “I seemed to be growing more distant from myself with each day that went by. If I stared at my hand for a while, I would begin to feel that I was looking through it.”⁹⁶

Tateno Hideo suggests that it is through pain that these characters try to reassure themselves of their existence.⁹⁷ His strongest example of this is when early on in the novel, Tōru goes to Hokkaido on a business trip. On the phone Kumiko tells him that she has had an abortion, the decision hers alone. The news upsets Tōru; he goes into a bar to

try to make sense of the situation. At the bar is a man playing the guitar on stage, who, at the end of his performance, performs a trick in which he puts his hand over a flame as the audience “could almost hear the sizzle of the flesh.”⁹⁸ In the end it is just a magic trick, and there are no burns on his hands. But the man, who “endured the pain, his face distorted in agony,”⁹⁹ must have gone through that pain for some reason. What was this reason? Tateno suggests it is because through pain he is able to confirm his existence. Furthermore, he goes so far as to argue that the man at the bar is an illusion that Tōru creates in order to deal with his own pain.¹⁰⁰ Although the man at the bar may not be an illusion, it is appropriate that Murakami put him there in order to reflect the internal pain that Tōru is feeling about Kumiko’s abortion.

Tōru’s need to confirm his existence through physical means is similar to Sartre’s belief that ““existence precedes essence”” in humans.¹⁰¹ In other words, one cannot identify oneself without first being sure of one’s physical existence in the world. Sartre thought of man first as “an existent rather than man as thinking object.”¹⁰² He was one of the existentialists who understood that the body was an important part of the existentialist crisis, although other existentialists chose to ignore it or not focus on it. For Sartre, it was impossible to ignore the body because he thought of the body as a “constitutive for existence”¹⁰³; one cannot interact with the world without one. The area in which Murakami’s belief of human identity differs with Sartre is the discussion of existence, or “that it is,” and essence, or “what it is.”¹⁰⁴ Sartre believed that existence preceded essence: ““We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards.”¹⁰⁵ However, Murakami does not seem to make

such a distinction. On the contrary, he believes that the essence of a person is always there within a person's subconscious – it is simply up to the individual to unveil it.

III. Lack of Identity

This doubt of one's existence stems from the fact that Tōru and the Japanese of his generation are lacking a concrete identity. At first Tōru does not fully understand the concept of an 'identity' and is disappointed that he has no external characteristic that distinguishes himself from anyone else. In the beginning of the novel, Tōru believes that having an identity is equal to having external uniqueness and does not comprehend that one's ultimate source of self comes from within.¹⁰⁶ However, Malta Kano, the medium, is able to identify Tōru immediately when they first meet in a café despite the fact that he is not wearing the polka dot tie that he told her he would be wearing. This indicates that although Tōru is not aware of his own identity yet, Malta Kano sees the potential of an identity forming within him; essentially, identity is something that exists mainly in the internal world.

This concept of identity as being something that is developed internally rather than externally continues with the death of Mr. Honda, a type of medium that Kumiko and Tōru visit at the wish of her parents. Upon his death, Mr. Honda specifically leaves Tōru an empty box, which is delivered by Lieutenant Mamiya, who served in the war with Honda. "It was absolutely empty. All that Mr. Honda had left me was an empty box,"¹⁰⁷ Tōru states. He is not sure what to make of the box at first. But it becomes clearer as the novel unfolds that the box represents Tōru's identity: it is empty because he

has failed to actively find his own core. It is almost as if Mr. Honda has left Tōru the task of filling this box, this void within him where his core identity should be.

Through Mr. Honda, Murakami suggests that individual identity is something that must be sought after actively. It is therefore the responsibility of the individual to seek out one's core identity, and then protect it from the homogenous culture – specifically, Japanese culture. For Murakami, “the system,” which he equates with the Japanese government, is the main reason why the postmodern generation of Japanese, represented by Tōru, lacks an identity. One perfect image Murakami gives us of the homogeneity of Japanese society is when Tōru sits in front of Shinjuku station doing nothing but watching the people around him rushing by: “...there were still plenty of men with briefcases and folded umbrellas hurrying towards the station steps...I saw lots of men my age, but not one of them wore a Van Halen T-shirt. Each wore his company's lapel badge and clutched a copy of the *Nikkei News* under his arm.”¹⁰⁸ With his Van Halen t-shirt, Tōru is trying to express his individuality, and is also fighting against conformity – something that is valued in Japanese society. The type of relation that these Japanese citizens have with each other is inauthentic in that they are only connected with one another through their homogeneity. They wear the same clothes and do the same things, but are not making personal and meaningful connections with one another. They conform to the group, yet no interconnections with individuals within the group are made.

While Murakami does place responsibility upon individuals to seek out their own core identities, he places heavier responsibility and blame on “the system” for structuring a society in which individuality and freedom of expression is suppressed. In an interview with *Asia Week* in 1997, Murakami uses the example of the Rape of Nanking to describe

this suppression of individual thinking. “Who did it?” Murakami asks. “The military or the individual soldiers? Just how responsible are individuals in a society where they relinquish their free will to the system?”¹⁰⁹ Murakami is genuinely interested in how people act during wartime, how soldiers “follow without a second thought the orders of a superior, no matter how outlandish.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, Murakami blames the state more than the individuals that carry out state orders.¹¹¹ Furthermore, to him, the state is an idiotic structure that carries out actions which benefit it but waste human life, such as what occurred during World War II when the Japanese people wholly supported the war effort only to have their lives devastated by it.¹¹² In other words, the state, led by self-aggrandizing politicians, exploits its people to do what it wants them to do without taking into consideration what is better for the individuals in society.

Famous Japanese journalist and author Honda Katsuichi calls Japan a “tadpole society,” a society that emphasizes memorization instead of critical thinking in schools. As a result, he argues, the system raises citizens who forget that they are individuals – their core identities become lost, or are never created in the first place, because the group is most important. Honda states: “In order to create a tadpole society, the Ministry of Education decides what is good to think, while denigrating individual opinion. Individuality is punished, and no one is encouraged to think on one’s own.”¹¹³ This suppression of individuality from a young age creates a generation of Japanese who are not actively creating an identity and are indifferent to political injustices. Unfortunately, Japanese society is far from the ideal society in which “social structures [promote] the highest degree of individual development, and conversely...[do] not disrupt the cohesion of social structure.”¹¹⁴ The reality in Japan is the existence of a homogenous society

where uniqueness is shunned and conformity is rewarded. There is even an idiom in Japanese, 「出る杭は打たれる」, which translates into: “the stake that sticks out will be hammered down.” In other words, those who choose to stand out will be censured into conformity.

Noboru Wataya represents this dark side of Japanese culture, along with the corrupt governmental system. Murakami depicts that system as omniscient, omnipotent, and dangerous.¹¹⁵ Tōru describes Wataya as someone who was “around every corner in the known world,”¹¹⁶ just as the government is. Furthermore, Tōru’s brother-in-law is a popular television commentator, and people adore him, although Tōru finds many inconsistencies in his arguments. Looking at his face even in person “was like looking at a television image.”¹¹⁷ Along with a critique of the government comes Murakami’s harsh censure of television, which for him is interconnected with the political system that runs Japan. He understands that information is a commodity in the postmodern world, and that those who control it are the ones with the power.¹¹⁸

When Tōru finally passes through the well wall from the conscious world to the subconscious world, he talks to a woman in Room 208, who ends up being Kumiko, about how Wataya has gained his power: ““Through television and other media, he gained the ability to train his magnified power on society at large. Now he is trying to bring out something that the great mass of people keep hidden in the darkness of their unconscious...its final effect is to destroy and obliterate people on a massive scale.””¹¹⁹ The obliteration that Tōru talks about is one of individuality and core identity; the government – represented by Wataya – is trying to prevent people from creating their own identities by handing them a pre-made one. This is Murakami speaking directly to

the Japanese government; he believes the mass of Japanese civilians have been objectified by the state and manipulated through popular media¹²⁰ despite there being “no universal pattern of a genuine humanity that can be imposed on all or to which all must conform.”¹²¹

Within Tōru’s subconscious world, Wataya is a part of the political world, and therefore a part of the domineering system. Murakami’s belief that media is a key part of how the government tries to control its people is clear when Tōru is running through his subconscious – through the labyrinth hotel – and finds people absentmindedly staring at a television screen: “...they sat separately and gave no indication of knowing each other. In fact, all the people in the group appeared to be strangers whose attention just happened to be locked on the same television screen.”¹²² More than just pointing out how people “believed only what they saw on television,”¹²³ this scene represents a society in which people are coerced into focusing on the same things without ever really being connected with one another. Although it is a homogenous society based on group mentality, there are few personal relations made within these groups.

IV. The Search for a Core Identity

It becomes clear that Tōru’s search for his wife becomes a hunt for his own core identity. According to May, the core identity is “the lump of death” within each person, “Something round and squishy, like a softball, with a hard little core of dead nerves.”¹²⁴ For Murakami, instead of “identity” being an abstract and amorphous idea, it is a concrete and physical entity. May even describes how she could feel it physically growing inside of her as she also sat at the bottom of the well: “This thing inside me, this

gooshy white thing like a lump of fat was taking over, taking me over, eating me up.”¹²⁵

It is the thing inside every person that makes that person who they are. The philosopher John Macquarrie describes it this way: “Each one’s existence is his own, characterized by a unique ‘mineness.’”¹²⁶ For May, this core identity, which she calls “that gooshy thing inside me,” is the “only thing that isn’t fake.”¹²⁷ Murakami suggests that without this core identity a person is lost: alienated from the self and others in society. The novel is a tool in which he expresses his belief that loneliness stems from one’s inability to communicate this core identity to another. As May states, “Everybody’s born with some different thing at the core of their existence... What I’d really like to do is find a way to communicate that feeling to another person.”¹²⁸

So what are the components of the core identity, and why is it so difficult to attain? Murakami’s definition of the core identity consists of two parts: the conscious self, which tells the subconscious what it sees, and the subconscious self, which tells the conscious self the meaning of what one perceives in terms of previous experience.¹²⁹ The structure of the novel itself indicates this division of conscious and subconscious. For example, Seats points out that chapters are often marked by 2-part titles (sometimes more) of what usually seem like unrelated ideas, indicating that there is no clear way to interpret the text.¹³⁰ However, what Seats perhaps fails to see is that more importantly, it is also a reference to the fact that as individuals we are made up of more than one part, parts which often seem completely random and disconnected.

The subconscious self, the part of a human being that is not easily accessible, is what fascinates Murakami the most. For him, the subconscious is a dark mystery that is worth solving. In a *New York Times* interview he credited this fascination with the

shadows of the mind to one of his first memories: being swept away by a creek into a dark tunnel. “I think that’s why I’m attracted to darkness,”¹³¹ he explains. His attraction to darkness leads to his attraction to the subconscious, an ultimate darkness “where the unconscious mind reigns supreme.”¹³² The subconscious is a chamber in which the conscious visitor is unwelcome, creating a tension and fight between the two halves over dominance of identity. Professor Tanaka of Konan University describes the subconscious as a “place that is connected to one’s heart” (「自分の心の中とつながっているようなある場所」¹³³). He adds, it is an uncontrollable part of the self that is associated with complete darkness (「コントロールもできずに暗い闇のような部分がある」¹³⁴).

For Murakami, it is this 「暗い闇」 (*kurai yami*), darkness, which symbolizes the subconscious. Tōru becomes aware of this dark subconscious when he realizes his lack of knowledge about his own wife. He realizes with sadness and awe that “inside lay a world that belonged to Kumiko alone, a vast world that I had never known. I saw it as a big, dark room.”¹³⁵ The darkness mentioned here is her subconscious, which he describes as a room, similar to how Tōru’s subconscious is a hotel. Kumiko has known about this subconscious part of her that her husband would never reach. Back in her description of the jellyfish, the “real world” that she is referring to, which she asserts “is in a much darker and deeper place” than the world we know, is each person’s respective subconscious.¹³⁶

In the world of Murakami, the subconscious and darkness are related; Tōru begins to understand this and decides that the only way he will be able to tap into his subconscious – along with Kumiko’s – is to go to the bottom of the well, just as Mamiya did in outer Mongolia, where he was able to “descend into a place that might be called

the very core of my own consciousness.”¹³⁷ Tōru is sure that his inner self can be reached there and that its discovery is the only way to retrieve his wife.¹³⁸ Essentially, the well becomes a channel between the conscious and subconscious worlds.¹³⁹ The well is a place where one can face oneself without fear. In the ending of the second volume in the Japanese version of the novel, which was omitted from the English translation, there is a scene (what was supposed to be the ending of the book) where Tōru is floating in the public pool and has the vision he is in a deep well. The image of Tōru floating in the well’s water brings to mind a fetus in a womb, especially since he describes how he felt a certain ease in the well¹⁴⁰ : He felt “surrounded by it, supported by it, and protected by it.” The well is a source of amazement for Tōru. Looking in, he thinks, “...in a place like this, in the middle of the day like this, there existed a darkness as deep as this”¹⁴¹ (「僕は 囲まれ、支えられ、守られているのだ」¹⁴²). What Murakami implies here is that within each person is a dark well such as the one Tōru climbs into; even in the light of day, which signifies the conscious mind, there exists a dark subconscious mind within each person.¹⁴³ Furthermore, understanding this subconscious will help one to further understand oneself and reach one’s core identity.

However, Murakami also addresses the dangers of the subconscious. It can be something that destroys a person, a monster within the self, especially if a balance is not achieved between the conscious and subconscious selves.¹⁴⁴ There are a few examples in the book of how the takeover of the subconscious within a person can lead to violence and destruction. Murakami uses the subconscious to demonstrate that the violence in the postmodern era is different than that of the violence in the 60s, which was an expression

of political resistance.¹⁴⁵ Now, with no clear enemy, the violence that occurs is just for violence's sake; it is a different type of violence (*bōryokusei* 暴力性).

One day in a bar, Tōru sees a man that he saw years ago, a time when Kumiko was becoming more distant and aloof towards Tōru because of her abortion. For little reason other than a spark of interest, he begins to follow this man to an apartment house. When Tōru follows him into the apartment house, the man, out of self-defense, attacks him with a baseball bat. Tōru at first begins to fight the man in counter self-defense. However, his initial feeling of terror turns into anger, and then “something close to intense hatred.”¹⁴⁶ Even with the man defenseless and on the ground, Tōru cannot stop but to continue beating the man senselessly: “I couldn't seem to stop... There were two of me now, I realized. I had split in two, but *this* me had lost the power to stop the other me. An intense chill ran through my body.”¹⁴⁷ This division of the individual suggests that when one part – the conscious or the subconscious – dominates, one's core identity is violated. When the conscious part of a person dominates, the whole self is not there because it ignores the subconscious; on the other hand, when the subconscious dominates, a dark and violent part of oneself has no way of stopping itself.

Loss of self-control appears again when Ushikawa, a sycophant who works for Noboru Wataya, describes how he physically abuses his family: “...when I got home I would take it out on my wife... It was like a sickness. I'd beat her face out of shape until you couldn't recognize her... I'd try to stop myself, but I couldn't. I couldn't control myself”¹⁴⁸ This is another example of and admonition against what happens when the subconscious dominates a person. A similar feeling is described by May Kasahara, who has a habit of doing reckless things that could be potentially fatal, such as trapping Tōru

down the well during one of his meditations. More shocking is when she confesses that she put her hands over her boyfriend's eyes while on a motorcycle, causing an accident that led to his death. "I just can't stop," she confesses to Tōru in a letter. "That's my greatest weakness."¹⁴⁹ Her reason for her impulsive actions is because she "just wanted to get close to that gooshy thing if I could... You've got to really push the limits if you're going to trick it into coming out."¹⁵⁰ What May is seeking here is her core identity – that is the reason for her reckless behavior. She is trying to channel her subconscious in order to get to the core identity that she knows lies within her.

A splitting of the self also occurs with Cinnamon, a character that is introduced in the final part of the novel. The son of Nutmeg Akasaka, he stops talking at the age of six for unknown reasons. One night he finds two men in the backyard burying something; to make sure it's not a dream, he later uncovers what the men had buried: a human heart. After putting the human heart back in the ground, he goes back to his bed only to find that somebody is lying there in his place. "...the person he found in the bed was himself...if I am already sleeping here, then where should *this* me sleep?"¹⁵¹ Here Cinnamon experiences a splitting of the self; when he awakens the next morning he finds he cannot speak, perhaps from the shock of realizing that he possesses two selves: his conscious self and subconscious self.

The importance of both selves working together in balance to structure a core identity is a main theme in the novel, and Murakami introduces instances in which one's core identity is corrupted or violated because one of these parts is missing. The most memorable character in which this occurs is Creta Kano, the sister of Malta Kano, who has experienced three phases in her life: one in pain, one in numbness, and one in

emptiness. After enduring the first third of her life with a condition in which she felt nothing but physical pain, Creta Kano fails in her attempt to commit suicide in a car accident. However, she finds after the accident that she feels no pain – but also no pleasure; she feels nothing, only numbness. With the failure of her suicide and her newfound numbness, she became prostitute. One of her customers was Noboru Wataya, Kumiko’s brother. It was not sex that Noboru wanted, however. Instead, he wanted to pull out of her something that was far more precious: her core identity. Creta describes the violation done to her:

From between the two split halves of my physical self came crawling a thing that I had never seen or touched before. How large it was I could not tell, but it was as wet and slippery as a newborn baby...It had always been inside of me, and yet it was something of which I had no knowledge...I knew that I should not let this happen, that I should not allow my very self to spill out this way and be lost forever.¹⁵²

The split halves of Creta Kano are physical, but also mental: the two halves are her consciousness and subconscious. Together, they form the core identity, the “gooshy thing” that May Kasahara refers to throughout the novel. Once it is extracted out of Creta, she is “completely empty” inside. Essentially, because Wataya pulls out of her the very core of her identity, she must reconstruct herself an identity that is her own: “I had to fill in that blank, little by little. With my own hands. I had to construct this thing I called ‘I’- or rather, make *the things that constituted me.*”¹⁵³

What Noboru Wataya does to his own sister, Kumiko, is slightly different. From Kumiko, instead taking away her entire identity, he has only taken her conscious self.

Therefore, she is trapped in her subconscious, which is exactly where Tōru finds her, in Room 208. Her core identity has become corrupt because it has been unequally divided. Only her subconscious remains. She is left with the “other” part of herself, one that is sexually charged.¹⁵⁴ This explains her countless infidelities during their marriage. It also justifies why Tōru feels such a need to reach his subconscious in order to reach her – it is because she no longer exists within her conscious mind – only in her subconscious mind. This is precisely why he must climb down to the dark abyss that is the well. And when he does succeed in crossing the border from conscious to subconscious, he finds himself in a hotel – a labyrinth, just like the chaotic subconscious – that he must somehow decode to find his way to Kumiko.¹⁵⁵ It is Room 208 where he finds a seductive woman lying in bed – the same woman who calls Tōru throughout the novel, having explicit sexual conversations with him on the phone. Towards the end of the novel, on his second journey into the subconscious, Tōru realizes that the woman lying there is Kumiko. She is a prisoner, never to escape from the subconscious that is represented by the hotel, and more specifically, Room 208.

The man behind these lost identities is Noboru Wataya. Who or what is he exactly? He is Tōru’s “other,” his subconscious self; he is the “feared alter ego.”¹⁵⁶ As Creta Kano points out to Tōru, “Noboru Wataya is a person who belongs to a world that is the exact opposite of yours.”¹⁵⁷ Why, then, would Wataya be such an antagonistic figure, when the subconscious usually works to help one’s conscious self to find one’s core, or true identity? The reason is because Wataya, the “other,” has separated himself from the subconscious realm and is trying to coexist with Tōru in the conscious realm, disturbing the balance of the two worlds. The conscious self and the subconscious “other”

cannot coexist in the same realm.¹⁵⁸ This also explains why Tōru “cannot accept the fact of his very existence,”¹⁵⁹ in reference to Noboru Wataya. Murakami shows that the two living in the same sphere is dangerous because it creates a fight for complete dominance. For example, when Tōru cannot stop beating up the man with the baseball bat, it can be said that it is the Wataya part taking over Tōru’s conscious mind.¹⁶⁰ His presence in Tōru’s conscious world results in a blocking of the flow between the subconscious and conscious worlds, subsequently blocking the communication between these two parts of the self. Therefore, it is up to Tōru to restore this fluidity between the two worlds by passing through the walls of the well – the walls of the conscious – to reconnect with his subconscious.¹⁶¹ This could explain the nickname that May Kasahara gives him, “Mr. Wind-up Bird.” Just as the wind-up bird in the novel is seen as a type of fantastical creature that winds and maintains the world’s balance through the passage of time, Tōru must restore the flow between the self and the other.¹⁶²

Essentially, the attainment of self-identity is a cumbersome process. Murakami’s idea of how an identity is formed comes from various areas, such as engagement with others in society, pursuit of one’s goals, and overcoming hardship.¹⁶³ Murakami does not try to paint a naïve picture of this process; he is well aware that with individuality come varying degrees of loneliness. This loneliness stems from a feeling that one has been left behind by society: “I felt with new intensity just how alone I was, just how far the world had left me behind,”¹⁶⁴ Tōru states. Here Murakami tries to point out the desperation that members of society feel when the society that they are living in does not fulfill their lives emotionally or spiritually. However, he urges the Japanese people not to give up and simply give in to the system; instead, he encourages each person to go on the journey of

self-fulfillment through finding one's identity. Despite the loneliness and hardship that is sure to transpire in seeking one's individualism, Murakami is firm in his belief that it is a journey worth taking.

Kafka on the Shore:
The Labyrinth Within

Published seven years after his immensely popular *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore* is a novel that is increasingly complex and questions human consciousness. Kojima Motohiro writes that just as Kafka, the main character, must roam to find his identity, so must readers roam the text for meaning.¹⁶⁵ In *Kafka on the Shore*, Murakami unfolds two parallel, simultaneous stories. One is the story of Kafka Tamura, a fifteen-year-old who runs away from his home in Nakano, Tokyo on his fifteenth birthday to escape both his father and an omen with which his father has burdened him. At the age of four, Kafka was abandoned by his mother, who took with her his adopted sister. Thus, Kafka grows up in a shattered home. Even more shattering to Kafka than his abandonment is the omen that his father, a famous sculptor, gives him: ““*Someday you will murder your father and be with your mother.*””¹⁶⁶ His father amplifies the classic Oedipal omen and adds the twist that Kafka will also sleep with his older sister. The curse is put upon him because his father uses him as a “punishment device”; the curse is not to penalize Kafka, but to penalize the women who abandoned his father.¹⁶⁷ This verbal curse explains Kafka’s reason for becoming a runaway, but also for his taciturn nature. He has developed a fear of words spoken aloud.¹⁶⁸ However, his fear of spoken words is unrelated to written words; he is an avid reader and appropriately finds shelter at a famous library, the Komura Library, which is in Takamatsu, Shikoku.

Simultaneously occurring is the story of Nakata Satoru, a sixty-year-old man who is slightly mentally handicapped and possesses fantastical powers such as the ability to talk to cats and make leeches fall from the sky. He becomes a savior-type character, who is aided by a young truck driver, Hoshino, who is drawn to Nakata because of his

resemblance to his deceased grandfather. Their journey also begins in Nakano, Tokyo, and ends in Shikoku, where they must open and close an “entrance stone” which has the power to open a world separate from the one we live in. Although these stories seem isolated at first, these parallel narratives intertwine and hold direct correlation to each other as the novel unfolds.

Kafka on the Shore examines many of the same existential themes that Murakami includes in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*; however, the set-up of the novel is quite different in that *Kafka on the Shore* has many elements of Greek tragedy, including the concept of fate and the role of the chorus, which we find in “the boy named Crow,” Kafka’s alter ego who tries to guide Kafka on how to survive in the adult world alone.¹⁶⁹ The allusions to Greek tragedy are explicit in the words of Ōshima, a transgender employee of the Komura Library who befriends Kafka and tells him, “[The Greek chorus] stands at the back of the stage and explains in unison the situation or what the characters are feeling deep down inside. Sometimes they even try to influence the characters.”¹⁷⁰ And, Murakami implicitly nods to the concept of a “chorus” by beginning and ending the novel with the words of the boy named Crow.

Similar to *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, this novel is also about finding one’s identity. Although Kafka is trying to run away from the omen that lies in his subconscious, he ends up accomplishing the opposite: accepting his omen, and from there establishing an identity which was lacking before. As Endō Shinji writes, Kafka must become someone who has a complete and stable center (「中心がちゃんとある自分に」¹⁷¹). In order to do this, Kafka must accept the hollowness that occupies him and come to terms with his subconscious – including taking responsibility of his dreams.

I. Alienation from Society

Undeniably similar to Tōru Okada, Kafka, too, is dealing with the alienation he feels from society. The obvious difference is that while Tōru is from Murakami's generation, Kafka belongs to a much younger generation, much like May Kasahara in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. Both of these young characters' existential crises demonstrate that it is not only Murakami's generation of Japanese who are facing a lack of identity; this identity problem has carried into later generations, especially as life becomes even more affluent and comfortable.¹⁷² Kafka's character is the quintessential Murakami protagonist who is self-absorbed, alone, and interacts little with society.¹⁷³ His decision to leave his home is not only a refusal to accept the omen given to him – it is also a rejection of society. He barely talks to anyone and “naturally” has “zero friends.”¹⁷⁴ He explains, “I've built a wall around me, never letting anybody inside and trying not to venture outside myself.”¹⁷⁵ Kafka distances himself from others knowing that because he has no memories of his mother's face or the adult face of his sister, he could unknowingly fulfill the horrifying prophecy.

The alienation Kafka feels from society is further stirred within him when he runs away from home. He begins to feel like an anomaly as he sees kids his age off to school. “...the platforms on the other side are packed with junior and senior high school kids in summer uniforms, schoolbags slung across their shoulders. All heading to school. Not me, though. I'm alone, going in the opposite direction. We're on different tracks in more ways than one.”¹⁷⁶ By taking a different course of action and separating himself from the Japanese concept of the group, Kafka is asserting his individuality in several ways. There

is the obvious assertion that he is not going to school. However, what is more important is his understanding that he and his social peers do not have the same priorities. Literally and metaphorically, as his train heads the opposite direction of the children going to school, they are on different tracks. And he feels that these “faceless hordes of people,”¹⁷⁷ with whom he feels little connection, is not grappling with the existential issues with which he is so engrossed.

This is made apparent as he watches the people at the train station:

The station's packed with people streaming in and out, all of them dressed in their favorite clothes, bags or briefcases in hand, each one dashing off to take care of some pressing business...In a hundred years everybody here...will have disappeared from the face of the earth and turned into ashes or dust. A weird thought, but everything in front of me starts to seem unreal, like a gust of wind could blow it all away.¹⁷⁸

This passage first demonstrates how disconnected he feels from the society he lives in, a society comprised of people living in their own narrow worlds, preoccupied with their own urgent business. Second, Kafka tries to understand a concept that is complex and almost ungraspable: that all things are transient. In this passage he asks, How can one accept the existence of things in the present when one understands that this present reality is fated to change, and perhaps not even exist in the distant future? And yet he must realize that as a human being he will always be in the middle of the paradox of stability and evanescence of life.

His alienation from society arouses within him a deep sense of aloneness and isolation. For example, at the train station he begins to have doubts about his decision:

“Am I really doing the right thing? The thought makes me feel helpless, isolated. I turn my back on the school kids and try not to look at them anymore.”¹⁷⁹ For Kafka, the urge to run away is not to try to find his identity, but to run away from it. Although he does not want to admit it the omen is a part of his identity, and by running away from the omen he is concurrently disregarding his identity. Furthermore, Murakami implies that just as Kafka is alienating himself from society, society is in turn alienating him as well. Kafka begins to realize that his fear of being caught by the police as a runaway has little basis, for nobody seems to even notice him: “...no one gives me a second glance. I'm starting to feel like the Invisible Man or something.”¹⁸⁰ Although he is glad that he does not seem suspicious to anyone, it seems that society's negligence is also a source of loneliness for Kafka. This loneliness is felt stronger when he is by himself in Ōshima's cabin in the forest for the first time: “I feel so alone I can't stand it. In the darkness, in the middle of the night, surrounded by a deep forest, I couldn't be more alone.”¹⁸¹ Despite trying to be independent and “the world's toughest fifteen-year-old”¹⁸² as instructed by the boy named Crow, Kafka is not immune from human emotions.

Nakata, whose story is even more tragic than Kafka's, also leads a life of solitude. Having been involved in a strange incident in elementary school which leaves him wiped clean of all memory, Nakata becomes mentally handicapped and cannot read or write. After this inauspicious and peculiar incident, Nakata “...didn't make any friends. None of this bothered him, though. Being left alone meant he could be lost in his own little world.”¹⁸³ The difference between Kafka and Nakata is that although both are isolated from society, Nakata feels no negative emotions about it because of his mental and emotional handicap, which stems from his loss of memory. However, he acknowledges

his disconnectedness in a direct way: “‘Nakata doesn’t *have* anybody. Nothing. I’m not connected at all.’”¹⁸⁴ Although Nakata’s narrow life can be blamed on his disability, the irony is that many Japanese living in the postmodern world lead lives just as narrow and isolated as his. In fact, there is a phenomenon of young Japanese shutting themselves up in their rooms and avoiding all contact with society. This condition is referred to as *hikikomori*, which literally means “one who stays indoors.” It seems that Murakami consciously models Nakata after those with this condition in order to address this serious contemporary Japanese issue. Some possible reasons why this has become such a phenomenon in Japan are: young adults today have decreased motivation; increase in economic comfort leads to devaluation of hard work; and parents are less strict in raising their children.¹⁸⁵ For Murakami, the cause of *hikikomori* is simple: Japan’s affluence has reared a generation of Japanese with no identity that feels little connection with society.

This sense of alienation from society also ties in with the theme of abandonment prevalent in the novel. Kafka was abandoned by his mother, the one person in his life who was supposed to love him unconditionally. “‘Maybe neither one of them [his parents] wants to have anything to do with me,’” Kafka tells Sakura, an older girl that he meets on the bus ride to Shikoku (whom he suspects might be his sister). “‘No one’s searching for me. I mean, they left and everything.’ *Without me*, I silently complete the thought.”¹⁸⁶ His sense of abandonment from the woman who gave him life reflects the abandonment and rejection he feels from a society that he is supposed to be a part of.

This scar of abandonment defines Kafka in such a deep way that in order for him to be released from his father’s curse, Endō suggests that he must be able to forgive his mother for her grave mistake.¹⁸⁷ Philip Gabriel supports this notion and links the concept

of forgiveness with a freeing of the spirit.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, forgiving his mother through Miss Saeki, the library's supervisor, who he theorizes to be his long lost mother, is also crucial for Kafka in finding his identity. As Crow narrates it, the moment he forgives his mother through Miss Saeki, "the frozen part of" Kafka's "heart crumbles."¹⁸⁹ Endō and Gabriel are correct in including forgiveness as a part of Kafka's journey to being freed from his father's curse; however, another important component of his liberation from the prophecy is his realization that while there are things that one must face alone, he cannot completely alienate himself from society and other people. As Ōshima states, "...my point is that it's really hard for people to live their lives alone."¹⁹⁰ Of course, Kafka learns this as he realizes that without the help of people like Sakura, who allows him to stay in her house the first night he is away from home, and Ōshima and Miss Saeki, who allow him to live in the spare room of the library, he would have been in lost.

Nakata is also emotionally and physically forsaken by his parents after his memory loss. His "parents – totally focused on their children's education – ignored him and turned their attention to his younger brothers,"¹⁹¹ and sent him to be raised by his grandparents. Despite his abandonment, Nakata does not hold resentment towards his parents as Kafka does towards his mother. Additionally, unlike Kafka, who believes when he first sets out on his journey that he will be able to move completely independently from others, Nakata, who is always worrying about losing his government subsidy, is aware that although he leads a very closed off world with little outside contact, he needs the help of others in order to live. When Mimi the cat aids him in locating Goma, the lost cat that he is searching for, he tells her that he "can't get by without other people's help."¹⁹²

II. Freedom As Illusion

Naively, Kafka believes that breaking away from society is tantamount to having absolute freedom. However, he soon learns that freedom is an elusive concept, one that he can never fully comprehend or attain. Upon traveling successfully to Takamatsu, Shikoku, Kafka thinks: “*I’m free*...I shut my eyes and think hard and deep about how free I am, but I can’t really understand what it means. All I know is I’m totally alone. All alone in an unfamiliar place, like some solitary explorer who’s lost his compass and his map. Is this what it means to be free?”¹⁹³ Here Kafka’s ingenuous perception that freedom is something that can be achieved easily is crushed.

This concept of freedom is one that is ubiquitous throughout existential thought. Essentially, fifteen-year-old Kafka is grappling with existentialism. Through Kafka Murakami challenges the belief that Sartre and Kierkegaard held that freedom and existence are one in the same, that “to be human is already to be free.”¹⁹⁴ In postmodern society, Murakami suggests, to be human is not the same as being free because of societal rules and pressures. “I think you have a right to live however you want. Whether you’re fifteen or fifty-one...But unfortunately society doesn’t agree,”¹⁹⁵ Ōshima tells Kafka. Indeed, society, in this case what seems to include both what people consider societal norms and cultural expectations, seems to be the biggest hurdle in achieving freedom.

However, what is more important to note is Kafka’s understanding that society is not the only culprit; the core of the problem is that the very concept of freedom is evasive and “an ambiguous phenomenon.”¹⁹⁶ Macquarrie describes freedom in this way: “However we try to grasp it, it seems to elude us. However precious we may esteem it, by

its very nature it is insubstantial and fleeting.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, while Kafka may want to believe that running away from home and his father’s omen makes him free, he soon realizes that freedom is not a concrete concept, and even if it were, he would still not be free. With the police after him in regards to his father’s murder, Kafka must stay shut up in the library; on one of the days that he goes to the gym, he sits at a restaurant and watches people coming and going in the train station. Suddenly, he feels that if he truly wanted to, he “could join them...Nothing’s keeping me here.”¹⁹⁸ However, he recognizes that his attachment to Ōshima and particularly Miss Saeki, with whom he has fallen in love, prevents him from leaving. The boy named Crow, yet again acting like the chorus of a Greek tragedy tells him, “You aren’t free. But is that what you really want? To be free?”¹⁹⁹

Here we see that a life of freedom implies a life of solitude, for it is human connections that make a person incapable of being completely free. Ōshima answers the boy named Crow’s question and states that people actually do not want to be free:

Perhaps most people in the world *aren’t* trying to be free, Kafka. They just *think* they are. It’s all an illusion. If they really were free, most people would be in a real bind...People actually prefer *not* being free...The people who build high, strong fences are the ones who survive the best. You deny that reality only at the risk of being driven into the wilderness yourself.²⁰⁰

Ōshima is not fooled by the grandiose image that freedom typically evokes and sees freedom for what it is: “...a nothing rather than a something, a possibility rather than an actuality.”²⁰¹ By making decisions and taking action one can experience a transitory

feeling of experiencing freedom; however, to actually sustain it is a goal that comes with sacrifice, responsibility, and solitude. He warns Kafka in this passage that if he continues to be blinded by the majestic image of freedom, he will truly have to fend for himself with help from no one.

III. Memory, the Subconscious, and Identity

One of the major themes that appear in this work is the link of memory loss to one's subconscious and identity as a whole. Towards the end of the novel Kafka asks Miss Saeki whether memories are actually valuable. To this she replies, "In some cases they're the most important thing there is,"²⁰² alluding to the fact that from memory individual identity is created. The most obvious example of memory loss leading to identity loss is Nakata. On a field trip collecting mushrooms, he and his peers suddenly all fall unconscious; he is the only one that does not regain consciousness, and goes into a coma-like state for several weeks before waking up with the "proverbial blank slate."²⁰³ After losing consciousness and his memory, Nakata is not the same; "...the real Nakata had gone off somewhere, leaving behind for a time the fleshy container."²⁰⁴ He cannot read or write and is mentally handicapped. As Nakata describes, "...my head was completely empty, like a bathtub after you pull the plug."²⁰⁵

William Walker Atkinson, advocate of the New Thought movement, wrote that "...memory is essentially a quality or phase of the subconscious mind."²⁰⁶ Ernest Holmes, also a part of the same movement, adds that within man's subconscious is "the seat of his memory."²⁰⁷ Because of the link between memory and the subconscious, it can be assumed that Nakata has also lost a part of his subconscious with the erasure of his

memories. Another factor that supports this is Nakata's lack of desire. As Endō describes, he is an emasculated man (「去勢された男」²⁰⁸). This is because he is missing the root of desire, which lies in one's subconscious. When his memories and subconscious are lost, so are his human desires: "...he never felt lonely or unhappy. He never felt sexual desire, or even wanted to be with anyone."²⁰⁹ The way in which Murakami describes this imbalance in Nakata's identity is by using the metaphor of a shadow. The cat, called "Mr. Otsuka," tells Nakata that his shadow is "*Faint*...the shadow you cast on the ground is only half as dark as that of ordinary people."²¹⁰ This shadow, which signifies his identity, is faint because he is missing a subconscious part of his mind. Nakata himself begins to understand the necessity of finding "the other half"²¹¹ of his shadow in order to fill the emptiness inside him, which he understands has a deeper meaning separate from his mental handicap: "It's not just that I'm dumb. Nakata's *empty* inside...like a library without a single book."²¹² Murakami, who believes identity to be made up of the conscious and subconscious, makes the point that without both one is unstable, with no firm identity.

What makes Nakata unable to be someone with his "own ideas, his own meaning"²¹³ is in some ways similar to what hobbles Kafka, whose mind seems to selectively erase memories that are violent or difficult to refer to; for example, on his second night as a runaway, Kafka finds himself under some shrubs in the back of a shrine with his shirt covered in blood. He has no recollection of what has happened, and cannot prove whether he did indeed kill his father or not. In 2004 Michael Anderson conducted research uncovering a biological mechanism that exists in the human brain,²¹⁴ supporting Sigmund Freud's controversial belief that people repressed unwanted, "disturbing and

anxiety-generating thoughts and memories out of consciousness”²¹⁵ and into the subconscious. Kafka’s unwanted memories and the omen are both buried away, repressed in his subconscious. The omen becomes a “mechanism buried inside”²¹⁶ of him, a ““timing device buried inside”” his genes²¹⁷ that he feels will lead to his destruction. Kafka relates his father’s omen to the execution device that appears in Franz Kafka’s *The Penal Colony*. For him, the device in the story isn’t “some metaphor or allegory – it’s actually *here*, all around me”²¹⁸ in the form of the omen.

Kafka’s father, Tamura Koichi, is a famous sculptor whose “...chief theme was the human subconscious...His best-known work was his major ‘Labyrinth’ series, which explored...the beauty and inspiration found in the meandering contours of the labyrinths.”²¹⁹ For this reason, Kafka feels that to his father he was just another sculptural project. The omen that he buried in his son’s subconscious is just like his sculptures, which focuses on the labyrinth of the subconscious. Kojima refers to the omen in the words of Ōshima as a “labyrinth set within”²²⁰ (「内にセットされた迷宮」²²¹). In other words, the labyrinth is a metaphor for the subconscious. Subsequently Kafka must constantly deal with the struggle between his conscious mind that is trying to get away from the omen and the subconscious mind, the labyrinth within, which is trying to fulfill it.²²² This leads to an alienation from himself. As Macquarrie states, “For the existentialist, alienation is understood chiefly in inward terms. It is the existent’s alienation from his own deepest being.”²²³ Ōshima clearly sees this struggle within Kafka: ““You’re seeking something, but at the same time running away for all you’re worth””²²⁴ (「君は何かを強く求めているのに、その一方でそれを懸命に避けようとしているって」²²⁵). What Kafka is searching for is his identity. However, he will not

be able to reach it while denying and running away from a part of his identity: his subconscious (omen).

IV. The Subconscious as Dream

The subconscious that Kafka is trying so desperately to flee is also represented through dreams, or a lack thereof. “I don’t dream,” Kafka comments. “Come to think of it, I haven’t had any dreams in a long time.”²²⁶ This lack of dreams is reflective of Kafka’s refusal to let his subconscious free, afraid that what lies in his subconscious – the omen – will be carried out. However, the boy named Crow admonishes Kafka that no matter how hard he may try to suppress his subconscious, it is an impossible and futile task. When Kafka suppresses his desire to masturbate, the boy named Crow frankly tells him that the

calm won’t last long... You might control yourself now, and not masturbate, but they’ll get you in the end, as a wet dream. You might dream about raping your sister, your mother... It’s a power beyond you... You’re afraid of imagine. And even more afraid of dreams. Afraid of the responsibility that begins in dream... When you’re awake you can suppress imagination. But you can’t suppress dreams.²²⁷

Essentially, he is trying to help Kafka learn that the subconscious is not something that he can escape because it is a part of him. Furthermore, he paints the subconscious – the part of the human mind that is uncontrollable – as something that is “...relentless, merciless, untiring.”²²⁸

Murakami also focuses on the responsibility that dreams and imagination carry. Kafka has no memory of killing his father, and therefore doesn’t know whether he

actually has committed the crime or not. However, he wonders whether he would be held responsible even if he does not remember the act of murder. ““If I committed a crime, I’m still legally responsible, right, whether I have a memory of it or not?””²²⁹ he asks Sakura. This question is answered by Ōshima, who is firm in his belief that “*Our responsibility begins with the power to imagine...In dreams begin responsibilities.*”²³⁰ The example that Murakami uses to support this claim is that of Adolf Eichmann, one of the organizers of the Holocaust. Eichmann helped in executing Hitler’s initial dream of annihilating the Jews. However, Murakami asserts that Eichman is equally responsible for what occurred because he was “caught up...in the twisted dreams of a man named Hitler.”²³¹ The social message that Murakami tries to communicate is that one person’s dream can possess so much power that it can lead to destruction. Although this concept is different from what we find in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, there is still a connection in the ultimate message that the subconscious is a “bottomless world of darkness”²³² that is a part of each individual and cannot be ignored; however, one also cannot underestimate the dangers that lie within. This is the lesson that Kafka learns, that “What I imagine *is* perhaps very important. For the entire world.”²³³

V. The Other World

Shigeoka Tōru categorizes the two types of “other worlds” that Murakami includes in his novels: one of a peaceful and serene world, and another of a violent and chaotic world, which is represented in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* through Tōru’s subconscious.²³⁴ The other world described in *Kafka on the Shore* is the one of tranquility. It is also a world that requires no identity. In the novel, in order to enter this

other world an entrance stone must be opened. Nakata and Hoshino together open it so that Kafka may enter it and experience a world in which no identity is necessary. A part of the attraction that Kafka has towards this other world is his knowledge that Miss Saeki will be there. She and Kafka have consummated their relationship, and he has unexpectedly fallen in love with her.

Miss Saeki's story is that of heartbreak and sadness. Having found true love at fifteen, she opened the entrance stone in order to "to prevent our perfect, private world from collapsing...so I wouldn't lose him, so things from the outside wouldn't destroy our world...And of course I received my punishment."²³⁵ The punishment she receives is the loss of both her lover and her identity. At twenty, her lover dies tragically and in vain while away in a university in Tokyo. He dies by the hands of student radicals during the uprisings of the 60s that occurred in Japan when students "mistook him for a leader of an opposing faction...His death was totally pointless."²³⁶ Murakami is not only suggesting that his death was pointless, but the counterrevolution itself was meaningless for it accomplished nothing. When Ōshima talks of "Narrow minds devoid of imagination...Intolerance, theories cut off from reality, empty terminology, usurped ideals, inflexible systems,"²³⁷ Murakami is also speaking of the countercultural uprising, which was nothing but empty words, and was no better than the governmental system it was trying to replace. Of course, the death of Miss Saeki's lover due to the *Zenkyōtō* movement is no coincidence on Murakami's part. He purposely inputs this movement – specific to the Japanese – in order to emphasize the loss of identity that his generation experienced because of its failure. Although Miss Saeki does not lose her identity (half of

her shadow) because of the lost ideals of the counterrevolution, she is indirectly affected; at twenty her life stops and her identity disappears because of the death of her lover.

In entering this other world, “a place beyond the flow of time,”²³⁸ Kafka, too, risks losing his identity forever. While hiding from the police at Ōshima’s cabin, he decides to proceed deeper into the forest despite Ōshima’s warnings not to. The forest represents a bridge from this world to the other world, much like the well is a conduit between the conscious and subconscious in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*.²³⁹ Two soldiers who abandoned the world war guard the gate to the other world. These two lead Kafka to this other world, Kafka knowing full well that “...once you’re in, it isn’t easy to turn back.”²⁴⁰ The world to which he is led is one without an identity. There is nothing defining about it. The room that Kafka stays in has “no paintings, no photos, not even a calendar. Just pure white walls.”²⁴¹ In addition, the clothes that are given to him “...are perfectly plain and design-free, like the whole idea of clothes with patterns never existed.”²⁴² Nothing that would assert an individual identity exists in this other world. Kafka finds himself “drifting away, away”²⁴³ from himself because the identity within him is slipping away.

In this other world Kafka encounters the fifteen-year-old Miss Saeki. She is assigned as a type of caretaker to Kafka until he becomes acquainted with his new living arrangements. Although he knows exactly who she is, she does not know him; when he asks for her name, she replies, “I don’t have a name. We don’t have names here.”²⁴⁴ As Strecher notes, for Murakami, names are an important element of one’s identity.²⁴⁵ Therefore, this is the ultimate removal of identity. Kafka must decide whether to stay in this world or to return. At the beckoning of the present day Miss Saeki, who has come to

this world to make sure that Kafka returns back to the world that he knows, he chooses to leave the other world. To stay in this other world would be simpler; his identity would be erased, with it erasing the omen.

Although Kojima believes that Kafka leaves the other world because staying would fulfill his father's omen,²⁴⁶ this is not true, and also unimportant. The point is not whether he fulfills or does not fulfill the omen; the key is that if he were to stay in this other world, he would be erasing his identity. It would be an easier course, but one that goes against all that Murakami wishes to assert: autonomy, individualism.²⁴⁷ Kafka must return to the world of identity because he cannot take the easy way out and forget about the omen; he must accept the omen and somehow create an identity that will allow him to move on with his life without denying its existence.

VI. Fate vs. Action

In order to create such a self-identity, Kafka must come to terms with fate, a reoccurring theme in the novel and one that is presented in the opening chapter by the boy named Crow:

Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something *inside* of you.²⁴⁸

Fate, therefore, is not something that is only outside of oneself; it can also represent something that stems from within. This is the case with Kafka, whose fate has a direct link to his omen of killing his father and sleeping with both his mother and sister. Because fate is linked directly with the omen, it is subsequently related to the subconscious, a part of an individual that one can try to ignore but will always be a part of one's identity. Throughout his journey Kafka feels that he is being swept up in this internal fate, which is referred to as a sandstorm: "...it feels like everything's been decided in advance-that I'm following a path somebody else has already mapped out for me. It doesn't matter how much I think things over...the harder I try, the more I lose my sense of who I am. It's like my identity's an orbit that I've strayed far away from."²⁴⁹

The internal map that Kafka feels somebody has etched in him refers not only to the omen; this is also Murakami's metaphor for the identity that postmodern Japanese society tries to distribute to its citizens. Kafka is not alone in feeling that it is fate and not his actual self that is steering his life. Hoshino, too, feels similar sentiments. "...it's like fate decided everything. The only one who hasn't had a clue has been *me*."²⁵⁰ In this case, fate can be interpreted as societal constrictions, and therefore a criticism of the system. In addition to a harsh sprinkling of criticism of the Japanese police, to which Hoshino refers as "just gangsters who get paid by the state,"²⁵¹ there are several examples in which Murakami writes of protagonists trying to break free from Japanese societal conventions. For example, Hoshino is described as man who became a truck driver because "...he knew he couldn't stand a regular company job, commuting to a dingy office every morning only to have a boss watch his every move like a hawk."²⁵² This counters the conventional idea in Japanese culture that all men want to become a サラリー

一マシ, or white-collar worker (Of course, this refusal to conform is also reflected in Murakami's personal life.). Another example of a character living an unorthodox life is Sada, Ōshima's brother, who describes to Kafka how he changed his fate: "I was working at a big ad agency in Tokyo. I couldn't stand it so I quit...and started surfing."²⁵³ Both characters refused the ready-made identities handed to them by Japanese society, and instead chose their own paths. Through these examples, Murakami is advocating a life that is different from what is accepted and expected by Japanese society. Murakami takes the stance that Macquarrie takes: "...I do act in 'bad faith' when I deliberately avoid facing an honest decision and follow the conventional pattern of behavior in order to be spared the anxiety that comes when one is...thrown into seventy thousand fathoms."²⁵⁴

Precisely as Macquarrie states, Kafka, in accordance with existential thinkers, believes he can form an identity and break free from fate by making decisions and taking action based on those decisions. For him, this is the only way he can express individuality and reject the pre-made identity given to him by the system, which is represented through his father's omen. Macquarrie supports this ideology and states that it "...is out of its decisions that the self emerges. A self is not given ready-made at the beginning. What is given is a field of possibility, and as the existent projects himself into this possibility rather than that one, he begins to determine who he shall be."²⁵⁵ This is precisely why Kafka decides to leave home and quit school. In action Kafka seeks to "attain concreteness and fullness"²⁵⁶ in his existence.

However, just because Kafka knows that decision and action form the path to self-identity does not mean that he is naïve to the difficulties of following that path. In

speaking with Ōshima about Natsume Sōseki's *The Miner*, Kafka comments on the main character's passivity. "All he does is watch things happen and accept it all...He has no sense that it was something he decided to do himself, or that he had a choice. He's like totally passive. But I think in real life people are like that. It's not so easy to make choices on your own."²⁵⁷ Through the voice of Kafka, Murakami is able to comment on the postmodern man: passive, and blinded to the fact that he can assert his individual identity through action. This message in *Kafka on the Shore* counters criticism that Murakami is taking a passive stance on contemporary issues. Ōe, who believes his own writing to take an "active stance," believes that "passive writing" such as Murakami's signifies the end of "socially critical, politically activated literature in Japan,"²⁵⁸ i.e. "pure literature." This novel is a testament to the fact that Murakami is not relaying a message of passivity; in fact, he is doing the opposite. However, his true message is often misinterpreted by critics such as Ōe because the type of active stance that Murakami is describing is far different from the one advocated by them.

Unfortunate for Kafka, his decisions and actions work towards fulfilling the omen, including killing his father subconsciously, sleeping with his supposed mother Miss Saeki, and sleeping with his supposed sister Sakura in a dream. Kafka's mindset towards fulfilling the omen of his own will is described perfectly by the boy named Crow: "If there's a curse in all this, you mean to grab it by the horns and fulfill the program that's been laid out for you. Lift the burden from your shoulders and *live* – not caught up in someone else's schemes, but as *you*."²⁵⁹ Tired of living a life shadowed by the *fear* of committing the sins in the omen, Kafka decides to commit them and fulfill the omen. By doing so, he believes that he will be rid of the omen and the fear. He does not

realize that although he is choosing to commit these acts, they are still not his actions – they are his father’s, of the omen. In this way, Kafka’s actions are not “projecting and realizing an image of personhood.”²⁶⁰ Furthermore, these actions do not stabilize Kafka’s identity because he is only acting on what is in his subconscious, creating an internal imbalance within himself.

The one who understands this wholly is the boy named Crow, who tells Kafka that nothing has changed with his doing all that was prophesied about him. “You didn’t overcome anything... Your fear, anger, unease – nothing’s disappeared. They’re all still inside you, still torturing you.”²⁶¹ This is because the subconscious and the omen embedded within is not something he can be rid of. It is in the other world that Kafka realizes that his identity will be lost forever if he runs away from the omen. Leaving that other world and deciding to stay in the world of identity is the first step that he takes in reestablishing an identity that is purely his own while also accepting his omen as a part of him. More importantly, it is his decisions to go back to Tokyo and go to the police that show Kafka’s maturity and willingness to rebuild his identity anew. This acceptance of the omen as a part of his identity subsequently creates a new world for Kafka: one in which he no longer has to escape himself. As the boy named Crow tells Kafka, “‘When you wake up, you’ll be part of a brand-new world.’ You finally fall asleep. And when you wake up, it’s true. You are a part of a brand-new world.”²⁶²

Conclusion

The two novels analyzed, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* not only showcase the ability of Murakami as a writer to interweave complex stories together for an entertaining plot, but his insistence on carrying home the message of autonomy. Indeed, his focus is not on global issues, but a narrower one that is specific to a Japanese generation without an identity, an identity that was usurped by commercialism and affluence. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2011 preceding the release of the English translation of his most recent novel, *IQ84*, Murakami said,

After 1945, we have been working so hard and getting rich. But that kind of thing doesn't continue anymore. We have to change our values. We have to think about how we can get happy. It's not about money. It's not about efficiency. It's about discipline and purpose. What I wanted to say is what I've been saying since 1968: we have to change the system.²⁶³

Indeed, his message since the beginning of his career as a novelist has been consistent: the Japanese person must regain individual identity, one that is separate from the system.

Although it is his un-Japanese writing style and familiarity with Western pop culture that has made him internationally known,²⁶⁴ his novels are not “placeless and timeless novels.”²⁶⁵ In fact, his novels are distinctively Japanese, and the focus is on the generation of Japanese that Murakami is a member of. The message that he conveys in his works is that development and preservation of self-identity is more important than affluence, despite the postmodern culture's obsession with materialism.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Hoshino tries to explain why the sea possesses a calmness that is difficult to find in society: “Probably ‘cause it's so big, with nothing on it... You

wouldn't feel so calm if there was a 7-Eleven over there, or a Seiyu department store, would you? Or a pachinko place over there, or a Yoshikawa pawnshop? But as far as the eye can see there's *nothing*--which is pretty darn nice."²⁶⁶ Through Hoshino, Murakami tries to imagine a society in which consumerism is not the highest priority but individual identity is. Murakami's large international readership indicates that his message to preserve individuality and reject conformity is striking a chord with readers around the world. However, as a Japanese writer, it is clear that he is first and foremost addressing his kinfolk not to be swallowed up by the system. Murakami understands on a personal level the identity crisis that the readers of his home country are experiencing, and therefore desires for them, as Japanese citizens, to take the same journey that his protagonists are taking, one in search for an identity that is in danger of being lost unless urgently pursued.

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