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Time and Transformation in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*

When reading novels like Haruki Murakami’s *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle,* with its incorporation of strange and often dreamlike psychological themes, I believe it’s important to treat interpretation like following a trail of breadcrumbs through a labyrinth. Sometimes it is useful to arm oneself with theory before they begin. In the case of *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle,* I would argue that it is imperative that they do, at least gaining a surface-level understanding of the chosen theory. Otherwise, some readers might be left feeling lost in Murakami’s complex, unconventional portrayal of the human experience. Reading one-star Amazon reviews reveals just that. One commenter, “foobah,” wrote that Murakami wrote “five different books and cut them apart and patched different pieces of them together in a rather random order. They were all pointless.” This seems to be a common complaint about the novel, that the stories told in the book do not connect and add nothing of value to the book. Some complained that Murakami was manipulating the reader, playing tricks on them, leading them through a story with no conclusion and ultimately no purpose. One review, by the user “kylan,” complained that the secondary characters “add nothing to the core story other than dress it up through a gesture of meek vanity to appear more complicated and worthwhile than it is.” If this is true, however, how is *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* as acclaimed as it is? Could it be that, as another commenter, “Duff,” wrote, “people like to go and make up theories and piece it altogether and make them feel like they are smart because they get it and the rest of us don't[?]” My answer is no. The secondary characters and their stories add tremendous depth to Toru Okada’s story, revealing connections and implications that could not be seen by viewing Toru’s life alone. Lieutenant Mamiya’s story, for example, connects with Toru Okada’s story through the themes of time and transformation, illuminating a kind of personal transformation that transcends time and defies chronology.

Despite being separated by time and history, Lieutenant Mamiya and Toru Okada’s stories bear remarkable similarities; their experiences are connected through time. The most obvious of these connections is through their respective wells. When in Outer Mongolia as a soldier during World War II, Lieutenant Mamiya witnesses a man skinned alive and is subsequently thrown into a dry well and left to die. There, he survives what Inez Martinez, Ph.D., in her paper, “Reading For Psyche: Numinosity,” calls a “numinous experience.” She pulls the term from Carl Jung, who took this term, which was traditionally used in religious contexts to describe divine visitations, and “psychologizes it,” using it as an explanation of an experience of a power greater than one’s will within oneself (Martinez 1). Jung says, “Numinosity is wholly outside conscious volition” (qtd. in Martinez 1). An important process of Jungian psychology is individuation, the integration of unconscious aspects of the self into the conscious personality. Martinez that “reading literature for renderings of numinous experiences can inform generations of readers about causes, effects and factors affecting successful, or partial, or failed processes of integration on unconscious material revealed through numinous experience” (2). In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle,* these numinous experiences also serve to connect characters through time on a psychic level, facilitating transformations across lifetimes.

In the bottom of the well for two days, Lieutenant Mamiya is blinded by light for a few seconds at a time, prompting a revelation that leads to his psychological transformation. Mamiya believed that this revelation was possible because he’d seen a man skinned alive, saying that his “consciousness had attained such a viscid state of concentration” that when bathed in that intense light, he “was able to descend directly into a place that might be called the very core of [his] own consciousness” (Murakami 208). There, he saw something dark come forth through the light, but was unable to understand what he saw, unable to integrate into his consciousness whatever part of himself that he saw in the light. He was, at that moment, transformed into a “hollow, empty shell,” everything that had once made him who he was burned away by the light and his inability to understand the revelation it offered (Murakami 209).

One way Toru is connected with Mamiya is through their respective wells, but Toru’s experiences in his well represent a slower, more gradual transformation. It is at the bottom of his well that he confronts old memories and eventually is able to cross through the wall and into the mysterious hotel room 208 for the first time. Rather than get burned by what he experiences in the well, he is instead able to reach what Martinez calls the realm of the psyche, “a realm where experiences not integrated by individual characters during life may, through the psyche of a living character, become transformed” (9). This realm is crucial in connecting the secondary characters to Toru Okada. Through this psychic connection that Toru makes with other characters through hearing their stories, Martinez argues, he is able to “bring to fruition the numinous experiences” (9) they had not integrated, even transcending lifetimes, like in the case of the veterinarian from Cinnamon’s “Wind-up Bird Chronicles.”

In Cinnamon’s computer, Toru reads the “Wind-up Bird Chronicles,” a series of stories written by Cinnamon but which are assumed to hold the truth of actual events (if not being a fact, as Nutmeg once points out). They include the story of Cinnamon’s grandfather, a veterinarian working in a zoo in Japanese-controlled Manchukuo. Murakami links the veterinarian’s experience through two concrete things, the mark and the bat, and through their relationship with fate. The vet has the same mark on his cheek that appears on Toru’s face after the first time he went into the mysterious hotel, further suggesting the hotel’s role as the realm of the psyche which enables one character’s numinous experience to transform another’s. The baseball bat, concerning the vet, was used by a Japanese soldier to kill an escaped Chinese soldier (from the group of soldiers that disguised themselves in baseball uniforms). When the Chinese soldier (whose jersey was marked with the number four, which can represent the word for death in Japanese) was hit by the bat and fell into the pre-dug grave, he seemed to spring back to life and dragged the vet, who’d passively witnessed the event, down into the hole with him. While the vet’s connection with the bat was through passively witnessing it being used, Toru’s connection is more active, having used a bat to beat the musician and to kill the evil figure in room 208. This difference between their experiences with the bat parallels their relationships with fate; the veterinarian was plagued with the thought of fate, always having had a “weirdly lucid awareness that ‘I, as an individual, am living under the control of some outside force’” (Murakami 509). And this attitude is clear in his experience in the zoo when the Chinese soldiers were killed. He did not participate, but stood aside, passively witnessing the horrifying violence taking place in front of him. In his lifetime, he was unable to become an active participant in his fate and ultimately suffered for it. But because of his connection to Toru, even beyond the limits of his lifetime, evidenced in the mark on Toru’s face and through his use of the bat, the veterinarian experienced a transformation. As Martinez writes, “Overcoming him there is the opposite of the veterinarian’s passive submission to fate” (11). Through the realm of the psyche, Toru’s actions there were able to “bring to fruition” the veterinarian’s numinous experience he had not integrated into his psyche (9). **“**Further,” Martinez argued, Toru’s actions in room 208 represent “the completion of the Lieutenant’s task of killing the sadistic man-skinner” (11).

Toru and Mamiya are linked through their respective fights against evil figures. After Mamiya’s experience in the well, living as a “hollow, empty shell” (209) and eventually failing not only to die, as he wished, but also to kill Boris the Manskinner. Murakami also creates a link between the two men through Mamiya’s experience in witnessing the live flaying of a man during the war. After Toru beats the musician with the bat, he dreams that the man peeled off his skin, which slithered onto Toru, encasing his body. Martinez argues that this dream is a sign that Toru is able to integrate this experience into his psyche: “Whereas the Lieutenant merely witnesses human irrational violence, Toru participates in and is thus able to confront it” (10). In the hotel, the “realm of the psyche,” Toru is saved by a man with no face, who calls himself “the hollow man” (573). This is reminiscent of Mamiya’s state of mind after his experiences and suggests Mamiya’s connection to Toru’s journey. Mamiya, through his aspect in the hotel, “the hollow man,” is finally able to take action against evil; while he lived his life “impotent against evil [and] in life” (Martinez 11), his connection to Toru’s victory through the “hollow man” allowed him to integrate his ‘numinous experience’ and complete his transformation. Mamiya’s transformation was suggested by Toru’s dream at the end of the novel, in which Mamiya helps to father a child with Creta Kano and lives with her on a farm.

Those Amazon reviewers above might now ask, so what? So Murakami decided to be clever and make Toru Okada, the veterinarian, and Lieutenant Mamiya’s stories similar. How do these secondary plotlines add actual value to the novel?

In a narrative, it is immensely important to use unifying themes. Without themes, major ideas for the character and reader to experience, what is left? One of the reviewers on Amazon, “foobah,” claimed that the secondary plotlines of the story were unrelated and lacked purpose, and they were only in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* because Murakami wanted to make the story seem more complicated than it is. But, as I have shown, the stories of Lieutenant Mamiya and the veterinarian parallel Toru Okada’s experiences closely. In reading the novel, it’s important to identify the primary themes so as to have something to think more deeply about. In the secondary plotlines previously discussed, the themes of time and transformation are running beneath every line, and I believe that Murakami wishes to express something about the human experience that cannot be easily explained through other mediums. Pulling from the work of Carl Jung, Martinez writes, “Literature functions as a conduit between unconscious and conscious understanding and bridges individual and collective consciousnesses” (1). Art, such as literature, Jung argued, “arises from unconscious depths” (qtd. in Martinez 1). In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle,* we see that many things can be made possible through numinous experiences and unconscious connections. The novel, Martinez argues, “portray psychological deaths following numinous encounters being transformed through the imaginal life of another” (12). Because Toru read about, and in a way witnessed, key numinous experiences of Mamiya and the veterinarian, the connection he forged by integrating these events into his own experience allowed him to bring these men’s unintegrated experiences into fruition. It was even suggested, through the disappearance of Toru’s mark, that the veterinarian, who had long since died during the Second World War, was thus transformed, transcending even a lifetime. This extranormal portrayal of a psychological connection between his characters may suggest something about the “potential power for effecting collective change through individual psychological work” (Martinez 11). It is the integration of these numinous experiences into the consciousness that leads to transformation. Jung’s theory of Individuation involves just that, the integration of repressed aspects of one’s personality into the consciousness; in doing so, a person must confront traumatic experiences to become transformed. Murakami’s novel portrays this process in a rather radical way, in the literal psychological connection between people enabling this transformation. But this may also suggest in reality that by empathizing with other’s experiences, it may help one on their own search for self, possibly allowing them to integrate their own numinous experiences. In Toru’s final struggle against the figure in room 208, the agent of evil, he demonstrates that he integrated Lieutenant Mamiya’s experiences into his actions. His thoughts before during the confrontation echo those that Mamiya wrote to him in a letter: “You are not allowed to use your imagination…Imagining things here can be fatal” (584). Boris the Manskinner was the one who originally said these words to Mamiya, and Mamiya passed these down to Toru. With these words in mind, the bat in hand, Toru is able to defeat his foe.

If these secondary plotlines were not present in the novel, if all the reader got was Toru’s story, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* would be devoid of many layers of meaning. The novel would not have been able to portray these themes; the baseball bat would be just a bat, Toru’s mark would be meaningless, and there would have been very little explanation behind Toru’s eventual ability to conquer the personified force of evil in room 208. The stories of the veterinarian and Lieutenant Mamiya give context for Toru’s gradual transformation and connect his story with these deeper themes and implications. One Amazon reviewer wrote that “people like to go and make up theories and piece it altogether and make them feel like they are smart because they get it and the rest of us don't.” But what is the point of reading a story like this one if the reader is not at least attempting to assemble a theory behind it? Literature can help us to understand experiences beyond our everyday grasp, but only if we construct theories and interpret the text beyond the surface. That includes considering the importance of these so-called “pointless” side stories. Toru, even as the main character, can be generally stoic, and even at times devoid of emotion. But the secondary plotlines add themes of irrational violence and personal trauma to Toru’s and ultimately enable him to gradually transform and gain a deeper understanding of his own traumatic experiences. Instead of being a passive, “impotent” (in Martinez’s words) bystander in his own life, Toru, through his connection to other’s experiences, is able to actively participate in violence and, therefore, is able to confront it. These side stories serve to ground the whole novel, including Toru’s story, into themes that offer, as Martinez writes, “the transformative power of story” (12). Murakami seems to suggest that we can ourselves become transformed by the stories we encounter, and in turn, transform others as well. Disregarding the stories of those such as Lieutenant Mamiya and the veterinarian deprives the reader of the level of understanding that can be gained through interpreting the story in this way.

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