The sound of hammering signifies disillusionment from meaning: a characteristic trait of the post-war Japanese psyche. At the start of the book, we see the main character fully committed to the fantasy of nationalism, adamant on the sanctity of the military cause and his responsibility to his nation. In that state of wartime fervor, the meaning of life is clear and simple: to serve his country and, by doing so, to sustain the collective imaginary that gives his own life meaning (as Takaaki Yoshimoto would put it). However, this pillar of meaning that much of the Japanese population relied on as their spiritual anchor is ruthlessly destroyed by the end of the war and Japan’s defeat, aptly captured by the sound of hammering. This was the first and foremost disillusionment as it traumatized our main character and more broadly the Japanese people by forcing them to grapple with the loss of meaning in their lives, raising awareness of the arbitrary and futile nature of all philosophies and concepts employed to establish meaning. Hereafter, all of the main character’s attempts to engross himself in activities that give him a sense of purpose are in vain as he is repeatedly awakened by his trauma and reminded of the emptiness of such efforts. Even nihilism, or the embracement of meaningless as a means of coping, is susceptible to this disillusionment.

The book is similar in content to many works of absurdist literature (the most notable that came to mind was *Bartleby, the Scrivener*), but what differentiates it from the rest is that *The Sound of Hammering* documents the aftermath of an actual historic event which afflicted an entire population and pushed them into a sort of collective existential crisis/absurdist awakening. The postwar era in Japan is marked by confusion; in the sudden absence of meaning, no one knew how to make sense of their situation. This confusion gave birth to many cultural narratives in art, philosophy, and literature that endeavored to explain the inexplicable, but at the root of such endeavors was always (a realization of) meaninglessness. With brazen honesty, Dazai calls out the insufficiencies of these narratives and conveys the spiritual void at their root. In many ways the story reflects Dazai’s own unease with the narratives that popped up to supersede Japan’s wartime nationalism, and his feeling of alienation as the memory of war starts to fade and more and more people resort to these new narratives finds expression in the main character’s conflicts with his uncle, his love interest, and finally the author he is writing to. The author in particular is a perfect example of someone who moved on from one narrative (war and nationalism) to another (Christianity) and the juxtaposition of the author’s smug confidence in the validity of his worldview and the main character’s skepticism feels almost autobiographical.

and a malaise that many thinkers struggled to make sense of

In *Sheep*, Oe paints a dismal picture of Japan under US occupation. There is nuance in his take, however, in that he does not offer us a mere one-dimensional criticism of US presence but rather a raw and honest portrayal of US soldiers in the eyes of ordinary Japanese, as well as interactions of Japanese with one another under occupation. The ordinary Japanese people, represented by the protagonist and his fellow disgraced passengers (monikered “the sheep” by the protagonist himself), are contrasted against the mercurial American soldiers commanding absolute authority over the passengers of the bus and the conniving non-sheep led by the teacher who had escaped the disgrace imposed on the sheep.

Throughout the story, the sheep are powerless towards their aggressors, whether that be the soldiers or the non-sheep passengers. The sheep are portrayed as being strictly passive; their actions in the story are reactions to the provocations of the Americans or the non-sheep. After the castration they endure by the Americans, this powerlessness is all the clearer, capturing the shame and vulnerability felt by the ordinary Japanese subject to the whims of the US occupation following the war.

The Americans are not depicted to be totally unjust; when the story begins, they are in jolly spirits and take nicely to the Japanese woman accompanying them. The protagonist was comfortable enough to take a seat next to them on the bus. It is only after the string of actions taken by the woman that the soldiers show their ruthless side, highlighting the moral ambiguity of the US forces in post-war Japan. On the one hand, many encounters that ordinary Japanese had with Americans were positive, the frequent gifts of food being a clear example. However, by the time the occupation ended and this story was written, ordinary Japanese were made to be cautious of Americans for their tendency to resort to violence in cases of misunderstandings, resulting in the capricious portrayal of soldiers and the general air of weariness towards them seen in the story. Even so, the way the protagonist describes the Americans as cows conveys how they were regarded as a powerful “other,” and this distinction leads the sheep to tolerate the soldiers’ actions with a sense of resignation, that it couldn’t be helped. The source of shame seemed to come more from being humiliated in front of fellow Japanese than it did from the Americans, which places further importance on the second half of the story.

In the second half of the story, the teacher supersedes the Americans in taking the role of antagonist. The authoritative teacher symbolizes the elite among the Japanese population who retained authority even after the occupation. This elite, obviously less affected by Japan’s defeat than the ordinary Japanese, betrays the ordinary Japanese people both in the story and in history as they feign concern for the ordinary Japanese solely to use them for their own megalomanic, self-serving interests. As a decidedly liberal author, Oe must have been disheartened by the conservative government that took the

and were attempting to dictate the proper response to the situation, appropriating the victimized party’s shame and using it to fuel their own self-righteous agenda.

I don’t think it normal for them to treat Japanese like animals and enjoy it. Mutes—we sheep had turned into reluctant mutes. I think it wrong for you to remain silent and put up with your humiliation.

The sheep = the disgraced.

He’s a black man, he’s no enemy! -> being black precludes the soldier from being an equal “other” and is the basis for a sort of twisted compassion.

clearly, the story is about frog’s transition from childhood to adulthood, but the world of children expressed in the story is not a world of innocence. Evident in the way Harelip treats the other village girls, or frog’s treatment of the girls, or the children’s treatment of the black soldier in general, or the way the protagonist regards the children of the town, the children of the village are abusive and self-serving; they care only about their own entertainment. When stepping into adulthood, in the tradition of psychoanalysis, it is typically said that the child experiences alienation from the world and comes to realize their distinct identity as opposed to the rest of the world via the construction of “other”. It is a sobering realization of true loneliness. However, prior to Frog’s last violent encounter with the soldier, the children and frog had already been doing just that: establishing the “other”. The betrayal that he felt, then, when the black soldier grabbed him as a shield was not from a sudden departure from childhood, but from realizing that the dehumanized “prize stock” that he had already established as the “other” was also a civilized individual capable of establishing his own “others” and defining himself through conflict.

Frog’s epiphany at the end, then, was not some sort of

*The Prize Stock* is undoubtedly a story of the growth and psychological development of the protagonist. The metaphors signaling the protagonist’s departure from childhood and into adulthood, most notably his severed fingers and unperturbed response to the death of the Clerk, are presented in an almost on the nose manner.

However, the “childhood” depicted in *The Prize Stock* is far from being a utopian world of innocence. In fact, the children in *The Prize Stock* routinely show their ruthlessness. Harelip’s treatment of the other village girls, the protagonist’s misogyny resulting from the suppression of his prurient interest, his wariness towards the children of the town, and the village children’s attitude towards the black soldier all indicate that the children in this book are abusive and self-serving; they care only about their own entertainment. Furthermore, they are capable of separating themselves from the external world through the formation of the “other”, a key concept in discussing maturity in the context of psychoanalysis. In the Freudian tradition, adulthood symbolizes the loss of unity and connection with the outer world, represented in one’s identification of oneself with their mother, and a realization of alienation. A distinct identity is formed via the construction of the “other” to supersede the identity shared with one’s mother and more broadly the entirety of their community. Prior to the protagonist’s last violent encounter with the soldier, the children and the protagonist had already been doing just that: establishing the “other”. The noticeable lack of a maternal figure in this story also makes it hard to witness such a harmonious sense of unity shared between the children and the community, and the separation of adults and children in the mind of the children express this disconnect.

The betrayal that the protagonist felt, then, when the black soldier grabbed him as a shield was not from a sudden departure from childhood, but from realizing that the dehumanized “prize stock” that he had already established as the “other” was also a civilized individual capable of establishing his own “others” and defining himself through conflict. The soldier had always been regarded as less than human, incapable of civilized interactions. They do not see an equal “other” in this soldier, nor do they see a representation of their greatest enemy and “other”: America. When Harelip stammers “He’s a black man, he’s no enemy!”, this was the sentiment that he had conveyed. The protagonist’s epiphany comes from observing and realizing the conflict between conscious subjects prevalent in society, i.e., war. He knew as a fact that it existed until then, but his true initiation into adulthood is facilitated by his proximity to the event afforded by the violent clash with the soldier, and his sudden humanization (conceptualization as the “other” = America) within him. War and the prospect of death are insignificant until they directly affect an individual, and the protagonist was directly affected by just that, making him switch sides from the children to the adults. This shift is manifested in the hate with which he blames the soldier for the smell on his arm.

grabbing the salt and letting go of the girl -> the victory of animalistic desire over spiritual and civil consciousness.

In *Fires of the Plain*, cannibalism appears as the ultimate act of animalistic desire. Eating you peers is portrayed as the result of

From the very first moments of the movie, *Fires of the Plain* cleverly highlights the duality of humanity. The story begins with a long monologue by a formidable captain on the importance of being diligent and preserving one’s dignity on the battlefield. The speech seems to go over the head of an already hazed Tamura, but it is clearly meant to frame the official narrative of the war, the “divine cause” for which the soldiers were laying their lives. Moments later, the captain can be seen lying down on the grass, vulnerably bemoaning his hunger as his inferiors continue to dig a trench in the ground. In this scene, we already see the central focus of this film: the juxtaposition of ideology and civility with an animalistic lust for life.

Interestingly, apart from the captain there were no depictions of soldiers who had loyally committed themselves to the militarist cause. All the soldiers were too preoccupied with their own survival to even consider the moral motives for their actions, and frequent talk of surrendering to the Americans and hoping for hospitable treatment from them shows a decisive lack of patriotic fervor. The intoxicating militarism that was described in tokatonton simply was not present on the battleground, where primal instinct superseded all ideology. Further, the lack of fervor did not indicate disenchantment of the same nature that plagued the protagonist of tokatonton among the soldiers, but rather simple indifference. Militarism and similar ideologies are hollow in moments of life and death. A conclusion redolent of Maslow’s hierarchy of desires, the depiction of the indifferent soldiers shows us that the acquired civility of humanity cannot beat the most fundamental of carnal instincts… so then what ideology is worth dying for?

A clear metaphor used to represent the conflict of humans against their own animal nature throughout the film is cannibalism. Cannibalism is presented as the antithesis to civility. While many soldiers are shown succumbing to the practice, Tamura manages to stave off the desire to eat human flesh until the very end. Even in the midst of an anarchic world without order, Tamura’s unwavering refusal to eat human meat seems to signal the triumph of the spiritual over the carnal and thus salvage ideology and morality from degrading into complete futility. However, in my favorite scene, Tamura returns to the house where he had just murdered a Filipino girl, and he sits beside the body for a while to internally process the guilt and shame of his barbaric actions. This moment of spirituality is interrupted, however, the moment he sees the salt underneath the cupboards. Once he sees that, he throws the girl’s body aside and desperately grabs for the salt. To me, this appeared to be a clear victory of selfishness and lust over spirituality and civility, showing that even Tamura was not immune to his animal cravings. This paints a grim picture of the primary conflict between culture and savagery, a picture accentuated by the ending in which Tamura’s strong desire to once again be connected to civilization is shattered by an act of brutal violence.

absurdity

When I finished watching the movie, I had only a seed of doubt about whether the protagonist had truly kept his promise of not eating human meat. Upon reading the book, this doubt has turned into certainty. Tamura had eaten human meat. The movie never shows Tamura explicitly engage in cannibalism, nor does it hint very strongly in that direction. The book, on the other hand, is filled with hints suggesting that Tamura is not the man he maintains to be in his subjective consciousness. One thing that distinguishes the movie and the book is that because the movie is a visual medium that can only portray third person images, objective stills sewn together, it leads us to believe that the events we witness are (at least to an extent) an objective account of the events that transpired during Tamura’s time in the Philippines. The book’s first-person narrative makes it overwhelmingly clear that we are only seeing things through the subjective lens of our protagonist, implying that the lack of explicit portrayal of Tamura eating the meat of his fellow soldiers does not rule out that he did. What’s more, the doctor diagnosing him with depersonalization and pointing out that his messiah syndrome maybe an indication of guilt deeply entrenched in his consciousness leads me to believe that Tamura had indeed partaken in cannibalism during the war, and that his madness was the result of an ex-ante justification/obfuscation of it.

While the movie focuses solely on war, I found that the book also dealt in depth with universal existential motifs. This is embodied in the passage where Tamura talks about the inability of humans to fathom coincidence, or absurdity. People long for a sense of preordained purpose, a structure to life that eliminates the contingencies of it. In this sense, Tamura is an eloquent and self-aware representation of the modern person. As humans, we fill our lives with banal distractions to avoid confronting the uncertainties of birth and death. But in a setting like war, where such efforts are ripped away and we are forced to confront death and other existential questions, the results are what we read in the novel. The theological rhetoric that Tamura borrows to explain his righteousness is an ultimate example of the lengths we go to establish a spurious notion of certainty.

1. How was the Tokyo Tower used in the film? What does the tower signify?

2. Describe the visual aspects of the film. Any notable camera work or visual technique? What are their effects?

3. One of the themes of the film is "family." How is it represented? How are wives/husbands/kids decribed?

4. Overall, what is your evaluation of this film? When it came out in 2005, it won 12 out of 13 categories of the Japan Academy Awareds. What in the film do you think attracted Japanese audiences in 2005?

5. The movie is set in 1958, two years after the Economic Survey of Japan of 1956 declared 「もはや戦後ではない」. How is the war used in the movie? Was there any reference to the occupation period or the United States? What statement is this film making about the Japan's postwar period?

戦争も終わったんだ，でっかい会社にだってきっとできる．

hopeful, optimistic that economic growth will come, that the days of war are over.

戦争から生き残って早13年―＞挨拶はいいから早くつけて（テレビ）

戦争という現実の認識の薄れ

日本人は最も憎悪心の少ない人種の一つ．こういうことだろうか．

前進する日本に対し，先生の家族の死など，戦争と共に取り残される日本の姿もある．

テレビ，冷蔵庫，洗濯機と，戦後の経済成長を象徴する品物が

世代間の格差．戦争中なんて着るもんも食うもんもなかった→父ちゃんの戦争の話なんていいや

In *Always: 三丁目の夕日*, we see conflicting images of postwar Japan. On the one hand, 13 years after the end of the war, Japan is growing at a rapid pace. The census of 1956 declares the “postwar period” to be officially over, and the lives of the normal Japanese people we see in the film reflect this. The speech made by Suzuki is representative of the optimism of this era: “The war is over. We could build a big company if we wanted.” We see this ambition materialize to a certain extent over the film as the Suzuki family acquires “三種の神器” one after another and grow noticeably economically richer. The economic boons of this age also provide a means to overcome social and class barriers. Hiromi, who used to be a dancer (most likely in the lewd context) now owns an izakaya, making an “honest” living. Roku moves all the way from the countryside to work with the Suzukis and share the joys of their newly established wealth. These examples highlight the weaker presence of social classes and increased class mobility in the postwar era, brought about by a strong economy. It is worth noting that the hope that people carry in this film is almost exclusively economical. Much like the present, there seems to be a lack of faith in the political establishment and instead a strong focus on the economy. Whether this was the result of the war awakening everyone to the futility of government and its foundational civic ideals, or this has always been the political attitude of the Japanese is unclear, but there is decisively little talk on politics throughout the film. The story told here is congruent with the observations of Ango in 日本文化私観. The Japanese we see in the film are pragmatic, economically oriented, and do not dwell on the tragedies of the past when faced with a promising future, a future embodied by the ongoing construction of the Tokyo tower. On the other hand, contrasted with auspicious economic prospects and the hopefulness of the people, we are also shown glimpses of tragedy and its enduring effects. The doctor, who lost his wife and daughter in the war, cannot move past the loss, and is trapped reliving the memory of them. Suzuki makes clear time and time again the deep impact that the war had on his life, and the difference in the level of appreciation for the postwar life between him and his son is indicative of a greater generational divide. The effects of the collective trauma experienced by the Japanese people are already being overshadowed by accelerated economic growth, and yet for those who experienced the war, it is an unforgettable event that had a momentous effect on their values and sensibilities.

What fascinated me about the The Face was that despite being a work of crime fiction, there is no mention of any crime, investigator, or mystery until well into the story. Even when the crime is finally introduced, there is no element of mystery to it, as it is introduced and explained to us by the perpetrator himself. Since most crime fictions revolve around the investigation of a mystery, culminating in the ultimate moment where all is revealed, this story did not feel like a crime mystery. Although he does inspire suspense and builds a sense of foreboding at the beginning of the story with arbitrary mentions of fear and exasperation by the protagonist, Seicho’s story completely ignores the customary problem solving and investigation elements that are present in most crime novels and instead offers a far more literary experience. The fact that the story is told solely through diary entries in the first person helps to this effect. Both the killer and the potential victim’s narratives take place ex-poste, ensuring that readers only have access to an annotated, subjective account of the events taking place. Without this narrative style, it would have been hard to fully understand the thoughts and motives of the killer Ino Ryokichi. Throughout the story, Ino shows very little emotion, and even in his depicted interactions with others, seems to come across as an unperturbed, soulless man. His face being presented time to time again as a manifestation of nihilism is a strong indication of the lack of his lack of character. In short, he seems to be the stereotypical crime novel killer, a sinister, unrelenting, unnamed figure existing solely for the creation of the crime and mystery which is to be the focal point of the story. Had the story not taken the first-person format, he would have become just another one-dimensional plot device so frequently seen in this genre. The way Seicho gives him a voice and explains this man’s growing obsession with fame and money, his paranoia, his very human and yet somewhat nihilistically inhuman thoughts and actions provides the story with depth unseen in other works.

I couldn’t see the expression in your eyes because your glasses were glittering too brightly.

You started to construct the story of my past, beginning with my childhood, and you argued that it was “inevitable” that I join the Party.

I had not arrived at this decision for any clear reason or through some cause-and-effect relationship. Wasn’t it enough if the Party accepted this decision?

When I said I was having a hard time with it, you asked why. This irritated me.

Sex with the worker -> Trying to see the abstract concept of “worker” in the practical, substantive worker in front of her. Felt assured by the concreteness of the worker, and his distance from conceptual narratives.

Objectification by “S”

What happened to my life history? -> S’s true desires surfaced, revealing the disingenuousness of the revolutionary rhetoric.

Eventually you began calmly to criticize me, your glasses glittering. “petit bourgeois”. I was quite accustomed to the scrutiny of others and to being labeled by them, but this time I couldn’t stand it.

Whereas the absurdism running through the works of Camus and Kafka took aim at the irrationalities and the spontaneous senselessness of life (absurdity) itself, in “Partei” this critical absurdist lens was more or less focused on ideological fervor.

*Partei* is undoubtedly a postmodernist work, with a strong resemblance to the works of absurdist authors such as Kafka and Camus. The whole story played out as a conflict of perspectives, similar to the way that the courtroom scene in *L’etranger* did. “I” was a strictly rational and far too honest character trying to make sense of the logic and rhetoric shared between “You” and the “Party”, the epitome of which is the inevitability of revolution. When asked to explain and write out her life history to join the party, “I” is stuck. The act of putting her life history on paper such as to justify her reasons to join the Party, which she alleges she has none, is a literal manifestation of the process wherein we fabricate and impose rational narratives with the intent of justifying our way of life and rendering it meaningful. Although this is observed in the context of political conviction in this novel, this process itself is universal within society; the same process by which Meursault was brought to trial in *L’etranger.* Humans, perhaps as an irrevocable side effect of the human condition, long for meaning and are abjectly terrified of the absence of meaning, of significance, of reason in our lives. We want to believe that our lives count for something, that our actions contribute to a general, abstract meaning that will exonerate our efforts and justify the absurdity of our existence. So, when this meaning is threatened in a manner similar to how “I” threatens the meaning of the “Party”, our first response is to attack, and this is the core “absurdism” underlying this story.

This is not all that is portrayed in *Partei,* though. *Partei* incorporates an important and unique perspective that is lacking in the abovementioned works of Camus and Kafka: that of gender. The story opens with “I” telling “You” her decision to join the party, but “I couldn’t see the expression in your eyes because your glasses were glittering too brightly.” This passage symbolizes the vagueness and distortion that existed in their relationship to begin with. Time and time throughout the novel, “You” naturally assumes leadership and instructs “I” on what to do. “You started to construct the story of my past… and you argued that it was “inevitable” that I join the Party.” “You” tried to impose his ideological narrative on “I”, but “I”’s absurdist disposition made it impossible for her to accept such a forcibly rationalized, disingenuous rhetoric.

“I”, in an effort to concretize the abstract concept of “worker” often touted in “Your” (The “Party”’s) rhetoric, agrees to a meal with one of the workers from her settlement and ends up having sex with him. She describes this experience as not an unpleasant one and noted that the worker was “nothing more than his simple, down-to-earth life.” It seems this grounded simplicity contributed to a sense of parity between the two, unadulterated by the bombast found in her relationship with “You”.

In a different encounter, “I” visits “S” in his home to discuss her life history with him, but during the stay is subjected to his objectifying gaze and engaged by him physically. When they are done, she asks “What happened to my life history?” to which “S” responds evasively. This interaction reveals the superficiality of the ideological convictions declared by “S” and the “Party” alike. At the end of the day, when all the hyperbole runs its course, they are not motivated by their higher calling but the very animalistic desires that they carry. “I” is not the outlier; we all lack a central governing doctrine to our lives. We just try to convince ourselves otherwise.

In the end, “I” refuses to allow “You” to control her. “I” rejects the “Party”, and in doing so severs the remaining ties binding her to the ideological fervor of the political movement, and the collective, farcical Weltanschauung which was imposed on her by “You”. What follows is a sudden clarity of perspective, and finally she becomes aware of what “You” looks like behind his glasses: wall-eyed and foolish.

Obvious from the get-go, The Woman in the Dunes by Abe Kobo leaves no space for levity. Consistent throughout the text is a dismal outlook on life that hardly believes in freedom of the individual. Sure, the protagonist begins his journey with strong faith in the “freedom” that he was endowed by the system in the outside world and a large part of the text establishes his struggle to gain back this previous way of life as the central conflict. However, as the novel progresses, we witness our protagonist grow increasingly cynical of the ostensible freedom of his former life. Revealed in his reminiscences are the restrictions he faced in his marriage to the “other woman,” the limits he and his students faced in the school he worked at, and the narrowly defined success driving the monotonous repetitions both in and outside of the dunes, epitomized in the frequent talks of buying a radio. Simultaneous to this is his gradual acceptance of the way of life within the dunes. While never fully admitting his adaptation to life in the sand, he grows less critical and more understanding of the operations of the village. Ultimately, we see the man arriving at sympathy for the village’s beleaguered status, expressed in how he responds to their shady dealings, and full immersion in his creative endeavors to build a water trap, a conspicuous metaphor for self-realization in labor.

Within this context, the sand in the dunes takes on a dual meaning. It is apparent from the text that the sand is a metaphor for labor. At first glance, this labor is framed as a criticism of the monotonous repetitions incumbent on workers in the productive apparatus. The routine sand digging required of the villagers to qualify them for rations completes, in its own right, a strictly rational arrangement. Villagers dig to survive. The question is, why the fixation on this interminable and ultimately futile process when there are other alternatives to sustain life? Likewise, labor in capitalist society is organized in an entirely rational manner. The logic of optimization commands that all activities contribute to the primary and only goal of creating capital… the only thing irrational about it is that itself: capital, which exists for the sole purpose of further expansion. There is no end there that reaches beyond the Sisyphean pile of accumulated capital, the ceaseless expansion of zeros on an accounting sheet. So, if both the inside world of sand digging and the outside world of capitalism consist of the same, restricted logic, there is no real choice between the two systems. At least the latter ensures security, whereas the former has a wider repertoire for productive action but greater risk of failure and threats to survival.

A closer look at the depiction of sand in the book reveals the “fluid dynamic” nature of the sand. There is a modicum of room for creativity and variation in these monotonic repetitions, albeit limited. And when the sand reveals the water veins pumping up through it, appointing the man to his “manifest destiny” of building a water trap, it begs the question of freedom in a constrained system. Must we have complete, active freedom to achieve true happiness? Is there no freedom to be found in a constrained way of life? Reading this story, it sounds to me like Abe, in his considerations of communism and capitalism, was not a purist or idealist for either camp. Instead, he understood and accepted the flaws (and certainly there are flaws) of both systems, and employed a more nuanced perspective in his comparisons of the two systems.

Territory of Light was an excruciatingly honest. Though employing mystical elements at times, the bulk of the text strayed far from symbolic allusions and allegories, making it less poetic and grandiose in comparison to the other texts we have read in class. Instead, it felt much closer to home, to our immediate reality surrounding us, and by virtue of this it was much easier to imagine myself in the position of the mother and sympathize with her.

Tsushima’s portrayal of the protagonist as a mother was surprising. The things the mother did and the ways she framed her thoughts concerning her child were unconventional and not always in the best interest of her child. However, I did not harbor any ill feelings for the mother while reading the story. This was due to how the narrative style of the book humanized her and introduced her to the reader as an individual before she was anything else (a mother, a wife, etc.). This protagonist was not “the mother”. She was a human who just so happened to have a daughter and a (failed) marriage. The effect that this narrative style had made me realize my own prejudices that I associate with mothers. Though not a conscious decision, I am wont to assume that parents in general, but especially mothers, are morally obliged to commit themselves to improving the lives of their children. They must constantly optimize their decisions to suit their children and failing to do so by prioritizing themselves is a sign of a failed parent. Following this criterion, the protagonist as a mother has undoubtedly failed the lifelong and unremitting task of parenting. But looking back at my own life, my own mother was not so different from the protagonist in the book.

My mother is and always has been a strong, pensive, opinionated to the point of stubbornness, independent person. Naturally, the role that society imposes on mothers did not sit well with her, and this was apparent even in my young and uncultivated eyes. Her pent-up frustration has, understandably, led her to do to me almost all the things the protagonist did in this book to her daughter. However, although this contributed to temporary bumps in my relationship with her, it never permanently damaged the fabric of our relationship. This is because she never fixated on her role as a mother, and never framed herself as a mother to us children. She was clear and honest with us that she was a human, an individual, and with that understanding, it was much easier to experience the rough patches that we went through. I knew that she was human, not some patron burdened with the social responsibility to be perfect. When you are possessed with the notion that a mother must be perfect, you start to believe that all their actions and words are adequate, leading you to take to heart every criticism or frustrated remark that comes your way and contributing self-blaming, feelings of inadequacy and heartbreak. The social norms we set for mothers not only pigeonholes women who are reduced to their reproductive and familial functions, but is also detrimental to the psyche of children who grow up believing in the sanctity of their mothers.

The main character, Ryu, is almost a caricature of adolescent nihilism.

The main character of this novel, Ryu, is almost a caricature of adolescent nihilism.

Almost Transparent Blue.

Much like the works of his contemporaries of the beat generation across the pacific, Ryu Murakami’s Almost Transparent Blue is in many ways anthemic: its frenzied, stream-of-consciousness narrative stands in defense of sensual indulgence, nihilism-induced rebellion, and more particularly the unsupervised, lascivious culture of the international youth of Japan. Ryu is a staple child of the disenfranchised and disillusioned youth. It is clear to all that he lacks meaning in his life, as do all the many characters who make an appearance, and he tries to fill the void (or at the very least to distract himself from the void) by numbing his senses with his hedonistic pursuits. Him and his gang are exiled from the public sphere of society and find themselves in the niche underground that is Yokota Base, so far detached from the typical reality of Japan. There, they live loyal to their teenage fascination with drugs, sex, and violence which, consciously or not, simultaneously acts as rebellion against the establishment in the form of embracing taboos. However, none of them care enough to politicize their actions or infuse it with a deeper meaning. They are numb, and this is evident in their interactions, their surface level conversations, and Ryu’s own suppression of his feelings towards Lilly until a brief letter appended at the end of the novel. The undeveloped, one-dimensional characters are of secondary importance to Ryu and are only there to serve the functional purpose of fueling his regular Bacchanalian outings. It is amazing how little concern they express for each other in situations of actual physical danger (Kei getting beat up, Yoshinori cutting his wrist). No one cares for each other. And as sad as that sounds, it would be a lie if I said I didn’t have my own share of friends whose relationship with me is characterized by the exact same mutual indifference. There is a certain liberation that comes from being with someone who does not care about you, and that is that they remain indifferent to your own self destruction, and in their presence, you are free to act without fear of being scorned. It allows you to shed the weight of your identity, of having to play a part and keep up appearances, and for teenagers discovering themselves, It is easy to imagine how such an environment gives great comfort.

The narrative style is very stream-of-consciousness. Ryu doesn’t bother to set the scene or explain in detail in such a way as to provide a clear, objective accounts of the events he describes. This has the effect of telling the story like what it most likely is, a haphazard assortment of hazy memories. The use of quotations marks seems to suggest that the Ryu is still of relatively sound mind, but when the quotations fade away, we know that the Ryu has entered a trance in which his distinction of subject and object is compromised. Ryu’s own hyperactive and all-over-the-place ruminations interjected between real dialogue simulates the short attention span of a person on drugs to the reader. The narrative style ensures that the reader vicariously experiences the same spans of drugged and drunken reverie and lucidity that Ryu goes through. And because of this we can realize intuitively what Ryu also realizes, that Lilly is special, that she deserves Ryu’s sober attention, and that he wants a deeper, more meaningful connection with her. Of course, he realizes this too late, and his self-destructive habits forcer her away.

An initial, crude reading of the ending suggests that through his encounter with the big black bird, he cuts himself with the glass to kill his old self, and the almost transparent blue of the glass represents his rebirth and departure from his old ways. I can’t help but think there is a more profound meaning to the bird, though.