Murakami for Beginners: My Take on Birthday Girl



[APRIL 6, 2017](https://justaplatypus.wordpress.com/2017/04/06/murakami-for-beginners-birthday-girl/)~[JUSTAPLATYPUS](https://justaplatypus.wordpress.com/author/perryk13/)

A few months ago, I was speaking to a friend about her reading habits when we came upon the subject of genres. She said “I read thrillers, romance, fantasy novels, Murakami,” which utterly confused me as I had never heard this word before. When I asked her what it meant, she clarified, “He’s a Japanese author. A different genre altogether.”

A little while later, I encountered my first Murakami short story. Titled *Birthday Girl*, it’s a confusing yet very gripping short story. At first, I neither understood nor enjoyed it. I did see what she meant by “a whole different genre,” though. If you’d like to read the story yourself, I found it available online [here](https://killingtimewithijahamran.wordpress.com/2010/11/17/birthday-girl-by-haruki-murakami/).

This short story utterly confused me when I first read it, as I could not follow who the narrator was, when it switched from past to present, or what the point of the story was. I also love clarity, so the open ending left me uneasy and feeling sort of incomplete. Yet, partly because I have to study it as a part of a syllabus, and partly because of the worldwide acclaim this author has, I read and re-read it until I could make a little more sense of it. I then read up on it online, and now I finally have some more clarity. So if you’re in the same position as I was, and are looking for help understanding it, then I hope this helps. If you have a different interpretation, or just more insights on Murakami’s writing, I’d love to hear them. And if you have answers to any of the several questions that I have posed, then once again, I would absolutely love to hear them.

~~~

Plot.  
Birthday Girl is a conversation between the narrator and the protagonist, a middle-aged married woman with kids. They are talking about their 20th birthdays, and she recalls the circumstances surrounding hers. When, on that day, her co-waitress had fallen ill, she ended up spending her birthday evening at work like any normal day. In a further unexpected turn of events, the manager fell ill suddenly and rushed off to the hospital, leaving her with the responsibility of taking the restaurant owner his dinner at eight that night, as was customary.  
The girl did as she was told, but ended up conversing with the owner, who invited her in for a drink when he heard that it was her birthday. *“A special birthday calls for a special commemorative gift,”* he said, and offered her a wish. She could wish for anything, and it would be granted. The only condition was that she couldn’t change her mind and take it back later.  
The girl made her wish, he told her it had been granted, and she went on with her evening. Now, several years later, she says it has been granted so far, but she’s yet to see how things work out until the end. *“It was a wish that takes time to come true.”* Murakami does not reveal the wish to us, nor hint at what it might have been. He simply leaves us guessing.

My interpretation.  
One thing I noticed in the story is the stark contrast drawn between who the protagonist is now and the life she led over ten years ago. Far from being a lonely individual, working as a waitress, with seemingly no close friends or relationship, she is now leading a satisfactory life, with a husband and children and a dog. She seems reasonably happy in life, even if everything isn’t 100% perfect. The metaphor of the Audi with the dents in its bumper symbolises perfectly that it doesn’t matter.  
This agrees with one of the common interpretations of this story, that her wish was to have no more wishes in life. It explains why she’s happy in life, yet the rest of her life remains to see if it will continue that way. It still has the ring of truth in it, that despite being given a magical wish, everything will still not be perfect – and that’s alright. It could explain the allusion at the end; when she says that the fact that the narrator cannot think of a wish means that his/her wish has already been made.

My second possible interpretation, which has also been suggested by several people, is that her wish was relates to who she is. *“No matter what they wish for, no matter how far they go, people can never be anything but themselves,”* she says. Did she wish to know herself better, to truly understand herself? Did she wish to be someone different? We will never know.

What remains important to Murakami, is the lingering questions this story leaves in the mind of the reader. Not those questions regarding the girl’s wish (which I’m obviously still full of), but that question in all of our minds right now, asking us what we, at 19 and 20 years old, would wish for in our lives.

Questions.  
This story still leaves me with a lot of questions. Who is the narrator, and what is his/her interest in the protagonist? “I looked at her mouth”, “beautifully shaped earlobe”, all the emphasis on eye-contact that they make – what does it all imply?  
Predictably, I’m still wondering about what she wished for. Could it have been any of the things I suggested above? Or was it something else entirely? I want closure.  
Finally, is there further significance of the last line of the story? *“That’s because you’ve already made your wish,”* she tells the narrator. *“[that’s why] you really can’t think of anything.”* Is this a subtle reference to what her wish was, and how that played out?