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### Shepherding Through Generational Hierarchy

In Haruki Murakami's *The Strange Library*, the symbolism of sheep and shepherding represents struggles against a hierarchy the main character *boku* faces. One of the major themes presented is the transformation from childhood to maturity that the novel takes the reader through. *Boku's* meekness is nurtured by the hierarchy of seniority he has been taught to abide by as a young boy, and his eventual growth allows him to battle the shepherd-like control that elder characters have on him. In *The Strange Library*, the symbolism of shepherding is representative of the maturation needed to break through a generational hierarchy imposed from a young age.

In the beginning chapters of the novel, we see how the author establishes the theme of a sheep/shepherd relationship—with *boku's* connection with his mother and his submissiveness towards the old man. The symbol is apparent from the first chapter of the story, when the boy is returning books to the librarian and thinks, "I am always on time, and I never hand things in late. That's the way my mother taught me. Shepherds are the same. If they don't stick to their schedule, the sheep go completely bananas" (Murakami 3). This introduction briefly touches on the theme of shepherding, but the interpretation that *boku* is the sheep in relationships with those older than him is suggested later, when he consistently stresses his concern over his mother's worries of him not being home on time. One could say that his mother is in a sense his "shepherd" because of the authority she holds over him, while *boku* is the embodiment of the sheep. Constantly in fear of troubling his mother, his agitation demonstrates how he is "herded" through his blind obedience towards her because of her power in their relationship. Similarly,

*boku* obediently trusts the old man when he guilt-trips him into staying at the library to read. This misplaced trust is a product of the innocence or submission his mother has fostered—his attachment to her is evidence of how he has been sheltered and taught to obey elders simply based off their age. As a young boy, he does not yet have the understanding to know he must be wary of those around him. Instead, his mother has inflicted a malleable quality in him which hinders him in distinguishing good from bad when interacting with those senior to him. His inability to refuse The old man's positional power is an example of this passiveness, and we see how he questions this himself when he wonders, "Why do I act like this, agreeing when I really disagree, letting people force me to do things I don't want to do?" (Murakami 21). *Boku's* ignorance of generational hierarchy that has been ingrained in him is in itself is symbolic of his innocence or sheep-like qualities.

*Boku's* submissiveness is his downfall, but his escape from the library is evidence of his maturation being the reason for his emancipation from his shepherds. As *boku* and the sheep man are about to escape, they are halted by the old man, who has a black dog sitting next to him. *Boku's* fear of the black dog had been mentioned prior to this, but now we see that he has not yet recovered from it. *Boku* expresses, "It was the same dog who had bitten me so many years before. My pet starling's bloody body was clamped between his teeth. I let out a small cry and started to collapse backward" (Murakami 80). Knowing that the black dog has bitten him before, the fact that the starling was now coincidentally also being held between the dog's teeth is shows that he is reminiscing this trauma from years ago. His refusal to move on from this incident is what allows the black dog to shepherd him through manipulation of his fear. The article "Murakami's Strange Library" by Chris Perkins addresses how the black dog is "the same dog that had in the past bitten the boy and made him so submissive" (230). The interpretation that

the black dog is what forced *boku* into submission supports the idea that he is a sheep answering to his shepherd, which in this case is his trauma. The pivoting point in *boku's* transition into maturity is when he is finally able to face this trauma and rid himself of the dog. *Boku* describes how his pet starling starts to expand to such a size that the “dog’s mouth ripped” and is “pressing the old man fast against the wall” (Murakami 86). The starling, an object of *boku's* childhood, destroys both the old man and the black dog and represents how the maturation of his childlike qualities is what rids him of his obedience towards elder figures in his life. The starling growing is symbolic of how his childish submissiveness matures and eventually kills his shepherds. Freeing himself from the role of the sheep he has been molded into by elder figures in his life, he breaks free of those shepherds, therefore letting go of the generational hierarchy he has been brought up in.

The growth of *boku* throughout *The Strange Library: 107* is vital to his journey to shed the barriers of a hierarchy that is inflicted on him. The symbolism of sheep and shepherds illustrates *boku's* submission as a child towards elders who shepherd him. His connection with his mother and his interaction with the old man prove how the cultivation of his obedience is inherently similar to that of a sheep. The growth of his maturity, particularly when faced with the black dog representative of his trauma, is what allows him to leave this generational hierarchy. Removing these limitations, he moves past his innocence and submission towards his elders.

#### Works Cited

Murakami, Haruki. *The Strange Library*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

Perkins, Chris. "Murakami's Strange Library." *Libraries in Literature*, 30 Sept. 2022.