Violence and Therapy in Murakami Haruki’s Kafka on the Shore

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**ABSTRACT**

Popular Japanese author Murakami Haruki's tenth novel, *Kafka on the Shore*, has been criticised by some for its overly therapeutic tone. This novel, these critics argue, fails to adequately address the central question of violence it raises and offers readers a false sense of psychological security. A more sympathetic reading of these therapeutic themes is possible, however, especially when the novel is situated within the wider historical context of its production. Employing both Jungian and Lacanian perspectives, this essay argues that the central protagonist's journey in *Kafka on the Shore*, from fear to forgiveness, is a legitimate response to the anxieties of the age and is heroic in nature. Nevertheless, this psychological victory is complicated and even partially undermined by competing themes and narratives in the work. *Kafka on the Shore* is thus a less reassuring novel than critics suggest and offers a complex view of the possibilities and limitations inherent in a therapeutic approach to the problem of violence in contemporary Japan.

**Keywords**: Murakami Haruki, Kafka on the Shore, psychoanalytic readings

**Introduction**

While Murakami Haruki's tenth novel, *Umibe no Kafuka* (Kafka on the Shore, 2002), was a commercial success in Japan and abroad, its critical response was mixed, with several critics in Japan dismissing it as a therapeutic work that fails to adequately address the central question of violence it raises. Kuroko Kazuo, for example, saw it as backing down from the kind of commitment Murakami advocated in his 1995 interview with Jungian psychologist Kawai Hayao, a commitment he saw later reflected in Murakami's non-fictional works *Andaguraundo* (Underground, 1997) and *Yakusoku sareta basho de* (The Place that was Promised, 1998). Kuroko asserts:

> The reason so many readers received “therapy” from this novel was undoubtedly its ability to suggest... in the most crucial part of the story, our ability to not face (to take flight from) the violence that symbolizes the reality we live in. Moreover, because of this, readers who have avoided facing the times must read the novel and feel relieved. In other words, *Kafka on the Shore*...
is a work that forgives readers—particularly young readers—for the self-deception that allows them to not fight against the (malice = violence) of these times. *Kafka on the Shore* is a story that accepts the kind of self-centred, self-deceiving lifestyle that says, regarding the violence arising in the various situations of everyday life, I will live and hope for my “personal security and safety,” and through this offers “therapy” to its readers.2

Similarly, Komori Yoichi questions *Kafka on the Shore*’s wide international success, which he sees less as a cause for celebration than as a dangerous sign of the times. Komori writes:

> However, should we unreservedly celebrate this situation where *Kafka on the Shore* has become a best-seller even overseas, saying “finally Japanese literature has been recognized in the world” and “at long last, a world-class, universal Japanese novel has appeared.”
>
> I for one cannot take this position. Rather, the position running through this book is that in those countries where *Kafka on the Shore* has been accepted, it has been consumed as a commodity that brings “salvation,” “relief,” and “therapy,” and this in the face of a shared social pathology that has spread since September 11th, 2001 (911). This cannot be taken as a good thing.3

The general tone of these criticisms, it should be noted, is not new. Years earlier, Oe Kenzaburō described Murakami and Yoshimoto Banana, another popular contemporary Japanese author, as writers who “convey the experience of a youth politically uninvolved or disaffected, content to exist within a late adolescent or post-adolescent subculture.”4 Karatani Kojin also critiqued the way Murakami’s absurd fictional quests parodied the more serious commitments of Oe’s fiction.5 Murakami’s popularity is not in question here. Rather, what these critics condemn is his failure to offer a larger moral vision adequate to the challenges of the age. Instead, Murakami is seen as pampering to his readers with therapeutic themes that forgive them for refusing to grow up and confronting the real world challenges that are theirs.

But is *Kafka on the Shore* really as psychologically reassuring a novel as these critics suggest? A close reading of the work, I argue in this essay, challenges this claim. While there are undoubtedly therapeutic themes running through *Kafka on the Shore*, these are complicated by the structure of the novel that alternates by chapter between two different storylines. The first storyline featuring a young man named Kafka who is battling an Oedipal prophesy and trying to find forgiveness for the mother who abandoned him years earlier is perhaps susceptible to the

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1 Murakami and Kawai 1996.
2 Kuroko 2007: 243-44.
5 Karatani 1990: 90.
types of critiques outlined above. The alternating storyline of an old man named Nakata who has been sent out on a journey by a malevolent figure named Johnnie Walker, on the other hand, partially undermines the achievements of Kafka’s psychological journey and leaves one wondering what he has really achieved. *Kafka on the Shore*, in other words, is a more unsettling work than these critics claim.

Moreover, even the therapeutic themes evident in Kafka’s story are less reassuring than they first appear. While aspects of the novel suggest that it is about the promise of psychological integration, other parts of the story undermine this simple narrative. There are themes in *Kafka on the Shore* both of balancing opposites and finding some kind of grounding to the self and realizations that this psychological project may be impossible. What Kafka must ultimately face is the sense of a void at the heart of his own subjectivity and the anxiety this creates. While parts of Kafka’s journey can thus be understood through a Jungian lens, a search for psychological integration and wholeness symbolized in the novel through a hermaphrodite mentor, his journey inward ultimately leads him to a more radical discovery of absence that is usefully understood in Lacanian terms. The ultimate solution offered to Kafka by his mentors in this novel thus lies somewhere between these two psychoanalytic theories.

This essay begins by offering a broad historical background against which *Kafka on the Shore* might be read. To understand the stakes involved in Kafka’s psychological journey, it is useful to understand the larger cultural milieu against which this novel was written and the motivation this may have provided for Murakami. The next section then looks more specifically at the nature of Kafka’s psychological journey and the psychoanalytic frameworks that might be used to understand it. Finally, the third section examines the second alternating narrative in the novel involving the old man Nakata and Johnnie Walker, the latter of who is trying to build a new power base in contemporary Japan. While the first two sections will argue for the relevancy of the therapeutic themes in *Kafka on the Shore*, the third section will demonstrate the ways the novel also works to undermine them.

**Anxiety and Violence in Japan’s Lost Decade**

The 1990’s provide an important backdrop for understanding the significance of the psychological themes found in *Kafka on the Shore*. Japan’s single-minded pursuit of economic goals in the post-war period, while part of a necessary project of nation-rebuilding, can also be seen as a sublimated attempt to recover from the humiliation of defeat that came at the end of World War II: an effort to win the war on another front. For this reason, the economic stagnation that followed the bursting of the speculative real estate and stock market bubbles in the late 1980’s, the beginning of Japan’s so-called lost decade, was a serious blow to the national psyche. More than just an end to the euphoria of high economic growth, it was a national trauma that reopened older psychic wounds. As Matthew Strecher convincingly argues in his study of Murakami’s fiction and themes, *Dances with Sheep*, Murakami’s writing project can be read in part as a cultural response to this...
historical reality. As Strecher reminds us, Murakami is part of a younger generation that had no direct historical memory of the war itself and who could not understand the incessant emphasis on economic goals. Murakami and others of his generation are thus engaged in a search for identity on their own terms.6

Against this backdrop of economic stagnation then came two disasters, one natural and the other human-made, which shook the nation to the core. The Great Hanshin Earthquake or Kobe Earthquake as it is also commonly known, occurred on January 17th, 1995, and left over 6,000 people dead. The extent of the damage and the cost to human life were significant. However, for many, it was the lack of a timely and adequate government response that left the bitterest aftertaste. This natural disaster was followed in March of the same year by a human-made one: the apocalyptically inspired cult Aum Shinrikyō’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. This attack killed twelve people and injured hundreds more, numbers that could have been greatly inflated had the attack been executed more effectively or a more deadly form of the gas produced. What shocked the nation was not just that this attack could occur on Japanese soil carried out by Japanese citizens, but that several of those involved had been trained in some of the country’s most elite institutions. What could have possibly driven these people, those who had full access to the material comforts of Japan’s post-war economic success, to become involved in such a senseless act of destruction?

Murakami was deeply affected by these events and spent much of his time in the following years responding to them, firstly in the two non-fiction works mentioned above, and then in a short-story collection, Kami no kodomotachi wa mina odoru 神の子どもたちはみな踊る (All God’s Children Can Dance, 2000), which dealt in a somewhat indirect fashion with the subtle traumatic after-effects of the Kobe earthquake. Murakami recognized the disbelief that had struck the nation in the aftermath of the Aum attack, the sense of dismay at the incredulity of those who could buy into the dubious myth-making of a fanatic. Yet the question he wished to ask was what Japan could offer these people in return: those who had been disillusioned by Japanese society and sought for answers in a cult like Aum. He recognized that, while important differences exist, there was something similar in what these people were searching for in religion and what he was searching for as a novelist. He thus felt a great responsibility to look for answers.7

The importance of this search becomes apparent when one considers the increased signs of psychological strain amongst some of Japan’s young people today. One example of this can be seen in the estimated over one million Japanese who are thought to have checked out of Japanese society all together: the so-called hikikomori (social recluses) phenomenon. Finding no value in the country’s highly structured and pressured education and work systems, these youth simply refuse to participate – passive form of protest with huge economic and social costs for the country. The government has responded to these perceived pressures with a more relaxed education system, the so-called yutori kyōiku system, but anxious parents

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6 Strecher 2002.
simply offset this reduction in course content and hours by increasing their children's attendance in after-hour cram schools and hiring private tutors, a desire to offset perceived declines in educational standards. This in turn has increased the costs of education for many parents, adding to the financial pressures placed on families.

At the same time, the Japanese model of lifetime employment, a symbol of financial security and corporate concern during Japan's period of high economic growth (at least for those employed in large, reputable companies), is rapidly breaking down under the competitive pressures of global capitalism. In Japan, this has resulted in the rise of so-called *furita*, freelance workers who pick up jobs as they can without the security of full-time, steady employment. These workers are the first to feel the strain in times of economic downturn, and while for some this system offers flexibility as they work to support other goals, for others it simply locks them out of the job security and benefits they desire. In this way, even as families continue to ratchet up the educational pressures on their children, the traditional rewards of success in this system, a lifetime of secure employment in a reputable company, are steadily being undermined.

The children caught up in this system express their frustration in various ways. While some, as discussed earlier, check out of the system all together, others direct their anger towards their peers or families, starting with psychological and physical bullying and escalating at the extreme end to murder. It is these murder cases in particular that dominate news headlines and come to symbolize for many a national sense of moral decline and panic. Katō Norihiro has argued that it is one of these attacks, the 1997 murder of two young children in Kobe by a fourteen-year-old boy (dubbed Shônen (Boy) A by the media), that provides the implicit backdrop against which *Kafka on the Shore* should be read.

For Katō, the central question *Kafka on the Shore* raises is: “How can a completely broken person recover?” He sees Kafka on the edge of a psychological breakdown desperately trying to hold his world together. Is Katō right? Is Kafka some kind of psychological everyman struggling with the same things we all struggle with, or is he a particularly troubled young man on the edge of a schizophrenic breakdown? I would not go as far as Katō in his diagnosis of Kafka's psychological starting point in the novel. While there are signs of this potential breakdown, particularly in Kafka's interactions with his alter ego, the boy named Crow, there is also a level of planning, resilience, and sociability in Kafka that undermines the extremity of Katō's position. Nevertheless, Katō does raise an interesting question about the stakes involved in Kafka's journey. The comparison with Shônen A, in particular, reminds us of the very real potential consequences that come when an individual is unable to maintain a certain degree of psychological equilibrium.

What this historical background offers is a sense of the potential stakes involved in Kafka's journey. When one sees the evidence for psychological strain in contemporary Japan and the way some young people have either imploded or
exploded because of it, it is hard to be entirely dismissive of a work that seems to offer psychological relief to its readers. In the third section, I consider the limits of this psychological view and the way the novel works to complicate and undermine it. In the next section, I take a closer look at the specific nature of this psychological journey, the ways in which it might be considered heroic, and some of the possible psychoanalytic frameworks that can be used to understand it.

**Frameworks for Understanding Kafka's Psychological Journey**

Psychoanalytic readings of Murakami's fiction are not uncommon, with Jung having more influence in Japan and Lacan more influence in the West. This difference in part reflects the reception of these psychoanalytic theories in these different cultural contexts. In the West, Lacanian psychoanalysis fits better with many of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist tendencies found in modern literary studies, while Jung has largely been left behind. In Japan, perhaps because of the de-emphasis on the teleological ideal of a unified self in the reception of Jungian thought within the country, Jungian theories have continued to have more relevance. What I wish to show in the reading of *Kafka on the Shore* that follows is the way both theories have a role to play in understanding the psychological themes found in this work.

*Kafka on the Shore* is the story of a fifteen year old boy, Tamura Kafka, who bearing the burden of an Oedipal prophesy, runs away from his home in Tokyo and begins a new life in the faraway city of Takamatsu, Shikoku—a metaphorical journey into the convoluted labyrinth of his own mind. His father has prophesied that Kafka will kill him and sleep with both his mother and sister, both of whom disappeared from Kafka's life when he was just four. Kafka must face the burden of this prophesy, which he suggests numerous times in the novel is somehow carried within his DNA, learn how to forgive his mother, and, as the boy named Crow constantly reminds him, become the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world.

In Shikoku, Kafka finds a home in the Komura library and is introduced to two important figures that play a vital role in his journey. First is the androgynous Oshima, a biological woman who thinks, dresses, and behaves like a man. As she explains, “My body is physically female, but my mind's completely male” She acts as a mentor to Kafka, acting in one sense as an extension of the library in which she works, offering him important cultural lessons designed to help him learn and grow. The second figure is Saeki, an older woman who has returned to the library in preparation for her own death. She lost a lover in the student protests of the late 1960s and a fifteen-year-old version of herself, the time in her life when she was perhaps happiest, still mysteriously exists within her and at times leaves her body to visit Kafka at night. Building a case on circumstantial evidence, Kafka starts to believe that Saeki may in fact be his mother.

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Oshima is more than a mentor to Kafka. She is an outward symbol of the kind of psychic balance he is seeking, and she offers him lessons designed to reinforce this message. On one of these occasions, for example, Oshima tells Kafka about Aristophane’s theory in Plato’s *The Banquet*: “In ancient times people weren’t simply male or female, but one of three types: male/male, male/female or female/female... But then God took a knife and cut everyone in half, right down the middle. So after that the world was divided into just male and female, the upshot being that people spend their time running around trying to locate their missing other half.” The suggestion here is that the lack we feel can only be fulfilled in the sexual other and that two halves need to come together in order to create a whole.

For Jung, the quest towards individuation eventually led to the archetype of the syzygy or divine couple. It was a sign that the male and female aspects of the personality were coming together and that a greater sense of self was beginning to take shape. Something similar becomes evident in *Kafka on the Shore* as Kafka searches for his absent mother. As Maria Flutsch explains in an essay that also looks at *Kafka on the Shore* from a psychoanalytic perspective, and quoting from Jung, “Oshima shows that this [male-female] split is not insuperable. Indeed, his androgyny is ‘a symbol of the creative union of opposites, a uniting symbol in the literal sense.’”

Oshima takes Kafka to a cabin on the edge of a deep forest. It is in this forest that he eventually meets this feminine other, the fifteen-year-old version of Saeki he has fallen in love with, and also learns how to forgive his mother. Oshima prepares Kafka for this journey and offers him suggestions about what he will find. As Kafka prepares to make his final journey into the forest at the end of the novel, for example, he first lies down on a bed where Oshima has been sleeping moments before. As Kafka explains, “The pillow and covers still show signs of Oshima having been there. Not him, really—more like his sleep. I sink down in those signs.” Later, as he is making his way into the forest, he again remembers this moment: “I remember Oshima asleep in the bed in the cabin, his face to the wall. And the signs he/she left behind. Cloaked in those, I went to sleep in the same bed.” Oshima offers Kafka a concrete reminder of what he is hoping to find in the forest: some kind of balance between the male and female forces he senses working within himself.

Kafka’s abandonment by his mother has left him hurt and afraid. One of the consequences of this is that he sometimes finds himself losing control and carrying out acts of violence. His journey is thus one of personal healing and from an individual perspective should be seen as heroic. Borrowing loosely from a Jungian framework, Joseph Campbell described one such view of the hero’s journey.

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11 Ibid.: 40 and 60.
12 Flutsch 2006: 73.
14 Ibid.: 279 and 415.
basic model he describes follows the pattern of an initiation including an escape and a return that should ideally bring the hero back into contact with his or her community. Near the end of the hero's journey, before this return, Campbell saw a similar encounter for the male hero with a mysterious female other. As he describes: “The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome is commonly represented as a mystical marriage... of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the world.”16 This female other offers the hero compensation for the disappointments of the world. The point of this journey is not to escape into a world of compensation, however, but rather to find the inner strength and healing one needs to engage again in the world outside.

This is one way of viewing Kafka's journey, and indeed, deep in the forest he meets the fifteen-year-old Saeki, finds a world of compensation, but also makes a conscious decision to return to the outer world. What this kind of reassuring, therapeutic account of Kafka's journey ignores though is the disturbing nature of the real world relationships he is involved in. In particular, Kafka's relationship with Saeki, which it is suggested at times could be incestuous, and at the very least develops into a sexual relationship between a troubled older woman in her fifties and a confused younger man in his teens, is unsettling. The description of Kafka's quest as an inward journey to find psychic compensation or wholeness, in other words, misses many more troubling aspects of the novel and needs to be placed within the larger context of these competing themes and problems.

One of the new elements found in Kafka on the Shore that distinguishes it from earlier Murakami novels is the heavy emphasis placed on DNA. Near the start of the novel, for example, Kafka stands before a mirror staring at himself, considering the genetic inheritance received from his parents: “I study my face in the mirror. Genes I inherited from my father and mother [not that I had any recollection of what she looked like]—created this face.”17 He is troubled by this genetic inheritance and wonders what it means for his fate: “I could probably kill him [his father] if I wanted to—I'm definitely strong enough—and I can erase my mother from my memory. But there's no way to erase the DNA they passed down to me. If I want to drive that way I'd have to get rid of me.”18

Kafka struggles with the question of human nature and the potential for violence and destructive sexuality he senses within himself. He wonders how he could destroy these things without destroying himself. This is the significance of the home Kafka finds in the Komura library. He spends his time reading, exploring themes of sexuality and violence through literature in the hope of understanding and defeating the genetic curse he carries within him. As will be discussed in the third section of this essay, this is in stark contrast to the alternating chapters where the old man Nakata is closer to a tabula rasa or blank slate.

This biological view of the human condition has important implications for the kind of struggle Kafka is involved in. While Oshima may suggest the potential

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18 Idem.
for a deeper balancing of opposites, this is challenged at certain points of the narrative by a very different perspective. In particular, what Kafka discovers through his journey through the forest is a void within himself that threatens to destroy him: “Alone in such a dense forest, the person called me feels empty, horribly empty... There’s a void inside me, a blank that’s slowly expanding, devouring what’s left of who I am.”

Kafka’s first thought is to kill himself, the only way he can see for ending his struggle:

If only I could wipe out this me who’s here, right here and right now. I seriously consider it. In this thick wall of trees, on this path that’s not a path, if I stopped breathing, my consciousness would silently be buried in the darkness, every last drop of my dark violent blood dripping out, my DNA rotting among the weeds. Then my battle would be over. Otherwise, I'll be eternally murdering my father, violating my mother, violating my sister, lashing out at the world forever.

This is not the decision Kafka makes though. Rather, he chooses a more heroic path, one that this time is better understood through a Lacanian framework. Lacan’s idea of the hero was very different to the Campbellite/Jungian view described above. Slavoj Žižek explains:

Lacan defines “hero” as the subject who (... like Oedipus for example) fully assumes the consequence of his act, that is to say, who does not step aside when the arrow that he shot makes its full circle and flies back at him – unlike the rest of us who endeavor to realize our desire without paying the price for it...

Lacan rejects Jungian ideals like the potential for psychic wholeness. The void that Kafka discovers was for Lacan the underlying reality of the human condition. The Lacanian ethic is not one of nihilistic surrender to this reality, however, but one of radical responsibility.

It is Ōshima again who first indirectly explains this power of personal responsibility to Kafka. Reading a book about a Nazi war criminal in the cabin by the forest, Kafka finds a note pencilled by Ōshima some time earlier:

It’s all a question of imagination. Our responsibility begins with the power to imagine. It’s just as Yeats said: In dreams begin responsibility. Turn this on its...
head and you could say that where there’s no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise.  

This claim goes against our natural intuitions. Normally, we are inclined to accept responsibility for the things we consciously decide that directly impact on others. Our private thoughts and dreams, on the other hand, we usually exempt from such judgements. Kafka discovers that he has secret dreams or desires to kill his father and sleep with his mother: the classical Oedipal motivations described by Freud. He learns how to cope with these dreams not by running away from them or by sublimating them to some other cause but by embracing them. This is the most radical and potential disturbing aspect of Kafka’s therapeutic path. It is also what makes him a Lacanian hero.

What Kafka comes to realize, in short, is that it is more courageous to embrace his fate than to run from it. As Oshima explains, “Oedipus is drawn into tragedy not because of laziness or stupidity, but because of his courage and honesty.” Kafka’s alter ego, the boy named Crow, later clarifies it for him this way: “If there’s a curse in all this, you mean to grab it by the horns and fulfil the programme 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.”

The true therapeutic breakthrough in Lacanian thought comes in this moment when the patient first takes responsibility for themselves rather than looking to the therapist or to someone or something outside themselves for answers. Put into the language of existentialism, it is the moment when the patient first breaks through their bad faith and embraces the radical freedom that is theirs. This act of confronting one's symptoms directly, embracing them even, and then taking responsibility for them is what Lacan described as the discourse of the analyst. It was the only path he believed where true freedom could be found.

So is this the view we find in Kafka on the Shore. Is Kafka’s determination to take responsibility for his symptoms, to embrace his curse, an expression of a similar philosophy? The answer, I would suggest, is mixed. While Kafka’s determination to follow through with his quest no matter the costs does echo this Lacanian view, it does not entirely undermine the Jungian/Campbellite motifs described above. To understand the therapeutic paradigm operating in Kafka on the Shore, in other words, it is useful to take something from both psychoanalytic theories.

Murakami’s fiction has become noticeably more didactic since 1995, a reflection of his growing sense of responsibility to his young readership post-Aum. This makes it easy to identify the solutions offered to Kafka in the story. As is made clear, there is not one solution but two. Oshima presents the first solution as follows:

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24 Ibid.: 343 and 214.
There are a lot of things that aren’t your fault. Or mine, either. Not the fault of prophesises, or curses, or DNA, or absurdity. Not the fault of Structuralism or the Third Industrial Revolution. We all die and disappear, but that’s because the mechanism of the world itself is built on destruction and loss. Our lives are just shadows of that guiding principle. Say the wind blows. It can be a strong, violent wind or a gentle breeze. But eventually every kind of wind dies out and disappears. Wind doesn’t have form. It’s just a movement of air. You should listen carefully, and then you’ll understand the metaphor.

Reader’s familiar with Murakami’s literary oeuvre will recognise that this advice comes straight from the title of Murakami’s debut novel, *Kaze no uta o kike* (Hear the Wind Sing, 1979). The solution given is essentially stoic. We should resign ourselves to our existential condition: we are like wind that blows to and fro but will eventually die out. No one is to blame; this is simply the way things are. At the same time, thinking about this metaphor offers other possibilities. There are always new winds blowing, changes of direction, and at times a certain exhilaration, or even awe that can be experienced. It is a philosophy with deep roots in the Japanese tradition: it is the ephemeral nature of life that in turns makes it so beautiful and intense.

This is not the only solution offered to Kafka, however. The second piece of advice, offered by the young fifteen-year-old Saeki just before Kafka leaves the forest, is to keep looking at the “Kafka on the Shore” painting that hangs on the wall where he sleeps at the library. The shoreline in this painting represents a liminal space between two worlds, the suggestion being that Kafka will need to continue to straddle both. Yes, he should return to the outer world; he cannot stay in this inner compensatory world forever. But given the harsh realities of the world he is returning to, he may also need to return at times. There is still an underlying belief here that the unconscious can provide answers for how we should live our lives.

This is a deeply romantic view of the role of the unconscious that can also be described as Gnostic in nature: there are answers within if only we know how to find them. Unlike the Gnostic or Jungian traditions though, there is no deeper self to find in Murakami’s schema. In fact, what we discover is a void at the heart of subjectivity. The solutions offered to Kafka, in this way, lie somewhere between the Jungian and Lacanian approaches to the question of meaning. On the one hand, Kafka must learn to live with this void and to accept the radical freedom it offers. He must learn to hear the wind sing. On the other hand, he should remain open to the power of a deeply compensatory unconscious, a source of inner wisdom and healing. The question that remains is whether this is a powerful enough response to stand up to the opposing forces in the novel.

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20 Ibid.: 189 and 361.
Living with the Living Dead: The Return of the Father
While Kafka's inner journey into the forest and the advice that he receives from Ōshima and Saeki is clearly significant for him, it is complicated by the fact that at the same time, Johnnie Walker, a clear symbol of evil in the work, is making the same journey. In the alternating chapters to Kafka's, we are first introduced to Nakata, an old man who has no memories and the magical ability to talk with cats and make strange objects fall from the sky. Nakata is eventually led to the home of Johnnie Walker, forced to witness the murder of some cats, and then manipulated into killing Jonnie Walker himself. Johnnie Walker then makes his own journey into the forest, readying himself to make a return to the world where he believes he can create an even more powerful system. Kafka's alter ego, the boy named Crow, spots Johnnie Walker in the forest and tries to attack him but to no effect. Johnnie Walker explains:

I died at my own bidding, but haven't gone on to the next world. I'm a soul in transition, and a soul in transition is formless. I've merely adopted this form for the time being. That's why you can't hurt me.\(^\text{27}\)

The question this competing narrative raises is how effective Kafka's heroic journey has really been? Yes, he has conquered the fear and anxiety he senses within himself and has also made a conscious decision to return to the world. The world he is returning to though is not the one he left behind. While in his inner world he has sought to deal with his feelings towards the mother, the question remains as to whether he has also somehow killed his father, and if so, what the consequences will be.

The question of whether Kafka has really killed his father is left mysteriously vague. Kafka's biological father, world-renowned sculptor Tamura Koichi, is definitely murdered. Kafka and Ōshima continue to follow the story in the newspaper, and the police continue to try and hunt Kafka down for questioning. Kafka, however, has an alibi; he is in Takamatsu when the murder occurs. The reason this does not completely answer the question of his guilt is that on the night of the murder, he wakes up in a Shinto shrine covered in blood, with an aching left shoulder, and without any memory of how he came to be there. Seeking an explanation, he begins to explore ideas of spirit projection. One of the literary precedents he discovers for this phenomenon is found in *The Tale of Genji*. Ōshima explains:

I don't know about in foreign countries, but that kind of thing appears a lot in Japanese literature. *The Tale of Genji*, for instance, is filled with living spirits. In the Heian period—or at least in its psychological realm—on occasion people

\(^{27}\) Ibid.: 366 and 467.
could become living spirits and travel through space to carry out whatever desires they had.  

Kafka on the Shore, in this way, plays with dualistic ideas in which spirits can leave bodies and carry out acts. The fifteen-year-old ghost of SaeKI is a similar entity in the alternating chapters. One possibility is that Kafka’s spirit has left his body, travelled to Tokyo, entered Nakata, and killed his father, Tamura Kōichi. Johnnie Walker, in this reading, might be seen as the spirit that exists within Kōichi. The novel never makes clear whether such a theory is actually true though. Regardless, the suggestion that Kafka may somehow be directly responsible for his father’s death is an important one, and as has already been suggested, even if all this is just somehow a dream, it is one he must take responsibility for. But what would it mean for Kafka to take responsibility for his father’s death?

One way of thinking about this question is to turn to one of Freud’s competing narratives for understanding the psychological tensions existing between fathers and sons. While the Oedipus complex is perhaps the most famous of Freud’s theories, another important one is found in his book Totem and Taboo. In this alternative narrative, the act of killing the father is not a psychological wish buried deep within the son’s psyche, but an event that has already occurred and which is responsible for introducing a wider symbolic prohibition. He offers the myth of a primal scene in which an alpha male dominated access to a harem of females and banished competitors from the group. Eventually, the sons banded together and killed their father whom they both respected and feared. The guilt that ensued was the bond upon which a new social order was founded and the dead father returned in name to fulfil an important new symbolic function. Thus, while the father is killed, he returns from death even stronger, exactly what Johnnie Walker believes can happen to him.

The main problem Kafka faces then is how he going to live with the living dead. Žižek explains this dilemma as follows:

What characterizes the human universe is the complication in the relationship between the living and the dead: as Freud wrote apropos of the killing of the primordial father, the murdered father returns more powerful than ever in the guise of the “virtual” symbolic authority... The double meaning of the term “spirit” (if we ignore the alcoholic association) - “pure” spirituality and ghosts - is thus structurally necessary: no (pure) spirit without its obscene supplement, ghosts, their spectral pseudo-materiality, the “living dead”. The category of the “undead” is crucial here: those who are not dead, although they are no longer alive, and continue to haunt us. The fundamental problem here is how to prevent the dead from returning, how to put them properly to rest.

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29 Freud 1953: 1-162.
Of course, with Johnnie Walker, we do not even have to ignore the alcoholic association. He is a ghost who is seeking to become some kind of pure spirit of the age who in the meantime has taken on the form of a famous alcoholic icon. The question Kafka faces, however, is the same. How can this dead father figure properly be put to rest?

One possible association here is with the Japanese emperor. During the Meiji restoration and later during the Second World War, the emperor was employed as a potent symbol of power, a symbolic father figure linking Japan with the gods. When the war was lost, the emperor spoke to his subjects for the first time and denied his divinity, and so in a sense the spell was broken. But was it? What was to become of the collective guilt that came from symbolically killing the father (or at least allowing him to be killed through losing the war), and how was Japan to continue to live with the living dead? The Yasukuni shrine controversy in which China and South Korea continue to protest every time a Japanese prime minister visits this shrine, a site where Japanese A class war criminals have been enshrined, demonstrates that this is still a problem in contemporary Japanese society today. As Kafka on the Shore suggests, killing the father it is not necessarily the end. The death of one system simply makes room for a new one, one often more powerful than the first. What this novel suggests is that a new kind of paternal presence, a new spirit of the age, is perhaps trying to take power again in contemporary Japan.

If Johnnie Walker provides the spirit of the age, then the flesh is provided by Colonel Sanders, another figure who has taken on the form of famous capitalist icon, this time the famous founder of the Kentucky Fried Chicken chain. As Nakata and a friendly truck driver named Hoshino make their way to Takamatsu, Hoshino is approached by a figure that, although he appears Japanese, dresses like and is named after the Colonel. Colonel Sanders is clear to explain what he is: “I’m a metaphysical, conceptual object. I can take on any form, but I lack substance. And to perform a real act, I need someone with substance to help out.” For whatever reason, on this occasion, he has chosen to take the shape of a famous capitalist icon. He is there to help Nakata and Hoshino find the entrance stone that can mysteriously open up a pathway between this world and another. Before he does this though, he offers Hoshino one of the most amazing sexual experiences he has ever had. Colonel Sanders is also a pimp, and he organizes a prostitute for Hoshino at a very reasonable price. It is only then that he tells him where the entrance stone lies.

Hoshino later wonders whether there is some connection between Colonel Sanders and Johnnie Walker. There are certainly similarities with their bizarre names and unusual natures. But what could this connection be? One possibility is that they are both manifestations of the power systems of the day. Johnnie Walker is a harsh father figure who is trying to build a powerful system and asks to be

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32 Ibid: 96 and 305.
33 Ibid.: 204 and 369.
killed so that he can come back stronger. He is loosely associated with the resurgence of paternalistic ideologies in contemporary Japan. Colonel Sanders, on the other hand, represents the late-capitalist injunction to enjoy. While the Freudian superego is usually thought of as an oppressive agent of prohibition, Žižek persuasively argues for the transformation it has gone through in late-capitalist societies. According to Žižek, in such societies, the superego “marks a point at which permitted enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into obligation to enjoy.”

It is perhaps interesting to recognize the ubiquitous presence Colonel Sanders has in Japan where he is often exhibited as a plastic model outside of Kentucky Fried Chicken stores. He is smiling and welcoming us in, literally inviting us to enjoy. If Johnnie Walker represents the spirit of the age, then Colonel Sanders provides the meat, the invitation to consume that keeps things going. At the very least, it is difficult to see him as completely benign.

What makes Johnnie Walker’s comeback possible is the existence of Nakata, a figure described at one point as “[t]he proverbial blank slate.” It is this lack of substance that makes him so vulnerable. As Nakata explains, “It’s not just that I’m dumb. Nakata’s empty inside. I finally understand that. Nakata’s like a library without a single book.” Part of what Nakata represents, I would argue, is the inter-generational nature of Kafka’s psychological difficulties.

Nakata’s condition is the consequence of a childhood trauma he suffered at the hands of his elementary school teacher. When this teacher’s period had started unexpectedly on a school excursion, she had improvised with a towel, but when Nakata later turned up with the blood stained towel that had been discarded in the woods, she exploded. She began to beat him with all the other children looking on. The entire group had then fallen into a coma, later to miraculously recover but without any memory of this event. Nakata stayed in a coma longer than the other children, and when he finally recovered, had lost not only memories of this event but all other memories as well. Nakata thus offers a stark contrast to Kafka who lives in a library and is trying to fill himself with as much knowledge as possible.

So what is the connection between Nakata’s forgetting and Kafka’s learning? One way of thinking about this is in terms of the inter-generational conflicts that some experts have identified in post-war Japanese society. Looking at the increase in Japan’s young hikikomori (social recluses) and the increasingly violent outbursts of some young people, for example, child psychologist Watanabe Hisako provocatively argues that to some degree this can be understood as a consequence of one generation’s need for repression following the Second World War. Writing about his interview with Watanabe, journalist Michael Zielenziger explains:

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35 Murakami has said in an interview that he did not find Colonel Sanders an evil character. At best, he found him ambiguous. (Interview with Murakami 22/11/05)
For a new generation of young Japanese who have never known war, trauma is reproduced through what Watanabe describes as “transgenerational transmission of oppression,” especially among elite families. “They have totally sacrificed the happiness of their own offspring and made their children their sacrifice to the gods, for Japan, to a god named Japan.”

Zielenziger elaborates on the trauma that was experienced by soldiers who returned from the war and who tried to find redemption in creating a certain kind of family:

Japan’s soldiers returned home deeply traumatized, yet a rigidly disciplined society demanded utter self-denial. Men dared not express their horror and shame over the atrocities they committed, whether in the massacre of civilians in Nanjing, China, or with the forced induction of “comfort women” as sex slaves. To compensate, these veterans grew determined never to be traumatized again and so created meticulous, fussy households, often neurotic environments, in which their children were expected to be scrupulous and always vigilant. “This process created very good, maybe ‘perfect’ children, but at the cost of their own individuality,” Watanabe said. “They were not allowed to explore, to try or to fail, to have the experience of trial and error. They became good children, the sort of child of whom the traumatized parent could say, ‘Oh look, I succeeded. I made a new version of success to mitigate my traumatic experience’ — a Golden Egg.”

This theme is arguably one that has particular relevance to Murakami. Generally, Murakami talks little about his own childhood experiences and particularly about his relationship with his parents. In one notable exception though, he spoke with Ian Buruma about his experience with what might be described as his own transgenerational trauma. According to Buruma, Murakami’s father fought in China, and, as a child, Murakami vaguely remembers him sharing something shocking about his wartime experience there. As Murakami uncharacteristically acknowledged to Buruma, he has little desire to talk with his father about such matters: “It must be a trauma for him. So it’s a trauma for me as well.” Ambiguity about China and the Chinese has continued to be an important theme running through his work.

Nakata, of course, is not Kafka’s father. He does belong to the same generation, however, and it his loss of memory, his inability to remember anything about the war and to pass it on to future generations that makes him of little help to Kafka. He finds the entrance stone and opens up a way for Kafka to make his inner journey, but he does this for Johnnie Walker, not for Kafka. In particular, it is
his lack of any kind of historical consciousness that makes him so vulnerable. Nakata explains his situation in this way:

Johnnie Walker went inside Nakata. He made me do things I didn’t want to. Johnnie Walker used me, but I didn’t have the strength to fight it. Because I don’t have anything inside me.41

While Nakata’s experiences are clearly exceptional, and while he did not choose to forget, his forgetting has made him susceptible to manipulation. This in turn has important consequences for the next generation.

Consequently, at the end of the novel, the question of how optimistic we should be about Kafka’s future remains unclear. Perhaps he has become the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world, and perhaps he is entering a brand new world. The challenges he faces though seem almost insurmountable. Nakata and Hoshino have made his journey possible by opening and then closing again the passageway to another world. By doing this, however, they have also aided the return of Johnnie Walker. The question Kafka faces is how he is going to learn to live with the living dead. How, in other words, is he going to respond to the return of this paternalistic presence. There is no answer offered to this question at the end of the novel. This, indeed, is where the limits of Kafka’s psychological journey become most evident. Kafka has made a heroic journey within and has found the power to forgive his mother. A new kind of father figure, however, is also returning with him, one who is trying to build an even more powerful and comprehensive system.

Conclusion

Does this then mean that Murakami’s critics are right? Is Kafka on the Shore nothing more than a therapeutic work that fails to address the central questions it raises about violence and commitment in contemporary Japan? In section one, I tried to demonstrate the significance of these therapeutic themes by putting the work into the larger cultural milieu of its production, while in section two, I tried to show that the therapeutic paradigm evident in this work is more complex and interesting than quick dismissals of critics might suggest. As the third section of this essay demonstrates, however, there are competing themes in this work, and a very ominous suggestion that perhaps Kafka’s journey, despite its significance for the individual, has been all for nothing.

Murakami is aware of the kinds of criticisms directed at his recent work and the claim that he is still failing to provide a sufficient model of commitment. He argues, however, for a different understanding of what it might mean for a writer to be socially committed in the world today:

The “commitment to society” I talk about is not limited to things like concrete political participation. As a writer, creating stories that organically fit into the

framework of society and actually function is one important shape social commitment takes. I think it's possible to be personal and social at the same time. I feel that one of the things asked of us as fiction writers is to offer narrativity [物語性 monogatarisei] that contains different values and that can resist the fascinating but dangerous narrativity [monogatarisei] offered by someone like Asahara.42

When one considers the destructive acts carried out by Aum and the violent outbursts of pressured young people in Japan, it is possible to see the relevance of Murakami’s argument above. And yet, *Kafka on the Shore* is also a work that demonstrates the limits of this approach. Whatever gains Kafka makes are outweighed by the grander schemes of Johnnie Walker. It is this tension in the end that makes this novel so rewarding for some and so disappointing for others. The appropriate response, however, probably avoids either extreme. This novel is not Murakami’s final word on the questions of violence or commitment. It is part of an ongoing project and shows Murakami’s testing the possibilities and limitations of a therapeutic approach to these questions. There is room left at the end of *Kafka on the Shore* for praising the power of the psychological journey of the individual, lamenting the impotence of this journey against the backdrop of a transitioning system of power, and hoping that perhaps this inner victory will eventually lead to some kind of outer engagement.

42 Murakami 2003: 32.

**GLOSSARY**

| Asahara Shōkō        | 麻原彰晃 | Monogatarisei | 物語性 |
| Aum Shinrikyō        | アウム真理教 |
| Furiță              | フリーター |
| Genji Monogatari    | 源氏物語 |
| Heteji Jidai        | 平安時代 |
| Kami no kodomotachi wa mina odoru | 神の子どもたちはみな踊る |
| Karatani Kōjin      | 栃谷行人 |
| Kato Norihiro       | 加藤典洋 |
| Kawai Hayao         | 河合隼雄 |
| Kaze no uta o kike  | 風の歌を聴け |
| Komori Yōichi       | 小森陽一 |
| Kuroko Kazuo        | 黒古一夫 |
| Komura kinen toshikan | 甲村記念図書館 |
| Hikikomori          | 引きこもり |
| Murakami Haruki     | 村上春樹 |
| Ōe Kenzabuño        | 大江健三郎 |
| Sekai no owari to Hādōbori dōdo | 世界の終わりとハードボイルド |
| Wandarando          | ワンダーランド |
| Shikoku             | 四国 |
| Shiniō              | 神道 |
| Shōnen              | 少年 |
| Takamatsu           | 高松 |
| Umibe no Kafuka     | 海辺のカフェ |
| Yasukuni Jinja      | 靖国神社 |
| Yoshimoto Banana    | 吉本ばなな |
| Yutori Kyōiku       | ゆとり教育 |
REFERENCES


