

English Literature in Lockdown

Haruki Murakami and his influences
By Rhiannon C, Year 11



***“There’s no such thing as perfect writing,
just like there’s no such thing as perfect despair.”
Hear the wind sing’ - published 1973***

Haruki Murakami

Haruki Murakami writes with a lyrical style and uses dream-like imagery. His work is often heavy with metaphors and he uses unusual characters and scenes to express his ideas about the world. As his writing is so unique, it can be hard to categorise it, however he writes mostly within the fantasy genre - blurring the line between reality and fantasy. It often leaves the reader questioning whether it is meant to be fantasy, or whether it is all metaphor, or perhaps a figment of the character’s imagination. His protagonists often are described as feeling lost, or unhappy with their position in the world - the novel exploring their emotions and path to figuring out where they belong. His plots tend to be quite explorative, with characters journeying to find answers and new experiences. An example of one of his books, in which the protagonist goes on an adventure, figuring out new things about himself and about life, is ‘Kafka on the shore’.

‘Kafka on the shore’ is an intriguing and unique tale that takes us on the wild adventures of ‘Kafka’ as he runs away from what he believes to be his father’s deadly prophecy. It grapples with various fascinating concepts such as mental health, insomnia and fate. The plot is at times confusing, but Murakami’s awe-inspiring descriptions and fantastic use of metaphor throughout the novel makes up for it. It also follows the journey of Nakata, a man who can talk to cats, as he follows his destiny and in trying to work out who is responsible for the recent increase in missing cats.

The way he has lived his life clearly impacts his writing style. His main influences include: music, cats and travel. Jazz music has played a particularly large role in his life. He ran a jazz club in Tokyo, called ‘Peter cat’. His writing is fluid like music, and rather lyrical - Murakami claims to listen to music while he writes, and the theme of music often shows up in his novels. As someone with many cats in his neighbourhood, and someone who grew up in Japan (where they are believed to symbolise fate and luck), cats often are a theme in his books. In “Kafka on the shore” this particularly shows - with ‘Nakata’ communicating with them throughout the story. In regards to travel, Murakami has lived in Japan, the US, Greece and Hawaii, and visited even more countries. His writing has had influence from a variety of cultures - Murakami himself believes that his writing cannot be associated with a single country or culture, as a result of this. At the same time however, all his books are set in Japan, with Japanese characters.

Murakami was influenced by various other authors such as: Kurt Vonnegut, Franz Kafka, Kazuo Ishiguro and Raymond Chandler. Raymond Chandler was an American detective fiction writer, who Murakami at one point translated for. As he is good at both writing in both Japanese and English, Murakami sometimes checks the English translations for his books before they are published, to ensure that his style is still present. The murder mystery genre also had an impact on his writing. In ‘Kafka on the shore’ this shows throughout, with ‘Kafka’ questioning whether he was committing all the crimes happening around him, and ‘Nakata’ trying to figure out where all the cats are going. He likes to reference other things in his books, to give a sense of the world in his writing being a part of a larger thing.

Haruki Murakami makes several references to Franz Kafka’s work in his writing. In ‘Kafka on the shore’, firstly there is the main protagonist’s name ‘Kafka’. The boy adopts the name when he runs away from home. Murakami also talks about Franz Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’, and within the novel there are some deliberate similarities to Kafka’s tale. ‘The metamorphosis’ is about a man who one day wakes up to find out he has turned into a giant insect. It follows his new life in this form, and how his treatment from others changes as a result of his physical body changing. His family, who once loved and cared for him, find themselves hating and fearing him. They believe the man they knew is gone, however the reader is aware that this is not entirely the case as the book is told from his perspective. In Murakami’s story, while ‘Kafka’ has not changed species, he is a growing boy and running away to a new life, with his new name. Murakami appears to have put his own twist on Franz Kafka’s ideas, perhaps in homage to the author, as he is one of his favourites. It plays on the concept of feeling unfamiliar in your own body.

Later on in Murakami’s novel, a character comes out as transgender, which also ties in with this theme. Apparently, ‘Kafka on the shore’ was also heavily influenced by the Oedipus myth as well as other sources.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/the-underground-worlds-of-haruki-murakami>

² <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4000-4366-8>

³ <https://medium.com/@jeremylimn/kafka-on-the-shore-book-review-f4248b2902d7>

⁴ <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/the-global-appeal-of-haruki-murakami>

⁴ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/04/28/national/novelist-murakami-likens-translating-hobby/>

⁵ <https://lithub.com/the-murakami-effect/>

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'Oedipus Rex' is a Greek myth that tells the story of the king of Thebes who killed his father and married his mother, unaware of who they were. His mother later kills herself, finding out that he was her son. It is this tale that ties into 'Kafka on the shore', with the character of 'Kafka' falling in love with the younger version of the woman he believes to potentially be his mother. There is also the same sense of a dreadful prophecy, which 'Kafka' tries and fails to escape.

Murakami, as a modern Japanese author, has possibly also been influenced by traditional Japanese literature. His parents taught Japanese literature, and his grandfather was a Buddhist monk. While Murakami's work is far from traditional, there could be some influence from this part of his life and his home country's culture. Traditional literature focused around mythology, folklore, the gods and spirits. It also focused on warriors, and was heavily influenced by Chinese literature. Haruki Murakami's books often have a sense of fate, and some of the supernatural elements of his work could be comparable to earlier Japanese styles. References to nature were also very popular, and this is seen in Murakami's books. In 'Kafka on the shore', he compares fate to a 'storm' that follows us wherever we go, and is a part of us - 'it is you'. While there isn't necessarily mention of 'warriors', the author likes to talk about the events of World War Two and its impacts on people. He has used soldiers as characters in his work.

Elements of traditional Japanese literature can still be found in modern literature nowadays as a result of the events from 1853-1912, where the newly formed Meiji state brought back Japanese classics and old texts as propaganda. In early Meiji Japan, there were many new changes. Nationalism was introduced, there was a new newspaper industry and state run schools began to provide compulsory education. While this was arguably the beginning of more modern Japanese literature, with influence from the West coming in through the newly opened trading ports, there were increased efforts to rediscover traditional classical literature. People began to bring back traditional Japanese literature and poetry in order to make the country appear prouder and richer in culture. It was perhaps this time that made modern and traditional Japanese literature start to combine, with people taking on styles from other countries and mixing them with the style of the classics which were coming back. The early Meiji period was all about promoting loyalty to the emperor and the Meiji state, and by reviving Japan's history, he made people's support for him strengthen.

In his work, his Western influence is cleverly combined with these traditional Japanese themes. Murakami reads a lot of Western literature. In his work he makes references to Western food, music and literature. He combines this with Japanese characters, ideologies and other themes. He sometimes mentions real events, such as the 1955 Tokyo gas attacks - in his novel 'Underground'.

Haruki Murakami's main influence is arguably the influence of the West. He struggled to relate to most Japanese literature growing up, which lead to him reading a great range of Western literature. He was also very much interested by Western culture, being a big fan of American jazz music. Most Japanese readers weren't a fan of one of his earlier novels, which he wrote abroad, however he gained a huge following in the Western countries. While Murakami was still later very much renowned in Japan as an author, he was determined to continue living a normal life. In Japan, famous authors are often treated as celebrities, so at times Murakami would move away to live abroad to escape this different lifestyle. This all lead to his work being influenced by Western culture, even if Japanese culture still plays a great part in his style.

⁶ http://www.harukimurakami.com/q_and_a/questions-for-haruki-murakami-about-kafka-on-the-shore/

⁷ https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=11&ved=2ahUKEwln9SBqsPpAhWSunEKHcgwC8AQFjAKegQIAhAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FJapanese_literature&usq=AOvYaw1m5CbDeWfurW87nsVnQpJ6

⁸ <https://www.massolit.io/courses/japan-1853-1912> [Andrew Cobbing]

⁹ <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/japan/articles/japan-caught-between-cultures/>