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Giselle Carter

Being the Other Woman: Watanabe's Unrequited Love for
Naoko in *Norwegian Wood*

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Short Analytical Essay

Throughout many novels, a protagonist is given a love interest. Throughout many love stories, this connection leads to a happy ending. Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood*, however, is not one that conforms to the literary norm. *Norwegian Wood* is a tale of death, grief, love, and self-exploration. The death of Kizuki, a best friend to one and a lover to another, leaves protagonist Toru Watanabe and his friend Naoko on the brink of emotional stability. Kizuki's death made their worlds dark, but it also revealed feelings and bonds that were not seen before. This would typically be where the love story blooms, instead the opposite occurs. Death does not bring about a romance, but instead the tension of one. Average, good guy Watanabe does not "get the girl," Naoko, because he would be left with nothing to chase in his life. Naoko is meant to be more than a friend but less than a lover for Watanabe because she has the power to make him reach self-actualization and feel whole in his identity. There is a term for this: the Other. I argue that for Watanabe, Naoko—specifically a romantic love from her—is his Other; however, being his Other, Naoko is inevitably unattainable.

Before delving further into *Norwegian Wood* itself, my interpretation of "Other" in relation to Watanabe needs to be clarified. The concept of the Other coexists with another concept, "desire;" without one, the other would not make sense. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan defines desire as the "longing for self-completion" (Mansfield 45). The scholar of Cultural Studies at Macquarie University Nick Mansfield explains, describing Lacan's theory, "At the heart of its [the subject's] very being is a sense of *lack*. It endlessly seeks to compensate for this lack, to fill the hole at its core" (45). The Other, in relation to desire, is the object that would fulfil the subject's desire, and is the one thing that the subject needs to fully realize their identity and feel whole. This is only attainable in theory, according to Jacques Lacan as the "mechanism is 'insatiable' because the real object of desire, the unconscious Other, is inaccessible to the self

[subject], and therefore various substitutes, grounded in linguistic connections (one might think of this in terms of psychological metaphors), must be created” (“Magical” 272). In other words, the object that is supposed to provide complete meaning to one’s life does not actually exist, and is not supposed to. Because it does not exist, though many are not aware of this, people are meant to live their lives in hopes of ending the chase of the object of their desires in order to reach self-actualization.

Japanese literature professor Matthew C. Strecher notes that “the lack of everyday human interaction . . . is precisely what Murakami highlights in his literature . . . Murakami’s protagonists try to solve this dilemma first by seeking the Other within themselves, with predictably unsatisfactory results, and more recently seek a similar solution through their efforts to reach out to others” (“Magical” 295). Watanabe definitely fits in this category. Characterized through the contrast between himself and other characters in the novel with distinct personalities, Toru Watanabe is the average, everyday loner. His attempt to reach out to others ends up in sexual situations for the most part: the sexually dense conversations between Watanabe and Nagasawa and engaging in actual sexual intercourse with Naoko, Reiko, and other random girls. This is an indication of his incapability of connecting with others on a personal level. For Watanabe, nobody will be as important as Naoko was. This is the reason Watanabe loses his wits when he thinks Naoko is never going to communicate with him again. This is the reason he dropped everything, including his bond with Midori at the time, for Naoko when she invites him to see her at the sanatorium.

Watanabe and Naoko are far from a simple pair; their relationship is complicated due to Naoko suffering from an illness that prevented her from “engaging in sexual intercourse” (“Beyond” 367). While it is apparently significant that Naoko, a woman with psychological

problems stemming from the suicides of her sister and boyfriend, opens up to Watanabe, she does not love him romantically. For one thing, after the first time they had sex, Naoko continued to have problems getting aroused enough to do it again. However, she definitely appreciates what he does for her, which is expressed in the letters she writes to him:

I've thought a lot about you in that time. The more I've thought, the more I've come to feel that I was unfair to you. I probably should have been a better, fairer person when it came to the way I treated you . . . I believe that I have not been fair to you and that, as a result, I must have led you around in circles and hurt you deeply . . . My doctor says it's time I began having contact with 'outside people— meaning normal people in the normal world. When he says that, the only face I see is yours . . . Please come and see me sometime when it's convenient for you. I look forward to seeing you. (Murakami 85-86; 88-89)

Watanabe and Naoko's relationship, on the romantic end, is one-sided. He is obsessed with Naoko. He is clearly infatuated with her when he visits her at the sanatorium and falls asleep:

With Naoko gone, I went to sleep on the sofa. I hadn't intended to do so, but I fell into the kind of deep sleep I had not had for a long time, filled with a sense of Naoko's presence. In the kitchen were the dishes Naoko ate from, in the bathroom was the toothbrush Naoko used, and in the bedroom was the bed in which Naoko slept. Sleeping soundly in this apartment of hers, I wrung the fatigue from every cell of my body, drop by drop. I dreamed of a butterfly dancing in the half-light. (Murakami 104)

This scene captures how captivated by Naoko Watanabe is. He does not even need her to be around for him to be at such peace; he only needs the thought of her. For him, "[h]olding her, I

felt warm in the chest” (Murakami 104). Naoko, on the other hand, is still happily in love with Kizuki and makes it clear that her feelings would not waver in the following quote:

The pain of growing up. We didn't pay when we should have, so now the bills are due. Which is why Kizuki did what he did, and why I'm in here. We were like kids who grew up naked on a desert island. If we got hungry, we'd just pick up a banana; if we got lonely we'd go to sleep in each other's arms. But that kind of thing doesn't last forever. We grew up fast and had to enter society. Which is why you were so important to us. You were the link connecting us with the outside world. We were struggling through you to fit in with the outside world as best we could. In the end, it didn't work, of course . . . And just as Kizuki loved you, I love you. We never meant to hurt you, but we probably did; we probably ended up making a deep wound in your heart. It never occurred to us that anything like that might happen. (128-29)

Naoko's description of her and Kizuki's love is formed in a way that showcases how natural and *perfect* their bond was. There is nothing that would break their bond, and even after Kizuki's death, the love from Naoko fails to falter. In light of this, Naoko was disheartened by the idea of her and Kizuki using Watanabe instead of truly appreciating him as a friend. Her feelings towards Watanabe are closely tied to her connection to Kizuki, as seen through her usage of “we” and “us” throughout her speech. The emphasis of romantic love for Kizuki, and lack of romantic love for Watanabe, further showcases how a romantic love for Watanabe from Naoko does not exist, leaving Watanabe to remain, chasing the idea of her love.

Naoko's disinterest in a romantic love with Watanabe is also emphasized as she states, “I wanted you to hold me. I wanted you . . . I had never felt like that before. Why is that? Why do

things happen that way? I mean, I really loved him [Kizuki]” (112). Her questions come off as regretful; she wanted to give her all to Kizuki but was unable, so her being able to give her physical self to Watanabe even though she loved Kizuki with all of her heart was unnerving to her. Watanabe’s response, “You want to know why you felt that way about me even though you didn’t love me,” shows his realization of Naoko not loving him like she loves Kizuki (112). The tone of his response comes off as listless, the sound of a heartbreak coming into fruition. He is definitely aware by now that Naoko will not love him like she loved Kizuki. Regardless of this, Watanabe continues to pursue that love because, as stated before, he subconsciously believed Naoko is his Other, the one who would complete his existence.

Taking a walk alone after Naoko became emotional from that conversation, Watanabe “went on watching it [the faint light in Naoko’s window] the way Jay Gatsby watched that tiny light on the opposite shore night after night,” with an unbearing amount of adoration and sadness (113). Protagonist Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* chases after an unrequited love, Daisy Buchanan, up to his death. The connection made between the texts in this moment highlights the hopeless infatuation that Watanabe is feeling for Naoko, as well as the fact that Naoko is not reciprocating his affection. Watanabe is aware that Naoko does not love him, yet still wishes to pursue her.

While some readers may interpret the relationship between Watanabe and Midori as Watanabe truly being in love with Midori and no longer pursuing Naoko, I argue that Midori, Reiko, and the random women he had relations with, are only emotional and physical substitutes for Naoko. This also falls into another theory from Lacan, the substitute object for the Other. According to Mansfield, “Each small transitory object that we mistake for the Other is called an *objet petit a* . . . This refers to another sort of other, an other so inconsequential it is not to be

written with a capital letter” (Mansfield 46). The random women and Midori were “mere substitutes for the huge and miraculous Other hovering on the horizon of human possibility” and the Other is Naoko (47). Watanabe had sex with Reiko, as well, but this does not make up for the void left within Watanabe. Strecher explains Reiko’s connection to Watanabe, “Murakami makes it clear that, for the time being, at least, the narrator’s attraction to her will not be physical, but fraternal and emotional in nature” (“Beyond” 369). The sex that was had between Reiko and Watanabe was not romantically fueled. The moment between the pair was an opportunity to reflect on their lives and change for the better. I thought that Kizuki would have been Watanabe’s Other, at first, too. However, Kizuki existed, and Watanabe was able to survive his death and grow up since Kizuki could not. Through the questioning of Reiko, Watanabe opens up to his supposed motivation for being with random women: “Here I was, seeing you almost every week, and talking with you, and knowing that the only one in your heart was Kizuki. It hurt. It really hurt. And I think that’s why I slept with girls I didn’t know” (Murakami 111). Watanabe is aware of him feeling lonely without Naoko around, and thus engaged in sexual intercourse with strangers in hopes to compensate for that what he felt he was missing without her.

The novel concludes with Watanabe asking, “Where was I now? I had no idea. No idea at all. Where was this place?” as he “[calls] out for Midori from the dead centre of this place that was no place” (Murakami 293). Earlier in the novel, Watanabe tells Reiko how if he is unable to learn how to love Naoko, he will end up lost in life. This parallel illustrates that he only had structure in his life while Naoko was alive. Even if she never loved him to the same extent as he loved her, just her presence would suffice. The novel itself is made along the lines of Watanabe remembering Naoko, just like she asked him to, as he retells their story. He does this even

though “[t]he thought fills me [Watanabe] with an almost unbearable sorrow. Because Naoko never loved me [him]” (Murakami 10). And as Watanabe recalls his thoughts of Naoko as he says, “Maybe it felt that way because I had thought about it so often . . . to the point where it had distorted my sense of time,” I believe that his conviction to infatuation with Naoko distorted his sense of self (107).

[T]hinking about the beautiful girl walking next to me . . . thinking about the two of us together, and then about myself again. It was the age, that time of life when every sight, every feeling, ever thought came back, like a boomerang, to me. And worse, I was in love. Love with complications. (4)

At 38 years old, almost two decades later, Watanabe is fully aware of his unrequited affection for Naoko. The “complications” in the love he felt boil down to one thing: Naoko not reciprocating Watanabe’s feelings. He needs Naoko more than Naoko does him, and that sticks with him through the entirety of the novel.

As a 20 year-old, Toru Watanabe questions the idea of love, saying he is not “really sure what it means to love another person” (Murakami 115). Naoko loved him “a little differently,” yet he continues his pursuit of a romantic connection with her because if he does not, he would be lost, unaware of where he was going to end up in life (115). Although he knows Naoko does not love him, and never will, Watanabe makes himself remember Naoko, and will “always remember” not only because “I [Naoko] want you always to remember me,” but also because his feeling of self-fulfillment is correlated to his attachment to her. This seemingly forced memory of Naoko maintains her existence for him, maintaining his sense of self.

Toru Watanabe is a lost man, left without his lover. With a never-ending void in his sense of self to fill, Watanabe travels. Without Naoko to fill the void in his reality, he will always be

lost. Almost 40 years old, Watanabe is traveling alone, his plane taking flight. He will always be alone without her to hold him together.

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