

Depths of the human psyche in kafka on the shore

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Kafka on the Shore is a novel written by the Japanese author Haruki Murakami, and translated into English by Phillip Gabriel. Originally published by Shinchosa, the English translation of Murakami's work is published in the United States by Vintage Books. This book delves into the depths of the human psyche, attempts to define the limits between dreams and reality, and deals heavily with the concept of fate. Kafka on the Shore is set in approximately 1995 and simultaneously tells the story of a young man who decides to run away from his home in the Nakano Ward of Tokyo, and the story of an elderly gentleman named Satoru.

The odd numbered chapters tell the story of the young man who on the night before/morning of his fifteenth birthday takes on the assumed name Kafka Tamura and boards a bus heading from Tokyo to Takamatsu in the Shikoku region of Japan. He runs away from home in an attempt to challenge fate and escape the prophecy made by his father that he would one day murder his father and be with his mother and sister. Having always loved libraries, in Takamatsu Kafka is drawn to the Komura Memorial Library, where he spends the majority of his time reading Burton's translation of The Arabian Nights, and the complete works of Natsume Soseki. He grows to be close friends with a man named Oshima who works at the library. Kafka himself comes to work in the library, living out of a vacant room in the back of the building. He develops strong feelings of love for the mysterious Miss Saeki who runs the library (and who may or may not be his mother), and he develops a friendship with a young woman named Sakura (who may or may not be his sister). But Kafka's new life is threatened when he and an old man whom he has never met are wanted in connection with the murder of his father.

Ultimately, Kafka's attempted escape from his home life fails and he returns to a life in Tokyo.

The even numbered chapters tell the story of Satoru Nakata, a man who is on a mission to find a lost cat. On November 7th of 1994, when he was nine-years-old, Nakata as well as the rest of his classmates fell unconscious for an unknown reason. The other students regained consciousness after a few hours, Nakata however, remained in that state for three weeks. Upon waking up he had lost the majority of his memories, the ability to do simple math, the ability to read and write, the ability to think abstractly, and his shadow had somehow become only half as dark as it had once been. He had become "dumb." As a result of the accident he did however discover a new ability. He could talk to cats.

Now an old man, Nakata lives in the Nakano Ward of Tokyo in an apartment owned by his brother. He receives a subsidy from the governor of Tokyo and to supplement his "sub city," he makes extra money finding lost cats for the people of the Nakano Ward. During the course of his latest assignment, he runs across "the infamous cat-killer Johnnie Walker" (Murakami 140), who extracts the souls of cats with the intention of making the souls into a flute. Wanting to die, but claiming that he is unable to kill himself, Johnnie Walker (who may in actuality be Kafka's father) goads Nakata into killing him. Killing Johnnie Walker sets into motion a series of events that lead Nakata to Takamatsu, and the Komura Memorial Library.

The name of the novel, Kafka on the Shore, is a reference to a song written by Miss Saeki about her lost love, as well as a reference to the painting on

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which the song lyrics are based upon. Both of which share the same title as the novel. Of course the title of the book also references one of the protagonists of the story; namely, Kafka Tamura. The title takes on a symbolic meaning as well. Just as if he were sitting at the edge of the shore, throughout the novel Kafka Tamura is metaphorically at the edge of reality. In this case, I believe that the ocean represents the reality that Kafka is trying to run from, while the sand is representative of the dream world that he so desperately wants to be a part of. By running away from home, Kafka has managed to become seated on the edge of the sand, but if he's not careful, the tide could snatch him back up, and his life on the sand could meet a tragic end. While Kafka is seeking an escape from his everyday life (the true world), Nakata attempts to escape the dream world in which he has been trapped in since age nine, and become a "normal Nakata" (Murakami 408).

In the beginning of the story, Nakata is depicted as the personification of Daoist ideals. Being unable read, write, or process abstract information, he is kept in blissful ignorance of the world. He couldn't tell time, nor did he know the days of the week. He lived in a dream world where cats talk and time stands still. He spent his days doing what came natural to him, talking to cats and helping them find their ways back home. He never felt lonely, angry, or worried. His life was "safe and content" (Murakami 215). This way of life ended after his encounter with Johnnie Walker.

After stabbing the cat-killer to death, something comes over Nakata, as if he suddenly became able to interpret his fate. He realized that he had to leave

the safety of the Nakano Ward and head west, on his journey he is assisted by a man named Hoshino who bonds with the slightly odd elderly man. After the pair ends up in Takamatsu, it becomes obvious to the reader that Nakata is beginning to change. Upon visiting a library, Nakata begins to express the desire to become a “ normal Nakata.” That is, he wants to escape the dream world, the sand, and return to the world that he was a part of before his accident. Near the end of his journey, Nakata demonstrates knowledge of the days of the week. Something that he never would have been able to/need to do, prior to his encounter with Johnnie Walker.

Johnnie Walker, the man who triggered Nakata’s journey (and very well may have been the man who made the Oedipus-style prophecy about Kafka) symbolizes the concept of fate. It is because of him that both protagonists of the story begin their journeys. And it is him that they are trying to escape. In combination with the police force that pursues Kafka and Nakata and represents the idea that one is unable to escape one’s fate, Johnnie Walker conveys the overall theme that is present throughout the novel. I believe this theme is best communicated through the words “ man doesn’t choose fate. Fate chooses man” (p. 199).

Kafka’s mother and sister (or at the very least, the characters that represent them) are symbolic of two distinct worlds. Miss Saeki represents the dream world. In Kafka’s room of the library every night, her living ghost appears before him. It is this form of Miss Saeki that Kafka falls in love with. He wants more than anything to be with her. He wants to escape from his current world into hers. On the night when the entrance to the other world is

opened, Kafka has his first sexual encounter with her. She quite literally opens up to him and allows passage into her world.

The character of Sakura (the girl who may be Kafka's sister) on the other hand, represents the world Kafka hopes to escape. She warns Kafka about dealing with people who are not grounded in reality (Miss Saeki). The night before Kafka abandons this world and passes into Miss Saeki's world, he dreams of Sakura. In this dream he is contemplating raping her. Sakura warns that should he proceed, that would be the end of their relationship, he proceeds. This dream signified a break from the waking world. Kafka had finally escaped from what he had been running from. However, after going to the world that he had longed for throughout the course of the novel, as if drawn back by fate, Kafka returns to his original reality. After returning, he decides to resume his life back in Tokyo, but before he does so, he calls Sakura. This is the reconnect between Kafka and his original world.

Blood carries a heavy weight in this novel. When characters bleed it is a representation of their evil, their sins. For example when Nakata stabs Johnnie Walker, a pool of blood quickly envelops him. Nakata and the scene of the crime are drenched in the dead man's blood. It is as if upon his death, all of the evil leaves his body and contaminates all that it touches. This could be an augmentation of the traditional Heian belief that blood was unclean.

The odd numbered chapters, Kafka's chapters, are narrated from the first person point of view. Kafka meticulously notes times, places, and descriptions. The majority of the story reads as if one is reading a diary. The even numbered chapters, Nakata's chapters are usually told from the

omniscient point of view, but at times are told from multiple points of view. This style of writing, coupled with the numerous pop culture and historical references (Beethoven, Tolstoy, Colonel Sanders, Simon and Garfunkel, etc.) and the fact that the true name of the young protagonist is never given draws readers into the story. It is as if the reader is part of the story, experiencing the same things that Kafka experiences. And yet, at the same time the reader is merely looking through a window at what is happening. The reader is fated to shift between these two worlds, just like the protagonists of the story.