

She once had me:
the significance of the
women in norwegian
wood



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The people in one's life are often more important in shaping one's future than the choices of that individual themselves. In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, the protagonist, Toru Watanabe, encounters various women who influence him and alter his outlook on life as he progresses through his relationship with his girlfriend, Naoko. Naoko herself is a reminder of adolescence and death to Watanabe; her mental instability is a reminder of the suicide of his best friend and therefore, he can only associate her with his past. Hatsumi, the girlfriend of Watanabe's profitable dorm mate, is an image of what Watanabe believes he wants in adulthood; she lives a comfortable and well-adjusted life, but she is disillusioned with her boyfriend's frivolous behavior despite living with profit and prosperity. Reiko, Naoko's caretaker, is a reflection of what Watanabe can be; she proves that even those with broken lives can heal after she accepts her own failures and losses. Finally, Midori, who Watanabe eventually falls in love with, represents his future; she has cast off all regrets from her past and lives solely for every passing moment. The women in *Norwegian Wood* each represent a different time in Watanabe's life and shape his transition from adolescence to adulthood; under their influence, Watanabe eventually learns how to cut ties with his past and look towards his future.

Naoko remains as a part of Watanabe's past; she becomes a living ghost, acting as an emotional weight on his shoulders and haunting his memories when he desires to break free and live independently. When Watanabe visits her in Ami, the sanatorium she is committed to, Naoko tells him, "Kizuki may be dead, but you are still my only link with the outside world. 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” (129). Here, Naoko acknowledges the sentimental scars that she leaves on Watanabe. By saying that he is her “only link with the outside world,” she makes Watanabe obligated to stay with her, thus emotionally dragging him down along with her depression. The constant reminder that Kizuki’s death is what brings the couple together continues to be a painful prevalence in their relationship, and Naoko points out that she realizes that their relationship is a burden on Watanabe. Even so, she does not take any initiative to help Watanabe or alleviate his struggle. Instead, even after her death, Naoko continues to remain a psychological barrier for Watanabe as he tries to reconnect with reality. Many years after Naoko’s suicide, when Watanabe hears “Norwegian Wood” playing on the radio, he is reminded of the girl he used to love. Reflecting on this moment, he thinks, “The more the memories of Naoko inside me fade, the more deeply I am able to understand her...she begged me never to forget her, to remember that she had existed. The thought fills me with an almost unbearable sorrow. Because Naoko never loved me” (10). Watanabe is obligated to remember his promise with Naoko and her existence — she is immortalized as a memory of Watanabe: something that will live with him forever. However, Naoko’s perpetuity in Watanabe’s memories creates even more pain for him as he is forced to acknowledge that Naoko’s relationship with him was based more on emotional dependency than romantic love. Therefore, the more Watanabe thinks about Naoko, the more regrets from her and Kizuki’s suicides pile up and the more he dwells on the past. Naoko will forever live on as the embodiment of Watanabe’s past; she encompasses most of his reminiscing

about his college years and becomes a weight that he will carry for the rest of his life.

Hatsumi represents adulthood and the future that Watanabe strives for, but her frustrations with her relationship with Watanabe's dorm mate, Nagasawa, and her eventual suicide reveal to Watanabe that adulthood is not necessarily the easy escape from his past. When Nagasawa holds a dinner in celebration of finding a high-status job, Watanabe recalls an argument that went on between Nagasawa and Hatsumi; "' You can't even call what I do fooling around. It's just a game. Nobody gets hurt,' said Nagasawa. ' I get hurt,' said Hatsumi. ' Why am I not enough for you?'" (208). Watanabe looks up to Nagasawa and Hatsumi as the ideal couple and the picture of success: beautiful, profitable, and unshakable. However, Nagasawa takes out his stress from striving for success by being unfaithful, signifying that there are aspects of adult life that are inherently unattractive. Beneath the sparkling exterior, adulthood is, in fact, a constant feeling of inadequacy and a stream of sentiments that are unable to be conveyed. Hatsumi's disillusionment is more evident as the scene unfolds and she directly confronts her boyfriend, "' Don't you care whether I understand you or not?'...'So is it a mistake for me to feel that I want to be understood by someone — by you, for example?' That was the first and last time I ever heard her shout" (210). As Watanabe watches this moment happen, he realizes that in adulthood, there is no honesty; as people grow older, they become more and more jaded, so much so that they barely recognize each other or show their true personas. By raising her voice, Hatsumi breaks from the subservient girlfriend character she had been playing all along; it is as if

Hatsumi and Nagasawa are putting on a play, as if all of adulthood is merely a theatrical facade. Even so, as Watanabe reflects on the moments that he spent with the older couple, he describes that, “ the image of Hatsumi flashed into my mind...It was a kind of childhood longing that had always remained — and would forever remain — unfulfilled...What Hatsumi stirred in me was a part of my very self that had long lain dormant...Someone should have done something — anything — to save her” (211-212). Watanabe realizes that Hatsumi reminds him of a life that has wasted away by waiting for Nagasawa to settle down. Instead of living a fulfilling adulthood and doing what is expected of successful adults, Hatsumi is left waiting with dreams that will never be granted and a lover who will never marry her. Hatsumi’s eventual suicide finishes the vicious cycle, revealing that even the most perfect of couples are secretly corrupt, with both parties unable to find their way out of the mess that they have created.

Reiko is a reflection of what Watanabe can become; she is in the process of healing after crippling loss and failure, but she eventually learns to let go of her past and start anew. After reflecting on Reiko’s letter about Naoko’s death, Watanabe is able to see the parallels between him and Reiko when he remarks, “ And just as Naoko and I had shared the dead Kizuki, Reiko and I shared the dead Naoko” (279). Here, Watanabe implies that death, or loss, is what brings people closer together, and while Naoko’s death will be another weight on their shoulders, it has connected Watanabe and Reiko on a personal level. In sharing their grief, they are able to help each other accept death. As Watanabe mourns Naoko, Reiko tells him that, “ That’s why you need to grab whatever chance you have of happiness where you find it, and

not worry about other people too much. My experience tells me that we get no more than two or three such chances in a lifetime, and if we let them go, we regret it for the rest of our lives” (269). Reiko speaks from experience; she had lived through the same regret that she is telling Watanabe to avoid, and she wants to help Watanabe overcome his grief and mourning by asking him to let go of his past and start a new life. Reiko continues to give Watanabe life advice until finally, they part ways at a train station after Reiko leaves Ami. Watanabe reflects, “ We were alive, she and I. And all we had to think about was continuing to live... ‘Be happy,’ Reiko said to me as she boarded the train. ‘ I’ve given you all the advice I have to give. There’s nothing left for me to say. Just be happy. Take my share and Naoko’s and combine them for yourself” (293). Reiko’s final advice is for Watanabe to find happiness, which is something that she had been unable to do, thus sending her to the Ami in the first place. She asks Watanabe to take Naoko’s and her own happiness, which was lost from living in Ami, and take it for himself. From this advice, Reiko teaches Watanabe how to let go of Naoko and his obligations to her and Kizuki, as well as how to accept their deaths. In this moment, Watanabe is truly living, having learned how to free himself from his memories of Naoko; Reiko shows Watanabe that he has an entire life ahead of him and can live normally, and therefore, he still has a chance at living life to the fullest.

Midori represents freedom and breaking away from the past to Watanabe; having been plagued by death in her past, she rejects social expectations that tie her down and relishes every moment as she lives in it. Midori never seems to hold on to regrets nor mourn for the things that she has lost —

when Watanabe expresses concern over Midori after the death of her father, she merely brushes it off; “ Nah, a funeral’s a piece of cake. We’ve had plenty of practice...We were drained, my sister and me. We couldn’t even cry. We didn’t have any tears left. Except, when you do that, they start whispering about you...The bastards! The more they wanted to see us cry, the more determined we were not to give them the satisfaction” (221).

Midori has gone through so much death in her life that she no longer cares about it — she stops dwelling on people who existed in her past and instead, she solely focuses on her relationships in the present. She regards death and funerals as a mere formality, and looks down on those who criticize her lack of sympathy. Midori refuses to conform to the expectations that the death of her father is something that she is supposed to mourn, and in order to keep on defying those expectations, she stops herself from crying. Midori’s idiosyncrasy can also be seen when Watanabe visits her home and she says to her father’s shrine, “ Night-night, Daddy...I’m sure you’re not suffering. If you are, you’d better complain to the gods. Tell ’em it’s just too cruel. I hope you meet Mum and the two of you really do it...So give it everything you’ve got” (230). Midori’s lighthearted approach to addressing her father, even after his death, shows that she no longer worries about his loss. Instead, she makes sexual jokes about her father up in heaven, which shows how quickly she is able to let go of what happened in the past. She does not dwell on or mourn the death of her father — instead, she is relieved by the end of his suffering. These instances reveal the way that Midori has learned to cope with grief, and in this way, she becomes what Watanabe eventually realizes he desires: a way to release himself from the past and live on looking forward towards the future.

<https://assignbuster.com/she-once-had-me-the-significance-of-the-women-in-norwegian-wood/>

Watanabe's final success in letting go of his past is a result of his attraction to Midori's independence and his realization that his love for Midori is what will eventually liberate him. When Midori talks about her ideal relationship, she mentions to Watanabe, " I've been waiting for so long I'm looking for perfection...Perfect selfishness. Like, say I tell you I want to eat strawberry shortbread...And you come back...and hold this strawberry shortbread out to me...And I say I don't want it anymore and throw it out of the window. That's what I've been looking for" (76). Midori has spent so much time serving and accommodating others that she now only cares about her own wants and needs. She wants a relationship that is as volatile as she is and that can satisfy her every whim; Midori wants to live in the moment, changing her mind whenever she likes, and she therefore she needs to find somebody who can easily change along with her. These aspects of Midori's personality causes Watanabe to end up loving her, even writing to Reiko, " there is a decisive finality to what exists between Midori and me. It has an irresistible power that is bound to sweep me into the future...It stands and walks on its own, living and breathing and throbbing and shaking me to the roots of my being" (268). Watanabe's love for Midori is alive, as dynamic and vivacious as the woman herself is, and has affected Watanabe much more than the emotions that Naoko sparks in him. With Midori, Watanabe is no longer buried in thoughts of death and weariness from Naoko, and instead, he feels alive, just like his love for Midori. His love is " bound to sweep" him " into the future," thus allowing Watanabe to let Naoko go and follow Midori onwards into freedom. Watanabe finds his future by following Midori's example, thinking about living in the present and looking forward to the future; by doing so, he finds a love that does not pull him down, but uplifts him instead.

<https://assignbuster.com/she-once-had-me-the-significance-of-the-women-in-norwegian-wood/>

Watanabe's life is marked and defined by the many women that he meets as he journeys through early adulthood. With Naoko, Watanabe is forced to remember the most painful parts of his past, from his best friend's suicide to Naoko's depression and her eventual death. Hatsumi represents Watanabe's ideal picture of what adulthood should be, but she remains unhappy because she keeps on waiting for a future that will never come. However, Reiko, who has survived loss, death, and rejection, guides Watanabe through the murkiness of his life and shows him that beyond the storm, there is always sunlight and beyond all, there is happiness to be experienced. This advice teaches him to live for himself and live for the present, which also allows him to start a relationship with Midori, the free-spirited girl who has cast off all the misfortunes in her life and solely lives for her own selfish reasons. Watanabe's desire to leave his painful past behind draws him to Midori, who lives spontaneously, and so their love, which continuously edges on towards the future, concludes the novel. All these women become important memories to Watanabe, except Midori, who stays as a tangible being to him. Each woman leaves Watanabe with a life lesson and leads him to his endgame with Midori, teaching him how to live with the future on his mind and happiness in his heart.