

**THE TRIVIALITY OF A POP SONG:
HOW MURAKAMI'S CHARACTERS
OVERCOME DETACHEDNESS**

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After returning from Princeton in what was his first extended stay in the United States, Japanese author Haruki Murakami witnessed two tragic events in native Japan. On January 17, 1995 a massive earthquake registering 7.2 on the Richter scale shook Kobe, thus killing over 6,000 people and causing major damage to the city itself. Shortly after this in March, the terrorist group AUM Shinryko attacked the train system of Japan by releasing deadly sarin gas onto various lines causing over 5,000 people to seek medical attention. This incident marked the first time any major terrorist activity had occurred within Japan since World War II, and still stands today as the most severe broad attack on the nation.¹ When one considers these two events in relation to one another, an immediate link between the two incidents seems hard to make. After all, one was an unforeseeable natural disaster and the other a premeditated attack. The only common theme one can formulate between these events is that regardless of a reason, terrible, almost meaningless violence occurs, and there is nothing an average person can do to prepare himself for such events. Unsurprisingly, Murakami became intrigued with these attacks and went on to write *Underground*, a collection of essays pertaining to the sarin gas attacks.

Murakami's first formal return to the romantically-driven novel came as *Sputnik Sweetheart*, in which critics like Michael Fisch see him finally offering some solution to the detachment his characters in past novels have experienced.² Rather than conclude that violent events prevented communication, Murakami extrapolates upon the idea that people

¹Jay Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* (London: Harvill Press, 2002), p. 239.

²Murakami Haruki *Sputnik Sweetheart*, trans. Philip Gabriel (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). Michael Fisch, "In Search of the Real: Technology, Shock, and Language in Murakami Haruki's *Sputnik Sweetheart*," *Japan Forum* 16 (2004): 361-383. Commercialization

really can relate on more than a superficial linguistic level, but only after experiencing some sort of shock, after which a person is able to understand another's condition. Instead of living in realities constructed for a small number of people detached from society, one can live in a community with others. Unfortunately, such communication only occurs when a person somehow breaks out of his conditioned state of "habituation and adaptation to the conditions of everyday life."³ Fisch develops this idea by stating that in order to function once again with others, some sort of shock must occur. He explains this shock as a "dangerous yet liberating encounter with the real." The earthquake or sarin gas attacks would be sufficient terms, in other words, for one to get back in touch with the "real" or for all practical purposes, being able to communicate with others. Fisch's assertion that through shock one can reacquire the ability to communicate with others is an interesting one, especially when taken in conjunction with Fuminobu Murakami's claim that "the hero in Murakami's stories is quite happy to live the alienated lifestyle characteristic of cosmopolitan city people."⁴ Murakami's ideas then seem to be in conflict with one another: the hero withdraws from society but by doing so he deprives himself of the opportunity to experience anything that would allow him to connect with others.

In *Dances With Sheep*, Matthew C. Stretcher asserts that:

His [the hero's] refusal to join what he considers to be a dehumanized society does gain him a modicum of freedom in his movements, it does not aid him in reconnecting with the real objects of his desire – friends and lovers from his past who helped him determine his sense of self during his youth.⁵

Stretcher does not see early Murakami (1979-1995) characters as striving to have sincere interactions with society. Their isolation is completely voluntary and in alignment with their ultimate goal of reframing and reinterpreting their past. Stretcher goes even further and later clarifies that

³Fisch, "In Search of the Real," p. 361.

⁴Fuminobu Murakami, "Murakami's postmodern world," *Japan Forum* 14/1 (2002), p. 126.

⁵Matthew C. Stretcher, *Dances with Sheep* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2002), p. 123.

the nostalgia is not recalled “in terms of pleasure and rediscovery, but of crushing sadness and loss.”⁶ Even though he does concede that Murakami has recently begun stressing that through experience and discussion of traumatic events, people get closer to meaningful interaction, he designates this as a relatively new direction for Murakami.⁷

Jay Rubin slightly contrasts this view by noting that Murakami’s descent into the self is not as meaningless as that of some of his contemporaries. He states, “[A] massive wall separates the inner core of self from the part of the mind that is most in touch with the world or reality.”⁸ The examples used to illustrate this all deal with material objects – why, for instance, does Murakami’s girl from Ipanema think about high school when she eats salads? In his book *The Music of the Words*, Rubin further defines the problem, “Endless thinking is what troubles him [the protagonist].”⁹ Yet here, Rubin focuses more on material objects that ground the hero in reality rather than interactions with other people. What Rubin’s essay lets the reader see is that even though Murakami’s characters are ostracized from society, they have moments when they function within it. In Rubin’s view, Murakami’s characters seem stagnant.

While in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Michael Fisch argues that the main character ultimately reestablishes himself in society, the conclusion of *Norwegian Wood* leaves the reader with a much more vague idea of whether or not the narrator, Toru, becomes actively engaged in society. Critics such as Fisch acknowledge that lately Murakami’s fiction acclimates his characters into society, yet his earlier works convey the idea that communication with others is futile. By analyzing the detachedness of the hero Toru in *Norwegian Wood*, I will show that although initially Toru seems at ends with society, by the end of the novel he appears on the verge of interacting with others in a meaningful way. While Matthew Stretcher claims that the ending of *Norwegian Wood* “turn[s] the moral fantasy of love triumphant into a farce, leaving the reader as confused as the narrator about how things finally stand,” it appears that things actually do reach a resolution, albeit it an incomplete one when compared to *Sputnik*

⁶Ibid., p. 211.

⁷Ibid., p. 214.

⁸Jay Rubin, “The Other World of Haruki Murakami,” *Japan Quarterly* 39/4 (1992), p. 497.

⁹Stretcher, *Dances with Sheep*, p. 54.

Sweetheart. The narrator, now acclimated with society, actually comes to terms with his position within society. He has undergone a sense of shock, and while it most certainly is not as intense as the shock that will later inhabit Murakami's work, it hints that as early as 1989 Murakami's view on communication was changing to a more hopeful outlook. Since the plot lines of *Norwegian Wood* and *Sputnik Sweetheart* follow nearly the same course, I intend to show that Fisch's idea of "shock" is applicable in *Norwegian Wood* by first establishing the detachedness of the main character, Toru. After he experiences traumatic events, specifically the riots of 1960 and interacting with people, he manages to overcome his prior affliction and somewhat reenter the realm of meaningful interactions with people. Ultimately, communication between people is possible.

In order to show how Toru is integrated into society, we must start by characterizing Toru's detachment from others. *Norwegian Wood* begins by giving the reader a glimpse of Toru's resolution from his detachment, yet simultaneously Murakami hints to the reader that while Toru achieves some sense of closure, pangs of his past inability to communicate with others still resides inside him. Within the first page, Murakami already mentions BMW and the song "Norwegian Wood," thus giving the reader a preview of the commercialization in a globalized society.¹⁰ Brand names make up the characters' world, and Toru immediately notices internationally recognizable branded objects but also minute details. Interestingly enough, the use of names recognizable worldwide seems to unite the character with others rather than separate him from others. Despite being about to arrive in Germany, Toru is able to immediately recognize the familiar. Instead of secluding the narrator from others as will be seen shortly, these symbols actually bring him closer to others. When the stewardess comes to check on a doubled-up Toru, he describes her smile as "lovely."¹¹ He is able to notice small details. After she talks to him in German ("Auf wiedersehen" or "Goodbye"), he accordingly responds in German. Here there are no barriers in communication between the two: Toru, an active member of society, has a sincere interaction. Toru is anything but detached in this scene: he is keen to pick-up on the stewardess'

¹⁰Ian Buruma, "Turning Japanese," *The New Yorker*, December 23-26, 1996, p. 67.

¹¹Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, trans. Jay Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 4.

actions and her disposition. This is the only scene within the book with an aged Toru and it shows the reader that Toru will eventually become a part of society – what Murakami leaves a mystery is *how* he gets integrated into it.

Perplexingly enough, this scene best depicts the author's ability to connect his characters with others. The novel quickly changes pace from the present to recollecting the past. Toru, now over a decade younger and detached from society, starts to describe meticulous details of some flowers, the lake, and finally one of the main female characters, Naoko. Yet he mentions these things only in a physical sense. Although he claims that this was the age when he was in love, he hardly mentions any actual emotions.¹² What is recalled is the trivial – details that might add to the scenery, but by themselves seem irrelevant. The meaningless brand names considered in the first few pages are gone and replaced by nature. Yet nature fails to allow Toru to communicate with Naoko. Already, Murakami hints that a natural existence is not enough for modern communication. Here, Toru recalls his love Naoko, one of the leading factors to his detachment with society.

Over the course of the novel, Naoko retreats away from the city and becomes so detached from society that she can no longer function within it. The first conversation Toru recalls Naoko discussing the “field well” – something that is undetectable in the middle of a grassy field. Any person could accidentally step onto the covering of this field well and fall into it and die. This reoccurring image in Murakami's work epitomizes one's distance in society. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*, one character comments on how when in doubt of what to do, crawling down into the deepest well will help solve the problem. Logically, being in a well completely removes one from society. Ian Buruma describes the well as “a common literary image. It is a retreat into the self; it is also a retreat into the world of memory, of the past, and of death.”¹³ Not only is one allowed to think but society also forgets about the person. Naoko goes as far as to remark, “Somebody disappears all of a sudden, and they just can't find him. So then the people around here say, ‘Oh, he fell in the field well.’”¹⁴ While such seclusion might allow the organization of thoughts, it simultaneously prevents one from actively taking part in society. This example has

¹²Ibid., pp. 4-5.

¹³Buruma, “Turning Japanese,” p. 67.

¹⁴Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 6.

diametric results: either think to oneself or be a part of society. Doing both, understandably, is impossible. The choice between introversion or active participation that Toru wrestles with is depicted in its clearest form here.

All of this serves as a backdrop to the actual story. Although his voice continues to narrate, Murakami never again mentions the thirty-seven year old hunched over in the airplane. Toru quickly confides in the reader his living situation – how his parents forced him to live in a dormitory although he “would have preferred to rent an apartment and live in comfortable solitude.”¹⁵ Toru readily recognizes his inclination towards spending life alone, thus setting up a second obstacle. In addition to coping with and understanding his relationship with Naoko, Toru must overcome his distance from others. This distancing is quite a feat. Stretcher notes that “he [Murakami] continues to point not only to the irony of the isolated individual in a city of over twenty million inhabitants, but also to the powerful and invasive force of the postmodern late-capitalist consumerist state into the lives of ordinary Japan.”¹⁶ The fact that Toru is detached from society is in itself quite an accomplishment because so many people surround him. Stretcher implies that *not* being engaged with other people is something that Toru, whether willingly or unwillingly, decides to do.

Not only does Toru separate himself physically from others, but he also does so mentally with his hobbies. Upon moving into the dormitory, he comments on “[t]he walls bore pinups from girlie magazines or stolen porno movie posters.” While he expresses disgust towards these decorations, it is not too long after that he actually buys one himself. His roommate tears it from the wall saying, “I’m not too crazy about this kind of thing,” and Toru is nearly unaffected.¹⁷ Like many other attempts Toru makes to conform to the mainstream, when he encounters even the slightest barrier he resigns and gives up. Carl Cassegard defines this as staple of Murakami novels: “Even though the story lines of his novels do not lack dramatic and unexpected turns of events, the protagonists are rarely

¹⁵Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁶Matthew C. Stretcher, “Beyond ‘Pure’ Literature: Mimesis, Formula and the Postmodern in the Fiction of Haruki Murakami,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57/2 (1998), p. 362.

¹⁷Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 15.

shocked.”¹⁸ Merely trying to enter into the dominant culture is not enough to remove a person from the isolation of an object.

To make matters worse, Toru’s roommate also seems to be an eccentric. In contrast to the other disorderly dormitory rooms, Storm Trooper, Toru’s nickname for him, keeps the room immaculately clean.¹⁹ If this quirkiness were not enough, Storm Trooper also stutters whenever he tries to say his major: maps. These two characters were randomly assigned to be roommates, yet this pair seems entirely different from anyone else at this private institution. Living with Storm Trooper instead of a “normal” college student presents an interesting problem to the reader: either there really is no typical college student, or the more reasonable conclusion that one is responsible for his view of what is typical or culturally normal. Regardless, Toru’s living situation further ostracizes him from assimilating into society’s conventions and causes him to withdraw even more into himself.

In an effort to connect with fellow students, Toru complains about the bizarre activities his roommate does while he is in the room, such as waking up at 6:30 AM every morning to participate in Radio Calisthenics. While his classmates warmly receive these stories, Toru does not initially understand that these stories say very little about him. Although these stories are shocking and quirky, they tell absolutely nothing about Toru himself. Others never ask Toru about how he is doing; rather, they inquire about the latest oddity Storm Trooper has done. Whether the conversations are chosen consciously or subconsciously, they distance Toru even more from other people. Perhaps this is because we hear about all the things Storm Trooper does, while Toru passively observes. As a result, although Toru tries to interact with others, he fails because he inhabits a realm of inaction.

While all these details demonstrate some of the reasons why Toru might feel detached from society, very little has touched the heart of the issue: communication. Because of Toru’s detachment, time and time again he shows a failure to communicate with others. Yet this inability to communicate with others does not always exist entirely because of him. On the first day he meets Naoko, she expresses:

¹⁸Carl Cassegard, “Haruki Murakami and the Naturalization of Modernity,” *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 10/1 (2000), p. 82.

¹⁹Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 15.

I can never say what I want to say...It's been like this for a while now. I try to say something, but all I get are the wrong words – the wrong words or the exact *opposite* words from what I mean.²⁰

Naoko suggests in this excerpt that her condition has not always existed, that there was a time when she had meaningful interactions with others, and furthermore, it hints at the severity of her miscommunication. It is one thing to have others not understand what Naoko says, it is another to have people think they know what she means when, in fact, the opposite is true. This scenario is similar to that of Murakami's female protagonist Sumire in *Sputnik Sweetheart* where, as Fisch points out, she has "Confusion over the functional difference between a sign and a symbol."²¹ Both female characters have trouble with the foundations of communication and consequently become so detached from society that they cease to function within it. It becomes clear to the reader that Murakami views language as a barrier. He suggests that to overcome detachedness, one has to do something more than just talk to one another – words alone cannot connect people in any meaningful way.

The detachedness both Naoko and Toru experience from society, it seems, keeps them from being able to talk to others. Toru describes how, despite knowing Naoko since high school because she was Kizuki's girlfriend, his freshman year in college marked the first time he ever really talked to her. He notes how conversation came easily when Kizuki, his best friend, was around, but the moment he left Toru plainly states, "Naoko and I had trouble talking to each other. We never knew what to talk *about*."²² This better clarifies Toru's affliction: he has had trouble since very early on communicating with others. His detached state has not recently come into existence; rather, he has never been able to function within society. Only when another person was involved could Toru communicate with Naoko. Toru, so far detached from society, could not even interact with his best friend's girlfriend.

Naoko too has trouble placing herself in society. Like Toru, from a young age she longed to move away from home. Although Naoko claims

²⁰Ibid., p. 364

²¹Fisch, "In Search of the Real," p. 364.

²²Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 22.

that she wanted to distance herself from the past in order to have a fresh beginning, the way she has conducted her life is by associating herself with Toru, a person she had known since high school. Rather than meet new people at her college, she avoids any opportunity to get involved in her school's community.²³ Toru does the same and further prevents himself from interacting with his classmates.

The characters' nonchalant attitude towards sex exemplifies their detachment from others. Sex – something that could create a meaningful bond between people – instead only makes Toru feel even more distant from others. Beginning as early as high school, Toru describes his first experience with a girl unenthusiastically while making note that, “Nothing about her really got to me.”²⁴ Casual adultery marks another way in which characters become detached from society. Instead of developing meaningful relationships over time, characters like Toru and the womanizing Nagasawa turn to sex instead of working out their problems. Like the many other traits that cause Toru's detachment from society, the more distant Toru feels from society and others, the more promiscuous he acts. Stretcher points out that “the narrator's reaction to meaningless sex is boredom and self-disgust, proving, according to Nagasawa, that the narrator is ‘an ordinary, decent guy.’”²⁵ The fact that Toru feels anxiety after meaningless sex shows that Toru's detachment is not a positive thing; it leaves him restless. Yet Toru does not realize he causes this because he is so out of touch with society. Nagasawa's revelation to Toru does nothing because Toru does not know how to interact with others. In *Norwegian Wood*, sex is not a unifying form of communication, but instead, an empty activity between people functioning as objects.

The way Toru idles away his time through Western literature and music further illustrates that he voluntarily removes himself from his Japanese home. He confides that, “I read a lot, but not a lot of different books. I like to read my favorites again and again. Back then it was Truman Capote, John Updike, Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler,” not normal Japanese authors like “Kazumi Takahashi, Kenzaburo Oe, Yukio Mishima.”²⁶ The only other people that share similar tastes to Toru are

²³Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴Ibid., p. 24.

²⁵Stretcher, “Beyond ‘Pure’ Literature,” p. 368.

²⁶Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, pp. 29-30.

Nagasawa and Naoko, both of whom are similarly detached from Japanese society. In fact, Toru affirms his friendship with Nagasawa when he learns of Toru's appreciation of *The Great Gatsby* in saying, "Well, any friend of the Gatsby is a friend of mine."²⁷ Here, for the first time, we see Toru not only meet a stranger but also begin a friendship with him. It becomes clear that Toru is not a social invalid; he understands the dynamics of how to get closer to people. His solitude and detachedness are a conscious choice.

Toru's musical choices similarly follow Western preferences. He and Naoko listen to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Waltz for Debbie* when they spend time together. Eventually, when Naoko moves away to a psychiatric facility, she asks her roommate to play "Norwegian Wood" on acoustic guitar. When Storm Trooper leaves the dorm room, Toru hangs up pictures of Jim Morrison and Miles Davis. Ian Buruma interprets Murakami's references to Western tradition as "part of a conscious effort to expunge Japanese tradition."²⁸ Thus, Toru purposefully prefers things that other Japanese cannot readily relate to; he is the cause of his own isolation. Stretcher furthers this idea by saying, "Murakami's fiction suggests that materialism...has indeed destroyed the soul of the Japanese, preventing them from interacting with one another (or outside of) that system."²⁹ In many cases, social interactions begin by identifying with objects rather than asking questions about another's life. Relating to people solely through materialism is empty conversation that reveals little about its participants. Instead of creating a bridge linking two individuals to one another, it creates a divide of empty symbols like songs and books.

The distinction between materialistic interactions and sincere interactions with others is important. In Fisch's essay on *Sputnik Sweetheart*, he asserts, "What we need now, I'm afraid, are words that work in a new direction and an absolutely new story that will be told in those words."³⁰ In other words, Fisch envisions experiences and stories uniting people. This differs from the materialism that connects Toru and Nagasawa. While Toru and Nagasawa are able to get along with one another, we get the sense that they never really connect. They have no deeper understanding of one another; their social lives consist of going to bars and picking up

²⁷Ibid., p. 30.

²⁸Buruma, "Turning Japanese," p. 64.

²⁹Stretcher, *Dances with Sheep*, p. 18.

³⁰Fisch, "In Search of the Real," p. 364.

girls to sleep with. What facilitates these two getting together are material objects. While things undoubtedly let the two relate more easily to one another, these very same things help distance them from society. In 1960s Japan, these objects start to *become* the character's identity. Materialism, it then seems, aids people in communicating with one another if they partake in similar things. In Toru's case, he refuses to subscribe to society's popular interest, thus making him even more detached. While likes and dislikes alone are not enough to prevent a person from engaging with others, they certainly do not help the situation.

We see a perfect example of detachment when Toru goes out with Nagasawa to pick up girls. When he brings one back to the hotel room, he notes the "terrific struggle when I tried to get her undressed and into the hotel bed."³¹ The girl here tries to connect with him: she asks him "all kinds of personal questions – how many girls had I slept with? Where was I from? Which school did I go to? What kind of music did I like?"³² The girl tries to relate to Toru on all levels including the materialistic, but he has no interest in this. He views her as a thing, not a person, and thus further distances himself by at least feigning interest. Cassegard discusses how in several other Murakami works, people become objectified as simply "the wife" or "the business partner."³³ In this case, the girl is thought of merely as "the sex partner." When he later tries to justify the situation to Nagasawa's girlfriend, the best explanation he can come up with is, "It's [sleeping with girls] just something to do."³⁴ Rather than classify the activity as something meaningful, Toru removes any social significance from it.

Toru first experiences "shock" when Naoko writes him a letter explaining that she has enrolled herself at a sanatorium. Although this event does not appear startling, it shakes up the foundations of Toru's entire social world because he has few people he interacts with meaningfully on a regular basis. He describes how he felt as, "be[ing] filled with the same unbearable sadness I used to feel whenever Naoko herself stared into my eyes."³⁵ From this point onward, Toru unconsciously begins assimilation

³¹Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 42.

³²Ibid., p. 43.

³³Ibid., p. 83.

³⁴Ibid., p. 207.

³⁵Ibid., p. 44.

back into society. He starts his own narrative by gathering stories and experiencing events that causes his detached habits to begin to subside. Stretcher argues that in order to fill the missing pieces, “We see, in our encounter with the gap, a reconnection with the real, the prelinguistic.”³⁶ Simply put, the words uttered do not matter nearly as much as the actions the character performs. Perhaps the reason the girl on the bed fails to gain any meaning in Toru’s life is because she merely talks about connecting with him, rather than actually performing actions and doing so.

Shortly afterwards, another sense of “shock” occurs in Japan; students begin rioting to dismantle the schools. Toru isolates himself even more from his classmates by refusing to respond to roll in class, noting that, “By remaining silent when my name was called, I made everyone uncomfortable for a few seconds. None of the other students spoke to me, and I spoke to none of them.”³⁷ At this point, it appears that Toru is worse than ever, yet because he witnessed an event alongside all his classmates, he shares a sense of unity within society. Whether he acknowledges this or not is irrelevant. In Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the character Rat disappears at the end of the 1960s, which Stretcher attributes to ‘the radically changing values’ gradual rejection of – or perhaps more passively flight from ‘reality as it is.’³⁸ Similarly, Toru, who is actively undergoing the drastic changes of the late sixties, acts in a passive way. Yet despite acting passively, the mere fact that he makes any statement is notable. Toru’s inaction during class – his miniature protest – shows that given the social circumstances of that era, not even he could escape from making some sort of statement. While Toru could easily have escaped any involvement in the movement, he is, in the end, a member. Events like the student protest cause people to participate whether they want to or not, thus forcing them to be active.

When Toru’s Euripides instructor is escorted out of the classroom by helmeted soldiers, he and Midori, a new love interest in his life, are able to bond together because of the situation.³⁹ In an interview, Buruma notes that Murakami “felt emotionally frozen by the violent radicalism as well as

³⁶Stretcher, *Dances with Sheep*, p. 113.

³⁷Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 48.

³⁸Stretcher, *Dances with Sheep*, p. 11.

³⁹Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 58.

by the chants of love and peace.”⁴⁰ This emotional frigidity Murakami talked about is reflected onto Toru and, because it has such an impact causes him to interact with others in society. The key idea is that the character feels anything – something that contrasts with the character’s unfeeling nature. Not long after the professor is escorted out, Toru goes to Midori’s to have dinner with her. The protests have put Toru in a situation he normally would not be a part of and impel him to interact with others on the basis of storytelling rather than materialism or sex.

Although Midori and Toru connect on some level by common interest like Humphrey Bogart, when she sings to Toru on her floor he confesses her song is a “musical mess.”⁴¹ It is clear that while Naoko and Toru’s relationship of isolation consisted of liking similar things, Midori and Toru must find another common ground. At face value, Midori hardly differs from Toru’s one-night stand. What makes her different to Toru, it then seems, is the shared narrative. The shock Toru undergoes removes him from his detachment and allows nonverbal communication to work where in other similar cases it had failed.

The couple later find commonality through this shock when they discuss people involved in the protests, saying “when they’re seniors they cut their hair short and go trooping to work for Mitsubisihi or IBM or Fuji Bank;” to show disgust towards their hypocritical nature. Stretcher points to a similar occurrence happening in Murakami’s *Rat Trilogy* where he states, “Two relevant points emerge from Ukuko’s experience: first, her identity, though fluid, is linked always and inexorably to the others around her; and second, these links are themselves bound to memory, experience, [and] the past.”⁴² This idea of nostalgia shows clearly why in Murakami’s world, overcoming detachment involves active participation in society. Not being involved with others harms the core of someone’s identity. In reference to George Herbert Mead, Stretcher offers further explanation by saying, “the self does not develop this capacity for self-reflexive discourse on its own, it must be created through meaningful interaction with others.”⁴³ In this case, the shock of the universities closing and constant recollection of the event brings Toru and Midori closer together.

⁴⁰Buruma, “Turning Japanese,” p. 66.

⁴¹Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 75.

⁴²Stretcher, *Dances with Sheep*, p. 119.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 120.

When Toru receives a letter from Naoko and visits her, the reader sees her detachment from society in full. Unlike Toru, Naoko has been completely sequestered from Japanese society; following the idea that shock helps one become less detached from society, she has missed out on crucial events of the student protests that have allowed Toru to engage society. This detachment is better understood when Naoko's roommate Reiko confesses, "We have just about everything we need without going to the city."⁴⁴ The world in which Naoko lives in no longer needs the "real" Japan to exist. Located in the country, people here exist happily without outside interference. Here Naoko and Reiko listen to the same pop songs over and over; nothing ever changes. This institution is a complete removal from the very society in which it is supposed to recondition its patients to reenter. No shock can ever occur because everything is safely monitored. Since Toru has begun overcoming his detachment from society, he paradoxically begins creating distance between him and Naoko.

During this visit, Murakami hints at how communication between individuals can occur. Reiko takes Toru aside and describes that the reason she is in this institution is because an adolescent she gave piano lessons to accused her of raping her during a lesson. Reiko's shocking incident allows her to be closer to Toru than talking about frivolous pop songs could ever allow. For nearly the first time in the novel, Toru responds to a story saying, "I understand...But I think you can do it. I think you can go outside and make it."⁴⁵ Even as early as here, Toru recognizes the importance of being a part of society. Fisch describes a similar incident in *Sputnik Sweetheart* where Miu's hair suddenly turns white as "confrontation with the real as a possibility for the emergence of the new story. Miu's story demonstrates unequivocally, that the encounter with *achiragawa* [surreal elements] inaugurates a shock in which the mechanism of repression is disabled and anamnesis is actualized."⁴⁶ Miu's white hair and Reiko's enrollment in the institution both precipitated some sort of action. The characters could no longer remain inactive and passive. Shocking events bring the characters together on a level beyond linguistic communication.

⁴⁴Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 100.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴⁶Fisch, "In Search of the Real," p. 375.

On returning to college life, Toru's boss tells him of his weekend conquests with girls.⁴⁷ While one might easily overlook this detail as excessive, it marks one of the few times Toru interacts with someone outside his close acquaintances. In conjunction with the riots, hearing Reiko's story has furthered Toru's integration. Stories about shocking events help Toru relate to others because they focus on action rather than mere words. Toru also manages to start understanding Midori in a more thorough manner. She asks him to explain the English subjunctive to her, and Toru does in a way that she understands. Real communication between two people is possible even though verbal games make it challenging. Toru can understand his boss on some level. His detachment diminishes with the more shock he undergoes, whether it be through first hand experience or through stories.

In contrast to Naoko, Toru actually does activities with Midori. Jay Rubin summarizes Murakami's outlook by commenting, "Civilization means transmission."⁴⁸ Since Naoko is no longer a part of society, she is thus no longer a part of civilization. She has no stories to transmit to Toru so the two grow apart. On the other hand, Toru and Midori reside in a relationship of action: they ride the Japanese trains from place to place, visit Midori's father, eat sushi, and cook for one another.⁴⁹ Compared to Naoko and Toru's Sunday ritual of taking long walks around the city together, it becomes apparent that Toru's antisocial, solitary tendencies lessen. Oddly enough, this happens because of the mere fact that he is out and doing things. Like the way his isolation only created more isolation, his activeness with Midori continually requires more and more participation, thus lessening his detachment from others. Toru manages even to communicate on several levels with Midori's father in a hospital room. He gets the dying man to eat, something he refused to do for many days on end.⁵⁰ Such talk is not perfect: upon leaving, Midori's father says "Ueno Station," and hopes Toru understands him. Seats notes that the usage of language in Murakami's work is part of the "critical-fiction thematic" he writes that "a concentration on the changing language of the novel becomes more closely correlated with an imagined 'colloquial' style," and notes the time period as

⁴⁷Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 165.

⁴⁸Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, p. 34.

⁴⁹Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 180.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 192.

“something which ultimately recuperates meaning.”⁵¹ Murakami shows in the hospital that although communication is possible, unless something unites the two people, the discourse will not be entirely understood on all levels.

Stretcher also illustrates the sentiment of misunderstanding: “Murakami Haruki plays a structuralist game with his readers, creating texts which are obviously and meticulously formulaic, but with results and purposes distinctly postmodern in character.”⁵² While glimpses are seen of Toru communicating rather successfully with people, moments like this one with the father (“Would you like something to drink?” Toru asks the old man, to which he replies, “Cucumber,” thus showing how words are cumbersome), illustrate that communication at times appears as if “true” meaning can be found but, in the postmodern vein, it recognizes that this is merely an illusion.⁵³ Words cannot (and need not) entirely convey meaning. When Toru’s detachment is taken into account where he has the inability to communicate with anyone at all, the progress he has made up until this point is because of mainly shared experiences, not verbal exchanges. Shock, not words, is what helps bring Toru back into society. Words always have the possibility of being misunderstood.

As Toru gets more involved with Midori, his behavior changes. He goes to a little league game and afterwards finds himself unable to read in solitude. After reading in frustration at a jazz café, Toru ponders, “How many Sundays – how many hundreds of Sundays like this – lay ahead of me? ‘Quiet, peaceful, and lonely.’”⁵⁴ The Toru that matriculated into college has already started to change into a character that craves attention from others. The solitude and introversion that characterized Toru at the beginning of the story has been replaced by socialization in order to fully function in society. Cassegard cautions that given time, if a shocking event does not occur, a person becomes naturalized and acclimated to his situation.⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, Toru has gotten used to his set of

⁵¹Michael Seats, *Murakami Haruki* (Maryland: Lexington, 2006), p. 37.

⁵²Stretcher, “Beyond ‘Pure’ Literature,” p. 354.

⁵³Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 191.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁵⁵Cassegard, “Haruki Murakami and the Naturalization of Modernity,” p. 84.

circumstances: no trembles or traces of shock have occurred in his world for a while, so he begins to resort back to his old isolation.

During dinner with Nagasawa and his girlfriend, Nagasawa makes the generalization that “where Watanabe and I are alike is, we don’t give a damn if nobody understands us.”⁵⁶ Toru angrily responds, “I don’t feel it’s O.K. if nobody understands me. I’ve got people I want to understand and be understood by. But aside from those few, well, I figure it’s kind of hopeless...I *do* care if people understand me.”⁵⁷ This statement best summarizes Toru’s views with being part of society: although he feels speech ultimately prevents communication rather than facilitates it, he attempts it anyway. Like the shock that sparks Toru to be more involved with others, action is the main driving force of communicating with others. When Toru was feeding Midori’s father, he scarcely said a word; what drove them to have a kind of connection was Toru watching and responding to him. Once again, the passivity that once exemplified Toru has dissolved into activity.

In an aside, Toru explains how two years later, Nagasawa’s girlfriend, Hatsumi, committed suicide. This is yet another example of shock driving a character to change the way he acts in order to adjust to the situation. Nagasawa, a man who only a page ago proclaimed how he did not need anyone, writes Toru an emotional letter that states, “Hatsumi’s death has extinguished something. This is unbearably sad and painful, even to me.”⁵⁸ Again, action drives the characters to interact with one another. Without Hatsumi’s death, Toru would have never again heard from Nagasawa. If anyone were immune to the power of shock establishing a person’s place within society, it would be Nagasawa. Fuminobu Murakami labels Nagasawa as, “merely curious to see if he can succeed in a chosen role. Everything is a game for him and in this respect he is a quintessentially postmodern character.”⁵⁹ Yet his letter written to Toru reinforces the idea that shocking events – stories – force even the most detached people, like the womanizing Nagasawa, to get involved with others. When detached from society, life was merely a game to Nagasawa but after witnessing shock, he has sobered to the idea of needing others.

⁵⁶Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 209.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵⁹Murakami, “Murakami’s Postmodern World,” p. 135.

After returning to the main story, we learn how powerful an effect Toru's presence has on Hatsumi when she states, "I was an only child, but the whole time I was growing up I never once felt deprived or wished I had brother or sisters. I was satisfied being alone. But all of a sudden, shooting pool with you, I had this feeling like I wished I had had an elder sister like you – really chic."⁶⁰ Since Toru has started going out and being a part of Japanese culture, he has had a powerful influence on those around him. In response to Hatsumi's question about whether people change, Toru responds, "You mean, like, they go out into society and get their butts kicked and grow up kind of thing."⁶¹ It seems here that Toru is talking about the shocking events he has recently undergone. This statement reaffirms the sentiment that only by participating in society can one become a part of it; the impediments a person encounters make him more relatable to others.

What the older Toru complains about is all the death that happened during the late 1960s, yet no revolutionary changes actually occurred. He states, "The 'changes' that came were just two-dimensional stage sets, background without substance or meaning."⁶² By explaining these changes, Toru signals that no universal shock was occurring in his world. Although he became more active in society and better functions within it, the shock he experienced was on a much smaller level than that of the sarin gas attacks that would change Murakami's life in the mid-1990s. Toru's shock allows him to communicate with a much smaller group of people – specifically people within his own age group – in other words, people who had experienced similar events. Yet here he cues the reader that nothing allows him to become integrated with all of Japan. He gets over his detachment from others his age, but not in any timeless sense.

Toru makes the statement, "I'm an inborn optimist," after he confides in Naoko that he is going to move out of the dorms.⁶³ This is shockingly in contrast with Toru's earlier tone. While Toru's behavior beforehand was certainly not pessimistic, his confession of optimism offers a stark contrast. Yet, taken in conjunction with Toru's approach towards his finals, "1970 – A year with a whole new sound to it – came along, and that

⁶⁰Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 215.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 216.

⁶²Ibid., p. 236.

⁶³Ibid., p. 239.

put an end to my teen years.”⁶⁴ Toru’s original detachment from society – where he identifies more with books and music than people – is clearly being left behind him. While he will never identify with the pop culture references that make up his world, they no longer impede him from interacting with other people.

Although his saying, “Now I could start my new life with a new state of mind,” shows Toru’s reintegration to society, he quickly remembers that he neglected to tell Midori he moved.⁶⁵ Almost as quickly as Toru stopped being isolated, he resumes, saying, “I saw no one and talk to almost no one” while he waits for two responses to his letters.⁶⁶ Despite his frustration, Toru does continue to have meaningful interactions with others – his landlord invites him to tea – thus showing that his isolation or detachment from society, even though it might reoccur, is never as complete as it was in the beginning of the story. Having interacted with society and undergone shocking events, Toru is now a part of society. Like in *Sputnik Sweetheart* where Fisch observes, “When individuals do attempt to communicate...it is misunderstanding and imperfect communication rather than perfect communication that characterizes their interaction and serves as the grounds for incomprehensible alienation and loneliness.”⁶⁷ To think that people can continually interact by relating their shocking experiences, however, seems unrealistic; people need to eventually fall back on the imperfections of language. Without a sense of shock – a common reality on which to base language – communication is difficult.

Yet Toru’s detachedness from society never completely fades. When he sees Midori for the first time in weeks, he fails to notice her drastically different new haircut. After this he learns of the plans she had to spend the night with him and that she wishes never to talk to him again. Following this, however, we see Toru of his own accord writing letters and calling Midori in attempt to be around people. Toru takes action, even though he opines, “I spent this whole month with this hopeless sense of isolation.”⁶⁸ Toru no longer is content being detached from Midori and Naoko, and not having either instills yet another instance of shock within

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 239.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 241.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 243.

⁶⁷Fisch, “In Search of the Real,” p. 364.

⁶⁸Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 255.

him. Soon after, he discusses Mozart, Ravel, Georges Bataille and Boris Vian with a fellow employee. Rather than using his interest in music and literature to distance himself from others, Toru once again relates to people by using these ideas. Rather than undergo an arrest of detachment and cease actively living his life, Toru pursues the company of others. Unsurprisingly, as Toru continues to engage society by being an active member, Midori resumes conversation with him. The possibility of losing his close friends shocks Toru and prevents him from regressing to past habits.

Midori explicitly describes how her use of “shock” was meant to make Toru engage her: “I wanted to give you a good kick in the pants.”⁶⁹ She does this through the unbearable silence she puts Toru through. In the following scene, Toru declares to her, “I love you...from the bottom of my heart.”⁷⁰ This is the first time in the book that Toru portrays any internal feeling besides loneliness. Furthermore, this feeling is no longer entirely framed around Toru himself; it is directed towards another person. If being detached from society means caring only about oneself, then a sign of overcoming detachment is conveying feelings towards others.

The final shock Toru undergoes is the death of Naoko in conjunction with her ex-roommate Reiko coming to visit him. Naoko’s death causes Toru to become a vagrant along Japan’s countryside. When Toru is at his worst, a young fisherman comes and helps him recover his now poor health by offering him food, drink, and money, but he describes this as “not money...it’s my feelings.”⁷¹ Even in instances where Toru tries to escape society, he is still a part of it. One should also note that a shocking event again causes Toru to take action. While being in touch with society mainly means being with others, it can also mean confronting and reacting to situations and not merely sitting in inactivity.

When Reiko comes over, the two perform a “funeral” for Naoko by playing songs on the guitar. Again, the reader is bombarded with names of musicians like “The Beatles, Ravel, Rodgers and Hart, Gershwin, Bob Dylan...” yet this time, the music serves a deeper meaning than the triviality it held earlier in the book.⁷² Here, the two discuss the meaning of the most notable song in the book, “Norwegian Wood,” commenting,

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 261.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 262.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 275.

⁷²Ibid., p. 289.

“Those guys sure knew something about the sadness of life and gentleness.”⁷³ These songs gain meaning not because of the “non-sense” and “non-meaning of lyrics,” but rather because both Reiko and Toru shared the experience of losing Naoko. The songs themselves act as a symbol and without any context would be meaningless. Since these two characters share similar aspects of their respective realities, they are able to understand the symbolism of the songs.

In the final scene, Murakami leaves the reader disoriented by having Toru telephone Midori, pleading, “I have to talk to you...I have a million things to talk to you about. A million things we have to talk about.”⁷⁴ This confession comes immediately after his brief encounter with Reiko telling him to, “Be happy.” Finally, Toru inhabits a world where other people care and have feelings towards him. Unlike one of the opening scenes with only Toru and Naoko walking through the park, here Toru is in the middle of a giant city with “people walking by to nowhere.” Through the course of several shocking events – some of these taking place on a national level while others a microscopic – the reader gets a sense that although Toru is not with Midori, he is about to “begin everything from the beginning.” Since Toru is no longer detached from society, he can now take part in a real relationship. Like in *Sputnik Sweetheart* where Fisch notes that “Boku will discover a new self-awareness and emerge from a lifetime of alienation,” the reader gets the feeling that Toru too has adjusted as a member of Japanese society. Although communication is imperfect, through shock and stories, meaning can be conveyed.

⁷³Ibid., p. 289.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 293.