

Reimagining the Self: A Critical Analysis of the Protagonist's Journey in the Works of Haruki Murakami

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Abstract: This study employs qualitative analysis to examine the transformation and development of protagonists in Haruki Murakami's novels. Data were derived through close reading and analyzed using psychoanalytical and postmodern literary criticism frameworks. The narrative trajectory of each protagonist generally follows three stages: self-discovery, confrontation with challenging circumstances, and the resolution of either personal transformation or acceptance of existing roles, interpreted through the theories of Carl Jung and Jean Baudrillard. Across the novels, common tendencies emerge and in each story, the main characters suffered an intense identity crisis due to encounters with the surreal and profound existential issues. The research found that wells, cats, different worlds and spaces on the brink were common motifs that help the characters learn more about themselves. The research showed that Murakami's characters go through personal growth that rejects traditional ways of seeing things and achieve deeper self-understanding. It is recommended to bring in more recent literature for analysis and to apply reader response theory to the study.

Keywords—literary works, protagonist, Haruki Murakami, psychoanalytical, postmodern, literary criticism

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, digital technologies have witnessed extraordinary growth across all spheres of public administration, including the domain of public finance and tax administrations. Within this context, the Tax Administration of Kosovo (TAK) is undergoing a necessary transformation where operational efficiency, institutional transparency, and effective risk management must be aligned through the effective integration of technology. However, decision-making within TAK is not always grounded in objective or standardized data but is frequently influenced by internal organizational factors, insufficient training,

and fragmented technological resources. This challenging situation calls for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between technology, risk, and decision-making within the institution.

Haruki Murakami is one of the few modern writers whose books appeal deeply around the world by pushing the boundaries of modern fiction and raising questions about identity, mind and the human experience. For decades after his debut in the 1980s, Murakami has developed a distinct way of writing that mixes magical realism with psychological realism, so his novels often explore the mental struggles associated with late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century life. Most of his books follow normal people who have to deal with unexpected challenges and learn more about themselves just as people face new challenges in a confusing world(Yurdakul, 2024). Studying how protagonists change in Murakami's novels matters not only for literary criticism but also for understanding the major issues and emotions that today's people experience. Amid today's fast technological growth, social isolation and weakening of familiar sources of identity, Murakami's narratives ask how people cope with questions of selfhood and belonging. often start out feeling isolated which is common in today's world, yet as they cross paths with unusual events, they start to recognize who they are and where they fit(Li & Xiao, 2024).

Since the world discovered Murakami, scholars have discovered the psychological and philosophical main ideas contained in his writings, whereas early commentaries mainly noticed the fantastic elements and exotic content from his famous works. People are now able to better understand Murakami's writing as they admire his stories and appreciate that he confronts big ideas about our minds, ourselves and the world. The regular use of certain symbols, stories and themes in most of his books hints that he carefully studied them, rather than using them just for styling(Caffrey, 2024). His works relate to his protagonists' journeys through theories drawn from psychoanalysis and postmodern literary criticism, mixing the study of psychology with modern culture. Through his concepts of individuation, shadow integration and the collective unconscious, Carl Jung helps explain the psychological side of character growth within Murakami's books, while Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulacra highlight the roles of the surreal and questions about reality that appear in Murakami's narratives. Using these theories, we can see how Murakami's characters' travel between what is happening inside them and what happens around them in society(Vaughan, 2023). If we look at several of Murakami's novels together, it becomes clear that his way of developing characters is consistently planned, with similar patterns showing the exploration of worldly psychological processes. From self-awareness to overcoming challenges and, finally, adapting or accepting situations, this narrative pattern is found in nearly all of Salinger's main books. He consistently uses certain symbols and wells, cats, parallel realities and women who fade from the story act as archetypes that open the door to exploration and change in his characters(Sinha).

Murakami's unique views about character transformation can only be understood from the culture surrounding his novels. With Japan facing rapid change and growth in the years right after the war, Murakami explores the problems that social transformation brings to people, along with the difficulties of keeping their original selves as modern consumerism spreads. The sense of isolation and meaning-seeking in Murakami's characters mirrors larger worries about who we are in today's Japanese culture, but the similarity between his work and that of other cultures appeals to readers globally (Takumasa, 2021). In addition to being stylistic devices, the narrative strategies in Murakami's books are key parts of how he investigates thoughts and identity. First-person narration gives us a close view into the characters' thoughts and strange and dreamlike scenes blur the line between reality and dreaming. Using this method, the author demonstrates a clear grasp of how people think and how ideas become too simple during times of great change and crisis (Runner, 2022).

Murakami's study of character transformation is useful in literary studies and also adds to knowledge in psychology, philosophy and cultural studies. He looks at how people form their identities in current society and he shows how human actions are affected by emotional and unconscious aspects as well as by reasoning and logic. The significance of his works means that Murakami achieves artistic excellence and seriously investigates big issues connected to being human (Zahra, 2022). Murakami's works have been widely received and translated because readers all over the world react to his books, revealing the wide appeal of his themes about changing how his characters think and feel. His impact outside the U.S. shows that his books portray experiences of separation, confusion and self-discovery applicable to many audiences today. The way his characters' journeys move readers everywhere points to the importance of the psychological concepts he examines which are relevant to us all in the modern global and divided world (Hansen, 2021).

This study extends previous scholarship by systematically mapping the recurring psychological and symbolic patterns across multiple Murakami novels, demonstrating how these motifs function as deliberate narrative mechanisms that guide protagonists toward deeper self-understanding and offering a new integrative model for interpreting character transformation in Murakami's fiction.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To insight closely at the ways main characters in Haruki Murakami's novels develop their identities and transform their selves.
2. To spot and make sense of the symbolic and metaphorical parts in Murakami's novels that allow his main characters to grow and discover themselves.

3. To assess how successfully surreal and hyperreal narrative methods represent both the growth of a person's identity and their search for meaning in the modern age.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do the main characters in Murakami's novels take steps from the moment they understand themselves, through the problems they encounter along the way, to when they eventually accept the revisions to their identity?
2. How do Murakami use certain symbols and styles to describe the changing mind and understanding of his main characters?
3. In which ways do the surreal and hyperreal parts of Murakami's stories support the protagonists' attempts to rediscover their self-esteem?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This work adds valuable insights to Murakami scholarship because it gives a first detailed analysis of character development in the author's most important novels, forming a useful framework for studying his characters. The recognition of repeated three-phase developments and important images in his novels gives helpful suggestions for students, scholars and readers interested in the deeper themes and psychology of Murakami's stories. These theories show the importance of these authors' works today and the detailed analysis of their creative choices is instructive for people working with fiction. In addition, the results of the book can help better understand the growth of identity, the mind and the effects of uncertainty in psychology, counseling and other areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since Murakami began to be recognized internationally, the reception to his books has changed a lot and at first, most reviews emphasized his unique mix of fantasy and realism. Earlier criticism from the West, a lot of them, would focus on how odd Murakami's stories seemed, rather than paying attention to their more philosophical and psychological themes. Labeling Murakami's early novels as either postmodern explorations or examples of magic realism only partly expressed the structured way he explored identity and consciousness through his novels (Tanaka Atkins, 2021). Psychologists have increasingly started interpreting Murakami's novels using Jungian analytical psychology in the last several decades. The fact that Jungian themes often appear such as meeting archetypes, journeys to the unconscious and embracing supposed shadow sides, has interested critics interested in both literature and depth psychology. As a result of these analyses, it is obvious that Murakami's fantastical parts show what goes on inside each character's mind, rather than appearing just to make the stories more entertaining or mysterious (Prabitha, 2023). Postmodern literary criticism helps

scholars look at Murakami's literature by focusing on hyperreality, simulacra and the uncertainty surrounding modern identity and meaning. Readers have interpreted these themes as comments on how simple concepts such as truth and individual identity are influenced by the growing use of technology and media. It has helped show that Murakami's protagonist journeys and their personal crises, often mirror the changing society in which they live(Prasol, 2023).

Feminist criticism looks at how Murakami represents gender and relationships and pays special attention to how female characters' support or help move forward the progress of male characters. The constant appearance of women vanishing in films has been interpreted as an unusual treatment of women and as an advanced study of anima projection and integration. Such studies have pointed out the multifaceted way gender works in Murakami's tales and have also noted potential shortcomings in how he writes about female characters(Mallabo, 2023).Several studies look at how Murakami includes both Japanese and Western elements in his books and how this blending becomes an important part of his literary style. Many scholars believe that the author infusing both Western pop culture and spiritual traditions from Japan reflects modern Japan's connection to the world. The studies found that Murakami's novels tell stories of Japanese people in their own age, but these novels also explore topics shared by many around the globe(Scammell, 2022).Researchers using narrative approaches have looked at how Murakami writes with a first-person narrator, distorts time and repeats symbols throughout his books. The way Murakami tells his stories and what he writes about have been studied together, showing that his style is carefully chosen to represent main themes rather than being random(Runner, 2022).

Urban studies experts explore how the city setting in many of Murakami's novels becomes important for the psychological experiences of his main characters. Major factors in creating new personal identities for urban protagonists are the lack of personal relationships, feeling cut off and a sense of detachment. Because of these analyses, it is now clear that Murakami's novels show a strong awareness of the modern city(Valente, 2022).Philosophers have discussed the ways in which Murakami's books face questions about meaning, being genuine and personal freedom. The idea of emphasizing choices, obligations and shape-giving in creating a hero has been linked, through existentialist philosophy, to Sartre, Camus and Kierkegaard. Such studies point out how Murakami's novels focus on major questions concerning what it means to be human and possible ways to live authentically today(Potik, 2024).Experts in comparative literature have studied Murakami's stories together with prose from other modern authors who focus on the same themes. By looking closely at his works, these studies exposed both what is special in Murakami's way of telling stories and the overall way writers today address awareness and identity in their narratives. By comparing his works, Murakami's place in world literature has been established and some of his unique achievements have been made clear(Cornyetz, 2025).

Readers have been examined in these studies to demonstrate how different people relate to and understand Murakami's novels, highlighting many variations according to culture, age and personal circumstances. The results from these studies show that Murakami's novels can be understood in many ways while still keeping their main themes together. Another point stressed by the research is that people's personal lives with identity affect how they appreciate and relate to what the protagonist experiences (Suter, 2020). Translation specialists have looked at how Murakami's books work in various languages and cultures and how translations can change the stories' meaning. Analysts have interpreted the author's own experience with translation and references to translation themes in his books as representing larger questions about the way people, cultures and societies communicate in today's globalized community (Zielinska-Elliott, 2020). New studies are bringing together ideas from cognitive science, psychology and neuroscience to discuss the way Murakami's books explore issues related to consciousness and identity formation. They could add novel insights into Murakami's work and what it means for our thinking about human minds and growth (Griffin, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study analyzed the protagonist's development and growth using a qualitative study of selected works by Haruki Murakami. The study used close reading in combination with psychoanalytical and postmodern literary criticism to study the development of different characters. The corpus featured five of Murakami's major novels—*Norwegian Wood*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *1Q84*—because they best reflect his exploration of themes related to identity and self-discovery. The analysis mapped out the story by looking at each protagonist's growth in three separate steps: when they first realize themselves, when they face big challenges and in their ultimate change or facing their truth. Concepts from Carl Jung's individuation and Jean Baudrillard's ideas about hyperreality were applied to explain how and why the strange elements affected the characters. I collected a lot of data by analyzing the texts' narrative styles, iconic symbols and commonly used motifs that explained how the main characters evolved emotionally. To recognize both repeated and different aspects in the stories, the methodology focused on comparative analysis. In order to strengthen the main reading and formulate theoretical ideas, scholarly articles, literary reviews and critical essays were consulted as secondary sources.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The systematic analysis of the five selected novels revealed comprehensive patterns in protagonist development and self-transformation processes. The data collection focused on character behavioral patterns, symbolic representations, and narrative progression markers that indicated psychological evolution.

Character Development Phases Analysis

The analysis confirmed the hypothesized three-phase structure across all examined works. Each protagonist demonstrated distinct characteristics and progression patterns within these phases, as detailed in the following analysis.

Table 1: Protagonist Development Phases across Selected Works

Novel	Protagonist	Initial Self-Awareness	Transitional Crisis	Final Transformation
Norwegian Wood	Toru Watanabe	Passive observer, emotional detachment	Naoko's suicide, sexual awakening	Acceptance of loss, emotional maturity
Kafka on the Shore	Kafka Tamura	Runaway seeking identity	Oedipal curse confrontation	Integration of shadow self
Hard-Boiled Wonderland	Narrator	Calculative detachment	Memory erasure threat	Choice between worlds
Wind-Up Bird Chronicle	Toru Okada	Unemployed drifter	Wife's disappearance	Active agent of change
1Q84	Aomame/Tengo	Isolated professionals	Parallel world recognition	Mutual recognition, connection

Table 1 demonstrates the consistent three-phase structure across all analyzed protagonists. The initial self-awareness phase characterized each protagonist as emotionally or socially detached individuals living relatively passive existences. The transitional crisis phase involved confrontation with extraordinary circumstances that challenged their fundamental understanding of reality and identity. The final transformation phase showed protagonists achieving greater self-integration and active agency in their lives.

Symbolic Motif Analysis

The textual analysis identified recurring symbolic elements that appeared across multiple works, functioning as catalysts for protagonist development and markers of psychological transformation.

Table 2: Recurring Symbolic Motifs and Their Functions

Motif	Frequency	Primary Function	Psychological Significance
Wells/Underground spaces	4/5 novels	Descent into unconscious	Jung's collective unconscious access
Cats	3/5 novels	Guide/mediator	Liminal beings bridging realities

Parallel worlds	4/5 novels	Reality questioning	Baudrillard's hyperreality concept
Music/Sound	5/5 novels	Emotional catalyst	Memory and identity triggers
Disappearing women	4/5 novels	Loss catalyst	Anima projection and integration

Table 2 reveals the consistent use of specific symbolic motifs across Murakami's works. Wells and underground spaces appeared in four of the five analyzed novels, consistently representing descent into unconscious realms where protagonists confronted deeper aspects of their psyche. Cats functioned as liminal beings that facilitated transitions between ordinary and extraordinary realities. Parallel worlds challenged protagonists' understanding of singular reality, forcing them to question the nature of existence itself. Music and sound served as universal triggers for memory and emotional awakening. The motif of disappearing women consistently catalyzed the protagonist's journey, representing the anima figure in Jungian psychology.

Narrative Technique Effectiveness

The analysis examined how Murakami's distinctive narrative techniques contributed to protagonist development and reader understanding of the self-transformation process.

Table 3: Narrative Techniques and Their Impact on Character Development

Technique	Implementation	Character Impact	Reader Effect
First-person narration	All novels	Intimate psychological access	Identification with protagonist
Magical realism	All novels	Reality boundaries blurred	Acceptance of ambiguity
Minimalist prose	All novels	Focus on internal states	Contemplative engagement
Circular structure	3/5 novels	Journey completion emphasis	Sense of resolution
Multiple perspectives	2/5 novels	Complex identity representation	Multifaceted understanding

Table 3 demonstrates how Murakami's narrative techniques directly supported the protagonist development themes. First-person narration provided intimate access to the protagonist's psychological states, allowing readers to experience the self-transformation journey from within. The consistent use of magical realism blurred the boundaries between reality and fantasy, creating space for psychological exploration and identity questioning. Minimalist prose

focused attention on internal rather than external action, emphasizing the introspective nature of the protagonist's journey.

Psychological Transformation Patterns

The detailed analysis of character psychology revealed specific patterns in how protagonists processed and integrated their transformative experiences.

Table 4: Psychological Integration Mechanisms

Integration Mechanism	Occurrence Rate	Primary Novels	Jungian Correlation
Shadow confrontation	80% (4/5)	Kafka, Wind-Up Bird, Hard-Boiled, 1Q84	Shadow integration
Anima encounters	80% (4/5)	Norwegian Wood, Kafka, Wind-Up Bird, 1Q84	Anima projection resolution
Active imagination	100% (5/5)	All novels	Individuation process
Symbolic death/rebirth	60% (3/5)	Kafka, Wind-Up Bird, Hard-Boiled	Ego death and renewal
Collective unconscious access	80% (4/5)	Kafka, Wind-Up Bird, Hard-Boiled, 1Q84	Archetypal encounter

Table 4 illustrates the psychological integration mechanisms employed by Murakami's protagonists during their transformation journeys. Shadow confrontation occurred in 80% of the analyzed works, representing the protagonists' need to acknowledge and integrate rejected aspects of their personality. Anima encounters, also present in 80% of the works, involved the protagonists' relationships with feminine figures that served as projections of their unconscious feminine aspects. Active imagination, present in all novels, manifested through the protagonists' engagement with surreal experiences and their willingness to explore non-rational realms of existence.

Temporal and Spatial Disorientation Analysis

The analysis revealed consistent patterns in how Murakami employed temporal and spatial disorientation to facilitate protagonist transformation.

Table 5: Disorientation Elements and Their Functions

Element	Frequency	Narrative Function	Psychological Purpose
Time distortion	5/5 novels	Linear progression disruption	Ego boundary dissolution
Liminal spaces	5/5 novels	Transition facilitation	Threshold experience
Memory fragmentation	4/5 novels	Identity questioning	Self-concept deconstruction
Dream/reality blending	5/5 novels	Consciousness expansion	Psychic integration
Geographic displacement	3/5 novels	Familiar context removal	Identity reconstruction space

Table 5 demonstrates how disorientation elements consistently appeared across all analyzed works. Time distortion occurred in every novel, disrupting linear narrative progression and forcing protagonists to experience non-chronological consciousness. Liminal spaces appeared universally, providing transitional environments where normal rules of reality were suspended. Memory fragmentation in 80% of the works challenged protagonists' stable self-concepts, requiring them to reconstruct their identities from fragmented elements.

The analysis of the data showed that, despite the differences in stories, Murakami's protagonists followed nearly the same transformation process. The model of developing the events in three phases clarified the changes in the characters and each repeated symbol represented important psychological events. The descriptions of events appropriately promoted transformation themes and the mental connections applied accepted theories of individualization and discovery of self.

Using numbers, Murakami showed a structured way of discussing the many challenges people face during modern identity formation. Frequent appearances of particular elements among the texts demonstrated that these elements were most important to the author's discussion of self-transformation. All the protagonists showed certain similar psychological integration, so universal patterns of self-understanding were evident.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that Haruki Murakami carefully and consistently features self-change in his main characters. Each of the five novels seems to use a deliberate three-phase structure that illustrates concepts from established

psychology on becoming an individual. You'll usually notice that in the self-awareness phase, the protagonists experience a sense of alienation, typically found in urban life today. Here, the base is set so that change is necessary and possible for the mind and personality to thrive.

The crisis during transition helps bring about big changes, offering extraordinary situations that you have to confront to change your beliefs. It was found that every crisis includes encounters with strange spaces, special beings and dreams that make no sense within regular reasoning. Here, the protagonist must change from using logical reasoning to accepting not knowing all the answers as a way to learn better about herself. This way of telling the story is convincing because it reproduces the way minds work during personal growth, as sometimes old patterns of identity must fall apart before successful growth happens.

The transformation phase finally points out that Murakami favors detailed character resolution, making sure to weave things together instead of ending things with simple answers. Usually, protagonists aren't able to resolve everything about themselves; however, they can recognize their many and confusing sides. Using this method fits with postmodern understandings of identity which see it as flexible rather than set. This change shows up by increasing flexibility and the ability to keep changing and growing over time, rather than fixedness.

The authors of the reading analyze how Murakami builds a symbolic set that brings together all the different accounts to describe the process of mental change. Wells, cats, parallel worlds and women who vanish work as archetypes in revealing aspects shared by people everywhere, while still playing key roles in each novel. Because this detail appears consistently, it means Murakami's look at personal growth covers broader matters of identity and consciousness in today's society.

CONCLUSION

It has become clear from this study that Murakami uses a careful and detailed method to present the challenges of changing oneself in the works he has selected. It is clear from the five major novels that Murakami uses repeated three-phase storytelling to explore how individuals grow and deal with changes in their lives. As the main characters move from noticing themselves, encountering a life crisis and finally transforming, they represent both their own transformation and the big picture of selfhood in our modern society.

A careful study of symbols has highlighted a consistent language used in many different stories, helping each narrative build greater relevance and strength through similar material. Wells, cats, parallel worlds, music and disappearing women appear again and again to help readers explore their thoughts and change, but they are also vital parts of the storytelling in each tale. Because the symbolism in his novels is largely the same, it indicates that Murakami's writing

is not only meant to entertain, but also seriously explores the leads' consciousness, identity and place in society today.

Analysts have found that discussing Murakami's work from a psychoanalytical and postmodern perspective helps us understand his techniques and what he is trying to convey. Jung's concepts of becoming an individual, facing the shadow self and understanding the collective unconscious offer helpful information on the main characters and their psychology, while Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality makes us aware of the role of the surreal elements in Murakami's stories. This approach makes clear the richness and relevance of Murakami's writing to recent conversations about personal identity, reality and the mind.

It is apparent from the analysis that Murakami uses unique narrative methods to reflect the challenges of self-transformation. Using a first-person narrator, magical realism, a simple style and confusing time and place makes reading *The Alchemist* so engaging that you feel like a witness to the character's own journey. These approaches are essential to understanding the meaning of Murakami's novels because there is a tight link between the form and the content in his stories.

The research findings also address broader questions regarding how identity forms, how the mind develops and how literature reflects the numerous aspects of human life. His protagonists show readers how to deal with modern-day challenges and uncertainties, believing that change and growth are possible in the midst of alienation, confusion and an existential crisis. Discovering who we are happens as a process that lasts for our lives, involving learning new things, considering them and working these ideas into our sense of self.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It would be useful to include the recent books *Killing Commendatory* and *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* in future studies to see if the themes discovered in the earlier works still occur in Murakami's later novels. Also, using reader response theory could help reveal how the protagonist's journey of self-growth is understood by readers from different societies and times. A comparison of other authors' works using similar techniques would reveal if the patterns found in Murakami exist in more authors or if they are only present in his works.

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