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Post-modern Human Identity

Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World is a novel by Haruki Murakami which utilizes two plot lines. With one plot serving as the “perfect” and the other serving as the “imperfect”, Murakami compares human identity in each. This purposeful alternation between “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” and “End of the World” is what gives the reader the ability to see Murakami’s postmodern way to challenge the idea that human identity is supposed to be flawed, unique and fluid rather than uniform like other modern ideas.

Murakami splits “Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World” into two separate plot lines, both of which the reader discovers to be narrated by the same character. The first of the plots, “Hard-Boiled Wonderland”, takes place in a slightly futuristic but still a recognizable modern Tokyo society, where the protagonist works a job shuffling data. A job given the name of Calcutec. After discovering that he is the last Calcutec alive of the original 26 who were to shuffle data, he finds himself wrapped in an even bigger issue. The device, installed in his head by the Professor who created data shuffling, was failing, and soon it would cause him to become stuck in the world that his subconscious formed with no apparent way out. A world that the professor said was seemingly “perfect” in comparison to their reality. The other plot, “End of the World”, takes place in a much less familiar setting, where there is a small town surrounded by a wall. There are beasts in and around the town which play a special role in the absorbing of the townfolks mind fragments and taking them outside of the wall in order to be forgotten with the

beast's death. Inside the wall live the townsfolk and the protagonist. In this world he is the only one within the wall that still has a "mind" and a shadow that is still alive. Upon entering this town the protagonist is stripped of his shadow by the Gatekeeper, something the reader learns that is required of everyone in this town in order to stay. The shadow, though now separated from the protagonist, is its own character. The shadow is to live with the Gatekeeper until it is supposed to die the following winter. The protagonist is given the job of Dreamreader, and must read old dreams from unicorn skulls until his shadow dies and he can become a full citizen of the town. With some digging and the help of his shadow, the Dreamreader learns this town is of his own creation, but does not fully understand why, though the reader understands "End of the World" to be the Calcutec's subconscious mind from the events in "Hard-Boiled Wonderland" (Murakami).

Between "Hard-Boiled Wonderland" and "End of the World" materialism or lack thereof plays a significant part in Murakami's comparison of "perfect" and "imperfect" human identity. In "Hard-Boiled Wonderland" the reader learns early on that the Calcutec is a very materialistic person. He even admits to buying a car just so he can take home all the stuff he buys while out in town. An addiction so bad that he compares himself to a squirrel; "Every time I go to town, I come back, like a squirrel in November, with mounds of little things. Even the car I drove was purely for shopping. I only bought it because I was already buying too much stuff to carry home by myself." (Murakami 71). Not only that, but we also learn that the Calcutec spends time collecting imported whiskey; a hobby that tends to be more on the expensive side. (Murakami 141). In "End of the World" however, all of the townsfolk with the exception of the Dreamreader, do not demonstrate this form of materialism anywhere near to the extent of the Calcutec in "Hard-Boiled Wonderland". Those in the town without a shadow have long since

forgotten about materials and what it means to collect things that are outside of necessities. When the Dreamreader asks about a room full of old suitcases in the library, the Gatekeeper states “Oh, those things, you can help yourself to any of them”. When questioned about the original owners the Gatekeeper goes on with “Forget about the owners, Even if the owners are around, they have forgotten about those things.” (Murakami 243). Those who this stuff formally belong to have all lost their shadows, or in a way have lost their human desire to accumulate needless things. Not just the Calcutec, but the Dreamreader as well displays some materialism with his relentless search for a musical instrument (Murakami 274). Because his shadow has not yet died and he has not become one with the town, he is the only one who is even able to experience materialism in “End of the World”. Similarly though, both the Calcutec and the Dreamreader show positive emotions when acquiring materialistic things. This demonstrates the idea that while materialistic possessions can sometimes have no purpose or may not be a necessity, they still bring small joys and even hobbies. So, in a way, the stripping of the townsfolk shadows is Murakami’s way of taking the flaws out of human identity, it is then the reader sees that materialism is one of the parts that makes human identity special.

Other human characteristics that are shown in Murakami’s “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” but not in “End of the World”, with the exception of the Dreamreader, is the ability to form connections. In “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” the Calcutec, though he does not seem to have a deep romantic relationship during the time of the novel, at one point in time had a wife (Murakami 377). Also, during the Calcutec’s whole journey to save himself from slipping into his unconsciousness, he forms connections with the Librarian, the Professor, and the Professor’s granddaughter along the way. All of which brought him comfort in some way when nearing his death. Although the relationships formed between the Calcutec and everyone else were relatively

fairly short from their meetings and the Calcutecs death, the Calcutec still valued these relationships. Even in his last moments of life the Calcutec chose to call the Professor's granddaughter just to hear her voice, he states "I was just glad to be able to talk to you, to hear your voice again (Murakami 394). When facing death the Calcutec decides to find comfort in his relationships with others, something which most people do in times of need. On the other hand, in "End of the World", none of the townsfolk except the Dreamreader are known to have any forms of connections from one another; whether it be romantic or platonic. There are seemingly no friends, family or even significant others in this world. This proves frustrating for the Dreamreader after discovering his love for the Librarian in "End of the World" knowing that she cannot reciprocate his feelings. Part of human identity is to seek comfort and love within others, but the townspeople do not recognize this concept, for their sense of connection with others was stripped with the loss of their mind.

The alternation between "Hard-Boiled Wonderland" and "End of the World" gives Murakami the ability to demonstrate a postmodern way to show that human identity is supposed to be unique rather than uniform. In the plot line "Hard-boiled Wonderland" the Calcutec is a seemingly normal person who desires things like to collect whiskey, buy needless things, form relationships and enjoy music. In reality, the Calcutec role is much deeper, rather he is Murakami's way of displaying raw and flawed human identity, as well as serving as a comparison to the townsfolk in "End of the World". On the contrary, in the plot line "End of the World", Murakami uses the townsfolk to represent what a "perfect" view of human identity would look like. However, this "perfect" display of human identity in the townsfolk proves to be lacking and unfulfilling. Murakami calls attention to this through a speech that the Colonel, one of the notable townsfolk, gives to the Dreamreader regarding the town. The Colonel states "No

joy, no communion, no love. Only where there is disillusionment and depression and sorrow does happiness arise; without the despair of loss, there is no hope” (Murakami 334). The town from an outsider's point of view, like the professor when he first discovered the Calcutec's subconscious, seems almost perfect. There is no loss, love, hatred or any other normal emotion in “End of the World”, for all of those emotions were taken away with the stripping of the townsfolk's shadows, leaving all of the townsfolk as empty vessels. The frustration that the Dreamreader puts up with in “End of the world” like the librarian not having feelings for him and his hard time remembering any music is to show what it would be like to live in a world where human identity is uniform, rather than fluid. Like Murakami said through the Colonel, the good and the bad go hand in hand, and to get rid of the bad is to also get rid of everything good. The Colonel also says that “All imperfections are forced upon the imperfect, so the ‘perfect’ can live content and oblivious” (Murakami 336). So, while the townsfolk are a uniform “perfect” human identity, they have none of the joys and hardships that come with being imperfect like the Calcutec in “Hard-Boiled Wonderland”, instead they are oblivious to everything that makes the human identity unique.

Human identity through the eyes of Murakami is at its most perfect when it is imperfect, for the imperfectness is what gives human identity room for uniqueness. While human identity is flawed, to take away those flaws would create an unfulfilling and uneventful life. The dual plot line in his novel was simply Murakami's way of comparing the “perfect” and “imperfect” human identities in a postmodernism form.

Works Cited

Murakami, Haruki. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Random House, 2011.