

## Self-Descent In The Fiction Of Haruki Murakami

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### **Abstract**

This article looks at the psychological descent experienced by the protagonists in three novels by Haruki Murakami—*A Wild Sheep Chase*, *Dance Dance Dance*, and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. What I am arguing is not that Murakami “teaches” psychology in any formal sense, but that he repeatedly stages the same basic emotional crisis: a man who is quietly neurotic—sometimes numb, sometimes simply drifting—is gradually pulled into a world that no longer behaves in a stable or predictable way. Murakami’s narrators begin in ordinary spaces—kitchens, apartments, hotel lobbies, trains—but those spaces slowly reveal hidden layers of violence, disappearance, and what increasingly appears to be supernatural intrusion. Drawing on ideas from Freud and Jung, not as rigid theoretical frameworks but as useful language, this essay reads Murakami’s recurring imagery—wells, hidden corridors, doubles, dreamlike environments—as symbolic expressions of unconscious forces that refuse to remain buried and hidden. Through close attention to scenes involving possession, wartime brutality, and metaphysical dislocation, the article suggests that Murakami links supernatural disturbance with historical trauma and with darker impulses embedded within the human psyche. Murakami’s narratives rarely conclude with heroic triumph or philosophical certainty. Instead they end with uneasy moments of perceptual clarity in which the protagonist recognizes how fragile the structures of identity actually are. In Murakami’s fictional universe, neurosis therefore becomes not simply a symptom of alienation but a form of perception through which the hidden forces shaping reality gradually become visible.

**Keywords:** Haruki Murakami; neurosis; death instinct; Freud; Jung; psychological descent

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The protagonists who inhabit the novels of Haruki Murakami rarely resemble traditional literary heroes. They are not especially powerful, decisive, or even socially prominent. Instead they tend to move quietly through the routines of everyday life—often unemployed, emotionally detached, or simply drifting without clear direction and/or motivation. Passivity seems to be their norm. At first these characters appear almost staged- seemingly deliberately ordinary. Yet as Murakami’s narratives unfold, the environments surrounding them begin to feel strangely unstable; seemingly and eventually unstable to the point of being bizarre. What initially looks like normality and passivity slowly takes on a more unsettling dimension. Murakami’s narrators frequently experience the world as if something essential has slipped slightly out of alignment- slight, ever so ineffable, something. Nothing dramatic has happened, and yet everything seems subtly, inherently wrong. Everyday reality remains recognizable, but it carries an undercurrent of unease that the characters themselves struggle to explain to themselves, let alone to others. In novels such as *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *Dance Dance Dance*, and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, this quiet disturbance gradually expands until it reshapes the entire narrative. What begins as mild psychological unease develops into encounters with violence, buried memory, and forces that appear to exist beyond the limits of ordinary perception and experience. Murakami’s protagonists do not consciously choose to undertake heroic journeys. More often they stumble into strange sequences of events almost accidentally, as if the narrative itself were pulling them forward and inward. They are thrust, unwittingly, into situations that are beyond explanation or control. Their movements frequently take the form of literal descents—into abandoned wells, empty rooms, hidden hotel floors, or dreamlike corridors that seem to exist just beyond the visible structures of everyday life. These spaces function symbolically as well as physically. They are environments in which memory, imagination, and reality begin to overlap. Within these environments the characters encounter disturbing images of death and violence that force them to confront aspects of themselves that had previously remained closed-off. Avoidance is another key aspect of these characters’ actions/inactions. Murakami occasionally signals this psychological dislocation in deceptively simple lines. Early in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the narrator remarks with quiet resignation that “the world was a terribly confusing place” (Murakami, 1989, p. 15). The sentence appears casual, yet it captures the emotional atmosphere that surrounds Murakami’s fiction. The confusion here is not dramatic. It is subtle and persistent, the sense that reality contains hidden structures that remain only partially visible or not at all. What begins to emerge is the idea that the neurosis of Murakami’s protagonists is not merely a background trait. Instead it becomes the mechanism through which the narrative is

driven. As the characters move deeper into strange encounters with violence, memory, and supernatural disturbance, their psychological instability becomes the very condition that allows them to perceive the darker structures underlying 'reality.' Moreover, this inner instability manifests itself upon the outer world as neurosis.

Critics frequently interpret Murakami's fiction through the lens of magical realism or postmodern surrealism. Matthew Strecher argues that Murakami's characters often inhabit what he describes as "a liminal space between dream and waking consciousness" (Strecher, 2002). Susan Napier similarly suggests that supernatural imagery in Murakami's work frequently emerges from unresolved psychological or historical trauma (Napier, 1996). These observations help explain why Murakami's narratives feel both familiar and disorienting at the same time. The world of the novel looks recognizably modern, yet it repeatedly opens onto strange symbolic spaces that seem to operate according to wholly different rules. One way to understand this pattern is through Freud's concept of the death instinct. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud proposes that human behavior is not guided solely by the pursuit of pleasure but also by a destructive impulse that manifests itself through repetition, aggression, and a strange attraction to situations and/or thought-patterns that seem antithetical and that often threaten stability or self-preservation (Freud, 1920/1961). This idea helps explain why Murakami's protagonists repeatedly move toward situations that destabilize their lives even when they sense the danger those situations contain. It provides a somewhat logical/psychologically-driven reason as to why the characters think and behave the way they do. At the same time, Murakami's imagery resonates considerably with Jung's concept of the shadow. Jung argues that individuals cannot achieve psychological integration without confronting the hidden aspects of the psyche that consciousness attempts to repress (Jung, 1969). These shadow elements often include aggression, fear, instability, anxiety, violence, and moral ambiguity. In literature such encounters frequently appear symbolically through images of darkness, underground spaces, or uncanny doubles. Murakami's recurring imagery of wells, tunnels, and dreamlike corridors reflects this movement toward confrontation with hidden psychological material; or the shadow self. This movement toward someone or something is what Jung referred to as individuation- the process in which an individual, often through pain and suffering, comes to a certain sense of self-realization. There appears, in the individual, a newfound and profound acceptance that the shadow/dark/negative have been there all along and it is with this new state of presence or awareness, one can continue to develop and eventually, transform and self-realize. There is a forward movement here that suggests that the dark coincides with the light and thus, completes the whole. Essentially, and paradoxically, there is no coming to the light in any other manner than through darkness.

This symbolic descent appears clearly in *A Wild Sheep Chase*. At first the novel reads almost like a strange detective story. The narrator is asked to locate a sheep marked with a distinctive star on its back, and the task initially appears eccentric rather than threatening. Yet as the narrator begins to investigate the history of the sheep, the tone of the narrative gradually shifts. The sheep reveals itself to be something more than an ordinary animal. It functions as a parasitic presence capable of inhabiting human hosts and amplifying their ambitions. It gives power and simultaneously drains life. It animates yet de-energizes. Those who fall under its influence gain extraordinary power, yet they also lose themselves in the process. Once latched onto its host, it is inevitably transformative and at the end, it annihilates- moving on to its next victim. Murakami extends this atmosphere further in *Dance Dance Dance*, where the supernatural element spreads across the entire narrative. The Sheep Man reappears and offers the narrator a strange piece of advice: "You gotta dance. As long as the music plays" (Murakami, 1994, p. 167). The sentence sounds almost absurd, yet it carries a peculiar existential weight. Movement becomes a strategy for survival within a world whose deeper structures often remain opaque. The Dolphin Hotel provides a particularly striking example of this instability. Once an ordinary commercial building, the hotel is reconstructed into a sleek modern structure whose polished surfaces conceal an unsettling emptiness. Beneath the building lies a hidden floor accessible only through a mysterious elevator. When the narrator reaches this hidden space, the corridors appear both familiar and deeply unsettling. The environment resembles the real world yet feels strangely distorted, producing precisely the kind of uncanny experience Freud describes as the moment when something simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar provokes psychological disturbance (Freud, 1955).

Often seen as his Magnus Opus, Murakami's exploration of violence reaches its most disturbing yet central form in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. The protagonist Toru Okada initially appears almost absurdly ordinary. He spends his days cooking pasta and performing small domestic routines. Yet the calm surface of his life gradually begins to fracture and unravel. His wife disappears without explanation. Mysterious phone calls intrude upon his daily routine. At one point an unseen voice calmly announces, "This is the wind-up bird" (Murakami, 1997, p. 24). The novel's most disturbing material emerges through the wartime recollections of Lieutenant Mamiya. In one of the narrative's most shockingly brutal episodes, Mamiya describes witnessing the slow execution of a prisoner - being slowly and 'artistically' skinned/flayed alive- during the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. Murakami recounts the event with remarkable restraint, allowing the horror to unfold methodically rather than dramatically. The violence is not exaggerated; instead it is presented almost clinically. The detachment is purposeful and uncanny; it is horror witnessing itself. This narrative strategy forces both the witness and the

reader to confront the brutality directly. Mamiya later explains that the memory “never left me” (Murakami, 1997, p. 153), suggesting the persistent psychological repetition Freud associated with traumatic experience. For Okada, these stories gradually dissolve the illusion that his life exists independently from the violent forces shaping history. This is historical trauma in its most rigorous form. This trauma, in Jungian terms, is the collective unconscious. Beneath the calm surface of contemporary society lies a buried landscape of suffering and aggression. Okada’s descent into the abandoned well becomes the most literal expression of Murakami’s recurring motif of psychological descent. Sitting alone in darkness, removed from the distractions of ordinary life, Okada begins to experience visions that blur the boundaries between dream, memory, and waking reality. The well, therefore, functions as more than a symbolic setting. It becomes a psychological chamber in which the protagonist confronts elements of himself that had previously remained hidden. These are aspects that have been unconsciously suppressed and avoided. In Jungian terms, this descent resembles the encounter with the shadow—the hidden aspects of the psyche that waking consciousness attempts to repress (Jung, 1969). Yet Murakami refuses to present this confrontation as a moment of clear resolution. Instead the experience remains ambiguous and unsettling. The key here is that Okada emerges not with certainty but with a heightened awareness that identity itself may be far less stable and clear-cut than he once believed. Here, there is no clear narrative climax because the psyche itself does not subscribe to such neat, structurally-explainable resolutions. We as readers are left subtly, yet deeply, uncomfortable.

By the conclusion of these novels it becomes clear that Murakami’s psychological disturbances are not merely signs of dissolution or alienation. Instead they function as a kind of perception, or more likely, a perceptual shift. Because Murakami’s protagonists exist slightly outside the routines of ordinary social life, they become unusually sensitive to disturbances that others overlook. Through encounters with violence, memory, and supernatural brutality, they begin to perceive the secret forces shaping their world. Murakami therefore transforms neurosis into something likened to growth- which can be considered paradoxical. The same psychological instability that initially appears to weaken his characters ultimately becomes the faculty that allows them to glimpse the deeper, previously unexplored meta-structures of reality. This is a key aspect of Jungian individuation. Their descent into darkness becomes the path through which moments of recognition—partial, unsettling, yet profoundly illuminating—become possible. It is self-awareness and/or epiphany through agony of experience, depth of perception, and the forced entry of the layman/anti-hero into the world of the uncanny.

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