

**Thematic Focus and Literary Techniques in Haruki Murakami's Essays
—A Close Reading of Five Essays from *Murakami Asahido Hiho!***

Ning Huang

Ph.D. in English with concentration in English Literary Studies, College of Arts and Science,
Silliman University, Dumaguete 6200, Philippines

Abstract:

This paper closely reads five representative essays from *Murakami Asahido Hiho!*, and systematically summarizes the thematic focus and literary techniques in Haruki Murakami's essays. The article points out that Murakami, with his unique sense of humor and self-deprecating spirit, focuses on themes such as changes of the times, social warmth, the passing of youth, and individual alienation, and is good at extracting universal meaning from daily trivialities. He skillfully uses metaphor, symbolism, detailed description, first-person narration, and multiple quotations to endow the essays with a sense of reality and literariness, flexibly switching between the perspectives of "bystander" and "participant". Murakami fuses fiction and non-fiction within the essay genre, and under a light and lively tone offers profound reflections, presenting the spiritual outlook and way of thinking of the modern Japanese intellectual. On the whole, Murakami's essays not only record the complexity and loneliness of the spiritual world of modern people, but also endow contemporary Japanese essays with new vitality and value.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, essay, modern Japanese literature

1.Introduction

Haruki Murakami is not only renowned as a novelist worldwide, but his essay works also display a unique sense of humor, satire, and profound self-observation (Strecher, 2002). Unlike the common surrealist and philosophical themes in his novels, Murakami's essays pay more attention to the details of real life and the inner states of modern people, sketching out philosophy and warmth in ordinary daily life with a light and carefree tone (Strecher, 2002).

This article selects five representative essays from *Murakami Asahido Hiho!*—*Where Did Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko Go?*, *Unlucky Capricorn*, *The End of the Youthful Mood*, *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture*, and *The Chandler Way*. These five essays, though independent in topic—from the disappearance of advertising images, self-deprecation of astrological fate, to the

fading of youthful memories, humorous observations of daily trivialities, and reflections on writing methods—they all embody Murakami Haruki's core themes and unique style in essay creation.

Through close reading of these five essays, this paper will analyze Murakami Haruki's repeatedly focused themes—such as nostalgia and loss, individual alienation, the passing of time, and the dissolution of a sense of reality in modern life. At the same time, it will explore the artistic techniques he uses in writing, such as humor, metaphor, detailed description, and self-reflective narration, and reflect on how Murakami breaks through the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, individual and society, trivial and philosophical, turning daily experience into thoughtful writing (Strecher, 2002). Through this analysis, the paper attempts to demonstrate Murakami Haruki's special status in contemporary Japanese literature: he is not only a storyteller, but also an observer and thinker who uses essays to capture the spirit of the times, ingeniously blending the ordinary and the extraordinary, playfulness and depth, and writing a spiritual map unique to modern people.

2. Thematic Focus

▪ 2.1 Changes of the Times and Social Warmth—Taking *Where Did Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko Go?* as an Example

In *Where Did Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko Go?*, Haruki Murakami uses the disappearance of the “Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko” cosmetics advertisement as an introduction, and through details full of Murakami-style humor, recalls a kind of social warmth that is gradually fading away. He writes: “When exactly did that advertisement disappear? When I asked the people around me, no one knew. It just disappeared unconsciously, as if someone said ‘now that you mention it’” (Murakami, 2011, p.7). This detail not only reflects the silent retreat of the advertisement, but also symbolizes the silent loss of collective social faith (Rubin, 2012).

Murakami uses the contrast structure of “Miss Shirako” and “Miss Kuroko” as a metaphor for the mutual help and warmth among people in society in the past. He analyzes: “A only reminds B of the state she should be in, and is simply happy that B is in the same situation as herself. I think this is really admirable” (Murakami, 2011, p.8). This setting seems trivial, but reflects the collective fantasy of the “ideal world of postwar democracy” (Rubin, 2012).

However, Murakami keenly observes that with the acceleration of social commodification, “the fantasy itself has thoroughly become a commodity, becoming a new field of investment, rather than a simple thing distributed to everyone freely and equally” (Murakami, 2011, p.8). Past goodwill and warmth have become beautifully packaged goods, idealism gradually dissipates, and what remains is a complex and ambiguous reality. “Where did Miss Shirako and

Miss Kuroko go? This is the theme of this essay. Probably nowhere at all.” (Murakami, 2011, p.10). Ending with a tone of self-deprecation and helplessness, Murakami uses subtle observations of life to reveal the modern proposition of the disappearance of ideals and the complexity of reality.

▪ 2.2 The Absurdity and Self-Deprecation of Daily Life—Taking *Unlucky Capricorn* and *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture* as Examples

In *Unlucky Capricorn*, Haruki Murakami uses relaxed and witty language to talk about astrological fate. He writes that he is “Capricorn type A”, and constantly encounters incompatible marriage and fortune. He self-deprecates: “I have no interest in divination at all... I think it would not be a bad thing for such things to exist in the world, but I don’t want to take the initiative to get involved” (Murakami, 2011, p.11). At the same time, he cannot help but “firmly believe in the astrological theory that ‘the combination of Capricorn and Libra will never be happy’, because it has been completely confirmed in reality” (Murakami, 2011, p.12). Murakami uses the unfortunate marriages of “Capricorn and Libra” friends as arguments, both jokingly saying “what a fool”, and using “Capricorn people, let’s all work hard together, good things should happen sooner or later” (Murakami, 2011, p.15) as an ending, showing Murakami’s characteristic attitude of “knowing there is no solution, but still smiling in the face of it.” This self-deprecation and humor dissolve the helplessness of daily life, and reflect the complex attitude of modern urbanites toward fate, labels, and identity (Gabriel, 2010).

In *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture*, regional observation and character depiction are at the core, reflecting the differences between urban and rural areas and the warmth and coldness of human relationships through many details of life. Murakami writes: “Taxi drivers in Chiba like to chat with passengers more than drivers in Tokyo, and there are more who talk than those who don’t” (Murakami, 2011, p.21). He reveals social stratification and individual identity through conversations with drivers: “The driver glanced at my face in the rearview mirror. ‘Ah—not good, I’ll forget it immediately. So you can’t do that kind of bad thing, maybe you can’t do good things either.’ He answered immediately. I didn’t know whether to be happy or sad, it was really hard to judge” (Murakami, 2011, p.22). These details make the trivialities of life full of absurdity and poetry, and show Murakami’s ability to capture social atmosphere and express his confusion about self-identity from a micro perspective (Gabriel, 2010).

▪ 2.3 Youth, Time, and Self-Perception—Taking *The End of the Youthful Mood* as an Example

In *The End of the Youthful Mood*, Haruki Murakami recalls the moment when he and his friends felt the end of youth. He frankly admits “youth has ended”, and adds: “Almost forty, if I relax my exercise a bit, my side gets slack to the point of worry... My one-time idol Jim

Morrison has long since passed away... Yes, it's middle age, whether I like it or not" (Murakami, 2011, p.16).

Through conversations with friends, Murakami shows details such as "envying my son's future life", and "the dual change of physical strength and mood." "What I mean by the end of youth is this. That is to say... it is through envying my son that I realize youth has ended" (Murakami, 2011, p.17). His frank self-analysis and detailed psychological portrayal deepen youth from a superficial age or appearance into the end of a psychological state and life experience (Nakamura, 2015).

In addition, Murakami describes his mood change while having dinner with a woman who "resembles his former lover", from excitement to helplessness, from nostalgia to relief. He says: "Things cannot be repeated again and again. Meeting by chance, disappearing suddenly, that's all" (Murakami, 2011, p.17). This calm acceptance of the passage of life and the gentle protection of beautiful memories of the past are the core of the time theme in Murakami's works (Nakamura, 2015).

▪ 2.4 Creation, Persistence, and Loneliness—Taking "The Chandler Way" as an Example

In *The Chandler Way*, Haruki Murakami introduces how he maintains his writing state by "daydreaming" in a narrative and humorous tone. He recalls Chandler's writing rule: "Even if you can't write a single line, you must sit at your desk, anyway you have to spend two hours at your desk" (Murakami, 2011, p.26). Murakami reflects: "I originally liked to daydream. When writing novels, I generally adopt this Chandler way. In short, I sit at my desk every day, whether I can write or not, anyway, I daydream at my desk for two hours" (Murakami, 2011, p.27).

He also describes in detail "the branch of yellow flowers and silver grass outside the window swaying constantly in the wind" (Murakami, 2011, p.28), expressing the loneliness, confusion, and occasional inspiration when writing. "After a long time, it feels like my brain is condensed like the dough for pancakes" (Murakami, 2011, p.28). These details truly convey the plainness, bitterness, and pleasure of the writer's daily life, and reflect Murakami's unique understanding of creativity: external adventure and stimulation are not as reliable as internal persistence and waiting. Through self-reflection, humor, and poetic details, Murakami transforms lonely persistence into a kind of survival wisdom for modern intellectuals, and strengthens his unique temperament in modern essays (Suzuki, 2013).

3. Writing Techniques and Artistic Methods

3.1 Humor and Self-Deprecation

In Haruki Murakami's essays, humor and self-deprecation run throughout, and this style is vividly expressed through specific linguistic details (Suzuki, 2013). For example, in *Unlucky Capricorn*, he makes fun of himself as a Capricorn type A: "I always feel that there is probably

nothing more unfortunate in the world than being a Capricorn with type A blood. No matter how I try to divine it, my luck is absolutely never any good... It's always a mess like this" (Murakami, 2011, p.12).

When chatting with friends who are also Capricorn type A, he writes: "All of them repeatedly agree, thoroughly resigned and hopeless because they are Capricorn with type A blood" (Murakami, 2011, p.12). This way of turning "despair" into "repeated agreement" easily resolves the difficulties of life.

In *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture*, Murakami is evaluated by the driver: "Ah—no, I forget immediately. So you can't do that kind of bad thing; maybe you can't do good things either" (Murakami, 2011, p.22). Facing this ambiguous evaluation, he just uses the sentence, "I didn't know whether to be happy or sad, it was really hard to judge," to make fun of himself, turning embarrassment into a joke.

3.2 Metaphor and Symbolism

Murakami is adept at turning the trivial matters of life into metaphors and symbols. For example, in *Where Did Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko Go?*, the setting of the two characters in the advertisement actually becomes a symbol of social ideals and warmth. "A merely reminds B of the state she should be in, and is simply wholeheartedly happy that B is in the same situation as herself without any conditions" (Murakami, 2011, p.8). He further analyzes: "This is the ideal world of postwar democracy that once existed... It is precisely for this reason that Miss Shirako keeps helping Miss Kuroko, Mr. Jinkun keeps helping Mr. Ichiro, and this kind of warmth, for a rather long time, functioned as a series of advertisements with the same pattern" (Murakami, 2011, p.9). The disappearance of the advertisement thus becomes a metaphor for the fading of social warmth and idealism (Tanaka, 2017).

In *The End of the Youthful Mood*, "youth has ended" is not simply a sigh about age. Through the "chance encounter" with a woman who greatly resembled his former lover, he wrote: "Something in me has been lost, has been damaged... it is this mood that disappeared neatly, because of her brief sentence, in that very instant" (Murakami, 2011, p.16). This kind of accidental event becomes a symbol of the turning point of personal growth, the passing of youth, and the irreversibility of life (Tanaka, 2017).

3.3 Detailed Description and Realistic Style

Haruki Murakami's writing excels at meticulously observing and capturing everyday details. In *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture*, he not only describes the appearance and character of the driver, but also handles the dialogue scenes in a vivid and concrete way. "Taxi drivers in Chiba like to chat with passengers more than drivers in Tokyo... 'Isn't there a big house with a pine tree in front of the railroad crossing? That's the landowner's house around here. The son of

that family killed a woman seven years ago and threw her into the sea at Tateyama.’ In this way, he knows everything about local circumstances” (Murakami, 2011, p.23). This kind of detail presentation not only helps to restore the local style, but also brings social human feelings to life on the page.

In *The Chandler Way*, his detailed description of the process of daydreaming is also very concrete: “First, put both hands on the cheeks, press the bottom of the chin with both thumbs, and press the corners of the eyes with the little fingers. Then relax the neck and subtly shift the focal points of both eyes” (Murakami, 2011, p.26). He even uses vivid metaphors for the state inside his brain: “It feels as if my brain pulp is congealing like the dough for making pancakes” (Murakami, 2011, p.28). These trivial and concrete descriptions make the writer’s daily life warm and tangible, enhancing the sense of reality in the text.

3.4 First-Person Narration and Shifting Perspectives

Murakami’s essays adopt a first-person narrative, making the narration highly personal and sincere. For example, in *The End of the Youthful Mood*, when recalling his changing mood while dining with a woman who resembled his former girlfriend, he writes: “Things cannot be repeated again and again. Meeting by chance, disappearing suddenly, that’s all. I am very clear about this. I’m already thirty, and I’ve long understood this kind of reasoning” (Murakami, 2011, p.17). He frankly expresses his “helplessness” and “relief,” directly presenting his individual emotional experience. This kind of “personalized public reflection” gives Murakami’s essays a strong sense of introspection and empathy (Karatani, 1993).

Similarly, in *The Chandler Way*, he directly and frankly shares the helplessness and perseverance in writing as a narrator: “When writing novels, I generally adopt this Chandler way. In short, I sit at my desk every day, whether I can write or not, anyway, I daydream at my desk for two hours” (Murakami, 2011, p.28). He does not hide failure, distress, or confusion, making the creative experience vivid and real.

3.5 Intertextuality and Multiple References

Haruki Murakami extensively quotes advertisements, songs, anecdotes from others, news, and even his own dialogues in his essays, endowing the text with rich layers and a sense of reality (Karatani, 1993). In *Where Did Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko Go?*, he is not content with analyzing just one advertisement, but also cites the “Yomeishu advertisement,” telling the story of “Ichiro-kun” and “Susumu-kun” to enrich the thematic expression. In *Unlucky Capricorn*, he even quotes lyrics, “Sparkling in the night sky / This pitiful constellation / Even if I travel to the ends of the earth / Worries still follow me” (Murakami, 2011, p.8), using popular culture to support his own viewpoint. In *The Chandler Way*, he uses Raymond Chandler’s writing method as a thread to carry out self-analysis of his writing habits. These quotations and

collages not only expand the multiple meanings of the text, but also strengthen its connection with the real world.

4. The Treatment of Themes and the Essay Genre

4.1 Extracting Universal Meaning from Trivialities

Haruki Murakami is always able to excavate the universality of the times and society from extremely ordinary details (Karatani, 1993). In *Where Did Miss Shirako and Miss Kuroko Go?*, he does not simply recall an advertisement, but with the sentence “It was nothing more than an unconscious ‘now that you mention it’ kind of disappearance” (Murakami, 2011, p.9), he expresses the natural fading of a certain social collective memory. Murakami then connects the advertisement model of “Miss Shirako helping Miss Kuroko” with the postwar social ideals of Japan: “In short, this was once the ideal world of postwar democracy, that is: there exists a proper state, and as long as one tries, everyone can reach it” (Murakami, 2011, p.9). He elevates the extremely trivial story of the advertisement to a collective reflection on the disappearance of warmth in an ideal society. The disappearance of the advertisement becomes a symbol of the disappearance of warmth.

In *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture*, from “Taxi drivers in Chiba like to chat with passengers more than Tokyo drivers,” to “The driver glanced at my face in the car mirror. ‘Ah—not good, I’ll forget it immediately’” (Murakami, 2011, p.22), these descriptions of daily details ultimately bring out a deeper understanding of urban-rural differences, social identity, and sense of local belonging (Karatani, 1993).

4.2 Blending Fiction and Non-Fiction

Murakami’s essays lie between autobiography and fiction, often blending fiction and nonfiction (Motohashi, 2014). In *Unlucky Capricorn*, he says, “I once conducted a survey, investigating whether there are fewer famous Capricorns who give a bad impression compared to other zodiac signs” (Murakami, 2011, p.12), thus creating an appearance of a rational survey. Yet at the end he casually concludes: “In conclusion, there are not especially more or fewer people of any particular zodiac sign; the average difference is very small” (Murakami, 2011, p.15). This playful treatment itself is a fusion of fiction and nonfiction.

In *The End of the Youthful Mood*, Murakami writes about having dinner with a woman who “strongly resembles an old lover,” delicately depicting emotional fluctuations and changes of mood, but he admits that this kind of simulated experience is just an illusion. He even deconstructs himself: “To have dinner with her is indeed pleasant and delightful, but after all, it’s a different matter” (Murakami, 2011, p.20). Here, real memories and imagined experiences are intertwined, and personal experience and literary fiction are seamlessly blended (Motohashi, 2014).

4.3 Profound Reflection under a Light Tone

Murakami's essays are gentle and humorous in writing style, but often present the truth of life unintentionally. In *The End of the Youthful Mood*, he narrates the midlife crisis in a teasing tone: "The side of my abdomen is now loose to a somewhat worrying extent... My one-time idol Jim Morrison has long since passed away" (Murakami, 2011, p.20). But at the end, he suddenly turns to calmness and philosophical thinking: "At the same time, the vague state of mind that could more or less be called youth has also come to an end. I can sense that... Why is it that the end of things is so easy and so insignificant" (Murakami, 2011, p.20). This switch between lightness and heaviness is precisely the charm of Murakami's essay style. He is able to switch freely between everyday narration and profound reflection, allowing readers to have a lasting resonance even as they smile knowingly.

4.4 The Dual Identity of "Bystander" and "Participant"

In his essays, Murakami not only displays his personal life as the "protagonist," but also always maintains a calm "outsider's" perspective (Motohashi, 2014). In *The Chandler Way*, he is both an active practitioner who "daydreams for two hours every day" and describes it with a tone of mockery and self-reflection from a distance: "After a long time, it feels as if my brains have condensed like the dough for pancakes. There is always such an illusion" (Murakami, 2011, p.26).

This attitude of self-distance is also reflected in *Unlucky Capricorn*, where he self-mockingly says, "Capricorn folks, let's all work hard together, good things should happen sooner or later" (Murakami, 2011, p.12). While making fun of fate, he still maintains a clear, detached reflection on the social popularity of astrological superstition and marriage dilemmas. In *Taxi Driver in Chiba Prefecture*, he is a "participant" in local life, yet he also examines local scenery and social relations with a fresh eye, switching between the roles of insider and outsider just right.

5. Conclusion

Through a close reading of five essays from *Murakami Asahido Hiho!*, this paper finds that Haruki Murakami is not only a novelist, but also an outstanding essayist. His essays, with their unique humor, self-deprecation, metaphor and symbolism, detailed description, first-person narration, and multiple references, present the warmth and loneliness of modern people in daily life, as well as the complexity and contradiction of the spiritual world (Suter, 2008).

Murakami skillfully blends fiction and non-fiction, the individual and society, the trivial and the philosophical, endowing the essay with new connotations and expressive power (Suter, 2008). His essays record the changes and confusion of the times, explore the loss and pursuit of

the individual, and demonstrate the value and vitality of contemporary Japanese essays (Suter, 2008).

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