

Essay on Haruki Murakami's *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*: The Shadow of America Lurking in the Everyday Order

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The Last Lawn of the Afternoon is one of Haruki Murakami's most important early short stories. In this paper, I avoid conventional arguments, focusing my analysis on the encounter between the middle-aged woman and Boku, and the work's historical backdrop and setting instead. This reveals how Boku's personal experience speaks to the everyday lives of Japanese citizens at the mercy of circumstances in postwar Japan under American influence and international events. It appears that Murakami attempts to convert the personal minority "memories", lurking in the everyday order of postwar Japan, into "novels" as open collaborative stories in his early short stories.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, America's influence, postwar Japan, the student movement, the Vietnam War

The Revised Version of *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*

Haruki Murakami's *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* (Takarajima, 1982, p. 8) is one of his most frequently referenced short stories. He recalls that, "There was quite a big response at the time and many people around me tell me that they personally like this novel" and that "The world of this novel is in a sense complete and assembled" (Complete Works of Haruki Murakami 1979-1989, Vol. 3) (Murakami, 1990a), indicating a fortunate agreement between readers and the author on the work's degree of completion and how to evaluate it. As contemporary author Yōko Ogawa (2000) said,

Having come to write novels myself, I realized even more how rich the story of *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* is. At the same time, I also feel a curious kind of envy toward Haruki Murakami for having written something so beloved. (Ogawa, 2000, p. 104)

Implying that the work enjoys a certain level of appreciation by authors that debuted later, with Haruki Murakami as a benchmark.

This short story seeks to reconstitute the main character Boku's past personal experiences by illuminating them from a present perspective using the terms "memories" and "novel". Moreover, the story's beginning presents the problem of awareness in literary creation, inquiring as to how personal "memories" can be expressed as a "novel", which implies that the short story acts as so-called metafiction.

Past studies, such as that of Jay Rubin (2005), identified the work's appeal as such, "In this short, some important characteristics of Boku, who is stereotypically depicted by Murakami, stand out. He engages in manual labor without using his head, is concerned with details, and heals wounded souls". Moreover, Hideyuki Sakai

(1999) and Yumie Yamane (2005) also focused on Boku's state of mind and center their discussions on changes in how Boku perceives his distance to others.

It is true that the story wants to reframe Boku's personal issue of how he can come to terms with the pain of a broken heart through his dialogue with the middle-aged woman he meets while mowing lawns part-time from Boku's present perspective and from the viewpoint of his relationships with others. Yet, while past studies analyze Boku's personal experience in detail, they treat the middle-aged woman, the facilitator of Boku's change, as little more than a minor character. I believe we need to analyze the history and current situation of the middle-aged woman who requested that her lawn be mowed, as can be discerned from the scene in her suburban house. The title of *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* signifies not only Boku's "last lawn", but also has an important meaning for the middle-aged woman who requested the lawn to be mowed.

Many past studies base their analyses on the text as it first appeared in *Takarajima* magazine. However, Murakami revised the text upon its inclusion in *Murakami Haruki zensakuhin 1979-1989, 3 Tanpen-shū* (Complete Works of Haruki Murakami 1979-1989, Vol. 3) (Murakami, 1990a). In this paper, I call attention to the revised text and analyze the connections between the work's details and its historical backdrop and setting, also including the circumstances of the middle-aged woman. Finally, I would like to explicitly discuss the features of the work that come to light when examining how the analysis relates to the short story's theme.

Haruki Murakami (1990a) shared the background of *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*, as follows:

I came up with this story while mowing the lawn. Anyhow, I thought I would write a story about a lawn being mowed. I was more concerned about depicting the task of lawn mowing itself rather than any plot.

I gave it quite a lot of thought, but in the end, I did not revise the contents much. I just changed some wordings and expressions. (Murakami, 1990a, p. VIII)

Murakami clearly stated, "In the end, I did not revise the contents much". It is true that the text's first publication and its revised version do not differ much. Yet, as I will discuss later, some revisions cannot be overlooked and lend definite meaning to the work.

The revised version, much more than the original, vividly reveals America's influence on postwar Japan as reflected in the solitary middle-aged woman's day to day life.

The Setting

Let us first look at the story's structure.

If we assume that the narrative present of the story is 1982 when the work was released, the recollected events of 14-15 years prior should have taken place in 1967-1968. At that time, Boku was an 18-19 year-old student who mows lawns part-time, and he is in a long-distance relationship with a lover around the same age; however, he receives a breakup letter. The middle-aged woman who requested that her lawn be mowed is of a large build, around 50, and seems to be an alcoholic. She tells Boku about her dead husband who was good at mowing lawns and her missing daughter who is around Boku's age.

The story is set in the summer, and it is Boku's last day for mowing lawns, "The rainy season really made lawns grow like crazy". It is "the 14th" and the start of the summer vacation, so we can identify the date as July 14.

The scenes are set at Boku's company Kyodo in Setagaya-ku and the house where Boku mows the lawn, in Tama-ku, Kawasaki, close to Yomiuri Land.

The *middle-aged woman*, whom *Boku* would not have met had he not been mowing lawns, lives by herself in a house close to Yomiuri Land, and it is depicted as follows:

My destination address turned out to be up in the hills. Gentle, stately hills, rolling down to rows of zelkova trees on either flank. In one yard, two small boys in their birthday suits showering each other with a hose. The spray made a strange little two-foot rainbow in the air. From an open window came the sound of someone practicing the piano....

It seemed a nice enough little house: cream-colored plaster wall with a square chimney of the same color sticking up from right in the middle of the roof. White curtains hung in the windows, which were framed in gray, though both were sun-bleached beyond belief. It was an old house, a house all the more becoming for its age. The sort of house, you often find at summer resort....

The yard was enclosed by a waist-high French-brick wall under a rosebush hedge. (Murakami, 1993, p. 276)

This is a depiction of a peaceful, calm scene in a typical high-end suburban residential area. Moreover, the destination is "an old house", depicted as such to convey a long passage of time.

The Odakyu Line, connecting Shinjuku, Tokyo with Odawara, has a station called Yomiuriland-mae, which used to be called Nishi Ikuta. It was renamed Yomiuriland-mae with the opening of the Yomiuri Land Amusement Park in 1964, some years prior to the events recollected (1967-1968) in *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*.

Yomiuri Land Amusement Park was developed as a large suburban amusement park with golf courses and a recreational park to the west of Tokyo, in the south of Tama Hills. It was created by Matsutarō Shōriki (1885-1969), the president of Yomiuri Shimbun and Nippon Television, in imitation of American recreational parks (Yomiuri Land, 1989). The details of the park's complex development process are described in Hidetoshi Shibata's *Sengomasukomikaiyūki* (Postwar Mass Media Excursion Record). Tama Hills, the area surrounding Yomiuri Land Amusement Park, was littered with ammunition depots, bacteriological weapon research institutes, and various other military facilities until the World War II since the Japanese military used the land¹. After the war, most of the facilities and the expansive grounds were confiscated by America, and there were still golf courses, residential houses, hospitals, etc. for use of American soldiers stationed in Japan. Yomiuri Land Amusement Park was developed in this historical space and the whole area was eventually developed as a suburban residential area named after the amusement park.

The American Husband and the Missing Daughter

As we have seen, Haruki Murakami recalls about his revision of *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*, "I gave it quite a lot of thought, but in the end, I did not revise the contents much". However, he did make an important revision regarding the setting of Yomiuri Land. This is how the paragraph where Boku takes a lunch break from lawn mowing at 12:00 and the middle-aged woman brings out a sandwich looked in the original version.

¹ A large number of military facilities, such as the Army's Ninth Technology Research Institute (currently the Noborito Research Institute Museum for Peace Education, Meiji University), the Tama Gunpowder Factory, the Tama Ammunition Depot, an Army Fuel Factory, the Tama Army Technology Research Institute, the Chōfu Airfield, the Nakajima Aircraft Company Mitaka Research Institute, and the Tokyo Sanatorium for Disabled Veterans, were scattered all over the area.

I enjoyed the sandwich, ham, lettuce, and cucumber, with a tang of mustard. Excellent sandwich, I told her. Sandwiches were the only things she was good at, she said. She did not eat a bite though, just nibbled at a pickle, and devoted the rest of her attention to her beer. She was not especially talkative, nor did I have anything worth bringing up. (Murakami, 1993, p. 280)

The revised version divides this single passage in two, and the scene's depiction becomes almost twice as long.

Her ham, lettuce, and cucumber sandwich was much more delicious than it looked. Excellent sandwich, I told her. I have always been good at making sandwiches, she said. I cannot do anything else, but I am good at sandwiches. My late husband is an American and he had sandwiches every day. He was happy as long as he had sandwiches to eat.

She did not eat a bit of sandwich, just nibbled at a pickle, and devoted the rest of her attention to the beer. It did not seem like she enjoyed it. I looked like she drank it because she had no choice. We sat by the table, eating a sandwich and drinking a beer. Yet she did not say anything more, nor did I have anything worth bringing up. (Murakami, 1990b, p. 126)

We should note here that the revised version specifies her husband as being "an American". The original version is also filled with depictions that lead us to suspect that the husband is American and not Japanese. It mentions that the middle-aged woman is of large build, that she lives in a Western-style suburban house, that the kitchen's "electrical appliances are all old" and "the huge fridge is humming loudly", and that "Whenever my husband got any time off, he would always be mowing the lawn". Norihiro Katō's (2011) study on the original text points out that, "It is strange that we for some reason are left with the impression that this large-built woman's husband was an American soldier or former soldier".

While the original version only encourages speculation, Haruki Murakami's revised version clearly specifies that the dead husband is "an American", making it an important keyword for interpreting the story. As already discussed with regard to the setting, the area surrounding Yomiuri Land is intimately connected to postwar America, especially the American military; we can assume that her husband was an American soldier who came to Japan after the war.

The middle-aged woman is depicted as follows (no changes were made in the revision):

It took a third ring before the front door slowly opened and a middle-aged woman emerged. A huge woman. Now, I am not so small myself, but she must have been a good inch and a half taller than me. And broad at the shoulders, too. She looked like she was plenty angry at something. She was around 52, I would say. No beauty certainly, but a presentable face. Although, of course, by "presentable" I do not mean to suggest that hers was the most likable face. Rather thick eyebrows and a squarish jaw attested to a stubborn, never-go-back-on-your-word temperament. (Murakami, 1993, p. 277)

The fact that she is "a good inch and a half" taller than Boku corroborates her marriage to an American, but here I want to draw attention to her age, "She was around 50".

After the lawn has been mowed, she takes Boku to the second floor of her house. He describes her daughter's room, "The bedroom was your typical teenage girl's room". Further, he guesses that the missing daughter "Goes to a women's college or junior college". From this, we can infer that the missing daughter is around 18-19 years old, the same age as Boku and his ex-lover. This means that the middle-aged woman, who is "around 50" in 1967-1968, must have given birth to her daughter around 1950, when she was about 30. If so, we can assume that she married her American husband in the late 1940s or around 1950, and that the two met in occupied Japan under the control of the General Headquarters/Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ/SCAP).

In other words, we can assume that her husband was an American soldier who came to Japan during the postwar occupation, met a Japanese woman, and moved to Yomiuri Land, not far from American military facilities, after they got married. However, it is also possible that he came to Japan due to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

If this is the case, the fact that the missing daughter is a half-Japanese, half-American girl born to an American military man and a Japanese woman of large build is an important point in this story.

The Historical Backdrop of 1967–1968

As Boku is on his way to his last job in the compact van, he listens to rock “n” roll on his transistor radio. The narrator adds that “An Far East Network (FEN) news-caster was stumbling over a rapid-fire list of the most impossible-to pronounce Vietnamese place-names”.

It was a radio broadcast for American soldiers stationed in Japan that started in 1945 (The name changed to AFN in 1997 when the American Forces Network integrated global broadcasts). Here, the text suggests a report about the Vietnam War. The war intensified and the anti-war movement gained force in the late 1960s. This FEN report, while included casually, fulfills an important function as it conveys information about the period in which *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* is set.

Boku was mowing lawns in 1967-1968, when the Japanese student movement, along with the anti-American movement including resistance against the Security Treaty and the Vietnam War, were reaching their respective peaks. Eiji Oguma (2009) had demonstrated in detail how the more diligent students tended to take the resistance against the Security Treaty and the anti-American movement seriously.²

The missing daughter started university right at this time. Her room is described, “Stacked on the desk were notebooks and two dictionaries, French and English. Both looked well used”. This indicates that the daughter was a serious student who diligently studied language. If so, we can easily imagine that she must have seriously and self-consciously engaged with tendencies toward *Security Treaty* resistance and anti-Americanism in her university’s student movement. For example, the diary Etsuko Takano³, who became involved in the student movement upon beginning university, reveals her attitude of earnestly wanting to engage with the student movement at the time, providing a candid account of how she came to grips with and interacted with it.

The middle-aged woman’s daughter’s room is again described, “A finger run over the desktop became white with dust, a whole month’s worth. The calendar still read June”. This implies that the daughter went missing about one month before Boku’s visit. While it is unclear whether she was missing or dead, we can conjecture that the reason for her disappearance very much has to do with the student movement’s anti-warism and anti-Americanism, given her inescapable fate as half-Japanese, half-American. The daughter’s race may have caused friction with other students in the anti-American movement, and revealed her hidden sense of guilt in relation to them. She may or may not have been attacked on campus for being half-American, but it is easy to imagine that she suffered because of her heritage. If her father had been in the American military, her pain must

² Eiji Oguma examines not only the social effects of the student movement, but the particulars of the mentality and actual circumstances of the students involved as well, which makes it possible to somewhat speculate about the missing daughter’s state of mind from the context of that time.

³ Refer to Etsuko Takano, *Nijussai no genten* (My Starting Point at Age Twenty) (Shinchōsha, 5. 1971); *Nijussai no gentenjoshō* (Prologue to My Starting Point at Age Twenty) (Shinchōsha, 6. 1974).

have grown in the midst of anti-American activities in response to the Vietnam War.

We find the following account in Murakami's short story, *Tony Takitani* (Bungeishunshū, 1990, p. 362).

For the child himself, though, living with a name like that was tough. The other kids at school teased him as a half-breed, and whenever he told people his name, they responded with a look of puzzlement or distaste. Some people thought it was a bad joke, and others reacted with anger. For certain people, coming face to face with a child called "Tony Takitani" was all it took to reopen old wounds. (translated by Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin, 2006)

This recollection of how Tony was bullied and hated by others because of his name suggests that he is half-American. The middle aged woman's half-American daughter started university when the Vietnam War was intensifying and Japanese student movement's anti-warism and anti-Americanism was at its peak, so I suspect the daughter was confronted with the historical circumstances of American/Japanese postwar society, and keenly felt its resulting pressures. By defining the dead father as "an American" in his revised version, Murakami wanted to represent these historical circumstances more clearly. If so, the revised text may imply that the daughter's disappearance is due to her suicide. Her mother, the middle-aged woman's dependence on alcohol one month after her disappearance maybe indicative of this possibility.

If we accept this argument, the middle-aged woman has been dealt an exceedingly bad hand by Japan's postwar situation. Her marriage to an American soldier should have ensured an abundant, luxurious life in her Western-style house after the war. The house, built in a hill countryside outside Tokyo, is adjacent to an area seized by the American military. This is very much evident in the depiction of her house as the sort you find in summer resorts, surrounded by a "French-brick wall" and "a rosebush hedge" in the elevated high-end residential area Yomiuri Land, named for a recreational park in imitation of American parks. The woman must have believed that her domestic everyday order would be guaranteed in postwar Japan since she married an American, acquired an American-style lifestyle surrounded by a lawn garden and major household appliances, and led an abundant and peaceful life in the suburbs. Yet the aspiration to live an American-style life and the tragicomedy that follows is also plainly depicted in *Hōyōkazoku* (Embracing Family) (Kōdansha, 1965) by Nobuo Kojima, a Japanese contemporary author liked by Murakami. By mowing the lawn, Boku comes into contact with America's shadow, lurking in a house suited to peaceful and happy living.

The Significance of Boku's Lawn Mowing

Boku steps from a peaceful suburban life, illuminated by the bright midsummer sun, into the shadow of a middle-aged woman's house. He no longer needs to work due to his lover's breakup letter, but he decides to mow one last lawn when his manager begs him. He mows the lawn, not to better his financial situation, but to complete his job properly. As Boku performs an unselfish act in exchange for heartache, he spends a few hours with a pitiful, suffering middle-aged woman, who seemingly leads a rich life. She tells Boku,

My late husband was fussy about the lawn, you know. Always did a crack job himself. Very much like the way you work....

The interior of the house was just as deathly quiet as before. Ducking in from the flood of summer afternoon light so suddenly, I felt my eyes tingle from deep behind my pupils. Darkness-in a dim, somehow dilute solution-washed through the place, a darkness that seemed to have settled in decades ago. (Murakami, 1993, p. 281)

This woman, who first lost her husband, then her daughter, now depends on alcohol to combat her loneliness and sense of loss, is filled with nostalgia due to Boku's way of mowing the lawn, which reminds her of her husband.

"What did you think?" Asked the woman, eyes still fixed on the window. "You know, about the girl ..."

General impressions are good enough. Whatever comes to mind? Anything you would care to say, any little bit at all. (Murakami, 1993, p. 286)

Her excruciatingly painful wish to have someone else recognize and recreate the figure of her missing daughter is fulfilled, for a moment, by imaginative Boku's words.

"You're pretty much on target," she said blankly, "pretty much on target ..."

"Uh-huh," the woman said after a moment's pause. "I see what you're saying." (Murakami, 1993, p. 287)

These abrupt words suggest that she experiences a moment of tepid salvation by sharing a moment with Boku, and remembering her daughter as she was before she went missing (and probably dying).

Takeshi Ōkawa (2008) pointed out that "distance" is a consistent motif in this short story, and it appears that the "distance" to Yomiuri Land perceived by Boku represents him coming into contact with Japan's postwar history under GHQ/SCAP occupation, a history that seems temporally "distant", on learning about the sadness of the middle-aged woman's past and present. At the same time, he also comes to feel that the ongoing war in Vietnam, a spatially "distant" location, is indirectly relevant to him as he glimpses the context of the daughter's disappearance. *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* can be considered a story in which Boku comes to recognize that things temporally and spatially "distant" are not actually unrelated to him; this happens through a brief chance encounter with the middle-aged woman.

All I wanted, it came to me, was to mow a good lawn. To give it an once-over with the lawn mower, rake up the clippings and then trim it nice and even with clippers-that is all. And that, I can do. Because that's the way I feel it ought to be done.

"Is not that right?" I spoke out loud.

No answer. (Murakami, 1993, p. 290)

In exchange for heartache, Boku comes to earnestly "mow a good lawn" and briefly shares a woman's sense of loss and loneliness, thus happening in on an opportunity to face her sadness of having been at the mercy of Japan's postwar history while confronting his own feelings of loss.

Conclusion: "Memories" and the "Novel"

Essays and diaries depicting Japan's student movement from the perspective of its participants, such as Kōhei Oku's *Seishun no bohyō* (Gravestone of Youth) (Bungeishunshū, 1965), Kaoru Shōji's *Akazukin-chanki o tsukete* (Be careful little red riding hood) (Chūōkōron, 1969), Etsuko Takano's *Nijussai no genten* (My starting point at age twenty) (Shinchōsha, 1971), Masahiro Mita's *Bokuttenani* (What am I?) (Kawadeshobō, 1977), and Ryū Murakami's *69: Sixty-nine* (Shūeisha, 1989), are well-known in Japan. These are all subjective accounts based on either memory of the main character's experiences or part of the author's own history.

By contrast, *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* depicts a moment of resonance following a brief encounter between Boku, who has almost no relation to the student movement, and the middle-aged woman, whom he

would not usually meet because of age difference. By meeting the widowed middle-aged woman who has experienced the postwar situation firsthand and now lives by herself in a suburban residential area he would not visit outside of his job, Boku comes to experience how social circumstances he felt were temporally and spatially “distant” are in fact connected to his late-teen self. Yet, he probably would not have been able to so naturally approach the agony of a woman so different in age and circumstances without his own concrete experience of painful and unreasonable personal loss due to heartache.

In response to her question “What’s the date today?” he replies, “The 14th,” meaning, as we confirmed in the beginning, that the day of the lawn mowing is July 14. This day also commemorates the French Revolution, and a military parade is held every year in Paris. It is well-known that Vietnam was once a French colony and before post-World War II American intervention, was even governed by Japan. I doubt that Murakami coincidentally set *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* on July 14. It is a story about *Boku*’s memories of and self-awareness about a special experience taking place at the point of July 14, 1967/1968, where the spatial X-axis of the Vietnam War and the historical Y-axis intersect.

If so, it is possible to question the validity of the assessment that Haruki Murakami has gone “from detachment to commitment” from the perspective of his early short stories. *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon* can be said to be a story of how the heartbroken student Boku discovers, wholly as an individual, the everyday life of the people who has been at the mercy of the postwar situation in Japan under American influence and amidst international events.

At the beginning of the story, Boku of the present (1982) reminisced about 14-15 years back, and the interposition of fiction here suggests the possibility of sharing personal minority “memories” with many people.

So as things went, looking at these junior-high-school kids every day, one day it struck me. They were all just fourteen or fifteen years old. It was a minor discovery for me, something of a shock. Fourteen or fifteen years ago, they were not even born; or if they were, they were little more than semiconscious blobs of pink flesh....

I really meant it. *Phew*.

Me, back fourteen or fifteen years ago, I was mowing lawns. (Murakami, 1993, p. 269)

Boku sees a group of junior-high-school students and remembers when “they” were born. I suspect the reason he frames the students as a collective “they” here is that he uses his “memories” of 14-15 years back to create a generational story. I think that by summoning his “memories” from a collective “they”, this opening episode suggests that his personal experience in 1967-1968 will be disclosed to the reader as a story about when “I was mowing lawns.”

In *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*, through the phrase “Memory is like fiction: or else it is fiction that is like memory”, Haruki Murakami attempts to convert personal minority “memories” lurking in the everyday order of postwar Japan into a “novel” as an open collaborative story as early as in 1982.

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