

Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders – an interpretation on the role of those iconic images in Haruki Murakami’s novel, *Kafka on the Shore*

Tomáš JURKOVIČ*

【要旨】『海辺のカフカ』におけるジョニー・ウォーカーとカーネル・サンダースの意味

ユルコビチ・トマーシュ

村上春樹の小説の中には数多くのブランド品が登場するが、2002年出版の『海辺のカフカ』までは、その言及を、現在の日本の状況に対する作家の批判として解釈することが可能であった。『海辺のカフカ』以前の作品では、贅沢なブランド品を舞台装置として構成された世界によって、その中に存在する消極的な主人公が抑圧される傾向が明らかであった。

一方、その消極的な主人公に対して、『海辺のカフカ』における田村カフカという主人公は、積極的に努力を重ねながら、自分の運命を切り開こうとしている傾向がある。この主人公の変化に従って、主人公をとりまく贅沢世界の代表者も変化を表す。以前の舞台装置のようなものとは異なり、ジョニー・ウォーカーとカーネル・サンダースというアイコンの形をとり、積極的な行動を取り始める。単なる「舞台装置」から、物事を動かせる登場人物になるのである。ウォーカーも、サンダースも、おとぎ話あるいは神話に登場する魔法使いのような役割で、カフカを成長させるのを手助けする。カフカの取った積極的な態度に反応しながら、彼らは逆に両親からの圧倒的な精神的影響を乗り越えさせるような刺激をカフカに与える。このように、『海辺のカフカ』は村上春樹の作家としての「転向」の典型的な例として捉えることができる。

If the title of this conference is *Consumption and Consumerism in Japanese Culture*, among contemporary Japanese writers, Haruki Murakami seems a very interesting choice to discuss. Almost everyone who has tried to read some of Murakami’s novels cannot overlook frequent mention of worldwide known brand-name products of consumption. For some readers these even became a pretext to label the author as an un-Japanese one. This mention of products can be interpreted as the author’s attempt to describe contemporary Japanese reality in quite an ironic and rather critical way. Murakami has until recently kept this stance in most of his novels. However, his *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) brought a dramatic innovation when two strange characters, Johnnie Walker, known to everybody from whisky labels, and Colonel Sanders, the icon of KFC, appeared and taking the form of living people, began to influence the development of the story.

In this paper I would first like to briefly explain, supported by quotations of selected passages, of what I consider to be a typical “Murakamian” way to handle the problematic of consumption and consumerism in his writing.

* Graduate Student

Theories and History of the Literatures of Asian and African Countries Charles University, Prague

After that, I am going to demonstrate with other quoted examples how this typical attitude of Murakami changed when Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders showed up in the novel, *Kafka on the Shore*. I will first concentrate on how these two characters are presented to the reader and their role in the development of the novel. Finally, I offer an interpretation of the meaning their arrival may have in the context of Murakami's previous depictions of consumerism in contemporary Japan.

1. Haruki Murakami and his portrayal of Japanese consumerism before *Kafka on the Shore*: Stage set to the personal dramas

In his novels and stories Haruki Murakami expresses a rather critical stance on consumerism in Japan. As a means to do this, he frequently uses various ways of describing the contrast between the world of the modern Japanese city, in which the protagonists live, and between their actual lives.

The material world Murakamian protagonists inhabit often contains many worldwide known brand-name products of consumption. Large amounts of branded items are mentioned, from music and films to clothes and food. Murakamian protagonists live in a world of luxury.

Contrary to possible expectations, this world of luxury does not in any way pamper the protagonists, but turns out to be a threat to them, or, in the best situation, to be full of difficult tasks to be solved. Consequently, the protagonists do not like their "world of luxury" very much – they criticize it, comment on it sarcastically, they feel depressed by it and they by no means consider it to be the place to live a happy life. In this way, the products of consumption mentioned so frequently in Murakami's fiction can in general be considered mere parts of a stage set, in which the real drama of the story takes place. Let us next discuss some examples.

The protagonists of *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Dance Dance Dance* find themselves to their unpleasant surprise either living in the world completely manipulated by political forces behind the advertising and television industry, or having their nostalgic old places destroyed by the construction of luxurious hotels.

Toru from *Norwegian Wood* misses love, represented here by Naoko, desperately all the time during his living in Tokyo and is by no means happy, when visiting luxurious bars in Shinjuku with his wealthy "friend" Nagasawa, whose presence makes it easy for him to seduce girls and have everything a young student could ask for. Similarly, Hajime from *South of the Border, West of the Sun* has everything anybody can possibly dream of – his own flat both in Tokyo and in Hakone, two jazz bars to earn him more money he can spend, an expensive BMW to drive – just to find himself unable to get the only true love of his life.

In the *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, the anonymous protagonist works hard and dreams of the easy life he will be able to afford in the future only to discover his seemingly perfect job actually cost him all, including his own life. In one of the most moving scenes of the novel, he looks over his destroyed apartment just in the same way as if he had looked over his own destroyed life, and it is clear he fully recognizes the vanity of his life. It almost seems that he mocks all the former so called Japanese economic miracle with stress put on owning things: televisions, cars, and air conditioning, among others:

"Looking at the assortment of debris around me, I was reminded of a near-future world turned wasteland buried

deep in its own garbage. A science fiction novel I'd read. Well, my apartment looked like that. Shredded suit, broken videodeck and TV, pieces of a flowerpot, a floor lamp bent out of shape, trampled records, tomato sauce, ripped-out speaker wires, ... Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy novels spattered with dirty vase water, cut gladioli lying in memorium on a fallen cashmere sweater with a blob of Pelikan ink on the sleeve... All of it, useless garbage.

When microorganisms die, they make oil, when huge timbers fall, they make coal. But everything here was pure, unadulterated rubbish that didn't make anything. Where does a busted videodeck get you?" (Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World p. 165, translation Alfred Birnbaum.)

2. Kafka on the Shore: From stage sets to actors

Such detachment, expressed by the protagonist toward the "world of luxury" he has to live in, is of course possible to find even in *Kafka on the Shore*. For example, the protagonist, who is here a young boy called Kafka Tamura, feels disturbed by living with his authoritative father who gives him everything he needs, but at the same time, destroys and manipulates him. One significant difference between *Kafka on the Shore* and the novels mentioned above is that Kafka Tamura refuses to passively accept his fate, so typical for the former Murakamian protagonists. He decides to change himself and the novel describes his effort to do so. Kafka decides to leave his home. He tries to become "the toughest 15 year old boy" in the world, to leave his old father-directed life behind and to live on his own, even if this means living very modestly, and he does so. In this way, *Kafka on the Shore* can be read as a Bildungsroman, an education novel, and this is supported even by the fact that the reason Kafka Tamura leaves his father, is expressed at another level of the novel in a symbolic way by describing his effort to escape from the oedipal prediction his father had told him.

This active effort of the protagonist is one of most important features of the novel. Kafka, quite contrary to the protagonists mentioned before, does not just "sit and wait." He does not stay helplessly paralyzed in one place. To fulfill his task, he keeps moving all the time from place to place. The novel starts with the beginning of his journey, and this journey continues to the end of the novel. His continuous activity also seems to be connected to a huge amount of some kind of "spiritual energy," which dramatically affects the lives of a few people who happen to live nearby him, making them, sometimes even against their will, go and help Kafka to continue his journey. This movement is to fulfill the oedipal prediction on the one hand, but also to destroy the evil power of his father on the other hand.

This is the kind of situation in which Murakami developed a very interesting new role for representatives of branded goods. Similarly to the active protagonist Kafka Tamura, neither of the representatives is simply a mere stage decoration, among which the drama just takes place. Murakami lets the branded goods, in the form of the iconic characters of Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders, rise from mere stage set items to the status of real "actors." Former passive symbols of consumption suddenly take seemingly humanlike form and start to play an active role in the development of the story.

Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders, originally mere trademark symbols, suddenly become humanlike in the novel and start to act. Their role in the novel is obvious: they are forces to *make things happen*. They are the part of the spiritual energy. When it seems that Kafka has escaped safely to Shikoku and it is impossible for him to kill his

father, the negative energy he struggles with takes the form of Johnnie Walker and forces the old Nakata to do the killing instead.

Here is how Johnnie Walker introduces himself to Nakata in the novel:

“My name is Johnnie Walker. Johnnie Walker. Almost everyone knows who I am. Not to boast, but I am famous the world over. An iconic figure, you might say. I’m not the real Johnnie Walker, mind you. I have nothing to do with the British distilling company. I have just borrowed his appearance and name. A person’s got to have an appearance and name, don’t you think?” (*Kafka on the Shore*, p. 164, transl. Philip Gabriel. Underlining added for emphasis.)

Colonel Sanders, on the other hand, does not seem to be such a destructive character as Johnnie Walker. His task is not to make anybody die. However, his role is basically the same: he also has to make things happen and thus make Kafka's journey possible to allow him to develop in the required way. Colonel Sanders enables Nakata to open the mysterious entrance to let Kafka confront his lost mother. He manages to do so by making Hoshino, Nakata's young companion, steal an “entrance stone” from a Shinto shrine in Takamatsu. His introducing himself to Hoshino resembles, to a great extent, the self-introduction of Johnnie Walker. Exactly like Walker, Sanders also openly admits he is not the “real” Sanders, but just an imaginary force to make things happen in the way they should.

“Are you really Colonel Sanders?”

... “Not really. I am just taking on his appearance for a time.” ... “Basically, I do not have a name or a shape. ... Since I don’t have a shape I can become anything I want. ... This time I decided to take on a familiar shape, that of a famous capitalist icon. I was toying with the idea of Mickey Mouse, but Disney are particular about the rights to their characters. ... I don’t have a character. Or any feelings. ... I am kind of an overseer, supervising something to make sure it fulfills its original role.” (*Kafka on the Shore*, p 371 – 372, transl. Philip Gabriel. Underlining added for emphasis.)

3. Conclusion: Helpers for the struggling protagonist

Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders as “living” representatives of brand-named goods in *Kafka on the Shore* can be considered as a result of the openly “dynamic” quality of the plot, whose protagonist, Kafka Tamura, differs very much from the previous Murakamian heroes in the active stance he takes on his own fate. Kafka desperately struggles to make his life better, or, to overcome the *violent metaphysical, symbolic storm* of his life (*Kafka on the Shore* p 5, translation Philip Gabriel.), as Murakami describes Kafka's situation at the beginning of the novel. From the very beginning of this original *Bildungsroman*, it is therefore clearly confirmed by the author that we should read this novel as a *symbolic and metaphorical* story, which means a symbolic and metaphorical expression of a coming-of-age-story, set in contemporary Japan. Later in the novel we are told that what seems to us at first sight to be Johnnie Walker or Colonel Sanders, is actually something that only uses the appearance of Johnnie Walker or Colonel Sanders. That is, Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders are just parts of the *symbolic and metaphorical storm*, which Kafka feels in his heart he must make it through. In a way, they are as well parts of Kafka himself. In a principle known from fairy tales where the protagonist's deeds can make some magical helper appear, the question is in

Kafka on the Shore if Kafka Tamura's emotions and inner problems, just because they are so strong, cause a similar response in the whole story. Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders are two metaphorical *magic helpers*, sent to Kafka not to stray from his predicted way, which is the only way to solve his problems. Kafka's active effort generated their appearance. That is, Kafka Tamura had, thanks to his effort, forced, in a "metaphysical way," the vain "world of luxury" around himself to become his active helper. He managed to change what his predecessors in former novels just hated or felt depressed about.

Bibliography

- Bremond, Claude: *Logika narativních možností*, in *Znak, struktura, vyprávění*, Host, Brno 2002
- Rubin, Jay: *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, The Harvill Press, London 2003
- Murakami, Haruki: *Hitsuji wo Meguru Bouken*, Kodansha Bunko, Kodansha, Tokyo Oct. 1985
- Murakami, Haruki: *Sekai no Owari to Hardboiled Wonderland*, Shincho Bunko, Shinchosha, Tokyo Oct. 1988
- Murakami, Haruki: *Norway no Mori*, Kodansha Bunko, Kodansha, Tokyo Apr. 1991
- Murakami, Haruki: *Dance, Dance, Dance*, Kodansha Bunko, Kodansha, Tokyo Dec. 1991
- Murakami, Haruki: *Kokkyo no Minami, Taiyou no Nishi*, Kodansha Bunko, Kodansha, Tokyo Oct. 1992
- Murakami, Haruki: *Umibe no Kafka*, Shinchosha, Tokyo Jan. 2003
- Murakami, Haruki: *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, New York, London: Kodansha English Library, 1991, English translation Alfred Birnbaum
- Murakami, Haruki: *Kafka on the Shore*, Vintage Books, London 2005, English translation Philip Gabriel