

# The Significance of Translating for Murakami Haruki

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### Introduction

Murakami Haruki is one of the most famous writers in Japan. After he published his maiden work “Kaze no uta o kike”, his popularity has been continuing to grow. His most popular work “Norwegian wood” sold more than ten million copies and became bestseller novel in Japan. Most of his works are translated into many languages and read by people all over the world. Above all, people in the US show the biggest preference for Murakami’s work. It is said that Murakami is a Japanese writer who is more probable to get a Nobel prize than any other Japanese writer. However, his achievement was not only his own novels but also his translation of foreign literature. I will explain the significance of translating for him in this paper.

### Background of Murakami

Murakami entered the first literature course of Waseda university and studied in movie drama department. He wanted to have a job related to movies, but at that time, the Japanese movie industry was really in a slump<sup>1</sup>, so he had no chance to work in movie industry. Nevertheless, he liked jazz, too, so, he opened a jazz café “Peter Cat”.

Seven years later, he decided to be a novelist and started to write while he was working at the café. The interesting point of his background is he did not receive any writing education in school. He said he learned the basis of writing by translating foreign literature.

Another important thing is I had neither a mentor of writing nor friends who like literature in my life so far. So, I had to learn how to write a novel, and make my own style from almost nothing but myself. As a result, to translate good text became my “writing training”, in other word, translating was my “writing pilgrimage<sup>1</sup>”.

In sequel of this passage, he also said his novels would have been much different if he hadn’t found translating. He started to translate English books into Japanese as a hobby in senior high school. Although he didn’t like English class at school, he loved translating foreign literature especially F Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Carver. Although most students in his high school were not interested in foreign literature, Murakami liked doing something many people didn’t do. Translating is one of the best memories of his adolescence<sup>2</sup>. And furthermore, “writing pilgrimage” is an important word to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Murakami Haruki. *Murakami Haruki honyaku hotondo zen shigoto*, chuoukouronsinsha, 2017, 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Murakami Haruki. *Murakami Haruki honyaku hotondo zen shigot*. chuoukouronsinsha, 2017, 8-9.

Murakami more deeply. Pilgrimage has been used as a main plot of his novel many times. For example, in “*Shikisai motanaitazakitukurutosonojunreinotoshi*”, Tazaki Tsukuru who is a main character of this book set off on his journey to meet his friends in senior high school one by one after he got old. He once considered himself as “colorless” which means nothing special, but in his pilgrimage, he found he played an essential role within a group of friends and decided to live life in his own way. In “*Umibenokahuka*”, the main character overcame a trauma of his father after a runaway from home by meeting many people living with their own existential angsts. Murakami’s characters grow up from pilgrimage. So, pilgrimage is a symbol of growing. He considers his translation as “writing pilgrimage”. It means he considers translation as growing. He improved his writing skill through translating like painters learn how to paint by copying others’ works. And he got old while translating. What foreign literature influenced is not only his novel but also his philosophy and attitude. He got his own points of view from foreign literature. It makes his novels unique.

## The Great Gatsby

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In this section, I will refer to one translation that particularly influenced Murakami. He started publishing his translations in 1981, two years after his Debut, and still continues today. The number of his translation is more than 60, but “The Great Gatsby” is very special one among them. The first book he translated is Scott Fitzgerald’s “My Lost City”. Murakami said Scott Fitzgerald acted as an incentive to start translating<sup>3</sup>. Especially “The Great Gatsby” was his favorite. This book is often referred in his novel.

He wanted to know what I was reading and I told him Gatsby.

Interesting? He asked. Interesting enough for me to read it three times through and still feel tingles. “Any guy who reads The Great Gatsby three times through has gotta be okay with me,” he said,

From “Norwegian Wood” translated by Alfred Birnbaum<sup>4</sup>

Murakami’s typical characters are the person who loved foreign literature and music. I think Murakami reflects himself in his characters. And most of his characters graduated in private prestigious universities. In my perspective, it is related to the fact that Murakami graduated Waseda university. It is easier to imagine the life which is similar to Murakami’s one than the life which is totally different from his. That’s why Murakami’s

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<sup>3</sup> Murakami Haruki and Motoyuki Shibata. *honyakuyawa*, bunshunshinsho, 1996, 56-57

<sup>4</sup> Murakami Haruki. *Norwegian Wood* translated by Alfred Birnbaum, Kodansha English Library, 1990, 59

characters are real and vivid. Besides, his novels contain the characteristic of some foreign writer. For instance, in “The Great Gatsby”, the storyteller is a neighbor of Gatsby, who is the most important character, and he describes what happened to Gatsby objectively. This style is seen in Murakami’s “Spútonikunokoibito” the storyteller “I” describes what happened to “Sumire” who is the most important character objectively, too. I think “The Sputnik’s Sweetheart” is influenced by “The Great Gatsby” a lot. Sumire fell in love with woman even though Sumire is a girl. Gatsby fell in love with woman who already married. These stories are both about love than can’t come true. However, in most of Murakami’s novels, the storyteller and the most important character are same. Probably the objective writing style didn’t fit in with him. He tried to imitate writing style of “The Great Gatsby” in “The Sputnik’s Sweetheart” and didn’t feel successful.

## The Catcher in The Rye

In my opinion, Murakami’s translation of “The Catcher in The Rye” is a good example to understand Murakami’s attitude toward translating. Murakami puts many annotations in his translation of this novel. These annotations are really informative and helpful to find hidden intention of the author. The most interesting one is in the scene that Holden, which is the main character found a notebook of his sister, Phoebe. Holden

always says Phoebe is so smart and especially good at spelling in his monologue.

However, Murakami's annotation pointed out some spelling mistakes in her notebook.

Why has south eastern Alaska so many caning factories?

Because there's so much salmon.

Why has it valuable forests? because it has the right climate.

What has our government done to make life easier for the Alaskan eskimos?

Look it up for tomorrow!

Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield    Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield

Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield    Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield

Phoebe W. Caulfield    Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield, Esq.

Please pass to Shirley!!!!

Shirley you said you were Sagitarius

From "The Catcher in The Rye"<sup>5</sup>

"Caning" should be "canning", and "Sagitarius" should be "Sagittarius". At first, I thought they were just typos. Nonetheless, Murakami asserts the author wrote these misspellings intentionally. These misspelling shows the Holden's explanation about Phoebe contains lies. Holden lies so often in this novel, but unconsciously readers tend to think his lies are only in dialogue, and the information in his monologue is true.

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<sup>5</sup> Salinger.J.D *The Catcher in The Rye* Kodansha English Library, 1991, 246-247.

Murakami thinks these misspellings are the author's message that warns readers to be dubious about all the information in this novel<sup>6</sup>. I couldn't find this message before I read Murakami's translation. Murakami always tries to translate not only text but also writer's intention. For Japanese reader, it is too hard to understand whole device and background of foreign literature. So, Murakami adds many annotations and extra information about novels in his translations to help readers. For example, he put an essay about the life of Scott Fitzgerald in his translation of "The Great Gatsby". As he likes foreign literature very much, he wants readers to understand all attractiveness of it. He has a quite diligent attitude toward translation. He doesn't spare any efforts to make his translation as good as possible. For instance, he sometimes rewrites his translations. He published translations of same novel after he found parts that can be made better. He rewrote a translation of one Raymond Carver's novel three times<sup>8</sup>. Of course, it costs a lot of efforts and money to both publishing company and himself, but the profit is negligible. However, Murakami has never compromised about his translations. That's his diligent attitude.

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<sup>6</sup> Murakami, Haruki and Motoyuki Shibata. *Salinger senki*, bunshunsinsho, 2003, 57-59



## Conclusion

In this paper, I considered the significance of translating for Murakami Haruki.

Although Murakami lacks experience of academic education of writing, translating helped him to find his own style. Due to translating, his style is much affected by foreign literature. Especially the influence of F. Scott Fitzgerald is conspicuous. He does not use only one style in his novel. He sometimes tries to imitate foreign writer's writing style. This trial does not always succeed. But after innumerable trial and errors, his own style became strong and sophisticated. Nevertheless, Murakami does not continue translating just for improving his novel. He simply likes foreign literature and translating since he was young. That's why he can be so diligent in translating. In my opinion, translating is like linking bridge with the world of writer for Murakami. Before he started translating, he was just a reader who just enjoy reading literature. By translating, he fully immersed himself in the writing experience. And thus, deepened and developed his understanding of the craft. Without translating, Murakami Haruki as a writer would not exist. That's how significant translating is for Murakami.

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