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THE ROLE OF ANTONYMS IN SHOWING EMOTIONAL AND THEMATIC CONTRAST IN NORWEGIAN WOOD BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

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Abstract

In *Norwegian Wood*, oppositions such as life and death, memory and forgetting, or hope and despair are not accidental. They shape how we understand the characters' inner struggles. For example, Toru's attachment to memory keeps him emotionally tied to the past, while other characters try to survive by forgetting. These contrasts are not just linguistic devices; they reflect the fragile psychological state of youth and the painful movement toward maturity. Rather than functioning as simple word pairs, antonyms become a way for Murakami to express existential tension throughout the novel.

Keywords: Antonymy, semantic contrast, emotional duality, life and death, memory, Murakami.

Introduction

Antonymy plays a central role in shaping meaning, especially in literary texts where contrast often reveals psychological and thematic depth. In *Norwegian Wood*, opposition is not merely a stylistic feature but a reflection of the characters' fragile emotional states. The tension between life and death, presence and absence, or memory and forgetting mirrors Toru's internal struggle as he moves between attachment to the past and the possibility of renewal.

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John Lyons defines antonyms as “structured oppositions within the lexical system,” emphasizing that such contrasts are systematic rather than random [1:270–280]. This idea helps explain why the oppositions in the novel feel organized and meaningful rather than accidental. Similarly, Geoffrey Leech notes that antonymy strengthens expression by intensifying contrast, particularly in literary devices like antithesis [2:90–110]. In Murakami’s novel, these structured oppositions function not only linguistically but also psychologically, shaping the emotional architecture of the narrative.

D. A. Cruse develops the discussion of antonymy by distinguishing several types of oppositions. He identifies gradable antonyms, which exist along a scale (such as hot and cold), complementary antonyms, which form absolute binaries (alive and dead), and converses like buy and sell that describe the same situation from different perspectives [3:197–214]. This classification is particularly useful when analyzing *Norwegian Wood*, where both gradable and complementary oppositions shape the emotional landscape of the novel. For example, the contrast between psychological “life” and emotional “death” often appears less as a fixed binary and more as a fragile continuum.

Rahmatullayev, on the other hand, approaches antonymy from a structural perspective. He defines antonyms as words of the same grammatical category that express diametrically opposed meanings and distinguishes between lexical antonyms with different roots (baland–past) and affixal antonyms formed through morphological markers (aqlli–aqtsiz) [5:110–120]. His classification helps to clarify how opposition operates not only semantically but also morphologically, which is relevant when examining how linguistic contrasts reinforce thematic contrasts in literary texts.

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Analysis of Thematic Antonyms

1. Life and Death

The contrast between life and death is one of the primary antonymies in the novel. It reflects Toru's mental state and the tragic fate of the character Naoko.

Reiko says:

“Whether Naoko is alive or dead, it has nothing to do with your decision.”

In the quote above, the contrast between the two antonymic adjectives alive and dead serves to underscore the unbridgeable line between life and death.

Later on, Toru says:

“She and I were bound together at the border between life and death.”

The contrast between life and death is heightened by the phrase “border between life and death,” which puts the characters in the unbridgeable space between the two. However, it is not the contrast between the two states in the biological sense. Rather, it is the constant presence of one of the terms, death, which implies the complete absence of the other, life, in the biological sense, as discussed by Cruse, which refers to the phenomenon of complementary antonymy [3:198].

2. Memory and Forgetting

Another significant antonymic pair is remember and forget. The entire novel is based on the theme of recollection prompted by memory.

Naoko asks Toru:

“Do you really promise never to forget me?”

Toru replies:

“I'll never forget you.”

However, the narrator quickly adds:

“Even so, my memory has grown increasingly dim...”

Thus, the contrast between remember and forget is based on the unreliability of memory. Murakami demonstrates the fragility and unreliability of memory.

Another such contrast is when Reiko bids farewell with:

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“Don't forget about me.”

The repetition of the word “forget” in the novel reinforces the contrast between the permanent and the transient. Lyons points out that within gradable oppositions, there is room to vary the degree of difference [1:279]. In the story, memory is never absolute; it gradually fades, highlighting the delicate and fragile nature of personal history.

3. Presence and Absence

The contrast of presence and absence is an emotionally significant one. When Naoko dies in the novel, Toru feels her absence as a presence.

At the end of the novel, Toru declares:

“We were alive, she and I. And all we had to think about was continuing to live.”

The repetition of the word alive contrasts with the absence of Naoko in the novel. Moreover, when Midori asks Toru:

“Where are you now?”

Toru answers in his mind:

“Where was I now? I had no idea.”

The contrast between being somewhere and nowhere reflects the antonymy of presence and absence. As Leech notes, using semantic contrasts can enhance the stylistic impact of a text by drawing attention to key ideas [2:108]. The tension between “here” and “nowhere” often creates a sense of disorientation, leaving the reader unsettled.

4. Youth and Maturity

In Karakalpak linguistics, Eset Berdimuratov views antonymy not merely as a form of opposition, but as a reflection of both a person's logical reasoning and social development. He describes the transition from "youth" to "maturity" as a gradual process—what he calls “gradual antonyms”—where words capture the different qualitative stages of life. In his influential book *Házirgi qaraqalpaq tili:*

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Leksikologiya, Berdimuratov suggests that antonyms like *jas* (young) and *kámal/úlken* (grown up) are closely tied to social responsibility and personal growth [6:88]. Within the novel, the term “grown up” embodies not only responsibility but also the often painful journey of coming of age.

There is this line in the novel where Reiko says to Toru:

“You're all grown up now, so you have to take responsibility for your choices.”

5. Hope and Despair

The opposition between hope and despair in *Norwegian Wood* does not function as a simple binary. Rather, it unfolds gradually, reflecting the instability of the characters’ emotional lives. Toru’s relationship with Naoko, for instance, moves between moments of fragile hope and overwhelming despair, especially as her psychological condition deteriorates. This movement suggests a continuum rather than an absolute contrast. Rahmatullayev observes that antonymy in adjectives and abstract nouns often operates along a scale, allowing for degrees of intensity [5:115]. The novel illustrates this idea clearly: hope and despair are not fixed states but shifting emotional positions that define the characters’ inner conflicts.

Example dialogue:

Naoko: *“Watanabe, can you really wait for me? I’m so far gone, sometimes I feel like I’ll never come back to the light.”* (Despair)

Watanabe: *“I’ll wait as long as it takes. We’re still young, and we have time to fix things. I believe we can make it.”* (Hope)

The despair of Naoko is absolute and is metaphorically expressed as “darkness.” The hope of Watanabe is associated with “time” and “youth.”

Conclusion

In our view, one of the most striking aspects of Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* is his masterful use of antonyms. He doesn’t just present life and death as opposites; he shows how intricately they intertwine. The characters don’t choose between them—they navigate the delicate space in between.

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The novel's tragedy, we believe, lies in this "grey area," where remembering someone also carries the pain of forgetting. Ultimately, these antonyms serve as a mirror to the human soul, revealing that our identity is shaped by the very tensions we strive to reconcile: hope and despair, past and future, presence and absence.

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