

## “FROM DEATH TO LOVE: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN THE LIVES OF CHARACTERS IN ‘NORWEGIAN WOOD’ BY HARUKI MURAKAMI”

Ngo Thi Ho Diep

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email address: [hodiep29122002@gmail.com](mailto:hodiep29122002@gmail.com)

<https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1206>

### Article info

Received: 13/8/2024

Revised: 24/9/2024

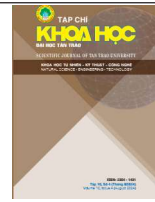
Accepted: 28/10/2024

### Keywords:

*Norwegian Wood,*  
*Haruki Murakami,*  
*meaning of life,*  
*character, existentialism,*  
*love, death.*

### Abstract:

Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* is not merely a love story but deeply portrays existential themes. This study aims to explore the relationship between love and death, as well as how these themes influence the characters' journey in seeking the meaning of life. Using a qualitative content analysis method, the research focuses on the symbols and emotions that Murakami has depicted. Through this, it clarifies how the main characters, such as Toru, Naoko, and Midori, confront loneliness, ultimately discovering existential elements like freedom, isolation, and the desire for connection. The results show that love, whether painful or joyful, plays a crucial role in helping the characters shape their identities, overcome chaos, and reclaim a sense of purpose in a socially turbulent context.



## TỪ CÁI CHẾT ĐẾN TÌNH YÊU: TÌM KIẾM Ý NGHĨA TRONG CUỘC SỐNG CỦA CÁC NHÂN VẬT TRONG “RỪNG NA UY” CỦA HARUKI MURAKAMI

Ngô Thị Hồ Diệp

Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam

Địa chỉ email: [hodiep29122002@gmail.com](mailto:hodiep29122002@gmail.com)

<https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1206>

### Thông tin bài viết

Ngày nhận bài: 13/8/2024

Ngày sửa bài: 24/9/2024

Ngày duyệt đăng: 28/10/2024

### Từ khóa:

*Rừng Na Uy, Haruki Murakami, ý nghĩa cuộc sống, tính cách, chủ nghĩa hiện sinh, tình yêu, cái chết.*

### Tóm tắt

Tiểu thuyết Rừng Na Uy của Haruki Murakami không chỉ là một câu chuyện tình yêu mà còn khắc họa sâu sắc các chủ đề hiện sinh. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khám phá mối quan hệ giữa tình yêu và cái chết, cũng như cách các chủ đề này ảnh hưởng đến hành trình tìm kiếm ý nghĩa cuộc sống của các nhân vật. Sử dụng phương pháp phân tích nội dung định tính, nghiên cứu tập trung vào các biểu tượng và cảm xúc mà Murakami đã mô tả. Thông qua đó, nghiên cứu làm rõ cách các nhân vật chính, chẳng hạn như Toru, Naoko và Midori, đối mặt với sự cô đơn, cuối cùng khám phá ra các yếu tố hiện sinh như tự do, cô lập và mong muốn kết nối. Kết quả cho thấy tình yêu, dù đau đớn hay vui vẻ, đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc giúp các nhân vật định hình bản sắc của họ, vượt qua hỗn loạn và lấy lại ý thức về mục đích trong bối cảnh xã hội đầy biến động.

### 1. Introduction

*Norwegian Wood*, one of Haruki Murakami's most renowned novels, has become a global literary phenomenon, selling over 4 million copies in Japan within just one year of its release and being translated into more than 40 languages worldwide. In this novel, Murakami explores the experiences of loss and suffering in youth through the turbulent lives of key characters such as Toru Watanabe, Naoko, and Midori. The work captivates readers not only through its smooth narrative and romantic love stories but

also through the profound existential issues that the author raises. Among them, the relationship between death, love, and the meaning of life is one of the central themes that Murakami delicately and hauntingly addresses.

The interplay between death and love is a central theme in *Norwegian Wood*, creating a complex and contradictory depiction of life and loss. However, how these elements influence the journey of searching for the meaning of life has not been thoroughly analyzed in previous studies. Many characters in this novel undergo existential

crises, and their interactions with love and death reshape their understanding of themselves and the world around them. This study focuses on the intricate relationship between death and love in the quest for life's meaning among the main characters.

This study aims to analyze how Haruki Murakami explores the journey of searching for the meaning of life in *Norwegian Wood*, particularly through the lens of death and love. The research will focus on the psychological transformations of the main characters, especially Toru Watanabe, as they encounter significant life events. Additionally, the study will examine the literary symbols Murakami employs to express profound ideas about life, love, and death. By applying existential theories, this paper will elucidate how love and death not only play pivotal roles in the storyline but also serve as tools for the characters to confront loneliness, despair, and internal chaos. The study will explore how Murakami constructs these elements, transforming them into means through which the characters gain deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

## 2. Literature review

Previous studies on *Norwegian Wood* have primarily focused on the psychological aspects of the characters and their responses to loss and suffering. Many authors have analyzed the relationship between Toru and Naoko through the lens of loneliness and death. For instance, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Hà (2020), in the study "Loneliness and Loss in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*," emphasized that Naoko's loneliness reflects a psychological crisis when confronting the wounds of her past. Similarly, Dola Saha (2024), in the dissertation *The Tapestry of Detachment and Nothingness in Haruki Murakami's Work: An Experimental Interaction Between Nihilism and Zen Buddhism*, highlighted that death in the novel

is not merely a biological phenomenon but also a symbol of the breakdown of social relationships in a post-war context.

Other existential studies have addressed the isolation and search for connection among characters in the post-war Japanese social context. For example, a research *From Postmodern to Post-Bildungsroman From the Ashes: An Alternative Reading of Murakami Haruki and Postwar Japanese Culture* analyzed the tension between the human need for connection and the fear of emotional vulnerability (Chiaki Takagi, 2009)

However, there remains a lack of deeper analysis on how love and death interact to influence the characters' search for meaning in life. This paper aims to fill that gap by focusing on the relationship between these two elements and how they shape the psychological journeys of the main characters, particularly through the stages of crisis and psychological transformation they experience.

## 3. Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this paper combines textual analysis, an existentialist approach, and the synthesis of secondary sources to elucidate the relationship between love, death, and the journey of searching for meaning in the characters' lives in *Norwegian Wood*. First, the novel is analyzed in detail through the citation of passages related to love, death, and symbolic elements, as well as the exploration of character dialogues and internal monologues. The textual analysis method focuses on the depth of the content and the messages conveyed in the novel, ensuring that conclusions are drawn from clear evidence within the text itself. Second, an existentialist approach is applied to interpret aspects such as loneliness, existential crises, and the search for meaning, drawing on theoretical foundations from philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. This approach allows

for a philosophical lens to examine the novel, providing deeper insights into the psychology and life philosophies of the characters. Additionally, the paper synthesizes secondary research from both Vietnamese and international scholars to provide a robust theoretical foundation and to identify research gaps. This combination of methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of the themes and contributes to the existing body of literature on the subject.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Existentialism and Key Concepts in Existentialism

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that gained prominence in the 20th century, particularly after World War II, explores fundamental questions about human existence. It emphasizes themes such as freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning in life. The core of existentialist thought lies in the notion that “existence precedes essence,” asserting that humans first exist and then define their essence and create values through their actions and choices (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1946)

However, existentialist philosophers do not all share identical views. Jean-Paul Sartre, a key proponent, emphasizes that individuals have absolute freedom in shaping their essence. Conversely, Martin Heidegger focuses less on individual freedom and more on the concept of “being” (Sein), examining the interconnectedness of humans and the world.

Søren Kierkegaard, regarded as the father of existentialism (Søren Kierkegaard, 2013), argues that individuals, rather than society or religion - are responsible for creating meaning in their lives and living passionately and sincerely (Michael Watts, 2003).

Prominent existentialist philosophers like Sartre and Albert Camus delve into concepts such as absurdity, freedom, loneliness, and death. They

propose that individuals must confront existential solitude and embrace their freedom to choose how to live, even amidst the absurdity of the universe.

#### 4.1.1. Key Concepts in Existentialism

##### Existential

Existential loneliness refers to the fundamental sense of separation from others and the world. It can be understood as an immediate awareness of being disconnected from those around and from the universe, often experienced through the recognition of life’s finitude, or especially during times of crisis when individuals feel a lack of authentic connection. The consequence is often negative emotions such as sadness, despair, grief, feelings of meaninglessness, or prolonged suffering (Bolmsjö et al., 2018). In *Norwegian Wood*, characters like Toru and Naoko confront profound loneliness, not only due to personal loss but also from a lack of connection and emotional distance from those around them. This loneliness is not merely an emotional state but a manifestation of existential crisis, reflecting the isolation of human beings in an absurd world.

##### Freedom and Responsibility

Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argued that humans are free to make choices but must also “take responsibility for themselves” and “for all others” (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2015). In *Norwegian Wood*, the characters cannot avoid making difficult choices, whether it is the choice between life and death, or love and abandonment. As an existential character, Toru must face decisions concerning love, loyalty, and the deaths of those close to him.

##### The Search for Meaning

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, asserted that although life lacks inherent meaning, humans must nonetheless seek and create meaning through their actions. Toru Watanabe, the protagonist of *Norwegian Wood*, undergoes a journey of self-questioning and searching for life’s meaning after tragic events. He continuously seeks connection with others to fill the void left by loss,

but remains trapped between the absurdity and meaninglessness of life

#### **4.2. Murakami and Existentialism in Norwegian Wood**

Haruki Murakami intricately weaves existential elements into *Norwegian Wood*. The existential crises of characters like Toru, Naoko, and Midori vividly reflect existentialist ideas. These characters must confront the deaths of friends, loved ones, or cherished individuals, which compels them to search for meaning and connection in an alienating world. The death of Kizuki, Toru's close friend, marks a pivotal turning point, forcing Toru to face the fragility of life and to question the meaning of love and existence.

#### **4.3. Existentialist Thought of Sartre, Camus, and its Application in Analyzing Murakami's Work**

##### **Jean-Paul Sartre and Existential Freedom**

Building on the concept that "existence precedes essence," Sartre believed that humans are "condemned to be free" (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2015), meaning that every individual must face the burden of their own freedom and be responsible for their actions. In *Norwegian Wood*, Toru is confronted with existential freedom as he must make crucial life choices regarding love and friendship, such as deciding whether to continue his relationship with Naoko or to pursue a new beginning with Midori. He cannot escape the responsibility that comes with these decisions, each of which carries significant psychological and philosophical consequences.

##### **Albert Camus and the Absurdity of Life**

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus discusses the concept of absurdity, describing how humans must grapple with the absurdity of life when seeking meaning in a world that offers no clear rationale or purpose. However, this does not imply that individuals should abandon the search for meaning. In *Norwegian Wood*, the absurd is

embodied in sudden deaths, imperfect love, and the inexplicability of life itself. Toru, Naoko, and Midori each confront this absurdity as they struggle to comprehend and accept loss and the complex emotions that love brings.

#### **4.4. Love and Death in Literature**

Love and death are perennial themes in literature, often juxtaposed to reflect the contradictions, suffering, and beauty of life. These two themes not only evoke intense emotions but also provide key insights for analyzing existentialism. In many literary works, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, love and death frequently coexist, illustrating the intertwining of life and loss. In *Norwegian Wood*, "love is the only refuge, a place where the fragments of a soul shattered by sorrow and displacement can be reassembled, and a place where one seeks salvation" (Pham Thi Hanh, 2012). However, love is not always a source of salvation; it can also be the root of anguish, pushing the characters toward a journey of self-discovery and existential reflection.

Toru, the protagonist, experiences conflicting emotions in his relationships, from the tender love he shares with Naoko to the intense connection with Midori, but these are always overshadowed by death and loss. In many literary works, death represents the culmination of an ending and transformation; in *Norwegian Wood*, it serves as a gateway to existential awakening.

Both Sartre and Camus viewed love and human relationships as instruments for creating meaning in life. For instance, in Camus' *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*), the relationship between Meursault and Marie suggests that even though the protagonist lives in a meaningless world, love still offers him a fleeting sense of happiness and vitality. Similarly, Sartre's *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*) demonstrates how relationships between people can reveal and test the essence of individual identity. Murakami applies this existential notion



by portraying love in *Norwegian Wood* as a means for the characters to explore themselves and confront their profound loneliness. Toru's love for Naoko is part of his journey in overcoming death, yet this very love also contributes to his inner fragmentation.

#### 4.5. Character Analysis in *Norwegian Wood*

##### **Toru Watanabe**

Toru Watanabe, the protagonist of *Norwegian Wood*, represents Japan's youth in the 1960s, grappling with themes of love, death, and the search for meaning in life. The sudden death of Kizuki, his best friend, leaves a profound mark on Toru's soul. Living under the shadow of loss and existential emptiness, Toru navigates feelings of aimlessness, confusion, and questions about existence.

Kizuki embodies the spiritual connection Toru once felt complete in, and his death severs that bond, leaving Toru adrift. "In the ten months from Kizuki's death to my exams, I didn't know where I was in this world" (Haruki Murakami, 2005). Initially, Toru withdraws emotionally, seeking solace in detached relationships. However, as the novel unfolds, his interactions with Naoko and Midori facilitate his journey toward self-awareness. Toru's path to understanding begins when he acknowledges that death, beyond taking Kizuki, compels him to confront his own existence.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, freedom comes with the responsibility of existence. Humans must live with their choices and take responsibility for the consequences they bring. Toru begins bearing this responsibility when faced with the absurdity of death. His journey evolves into a search for life's meaning through romantic relationships and painful memories. Sartre's notion that humans are "condemned to be free" resonates with Toru's struggle to create meaning in a chaotic world. Toru's hesitation between Naoko

and Midori symbolizes his struggle to choose a path and define the meaning he wishes to pursue.

##### **Naoko**

Naoko, engulfed by the pain of her past, suffers deeply from the deaths of Kizuki and her sister. These losses scar her psyche, leaving her life overshadowed by meaninglessness and isolation. Her journey in the novel is a battle between seeking love as salvation and being trapped in an inescapable web of sorrow.

Naoko's connection with Toru symbolizes their mutual effort to find salvation in one another. However, she gradually realizes that their love is insufficient to heal her wounds. "Naoko and I had to save each other. That was the only way we could be rescued" (Haruki Murakami, 2005).

Naoko's character arc focuses on her attempt to confront her pain. However, she ultimately succumbs to the absurdity of life, echoing Albert Camus' "problem of suicide" in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. "I also saw many people die because they thought life wasn't worth living" (Albert Camus, 1942). Her decision to end her life represents the peak of her existential crisis, highlighting her inability to find meaning in life or love. While her death is tragic, it propels Toru to confront the reality that not everyone can escape the shadows of their past.

##### **Midori**

In stark contrast to Naoko, Midori embodies vitality, optimism, and joy. She enters Toru's life like a refreshing breeze, bringing light and a new perspective on existence. Midori's candidness and willingness to express her emotions captivate Toru, leaving him both puzzled and attracted.

Midori represents the present and the possibility of freedom and living authentically. She teaches Toru that life encompasses not only past sorrows but also the joys and hopes of the present. "Midori looked straight into my eyes, then smiled. 'You know, Watanabe, I'm not the type to live with sad

memories. If I keep drowning in sorrow, I'll miss all the beautiful things life has to offer'" (Haruki Murakami, 2005).

Midori's journey is not without challenges. Despite her optimism, she faces difficulties in family relationships and societal expectations. What sets her apart is her ability to transform negative experiences into motivation for a better life. In her relationship with Toru, she helps him see that life requires embracing both joy and sorrow. Midori tells him, "You can choose Naoko because she's your past, but if you want a future, I'm right here" (Lương Hải Vân, Vũ Hải Yến, Nguyễn Thị Thu Thảo, 2021).

#### **4.6. Relationship Analysis**

##### **The Love between Toru and Naoko**

The relationship between Toru and Naoko is inextricably tied to the past. It is built on a shared empathy from the mutual loss of Kizuki's death, but this connection also traps Toru in the sorrow of that past. Naoko represents human fragility in the face of death, and Toru's love for her is unable to liberate either of them from their internal pain.

Their love is rooted in the need for healing from grief, yet it becomes clear that this bond is not strong enough to save Naoko from her psychological breakdown and existential despair. Their relationship is suffocated not only by Kizuki's death but also by their inability to overcome the deep-seated loneliness and emotional suffering Naoko endures. This emotional distance becomes a reflection of existential loneliness, where each person is isolated despite their intimate connection.

##### **The Love between Toru and Midori**

Midori enters Toru's life as a symbol of vitality and renewal. The relationship between Toru and Midori stands in stark contrast to that of Toru and Naoko. Midori represents freedom, life, and hope, completely different from the melancholic weight of Naoko. "What I felt with Naoko was a pure, tender, and utterly calm love. But what I had with

Midori was entirely different. It had a life of its own, breathing and pulsating, shaking me down to the roots of my being" (Haruki Murakami, 2005).

Toru's love for Midori is not just a contrast to the sadness he experiences with Naoko; it represents a significant shift in his search for meaning. Midori brings brightness, energy, and spontaneity, helping Toru see life through a new lens, one where meaning can be found in real-life experiences and emotional freedom. Midori is more than just a companion; she is a source of motivation that pushes Toru to break free from his emotional darkness and discover new purpose in life.

#### **4.7. Symbols Analysis**

##### **The Forest**

The forest in *Norwegian Wood* serves as a central symbol, not only appearing in the title but also deeply embedded in the psyche and journey of the characters. It represents being lost, inner confusion, and the search for self-core themes of the novel. The forest is often described as a misty, dark space where one can easily lose their way, signifying ambiguity and internal contradictions.

When Naoko and Watanabe walk in the forest, their inability to find a way out becomes a profound metaphor. It symbolizes Naoko's emotional and psychological struggles, as she is unable to escape the shadows of her past. For Watanabe, the forest reflects his loneliness and insecurity as he confronts critical life decisions.

Additionally, the forest symbolizes escapism from reality. For Naoko, it is a temporary sanctuary but ultimately draws her deeper into her enduring sorrow. On a broader level, the forest represents the psychological state of modern individuals, a disoriented response to unresolved pressures and contradictions.

##### **Music**

Music, particularly the song *Norwegian Wood*, carries multi-layered meanings in the novel. It is

not only a medium through which the characters connect to memories but also a symbol of reminiscence, pain, and being trapped between the past and the present.

Each time Watanabe hears *Norwegian Wood*, he is pulled back to memories of Naoko and Kizuki, moments interwoven with happiness and loss. Music evokes emotions while reflecting Watanabe's state of being "caught between two worlds": one tied to a past he cannot let go of, and the other urging him to face the future. This tension underscores the novel's central theme, the struggle between holding onto the past and yearning to move forward.

Music also acts as a catalyst for self-awareness. The melody is both soothing and a reminder of indelible pain. This reflects the existential perspective within the novel: individuals must learn to confront and embrace their pain to find meaning for themselves.

### **Death**

Death is an ever-present, haunting symbol throughout *Norwegian Wood*, not just as a physical end but as a manifestation of loss, trauma, and despair. It appears through the deaths of Kizuki, Naoko, and Hatsumi, forming a series of tragedies that profoundly affect the main characters.

Kizuki's death marks the beginning of Watanabe's inner transformation. He is forced to grapple with the absurdity of life and a sense of existential emptiness. Meanwhile, Naoko's death reflects her inability to overcome past traumas and becomes a turning point for Watanabe, driving him to realize that he cannot remain trapped in the shadows of grief.

Death impacts not only individual characters but also underscores the fragility of life. It compels the characters to wrestle with larger questions: how to live meaningfully in a world filled with loss and suffering. In this way, death ties into the existential

theme of the novel, where individuals must create meaning for their lives amidst an absurd reality.

### **Loneliness**

Loneliness is another crucial symbol in *Norwegian Wood*, acting as a thread that connects the characters and reflecting the common psychological state of individuals in modern society. Loneliness is not just a sense of separation from others but also the haunting inability to connect with oneself and loved ones.

Each character confronts loneliness in their own way. Watanabe feels isolated from the world, especially after Kizuki's death. Naoko is trapped in her solitude of pain and trauma, unable to open her heart to love and salvation from others. Meanwhile, Midori faces loneliness with an outwardly optimistic attitude, although she, too, endures personal struggles and losses.

Loneliness, like the forest and music, highlights the novel's central theme: the inner struggle to find meaning in a world where individuals are often thrust into states of alienation and contradiction. It is through loneliness that the characters are forced to confront themselves, ultimately uncovering the true essence of their emotions and lives.

## **4.8. Event Analysis**

### **The Death of Kizuki**

The sudden death of Kizuki serves as a pivotal event, initiating a series of existential crises that Toru and Naoko must confront throughout the novel. This loss shakes their emotional stability and raises profound questions about life, death, and their meanings, compelling the characters to reflect on the fragility of existence. For Toru, Kizuki's death thrusts him into a long journey of seeking answers about existence, while Naoko struggles to overcome this profound loss and ultimately feels compelled to find closure in her own life.



Kizuki's death also signifies the beginning of Toru's emotional turmoil, as he grapples with feelings of guilt and helplessness. The bond he shared with Kizuki, which once provided him with a sense of connection, becomes a source of anguish. This event catalyzes Toru's exploration of love, loss, and the search for identity, encapsulating the themes of existentialism that permeate the narrative.

#### **Naoko's Suicide**

Naoko's suicide represents one of the most tragic moments in the story and serves as a climax of her harrowing struggle with overwhelming loneliness. Throughout the novel, she endures significant psychological pain stemming from her past, particularly the loss of Kizuki. Her decision to take her own life is a culmination of her inability to escape the haunting memories of death and loss, as well as her failure to discover meaning in her existence.

For Toru, Naoko's suicide deepens his existential crisis, forcing him to confront the stark realities of love and death. This act amplifies his sense of loss and isolation, challenging him to find a way to move forward in a world that feels increasingly devoid of purpose. The aftermath of Naoko's death propels Toru into a state of introspection, where he must navigate his feelings of guilt, despair, and the longing for connection. Ultimately, her suicide serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of life and the desperate search for meaning amid suffering, encapsulating the novel's overarching themes of existential struggle and the search for identity in the face of loss.

#### **4.9. The Link Between Death and Love**

In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, death and love are not only parallel elements but deeply intertwined forces that shape social and familial relationships. They are existential in nature and also reflect the cultural and societal upheavals of post-war Japan.

#### **Death and Its Impact on Social and Familial Relationships**

Death in *Norwegian Wood* not only profoundly affects individual lives but also disrupts or reshapes the social and familial relationships of the characters.

The death of Kizuki, Toru's best friend, is not just a personal loss but also alters the nature of the relationship between Toru and Naoko. Kizuki's suicide leaves a significant void in both of their souls, binding them together through shared grief. Losing Kizuki, Toru comes to recognize the fragility of life, and this loss brings him face-to-face with the meaninglessness and precariousness of existence. As philosopher Albert Camus expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, death becomes the starting point for individuals to confront the absurdity of life and find ways to transcend their pain (Albert Camus, 1942). The relationship between Toru and Naoko exemplifies how death can create emotional dependency while simultaneously isolating them from society.

Naoko, Kizuki's lover, faces pressure from her family and society as she struggles to cope with her grief. Kizuki's death not only haunts her but also leads her to withdraw from other relationships, including her connection with Toru. Her family appears absent in helping her navigate this mental crisis, reflecting the disconnect between generations in modernizing Japanese society.

Conversely, Toru feels isolated from the community as he is unable to share his pain or find empathy from society. This highlights the crisis of a young generation in Japan caught between traditional values and rapid societal changes.

#### **Love: Salvation or the Source of Suffering?**

The relationship between Toru and Naoko illustrates the paradoxical nature of love. Their love holds the hope that they might overcome their shared grief, yet it is inseparably tied to the shadow of death. Their love is not merely a

romantic connection but also an attempt to share pain and heal from physical and emotional losses. “Toru reunited with and loved Naoko as a way to forget his melancholic past, while Naoko believed she could reintegrate into the world” (Lương Hải Vân, Vũ Hải Yến, Nguyễn Thị Thu Thảo, 2021). However, Naoko cannot escape the impact of Kizuki’s death or find peace, turning their love into more of a burden than a source of salvation. Naoko’s eventual death not only ends their relationship but underscores that love alone is insufficient to erase the deep wounds left by death.

On the other hand, Toru’s relationship with Midori represents a different dimension of love: vibrancy, presence, and the capacity to face life’s challenges. Midori’s open and optimistic approach to life offers Toru an escape from the shadows of his past. Their love is not about avoiding pain but about seeking new meaning in life. This duality of love not only underscores its existential nature, where individuals seek meaning through relationships, but also reflects changes in Japanese society during the era. As the society transitioned from collective values to a focus on personal freedom, love became a means of self-expression rather than solely serving traditional or familial expectations.

Reflection of Social and Cultural Issues in Japan

In *Norwegian Wood*, love and death transcend personal significance, reflecting the unique social and cultural issues of post-war Japan.

### **Death and Social Disconnection**

The deaths in the novel, from Kizuki to Naoko, are consequences of isolation, mental pressure, and the inability to connect with family or society. Japan during this period faced a high suicide rate, particularly among young people, due to societal pressures and rapid change. Haruki Murakami skillfully incorporates these deaths to highlight human loneliness and fragility within this context.

### **Love and the Struggle Between Tradition and Modernity**

The relationships between the characters mirror the shift in how Japanese society approached love. Toru and Naoko’s love is tied to responsibility and the pain of the past, representing the constraints of traditional values. In contrast, Toru and Midori’s love symbolizes liberation, freedom, and the desire to live fully in the present—values that were becoming more prevalent in modern Japanese society.

### **5. Conclusion**

*Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami transcends a mere romantic narrative; it represents a profound journey into the human psyche, exploring existential themes such as death, love, and the search for meaning in life. In this novel, the intricate interplay among death, love, and the quest for meaning is portrayed in a nuanced and complex manner.

Through an analysis of the characters’ trajectories, particularly those of Toru, Naoko, and Midori. This study reveals that death serves not only as an endpoint but also as a compelling impetus driving the characters toward seeking connection through love. The relationship between Toru and Naoko, shrouded in the pain of their shared past, symbolizes a state of stagnation and despair in their search for life’s meaning. In contrast, the love between Toru and Midori embodies a more optimistic approach to existence, wherein individuals find hope and new significance amid the remnants of loss.

This investigation affirms that love, whether imbued with suffering or joy, plays a crucial role in the journey of searching for life’s meaning. Furthermore, in many instances, death acts as a precursor to new explorations of self and connections with others. Murakami skillfully employs existential elements to reflect the internal struggles of individuals confronting death and

solitude. Thus, the work not only presents personal narratives but also provokes deep reflections on the essence of life, death, and the intrinsic value of love within the human experience.

## REFERENCES

- Albert Camus (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Tre Publishing House
- Bolmsjö et al. (2018). Existential loneliness: An attempt at an analysis of the concept and the phenomenon. *Sage Journals Vol 26*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733017748480>
- Hanh, P. (2012). *The Search-Seeking Character Type in Haruki Murakami's Novel Norwegian Wood*. University of Social Sciences and Humanities. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=9dfd87ddc8824c911e572f71031e4b758d2842ed>
- Jean-Paul Sartre (1946). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15vwkgx>
- J.P. Sartre (2015). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Tri Thuc Publishing House, Ha Noi.
- Michael Watts (2003). *Kierkegaard. Oneworld*.
- Murakami, H. (2005), *Norwegian Wood*, Hoi Nha Van Publishing House, Ha Noi
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2023). Søren Kierkegaard. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>
- Saha, D. (2024). *The Tapestry of Detachment and Nothingness in Haruki Murakami's Work: An Experimental Interaction Between Nihilism and Zen Buddhism*. BRAC University. [https://dspace.bracu.ac.bd:8443/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10361/22917/20103020\\_ENH.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dspace.bracu.ac.bd:8443/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10361/22917/20103020_ENH.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Takagi, C. (2009). *From Postmodern to Post-Bildungsroman From the Ashes: An Alternative Reading of Murakami Haruki and Postwar Japanese Culture*. The University of North Carolina [https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Takagi\\_uncg\\_0154D\\_10291.pdf](https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Takagi_uncg_0154D_10291.pdf)
- Van, L., Ye, V., Thao, N. (2021). *Man Seek Identity in Norwegian Wood by Haruki Murakami*. *Vietnam Journals Online Vol 50* <https://vjol.info.vn/index.php/otn/article/view/60515/50786>