

Living in the After Hours of Life:

An Analysis of Haruki Murakami's "Sleep"

After one reads Haruki Murakami's "Sleep," one seems compelled to question the validity of the narrator's life as well as one's own life. The narrator fails to find a life for herself in her never changing society and ceases to reach fulfillment in her routine-filled days. The leeching society is sucking the life out of her thus causing her to feel completely dead inside. Her pragmatic life is what is holding her back from blossoming her own individuality. Thanks to her husband and her son, she is stopped at a standstill in life, obligated to be the stereotypical housewife, disregarding her hatred for it. She forces herself to constantly please her husband which leaves no time for herself. What she needs is change, a difference, something to excite her in a way that nothing has before. As she starts to experience sleepless nights, she takes advantage of this opportunity to make these nights something more. Therefore, she permanently breaks away from everyday society and creates a life of her own: a life without sleep, a life during the darkness, a life with unimaginable freedom.

Once the people of the world are condemned to their restless dreams, she awakes and discovers she is free to be who and what she wants to be, experiencing a freedom that no one else in the world is privileged to have. This freedom empowers her and becomes an addiction that she cannot live without. While she runs lifeless during the day, everyone else lies lifeless at night. Her life is dead to everyone but her. During the day she is never truly awake and living for she says, "Once you learn to run it, it's just a matter of repetition. You push this button and pull this lever. You adjust a gauge, put on the lid, set the timer. The same thing over and over" (96). Haruki Murakami uses certain diction in this quotation that portrays for the reader a

mechanical and robotic way in which the narrator lives. He uses words such as “gauges”, “timer”, “lever”, and “button” to describe the narrator’s life as being as repetitive and mundane as a robot’s life. As a robot cannot feel emotion, she fails to do so as well. She also lives to do just as she is told and never question any authority just as a robot would do. It is almost as if her “switch” is turned off during the day, but then at night she is re-ignited with the strength needed as she is void of the replenishing power of sleep that one would normally need. The narrator makes the statement, “What were they if not ‘tendencies’? I could do them with my eyes closed” (99), insinuating that she could in fact be sleeping through her endless routine filled days. This ironic sleeping during the day could be another form of empowerment needed for her to thrive in the night hours. Now that she is void of any form of sleep, most would think that she would wither physically or pass away from severe sleep deprivation. On the contrary, “[Her] body appeared to be almost bursting with vitality” (97), proving that in actuality she was becoming more youthful as the sleepless nights passed.

Throughout the novel, Murakami uses repetition to show emphasis on certain themes and ideas. The themes of change and transformation are very apparent as the narrator changes physically and mentally as the story unfolds. She is transformed completely from her dreaded housewife self to her true free self. The author also incorporates very slight details of the woman’s background that, at face value, may seem unimportant, but once the depths in the story are revealed, the reader understands that as the author is meticulous about every detail, the woman is as well. She pays attention to every detail whether large or small and is certain to catch any discrepancy in her life.

During one of her many sleepless nights, she discovers the ugliness in society which is represented by her husband. She finds her husband “incredibly ugly” as she watches him sleep

(103). This symbolizes her hatred of society and the fact that her husband has fallen victim to it with no way out. She even finds her son repulsive for the sole reason of looking exactly like her husband. Her perception of society has now affected her perception of her family. She no longer desires their presence or acknowledgement. Lonesomeness is what she craves.

The ending of the novel is open for interpretation as the author purposely leaves it open-ended. One interpretation could be as thus. The narrator seems to fall victim to two dark shadows. They are shaking her car, as if someone was shaking her to wake from her sleep. She fears for the worst as these dark shadows may be her husband and son, trying to get her to stop living in her world and to start living back in theirs again. They want their wife and mother back instead of the robot acting in her place. She replenishes herself at night to prepare herself for the next day that she must suffer through, thus giving her a reason to resent her husband and son. They cause her life to be pragmatic as they choose to abide by societal ways. Unfortunately, her husband and son are filled with rage because she abandoned them for a life of solitude. They feel revenge is necessary for the pain she caused them so they cause her demise. Another interpretation of the end of the novel could be that the two shadows are humankind as a collective overthrowing her and her lifestyle because of its unfair singularity. Humankind is jealous that she has found this escape that no one else in the world can experience. She is cheating life and society therefore deems it unjust. It is the life that everyone else fails to find, a life of complete freedom, and it is all hers. The wall of separation dividing her two lives is broken as they overlap and struggle for existence. Survival of the fittest decides and in the end it is the collision of her two lives that overthrow her very existence. The sleepless life was never intended to exist and in order to destroy it without risk of it being created again she had to die to extinguish it.