

The Past That Refuses to End: Memory, Nostalgia, and the Construction of Identity in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* explores the complex relationship between memory, nostalgia, grief, and identity through the retrospective narration of Toru Watanabe. Originally published in Japan in 1987, the novel follows Toru's recollection of his university years and of the relationships that profoundly influence his understanding of himself. The narrative begins with an encounter between music and memory, establishing the past not as something permanently gone but as an experience that may return unexpectedly into the present. This paper argues that Murakami presents memory not as a stable archive of past events or as a straightforward path toward emotional resolution, but as a fragmented and continually reconstructed process through which identity is formed. Toru's memories of Naoko, Midori, Kizuki, and his university life reveal the extent to which his sense of self depends upon his interpretation of the past. The novel also establishes an important contrast between characters who remain heavily oriented toward the past and those who demonstrate greater engagement with the present. Through this contrast, Murakami questions whether remembering enables closure or instead keeps individuals emotionally attached to experiences that can no longer be recovered. Drawing upon memory studies, narrative theory, and scholarship on Murakami's intertextuality, this paper examines how nostalgia functions simultaneously as preservation and imprisonment. Ultimately, *Norwegian Wood* suggests that identity cannot be separated from memory: the self is continually reconstructed through the stories individuals tell themselves about what they have experienced, lost, and remembered.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, memory, nostalgia, identity, grief, narrative, Japanese literature

Introduction

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* is one of his most recognizable and widely discussed novels. First published in Japan in 1987, the novel differs in important ways from Murakami's more overtly surreal works. Instead of relying primarily upon supernatural events or parallel realities, *Norwegian Wood* concentrates on the emotional and psychological experiences of Toru Watanabe, a young man negotiating love, friendship, loneliness, loss, and adulthood. The English edition translated by Jay Rubin was published by Vintage International in 2000.

At the centre of the novel is an apparently simple narrative device: an older Toru remembers his youth. However, this act of remembering becomes much more than a method of telling a

coming-of-age story. The entire novel is shaped by the tension between past and present. Toru does not merely report what happened to him as a young man; he revisits experiences that continue to affect his emotional understanding of himself. Memory therefore becomes one of the novel's most important subjects as well as its principal narrative mechanism.

The importance of memory is established at the beginning of the novel, when music unexpectedly brings Toru into contact with his past. The relationship between music and recollection is particularly significant because the memory is not deliberately summoned. Instead, the past returns through a sensory and emotional association. Murakami thereby establishes an important distinction between remembering intentionally and being involuntarily returned to a memory. The latter is central to Toru's experience. The past is not simply behind him; it remains capable of appearing in his present.

This structure makes *Norwegian Wood* particularly suitable for a study of memory and identity. Memory is often understood as a means through which individuals maintain continuity between their past and present selves. Yet remembering is never entirely neutral. Memories are selected, interpreted, emotionally coloured, and reconstructed from the perspective of the present. Toru is therefore not the same person who originally experienced the events he describes. The adult narrator interprets the younger Toru, Naoko, Midori, and others through the distance created by time.

Recent scholarship has recognized this dimension of the novel. Merry Ling's 2025 thesis argues that *Norwegian Wood* challenges the conventional idea of memory as a linear process leading naturally toward self-understanding and reconciliation. According to Ling, Murakami presents memory as fragmented and nonlinear, complicating the possibility of closure and revealing the fluidity of identity (Ling). Similarly, Edilberto C. Cruz's study emphasizes the novel's extensive intertextual relationship with literature, film, and music, demonstrating how cultural references participate in the novel's construction of meaning.

This paper develops these approaches by focusing specifically on the relationship between memory, nostalgia, and identity. It argues that in *Norwegian Wood*, memory is not merely a record of who Toru once was. It actively participates in determining who he becomes. His memories of love and loss shape his understanding of intimacy, responsibility, and adulthood. Nostalgia simultaneously preserves the significance of the past and prevents complete detachment from it. The central argument of this paper is therefore that Murakami presents memory as a fragmented and emotionally charged process through which identity is continually reconstructed. Rather than allowing Toru to achieve straightforward closure, his memories demonstrate that the self is created through an ongoing negotiation between what has happened, what has been lost, and what remains emotionally present.

Memory and the Structure of Retrospective Narration

The narrative structure of *Norwegian Wood* is fundamental to understanding its treatment of identity. Toru narrates his story from a later point in life, meaning that the events of his youth are filtered through the consciousness of his older self. This creates two versions of Toru: the young man who experiences the events and the older man who remembers them. The distinction matters because the novel does not offer the reader direct access to the past. Everything is mediated through recollection. Toru's memories therefore contain both experience and interpretation. The young Toru cannot know what his future self will think

about his relationships, while the older Toru cannot completely reproduce the consciousness of his younger self.

The opening musical trigger is especially significant. Music functions as a bridge between different moments in Toru's life. The song does not simply remind him of an event; it evokes an entire emotional world. The connection between music and memory demonstrates how recollection is often associative rather than chronological. A sound, place, object, or image can suddenly make a memory alive. Cruz's research is valuable here because it identifies the importance of intertextuality in the novel, particularly Murakami's references to music and literature. The study argues that these references do more than just decorating the narrative; they create relationships between the novel and other cultural texts, encouraging readers to understand the characters through a larger network of cultural associations.

Music in *Norwegian Wood* therefore operates as a form of cultural memory. Toru's memories are not isolated from the world around him. They are connected to songs, books, films, places, and cultural experiences. His personal identity is consequently constructed partly through the cultural objects that accompany his memories. The retrospective structure also complicates the reliability of memory. This does not mean that Toru is deliberately lying. Rather, it means that his version of the past is inevitably shaped by his present consciousness. The older narrator has knowledge that the younger Toru did not possess. He understands consequences that were invisible to him at the time. This creates a central paradox: Toru remembers the past because it remains meaningful, but its meaning exists partly because he is remembering it from the present.

Memory consequently becomes circular. The present interprets the past, while the past continues to influence the present. Ling's study similarly emphasizes that Murakami challenges the notion of memory as a linear progression toward resolution. Instead, memory operates through fragments and connections, repeatedly returning Toru to experiences that remain emotionally significant. The narrative structure thus establishes the foundation for Murakami's treatment of identity. Toru is not simply a character who has a past; he is a character whose understanding of himself depends upon the way that past is remembered.

Nostalgia, Grief, and the Emotional Power of the Past

If memory allows Toru to revisit his youth, nostalgia gives those memories their emotional intensity. Nostalgia is more complex than simple happiness about the past. It involves a longing for something that cannot be fully recovered. In *Norwegian Wood*, this longing is inseparable from loss. Toru's memories are often emotionally powerful precisely because the past cannot be restored. The people, relationships, and circumstances he remembers belong to a world that no longer exists in the same form. His act of remembering consequently becomes an attempt to maintain a relationship with something that has disappeared.

This explains why the novel's memories are simultaneously comforting and painful. To remember is to preserve the significance of a person or experience, but to remember also confirms that the original moment has passed. The title itself participates in this dynamic. The song associated with the title becomes a mnemonic object through which the past returns. The relationship between song and memory suggests that nostalgia does not require the past to be physically present. A cultural object can preserve an emotional connection to something absent. The result is that Toru's past remains psychologically active. His memories influence

how he understands his relationships in the present, particularly his relationship with Naoko. His connection with her cannot be understood independently of their shared history. Their relationship is marked by memories of earlier experiences and by the emotional consequences of those experiences. Memory therefore creates continuity, but continuity is not necessarily healing.

This is one of the most important tensions in the novel. Conventional narratives of personal development often assume that individuals confront their past, understand it, and move beyond it. Murakami complicates this model. Toru's remembering does not produce a simple progression from suffering to resolution. Instead, the past continues to exist alongside his present. Ling's study provides a particularly useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. Her research suggests that Murakami rejects the idea of memory as a straightforward route toward closure, instead representing it as fragmented and nonlinear.

This does not mean that remembering is entirely destructive. On the contrary, memory allows Toru to preserve emotional relationships and to recognize the significance of his experiences. Without memory, personal identity would lose much of its continuity. The problem is therefore not memory itself but the assumption that memory can neatly resolve what has been lost. The novel suggests that certain experiences cannot be made completely coherent. Toru must continue to live with the fact that some relationships have changed irreversibly. His identity emerges from his attempt to live with this knowledge.

Nostalgia thus becomes a double force. It preserves the past while simultaneously reminding the individual that the past cannot be recovered. This duality explains much of the melancholy of *Norwegian Wood*. The novel does not simply celebrate youth through nostalgic remembrance. It demonstrates the cost of looking backward. Among the novel's characters, Naoko most strongly represents the difficulty of separating the present from the past. Her relationship with Toru is deeply connected to their shared history and to the absence of someone important to both of them. Their connection is therefore not created in an emotionally empty space. The past is present within their relationship from the beginning. Toru's attachment to Naoko is consequently partly an attachment to shared memory. She represents not only a person he cares about but also a connection to a particular period of his life. His memories of her are intertwined with memories of youth, friendship, loss, and emotional uncertainty. This makes Naoko especially important to the paper's argument about identity. Toru's relationship with her forces him to confront the question of how much of one's identity is constructed through relationships that no longer exist in their original form.

Naoko's character can also be interpreted through the novel's larger concern with emotional isolation. She exists at a considerable distance from ordinary social life, while Toru occupies a contradictory position: he is capable of forming connections but remains deeply attached to his emotional history. The contrast between them is important. Toru is able to continue participating in everyday life, attending university, meeting new people, and developing new relationships. Yet his memories repeatedly draw him back toward experiences that remain unresolved. On the other hand, Naoko becomes associated with the gravity of the past. She represents a form of emotional existence in which earlier experiences exert tremendous influence over the present.

However, it would be too simplistic to suggest that Naoko merely represents the past while Midori represents the future. Murakami's characterization is more complicated than such a binary interpretation. Both women are individuals with their own emotional realities, and

neither should be reduced to a symbolic function within Toru's development. Nevertheless, the contrast between their relationships with Toru is significant. Naoko's relationship with him is heavily mediated by memory, while Midori's presence tends to challenge Toru to respond to immediate circumstances. This distinction helps reveal the novel's central conflict: Can Toru construct a future without abandoning the emotional importance of his past? The answer is not simple. To abandon the past completely would be to deny the experiences that have shaped him. Yet remaining entirely within the past prevents genuine engagement with the present. Toru's identity therefore develops in the space between these two possibilities.

Midori provides an important counterpoint to Toru's relationship with Naoko. Her presence introduces a different emotional and social energy into the novel. Whereas Toru's relationship with Naoko is deeply influenced by shared memories, his interactions with Midori repeatedly draw him toward immediate experience. Midori's significance lies partly in her insistence on being encountered as a person in the present rather than merely as part of Toru's emotional history. Her personality, spontaneity, and independence challenge Toru's tendency toward introspection. This makes Midori particularly important in relation to the novel's treatment of identity. If Naoko represents the emotional force of the past, Midori can be understood as an invitation to engage with the present. Yet the novel does not allow Toru to move easily from one state to the other. The difficulty is that the past cannot simply be erased in order to create a new identity.

Toru's relationship with Midori consequently becomes a test of whether he can develop a sense of self that incorporates his memories without being completely governed by them. His choices involve not only romantic relationships but also competing ways of understanding existence. This is where memory becomes an ethical issue. Toru must determine what it means to remain loyal to the emotional significance of his past while continuing to participate in life. Midori's role is particularly significant because she disrupts Toru's tendency to transform relationships into memories before they have fully become experiences. Her presence continually brings him back to the immediate world.

However, the distinction should not be treated as absolute. Naoko is not simply "the past," nor is Midori merely "the future." Instead, they represent different emotional orientations through which Toru negotiates his own identity. This is consistent with Ling's argument that *Norwegian Wood* presents identity as fluid rather than fixed. Toru's sense of self develops through encounters with different ways of relating to memory and emotional experience. His development therefore cannot be reduced to choosing one person over another. The deeper question is whether he can accept that the self contains contradictory emotional experiences.

Memory and the Fragmented self

The relationship between memory and identity becomes clear when the novel's various characters and experiences are considered together. Toru's identity is not based upon a single defining characteristic. Instead, it is composed of memories of friendships, relationships, cultural experiences, places, books, music, and loss. The fragmented quality of these experiences is reflected in the structure of the novel. Toru's story is not presented as a perfectly continuous sequence in which every event naturally produces the next. Instead, the narrative is organized around recollection.

Human beings do not remember every moment of their lives with equal intensity. Certain moments become significant because they are emotionally charged or because later experiences give them new meaning. The same event can therefore mean something different when remembered years later. Murakami's narrative structure captures this instability. The adult Toru remembers his younger self, but the act of remembering also reveals how much the older Toru has changed. His interpretation of the past tells readers as much about the narrator's present identity as it does about his younger life. Toru looks backward in order to understand what happened, but the reader also looks at the past in order to understand the person who is remembering it. This perspective complicates the idea that identity is fixed. If our understanding of ourselves changes as our interpretation of our memories changes, then identity must also be understood as something fluid.

The recent scholarship by Kowsalya and Kannan similarly examines Norwegian Wood through questions of displacement and identity, using Paul Ricoeur's ideas about identity to explore Toru's search for belonging and meaning. Their approach reinforces the idea that Toru's identity is constructed through relationships and experiences rather than existing independently of them. At the same time, Cruz's study demonstrates that Toru's personal memories are connected to broader cultural texts. Music and literature become part of the character's emotional vocabulary. This means that identity in Norwegian Wood is simultaneously personal and cultural. Toru remembers himself through the books he reads, the music he hears, the places he visits, and the people he encounters. His identity is therefore relational: it develops through his connection to people and cultural experiences.

The novel's engagement with Western culture is particularly important in this regard. Nachtgeael's study examines the dialogue between Japanese and Western cultural traditions in Norwegian Wood, arguing that the novel's identity cannot be understood solely through a narrowly national framework. The use of Western literature and music does not mean that Toru becomes culturally "Western." Rather, it demonstrates that identity can emerge through cultural interaction. Toru inhabits a world in which Japanese and Western cultural references coexist

The Past That refuses to End

One of the most compelling aspects of Norwegian Wood is that it refuses to provide an easy resolution to the tension between memory and identity. Toru's act of remembering does not erase the past. Nor does it transform every painful experience into a lesson with a clear conclusion. Instead, Murakami suggests that some experiences remain meaningful precisely because they cannot be completely resolved. This is where the novel's treatment of nostalgia becomes particularly sophisticated. Nostalgia is often associated with an idealized version of the past. Toru's memories certainly contain moments of emotional intensity, but they are not presented as a perfect lost world. His recollections include confusion, loneliness, conflict, and emotional vulnerability. The past is therefore neither entirely beautiful nor entirely painful. It is unfinished. That unfinished quality is central to the construction of identity. Toru cannot simply divide his life into a past that has ended and a present that has begun. The two coexist.

The older Toru remains connected to the young man he once was because the experiences of that younger self continue to influence his understanding of the world. This is why the novel's retrospective narration is more than a stylistic choice. It expresses the novel's philosophical understanding of identity. The self is not a static object that exists

independently of time. Instead, identity develops through the continuous relationship between memory and present experience. Ling's interpretation is particularly relevant here. Her study concludes that the novel's treatment of memory does not lead neatly toward closure but instead reveals the fragmented and fluid nature of identity and selfhood. This argument also helps explain why the novel remains emotionally powerful. It does not suggest that maturity means forgetting. Rather, maturity involves recognizing that the past will remain part of the self without allowing it to completely determine the future. The central challenge for Toru is therefore not: "How can I forget the past?" but: "How can I continue living while carrying the past with me?" That distinction is essential. Memory becomes neither an enemy nor a cure. It is simply one of the conditions through which human beings understand themselves.

Conclusion

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* presents memory as far more than a narrative device. Through Toru Watanabe's retrospective account of his youth, Murakami constructs a novel in which the past continuously interacts with the present. Music, literature, relationships, places, and emotional experiences become triggers through which earlier versions of the self return to consciousness. The novel demonstrates that memory is neither entirely reliable nor entirely unreliable. It is selective, emotional, fragmented, and continually reconstructed. Toru's memories are therefore shaped by the perspective of the adult narrator, while the adult narrator's identity remains shaped by the memories of his younger self.

This circular relationship between memory and identity forms the central argument of the novel. Toru does not remember simply because he wants to know what happened. He remembers because the past continues to constitute part of who he is. Nostalgia intensifies this relationship. It allows Toru to preserve the emotional importance of people and experiences that can no longer be recovered, but it also reminds him of their absence. The past becomes simultaneously a source of continuity and a source of emotional difficulty. The contrast between Naoko and Midori further develops this theme. Naoko is closely connected to Toru's memories and the emotional weight of the past, while Midori repeatedly draws him toward the immediacy of the present. Yet neither character can be reduced to a simple symbol. Their importance lies in the different possibilities they reveal for Toru's relationship with memory, intimacy, and identity.

Ultimately, *Norwegian Wood* rejects the idea that personal development requires complete separation from the past. Instead, Murakami presents identity as an ongoing process of negotiation. The past cannot simply be discarded because it contains the experiences through which the self has been formed. At the same time, remaining entirely within memory makes it difficult to engage fully with the present. Toru's experience therefore illustrates a broader human paradox: we become who we are partly through what we remember, but memory can never reproduce the past exactly as it was.

The significance of *Norwegian Wood* lies precisely in this tension. Memory preserves what time has taken away, but it also transforms what it preserves. By presenting the past through the consciousness of the remembering self, Murakami demonstrates that identity is not a finished product. It is continually rewritten through the relationship between experience, memory, loss, and the present moment. The past refuses to end because it remains part of the self. Yet remembering it does not necessarily mean remaining trapped within it. The novel's deeper suggestion is that adulthood involves learning to carry one's memories without

expecting them to provide complete answers. In this sense, Norwegian Wood ultimately presents identity not as a destination reached after confronting the past, but as an ongoing process of living with what cannot be fully recovered, forgotten, or resolved.

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