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Postmodernism through the scope of Japanese Literature

Postmodernism is an abstract term that does not have any clear definitions, but its purpose serves to go against what we know, extending past our modern understanding of a variety of things. Through the scope of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, a few indicators are given showcasing some of the characteristics of a postmodern literary work of art. At a surface level, postmodern literature is filled with unreliable narrators, fragmented stories, and uses irony in unique ways. Through these characteristics exemplified, the novel explores hyperreality, and existentialism.

The novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* tells two contrasting narratives, split between two contrasting worlds. The setting for the first world known as the Hard-Boiled Wonderland (HBW) is analogous to the characteristics seen in a setting of a cyberpunk genre. It takes place in a hub of numbers, industry, and technology and is told through the perspective of a man who is a Calcutec, an operative who is trained to use their subconscious mind as a key for encryption. Contrastingly, the other world known as End of the World (EW) is a dream-like place that takes place in an isolated town, where unicorns graze. The narrator of this world is forced to give up his "shadow", an embodiment of memories, and self, and finds himself unable to remember his life or how he came to be in such a place. Tasked to be a dream reader that reads dreams from the skulls of unicorns, we follow his journey of learning more about who he is and the world that encompasses him.

As a reader, you're thrown right into the middle of the story and are given two perspectives that seemingly have no connection whatsoever with even chapters correlating to the End of the World, and odd ones, the Hard-Boiled Wonderland. In other words, once you feel like you have a grasp of one narrative style, you're thrown into the other one. This unique aspect of contrasting narratives told through alternating chapters adds to the abstractness often seen in postmodern works of art. Through a structure like this, the reader gradually learns more about both worlds and tends to look for any connection that the two may have in order to fill in the backstory of both narrators. The reader further wonders if the events are happening simultaneously, or on a different axis of time. This lack of a linear plot exemplifies the characteristics of a postmodernism by embodying the aspect of a fragmented story. Furthermore, through one of the characters in the EW, the Librarian, we learn that "memory is unreliable and uncertain" and that "there are things we can remember and things we cannot remember" (Murakami). This line helps break the fourth wall between the reader and the story by making the reader themselves question what they know to be true. Eventually as the story continues to progress, I believe that many readers *subconsciously* become more aware that both worlds are actually portrayed by the same person. As a result, we notice how the protagonist's self identity and perceptions of the world is fragmented itself. This detail of the novel becomes even more apparent and clear when you compare the translated English version to that of the original Japanese version. One key distinction is that the Japanese language has multiple ways to say the first person pronoun I. Each portrayal of the narrator uses one of the various pronouns that carries a different nuance: 俺 *ore*, 私 *watashi*, or 僕 *boku*. When it comes to the shadow, he uses ore "a raw, tough, or rude way to refer to oneself" while the dreamreader uses boku, "a more informal use of the first person pronoun" (Manuel 2019). From this we see that even in the

alternate world the two embodiments of the narrator show how fragmented he really is because by using a rough manner the shadow is portrayed as “stronger and more self assured” than the dreamreader (Manuel 2019). Furthermore, the HBW narrator uses *watashi*, the politest way to refer to oneself.

In a broader context, the *End of the World* portrays the scope of hyperreality, existentialism and what our subconscious mind experiences while we're asleep. We process concepts and ideas through our dreams turning them into things that may or may not be comprehensible and may or may not correlate to the events that we have experienced throughout our daily life and even our lifetime. Instead the narrator is stuck in the town, and by losing his shadow therefore his sense of self, it becomes analogous to how our five senses are put mostly to rest when we sleep at night, telling the perspective of our subconscious mind. Towards the end of the novel one last implementation is given to showcase fragmentation. It has an ending that is open ended and leads room for interpretation, a common trend that I have noticed in Japanese literature and alludes to postmodernism.

Overall, I believe there is significance to the narrator's fragmented view of himself and the world inside of his head. Through the channels that influence his characters' day-to-day lives, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* explicitly gives rise to an awareness of the second world that we all as human individuals have lying beneath our own perceived realities in a postmodern style.

Works Cited

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