

How does the role of cats differ in Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*
compared to Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*?

Subject: English A: Category 1

Word Count: 3994

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Comparison of the two texts	3
Conclusion	13
Works Cited	14

Main characters are the focus of every novel and often minor characters don't get that same attention. This is usually based on the assumption that they don't seem to contribute much to the conflict; this ideology is especially applied, wrongfully, to the character's pets. With authors like Haruki Murakami, whose writing is often characterised as "allegorical, constructed of familiar symbols, [with their meaning remaining] hermetic to the last," it seems to be that each detail in novels, however minor, shouldn't be overlooked (Wray). This got me wondering whether the main character's pet serves a major role in a novel's conflict, not just as a companion. Haruki Murakami's novel, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, begins with the disappearance of Toru Okada's pet cat, Mackerel (formerly Noboru Wataya), jumpstarting strange chain of events the main character goes through while venturing to find his cat. Toru's search leads him to meet people who help him and later play a huge role in his personal life. Alternatively, in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the pet cat's role is more implicit, since the cat, Jonas, just accompanies the main character, Merricat Blackwood, when facing conflict. Jonas is tied so closely to Merricat that often readers see her internal thoughts reflected in Jonas' actions. This leads me to question, how does the role of cats differ in Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* compared to Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*? To answer this, one needs to analyze the cats' actions to establish the cats' role, in order to understand the author's intended purpose of the cat. From this, similarities and differences can then be distinguished in each of the author's choices, which creates a better understanding of the role of cats in novels. This leads me to claim, minor characters often work as a gateway to deeper meaning, allowing readers the ability to use the cats as sources of explanation; but in separate ways. Murakami has Mackerel serve as an explanation to complexities of the plot whereas Jackson has Jonas serve as an explanation to complexities of Merricat.

Murakami establishes the cats' importance to understanding the plot by having its disappearance guide the storyline. The first chapter introduces the cat's disappearance, causing Toru to make "Cat hunting apart of [his] daily routine" (58). Murakami foreshadows what the story will entail by introducing Toru's repeated attempt to find Mackerel as the initial focus. In doing so, readers become engaged in why Mackerel isn't found yet, since "daily" since to imply that this search needs intensive dedication to resolve. Having this be such a repeated action that it becomes a "routine" characterises the disappearance of Mackerel as a long term issue, that'll require prolonged time and effort. This causes readers to be more attentive to strange aspects of Toru's life, trying to assist in the search for Mackerel. Additionally, Toru embarking on this hunt also results in him meeting various strange people, like Malta Kano and May, that not only work to help him find his cat but also as a support system Toru later needs to face life challenges. This all wouldn't have happened if the cat hadn't disappeared.

By having Mackerel play this role, Murakami's reinforcing the idea of the importance of minor characters. Laurie Schnebly Campbell said that in order to have a "plausible, [consistent and interesting] character, there's got to be a driving-force motivation." What she means is characters need to have a focus in order to have their actions be meaningful; they should be working towards something, a larger goal, readers can look forward to. Often, minor characters play a supporting role in this as they can guide the main character and cause the conflict that the main characters work with (Tennant). In this case, Mackerel's disappearance was the driving force of the novel as it provided the main character something to do; it gave Toru's actions meaning since it was working towards the larger goal of finding Mackerel. This results in the reader becoming more engaged with the storyline as they want to see the conflict resolved and what happened to Mackerel.

Instead of having the cat provide momentum for the storyline, Jackson establishes the importance of the cat to understanding Merricat by equating the two. Jackson associates Jonas with Merricat, in order for Jonas to then become a tool for Jackson to have certain actions, thoughts and mannerisms to be associated with Merricat. She does this in three ways: aligning their physical actions, their opinions and how others treat them. She first aligns their physical actions, as a basis for similarity, like when “[Merricat] runs, Jonas ran and when [she] stopped and stood still, he stopped and glanced at [her]” (52). Through this, Jackson establishes a clear connection and correspondence between them; yet she distinguishes that Jonas is an extension of Merricat since he “glanced at” her, displaying a dependence he has on her. Secondly, Jackson aligns them on a deeper level when they share the same opinions. Jackson has Merricat say things like “Jonas and I dislike rhubarb,” where she speaks on behalf of both of them when people were just referring to her, telling the readers that they come as a pact (44). This strengthens Merricat and Jonas’ bond since sharing the same internal thoughts is a very intimate connection. Finally, Jackson has other characters treat them in the same manner, confirming that they function as a unit. This is seen when Jackson writes that, “Jonas and [Merricat] were expected to stay in [their] corner ... while Constance worked” (21). Having the corner be “[theirs]” as opposed to Merricat’s shows that others reinforce the same level of discipline on both of them, which brings Jonas up to the same level of standards as Merricat, ultimately equating them. From these three connections, with the assumption that their internal emotions align, Jonas results in becoming a source of her true emotions. Jonas becomes a reflection of Merricat’s true intentions through his actions, regardless of whether their actions align because unlike Merricat, Jonas is an animal that doesn’t need humankind’s validation and therefore doesn’t have an incentive to have a filter.

Murakami also presents a strong relationship between the main character and the cat, yet instead of using the cat to characterise the main character, he uses their relationship to add to the characterisation of the cat itself. Before Mackerel reappears and Toru is alone, he said he “didn’t have anyone to talk to, not even the cat” (371). “Not even” infers that it takes an exceptional level of loneliness to “not even” have his cat there for him when already having no one to talk to. This characterises the cat as an unconditional support system that’d usually be there for their owner when no one else would be. This idea gets confirmed when Mackerel returns and becomes a source of comfort to Toru; for example, a long day for Toru ends with him cuddling his cat, inferring that his best way to debrief and reconcile is with the cat’s comfort; additionally, he falls asleep thinking of his “warmth” and other physical features while characterising Mackerel’s return as “a blessing” (506). Murakami shows that the mere return of Mackerel empowered Toru, creating a strong visual of the cat’s being a symbol of comfort and hope.

Yet, Murakami also had the cat embody a strong relationship more literally, by having the cat represent the best of Kumiko and Toru’s relationship. Murakami has Mackerel be the strongest topic of conversation and common ground between them, adding to the idea of the cat being closely bonded to Toru and the relationship. Almost every conversation they shared was about Mackerel and his whereabouts, and Kumiko even said in her final letter that “[Mackerel] was always a symbol of something good that grew up between [them]” (603). Murakami chose to have the cat be marked as “a symbol of something good” to further characterise the cat as wholesome and righteous. This elevates how the readers view Mackerel and respect him as the best thing in Toru’s life. Yet, Murakami had Mackerel also be a symbol of the best thing in Kumiko’s life, by being the first cat she bought which was an “important kind of symbol” of rising from her parent’s oppression (48); this allows the cat to

represent strength and hope for Kumiko. Murakami has Mackerel embody their relationship through being their common ground, to attach traits like strength and hope to the cat's image.

It isn't uncommon for minor characters to be a tool of symbolism for authors. Karen Bernardo defined minor characters as "static" and "lacking in depth" since they only serve a specific purpose. However, this proves to be false since Murakami's minor character, the cat, has ample depth and play a major role in understanding the novel. Historically, it's known that Murakami often uses cats as a tool for symbolic roles, as he has a personal connection with them; not only does he own many cats, but he also sees them as a "lucky charm, a mascot" (Vasile). In this case, when Mackerel works as a symbol of Kumiko and Toru's relationship, Mackerel becomes a physical embodiment of their relationship that both Kumiko and Toru can interact with; knowing that the cat symbolises the relationship, readers can then gain a deeper understanding into how Kumiko and Toru approach the relationship through how they interact with Mackerel. This then creates the deep metaphor of the search for the cat being Toru's search for what was lost in his relationship.

However, Bernardo may not be entirely wrong; She could be right when she says minor characters need to "static" from the viewpoint that minor characters need to be consistent. They need to have that consistency so that readers are able to rely on them as tools for understanding the novel. This works for Jackson's novel since Jackson has the role of Jonas be consistently a reflection of Merricat, which allows readers to use Jonas as a tool to understand Merricat. This consistency strengthens the role of minor characters as an aid to understanding the main characters and the novel as a whole.

To support Bernardo's idea of minor characters being a reliable tool, Jackson uses the close relationship of Merricat and Jonas to foreshadows Charles' bad nature and intentions, villainizing him. Jackson not only further links Merricat and Jonas as a team but also has the

readers apply sceptical feelings towards Charles. In chapter 3, when Jonas “runs up a storm” Jackson had Merricat characterise Jonas as an “omen [speaking] of change” (40). This results in readers becoming sceptical of Charles since he’s the only recent change happening. The negative connotation of change then characterises him as the enemy, since his brought upon change seems to cause distress to Jonas. Paired with Merricat’s feelings about Charles, wanting to “[eliminate] Charles from everything he’d touched” (87), this not only validates Merricat’s feelings and Charles’ role as the villain, but adds to Jonas’s credibility as intuitive not only as an omen, but also as a reflection of Merricat.

Furthermore, Jackson has the readers relate to Merricat, using Merricat’s negative feelings towards Charles and her attempts to get rid of him, to villainize him and victimise Merricat and Jonas. In chapter 5, Charles asks Jonas “how [Charles can] make cousin Mary like [him]?” and gets increasingly rude in chapter 6 asking, “what would poor Mary do if Constance and Charles didn’t love her?” touching on her insecurities in a threatening way (67, 78). This condescending questioning and tone work to belittle Merricat, especially since they’re being asked to Jonas, a cat unable to respond, making the questions rhetorical. Additionally, by referring to Merricat as “poor Mary” he belittles her directly, as an attempt to assert dominance within the family dynamic. His attempt at shifting the dynamic continues as he suggests a new family dynamic where “Constance and Charles [don’t] love her.” This is highly disrespectful to Merricat since regardless of Charles being blood-related, he’s a guest, in no position to make changes to one’s family dynamic. Readers then empathise with Merricat, resulting in Charles being villainized further. Additionally, Charles ways of belittling Merricat inadvertently reaffirms the connection between Merricat and Jonas. By talking through Jonas, unable to respond, to get to Merricat, Charles displays Merricat and Jonas’ interchangeable nature. Therefore, Jackson has Charles use Merricat and Jonas’

connection for his personal gain, highlighting his disrespectful nature, to villainize him; and in doing so, Jackson also validates Merricat and Jonas' unity.

As Jackson marks Charles as the villain, Murakami also uses the cat to highlight who the villain is, by having the cat be a symbol of benevolence which exemplifies Noboru's malevolence. Murakami sets up readers to draw a link between the cat and Noboru Wataya, Toru's brother, explicitly by having the cat's name initially be Noboru. Toru's reasoning behind naming the cat Noboru is superficial, saying it was "just for fun" since "the cat reminded [them] of [Noboru]" (15). With everything else about the novel being so symbolic, readers struggle to accept this reasoning, and can't help but wonder what's the meaning behind the link of the cat and Noboru sharing the same name; especially since Toru hates his brother in law, making it strange for him to name a pet he loves, after a person he hates. Therefore, when Murakami establishes the cat as a symbol of benevolence, the readers will automatically compare this trait with Noboru; and when the positive traits of the cat aren't reflected in Noboru, the readers then become more attentive of their differences and the bad in Noboru. Readers begin to notice Noboru's opposing behaviour contrasting with the cat through Toru's view of the two; he clearly loves his cat but feels the opposite about Noboru, calling him a "shitty island" (202). Murakami continues to juxtapose the two throughout the novel: examples include, the cat being a symbol of Kumiko's freedom whereas Noboru was what made her feel trapped; Toru seeks to find his cat yet runs from Noboru; finally, the cat symbolises the good in Kumiko and Toru's relationship and Noboru is against it. Malta, the respected medium, even implicitly supports this idea when she tells Toru "Noboru lives in a world opposite of yours. When you lose something he gains something" (312); this validates Noboru and the cat's conflicting relationship further since Malta's characterised as credible through being a medium. Therefore, Murakami used Noboru as a foil to further characterise

the cat as a symbol of benevolence, by having the two share the same name, making it easier for the audience to notice their contrasting traits; alongside this Murakami can then characterize Noboru as a symbol of malevolence through the distinct contrasts between them. This relationship will then prove to work symbolically as anything good the cat does will make Noboru seem worse, and vice versa.

Similarly to Murakami using Mackerel to exposing Toru's feelings, Jackson has Jonas be a reflection of Merricat's complex feelings. Readers often end up deducing Merricat's feelings through her actions, since Merricat doesn't provide direct insight, regardless of her first-person narration. Joyce Carol Oates in the afterword of the novel describes Merricat's outward behaviour as "mildly retarded," but inwardly "razor-sharp in her observations" and "hyperalert to threats," suggesting a defensive demeanour (152). Being apart of a household that's completely isolated from the town, physically and socially, it isn't surprising that Merricat is relatively reserved with her thoughts and emotions; additionally, with the town hating the Blackwoods, Merricat can't help being defensive. Luckily, Jackson provides Merricat with a companion to confide in, Jonas, which then serves as an outlet for her emotions. This is because Jonas, as an outsider, doesn't share the same damaged behaviour that Merricat uses to cover her true inner intellect; Jonas sees through Merricat's cold demeanour and reflects how Merricat truly is, as opposed to how Merricat chooses to represent herself, and her true emotions of feeling insecure.

When Jackson establishes the strong bond between Merricat and Jonas, she uses Jonas to be a gateway into Merricat's feelings and true intentions, understanding her better. She does this by having Jonas's actions follow Merricat's. For example, when Merricat tried telling Jonas that Charles is a ghost, he "closed his eyes and turned away" (70). This cold behaviour from Jonas represents a clear rejection of the idea of Charles being a ghost; knowing that

Jonas is a reflection of Merricat's true feelings, readers can then interpret this as Merricat knowing deep down that Charles isn't really a ghost and he's just a bad person. This results in her true intention being to want Charles to leave because he's an infiltration of their family, instead of because he's a dangerous ghost. This also reassures the audience that Merricat isn't delusional and with her bad feelings about Charles still credible since she doesn't actually think he's a ghost. In turn, Merricat is now characterised as stubborn, by ignoring the "truth", and also exposed as insecure about her current family relations.

Through this connection between Jonas and Merricat, Jackson proves to readers and reinforces the idea that the role of minor characters is to guide the readers into a deeper understanding of the characters and plot. Tom Tennent wrote that part of the importance to minor characters is their role to "deliver exposition and add dimension to leads." He argued that each character has a function and important influence, however minor. Minor characters are provided as a foil to have readers see through the characters in their actions, through their interactions; especially in cases where the character's hiding something from the readers. In Merricat's case, Jackson has Jonas be a tool of showing sides of Merricat that she doesn't want to, or is unable to, show herself; especially when it comes to her emotions, Jonas can work as a gateway into them while Merricat can act the way she wants to come across to others, however defensively and untrue to herself, to add to her independent and stubborn character. This proves that minor characters can aid in the reader's understanding of the emotions and true feelings of a character, regardless of how private the character is themselves and if they reveal them directly.

In contrast, rather than a reflection of the main character, Murakami has the role of the cat to be a reflection of the plot by using it as a tool of foreshadowing. Murakami reassures the audience that the cat's actions are credible in foreshadowing through Malta Kano saying

so. In the beginning, Malta's reasoning of why Mackerel decided to leave specifically at the time was that "cats are sensitive creatures ... Perhaps the flow [changed or got obstructed by something]" (43). This characterises cats as intuitive and suggests that the cat sensed the "obstruction" foreshadowing the bad things ahead; Murakami indicates to the audience that the actions of the cat may give signs on what's going on and foreshadow bad things, elevating their importance in the plot. When Mackerel returns, considering Malta Kano said "barring some major change, [the cat] will never come back," the cat becomes a major sign of hope, by doing the impossible and coming back (178). Murakami has Malta use strong, definite language like "major" and "never" making it difficult for the readers to believe anything can refute that, especially with Malta's credibility. This all the more exemplifies the importance of the cat's return and what it means for Toru's life, since anything seems possible after the impossible got disproven.

Additionally, with Mackerel symbolising benevolence, Murakami then has the return of Mackerel become a symbol of hope and a representation of the beginning of the end, with respect to Noboru. Readers knowing that how good the cat's doing reflects how bad Noboru's fate is, allows the return of the cat to foreshadow the downfall of Noboru. Murakami enforces this idea when Toru indicates the return of his cat as a "good omen" and renames him Mackerel, drawing a distinct difference between Noboru Wataya and his cat (378). Murakami even foreshadows especially how Noboru will be defeated through the attributes of the cat when it returned; Toru stressed that when Mackerel returned he was unharmed and "didn't seem like a cat that'd been missing for a year" (377). This seems to infer that this blessing won't be the same for Noboru and the cat's good luck is a sign of Noboru's upcoming bad luck. Murakami uses Malta again to help push this further when her response to the reappearance of the cat is that the "tail is an imitation," since she's holding

it's real tail (537). By having Mackerel's tail be fake in the real world, Murakami makes the readers put the dream world's reality into question. Knowledge about Mackerel and Noboru's relationship, readers then seek Noboru's involvement in answering uncertainties of the dream world. This allows readers to draw the correlation that Noboru is the unknown man that chases Toru. From which readers can anticipate Noboru's downfall: his death in reality happening through his death in the dream world. Therefore Murakami uses actions and traits of the cat, and Noboru's subsequent opposing traits, to foreshadow upcoming conflict.

In a different way, Jackson conveys the idea of hope and a silver lining in her novel through Jonas' actions. With the Blackwood family having their house burned down, an invasion from the whole town and the death of a family member, it's difficult to see a happy ending. In addition, Merricat's stubborn nature infers that her pessimistic attitude and resentment towards Charles, who inadvertently caused the fire, wouldn't help either. But Jackson helps Merricat move forward and move on by having Jonas embody that. Since their mattresses burned, they had to sleep on the floor; Merricat could've been upset about it but when she saw "Jonas [sitting and sleeping] on the floor, [she] thought it [shouldn't] be so difficult for [her]" (130). In this case, Jonas, rather than reflecting Merricat's current emotions, reflects her best emotions, whether they're current underlying with her or not. Jonas moving forward before Merricat helps push the process of Merricat moving on. This is seen again when Jonas goes into Uncle Julian's room; neither Merricat nor Jonas ever went into Uncle Julian's room, so Jonas going in, (even when Merricat still didn't) physically embodies the mental change Merricat's undergoing. Specifically, this represents the beginning of Merricat overcoming his death and moving on, by breaking her self inflicted rule of being forbidden to go into his room; since now that he's gone, it's just a room.

This essay set out to explore the question of how does the role of the cats differ in each novel. It's argued that both Jackson and Murakami use the role of the cats to offer deeper insights and explanations to the plot or characters. Jonas, in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, worked as a gateway into the main characters underlying feelings, whereas, Mackerel, in *The Windup Bird Chronicles*, focused more on being a gateway into the underlying meanings and direction of the plot, and empowering main characters. However, both Jackson and Murakami characterise the cat as good "omens," holding symbolic meanings of benevolence. They used this to highlight the malevolence in a certain character, creating a villain; Jackson had Charles as the villain, whereas Murakami had Noboru. Yet to contrast, each author communicated this foil differently; Murakami explicitly had the cat and Noboru share a name, whereas Jackson implicitly just used the cat involvement whenever Merricat interacted with Charles. Both cats represented good, but more specifically, hope. Yet the role of hope was different; Jonas' hopeful outlook about the future, empowered Merricat to move on, after facing tragedies, whereas Mackerel's return was a symbol of hope to empower Toru to face the tragedy of Noboru. Overall, although considered minor characters, both cats proved to be essential elements, not only in the plot and resolution of the novels but also to enjoy these novels on a deeper level. This goes to show that the biggest mistake in reading is to neglect details, however minor.

Works Cited

- Bernardo, Karen. "Types of Characters in Fiction." *Lexiconic Education Resources!*,
learn.lexiconic.net/characters.htm. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.
- Campbell, Laurie S. "Your Character's Driving Force." *Writers In The Storm*, 19 Feb. 2016,
writersinthestormblog.com/2016/02/the-driving-force/. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.
- Jackson, S. (1962). *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. American Reprint Company.
- LA Vocelle. "Cats in the 20th Century (Cats in Literature-Haruki Murakami)." *THE GREAT CAT*, 30 Jan. 2015, www.thegreatcat.org/cats-20th-century-cats-literature-haruki-murakami/. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.
- "Major and Minor Characters in Literature." *Free Essays & Free Online Research Papers*,
www.freeonlineresearchpapers.com/major-minor-charactors. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.
- "Making Minor Characters Matter." *AutoCrit Online Editing*, 18 Apr. 2019,
www.autocrit.com/blog/making-minor-characters-matter/. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.
- Murakami, H. (2010). *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle: A Novel*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Tennant, Tom. "The Importance of Minor Characters." *Pen and the Pad*, 21 July 2017,
penandthepad.com/importance-minor-characters-8410673.html. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.
- Wray, John. "Haruki Murakami, The Art of Fiction No. 182." *The Paris Review*, 30 Nov. 2018, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2/haruki-murakami-the-art-of-fiction-no-182-haruki-murakami. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.