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## Exploring the intersection of Anton Chekhov and Haruki Murakami: a slow reading analysis of “Drive My Car”

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**Abstract.** The study aims to employ the method of slow reading to analyze the short story authored by Haruki Murakami. Intertextuality is the predominant feature of the narrative, the references to the Beatles’ song and Ernest Hemingway’s collection of stories add to the subtext of the story. However, it is the allusion to Chekhov’s “Uncle Vanya” in the Meiji-era adaptation (translated by Senuma Kayō) that stands out among others as the basis for deeper understanding of the story’s nuances. The characters in the 2014 story encounter similar challenges as those in Chekhov’s 1890s play, where the inability to comprehend others raises a crucial question of how to continue living and for what purpose. Misaki’s articulation of the answer echoes Sonya’s words from “Uncle Vanya”, emphasizing the necessity of enduring difficulties and persevering in one’s trained and most proficient area. The literary work “Drive My Car” epitomizes the characteristic style of Haruki Murakami, as evidenced by his fondness for music and incorporation of songs and musical elements, his propensity for employing allusions, quotations, and other forms of intertextuality. The story is similar to Chekhov’s play in the melancholic tone of the narration, lack of action, loose plot structure, a metaphorical employment of mundane life events, the choice of words the text is made of. Chekhov and Murakami stand together in their refusal to judge or blame their characters, in their acceptance of life in all of its most complicated manifestations.

**Keywords:** Uncle Vanya, text, slow reading, plot, intertext, intertextuality, metaphor, narration, allusions, quotation, Meiji-era translation, Senuma Kayō

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## Где встречаются А.П. Чехов и Харуки Мураками: медленное прочтение рассказа Drive My Car

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**Аннотация.** Исследование направлено на использование приема медленного чтения для анализа поэтики рассказа Харуки Мураками. Интертекстуальность – преобладающая черта повествования, ссылки песни «Битлз» и сборник рассказов Эрнеста Хемингуэя дополняют подтекст рассказа. Однако именно аллюзия на чеховского «Дядю Ваню» в переводе эпохи Мэйдзи (перевод Сэнума Кайо) является основой для понимания всех смысловых нюансов рассказа. Герои произведения 2014 г. сталкиваются с теми же проблемами, что и герои чеховской пьесы 1890-х гг. Неспособность понимать других ставит важнейший вопрос о том, как и для чего продолжать жить. Формулировка ответа Мисаки перекликается со словами Сони из «Дяди Вани»: нужно терпеливо сносить трудности и продолжать делать то дело, которое для тебя главное, которое ты умеешь делать лучше всего. Рассказ Drive My Car воплощает самые характерные черты стиля Харуки Мураками: его склонность к использованию музыкальных произведений, аллюзий, цитат и других форм интертекстуальности. С чеховской драмой рассказ объединяет меланхоличный тон повествования, бессобытийность, бессюженность, метафоризация бытовых слов и понятий, важное значение словесной ткани рассказа. Чехов и Мураками едины в полном отказе судить или обличать своих героев, едины в принятии жизни во всех ее самых сложных проявлениях.

**Ключевые слова:** Дядя Ваня, текст, медленное чтение, сюжет, интертекст, интертекстуальность, метафора, повествование, аллюзии, цитаты, перевод эпохи Мэйдзи, Сэнума Кайо

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### Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the adjective ‘slow’ to describe a method of reading literary texts in order to achieve a deeper understanding of their message and significance in his 1881 work: “I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading” (Nietzsche, 1887). This concept was further developed by Mikhail O. Gershenzon (1869–1925) (Smirnova, 2020) and his followers (The art of slow reading, 2020; Experiences of slow reading, 2021). Presently, ‘slow reading’ is characterized as a careful and thoughtful examination of a text, involving close attention to its language, structure, themes, and allusions.

The short story “Drive My Car” was initially published in the Japanese literary magazine “Monkey” in 2014. It subsequently served as the opening story for a collection of short stories titled “Men Without Women”, which was first published in Japan in 2017. The English translation of this collection was also released around the same time and received favorable reviews in the US press.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the title of the collection is a direct replication of the title of Ernest Hemingway’s famous collection of short stories, first published in 1927. Hemingway’s collection featured 14 stories centered around traditionally masculine pursuits such as war, bullfighting, boxing, and the complex emotional experiences of men – including love, infidelity, marriage, divorce, and death. The collection by Haruki Murakami features seven stories that focus on male protagonists and their relationships with women. It also touches on the power dynamics between men and women, as well as the concept of emotional intimacy and vulnerability. The traditionally male gender roles are not featured in Murakami’s collection.

## Discussion

### *Music in the story*

The title of the collection of short stories holds significance as it establishes an intertextual tone. A discerning reader may observe that the first two stories are titled after songs by the Beatles. In order to ensure that this connection is not lost, both the Japanese and Russian versions of the titles are rendered in English, specifically “Drive My Car” and “Yesterday”.

Haruki Murakami draws a comparison between his collection of short stories and a music album (Murakami, 2022, pp. 51–52). He intentionally establishes this connection, citing the Beatles, “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” and “the Beach Boys Pet Sounds” as inspirations. The author expresses his desire for readers to bear this intention in mind. The significance of a specific song’s connection to the first story in the collection warrants examination.

The song “Drive My Car” by the Beatles features a suggestive and light-hearted conversation between a female character and a young man. The female character expresses her desire to become a famous screen star and invites the young man to engage in an activity with her – become her driver. Although the female character does not possess a car, the young man is eager to participate immediately. The repeated use of the phrase “Baby, you can drive my car” throughout the song hints at a deeper meaning beyond the absence of a vehicle. Paul McCartney, during a conversation with Barry Miles, the author of a 700-page book on the Beatles, reveals the underlying significance of this phrase: “and then

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<sup>1</sup> McAlpin, H. (2017, May 5). ‘Men Without Women’, a new story collection by Haruki Murakami. *Washington Post*. Retrieved May 11, 2023, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/men-without-women-a-new-story-collection-by-haruki-murakami/2017/05/05/c7238abc-30e6-11e7-8674-437ddb6e813e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/men-without-women-a-new-story-collection-by-haruki-murakami/2017/05/05/c7238abc-30e6-11e7-8674-437ddb6e813e_story.html); Fielden, J. (2017, May 9). New from Murakami: Tales of cool cars, Shinto spirits and lost love. *The New York Times*. Retrieved May 11, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/books/review/men-without-women-haruki-murakami.html>; Morris, J. (2017, May 16). Each of the stories in Murakami’s ‘Men Without Women’ is a psychological and existential mystery. *Popmatters*. Retrieved May 11, 2023, from <https://www.popmatters.com/haruki-murakami-men-without-women-2495392586.html>

it was wonderful because this nice tongue-in-cheek idea came and suddenly there was a girl there, the heroine of the story, and the story developed and had a little sting in the tail... ‘Drive my car’ was an old blues euphemism for sex, so in the end all is revealed” (Miles, 1997, p. 269–270).

The reference to the Beatles’ song in “Drive My Car” initially suggests a light-hearted romantic relationship between Kafuku, a middle-aged stage actor, and his young female driver, Misaki. However, Murakami skillfully employs Chekhov’s “it seemed” – “it turned out” situation (Kataev, 2011, p. 277) to reveal a more complex narrative. As Kafuku and Misaki spend more time together, they begin to open up about their past traumas and the existential issues surrounding life, love, and death. This intertextuality is further developed through various references to Chekhov’s play “Uncle Vanya”. Murakami’s masterful use of multiple levels of intertextuality creates a rich and nuanced narrative that challenges the reader’s initial assumptions.

Other music appears in the story. The cassette player, used to rehearse lines on the way to the theater, plays classical music or classic American rock on the way home. The author’s love for music has been carefully studied in the academic work by his translator, emeritus professor of Japanese literature at Harvard University Jay Rubin (Rubin, 2002). Even though the narrative under consideration was not composed until 2014, music assumes a significant role within Murakami’s literary style, as is evident in “Drive My Car”.

### ***The car as a character and chronotopic dimension***

Kafuku, the protagonist, exhibits a personal attachment to his vehicle, a durable Saab that he acquired brand new and whose yellow color was chosen by his late wife. Despite having engaged with multiple women since his bereavement, none had ever joined him in the passenger seat during his nearly decade-long solo drives. In the thematic exploration of inter-subjective relationships between man and machines, the car is depicted as a sentient entity that is anthropomorphized through its selective characterization. As such, the car is likened to a horse, caressed akin to a large dog, and referred to by the personal pronoun “she”, a clear indication of Kafuku’s emotional attachment to his “baby”. The recruitment of Misaki as the car’s driver is exclusively premised upon her exceptional driving skills, as well as her inclination to acknowledge the animate nature of this machinery by referring to it as ‘him’ and expressing her fondness for it.

An additional pivotal aspect responsible for the closeness observed between Kafuku and Misaki pertained to their age difference. Misaki, aged 24, coincidentally shares the age that Kafuku’s deceased daughter would have reached had their baby survived. That infant passed away nameless three days after birth, owing to a heart condition deemed weak by medical professionals. Misaki checked Kafuku’s year of birth and discovered that he approximated her father’s age. The father abandoned Misaki’s mother when their progeny was eight years old, and Misaki never encountered him thereafter.

The automobile presents a distinct chronotopic dimension wherein temporality and spatiality assume singular qualities. The measure of time is not limited to the traditional ticking of a clock but rather to the degree of traffic flow and the fluctuation of traffic signal alterations. In terms of physical space, the car envelops

its surroundings with the inclusion of avian presence atop telephone lines and the overhead expanse of sky, or alternatively, contracts into a comfortable personal space readily transformed by the soundscape. Within the car, a cassette player serves as a tool for Kafuku's line rehearsals for an adaptation of Anton Chekov's "Uncle Vanya", set in the Meiji era, wherein he assumes the role of Uncle Vanya.

### ***The Meiji era translator***

The mention of the Meiji-era adaptation of "Uncle Vanya" may prove perplexing to a non-Japanese reader. One may question the reasoning behind Murakami's specificity. It should be noted that following the initial translation of "Uncle Vanya" in 1912, there were numerous subsequent translations and adaptations of Chekhov's work (Seiro, 2005). The reason for selecting the Meiji-era adaptation of "Uncle Vanya" could be to ensure that the play retains an old-fashioned sound (Tomico, 2005, p. 83). Nevertheless, potential causes behind the author's deliberate use warrant examination.

During the Meiji era, spanning from 1868 to 1912, Japan embarked upon a process of opening up to other nations. In February of 1912, the first translation of Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya" was published in "Seitō," Japan's inaugural literary journal created by and for women (Craig, 2006, p. vii). The translator responsible for this work, Senuma Kayō (1875–1915), was a Russian Orthodox believer and the wife of Senuma Kakusaburō, the head of the Russian Seminary in Tokyo. At the time of her love affair with a Russian medical student, Kayō had five children with her husband. Following her separation from him, she gave birth to a baby girl and subsequently traveled to Russia twice (Diary of St. Nicholas, 2004). At the age of 39, Kayō passed away due to complications arising from the birth of her seventh child. It is noteworthy that she was the first individual to translate directly from Russian not only "Uncle Vanya", but also "The Cherry Orchard", "Ivanov", and numerous stories by A. Chekhov (Hiratsuka, 2006, p. 190–191).

The potential relevance of Senuma Kayō's life to Haruki Murakami's story is uncertain. It is unclear whether Murakami was aware of the existential crisis experienced by the Meiji era translator. This may be an instance of optional intertextuality, a subtle form of interconnectedness that is not essential (Yüksel, 2019). In this case, the author has referenced the Meiji era text to add another layer of meaning to the story. The salient point is that the reference to Senuma Kayō's difficult and agonizing decision-making process contributes to the emotions of guilt, regret, and loss in the narrative. Kafuku's wife chooses to remain with her husband despite having multiple affairs and engaging in extramarital relations. Although Kafuku is aware of his wife's infidelity, he refrains from confronting her and subsequently regrets this decision after she departs. His remorse and culpability are recurrently present, representing a *zugzwang* situation in which any action taken would result in a disadvantageous outcome. The resolution of this predicament will be explored through an examination of allusions to Chekhov's play.

### ***Chekhovian mood***

The tone of Chekhov's literary style is discernible in Haruki Murakami's narration, characterized by a seemingly deficient plot progression and a preponderance of introspection among the characters. The play's structure in "Uncle

Vanya” is notably loose, which is foregrounded by the subtitle “Scenes from Country Life in Four Acts”. The full emphasis is on language as the primary means of conveying meaning. Recent studies confirm this observation regarding the centrality of language in Chekhov’s work (Scharenskaya, 2020). The usage of certain words or even terms in various contexts can result in their transformation into metaphors. These metaphors gradually unveil their significance to the perceptive reader and serve as a guide towards the primary message of the narrative. The evolution of the word-combination “blind spot” provides an exemplary illustration of this process, whereby it transitions from a medical descriptor to a symbolic metaphor.

In an effort to comprehend his late wife, Kafuku cultivated a rapport with Takatsuki, the final individual to have engaged in a romantic involvement with her. Following the termination of their relationship, Kafuku’s wife received a diagnosis of advanced uterine cancer after undergoing hospital tests. Consequently, the two men formed a bond over alcohol. Regardless of the topic that initiated their conversations, they invariably returned to Kafuku’s departed spouse. Kafuku was primarily afflicted by his failure to truly comprehend his wife. Despite living as husband and wife for 20 years and holding the perception that they could be candid with each other about anything, such was not the case. Figuring out an allegorical way to express his feelings, Kafuku applied the term “a lethal blind spot.” This phrase initially materialized in an ophthalmic sense in the story: “...there was an issue with... vision. <...> The police-mandated eye examination disclosed the presence of glaucoma. It would seem that I possess a blind spot. Positioned on the right side. In the corner. I was not aware of it” (Murakami, 2017) The blind spot was the cause of the minor vehicular mishap Kafuku experienced and necessitated the procurement of a driver – the theater management stipulated that he abstain from driving until the problem had been rectified.

The blind spot, as portrayed in the story, serves as a metaphor and then a symbol of the insurmountable challenge of comprehending the intricacies of the opposite sex. Women’s thoughts and feelings are deemed by men as incomprehensible. Takatsuki, through his use of metaphor, underscores this sentiment, stating that apprehending a woman’s thoughts in entirety is a futile endeavor, regardless of her identity. He notes that the blind spot, which is the metaphor used to describe this phenomenon, is not limited to a specific individual, but rather an issue that affects all men. Consequently, men are all caught in the same circumstantial blindness, finding it impossible to fully understand the thoughts and feelings of women.

### ***The characters of Chekhov in contemporary Japan***

Throughout the course of the narrative, Kafuku’s significant other is consistently labeled as “his wife,” without a proper appellation, resulting in the depersonalization of the character and the loss of her individual identity. The only thing we know about her is that her appearance is exquisite. Repeatedly, it is accentuated that she exuded beauty, as she is consistently described as “stunning,” “beautiful,” and identified as an actor and a “real leading lady.” As she grew older though “her star began to wane.” During their drive, Misaki and Kafuku engage in conversation that reveals Kafuku’s wife had been unfaithful to him, engaging in extramarital affairs since the tragic loss of their newborn child shortly after birth. Despite his belief that

their marriage had been an amicable and harmonious union, Kafuku refrained from confronting his wife about her infidelity, harboring unwavering affection for her until her untimely passing. Kafuku laments his failure to confront his wife during her lifetime, regretting his reluctance to inquire about what drove her to engage in such behavior, a question he remained too fearful to ask until it was too late.

Kafuku – Uncle Vanya. In Chekhov’s play, Elena’s remarkable beauty disrupts the rural serenity of the country estate, causing both Doctor Astrov and Uncle Vanya to fall in love with her. Uncle Vanya loses his head completely, but Astrov is still very critical and sums up his observations of Elena in the famous quote: “People should be beautiful in every way – in their faces, in the way they dress, in their thoughts and in their innermost selves. She *is* beautiful, there’s no question about that, but – let’s face it, she does nothing but eat, sleep, go for walks and enchants us with her beauty. That’s all” (Chekhov, 2008, p. 138). Still Uncle Vanya cannot imagine his future life without Elena, he cannot see any meaning in his life without love. In the similar way Kafuku’s affection for his wife persists even after she has passed away. However, the memory of her affairs with Takatsuko and others, fills him with a painful sensation. He struggles to erase these memories from his mind, but they linger, tormenting him relentlessly. Misaki quotes Chekhov’s work on the unbearable sadness of life for girl who is not pretty, and Kafuku echoes this sentiment by invoking Uncle Vanya: “Oh, how unbearable! Is there no help for me? I am forty-seven now. If I live till sixty, I have thirteen more years to endure. Too long. How shall I pass those thirteen years.” (Chekhov, 2008, p. 160). Kafuku expresses his anguish at the prospect of facing long years without his wife, as life expectancy has increased significantly since the time of Uncle Vanya.

Misaki – Sonya. Misaki drove Kafuku around while hearing little bits of Chekhov’s play in the car. She became curious and decided to read the play to learn more about it. After reading it, she realized that there were suggestive details that she could relate to, such as her rural origin and her homely appearance, which made her see the similarity between herself and Sonya: “My features are plain, that’s all. Like Sonya’s”. The play left Misaki feeling very sad, and she quoted Sonya’s lament from the second act: “Oh, how miserable I am! I can’t stand it. Why was I born so poorly favored? The agony!” (Chekhov, 2008, p. 140). Misaki’s physical appearance was predetermined, and unfortunate in the eyes of her mother. She was perceived as terse and unattractive, and as the sole offspring of her parents, her mother held her responsible for her father's departure. The mother firmly believed that if Misaki had possessed a more pleasing appearance, her father would not have left them. Thus, her father’s abandonment was attributed to Misaki’s perceived lack of physical beauty.

The absence of physical beauty and sexual appeal presents a significant challenge for both Sonya and Misaki. Despite this, they demonstrate proficiency in their respective roles, such as managing the household and driving cars. Furthermore, they provide love and support to those close to them, seek personal fulfillment, and motivate their loved ones. Notably, Misaki’s final words bear striking similarity to Sonya’s renowned monologue, which begins with the phrase “Well, it can’t be helped. Life must go on. And our life will go on, Uncle Vanya.” (Chekhov, 2008, p. 167). This comparison is further emphasized by Misaki’s own

statement: “All I can do is accept what they did and try to get on with my life.” (Murakami, 2017). Uncle Vanya, though he is depressed, agrees with Sonya and returns to his usual work – taking care of the estate. In the same way Kafuku takes in what Misaki says. Acting is what Kafuku does well, acting is his life, i. e. leaving who one was for a brief time, then returning. But the self that one returned to was never exactly the same as the self that one had left.

Uncle Vanya, despite of his depressive state, concurs with Sonya and proceeds to resume his customary duties of attending to the estate. Similarly, Kafuku internalizes Misaki’s utterances, endeavors to rest briefly, and subsequently, will recommence his engagement in the theatrical performance, which he excels at and constitutes a fundamental part of his existence. As Kafuku reclines for a nap, Misaki quietly drives the car.

### Conclusion

Through a methodical slow reading of the story, the reader can uncover elements that may not be immediately apparent upon cursory inspection. The narrative contains a multitude of features that are emblematic of Murakami’s signature style, including intricate intertextuality and musical references. One of the most influential figures for the author in “Drive My Car” is Chekhov, whose work straddles the line between realism and modernism. The play is written at the end of the 19th century (the question of when “Uncle Vanya” was written is still being debated, the proposed dates range from 1890 to 1896 (Gitovich, 1965; Lukashevsky, 1978; Kuzicheva, 2018; Golovacheva, 2018; Silaev, 2018)). Chekhov’s subtle tone, sparse plot development, and propensity to eschew explicit displays of emotion resonate with those who have been raised in Japanese culture. This is evidenced by his immense popularity in Japan, where new translations of his plays are frequently released, a phenomenon referred to by some as the “Japonization of Chekhov” (Nagata, 2012). Similarly, the crux of Murakami’s enigmatic storytelling lies primarily in the nuances of language rather than the plot itself. Central themes of love and acceptance compensate for the lack of communication and understanding between individuals of different genders. Contrary to passing judgment on his characters, Murakami allows them to undergo trials and tribulations in order to arrive at a realization that, despite the difficulties and hardships they encounter, life is still worth living. The quest for the purpose of life among Chekhov’s characters bears pertinence to that of Murakami’s counterparts, who similarly adopt the approach espoused by Sonya of perseveringly and composedly bearing the vicissitudes of life, grasping the nettle and continuing to strive until the natural denouement of existence. The absence of religious hope, which is a mainstay for Sonya, does not prevent Japanese characters from acknowledging the essentiality of perpetuating their endeavors and continuing with their lives.

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