



Nothing Is Something

The Concept of Minimalism in A Wild Sheep Chase

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In this highly innovative piece of literary criticism, Rhiannon Quillin draws from scholarship on art, architecture, and design to analyze how Haruki Murakami uses minimalist aesthetics to enrich the atmosphere and characterization of his novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*. This essay was written for World Literature III with Dr. John Bruce.

THE MINIMALIST MOVEMENT in interior design and architecture was notably influenced by the traditional designs of Japanese architecture, which later became adopted within American culture and society. In Japanese architecture, the layout of minimalism in interior design and décor typically featured a limited amount of furniture and simple arrangement of composition to emphasize the spacious and open quality of a room or building (Vaughan and Ostwald). This method of design experienced a resurgence in America during the late 1970s that lasted throughout the 1980s, as many apartment-dwellers in upstate New York desired to transform their compact, dense apartments into sophisticated, seemingly spacious living areas. However, the “sophistication” of minimalism tends to carry negative undertones of isolation and emptiness, leading to an overall feeling of discomfort and estrangement with familiarity. Minimalism, as a concept, is believed to occur

in four different modes of discussion: “a minimality of means, a minimality of meaning, a minimality of structure, and a minimality in the use of patterns” (VanEenoo 9). Haruki Murakami specifically, and strategically, captures the overwhelming discomfort residing within different modes of minimalism in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, where the majority of the plot occurs within a spacious, black-and-white, minimalistic backdrop, effectively contributing to the bleak mood of the novel.

The American stylization of the novel coincides with the rising popularity that Minimalist architecture and décor had in the busy cities of America during the 1980s. Minimalism also spread to other forms of art with the concept’s prevalence in the popular rock music genre “as early as the mid-sixties when Young’s drones were transmitted via John Cale...and from there to the punk generation and their belatedly fashionable nihilism as described by Strickland in 2000” (VanEenoo 8). The narrator of *A Wild Sheep Chase* references many rock bands from this era, including The Stooges, the Yardbirds, and the Doors, all of whom are arguably related to the Minimalist movement with their simplistic styles and composition in songwriting that occurred in rock music at the time. Although these pop-culture references add pigment to the black-and-white tone of the novel, the art form’s presence is not solely confined to short references within the novel. Minimalism is also present within the dialogue and identity of the characters and their relationships within the setting.

Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase* specifically mimics the style of American detective novels and film with many American pop-culture references, as mentioned previously, residing within the humorous yet cynical dialogue. The dialogue’s seemingly “void of meaning” delivery is directly proportional to the setting where, even though the novel begins in the expectedly busy city of Tokyo, the description of the location is established in the concept of “perceived seclusion” within a heavily populated, industrialized city. This seclu-

sion is further emphasized by the emptiness detailed within the narrator's apartment. After an impending divorce with his wife, the narrator takes note of his solitude and describes his current situation as comparable to the experience of "a tiny child in a De Chirico painting, left behind all alone in a foreign country" (23). De Chirco, a Metaphysical painter later influencing the Surrealists, often depicted scenes of "partial bodies in illogical spaces," hence the comparison drawn to the detachedness the narrator experiences with his own environment (McCulloch and Goodrich). Although the apartment was already decorated in a simplistic, minimal fashion, the narrator's split with his wife emphasizes spatial awareness and the frequently occurring concept of feeling lost in continuous, foreign space even further.

The concept of space and Minimalism is specifically referred to within several of the main backdrops of the novel. The structure that the mysterious characters of the Boss and the black-suited secretary reside in is described as "a grand manor" accompanied with an internal emptiness and silence (124). This concept of monotone open space continuously contrasts with the absurdity of the plot, adding a nihilistic, realistic overtone to the unrealistic situations that the narrator, or protagonist, experiences. Interior design also becomes a topic of relevancy in the Dolphin Hotel and the house the Sheep Professor initially constructs, a space the narrator's friend Rat inhabits for a period of time as well. The Dolphin Hotel's lobby is initially described as "bigger than expected" (193). However, the narrator soon learns that the size of the room is an illusion, as it only seems spacious because there is an extreme lack of furniture and décor. The only furniture that the hotel contains is the "necessary amount," as the girlfriend of the narrator identifies the Dolphin Hotel as being a "no frills" type of establishment (193). Again, this concept of "no frills" minimalism is applicable to the house where the narrator discovers the truth about his friend, the Rat, and the mystical Sheep. The house was initially described as "[l]arge, quiet, and smelling like an old barn," holding the essential amount of comfort

and necessities for the narrator to survive on for the length of time he is held up there during the Winter (280-81). Still, both structures, the Dolphin Hotel and the Sheep Professor's house, conjure a rhetorical image of denoted distance, a concept that can be visually detected, and a connoted foreign quality that occurs in undertones (Barthes).

Minimality is present with the identification of the characters, offering the same detachment that is associated with more conventional forms of the art movement as well. Most of the major characters in Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* are not explicitly named. The name of the narrator is never actually revealed, further emphasizing objectivity that is comparable to the extensiveness of minimality in space and the remoteness that is paired with it. In other words, the lack of identification in characterization metaphorically creates space between the reader and the characters, lengthening the space between the characters themselves. This white space, created by the strategic choices of the author, effectively blends among the different aspects of the story and adds a cold and seemingly desolate overtone to the novel.

The adoption of detachment within *A Wild Sheep Chase* conceptually aligns with ideas and perspectives in minimalism, where minimalism—in its effects as a tangible art form directly manipulating space—can then be attributed to providing a solid foundation of setting and tone for the novel. The discomfort and unfamiliarity stemming from the minimalist manipulation of space, or setting, pervade the entirety of the novel in instances that initially may be deemed unimportant or mundane to the plot. However, the white space inherent to minimalism lying between those instances is then emphasized, giving meaning to “the void” of meaning, as well as emphasizing the “décor” that is tangibly there. ▶▶

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