

Killing Commendatore as a Story of the Twenty-first Century Inheriting the History of the Twentieth Century

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1. Introduction: Translated Versions of *Killing Commendatore*

Haruki Murakami's latest novel, *Killing Commendatore* (Part 1: The Idea Made Visible, Part 2: The Shifting Metaphor), was published on 24 February 2017 in Japan. Reviews by well-known figures began appearing in newspapers in Japan immediately after the book hit the shelves. Critics also reviewed the book in literary magazines a few months later. Subsequently, translated versions of the novel were published in Korean on 12 July¹, in Dutch (Part 1)² on 1 December, in Chinese (traditional Chinese character version)³ on 12 December in Taiwan, and in German (Part 1)⁴ on 22 January 2018. Additionally, a translated version of the novel will be published in Chinese⁵ on 10 March in China. *Killing Commendatore* as a Story of the Twenty-first Century Inheriting the History of the Twentieth Century

Once the English translation of the novel is released, it is expected that readers will actively write reviews on book community sites such as Goodreads⁶ and Library Thing⁷.

In this paper, to examine the theme of *Killing Commendatore*, I will aim to shed light on the implicit meanings of the characters, scenes, time period, and various events. The action of *Killing Commendatore* is assumed to take place in 2007 or 2008. However, events related to wars in the twentieth century are also implied in various scenes. While *Killing Commendatore* is a twenty-first-century Japanese story, it also tries to convey to readers memories of the negative worldwide legacies of the twentieth century. I will investigate Murakami's intentions by deciphering implicit aspects of the novel's setting while tracing shifts in the interior features of the main character.

2. Characters and Storyline

First, I will review the main characters who appear in the novel.

The main character, referred to only by the first-person pronoun '*watashi*' (and hereafter simply called *Watashi*), is a 36-year-old portrait painter who is also the narrator of the novel. His wife, Yuzu,

¹ 『기사단장 죽이기 1,2』 번역가 홍은주 (文学동네 12 July 2017).

² *De moord op Commendatore* Luk Elbrich; Fennema, Van Haute (Translator), Atlas Contact (1 December 2017; 11 January 2018 for Part 2).

³ 『刺殺騎士團長』 Ming-chu Lai (Translator) (時事文化出版 12 December 2017).

⁴ *Die Ermordung des Commendatore*; Ursula Gräfe (Translator), Dumont (22 January 2018; 16 April for Part 2).

⁵ 『暗殺騎士団』 Shaohua Lin (Translator) (Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 10 March 2018). Pre-ordering started on 5 February.

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/>

⁷ <https://www.librarything.com/home>

asks for a divorce after six years of marriage. After his wife says she wants a divorce, he goes on a journey in the Tohoku Region and Hokkaido with no particular destination in mind. After a month and a half, his friend introduces him to a mountain cottage owned by an old art school friend named Masahiko Amada, which has a painting studio and is located in the suburb of Odawara City, Kanagawa Prefecture. He lives there for about nine months while working as a painting teacher. Masahiko Amada's father, Tomohiko Amada, is a famous Japanese-style painter who is now 92 years old and lives in a nursing home in Izu Heights. Prior to World War II, he had been a Western-style painter. However, while studying abroad in Vienna, he was sent back to Japan due to his involvement in an attempt to assassinate a high-ranking Nazi official. Back in Japan, Tomohiko became a Japanese-style painter after the end of World War II. Tomohiko's brother, Tsuguhiko Amada, had been an aspiring pianist studying at the Tokyo Academy of Music. However, he was drafted at age 20 and was ultimately involved in the Nanking Massacre. After he was demobilised, he committed suicide.

Meanwhile, Wataru Menshiki is a 54-year-old man with snow-white hair who lives in a mansion built on the other side of the valley from the mountain cottage. He asks Watashi to paint his portrait. Living in a nearby mountain house are Marie Akikawa, who is 13 years old, and her aunt, Shoko Akikawa, who is single. Marie attends the painting classes taught by Watashi. As Menshiki believes a possibility that Marie is his daughter who was born to his deceased girlfriend, he watches Marie from his mansion using binoculars. Later, he will ask Watashi to paint her portrait as well.

3. Use of First-Person Pronouns

The main characters in Murakami's novels are often described in the first person, and in many cases he has used the pronoun *Boku*. In *Killing Commendatore*, however, he uses *Watashi*. Among Japanese male first-person pronouns, *Boku* has a more private sense while *Watashi* conveys more of a public image. Murakami's decision to use *Watashi* in this novel suggests that he wanted the main character's personal experiences and memories to be shared by readers around the world. As Tomohiko Amada, who had faced the tragic history of the twentieth century, aimed to pass his memories to the world through his painting *Killing Commendatore*, there is a sense that it was necessary to use the first-person *Watashi*, with its more public image, for the main character.

4. Culmination of Past Work

Scenes and conversations from Murakami's previous work are occasionally evoked in *Killing Commendatore*. The novel reflects aspects of not only his major novels, such as *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *1Q84*, and *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, but also his shorter novels, such as *The Last Lawn of the Afternoon*, *Barn Burning*, *The Second Bakery Attack*, *TV People*, *Tony Takitani*, *Honey Pie*, and *Hanalei Bay*. Fans of Murakami's novels will encounter scenes in

each chapter of *Killing Commendatore* that recall his past work. This might be understood as Murakami's way of giving something extra to his fans. However, it is more likely that with *Killing Commendatore*, Murakami, who recently turned 69, aimed to write something that would represent a culmination of his work from the past 40 years. It is telling that the main character is also an artist, who, in many scenes, refers to his feelings as an artist as well as the meaning of fiction. As such, *Killing Commendatore* is also a metafiction that reflects on the role of fiction in the twenty-first century, including aspects such as the significance of creation, the attitudes artists should adopt, and the importance of the imagination.

5. Watashi's Journey with no Destination in Mind: Fukushima and the Anschluss

Hurt by his wife's request for a divorce, Watashi leaves his Tokyo apartment, gets rid of his cell phone, and begins a journey without a destination in mind, driving away in his Peugeot 205 in the early spring. However, in the beginning of May, as he drives south along the Pacific coast in the Tohoku Region, the car breaks down right before he reaches Iwaki City, Fukushima Prefecture. This region will later be affected by radioactive contamination due to the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake. By having Watashi's car break down, Murakami lays the foundation for the scene where Watashi becomes concerned about Fukushima again when the Great East Japan Earthquake occurs at the end of the novel.

Just as it is a Sunday in mid-March when Watashi is shocked by his wife's request for a divorce, the Anschluss (Hitler's annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in 1938) also occurred on a Sunday in mid-March while Tomohiko Amada was studying in Vienna. As such, Watashi begins his journey with no destination in mind on the same Sunday, 70 years after the Anschluss, and faces loneliness and predicaments. As a result of this experience, however, he is able to discover Tomohiko's painting. In this way, Watashi's experiences overlap with the incident in Vienna Tomohiko was involved in, bringing events from 70 years ago into the twenty-first century. Thus, the novel enables readers to experience events from World War II—the Nazi advance in Central Europe after 1938 and the Japanese military advance in East Asia—as they simultaneously witness Watashi's nine-month experience.

Going forward, I will discuss several parts of the novel where the characters' experiences or events they are involved in evoke historical events of the twentieth century.

6. Watashi's Life in the Mountain Cottage in Odawara

The house in Odawara where Watashi lives for nine months is situated on top of a mountain in natural surroundings. There is no Internet access, and a horned owl lives in the attic. Since being divorced from his wife and having quit working as a portrait painter, he has not met anyone or painted for some time, remaining idle and feeling empty. However, because of these feelings, he is interested in a painting by Tomohiko Amada, and he is able to envision Amada's struggles during World War II,

which resonate with his own feelings.

Watashi discovers Tomohiko's painting in the attic when investigating noises made up there by the horned owl. Hakushu Kitahara (1885-1942), a well-known modern Japanese poet, also lived in a studio he called the 'Horned Owl House', located in the mountains in the suburb of Odawara, from 1918 to 1926. Similar to Watashi, Hakushu moved to Odawara as he was struggling with various difficulties: his wife had also divorced him when he was 36, and he, too, had lived in this 'Horned Owl House' for nine months as a single man. Then, he turned his life around, just as Watashi does. It appears that Murakami used Hakushu as a model for the part where Watashi leads a lonely life for nine months in Odawara.

Incidentally, World War I ended in 1918—the same year Hakushu moved to the house. World War I broke out with Austria's declaration of war on Serbia. With that in mind, it is likely that the scenes in Vienna described in the novel are intended to evoke the two world wars of the twentieth century. Moreover, Mozart, who composed the opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), which provided the basis for Tomohiko's painting, wrote many of his most famous works while in Vienna. Finally, Adolf Hitler himself, architect of the Anschluss, was also from Austria.

7. The Basis for Tomohiko Amada

In the novel, Tomohiko Amada had studied abroad in Vienna in 1938, aiming to become a Western-style cubist painter, but after the war, he ended up becoming a prominent Japanese-style painter.

Similarly, the Japanese-style painter Sanko Inoue (1899-1981) had lived in the suburb of Odawara. It has been suggested in online discussions that Tomohiko was modelled after Sanko. Sanko, who also had interactions with Isamu Noguchi, started living in a studio in the mountains of Odawara in December 1952⁸; he passed away at the age of 82 in 1981. Sanko, too, had aspired to be a Western-style painter before World War II. However, having been drawn to ancient Japanese wall paintings, he became a Japanese-style painter in 1949 and developed a unique style reflecting his interest in ancient times. The painting *Killing Commendatore* in the novel is stylistically similar to Sanko's well-known painting *The Warriors*⁹. In the novel, Tomohiko Amada had moved to the mountain cottage in Odawara in the mid-1950s and had become a Japanese-style painter. Thus, it seems very likely that Tomohiko is modelled after Sanko. Moreover, while Tomohiko was born in Kumamoto in the novel, Hakushu Kitahara, who is believed to be the model for Watashi, was also born in Kumamoto. Hakushu grew up in Fukuoka, which is where Sanko was born.

In short, Hakushu Kitahara, a poet who provides the model for Watashi, and Sanko Inoue, a Japanese-style painter after whom Tomohiko Amada is modelled, came from the same place. Both also lived in studios in the suburb of Odawara. This clearly indicates that Murakami wrote *Killing*

⁸ The address is 437 Iriuda, Odawara City ('The 100th Birth Anniversary: Sanko Inoue Exhibit', April 1998. The Hiratsuka Museum of Art).

⁹ Date painted unknown (from the catalogue).

Commendatore using actual artists who had lived in Odawara as the models for his characters¹⁰.

8. Significance of Odawara and the Discovery of a Stone Chamber

There is another reason why Murakami chose Odawara for the novel's setting. *Killing Commendatore* describes a stone chamber that was unearthed at the mountain cottage site, but there are no clues about its purpose, and a mysterious bell is placed in it. In September, Watashi, living in the mountain cottage, starts hearing the bell sound from the stone chamber between 1:40 and 2:30 AM, when no one should be present at the site.

In fact, a distinctive event associated with World War II took place in Odawara. On the day Japan surrendered (15 August 1945), Odawara experienced an air raid from 1:00 AM to 2:30 AM. The US military dropped unneeded bombs that remained on its fighter aircraft over Odawara, located on the Pacific coast, as the planes withdrew from Japan on the night of the ceasefire. Since the air raid was not a planned operation, it is not recorded in US military records. It was not revealed until the 1990s, when interviews with residents conducted by an Odawara citizens group verified that the airstrike occurred just after midnight on 15 August¹¹. In other words, Odawara was the last place to experience an airstrike during World War II. The time during which the bell rings from the stone chamber corresponds to the time when Odawara experienced the air raid. Just as Watashi first hears the bell ring in September, Japan officially signed the Instrument of Surrender on 2 September 1945. This suggests that, by choosing Odawara—a place mostly unknown during the war though it suffered the last air strike—and having the bell ring during the same hours the bombing took place, Murakami aims to give voice to citizens' silent protests to give repose to the souls of the victims.

If this argument is correct, the mysterious, round-shaped stone chamber with a depth and diameter of two meters, discovered at the mountain cottage site, evokes not only ancient archaeological sites but also the shelters built throughout Japan during World War II. The size of the stone chamber corresponds to that of the vertical shelters the Japanese military forced citizens to build¹². It would appear, then, that when Watashi starts hearing the bell after discovering Tomohiko's painting, which symbolises the war, in the attic of the mountain cottage, it links the chaos and turmoil in Vienna during World War II with the disaster of the last airstrike on Japan in Odawara.

As explained above, by setting scenes in Vienna and Odawara, the novel elicits memories of the two great tragedies of the twentieth century—World War I and World War II—in a multi-layered way.

9. Menshiki's Presence in the Novel

Wataru Menshiki has an impact on the mental dynamism of Watashi as an artist. While Menshiki

¹⁰ Murakami's house is in Oiso Town, Naka District, Kanagawa Prefecture, which is only about 20 km from Odawara City.

¹¹ *The Airstrike on Odawara*, Hiroshi Inoue (February 2002, Yumekoubou).

¹² *Construction of Air Raid Shelters* (Dai Nippon Air Defence Association in the Home Ministry, December 1940).

now trades IT-related stocks, he had been wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit, jailed at the Tokyo Detention House for 435 days, and eventually released when his innocence was proven. Memories of the twentieth century can be found in Menshiki's experience as well. The length of his detention (435 days) mostly corresponds to the period in which the Treblinka extermination camp operated. Chapter 32, the last chapter of Part 1 of the novel, consists entirely of a passage quoted from the book *Revolt in Treblinka*¹³ by Samuel Willenberg. The quoted section describes a scene where a detained Jewish painter at the Treblinka extermination camp laments that he is forced to draw a portrait of a Nazi soldier. The Treblinka camp was built in north-eastern Poland and began operating in July 1942. The last massacre took place in October 1943; the length of its operation was about 430 days. Since Menshiki was detained for a crime he did not commit, his situation can be said to be similar to that of Jews sent to concentration camps. Moreover, he learned Spanish, Turkish, and Chinese during his detention.

As is widely known, Spain, Turkey, and China either declared neutrality for the most part or became victims of countries that participated in the war. Based on this, we can assume that Menshiki implicitly speaks on behalf of victims, including Jewish people during World War II.

10. Picasso and Tomohiko

Among the three abovementioned countries, Spain has a city called Guernica where Nazi Germany conducted its first aerial bombing as part of its indiscriminate aerial bombardment campaign. Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica* in 1937 as a criticism of the event. It is widely known as a painting that symbolises the twentieth century. Thus, Guernica suffered the first aerial bombing of the war while Odawara endured the last. It was in Odawara that Tomohiko painted *Killing Commendatore*, aiming to criticise post-Anschluss Nazi Germany. Moreover, his painting style is similar to Picasso's since he had originally studied cubism. It would appear, then, that Murakami depicts Tomohiko's *Killing Commendatore* as comparable to Picasso's *Guernica*.

Meanwhile, Tomohiko's younger brother, Tsuguhiko Amada, had been drafted by the Japanese military and had little choice but to participate in the Nanking Massacre in China. After returning to Japan, he committed suicide in the attic of his parents' house in Kumamoto. After learning about his younger brother's suicide, Tomohiko starts participating in an anti-Nazi student movement called 'Candela', resisting the Nazi regime. In this way, while Don Giovanni's intention to stab the Commendatore in Tomohiko's painting signifies resistance to Nazi officers who followed Hitler, it also implies resistance to Japan's invasion of China. This, in turn, leads to criticism of the Japanese military and ultimately of the emperor, who was most responsible. While Tomohiko's painting is a fable based on ancient times in Japan, it also, arguably, contains an underlying criticism of the Japanese emperor

¹³ First published in Hebrew as *Mered be-Treblinka*, Israel Ministry of Defence, Tel Aviv, 1986. The Japanese translation of *Revolt in Treblinka* was done by Yasuko Kondo (Misuzu Shobo, July 2015). Also published in English as *Surviving Treblinka*.

system, which has continued to exist since ancient times.

11. Eichmann and ‘The man in the white Subaru Forester’

Murakami does more than provide one-sided criticism of war aggressors such as Nazi Germany and Japan. As Tomohiko was participating in an anti-Nazi student movement called ‘Candela’ in September 1938, Adolf Eichmann was at the height of his activities in Vienna, which he described as his ‘happiest and most successful period’¹⁴. He was dispatched to Vienna in March 1938 after the Anschluss and had expelled 50,000 Jewish people from Austria by September. He was recognised as ‘the Meister’ of Jewish expulsions within the notorious SS. Murakami has mentioned Eichmann in other books, such as *Barn Burning*¹⁵ and *Kafka on the Shore*. Thus, it is possible to associate the Commendatore depicted in Tomohiko’s painting not only with Hitler but also with Eichmann.

Regarding Eichmann, Hannah Arendt, who attended Eichmann’s trial, famously suggested that ‘the banality of evil’ lurks in all of us in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*¹⁶. The 2012 film *Hannah Arendt*¹⁷ also sheds light on ‘the banality of evil’. As Watashi travels with no destination in mind, he has contact with ‘the man in the white Subaru Forester’ in the Tohoku Region. Watashi sees in this man the negative side of human nature, including his own hidden dark side, containing anxiety, anger, hatred, and violence. Thus, he ends up creating a painting titled *The Man in the White Subaru Forester*, which reflects his own dark side.

In other words, Watashi, while living alone, becomes aware of the banality of evil within himself, as demonstrated by Eichmann. This awareness causes Watashi to struggle with his own darkness in the imaginary underground world described in the latter half of Part 2.

12. Watashi and His Wife, Yuzu

On 19 April, while travelling with no destination in mind in the Tohoku Region and Hokkaido, Watashi, in a dream, has sex with his ex-wife, Yuzu, in the mountains of Aomori. Ten months later, Yuzu actually gives birth to a girl and names her Muro. At the end of the novel, Watashi, having overcome the struggle with his dark side, reunites with Yuzu and starts a new chapter of his life while raising Muro, whose father is unknown. These turning points, which had helped Watashi get back on his feet, were implicit in what had happened in his dream of 19 April.

The 19 April event is also related to an event that took place during the war. From April to May 1943, Jewish resistance fighters staged the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. April 19 marked their only

¹⁴ In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Kazuo Okubo (Misuzu Shobo, September 1969).

¹⁵ Regarding this subject, my article ‘Haruki Murakami, the Theory of “Barn Burning”: Light and Shadows behind the Prosperity in the ‘80s’ (*Senshu University Journal of Japanese Language and Literature*, March 2018) discussed the significance of Eichmann mentioned in the novel {story?}.

¹⁶ Arendt, Hannah: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*; Viking Press, 1963, 1965.

¹⁷ *Hannah Arendt*, directed by Margarethe von Trotta, 2012 (Germany, Luxembourg, France).

successful armed revolt during the uprising. On that day, Jews who had been confined to concentration camps for a long time celebrated the victory of the resistance, seeing it as a glimmer of hope for a new beginning. It would appear that Murakami carried the event of 19 April into the twenty-first century, using it as the date for Watashi's new beginning.

13. Pathway As Metaphor

In Part 1 of *Killing Commendatore*, the Commendatore, calling himself 'Idea', appears as a trickster who leads Watashi. Here, 'Idea' symbolises ideologies that essentially form the world, such as human perceptions, thoughts, and values. Meanwhile, 'Metaphor' emerges in Part 2 as a symbol with a higher degree of freedom compared to 'Idea'. This can be described as a higher level of creative activities which make it possible to express imagination, the power of belief, hope, and possibilities.

Watashi, who fictitiously kills the Commendatore in the painting in the latter half of Part 2, goes through a 'metaphor pathway'. While facing the unconscious and what lies deep within himself in the dark underground world, he is supported by people he trusts, and he turns his life around, as passing through the birth canal from the placenta on his own. In this imaginary world, he transcends time and space with his imagination and faces a mental challenge to create something from nothing. This is a self-cleansing process represented as a person discussing the negative memories of the twentieth century. This suggests that Murakami is also trying to show the core (essence—indispensable elements) of his own creative activity to the reader. This 'metaphor pathway' symbolises the role of leaders in fiction and the importance of their existence in the twenty-first century.

14. The Presence of Muro and Pre-Earthquake Literature

Small children rarely appear in Murakami's previous novels. However, Watashi, who renews himself by going through the 'metaphor pathway', chooses a life with his wife and his child, Muro; they are connected by love regardless of whether he is the biological father. This presents a new family image built on trust and love, as opposed to twentieth-century paradigms linked with fascism, such as heredity, consanguinity, feudal family structure, and paternalism. As the world enters a turbulent age in the twenty-first century, we are reminded that trust and love, described at the end of the book, are important factors playing a key role in human existence.

In the novel, the story of Watashi's struggles takes place before the occurrence of the Great East Japan Earthquake, which caused unprecedented disasters in Japan. Here, it would seem that Murakami aims to suggest how we should live following the Earthquake, reminding readers of negative memories of the twentieth century, events that occurred before the Earthquake. While the term 'post-earthquake literature' has been used widely in Japan, *Killing Commendatore* can be considered 'pre-earthquake literature' that attempts to face and thoroughly examine twentieth-century history before dealing with post-earthquake situations.

15. Conclusion: Main Theme of *Killing Commendatore*

Using an imaginary painting, Murakami tries to address twentieth-century issues in the story involving the painting. He tries to show a new way of living in the twenty-first century by examining the previous century's world wars while setting up another fictitious world and recognising 'the banality of evil'. Additionally, via metafiction, he describes his own creative values. Arguably, this novel makes actual suggestions from Murakami's perspective as a writer by describing a possible history in response to reactionism and historical revisionism, which have become more widespread in the twenty-first century.

Killing Commendatore is a twenty-first-century novel in which memories of the twentieth century are inscribed in various events. The main theme of the novel concerns guiding the next generation toward a new way of living built on trust and love. It does this by using a painting that describes the root problems behind the disasters of the twentieth century and by passing that memory into the twenty-first century. The novel also aims to accomplish that goal by presenting an image of new life in fiction.