

From Song to Novel: Intermedial and Transmedial Analysis of *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami and The Beatles

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Abstract

This contribution presents a multidisciplinary and cross-boundary analysis of the transmedial connections between Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987) and its homonymous Beatles classic. Grounded in intermedial analysis, it examines the articulation between lyrics and music in The Beatles' song and explores how its verbal and musical elements resonate throughout Murakami's novel. *Norwegian Wood* establishes its intermedial dialogue with The Beatles' song from its very opening scene, in which the protagonist hears an orchestral arrangement of the piece—a narrative device that activates a process of self-exploration and inner turmoil. The Beatles' lyrics are reflected in the dynamic, sexual, and emotional transitions experienced by Toru as he reaches adulthood, in stark contrast with his best friend Kizuki, who inexplicably committed suicide without undergoing such transformation (Cruz, 2019), unfolding a narrative of the self—a process instrumental in the construction of selfhood. Murakami's fiction transliterates musical genres—jazz, pop-rock, classical—into prose, enacting a form of translation that, alongside linguistic mediation, renders his work globally resonant. His narrative style, described as *magical realism*, bridges East and West, the conscious and the unconscious (Strecher, 2002), capturing the spirit of the 1960s–70s generation while underpinning our globalised and transcultural age (Juen, 2017). Framed by the idea of *everyday cosmopolitanism* (Wakatsuki, 2018), this contribution guides the reader into a labyrinth of references that constitute *obligatory and optional intertextualities* (Fitzsimmons, 2013), explored through musical and literary modes of analysis.

Keywords: intermediality, transmediality, Norwegian Wood, Haruki Murakami, Beatles

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Introduction

This contribution aims to unravel the intertextual connections between Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* and the homonymous Beatles classic, tracing the musical elements of the song that resonate within the novel. Starting with its title—which according to Cruz (2019), constitutes an *obligatory intertextuality*—and moving through the song's stanzas as well as the novel's eleven chapters, this study examines how The Beatles' song is represented and reinterpreted within the literary text. The objective of this inquiry is to identify the melodic and lyrical features of The Beatles' song that resonate within the narrative structure of *Norwegian Wood*, and to propose a concluding reflection on how such intermedial analysis can foster a multimodal and multisensory engagement with literature. The musical analysis draws on *The Beatles for Solo Piano* (The Beatles, 2009, pp. 69–72), as well as on transcriptions specifically produced for the purposes of this study. The song lyrics are quoted from *The Complete Beatles Lyrics* (The Beatles, 1982, p. 90). Finally, the literary analysis refers to the Vintage Books edition of *Norwegian Wood* (Murakami, 2011), translated by Jay Rubin.

Theoretical Framework

A *performative intermedial analysis* is a methodological approach that investigates the articulation between lyrics and music as an integrated cultural object through the act of playing and performing the song. Such an approach fosters embodied forms of knowledge (Araya, 2017; Gallagher, 2005), enabling a deeper understanding of the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of the artefact under analysis. Thus, the linguistic and musicological analysis of *Norwegian Wood* has been complemented by a multisensory exploration of the song to better understand the songwriters' creative process as simultaneously intellectual and physical.

The intermedial references between The Beatles' *Norwegian Wood* and Murakami's novel can be framed within Scher's (1968, 1970) typology of word–music relations and Wolf's (2002) theory of intermediality. In Scher's terms, Murakami's novel exemplifies *music in literature* as an instance of *explicit reference*, since The Beatles' song is not only cited in the title but also interwoven thematically and symbolically throughout the narrative. In addition, the text displays structural analogies, as its rhythm and tonal qualities mirror the song's musical architecture, producing what Scher would describe as *verbal music*. As Murakami himself explained in his 2005 conversation with Jonathan Ellis and Mitoko Hirabayashi: “At one point, I thought I should write the book as if I was playing good music. What good music requires is good rhythm, good harmony, good melody line. Three things. Writing is the same—rhythm, harmony, and melody. Once I realized that, it got easier for me to write” (Ellis et al., 2005). From Werner Wolf's perspective, these correlations exemplify *extracompositional intermediality*, in which the dialogue between distinct media—song and novel—generates new meanings across their respective semiotic systems.

Alongside the intermedial analysis of The Beatles' classic, a literary-structural inquiry into Murakami's novel has been conducted. To frame this approach, it is useful to recall Bruner's (1960) observation in *The Process of Education*, where he notes that understanding the structure of a work requires recognising how its constituent elements are interrelated. According to this view, meaning arises from the dynamic interplay between the parts and the whole. Another key reference is Walker's *The Structure of Literature* (1966), which—after an extensive review of major theories and schools of literary structure—argues that literary analysis should begin with a close examination of the text itself, in order to identify the internal patterns and relationships that organise it. Investigating structure, he suggests, requires an

inductive process that moves from the observation of specific textual details toward a broader understanding of how the work functions as a coherent whole. These principles ground the methodological approach adopted in the present study, which considers not only the plot, characters, and language of the novel but also the biographical, historical, and transcultural elements that inform it—particularly the ways in which music contributes to the organisation of the narrative structure.

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*: A General Overview

Noruei no mori, published in 1987 as Haruki Murakami's fifth novel, sold more than four million copies, marking Murakami's transformation into an international literary phenomenon (Wakatsuki, 2018) and paving the way for the so-called *Murakami genshō* 村上現象 (*Murakami phenomenon*) (Juen, 2017; Seats, 2006). Haruki Murakami's international success is also linked to his self-described *nomadic spirit*—that is, the capacity, as outlined by Yama (2016), to *dissolve and coagulate* his transcultural life's experiences, stored in the *drawers of memory*, and transform them into creative material for his novels. *Norwegian Wood* narrates the story of Toru Watanabe, a Japanese literature student from Kobe who falls in love with Naoko, the former girlfriend of his best friend Kizuki, who died by suicide as a teenager. The narrative revolves around the tension between sexual desire and mental illness, framed by Naoko's traumatic exposure to suicides among those close to her and the resulting derailment of her psyche. As Strecher (2002) observes, the narrative depicts Naoko's struggles through Toru's perspective, revealing her profound psychological trauma and the deep dichotomy between her inner and outer selves, which prevents her from engaging in sexual intimacy. The theme of sexual desire is central both to The Beatles' classic and to Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, where it is explored from multiple perspectives: the guilt and frustration embodied by Naoko, the confusion and ambivalence experienced by Toru, the hedonism represented by Nagasawa, the illicit sexual attraction personified by Reiko, and the curiosity and spontaneity expressed by Midori.

In portraying these contrasts, Murakami constructs a *bildungsroman* that departs from his usual magical-realist style, adopting certain conventions of the formulaic romance while focusing on the transition from adolescence to adulthood. *Norwegian Wood's* finale is left open to the reader's interpretation, who—especially during the first reading—may feel momentarily abandoned to their own conclusions, compelled to determine for themselves what lies ahead for Toru. As Strecher (2017) explains, Murakami's fiction situates itself beyond the dichotomy between *junbungaku*—which instructs and interprets reality for the reader—and other forms of serious literary engagement. His narratives, in fact, leave a series of unresolved inquiries, contributing to what Strecher terms an *empty narrative*—a structure sustained by open-ended questions that invite the reader's interpretative participation for the text's completion. Moreover, Murakami enriches his fiction through a transnational and nomadic perspective that fuses Western and Japanese elements (Juen, 2017). As a passionate music enthusiast, he has been, in fact, profoundly influenced by Western genres such as jazz, classical, and rock, recontextualising them as transcultural objects within his narratives.

One Title, Two Cultural Objects: The Beatles' Song and Murakami's Novel

As outlined by Cruz (2019), who followed Fitzsimmons' (2013) classification of intertextualities, the title of the novel constitutes an *obligatory intertextuality*—a form that arises when an author explicitly compares or associates two texts. Murakami's translation of The Beatles' song title renders *wood* as *mori*, a term that in Japanese denotes *forest* rather than

lumber. This represents a deliberate linguistic choice, given Murakami's mastery of English and his experience as a literary translator—having translated works such as *The Great Gatsby* into Japanese. The song's title was, in fact, inspired by the contemporary fashion of furnishing rooms with inexpensive pine—marketed at the time as *Norwegian wood*.

In *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*, Barry Miles (1997) reports McCartney's explanation that the phrase *Norwegian wood* was intended as a playful reference to the type of girls whose flat was decorated in that style: "It was pine really, cheap pine. But it's not as good a title, 'Cheap Pine,' baby" (Miles, 1997, p. 270). As Runner (2022) observes, Murakami's translation of the title aligns with Kiriya's (2016) interpretation that his recurrent use of *mistranslation* draws attention to the interstitial space between texts and cultures. Moreover, the fact that the *Ami Hostel* sanatorium—where Naoko receives treatment for her mental illness—is situated within a forest further strengthens the analogy between the title and the setting. The Beatles' song appears already at the beginning of the novel, upon Toru's landing at Hamburg Airport, underscored by an orchestral arrangement of *Norwegian Wood*. In addition, the song recurs several times throughout the narrative, taking centre stage on page 146:

Play Norwegian Wood, said Naoko. Reiko brought a porcelain beckoning cat from the kitchen. It was a coin bank, and Naoko dropped a hundred-yen piece from her purse into its slot. What's this all about? I asked. It's a rule, said Naoko. When I request Norwegian Wood, I have to put a hundred yen into the bank. It's my favourite, so I make a point of paying for it. I make a request when I really want to hear it. (Murakami, 2011, p. 146)

Towards the end of the novel, Murakami quotes the song once again as the first piece in a long sequence of tunes that accompany an intimate, informal commemorative ceremony shared by Reiko and Toru in memory of the late Naoko:

We are going to have our own funeral for Naoko, just the two of us. . . . Now what I want you to do is lay down a match every time I play a song, just set them in a row. I'm going to play every song I can think of. Reiko moved on to the Beatles, playing 'Norwegian Wood,' 'Yesterday,' 'Michelle,' and 'Something,' then played 'The Fool on the Hill.' (Murakami, 2011, p. 383)

In doing so, Murakami assigns The Beatles' song three key appearances—at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the novel—each endowed with a distinct symbolic function: remembrance at the opening, vitality and emotional engagement at the centre, and commemoration at the close.

Intermedial Analysis of The Beatles' Classic

Written for The Beatles' 1965 album *Rubber Soul*, *Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)* is primarily attributed to John Lennon, who first conceived its idea and narrative during a skiing holiday in the Swiss Alps and later completed it with Paul McCartney in England. Structurally, *Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)* adopts a strophic verse–bridge design. The melody corresponding to the verse (see Figure 1) is countered by the bridge section, thereby mirroring the previously discussed dialectic of opposites that lies at the core of *Norwegian Wood*.

The melodic line is built around a reiterated rhythmic cell—a dotted crotchet followed by three quavers—in which the first two motifs move predominantly by descending stepwise motion. In contrast, the closing motif unfolds through a leap-based contour that recurs at the end of each verse, occupying what Pattison (1991) defines as a *power position*—a structurally salient point that enhances mnemonic retention—and coinciding with the utterance of the song’s title. The words *Norwegian wood* are sung over the notes D–A–C#–B, with the D natural establishing the Mixolydian modality, a musical scale that conveys a sense of suspension, nostalgia and unresolved openness.

Figure 1

Verse From The Beatles’ Norwegian Wood

The musical score for the verse of 'Norwegian Wood' is presented in two staves. The first staff contains the lyrics: "I once had a girl or should I say She once had me". The second staff contains the lyrics: "She showed me her room i - snt it good Nor - we - gian wood". The melody is written in treble clef, 12/8 time, and E Mixolydian mode (three sharps). The rhythmic pattern is a dotted quarter note followed by three eighth notes.

The lyrics *I once had a girl / Or should I say she once had me*, reflect Toru’s subjugation to Naoko’s psychological condition in the dynamics of their relationship. Early in the novel, Toru recalls: “We kept on walking like this almost every weekend. She would lead, and I would follow close behind” (Murakami, 2011, p. 35). Later, after their sexual encounter (pp. 52–54), Naoko’s loss of virginity triggers the resurfacing of her past traumas so intensely that she withdraws from the world, retreating to a sanatorium deep within the woods, becoming increasingly inaccessible—almost unreachable—to Toru.

The melody in Figure 2 shows the bridge, which contrasts with the primary melodic idea of the verse. It introduces a *modal interchange*, shifting from E Mixolydian—a major mode—to E Dorian, a minor mode as signalled by the presence of G natural. The lyrics *So I looked around and I noticed there wasn’t a chair*, can be compared to the description of Naoko’s apartment: “The room was small and neat and so lacking in frills that only the stocking drying in the corner by the window gave any hint that a girl lived there” (Murakami, 2011, p. 47). In the subsequent stanzas, the song continues to recount the night the protagonist spends with the woman of the apartment in *Norwegian Wood*, who, despite having invited him in, ultimately proves unavailable to him: *We talked until two and then she said / ‘It’s time for bed.’ / She told me she worked in the morning and started to laugh*. The narrator, left alone, *crawled off to sleep in the bath*, a mildly humorous yet poignant image. A similar scene occurs also in Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*: “I got undressed first and sat in the bathtub drinking beer with a vengeance. (...) She was gone when I woke at twelve-thirty. I found no note of any kind” (Murakami, 2011, p. 112).

Although the image of sitting/sleeping in the bath/bathtub is similar, the contexts differ. In the novel, the episode does not refer to Naoko but to a random, occasional encounter—one of the many casual relationships encouraged by Nagasawa—in which Toru actually consummates the liaison. This contrasts with the song, where the protagonist is instead sent to sleep alone; nevertheless, what emerges as a point of similarity is the scene of the male protagonist retreating to the bathroom and sitting/sleeping in the bathtub.

Figure 2*Bridge From The Beatles' Norwegian Wood*

She asked me to stay and she told me to sit a - ny -
 where So I looked a-round and I no-ticed there wa-sn't a chair

According to several sources, Lennon’s lyrics are autobiographical, recounting an extramarital affair. Paul McCartney, the song’s co-composer, explains: “She makes him (Lennon) sleep in the bath and then finally in the last verse I had this idea to set the Norwegian wood on fire as revenge.” (Miles, 1997, p. 270). The final verse refers to this gesture: *And when I awoke I was alone / This bird had flown / So I lit a fire / Isn’t it good Norwegian wood?* The imagery of fire recurs also in Murakami’s text, notably during Toru’s first kiss with Midori, which occurs as they watch a blaze in a neighbouring building, and again at the novel’s close, when Reiko and Toru hold the aforementioned musical ceremony for Naoko—lighting a match for every tune Reiko plays: “For our forty-ninth song, Reiko played ‘Eleanor Rigby,’ and the fiftieth was another performance of ‘Norwegian Wood.’” (Murakami, 2011, p. 382). In this passage, *Norwegian Wood* reappears as the fiftieth and final piece, concluding both the musical sequence and the narrative arc, and thus completing the circle bridging memory, music, sexual desire, and loss. Lastly, the image of a *bird that had flown* resonates with Toru’s repeated experiences of abandonment—the bitterness of being left alone following Kizuki’s suicide, Naoko’s retreat and death, and even the sudden disappearance of his roommate, Storm Trooper, who vanishes without leaving a note.

Conclusion

This contribution has aimed to highlight the intermedial and transmedial processes that connect Haruki Murakami’s *Norwei no mori* (1987) and The Beatles’ *Norwegian Wood* (1965) shading light on how Murakami reifies The Beatles’ song as a transcultural artefact within his storytelling. Wakatsuki (2018) outlines how Murakami’s notion of *everyday cosmopolitanism* is embodied in his capacity to write seamlessly beyond the confines of national identity, embracing universal human experiences that have become the hallmark of his fiction and the basis of his global appeal, while integrating narrative elements drawn from cultures beyond Japan. Moreover, as Rubin observes, Murakami’s narratives evoke psychological conditions shared across humanity and express them through imagery and language that transcend cultural and linguistic borders. A similar dynamic can be observed in the work of The Beatles, who transform personal experience into universally recognisable emotions through their music. As previously argued “songs speak for us, and we respond to them when those who write them are capable of treating, in a personal manner, themes of universal interest” (translated from Italian; Pantano, 2023, p. 45). Further inquiry into the role of music in shaping and reflecting Murakami’s fiction could extend beyond *Norwegian Wood*. Music plays a pervasive role throughout his oeuvre, with particularly high densities of musical references in *Dance, Dance, Dance* (195 songs), *1Q84* (96 songs), and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (59 songs) (Oshima, 2022). To give a further example, Murakami’s *Killing Commendatore* structures its narrative—and even derives its title—from a pivotal scene in Mozart and Da

Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, itself inspired by *El burlador de Sevilla*, the play traditionally attributed to Tirso de Molina. This intertextual lineage once again illustrates the profound interweaving of musical and literary imagination in Murakami's work. From an educational perspective, these intermedial correspondences could inspire innovative university and school laboratories that employ music as a gateway to literature—encouraging younger generations to engage with reading through multimodal and multisensory approaches to learning.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that OpenAI's ChatGPT was used exclusively during the proofreading and cross-checking stages of this manuscript. Its use was limited to verify the accuracy and consistency of references and citations and ensuring compliance with APA 7th edition standards as well as the formatting and stylistic guidelines of the IAFOR conference proceedings. All ideas, interpretations, and analytical claims presented in this manuscript are the author's original work. The author retains full responsibility for the content, and the use of AI-assisted technologies did not replace scholarly judgment, critical analysis, or academic authorship.

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