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Cats and the Representation of Mono no Aware in Murakami Haruki's Neko o Suteru

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ABSTRACT

Literary works often convey emotion indirectly through symbols, and the meaning of a symbol is shaped by the cultural setting in which it develops. Murakami Haruki's *Neko o Suteru*, an autobiographical work of nonfiction, presents a cat that prompts the author's memories of his father. This study describes the meaning of the cat as a symbol and how it represents the cultural value of *mono no aware* in the work. It follows a descriptive qualitative approach based on Roland Barthes's (1972) semiotics, covering denotation, connotation, and myth, and examines *mono no aware* at the level of myth through Motoori Norinaga's thought as discussed by Flowers (2023). The data are passages that mention cats in the 2022 pocket edition, collected by note-taking while reading. The analysis identified 13 data: six representing sympathy and empathy toward living beings and seven representing awareness of the impermanence of life. At the level of myth, the cat carries four meanings in the relationship between the narrator and his father: memory, experience in small things, the transience of life, and a bond that persists even as a relationship grows distant. The cat therefore does more than represent *mono no aware*. It works as a reflective medium through which the father son relationship is understood in terms of a fleeting life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Meaning in literature is rarely stated outright. It also travels through symbols, atmosphere, and narrative detail that build the emotional tone of a story. A symbol can carry more than its literal sense because it reflects the social and cultural life of the people who use it, so reading one calls for attention to the context in which it grew (Tiofanny et al., 2017; Wiani et al., 2018).

One work that conveys emotion in this implicit way is Murakami Haruki's *Neko o Suteru* (English title: Abandoning a Cat), an autobiographical work of nonfiction about the author's memories of his father. The story starts from a small episode, taking a cat to the seashore and leaving it there, which leads the narrator to reflect on family, the past, and loss (Murakami, 2022). The cat keeps coming back in the narrator's account of his father. It is more than a pet; it is a sign whose meaning has several layers.

In Japanese culture, the meaning of the cat is shaped by the bond between people and cats as companion animals (Takagi, 2023) and by cultural constructions that circulate through folktales, kabuki, and ukiyo-e prints (Kobayashi, 2011, 2012). Animals are also seen as taking part in shaping how people

experience life (Mitsuyama, 2023). In Japanese literature, a cat character such as the one in Wagahai wa Neko de Aru (I Am a Cat) gives the author an observer's vantage point (Pan, 2000; Tashiro, 2004). Murakami himself named his jazz cafe Peter Cat after his own pet and often gives cats a place in his fiction (Mushtaq & Jain, 2023).

Mono no aware (物の哀れ) can be understood as a deep stirring of feeling toward something that touches the heart (Suciptha et al., 2021). Following Motoori Norinaga (as cited in Flowers, 2023), the concept has two aspects: awareness of the transience of things and the unrepeatable nature of the past (Flowers, 2023, pp. 21–24), and sympathy and empathy toward living beings (Flowers, 2023, pp. 3–4).

Earlier studies have linked *mono no aware* to the suffering and fleeting happiness of a film character (Armansyah & Astuti, 2023) and to nature and the passing of time in haiku (Krisandi, 2025). Barthes's semiotics has been used to read symbols in a short film (Herisen & Erlyana, 2025) and in a poem (Putri et al., 2025). Among the studies reviewed here, none examines the cat as a symbol in *Neko o Suteru* or connects it to *mono no aware*.

This study uses Barthes's (1972) semiotics, which treats the sign as a layered system of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. It asks how the cat represents *mono no aware* in *Neko o Suteru*, and its aim is to describe the meaning of the cat as a symbol and its representation of this cultural value.

2. METHODS

This is a descriptive qualitative study that applies Roland Barthes's (1972) semiotics. The primary data are passages that mention cats (猫) in the 2022 pocket edition of *Neko o Suteru* (Murakami, 2022), chosen because its content does not differ from the earlier edition and it is easier to obtain. Data were gathered by note-taking: reading the whole work closely and recording the relevant passages. The Japanese passages were then translated into English for analysis. Library research supplied the secondary data used to support the analysis.

Each passage was entered on a data card recording the data code, page number, original passage, translation, denotative meaning, connotative meaning, myth, and *mono no aware* category. The codes combine a category abbreviation with a page number. SEMH stands for sympathy and empathy toward living beings (*simpati dan empati terhadap makhluk hidup*) and KAKH for awareness of the impermanence of life (*kesadaran akan ketidakkekalan hidup*). For example, KAKH.106 is a datum in the impermanence category found on page 106.

Analysis followed Barthes's (1972, pp. 113–114, 142–143) three stages. Denotation identifies the literal meaning of the cat in context. Connotation identifies meanings tied to the narrator's experience and reflection. At the stage of myth, understood here as cultural meaning that has been naturalized and so appears self-evident, the cat is interpreted as a representation of *mono no aware*. The results are presented descriptively.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yielded 13 data that represent two categories of *mono no aware*: sympathy and empathy toward living beings (six data) and awareness of the impermanence of life (seven data). Table 1 summarizes them. Not every datum can be discussed in the space available, so four representative examples are discussed for each category.

Table 1. Summary of the data

Category of *mono no aware*	Data code (number of data)	Total
Sympathy and empathy toward living beings (SEMH)	SEMH.15–16 (2), SEMH.16–17 (1), SEMH.17 (2), SEMH.110 (1)	6
Awareness of the impermanence of life (KAKH)	KAKH.106 (1), KAKH.110 (1), KAKH.111 (1), KAKH.112 (2), KAKH.119 (1), KAKH.121 (1)	7
Total		**13**

3.1 Sympathy and Empathy toward Living Beings

An example of sympathy and empathy toward living beings is datum SEMH.15–16, which describes the return of the cat that had been abandoned.

さっき棄ててきたはずの猫が「にゃあ」と言って、尻尾を立てて愛想良く僕らを出迎えた。

"The cat we were sure we had just abandoned said 'meow' and, tail held high, greeted us with a friendly air." (Murakami, 2022, pp. 15–16)

At the denotative level, the abandoned cat got home before the narrator and his father and welcomed them. Connotatively, this shows that the cat still recognized the house and the people who had cared for it, so abandoning it did not erase the relationship between them. The cat is no longer just an animal that was thrown away; it is a living being that keeps its attachment to people. As myth, the cat is taken as part of Japanese everyday life, a meaning said to reach back to the Nara period and to develop during the Edo period through the cat's closeness to daily life, art, and culture (Shen, 2024). The reaction of the father and the narrator came at a time when abandoning a cat was still considered ordinary (p. 106). It reflects the aspect of *mono no aware* concerned with sympathy and empathy for living beings, since, for Motoori, every living thing has a *kokoro* able to feel aware (Flowers, 2023, pp. 3–4).

Another example, SEMH.16–17, shows how the father's attitude changed after he saw the cat come back.

そのときの父の呆然とした顔をまだよく覚えている。でもその呆然とした顔は、やがて感心した表情に変わり、そして最後にはいくらかほっとしたような顔になった。そして結局それからもその猫を飼い続けることになった。

"I still remember clearly the dumbfounded look on my father's face. But that look soon turned into one of admiration, and in the end into something like relief. And so, in the end, we kept the cat." (Murakami, 2022, pp. 16–17)

Denotatively, the father's expression moves from dumbfounded to admiring and then relieved, and the cat stays. Connotatively, the change signals a new way of seeing the cat. The house had turned out to be a place the cat chose to return to, so the father no longer treated it as an animal that could simply be left behind but as a living being attached to its home. This fits the proverb *inu wa hito ni tsuki, neko wa ie ni tsuku* (犬は人につき、猫は家につく), roughly "dogs follow people, cats follow houses" (Jitenon Kotowaza Dictionary). His decision to keep the cat shows sympathy and empathy toward a living being.

A further example is SEMH.17, where the cat appears as the narrator's companion.

猫たちはいつも僕の素晴らしい友だちだった。兄弟を持たなかったので、猫と本が僕のいちばん大事な仲間だった。

"Cats were always wonderful friends to me. Since I had no siblings, cats and books were my most important companions." (Murakami, 2022, p. 17)

Denotatively, the narrator calls cats his best friends and explains that he had no siblings. On the same page he asks why the cat had to be abandoned and why he did not object. Connotatively, the cat carries real emotional weight for him, which sets his closeness to it against his part in abandoning it. The episode is no longer just a childhood memory but a reflection on his own action. As myth, the cat is regarded as a companion animal with a close emotional bond to people (Takagi, 2023), and in contemporary Japanese fiction it is depicted as a friend who understands human feelings without words (Alexandrescu, 2022).

A final example in this category is SEMH.110, in which a kitten is stuck in a pine tree.

しかしそのうちに、子猫は助けを求めるような情けない声で鳴き始めた。

"But before long the kitten began to cry in a pitiful voice, as if asking for help." (Murakami, 2022, p. 110)

Denotatively, the kitten cries as if asking for help. Connotatively, the sound is no longer just animal noise but the vulnerability of a living being that needs assistance. The narrator calls his father at once, but the father can do nothing, since even a ladder would not reach that height (pp. 110–111). As myth, this response fits the view that animals take part in shaping human experience (Mitsuyama, 2023), and it shows sympathy and empathy: people notice and respond to the distress of another living being

3.2 Awareness of the Impermanence of Life

An example of awareness of impermanence is KAKH.106, where the narrator recalls the failed attempt to abandon the cat as an experience he shared with his father.

何はともあれ、それはひとつの素晴らしい、そして謎めいた共有体験ではないか。……そんなひとつひとつのささやかなものごとの限りない集積が、僕という人間をこれまでにかたち作ってきたのだ。

"Whatever else, wasn't it a wonderful and mysterious shared experience? … It is the endless accumulation of such small, modest things that has shaped me into the person I am." (Murakami, 2022, p. 106)

Denotatively, the narrator and his father were both outwitted by a cat that reached home first, and he has remembered the episode ever since. Connotatively, the cat stands for a past experience that is over yet still meaningful to him. As myth, the cat becomes part of the lived experience that formed the narrator, which fits Murakami's closeness to cats in his own life (Mushtaq & Jain, 2023). The reading agrees with *mono no aware*: an experience becomes precious precisely because it cannot be repeated (Flowers, 2023, pp. 21–24).

Another example is KAKH.110, where the narrator states the trait that lies behind the kitten's predicament in the pine tree.

猫は木を上るのは上手だが、降りるのは不得意だ。

"Cats are good at climbing trees, but poor at coming down." (Murakami, 2022, p. 110)

Denotatively, the sentence describes a cat's behavior: going up is easy, coming down is not. Connotatively, it suggests that every living being has abilities and limits at once, and that ability can turn into helplessness in the wrong situation. As myth, this resembles Japanese literature that uses cats to reflect on human life, such as *Wagahai wa Neko de Aru* (Pan, 2000), and Murakami's own fiction, which often uses cats to reflect on the existential problems of his characters (Mushtaq & Jain, 2023). Awareness that the conditions of life do not last is a form of *mono no aware* (Flowers, 2023).

A further example is KAKH.112, in which the narrator imagines the fate of a kitten he never learned. Earlier, his calls toward the tree went unanswered, and there was only silence (p. 111).

その枝の上で白骨になりながら、消え損なった記憶のようにまだそこにしっかりとしがみついているかもしれない子猫のことを思う。

"I think of the kitten that may still be clinging tightly to that branch, reduced to bones, like a memory that failed to fade away." (Murakami, 2022, p. 112)

Denotatively, he pictures a small white kitten that could not get down, died, and dried out on the branch. Connotatively, the phrase *hisshi ni* (必死に, "desperately"; p. 112) marks the instinct to survive, the smallness of the kitten marks vulnerability, and the memory of the kitten persists although its fate is never known. As myth, the cat stands for the limits every living being faces in staying alive

however hard it tries, and for a memory that remains after the physical presence can no longer be confirmed. In modern Japanese fiction, cats are often portrayed as forming an inner bond with people and leaving an influence after they are gone (Alexandrescu, 2022). The emotional response arises when the narrator realizes that not every life ends with certainty, which is how awareness of impermanence appears in *mono no aware* (Flowers, 2023).

A final example is KAKH.119, where the cat triggers the narrator's decision to write about his father.

> でも子供時代、父と一緒に海岸に猫を棄てに行ったときのことをふと思い出して、そこから書き出したら、文章は思いのほかすらすらと自然に出てきた。
> "But when I happened to recall the time in my childhood when I went with my father to the shore to abandon a cat, and began writing from there, the words came smoothly and naturally, more so than I had expected." (Murakami, 2022, p. 119)

Denotatively, recalling the abandonment helps the narrator get past his difficulty in starting to write about his father. Connotatively, the cat links past and present: the memory revives an emotional bond that had been stored away and offers a way to understand his father again. This matters because the two had nearly cut ties for more than twenty years (p. 102), and only after his father's death did the narrator begin meeting people who had known him (p. 106). The cat's role is underlined in KAKH.121, where the cats who were once by his side "quietly supported the flow of the story from behind" (p. 121). As myth, the cat represents a memory that endures although time has passed. The awareness that people, relationships, and experiences are not permanent while memory remains is what represents *mono no aware* (Flowers, 2023).

3.3 The Meaning of the Cat in the Relationship between the Narrator and His Father

After comparing the data and grouping them by the symbolic function they share, the meanings at the level of myth across all 13 data fall into four themes, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The meaning of the cat in the relationship between the narrator and his father.

No.	Meaning of the cat	Supporting data	Link to the narrator–father relationship
1	Memory	KAKH.106, KAKH.112, KAKH.119, KAKH.121	The memory of abandoning the cat becomes the narrator's starting point for reconstructing his relationship with his father after the father's death.
2	Experience in small things	KAKH.106, SEMH.17, SEMH.110	Everyday moments with the cat become an unspoken togetherness between the two, in a relationship with little verbal communication.
3	The transience of life	KAKH.110, KAKH.111, KAKH.112	The cat's transience becomes a mirror for the narrator's awareness of his own father's transience.
4	A bond that persists as the relationship grows distant	SEMH.15–16	The pattern of being abandoned, returning without explanation, and being accepted again parallels a relationship that nearly broke yet stayed connected.

First, the cat links memories. The memory of abandoning it brings back the narrator's childhood and also lets him write about his late father and understand him again. Second, the cat stands for

experience in small things, which accumulate to shape the narrator and form an unspoken closeness between him and his father. Third, the cat's fragility leads the narrator to think about transience, including that of his father. Fourth, the cat's pattern of being abandoned, separated, returning, and being accepted runs parallel to the narrator's relationship with his father, which grew distant over decades yet stayed connected by a bond that is hard to explain. The fourth theme rests on a single cluster of data (SEMH.15–16) and is better read as an interpretation of a parallel pattern than as proof on its own.

In this way the cat does more than represent *mono no aware* in general. It also mirrors a father–son relationship that is quiet, distant, and hard to put into words, yet still holds a bond worth remembering. The findings suggest that *mono no aware* in this work does not come only through nature and the changing seasons, as in the haiku studied by Krisandi (2025), but also through people's relationships with other living beings and through everyday experience.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the semiotic analysis of 13 data, the cat in *Neko o Suteru* represents two categories of *mono no aware*. Six data (SEMH.15–16, two data; SEMH.16–17; SEMH.17, two data; and SEMH.110) show the narrator's emotional sensitivity toward the cat, from the welcome after its return and the decision to keep it to the guilt he feels when he recalls abandoning it. Seven data (KAKH.106, KAKH.110, KAKH.111, KAKH.112, two data, KAKH.119, and KAKH.121) show how the cat's limits and fragility, its unknown fate, and its role as a link to memory represent the transience of life.

At the level of myth, the cat carries four meanings in the relationship between the narrator and his father: memory, experience in small things, the transience of life, and a bond that persists as a relationship grows distant. The cat thus becomes a reflective medium that connects everyday experience with awareness of transience, loss, and the narrator's personal relationship with his father. The study supports the use of Barthes's semiotics for Japanese literature and broadens the understanding of *mono no aware* through a symbol close to everyday life. Future research could examine other symbols in the work, such as the pine tree, war, journeys, or the house.

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