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# Anime *Haibane Renmei* (Charcoal Feather Federation): An Enclave for the Hurt, Alienated Souls

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Anime is an audiovisual, symphonic narrative form characterised by diversity, fluidity, hybridity and intertextuality. The abundant borrowing of images is a common practice in both manga and anime, and is considered as homage to the pretext and/or the establishing of a provocative dialogue between texts. This paper will discuss some of its distinctive characteristics, mainly intertextuality, using Yoshitoshi Abe's enigmatic *Haibane Renmei* series (2002) and Haruki Murakami's novel, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (hereafter *HBW/EOW*) (1985).

The creation of *Haibane*, as Abe acknowledges, deeply involves two works as the pretexts and source of inspiration. The first is his *doujinshi* (private publication) work, *Old Home no Haibane-tachi* (literally 'Haibane in Old Home'). This story is rather fragmentary and evolved as an experimental exploration of his own sub-consciousness. It consists of 40 chapters, alternately narrating two stories of the two worlds, from the perspectives of two adult male protagonists, *Watashi* (a formal, male pronoun for 'I') in a hyper-active, futuristic Tokyo in *HBW* and *Boku* (an informal, male pronoun for 'I') in *EOW* – which is in fact *Watashi's* core unconsciousness. These paralleled worlds link like a Möbius strip and interact at several moments.

The world of *Haibane* is constructed on the key images of the walled town in *EOW*. However, by isolating it from Murakami's 'Möbius strip' and integrating the Haibane (and focusing especially on the female teenage Haibane), the thematic significance of the derived materials undergo a critical change and the walled town becomes, not an eternal cage, but a temporal enclave for staging their rebirth. Unlike the detailed, potentially unreliable first-person narrations in *HBW/EOW*, *Haibane* unfolds through multiple character focalisations, which constitute the audience's subject position as empathetic alignment, through what Stephens calls, 'a dialectic between textual discourse and a reader's pre-existing subjectivity' (1992, pp.80-1). By offering viewing positions whereby the audience both shares the uncertain and confused perceptions of Rakka, for example, and also has an observer perception of the fragility and vulnerability of the Haibane, the film text establishes a complex and subtle relationship between

character experience in the text and audience experience of the text.

*Haibane* is the story of angel-like beings, the Haibane (lit. ash-coloured feathers), who live in a mysterious, walled town, under the supervision of the seemingly patriarchal Haibane Renmei. The story evolves around a newborn Haibane, Rakka (literally, 'falling'), and her mentor-like Haibane, Reki (literally, 'pebbles; to be run over') and their respective quests for their true identities. The opening sequence depicting a figure falling through indeterminate space, a falling which transmutes into a surfacing, establishes a sense of disorientation common to both character and viewer (what is happening here? What does it signify?). The narrative then continues to work through mysteries and questions: why does a girl (Rakka) fall from the sky, to be reborn from a cocoon with no knowledge of her former life? Are they doing some kind of penance, since their everyday life is governed by peculiar rules (they cannot use cash, or own anything new)? What does the Day of Flight signify, when Kuu (literally 'sky') one of their group disappears?

*Haibane* mingles incongruent religious and mythical images, and thereby produces a rich mix of pretexts and metanarratives. It invites diverse interpretations, a characteristic of anime narratives. It is unusually introspective for anime, however, achieving this effect through use of unusually subdued colours and sounds (including voices) and through slowly paced narration. The strategies offer the audience a subject position from which flows a strong empathy with the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of the Haibane. The series thus seems to offer a new direction in anime by grounding its narration not in vivid drama and actions but in a profound, emotional journey into the depth of the unconscious, where questions are only answered through sensitive intuition and symbolic images, and intersubjectivity emerges from self-searching and communication with others, whether people or other forms of being. Although the anime is often seen as 'aftermath of suicide victims' (Napier 2005), I would argue, through the intertextuality between *Haibane* and *HBW/EOW*, that the series is built around a rite of passage structure (separation; liminality; reintegration) in which the Haibane's world is an enclave for the hurt individual's

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self-discovery, recovery and acceptance of their true self and trust in others, relating to the social issues teenagers face in their everyday lives.

The liminal space into which the Haibane are relocated is an old, peaceful, European-like town, named Glie, completely surrounded by a high, thick and mysterious wall, which no residents are allowed to cross. Supervised by Haibane Renmei, who have access to the wall, the purpose for the town's existence seems to be to provide a secure nurturing environment for both child and young adult Haibane. Haibane's lives are regulated by peculiar rules, such as: to use only second-hand products (e.g., their clothes and accommodations, Old Home and Old Factory); to have suitable jobs; to use a special passbook issued by Haibane Renmei instead of money; to use sign language when they see Haibane supervisor, *Washi* (Communicator), unless he permits them to speak; and to prepare themselves for their Day of Flight. Why should they obey such rules? Are they undertaking atonement, for example, for their act of suicide as indicated by Reki's nightmare in which she is alone on a railway track awaiting a train to run her over?

It is clear, then, that *Haibane* is shrouded by a shadow of suicidal deaths, real or symbolic. The names of the teenage Haibane girls in Old Home are from their dreams in the cocoons and indicate loneliness and self-denial in their forgotten past.<sup>1</sup> The metanarrative which informs the Haibane girls' lives is a conception of contemporary Japanese teenagers and their self-alienation, self-denial and suppressed desire for connection to their own selves and to others. Many children in Japan constantly experience an identity crisis under intense, normative pressures for social conformity, as evident in children's endemic problems (e.g., high rates of suicide, social withdrawal, bullying, violence, drug abuse, self-mutilation and prostitution). As Yoneyama (1999) claims, Japanese children's problems are generally 'school-related' and largely due to the denial of their individual differences and the imposition of endless and multi-layered competitions (e.g., academic, behavioural and for others' affection). In order for them to survive, emotional detachment may be necessary, as typified by Murakami's protagonists (Strecher 2002, p.18). The intertextual link to Murakami's narrative, in conjunction with the depiction of Haibane lives as intensely

over-regulated, points audience attention towards the text's implicit social commentary. Rakka is sincere and polite, therefore, her placid, submissive 'falling' suggests her exhaustion, loneliness and her sense of self-worthlessness. Similarly, Reki's desire, in her nightmare, to become a small stone so that she will no longer feel pain and sorrow manifests her vulnerability and longing for someone who loves her as she truly is. Their feelings and tendency for self-erasure are, as Yoneyama argues, indeed widely and readily shared by numberless children and young adults in the real world, who desperately try to meet their imposed, often unreasonable, tasks, in the name of love and expectation.

The anime opens with darkness about to be broken, as if a subject is rising to the surface of a well. By breaking the water, Rakka enters the liminal world, perhaps the unconscious. The metaphorical significance of an old, forgotten well is poignant, ambiguous and ambivalent: entombment (absolute isolation and death); rescue (reconnection); and/or an entrance to a different world (from its tunnel-like shape). In Murakami's novels, a 'well' frequently appears to signify Freudian 'id' and/or 'unconsciousness', based on the actual image and the phonetic resemblance with the Japanese word, *ido*, 'well' (Kobayashi 1998).

The topos of the well in *Haibane* returns to signify a critical turning point for Rakka, after she has been stigmatised as 'sin-bound' when her feathers develop black stains because of her intense grief over the loss of her friend, Kuu. Distressed and pondering the meaning of her existence as Haibane, she is led by crows to the corpse of a bird at the bottom of an old well in the forbidden western woods. When an old ladder on which she begins to descend into the well crumbles, and she falls, her dream in her cocoon recurs, bringing with it a memory of loneliness and desire for obliteration. Finding a black feather in her hand, she realises the corpse is the same bird which had tried to pull her back from falling from the sky. She then recognises that it embodies someone who loved her. Expressing her apology and gratitude, she buries the bird. This is the end of her self-alienation. The well therefore facilitates two layers of her symbolic death and rebirth: the death from her real world and rebirth in the Haibane world (the depth

of her inner self); and the death of the 'sin-bound' Haibane by realising her wrongness about her belief of being lonely and unloved, thereby putting her past behind to fully live as Haibane. Rakka is rescued by Touga, strangers from the outside world, an act which confirms her reconnection with others and the outside world. Similarly, the crows, ambiguous messengers of gods and death in many cultures, play a role as Rakka's spiritual guide accompanying her death and rebirth, with their capacity to fly over and bridge two worlds: the outside and the inside of the Wall; and the Haibane's lost past and present.

*Haibane's* intertextuality is exemplified by its use of the walled town from *EOW*. The wall is respected as 'protection' in Glie, thus Reki has to warn Rakka to take care of her (sin-bound) wings in winter when the wall's power weakens. Various episodes identify Glie as the place of rebirth. The clock of the Tower is repaired and, because of Kana's work, the clock in Old Home begins to ring. Nemu, helped by Rakka, creates a book on 'the beginning of the world' for Sumika (her supervisor and Librarian), who is about to bear a child. Glie embraces the irreversible thus precious flow of time. Activities taking place in Glie are meaningful and involve emotional connection. These positive improvements bring the text into active dialogue with the ideology underpinning *EOW*, where, for example, the time of the clock tower remains frozen and the meaning of life is continuously fading. The overbearing Gatekeeper cuts off residents' shadows - their *kokoro* (heart/mind); their memories, identities, subjective agencies, inner-selves. Here, 'kindness is manners' (Murakami, 1985, p.170). It is in a sense 'utopian', yet as Welch puts it, 'a world devoid of life, love, or significance' (2005, p.56). Although *EOW* represents *Watashi's* core consciousness, its nature is uncertain as to whether it is 'an elaborate well of the unconscious' (Rubin 2002, p.122) or the wall that protects the ego and super-ego from the invasion of the ambiguous, uncontrollable *id* (F. Murakami 1998). In so far as the latter seems to be the more convincing reading, the topology of Glie can be said to evoke *EOW* in order to overthrow what it stands for.

Visual emphasis on the natural world in *Haibane*, with a concomitant aura of nurturance and growth, further expresses the differences between the worlds. The earthy,

nurturing power of Glie is expressed through light-green coloured sky and water in the cocoons in which the Haibane shed their body to return to the core of their personality (the seed), and rest in a vegetable form before re-growing. Winds are constantly visible in both worlds; however, in *EOW* it is a desiccating wind, whilst in Glie it is involved in nurturing Haibane growth. A gust brings Rakka into her cocoon, from the sky above Glie. In the blustery weather, she cries facing a windmill and wishes to disappear, from where the crows lead her to the old well. A breeze reveals Reki's painting of Kuramori and her diary to the dejected Rakka, whereby she regains her willpower to rescue Reki in her final ordeal. Thus although nature may buffet the characters, it also functions as a prompter of subjective agency, disclosing to the characters that they do have choices and can act on them.

Glie thus functions, not as the Haibane's 'purgatory', but as a nest for their healing, training and self-searching towards their ultimate departure. The peculiar rules imposed upon them can signify differently, designating not confinement and repression but the assurance of the presence of others in life and the Haibane's development of confidence and ability for mutual support. In other words, social formations may act as sites for agency depending on how characters orient themselves toward those formations. For example, all teenage Haibane should find their own appropriate job, which urges them to examine their ability and to associate with others, such as townspeople who take them as apprentices (e.g., Kana in the Clock Tower). The use of second-hand goods also implies 'educational' value - not only to appreciate the material value, but more importantly to recognise the presence of others who previously made, bought, used and handed them on. The use of sign language may be to develop their ability to communicate introspectively.

The intertextual parallel between the protagonists in *Haibane* and those in *HBW/EOW* is stressed through Rakka at work, Rakka's cleaning of the internal walls. Inside the wall is a tunnel, through which runs a canal. Her job is to clean numberless plaques engraved with mysterious letters, placed on the wall. To go there, she has to descend, "falling" further into her *id*. She has to wear a large raincoat-like protector, boots and gloves, similar to *Watashi* when he

walks along an underground stream in darkness to meet his employer, Professor. Their attire signals the danger of the exploration of the unconscious. Rakka's resemblance with *Boku* is intrinsic – their ability to 'read'. *Boku* is a Dream-reader. He touches the skulls of old unicorns to read their dreams, in fact, to release the townspeople's emotions, which the unicorns have absorbed. Similarly, yet with more clarity, Rakka touches and learns. After having been rescued from the well, Rakka hears Kuu's happy laughter from the wall and touches it. Her act is punished but directs her to *Washi*'s consultation and job assignment. Being inside the wall, she feels Kuu's presence and touches a plaque to realise that the letters are Kuu's true name. The discovery enables her to end her grief over the loss of Kuu and develop her insight into the identities of Haibane, the wall and Glie, whilst sufficiently impressing *Washi* to entrust her with Reki's true name, which urges Rakka to participate in Reki's salvation. *Haibane*'s contrast with its pretext thus redefines the significance of the unconscious: no longer the seat of abjection, it becomes the source of personal growth through the development of a capacity to outgrow solipsism and become other-regarding.

Rakka's job also includes the collection of shiny articles used to make halos, from the plaques. This connects her to past and future Haibane. The wall shields the former Haibane's identities under their true names. What is held there; their memories or souls? Is the plaque with Kuu's name her epitaph? It may be so, however, I am more inclined to consider that it is her memories of the past as Haibane and perhaps her message to Rakka to show her happiness on her Day of Flight. This is because the isolation from the past and the future seems to be an essential element of the Haibane's life. Reki tells Rakka that no one in her previous world can recognise Rakka and also no one in Glie can recognise her in the future world. Furthermore, if the wall is to separate the unconscious from the external worlds, Rakka's inquiry about the wall means the exploration of how to negotiate with them both. She is designed to undertake the task, from the outset, when she awakens in 'water' in her cocoon and hatches in a junk-filled spare-room which the fellow Haibane just finished 'cleaning'. The audience may also recall that Rakka cleans Kuu's room to communicate to her. Cleaning plays a significant role

in the text, with various performances of it functioning as metonyms of a deeper cleansing. The motif can be seen to culminate in Reki's attempts to clean her own and Rakka's wings, whose stains are taken to signify a 'sin-bound' state. When such cleaning becomes interiorised, not superficial, the Haibane find freedom.

The Day of Flight is Haibane's goal and salvation. When the time comes, s/he must leave quietly, walk up to the special platform near the wall and then fly – where and how? Are they unborn, and/or disqualified angels? The text is extremely ambiguous and entails incongruent metanarratives, both religious and cultural. The Japanese terms, *sudachi no hi* (literally 'the day of leaving the nest') celebrates youthful pride and familial love (and concerns), yet the glorious column of light rising in the sky at the time of their flight may suggest their ascendance to Heaven. Moreover, unlike the southern pool (*id*) into which *Boku*'s shadow jumps, Haibane fly up from the western woods, an allusion to the western paradise in Buddhism. Permeated by such religious imagery as to stress the solemn importance of the event of ascension, in the fantasy world this event becomes a symbolic death; an individual's accomplishment of their search for a core identity in the depth of their inner world, only to return to their life. Rakka flew into the cocoon, thus it is not unreasonable to consider that Haibane return, through the sky (the metaphorical well) to the outside world where they came from. This view is supported by what *Washi* utters – the Day of Flight will come to Haibane only when they are ready to live outside the wall.

Rakka's first experience of a Day of Flight is Kuu's sudden disappearance and this brings shock, unrelenting grief and depression, turning her 'sin-bound'. Reki also experiences such destructive grief after Kuramori has gone. What is the notion of 'sin' in *Haibane* and why is Reki trapped, in spite of her caring personality? It appears to be neither the Christian concept nor the Buddhist promotion of emotional detachment, for Rakka uses a word '*noroi*' (curse) as a synonym to '*tsumi*' (sin) and *Washi* tells her that one's sin is cleansed only with others' forgiveness, as the crow did for Rakka. It reveals that what traps Reki in a cycle of 'sin' is her refusal to ask for help. The core of 'sin' is therefore self-centredness, self-alienation.

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This issue of self-alienation is dramatised by Reki in a psychoanalytical context. She has been the closest to Rakka since her discovery of her cocoon. Reki's helpfulness is demonstrated when she nurses the newborn Rakka and later proactively fends and helps the sin-bound Rakka, even exposing her secret—her inborn state of being 'sin-bound'. She places her last hope for her salvation on Rakka, yet when the time comes, she declines Rakka's help, whilst painting and reconstructing her dream in the cocoon—her lonely walk on pebbles in darkness. In the presence of Rakka, the scene reappears, revealing that it is a memory from just before she was killed by a train. When the train approaches Reki, the young Reki appears and desperately begs her to ask for help. This shows why Reki's true name implies 'split' and why she has become Haibane. The young Reki is, however, refused help and she crumbles. Rakka's calling for her is also unheard.

This intense focus on Reki at the closing suggests that she is the true hero of *Haibane*. Her problem is, however, essentially shared by Rakka: self-alienation and self-withdrawal. It also resembles *Watashi's* hardening of his shell, possibly caused by his childhood trauma, misguided upbringing, over-objectified ego, guilt' etc., as Professor suggests (p.268). Reki's similarity with *Watashi/Boku* is affirmed by their facilitation of art for the recovery of their lost memories, although Reki's painting in isolation indicates her deeper sense of alienation, compared to *Boku* who shares the retrieval of music with his girl friend (Librarian). Reki's obstinate refusal to ask for help is in fact due to her profound fear of being rejected. At the final moment, however, she calls Rakka for help, and Rakka is then able to rescue her from the coming train and her persistent nightmare. Reki's stained feathers whiten and her salvation is assured. Her true name is altered from 'run over' to 'pebble'. The letter from Haibane Renmei now acknowledges that Reki has chosen the hardest path to become a stepping stone to help others' salvation, echoing the image of Christ.

In conclusion, *Haibane* utilises *HBW/EOW* widely and deeply. Employing abundant imagery from *HBW/EOW*, it creates a fantasy that appears to be opposite in nature to its literary pretext. With its gentle yet firm nurturing capacity allowing sensitive sufferers to rest, rehabilitate and

reflect within solid, protecting walls, the anime contrasts starkly with the nihilistic *EOW* where irrational emotions, memories and 'shadows' are all expelled outside the wall. In essence, however, they share a common theme – the recovery of the lost integrity of self. The optimistic closure with Reki's magnificent flight and Rakka's joy at finding twin cocoons indicates that *Haibane* focuses on the troubled individuals' rebirth; the liberation from their self-trapped cage of alienation. *Haibane* engages the audience in the interrelated journeys of individual Haibane to overcome self-alienation and reintegrate themselves with others and their inner selves. Taking the form of the deaths and rebirths of potential suicide victims, it offers an encouragement to timid, frightened and resigned individuals to re-open their heart to themselves and their surroundings, as Rakka transforms herself from 'falling' to 'fallen nut/seed to regenerate and become intersubjective'.



#### NOTES

1. Napier (2005, p.190) suggests that their names allude to how they killed themselves: falling (Kuu & Rakka), being run over (Reki), drowning (Kana: fish in river) and electric shock (Hikari; light). Rakka's desire to 'disappear' and Reki's nightmare definitely work to support this idea. Moreover, the name, Kuramori (Reki's mentor-like caretaker), insinuates 'dark forest' and Nemu (sleepy), who was sleeping in her dream, suggests her absolute social withdrawal. Kuu's name also implies 'emptiness', thus her constant imitation of others' behaviour may refer to her attempt to find her selfhood.



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