

# The hero-Zen practitioner protagonist in Haruki Murakami's novels: An analysis from Joseph Campbell's hero's journey monomyth

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## **Abstract:**

The authors approach the protagonist in Haruki Murakami's novels from the archetype methodology, and from the perspective of J. Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey. According to J. Campbell's theory, the archetypal hero embarks on challenging journeys to accomplish the twin goals of exploring the world and self-perfection. The journey of the heroic characters in H. Murakami's novels is from isolation, away from the problems of social life. Then, because of an unexpected mission, returning and entering the underground world to execute hard tasks, solving the problems of individual destiny, hence getting closer to the core of one's own existence (the self), very close to the the archetypal hero's journey that the American comparative mythologist J. Campbell outlined and explained. Haruki Murakami's hero - meditator has reached the core of Japanese art and culture, which is Zen. The type of character like a Zen master creates an artistic and ideological bond between Murakami's literature and the Japanese artistic tradition. Moreover, this research also clarifies the connection between Murakami's works and myths in famous Japanese historical records such as *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*.

**Keywords:** Haruki Murakami, hero-Zen practitioner, Japan, Japanese literature, Joseph Campbell's monomyth, novels, protagonist.

**Classification numbers:** 9.2, 9.3

## **1. Introduction**

In most of H. Murakami's novels with their dual narrative structures, the protagonist embarks on a journey to another world to accomplish an unexpected task which does not only relate directly to the protagonist's own fate but also affects the fates of many others. Despite being primarily set in contemporary Japanese society, H. Murakami's stories resonate deeply with readers around the world living in modern, sprawling metropolises as they share the characters' experiences. In an interview, the author revealed his artistic goal: "What I write are stories in which the hero is looking for the right way in this chaotic world... That is my theme. At the same time, I think there is another world underground. You can access this inner world in your mind. Most protagonists in my books live in both worlds - the realistic world and the underground

world" [1]. The protagonist's journey in a H. Murakami novel typically goes through three stages: (1) leaving the ordinary world and everyday life to embark on an unexpected quest, (2) encountering and battling strange, dark forces in another world, and (3) returning to the real world and normal life. This three-stage pattern resembles the three stages described in J. Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey, proposed in his famous 1949 work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. By applying J. Campbell's general monomyth of the hero's journey to analyze H. Murakami's storytelling, this article aims to examine the characteristics of the hero protagonist in H. Murakami's novels, identify similarities and differences in implementing the hero's journey monomyth between H. Murakami's and J. Campbell's models, and determine the protagonist type that shapes H. Murakami's literary style: the

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hero-Zen practitioner protagonist. Additionally, the article points out the uniqueness that H. Murakami has inherited from Japanese culture and traditional ways of thinking in constructing the hero-Zen practitioner protagonist.

This article applies archetypal literary criticism and J. Campbell's monomyth theory to analyze the journeys of the protagonists in these five H. Murakami novels: *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of The World* [2], *Kafka on The Shore*, *The Wild Sheep Chase* [3], *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* [4], and *Killing Commendatore* [5]. These five novels are chosen because H. Murakami employs the hero's journey motif of travelling to another world, with two archetypes of journeys: (1) travelling to another place on earth; (2) travelling to another world underground in order to accomplish a special quest.

## 2. Joseph Campbell's hero's journey monomyth in narrative

Through comparative mythology, J. Campbell found a general formula we can use to read all myths and narratives around the world: "The hero's journey" from the ordinary world to another world to battle supernatural forces, and then return to the old world to bestow boons upon the community. J. Campbell called this journey formula "monomyth": "*The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation - initiation - return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth*" [2].

In J. Campbell's monomyth, the hero's starting point is the ordinary world, not the supernatural world. The hero receives a call to adventure and embarks on a strange adventure. After the victory, the hero returns to the old world and brings change to the whole community: "*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*" [2]. J. Campbell's monomyth (hero's journey) model consists of three basic stages corresponding to 17 events in the hero's journey (Fig. 1).

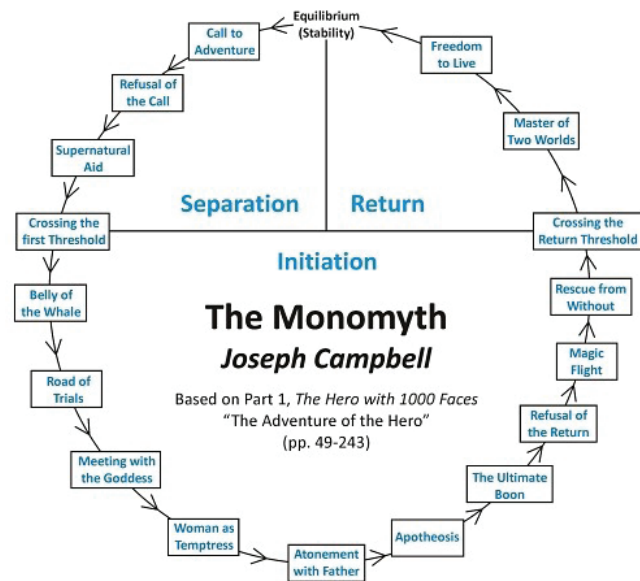


Fig. 1. Joseph Campbell's 17-Stage Monomyth (The Hero's Journey).

The characteristic feature and key difference of this formula lies in the initiation ritual - the crucial element that all heroes must undergo before returning and resurrecting the old world. In other words, this is the most important event in the hero's journey because it marks the turning point of transformation, when the hero overcomes the threshold of challenge, achieves spiritual maturity and enlightenment. It determines the difference between the nature of the hero in the two periods before and after returning to the community. After undergoing the initiation ritual, the hero gains another power and becomes someone who can go back and forth, understanding both the human world and the spiritual world.

Above, we have introduced J. Campbell's monomyth formula and the basic stages of the hero's journey. It can be seen that the archetypal criticism method and J. Campbell's journey formula are quite suitable if applied to reading narrative stories that are connected to mythological thinking. In postmodern literature, authors sometimes use the mythological literary technique to create new myths in order to revive the mythological atmosphere of ancient times in novels. By re-reading myths from new perspectives or adding new meanings to existing archetypal myths, authors have created resonances, connections

between the past and the present, between the myths of their own nations and the myths of humanity, in a systematic and comparative view to create intertextual dialogues. H. Murakami is one of the contemporary authors with this writing style. His works always refer to Japanese and Western myths, evoking readers' new and boundless imaginations. In the next part, we will proceed to demonstrate and analyze the characteristics of the journey of the main characters in H. Murakami's novels to prove the encounter between the characteristics of the journeys of the heroes in H. Murakami's novels and J. Campbell's hero's journey formula.

### 3. Haruki Murakami's protagonists' journeys: Adapting Joseph Campbell's hero's journey pattern

Examining the journey of the main characters in five H. Murakami novels within the scope of this article, the common point is that the main characters all go through 3 steps in their adventure: Leave their ordinary daily life; Go to another place and return to ordinary daily life, where they had left before (Fig. 2).

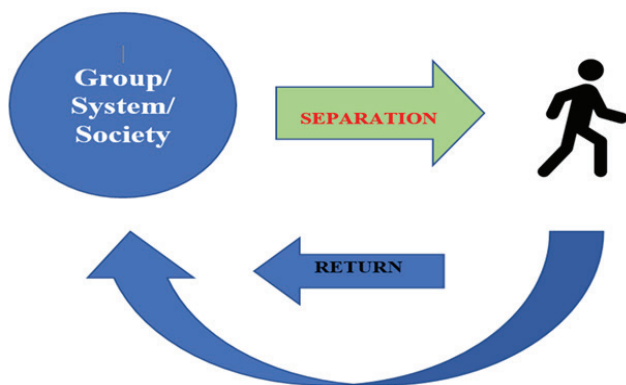


Fig. 2. The journey of the main characters in Haruki Murakami's novels.

The main characters of H. Murakami are often young or middle-aged people living in large cities. Their common feature is that they often have a lonely mood, indifferent to social issues. They actively detach themselves from groups, companies, and government organizations; live in their own world, pursuing passions like listening to music, reading books, cooking, and exercising. They equip themselves with

many survival and independence skills but inevitably feel lonely because they really have little connection with family and society. The main characters in H. Murakami's works are ordinary people, if not quite bland in society. The narrator (boku) in the novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*, before embarking on a strange journey to find a sheep with a star on its back, is introduced as a bachelor working for a small private advertising company, always busy in the office with advertising photo contracts. T. Okada, the protagonist of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [4], is unemployed, his wife left and then sent him a divorce petition in absentia, asking him to sign without meeting again. The portrait painter protagonist who undertakes the journey in *Killing Commendatore* [5] was originally a poor painter, after being abandoned by his wife, he lives alone in a rented house with little income from portrait painting work, while also teaching drawing classes locally. H. Murakami's main characters not only have unfortunate and loss-filled lives, but are sometimes self-described as tasteless, colorless and without identity. *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* - the name the author gave to one of his novels - reflects the accurate characteristic spirit of the young generation in modern Japanese society with a sense of alienation, lack of identity, lack of real meaning in life, not knowing where to go in a lonely life full of losses in an irrational society with many changes. If judged by the criteria set by Japanese society, H. Murakami's main characters would sometimes belong to the group of losers, pushed out of the huge industrial machine - where only efficiency and economic benefits are valued. Japan is a country with a modern economy and strong digital technology development. The fierce competition to chase efficiency to maintain such a huge economic machine has turned people into emotionless machines, existing as "screws" in the system and sometimes being swallowed up by the system itself. From this perspective, H. Murakami's main characters show an attitude of resistance to automation and herd mentality in Japanese society when they tend to oppose, even completely detach from groups and systems in society that stifle life and individual freedom. So, the question here is what people will do after detaching from the system? Can they still exist and find true freedom for

themselves or will they be lost in the system itself? This is also the fundamental issue that H. Murakami always poses in his huge fictional novels to find the answer - the destination of the main character's journeys. Will H. Murakami's main characters be swallowed by the system, depriving them of freedom and meaning of life or will they become "heroes" with their own path - as the author said: my characters are "heroes seeking the right path in this chaotic world".

To measure human endurance and limitations, H. Murakami conducts experiments on his main characters. The author lets them follow the call to embark on strange journeys, forcing them to fully reveal their latent potential that has not yet been fully discovered. All those small, ordinary people have a common script: they are suddenly pulled out of their everyday world, thrown into a "Kafkaesque" situation. They embark, take action and face their fate as heroes in stories and myths that J. Campbell mentioned. Kafka, the young hero, the "toughest teenager" in the novel *Kafka on the Shore*; T. Okada of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [6] or the employee of a small private advertising company in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the portrait painter in *Killing Commendatore* [5] and the mathematician in *The Accidental Kingdom*... are all characters who embark, take action, embark on their fateful journey, face unpredictable situations, accomplish difficult tasks that cannot be refused. Indeed, difficult tasks are always the starting point of the journey to seek and discover the fate and world of all heroes. Without challenges, heroes cannot embark on the battle, in order to accomplish their noble mission.

Overall, H. Murakami's main characters in the first stage of their journey go through events that align with J. Campbell's monomyth model. Specifically, they listen to the call to action and embark on their journey rather than refusing the difficult task at hand. For H. Murakami's characters, accepting the call and facing the challenges of the journey is the virtually inevitable choice, as there are no viable alternatives.

After the first stage, the main characters in H. Murakami's novels continue into the second stage - experiencing unexpected challenges and undergoing

initiation rites in the difficult journey. When they enter another world, they meet strangers or meet their own parents again; they go through the strange events of initiation rites similar to the journey model of hero J. Campbell.

In Murakami's novels, there are many types of "other worlds" where the main character goes and experiences the second stage of the journey. That world is not just another place on earth but sometimes an unfamiliar place underground - an underground world existing right under Japanese megacities. That world is not just physical space but also a metaphysical space of consciousness. As in the novel *Killing Commendatore* [5], the mathematician enters another world called "the end of the world" - in fact it is his subconscious world, encoded by himself. Therefore, when the mathematician enters this world, he enters the darkness of his unconscious, exploring memories and dreams that he has lost. H. Murakami also often creates a special intersection between different spatial and temporal modes in his works: reality - surreality, consciousness and unconsciousness, past and present... And at these intersections, at special moments of intersection, the main characters perform special, extraordinary actions or experiences. In other words, the main characters are often transcended in space, time, experiencing moments of revelation, seeing the essence of existence and the world.

It can be seen that in the second stage, H. Murakami's characters also go through special events similar to J. Campbell's model events. For example, the main characters embark on the *Road of Trials* and complete Initiation (*Complete the Initiation*). The mathematician in *Killing Commendatore* [5] had to live in the darkness of his unconscious until he was completely immersed in his own shadow. The portrait painter in *Killing Commendatore* [5] ventured into the dark cave under the ground to rescue his student. T. Okada in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [4] went down to the darkest place in the well alone to understand his own darkness, then decided to rescue his wife Kumiko and help those around him out of the darkness of their lives. The narrator (boku) in *A Wild Sheep Chase* went to the cold land of Hokkaido to find his

missing friend and find the sheep with a star on its back - a symbol of evil that steals the souls and minds of others, including his friend the Rat. And we cannot overlook Kafka's special journey to escape his cruel father's curse and save his own wounded soul. All of H. Murakami's characters, in the sense of their actions, can be considered heroes because they fight not only for themselves but also for others. If in myths the hero embarks and acts to protect and rescue the community, then in H. Murakami's postmodern novels the hero first fights for himself to solve his personal problems. Before there is a sense of community and fighting for great things, H. Murakami's main characters - heroes must understand their own pain and find solutions to their personal fate. This is the difference, also the interest and uniqueness in the journey and mission of the hero in H. Murakami's novels. And in that journey, along with maturity, through initiation, they achieve a double result: saving themselves and helping the community and those around them.

In the second stage of the journey of characters in H. Murakami's novels, we also see the appearance of the hero meeting the goddess element/event (Meeting with the Goddess). These women often have special abilities to support the hero in overcoming the difficulties they face. The role of female characters in the journey of H. Murakami's main characters cannot be denied. They often appear at important times, playing the role of the right-hand person, an effective and efficient supporter for the success of the journey. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the main character has to rely on the special ability of the girl with beautiful, alluring ears and extrasensory ability to help him find the Sheep and accompany him to Hokkaido. T. Okada in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [4] also met some important women who influenced his key decisions, such as the young girl K. May or N. Akasaka - the middle-aged woman with special abilities who will later share with him the strange story of herself. In the novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of The World* [2], in either world, the mathematician is guided and guided by special girls: the pink girl, the professor's granddaughter guides him down to the secret laboratory to avoid the black ghosts; the girl working at the library of "the end of the world" plays the role of

preserving and guiding him to read the lost dreams. Even in H. Murakami's novels, sometimes the female protagonist is directly involved in the initiation ritual - or the rite of passage, helping the hero transform his power and enter another world. This is the case of Miss Saeki when she plays the role of both the one who needs to be healed and the one who heals Kafka when she performs the baptism ritual, dissolving the terrible curse, helping Kafka complete the initiation before returning to his own world. Thus, although the female characters are minor characters, functional characters, their importance in supporting the hero in overcoming challenges and completing his initiation cannot be ignored.

At the end of the journey, after undergoing initiation rituals and enlightenment experiences (whether in reality or symbolically), H. Murakami's heroes have to make a choice between returning or staying - refusing to return to the old world. Out of the 5 novels surveyed, only one novel has the hero choosing not to return to the old world (refusal of return) - that is the mathematician character in the novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of The World* [2]. But in fact, staying in "the end of the world" is for the mathematician to continue the journey to regain his lost shadow, memories and self in the world he himself created. Ultimately, this decision is an act of self-responsibility, facing oneself. The other four main characters in the four other novels - Kafka in *Kafka on The Shore*; the narrator in *A Wild Sheep Chase*; the portrait painter character in *Killing Commendatore* [5]; and T. Okada in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [4] - all choose to return to the old world (return). Among these heroes, we see that three out of four (the advertising agency employee character, the portrait painter character and T. Okada) have achieved results that affect the fate of others around them. The nobility and significance of their struggle is further heightened by H. Murakami skillfully connecting the private story of the hero with important issues related to the past, history of a land or the Japanese nation. From there, their lives become more meaningful and steadfast when they have rooted and connected with the vast and broad life... In other words, the experiences on that journey have awakened not only their inner strength but also their historical roots and national identity that they have lost before.

The constant construction of the endings of journeys is for the main characters - heroes to return to ordinary life after experiencing pain, facing the dark past of individuals and the nation with a new awareness of personal responsibility in connecting with the community and society. This also reflects H. Murakami's maturity and commitment as a writer who always orientates towards the nation, as J. Rubin noted: *"Both writers (O. Kenzaburo and H. Murakami) explore questions of memory and history, legend and storytelling, and both continue to probe the dark forest of feeling to find who they are as individuals, as citizens of the world, and as Japanese"* [7].

Therefore, from analysing the characteristics of the three-stage journey of H. Murakami's heroes in the novel, we can see the transmission and similarities with J. Campbell's monomyth model. From this we can see that although H. Murakami's novels are postmodern stories, they seem to be systematic and inherit unique elements of autobiographical storytelling from mythological hero journey stories, in terms of narrative structure and character traits (archetypal hero).

#### **4. Haruki Murakami novel's protagonist as the hero - Zen practitioner**

In his work, J. Campbell demonstrated that Buddha is a typical example of a hero - a Zen master. What distinguishes an ordinary hero from a hero - Zen master in literature? The difference lies in the results and ultimate goals of a journey, when the hero achieves spiritual enlightenment and can master both the human and spiritual worlds. This enlightenment helps the hero achieve the super-ego - what Jung calls the Self archetype in his model of the human psyche. The difference between Western epic heroes and Eastern epic heroes (Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata) is also in this direction: while Western epic heroes are emphasised in the spoils they gain after battles (opponent's head, wealth, kingdom, beauty), the most meaningful victory of the five Pandava brothers in the great epic Mahabharata is self-conquest, relinquishing the ego to achieve spiritual liberation (Moksha).

H. Murakami's novel characters are also built with characteristics like Eastern epic and mythological heroes. A common feature of H. Murakami's main characters is that in their adventures, they often undergo special metaphorical events such as meditation, entering the inner world (unconscious) and experiencing enlightenment states as in initiation ceremonies commonly seen. This also helps readers identify H. Murakami's main characters. The initiation ceremony or investiture of H. Murakami's characters often occurs before they are reborn into another world or return to the real world - the world they have long left. The narrator character in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, after all the strange events in Hokkaido, 'purifies' his body and mind in the simplest way by taking a bath before returning to Tokyo. In all novels, Miss Saeki's purification ritual (*Kafka on the Shore*) with Kafka - her (possible) son - is the most special. Saeki's act of bleeding herself and then letting Kafka drink her blood reminds readers of ancient rituals where humans used blood for purification in sacred ceremonies of primitive communities in many different cultures around the world. R. Thakur, et al. (2020) [8] believed: *"She commits the taboo of sleeping with her 'supposed' son. As she renounces her earthly life, she stabs a hairpin in her arm and lets Kafka drink her blood in lieu of the milk a mother provides to her offspring. The ritual absolves her and purges Kafka of the toxic blood he has inherited from his father. He accepts the taboo relationship, completes the prophecy and ultimately empathises and forgives her"*.

To prepare for the initiation ritual of heroes, H. Murakami often creates a special space in his novels: a dark cave, a basement or a secret underground world beneath the ground... The cave in H. Murakami's novels is not only a physical space where the main character's adventures take place but also a spiritual space connected to the characters' journey into the depths of consciousness. It reflects the complex, multi-layered nature of the human psyche. The cave is the shadow of the unconscious - the spiritual reality, containing fears, repressed feelings and "personality masks" in humans. The cave image in H. Murakami's novels plays the role of an archetype meaning the center of energy of the world, where transformation

and rebirth occur. The main characters in the novels, before achieving 'enlightenment' and awakening the inner world to reach the stature of heroes, must enter dark caves, tombs or deep wells. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [4], Toru entering the dry well in the abandoned house, which can connect him to the past, is a symbolic act: entering the inner world to connect with his unconscious. And each time entering the world of darkness under the well, he almost gets closer to the "crux" of the problem, understanding the deep reasons why his wife Kumiko left for the stories of the past related to N. Akasaka and C. Akasaka. Sitting under the dry well, Toru first feels a clear physical change as he notices the bruise on his face starts to heat up. Then comes spiritual transformation when he feels the darkness inside and outside merging. Toru begins to leave himself to go to another world. After the symbolic initiation ritual, Toru returns to the real world on the ground with the attitude of one who has seen through the layers of consciousness and found the solution to his problem: rescuing Kumiko. In *Killing Commendatore* [5], the cave space - where the journey takes place - is an ancient tomb that the portrait painter accidentally discovered and entered. The ancient tomb was where Japanese Buddhist monks practised nyūdō, an ancient Buddhist initiation ritual to achieve "enlightenment" in the form of mummification (overcoming the boundary of life and death) to become a living Buddha. This ritual was practiced for a long time in the history of Japanese Buddhism until the Meiji period when it was banned. The painter was able to connect with the past and understand the secret of the famous painter Amada - the owner of the mountain house where he is living - after experiencing the strange journey in the darkness of the cave he discovered when going down the stone cellar.

Thus, in H. Murakami's novels, the cave really means the center of energy where heroes, through the "initiation ritual", transform their spiritual energy and gain supernatural power before returning to the real world. According to J. Campbell, once heroes have overcome all challenges and decided to return to the world, they will become those who can connect the two realms. At that time, the hero possesses a mysterious

and especially the ability to master two worlds: the human realm and the spiritual realm. He is called the "master of the two worlds": "Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back-not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other - is the talent of the master" [9]. In H. Murakami's novels, the function of connecting the two worlds of the hero - the Zen master - has also been established and demonstrated. The main characters, after the journey of challenges, have acquired a kind of superpower that allows them to move between the conscious and unconscious mind and sometimes even cross the boundary of physical space and time. At that time, the existence of heroes not only had personal meaning for them but also carried greater values and could affect the whole community. J. Rubin saw the transformation of the character Toru (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*) and called this character a cultural hero: "*Toru launches his quest inwards. He goes down into the earth, into a well, to brood on his past. What he finds there has implications that go far beyond his own inner world. As his young friend May Kasahara tells us (almost too directly), in choosing to fight for his wife Toru will become a kind of culture hero, fighting battles not only for himself as an individual but "fighting for a lot of other people" as well. In trying to find out who he is, Toru discovers elements of his identity that have wide-ranging cultural and historical significance*" [7].

Thus, the heroes - Zen masters of H. Murakami, after the journey, have found spiritual power and more genuine and intimate joys and pleasures closer to life. Happiness and things they lost before sometimes also return to them. And most importantly, they find true freedom (freedom to live) in their lives. This freedom means something different from lonely and alienated freedom, detached from society and responsibility as before. They attach themselves to the lives of others, of the community - as a true hero can fight not only to change oneself but also to change the lives of those around. In this very human sense, H. Murakami and his fictional adventure stories have value in inspiring the spirit of young lonely and lost people who are

detached from society and cannot yet awaken their inner strength. The choice to become a hero or become a fool, not finding true happiness and high noble values - that is entirely within the possibility of each of us. Murakami's typical of hero - Zen practitioner protagonist has contributed to demonstrating the unity of the his perspective on the meaning of the writer's storytelling activity: The artist must face the shadow, must go through his dark inner tunnel. Telling a story is the process of the Japanese writer facing his own shadow to heal his own problems, as he wrote: "*When I write novels myself, as I pass through the dark tunnel of narrative I encounter a totally unexpected vision of myself, which must be my own shadow. What's required of me then is to portray this shadow as accurately, and candidly, as I can. Not turning away from it. Not analyzing it logically, but rather accepting it as a part of myself. But it won't do to lose out to the shadow's power. You have to absorb that shadow, and without losing your identity as a person, take it inside you as something that is a part of you. You experience that process together with your readers. And share that sensation with them. That's one of the vital roles for a novelist*" [6].

## 5. Conclusions

The main character - the hero in H. Murakami's novels has the characteristics of the archetype of the hero, appearing in all the author's novels and creating his own style of storytelling. Reading H. Murakami's novels and examining the characteristics of the main character from the perspective of J. Campbell's theory of the hero's journey, we have two conclusions: (1) Through the fate journey of the main characters, H. Murakami's works have reflected the realistic state of mind of modern Japanese people: people with deep spiritual wounds, the collapse of belief in traditional values; being discarded from the political, economic and educational machinery; feelings of emptiness, anxiety and loss of identity in an irrational, chaotic and constantly changing world. (2) The type of main character as heroes - Zen masters in H. Murakami's novels reveals the author's proposed solution to Japan in dealing with and healing the psychological wounds of Japanese people after World War II and

the period of rapid economic development, when people are facing many intractable problems in finding solutions to existence. Clearly, the solution is the lesson of facing one's own darkness, personal and national darkness to understand and self-heal. Only by going through the unconscious darkness can people sincerely face and resolve personal pain. The new contribution of this assessment is identifying a typical archetypal character in H. Murakami's novels: hero - Zen practitioner. This is a new discovery that results from approaching H. Murakami's novels by J. Campbell's hero's journey monomyth.

## CRediT author statement

Thi Mai Lien Nguyen: Conceptualisation, Writing; Bich Nha Truc Nguyen: Writing - Original draft preparation, Reviewing, Editing.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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