

Aron Mo

# The Portrayal of Love in Hiromi Kawakami's *The Ten Loves of Mr. Nishino*

Bachelor's project in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Language and Literature





## Abstract

This thesis will be looking at the portrayal of love in the short story collection *The Ten Loves of Mr. Nishino* by Hiromi Kawakami. The thesis topic is explored through a selection of three short stories from the collection: “In the Grass”, “The Kingdom at Summer’s End”, and “Marimo”. Each story offers a different take on the topic of romantic relationships, and explored individuals from different age groups and stages of life. For each story we look at the literary devices used by the author, and utilize these to explore the thesis topic. This thesis will show how Kawakami assigns certain traits as common to people experiencing love at certain stages of life, but also that these stereotypes are not always accurate.

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# The Portrayal of Love in Hiromi Kawakami's *The Ten Loves of Mr. Nishino*

## Introduction

"I didn't really get what was so fun about hanging out with boys" (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 23-24).

"I'd really like to have sex with him, I thought" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 81).

"And to top it all off, he had a steady job with a respectable company" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 138).

These are the thoughts of three women who meet Mr. Nishino at different stages in their lives. In this essay I will be looking at how author Hiromi Kawakami portrays these women's relationships in her short story collection *The Ten Loves of Mr. Nishino*. This essay will focus on a selection of three of the ten short-stories. In what follows I will introduce and justify my choice of author, look at each of the selected short stories in light of the thesis topic, before presenting my conclusion.

Hiromi Kawakami was born in Tokyo in 1958, is best known for her offbeat literary fiction, and has won multiple literary prizes, such as the Akutagawa Prize and the Tanizaki Prize, as well as being shortlisted for both the Man Asian Literary Prize, and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (Kawakami, 2020, introduction). In other words, she is an established author recognized by the writing community worldwide. Though Kawakami is not from an English-speaking country, her works, as well as those of many other Japanese authors, have been translated and widely distributed in the Anglophone world. The interest for Japanese literature is only increasing, as shown from the news coverage on Japanese authors. Multiple news articles, from news sites such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* mention Kawakami (Flood A.; Thomas R., Kitamura K.; Nimura J. P.) In addition, Kawakami's work largely conforms to many of the conventions associated with the short story genre, as will be shown in the analysis below. Her texts are a continuation of the short story tradition in a country largely different from the Anglophone world in its literary traditions. On the issue of meaning being lost in translation I can only say that the translator, Allison Markin Powell, has considerable experience with the translation of Japanese

literature into English (Kawakami, 2020, introduction). Also, love is often assumed to be a universal experience, despite the different types of social organization surrounding this concept around the world, which will make it easier to bridge the translation-gap.

I do not claim that the short stories I focus on offer a complete picture of what the romantic lives of individuals at a certain age must look like, but merely that they give some indication as to what some of the factors we concern ourselves with might be, more generally, at different stages of life. “In the Grass” is the first story I chose – the second in the collection – and it follows the lives of characters in their adolescence. The next story, “The Kingdom at Summer’s End” – the fifth in the collection – follows characters in their early thirties, who have yet to settle down and marry. In the third story, “Marimo” – the eight in the collection – we get acquainted with the romantic life of a married woman. Each of these stories offer a different take on the concept of a romantic relationship.

## **“In the Grass”**

### Shiori Yamagata – unexperienced in the endeavors of the heart

In this story we follow the young girl Shiori Yamagata, who often visits a vacant lot in her neighborhood to bury things there. Shiori is both introduced to Toru Tanabe, a boy who is very uncertain of himself, as well as his stark opposite, the boy Nishino, who Shiori sees with an adult woman in the vacant lot she likes to visit.

The first few pages offer an introduction to Shiori Yamagata and her life. The only mention of love in this section is that of her mother who ran off with another man a few years back (Kawakami, 2020, p. 19). The mother-figure sparked a crisis in Shiori’s life which seems to be what lies behind her burying things in the vacant lot, as she only began doing so after her mother left, starting with the goldfish Tara, which her mother acquired for her. The *in medias res* opening of the story, placing us in the middle of the action, adds to this atmosphere of being lost and confused (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 281).

Kawakami quickly establishes the youth of our main character with phrases such as “Those are the only two kinds of trees I know” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 17), and actions such as burying fourteen candles in the vacant lot, foreshadowing her age, which is confirmed with the line “The



candles had been on my birthday cake” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 18). Having buried the candles indicates to us that Shiori is attempting to hide what has happened in her past.

Shiori has gone on dates before, but none were of any significance to her (Kawakami, 2020, p. 23). Relationships are still a relevant topic for people her own age though, as her lack of interest in boys is contrasted with that of her two friends. One of them, Chie, floats around from boy to boy constantly, while the other, Toko, has a steady boyfriend (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 22-23). Toko tells her that “You’ll understand Shiori, once you find a guy you’re crazy about” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 24). Shiori does not see this as likely, and contrasts her future with Toko, who she thinks is much more likely to have a successful relationship than herself, from the way she describes her as meeting the right guy, getting married, having kids, and dying peacefully (Kawakami, 2020, p. 24). Shiori is uncertain about her own ability to love.

Romance for Shiori comes in the form of a letter from her fellow student, Toru Tanabe, asking her to go out on a date the next time they meet (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 22-23). Shiori will accept Tanabe’s request, but will not think of what comes after this potential date (Kawakami, 2020, p. 24). Thinking about the future is not the main concern at this stage of life. The excitement of dating itself is the main draw, as well as the approval this will gain her from her friends. This is reinforced with her thinking that “As for Toru Tanabe, and other boys I hadn’t yet met, they still weren’t any more distinct to me than all of the grasses growing here in the vacant lot” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 25).

Shiori is then introduced to Nishino, in the vacant lot. This vacant lot could represent her heart; she has attempted to fill it with the keepsakes of her mother, as well as birthday candles and other memorabilia from her own development, but it is still a vacant lot. As mentioned above, a goldfish given to her by her mother was the first thing to be buried in the lot and its name is interesting, because Tara is often associated with love, and as such the implication is that Shiori buried her ability to love at the time of her mother’s disappearance (Kawakami, 2020, p. 21). The rock in the lot might represent Shiori’s strength in dealing with the loss of her mother. Seeing Nishino here indicates that he will be of importance to her emotional development. When she sees Nishino, he is not alone, but sitting with an adult woman (Kawakami, 2020, p. 25). At first glance, Shiori mistakes the woman for her mother (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 25-26). This shows

us yet again how closely her view of relationships could be tied to her mother's abandonment of her.

### Nishino – a child's wishful thought

Nishino is in many ways unfamiliar to Shiori. He is described as having “a strange air” about him, indicating how he is unapproachable (Kawakami, 2020, p. 29). She thinks that it is this air of distance that makes him interesting and unique, rather than the actual person himself (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 29-30). His appeal is also connected to status, in that she remembers that both of her friends might have feelings for Nishino (Kawakami, 2020, p. 28).

There is a duality to him: At times he seems more grown up, despite being her own age (Kawakami, 2020, p. 27). He and the adult woman he is with are said to be “in sync” multiple times throughout the story (Kawakami, 2020, p. 26). At other times, however, his inexperience is also evident: As when he asks her “Do you...come here a lot?” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 26). evoking that feeling of an awkward pick-up line which only the unexperienced or nervous would make use of.

Shiori later waits for Nishino and the woman in the vacant lot, spying on them (Kawakami, 2020, p. 33). She sees him sucking on her breasts, releasing the milk from them and into his mouth. “This is how an infant suckles,” she thinks to herself, again creating this conflicting image of young and older – of innocent and devious (Kawakami, 2020, p. 35). This duality is also seen here:

“Nishino, are you...in love with your sister?” I asked gingerly.

“I feel sorry for her,” Nishino replied. He gazed off into the distance as he spoke.

I wanted to know what had happened to his sister's husband, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. The air between Nishino and his sister was not quite what might exist between lovers, although neither was it anything like that between family members (Kawakami, 2020, p.37).

This indicates how emotions such as romantic love, love among siblings, and sympathy for another's grief might not be as clear-cut or distinguished from one another for someone who has not had the time to reflect on and experience them.

At one stage Nishino and Shiori kiss, and as they are kissing, they both think of other things than the actual kiss (Kawakami, 2020, p. 38). Shiori thinks of the things she has buried in the vacant lot, finally confronting her past. The kiss is described as both wonderful and sad (Kawakami, 2020, p. 38). Short stories often feature one or more epiphanies – sudden, life-defining, moments of insight (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 41). This kiss is such a moment, and she starts to grow up and move past what has been. The grass itself, which appears in the lot, has seeds which cling to Nishino's pants. Grass grows, just like love, until nothing of what has been buried beneath can be seen, just like Shiori grows beyond her trauma. The seeds on Nishino's pants, and the kiss happening in the grass, could symbolize that he is the start of Shiori's larger romantic journey (Kawakami, 2020, p. 41). Despite Nishino's request for her to break up with Tanabe, following the kiss, she refuses (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 39-40). He will remain as a wishful thought of what love should feel like, though she knows it is not real (Kawakami, 2020, p. 41). Nishino being in the vacant lot could also tie him to the buried objects: Shiori cannot bury her past forever, in the same way that the escape she momentarily finds in Nishino is not sustainable.

In this story Shiori experiences a movement from childhood to adulthood, expanding on her understanding of love and death. Such stories are sometimes referred to as initiation stories. This is supported by the frame – an image or event present near both the beginning and then at the end, indicating completion of the story. In this story the frame is the vacant lot. At the beginning of the story Shiori would bury things she wished she could forget there, while at the end the lot is leveled and sold off. This symbolizes the change that has taken place within Shiori. “I would always remember clearly what had happened in the grass between our fourteen-year-old selves, in the elusive space between adulthood and childhood” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 41).

### Toru Tanabe – the reality of a first love

Toru Tanabe takes Shiori on movie appreciation dates, and to a café, all the while talking about his hobbies. She describes the air around him as “clear” compared to Nishino's (Kawakami,

2020, pp. 29-30). There is no mystery surrounding Tanabe. This is also indicated with lines such as “I always ask this question right away, and that must be why they say I’m boring.” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 30), and the letter he sends Shiori, informing her of his intention to ask her on a date, as well as him asking her beforehand if it would be alright for him to kiss her (Kawakami, 2020, p. 31). After the failed kiss, Shiori reflects on her situation:

I stood by the gate and watched his figure retreat, wondering to myself if I liked Toru Tanabe. I did like him. But whether I would learn to like kissing Toru Tanabe, that I didn’t know.

[...]

I didn’t want to grow up. More than anything else, I was afraid of growing up and, without even knowing it, becoming exactly like my mother (Kawakami, 2020, p. 33).

Tanabe is the reality of what a first love often is. He is not unpleasant, but not the alluring mystery we often dream of. He represents the more mature and realistic expectations of love. From the last part of this quote, we can see how Shiori’s relationship with Tanabe makes her confront her trauma, and in this way begin a deeper exploration of her inner emotions.

What follows is a successful and more fulfilling relationship with Tanabe in the coming months (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 40-41). In this time Shiori starts changing her life, even thinking about cutting her hair, which earlier in the story was something she dreaded, as it would increase the gap to her mother (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 40-41). She even considers telling Tanabe about her mother in the near future (Kawakami, 2020, p. 41). Shiori will forever remember the milky sweet kiss with Nishino that sparked this change, and made her realize that he was not what she needed.

## **“The Kingdom at Summer’s End”**

### Reiko – a woman who says what she thinks

Reiko is a woman in her 30s, who works as an author and lives alone (Kawakami, 2020, p. 88.) When it comes to men, she has thoughts like “*I’d like to tear a fresh-baked loaf of bread in half and devour it with him*”, or in the case of Mr. Nishino: “*I’d really like to have sex with him*”

(Kawakami, 2020, p. 81). She is forward about her appetite for physical intimacy, seen through how she simply tells Nishino “Hey, let’s do it!” (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 81-82). She has experience as well, calling their sex “Kind of great” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 84). Nishino describes her as “an animal” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 86) and comments on her ability to say what she means outright (Kawakami, 2020, p. 87). The toothbrush and underwear Reiko quickly goes through could be a metaphor for how she quickly goes through men (Kawakami, 2020, p.82). After a few days at his place the toothbrush is already frayed (Kawakami, 2020, p.89).

Despite not seeing herself as someone who is ready to settle down, she notices that Nishino is a hard worker, and she comes to stay at his apartment for days on end, in many ways assuming the role of his partner (Kawakami, 2020, p. 84). The key, which Nishino lends his girlfriends until he breaks up with them, is picked up by Reiko, showing how she takes up this role (Kawakami, 2020, p.84).

She leaves the key when she leaves his apartment, symbolizing her waning interest in Nishino (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 89-92). She thinks she should find someone new, which tells us that the thought of growing attached scares her (Kawakami, 2020, p. 91). Regarding her future “there’s nothing like marriage, or children or pensions” that comes to mind (Kawakami, 2020, p. 92). She does not wish to change her lifestyle. The future is a kingdom at summer’s end – a fairytale far away.

Only when Nishino becomes more forward, does Reiko gain an interest in him again.

“Well, maybe I am like one of those guys – a womanizer. But how do you know about that Rei?”

[...]

“I can tell, from talking to you and from having sex with you – that’s all it takes,” I replied, laughing (Kawakami, 2020, p.95).

Reiko is clinging to her old lifestyle. Seeing Nishino as a womanizer allows her to escape the looming responsibilities of her future. From the last part of the quote, we can see how being aware of him being unfaithful puts her more at ease, with her laughing.

But Reiko has begun to change her perspective, as indicated by, for instance, the line “It was summer’s end when I began to fall in love with Nishino. I truly wanted all of him now” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 96). She has an epiphany: she has arrived at the future she never imagined herself reaching. She has stopped evaluating how good or bad their sex is and focuses more on the person than the act itself (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 96-97). She is finished with switching men, as shown with: “I want all of you” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 97). She knows he is still seeing others, and that is no longer alright with her. She knows their relationship will come to an end. She tells him summer is almost over, which she likes, and he does not (Kawakami, 2020, p. 98). She is ready to move on to the next stage of her life. At summer’s end Nishino tries to change her mind, but Reiko only wants to get away from him now, the same way she earlier wanted to love him (Kawakami, 2020, p. 99). She has started thinking about the future.

### Nishino – the man who lends out his keys

Nishino is around 30 years old here, and at the same stage of life as Reiko (Kawakami, 2020, p. 88). They are working and dating rapidly, not settling down. When the key is brought up, he tells her it belongs to “The last one. Or rather, the girlfriend I’m in the process of breaking up with” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 83). He does not like for it to get too personal, as shown from his constant use of “Ah” and other non-committing replies to Reiko’s questions (Kawakami, 2020, p.85).

Reiko represents an opportunity for change in Nishino. When she asks him to take a bath together, he is evasive at first, until he finally tells her he prefers to bathe alone (Kawakami, 2020, p.87). He is allowed to speak his mind, “Like you do, Rei” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 87). After she has left his apartment, he calls her up and talks to her, like he would with most of his girlfriends. His interest increases. She tells him “I love you. I loved you” (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 99-100). Nishino wants to follow her change, but he is unable to. This is his crisis. While they have been together, he is still seeing other women, and despite him promising to not do so anymore, Reiko knows “that he wasn’t crazy in love with me” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 99). She thinks that “Maybe Nishino was incapable of love” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 99). Despite all the years he has lived – or maybe because of them – he still has that cool air of detachment about him (Kawakami, 2020, p.99). Nishino owns a book titled *The Broken Commandment*, which indicates that he does not live life in accordance with traditional values (Kawakami, 2020, pp.84-

85). He also has the book *The World According to Garp* by John Irving, which deals with themes like ostracization from society and sexual arousal (Irving, 1978). The book could be in Nishino's apartment to indicate that his lack of emotional investment in relationships stems from his early life. It is also possible to connect this to other parts of the collection, where we learn about his sister who lost a child and killed herself afterwards, reinforcing the likeliness of a traumatic experience with ties to the concept of love having affected him.

Reiko feels sorry for him, as he seems stuck in an endless cycle of not being able to fully commit. "Such profound depths this poor guy has" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 99). Nishino thinks he will find his death at summer's end (Kawakami, 2020, p.101). He also reveals that his sister died at summer's end, which could be taken to mean that moving to this new stage in her life killed her (Kawakami, 2020, p.98). The frame of the story, which started with the line "It was summer" is now contrasted with the story's ending being summer's end. Reiko follows Nishino to the train station (Kawakami, 2020, pp.100-101). She has been a part of his journey, but now he must go on alone.

## **"Marimo"**

### Mrs. Sasaki – your typical housewife

Sayuri Sasaki has been married for over 30 years (Kawakami, 2020, p.134). She lives in a quiet neighborhood, and has a set pattern to her life, as shown with her almost scripted conversations with Mrs. Kobayashi (Kawakami, 2020, p.135). She has these exchanges, not because she enjoys them, but because it is expected of someone with her position in the family and community. These expectations can for instance be seen in how Mrs. Kobayashi complains about people over the age of 30, who are not married or having children (Kawakami, 2020, p.135).

There is not much passion left in Mrs. Sasaki's marriage. Her husband's hobby is visiting gravesites, and when he all of a sudden wants a new car, a red Nissan March, this is a surprise to her (Kawakami, 2020, p.134). This indicates that her husband also wants something else than what he has. Among her fellow housewives they ironically call themselves "young ladies", showing how they view themselves as being older and having settled down.

Mrs. Sasaki is introduced to Nishino through the Energy-Saving Cooking Club in her neighborhood (Kawakami, 2020, p.133). Most of the members are female, and like Mrs. Sasaki, they now all have a chance to enjoy the company of a man other than their husbands, while still meeting social expectations (Kawakami, 2020, p.136). She notes his ability to keep up with Mrs. Kobayashi's conversations, as well as his respectable job at a reputable company (Kawakami, 2020, p.136). He is also in line with their less-waste ethics (Kawakami, 2020, p.137). These are the values she looks for in a relationship at this stage of life. He is "a bargain" (Kawakami, 2020, p.137).

He tells her she is not like other women, and despite her knowing what a cliché this is, she falls for it, simply because no one has seen her in such a way for a long time (Kawakami, 2020, pp.138-139). He offers her the excitement she has given up in exchange for her respectable life. She is aware it is against social expectations to fall for him, but even so, she does. "All is lost" she thinks in a moment of realization (Kawakami, 2020, p.139).

Nishino calls her, always at the right time, and always when her family is not around (Kawakami, 2020, p.141). This clearly shows how she is aware of the connotations of her connection to Nishino. She wishes for their relationship to happen, but she knows she will not change her life for him. When he stops calling her, and stops coming to their cooking classes, Mrs. Sasaki is sad because they both shared perfect attendance, showing how appearances still have a value in her life (Kawakami, 2020, p.143). She thinks: "I suffered for three months, thinking about Nishino" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 144). Despite this, she still keeps up her attendance, and her conversations and daily life.

She finds herself at the pet store, which sells marimo: moss balls growing at the bottom of lakes.

*Mustn't the marimo get lonely?* I repeated these words over and over in my head as I stared at the *marimo*. The *marimo* seemed very much like Nishino. [...] For an instant I considered buying one of the marimo, [...] as a memento of my feelings for him. But I gave up the idea. "Young ladies" like me, we have a tendency towards unsentimentality, much more so than most people realize (Kawakami, 2020, p.145).

In this moment of realization, she is at peace with the fact that she is not ready to give up her current life. In this way she shares common ground with Nishino, in that they are both, currently,



unable to change who they are. Mrs. Sasaki waves goodbye to the marimo, as she calls out “Goodbye, Nishino” (Kawakami, 2020, p.145).

### Mr. Nishino – the perfect man?

Yukihiko Nishino is 37 years old here (Kawakami, 2020, p.138). Upon learning this, Mrs. Kobayashi stops complaining about how people are taking too long to get married. So strong is his allure, that even the shepherdess of the flock cannot fault him (Kawakami, 2020, p.138). Mrs. Sasaki finds herself agreeing with him on everything, beginning to like an author she previously did not care for (Kawakami, 2020, p.140).

He still has a multitude of romantic relationships at once, and even tells Mrs. Sasaki about them over the phone (Kawakami, 2020, p.141). He complains about how all his girlfriends eventually find some sort of flaw with him they cannot deal with, along the lines of “You’re too cold”, “You don’t love me enough” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 142). When Mrs. Sasaki asks if he would ever be able to drop that cool act and truly love someone, all he does is deflect the question. Nishino is unable to selflessly love.

### **Final thoughts**

These are stories about people in widely different situations, but they all have some things in common. Nishino is always present, functioning as a symbol of the ephemerality of love. He comes into people’s lives, and then he disappears, either by their will or by his. He makes our female characters reflect on their situations, promoting realizations about wanting to change or being content where they are. Kawakami portrays adolescent love as confusing and exciting. Then comes the stage of uninhibited desire, before thoughts of the future and settling down make themselves known. Despite general traits in the stories, she also tells the readers that understandings and experiences of love are in constant development, and that some people, like Nishino, will never conform to the stereotypes. I think what Kawakami tells us in this collection, is that questioning love is always permissible.

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