

Haruki Murakami: Barn Burning

"Five barns. Five barns worth burning.... The kind of barn it would take fifteen minutes to reduce to ashes, then no one would miss it."

In this simple, disturbing story, our narrator begins an ambiguous relationship with a part-time model and amateur mime artist. Their relationship seems odd, but neither of them seem to mind. But, after she goes on a sudden trip to North Africa, things begin to change between them. While there, she met a new man and one Sunday, out of the blue, she calls up the narrator and asks if she can introduce them. Since his wife is out of town and he's at a loose end, the narrator agrees. Later, in confidence, the stranger confides in the narrator that he enjoys a very unusual hobby indeed: once every few months he chooses a barn and burns it down.

Since its publication in 1983 (and its translation into English in 1992) the ambiguity of Barn Burning has led to a variety of interpretations. Is the mysterious man responsible for the burning of barns, or is he leading the narrator down a false path? Could barn burning be a metaphor for serial killing or violence against women? The story has also been interpreted as a metaphor for social isolation and loneliness, as a mysterious stranger interposes himself into a close relationship, eventually ending it. After reading this story, you can make up your own mind about the meaning of Barn Burning.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. Where did the narrator first meet his female friend?

- (a) At a school reunion
- (b) At a wedding party
- (c) At a funeral
- (d) On a tour group

2. In what field of study does pantomime belong?

- (a) Theatre
- (b) Film
- (c) Literature
- (d) Physics

3. What performance impresses and unnerves the narrator?

- (a) Walking the tightrope
- (b) Escaping a box
- (c) Peeling a mandarin orange
- (d) Juggling firesticks

4. Where does the girl meet her new boyfriend?

- (a) Casablanca
- (b) Algiers
- (c) Tripoli
- (d) Cairo

5. What colour is the boyfriend's sports car?

- (a) Bright red
- (b) Racing green
- (c) Silver gray
- (d) Hot pink

6. What item is NOT in the impromptu picnic the three share at the narrator's house?

- (a) Sausage rolls
- (b) Smoked salmon
- (c) White wine
- (d) Blueberry ice cream

7. What does the narrator think the boyfriend does to earn money?

- (a) Teaching
- (b) Drug dealing
- (c) Modelling
- (d) Trading

8. From where does the boyfriend buy his marijuana?

- (a) Japan
- (b) Tunisia
- (c) India
- (d) Thailand

9. How many barns does the narrator identify as potential targets for the boyfriend?

- (a) Four
- (b) Five
- (c) Six
- (d) Seven

10. The story is told in flashback, so for how long has the narrator's friend been missing?

- (a) Two weeks
- (b) Two months
- (c) Six months
- (d) One year

Understanding and Interpretation

1. In what way is the narrator's part time model kind-of girlfriend similar or different to other female characters you've met in the collection so far? How does her field of expertise (mime performance) contribute to your interpretation of her character?
2. What do you find appealing and charismatic about the new boyfriend when he appears in the story? On the other hand, what do you find off-putting?
3. What does the new boyfriend say about morality? Does he have a moral code? Can you describe it?
4. How do you interpret the act of barn burning? Do you think it is symbolic in any way?
5. After hearing the new boyfriend talk about barn burning, what happens to the narrator's character? How is his life changed by this interaction?
6. What is your interpretation of the girl's disappearance at the end of the story?

Important Character: *the barn burning boyfriend*

'I'm not judging anything... I'm simply obliging. You get it? Just like the rain. Rain falls... Things get swept along. Does the rain judge anything?'

At the beginning of *Barn Burning*, the narrator finds himself reminded of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi perpetrator of the Holocaust, who organised the mass transportation of Jewish people to ghettos and camps. While watching his friend perform a mime, the narrator “felt the reality of everything around me being siphoned away”. Into this gap in reality, the narrator thinks about Eichmann on trial. He doesn't know why this thought pops into his mind, but it does. Through this allusion, Murakami foreshadows the appearance of a **personification of evil** into the story – a charismatic-yet-sinister man who confesses to a strange hobby: burning barns.



Throughout *The Elephant Vanishes* story collection, the reader is haunted by an elusive feeling that things in the world are not quite right. There're subtle, insidious forces at work that drain the world of vitality, leaving characters adrift in a landscape that feels increasingly disjointed and emotionally hollow. Characters experience feelings of alienation and loneliness that, while quiet, permeate their lives like a fog, so relationships falter, communication breaks down, and people drift apart. Murakami's protagonists find themselves stuck in a kind of existential limbo, going through the motions of life without feeling like they're truly alive. People are surrounded by modern conveniences, technology, and material goods, but they feel spiritually and emotionally starved. Occasionally, objects, animals, and even people disappear, succumbing to an unknown fate. In summary, Murakami's evil forces are not villains in the traditional sense, but invisible forces that leech colour, vitality, and purpose in ways that are hard to name... but nevertheless deeply felt.

That's until we get to *Barn Burning*. In this story, readers encounter a mysterious man who can be interpreted as the **personification** of the forces of evil that Murakami explores throughout *The Elephant Vanishes*. He's an ambiguous character who mirrors the way Murakami's evil forces operate: through destabilisation rather than overt violence. Unlike the unsettled narrators of many stories, he is disturbingly calm from beginning to end. His detachment reflects a lack of empathy or passion - even when he's confessing to his favourite pastime, the burning of barns. His suave composure contrasts with the narrator's emotional unravelling. After hearing his confession, the narrator becomes obsessed with barns and his world begins to fray at the edges. He loses touch with the ordinary rhythms of life, instead searching compulsively for signs of destruction. In just a couple of quietly devastating encounters, the reader undoubtedly feels the compelling, stylish, and ultimately devastating effects of the invisible forces of evil **personified** by a mysterious stranger who may or may not burn barns.

Activity

Create a character profile of the mysterious man from *Barn Burning*. Search the story for details that align him with the invisible forces you've sensed working elsewhere in the story collection (such as consumerism, mysterious disappearances, uncertain morality, the loss of tradition and identity, and so on). Annotate your profile with details, quotations, and explainers.

Literary Context: *Japan's Lost Decade*

'There's a lot of barns in this world, and I've got this feeling that they're just waiting to be burned.'



The Elephant Vanishes collection was published in 1993 (although some of the stories were written across the preceding decade). The 1980s was a time of optimism as Japan rode high on a wave of economic success. Japan had become the world's second largest economy, companies like Sony, Toyota, and Panasonic were global leaders in electronic innovation, and, thanks to rising incomes and consumption, white collar workers thrived and consumer culture was booming. Real estate values soared and there was a strong belief that Japan had found a superior economic model. Some even believed that Japan might surpass the US economically!

This optimistic bubble was destined to burst. Thanks to a complicated mix of factors including overspeculation in real estate, overconfidence in business, and a herd mentality in believing the boom years would never end, in 1991 there was a crash in asset prices and a banking crisis preceding a long period of high unemployment, deflation and stagnation. What was to become known as **The Lost Decade** had begun. However, this slump wasn't just economic – the bursting of the optimism bubble deeply affected the national psyche, triggering feelings of alienation, existential uncertainty, and loss of meaning and purpose in life. Characters in *The Elephant Vanishes* often reflect this sense of disorientation as they drift through life, experience inexplicable events that block their growth as individuals, struggle with communication, and feel disconnected from others – and themselves.

While Murakami never directly references this economic crisis in *The Elephant Vanishes*, the stories reflect its emotional aftermath and some stories written earlier seem to have eerily predicted the collapse in Japanese national confidence. For example, in *Barn Burning*, the wanton destruction of property may reflect the sudden disappearance of real estate assets as prices crashed, or symbolise the destruction of stability, or of Japanese tradition. The narrator is largely a passive observer of events, powerless to act, intervene, or even understand the burning of barns. In this way, he projects the kind of helplessness that mirrors how many Japanese felt during Japan's economic decline. While he never actually witnesses the barn burning, he keenly feels its impact psychologically, echoing the experience of people who lived through the invisible economic collapse.

Activity

Research more about modern (1980s – 2000s) Japanese economic and social culture through reading about contextual events such as The Lost Decade or *hikokomori* (the curious ritual adopted by a subsection of Japanese men who isolated themselves in their own homes).

Keep track of your discoveries through notetaking, or making a chart or mind-map, and include ideas about how you might link real world contextual factors to the characters, events, and themes of the stories you've read in *The Elephant Vanishes*.
