

Haruki Murakami: The Second Bakery Attack

"We should have threatened him... and taken the damn bread. Then there wouldn't have been any problem."

A newly married couple lay around in bed, starving hungry. They have little in their refrigerator except beer, and they find a discarded box of cookies in the cupboard – hardly enough to stave off their hunger pangs. While they ponder what to do, the man tells his wife the story of a time he attacked a bakery, intending to take all the bread they could. Strangely, before they could go through with their attack, the baker offered them a counter-proposal: if they listen to opera together with him, he will give them all the bread they can carry.

This story (published in 1993 in English for the first time) is a sequel to Murakami's own 1981 story called 'The Bakery Attack.' After hearing it, the narrator's wife decides they should replay the attack, but as they can't find any bakeries, they decide to rob a McDonald's instead. Again, Murakami presents a female character who has strength and emotional depth – but is also shrouded in mystery and ambiguity.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. How old was the narrator when the two got married?

- (a) 21.
- (b) 25.
- (c) 29.
- (d) 33.

2. Which two items are in the fridge?

- (a) Beer and onions.
- (b) Cheese and peppers.
- (c) Take-away pizza and mayonnaise.
- (d) Gherkins and orange juice.

3. What image does the narrator NOT use to describe his hunger?

- (a) A boat floating over an underwater volcano.
- (b) As vast and boundless as the Sinai peninsula.
- (c) A car surrounded by dark figures.
- (d) A hermetically sealed cavern with no entrance or exit.

4. Who did the narrator attack the first bakery with?

- (a) His wife.
- (b) His brother.
- (c) His best friend.
- (d) By himself.

5. Which composer was the baker obsessed with listening to?

- (a) Shostakovich.
- (b) Wagner.
- (c) Dvorjak.
- (d) Brahms

6. What weapon(s) did the narrator carry in the first attack?

- (a) Lead piping.
- (b) Shotgun.
- (c) Knives.
- (d) Lasers.

7. What time do the couple set off to find another bakery?

- (a) 11pm.
- (b) Midnight.
- (c) 2.30am
- (d) 6.15am.

8. How many workers are in McDonalds?

- (a) One.
- (b) Two.
- (c) Three.
- (d) Four.

9. What do the couple order from McDonalds?

- (a) Thirty Big Macs.
- (b) Thirty Chicken Nuggets.
- (c) Thirty Cokes.
- (d) Thirty Fillet o'Fish Burgers.

10. What car do the couple drive?

- (a) Citroen.
- (b) Toyota.
- (c) Hyundai.
- (d) Corolla.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What is the situation at the start of the story? How does Murakami set the scene for the story to come?
2. In Murakami's stories, everyday details become strange and ordinary items gain symbolic meaning. Can you find examples of any unsettling moments, ideas, or images at the start of the story?
3. What strikes you most about the character of the narrator's wife? How would you describe her? How does she compare to her husband?
4. What do you find strange about the first bakery attack? How do characters act and react, for example?
5. Is it possible to say whether the first or second attack is more or less successful? What would you suggest the characters 'gained' from each attack?
6. What happens at the end of the story? How do you interpret the ending?

Literary Study: *men and women as foils*

‘Some people, ten years together and they still can’t understand each other.’



Just like in the first story of the collection, *The Second Bakery Attack* presents a relationship between two people that doesn't actually seem all that close. The narrator seemed to have no idea of his wife's backstory, how she might know how to rob a bakery – and where all the equipment in the back of the car came from!

You may have heard the phrase ‘opposites attract’? That's as true in Literature as in any other art form. Black seems darker when placed next to white. For every alpha there is an omega. Up counterbalances down; the sun is warmer after a long winter; freedom is all the sweeter once one has tasted confinement. When writers create **contrasts** in a story, readers enjoy the tension and find added meaning in dissimilarity.

Writers can employ contrast to bring out opposing qualities in a character. A **literary foil** is a character whose purpose is to accentuate or draw attention to the qualities of another character – usually the protagonist. This terminology derives from an old jewellery trick: a crafty jeweller would set a colourful gemstone on a dull foil base to enhance its shine through contrast.

Haruki Murakami's stories almost always involve grown men who have not fully developed emotionally and strong-willed women who force them to question their worldviews. In *The Second Bakery Attack*, the narrator and his wife are **foils**. He is a thinker, worrier, and seems reluctant to act. By contrast, she seems determined, forceful, and acts spontaneously when the situation for action arises!

Activity

Create a profile of men and women in the stories you have read so far, making points of contrast between them. You could write a passage, prepare a presentation, or create a visual representation (such as a mirror profile) of men and women from *The Elephant Vanishes*.

Literary Study: Murakami's Modern Style

'Wearing a McDonald's hat, the girl behind the counter flashed me a McDonald's smile.'

Murakami writes in a pared-back, straightforward style, often reflecting the way his narrators view the world. Although there are some poetic descriptions and wonderfully rendered images, his style is not florid or overly difficult to follow. The reader gets that sense that, should they one day bump into one of Murakami's characters, they would talk in a very similar way. Whilst some of the events in the stories verge on the magical, the characters' viewpoints are those of real-world people and they are often as confused as we are by the strange things they encounter.

Part of Murakami's style involves using the specific names of products, places and brands, such as the Toyota Corolla car driven by the couple in this story. Characters drink particular brands of whiskey, or listen to certain pieces of music. In *The Second Bakery Attack*, the narrator and his wife don't just rob any fast-food restaurant; they go to a McDonalds, a place the reader is certain to be able to visualise. While one effect of using actual names is to give the stories a grounding in the real world, another is to create the effect that the characters inhabit a globalised world that is being taken over by large corporations. Only on a few occasions are the names or products he mentions Japanese. Often they are American, indirectly suggesting that Japanese culture is being lost through modernity and globalisation. In fact, the products and brand names surround the characters like snowflakes in a blizzard, they come so thick and fast it's hard to see beyond the corporate logos and slogans. On page 45 of *The Second Bakery Attack*, for example, Murakami repeats the name *McDonalds* 4 times in just a single paragraph! Other names in this story include: *The Wizard of Oz* (an American film); *Corolla* (a Japanese car); *Remington* (an American brand of gun); *Sony* (a Japanese media and technology company); *Coca Cola* (an American drink); and an *American Armed Forces* brand radio.

Activity



Skim and scan as quickly as you can through the story collection. Make a word splash of all the quotations, brands and products that you come across. If you like, you can quickly sketch out the logos or products themselves. Try to get a sense of how everyday life is obscured by a blizzard of corporate logos and slogans in the world of *The Elephant Vanishes*.

Discussion Point

A prolific novelist, Murakami's modern style is signature and immediately recognisable. Take another of his works, *After Dark*, for example. While set in Japan, the opening scene takes place in Denny's, an American restaurant chain. The narrator of this story is an aspiring jazz trombonist and the novel bursts with references to American jazz greats. (Murakami himself is a jazz aficionado and once even ran a jazz café in Tokyo!)

But... is it a problem that Murakami's characters inhabit a Japan that doesn't seem to be particularly Japanese? How do you interpret the immersion in Western culture that he seems to enjoy? What do his stories imply about the good and bad aspects of globalisation?
