Analysis on Haruki Murakami’s *Barn Burning*—Focusing on the Metaphor in the Story

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**Keywords:** Haruki Murakami; Barn Burning; Metaphor.

**Abstract.** *Barn Burning* written by Haruki Murakami tells a story that the boyfriend of a young woman whom “I” met at an acquaintance’s wedding has an addiction to burning down barns. He tells “me” the next one he will burn is very close by my house. But as time goes by, the barns around my house remain intact whenever “I” inspect. Yet the young woman disappears into thin air.

This paper intends to clarify the deep connotation of the story from three important metaphors.

**Introduction**

*Barn Burning* is included in Haruki Murakami's short story collection *The Elephant Vanishes* published in 1987. As a short story with less than 10,000 words in Chinese, it was adapted into a movie, *Burning*, by Korean director Lee Chang-dong 30 years later. The film premiered on May 16, 2018 at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, where it competed for the Palme d'Or, and had a weighted average score of 3.8 out of 4, based on critics and media, indicating “universal acclaim”. The success of the film is of course not only due to the perfect visual interpretation created by the film director, but also the attractive storyline and deep connotation of the story written by Haruki Murakami. The story *Barn Burning* itself is such a fascinating work that combines suspense and metaphor.

It tells a story that “I”, the narrator, meet a young woman “she” at an acquaintance's wedding, and become familiar with her after several times dating. Then “she” goes on a trip and takes a new boyfriend back whom “she” gets to know in Africa. One day they have a visit of my house, and we chat while drinking cans of beer. During this impromptu party, the boy friend tells “me” that “he” burns down barns whenever “he” gets the urge to. According to him, the next one he will burn has been already decided on, which is very close by my house. Therefore with the purpose of finding out the next barn he will burn, “I” buy a map of the part of town where “I” live and mark the location of every barn. Finally I pick five barns that could be burned. Everyday “I” run to check whether one of them has been hurt. But as time goes by, the barns remain intact. Yet the young woman disappears into thin air after the last meeting talking and drinking at my house.

The reason why the story can successfully attract the attention of the readers and the director Lee Chang-dong, the author of this paper holds is the charm that lies in the plentiful use of metaphors in the story. As for metaphor, the ancient Greek scholar Aristotle believes that metaphor originates from the similarity of different things. People associate different things together through the commonality of them, and then they gain insights from this commonality of different things to make further association and views. [1] He also emphasizes in his *Rhetoric* that Metaphors should be taken from things that have relationships, but relationships cannot be too prominent; just as in philosophy, a person must have a keen eye to see their similarities in things that are far apart. [2] *Barn Burning* is such a fiction just as Aristotle said above, those story scenes in which are seemed insignificant at one glance but tell you the code to interpret the theme of the novel in the form of metaphor. Such story scenes are as the following: a mime of the young woman performing tangerine peeling; the recollection of a play that we’d done back in grade school, which is about a baby fox goes to buy mittens; and the behavior of burning down barns itself. If there were no metaphors, the story would inevitably be boring. Just because of the existence of these metaphors, it is possible to provoke the readers into further thinking on the depth of the novel’s implication.
Therefore, this article intends to reveal the cruel truth of the story *Barn Burning* by taking these metaphors in the story as the research objects.

### Tangerine Peeling

In *Barn Burning*, the reason why the young woman “she” has left a good impression on “me” is the mime “she” enacts for me. The mime is the Tangerine Peeling. “She” picks up an imaginary tangerine, starts peeling it, puts one section in her mouth and pretends to spit out the seeds. Then she will carefully wrap up the seeds in the peel, and repeat these movements again and again. The girl reveals to me the key to performing this mime: “What you do isn’t make yourself believe that there are tangerines there. You forget that the tangerines are not there. That’s all.” [3] It sounds pretty like Zen to me, so “I” starts to like “her”. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, said in *Tao Te Ching*, “Tao begets One (nothingness), One begets Two (yin and yang), Two begets Three (Heaven, Earth and Man).” [4] The Tao here refers to nothingness, and the whole sentence means that all things in the world, Heaven, Earth and Man, originate from “something”, while this “something” originates from “nothingness”. It not only suggests that nothingness is the origin of everything, but also further reminds us of the contrasting and unified dialectical relationship between existence and nonexistence, a pair of opposites. Without “nothingness”, there will not be “something”. This is comparable to the girl’s performance of the Tangerine Peeling; only by forgetting the nonexistence of tangerines can we “get” the movements showing the “existence” of tangerines of pretending to pick up a tangerine and eat it. Essentially for the existence of things, the young woman’s mime of acting like there is a tangerine and she starts peeling it is no different from the mental activity of forgetting the nonexistence of tangerines. That is, in either way, there are actually no tangerines. However, these form the two aspects of things together, which can coexist in harmony.

Such duality of things is also embodied in the girl’s boyfriend whom she gets to know from her trip in Africa. The story describes “he” as, “impeccably dressed, and well-spoken”, [5] “drove a silver sports car, German”, [6] and “never seems to be hurting for money”. [7] There are only a few words, but they convey an image of a youth of the elite who lives in the upper society of capitalism and has no worries about food. However, such a distinguished young man turns out to smoke marijuana and inform me of his propensity for burning others’ barns in a meeting where he accompanies the girl to drink and chat in my house. From the perspective of the public, both using drugs and burning barns are definitely behaviors which are immoral and against the law. But “he” maintains that he is still with morals, because “a sense of morality is important; people can’t live without it” [8] and yet believes “morality is the delicate balance that’s involved in parallel existence.” [9] He says, “There’s a balance involved, and without it I don’t think we’d be able to live. It’s like a clasp-if it came undone we’d fall to pieces. But because it’s there we can experience this kind of parallel existence”, [10] and even tells me, “Burning down barns is more an act that sustains that morality. But enough of this morality talk. That’s not the point I’m getting at.” [11] Thus, it can be seen that from the point of view of the girl’s boyfriend “he”, complying with and violating the code of morality can coexist and form a duality. Although barn burning is an illegal act, as long as morality is ignored, it is rational and even in line with the code of morality. Does not this indicate the same thing with the mime of the Tangerine Peeling? Her psychological suggestion of being oblivious to the nonexistence of tangerines “begets” her performance of pealing tangerines and eating them, while her boyfriend’s mental ignorance of the immorality of burning down barns “begets” his conduct of burning a barn every two months.

Therefore, the author of this paper holds that the mime of the Tangerine Peeling is a metaphor of the duality in the boyfriend’s statement that complying with and violating the code of morality can be coexistent. Because the performance of the Tangerine Peeling is amoral, as readers and standers-by, we can accept it naturally and even be impressed by its Zen implications. This is the same with the thinking of the boyfriend who actually considers barn burning irrelevant to good or evil; it is based on this psychological orientation that complying with and violating moral standards are two coexistent opposing parts of things, that “he” justifies and excuses himself for setting fire to barns repeatedly. The boyfriend’s decent dress, outward appearance and identity contrast sharply
with the criminal behavior hidden behind positive looks. Nevertheless, they do not clash with each other, but constitute his duality as a member of the capitalist elite.

A Baby Fox Goes to Buy Mittens

After the Tangerine Peeling, the author of this paper believes that another metaphor in the story is the play that suddenly occurs to “me” which “I” have done back in grade school, when the young woman calls on “me” at home to drink and converse bringing her boyfriend. The play is about a baby fox who wants to buy a pair of mittens for his Mama. He does not have enough money and begs the owner of the glove shop. However, the owner played by “me” is unshaken, insisting the baby fox come for this purchase after he saves up enough money. After making a research about the play, the author of this paper founds that the embedded story is adapted from the well-known fairy tale in Japan named Buying Mittens. The only difference is that in the original story the middle-aged owner of the glove shop agrees to sell the mittens to the baby fox, so as to highlight the ruling kindness and affection between humans and animals. On the other hand, in Haruki Murakami’s short story, the tale exudes a kind of helplessness and apathy because a sufficient amount of money is definitely required to buy the mittens. Haruki Murakami’s adaption of the fairy tale reflects the reality that everything in society should be subject to the principle of “equivalent exchange”.

Does not the young woman “she” exactly resemble such a baby fox fretting about money in the story Barn Burning? Although the girl makes a living as an advertising model, “her income didn’t amount to much”, [12] and “what it didn’t cover, her boyfriends made up”. [13] She has no relatives, “or any real friends, either”. [14] Arguably, struggling alone in an environment without the care and love from family or friends, she has deteriorated into a marginalized existence isolated from society. She needs money to stay alive. In the play, the middle-aged man selling mittens symbolizes the realistic capitalist society represented by the girl’s boyfriend “he”. Therefore, as a matter of fact, the artistic drama that suddenly crosses “my” mind while “I” chat with him serves as a metaphor to further arouse the common question in the hearts of the reader and “me”. That is, as a marginal person, what advantages on earth does she have to manage to get along with him, who occupies an advantageous position in the society? Or rather, what does he need her to pay for this privilege? The teaching from the story of the baby fox is plain: in a capitalist society, it requires every person to pay the corresponding price for anything he or she desires. From him, she obtains a life of not worrying about food and money, and from her, he gains only the company and dependence as his girlfriend? Judging from the story’s meaningful ending, what he gains is clearly far more than that.

Barn Burning

When the three characters of the story get together to drink and talk for the last time, the boyfriend “he” mentions to “me” that he often burns barns, and informs that “he” has selected the next barn “he” plans to burn down, which is right near “my” house. Then the shocking words “barn burning” hovers in my heart like a kind of witchery, urging me to check all the possible barns nearby that may be burned. But these barns remain intact whenever I inspect. It is not until I come across him again that I can’t help bringing up the topic of burning barns to him. But “a trace of a smile played at the corners of his mouth” [15] and “he” says, “I burned it, of course. Burned it right down. Just like I said I would.” [16] “He” then tells me that he has not been able to find the girl after their last meeting. Concerning the reunion of “I” and “he”, readers must have two questions: First, as “he” is so affirmative that the barn has been burned but all the barns stay on as before, then what was burned? Second, where has the girl “she” gone for no reason? So, how are the two events, the barn burning and the missing of the girl, related to each other?

The author of this paper holds that despite the elusive nature of the short story until its very end, various hints can actually be discerned here and there in the narration. For example, it describes the barns as “the third and fourth barns looked alike, like two ugly old twins”, [17] “the kind that could be burned down in fifteen minutes, and would burn clear to the ground and wouldn’t be any loss”.
and “I won’t get caught. The police aren’t going to comb the streets over a lousy little barn burning down.” [19] It can be seen that the barns “he” picks up to burn share these characteristics: ugly, useless, forgotten and insignificant. We cannot help associating this with the girl’s social situation. Isn’t it similarly alone and desolate, like these barns? She doesn’t have a cent and any caring relatives, “or any real friends, either. Her address book is crammed, but those are just names. There’s not a single person she can depend on.” [20] This is apparently an image of the socially marginalized. In addition, there is the hint that the barn “he” is going to burn is near “my” house. Actually, such “nearness” is in the sense of relationship, rather than geographical distance, since the girl trusted “me” and “I” am someone special to “her”. On this account, the author of this paper considers that what “he” actually burned is not the barn, but the young woman. The old and dilapidated barns stand for “she”, the group of people who are useless and have nothing to rely on in society. So, barn burning is a case of murder which takes place unnoticed around “me”.

Conclusion

The three protagonists in the story Barn Burning are given no names, but designated only as “I”, “he” and “she”. From the perspective of the author of this paper, this carries a profound meaning. This is because “he” is a symbol of the people of the upper class who controls superior resources in a capitalist society; these people are glorious in appearance but have a hidden aspect. “She”, on the other hand, represents the marginalized who are helpless and uncared for in society. They exchange for their survival by clinging to others, so ignorant of the universal principle of equivalent exchange that applies to everything in the capitalist society that they eventually pay the price of their lives. “I” stands for the general public who can do nothing to intervene even though “I” starts to doubt the missing of the girl. The story compares “he” to the main character of The Great Gatsby. After achieving wealth and social status, Gatsby cannot continue his relationship with Daisy, but drives out his mental emptiness with debauchery in his villa; while “he” is well-dressed and decent in appearance, but has to maintain a mental balance and finds himself by “burning barns”. The author of this paper thinks that what the writer tries to tell us is this: without fullness at heart, we cannot attain real happiness even though we are rich in material wealth.

References

[23] F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Great Gatsby, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1925.