Haruki Murakami: The Second Bakery Attack

Focus: Hidden Motivations

In the second story of the anthology, our narrator recounts the story of a time he robbed a bakery, which prompts some quite startling behaviour from his wife. As with the first story, Murakami presents women characters who seem to have strength and emotional depth that is conspicuously lacking in the male narrators. But the female characters are also shrouded in mystery and ambiguity.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

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 at the start of the story?
   a) Beer and onions
   b) Cream cheese and peppers
   c) Take away pizza and mayonnaise
   d) Gherkins and orange juice

3. Which composer was the baker obsessed with listening to?
   a) Shostakovich
   b) Wagner
   c) Dvorjak
   d) Brahms

4. What weapon did the narrator use in his first attack?
   a) Lead piping
   b) A shotgun
   c) Knives
   d) A laser

5. What kind of car do the couple drive around town?
   a) Corolla
   b) Citroen
   c) Volkswagon
   d) Toyota

6. What do they order from MacDonalds?
   a) 30 Big Macs
   b) 30 Chicken nuggets
   c) 30 Vegeburgers
   d) 30 Fillet'o'Fish

Understanding and Interpretation

These questions require a little more thought. Skim and scan to find the relevant information, and try to express your ideas in short answers.

1. What is the narrator’s situation at the start of the story?

   • Significance:
2. Describe the first bakery attack. What details do you find strange?

• Significance:

3. In what ways is the second bakery attack different to the first?

• Significance:

4. How does the story end?

• Significance:

Discussion Point: relationships

The narrator of The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday’s Women said, “Some people, ten years together and they still can’t understand each other.” How does the story of The Second Bakery Attack develop this idea? What about other relationships in the short story collection? Are there any couples who seem to really know each other? Would you describe any of the relationships as intimate?

Note down your ideas here:
Literary Study: Characterisation

As one of Murakami’s most popular short stories, The Second Bakery Attack has inspired alternative media of all kinds, including short films such as this 2010 short by Mexican director Carlos Cuaron

Much of the interest of prose novels and short stories depends on the characters whose lives we enter and whose worlds we learn about. The reader often regards them as people who share characteristics with ourselves and with others. The closer a character is to us, the more we empathize. But some characters remain alien: it is difficult to understand their thoughts and motivations. In The Second Bakery Attack, the narrator’s wife is a difficult character to relate to as she remains shrouded in ambiguity. Who is she? Where is she from? How did she know what to do during the robbery? Murakami gives us no answers to these questions.

However, readers should remember that characters live only inside the pages of a book, and it is rarely useful to speculate about their lives outside of the story. It is much more important to recognize the ways in which an author presents characters, in order to really understand them. Characters are revealed in one of two major ways. The first is direct characterization, where an author tells us – directly – what the character is like. Far more common is indirect characterization, by which the author shows us the character living their life, and we make inferences based on this information. There are several indirect characterization techniques available to an author, and you can remember them using the acronym STEALS:
• **Speech** – we can learn a lot about a character from **dialogue** and what they say to others.

• **Thoughts** – the ‘inner life’ of a character can be revealed through thoughts and feelings, particularly in a first person or third person subjective narrative.

• **Effect on others** – how others **react** to a character can be revealing.

• **Actions** – how the character behaves in certain situations influences our view of them.

• **Looks** – the character’s **appearance** includes skin colour, facial expression, body language, clothing and accoutrements, shape and size, scars and marks, physical disabilities and so on.

• **Symbolism** – authors use **imagery** and **symbols** to help establish characters. For example, a character can be associated with a particular object, element, sign, material or even sound or smell. The presentation of a character in association with fire, for example, might make one believe the character is warm, passionate, angry or dangerous. Ice would create different associations. The repeated use of a symbol develops it into a character’s **motif**.

Short stories are different to prose novels in that they are, well… short. Therefore, a writer might present a character using only two or three of these techniques. Examine the way the narrator’s wife is presented in this story. Much of the information we get is imparted through the eyes of another character: the narrator. However, we also get to read her dialogue in response to his story of the first bakery attack, and we see her in action during the second bakery attack. Finally, the end of the story is symbolic.

**Create a character profile of the narrator’s wife**, with the aim of including different characterisation techniques. Include:

• Speech;
• Effect on the narrator;
• Actions;
• Symbolism and associations;
• Other aspects of characterisation you have noticed.