

“The Beauty of Evil” – On the Uniqueness of Arson in Literary Works



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ABSTRACT: Fire is of great significance in the process of human civilization, carrying multiple functions such as hunting, sacrifice, cooking, and punishment. Arson, as one of the means of destroying objects, often appears in literary and artistic works. Why arson has become a means of evil favored by creators, and occasionally presents a strong sense of beauty in the text. This article will start with Bertha Mason's arson in "Jane Eyre", linking classic texts with arson as an important plot, such as "Burn the Warehouse" and "Golden Pavilion", and explore the unique literary meaning of the dialectic of the beauty and evil of arson in combination with archetypal criticism.

KEYWORDS: Arson, Dialectics of Beauty and Evil

As the "fire" of the human civilization process, the natural element of fire is endowed with multiple spiritual connotations by humans. On the one hand, fire, as a tool for primitive humans to resist beasts, to resist cold and heat, and to make cooked food, provides humans with warm and safe living conditions. Parallel to this are volcanic fires, conflagration, fire attacks, artillery fire... Due to the immense power of fire, mankind also inherits the fear of fire. Fire is often worshipped with the earth and its power, such as the "fire ancestor" Sui ren and the god of fire Zhu Rong in Chinese myths and legends, and like Western Prometheus stealing fire and Icarus getting so close to the sun that he burned his wings to death. Fire bears the positive significance of benefiting mankind, and it often appears in local folklore as a means of offering sacrifices to gods. On the other hand, hell and evil ghost companions are part of the power of terror, and the term pyrophobia is even exclusively used in psychology. In the scenes described in some literary works, arson often occurs. This article attempts to introduce and analyze this.

FIRST, ARSON-MEANING BEYOND EVIL

"Jane Eyre. An Autobiography", first published in 1847, was written under the pseudonym Currer Bell by British author Charlotte Brontë and is a classic of 19th century Victorian fiction.¹ Fire is a very important natural element in "Jane Eyre" According to

¹ Slightly earlier, with the outbreak of Enlightenment literature, morality, passion, and sexualization was presented in a different way, in the shadow of revolution, thus fire as well. Fire and passion often go hand in hand, for example in the course of the French Revolution, for which many works were written that reflect creative power but also destructiveness. More about authors and recent discourses: Jialin Zhao & Rainer Feldbacher (2020): Reflection of Sexual Morality in Literature and Art. Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature, 1(3), 81-88.

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Statistics, “the book contains about 85 mentions of home fires, about forty three vivid references to fire, about ten places actually mentioned fire (in connection with mad women who set fire), and 4 mentions of the fire of hell.”² The description of fire in the book is no longer a simple scene description. On the one hand, there is a direct connection between the state of fire and the turbulent mood of Jane Eyre, which is a unique image of natural feminization and feminine naturalization. From this perspective, fire and water (ice, rain, snow), earth, moon and other natural images together form a set of imagery systems, revealing Jane Eyre's mental state between heaven and earth. When Jane learned of the existence of Bertha Mason, she described her despair with a series of changes in the natural scene.. When facing Rochester's confession again, Jane Eyre felt that "a pair of iron-forged hands tightly grasped my lifeblood. A terrible moment: full of fighting, darkness and burning"³. On the other hand, fire has also become the way Bertha Mason plays. Bertha Mason is an image without the right to speak in "Jane Eyre". Readers can only piece together the image of Bertha Mason as "crazy" through the perspective of others. Bertha's four official appearances and the final death were accompanied by the fire. For the first time she lit Rochester's bed, and lit a candle in the corridor outside Jane Eyre. The second time Bertha did not set fire but bit her brother Mr. Mason. But while Jane Eyre was taking care of Mr. Mason, the dimming candlelight, the floating shadows and the gleaming light undoubtedly became the spokesperson of Bertha's mysterious and terrifying image. The third time Bertha tore off Jane's wedding veil. Jane used fire to describe Bertha's eyes when she recalled her actions before she was stunned. Bertha's strange act of raising the candle close to Jane and blowing it out under Jane's eyes undoubtedly frightened Jane. For the fourth time, Bertha set fire to the curtains in the room next to her, and then ignited the bed in Jane Eyre's original room. The fire spread to the entire Thornfield Manor, and finally she came to the roof and fell to her death in the flames.

Judging from Bertha's residence, she lives in a windowless room with a fire burning outside, surrounded by a tall and strong stove fence.” The limitation of objective conditions does increase the possibility of Bertha's retaliation by arson. But Mrs. Grace Poole, who guards Bertha, often falls asleep because of drinking, and Bertha has repeatedly got the key and sneaks out of the house and wanders around Thornfield Manor. Bertha's directional and differentiated behavior clearly shows that she is not irrational madness. Thus, arson is not the only option for Bertha. So why did Bertha repeatedly set fires or why did the author associate the fire with Bertha's behavior? On the one hand, the combination of Bertha Mason and the burning fire cannot be ruled out as the author's Gothic element to create a mysterious atmosphere and enhance readability. On the other hand, arson can also be seen as an inheritance of the mythical archetype. Fire has the dual meaning of purification and destruction in the context of Western culture. Fire can be a wildfire in hell and a stake for punishment; it also surrounds angels in the Bible and becomes Dante in the Divine Comedy. The ring of fire from purgatory to heaven has become a sacrificial ceremony for people in the real world. Bertha, who carried out the arson, assumed the dual meaning of fire, which prompted the love between Jane and Rochester to experience the process of paradise lost to paradise

Judging from the natural environment of Thornfield Manor, it is surrounded by mountains and dense thorns. It can be said that this is a remote place away from people. The interpersonal relationship within Thornfield Manor was simple. Before Bertha's existence was revealed, only Jane could match Rochester, and the rest were young and old and servants. Before coming to Thornfield Manor, Jane spent eight years of a single, routine life in Loward. She had little communication with the outside world, and everything in the school is what Jane knows about life. So for Jane, Thornfield Manor is a whole new world, like the Garden of Eden on the

² David Rocky: Fire and "Love": Charlotte Bronte's Battle of Earthly Elements, translated by Yang Jingyuan and others: "Sister Langte Study", Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1983, p. 531.

³ Charlotte Brontë: Jane Eyre, translated by Huang Yuanshen, Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, 2016, p. 318.

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social attribute level. Here she was farther away from Gateshead House and able to meet the needs of food and clothing. She gradually took it as her home and knew herself in the process of falling in love with Rochester. But Bertha's repeated appearances made Jane full of doubts about the secrets of Thornfield Manor. "What mysterious reason kept him from accusing her? Why did he ask me to keep the secrets strictly?"⁴ "What kind of crime is it, appearing as a human incarnation, living in this isolated building, where the owner can neither drive nor subdue it?"⁵ Bertha's appearance is like a snake in the Garden of Eden, tempting Jane to keep searching for the truth. Before knowing the truth, Jane's love with Rochester is like an ignorant belief before eating the forbidden fruit. It is the asymmetry of information that Rochester deliberately concealed. No matter what Rochester thought, he did almost make Jane his illegal mistress in action. After learning the truth, Jane could not stand Rochester's deception on her, and chose to leave and leave the paradise. Then Jane lost her luggage and was hungry and cold. She ran and wandered between the mountain villages and asked about but could not find a place to work. She was really hungry and had to beg. Finally, she with a low-grade fever passed out in front of the steps of the Marsh Residence and was saved by Mr. St. John. Jane was not only in danger of life after leaving the park, but also enduring the torment of missing Rochester all the time, just as Adam and Eve were punished for leaving the garden of Eden. But this is the result of Jane's own choice. Just like in the Bible, although Eve explained to God, "The snake tempted me, and I ate it" (Genesis 3.13), Eve has already developed a desire for the forbidden fruit under the lure of the snake.⁶ The same is true for Jane. Although Bertha's existence has had a direct impact on Jane, Bertha is "imprisoned in a man's house".⁷ The current situation actually reflects the unequal relationship between Jane and Rochester in the patriarchal society. Before learning the truth about Bertha's existence, Jane had always had a clear understanding of the economic and class differences between herself and Rochester. For example, when Rochester was about to buy clothes for her, Jane thought "If I can expect to give Mr. Rochester has brought a new fortune, so I can better bear to be raised by him now", and compared Rochester's smile to the smile given to slaves by a sentimental sultan. The unequal relationship has become Jane's hidden worry before the truth is revealed. The so-called "forbidden fruit" is not only the existence of Bertha, but also the fate of Jane and the fate of women as shown by Bertha. Jane took the initiative to pick off the forbidden fruit, interrupting Rochester's demonization of Bertha, and said bluntly, "You are so cruel to that unfortunate woman. You hate her when you talk about her. It's cruel - she can't help but go crazy."⁸ Jane knew that Bertha was only a representation, a synonym for thousands of women. If she "follows the mistakes of these poor girls, one day, he will treat me with the same mood when he recalled them at this moment".⁹

Bertha Mason inherited the dual characteristics of fire. While being connected with the evil and horror atmosphere in "Jane Eyre", he played the purifying significance of fire. When discussing the image structure of the five archetypes, Frye gave an example: "Fire is often a symbol of purification in the innocent world. This is a world of flames that can only be passed by pure and flawless people, such as Spencer's cloth Sirene Castle, Dante's net fire at the top of the purgatory, fire sword to prevent the fallen Adam and Eve

⁴ Charlotte Brontë: "Jane Eyre", p. 158.

⁵ Charlotte Brontë: "Jane Eyre", p. 211.

⁶ Also seen as symbol of sexual morality, the original desire of Adam and Eve. Zhao, J.& Feldbacher, Rainer (2020). Reflection of Sexual Morality in Literature and Art. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 1(3), p. 86.

⁷ Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar: "The Madness in the Attic" *Women: Female Writers and 19th Century Literary Imagination*, translated by Yang Lixin, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2015, p. 106.

⁸ Charlotte Brontë: "Jane Eyre", p. 305.

⁹ Charlotte Brontë: "Jane Eyre", p. 315.

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from leaving the paradise, etc."¹⁰ Although the level of imitation of "Jane Eyre" is not high, it is more realistic, but it is undeniable that Bertha played a role of purification and promoted the arrival of Rehabilitation Paradise. Bertha's arson cleared the barriers that prevented Jane and Rochester from continuing to love each other, and burned herself along with Thornfield Manor, where she was imprisoned. First of all, Bertha's self-sacrifice directly solved the legal and social ethical barriers to love between Jane and Rochester, and destroyed the results of Rochester's past sins. Second, the fire buried Rochester's disgraceful past. In the past, Jane's love for Rochester was based on ignorance. Jane did not understand Rochester's past experience, but fell in love with Rochester in the small world of Thornfield Manor. But the concealment of the past has caused Rochester's anxiety, pain, and Jane's secret worry from time to time. But Bertha's appearance made Jane and Rochester have to face the concealed truth: Jane took the initiative to "eat the forbidden fruit". After learning about Rochester's past, she still found that she had deep feelings for Rochester. And she happened to get a legacy to realize the rise of economic status. Finally, as if guided by God, she heard Rochester's cry and returned to Rochester. These plots are rather mysterious. At the same time, Rochester finally candid the past to a certain extent, reflecting on what situation he had put her in. It was the exposure of evil that allowed their love to be purified and matured, and finally they fell in love again in the Finding Manor. Finding Manor is an ancient building hidden deep in the dense forest. The manor is surrounded by lush foliage, just like another paradise isolated from the world. However, the return of paradise lies in being with the "truth". Jane and Rochester treat each other frankly and have a heart-to-heart. Jane also uses "bone in bone, flesh in flesh" to describe the happiness of each other's lives, just like in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve.

SECOND, ARSON – A PROCESS OF SELF-SATISFACTION

Similarly, in "Golden Pavilion Temple", an oriental novel based on the real crimes of the arson case of Lin Yangxian, a monk at Kinkakuji Temple in Japan, in 1950, arson also assumes a meaning other than evil. To do research, Mishima visited the perpetrator in prison and spoke to him. The protagonist of the novel Mizoguchi felt cut off from the outside world due to severe stuttering. Mizoguchi fantasized about the incomparable beauty of Kinkakukji before seeing it because of his father's description.. He almost turned the Kinkakuji into a concept of beauty. But when he first saw Kingkakuji, Mizoguchi was disappointed to find that he could not feel its beauty. However, "wars and restlessness, tired dead bodies and a lot of blood enrich the beauty of the Golden Pavilion"¹¹, the evil of beauty made Mizoguchi realize the beauty of the golden pavilion. When Mizoguchi came up with the idea that the golden pavilion would be destroyed by air raids and turned to ashes, destructibility broken the immortality of the golden pavilion and made him think the golden pavilion was alive, which added a tragic beauty to the real Kinkakuji. At the same time, the war that burned down the golden pavilion can also burn himself to death, making it achieve equality on the level of extinction, and eliminate his own ugliness through the beauty of the golden pavilion. The crisis of destroying Mizoguchi and Kinkakuji together made Mizoguchi find a medium to connect with beauty, but the defeat of Japan made this idea frustrated, and the defeat and the sorrow of the nation made Mizoguchi feel that Kinkakuji shows unprecedented eternal beauty. The beauty gave him the idea that Kinkakuji was isolated from him. The beauty of the Golden Pavilion betrayed and abandoned Mizoguchi, showing the characteristics of evil. Since then, the golden pavilion has become a barrier between Mizoguchi and the outside world. Even when Mizoguchi tried to have sexual intercourse with a woman, the beauty of the golden pavilion always degraded the body to a boring existence, and then is given the

¹⁰ Northrop Frye: "Analysis of Criticism", Chen Hui, Yuan Xianjun, Wu Weiren Translation, Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 1998, p. 175.

¹¹ Mishima Yukio: "Golden Pavilion Temple", translated by Tang Yuemei, Beijing: Writers Publishing House, 1994, p. 48.

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"beauty ineffective and unpleasant nature."¹² Kinkakuji made Mizoguchi unable to show sexual function in the face of women. The eternal existence of the golden pavilion revealed the vainness of Mizoguchi's desire to live. The golden pavilion isolated Mizoguchi from life and possesses beauty in an eternal and absolute posture. While Mizoguchi was constantly thinking about the golden pavilion and beauty, a set of event such as the subject of meditation in "Nanquan Killing the Cat", the teacher who was addicted to sex, the cypress who regarded X-legs as his own existence, and the American soldier that encouraged Mizoguchi to trample on women and cause miscarriage made Mizoguchi come into contact with hypocrisy and evil. And Mizoguchi even called the pleasure of doing evil the "sweet core"¹³.

Because of Mizoguchi's dual exploration of beauty and evil and the dialectical significance of the Golden Pavilion to Mizoguchi, he has the idea of arson and destroying the Golden Pavilion. This idea immediately added great strength to Mizoguchi. The thought of burning the golden pavilion surrounded Mizoguchi, becoming the projection of his desire and the sustenance of existence. And the fantasy of fire even gave Mizoguchi sexual pleasure. After making up his mind to burn the golden pavilion to realize the rebellion against beauty's evil, Mizoguchi seemed to return to a teenager who had never experienced evil before, and was able to have sex with Ju Zi and lose his virginity. It can be said that being an enemy of the beauty gave Mizoguchi the power to live toward death, which became a prerequisite for him to revisit objects.

However, for Mizoguchi, combustion is completed before ignition. When Mizoguchi admired the golden pavilion before the fire, and said goodbye to it, the beauty of destruction showed great sensual power. And Mizoguchi's burning of evil against the evil of beauty also gave Mizoguchi an absolute and eternal sense of spiritual beauty. In Mizoguchi's eyes, the golden pavilion had already burned, "as if it was always built of materials like fluttering wind, water, and flames."¹⁴ Combustion precedes arson, and arson itself has become the self-evidence of nothingness, "action is nothing but a surplus material"¹⁵.

In 1956 the novel was awarded the Yomiuri Literature Prize, a Japanese literary prize that has been awarded by the newspaper of the same name since 1949. The prize was intended to support a renewed upswing in Japanese literature after the defeat in World War II – that set the globe ablaze, and Japan suffered at its end literally a huge fire on its soil.

There are also expropriation and interpretations of arson in modern film and television works. In 2018, South Korean director Li Cangdong's film "Burning" was adapted from the short story "Burning Barn" by Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, and grafted the image of the father in the short story "Burning Stable" by American writer William Faulkner to the the father of the hero Zhong Xiu in "Burning". The basic character setting of "Burning" and important plots such as the mime of peeling oranges and burning the plastic shed (warehouse) are all born out of "Burning the Warehouse". However, the film clarifies the protagonist's class identity, not only adding a class narrative that reflects on the situation and class differentiation of the marginalized people in the real society of South Korea, but also highlights the existential philosophical thinking of individual alienation, loneliness, and nihilism. All of this makes the original seemingly understatement in "Burn the Warehouse" more directional. For example, the protagonist's idea of "Will he ask me to burn the warehouse?" in "Burn the Warehouse" is transformed into an arson after Zhong Xiu stabbed Ben with a knife. The clues about Ben burning plastic shed and the disappearance of Haimei have also become a huge suspense for the

¹² Mishima Yukio: "Kinkakuji", p. 157.

¹³ Mishima Yukio: "Kinkakuji", p. 95 .

¹⁴ Mishima Yukio: "Kinkakuji Temple", p. 252.

¹⁵ Mishima Yukio: "Kinkakuji", p.253.

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viewer to extend the discussion of the film.

"Arson" is an unfulfilled metaphor in "Burn the Warehouse". Realistic burning or not burning is not important for the expression of desire. Compared with the blank in "Burning Barn", "Burning" shows that Ben likes to burn plastic greenhouses to fill the emptiness. It is closer to the meaning of father Abner's dependence on arson in "Burning Stables". Arson can be seen as a way for Abner to retaliate, but fire obviously has extraordinary significance to Abner. "Dad believes that only the power of fire can maintain his integrity, otherwise he is living in vain. So fire should be respected, and fire should be used with caution"¹⁶. Abner usually used only small fires for heating, but he had no scruples when setting fires and prepared the oil tank skillfully and calmly. Fire is not only an external manifestation of Abner's anger, but also a weapon used by him to show his own life. It is a catharsis for him to express himself in the racial conflicts in the South after the American Civil War, just like a ritual created by generations of resentment, cruelty and desire.

Whether it is a barn, a horse shed, or a plastic greenhouse, burning itself undoubtedly carries a unique meaning in these three literary works. The "he" in "Burn the Warehouse" will be burned as if there had never been a warehouse before as something that should have been burned, often burning the warehouse, and slowly admiring it from a distance after arson; in "Burning" Ben likes to feel the low sound of the deep soul when he burns the plastic greenhouse. He also said to Zhong Xiu, who has been looking for Haimei, "You are too serious. You have to enjoy life. The bass sound that needs to be felt from the depths of the bones is alive"; Abner, the father of the Stables, habitually uses arson to complete the conflict.

The meaning of arson for these three is not to destroy the burned object, but a sense of satisfaction brought to the arsonist from the burning process after arson. From the perspective of the mechanism, arson is irreplaceable. For Ben, he treats women on the margins of society as plastic sheds that can be burned to fill his own "great hunger", which actually demonstrates "from the materialization of survival traits to material desires" in a pan-textual context. The transformation of chemical and material servitude is manifested in the world of waste and the absurdity of human existence"¹⁷. It is not so much that Ben believes that everything is nothing, but that he uses the alienation of others into objects to weaken the emptiness of being alienated, and feel his own existence in the process of burning after arson, so as to satisfy the meaning of his own survival. For Zhong Xiu in "Burning", it is uncertain whether he assassinated and set fire to Ben. After the lens of Zhong Xiu's writing, the movie uses God's perspective to shoot Zhong Xiu's killing of Ben, so that the subsequent plot can also be regarded as Zhong Xiu's novel creation, which also confirms that "No matter how the image of burning the barn in my head expands, I'm not the kind of person who actually set the barn on fire"¹⁸, Zhong Xiu used his father's knife to assassinate Ben and burned him in a way of alienating others. The arson is more like a kind of verbal burning. This act of arson reflects Zhong Xiu's real imagination and desire between the virtual and the real. As for Abner, he did not directly aim the target of the conflict. He also sent black people out before the arson to tell "wood and hay, just a little bit"¹⁹, even wearing a hat and a coat, "as if dressed up neatly and politely going to murder and do bad things"²⁰. It follows that Abner's

¹⁶ William Faulkner: "Burning the Stables", William Faulkner: "William Faulkner's Short Stories Collection (Part 1)", Translated by Li Wenjun and Tao Jie, Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Publishing House, 2020, p. 8.

¹⁷ Zou Shipeng: "A Study of Nihilism", Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016, p. 102.

¹⁸ Haruki Murakami.: "Burning the warehouse", Haruki Murakami: "Firefly", translated by Lin Shaohua, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, No. 2009, p. 52.

¹⁹ William Faulkner: "William Faulkner's Short Story" Collection of Novels (Part 1), p. 4.

²⁰ William Faulkner: "William Faulkner Collection of Short Stories (Part 1)", p. 21.

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habitual arson after conflict with others is more like a unique way to release his resentment and embody himself.

CONCLUSION: ARSON-THE DIALECTICAL QUALITY OF BEAUTY AND EVIL

Fire has been endowed with multiple connotations in the process of human civilization. In "The Psychoanalysis of Fire", Bachelard uses the concept of "complex" in psychoanalysis to analyze fire.. He used the "Prometheus complex" to explain the respect and disobedience of fire in nature from the origin of fire; he used the "Empedocler complex" to describe the unconscious reverie caused by fire; the "Valli Complex" summarizes the primitiveness of the prehistoric conquest of fire, and then analyzes the sexualized fire and a stronger inner passion. Although Bachelard's interpretation has distinctive characteristics of psychoanalysis and criticism, fire does contain multiple dialectical relationships, and it has become an image of contradictory unity in literary works. "Only it does have two opposite values of It illuminates heaven and burns in hell."²¹

The dual nature of fire coincides with the contradictory demands of arsonists for evil and pleasure. Although the protagonists' choice of arson is subject to the objective limitation of the conditions for committing the crime, it is undeniable that arson has the unique meaning of satisfying the inner desires of the arsonists. Arson inherits the sacrificial behavior in the process of human civilization, transforms the fire of human fear and conquest into tools and weapons used by oneself, and implements the inner fantasy in a ritualistic way. The burning created by arson prolongs and exaggerates the enjoyment of this meaning by the arsonists. As a dynamic process of destruction, burning presents brilliant and noteworthy visual effects before destruction, giving the arsonist a sense of purposeless self-satisfaction, allowing him to exchange for the experience of beauty in the evil process and highlight the existence of the individual. And this meaning already exists before the action is implemented, and the arsonist can even get a sense of pleasure or beauty from the imagination and memory of arson.

Behind the evil deeds, arson carries people's exploration of aesthetics and humanity in literary works. Since Edmund Burke introduced emotions such as horror and pain into the aesthetic dimension, it has become an aesthetic topic to explore why the aesthetic subject who examines evil as a bystander can obtain aesthetic pleasure. The tremendous shock and aesthetic experience brought to readers by arson highlights the more powerful stimulus and purity of evil's description of human nature, so it carries a unique meaning in literary works.

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²¹ Bachelard: "The Psychoanalysis of Fire", translated by Du Xiaozhen and Gu Jiachen, Beijing: Life·Reading·Xinzhì Sanlian Bookstore, 1992, p. 8.