

**JAMES THURBER'S VICTIMS OF THE BULLY**

**BY**

**PEGGY STEWART FERRELL**

JAMES THURBER'S VICTIMS OF THE BULLY

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in Education

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by  
Peggy Stewart Ferrell

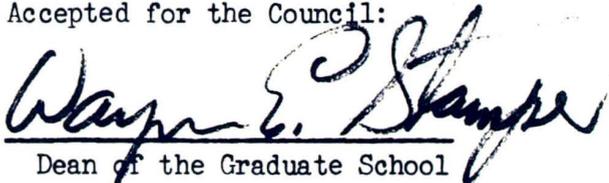
December 1975

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Peggy Stewart Ferrell entitled "James Thurber's Victims of the Bully." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education, with a major in English.

  
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## JAMES THURBER'S VICTIMS OF THE BULLY

For more than fifty years people have been amused and entertained by the writings and drawings of James Thurber. While he has never been highly acclaimed, he has been well read; and his name is known by both British and American people in all ranks of society. Relatively few critics have analyzed his work, but he is highly praised by those who have. Perhaps because of his drawings as much as his writing, Thurber's principal subject is generally regarded as the battle of the sexes: a small, meek man is usually at war with a large, domineering woman. Charles S. Holmes points out that the world of domestic chaos and uproar became Thurber's own very special material and manner.<sup>1</sup> This world is indeed the setting for many of his selections. Of equal importance, but less frequently noticed is his subject of man in conflict with his world. The domestic scene is only one portion of the larger backdrop of overall twentieth century chaos against which James Thurber develops his men characters. These men are more than foils of the domineering women. They represent the creative man in the modern world. Throughout his writings James Thurber portrays men of imagination as victims of the realistic world.

<sup>1</sup>Charles S. Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 72.

During the years that James Thurber wrote for The New Yorker, the recurring use of the first person in his writing established in his readers' minds an identification between narrator and writer. Even today, a reading of his books presents a frequent question, "When is he casually talking or reminiscing, and when has he become the story teller?" The reader knows that exaggeration is "stock in trade" for the humorist; therefore, the stories of family history and family life in Columbus, such as those in The Thurber Album, are easily accepted as having an autobiographical basis. It is, then, simple to project the autobiographical technique into a short story such as "The Lady on 142," which has a first-person narrator. In this case, the persona has become a surrogate for James Thurber. In fact, many people carry the identification even into stories which employ the third-person narrator. The hero of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" has become so well known in American life that a physician has used his name for a syndrome,<sup>2</sup> and high school students can identify the type.

Physically, James Thurber had no resemblance to Walter Mitty, or at least to the Walter Mitty that people picture in their minds: the story itself contains not one word of physical description of its protagonist. It is a characteristic of Thurber's writing that the narrator does not often describe other characters. Descriptions are implied through actions, or responses to the actions of others, and to situations. The picture a reader receives is actually of a

<sup>2</sup>Richard C. Tobias, The Art of James Thurber (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 6.

personality, not of a person; but many readers, failing to make the distinction, form a mental picture of Walter Mitty, Thurber's personae, and James Thurber as small, meek, and unimposing. Thurber stood six feet, one-and-one-half inches tall and had a shock of unruly hair. He was a born conversationalist, concerned with helping the other person feel at ease despite the fact that "stage center was a psychological necessity" for him.<sup>3</sup>

That many people did equate him with the mild, gentle men of his stories was apparently at times a bother to James Thurber. In 1960 he told a Life reporter, "One thing let's get straight -- I'm not mild and gentle. Let the meek inherit the earth -- they have it coming to them. When Life called me 'mild' in 1945, my old friend Nunnally Johnson said, 'It must be a misprint for wild.'"<sup>4</sup>

There is a possibility that Thurber's father was used as the model for the men characters, just as critics point to his aunts and his mother as models for the women in the stories. Certainly, the pictures we have of Charles Thurber seem to justify this assumption. "Gentleman from Indiana," in The Thurber Album, is a tribute to the quiet, gentle man who "was sorrowfully aware, from twilight to twilight, that most men, and all children are continuously caught in one predicament or another."<sup>5</sup> The father, like the characters in

<sup>3</sup>Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>James Thurber in "Thurber: An Old Hand at Humor with Two Hits on Hand," Life, 48 (July 14, 1960) p. 108.

<sup>5</sup>James Thurber, The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), p. 122.

many of his son's stories, was "plagued by the mechanical,"<sup>6</sup> and he would not learn to drive a car.<sup>7</sup> It is relatively simple to transpose this man into such men as Mr. Monroe, who was perplexed by the problem of a bat in his bedroom, or as Mr. Pendly, whose great mechanical triumph was to open the trunk of the Poindexter.

Of course, stories such as "The Night the Bed Fell," "The Car We Had to Push," and "More Alarms at Night," from My Life and Hard Times, are obviously autobiographical in basis. Here the father is dominated by the mother and sons. He has retired to the attic "to think" in "The Night the Bed Fell," and is not present during the main action of the story; however, he is the victim of the incidents, because "Father caught a cold from prowling around in his bare feet but there were no other bad results." The sons deliberately victimize the father in the other two stories. In "The Car We Had to Push," kitchen utensils of all types are tied under the car so that they will make a frightening clatter for the man who is in awe of the manufactured. For a while he believes the son who tells him that he cannot stop the car because the engine fell out. In "More Alarms at Night," the villain is James Thurber's brother Roy. Pretending delirium during an illness, Roy goes into the father's room, calls his father Buck, and threatens to whip him. This whole episode is attributed to the imagination of the father by the rest of the family, and it does serve to stimulate the father's imagination when the younger son,

<sup>6</sup>Thurber, The Thurber Album, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

James, awakes him in the middle of the night a few months later. James is innocently wakeful because he can not think of a particular town in New Jersey. However, when he awakens his father to ask for the names of New Jersey towns, the man believes another of his sons is out of his senses. Like the father of this story, the men in "The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery," the Mr. and Mrs. Monroe stories, and "The Unicorn in the Garden" are all men of imagination; and their imaginations affect their reactions to the real world.

Another aspect of the character of James Thurber's "little man" may well have been influenced by his long friendship with Harold Ross. Robert E. Morsberger said, "A probable though not so obvious inspiration for some of Thurber's fictional characters was The New Yorker's editor Harold Ross in his 'God how I pity me' phases."<sup>8</sup> This does not imply that Ross was meek or insignificant. On the contrary, he was a man of action; but he was a man in conflict with most of the rest of the world, and he succeeded under almost impossible odds. Harold Ross was not sophisticated, yet he conceived and developed an extremely sophisticated magazine. In his position as editor of The New Yorker he came to have great influence, yet he was continually concerned with trivia. He would spend hours checking to see that commas were correctly placed. He would go to great lengths to avoid painful situations, which ranged from firing people on his staff to merely seeing people while he waited for an elevator. He was afraid of most women and wished for an office without any. He continually

<sup>8</sup>Morsberger, p. 27.

fought with the financial department of his magazine.

The Years with Ross, written after the death of the editor, is Thurber's tribute to his friend and associate; but it is also, as Richard Tobias says, "a final statement of all of Thurber's themes."<sup>9</sup> Ross is the creative man in a realistic world; and he is a comic figure because he can do little about the predicaments in which he finds himself, but he keeps trying. In this book Thurber discusses Ross's influence as a model for his characters:

A dozen years ago I found myself almost unconsciously making a Harold Ross out of one King Clode, a rugged pessimist in a fairy tale I was writing. At one point the palace astronomer rushed into the royal presence saying, "A huge pink comet, Sire, just barely missed the earth a little while ago. It made an awful hissing sound, like hot irons stuck in water." "They aim these things at me!" said Clode. "Everything is aimed at me." In this fantasy Clode pursues a fabulously swift white deer which, when brought to bay, turns into a woman, a parable that parallels Ross's headlong quest for the wonder man who invariably turned into a human being with feet of clay, as useless to Ross as any enchanted princess.<sup>10</sup>

From his own experiences and feelings, from his observations of his father and Harold Ross, and from his creative talents, James Thurber developed the men of his stories. All of them are more or less victims of the world they inhabit and of the other people who share this world. These victims may be divided into three groups according to their responses to the predicaments in which they become involved: there are the victims who submit, sometimes in resignation to a state of affairs, sometimes in despair; there are the victims

<sup>9</sup>Tobias, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup>James Thurber, The Years with Ross (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc., 1957), pp. 10-11.

who escape in fantasy, avoiding recognition of defeat (These victims may be physically in a harsh world of realism, but their minds transpose them to an imaginary world); the third group of characters embodies the better qualities of the other two groups. Like the first group, these latter characters recognize the situation; but they do not submit. They are capable of the second group's world of fantasy, and they make use of it to cope with and, sometimes, to quietly triumph in the realistic world.

Many of the autobiographical or personal-anecdote type belong to the first category of victims, those men who submit. Mr. John Hance, the grocery store owner of "The Figgerin' of Aunt Wilma," belongs to this category. The story is narrated by a young boy who is both observer of the grocer's intimidation by Aunt Wilma and himself a victim. He has been called upon to escort his aunt shopping and to carry her shopping basket. When Aunt Wilma does not have the correct change to pay for her purchases, she gives Mr. Hance a dollar bill. Mr. Hance lacks the two pennies needed to make a smooth transaction. This deficiency presents the small predicament of life so typical of James Thurber's observations. Simple solutions present themselves to the man and to the boy, but Aunt Wilma feels she is being cheated. This woman will not allow such a thing to happen to her. Patiently, Mr. Hance tries to explain his simple calculations. The boy tries to help, and his aunt quickly puts him in place. When Aunt Wilma finally presents her solution to the problem, her words are more of an edict. Mr. Hance recognizes the hopelessness of further argument and accepts the verdict, even though he will be the one who sustains the loss of

five cents. He is afraid that he might lose more by continued struggle. His quiet submission is emphasized by the boy's role of helpless observer and later by the understanding amusement of Aunt Wilma's husband.

This story is one of the pieces collected in 1953 for Thurber Country. At the time, the United States of America was in the clutches of McCarthyism; and James Thurber recognized the fear that was spreading into every aspect of American life. In June, 1952, in an interview with Harvey Breit, James Thurber said, "We're living in the most frightened country in the world."<sup>11</sup> He also said that his retreat to nineteenth-century characters and settings during the fifties was a form of escape. Even though Aunt Wilma is one of these nineteenth-century characters, her mind is representative of the chaos and fear in the twentieth-century world. She even fears being cheated by the kindly grocer whom she has known for years. Symbolically, the grocer is unable to meet the needs of the "changing" situation. He submits.

"Teacher's Pet," another story from the same collection of Thurber's work, also reflects the intimidations of society. In this skillfully developed short story, the threatening force is masculine. Willber Kelby is a mild intellectual, the exact opposite of the robust host of the cocktail party he is attending. Bob Stevenson, the host, is the ex-football hero. Influenced by a magazine article dealing with the fears of middle age, Willber begins to muse about himself. Any time that he is upset, his thoughts turn to his youthful days as "teacher's pet." He is conscious of a similarity between his host and Zeke Leonard, who bullied Willber during childhood. When his

<sup>11</sup>James Thurber in The Writer Observed, by Harvey Breit (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), p. 256.

musings are interrupted by a feminine guest who inquires into his thoughts, Willber tells her about his experiences and adds, "A teacher's pet doesn't have to do anything. It is the mere fact of his existence that makes the stupid and the strong want to beat him up. There is a type of man that wants to destroy the weaker, the more sensitive, the more intelligent." These words identify the conflicting roles of Stevenson and Kelby.

The woman then tells Willber about her son, Elbert, who has similar problems to those of Willber's youth. Elbert is tormented by a younger Bob Stevenson, son of the host. The two guests argue about whether or not a victim's submission to a bully is cowardice. Through this dialogue, the reader soon sees that Willber also feels contempt for himself because of his inability to stand up against the bullies of the world. He feels that because he is forced physically to submit he is a coward.

A few days later when Willber comes upon young Bob Stevenson tormenting Elbert, he first turns his wrath upon the bully; then he slaps the sniveling Elbert and calls him a coward. The action is stopped by the appearance of Elbert's father, who in turn misinterprets the scene and later calls Willber the bully. All his life Willber has had to submit to the bullies of the world around him; but, what is worse, he is now faced with submission to his dissatisfaction with himself. When he turns upon Elbert, it is because he sees himself, and he also sees cowardice.

Critics such as Morsberger and Tobias point to the ironic ending of "Teacher's Pet" when Stevenson is told about Willber, the bully.

Stevenson replies, "Young Bob tells me Kelby threatened him, too."

The critics fail to make note of the comparative situation in American culture when the powerful politicians are calling the intelligentsia, the writers, a threat to our democratic form of government because in years past they belonged to groups associated with the Communist Party. This is not to suggest that Thurber approved of Communism. He was very definitely opposed to it, but he also opposed the bullying tactics of McCarthyism and the spectacle of writers' turning on their friends to divert pressure from themselves.

"The Cane in the Corridor" contains a different type bullying. There is no physical threat; it is all psychological. Three friends are spending a quiet evening drinking and conversing. Fletcher is the guest in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mintrum, and he is angry because he did not receive a visit from them during his recent hospital stay. During the dialogue Fletcher assumes the role of a bully and insists upon discussing post-operative mental states. Mr. Mintrum seeks means of escape, wishing to go to various bars, while continuing to down his brandy. His increasing incompetency is emphasized when his wife has to direct him toward the kitchen for a second time as he goes to get more brandy and also when he gives the bottle to Fletcher to open and pour. Symbolically, Mintrum sinks lower and lower in his chair as Fletcher begins a hypothetical story in which Mintrum is hospitalized. Mrs. Mintrum realizes what is going on, but in her inebriated condition she hiccups and confuses words in her speech. Finally, she masters the situation enough to order Fletcher to leave. Fletcher leaves, but there is the feeling that he has had his revenge. Mr. Mintrum, "from

far down near the floor," sits saying, "Tap, tap, tap," in imitation of the mental suggestion made by Fletcher. The imaginary scene in which a feeble Fletcher uses a cane to aid him as he moves down the hospital corridor has taken over the mind of Mr. Mintrum. The host has become the seriously ill patient waiting for a visit from his friend.

Mr. Monroe is an earlier version of the pathetically weak man protected by his wife. A series of brief episodes dealing with Mr. and Mrs. Monroe was first published as a portion of The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities. One of Mr. Monroe's perplexing situations occurs when a bat invades his bedroom. Similar to the wife in "The Unicorn in the Garden," Mrs. Monroe thinks the entire situation is all her husband's imagination. Alone he is entirely unable to cope with the threatening creature, yet he does not want to display his incompetency. Mr. Monroe fakes a return to his room; then he quietly takes his cover to the couch in the hall. In "Mr. Monroe Holds the Fort" it is his imagination that creates an impossible, threatening terror of his home, so that he can not remain there alone. To escape, he goes early to the train station. He will wait for his wife in the presence of other people. In his episodes with the moving men and with finding a terminal, Mr. Monroe is equally cowed; but he does make some effort to meet the complexities of the world on a realistic basis. Throughout the series the reader feels that Mr. Monroe realizes that he is a victim, but does he realize that he is a victim of himself and of his extraordinary imagination?

The second group of stories includes "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," one of Thurber's most popular selections and one frequently discussed in the commentaries. Walter Mitty escapes from his domineering wife to a fantasy world much like the one described for a friend by a fourteen-year-old Thurber in a class prophecy for his eighth grade class.<sup>12</sup> One wonders if the carry-over is because James Thurber has at times escaped to a fantasy world such as Walter Mitty's. Thurber worked on the short story day and night for eight weeks and rewrote it fifteen times.<sup>13</sup> It is included in My World and Welcome to It, published in 1942; but it was printed earlier in The New Yorker.

Charles S. Holmes highly praised the story:

This little story (it is only about four thousand words) is a curious phenomenon: comic in substance, elegant in form and style, it is a work of art in its own right; but it has also become, through one of those mysterious cultural transubstantiations, a part of our modern mythology and folklore. Like Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, Mitty is a genuine culture figure, a character whom we immediately recognize; and in his predicament and his absurd daydreams we see a comic image of our own impotence and desperation.<sup>14</sup>

In his ability to escape to the world of fantasy, Walter Mitty shows his power of imagination. Snatches of words, a particular building, things of the real world both send him off to fantasy land and bring him back to reality. The words of the policeman commanding him to move along cause him quickly to put his gloves back on as if

<sup>12</sup>Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup>"James Thurber in Conversation with Alistair Cooke," Atlantic Monthly, 198 (August 1954), p. 37.

<sup>14</sup>Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 216.

his wife were present. Sight of a hospital projects him into the world of a surgeon. The words he speaks in the imaginary court room remind him of what he was to buy in the real grocery store. Walter Mitty uses his fantasy land. In reality he submits to his wife, the policeman, and the parking lot attendant; but in his own private world of imagination he is "proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last."

James Ellis attributes the popularity of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" to the fact that, "its comedy treats a serious theme, the estrangement of the twentieth century man from the real world and his consequent withdrawal into a world of fantasy."<sup>15</sup> Estrangement is emphasized in the story by the use of three levels of language. "There are the melodramatic clichés of the dream-sequences . . . contrasting sharply with these in the flat colloquial idiom of the scenes of real life . . . and holding it all together is Thurber's own narrative style -- economical, lightly ironic, and wonderfully expressive."<sup>16</sup>

This same technique, a similar change of language, can be found in "The Lady on 142." This story has the first-person narrator who uses the style of the casual Thurber for the greater portion of the story. However, when the narrator leans back in the seat of the train and closes his eyes, the style changes to a clipped dialogue that could be called a parody of the popular spy stories of the fifties.

<sup>15</sup>James Ellis, "The Allusions in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,'" English Journal, 54 (April 1965), p. 310.

<sup>16</sup>Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 218.

Conflict and perplexity in this story are almost nonexistent. It is based on the simple incident of a couple's waiting in the train station and hearing a message that the station master gives over the phone. Both the man and the woman engage in speculation as to the meaning of the message. The woman's speculations are practical, logical explanations. At least, they are to her; and later her friend, who meets them at the end of the journey, makes the same assumptions. However, the narrator of this story is not at any stage the cowed, little man of the Walter Mitty type. The bickering dialogue in "The Lady on 142" is friendly disagreement with no real resolution -- except for the narrator. During the time his eyes are closed on the train, the narrator lives his fantasy that the lady is a spy; and a feminine accomplice forces the couple off the train, taking them to a mob hide-out. The following discussion concerns who is to "bump them off" because the man and woman know too much. The style of the language fits the fantasy.

This fantasy world of the narrator may well be nothing but a dream while he sleeps on the train. His practical wife, a part of the dream, nonchalantly snaps green beans during the "bump-them-off" discussion. She argues with him as to which of them is being called "punk." However, regardless of the narrator's form of fantasy escapism, he feels satisfied with himself in his firm belief that he alone knows the true story of the lady on 142. The reader can imagine a smug smile accompanying the narrator's closing words, "I lighted a cigarette. 'The lady on 142,' I said firmly, 'was definitely not sick.'" The wife's "Here we go again" shows that the husband has not convinced her, but

it also shows that this man has not submitted. The knowledge from his fantasy world is enough for this man of imagination.

Language variance also plays a role in "A Couple of Hamburgers." The woman of this story resents the clichés used by her escort. Her resentment carries over to his choice of restaurants. She feels superior to his speech, his selections, and his knowledge of automobiles. The major difference between the man of this story and the man in "The Lady on 142" is that the reader knows at the conclusion that the man's feeling of victory as he sings the deliberately irritating songs is ill-founded. This story ends with the woman's relaxing and leaning back. She has heard the noise and is content to wait, to let the machine be the instrument of the world of reality. She and the reader know that this man's feeling of superiority is actually only a temporary escape into fantasy.

The stories of "A Friend to Alexander," "The Remarkable Case of Mr. Bruhl," and "The Whip-poor-will" are all stories of men who are victims as much of their imaginations as of the realistic world in which they live. None of these men submits to the realistic world, but they do not find a satisfaction through escape in their fantasies either. "A Friend to Alexander" is the story of a Mr. Andrews, who dreams of Aaron Burr. In these dreams Alexander Hamilton is also the dead brother of Mr. Andrews. When Andrews dreams of the famous duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, Andrews feels compelled to avenge Alexander's death. His dreams become his obsession. He must kill Aaron Burr in a duel. When Andrews is found dead, his wife is not surprised to note that his hand seems cupped, with the forefinger bent

as if on the trigger of a gun.

Death is also the means of escape for Mr. Bruhl, and the circumstances of his death are at least in part a result of his fantasy. When his friends and associates note Mr. Bruhl's resemblance to a notorious gangster, he begins to feel uneasy under the gaze of any strangers. Fear grows that he will be mistaken for the gangster; and he loses weight, becomes fidgety, and buys a revolver. After a time, "Samuel Bruhl began to take on a remarkable new appearance," and at this point Thurber again uses language to show a change to the fantasy world. Bruhl's imagination has turned him into a different person, a facsimile of the gangster for whom he fears being mistaken. Bruhl now uses the slang appropriate to his new role. When he is indeed shot as a gangster, Bruhl closes his eyes with "a pleased smile." His new role has been confirmed, not only by those who shot him, but also by the investigating policemen. His fantasy world and the real world have merged.

Death holds less victory for Mr. Kinstrey, of "The Whip-poor-will," but it is a form of escape. This escape is not from the real world, but from the fantasy one he has built in his mind. The members of his household are both the unwitting instigators of the fantasy and the victims of its consequences. When Mr. Kinstrey is kept awake night after night by the call of the whip-poor-will, he comes to believe that his wife and servants are plotting against him. He can not believe that they do not hear the bird. This fantasy dominates his mind until he murders the entire household and then takes his own life. Thus the real world of his wife and his own fantasy world are both

ended. This is the most brutal of the stories written by James Thurber. He has said, "I wrote 'The Whippoorwill' after five eye operations. It came somewhere out of a grim fear in the back of my mind. I've never been able to trace it."<sup>17</sup>

Charlie Deshler, in "The Curb in the Sky," is a hero whose attempt to escape through fantasy is unsuccessful in a different way. His doom was forecast by friends with the announcement of his approaching wedding. When he marries Dorothy, a woman who finishes sentences for people, Charlie does not become a beaten husband. He attempts to escape this fate by beginning to tell outlandish dreams, "knowing that Dorothy could not correct him in his own dreams." His dreams become his life, and Charlie becomes a patient in a mental institution. Even here he has not achieved escape, because in the progress of his illness he has begun to retell one dream over and over. The story ends with Dorothy's sitting beside Charlie's bed, correcting his story.

The fantasy world that Charlie develops as a means of escape takes him away from the world of reality in the physical sense; but it does not enable him to escape his wife, the cause of his problems. As the victim who tries the escape through imaginative means and fails, Charlie Deshler is even more to be pitied than those who manage the finality of escape through death.

Although a number of James Thurber's men characters are dominated in all respects by women and the realistic world which the women represent, some of the men are able to triumph quietly. These victors

<sup>17</sup>James Thurber in "Thurber on Himself: An Interview by George Plimpton and Max Steele," in Thurber, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Charles S. Holmes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 114.

are not representative of any one period of Thurber's writing, as they range from Mr. Pendly, a predecessor of Walter Mitty, to the heroes of the fairy tales written during the last decades of Thurber's career. Among these men might also be counted Harold Ross, the central figure of Thurber's only full-length book dealing with one subject and not written in collaboration with anyone.

"Mr. Pendly and the Poindexter," from The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, is typical of the usual concept of a Thurber male. He is nearsighted, and he is befuddled by machinery. He has not driven the family car for five years, or since "he mistook a pond for a new concrete road and turned off onto it." His wife now does the driving and the managing of the family business. When she takes Mr. Pendly with her to shop for a new car, the little man cannot think of any intelligent way to use his meager vocabulary of mechanical terms. Soon he has been left entirely in the background as his wife and the salesman discuss the trade. When none of the people of the mechanical world is able to open the car's trunk, Mr. Pendly is successful. His proud announcement of his achievement, however, is completely unnoticed. On the way home Mr. Pendly retreats into the world of imagination. Others may overlook him, but in his daydream he becomes the mechanical whiz. His self-satisfaction is shown as he gives his wife a "cold, superior look" and then tells her, "Never mind about me." Even though James Thurber allows this character to receive recognition only in the world of fantasy, his fantasy has a firm basis in reality because he knows that he opened the car trunk.

Mr. Martin's experiences with fantasy and reality follow a reverse pattern to those of Mr. Pendly. In "The Catbird Seat," first collected in The Thurber Carnival, Erwin Martin is the cautious, painstaking head of the filing department at F and S. His problems are caused by Mrs. Ulgine Barrows, who, as the special advisor to the president of the firm, has caused turmoil throughout the office and now threatens Mr. Martin's position.

Mr. Martin differs from other Thurber men because he is shown as a competent, well-organized man of responsibility. Not only his two assistants, but the entire company and its president respect him. This position of respect allows Mr. Martin's fantasy to lead to accomplished reality.

The very qualities that contribute to Mr. Martin's success are those that in other Thurber stories allow the characters to be victimized. He goes into a store to buy cigarettes, and the clerk does not notice him. No one can believe that he would smoke, drink, or be forward in any way. His language and manner are always quiet and meek. When Mrs. Barrows loudly tells of Mr. Martin's unseemly behavior and coarse language at her apartment, no one will believe her. She then, unknowingly, points out exactly what has happened when she yells, "If you weren't such a drab, ordinary little man, I'd think you'd planned it all."

In these words Mrs. Barrows points out the irony of the story. Mr. Martin does plan it; however, he begins with a plan to "rub out" his enemy, not just to discredit her. The story begins with Mr. Martin's plan in progress. For a week following Mrs. Barrows' intimations

that his department is next in her line of advance, Mr. Martin puts her on trial in his imagination. She is found guilty, and he begins the fantasy of planning her death. He is in the process of carrying out his plan when he realizes that murder is not necessary. The narrator says that he "became acutely conscious of the fantasy he had wrought."

Mr. Martin's fantasy is designed to save his world of reality. It is an impossible plan until he makes use of the fantasy. Mr. Martin does not submit; he does not escape; he acts. He cannot tell of his deeds, or his actions will be useless. He must be content to savor his triumph quietly.

An unnamed protagonist in "The Unicorn in the Garden" has a victory similar to that in "The Catbird Seat." In this fable James Thurber again uses the conflict of husband and wife, the man of imagination versus the woman of factual realism. When the husband sees a unicorn in the garden, he goes to tell his wife. At first she reacts matter of factly by stating, "The unicorn is a mythical beast." Later, with "a gloat in her eye," the wife calls the psychiatrist and the police, telling them to bring a strait-jacket for her husband. When she has told them her story and her husband enters the house, he tells the police, "The unicorn is a mythical beast." The strait-jacket is used to control the wife as she is taken away by the authorities.

The wife's reactions parallel Mrs. Barrow's of "The Catbird Seat." She, too, becomes the conquered. The husband, like Mr. Martin, lives "happily ever after." His victory may be accidental, but it could also be the act of a creative mind.

In 1943 James Thurber published his first fairy tale, Many Moons. This is the story of a princess who becomes ill and feels that she will get well only if she has the moon. After all of the higher court officials have failed to secure the moon for Princess Lenore, the jester solves the problem. Like the men of Thurber's short stories, he is very low in rank, and he is laughed at by the members of the court; yet his is the wisdom needed for the continuation of life. The jester uses a combination of logic and imagination. He explains his reasoning with these words: "If they are all right, then the moon must be just as large and as far away as each person thinks it is. The thing to do is to find out how big the Princess Lenore thinks it is, and how far away." Thus he has a silver moon made just the size of the Princess's fingernail, the size she thinks the moon is. He produces reality for her from her imagination.

Later, in one of Thurber's last fairy tales, The Wonderful O, the poet leads the people in their rebellion against the conquerors of their land. Invading pirates have issued orders for the removal of all o's from the language. In successive pronouncements, they seek to eliminate various groups of things that contain o's in their names. This story enables Thurber abundant opportunity for delightful play with words. The poet becomes no different from his dog, because in a world without o they are both pets. It is also an example of what Alice Baldwin called Thurber's "carefully constructed double vision."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Alice Breme Baldwin, "Congruous Laughter: The Linguistic Form of Humor in James Thurber's Casual Essays," Dissertation Abstracts, 31 (1970), 2365 (University of Massachusetts).

The sound of the sentences will intrigue a young child, the story will hold the attention of one slightly older, but this is not a story for children alone. It is actually a warning to the world about the possible results when there is curtailment of language and of the creative mind. However, Thurber's warning ends with an optimistic idea. The dictators did not think to destroy the little things; and when the buried chests are found, the precious jewels are actually one word -- freedom. Perhaps through his fantasies James Thurber makes his strongest statements about the condition of twentieth century America. If language were restricted and the o's eliminated, the world would lack love and valor as well as freedom.

James Thurber's little men first gained recognition through his drawings. His cartoons became quite popular in England; and after others began to praise them, Ross published them regularly in The New Yorker. Many of the themes of his stories are found also in his art. Most notable is the conflict between the small man and the large, shapeless woman. Animals are also prevalent in both writing and drawing. Thurber's own breed of dog is as easily recognized as his little men.

The drawing was a form of relaxation and seemed to come from James Thurber's subconscious, as it was easily and quickly done. The entire book The Last Flower was drawn in one evening, or approximately two hours time. When blindness made it impossible for Thurber to continue to draw, it was not the catastrophe it would have been had he been unable to write. He said that if he were unable to write, he would be unable to breathe. "A blind writer does not have the

distraction of the writer who can see."<sup>19</sup>

A remarkable memory enabled Thurber to continue writing, even after he became blind. He would write in his mind during the mornings and dictate to a secretary in the afternoons. If he became bored at a party, he might even then retreat into his mind and write. His wife, Helen, was able to tell when he was "writing." Despite his loss in the area of observation of intricate physical detail, Thurber's writing suffered very little from his inability to see, and his writing gained in oral quality. Whether this added oral quality and the word games he played with the reader are an advantage or not is a matter of the opinion of the critic. In some selections it becomes burdensome; but in others such as The Wonderful O, it is an added dimension to the work of a skillful author.

Some readers may object to the word play because it can interfere with the clearness of a selection. These readers need to remember Thurber's ability to create double vision and to seek greater profundity. This is not to imply that James Thurber is vague or obscure. Clarity is one of his greatest assets. His early newspaper training, the editorial skills of Harold Ross, and Thurber's own respect for the English language all contributed to the development of this ability. It was not unusual for Thurber to rewrite a piece fifteen or more times. Even after he was blind, he was able to hold in his mind at least three complete versions of a story as he sought for the best one. Malcolm Cowley said, "For James Thurber 'write' and

<sup>19</sup>"Conversation with Alistair Cooke," p. 40.

'right' weren't homonyms; they were the same word."<sup>20</sup>

It may be that the influence of his newspaper and magazine work prevented Thurber from ever writing a novel. He went to France with this project in mind in 1925 and was unable to accomplish it. This date was before his association with The New Yorker, so the magazine cannot be blamed for that specific lack of accomplishment. Moreover, there is some feeling that Thurber influenced The New Yorker as much as The New Yorker influenced Thurber. Clearness and brevity are certainly characteristics of both during the years of their association.

Much of Thurber's writing is a smooth-flowing narrative written in the personal anecdote style; but he is not limited to this technique. He is one of the few Americans to experiment with the fable. In his Fables for Our Time and in Further Fables for Our Times, he has shown his skill in one of literature's oldest forms. The parody is also a device employed by Thurber and one that shows his capabilities in a wide range of writing styles. Many of his parodies seem to have been written in a delightful spirit of fun. "The White Rabbit Caper" is one of these. Among his more serious parodies is "A Call on Mrs. Forrester," written after he reread Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady" and Henry James's "The Ambassadors."

As a social commentator James Thurber reflects more than forty years of the twentieth century through his various forms of writing. From essay to short story to fairy tale, he explores one-to-one relationships in a modern society; he displays the strengths of mid-

<sup>20</sup>Malcolm Cowley in "Salute to Thurber," Saturday Review, 44 (November 25, 1961), p. 14.

western culture and the foibles of the big city cocktail party; he proclaims the wisdom of the ordinary man. He recognizes the great need for humor in the world and has done his best to provide for this need. James Thurber did not allow himself to be a victim of woman, man, society, or fate.

In 1956 Thurber told Harvey Breit that the best estimate of his work was done by T. S. Eliot.<sup>21</sup> Six years earlier Eliot had said of Thurber's writing,

It is a form of humor which is also a way of saying something serious. There is a criticism of life at the bottom of it. It is serious and even somber. Unlike so much humor, it is not merely a criticism of manners -- that is, of the superficial aspects of society at a given moment -- but something more profound. His writings and also his illustrations are capable of surviving the immediate environment and time out of which they spring. To some extent, they will be a document of the age they belong to.<sup>22</sup>

If Eliot is correct and James Thurber later becomes more fully acclaimed in the world of literary greats, the little man of great imagination will indeed have triumphed through his use of fantasy.

<sup>21</sup>Harvey Breit, The Writer Observed (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), p. 257.

<sup>22</sup>T. S. Eliot in "Priceless Gift of Laughter" by Joel Sayre, Time, 58 (July 9, 1951), p. 88.

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