A STUDY OF JAMES THURBER AS A SOCIAL CRITIC

A Thesis

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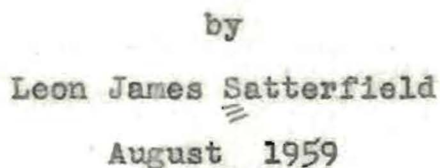

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PREFACE

Almost any connoisseur of American humor will declare James Thurber the country's greatest humorist since Mark Twain. He has been called by critics and scholars everything from ". . . the best living writer of humor"[1] and ". . . the greatest and most original humorist this country has produced to date"[2] to ". . . le plus feroce humoriste des Etats-Unis."[3] Such praise in itself is enough to insure Thurber's place in American letters. But he is more than just a humorist. There is a vast difference between his work and the work of a Max Schulman or an S. J. Perelman, a difference that is more than just in the degree of humorous effect. Thurber, more than any other humorist and perhaps as much as any serious writer in the country, is concerned with the foibles of the people around him. He recognizes these foibles and comments upon them. That is what makes a social critic.

Unfortunately, too many scholars fail to take Thurber seriously. "There is some absurd prejudice in our minds," writes Leonard Bacon in an article on Thurber, "which makes us believe that what is lightly said is probably trivial, be-

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[1]"Thurber and His Humor," Newsweek, 49:52, February 4, 1957.

[2]David McCord, "An Anatomy of Confusion," Saturday Review, 36:33, December 5, 1953.

[3]"Thurber and His Humor," loc. cit.

cause it didn't give us a headache."[4]

Peter De Vries gives his readers a glimpse of the true Thurber when he calls him ". . . the comic Prufrock."[5] Robert H. Elias writes that there is no doubt that Thurber is a great humorist, but he bemoans the fact that

> . . . although slightly older than Hemingway and Faulkner, he has been the subject of no full-length studies, nor has he been prominently mentioned, as he should have long ago, for the Nobel Prize . . . when he has not been dismissed as simply a cartoonist, he has been condemned by a conglomeration of whimsical reviews, human interest features full of newsworthy legends and pictures, and that extinguisher of merit, to the minor category of humorist . . .[6]

Thurber's work, maintains Elias, is

> . . . as well shaped as the most finely wrought pieces of Henry James, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, as sensitively worded as the most discriminatingly written prose of H. L. Mencken, Westbrook Pegler and J. D. Salinger, and as penetrating . . . as the most pointed insights of those two large poets of our country, E. A. Robinson and Robert Frost.[7]

Thurber himself is serious about his humor. "In anything funny you write that isn't close to serious you've missed something along the line,"[8] he told an interviewer in 1958. Two

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[4] Leonard Bacon, "Humors and Careers," Saturday Review of Literature, 20:22, April 29, 1939.

[5] Peter De Vries, "James Thurber: the Comic Prufrock," Poetry, 63:150, December, 1943.

[6] Robert H. Elias, "James Thurber: the Primitive, the Innocent, and the Individual," The American Scholar, 27:355, Summer, 1958.

[7] Ibid.

[8] George Plimpton and Max Steele, "James Thurber on Fiction," Best Stories and Articles, 2:24, December, 1958.

years earlier, he had said that ". . . it's very hard to divorce humor from other things in life. Humor is the other side of tragedy."[9]

Thurber first became a published writer in 1923 when he sold a piece to the Kansas City Star Sunday magazine.[10] In the more than three decades since, he has turned out work, most of it for the New Yorker magazine, in just about every literary genre except the novel--short stories, essays, plays, fables, fairy tales, and feature pieces. In almost every one of these items, there is present along with the humor some form of social criticism. This study is an attempt first, to enumerate the different elements of social criticism in Thurber's work; and second, to show how these elements are embodied within the style in an artistically valid manner.

The organization of the thesis is a simple one. The first three chapters are devoted to three general elements of social criticism in Thurber's work: the conflict between Man and Machine; the Man-Woman relationship; and a kind of catch-all category entitled Man and Manners. In these chapters, an attempt is made to trace the chronological development of each of the different elements of criticism, and to determine what changes, if any, have come about in Thurber's outlook. The fourth chap-

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[9] Alistair Cooke, "James Thurber in Conversation with Alistair Cooke," Atlantic Monthly, 198:37, August, 1956.

[10] James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. xi.

ter deals with Thurber's stylistic integration of humor and social criticism.

The author would like to express his appreciation to the following: Dr. Green D. Wyrick, Associate Professor of English at Kansas State Teachers College, for his advice and inspiration; Jerry P. Leibman, Assistant Professor at Kansas State Teachers College, for his encouragement and proof-reading chores; John Kloefkorn, Instructor of English at Kansas State Teachers College, for his companionship and typing abilities; Mary Ann Satterfield, for putting up with it all; and finally, James Thurber himself, for his writings which made the research for this work the most delightful task imaginable.

---L. J. S.

Emporia, Kansas
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CHAPTER I

MAN AND MACHINE

One of several reasons that mankind, Americans especially, is going to pot, James Thurber believes, is the over-mechanization of our lives. To Thurber, machines have become infernal devices seemingly bent on the destruction rather than the improvement of mankind. Because of machines, man is denying his basic instinctive knowledge; he is losing his capacity for independent action, and with it, his identity.

Thurber is not only opposed to machinery *per se*, cars, escalators, gadgets, and other such devices; he is opposed to machinery in a broader sense: anything which causes men to go against what D. H. Lawrence has called "blood knowledge," the instinct or the imagination. Under such a definition, almost all the artificial trappings of modern society may be called mechanization of a sort. Robert Elias writes that

> Since almost the beginning of his career as a story writer Thurber has insisted that the menace to the individual lurks in the world of man-made systems, whether mechanical or mental, and that the promise waits in the uncircumscribed realms of instinct and the imagination.[1]

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first will deal with the literal machine; the second will be concerned with machinery in the wider sense.

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[1] Robert H. Elias, "James Thurber: the Primitive, the Innocent, and the Individual," *The American Scholar*, 27:356, Summer, 1958.

I. MAN AND STEEL

Literal machines in Thurber's work usually are not just inanimate objects. They take on diabolic characteristics almost as though they have been sent by the devil. They often offer direct opposition to the desires of the men they are supposed to be serving, and more often than not, the whims of the machines prevail. Man is losing his battle with machines, and with the battle, he is losing his confidence and self respect.

The situation has not always been so, according to Thurber. In the days of his boyhood, machines were innocent enough. True, they rarely did the things they were supposed to, but there was nothing malicious about them--confusing perhaps, but not malicious. Thurber tells of them in his recollections of turn-of-the-century days in Columbus, Ohio, in his 1933 collection called My Life and Hard Times. In a story called "The Car We Had to Push," the machines are infinitely contrary, but there is no question about who is master and who is servant. The confusion machines caused then was something to be laughed at. For example, one member of the Thurber family

> . . . lived the latter days of her life in the horrible suspicion that electricity was dripping invisibly all over the house. It leaked, she contended, out of empty sockets if the wall switch had been left on. She would go around screwing in bulbs, and if

> they lighted up she would hastily and fearfully turn off the wall switch and go back to her <u>Pearson's</u> or <u>Everybody's</u>, happy in the satisfaction that she had stopped not only a costly but a dangerous leakage. Nothing could ever clear this up for her.[2]

In the same story, Thurber tells of his mother's innocent distrust of things mechanical. She always told her boys that

> . . . it was dangerous to drive an automobile without gasoline: it fried the valves, or something. "Now don't you dare drive all over town without gasoline!" she would say to us when we started off. Gasoline, oil, and water were much the same to her, a fact that made her life both confusing and perilous. Her greatest dread, however, was the Victrola--we had a very early one, back in the "Come Josephine in My Flying Machine" days. She had an idea that the Victrola might blow up. It alarmed her, rather than reassured her, to explain that the phonograph was run neither by gasoline nor by electricity. She could only suppose that it was propelled by some new-fangled and untested apparatus which was likely to let go at any minute, making us all the victims and martyrs of the wild-eyed Edison's dangerous experiments. The telephone she was comparatively at peace with, except, of course, during storms, when for some reason or other, she always took the receiver off the hook and let it hang.[3]

The worst mechanical disaster the Thurbers were involved in happened the night that a streetcar hit their old Reo car (the one that had to be pushed). It fell apart.

> Tires booped and whooshed, the fenders queeled and graked, the steering-wheel rose up like a spectre and disappeared in the direction of Franklin Avenue

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[2]James Thurber, <u>The Thurber Carnival</u>, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), p. 186.

[3]<u>Ibid</u>.

> with a melancholy whistling sound, bolts and gadgets flew like sparks from a Catherine wheel. It was a splendid spectacle but, of course, saddening to everybody (except the motorman of the streetcar, who was sore). I think some of us broke down and wept.[4]

They may have wept, but it was not a bitter weeping. Modern machines are not so neutral, though, as those in the days of Thurber's boyhood. Now they undermine a man's confidence and often reduce him to a state of complete helplessness. In a 1945 story called "Recollections of the Gas Buggy: Footnotes to an Era for the Future Historian," Thurber tells of the trouble he has had with a certain car. The battery ran down one day in England and Thurber had a mechanic in another car tow him.

> He said he would give me a tow for a few yards. I was to let the clutch in and out (or out and in, whichever it is) and start the engine that way. It is a device as old as the automobile itself . . . any child or old lady can do it.[5]

Any child or old lady can do it, but Thurber, a grown man, cannot.

> I kept letting the clutch out and in (or in and out) madly, but nothing happened. The garage man kept stopping every 500 yards or so and coming back to consult with me. He was profoundly puzzled. It was farther than he had ever dragged a car in his life. We must have gone, in this disheartening manner, about a third of the way to York. Finally he got out for the seventh time and said to me, "What

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[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

> gear have you got her in?" I didn't have her in any gear. I had her in neutral. She had been in neutral all the while.[6]

In the same car, Thurber drove into a garage one day with an overheated engine. While the mechanic checked the thermostat, Thurber

> . . . was standing outside the car, staring at the dashboard and its, to me, complicated dials, when I noticed to my horror that one of them registered 1560. I pointed a shaking finger at it and said to the mechanic, "That dial shouldn't be registering as high as all that, should it?" He gave me the same look I had got from the man in England. "That's your radio dial, Mac," he said. "You got her set at WQXR."
>
> I got into the car and drove home. The garage man stared after me until I was out of sight. He is probably still telling it around.[7]

Such experiences do something to a man's spirit. The gasoline gauge of the same car once registered "full" when the gas tank was empty. Thurber was stranded in the wilderness. The car seemed to possess a demonic quality all its own.

> Whenever I tried to put chains on a tire, the car would maliciously wrap them around a rear axle. If I parked it ten feet from a fire plug and went into a store, it would be only five feet from the plug when I came out. If it saw a nail in the road, the car would swerve and pick the nail up. Once, driving into a bleak little town in the Middle West, I said aloud, "I'd hate to be stuck in this place." The car promptly burned out a bearing, and I was stuck there for two days.[8]

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p. 39.

[8] Ibid., p. 40.

There are many other examples in Thurber's writings of man being completely undone by malicious machinery, but the point has been made. One might argue that the examples just cited do not constitute true social criticism; that Thurber is only trying to get a chuckle from his readers rather than to teach them anything. That would be true if such passages are read only for the surface meaning. But a careful reader will get more than just the humor. Cars become, by extension, machinery in general. And the narrator, who loses all semblance of human dignity, becomes men in general. In the examples given, the result is funny. But the real moral of the tales--man being subservient to or even destroyed by a cold, impartial machine--is serious criticism.

This incompatibility of man and machine in a world mechanized to an extent thought impossible fifty years ago has a definitely damaging effect on man, Thurber believes. Machines make men do strange things and Thurber likes to tell about them. Again he is humorous in the telling, but the humor has a haunting ring of truth to it that makes the sensitive reader do a mental double-take. Thurber is telling about something that is funny in itself, but it serves as a reminder of some past experience which the reader does not usually associate with laughter. Life becomes too complex in this world of machinery to be enjoyed as thoroughly as it should be. Confusion, not the innocent kind present in My Life and Hard Times, but a kind

that creates a vague fear that gnaws at a man's innards, takes the place of purpose in men's lives. Thurber might well be talking about all men when he writes third person about himself in this modern age. He

> . . . moves about restlessly wherever he goes, ready to get the hell out at the drop of a pie-pan or the lift of a skirt. His gestures are the ludicrous reflexes of the maladjusted; his repose is the momentary inertia of the nonplussed. He pulls the blinds against the morning and creeps into smokey corners at night. He talks largely about small matters and smally about great affairs. His ears are shut to the ominous rumblings of the dynasties of the world moving toward a cloudier chaos than ever before, but he hears with an acute perception the startling sounds that rabbits make twisting in the bushes along a country road at night and a cold chill comes upon him when the comic supplement of a Sunday newspaper blows unexpectedly out of an areaway and envelopes his knees. He can sleep while the commonwealth crumbles but a strange sound in the pantry at three in the morning will strike terror into his stomach. He is not afraid, or much aware, of the menaces of empire but he keeps looking behind him as he walks along darkening streets out of the fear that he is being softly followed by little men padding along in single file, about a foot and a half high, large-eyed, and whiskered. . . . his time is circumscribed by the short boundaries of his pain and his embarrassment, in which what happens to his digestion, the rear axle of his car, and the confused flow of his relationships with six or eight persons and two or three buildings is of greater importance than what goes on in the nation or in the universe. He knows vaguely that the nation is not much good any more; he has read that the crust of the earth is shrinking alarmingly and that the universe is growing steadily colder, but he does not believe that any of the three is in half as bad shape as he is.[9]

That is the result of mechanization on modern men, Thurber believes. Life has taken on great complexity for Thurber's

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[9] _Ibid._, pp. 173-74-75.

characters, and it is reflected in even the titles of some of his collections: The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, Let Your Mind Alone!, My World--And Welcome to It, The Beast in Me and Other Animals, and Alarms and Diversions. This theme of complexity is one which Thurber has written on from the beginning. In most cases, the characters, because of it, become almost incapable of any real action.

An outgrowth of this complexity is the deep humiliation man suffers at the hands of a mechanized world. Some of Thurber's best humorous situations have developed from that humiliation, and it is a theme he has been concerned with ever since his first sale to the New Yorker in 1927. In that year, the magazine published a story of Thurber's called "American Romance." It concerned a man who unwittingly and unwillingly set a new international record for the most consecutive orbits in a revolving door. Thurber's man was trying, not to set a record, but only to get out of the thing.[10] He was the first of many who were to be similarly humiliated.

For example, Mr. Monroe, a character who was created four years later in 1931 and who was to crop up in essence many more times in later years, can not even master the comparatively simple task of taking a shower. He always gets the water either too hot or too cold. His wife explains that Mr. Monroe, when fronted with mechanical difficulties such as the one when he

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[10] "Thurber and His Humor," Newsweek, 49:54, February 4, 1957.

steamed up the entire ground floor of a college building where he had attempted a shower, can only "'. . . go "Woo! Woo!"--like a child. He always goes "Woo! Woo!" when things go wrong with machinery.'"[11]

When Mr. Monroe is faced with the mechanical chore of storing household goods, he goes completely to pieces. In an aside, Thurber explains the characteristics of a man haunted by machines:

> He had a certain charm, yes; but not character. He evaded difficult situations; he had no talent for firm resolution; he immolated badly; and he wasn't even very good at renunciation, except when he was tired or a little sick. Not, you will see, the man to move household goods into storage. . .[12]

He is no better at finding a freight terminal where his wife's dog has been shipped. A shipper's letter gives all the information necessary to find the terminal, but Mr. Monroe, experienced by other defeats by things mechanical, knows it will not be that simple.

> Mr. Monroe, after a profound study, read one sentence aloud, slowly, "Go to the West Terminal on Sixteenth Street and ask for Messenger Car of New York Central train 608, which gets in about nine thirty."
> "It's only a step. . ." began Mrs. Monroe, soothingly. (The Monroes lived, at the time, in the East Sixties.)
> "It's just one of those letters that never work out," said John Monroe, wisely. "We'll get way over on Sixteenth Street and we'll see a lot

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[11]James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), p. 31.

[12]Ibid., p. 35.

> of big, dark, locked buildings lighted by dismal street lamps. I'll ask a man where the West Terminal is and he won't know. You can't go directly to a terminal and get a dog. I've lived long enough to know that."[13]

In a 1935 story, Thurber tells of another in a long line of male characters who is humiliated by an automobile. The protagonist of the story, Mr. Pendly, can do nothing, except in his imagination, to cope with machines. He and his wife are buying a second-hand car and he is terrified because "he knew Mr. Huss [the salesman] would expect him to ask acute technical questions about the car, to complain of this and that."[14] Of course, he is bewildered by such matters and after being ridiculed in front of his wife by mechanics (in whose presence ". . . he felt that he was at the mercy of malignant powers beyond his understanding"[15]), Pendly's only retaliation can come in the form of a daydream.

> He was imagining that, as he sauntered over to Mac, Mac got out from under the big car he was working on and said: "Well, it's got me licked." Mr. Pendly smiled. "Yeah?" he said, slowly removing his coat and vest. He handed them to Mac. Then he crawled under the car, looked the works over coldly, tinkered delicately and expertly with a couple of rods and a piston, tightened a winch gasket, blew softly into a valve, and crawled out again. He put on his coat and vest. "Try her now," he said, indifferently, to Mac. Mac tried her. She worked beautifully. The big mechanic turned slowly to Mr. Pendly and held out an oily hand. "Brother," said Mac, "I hand it to you. Where did you . . ."[16]

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[13]*Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

[14]James Thurber, *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 58.

[15]*Ibid.*

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 61.

Thurber points out the frustration that is a part of the over-mechanization in the first fable in his 1940 publication, Fables for Our Time. The parable deals with a city mouse who wishes to go to the country. He does not make it because the train on which he is riding does not stop at Beddington on Sundays. He is carried on to Middleburg where he has to wait three hours for a train to get back to Beddington where he is supposed to take a bus to Sibert's Junction where a mouse is waiting for him. By the time he gets back to Beddington, the last bus is only a short way out of the station. With great effort, he catches it and climbs aboard. Then he is told that the bus he is on is not going to Sibert's Junction after all; it is going in the opposite direction through Pell's Hollow and Grumm to a place called Wimberby. The city mouse, completely defeated by this time, gets off the bus in the rain to find that there are no more buses going anywhere tonight.[17]

Constant contact with machinery sometimes makes Thurber's men as demon-like as the machines themselves. In a 1942 story published in My World--And Welcome to It, Thurber tells of a diabolic little man who has apparently sold his soul to the machines. His name is Mr. Peffifoss and he is in charge of the Number Changing Department of the Connecticut Telephone Company. He delights in changing simple, easily-remembered

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[17]James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. 3.

telephone numbers into monstrosities that even an I. B. M. machine would have trouble with.

> "Take a number change, Miss Rettig," he says with an evil smile. "New Milford 905 Ring 4 to be changed to Pussymeister W-7 Oh 8 Oh 9 6 J-4."[18]

Peffifoss, whose full name is Rudwooll Yurmurm Peffifoss (that, Thurber believes, has something to do with his sadism), is told by his secretary that such a number is not yet possible under the company's regulations. He goes home ". . . to kick his children's rabbits around a while before sitting down to dinner."[19]

The same sort of man is represented in another story in the same collection, this one called "The Vengeance of 3902090." It tells of the personal battle between the story's narrator, Connecticut motor-vehicle operator 3902090, and the man in charge of the state's drivers' license and vehicle registration bureau at Hartford. The latter, like Mr. Peffifoss, is on the side of the machines and he revels in fouling up the lives of the people of Connecticut, especially 3902090. He does this by not allowing them to register their autos and apply for their drivers' licenses at the same time, knowing well that most, having done the one task, will forget the other and eventually run afoul of the law. That is exactly what happens

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[18] James Thurber, My World--And Welcome to It, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 41.

[19] Ibid., p. 42.

to the narrator. Like Mr. Pendly, his only retaliation is in his own mind. He thinks of a letter he will write to the Man in Hartford.

> "Dear Sir," I shall say, "Since I got my 1939 operator's license I have gone nuts. I am as crazy as a monkey and am letting you know, like you asked. I am going to lay for you and run you down. There is no use in your trying to escape me. If you notify the police, I will run down your secretary. Every time you see a red light, drop $5,000 out of your car in a shoe box; the money must all be in three-dollar bills." I am going to sign it, quite simply, "3902090." I suppose they will catch up with me in the end, but it will be fun. It is fun already. I spend a great deal of time imagining the Man in Hartford opening my note, turning pale, grabbing a chair for support, and saying to his secretary, "Good God, girl, 3902090 has got us!"[20]

Thurber has continued in the same vein with his writings of the past decade. In the 1953 collection called Thurber Country, there is a story called "Lady in a Trap." In it, a husband attempts to solve the mechanical difficulties involved in preparing a meal in a modern kitchen. He fails miserably. First, he cannot find any of the principals. He finally locates the refrigerator and succeeds only in

> . . .peering helplessly inside, getting his forefingers into something cold and sticky, and at length, removing a head of lettuce wrapped in cheesecloth and two eggs. He sets these on the kitchen table, but the eggs begin to roll, so he puts them in his pocket.[21]

He wants to make some coffee, but knows he cannot work the Silex.

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[20] Ibid., pp. 159-60.

[21] James Thurber, Thurber Country, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), pp. 78-79.

He finds a can of peaches and knows only vaguely that he should not try ". . . to open the can . . . by putting it in the Mixmaster and starting the thing."[22] By this time, he has lost his appetite and is confronted with cleaning up the tremendous mess he has made. Man is not even capable of feeding himself when he must depend on machinery for help.

Also in _Thurber Country_ are two stories, "File and Forget," and "_Joyeux Noel_, Mr. Durning," which consist solely of correspondence between Thurber and mechanically inclined bureaus and departments. The first records the confusion resulting when a publishing house sends Thurber thirty-six copies of a book which he did not order. That in itself would be chaotic enough, but the books are sent to an old address. Thurber gets deeper into the quagmire with each letter and before the thing has ended, two different publishing houses, one of Thurber's long-ago Columbus, Ohio, neighbors, his mother, and various other unrelated persons are involved.[23] In the second story, Thurber demonstrates the fantastic amount of red tape involved in the one-time simple task of transporting a bottle of wine from France to the United States through the mail. All sorts of state and federal permits, taxes, custom restrictions, and fees are involved. The bottle had been intended as a Christmas gift to the Thurbers. After all the sound and fury, they received it two days after Easter.[24]

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[22] _Ibid._, p. 80. [23] _Ibid._, pp. 83-99. [24] _Ibid._, pp. 231-52.

Things are getting still more complicated, according to Thurber, as the world gets more mechanical "conveniences." Occasionally a man has got to do something to combat this creeping mechanism. In one of the 1956 Further Fables for Our Time, Thurber tells of a grizzly bear who did do something. Thurber's bear has just returned home after a week or two on the town to find his house completely overrun with idiotic gadgets. The doorbell has been replaced by an ornamental knocker that plays two bars of "Silent Night" when lifted. When the doorknob is turned a metallic voice says "Happy New Year," and a two-tone gong rings "Hello." The walls of the house have been soundproofed so well that nobody can hear anything six feet away. When the lights are turned on, an odor of pine cones, which the bear detests, is released. His easy chair has been replaced by a "Sitpretty" contraption which bounces when he sits in it. Going for a cigarette, the bear finds a transparent cigarette box shaped like a castle; inscribed on it is the legend: "You can have a cigarette on me/If you can find the castle key." Naturally, he cannot find the key, but he finds a cigar and finally a box of safety matches so safe that they cannot be fired. The bear finally goes berserk, tears up the house, and attracts all the neighbors. Leaving his wife in bed dreaming of marrying a panda, he chooses the most attractive female bear in the neighborhood, one named Honey, and roars off into

the woods. Thurber concludes the tale with the moral: "Nowadays most men lead lives of noisy desperation."[25]

II. MENTAL MECHANICS

Literal machines are bad enough, but Thurber is just as concerned with a more subtle and abstract mechanization which he feels is doing the country no good. It is the mechanization of man's mind, the emphasis on reason over instinct which results in the mechanical thinker rather than the instinctive man of action. Thurber's attitude is not new; it is closely associated with the late eighteenth century romantics' idea that the natural man, the "Noble Savage," was a better man than his more sophisticated, more "civilized" brother. Thurber is working with the same basic idea, but it is applied to the twentieth century man facing problems the romantics never dreamed of. He is perhaps not so extreme as Rousseau and his followers were; Thurber could never be labeled anti-intellectual. What he is opposed to is the tinkering with the mind; what educators and psychologists call "channeling" the thoughts toward goals of "social success" and "adjustment." That is not the way the mind works, says Thurber, and we should let it alone, let it think the thoughts it will, the natural and instinctive thoughts that produce actions rather than theories. He is opposed to mechanization of the mind because it is a limiting factor; there is

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[25]James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 89-94.

no place in the mechanized mind for spontaneity, for imagination, for spur-of-the-moment impulses that have no logical reasoning behind them. Without these things, Thurber believes, man is not whole.

In 1939, in a magazine article appropriately entitled "Thinking Ourselves Into Trouble," Thurber wrote that

> Abstract reasoning, in itself, has not benefited Man so much as instinct has benefited the lower animals. On the contrary, it has moved in the opposite direction. Instinct has been defined as "a tendency to actions which lead to the attainment of natural goals." In giving up instinct and going for reasoning, Man has aspired higher than the attainment of natural goals: he has developed ideas and notions; he has monkeyed with concepts. The life to which he was naturally adapted he has put behind him; in moving into the alien and complicated sphere of Thought and Imagination he has become the least well-adjusted of all creatures of the earth and, hence, the most bewildered. It may be that the finer mysteries of life and death can be comprehended only through pure instinct; the cat, for example, appears to know (I don't say that he does, but he appears to). Man, on the other hand, is surely further away from the Answer than any other animal this side of the lady bug. His mistaken selection of reasoning as the instrument of perception has put him in a fine quandary.[26]

Thurber is a great dog man (as opposed to cat men), and he is fond of using the dog as a foil to point out human failings. The dogs can do it, too, because they are natural thinkers surrounded by "logical" thinkers, their owners. Thurber's dogs are usually great kindly creatures, but they are always perplexed by the actions of their owners. In the introduction

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[26]James Thurber, "Thinking Ourselves Into Trouble," Forum, 101:310, June, 1939.

to a 1955 volume called Thurber's Dogs, Thurber writes that dogs are

> . . . privileged to live with and study at close range the only creature with reason, the most unreasonable of creatures.
>
> The dog has got more fun out of Man than Man has got out of the dog, for the clearly demonstrable reason that Man is the more laughable of the two animals. The dog has long been bemused by the singular activities and the curious practices of men, cocking his head inquiringly to one side, intently watching and listening to the strangest goings-on in the world. He has seen them go to bed when it is time to get up, and get up when it is time to go to bed. He has observed them destroying the soil in vast areas and nurturing it in small patches . . . [he] . . . has caught at one and the same time the bewildering smells of the hospital and the munitions factory. He has seen men raise up great cities to heaven and then blow them to hell.
>
> . . . .
>
> He knows that the bare foot of Man has been too long away from the living earth, that he has been too busy with the construction of engines, which are, of all the things on earth, the farthest removed from the shape and intention of nature.[27]

Thurber's most ambitious single work in this direction is his successful Broadway play, The Male Animal, written in 1940 in collaboration with Elliott Nugent. At the time of the play's productions (it opened on Broadway in 1940 and was brought back in 1952), many critics complained that there was too much Nugent and too little Thurber in the dialogue. Nugent probably was responsible for the smooth dramatization of the play, but the theme, the moral of the play, is as Thurberesque as any of his fables. The play's plot involves a college English professor, Tommy Turner, his wife, and her old football-hero

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[27] James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 9-10-11.

beau, Joe Ferguson. Turner is a typical professor, gentile, absent-minded, and almost entirely given to things of the mind rather than to emotion or instinct. Ferguson, on the other hand, is the picture of man in the rough; he is brimming with animal warmth. True, he is not very intelligent, but when he comes back to the Alma Mater for the big Homecoming football game, he brings to life old forgotten desire in Turner's wife. Thurber paints a devastating first-act picture of Turner, showing him as a man who likes to think of himself as the compleat rational being. Even though he deeply loves his wife, Turner at first decides to suavely let Ferguson have her. Then, in a memorable drunk scene between Turner and his intellectual protege, one Michael Barnes, the age-old heritage of the cave man clubs the professor over the head with a primitive bludgeon. The difference between himself and Ferguson, Turner explains with the detachment of a man in his cups, is that

> He's a hunter. He comes home at night with meat slung over his shoulders, and you sit there drawing pictures on the wall of your cave.[28]

When his home is threatened, a man like Ferguson

> . . . does not expose everyone to a humiliating intellectual analysis. He comes out of his corner like this--(Rises, assuming an awkward fighting pose, fists up, then sits quickly down) The bull elephant in him is aroused.[29]

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[28]James Thurber and Elliott Nugent, The Male Animal, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), p. 59.

[29]Ibid., p. 67.

A few speeches later, the full glory of what he must do hits Turner.

> All animals are the same, including the human being. We are male animals, too . . . the sea-lion . . . snarls. He gores. He roars with his antlers. He knows that love is a thing you do something about. He knows it is a thing that words can kill. You do something. You don't just sit there. (Michael rises) I don't mean you. (Michael sits) A woman likes a man who does something. All the male animals fight for the female, from the land crab to the bird of paradise. They don't just sit and talk. They act. (He removes his glasses and blinks owlishly around) I hope I have made all this clear to you. Are there any questions?[30]

And so Turner fights Ferguson for the female of the species. From the fight, he gets a cracked skull--and he regains his wife's love and respect. The play points up other morals, but this is Thurber's main theme.

In a 1940 fable called "The Glass in the Field," Thurber tells of another kind of trouble one can get into by "reasonable" thinking as opposed to natural thinking. The fable tells of a goldfinch who flies into a huge square of plate glass that workmen have left standing in a field. He is knocked cold and after he recovers, he tells his friends at the club that ". . . all of a sudden the air crystallized on me." A sea-gull, a hawk, and an eagle, reasonable birds all, think it is a nice story but not a true one. "Fledgling and bird, I've flown this country and I can assure you there is no such thing as air crystallizing," the eagle says. On the other hand, a small

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[30] Ibid., p. 68.

swallow who is a natural thinking bird, is not too sure; perhaps the air did crystallize because one cannot argue with the bump on the goldfinch's head. After attempting to rationalize the matter by saying that the goldfinch probably was hit by a hailstone or had a stroke, both logical explanations, the three larger birds decide to prove the goldfinch wrong by flying across the same field. When asked to come along, the swallow hesitates and replies that ". . . well, no, I don't think I will." The three large birds take off, fly at the field, and are knocked cold when they hit the glass. The swallow, who had enough imagination to believe that perhaps the air had crystallized--at least there was something solid there--is spared a lump on his head.[31] The other three birds, who had probably read in books that it was a physical impossibility for air to crystallize, are the losers. Thurber is telling the reader that things do not always happen logically and that the man who is so restricted in his thinking to disregard the result of what he considers the impossible, is going to get into trouble.

Just as machines have not always been the ominous threats to society they are now, Thurber feels that men have not always been incapable of instinctive action. In 1952, he wrote a collection called The Thurber Album about remembered people in the Columbus, Ohio, days of fifty years ago. Thurber's reason

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[31]Fables for Our Time, p. 59.

for writing the book:

> . . . the Thurber Album was written at a time when in America there was a feeling of fear and suspicion. It's quite different from My Life and Hard Times which was written earlier and is a funnier and better book. The Album was kind of an escape--going back to the Middle West of the last century and the beginning of this, when there wasn't this fear and hysteria. I wanted to write the story of some solid American characters, more or less as an example of how Americans started out and what they should go back to. To sanity and soundness and away from this jumpiness. It's hard to write humor in the mental weather we've had, that's likely to take you into reminiscence.[32]

The Album is full of characters quite different from people today, Thurber believes. People in those days were capable of action, albeit not always very wise action. "A far lesser breed of men has succeeded the old gentleman on the American earth, and I tremble to think what he would have said of a great-grandson who turned out to be a writer,"[33] Thurber writes of his great-grandfather, a sturdy man named Jake Fisher. A paragraph which points out the difference between Jake Fisher and Tommy Turner, and, by extension, the difference between men today and the old pioneer stock:

> Jake Fisher fought a thousand fights in his time. In those days, if you went west of the Alleghenies, there was only one way of settling an argument or a difference of opinion. Farther west they wrassled and gouged out eyes with their thumbnails,

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[32]George Plimpton and Max Steele quoting James Thurber, "James Thurber on Fiction," Best Articles and Stories, 2:25, December, 1958.

[33]James Thurber, The Thurber Album, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 26.

> but in the Northwest Territory they fought standing up, with their fists. Some men would pick up a club or a rock or even a broadaxe, and a few grabbed for their guns, but mostly they slugged it out toe to toe.[34]

How different are the men of today. But the difference does not lie entirely with the men. The times, affected directly or indirectly by machines, are different. A man can hardly be a rugged individualist even if he wants to. In a short piece called "A Note at the End," published as an afterthought to My Life and Hard Times, Thurber's narrator tells of being fed up with it all and considering ". . . spending the rest of my days wandering aimlessly around the South Seas, like a character out of Conrad, silent and inscrutable."[35] He cannot do it though, because he must make frequent visits to his oculist and dentist, and ". . . you can't be running back from Singapore every few months to get your lenses changed and still retain the proper mood for wandering."[36] Besides that, the narrator complains,

> . . . my horn-rimmed glasses and my Ohio accent betray me, even when I sit on the terrasses of little tropical cafes, wearing a pith helmet, staring straight ahead, and twitching a muscle in my jaw. I found this out when I tried wandering around the West Indies one summer. Instead of being followed by the whispers of men and the glances of women, I was followed by bead salesmen and native women with postcards. Nor did any dark girl, looking at all like Tondelayo

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[34]Ibid., p. 27.

[35]The Thurber Carnival, p. 240.

[36]Ibid.

in "White Cargo," come forward and offer to go to pieces with me. They tried to sell me baskets.[37]

In the West Indies, the narrator tried one day to defeat the machinery of our society. But it was a feeble attempt, and it naturally failed.

In Martinique, when the whistle blew for the tourists to get back on the ship, I had a quick, wild, and lovely moment when I decided I wouldn't get back on the ship. I did, though. And I found that somebody had stolen my pants to my dinner jacket.[38]

In fact, about the only Thurber characters who are successful in defeating the social machines are, significantly enough, the heroes in his fairy tales. The first one, Many Moons, was written in 1943 and it is typical of Thurber's others. It tells the story of a sick princess who wants the moon. Her father, the king, feels she will surely die if she does not get it, so he calls in his Royal Physician, the Lord High Chamberlain, the Royal Wizard, and the Royal Mathematician. All being highly rational men, they tell the king, after enumerating the many tasks they have successfully performed in the past, that the moon can not be obtained. The one to solve the problem is the artist of the group, the impractical, imaginative, and un-mechanical Court Jester. He simply asks the princess how big the moon is, what it is made of, and how far away it is. She replies that it is just a little smaller than

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[37] Ibid., pp. 240-41.

[38] Ibid., p. 241.

her thumbnail, made of gold, and no higher than the big tree outside her window (because it sometimes gets caught in the top branches). The jester has a moon made to meet those specifications, and the Princess is happy again. The same process takes place when the King wonders what the Princess will say when she sees the moon in the sky again that night. All his wise men have mechanical solutions, but they are too ridiculously complex to work. Again, it is the jester who solves the problem. He asks the Princess about it, and she replies with disarming candor that the moon will grow back like a lost tooth.[39]

One of the chief reasons that modern man has neglected his instinctive or natural thinking powers is that he is continually being told by "experts" how to do things that should come naturally. Thurber believes that out of this advice, our thinking is being dictated by the whims of social and psychological engineers wholly as much as our physical actions are being dictated by machinery of steel and chrome. The danger in this mental dependence is even greater than the danger of the physical dependence; mechanization of the mind is more insidious because it makes man lose his capacity for original thought. Thurber first struck out at the experts in his first book, Is Sex Necessary?, written in 1929 with E. B. White. White tells

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[39] James Thurber, Many Moons, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943).

of the circumstances leading up to the writing of the book:

> Thurber and I were neither more, nor less, interested in the subject of love and marriage than anybody else of our age in that era. I recall that we were both profoundly interested in making a living, and I think we somehow managed, simultaneously, to arrive at the conclusion that (to borrow a phrase from Mr. Wolcott Gibbs) the heavy writers had got sex down and were breaking its arm. We were determined that sex should retain its high spirits. So we decided to spoof the medical books . . .[40]

Thurber wrote alternate chapters in the book which burlesqued such straight-faced sex advisors as Samuel D. Smalhausen, V. F. Calverton, Fritz Wittels, and a Mrs. Stopes.[41] These experts were trying to tell the public how to think on sex and to make sex itself a highly complicated subject fraught with all sorts of psychological trappings. Sex to them was only a theory, rather than something physical. Thurber and White wrote in their forwarding note that the experts

> . . . made the whole matter of sex complicated beyond the wildest dreams of our fathers. The country became flooded with books. Sex, which had hitherto been a physical expression, became largely mental. The whole order of things changed. To prepare for marriage, young girls no longer assembled a hope chest--they read books on abnormal psychology. If they finally did marry, they found themselves with a large number of sex books on hand, but almost no pretty underwear. Most of them, luckily, never married at all--just continued to read.[42]

The tone of the book is set in the first chapter. Written

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[40]James Thurber and E. B. White, Is Sex Necessary?, (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1929), p. 12.

[41]Robert M. Coates, "Thurber, Inc.," Saturday Review of Literature, 21:11, December 2, 1939.

[42]Is Sex Necessary?, pp. 19-20.

by Thurber, it gives the case history of one George Smith. George goes with a girl for three years without so much as holding her hand. It worries him, and he begins to feel he is getting a complex. As an undertaking significantly parallel with his attempted conquest of the girl, George begins fiddling around with a pig-in-the-clover puzzle--one of those glass-topped gadgets equipped with several small holes and a corresponding number of small ball-bearings which fit into the holes. The trick, which George somehow associates with the struggle with his girl, is to roll the ball-bearings into the holes in such a manner that they are all lodged at the same time. This he cannot do, and before long he has become obsessed with the devices. He buys thousands of them, but cannot work a single one. He is having no more success with his girl. Then one day, he accidentally drops one of the gadgets and breaks the glass top. He finds that he can push the ball bearings into the holes with his fingers, a much simpler task than rolling them in with the glass intact. He gets a hammer and breaks the glass in all the puzzles and solves them all by that method. With a new confidence and sense of power, he again takes up the conflict with the girl he loves. Shortly thereafter, the two are married.[43] The moral of the tale is clear. Quit playing complicated mechanized games, Thurber is telling his reader, and get on with the humanistic business of living.

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[43]Ibid., pp. 49-58.

Thurber's most extensive treatment of mental tinkerers came eight years later in 1937 with the publication of Let Your Mind Alone! Like his first book, Let Your Mind Alone! is a reply to mental mechanics; the victims in this case are David Seabury (How to Worry Successfully), Dr. Louis Bisch (Be Glad You're Neurotic), Dr. James L. Mursell (Streamline Your Mind), and Dorothea Brande (Wake Up and Live!), all of them experts in mental efficiency and human relations. Thurber, working with the idea that man is better off in these confusing times with an undisciplined mind than with one as streamlined and efficient as an I. B. M. machine, tears apart the experts' theories by methodically taking each one and showing how it simply does not work. In the first chapter, Thurber ridicules Dr. Mursell's attempt to teach a young man how to conduct a young lady to a restaurant table. Thurber denies the importance of such teaching.

> These things, as we know, always work out; if the young man doesn't work them out, the lady will. (If she wants him to go first, she will say, "You go first.")[44]

It is that simple, says Thurber. Just do what comes naturally. In another instance, Dr. Mursell tells of a man who is going to re-roof his house. Not having a ladder, he has no way of knowing how much roofing material he will need. Finally a guest at the house, presumably one with a streamlined mind, notices that the angle formed by the two sides of the roof

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[44]James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 7.

(which are equal in length) is a right angle. The supreme victory of the streamlined mind comes when it recalls Pythagoras' theorum about the sum of the squares of the two sides of such a triangle being equal to the square of the hypotenuse. Thurber, who claims that most people would get their theorums mixed up and order enough material to roof seven houses, would take the unstreamlined way out and borrow a ladder, ". . . a much simpler way to go about measuring a roof than waiting for somebody to show up who knows the theorum of Pythagoras."[45]

In similarly devastating fashion, Thurber rips the theories of other mental mechanics. It is a favorite pastime with him, and one he has indulged in from the early years of his career. He is particularly fond of showing what happens to people like himself when they take the saccharine-sweet advice of the helpful-hint columnists who plague our daily newspapers. He does it with two parodies in the 1931 collection, The Owl in the Attic. The first is a hilarious spoof of the daily pet column in the New York Post. One entry will serve as an illustration:

> Q. My police dog has taken to acting very strange, on account of my father coming home from work every night for the past two years and saying to him, "If you're a police dog, where's your badge?", after which he laughs (my father).
>
> Ella R.
>
> A. The constant reiteration of a piece of badinage sometimes has the same effect on present-day neurotic dogs that it has on people. It is dangerous

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[45] Ibid., p. 10.

> and thoughtless to twit a police dog on his powers, authority, and the like. From the way your dog seems to hide behind tables, large vases, and whatever that thing is that looks like a suitcase, I should imagine that your father has carried this thing far enough--perhaps even too far.[46]

The second parody, called "Ladies and Gentlemen's Guide to Modern English Usage," was inspired by H. W. Fowler's "Dictionary of Modern English Usage." Dealing with adverbs, Thurber discusses the pros and cons of saying "I feel bad" or "I feel badly." If one is among friends, says Thurber, neither will get him much response. If you really do feel bad (or badly)

> . . . it is wise to abandon all adverbial constructions and resort to exclamations and interjections such as "help!," "hey!," "hi! hi!," "halloo, there!," and the like.[47]

If the recipient of the comment is your wife, Thurber says it is best to say simply "I think I am dying, dear," or "I guess it's all up with me, Marion."[48] No matter what is said, Thurber's point is clear. If a man is in real trouble, he is not wise to fool around in an attempt to make his complaint grammatically correct.

Thurber again attacked the helpful hint columnists in 1937 with a story in Let Your Mind Alone! This one is an Elinor Ames who wrote an etiquette column for the Daily News. A

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[46] The Owl in the Attic, p. 80.

[47] Ibid., p. 149.

[48] Ibid.

lady wrote to her complaining that her dinner guests would not stop drinking cocktails long enough to come to the dining room. What should she do? Miss Ames suggested

> Why not try a laughing imitation of a butler? Stand at the door and say in clear tones, "Dinner is served." If your manner is pleasant but pointed--and there are no more cocktails--your guests will follow you into the dining room.[49]

As one might expect, Thurber delightedly tears into this one. "A roomful of guests," he writes, "who have had only two cocktails are not going to be amused by, or cater to anybody doing imitations of any kind whatsoever. To enjoy imitations, or even pay attention to imitations, people must have about five cocktails, at which point they will, of course, begin giving imitations themselves . . ."[50] After pointing out all the different predicaments such advice can lead to, Thurber flatly concludes, "I don't like to think of Hostess standing there at the door, laughingly imitating a butler, hoping everybody will clap hands and file gaily out to dinner. Life isn't that simple."[51]

The same theme of rebellion is present in "Footnotes on a Course of Study," "Food Fun for the Menfolks," (both in Let Your Mind Alone!), "Helpful Hints and the Hoyeys," (My World--And Welcome to It), "It's Your Mother," (Alarms and Diversions) and a number of other stories and pieces.

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[49] Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 118.

[50] Ibid., pp. 120-21.

[51] Ibid., p. 124.

Thurber is clearly alarmed about the way man is succumbing to machines. He has written about it throughout his career, becoming more concerned as the world becomes more mechanized with each passing year. If we are, as Thurber believes, becoming an inferior race because of the Frankenstein monsters of our own creation, what will become of us in the future, a time in which mechanization will be even greater? In a piece written in 1957 and included in the collection called Alarms and Diversions, Thurber gives an answer that is only half humorous. It has the capacity for inspiring the same sort of terror present in George Orwell's 1984 and Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Thurber calls his story "The Ladies of Orlon," and he begins with:

> Surgical science, still achieving, still pursuing, has successfully replaced a section of the femoral artery in a human leg with a tube made of nylon, and the medical profession confidently prophesied for the near future a practicable aorta made of the fabric known as orlon. We are all so used to the heart as a lyrical organ, made of the stuff that breaks, that a metaphorical shift to a heart made of the stuff that tears, or rips, or has to be hemstitched, may have a strange and disastrous effect . . .[52]

The thought gives Thurber nightmares, but he believes that "Nature (I do not say God because I think protective Providence washed Its hands of us long ago) realizes that we have to be

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[52]James Thurber, Alarms and Diversions, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 1.

turned into something as durable as the toughest drygoods if we are to endure the wear and tear caused by the frightened tempo of our time."[53]

That is Thurber's answer. If the mechanization continues, he says, man will be literally reduced to a machine. Thurber sees it as a pretty frightening thought.

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[53] Ibid., p. 2.

CHAPTER II

MAN AND WOMAN

Closely allied to the battle of man and machine in Thurber's work is the battle of man and woman. No other writer has produced such a prolonged running account of the Battle of the Sexes. This eternal conflict Thurber acknowledges to be going to the side of the female; and therein lies his criticism. It is allied to the man-machine conflict, because the effects, at least on the man, are similar--frustration, loss of self respect, and finally, incapacity for action.

Domination of man by woman is a situation peculiar to this country, Thurber believes. In a 1958 interview, he disclosed what prompted him to launch his crusade:

> I think it's really from having lived two years--1918 and a part of 1920--in France, and comparing the life of French, English, and other foreigners from that viewpoint with family life in America. I could see clearly the domination of the American woman over her man as compared with that of other countries. America is a matriarchy, it always has been, it always will be. It became obvious to me from the time I was a little boy that the American woman was in charge . . . I think it's one of the great weaknesses of America . . .[1]

Who are Thurber's men and women? Neither are particularly malicious, but a definitely contrasting general picture can be painted of each. The great difference is that the woman is almost always more virile, materialistic, and practical (Thurber's

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[1]James Thurber quoted by Henry Brandon, "Everybody is Getting Very Serious," New Republic, 138:13, May 26, 1958.

women have a strange affinity for machines; the two usually team up to defeat the men), while the men are the more sensitive, the dreamers, rarely caring as much for material gain, completely befuddled by machinery, and often having something of the artist about them. The women usually display a blind trust in what they consider to be authority, their doctors, psychologists, and almost anything they read. On the other hand, the men have a combination of gullibility and skepticism; they rather suspect that the experts are really as confused as they are, but they are always looking for things to get better. The women are certainly more socially conforming than the men, if not in actions, at least in attitude. They both turn out for social events; the difference is, the men rarely enjoy them. They go anyway because they are meek and afraid of their wives.

Thurber deals almost exclusively with white-collar families, and an argument could be made that his criticism does not apply to people who get their hands dirty, a species he finds full of mystery. Most Thurber people live within a fifty-mile radius of New York, the land sociologists call exurbia. Others reside temporarily in the places Thurber himself has lived--Bermuda, France, Connecticut, and Columbus, Ohio. Most of them are college people making their living at what are considered by the masses as "soft" jobs. They all fit into the category mentioned in Chapter I--people who have been too long with

their bare feet away from the soil. They are usually week-end drinkers and are well enough off to employ a maid. They lack none of the modern conveniences. In short, they are the upper-middle class, the "respectable" people.

I. FEMALE DOMINATION

Thurber has been concerned with female domination since almost the beginning of his writing career. It is interesting to note, however, the completely different tone that prevailed in his first published short story, one called "Josephine Has Her Day," printed in a 1923 Kansas City Star Sunday magazine.[2] Anyone reading it today who is even slightly acquainted with Thurber's other writing will swear it had another author. It tells the story of a man and his wife who own a sickly pup. They give it away, then decide they want it back. The husband finds that the pup has been stolen from the man he had given it to by the town bully, a great hulking man who was physically superior to the original owner. In a now-fantastic grocery scene, Thurber has the husband approach the bully, demand his dog, and then, when the man refuses, knock him out with a mallet after a wild and wooly fight. The husband, like a caveman of old, triumphantly returns home with the dog to an adoring wife. There is no question about who wears the pants in the family; the sweet young wife is completely subservient to her husband.[3]

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[2]Thurber's Dogs, p. xi.

[3]Ibid., pp. 89-114.

Thurber's men have never had it so good since. Between 1923 and the present, Thurber has chronicled the goings-on of what Newsweek has called "the nominative She and the accusative Him."[4] He began in 1929 with the publication of his joint project with E. B. White, Is Sex Necessary? (which significantly begins with the epigram "Things look pretty bad right now," a quote from one Major General Briggs at Shiloh[5]), and he has not stopped yet. At the end of World War I, Thurber wrote, the American man ". . . turned to sex, out of sheer momentum, and overestimated its importance as he had magnified the immensity of war."[6] Americans thought sex was everything (Thurber maintained that in different cases it varied ". . . from only 78 per cent of everything to as low as 3.10 per cent."[7]) They believed if a man and woman were sexually compatible, things would work out. Not so, said Thurber--no matter how well sexually adjusted a man is to his wife, there is going to be trouble. It usually begins when the male is asked to help out around the house.

> . . . a wife will concentrate on buying kitchen ware, painting chairs, selecting silver patterns, building bookshelves, etc., to the complete exclusion of everything else in life. The young husband, hearing all this tinkling and rattling and shoving going on around him, smelling paint, listening to hammering, etc., will begin at once to have a fear of being trapped

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[4]"Thurber and His Humor," Newsweek, 49:53, February 4, 1957.

[5]Is Sex Necessary?, p. 7.

[6]Ibid., p. 140.

> or "caught." He will strive to get out of the house, and his wife should allow him to go. What she almost invariably does, however, is to stop him and ask him to hold a piece of chintz or toile de Jouy up over the mantel so that she can see whether she likes it there. She won't like it there, and he then has to hold it, first high, then low, then in between, over a table in another part of the room. When this point is settled, he will likely be asked to hang a few pictures. Now a curious thing happens to many sensitive husbands when they are hanging pictures or holding things against walls. They get the impression that the walls are being made thicker, for the purpose of making it harder for them to get out--interfering with a speedy escape into the open. This is usually the beginning of the most dangerous of all hallucinations in claustrophobia cases--the Persecution Complex.[8]

The Persecution Complex leads the man to the fear that he is being dominated by his wife--and he is. The female dominance in Thurber's next book, The Owl in the Attic, is more pronounced. In it, Thurber has eight short stories about Mr. and Mrs. Monroe, prototypes who are to carry on the battle of the sexes under different names throughout Thurber's career. The first of the eight stories sets the tone. The Monroes are at tea in the home of some older friends after having just come from a cocktail party. Mrs. Monroe is under the influence and is acting quite irrational. Her husband, says Mrs. Monroe, has eight hundred and seventy-four thousand pencils. She is, Mr. Monroe knows, ". . . alluding in a fanciful and distressingly untimely manner to a habit of his, which was to bring

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[8] Ibid., pp. 144-47.

home from the office several pencils each day and to leave them on his desk, or failing that, on her dressing table. She frequently spoke to him disapprovingly about such things."[9] But their hosts are gentile folk, so Mr. Monroe covers up.

> "Yes--I--have got a few pencils together--nothing much," said Mr. Monroe with becoming modesty . . . "I became interested in pencils in the Sudan . . . the heat is so intense there that it melts the lead in the average Venus or Faber . . ."[10]

Another story in the same group shows that Mrs. Monroe not only dominates her husband in the social and household intricacies, she seems to have more of what used to be thought of as a strictly male characteristic--physical courage. The couple is at their summer place where they have separate bedrooms, when a bat somehow gets into Mr. Monroe's room one night. He begins flinging blankets around, creating a dreadful disturbance in an attempt to fight off what to him is a deadly threat.

> "John?" called his wife.
> "What's the matter now?" he asked, querulously.
> "What <u>are</u> you doing?" she demanded.
> "There's a bat in the room, if you want to know," he said. "And it keeps scraping the covers."
> . . . .
> "It'll go away," said his wife. "They go away." . . . his wife's tone was that of a mother addressing a child.[11]

But it does not go away, and Mr. Monroe, ". . . panic-stricken, ran for his wife's room. He went in and closed the

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[9] <u>The Owl in the Attic</u>, p. 4.

[10] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 4-7.

[11] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 26.

door behind him, and stood there. 'Get in with me, dear,' said Mrs. Monroe."[12]

Mr. Monroe is terrified again when his wife leaves him for a few hours one night while they are at their country house (he hears burglars).[13] In that last of the Monroe stories, one called "The Middle Years," Mr. Monroe attempts an affair with another woman while his wife is away. He fails, though, because even while his wife is gone, her spirit haunts him, and he has been so beaten down that he no longer has the confidence to go through with an affair he would have relished ten years earlier. Mr. Monroe realizes he is beaten when

> . . . it struck him, as he glimpsed himself in a long glass, that a tall thin man looks like an ass in socks and garters. The thought depressed him terribly.[14]

Thurber chronicles the man-woman relationship not only through his writings, but with his famous drawings. In a 1932 collection of them called <u>The Seal in the Bedroom</u>, is what is probably his most famous cartoon, the one from which the collection takes its title. The drawing shows that even in the realm of fantasy, Thurber's men are dominated. It depicts a man and his wife in bed. Looking over their shoulders from behind the headboard is a large, rather confused seal, probably wondering how he got there. The scowling woman is saying: "All

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[12]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 27.

[13]<u>Ibid</u>., pp. 55-63.

[14]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 71.

right, have it your way--You heard a seal bark!" The look on her face betrays the fact that she believes this is another of her husband's impracticalities and that there could not possibly be a seal in the room. The husband is looking resigned, probably believing by now that he was hearing things, but wishing so much that he could be right just once.[15]

The cover of Thurber's 1935 collection, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, has a Thurber drawing which tells more about the man-woman situation in America than far more paper filled with words could do. It depicts, appropriately enough, a middle-aged man on a flying trapeze, or rather a middle-aged man who has just left a flying trapeze and is hurtling through thin air. Hanging by her legs from a lower trapeze is a middle-aged woman, obviously the man's wife. If things go right, she is supposed to catch the man. But one gets the feeling things are not going to go right. At least the look on the face of the man gives that impression. He is worried and he has reasons, for the woman has a sort of scowling smirk on her face that may indicate she is about to get revenge for something the man has done--or forgotten to do.[16]

In the 1935 story about Mr. Pendly, Thurber shows that his protagonist is no match for machines. He also is no match for his wife, who had done the family driving since 1930 when Mr.

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[15]James Thurber, The Seal in the Bedroom, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 1.

[16]The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, front cover.

Pendly ". . . mistook a pond for a new concrete road and turned off onto it."[17] The affinity Thurber's women have for machines (indeed, some of the women are almost mechanical themselves) is demonstrated by Mrs. Pendly's dexterity at the wheel. And the fact that Thurber uses the third person feminine pronoun in referring to things mechanical ("'Try her [the car] now,' he said indifferently"[18]) may or may not be significant. At any rate, when she and her husband are buying a used car, Mrs. Pendly knows enough to ask the salesman about brakes and vacuum pumps, while her husband can only comment on the monogram of the previous owner on the car's door. "'That monogram,' said Mr. Pendly, 'would have to come off.'"[19]

The same situation exists in another story in the 1935 collection, "Smashup." Tommy Trinway has not driven a car since a boyhood accident with a horse and buggy. His wife does all the driving, until one day, Trinway decides to drive in New York City. A woman darts in front of the car, and it just misses her, swerving off the side of the road. A policeman congratulates Trinway on his driving, but it is not until later that the reader finds what has really happened.

> "Well," he said, "nobody got killed." "No, thank God," said Betty."But somebody _would_ have if I hadn't jerked on the hand brake. You never think of the hand brake. You'd have hit that pillar sure, and killed both of us."[20]

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[17]_Ibid._, p. 56.

[18]_Ibid._, p. 61.

[19]_Ibid._, p. 58.

[20]_Ibid._, p. 200.

In still another story in the 1935 collection, Thurber tells of the changes brought about in the lives of the Bentleys when Mrs. Bentley discovers that her great-great-great-great grandmother had slain nineteen Pequot Indians single-handedly ". . . in an incredible and dimly authenticated struggle near New London, Connecticut, in 1643, or 1644."[21] The thought gives Mr. Bentley the shakes. He feels great sympathy for the heroine's husband, one Coppice Allyn.

> What must he have thought that April evening. . . when he came home from the fields to find a new gleam in his wife's eyes and nineteen new corpses under her feet? He must have felt some vague, alarming resentment; he must have realized, however dimly, that this was the beginning of a new weave in the fabric of life in the Colonies. Poor old Coppice![22]

The final, most humiliating dominance a woman can have over a man is pure and simple brute strength. And even this Thurber records in the 1937 Let Your Mind Alone! The narrator of the story had, for some reason or other, always wanted to own a javelin. One of the reasons he refuses to buy one:

> . . . I had been afraid that I would not be able to throw a javelin as far as Babe Didrikson used to throw one, and I knew that the discovery that a woman could throw anything farther than I could throw it would have a depressing effect on me and might show up in my work and in my relationships with women.[23]

Not only is woman dominating, Thurber claims in another piece in the same collection, she is becoming almost indestructible. The time has come to make a definite distinction between

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[21] Ibid., p. 63.

[22] Ibid., p. 66.

[23] Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 152.

Man and Woman because ". . . socially, economically, physically, and intellectually, Man is slowly going . . . to Hell . . . but Woman is not going with him."[24] And Thurber darkly gives the reader somber statistics to prove his point. During one week in 1937, Thurber kept track of the number of newspaper items dealing with people who had lived to be one hundred years old or older. He found the names of six men (four were mentioned because they died), the oldest being one hundred and three. On the other hand, the record contained the names of thirty seven women, and twenty four of the items were reports of how the girls celebrated their birthdays--". . . by singing, dancing, riding in airplanes, playing kettle-drums, running foot races, chinning themselves or entertaining their great-great-grandchildren."[25] The oldest of the women was one hundred and fourteen. Thurber concludes that

> There is about the female . . . a hint of survival, a threat of perpetuation, a general "Here I am and here I always will be," which are . . . unmistakable. The male is obviously not looking at anything; he is lost in the moody contemplation of an existence which is slipping away from him; already its outlines are far and vague. The female unquestionably has her eyes on an objective; you can feel the solid, sharp edges of her purpose.[26]

The theme of female domination is continued through Thurber's 1940 Fables for Our Time, particularly in one called

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[24]Ibid., p. 230.

[25]Ibid., p. 231.

[26]Ibid., p. 233.

"The Lion Who Wanted to Zoom." There is a lion who coveted an eagle's wings. He is wily and offered to trade his mane for the eagle's commodity. When the eagle agrees, the lion, who is much the larger, takes the wings, but refuses to give up the mane. This discouraged the eagle, but he gets an idea. He challenges the lion to fly off yonder rock. Because the eagle's wings can hardly support the weight of the lion, and because he does not know how to fly in the first place, the lion ". . . crashed at the foot of the rock and burst into flames."[27] The eagle quickly takes back his wings and, for good measure, the lion's mane, and then happily goes home. So far, it is a success story. The eagle has outwitted a far larger animal, saved his wings, and gained a mane. He is a man among men, or rather, an eagle among eagles; that is, until he gets home where he is done in by his wife. Thinking to have some fun with her, he covers himself with the lion's mane, sticks his head in the door, and shouts in a deep, awful voice, "Harrrooo!" His wife, thinking he is a lion and being the nervous type, pulls out a pistol and shoots him dead.[28] The theme of the story is familiar: no matter how well a man may do downtown, he may well be a dead pigeon when he comes home to mama.

Three years after publishing the first book of fables, Thurber came out with another collection of drawings, this one

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[27]Fables for Our Time, p. 15.

[28]Ibid.

called Men, Women, and Dogs. Dorothy Parker wrote an introduction to the collection (she had done the same for the earlier one), and she detected this development in Thurber's drawings:

> . . . I see certain changes in his characters. The men seem to me, in the main, a little smaller, even a little more innocent, even a little more willing to please than before . . . the ladies are increasingly awful. They get worse and worse, as we sit here. And there they are behaving, with never a moment's doubt, like femme fatales.[29]

One of the drawings depicts a domineering wife seated in a clothing store watching her husband try on a polo shirt. Both the husband and the sales clerk are dismayed at her frowning comment: "I don't want him to be comfortable if he's going to look too funny."[30] In another, one frightened little man is introducing a sinister young lady in black to another frightened little man. The caption: "Miss Gorce is in the embalming game."[31] A third shows a large, robust woman leading her small, uncomfortable husband into a room full of people. "Yoo-hoo," she is saying, "it's me and the ape man."[32] And in a surrealist drawing, Thurber shows a timid little man slinking home to an object that begins as a house, but suddenly blends into a huge and menacing wife.[33] There is no caption, and none is needed.

Two years later in 1945, Thurber depicts in The Thurber Carnival, the career woman. The story, "The Catbird Seat,"

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[29]Dorothy Parker, preface to Men, Women, and Dogs (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), p. ix.

[30]Ibid., p. 72.

[31]Ibid., p. 95.

[32]Ibid., p. 112.

[33]Ibid., p. 118.

shows that Thurber feels that the career woman is to the office what the housewife is to the home--the domineering mistress. The woman is a Mrs. Ulgine Barrows and she is hired as a special advisor to the hitherto-smooth running F. and S. accounting firm. Not really knowing what she is doing, she makes such comments as: "Do you really need all those filing cabinets?"[34] The sad part of the situation is that she has the boss under a witch-like spell and can do no wrong in his eyes. She succeeds in firing four people and several others quit because of her. She was guilty of ". . . willful, blatant, and persistent attempts to destroy the efficiency and system of F. and S."[35] She is different from most Thurber women in that she is a destructive force, rather than an organizing one. But she falls into the same general category with the others; she is domineering and completely defeats the male--up to a certain point which will be discussed later in this chapter.

One of the most constant themes in Thurber's writings, female dominance plays a big part in plots of several stories in the 1953 collection, Thurber Country. A representative piece, "The Pleasure Cruise and How to Survive It," will serve as an illustration. Men invariably get things mixed up like sailing schedules, pier locations, and other such data necessary to take a pleasure cruise, says Thurber. But women do not.

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[34]The Thurber Carnival, p. 11.

[35]Ibid., p. 10.

They know. Without them the man would be lost on such an adventure.

> On the way to the right destination . . . the taxi driver suddenly has a hunch that the Santa Maria sails at 11 p.m., on Tuesdays, and not at 11 a.m. on Thursdays. This throws the male passenger into a panic. The seasoned woman traveler pays no attention to all this unnecessary masculine excitement. She leans back in the cab, closes her eyes and wonders if she forgot to pack her white pique evening dress.[36]

Of course, she was right. Her husband and the cab driver were wrong.

And in the first of the Further Fables for Our Time (1956), Thurber tells basically the same story. The fable is called "The Sea and the Shore," and it tells of the dawn of man's life, when the human still lived in the sea. The female of whatever species the human was then is not satisfied. She wants to go to shore and think about things that ". . . would one day become rose-point lace and taffeta, sweet perfumes and jewelry."[37] The male, who ". . . had a feeling only for wetness and wash,"[38] is satisfied where he is. "You're always wanting things that aren't yet," he tells her.[39] But she goes to shore anyway, and several eons later, the male, unable to get along by himself, "flobbers" up to shore, notices that somehow, the old girl looks a little better than before.

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[36] Thurber Country, p. 261.

[37] Further Fables for Our Time, p. 2.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

> Suddenly the sea seemed something less than satisfying. He turned . . . toward the female, who seemed certain to reach the greening undergrowth in another two thousand years. "Hey, Mag," he shouted. "Wait for baby!"[40]

The moral Thurber points out is: "Let us ponder this basic fact about the human: Ahead of every man, not behind him, is a woman."[41]

Thurber has not changed his viewpoint. In the collection called Alarms and Diversions, published only two years ago in 1957, he has two pieces dealing with female dominance. In the first, "The Ladies in Orlon," which tells of the literal mechanization of the human of tomorrow, it is more than coincidence that Thurber's mechanical human of the future will be female. Man's function will be carried on by artificial insemination.[42] He ends the piece on this somber note: "The women will now please keep their seats until the men have left the auditorium. They need, God knows, a head start."[43] In another story in the book, "Get Thee to a Monastery," Thurber simply makes the point that even the American stage, once the stronghold of the likes of John Barrymore, is now being taken over by the woman.[44]

II. MALE REBELLION

Thurber's men do not always buckle under to this dominance. Occasionally, they strike back, albeit usually in an ineffectual

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[41] Ibid., p. 3.

[42] Alarms and Diversions, p. 2.

[43] Ibid., p. 5.

[44] Ibid., pp. 36-44.

and meek way. An examination of some of the forms and results of the rebellion will point that up.

The first Thurber man to do something in retaliation is Mr. Monroe of The Owl in the Attic. It is not much. In a story called "The Imperturbable Spirit," Mr. Monroe creates a daydreaming role for himself in an effort to regain the self confidence he has lost because of such experiences as the battle with the bat. He decides to become darkly mysterious, imperturbable, a man of the world. He becomes so imperturbably dark and mysterious that

> . . . it was almost impossible for him to work. He liked to brood and reflect and occasionally to catch glimpses of himself in store windows, slot-machine mirrors, etc., brooding and reflecting.[45]

Mr. Monroe has been doing this ever since his wife went to Europe for a vacation, intending it as a kind of surprise for her when she returns. The homecoming scene:

> He remembered (oh, keenly) as he stepped toward her, how she was wont to regard him as a person likely to "go to pieces" over trifles. Well, she would find him a changed man. He kissed her warmly . . . in such a strangely masterful manner, that she was at first a little surprised . . . in three minutes . . . she figured out that he had been reading something, but she said nothing.[46]

Mr. Monroe's new role holds up only until his wife informs him that she has smuggled into the country a dozen bottles of Benedictine, three of which she left in a hatbox at the customs

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[45] The Owl in the Attic, p. 11.

[46] Ibid., p. 13.

checking point. Will he go back for them? He does, fearfully picking up the box and walking out into the street. Then:

> "Hey!" cried a loud voice. Mr. Monroe broke into a run. "Taxi!" continued the loud voice. But Mr. Monroe was a hundred yards away. He ran three blocks without stopping, walked half a block, and ran again. He came home by a devious route, rested for a while outside his door, and went in . . .[47]

He assumes his role again that night, but by this time, it fools no one, not even himself.

> . . . Mr. Monroe read to his wife from the morals, ethics, and imperturbability book. He read in a deep, impressive voice, and slowly, for there was a lot his wife wouldn't grasp at once.[48]

That is the extent of Mr. Monroe's rebellion, his assertion of his masculine superiority.

In a Harper's article published a year later in 1932 entitled "Listen to This, Dear," Thurber maintains that the most effective way of retaliation is to ignore the wife. Of course, one cannot let her _know_ that she is being ignored. The situation arises when the husband is attempting to read the paper, and the wife wants to talk. The simplest way out, says Thurber, is to place the paper on the floor, continue reading it with bowed head as though deeply considering what the wife is saying. It is best to occasionally respond with a "yes?, no!, or um hm." One must be careful though with inner quotes. If the wife says

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[47] _Ibid._, p. 19.

[48] _Ibid._, pp. 19-20.

"So I asked her, 'What time is it?'" and the husband replies that is eight o'clock, he is in trouble. Thurber concludes that "I know a few husbands who simply evade the whole problem by giving up reading. They just don't read anything anymore. It seems to me that this is cowardly."[49]

Mr. Pendly, in the Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, can do no more in retaliation than Mr. Monroe. Pendly is the man who cannot drive a car. His wife can, and he resents it. The resentment takes the form of no action, but only another daydream.

> . . . he used to dream at night of descending, in an autogiro, on some garden party she was attending: he would come down in a fine landing, leap out, shout "Hahya, Bee!," sweep her into the machine and zoom away. He used to think of things like that when he was riding with her.[50]

The first active hero among Thurber's men is one Mr. Brush in a 1935 story called "Everything is Wild." Brush is persuaded by his wife to visit some friends. After dinner, the host suggests a game of dealer's choice poker. Unfortunately, there are women present, and they want to play. Mr. Brush is a poker player of the classic five-card stud, five-card draw school and he is dismayed when the women call such games as Duck-in-the-Pond, Poison Ivy, seven card stud with twos and threes wild, and other such feminine versions of the game. When it comes his

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[49]James Thurber, "Listen to This, Dear," Harper's, 164:250, January, 1932.

[50]The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 57.

turn to deal, he calls a ridiculously complex game known as Soap-in-Your-Eye (out west, they call it Kick-in-the-Pants). Making up his own rules as he goes along (the red queens, the fours, fives, sixes, and eights are wild), Brush deals royal flushes to three players, including himself. His is high on a technicality he discovers after the cards are turned up. The game breaks up shortly after he rakes in the chips. On the way home, the Brushes ride in silence until the husband speaks.

> "Darn good game, Soap-in-Your-Eye," he said. Mrs. Brush stared at him, evilly, for a full minute. "You terrible person," she said. Mr. Brush broke into loud and hearty laughter. He ho-hoed all the way down the Grand Concourse. He had had a swell time after all.[51]

Here is a rarity among Thurber men; a man capable of real action in the face of feminine opposition. There are not many.

In another story in the same book, Thurber turns a basically tragic situation into high humor with his account of a nagging wife and a meek husband. Called "Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife," the story tells of how Mr. Preble has decided to run away with his stenographer after "getting rid" of his wife. Thurber lets the reader know immediately that Preble is not the man for the job.

> "Let's go down in the cellar," Mr. Preble said to his wife.
>
> "What for?" she said, not looking up from her book.
>
> "Oh, I don't know," he said. "We never go down

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[51]Ibid., p. 47.

in the cellar any more. The way we used to."[52]

A rather unconvincing way to begin a murder, to say the least, but Mrs. Preble, nagging all the way, finally gives in and goes to the cellar with her husband. She knows what he is up to.

> "Brr," said Mrs. Preble, starting down the steps. "It's cold down here! You would think of this, at this time of year! Any other husband would have buried his wife in the summer. . . . What have you got there?"
> "I was going to hit you over the head with this shovel," said Mr. Preble.
> "You were, huh?" said Mrs. Preble. "Well,get that out of your mind. Do you want to leave a great big clue right here in the middle of everything where the first detective that comes snooping around will find it? Go out in the street and find some piece of iron or something--something that doesn't belong to you."[53]

Mr. Preble goes out into the street to find a piece of iron or something. As he leaves, his wife, domineering even in her own murder, screams after him, "And shut that door behind you! . . . Where were you born--in a barn?"[54] Thurber never tells the reader if Mr. Preble carried out his plan. One feels that he did not. But it does not make much difference. He is a beaten man.

A story of a more serious nature, "The Breaking Up of the Winships," published two years later in Let Your Mind Alone!, tells of a divorce which results from a minor rebellion by a

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[52]Ibid., p. 82.

[53]Ibid., pp. 85-86.

[54]Ibid., p. 86.

husband. It begins innocently enough at a cocktail party when both Mr. and Mrs. Winship are a bit under the weather. Mrs. Winship is putting forth the argument that Greta Garbo is by far the greatest dramatic artist of the day. Her husband, more in an effort to annoy her than anything else, objects. Donald Duck is better, he says. It is hardly an incident to break up a marriage, but a seed of conflict is sown. It grows on the pride of the Winships, and the result is divorce. Mr. Winship claims

> . . . that he sincerely believed Donald Duck was as great a creation as any animal in all the works of Lewis Carroll, probably even greater, perhaps much greater. . . . "If," he said, grimly, "Marcia persists in her silly belief that that Swede is great and that Donald Duck is merely a caricature, I cannot conscientiously live with her again. I believe that he is great, that the man who created him is a genius, probably our only genius. . . . What does she expect me to do, go whining back to her and pretend that I think Garbo is wonderful, and that Donald Duck is simply a cartoon? Never!"[55]

The wife is just as adamant. The argument, she says,

> . . . was not silly and nonsensical to her. It might have been once, yes, but it wasn't now. It had made her see Gordon clearly for what he was, a cheap, egotistical, resentful cad who would descend to ridiculing his wife . . . furthermore, her belief in Garbo's greatness was a thing she could not deny and would not deny, simply for the sake of living under the same roof with Gordon Winship. The whole thing was part and parcel of her integrity as a woman and as an--as an, well, as a woman.[56]

Here is an example of a man who resisted domination, albeit

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[55] Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 88-89.

[56] Ibid., p. 89.

not too wisely. The separation is a result, not so much of the rebellion, but of foolish pride on the part of both, a pride that probably does not exist in the less sophisticated people that Thurber does not write about. A similar story, "A Couple of Hamburgers," appeared in the same book. The result is not as tragic, but the man and wife involved are just as venomous as any Ring Lardner couple. Again, the man is resisting female domination. He and his wife are driving down a highway and they are hungry; he wants to stop at what he calls a "dog-wagon," a roadside diner, for a couple of hamburgers. She wants to go to a restaurant. While they are arguing, the wife, who hears better than her husband, notices a "funny sound" coming from the car engine. She had heard the sound before, and a bearing had burned out. He ignores her when she notices it this time. The wife finally concedes to stopping at a "cute" diner for food. They pass up several because she does not approve of them. Finally,

> He pulled up and stopped beside the diner, and turned on her. "Listen," he said, grittingly, "I'm going to put down a couple of hamburgers in this place even if there isn't one single inch of chintz or cretonne in the whole--" "Oh, be still," she said. . .[57]

They go in, he eats his hamburgers (with onions, which his wife detests), and she has only a cup of coffee because she thinks the place is not clean. On the road again

> . . . he began to sing, very loudly, "H-A-double-R

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[57]*Ibid.*, p. 115.

> I-G-A-N spells Harrr-i-gan--" She gritted her teeth. She hated that worse than any of his songs except "Barney Google." He would go on to "Barney Google" pretty soon, she knew. Suddenly, she leaned forward. The straight line of her lips became curved ever so slightly. She heard . . . [the noise from the engine] again. Only now . . . [it] was louder, more insistent, ominous. He was singing too loud to hear . . . "Is a name that shame has never been con-nec-ted with--Harrr-i-gan, that's me!" She relaxed against the back of the seat, content to wait.[58]

He has resisted her domination and is seemingly successful. But in the end, Thurber lets the reader know, the wife, with the aid of machinery, incidentally, is surely going to win.

In Fables for Our Time, Thurber has several examples of male rebellion. The first comes in a brief fable called "The Shrike and the Chipmunks," a tale about a sensitive male chipmunk who rebels by arranging nuts in artistic patterns as his materialistic mate urges him to pile up as many as possible, regardless of the esthetic effect. She leaves him when he resists her attempt to make him sell out his art. He gets along better without her. True, he cannot go to the banquet because he cannot find his studs, but all the chipmunks who do go are killed by a weasel. A shrike cannot get in the chipmunk's door to catch him because it is blocked with dirty laundry. The chipmunk is doomed, however, when his wife returns and cleans the house. She makes him take a walk in the daylight (he has been sleeping all day), and the shrike kills them both. Who

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[58] Ibid., pp. 116-17.

is the winner? The wife, one supposes.[59]

There are other tales in the book in which the male successfully resists for a time, but then is defeated in the end. One is entitled "The Stork Who Married a Dumb Wife." The protagonist tells his spouse that he has to deliver babies all night when he is really out on the town. She eventually finds out that babies do not come from storks and crowns her husband with a chimney brick.[60] In another, a crow leaves his wife to run off with a Baltimore Oriole. After he is rejected, he returns home to find a note from his wife telling him that she has gone away with Bert and that he will find some arsenic in the medicine chest.[61]

A tale of a man who wins an even greater victory over the female than Mr. Brush does in the poker game, is one called "The Unicorn in the Garden," also included in Fables for Our Time. Where Mr. Brush only won a single battle (one suspects his wife will get back at him in some way), the husband who says he sees a unicorn in the garden decisively wins the entire war. He is a typical Thurber man, small and meek, and he is delighted and not really much surprised to find a unicorn in his garden eating roses one morning. He tells his wife about it and she informs him that the unicorn is a mythical beast. Furthermore,

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[59] Fables for Our Time, pp. 21-22.

[60] Ibid., pp. 41-42.

[61] Ibid., pp. 45-46.

she tells him, he is a booby and she is going to have him put in a booby hatch. Her husband is wiser than she thinks.

> The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby hatch," and who liked them even less on a morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her.[62]

The wife calls the police and a psychiatrist and tells them to bring a strait-jacket. When they arrive, when the wife is sure the husband is still in the garden, she tells them that her husband has seen a unicorn. The plan backfires.

> At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle. . . . Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.
> "Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast."[63]

The psychiatrist tells the man that his wife is crazy as a jay bird, and takes her away to an institution. The husband, Thurber tells the reader, lives happily ever after. It is a complete victory, not only of the man over his wife, but of the artist over the practical person. It is the closest Thurber comes to making life livable for the male.

Thurber records several other male rebellions in his 1943 collections of drawings, Men, Women, and Dogs. One cartoon

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[62] Ibid., p. 65.

[63] Ibid., p. 66.

shows an embittered man looking in the door of the Sapphire Bar where members of a ladies' club are seated around tables drinking what looks to be Singapore Slings, Pink Ladies, and Whiskey Sours. The man, obviously the sentimental type who longs for the strictly male bourbon-and-water bar of the old days, is snarling: "You gah dam pussy cats."[64] Another depicts a man and wife in twin beds. The man, wearing a shy, wishful little smile, is pointing his index finger at his astonished battle-axe of a mate, and saying "Bang! Bang! Bang!"[65] A third shows a smug, smiling man sitting in a living room opposite his angry wife, who is saying, "Why don't you let <u>me</u> know what it is, if it's so pleasant?"[66]

A triumph almost as decisive as the unicorn man's is related in a short story called "The Catbird Seat," one in the 1945 collection, <u>The Thurber Carnival</u>. The situation in the story is recorded earlier in this capter. Mrs. Barrows, the career woman who is wrecking the F. and S. efficiency, is found particularly repugnant by the usually-meek little head of the company's filing department, a Mr. Martin. She is becoming a definite threat to the system he had initiated, and beside that, her habit of constantly using Red Barber's baseball phraseology ("sitting in the catbird seat," "tearing up the pea patch," "hollering down the rain barrel") is becoming too much for him. To his own amazement, he finds himself planning to murder her.

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[64]<u>Men</u>, <u>Women</u>, <u>and</u> <u>Dogs</u>, p. 9.

[65]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 8.

[66]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 40.

Then, when he backs out at the last minute, he uses the same basic device to defeat Mrs. Barrows that the unicorn man uses to defeat his wife. He goes to her apartment, smokes a cigarette, has a drink, speaks calumny about the head of the firm (three things nobody has ever known Mr. Martin to do before), and finally announces a plan to become ". . . coked to the gills" on heroin and ". . . blow the old goat [the boss] higher than hell."[67] Mrs. Barrows is, of course, shocked. She informs her employer the next day of Martin's devious plan, after also telling him of his disgraceful actions. It works. Martin's employer does not believe the story. He thinks that Mrs. Barrows, like the unicorn man's wife, is crazy as a jay bird, and he dismisses her.[68] The only restriction on Martin's victory is that he cannot tell anyone about it.

A 1953 story called "The Case of Dimity Ann," published in Thurber Country, relates a man-woman conflict on a much better natured and more subtle level. The principals are a writer and his wife and they are arguing, both a little drunkenly, after a cocktail party. When the wife tries to analyse one of her husband's old idiosyncrasies (he used to tie up a cat several times a day with the cord of his dressing gown) and to give it Freudian significance, he retaliates by ridiculing her old beaus and questioning the psychological terminology

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[67] The Thurber Carnival, p. 14.

[68] Ibid., pp. 9-17.

she is using ("You are the Goddamnedest fuzziest psychologist in the world. . ."[69]) He insists that it was the cat's fault, not his, that he kept tying it up. The cat, he claims, ". . . actually wanted to be tied up, and the only thing that worries me is that I was weak enough to give in to her."[70] Cats are like that, the writer says. He once knew one that liked to have a Scotty drag it by its tail.

> "The damn cat would lie on its back and wave its tail at the Scotty until the Scotty sighed and dragged it around. Its name was Asia. You won't believe this, but while the cat was being dragged, it purred."[71]

But for all such overwhelming evidence the writer presents, the wife wins the argument when she

> . . . walked slowly out into the hall, and waited at the foot of the stairs for his last word. On nights like this, he always had the last word. She could see his right hand groping for his missing glass, and she could sense his mind and tongue searching for something final to say. She realized, after several minutes of silence, that he couldn't find the last word, for the simple reason that she had said it herself. She ran up the stairs as lightly and swiftly as a girl, restraining a new and unexpected impulse to clasp her hands above her head and wave them, in triumphant greeting to the invisible wives of all the writers in the world.[72]

There are several fables in the 1956 Further Fables for Our Time which relate instances of male rebellion. In one mentioned in the first chapter, "The Grizzly and the Gadgets," the male bear rebels by simply tearing up his gadget-cluttered

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[69]Thurber Country, p. 113.

[70]Ibid., p. 115.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid., p. 119.

home, leaving his gadget-loving wife, and running off with a female bear named Honey.[73] Although Thurber does not tell the reader anything about Honey, he can assume that she is a female bear _au naturel_, the natural woman uncomplicated by society. In this case, the rebellion is a success. With similar success, a male guinea pig and a male hare rebel by simply running away to Tahiti. They are revolting against their materialistic, ambitious wives who are members of such organizations as the "Bear a Basket of Babies Committee," the "Get Behind Your Mat and Push Movement," the "Don't Let Dad Dawdle League," the "D. A. R." ("Daughters of Ambitious Rodents"), and the "He Could If He Wanted To, He's Just Not Trying Club."[74]

The male tiger in "The Tigress and Her Mate" is not so lucky, though. His name is Proudfoot and he likes to spend weeks on the town fighting water buffaloes and riding around with plain-clothes tigers in prowl cars. He comes home from one of these jaunts to find himself the father of a litter of young. He is tired and before going to bed warns his mate that ". . . if the kids keep me awake by yowling, I'll drown them like so many common house kittens."[75] His mate takes maternal offense at the warning and a brief and terrible fight follows.

> The next morning, when the cubs, male and female, tumbled eagerly down the stairs demanding to know

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[73] _Further Fables for Our Time_, pp. 89-94.

[74] _Ibid._, pp. 60-64.

[75] _Ibid._, p. 148.

> what they could do, their mother said, "You can go in the parlor and play with your father. He's the tiger rug just in front of the fireplace. I hope you'll like him."[76]

No other male in Thurber's writing has been dealt with by the female in so decisive and final a manner. Proudfoot's rebellion was a real and active one, but like so many others, it was doomed to failure.

Unlike Thurber's account of the man-machine struggle which he became more concerned with throughout his career, his record of the Battle of the Sexes is a static one. This is the way man and woman are, and this is the way they always have been--at least in Thurber's eyes. His viewpoint on the subject has hardly changed since he began writing. Because of that, his opening attack in Is Sex Necessary? written thirty years ago can serve as a conclusion to this chapter. It is as valid now as it was then.

Women dominate American men and the effects of that domination have been seen. The question left to be answered is the big one: why? It is nobody's fault, writes Thurber, except the male's. He has put the woman in the place she now holds. Thurber and White tell the reader in the preface of their book that man, through lack of understanding, has tried to make something of woman that she is not. They demonstrate

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[76] Ibid., pp. 148-49.

the error with a story about a caveman who is barely missed by a falling meteor. He is naturally frightened and he runs all the way home to his mate.

> "Wha' was 'at?" he croaked, pointing behind him. His mate saw nothing but the waving of fern fronds in the wind, the form of some animal slinking into the woods.
>
> "It is nothing," she said, and smiled, and ran her hand through his hair.
>
> Right then and there Man conceived the notion that Woman was so closely associated, so inextricably entwined with the wonders and terrors of the world, that she had no fear of them. She was in quiet league with the forces of life. She was an integral part of the stars and the moon, she was one with the trees and the iris in the bog. He fell down on his knees, the pitiable idiot, and grasped her about the waist.[77]

So now, when the American man finds that his woman has feet of clay, he is disillusioned. She, herself, has come to believe the story men have told about her. Together man and woman go down the wrong road, says Thurber, both believing the woman to be the weaker, the more sensitive, and the more closely associated with the heavens of the two sexes. And when, as has happened in this country in the past fifty years, woman attempts to take her place beside man in the bars, the office, and as a joint head of the household, trouble is the result.

Thurber has recorded that trouble with more insight and sensitivity than the most profound sociologist.

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[77] Is Sex Necessary?, pp. 28-29.

ing to legend*, has almost always criticized Americans for their herd instinct to conform. This is one of several things wrong with Thurber women. Almost all his real heroes, the ones who beat the system and stymie the psychologists and helpful hint experts, are non-conformists. It was true when he began writing and it is true today.

In Is Sex Necessary?, the case history of George Smith, which has been mentioned in an earlier chapter, is the case history of a conformist turned non-conformist. The minute he breaks the glass in the pig-in-the-clover puzzles and pushes the little ball bearings in their holes with his fingers, he has ceased conforming and he is a better man for it. Even poor little Mr. Monroe in the 1931 book, The Owl in the Attic, is a non-conformist in his misguided way. He cannot make showers work; he cannot store furniture; he cannot do all the things that the Real American Man in the Marlboro cigarette ads can do. What he does do, and what one suspects the Marlboro Man is incapable of doing, is to dream, to imagine himself mysterious and imperturbable. That is his rebellion against wife

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*According to a legend perpetuated by C. Lester Walker in the July, 1946, issue of The Ladies Home Journal, Thurber is as much a clown as many of his characters. For example, Walker relates the story about Thurber's glass eye. He is supposed to have a special set of five glass eyes, their whites varying in graded shades of pink, because he noticed that when he was drinking his real eye got bloodshot and his glass one did not. At a night club table, he would match it with a pink-glass eye, going up the scale as the evening and the drinking progressed, and winding up with the last glass eye, one which gleamed, in full color, the American flag. It is a nice story, but I do not believe it.

and machine, and that is his saving grace. The same thing is true with Mr. Pendly in the 1935 story and it is true with almost every Thurber male protagonist since then.

One thing that one must not do however, according to Thurber, is to make a conscious effort not to conform merely for the sake of non-conformity. In a devastating satire in the <u>Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze</u> called "Something to Say," Thurber tells of a dictator named Elliot Vereker who outstrips all his literary crowd in every respect except one--he does not write anything. He keeps his place in the group by non-conforming. He wears an admiral's hat stolen from an admiral. He carries a bag of burned-out light bulbs which he throws against the sides of houses and the walls of people's guest rooms. He has "something to say" about every literary great and he discredits them all (most of whom he has never read). He drops in for dinner uninvited and then goes upstairs to wrench the bathtub away from the wall ("Breaking lead pipe is one of the truly enchanting adventures in life," he says). He ridicules scholarship, the Church, home and mother. Finally a group of his "friends" collects fifteen hundred dollars to send him to Paris that he might write something. He snarlingly accepts the money, saying he is ". . . cheap at twice the price." He throws a drunken party with the collection and is mysteriously killed. Dripping sarcasm, Thurber concludes:

> "The world's loss," murmured Deane, as he looked down at the pitiful dust so lately the most burning genius we had ever been privileged to know, "is Hell's gain."
>
> I think we all felt that way.[16]

Non-conformity is not always an easy thing for Thurber's characters. In a hilarious 1935 story, Thurber tells of a man who stops wearing an overcoat like everyone else does. He wears one at first that does not fit which he bought ". . . after a brief and losing battle with a sharp-tongued clerk who was taller than I was," but it is always causing trouble. The buttons fall off the first week he owns it and from then on, his life is hellishly complicated. On windy days, he has to hold the coat to keep it from billowing up around him. On one of these days, his hat blows off as he is holding the coat. He makes almost successfully a lunge for his hat and knocks off his glasses, without which he can see nothing.

> Several people stopped and watched the struggle without offering to help until finally, when everybody had had his laugh, a woman picked up my glasses and handed them to me. "Here's your glasses," she tittered, grinning at me as if I were a policeman's horse with a sunbonnet.[17]

Later, in a Broadway theatre, the narrator takes off his overcoat and the jacket of his dinner clothes comes off with it, leaving him standing red-faced ". . . in the crowded and well-dressed lounge in my shirt-sleeves, with a section of my suspenders plainly visible through the armhole of my waistcoat."[18]

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[16] The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 174-82.

[17] Ibid., p. 2.

[18] Ibid., p. 5.

After that, the man refuses to conform and wear an overcoat because

> I simply want to be mentally at ease, and I have found out after years of experience that I cannot be mentally at ease and at the same time wear an overcoat. Going without an overcoat in bitter weather has, God knows, its special humiliations, but having a kindly old lady come up to me on the street and hand me a dime is nothing compared to the horror I went through when I wore an overcoat, or tried to wear one.[19]

Non-conformity is even harder for characters in Thurber's 1956 collection of fables. It is especially hard for foolish non-conformists like the young jackdaws who want to build their nest on the minute hand of the town clock. Naturally, the nest falls off every time the hand makes a half circle, but the birds are not dismayed. They think they did not start early enough and they try again the next day with the same result. Finally they give it up and build their nest in the muzzle of a cannon where they hear only the first gun of a twenty-one-gun salute fired in honor of a visiting chief of state.[20] They are not very smart, but their non-conformity gives them a certain innocent charm.

A more serious fable in the same collection tells of a mongoose who does not conform to the standards of other mongooes, or mongeese. He is peace-loving and does not like to kill cobras. That quirk in his personality gets him into lots

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[19]Ibid., p. 6.

[20]Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 119-22.

of trouble.

> "He is crazy," cried the young mongoose's father.
> "He is sick," said his mother.
> "He is a coward," shouted his brothers.
> "He is a mongoosexual," whispered his sisters.
> . . . .
> Finally, the rumor spread that the mongoose had venom in his sting, like a cobra, and he was tried, convicted by a show of paws, and condemned to banishment.[21]

Thurber's moral, and it is not a very happy one, is: "Ashes to ashes, and clay to clay, if the enemy doesn't get you, your own folks may"[22]--that is, if you do not conform.

Conforming can be even more dangerous than non-conforming, according to a Thurber fable published in the 1940 collection. In it, he tells of a "fairly intelligent fly" who knows enough not to land in a spider's nest, because ". . . I never light where I don't see other flies." In that circumstance, conformity saves his life. But a few minutes later he flies

> . . . to a place where there were a great many other flies. He was about to settle down among them when a bee buzzed up and said, "Hold it, stupid, that's flypaper. All those flies are trapped." "Don't be silly," said the fly, "they're dancing." So he settled down and became stuck to the flypaper with all the other flies.[23]

That Thurber has remained a non-conformist's man is shown in his latest work, a full-length biography of his old New Yorker boss, Harold W. Ross.[24] If there has ever been a man who

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[21]Ibid., p. 85.

[22]Ibid., p. 86.

[23]Fables for Our Time, p. 13.

[24]James Thurber, The Years With Ross, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959).

refused to conform to the standards of his profession, Ross was that man. He knew almost nothing of literature, yet he edited the country's most literate magazine. The <u>New Yorker</u> was not geared ". . . for the old lady in Dubuque," Ross proclaimed, yet he had a puritannical fear that his writers and artists were always slipping something off color by his watchful eye. Ross appeared to be, in brief, anything except a magazine editor. And Thurber loved and admired him for all of it. The biography is more than just a eulogy, because Thurber does not mince words telling of Ross's many faults. But he treats him with more compassion, understanding, and respect than any other character, real or imagined, he has dealt with.

III. CLICHÉ

Americans are a people surrounded by the cliché and most of them seem to enjoy it. Witness the overwhelming popularity of such cliché-ridden institutions as radio soap opera (which Thurber incidentally explores to some length in a straight reportorial job in <u>The Beast in Me and Other Animals</u>), Hollywood, television, and any number of pulp magazines and paper-back publishing houses. An experienced observer can successfully predict the outcome of their products after the first scene or page. Everyone knows how the stories go: the harder working, more dependable character invariably wins out over the less

conscientious, more talented one; the spoiled, rich child ends up as a bum, while the orphaned urchin becomes a successful business man; the team that prays at half-time always stages a stirring second-half rally to whip the professionalized team whose players were out on the town the night before; the beautiful girl is rarely chaste, the plainer one always is; the country lad invariably outwits the more experienced, smoother talking city boy, and so on, _ad infinitum_. Pretty stories, all of them--but they are not necessarily so, according to Thurber. And people often get in deep trouble for believing them true. He shows this in the 1940 fable about the chipmunks who are killed by the shrike while they are taking an early morning constitutional. Thurber's moral: "Early to rise and early to bed makes a male healthy and wealthy and dead."[25]

Almost all of Thurber's cliché-blasting activities have come in the fable genre. He is fond of taking the standard script and tacking a more sensible but less romantic ending on it. He first does it in the 1940 collection with his handling of the old tortoise-hare parable. The tortoise, impressed by past press clippings, one day goes searching for a hare to race. He has read that the swift are not always so fast, or by extension, that the more talented are not always so good as the Go-Getters who have Pep. He finds a hare, challenges him to a

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[25]_Fables for Our Time_, p. 22.

fifty-foot race, and confidently warns that the hare ". . .probably won't even finish second." When the hare crosses the finish line, Thurber's tortoise ". . . had gone approximately eight and three-quarter inches."[26]

In another in the same collection, Thurber tells of a young dreamy-eyed moth who would rather try to fly to a star than flit around hot light bulbs and open flames the way the "respectable" moths do. His father tries to shame him into going into the profession ("A big strapping moth like you without a mark on him!"), and the boy leaves home. The scene then changes to many years in the future, when, according to Hollywood or any other reputable cliché factory, the boy should have been found drunk and broke in an alley behind the bar where he sings songs for bean pods and cigarette butts. But it is Thurber's story and that is not the way he tells it. The rebellious moth is now in happy old age, going around telling people he <u>has</u> reached the star, which by this time he believes. The boy's family which had spent its days with noses to the grindstone? They are all burned to death when they are quite young.[27]

And then there is the fable about the bear who could take it or let it alone. At first, he is addicted to mead (a drink made of fermented honey), and he would come home,

> . . . kick over the umbrella stand, knock down the bridge lamps, and ram his elbows through the windows.

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[26] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 61.

[27] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 19.

> Then he would collapse on the floor and lie there until he went to sleep. His wife was greatly distressed and his children were very frightened.[28]

Finally, he reforms and becomes a famed temperance speaker. Were Hollywood telling the story, the reformation would have been a thing of great inspiration. The bear's income and complexion would improve and his wife and children would be happy as larks now that daddy is not a drunkard anymore. Not so with Thurber. To demonstrate his well-being since swearing off, Thurber's bear

> . . . would stand on his head and on his hands and he would turn cartwheels in the house, kicking over the umbrella stand, knocking down the bridge lamps, and ramming his elbows through the windows. Then he would lie down on the floor, tired by his healthful exercise, and go to sleep. His wife was greatly distressed and his children were very frightened.[29]

There are many more*, but as pleasant as it is to refer to them, the point has been made.

IV. FALSE GODS

Two stories appear in the 1935 <u>The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze</u> which are the first of several moral essays Thurber was to write about men who would make themselves gods and

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[28] Ibid., p. 33.

[29] Ibid.

*"The Courtship of Arthur and Al," "The Patient Bloodhound," both from <u>Fables for Our Time</u>, "The Princess and the Tin Box," from <u>The Beast in Me and Other Animals</u>, and "The Bat Who Got the Hell Out," "The Cricket and the Wren," both from <u>Further Fables for Our Time</u>, are the best of the others.

the people who worshipped them. The first, "Something to Say," has already been discussed in this chapter. The second, "The Greatest Man in the World," tells a devastating story about a national hero. His name is Pal Smurch and his character is just as ugly. Smurch, a former mechanic's helper in a garage at Westfield, Iowa, flies non-stop around the world in a grotesque plane equipped with weird floating auxiliary gas tanks devised by a crackpot professor. He flies east from the east coast after commenting that ". . . nobody ain't seen no flyin' yet," and laying in a supply of one gallon of bootleg gin and six pounds of salami. Nobody pays much attention to him. But nine days later, when Smurch's plane approaches San Francisco Bay from the west, the nation goes into hysterics preparing for its hero's triumphant return. Newspapers send feature writers to Westfield to dig up material, and they are rather nonplussed when Smurch's mother, a short-order cook, answers all their questions with "Ah, the hell with him; I hope he drowns."[30] They find other information that does not fit too well with the story of their hero's life: he has knifed the principal of his high school; he has stolen an altercloth from a church; his father and brother, the latter feeble-minded, are both in jail. The newspapers, used to the sweetness and light backgrounds of former heroes such as Lindbergh and Byrd, obviously cannot use the facts, so they make up their own "facts" to suit the occasion.

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[30]The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 206.

The country has another god to worship; what it does not know is that the new idol is made of clay from head to foot.

> "Youse guys," he said--and the Times man winced--"youse guys can tell the cock-eyed world dat I put it over on Lindbergh, see? Yeh--an' made an ass o' them two frogs." The "two frogs" was a reference to a pair of gallant French fliers who, in attempting a flight only halfway around the world, had, two weeks before, unhappily been lost at sea.[31]

The newspapers covered up the interview, too. They make him out to be a modest and unassuming lad, so still the country has its god. The end comes several days later when Smurch meets with the bigwigs of the country--mayors, governors, government officials, behaviorist psychologists, and editors. The group tries to tell Smurch that he is a national hero now, and that he must act the part.

> "I get ya, I get ya," he cut in, nastily. "Ya want me to ack like a softy, huh? Ya want me to ack like that ________ ________ baby-face Lindbergh, huh? Well, nuts to that, see? . . . When do I start cuttin' in on de parties, huh? And what's they goin' to be in it?" He rubbed a thumb and forefinger together meaningly. "Money!" exclaimed a state senator, shocked, pale. "Yeh, money," said Pal, flipping his cigarette out of a window. "An' big money."[32]

That is the new national hero and his end comes mercifully before the public finds out about him. He is shoved out a window nine floors from the sidewalk, buried in Arlington Cemetery under a shrine.[33] America is a great nation for heroes. But when one like Smurch comes along, the country finds itself

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[31] Ibid., p. 209.

[32] Ibid., pp. 211-12.

[33] Ibid., pp. 212-14.

in the embarrassing position of pushing him out the window. The defeat is not Smurch's--he never has anything to lose. The ones defeated are the idol-worshippers, the makers of false gods.

Thurber tells the same story in a much lighter mood in his 1940 Fables for Our Time. Entitled "The Owl Who Was God," the parable tells of an owl, who by being able to see at night, is considered a deity by the other animals of the forest. He is obviously blessed with god-like knowledge too, for he can rightly answer all questions which have as their answers "to wit" (What is another expression for "that is to say" or "namely"?), or "to woo" (Why does a lover call on his love?) Beside these attributes, the owl looks quite dignified and wise, especially in the daytime when he blinks. It is no wonder a Plymouth Rock hen screams "He's God!" Of course, there are a few skeptics in every crowd, and this one has a dormouse, a red fox, and a French poodle who want to know if the owl can see in the daytime, too. The other animals think that a foolish and sacrilegious question, set upon the three radicals, and drive them from the country. Then the animals begin following the owl around, bumping into the same things he bumps into, for it is daytime, and the owl cannot see. He leads them onto a highway where a truck is sighted coming toward them at fifty miles an hour.

> "There's danger ahead," said the secretary bird. "To wit?" asked the owl. The secretary bird told him. "Aren't you afraid?" he asked. "Who!" said the owl

> calmly, for he could not see the truck. "He's God!" cried all the creatures again, and they were still crying "He's God!" when the truck hit them and ran them down. Some of the animals were merely injured, but most of them, including the owl, were killed.[34]

In 1945, Thurber wrote "The Catbird Seat," the tale about the career woman who would be god in the accounting firm where Mr. Martin works. The result there has been related. Thurber continues with the same theme in the second collection of his fables, published in 1956. Three of those deal with men who would be gods. One will suffice as an example. It concerns a city mouse who goes to live in the walls of an old house in the country. He begins lording it over the country mice when he

> . . . trimmed his whiskers, put _mousseline_ in his hair, talked with an accent, and told the country mice that they came from the wrong side of the mouse tracks.
>
> "My ancestors were of the French aristocracy," boasted the city mouse. "Our name still appears on bottles of great French wine: '_Mise du chateau_,' which means mice in the chateau, or castle mice."[35]

He lists several other reasons for the fame of his ancestors and then goes out exploring through the forbidden walls of the country house where he happens on a treasure of folding money hidden there years before. He ignores a wise old country mouse who tells him not to eat it (it causes "greenback bellyache" and is the root of evil), and begins downing the stuff,

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[34] _Fables for Our Time_, pp. 35-6.

[35] _Further Fables for Our Time_, pp. 109-10.

getting off such witticisms as "Blessed are the rich, for they can pay their way into the kingdom of Heaven," "Legal tender is the night," and "Money makes the nightmare go."[36] He figures he will go back to the city and live like a king because ". . . they say you can't take it with you, [but] I'm going to take it with _me_." But after the city mouse eats all the money, he finds that he is too fat to get out of the wall. He dies and nobody but the country mice know that he is the richest mouse in the world. Thurber's moral is one to be heeded not only by men who would be gods, but by men who worship the Almighty Buck: "This is the posture of fortune's slave: one foot in the gravy, one foot in the grave."[37] The same theme prevails in three other _Further Fables_, "The Cat in the Lifeboat,"[38] "What Happened to Charles,"[39] and "The Human Being and the Dinasaur."[40]

V. THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

"If we went out into the streets dressed the way we talk," Thurber said in an interview in 1958, "we would be arrested for indecent exposure."[41]

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[36]_Ibid_., pp. 111-12.

[37]_Ibid_., p. 112.

[38]_Ibid_., pp. 54-59.

[39]_Ibid_., pp. 115-18.

[40]_Ibid_., pp. 65-69.

[41]Brandon, _op_. _cit_., p. 16.

Several years ago, Thurber launched a campaign to save the English language in this country. He believes that it is going to pot at the hands of politicians, Madison Avenue hucksters, and psychologists who coin such abortions as the verbs "to finalize" and "to eroticize." Of the latter, Thurber writes that

> . . . it is one of those great big words, or tortured synonyms, with which psychiatry has infected the language, so that a page of type sometimes looks like a parade of Jack Johnsons wearing solid gold teeth and green carnations in the lapels of their electric-blue morning suits.[42]

Thurber himself is an exquisite arranger of words and when the language gets to the point that the words are almost meaningless, a point he feels the American language is certainly approaching, he does not take kindly to it. He has always been fascinated by the sounds and meanings of words and never tires of playing games with them. One example will serve to illustrate. In a 1955 <u>New Yorker</u> piece called "The Tyranny of Trivia," which began as a defense against one critic's charge that Thurber is too much concerned with the small things of life, but then lapsed into a description of the characteristics of certain letters in the alphabet, he wrote:

> G, if you are still with me, is no longer the most gruesome, gloomy, and gory letter; its terrors have become old-fashioned with the passing of the centuries and the development of modern man. The things that go bump in G would no longer frighten even Goldilocks, for who is afraid nowadays of ghouls, ghosts, goblins, giants, gargoyles, griffins, gorgons, or Gargantua and Goliath? If you want to get hell's own

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[42]Cowley, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 43.

> heebie-jeebies, take H. This Century of Violence has invented new words and combinations of words and thrown a greenish light on old ones to point up its hellions and horrors, and most of them begin with H: hoodlum, hooligan, heel, hooch, heroin, hitchhiker, hotrod, hijacker, hold-up, hophead, hipped, hideout, hatchetman, higher-up, hangover, hooker, homicide, homosexual, hydrogen, halitosis, hysteria, and Hollywood.[43]

Thurber himself marks the beginning of his crusade with the end of World War II, but his insistence that words mean something may be noted in previous work. In two earlier stories, "The Black Magic of Barney Haller" (1935) and "What Do You Mean, It Was Brillig?" (1942), Thurber shows the confusion that results from simple misunderstanding of words. The narrator of the first story believes that Barney Haller, his hired hand, is trafficking with the devil when he says things like "Dis morning bime by, I go hunt grotches in de voods" and "We go to the garrick now and become warbs." The narrator tries to fight off the spell he feels sure is coming by throwing back at Barney some nonsense phrases from Lewis Carroll and the result is nothing short of hilarious. Of course, there is a logical meaning to Barney's words, but Thurber has fun for a while. "Dis morning bime by, I go hunt grotches in de voods" means that as soon as the morning has gone by, Barney is going to hunt tree crotches, forked saplings for use as fruit tree supports, in the woods. Barney leaves after the narrator tells

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[43] James Thurber, "The Tyranny of Trivia," New Yorker, 31:33, December 17, 1955.

him that ". . . even when it isn't brillig I can produce slithy toves," so he never finds what going to the garrick and becoming warbs means.[44]

The second story is similar. It concerns a colored maid who says things like "They are here with the reeves" and "The lawn is full of fletchers."[45]

In another 1935 piece, Thurber quibbles with a line from Gertrude Stein's play, Four Saints in Three Acts, about "pigeons on the grass, alas." Thurber maintains that the "alas" has no business there, because of all the animals he knows, the pigeon is the least capable of producing in humans any emotion ("They have nothing to do with alas and they have nothing to do with hooray. . ."[46]) It would have been better, Thurber writes, had Miss Stein written: ". . . dogs on the grass, look out, dogs on the grass, look out, look out, dogs on the grass, look out Alice."[47]

Thurber gets around to seriously criticizing the things the country is doing to the language with a 1956 piece in the New Yorker called "Hark, the Herald Tribune, Times, W. Q. R., and All the Other Angels Sing." It is a protest against the language used in advertisements for spectacular movies in the DeMille vein. Because of such ads, Thurber claims, words like

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[44]The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 159-64.

[45]My World--And Welcome to It, pp. 3-8.

[46]The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 14-15.

[47]Ibid., p. 17.

"spectacular," "terrific," "classic," "bold," and all the other superlatives used by Hollywood have come to mean nothing. He ends the piece by imagining that a movie spectacular has been made from Wordsworth's "Lucy," and that he is writing the advertisement for it. The ad ends on this frenzied note:

> "In 'Lucy' the fair solitary star first shines all alone, and then, on the Vastascreen, which runs around all four walls of the theatre and up over the ceiling, more than a thousand billion stars suddenly glitter. They represent You and You and You, and You and You and You! Don't, for God's sake, miss Bvuga Breen in the sultry screen classic of the loneliest women in the world, supported by practically everybody you ever heard of! Everybody you ever heard of, I tell you! Everybody in the world, do you hear me! Everybody in Hell, Hollywood, and Heaven, I tell you! DO YOU HEAR ME? DO YOU HEAR M . . ."
>
> Editor's Note: The unfinished manuscript ends abruptly, probably at the moment they came for him.[48]

In the same year, Thurber's Further Fables for Our Time was published, and he lashes out at the language defilers in several of them. In one which sums up Thurber's feelings about it all, called "The Weaver and the Worm," he writes:

> A weaver watched in wide-eyed wonder a silkworm spinning its cocoon in a white mulberry tree.
>
> "Where do you get that stuff?" asked the admiring weaver.
>
> "Do you want to make something out of it?" inquired the silkworm, eagerly.
>
> Then the weaver and the silkworm went their separate ways, for each thought the other had insulted him. We live, man and worm, in a time when almost anything can mean almost anything, for this is the age of gobbledygook, doubletalk, and gudda.
>
> MORAL: A word to the wise is not sufficient if it doesn't make any sense.[49]

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[48] James Thurber, "Hark the Herald Tribune, Times, W. O. R., and All the Other Angels Sing," New Yorker, 32:41, April 14, 1956.

[49] Further Fables for Our Time, p. 129.

The word "gudda" is one that Thurber uses to describe the reckless verbal slurring used in this country, e. g., "Where's he gudda go? What's he gudda do?"[50]

In two other fables in the 1956 collection, Thurber shows what can happen when words cease to make sense. One called "The Lady of the Legs" tells of a very vain, very dumb female frog who lives in a pool near Paris. A Parisian restauranteur pleases her no end when he tells her that she has the most succulent legs on earth, that she should be served like a queen with the most excellent vintage wine to a certain celebrated bon vivant, a connoisseur of the grande haute cuisine. He tells her she will be talked about whenever devotees of the culinary art assemble and that she will be remembered as the daintiest dish in the history of gastronomy. The frog, not knowing what all the words mean, but greatly impressed with their elegant sounds, agrees to his proposal. Her legs are eaten.[51]

In the last fable in the book, Thurber tells a story of the end of civilization, just as he told of the beginning of civilization in the book's first fable. It is about lemmings, who by extension become all mankind. The end begins when an excitable lemming sees the sunrise through the trees and begins running about toward the sea crying "Fire!" Others join in the mad rush, shouting that the world is coming to an end. One

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[50]"Thurber and His Humor," Newsweek, 49:56, February 4, 1957.

[51]Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 134-36.

drunken male who has been out all night shouts that they are going on a treasure hunt and ". . . full many a gem of purest ray serene the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear." "It's a bear," his daughter shouts, not getting the full context of her father's elegant words. "Go it!" There are many other confused words and shouts; some yell "goats!" and others misunderstand and think they have screamed "ghosts!" And all the lemmings run to the sea and are drowned in a great babble of confusion, some shouting "We are saved!", others crying "We are lost!"[52] Malcolm Cowley writes that ". . . symbolically it was also the end of mankind as only Thurber could have imagined it: not with a bang, not with a whimper, but in a universal confusion of voices and meanings."[53]

Thurber's latest and most critical attempt to save the language comes in a 1957 piece called "The Psychosemanticist Will See You Now, Mr. Thurber." In it, Thurber proposes that a new profession, that of the psychosemanticist, be set up to

> . . . cope with the psychic trauma caused by linguistic meaninglessness, to prevent the language from degenerating into gibberish, and to save the sanity of persons threatened by the onset of polysyllabic monstrosititis.[54]

Thurber maintains that politicians are mainly responsible for the sad state of the language today. He writes that

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[52] Ibid., pp. 172-4.

[53] Cowley, op. cit., p. 44.

[54] Alarms and Diversions, p. 18.

> Once the political terminologists of all parties began to cross-infect our moribund vocabulary, the rate of degeneration became appalling. Elephantiasis of cliché set in, synonym astrophied, the pulse of inventiveness slowed alarmingly, and paraphrase died of impaction. Multiple sclerosis was apparent in the dragging rhythms of speech, and the complexion of writing and of conversation began to take on the tight, dry parchment look of death. We have become satisfied with gangrenous repetitions of threadbarisms, like an old man cackling in a chimney corner, and the onset of utter meaninglessness is imminent.[55]

After commenting as cuttingly on the effect fundamentalist evangelists and medical science have had on the language, Thurber shows what Americans would do with Sir Winston Churchill's rather clear "Give us the tool and we will finish the job." In Washington, says Thurber, the sentence would be changed to "Supply us with the implements and we will finalize the solution of the matter."[56] Thurber turns finally to the greatest institution of aborted words of them all--Madison Avenue. After commenting on the cigarette company which claimed its product "tastes good like a cigarette should," Thurber makes two suggestions to the ". . . Madison Avenue illiterates in gray flannel suits." The first is a slogan for a brewery: "We still brew good like we used to could."[57] The second is to be used by a tranquillizing drug firm.

> Does he seldomly praise you any more? Those kind of husbands can be cured of the grumps with Hush-Up. So give you and he a break. Put Hush-Up in his food. It don't have no taste.[58]

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[55]*Ibid.*, p. 19.

[56]*Ibid.*, p. 26.

[57]*Ibid.*, p. 25.

[58]*Ibid.*

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Thurber, for all his social criticism, is primarily a humorist. And the humor is there because Thurber is perhaps the most meticulous stylist in the country. No matter what his message is, he never forces his prose to fit the mold of more standard vehicles for criticism. The reader is never wary of being taught something. Thurber does not say to him: "Look out. Here comes some social criticism." The criticism is so artistically embodied within the tale itself that to the casual reader, it seems that Thurber's story could be no other way, that the moral is inherent.

Thurber wrote a friend in 1926 that ". . . I can do only one thing, even passably, and that is make words and space them between punctuation points . . ."[1] He does it much better than passably and critics recognize him for it. Malcolm Cowley writes of Thurber:

> Comedy is his chosen field and his range of effects is deliberately limited, but within that range there is nobody who writes better than Thurber, that is, more clearly and flexibly, with a deeper feeling for the genius of the language and the value of words.[2]

This stylistic excellence does not come easily for Thurber; he gets it through the hard work of re-writing, not just two or three times, but many more. In a 1958 interview, he said:

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[1]"Thurber and His Humor," op. cit., p. 52.

[2]Cowley, op. cit., p. 43.

> For me, it's mostly a question of re-writing. It's part of a constant attempt on my part to make the finished version smooth, to make it seem effortless. A story I've been working on . . . was rewritten fifteen complete times.[3]

Other social critics may have written more widely and profoundly than Thurber. But none has written so well. To prove that, one need only to read the stilted, paralyzing treatises written by even the most literate sociologists on the same problems Thurber has dealt with.

Even the most casual Thurber reader probably has been disappointed that no mention has been made in this work of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." It is Thurber's short story masterpiece and certainly his most widely-known work, having been made into a successful movie starring Danny Kaye in the late forties (Thurber did not like what Hollywood did to the story--"It began to get bad with the first git-gat-gittle," he said. "If they'd spent one tenth the money, it would have been ten times as good."[4]) The story of Mitty has been saved for this concluding chapter--and it illustrates all that is the best in Thurber, both stylistically and as social criticism. It is offered as the proof of this thesis--that Thurber has successfully integrated humor and social criticism.

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" was first published in the New Yorker in 1939. It has been reprinted many times since then and first appeared in book form in the 1942 collection,

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[3]James Thurber quoted by George Plimpton and Max Steele, "James Thurber on Fiction," Best Articles and Stories, 2:21, December, 1958.

My World--And Welcome to It. It is short--only about four thousand words--and Thurber devoted fifty working days to it.[5] Thurber begins the story in the midst of the first of five Mitty dream sequences.

> "We're going through!" The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye.[6]

Immediately with those opening lines, Thurber tells the reader several things about his character. First, the Commander is obviously unafraid of meeting a challenge of some kind or other. Second, his voice is ". . . like thin ice breaking," an audio simile that does not make sense to anyone who has heard thin ice breaking. From that, the reader can conclude one of three things: that the author is deaf, that he is a bad writer, or, and of course this is the correct conclusion, that the author is parodying any number of pulp magazine writers who think such a simile adds class to their prose. Third, the reader is told something of the Commander's personal appearance: he is immaculately dressed and he has something of the romantic swashbuckling devil-may-care attitude about him which is denoted by ". . . the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye." Thurber continues:

> "We can't make it,sir. It's spoiling for a hurricane, if you ask me." "I'm not asking you, Lieu-

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[5]Cowley, loc. cit.

[6]My World--And Welcome to It, p. 72.

> tenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!" The pounding of the cylinders increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" he shouted. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" repeated Lieutenant Berg. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" shouted the Commander. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!"[7]

It is obvious that Lieutenant Berg is a young, somewhat frightened officer who still has peach fuzz on his chin. He could in no way be accused of treasonable motives; he really believes that they cannot make it because of the impending storm. But the Commander, who obviously is older, more experienced and braver, ignores the Lieutenant by telling him that "I'm not asking you." Later, after the ordeal is over, the Commander will probably clasp the boy's shoulder in the best Hollywood tradition and say: "It's all right, son. We've all got to learn." But now is the time for action, not sentiment, so the Commander ignores him. A new note has been added to the Commander's character--he is completely at ease with machinery. He twists complicated dials, orders her revved up to eighty-five hundred, switches on number eight auxiliary, and cries "Full strength in No. 3 turret." What all these things mean, the reader has not the slightest idea, but the Commander knows. He can get more out of a machine than anyone. His men know that.

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[7] Ibid.

> The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!"[8]

The reader knows at last what the Commander is commanding: an eight-engined Navy hydroplane. Eight engines are more than the United States government has seen fit to put on any of its planes except the Commander's. It was probably made especially for him. The reader has found something else about the Commander--he is a man among men, trusted and loved by his crew members, who obviously have been through this terrible thing with him before. It is probably Lieutenant Berg's first mission, and he has no way of knowing that "the Old Man'll get us through," that "the Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!"

The account of the Commander is suddenly broken off and Thurber's next paragraph begins with:

> "Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?"
> "Hmmm?" said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd. "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five." Walter Mitty drove on toward Waterbury in silence, the roaring of the SN202 through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying fading in the remote airways of his mind. "You're tensed up again," said Mrs. Mitty. "It's one of your days. I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over."[9]

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[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Now the story has begun to unfold. The reader sees the real Mitty--not the Commander of the Navy hydroplane, but a man who is nagged by his wife for driving too fast. Mitty has been imagining the sequence which went before, and there is a terrific contrast between his real life and his "secret" life. The reader finds out things about Mrs. Mitty, too. She is the domineering prototype of all Thurber females. She is not an unkind woman, though. She is genuinely concerned with her husband's health. But, like Thurber women in general, she is insensitive and practical. She thinks her husband is "tensed up," rather than involved in wild daydreams. If he told her what he had been dreaming, and he most certainly would never do that, she would have thought him crazy. The reader knows by now that this daydream is not an isolated one. "It's one of your days," Mrs. Mitty tells him, indicating there have been others. And anyone who cannot see the humor--it comes close to what Charlie Chaplin's humor must have been--in the contrast between the secret Mitty and the real one, has no business thinking he has a sense of humor. Thurber continues:

> Walter Mitty stopped the car in front of the building where his wife went to have her hair done. "Remember to get those overshoes while I'm having my hair done," she said. "I don't need overshoes," said Mitty. She put her mirror back into her bag. "We've been all through that," she said, getting out of the car. "You're not a young man any longer." He raced the engine a little. "Why don't you wear your gloves? Have you lost your gloves?" Walter Mitty reached in a pocket and brought out the

> gloves. He put them on, but after she had turned and gone into the building and he had driven on to a red light, he took them off again. "Pick it up, brother!" snapped a cop as the light changed, and Mitty hastily pulled on his gloves and lurched ahead. He drove around the streets aimlessly for a time, and then drove past the hospital on his way to the parking lot.[10]

Mrs. Mitty's dominance over her husband is shown again. She wants him to buy overshoes; he thinks he does not need them. And the line, "We've been all through that," indicates it is not a spur-of-the-moment dominance. It is one that Mrs. Mitty has enjoyed for quite a while. In this paragraph, the reader sees for the first time signs of rebellion in the husband. When Mrs. Mitty tells him that he is not a young man anymore, Mitty ". . . raced the engine a little." He does not actually say anything to his wife; he can only race the engine (and not even very much, either). It is funny because of the imagery involved: a little man being nagged by his wife can answer her only by gunning the engine a little, and his wife is not even aware that it is an answer. Mitty again rebels by taking off his gloves after he has left his wife. But he is frightened into putting them back on when a policeman chides him for stopping too long for a red light. Both the policeman and Mitty's wife are symbols of authority to the little man, and he probably pictures them as somehow working hand in hand. Mitty rebels again by not going directly to buy the overshoes, but by driving ". . . around the streets aimlessly for a time."

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[10]Ibid., pp. 73-74.

During his wanderings he happens by a hospital, and the sight of it provides the transition into the next dream sequence:

> . . . "It's the millionaire banker, Wellington McMillan," said the pretty nurse. "Yes?" said Walter Mitty, removing his gloves slowly. "Who has the case?" "Dr. Renshaw and Dr. Benbow, but there are two specialists here, Dr. Remington from New York and Mr. Pritchard-Mitford from London. He flew over." A door opened down a long, cool corridor and Dr. Renshaw came out. He looked distraught and haggard. "Hello, Mitty," he said. "We're having the devil's own time with McMillan, the millionaire banker and close personal friend of Roosevelt. Obstreosis of the ductal tract. Tertiary. Wish you'd take a look at him." "Glad to," said Mitty.[11]

Mitty is now a doctor, and a very, very good one. He is more than that, though. In the first two lines of the paragraph, the reader is shown that Mitty is not a man to be flustered by a pretty nurse. He is cold and precise as he slowly takes off his gloves, registering no emotion when he is told that the millionaire banker is the patient. He has handled, one supposes, millionaire bankers before, yes, and even <u>more</u> important people. The case is, however, important enough, for specialists from New York and London have come. It is important enough that Mr. Pritchard-Mitford--and the name with its hyphen is perfect in its connotations of English importance--has flown over, and people who flew across the Atlantic in 1939 were <u>really</u> going somewhere to do something. The reader knows that Mitty is well-known to Dr. Renshaw, probably a famous doc-

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[11] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 74.

tor in his own right, because Renshaw calls him only by his last name. The speech, "We're having the devil's own time with McMillan," shows that the case is troublesome enough to call in Mitty. The descriptive phrase, ". . . the millionaire banker and close personal friend of Roosevelt," is humorous because that is the way magazine writers and newspapermen write, not the way people talk. McMillan's ailment--"obstreosis of the ductal tract"--is, like the phrase "full strength on No. 3 turret," made up of nonsense words. They do not mean anything, but they sound impressive and that is all that the real Walter Mitty, who is dreaming the whole business, cares about. They impress him and they impress the reader, but Dr. Mitty is not bothered a bit. He would be glad to look at him. Thurber goes on:

> In the operating room there were whispered introductions: "Dr. Remington, Dr. Mitty. Mr. Pritchard-Mitford, Dr. Mitty." "I've read your book on streptothricosis," said Pritchard-Mitford, shaking hands. "A brilliant performance, sir." "Thank you," said Walter Mitty. "Didn't know you were in the States, Mitty," grumbled Remington. "Coals to Newcastle, bringing Mitford and me up here for a tertiary." "You are very kind," said Mitty.[12]

Here again, the reader is impressed with Mitty's fame as a physician. He has written the last word on "streptothricosis," another impressive but meaningless word invented by the dreaming Mitty, and even the famed Pritchard-Mitford recognizes it as

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[12] Ibid., pp. 74-75.

"a brilliant performance, sir." Mitty is not only a nationally-famous doctor, he is known the world around, and the line, "Didn't know you were in the States, Mitty," implies that he probably has just returned from an operation on Gandhi, or something just as important. Remington makes it clear with the coals-to-Newcastle line that it has been a waste of time to call in other specialists when the great Mitty is in the area. Mitty is not only great, he is, as Walt Kelly's Albert the Alligator would say, modest to a fare-thee-well. His only retort to the compliments are a curt "thank you," and "you are very kind," implying that such praise is an everyday occurence in his life. The conversation and characterization are a brilliant satire on the Dr. Kildare type of movie and radio program which were so popular during the period. And then unforeseen trouble develops:

> A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table, with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. "The new anesthetizer is giving way!" shouted an interne. "There is no one in the East who knows how to fix it!" "Quiet, man!" said Mitty, in a low, cool voice. He sprang to the machine, which was now going pocketa-pocketa-queep-pocketa-queep. He began fingering delicately a row of glistening dials. "Give me a fountain pen!" he snapped. Someone gave him a fountain pen. He pulled a faulty piston out of the machine and inserted the pen in its place. "That will hold for ten minutes," he said. "Get on with the operation."[13]

Again, the reader sees Mitty's imperturbability and his

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[13] Ibid., p. 75.

great knowledge of machinery. When all about him are losing their heads, he keeps his and inserts a fountain pen in place of a faulty piston in the delicate anesthetizer. The wild-eyed interne obviously does not know much about Mitty or he would not have been so excited. Mitty, always cool, always in command of the situation, is not at all flustered by a machine that goes "pocketa-pocketa-queep-pocketa-queep," a mechanical sound so ominous that it would give the shakes to the most stalwart of Thurber's real men. It would take a long time, even for Mitty, to permanently fix the machine, and time is important; a man of action is needed. Mitty is that man and he can make the machine function for ten minutes with a fountain pen. That is enough time for one as accomplished as he.

> A nurse hurried over and whispered to Renshaw, and Mitty saw the man turn pale. "Coreopsis has set in," said Renshaw nervously. "If you would take over, Mitty?" Mitty looked at him and at the craven figure of Benbow, who drank, and at the grave, uncertain faces of the two great specialists. "If you wish," he said. They slipped a white gown on him; he adjusted a mask and drew on thin gloves; nurses handed him shining. . .[14]

A new dilemma arises, the dread coreopsis, and Mitty is the only one capable of standing up to it. Webster defines "coreopsis" as a "daisy-like flower," but to the dreaming Walter Mitty (and to the layman), "coreopsis" connotes a delicate condition terribly near death's door, and Dr. Mitty alone can

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[14] Ibid.

handle it. Certainly the others are not up to it. Renshaw is nervous. Remington and Pritchard-Mitford are grave, uncertain. And Benbow, ". . . who drank," is obviously not the man for the task. There is as much genius in those two words--"who drank"--as there is in most complete novels. Immediately, one gets the picture of Benbow, ashen faced, his hands quivering, the one-time great surgeon gone to pot. He probably rushed out into the corridor and, after glancing furtively up and down the hall, took a trembling drink, smashed the bottle against the wall, and then began sobbing, ashamed of his cowardice, yet thankful to be relieved of the terrible responsibility. Mitty underplays his role superbly in the best Hollywood manner. His only comment is, "If you wish." He draws on the thin gloves, dons his gown and mask, and sets to work, a man of action who knows what he must do. The bubble bursts again at this point, and Thurber takes Mitty back to cold, gray reality where a mere parking lot attendant is telling the famed surgeon to

> "Back it up, Mac! Look out for that Buick!" Walter Mitty jammed on the brakes. "Wrong lane, Mac," said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely. "gee. Yeh," muttered Mitty. He began cautiously to back out of the lane marked "Exit Only." "Leave her sit there," said the attendant. "I'll put her away." Mitty got out of the car. "Hey, better leave the key." "Oh," said Mitty handing the man the ignition key. The attendant vaulted into the car, backed it up with insolent skill, and put it where it belonged.[15]

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[15] _Ibid._, pp. 75-76.

Here, for the first time in the story, Thurber tells of the real Mitty's almost complete inability to do anything with mechanical devices. In the parking lot, he almost drives into a Buick after entering the lane marked "Exit Only," and he is further humiliated when he walks off without surrendering his ignition keys to the attendant. Again, the contrast is what makes the incident funny. Mitty, a man who dreams of commanding Navy planes and fixing delicate anesthetizers with a fountain pen, cannot even park his car properly. There is a contrast too between the secret Mitty's handling of underlings and the way the real Mitty is cowed by them. "Quiet, man," the secret Mitty tells the excited interne. All the real one can say to the parking-lot attendant is "Gee. Yeah," and "Oh." The attendant is the same type of person who in the dream would be reverently saying that ". . . the Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!" But he calls the real Mitty "Mac." Mitty is at a loss with machinery while the attendant can back a car up ". . . with insolent skill." Such affinity for machinery makes the attendant, in Mitty's mind, as much a symbol of authority as his wife or the policeman. He bows to the authority, but underneath, he is rebelling, just as he rebelled against his wife.

> They're so damn cocky, thought Walter Mitty, walking along Main Street; they think they know everything. Once he had tried to take his chains off, outside New Milford, and he had got them wound around the axles. A man had had to come out in a wrecking car and unwind them, a young, grinning

> garageman. Since then Mrs. Mitty always made him drive to a garage to have the chains taken off. The next time, he thought, I'll wear my right arm in a sling; they won't grin at me then. I'll have my right arm in a sling and they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself. He kicked at the slush on the sidewalk. "Overshoes," he said to himself, and he began looking for a shoe store.[16]

His rebellion against the attendant is not very violent--Mitty can only think calummy about him. Thurber lets the reader know in this paragraph more about Mitty's inept dealings with things mechanical when he tells about the chains wound around the axle, and Mitty's defensive ruse of wearing his arm in a sling so ". . . they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself." The ruse is not a full-scale rebellion; it is a strategic retreat in the face of overwhelming odds. And here is another example of woman and machine joining forces to defeat man. When Mrs. Mitty _makes_ her husband take the car to the garage to have the chains taken off, she is subjecting him to deep humiliation. True, she thinks she is doing it for his own good, but that does not make the grins of the young garagemen any easier to stomach. Thurber continues:

> When he came out into the street again, with the overshoes in a box under his arm, Walter Mitty began to wonder what the other thing was his wife had told him to get. She had told him, twice, before they set out from their house for Waterbury. In a way he hated these weekly trips to town--he was always getting something wrong. Kleenex, he thought, Squibb's, razor blades? No. Toothpaste, toothbrush, bicarbonate, carborundum, initiative,

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[16] _Ibid_., p. 76.

> and referendum? He gave it up. But she would remember it. "Where's the what's-its-name?" she would ask. "Don't tell me you forgot the what's-its-name?" A newsboy went by shouting something about the Waterbury trial.[17]

From this paragraph, the reader is told that Mitty obviously does not have the "streamlined" mind referred to in Let Your Mind Alone! His mind wanders from object to object in an attempt to remember what his wife told him to get. The linking of "carborundum" to the old schoolboy rote lesson of "initiative and referendum" is a process of the natural brain, but it certainly does not show the efficiency of thinking preached by the success experts. And the objects that naturally come to his mind, objects he has obviously been told to buy before,--Kleenex, Squibb's, toothpaste, toothbrush, bicarbonate--are objects that take away a little of a man's masculine dignity when he asks a clerk for them. It shows yet another form of dominance that his wife has over Mitty. Flustered by his inability to remember, Mitty hears the newsboy shouting about the Waterbury trial and again retreats into reverie.

> . . . "Perhaps this will refresh your memory." The District Attorney suddenly thrust a heavy automatic at the quiet figure on the witness stand. "Have you ever seen this before?" Walter Mitty took the gun and examined it expertly. "This is my Webley-Vickers 50.80," he said calmly. An excited buzz ran around the courtroom.[18]

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[17] Ibid., pp. 76-77.

[18] Ibid., p. 77.

The district attorney's words are funny because they are perhaps the most oft-quoted of any in Hollywood courtroom scenes. Mitty, ". . . the quiet figure on the witness stand," is imperturbable again. On trial for his life, he can calmly tell the court that the gun is his, a speech that makes the same old "excited buzz" run through the courtroom that has been running through courtrooms for the past century. And again, Mitty shows his complete dexterity with machinery by "expertly" examining the heavy Webley-Vickers 50.80. The gun's very name hints at deep intrigue. Thurber goes on:

> The Judge rapped for order. "You are a crack shot with any sort of firearms, I believe?" said the District Attorney, insinuatingly. "Objection!" shouted Mitty's attorney. "We have shown that the defendant could not have fired the shot. We have shown that he wore his right arm in a sling on the night of the fourteenth of July." Walter Mitty raised his hand briefly and the bickering attorneys were stilled. "With any known make of gun," he said evenly, "I could have killed Gregory Fitzhurst at three hundred feet <u>with</u> <u>my</u> <u>left</u> <u>hand</u>." Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Walter Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin. "You miserable cur!" . . .[19]

The reader has in this paragraph a strong clue to the District Attorney's personality. He is obviously no good, probably looks like Joe McCarthy looked on the televised hearings, and he is out to get Mitty for something or other, perhaps for stealing the "lovely, dark-haired girl" from him. At any rate,

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[19] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 77-78.

Mitty is up to the challenge, cool and unshakable in his knowledge that he has done what he had to do. And he is not backing down; he has an alibi, but he refuses to use it. He is not bragging when he says he could have killed Gregory Fitzhurst at three hundred feet with his left hand; he is merely stating a fact, a fact that he feels the jury should know. Thurber does not tell the reader whether or not Mitty actually did kill Gregory Fitzhurst, but if he did, he certainly had good reason. One of the many facets of Thurber's genius is his knack for choosing names which fit characters. A man named Gregory Fitzhurst is obviously a cad and should be killed. Another line that is parody is the one about pandemonium breaking loose in the courtroom. Pandemonium has broken loose in nine out of ten courtrooms ever since the word was coined by the Romans. When the pretty girl runs to Mitty's arms, the District Attorney strikes her, easily the most evil crime known to men like Mitty. Even in the face of this outrage, Mitty maintains his poise. He casually clips the D. A. on the chin without even rising from his chair. And the way he curses him as he clips him--"You miserable cur!"--sounds like a line from the Rover Boys. No telling what would have happened next if Thurber had not brought Mitty back to the reality of

> "Puppy biscuit," said Walter Mitty. He stopped walking and the buildings of Waterbury rose up out of the misty courtroom and surrounded him again. A woman

> who was passing laughed. "He said 'Puppy biscuit,'" she said to her companion. "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself." Walter Mitty hurried on. He went into an A. & P., not the first one he came to, but a smaller one farther up the street. "I want some biscuit for small, young dogs," he said to the clerk. "Any special brand, sir?" The greatest pistol shot in the world thought a moment. "It says 'Puppies Bark for It' on the box," said Walter Mitty.[20]

Again, the humor in the paragraph comes from the tremendous amount of contrast between the secret and the real Mitty. The secret Mitty is unshakable, always calm, always in control of the situation. The real one is so nonplussed when two women overhear him say "puppy biscuit" to himself that he becomes ashamed to go into the first grocery store he comes to, and goes instead to ". . . a smaller one farther up the street," where, incidentally, there won't be as many people to witness his humiliation. It seems the humor in the women overhearing his words defies analysis, but surely the line, "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself," is one of the funniest in the story. When Mitty does get to the store, he refuses to tell the clerk he wants "puppy biscuit," saying instead "biscuit for small, young dogs." Again, Thurber shows that the real Mitty is not streamline-minded, because he cannot remember the brand name of the biscuit, only its slogan, "Puppies bark for it." Such recall is the act of the natural mind, not the disciplined one. And the line, "The greatest pistol shot in the world thought a moment," is nothing short

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[20] Ibid., p. 78.

of hilarious in its irony. The very idea of such a man even being concerned with such trivia as puppy biscuit is a paradoz.

Thurber continues:

> His wife would be through at the hairdresser's in fifteen minutes, Mitty saw in looking at his watch, unless they had trouble drying it; sometimes they had trouble drying it. She didn't like to get to the hotel first; she would want him to be there waiting for her as usual. He found a big leather chair in the lobby, facing a window, and he put the overshoes and the puppy biscuit on the floor beside it. He picked up an old copy of Liberty and sank down into the chair. "Can Germany Conquer the World Through the Air?" Walter Mitty looked at the pictures of bombing planes and ruined streets.[21]

Thurber gives the reader more evidence in this paragraph of Mrs. Mitty's dominance. She makes her husband get to the hotel lobby first, so he, not she, will have to do the waiting. All he can do in retaliation is to dream again, and the magazine article sets him off.

> . . . "The cannonading has got the wind up in young Raleigh, sir," said the sergeant. Captain Mitty looked up at him through tousled hair. "get him to bed," he said wearily. "With the others. I'll fly alone." "Gut you can't, sir," said the sergeant anxiously. "It takes two men to handle that bomber and the Archies are pounding hell out of the air. Von Richtman's circus is between here and Saulier." "Somebody's got to get that ammunition," said Mitty. "I'm going over. Spot of brandy?"[22]

The reader does not know exactly what the situation is, but it is so bad that it ". . . has got the wind up in young Raleigh," a line that is a direct quote from Journey's End.

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[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., p. 79.

When Captain Mitty says to put him to bed "with the others," the reader knows that it has been going on for some time, that almost the whole command, with the exception of the sergeant and Mitty, are also bedridden. Mitty himself is weary and his hair is tousled--he has probably been flying all the missions for his group during the past week. There is hardly anything in Hollywood which gives a hero an overworked look any more than tousled hair. The sergeant is worried about him because the ". . . Archies are pounding hell out of the air," but Mitty is resolute. Somebody's got to get that ammunition dump--one suspects the outcome of the way depends upon it--and Mitty, always the man of action, is ". . . going over." And he is going by himself, able to handle the two-man plane alone with his great understanding of mechanical things. That he is in complete command of the situation is shown by his casual invitation, "Spot of brandy?" Thurber goes on:

> He poured a drink for the sergeant and one for himself. War thundered and whined around the dugout and battered at the door. There was a rending of wood and splinters flew through the room. "A bit of a near thing," said Captain Mitty carelessly. "The box barrage is closing in," said the sergeant. "We only live once, Sergeant," said Mitty, with his faint fleeting smile. "Or do we?" He poured another brandy and tossed it off. "I never see a man could hold his brandy like you, sir," said the sergeant. "Begging your pardon, sir." Captain Mitty stood up and strapped on his huge Webley-Vickers automatic. "It's forty kilometers through hell, sir!" said the sergeant. Mitty finished one last brandy. "After

> all," he said softly, "What isn't?" The pounding of the cannon increased; there was the rat-tat-tatting of machine guns, and from somewhere came the menacing pocketa-pocketa-pocketa of the new flame-throwers. Walter Mitty walked to the door of the dugout humming "Aupres de Ma Blonde." He turned and waved to the sergeant. "Cheerio!" he said . . .[23]

Mitty is more than just a hero; he is a democrat, unafraid to drink with enlisted men. And when the sergeant says that "I never see a man could hold his brandy like you, sir," he is assuming the same role of the awed underling who in the first dream sequence said that ". . . the Old Man ain't afraid of Hell." But in real life, the sergeant and the crew member are the same men who call Mitty only "Mac." Mitty again shows his imperturbability in the face of danger when the shell barely misses the dugout and his only comment--and a careless one at that--is, "A bit of a near thing." He becomes darkly and romantically mysterious when, smiling faintly and fleetingly, he says that people only live once, ". . . or do we?" The sense of that statement and another--when the sergeant says it is forty kilometers through hell, Mitty replies softly, "After all, what isn't?"--escapes the layman, but this Mitty has been through a lot, and they probably mean something very profound to him. He knows something about Life that most men do not. Captain Mitty can hold his liquor. There is a great deal of difference between "tossing off" brandies the way Mitty does, and the kind of drinking done by Dr. Benbow in the hospital sequence. Benbow, "who

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[23] _Ibid._, pp. 79-80.

drank," obviously cannot control the Demon Rum. But Mitty, tossing them off in rapid succession, is always in control of his drinking. To him, drink is merely a pastime; Benbow is a case for Alcoholics Anonymous. One suspects that the real Mitty gets sick when he drinks. The dream Mitty is the complete romantic. When he leaves the dugout, he is humming a French tune and his final devil-may-care word is a chipper "Cheerio!" The dialogue of the entire sequence is an excellent parody of the clipped understatement of the British made famous in movies, books, and plays. And Thurber's coinage of the metallic sound of things mechanical--"pocketa-pocketa-pocketa"--is frightening enough to surely scare Thurber and the real Mitty, if not the dream one. Incidentally, why a flame-thrower should make such a noise is hard to understand, but it can be supposed that these were especially deadly flame-throwers. Leaving Captain Mitty about to fly "forty kilometers through hell," Thurber transports the reader back to the hotel lobby and the real Mitty where

> Something struck his shoulder. "I've been looking all over this hotel for you," said Mrs. Mitty. "Why do you have to hide in this old chair? How did you expect me to find you?" "Things close in," said Walter Mitty vaguely. "What?" Mrs. Mitty said. "Did you get the what's-its-name? The puppy biscuit? What's in the box?" "Overshoes," said Mitty. "Couldn't you have put them on in the store?" "I was thinking," said Walter Mitty. "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" She looked at him. "I'm going to take your temperature when I get you home," she said.[24]

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[24]*Ibid.*, p. 80.

In this paragraph, Mitty comes as close to real physical rebellion against his wife as he ever does. After she chides him for "hiding" and for not putting on his overshoes when he bought them--the conversation sounds like one between mother and child--Mitty tells her (rather sharply, too, one imagines) that "I was thinking. . . . Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" But Mrs. Mitty quickly quells the rebellion by telling him she is going to take his temperature later. She is surprised at even this slight indication of discontent in her husband--Thurber tells the reader that "She looked at him," probably scowling darkly. Even the sentence structure of her last speech denotes strong dominance on her part--"I'm going to take your temperature _when_ _I_ _get_ _you_ _home_." The use of the nominative case for the first person and the accusative case for the second person indicates who is doing what to whom. Mitty is not going home--he is being taken home. This dominance is one of long standing; Mitty is not acting as he usually does when he asks if it ever occurs to his wife that he is sometimes thinking. He is acting differently, and Mrs. Mitty, as insensitive as she is, can only think that there is something physically wrong with her husband, that he needs his temperature taken. Thurber goes on with the tale:

> They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, "Wait here

> for me. I forgot something. I won't be a minute." She was more than a minute. Walter Mitty lighted a cigarette. It began to rain, rain with sleet in it. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore, smoking. . .[25]

One can be sure that the sound the revolving door makes--"faintly derisive"--was heard only by Mitty and not by his wife. To Mitty, it is just another in a long, long line of insults he has received from machinery. His wife does not notice things like that. And when she keeps him waiting in front of the drug store, it is only another sign of her unconcern for her husband's convenience. The combination of a cigarette, the cold rain, and his back being against a wall sends Mitty into another dream, the last of the story.

> He put his shoulders back and his heels together. "To hell with the handkerchief," said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last.[26]

In the romantic way of thinking, this is the final triumph, to die well. The words "To hell with the handkerchief," the contemptuous flicking away of the final cigarette, indicate that Mitty is the victor even in death, just as so many radio, movie, and Latin American heroes win out over death with the same lines and actions. Mitty is still the man among men,

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

not about to break down and blubber for mercy. He di
lived, "proud and disdainful . . . inscrutable to the last."

The story ends there, but one suspects that the secret life of Walter Mitty will go on. Indeed, it almost must go on, if Mitty is to survive with even a trace of dignity in this world overrun by women and machines. Mitty really __is__ the Undefeated. As long as he can dream, he is undefeated. His is not really much of a victory--not only is the man incapable of physical rebellion, but the only rebellion he can accomplish, the rebellion in his mind, is not even artistically valid; it is cloaked in the clichés of pulp literature and Grade B movies--but it is still a victory. Mitty is weak, but as long as he can dream, he is not dead. His imagination is the only defense he has against the humiliating realities of life--his wife, grinning garagemen, malicious machines. As long as he can keep them from his dreams, he is the victor in his own small way. Mitty's secret life is one realm into which his wife and his car cannot trespass. That is Thurber's optimism and his pessimism, his cause and his effect.

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is a masterpiece of expression and condensation. With great economy of words, Thurber has told his reader as much about the modern American man and his dilemma as is told in most novels of thirty or forty times the length. Almost all the elements of social criticism dis-

cussed in the first three chapters can be found in the story, can be found even in the last two paragraphs. If the reader has not already been aware of the conflict between man and machine, the ". . . faintly derisive whistling sound" made by the revolving doors is enough to tell him. Certainly the nominative feminine and the accusative masculine in Mrs. Mitty's speech ending ". . . when I get you home," is an indication of the female dominance theme which runs throughout Thurber's work. And the last dream sequence, like the others, is a parody of cliché-ridden movies and pulp fiction, and by being a parody, is a kind of protest.

That is social criticism. Yet Thurber has embodied it within his prose in such an artistic manner that it has become an integral part of his style. Social criticism is so inseparable from the story that it _becomes_ the style, it _is_ "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Take away the criticism, and it is a different story; indeed, it is hardly a story at all. All the while the reader is laughing, he is learning, and such integration of the two is high art. "Mitty" is Thurber's masterpiece, but the same things said about it may be said in some degree about all his humorous work.

With high humor and higher art, James Thurber has dealt for the past thirty years with modern American problems. One does not have to consult a sociologist to know that they are

real and serious ones. If the reader has not run across them before, and it would be hard to find one who had not, he has only to visit any home, to read in any daily newspaper of the divorce cases in court, the automobile accidents, the suicides. They are real and serious problems and James Thurber has taught the reader something about them. And never have lessons been put forth in so entertaining a fashion.

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