An American Romance Short Guide

An American Romance by James Thurber

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Characters

Theoretically, humor serves a social function by exposing society's foibles to the members of that society so the existence of these faults can be recognized and corrected. In "The Case for Comedy," an article published in the Atlantic Monthly, Thurber declares that "The decline of humor and comedy in our time has a multiplicity of causes, a principal one being the ideological beating they have taken from both the intellectual left and the political right." As a result, he says, "only tragedy is [considered] serious and has importance." But, "the truth is that comedy is just as important, and often more serious in its approach to truth, and, what few writers seem to realize or to admit, usually more difficult to write."

"An American Romance" was the first story Thurber published in the New Yorker. The 426-word result of Thurber's forty-five minute exercise appeared in the New Yorker on March 5, 1927. Unless the reader is aware of the author's description of the piece as a "burlesque of Channel swimming," it is not likely that such a connection would be made. Significantly, the story contains several elements that were to become characteristics of the author's writing. Foremost of these is the main character, identified simply as "the little man." While Thurber's Little Man differs from his predecessors, as envisioned in the works of Robert Benchley and others, the hero of this story is clearly one of the genre. A meek, physically small man, he is badly dressed and has just had a "distressing scene" with his wife. He remains silent, going around in circles, while department store management and a policeman try to bully him and while a "specialist" tries to analyze him, to determine "if he had ever been in a cyclone and if he had ever had a severe shock while out walking."

The little man persists in revolving for a total of four hours, at the end of which he receives $45,000 from a "big chewing gum magnate from the West" and more than $100,000 worth of vaudeville and motion picture offers.

His explanation for accomplishing the feat is a cliche: "I did it for the wife and children."

Techniques

The fact that Thurber wrote "An American Romance" at one short sitting was an anomaly. Normally, he spent enormous amounts of time perfecting his writing; many works remained unfinished for years. To some extent the writer's commitment of time to his work helps to explain his success. Thurber's style is his trademark.

It is above all readable. Perhaps because his pieces are short they hold the reader's attention. (In spite of his several attempts to write a novel — one of which resulted in his spending "a thousand hours" on a 20, 000-word book that went through twenty to thirty rewrites over a period of two years yet was never published — he did not complete a novel because he could not sustain a reader's interest over such a length.) Thurber was meticulous and precise in word choice, and as a result his prose flows. It is relaxed and subtle, not at all harsh and haranguing.

His remarkable memory allowed him to recall conversations exactly and thus realistically, and his attention to detail gave his stories a further solid, realistic feel. As was true of other practitioners of basically journalistic humor, Thurber's writing is paradoxical in that it contains the oral quality of the best yarn spinners of the nineteenth century while it simultaneously reflects an appreciation for the way that words appear on the printed page. The leisurely storytelling may be traced back to Henry James, who Thurber admits influenced his style, although the humorist also claims that he had to overcome that influence too. Thurber's love of the physical appearance of printed words is evident in The Wonderful O (1957), for example, and when he notes that the word "reason" is six-sevenths of the word "treason." Elsewhere he has commented, "I liked the shape of words and phrases, and I liked clean copy. I never turned in a page with a single mistake on it. I always copied it over. Naturally, when you copy you make changes and you improve your copy."

Literary Precedents

Historically, Thurber follows the traditional horse-sense humorists, and he is clearly related to the nineteenthand early twentieth-century journalistic humorists and literary comedians such as Mark Twain, George H. Derby (who wrote "A New System of English Grammar"), Robert Henry Newell, Charles Farrar Browne, David Ross Locke, Henry W. Shaw, Charles H. Smith, Edgar Wilson Nye, George Ade (the author of a series of Fables in Slang), Finley Peter Dunne, Ambrose Bierce, and Ring Lardner, among others, who commented from an objective point of view on the contemporary world that surrounded them and in a very specific format. Thurber's Little Man character draws from Benchley, and perhaps later from S. J. Perelman a bit, but he is at the beginning of a tradition, and ultimately his refinements make the character uniquely and identifiably his own creation.

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