The Catbird Seat Study Guide

The Catbird Seat by James Thurber

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Contents

Introduction

First published in the November 14, 1942, issue of the *New Yorker*, "The Catbird Seat" also appeared in Thurber's 1945 collection, *The Thurber Carnival*. Since that time, the story has been published in dozens of anthologies for high school and college students, and Thurber has been called America's most important twentieth-century humorist.

The story chronicles a battle of wills between the fussy Erwin Martin, head of a filing department, and Ulgine Barrows, the firm's efficiency expert who threatens to bring change into Martin's wellordered existence. With comic irony, Martin uses his reputation as a meek and pleasant man against the flashy Mrs. Barrows. The character of Martin is typical of what critics have called Thurber's "Little Man," a common working man who is baffled and beaten down by life in United States in the twentieth century.

The title "The Catbird Seat" derives from the speech patterns of Red Barber, the radio announcer for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team in the 1940s. Thurber, a devoted baseball fan, was among those who enjoyed the colorful expressions Barber sprinkled throughout his commentary. As Joey Hart, Martin's assistant explains, sitting "in the catbird seat" means being in an advantageous position. Although it is Mrs. Barrows who seems strong and bold and powerful, it is Martin who wins in the end.

Author Biography

Thurber was born in Columbus, Ohio, on December 8, 1894, the middle of three sons. When he was six, his brother accidentally shot him in the eye with an arrow, leaving him blind in that eye.

Thurber attended public school in Columbus, and then Ohio State University, where he was a bright but careless student who earned low grades and was rather unpopular. He wrote humorous pieces for the campus newspaper and literary magazine, but left college in 1918 without a degree. He worked as a code clerk, and then as a reporter, columnist, and correspondent for various newspapers before settling in New York in 1926.

After dozens of rejections, he finally had an article accepted by the *New Yorker*, and soon was hired as staff writer. He had the good fortune to share an office with E. B. White, who was the first to appreciate Thurber's drawings; Thurber later credited White with helping him develop a cleaner, stronger writing style. Over the next decade the two writers became the strongest influences on what is still known as "The *New Yorker* style."

During the 1930s Thurber published short pieces in the *New Yorker* and other magazines, and several books, including an autobiography, *My Life and Hard Times* (1933), and a spoof of psychology, *Let Your Mind Alone!* (1937). He also earned acclaim for his drawings.

As his friends often commented, Thurber was not much like the shy, nervous protagonist of many of his stories. He was wealthy and successful, and was frequently compared with Mark Twain. By 1940 the sight in his good eye was failing, but he continued writing and drawing, with the aid of large paper and a good secretary. In 1942, nearly blind, he wrote one of his most enduring stories, "The Catbird Seat."

Three years later the story was included in *The Thurber Carnival* (1945), which stayed on the bestseller lists for almost a year. For the first time, Thurber's work drew serious critical attention—no longer was he regarded as "just a humorist." Over the next fifteen years he tried out new forms including children's fantasy stories, and television and film adaptations of his earlier work.

On November 2, 1961, Thurber died of pneumonia following a stroke. Widely regarded as the most important American humorist of the twentieth century, he had published more than twenty books and hundreds of stories and drawings.

Plot Summary

"The Catbird Seat" opens in a crowded cigar store in New York City, where Mr. Erwin Martin is buying a pack of Camel cigarettes. As the narrator points out, this is an unusual act for Martin, who is generally known as a nonsmoker. But the reason for his purchase is soon made clear: he is planning to murder Mrs. Ulgine Barrows.

Martin is the head of a filing department in a large corporate firm; he is characterized as a neat and precise man who is known for his "cautious, painstaking hand." Back in his apartment, drinking a glass of milk, he contemplates the horrible Mrs. Barrows. He resents her for her "quacking voice and braying laugh," her constant chattering, and her use of colorful phrases she picks up from the radio.

Quoting Red Barber, the announcer for the Brooklyn Dodgers, she asks him seemingly nonsensical questions like "Are you lifting the oxcart out of the ditch?" and "Are you sitting in the catbird seat?" The expressions are Southern colloquialisms picked up by Barber during his years in Tallahassee, Florida. "Sitting in the catbird seat," for example, means holding an advantage. Even though the source and the meaning of the lines has been explained to him, Martin finds her way of speaking "annoying" and "childish."

Yet the most serious offense she has committed is her "willful, blatant, and persistent attempts to destroy the efficiency and system of F&S." Nearly two years ago, she met the elderly company president, Mr. Fitweiler, at a party, and charmed her way into a new job as his special adviser. Since then she has fired several loyal employees and driven others to quit.

Now she has turned her attention to the filing department, even hinting that perhaps some of the file cabinets are no longer needed. For Martin, who has worked with the F&S files for twenty-two years, this threat to his well-ordered system is reason enough to kill her.

Martin plans to go to Mrs. Barrows's apartment and kill her. He buys the Camel cigarettes—not her brand—so he can leave one in her ashtray and throw the police off his trail.

On the night of November 9, 1942, he eats his dinner as usual and sets off for his evening stroll, which this time takes him to her apartment. He finds her alone and accepts her invitation to come in. While she is in the kitchen fixing drinks, he looks around her apartment for a murder weapon, but finds nothing suitable. Then a new idea comes to him.

When Mrs. Barrows returns with his drink, he takes out one of his cigarettes, and lights it. She is surprised by his unusual behavior. He raises his glass, and makes a toast that insults "that old windbag," the company president. He tells Mrs. Barrows that he intends to make a bomb and blow up Mr. Fitweiler, and that he will be "coked to the gills" on

heroin when he does it. Shocked and indignant, Mrs. Barrows throws him out, but not before he sticks out his tongue at her and announces, "I'm sitting in the catbird seat."

The next morning, Martin arrives at work at his usual time, and behaves in his normal "neat, quiet, attentive" manner. Mrs. Barrows arrives soon after, storming in and promising to report Martin to the boss. Martin pretends he does not know what she means, and she charges into the president's office, where she is heard yelling.

More than an hour later, Mr. Fitweiler sends for Martin. Apologetically, he explains that Mrs. Barrows has come in with a crazy story about Martin drinking, smoking, and threatening the boss. Martin calmly denies having been to Mrs. Barrows's apartment, and Fitweiler believes him, knowing that Martin is his best employee and that he does not drink or smoke. Mrs. Barrows, he explains, has been under a lot of strain, and this must account for her wild accusations.

Naturally, Mrs. Barrows is furious that Martin denies their encounter, but her rage only makes it clear to Mr. Fitweiler that she has suffered a nervous breakdown. Mrs. Barrows is taken away. Mr. Fitweiler apologizes again to Martin, and Martin returns to his files.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Mr. Martin, a small, officious little man who works for F & S (in a filing department), is out on the streets of New York, putting into motion his plan to kill Ulgine Barrows, a woman who works in his office. This is rather surprising, since Mr. Martin is a thoroughly unremarkable man who is perfectly content to work as an unremarkable, yet remarkably efficient employee at F&S. Furthermore, he does not smoke and has never drunk anything stronger than a glass of milk, save the one time when he drank a ginger ale.

As Mr. Martin thinks about the reasons for wanting to get rid of Ulgine Barrows, the story moves back in time to her arrival in the office. Ulgine Barrows is introduced as the new special adviser to the president of the firm, Mr. Fitweiler, after Mr. Fitweiler meets her at a party. No one is sure why she was appointed to this position, but Mr. Fitweiler seems confident enough in her abilities.

It takes no time for Mr. Martin to dislike the woman, since she has a loud boisterous manner and she is constantly spouting off bizarre phrases such as, "Are you hollering down the rain barrel? Are you scraping around the bottom of the pickle barrel? Are you sitting in the catbird seat?" (2) Nobody else around the office likes her either and a few of the older members of the firm leave in order to get away from her. However, Mr. Martin puts up with her for two years as he quietly endures her constant needling and inane questions.

However, Mr. Martin is not planning to kill Ulgine Barrows because he cannot stand her. In fact, he is planning to kill her because she is ruining the efficiency of F & S. As Mr. Martin recalls, Ulgine is constantly reorganizing departments, changing old methods of business, and generally disrupting the entire office's practices. Though Mr. Martin disapproves of her practices, he continues to endure her. However, the final straw arrives when she points herself at Mr. Martin's department in order to reorganize his precious, highly efficient work life. Thus, Mr. Martin decides that Mrs. Barrows must go.

After spending the day carefully maintaining his normal routine, he walks over to Ulgine's apartment and, surprised at the arrival of her guest, she invites him in. Then, while Mrs. Barrows is in another room fixing a drink for herself and her guest, Mr. Martin looks for a weapon with which to kill her. However, nothing in the room will work and it seems that he is stuck. However, as Mrs. Barrows returns with a scotch-and-soda for Mr. Martin, a wonderful plan occurs to him.

Mr. Martin pulls out a pack of cigarettes he bought earlier and has a smoke along with a few gulps of scotch. Mrs. Barrows is surprised at her coworker, since he is well-known to never smoke or drink. However, she is utterly shocked when Mr. Martin offers the toast, "Here's nuts to that old windbag, Fitweiler." (6) Furthermore, Mr. Martin tells Ulgine Barrows that he is planning to get coked up on heroin and detonate a bomb in

Fitweiler's office. Of course, Mrs. Barrows is appalled and she orders Mr. Martin to leave her house at once.

The next day, Mrs. Barrows comes in to work and loudly announces to Mr. Martin that she is telling Mr. Fitweiler all about his plan before she storms off to Mr. Fitweiler's office. The other people in the office are, obviously, confused at her pronouncement, but Mr. Martin acts as though he has no idea what she is talking about and he resumes his work as though nothing is wrong.

Meanwhile, there is a loud argument in Mr. Fitweiler's office as Fitweiler and Mrs. Barrows argue about something that is not entirely clear to the rest of the office staff. However, when Mrs. Barrows storms out of the office, Mr. Fitweiler calls in Mr. Martin, much to everyone's surprise.

Mr. Fitweiler informs Mr. Martin that Mrs. Barrows has made several surprising statements and allegations about Mr. Martin, but Mr. Martin pretends to have no idea what she is talking about. As well, when Mr. Fitweiler says that Ulgine Barrows claimed to see Mr. Martin smoking and drinking, Mr. Fitweiler was shocked. In fact, Mr. Fitweiler decides that his adviser has been working too hard and is probably undergoing some sort of nervous breakdown.

Just then, Mrs. Barrows storms into the office and launches into a tirade against Mr. Martin and all his denials. However, Mr. Martin is completely unaffected and the rest of the office thinks that she has gone insane. A few men there grab and hold of her and physically force her out of the building, never to return. Thus, with Ulgine Barrows finally out of the way, Mr. Martin returns to his office and continues his work as though absolutely nothing is wrong.

Analysis

The story is told from Mr. Martin's point of view and this provides several insights into him as a person. First, Mr. Martin is referred to as Mr. Martin throughout the story. This shows that his relationship with himself is very formal and dignified and he does not think of himself outside of his role at work. Secondly, of all the major characters, Ulgine Barrows is the only one that is given a first name. This shows that Mr. Martin is a very formal person whose relationships are kept on a strict, business-like footing. However, Mrs. Barrows changes this when her loud manner causes Mr. Martin have an opinion of her as a person rather than a coworker. Though it is a decidedly negative opinion, it is an opinion nonetheless.

Mr. Martin tells himself that he does not consider his personal distaste for Ulgine Barrows as a motive for murdering her. However, when Mr. Martin first considers his plan to murder Ulgine Barrows, he starts by thinking about her annoying habits and mannerisms, showing that they certainly are a motive for his planned murder.

Though Mr. Martin is a very quiet, retiring, unremarkable man, he is also a man who plans to murder a woman who annoys him. Thus, Mr. Martin actually fits well with the

old profile of killers, in that he is the shy, quiet type who keeps to himself and not at all the sort of person anyone would think capable of murder.

In her role as adviser, Ulgine Barrows is attempting to change things at the office while Mr. Martin simply wants things to stay the same. However, when Ulgine Barrows is about to change Mr. Martin's department, he concocts a plan for murder. However, instead of killing the woman, he actually tricks her into getting herself fired. This symbolizes the idea that simply changing things to change things will bring about unexpected changes, as they do in Mr. Martin. At first, Mr. Martin plans to become a cold-blooded killer but, instead of murdering Ulgine, he manages to coldly murder her reputation and her position simply because she is looking to change his department and his work habits. Thus, Mr. Martin is a changed man thanks to Ulgine Barrows.

This short story is, in a way, a symbolic representation of Britain in World War II. Britain is a small country whose people are generally considered officious, impersonal and very reserved, much like Mr. Martin. However, Ulgine Barrows is loud, obnoxious, and is looking to change things that should not really be changed, much like Germany in World War II. Thus, the small little Mr. Martin bests the overbearing Ulgine Barrows by simple cunning and stunning audacity, much like Britain managed to do to Germany during the frequent bombings of The Blitz and the Battle of Britain.

Characters

Ulgine Barrows

As the "newly appointed special adviser to the president of the firm" of F&S, Mrs. Barrows has been hired to "bring out the best" in the company. In eighteen months on the job (which she obtained by cuddling up to the president, Mr. Fitweiler, at a party) she has fired three loyal employees, driven another to resign, and made changes in nearly every department. Now she plans to reorganize Mr. Martin's area, the filing department.

Mr. Martin despises her large and commanding presence, her loud "quacking voice and braying laugh," and her habit of repeating the colorful phrases of her favorite baseball announcer, Red Barber. When she reports Mr. Martin's shocking threats, Fitweiler does not believe her. Instead, he summons a psychiatrist. In a rage she screams accusations at Martin, confirming Fitweiler's belief that she has gone mad.

Mr. Fitweiler

Mr. Fitweiler is the aging president of the firm of F&S. Almost two years before the story begins, he met Ulgine Barrows at a party, where she "worked upon him a monstrous magic." Shortly afterwards, he hired her and began to follow her suggestions for reorganizing the company. Fitweiler is formal and autocratic; after twenty-two years of working together he still calls Mr. Martin by his last name, and Martin calls him "sir."

Joey Hart

One of Mr. Martin's assistants in the filing department, Joey Hart explains to Martin that Mrs. Barrows' colorful expressions are taken from the baseball announcer Red Barber.

Erwin Martin

Mr. Martin is the protagonist of the story. He is described as a small, neat, quiet man. He has never taken a drink of alcohol or smoked a cigarette, and he has no family or friends. For twenty-two years he has worked for the firm of F&S, eventually rising to the position of head of the filing department. He takes great pleasure in keeping the files as orderly as the rest of his life.

When the loud and aggressive Mrs. Barrows joins the firm and threatens to make changes in his filing system, he goes to her apartment planning to kill her. Suddenly he realizes that he could have her removed from the firm by discrediting her instead. Because Martin is such a "drab, ordinary little man," not even Mrs. Barrows believes that he has planned her demise.

Miss Paird

One of Mr. Martin's two assistants in the filing department, Miss Paird is "always able to find things out." She spreads the story of how Fitweiler and Barrows met, and tries to eavesdrop when Barrows storms into Fitweiler's office.

Themes

Men and Women

One of the more important themes of "The Catbird Seat" is the struggle for men and women to understand each other and live together. In Thurber's work, the battle is always between a weak, nervous man and a strong, domineering woman. It was a recurring theme in his work, most notably in fictional works like *The Owl in the Attic* (1931) and the "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1939). When "The Catbird Seat" was adapted as a movie in 1960, the film was called *The Battle of the Sexes*.

Many of Thurber's stories and drawings explore the struggles between men and women in marriage. In "The Catbird Seat" the arena is the workplace. In Thurber's world, men and women can never understand each other. Like Mr. Martin and Mrs. Barrows, they speak different languages; moreover, women always want to change things.

In this story, many of the traditional male and female characteristics are reversed. It is Mrs. Barrows who drinks alcohol, smokes cigarettes, and follows baseball. Mr. Martin drinks milk, has never smoked, and does not know who Red Barber is. Mrs. Barrows is loud, with a commanding presence. Mr. Martin "maintain[s] always an outward appearance of polite tolerance."

So if conventional behaviors are considered, Mrs. Barrows is the more "masculine" of the two, and Mr. Martin the more "feminine." Martin himself finds her masculinity offensive. Though he tries to "keep his mind on her crimes as a special adviser," he cannot help dwelling on "the faults of the woman as a woman."

The stereotype of the feminist who emasculates men is common in twentieth-century fiction. Yet Mrs. Barrows does not strip Mr. Martin of his manhood, but actually forces him to solve his own problem—to "act like a man," for the first time. The moral of the story seems to be that strong women should be eliminated in order to maintain the status quo.

For Jesse Bier, author of the critical history *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (1968), "The Catbird Seat"

represents the ultimate victory of put-upon man over matriarchism. Thurber's work is a joyfully vengeful and tireless attack on womanhood. . . . Thurber's stories . . . are the very acme in our literature of controlled wish fulfillment and triumphant, sustained opposition to everything that Woman, especially the aggressive American woman, stands for."

Many critics sense this anger in Thurber; but others find him cheerfully resigned to the battle of the sexes. Catherine McGehee Kenney's *Thurber's Anatomy of Confusion* describes his handling of the theme as "both bright and melancholy, enlightening and saddening, amusing and frightening."

Alienation and Loneliness

Underlying the inability of men and women to communicate is a deeper truth: all people are essentially alone. Men cannot communicate with women, but they cannot communicate with each other, either. The "battle" between men and women is simply the most visible demonstration of how isolated people are from one another.

In eliminating Mrs. Barrows, what is Martin protecting? The same job he has held for twentytwo years, working for a boss who barely knows him and still calls him by his last name. When he steps out of his routine to buy cigarettes, the clerk does not even glance at him.

In fact, Martin relies on this isolation and anonymity to carry out his plan unnoticed. Only the reader will note that once Martin has achieved the greatest victory of his life, he has no one to share it with.

Style

Irony

The term "irony" refers to a difference between appearance and reality, between what might be expected and what actually happens. Often, as in Thurber's work, irony comes out of a grim sense of humor and to make a serious point.

It is ironic that Martin's well-established reputation as a timid, quiet man makes it possible for his outrageous plan to succeed. To his boss and coworkers, the thought of Martin drinking, smoking, and saying "I'll be coked to the gills when I bump that old buzzard off" seems ridiculous.

The central irony of the story is found in the title. It would appear to be Mrs. Barrows who sits "in the catbird seat." She has the ear of the president, she has mysterious feminine charms, and she has a strange language that Martin cannot under stand. Yet as the story plays out, her strength is what brings her down.

In the end, Martin is able to use the title phrase as a weapon against the woman who taught it to him. Mrs. Barrows charges him with "sticking your tongue out, saying you were sitting in the catbird seat, because you thought no one would believe me when I told it!" She recognizes Martin's plan, but she cannot stop it; Mr. Fitweiler knows that Martin would never use such a phrase. Ironically, in the end it is Martin, not Mrs. Barrows, who sits in the catbird seat.

Imagery

The term "imagery" refers to the representation in words of something that is experienced through the senses—but it can be much more than that. Images are not only a way of giving readers a sudden and vivid picture of what something looks like, but also a sense of what it is like.

For example, Thurber uses vivid animal imagery to describe Mrs. Barrows. To Martin's ears, she has a "quacking voice and braying laugh." She romps through the halls of F&S "like a circus horse." In her fury after she confronts Mr. Fitweiler with her accusations, she brays and snorts and bawls.

Thurber does not expect the reader to consciously absorb and add up the animal imagery, and to analyze which animal Mrs. Barrows is most like. Instead, the intention and the effect are subtle. Each animal image quietly follows another, building up in the reader's mind, as Mrs. Barrows's many offenses build up in Martin's. Subconsciously, the reader forms an impression of Mrs. Barrows as animal-like. By creating that distance between the reader and Mrs. Barrows, Thurber makes it seem less shocking—and more fitting—that she should be "rubbed out."

In the *Explicator* in 1982, Marilyn Underwood examines the bird imagery in the story, and finds that Thurber chose his birds carefully to enhance his characterization. The catbird, she points out, is a quiet bird that can be riled; the sparrow (Mrs. Barrows) is known for invading territory of other birds; the martin is a type of swallow, associated with the formal and precise swallowtail coat men used to wear.

Again, the imagery serves to reinforce structures and meanings that are presented more overtly through plot and dialogue. By using layers of imagery, Thurber strives to make his story a richer experience.

The story also features a cluster of football images, used in scenes where Thurber wishes to underscore conflict. Mrs. Barrows first meets the company president at a party, where she helps him escape from a drunken man who thinks Fitweiler is "a famous retired Middle Western football coach." By the end of the scene, she has become special advisor to the president. At the end of the story, when an enraged Mrs. Barrows lunges for Martin, Thurber turns to football again: "Stockton, who had played a little football in high school, blocked Mrs. Barrows as she made for Mr. Martin." This time, the scene ends with Mrs. Barrows's dismissal.

Martin, too, has his brief moment of strength, when he summons his courage and goes to Mrs. Barrows's apartment. Hearing her braying welcome, "He rushed past her like a football tackle, bumping her." His plan is to kill her, to use physical force to have his victory. He realizes after only a few minutes in her apartment not only that she seems "larger than he had thought," but that he can use his cunning instead of his body.

Linking these three scenes by utilizing football imagery, Thurber emphasizes the difference between Mrs. Barrows and Mr. Martin. Of course, Mrs. Barrows's colorful expressions come from baseball, a sport Thurber followed closely. Mrs. Barrows appreciates baseball, while Martin does not; this difference emphasizes the contrast between her "masculinity" and his "femininity."

Historical Context

Humor in the Modern Period

Although Thurber has often been compared with the nineteenth-century humorist Mark Twain, this has more to do with their importance than with their subjects or styles. American humor in the nineteenth century and earlier featured rural or western heroes like Huck Finn, Davy Crockett, and Uncle Remus, slow-talking but clever country folk who made up in "horse sense" what they lacked in education. A staple of this kind of humor was the humiliation of the conniving "city slicker" who thought he could use his education and sophistication to win the fight or the contest or the girl.

When the *New Yorker* was founded in 1925, it strived to present a new type of humor, focusing on life in the modern city. The central characters of the new humor were formally educated, spoke "proper" English, and worked in offices instead of on the land. This humor was different for another reason: where earlier humor had celebrated the triumph of the pioneer spirit with its energy and cleverness, the new humor offered its heroes only hollow victory and loneliness.

Thurber and his colleagues at *The New Yorker* did not invent the school of urban humor, but became its most important contributors. Charles S. Holmes, in his introduction to *Thurber: A Collection of Critical Essays*, describes Thurber's heroes as lost in a modern world that lacks the stability of the past:

Trapped in a world of machines and gadgets which challenge his competence and threaten his sanity, a world of large organizations and mass-mindedness which threatens his individuality, and—most painfully— a world of aggressive women who threaten his masculine identity, he is forced to go underground, so to speak, and to fight back in small, secret ways.

Erwin Martin is more like the protagonists of the novels of Henry James than he is like the wise folk heroes of Mark Twain.

Psychology and Modern Man

During the early part of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud revolutionized the understanding of human psychology and originated the practice of psychoanalysis. His many books, including *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory* (1905), were widely read and discussed by both professionals and general readers; moreover, such terms as "the unconscious" and "the Oedipus complex" became part of the American vocabulary. From the beginning, Thurber rejected many of Freud's ideas, including his theories in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) that humor arises from impulses beyond the humorist's control.

Throughout his career, Thurber used psychology and its misapplications as a target for his humor. His first book, *Is Sex Necessary?* (1929) makes fun of Freud's theory—as interpreted in popular culture— that an obsession with sex underlies all human activity. He also spoofs the many "pop psychology" books that appeared in the 1920s. In *Let Your Mind Alone!* (1937) Thurber parodies the selfhelp book genre. The problem with modern popular psychology, he implies, is that it assumes that motivation and behavior are consistent from one person to another.

"The Catbird Seat" demonstrates the failures of popular Freudian psychology. Martin succeeds because he is different, because his mind does not work like it is "supposed" to, and because he knows he can count on everyone else to accept modern psychology as truth. When Mr. Fitweiler confronts Martin, his talk is laced with the vocabulary of pop psychology: "Mrs. Barrows . . . has suffered a severe breakdown. It has taken the form of a persecution complex. . . . It is the nature of these psychological diseases . . . to fix upon the least likely and most innocent party as the—uh— source of persecution."

Fitweiler has not come to this conclusion on his own, but rather with the help of his psychiatrist. After all, "these matters are not for the lay mind to grasp." The newness of psychology, and the quickness with which it was adopted by a public who only barely understood it, gave Thurber much material for his work.

Critical Overview

Thurber published hundreds of short stories and essays during his career, and while he was one of the few writers to be widely admired both by the critics and by the general public, there is little serious criticism of his work.

"The Catbird Seat" was one of four stories Thurber published in 1942, and it was included in the volume *Best American Short Stories of 1943*. Thurber liked the story, and chose it for the 1945 retrospective collection of his best work, *The Thurber Carnival*.

The *Thurber Carnival* was widely reviewed. Critic and editor William Rose Benét, writing in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, praised the book's humor and handling of psychology, and called it "one of the absolutely essential books of our time."

A reviewer for the London

Times Literary Supplement ranked Thurber as America's most important humorist. Poet and critic Malcolm Cowley's review in *The New Republic* found traces of French expressionism and surrealism in Thurber's work, but hoped that the humorist would turn his considerable talents to creating longer, more worthy, pieces.

Yet several reviewers lauded Thurber's mastery of the short form, and predicted that this volume would finally bring his work serious critical attention. *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Fanny Butcher wrote that she expected Thurber's reputation to move from "cult into a literary culture."

In the intervening years, a handful of booklength critical studies on Thurber have been published. Each points to "The Catbird Seat" as an example of Thurber's finest work, but spends only two or three pages discussing it, usually in contrast to "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."

For Catherine McGehee Kenney, the two stories must be considered together: "Martin is really Mitty's second cousin, acting out the fantasies of Hollywood films that Mitty had only dreamed about. Taken together, these two stories represent the height of Thurber's powers as a short-story writer."

Robert Elias also compares Martin to Mitty, finding that they both "win not too dissimilar victories over the commonplace, the dead level of practicality, the enemies of the imagination." He includes both stories among a short list of Thurber's "important and challenging masterpieces."

Only a few scholarly articles have been written specifically about "The Catbird Seat." These critical studies have pointed out that Mr. Martin is unlike Thurber's typical male protagonist in actually achieving victory over his female tormentor. Moreover, Earl Dias claimed in 1968 that the victory is undercut by Martin's own femininity.

Thomas Kane proves that Martin's victory occurs on Armistice Day. Fourteen years later, another article appeared, in which Marylyn Underwood examined the implications of Martin and Mrs. Barrows ("Mrs. Sparrows") both having bird names.

In the preface to his *James Thurber* (1964), the first book-length study of the author's work, Robert Morsberger comments on the state of Thurber scholarship:

Perhaps no other distinguished contemporary has been so neglected critically: for, in spite of his immense popularity at home and abroad, he has received little serious critical attention and that only in book reviews or brief articles. One difficulty for reader and critic is that most of Thurber's pieces are short and are scattered over thirty years of periodicals and more than two dozen books. Most of his pubic read him intermittently, relishing the individual selections but failing to survey the whole of his achievement.

The Thurber Carnival has never gone out of print. "The Catbird Seat" has been included in many of the major high school and college short story anthologies of the last third of the twentieth century. Thurber has not reached the heights of "literary culture" that Fanny Butcher envisioned, however. Like Mark Twain, with whom he is frequently compared, he is studied primarily as a "humorist," not as a "serious" or "major" figure.

Still, generation after generation of new students study the story, using it as a model of irony and characterization and as a prime example of how a writer can use language for comic effect.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches writing and literature at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, and writes for various educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses isolation and invisibility in "The Catbird Seat."

When James Thurber published "The Catbird Seat" in the *New Yorker*, he was already famous. He had published dozens of stories in the magazine, and ten books of humorous writings and cartoons. Each new book was heralded with reviews in all the major publications in the United States and in Europe.

Yet individual short stories, while they were welcomed by regular readers of the *New Yorker*, were scarcely noticed by critics; "The Catbird Seat" was no exception. Not until it was included in the best-selling collection *The Thurber Carnival* did it earn its place among the most popular and most widely anthologized American short stories of the twentieth century.

The "The Catbird Seat" was recognized as a prime example of a Thurber story: the weak but imaginative little man oppressed by a large and strong woman; the spoof of amateur psychologists; the suffocating climate of the modern business office; and the understated humor in ridiculous situations.

These elements can be found in many of Thurber's short fiction, most notably in stories featuring the character of Mr. Monroe in *The Owl in the Attic* (1931) and Walter Mitty in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," published in the *New Yorker* in 1939.

Like Mr. Monroe and Mr. Mitty, Mr. Martin of "The Catbird Seat" copes with a haranguing woman— or tries to—by dreaming of himself as strong and capable enough to overcome his foe. While Mr. Martin is merely unpleasant and Walter Mitty is charming, Erwin Martin, the hero of "The Catbird Seat" is ultimately sad and pitiful.

One important difference between Martin and the others is his living arrangements: he is a bachelor living in an apartment in New York City. He has no family, no friends, and no a pet. The New York of "The Catbird Seat" is not the writhing, exciting city, but an empty and lonely place where a person can go all day without a friendly word.

Thurber states and restates this idea throughout the story. When Martin buys his cigarettes in "the most crowded store on Broadway," no one speaks to him and the clerk does not even look at him. If any of his coworkers had seen him buying cigarettes they would have been surprised, but "No one saw him." Every evening he eats alone, reading the paper, and apparently chats with no one before he leaves for a solitary stroll.

Martin counts on his invisibility to carry out his plan to rid himself of the presence of Mrs. Barrow; he knows that "no one would see his hand" because no one ever sees him. He is so trained in hiding behind a mask, in maintaining "always an outward appearance of

polite tolerance," that even Miss Paird, one of the two people with whom he works closely every day, is completely fooled by it.

Miss Paird believes that Martin actually likes Mrs. Barrows. Martin has never shown his dislike, but gives Mrs. Barrows his "look of studious concentration." In the excitement of waiting to carry out his plan, he behaves strangely—he polishes his glasses a few extra times and sharpens "an already sharp pencil"—but again, no one notices.

On the night of the intended murder, Martin takes an unusually long walk to pass the time. He is worried about being noticed, but in fact this New York City is deserted and no one is watching. Mrs. Barrows's apartment house has "no doorman or other attendants," and at 9:18 p.m. her street is empty except for Martin, a man passing, and a man and woman talking. "There was no one within fifty paces when he came to the house"—convenient when one is planning a murder, but unusual for Manhattan. Inside, there is "nobody" in the hallway.

Mrs. Barrows is not a "nobody." She is a person other people notice, whether they wish to or not. She romps and hollers and shouts silly phrases. Men notice her at parties. Bosses are taken with her and hire her as "special advisers." Where Martin has his "look of studious concentration," hers is an "amused look." What does she see? Even a man as studious as Martin is driven "near to distraction" by her. It is more than he can stand.

The problem with Mrs. Barrows is that she seems to see right through his cloak of anonymity. As soon as he sees her (from under his eye shade) looking around the filing department, "taking it in with her great, popping eyes," he worries that she will see him for the person he really is.

Ironically, Mrs. Barrows, the person whom Martin dislikes most in the world and the last person he would allow himself to be honest with, is in some ways the only one who truly sees him. As soon as Martin enters her apartment, Mrs. Barrows sees what his two assistants have missed all day: "What's after you? . . . You're as jumpy as a goat."

Of course, Mrs. Barrows is not as perceptive as she thinks she is—or as Martin fears. As an efficiency expert she has a good eye for fine details, but not for broad strokes, and she is taken in by Martin's outrageous performance.

Just as Martin is undone by Mrs. Barrows's largeness and loudness, Martin's large gestures fool Mrs. Barrows. He gives the performance of his life, a startling imitation of Mrs. Barrows herself. He leaves her building. "No one saw him go." He walks home alone. "No one saw him go in."

The next morning at the office, everyone is suddenly seeing everyone else; in one paragraph Thurber emphasizes seeing and not seeing. When Mrs. Barrows announces she is going to report Martin to Mr. Fitweiler, he gives her "a look of shocked surprise." When she storms out of the office, she leaves Martin's two assistants "staring after her."

Martin returns to work, and the assistants look "at him and then at each other." Martin's look is a disguise, a lie. He is not surprised, but only playing a part. The assistants look at Mrs. Barrows, and then at Martin, and then at each other, but they do not see anything. They have no idea of what is going on.

For a brief instant, Mrs. Barrows almost understands what Martin has done. A "new glint" comes into "her popping eyes" and she says, "If you weren't such a drab, ordinary little man . . . I'd think you'd planned it all." Yet as Martin has known all along, the idea of him drinking and smoking and making bomb threats is too impossible to be believed. "Can't you see how he has tricked us, you old fool?" shouts Mrs. Barrows. "Can't you see his little game?"

Mr. Fitweiler cannot see it. The only Erwin Martin that Mr. Fitweiler has ever seen—and will ever see—is "the head of the filing department, neat, quiet, attentive." His perception will never change because he will never really look.

When Martin leaves Mr. Fitweiler's office after Mrs. Barrows has been sent home, he has a moment of pleasure that makes his step "light and quick." Of course, no one sees it. By the time he reenters the filing department offices, he has resumed his usual step, and "a look of studious concentration." He will not share his triumph with anyone, and no one will notice that he is relieved. Martin's plan was to "rub out" Mrs. Barrows.

In fact, Martin himself has already been rubbed out, erased and written over with the legend of Mrs. Barrows. No one really looks at him, or tries to learn about him, because they think they already know all there is to know. Martin was right: his plan will succeed because no one ever pays attention to anyone else.

Yet he should take no comfort in this. The sad thing about Erwin Martin is that he is invisible and alone every day—not just when he is hiding a murder plot—and he can't imagine any other way to live.

When Thurber wrote "The Catbird Seat" he had just undergone the last of five unsuccessful eye operations. He had lost one eye in an accident when he was a young boy, and now the other was stricken with cataracts and other ailments. Only in his forties, Thurber was practically blind, and he was forced to find new ways to write and to draw.

Not surprisingly, he responded to his condition by becoming withdrawn and depressed. If the story of Erwin Martin seems more bleak than Thurber's other tales of henpecked men, perhaps it is because the writer was struggling in his own life with questions of seeing and being seen.

Source: Cynthia Bily, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kendle discusses the difficulties of translating literature into popular film, with specific attention to Thurber's "The Catbird Seat."

My pleasurable recognition of the Aged P, Dickens's lovable and thematically crucial character who doddered briefly across the screen in David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946), generated a perplexing question. I wondered whether the movie image would have been meaningful to someone who had not spent the previous two weeks rereading and teaching the novel. This concern, added to others I felt about Lean's version, led me to a number of more general questions about the process of translating a work of fiction to film. Is a film adaptation an independent entity accessible to even an unlettered viewer, or does the adaptation exist primarily as an homage to, or even a series of illustrations from, the original? Such speculations inevitably involve assessments of the intrinsic worth of the literary work: are we perhaps relatively complacent about films that translate undistinguished novels like *The Godfather* or *Gone With the Wind*, and do we make unfair demands of films that adapt masterpieces like *The Brothers Karamazov?*

Soon after my disappointing experience with *Great Expectations*, I saw Charles Crichton's *The Battle of the Sexes* (1961), a screen version of James Thurber's story "The Catbird Seat," for the first time in thirty years. My delighted response stimulated an assessment of my different reactions to the two films. Had I been less awed by Thurber's work than by Dickens's and therefore more accepting of Crichton's major changes in setting, plot, and tone? Why did Lean's highly regarded film with its brilliant visual effects and fine performances frustrate me? Perhaps a clue lay in the films' treatment of the grotesque comic elements of the originals, a treatment that raises key questions about the strengths and possibilities of the two forms, and the different problems of adapting novels and short stories to the screen. Thurber's small masterpiece of misogyny, an impressive example of the short story genre, brilliantly encapsulates his obsessive theme of malefemale relationships and shrewdly creates a sense of the power dynamics of New York's business and social worlds (Dickens obviously has a broader canvas and room for fuller detailing in his picture of London). Just as Dickens challenges filmmakers to find a means of condensing the material without destroying the novel's richness, Thurber's brief story offers perhaps greater difficulties because of the small number of episodes from which it creates its world and because its cartoon-like characters might seem untranslatable to a full-length film. Crichton's adaptation raises the serious question of how to invent additional episodes while remaining true to the spirit of Thurber's original and how to seduce a sophisticated audience into spending time with outrageous comic stereotypes. .

Charles Crichton's version of Thurber's "The Catbird Seat" disarms criticism immediately. Though the film title, *The Battle of the Sexes*, sounds lurid, Thurber's story *does* focus on the planning of a perfect murder and culminates with the brutal heroine, an "industrial consultant," being pushed over the edge of sanity and apparently relegated to an institutional future by the milquetoastish protagonist, a clerk in the firm she plans to reorganize. (In Thurber's unpublished first version of the story, the clerk

does successfully carry out the crime.) The material and characterizations are so exaggerated that they might seem more suited to a cartoon than to a film with human performers. In fact, Thurber's thematically similar "fable," "The Unicorn in the Garden," in which the hulking despotic wife of the mild-mannered protagonist is hauled off to the "booby-hatch," apparently as the result of his sly manipulation of her mental state (the seemingly strongest females are the most vulnerable in Thurber's cosmos), did become a brilliant UPA cartoon in the fifties. But Crichton and witty screenwriterproducer Monja Danischewsky have skillfully muted Thurber's grotesqueness without destroying the comedy. The film smoothly shifts Thurber's original Manhattan setting to Edinburgh after the signifi- cantly bow-tied American efficiency expert so offends even her American colleagues that they send her on a fact-finding mission to Scotland. Thurber's heroine, the uneuphoniously named Mrs. Ulgine Barrows (Mr. Barrows' fate is never mentioned) is more humanely rechristened Angela Barrows for the film. Though a reader might envision the American Hope Emerson or the British Peggy Mount in the role, the film wisely casts the Canadian-born Constance Cummings, who appeared in many undistinguished American movies of the thirties before settling in England and turning up every few years in with impressive performances in films like *Blithe Spirit* or plays like *Long Day's Journey Into Night* with Olivier. The stylish Cummings, whose couturier is listed in the credits, skillfully humanized Thurber's harridan and is sufficiently attractive to make plausible the budding gallantry of protagonist Peter Sellers at the end. The film thus successfully dramatizes the sexual tension in Thurber's power struggle and wittily implies the force of such tension in all male-female relations. Sellers's performance suggests the sly Alec Guinness persona of the Ealing comedies (Crichton had directed Guinness in *The Lavender Hill Mob*). But Sellers's fussy Scotsman is, in fact, overshadowed by Robert Morley, who upstages everyone by appearing a few times in kilts as Cummings's would-be suitor, a character invented for the film. Morley's casting as a romantic rival suggests that the film's version of the gender wars will be, to put it mildly, idiosyncratic. From the film's opening shots of kilted bagpipers, as a voiceover calls Edinburgh "one of the last bastions of male supremacy, in which the shortest skirts are worn by men," the audience pleasurably senses that it is being controlled by master manipulators of stereotypes, both sexual and national.

Thurber's monstrous Mrs. Barrows, who "bawls," "snorts," metaphorically "swings at the firm's foundation stones with a pickax," "catapults through doorways," and governs many other violent verbs, becomes in the film an explicitly American phenomenon, Europe's punishment for Columbus's voyage. The brief appearance of a brash female American tourist with a timid husband in the showroom of the venerable weaving firm that is the Morley family business both supports the negative generalizations about domineering American women that structure the film and also makes Cummings less grotesquely cartoonish by contrast. Thus, she does not have to embody all the frightening American womanhood that terrorizes Thurber's hero and that Sellers and his co-workers feel as a perpetual threat. This altered image of Mrs. Barrows allows her a more humanized appearance and behavior. Like Thurber's original, she still does her share of braying: "If there is any night life in this dump, I haven't found it yet" is her ugly American assessment of Edinburgh. But she is really too attractive to make the audience comfortable laughing at her final breakdown and defeat, as can readers of the story. Some time after Sellers has successfully driven her from the firm and apparently

from Morley's life, Sellers sees her as she walks tearfully, still unaccountably in Edinburgh (has the atmosphere of the city gotten to her despite its lack of night life?), and still elegantly dressed and carrying impressive shopping bags. He shyly offers her flowers, as the voiceover mentions man's greatest hazard, "a woman's tears."

Danischewsky and Crichton, having assessed what is workable in print as opposed to what is possible on film, obviously respect Thurber's material without necessarily venerating it and give it an individual, often hilarious spin. Surprisingly, most of the film's sexual comedy derives not from Cummings's potentially lethal relationship with Sellers, who rather overdoes his subdued slyness, but from her abortive courtship by Morley. After a stage success as Oscar Wilde, a role he repeated in a 1960 film, Morley established his essential screen persona in his first film, *Marie Antoinette* (1938), as Louis XVI, a physical and erotic disappointment to Norma Shearer's character. A successful paterfamilias in real life, Morley created a fussy, purse-lipped character who is perhaps less sexually ambiguous than infantilely pre-sexual, or at times, as *The Battle of the Sexes* wittily demonstrates, is too fastidious or hypochondriacal to let himself go in any way. The film begins its teasing of Morley's sexuality early on when, looking for the company chauffeur, he accosts the wrong man, "Are you my chap?" and receives a rude but amused response, "No, I'm promised to another."

Though the film derives a great deal of its humor from the spectacle of Morley as a suitor, it is equally fair (or unfair) to both sexes. The story's Mrs. Barrows seems the familiar hulking female of Thurber's cartoons. He never gives a detailed description of her, but Mrs. Barrows's barely-controlled violence of speech and behavior as she explodes into rooms and bellows baseball jargon ("Are you tearing up the pea patch? . . . Are you sitting in the catbird seat?") suggests a threatening physical presence. In one bizarre episode she "bounced" in the protagonist's office and yelled "Boo," a sign that she is aware both of her power to terrorize and of her cartoon origins. In softening but not eliminating this aggressive aspect of Mrs. Barrows, the film acknowledges that literary grotesques are difficult to make credible on film, which must deal with images of real people. Instead of deleting such comic exaggeration, as did Lean, Crichton balances the grotesque and the believably human. (The recent British television version of Muriel Spark's comic novel *Memento Mori* failed primarily because director/co-screenwriter Jack Clayton could not find appropriate visual equivalents for Spark's material. Clayton shied too far from confronting the physical and psychological breakdowns of a group of upper-class Londoners, a phenomenon that seems grimly amusing in the privacy of the reader's imagination but would be painful to watch on screen, especially when the actors are approximately the same age as the characters they portray. Clayton, who had directed *The Innocents* (1961), a fine adaptation of James's "The Turn of the Screw," muted the humiliation of Spark's characters and imposed a comparatively happy ending on Spark's no-nonsense religious finale in an unsuccessful attempt to make her vision palatable to a mass audience. He was thus unable to sustain the balanced treatment of grotesques evident in Crichton's film.)

The Battle of the Sexes goes flaccid at times and fails to find a rhythm for the climactic farce sequence when Sellers tries to escape from Cummings's flat after his presumably serious attempts to kill her, and she tries to convince Morley that the teetotaling, non-

smoking Sellers has really been there lighting cigarettes, drinking, talking of being coked to the gills (a phrase he learned from a film thriller), and making insulting comments about Morley. Sellers actually tried harder (and more farcically) to kill Cummings than does the story character, but the film's kinder, gentler atmosphere absorbs this material without turning Sellers into a monster. The wonderful dialogue, some transcribed from Thurber, some invented by screenwriter Danischewsky, redeems this episode, as it does the entire film. Cummings complains of Morley, "Oh, but you're so helpless; if only there were a man here," a comment that both establishes her femininity and raises questions about both men. She had earlier, however, told Morley, to rebuff his unconvincing attempt at an embrace, "I wish you wouldn't think of me as a woman—I'm your business partner." Sex, which motivates all three characters consciously and unconsciously, must thus compete, often unsuccessfully, with a variety of commercial and health concerns. Morley, who hypochondriacally keeps a thermometer on his office desk, is disturbed by a nude pre-Columbian statue which Cummings has purchased for his office, and which Sellers destroys, presumably because if offends*his* puritanism.

In the film's world of reversed and undercut sexual stereotypes, it is possible simultaneously to savor the cruelty of the comedy and to feel grudging compassion for the plight of the flustered characters, an effect that improves upon Thurber's more single-minded misogyny. Crichton and Danischewsky thus demonstrate appropriately humanized equivalents for Thurber's cartoonish exaggeration. Lean and his collaborators, on the other hand, in their laudable effort to convey the seriousness of Dickens's material, fail to recognize the crucial role of the comic grotesque in defining and enriching Dickens's world. By essentially eliminating such grotesqueness (Miss Havisham is the film's only example of the grotesque, but she is hardly comic), Lean both dilutes the richness of Dickens's world and ironically undercuts the seriousness of his themes.

Source: Burton Kendle, "Lean Dickens and Admirable Crichton: Film Adaptations of Literature" in *Michigan Academician*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, January 1996, pp. 19-27.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Underwood examines some of the deeper devices Thurber employs in the story.

Critics of James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat" invariably refer to his humorous tone, his control of language, and his effective characterization in this tight-plotting short story. But this is not all, one needs to dig deeper to unearth what devices Thurber uses to make this story the success it is. One device in particular has been overlooked by critics. A biologist would not have been so negligent: he would have looked at the catbird's *seat* and would have seen an instant correlation to the events and characters in Thurber's story.

Anyone who picks up a copy of Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds of Texas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963) will find on page 182 a description of the catbird. This bird is unobtuse, "skulks in undergrowth," and is hard to rile. However, upon being disturbed, it will come out from the underbrush, where it meshes with its environment because of its drab coloring, and will flare its tail feathers, showing a rusty tuft of seat (or "under tailcoverts") to the cause of its disturbance.

This description is significant to understanding Thurber's short story. Consider who is first "sitting in the catbird's seat" or "sitting pretty"—Mrs. Ulgine Barrows, an upstart, a new-comer, a defiler, an intruder in the territory of Erwin Martin. That her name sounds much like *sparrows* is equally signifi- cant. Note the imported sparrow's characteristics: a little gray bird that takes territory away from the domestic bird by "settling in" noisily, eating the seeds of the domestic, and making, literally, a mess of the former domestic bird's habitat. The sparrow, with its conical-shaped short bill, is quick and effective in pecking away the foundations of the former owner's home. Soon only sparrows inhabit the territory, the take-over complete.

Mrs. Ulgine Barrows is "sitting in the catbird's seat," flaunting her tail (if you will) in the face of everyone in the office of F&S. She is an import, having been brought in by Mr. Fitweiler. She "eats the seeds" of the employees at F&S, taking from them the sustenance, the employment that has been theirs for years. Aggressive as an efficiency expert, she has several fired, others just quit. If she is not stopped, the very foundations of F&S will crumble. Mr. Martin, astute as he is austere, comprehends this eventuality, but, like the catbird, remains quiet and unobtuse—until she invades his territory.

Consider now Mr. Martin and the connotations inherent in his name. The martin is a member of the swallow family, a small gray bird with long wings, a forked tail, swift and graceful flight. *Swallowtail* is a term for *cutaway*, a man's formal coat with tails. Indeed, it is easy to imagine Mr. Martin clad in a cutaway, as he is precise in nature, impeccable in character, and haughty in his regard for his occupation and position.

Mr. Fitweiler innocently brings Mrs. Barrow to his firm—as if in a *fit* (defined as "a sudden, acute attack" and "a highly emotional reaction") to the F&S *weiler* or *hamlet*.

Also innocently, he allows her to quack and bray commands, yell and bawl obscenities, and chip and pick "at the foundation stones" of F&S. Thurber's descriptive terms of Ulgine Barrows are similar to the terms used to describe the calls of yet another bird—the cuckooburro— which is distinguished by a raucous, braying, laughing call that approximates the ass for which it is appropriately named (as is apparently Mrs. Barrows).

Barrows' asininity does not concern Mr. Martin, though it bothers him; but her invasion of his territory does, to the extent that he plans his strategy which he changes at the last minute. Instead of "rubbing her out," he flaunts his tail jauntily by being obnoxious, by exhibition of characteristics not his own. In short, he shows a color heretofore covert. When the deed's done, he very unobtrusively returns to his underbrush, the W20 file, "wearing a look of studious concentration," while his antagonist is removed from the coveted "catbird's seat."

Source: Marylyn Underwood, "Thurber's 'The Catbird Seat'" in *The Explicator*, Vol. 40, No. 4, summer 1982, pp. 49-50.

Adaptations

Read by Wolfram Kandinsky, "The Catbird Seat" was recorded on audiocassette in 1984. It is available as part of an unabridged reading of *The Thurber Carnival*, produced and distributed by Books on Tape, Incorporated.

"The Catbird Seat" was adapted in 1960 as a British feature film, *The Battle of the Sexes*, starring Peter Sellers as Mr. Martin. The film is not available on videocassette.

Topics for Further Study

If "The Catbird Seat" were set today instead of in 1942, who might play the Red Barber role? Name a few famous entertainment or sports figures that use unusual language or unique ways of expressing themselves. Give an imitation of these distinctive qualities.

Interview someone who works in a business office. How has the office environment changed since Mr. Martin worked for F&S? How has it remained the same? You might consider relationships between bosses and employees, relationships between employees, and hiring and firing procedures.

Mr. Martin is an oddity because he does not smoke or drink. Does the story ultimately present Martin's abstinence as a weakness or a strength?

Investigate the psychological phenomenon of the "persecution complex." Does Mr. Fitweiler's explanation for Mrs. Barrows's behavior seem plausible?

Search for the phrase "catbird seat" using two or three Internet search engines. How many different publication titles and product names include the phrase? Which of these uses seem to be based on an understanding of the phrase's origin?

Compare and Contrast

December 8, 1941: After a Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States declares war on Japan and enters World War II. The war will continue until August 14, 1945.

Today: The United States is involved in several international conflicts, but has not officially declared war since 1941.

1941: The Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team wins the National League pennant, but loses the World Series to the New York Yankees. Red Barber is the baseball announcer for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Today: The Dodgers now play in Los Angeles, where they moved in 1958. Most fans follow the games on television, which became popular in the 1950s.

1940s: In metropolitan areas like New York City, outerwear for businessmen includes gloves and formal hats, usually of felt, with creased crowns and narrow brims that go all the way around.

Today: Businessmen usually are seen without hats of any kind, except in severe weather.

1942: Although women work at manufacturing jobs formerly held by men, relatively few women work in offices. Most of these businesswomen are unmarried, like Miss Paird and the apparently unattached Mrs. Barrows. Women in influential positions are rare.

Today: Although sociologists have described a "glass ceiling" that prevents many women from being promoted to the top ranks of large corporations, women do appear at every level of business.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1939) is Thurber's best-known short story. Mitty is a mild-mannered man who shuts out his nagging wife and other troubles by daydreaming about himself as hero.

Thurber's *The Thurber Carnival* (1945) is collection of over one hundred stories and drawings by Thurber and represents the best of his humorous work written during the 1930s and 1940s.

Remember Laughter: A Life of James Thurber (1994), by Neil A. Grauer, is the most accessible of the Thurber biographies. It includes photographs and a selection of Thurber's most famous drawings.

Robert Benchley's *My Ten Years in a Quandary* (1936) portrays common American men struggling with the frustrations of twentieth-century life.

America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury (1978), by Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, is a history of American humor.

Further Study

Bowden, Edwin T., *James Thurber: A Bibliography*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968.

This valuable resource lists and describes every known writing and drawing published by Thurber in books and magazines, including those in translation.

Kinney, Harrison, *James Thurber: His Life and Times*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995.

Considered the definitive biography of Thurber.

Long, Robert Emmet, *James Thurber*, New York: Continuum Publishing, 1988.

An overview of Thurber's life and works, more useful for its observances of common themes and contexts than for its discussion of any individual work.

Morsberger, Robert E., *James Thurber*, New York: Twayne, 1964.

Published three years after Thurber's death, this overview was the first book-length study of his work. It was also the first serious attempt place Thurber among America's great writers.

Thurber, James, *The Years with Ross*, Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1959.

A memoir of Thurber's years writing for *The New Yorker* under the guidance of Harold Ross, who edited the magazine from 1925 until his death in 1951.

Toombs, Sarah Eleanora, *James Thurber: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*, New York: Garland, 1987.

A well-organized and thorough listing of over one thousand books, articles, and reviews discussing Thurber's writings, drawings, plays and productions.

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Introduction

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The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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