

The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast Short Guide

The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast by Theodore Sturgeon

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Overview

A hurkle inadvertently transports itself from a faraway planet to an elementary school on Earth in this comic story.



About the Author

Theodore Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo on February 26, 1918, in St. George on Staten Island, New York, to Edward Waldo, a paint salesman, and Christine Waldo, a teacher. In 1923, his parents separated, with his father leaving home; they eventually divorced. His mother married William D. Sturgeon in 1935, and Waldo legally changed his name to Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon. Accounts of how he came to be a writer vary considerably, from the fantastic (he tried writing only after giving up on becoming a circus acrobat) to the mundane (he needed money), but he first tried his hand at seamanship, attending Pennsylvania State Nautical School for one term in 1935 and working as a seaman from 1935 to 1938.

In 1937, Sturgeon sold his first published story to the McClure newspaper syndicate, and he sold forty stories from 1937 to 1939, mostly to McClure. With the sale of stories to the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1939, he entered the mainstream of science fiction publications. His marriage in 1940 to Dorothy Fillingame may have increased his need to earn money and probably persuaded him to find a job that kept him in one place, which likely accounts for why he left his career as a seaman and took a job as a hotel manager, from 1940 to 1941.

After serving in the U.S. Army in 1941, he took a job as a bulldozer operator in Puerto Rico. His restlessness may have strained his marriage; his wife took their two daughters and left him.

From 1946 to 1947, he worked as a literary agent. After that, he worked for two years on the circulation staff of *Fortune* and *Time* magazines, meanwhile marrying and soon divorcing Mary Mair. During this period, his writing career began to catch fire; he had been building a fan following with his short stories and had published at least one minor classic, "It," in 1940. With the publication of his short story collection *Without Sorcery* in 1948, he broke into a larger, more profitable market than the magazine market. In 1950, he worked as a fiction editor for *Tales of Tomorrow*, and in 1951 he married Marion—they had four children together. The publication of the novel *The Dreaming Jewels* (also published as *The Synthetic Man*) in 1950 garnered him more attention from science fiction fans and established his reputation as a daring analyzer of human frailties and proscribed subjects such as aberrant sexual behavior. In 1954, he received the International Fantasy Award for *More Than Human*; even so, making a living as a professional writer—even a now famous one—was very hard, and in 1961 he became feature editor for the magazine *If*, retaining the job to 1964. Also in 1961, he became the science fiction reviewer for the magazine *National Review*, a position which he held until 1973.

By 1962, his stature was such that he was made the guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention, and the magazine *Fantasy and Science Fiction* devoted an issue to him. In 1966, he broke into the lucrative market of writing television screenplays and wrote screenplays until 1975. In spite of the upward progress of his career, his personal life remained difficult; his third wife and he divorced. In 1969, he married Wina



Golden, and they had one child. By this time, he had formed many affectionate friendships with other writers, and his reputation grew not only because of his writing but because of his help to them. By the time of his death on May 8, 1985, in Eugene, Oregon, he was a beloved father-figure among science fiction writers; it was and remains hard to separate the literary merits of his work from the praise from writers whose warm friendships with him color their views of his writings.

In 1970, Sturgeon received the Nebula Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America and in 1971 the Science Fiction Achievement Award (also known as the Hugo Award, given by a vote of attendees at the annual World Science Fiction convention), both for "Slow Sculpture."

Attendees of the 1981 and 1982 World Fantasy Convention voted his short story "The Silken Swift" into the Fantasy Hall of Fame.

Setting

There are two principal scenes of action.

One is in the "greatest city" of Lirht, a planet in a galaxy other than our own. In that city is a laboratory in which a scientist has been working on a transportation device. A happy hurkle kitten (hurkles are nearly always happy) wanders into the laboratory while its staff is out, probably heading toward the center of the city, where a bomb has gone off. Like an earthly cat might, it plays with the lights and switches on the transportation device and is transported to an elementary school on earth.

The elementary school is where the confrontation between alien creature and human beings is played out. There is nothing remarkable about the school, except perhaps for its supply of powdered DDT. The particular classroom that the hurkle kitten disturbs is composed of bored children and a weary teacher, and the itching caused by its purr may be the most interesting thing that has ever occurred there.

Social Sensitivity

"The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" touches lightly on the issue of how human beings associate with animals. Mr. Stott represents a scientific bent of mind that perceives the hurkle not as another being but as a curiosity to be studied. His use of DDT powder to coat the almost invisible hurkle kitten is ingenious, but it is also potentially dangerous for the hurkle; a common complaint about biological science is that researchers often put at risk or outright harm the animals they study. In this sense, "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" is a serves-you-right story, with humanity as represented by Stott driven from the earth by an animal that wants nothing more than to be friendly. "Isn't this a lovely place?" concludes the story, implying that life on earth is better off without human beings.

Literary Qualities

An important part of the storyteller's art is the comic story. Whether a folk tale or modern fiction, the comic story provides laughs and relief from the sometimes overbearing seriousness of survival. "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" is a comic story, full of silly remarks and misdirections, and it has a happy, light tone that belies its serious theme. The story provides a pleasant diversion, and if its audience is so inclined, provides some food for thought.

Sturgeon employs a deft bit of misdirection at the start of "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast." The story looks as though it will take place on Lirht. The gwik, who seem to be the planet's lone civilized species, are in the middle of some political turmoil: "a gwik named Hvov, whom you may immediately forget, blew up a building which was important for reasons we cannot understand. This event caused great excitement, and gwik left their homes and factories and strubles and streamed toward the center of town." Sturgeon is honest when he says we may forget Hvov, for the explosion and the streaming toward town lead in a direction away from the events most important to the story—the hurkle kitten playing with some unattended scientific equipment and finding itself transported to the earth.

Much of the humor of the story depends on such misdirection, with the narrative seemingly leading one way and then heading in another direction altogether, as when the hurkle kitten's "slightest movements ceased, and it stretched out stiffly, motionless. ..."—this looks like death, but in fact the hurkle revives and has kittens. Even the snappy ending of the story is a surprise shift from the usual human-meets-extraterrestrial-being story. Instead of a battle, there is peace, instead of humans divining the nature of the hurkle, there is abandonment.

Some of the comedy of "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" derives from its discursions such as the commentary on what people in Moscow did during the "Ten Days That Shook the World." The narrative seems to wander wildly about, moving rapidly between galaxies and between the point of view of humans and the happy but befuddled view of the hurkle itself. Silly names such as "hurkle" and "gwik" contribute to the nonsensical tone of the story.



Themes and Characters

Hurkles are happy-go-lucky animals, and on Lirht "The hurkle are highly regarded by the gwik as pets, in spite of the fact that a hurkle is so affectionate that it can have no loyalty." Hurkles have the valuable power, on Lirht, to "become invisible if frightened." These aspects of the hurkle are crucial to its behavior on earth; it is an animal that could itch humans to madness with its affection while remaining completely friendly, with no malice at all.

The characters of "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" are sketches; the humor and the theme are more important than character development. Even so, Sturgeon provides a detailed description of the hurkle kitten that has been transported to earth: It was blue—a truly beautiful blue. It had a small spherical head and an almost identical knob at the other end. There were four stiff, straight legs, a long sinuous body, and two central limbs with a boneless look about them. On the side of the head were four pairs of eyes, of graduated sizes.

It teetered there for perhaps ten seconds, and then, without a sound, leapt through the window and was gone.

Much of the story is told from the hurkle's point of view, which is a comical counterpoint to the more pedestrian view of Mr. Stott, the teacher. When the hurkle looks in on the classroom of children that exasperate Stott, the hurkle sees "a most pleasing vista": More than forty amusingly ugly animals, apparently imprisoned by their lower extremities in individual stalls, bowed and nodded and mumbled. At the far end of the room stood a taller, more slender monster with a naked head—naked compared with those of the trapped ones, which were covered with hair like a mawson's egg.

This is a funny passage with an ironic twist—are the children in fact imprisoned?

Has the hurkle kitten seen more than at first appears?

When Stott looks at his students, he sees something different: "His forty-odd charges were writhing and squirming in an extraordinary fashion, and the sound they made, a sort of whimpering giggle, was unique."

What Stott sees is displeasing, the opposite of the hurkle kitten's perception.

The hurkle kitten seems to be a smart animal. For instantly, it encounters a problem: "It went invisible; but its visibility system was reversed here, and it was suddenly outstandingly evident." Even though trying to turn invisible makes the hurkle kitten visible, it adapts and becomes invisible by doing the opposite of what it would have done on its home planet. This is in contrast to Stott, and by implication, to human beings in general. The hurkle adjusts to humans, but humans do not adjust to it. The hurkle's willingness to be univervally affectionate overmatches the human unwillingness to submit to the ways of an animal.



In this lies the theme of "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast," the idea that humans are hostile to other forms of life. The hurkle is the antithesis of the human attitude, surviving because of its friendliness and willingness to get along with people. Unable to control the animal, and unwilling to adapt to the presence of the animal, humans abandon the earth. Thus, underneath the comedy is a significant idea—the suggestion that even when dealing with a creature that is all affection, humans have a need to dominate.



Topics for Discussion

1. What other techniques besides coating the hurkle kitten with powder might Stott have employed to reveal the invisible animal?
2. Why would the hurkle think the children were imprisoned?
3. What, if anything, does "He had saved the Earth from battle, murder, and bloodshed, forever, but he did not know that" mean? Does it have something to do with hurkles driving humans off of the earth?
4. What could people have done to stop the itching caused by the purr of hurkles?
5. How is the earth different from Lirht?
6. Why is the earth, from the hurkle kitten's perspective, a place where "No colors were right; everything seemed half-lit, out-of-focus"?
7. Why is the hurkle kitten not angry about being covered with DDT, which is poisonous?
8. What would make a hurkle a good pet? What does it say about the gwik that they prize hurkles as pets?
9. What is the point of having the hurkle try to eat a bee and then give up trying?
10. Why do hurkles thrive on earth?
11. Is the earth better off with hurkles instead of humans?
12. Why is Stott satisfied with what he has done to the hurkle kitten?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the proper scientific approach for dealing with a newly discovered animal? What is the importance of the proper approach? What does it prevent? What does it do?
2. Draw a picture of the hurkle kitten.
3. Write a short story that takes place on Lirht. Perhaps you will wish to describe what happens to Hvov, the adventure of another hurkle kitten, or what happens when an earthly cat is transported to Lirht.
4. A matter transportation device like that in "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" is a staple of science fiction. Where has it been used before? How does it advance the plot in science fiction tales?
5. What other writers have written fiction depicting the earth as better off without humans? What reasons do they have in common with "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast"?
6. Having children stuck at their desks during class seems bad in "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast." What alternatives are there? What have educational theorists suggested?
7. Jane Yolen writes, "Theodore Sturgeon is an author who has always written stories that speak beyond their actual words" (in her *Zoo 2000*, 1973, p. 23). What does she mean by this? How does "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast" exemplify her point?

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Clareson is editor of *Extrapolation* and, while he may not be widely known to the public, is regarded with affection among science fiction writers. Here, he points out Sturgeon's views as a literary critic, as well as an author of fiction.

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Wolfe is one of the most critically acclaimed science fiction writers. "Eudiche" is a name drawn from Sturgeon's short story "Make Room for Me." Eudiche had too much empathy; Wolfe suggests empathy was a key element in Sturgeon's writings.



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