My Life and Hard Times Study Guide

My Life and Hard Times by James Thurber

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

In My Life and Hard Times, humorist James Thurber looks back fifteen years to relate nine stories that illustrate the oddball family conditions in which he grows up in the era of World War I.

James Thurber's My Life and Hard Times consists of nine vignettes that stand out in the memory of his youth. They center around a grandfather whose mind and temper flash back to fighting in the American Civil War, a jittery mother and father somewhat at odds over the state of the household, a docile older brother Herman, a normally "quiet and self-contained" younger brother, Roy, who periodically feels the need to play pranks, and the author, whose weak eyes never miss the vivid details of life.

The inexplicable seems to happen to the Thurbers in the wee hours of the morning. In "The Night the Bed Fell," Mother fears that Father will be killed in the heavy attic bed, and when she hears James' cot collapse, assumes that it has happened. In "The Car We Had to Push," the family's odd views about cars and electricity are examined, Roy plays a prank while driving, the badly-parked family car is mangled by a passing street car, and Grandfather has to be calmed about an overlooked funeral.

In "The Day the Dam Broke," the whole East side of Columbus, OH, is caught up in a panic over the bursting of the dam. It turns out to be a false rumor but demonstrates how mass hysteria works. The Thurbers, of course, are in the thick of things. "The Night the Ghost Got In" returns home, late at night, as suspicious sounds downstairs lead to a police invasion to capture burglars and Grandfather's wounding one officer with his own gun. In "More Alarms at Night," Roy plays another prank on Father and James wakes Father for help remembering the town Perth Amboy.

"A Sequence of Servants" recalls the zaniest of the incredible string of domestic servants that come through the Thurber home, while "The Dog That Bit People" recalls Muggs, their antisocial pet. In "University Days," Thurber describes his mediocre career at Ohio State University, and in "Draft Board Nights" describes how, after being rejected for poor vision, he is repeatedly recalled for physical examinations. The last time comes on comes Armistice Day.

Chapter 1, The Night the Bed Fell

Chapter 1, The Night the Bed Fell Summary and Analysis

With grandfather away, father decides to sleep in the attic, in order to think. Mother is opposed, fearing the wobbly bed will collapse and the heavy oak headboard crush him. She is overridden. When James' poorly-balanced army cot flips over atop him at 2 AM, the noise sends Mother into a hysterical fit over her husband's fate, awakening the household. Visiting cousin Briggs knocks over a glass of camphor oil, nearly suffocating them, James awakens to find himself trapped and yells for help, brother Herman finds the attic door stuck and fights to open it. Father meanwhile awakens, assumes there is a fire, and yells "I'm coming!" Mother interprets this as him talking to God as he is dying. Father appears safe as the door finally opens. Later, they piece the situation together like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

This story, relating "the high-water mark" of Thurber's youth, sets the pattern for this memoir and the mood for most of the volume. Thurber briefly but carefully sets up the tale with minute detail, then wanders off on some related matter (here: his relatives' foibles), and finally returns to watch the rippling, domino-like effect of events. Grandfather is introduced as out of town but subject to flashbacks to the American Civil War. Father and Mother are shown as often at odds and easily panicked. Brother Herman, like the dog—one of many, it later turns out—is largely there only to contribute to confusion.

Chapter 2, The Car We Had to Push

Chapter 2, The Car We Had to Push Summary and Analysis

It takes up to six people to start the aging family car. It is beyond cranking; it must be pushed up to speed and the clutch then engaged. Father has never liked the REO and is sure that it will some day explode. To exploit this fear, younger brother Roy one day packages kitchen utensils under the car to release during a drive, to simulate catastrophe. Mother and grandmother believe gasoline, oil, and water interchangeable and fear that the Victrola (record player) will explode. Telephones are dangerous during storms, and all sockets must be filled with bulbs and switched off to prevent deadly electrical "drippage."

When the REO one day is parked too far from the curb, the streetcar snags it and drags it to its destruction. The family's grief convinces Grandfather that his long-dead brother Zenas has just died and is not being properly buried. Zenas, it is explained in an aside, goes to South America to let the American Civil War "blow over," and returns in 1866 to become the only human being ever to die of the chestnut blight. When George Martin dresses up as Zenas to set Grandfather's mind at rest, Grandfather is not fooled, and declares that he had always recommended the Pope-Toledo over the REO.

This story's aside is about cars. Unlike his friends, young Thurber cannot distinguish models readily and is interested only in the Red Devil driven by the "Get-Ready Man," who everywhere proclaims the End of the World. Thurber then segues into a description of his mother and grandmother's fear of electricity. At the end of the story, Grandfather lucidly discusses his preference for a much more expensive car than the moderately-priced REO. Grandfather's passage in and out of lucidity is better established and continues throughout the memoir.

Chapter 3, The Day the Dam Broke

Chapter 3, The Day the Dam Broke Summary and Analysis

In 1913, panicky residents of Columbus, OH, flee eastward to escape drowning, believing that the dam has broken. West of High St. is under water, like most of Ohio that spring, but the East Side, where the panic spreads, is beyond danger. It is business as usual on High St. until someone for some innocent reason starts running, is joined by someone else, and then by many others. When finally someone utters "dam[n]," a cry goes up that panics 2,000. People drop everything and stream eastward. Few people take the time to start their cars (hand-cranking is time-consuming). When Grandfather believes it is a Rebel invasion, he is knocked unconscious and lugged away, but comes to in time to rally the mob.

An Army officer and militiamen trying to calm the situation are both misconstrued and their official positions lend credence to the rumor. The evacuation of Columbus is complete and lasts for two hours, with people running up to twelve miles away. In a movie theater, when someone trots innocently away from his seat, someone else yells "Fire!" and the audience claws one another—only to join the chaos outside. Thurber quotes a letter from his Aunt Edith about her experiences: a tall woman running without knowing why and the respected Dr. H. R. Mallory who believes that the sound of a child's roller skates are the rushing waters. The next day, Columbus goes back to normal, but it is years before anyone sees humor in the "Afternoon of the Great Run."

This story quite effectively portrays the mechanics of mass hysteria and particularly the role inadvertently played by authority figures seeming to lead. The spirit is much that of "The Night the Bed Fell." Finding that Grandfather is again re-living the Civil War and feeling the need to flee, the family hits him with an ironing board, gathers him up, and runs. It appears from later stories that the Thurbers rather routinely resort to knocking out frantic family and servants, and frantic seems the perpetual state in the household.

Chapter 4, The Night the Ghost Got In

Chapter 4, The Night the Ghost Got In Summary and Analysis

On 17 November, 1915, a ghost enters the Thurber house and causes "a hullabaloo of misunderstanding." At 1:15 AM, Thurber, fresh from a bath, hears something walking around the dining room table downstairs. Suspecting a burglar, he wakes Herman. Both hear something coming up the stairs invisibly, but slam the door against it. More steps are heard downstairs, followed by nothing. Mother awakens, agitated, and wants to call the police, but the only phone is downstairs, with the burglar(s). She throws a shoe through the neighbor's window and convinces angry Mr. Bodwell to make the call for her. In an aside, Thurber notes that Mother enjoys the sensation of breaking the window and he has to talk her out of breaking another.

The police arrive in force, break down the front door, and swarm through the downstairs, ransacking, but finding nothing. They are suspicious of why Thurber wears only a towel. Hearing Grandfather roll over in the attic, the police race upstairs, where he, taking them for deserters from General Meade's army, disarms an officer and shoots him in the shoulder. Dressed hastily in his mother's blouse, Thurber explains that they heard ghosts, and promises to return the wounded officer's gun. The police feel defeated. In the morning, lucid Grandfather asks why all the cops had been "tarryhootin' round the house."

The Keystone Kops-like scenes are filled with Midwestern dialect and Grandfather's antiquated phrases from when Confederate General Stonewall Jackson hammered General George Meade's Union army. Meade is known for his harsh treatment of deserters and cowards. Grandfather's swings in and out of present reality are becoming increasingly dramatic and poignant.

Chapter 5, More Alarms at Night

Chapter 5, More Alarms at Night Summary and Analysis

One night, while living at 77 Lexington Avenue, Father threatens mysteriously to "get Buck." As the story unfolds, Father goes to bed at 9:30 but gets up at 10:30 to protest the boys' loud Victrola. Around 3 AM, Roy decides to play a joke. Pretending to suffer delirium, Roy yells in his father's ear, "Buck, your time has come!" Father leaps up, keeping the bed between himself and his son, until he is able to flee the room, locking Roy in. Mother finds Roy sleeping easily and not feverish, and angers Father by insisting that he has had a nightmare. Seeing an advantage, Roy claims that it is Father who awakens him and first mentions this Buck character.

Six months later, unable to sleep one night, Thurber runs through the names of New Jersey towns, struggling to recall "Perth Amboy." Finally, he awakens Father to ask him. Father names a few towns, as he warily dresses, again watching for his chance to escape. Father awakens everyone at 3:30 but Mother sends them to bed and in the morning insists on talking about something "more elevating."

This story shows the Thurber family at its middle-of-the-night worst. The boys have played their records so long that the grooves stick and annoyingly repeat the same fragment, which grates at Father as he tries to sleep. Normally mild Roy decides to play a trick, which awakens the entire family. Mother is clearly the arbiter and Father normally listens. Twice he is portrayed in comic garb and wide-eyed with panic. He relates to his sons as to rabid dogs, and the boys know how to work his fears. The search for the name "Perth Amboy" provides delicious farce.

Chapter 6, A Sequence of Servants

Chapter 6, A Sequence of Servants Summary and Analysis

Thurber recalls "the immortals" among the 162 servants that his mother employs during his youth. Dora Gedd wounds a lover in her bedroom and is shooting up the downstairs when police arrive. Gertie Straub comes home drunk, disturbs the sleeping family, and claims to be simply dusting. Juanemma Kramer has a great fear of being hypnotized because she is so susceptible. Belle Giddin scalds a finger on purpose to help decide which 50¢ painkiller works best. Vashti has a gift for finding lost objects and is in a love triangle with a chauffeur and a stepfather who turns out to be imaginary. Fiancé Charley, who wants to kill the stepfather, abandons her.

Mrs. Doody goes berserk and decides that Father, as the Antichrist, is chasing her through the house. Mrs. Robertson, a former slave, recalls the Civil War but not what it was about. A cricket in the basement, she is sure, is Death watching. She embraces black pride after a famous boxing match but does not know what "'speriority ob de race" means. Finally, Edda Millmoss spoils Father's important political dinner and, parenthetically, burns the house.

This story is a lively string of vignettes of oddball characters from the author's childhood. Most of the incredible 162 leave no great impression on him. Thurber reproduces a good deal of dialect, particularly of the black characters. He does so without overtones of race bigotry. The story includes an aside on hypnotism mentioning that Thurber hopes the hypersensitive Kramer never sees Lionel Barrymore's portrayal of the mad Russian pseudo-monk in the film, Rasputin and the Empress. A later story likens one of Thurber's college professors to the famed actor, suggesting that he exerts a strong influence. The story also includes a reference to Jack Johnson, a flamboyant black boxer, whose victory over a white boxer, Jim Jeffries, spawns race riots. Thurber concentrates on the positive aspect: Mrs. Robertson's participation in a black pride parade.

Chapter 7, The Dog that Bit People

Chapter 7, The Dog that Bit People Summary and Analysis

Muggs is a "big, burly, choleric dog" that excludes Thurber from the family. Muggs refuses to kill mice, turning them into virtual domestic pets, but bites humans with regularity, bringing complaints to the police department. Mother does not have the heart to humiliate Muggs by restraining him and blames the victims for provoking his bites. She also prefers to meet vendors of ice, milk, etc., down the street and carry the products home.

Muggs is never in a good mood, even after meals, but is particularly nasty in the morning. When Thurber foolhardily punishes Muggs, he is chased around and bounds onto the fireplace mantelpiece for safety. The noise of its collapse makes Muggs avoid entering the house, so when Mother wants him inside, she has to rattle a homemade "thunder-machine" to scare him in. For fear of being bitten while laying down Muggs' food dish, the Thurbers feed him on an old table, standing with his hind feet on a bench. Uncle Horatio, a veteran of the Battle of Missionary Ridge, finds this ludicrous, but Father does not allow him to show his bravery by putting the plate on the floor. Shortly before his death, Muggs begins "seeing things." He dies suddenly one night and is buried along a lonely road with the Latin epitaph "Cave Canem." Not knowing that this means "Beware of the Dog," Mother is pleased by the solemnity.

Thurber sets up Muggs' story by describing two other pets: Jeannie, a Scotch terrier who after birthing six puppies demands to go for a walk and delivers a seventh on a busy New York City street corner; and an unnamed, prize-winning French poodle who draws the prejudiced ire of garage workers. Mother continues to appear a bit unbalanced but entirely well-meaning. Uncle Horatio, alongside Grandfather, suggests that Civil War survivors suffer a good deal of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Chapter 8, University Days

Chapter 8, University Days Summary and Analysis

Thurber talks about his time at Ohio State University. He fails to graduate because he cannot pass biology, no matter how hard he and his instructor try to adjust the microscope so he can draw plant cells. The unnamed instructor gets so angry at Thurber's failure that he quivers all over like Lionel Barrymore—a second reference to the renowned actor in these stories. Thurber's weak eyesight (John K. Hutchens' "Introduction" discusses the impact of total blindness on Thurber's later writings) becomes a major factor in this story and the following.

Thurber turns next to a timid economics professor, Bassum, who begins making railroad sounds to help the dumb-as-an-ox star tackle, Bolenciecwcz, answer the question that will save his grade: name a mode of transportation. The whole class lends a chorus of sounds. For several pages it is touch-and-go whether Bolenciecwcz will find an acceptable answer.

Thurber turns to gymnasium, another course that gives him trouble. Because eyeglasses are forbidden, he runs into people and objects. He dislikes answering questions while naked. He talks an amiable colleague (Gymnasium No. 473) to pass swimming trials for him. Thurber recalls an agricultural student who decides to take up journalism, but is clearly not cut out for writing. The typewriter keyboard puzzles him and every assignment yields deadly, boring prose.

As a Land Grant university, Ohio State requires students to complete two years of military drill. Thurber marches badly for three years but in the fourth marches so perfectly that he is made a corporal. General Littlefield, who once calls him "the main trouble with this university," summons him to his office, doubtless to praise him and/or apologize for the earlier comment. When Thurber causes the fly that the general aims to swat to fly away, Thurber is dismissed with no idea why he was called in. He notes that while World War I is raging, the cadets are drilling to Civil War-era tactics.

Chapter 9 Draft Board Nights

Chapter 9 Draft Board Nights Summary and Analysis

Thurber leaves Ohio State in June 1918 but cannot enter the Army because of his eyesight. Grandfather is disappointed at being turned down because of age and wants to go to Germany at the head of a division—or even as a private. His younger brother Jake helps watch that he not run off at night to Lancaster, OH, to complain about this to the late General William Tecumseh Sherman. Grandfather is also indignant that Grandmother has learned to steer the electric runabout while he constantly pulls the controls too hard, as he would do while breaking a horse. He practices in Franklin Park with little success. When, one day Grandmother needs the runabout for marketing but finds it missing, it takes a whole day to find Grandfather near the town of Shepard, entangled in a barbed wire fence.

The Columbus draft board never calls Grandfather but many times calls the author, even after he is declared exempt because of his eyes. Letters keep coming and he keeps responding, enduring the unchanging rigmarole, with vision, of course, being the final test. After 9-10 times, he pretends to be a doctor and helps old Dr. Ridgeway listen to chests. He is surprised to hear one man ticking; swallowing objects, including watches, is a standard way to avoid the army.

Thurber does this at nights for four months. During the day he works as publicity agent for an amusement park. The manager, Byron Landis, is a prankster who invites Thurber to ride the new Scarlet Tornado roller coaster ride. The hair-raising experience keeps Thurber from ever riding the elevated and makes him jerk other people's emergency brakes. He feels like he is flying when he lies down and in certain months cannot hold food down.

When he tires of playing doctor, Thurber lines up with the draftees again and is rejected. Dr. Ridgeway does not recognize him. Shortly after Thurber's last failed examination comes Armistice Day. Such a casual reference to the coming of peace is momentarily shocking, until one realizes that Thurber writes a decade and a half later, when the resumption of war is looming.

A Note at the End

A Note at the End Summary and Analysis

In the postscript to his memoir of youth, Thurber changes mood. He hints at hard times in his "middle years" about which he lacks the proper perspective to write, so he leaves off with the illusory peace as World War I ends. He refers obscurely to an event at one James Stanley's home in 1925 as too near to deal with; readers in 1933 and Thurber scholars might catch the reference and its importance, but the average reader must simply move on. While the preceding stories often include obscure references to people and the material objects of early 20th-century culture that can be understood in context and pictured in the mind from old movies, this reference is of a different sort.

Thurber goes on to gloss over his "mistaken exits and entrances" that lead him to daydream of becoming a footloose character out of a Joseph Conrad novel, but says that his weak eyes and teeth keep him tethered to physicians. Several stories allude to his activity-limiting eyesight. When he visits the West Indies one summer, he finds it nothing like the movies. Like all other Columbus natives, he returns home and behaves. Thurber closes by noting that even Lord Jim cannot run away from his own "special discomfiture." The routines of life constantly reveal unexpected turns. Once, Thurber is tempted not to rejoin a cruise ship, but gives in—only to find his dinner pants stolen.

Characters

James Thurber

The author of these memoirs highlighting select incidents during his first twenty or so years of life, Thurber is born December 8, 1894 in Columbus, OH, to Mary Agnes and Charles Thurber. He has an older brother, Herman, and a normally "quiet and self-contained" younger brother, Roy. His paternal grandfather, Clem, lives with the family in the attic, flashing back regularly to his Civil War days. Thurber says nothing about his schooling before college, but much about his sometimes bizarre family. Thurber has 44-45 dogs in his lifetime (through 1933), most bringing "more pleasure than distress." A regular stream of household servants comes through the doors, but only a half dozen make an impression.

During World War I, Thurber attends Ohio State University,but leaves in 1918 without earning a degree. He writes about his difficulties with biology, economics, gymnasium, and obligatory military training. Most of his problems are linked to eyesight which he dismisses as weak. It gets him repeatedly turned down by the U.S. Army, which he seeks to join as the war ends. He includes a story about a hapless journalism student but does not mention his own major. Nevertheless, he begins working as a journalist in Ohio. He mentions in passing his move to New York City, where, the "Introduction" and "Preface to a Life," make clear he makes good, joining the staff of the prestigious New Yorker magazine. He collaborates with E. B. White on his first, Is Sex Necessary? and begins contributing cartoons that become public favorites.

Thurber concludes this book, published in 1933, in 1918, claiming that he lacks perspective to deal with more recent events. John K. Hutchins talks at length about the gathering blindness that forces Thurber to stop cartooning and sharpens his ear as he is forced to dictate his stories. The early stories already show his precision in describing vivid detail, even while exaggerating. They also show the male/female conflict and need to escape most famously told in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."

Clem Thurber

Author James Thuber's grandfather, Clem frequently suffers flashbacks to the American Civil War, but is at other times, unpredictably, completely lucid. He normally lives in the attic of the Thurbers' Columbus, OH, home, but from time to time disappears for six to eight days and often returns befuddled. When living in the past, Clem is particularly tough on the Army of the Potomac, which he believes is filled with deserters. Several times, while drifting back to the 1860s, Clem lashes out violently. He shoots a policeman with the policeman's own gun, brandishes his old saber at Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry, and is knocked unconscious in order to get him out of harm's way when people believe that the dam has burst. The offhand way that Thurber mentions this suggests that it is not an isolated incident.

Clem is described as over six feet tall, 170 pounds, "hawk-nosed, round-oathed." He wrestles a policeman's gun away from him, which suggests considerable remaining strength. When turned down by the draft board to serve in World War I, Clem strips down to challenge them to a fight to show who is too old. He is ready to travel to his birthplace, Lancaster, OH, to complain about being excluded to the late General William Tecumseh Sherman, also of Lancaster.

Clem has a brother, Jake, fifteen years younger than he, and a wife who is mentioned only in the context of being able to master driving an electric runabout while the mechanics continually frustrate the old horseman. The adventures with the "electric runabout" seem linked with the draft adventures, but Grandmother's whereabouts while Clem is living in the attic are not clarified. Clem is not a dog capable of learning new tricks. He wants to "break" the runabout like a wild horse, and as a result drives in frustrating circles.

Another brother, Zenas, dies in 1866, but Clem gets confused and indignant that the family will not give him a decent burial when it is in fact the family car that perishes in an accident. Clem is willing to go to the public health authorities to right the matter, but when a friend dresses up as Zenas to calm him, he sees through the sham and remarks about a brand of car superior to the one destroyed. This incident perhaps most clearly shows Clem's standing on the edge of two worlds.

Muggs

Not a human, but a "big, burly, choleric" Airedale, Muggs takes center stage in one of the longest stories and clearly occupies a defining place in the household of author James Thurber. He is depicted anthropomorphically with a wide range of human emotions, motivations, and reactions.

Muggs is bought by Thurber's younger brother Roy while Thurber is on vacation, but apparently becomes Thurber's dog. Muggs is one of 44-45 dogs that Thurber owns through 1933, and is an exception to the rule that most bring "more pleasure than distress." Muggs treats Thurber as though not part of the family. Muggs refuses to kill the mice that overrun the house and expects them to be treated as pets, but with regularity bites human beings, keeping the Thurbers in conflict with the local police department. Mother does not have the heart to humiliate Muggs by restraining him, blames the victims for provoking him, and prefers to meet vendors down the street and to lug home their products rather than annoy Muggs

Muggs is never in a good mood, even after a meal, but is particularly nasty in the morning. The noise of a fireplace mantelpiece collapsing as Thurber jumps on it to avoid being attacked makes Muggs reticent to enter the house. When Mother wants him inside, she has to rattle a homemade "thunder-machine" to scare him in. For fear of being bitten while putting down Muggs' food dish, the Thurbers feed him on an old table, with his hind feet on a bench.

Shortly before dying, Muggs begins "seeing things." He dies suddenly one night and is buried along a lonely road with the epitaph "Cave Canem" (Beware of the Dog).

Briggs Beall

Author James Thurber's first cousin, Briggs has a phobia about stopping breathing while asleep. While visiting the Thurbers overnight, Briggs keeps a glass of oil of camphor on the bed stand just in case, and nearly asphyxiates when he spills it on himself.

The Bodwells

Natives of Peoria, the Bodwells live next door to the Thurbers. Convinced that there are burglars in her house late at night, Mary Agnes Thurber throws a shoe through the Bodwells' window to get their attention and ask them to call the police.

Bolenciecwcz and Prof. Bassum

A star tackle on the Ohio State University football team, Bolenciecwcz is in danger of being ruled ineligible to play because of academic failure. His professors try to help him along. Economics Professor Bassum and the entire class coax out of him a means of transportation by making various railroad sounds.

Mrs. Doody

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Doody is "a huge, middle-aged woman with a religious taint" who on the second night goes berserk while doing dishes, thinking that Father is the Antichrist chasing her through the rooms. Mother takes Doody's side.

Dora Gedd

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Gedd is a mousy girl of 32 who one night shoots her lover in her room. Afterwards, she quotes Shakespeare and chases the man into Father's room. The household goes into chaos. Gedd shoots out Welsbach gas mantles as the police arrive.

Belle Giddin

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Giddin scalds her finger one day in order to test which 50¢ pain-killer works best.

Get-Ready Man

An elderly gentleman, lank, unkempt, with wild eyes and a deep voice, the Get-Ready Man drives around Columbus, OH, in his Red Devil automobile, yelling into a megaphone that people should get ready for the end of the world. Once, the Get-Ready Man makes his announcement in the Colonial Theatre during King Lear and is escorted out.

Haskins

A journalism student not cut out for writing, Haskins gets confused by the typewriter keyboard and makes every writing assignment sound boring.

Uncle Horatio

Priding himself on being the third man up Missionary Ridge during the Civil War, author James Thurber's maternal uncle insists on showing the family that the ferocious dog Muggs can be fed on the ground without being bit. Father does not let him take the chance.

Juanemma Kramer

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Krame,r like all her siblings, has "Juan" embedded in her name by her mother. She is thin, nervous and so easily hypnotized that she lives in constant dread of anything that might put her under.

General Littlefield

The commandant of the cadet corps at Ohio State University, Littlefield once declares author James Thurber (or his type) the university's main trouble. When Thurber alone performs close order drill correctly, Littlefield promotes him to corporal and summons him to his office. Thurber disturbs a fly that Littlefield is about to swat and is dismissed without learning why he had been called.

Dr. H. R. Mallory

A man in Columbus, OH, with a white beard resembling Robert Browning, Mallory is a man whose voice is respected. When he joins the mob running from the allegedly burst dam, people follow. It turns out that he mistakes the sound of boy's roller-skates for that of rushing water. It is a long time before anyone can see humor in the event.

Edda Millmoss

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Millmoss is a morose but efficient worker until one night she accuses Father of depriving her of her rights to the land on which Trinity Church, New York, stands, ruining an politically important dinner. Millmoss also sets the Thurber house on fire.

Mrs. Robertson

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Robertson is "a fat and mumbly old Negro woman" between 60 and 100 who does the family washing. A former slave, she remembers the Civil War but not what it was about. Father cannot stand to have her around, but Mother refuses to fire her. Jack Johnson's victory over Mistah Jeffries on 4 Jul. 1910 inspires Robertson to join a black parade that proclaims "de 'speriority ob de race," although she is not sure what that means.

Grace Shoaf

Author James Thurber's aunt, Grace suffers a burglar phobia. She collects all of the shoes in the house beside her before going to bed and at the first imaginary sound begins throwing them.

Gertie Straub

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Straub is "big, genial, and ruddy." One night she comes in from drinking, wakes the family, and claims to be dusting.

Charles L. Thurber

Author James Thurber's father, Charles is "a tall, mildly nervous, peaceable gentleman, given to quiet pleasures, and eager that everything should run smoothly." It is vaguely suggested that he is somehow involved in politics. The Lieutenant Governor visits his home—only to be bitten by Muggs, the dog. He sometimes takes overnight business trips. Charles is a sound sleeper, easily startled. He distrusts old cars and suspects that his REO will explode. He argues with his wife Mary, but generally does as she dictates.

Mary Agnes Thurber

Author James Thurber's mother, Mary is consistently shown as gullible, superstitious, volatile, and a bit domineering. She knows little about automobiles, holding gasoline, oil, and water as necessary and largely interchangeable and, like her mother, is afraid of

electrical "drippage" from fixtures. When she cannot get downstairs to call the police, she throws a shoe through the sleeping neighbors' window to ask them to make the call. She then discovers that she likes carrying through the destructive impulse and has to be restrained from throwing another. Her relatives show similar quirks. She differs with her husband over troublesome servants and pets, refusing to get rid of either.

Herman Thurber

Author James Thurber's older brother, Herman sometimes sings in his sleep, usually "Marching through Georgia" or "Onward, Christian Soldiers." He gives the impression of being a large and docile force in the household.

Jake Thurber

Grandfather Clem Thurber's younger brother, Jake sits up with Clem during his agitation over being turned down to serve during World War I. Having trouble sleeping, Jake seems the perfect guardian, but when he does nod off, Clem changes clothes and position with him, pretending to read by the bedside.

Roy Thurber

Author James Thurber's "quiet and self-contained" younger brother, Roy several times breaks into pranks. On one occasion, he collects a great many articles from the kitchen into a canvas, slings this under the car, and while father is driving, releases it, convincing Father that the car has exploded. At age 16, Roy pretends to suffer delirium, calling his father Buck and scaring him badly.

Uncle Zenas Thurber

Grandfather Clem Thurber's late brother Zenas goes to South America to let the American Civil War "blow over," and returns to be the only human being to ever die of the chestnut blight of 1866. Clem's son asks friend George Martin to dress up like Zenas and put Clem's mind at rest about his being dead. Clem is not taken in.

Vashti and Charley

One of the "immortals" among the Thurber family's 162 servants during the author's youth, Vashti is a "comely and sombre Negress" with an uncanny ability to find lost objects. Her lover, Charley, is a chauffeur, but her Georgian stepfather also desires her. Charley wants to kill the old man and flee, but she prefers to bear her cross, keeping the Thurber family in jeopardy. When Charley learns that there is no stepfather, he throws Vashti over for Nancy.

Objects/Places

Columbus, OH

Author James Thurber's birthplace and hometown until he moves to New York City in the 1920s, Columbus is the setting for most of the stories in this memoir. The author declares: "Columbus is a town in which almost anything is likely to happen and in which almost everything has." He names in his stories many local streets, buildings, and parks. He claims that in the early 19th century, Columbus wins out as the Ohio capital over Lancaster by a single vote, and afterward acts as though it is in charge of the state.

High St. is the main thoroughfare dividing Columbus. When on March 12, 1913, rumors fly that the dam on the Scioto River is breaking, the West Side, like most Ohio towns, is under 30 feet of water, but the East Side, where the Thurbers live, is 95 feet above being touched by water, even if the dam had broken.

Clintonville, OH

A town six miles north of Columbus, OH, Cintonville receives many of the refugees who flee the rumored dam break that causes a panic in 1913.

Fort Hayes

A U.S. Army base in the northern part of Columbus, OH, Fort Hayes is holding a review when the dam allegedly bursts, and its officers in dress uniform add color to the chaotic scene. When an unnamed lieutenant colonel takes up the call "The dam has broke!" and "Go east!" it lends an aura of authority.

Lancaster, OH

Lancester is the hometown of both the famous Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Grandfather Clem Thurber. During World War I, the Thurbers worry that Grandfather will try to drive the electric runabout there to complain to the by-then-deceased "Cump" about being turned down for service.

New York, NY

Author James Thurber leaves off his memoir in 1918, but in conjunction with the various dogs that he owns, mentions living in new York. He becomes a staff writer for the prestigious New Yorker magazine, which publishes the cartoons and stories that establish his fame.

Ohio State University

Author James Thurber's college alma mater Ohio State includes schools of Liberal Arts, Engineering, Commerce, and Agriculture. It fields a powerful football team in the Western Conference. As a Land Grant university, it requires students to complete two years of military drill. Thurber describes himself as doing poorly in biology because he cannot see cell structures through a microscope, in gymnasium because he is not allowed to wear his glasses, and in military drill, although he takes it all four years. Thurber leaves Ohio State in June 1918 without graduating.

Perth Amboy, NJ

Perth Amboy is the name of a New Jersey town that gets into author James Thurber's adolescent mind one night and keeps him from sleeping when he cannot recall it. It so obsesses him that he re-awakens his father for the answer, startling Father and turning him paranoid.

REO Automobile

The Thurber family owns an old REO (at least 20 years old) that can no longer be started by cranking, but must be push started and the clutch then engaged. This operation is made more difficult by the fact that the clutch and brake share a single pedal. When it is parked too far from the curb one day, a passing streetcar snags it and drags it to its demise.

Reynoldsburg, OH

A town twelve miles east of Columbus, OH, Reynoldsburg receives many of the refugees who flee the rumored dam break that causes a panic in 1913.

The Scarlet Tornado

A roller coaster ride at an unnamed amusement park near Columbus, OH, for which author James Thurber does publicity work in 1918. The Scarlet Tornado so frightens him during a single ride that Thurber claims he is never able to ride the elevated train again and involuntarily jerks other people's emergency brakes while riding as a passenger. He feels like he is flying when he lies down and in certain months cannot hold food down.

Themes

Fear

The Thurber family and those around them demonstrate an inordinate amount of fear. Author James admits to fear only when his army cot overturns at night pinning him, while everyone else is beginning to howl in fear. Mother inherits from her mother a fear of deadly electrical "drippage." Father distrusts old cars and suspects that his REO will some day explode. His son Roy uses this fear to trick him. James and Roy both watch the horror with which he awakens suddenly from a sound sleep, and keeps the bed between them and himself as he makes his break to safety. The behavior resembles fleeing a rabid dog. Rounding out the immediate household, Grandfather periodically fears that the Union troops may mutiny, allowing the Confederates to win the Civil War. He rather fearlessly leads the imaginary counterattack on several occasions.

Everyone in the household and the neighborhood fears Muggs, the Thurbers' dog, whose only fear is thunder and lightning. Mother blames the victims for being bitten and walks down the block to fetch what delivery people are afraid to bring to the door. Only Uncle Horatio, third man up Missionary Ridge during the Civil War, is unafraid to feed Muggs, but is not allowed to try his luck.

Relatives display phobias: Cousin Briggs, of sleep apnea and Aunt Grace Shoaf, of burglars. Cousin Briggs keeps camphor by the bed to revive himself, while Aunt Grace piles up shoes to hurl, and at the first imaginary sound after going to bed begins throwing them. Fears are not only within the family; the servants also suffer them, particularly Ms. Kramer, whose fear of hypnotism is based in her extreme vulnerability to being put under. Vashti puts the whole family in mortal fear by being in a love triangle, with her fiancé buying a gun and vowing to kill the rival. The Get-Ready Man, looking forward to the End of the World, tries to put the fear of God in everyone on every occasion.

Finally, there is the mass hysteria of the dam bursting. The respected Dr. H. R. Mallory mistakes the sound of boy's roller-skates bearing down on him for that of rushing water and certain doom. Even after seeing reality, he continues to run. Everyone on the East side of Columbus clears out for no good reason. During the panic, another breaks out inside a theater. Seeing a patron leave hastily, someone yells fire and all scramble to get out. The run from the flood waters started just as innocently.

War

James Thurber's memoir, My Life and Hard Times, is largely set during World War I. The final story ends on Armistice Day, which he notes brings false hope to the world. Thanks to his grandfather's flashbacks, many stories allude to the Civil War.

Since Thurber writes "largely about small matters and smally about great affairs," one finds virtually nothing about the issues of war and peace raging in society at the time, including the military draft. His college, Ohio State University, as a Land Grant school, requires students to complete two years of military drill. Thurber admits that he is a terrible would-be soldier, having to drill all four years, and once being accused by the commanding general of being the reason for the university's decline. He indicates that most of the students perform their duty halfheartedly. In his fourth year, having marched more than anyone, he alone performs an intricate drill perfectly, ending far apart from the befuddled masses. He observes that they drill with outdated weapons, using Civil War-era tactics.

After leaving college, Thurber tries to enlist in the Army but fails the physical because of his eyes. Nevertheless, he is repeatedly summoned for physicals and obediently puts up with the rigmarole. Vision tests are always last, so he fails only at the end of the process. For a while he impersonates a doctor, listening to draftee's chests. Hearing an odd ticking, he is informed that young men regularly swallow odd objects in order to be excluded. Grandfather, who has fought in World War I, is anxious to be sent to Europe, but is told he is too old. Some of his contemporaries, however, through shoddy paper work, are summoned to physicals.

Grandfather rather frequently experiences flashbacks to his days of combat. One of his brother, Zenas, "sat out" the war in South America, while another, Horatio, was the third man up Missionary Ridge in a major battle. This remains the defining moment of Horatio's life, although he shows no signs of flashbacks in his one brief appearance in the book. Grandfather focuses most often on deserters from the Union armies. He specifically rises up against Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry, saber in hand, and Meade's retreats before Stonewall Jackson. When he cannot join up for World War I, Grandfather wants to appeal to William Tecumseh Sherman, as he reads Grant's memoirs. Finally, Mrs. Robertson, a former slave serving as the Thurbers' maid, remembers blue and gray soldiers marching but does not know why they fought.

Memory

Memory lies at the base of My Life and Hard Times. In the brief "A Note at the End," James Thurber explains that he is able to write only about what he can recall without pulling a pillow over his head in horror. Writing in the early 1930s, he finds himself talking loudly to himself in order to shout down "memories of blunderings and gropings" that occur after 1918. Therefore, he cuts his narrative off with the Armistice. Writers, he explains must be able to examine distresses painstakingly, order events carefully, and expose matters calmly and with balance.

This he manages to do, recalling select events of his youth in Columbus, OH. It is, he declares, "a town in which almost anything is likely to happen and in which almost everything has," and his family is a perfect microcosm. Thurber writes "largely about small matters and smally about great affairs." The "high-water mark" of his youth is the night the bed (supposedly) falls on his father. A panicky chain of event gradually plays

out. The grandest scale event he portrays is the day in 1913 that the dam (supposedly) breaks, the rumors sending the citizens of the East side of Columbus scrambling for their lives up trees and statues and away to nearby towns. No one remembers precisely what set off the panic, and the evacuation is so humiliating that few are willing to talk about it for years to come. Thurber recalls the great event in minute detail.

In several stories, Thurber deals directly with memory. A former slave recalls blue and gray soldiers marching down South but not why they are fighting. Thurber himself one night agonizes in bed over the name of the New Jersey town, Perth Amboy. Finally, he awakens his father from a deep sleep to ask his odd-ball question, and Father relates to him as he would to a rabid animal—keeping his distance, dressing hurriedly, and fleeing at first chance.

Most of the memory stories feature Grandfather, a veteran of the American Civil War. He frequently flashes back to those days, swinging his old saber to fight off the Rebels, in the form of Columbus policemen come to investigate a burglary report, or to prevent the troops from retreating during the "flood." Hearing the lamentations over the demise of the family car, Grandfather imagines his brother Zenas (deceased in 1866) has died and no one is bothering to bury him. As quickly as the spells come over him, Grandfather is able to lapse back into lucidity, astounding those around him.

Style

Perspective

James Thurber writes these reminiscences of his youth in 1933, when he has won acclaim for his cartoons and stories in the New Yorker magazine. He has also co-authored his first book with E. B. White.

Thurber narrates in the first person past tense, while frequently reproducing snippets of conversation in dialect. In some instances he is more of an observer than a participant, but is often caught up in the middle of the chaos which is his family life. He branches out to the wider community only while describing the 1913 panic over a supposedly broken dam, his college years at Columbus State University, and his frequent attendance at draft physicals, although from the start his deficient vision results in his being rejected.

Thurber treats this focused collection as autobiography, and briefly mentions some characteristics of the genre. While noting that some consider the tales fiction, John K. Hutchins, in his "Introduction," supports Thurber's position that these are things he can recall with placid enough a mind to put down on paper. He discontinues the story at the point that painful memories are still too fresh.

Thurber writes for the general reading public, rather educated, and appreciative of the astounding societal and technological changes that lie before and after World War I. Twenty-first century readers will find some references hopelessly obscure, but the wacky universality of the situations more than redeems this. Few people will have as crazy a family as Thurber portrays, but all can identify with the honest humanity.

Tone

My Life and Hard Times is a memoir of James Thurber's youth as recalled in 1933. He records things that he can recall with placid enough a mind to put down on paper, and discontinues the narrative at the point that painful memories are still too fresh. In his "Introduction," John K. Hutchins supports Thurber's position that this is autobiography, but acknowledges that some critics hold it to be fiction. It is certainly highly selective.

By 1933, Thurber is an established humorist, writing and drawing for the New Yorker magazine. He has also co-authored with E. B. White a successful book, which he has illustrated with his familiar and popular style of line art. My Life and Hard Times is filled with his drawings. Thurber tells his selected tales of youth with rich, wry humor. He incorporates a great deal of detail about a society that has greatly changed since the events he depicts. One suspects that he chuckles at incorporating old-fashioned styles and brand names that will puzzle younger readers. Incorporating Grandfather in most of the stories allows him to dig even further back to the American Civil War, which is still a living memory to its surviving veterans.

Thurber doubtless is quite objective about historical places, people, and events that he incorporates but highly subjective about how he uses them in his story. He always writes for humor, occasionally tinged with pathos. He evokes a lost time that to him is precious. His contemporaries doubtless read it differently from twenty-first-century readers, for whom any references are archaeological. The human emotions that he taps, however, are universal.

Structure

My Life and Hard Times consists of nine numbered and titled vignettes from James Thurber's childhood and youth, followed by "A Note at the End" that deals largely with why he elects to end the collection with the Armistice of 1918. The stories are introduced by John K. Hutchens and prefaced by Sandy Hook. These appreciative essays about Thurber's unique genius help the reader appreciate the humor of the stories. The text is accompanied by Thurber's delightful pen-and-ink illustrations, demonstrating the talent that first brought him fame.

The chapter titles are: 1) "The Night the Bed Fell," 2) "The Car We Had to Push," 3) "The Day the Dam Broke," 4) "The Night the Ghost God In," 5) "More Alarms at Night," 6) "A Sequence of Servants," 7) "The Dog That Bit People," 8) "University Days," and 9) "Draft Board Nights."

Thurber is selective about what tales he shares about his family's ability to attract the odd and inexplicable. Wacky chains of events break out and suddenly disappear. The family goes through a series of bizarre household servants and a menagerie of maladjusted dogs. Their neighbors all seem to suffer "attacks." At one point, the whole town of Columbus, OH, panics and runs eastward, fearing that the dam has broken.

Many tales begin a narrative, take a more-or-less related sidetrack, and then smoothly return to the story line as Thurber realizes that he has gone astray. The asides are all delightful stories in their own right. Several stories are precisely dated and all seem to flow in chronological order, with references back to previously narrated events. The time period is World War I, but his doddering grandfather, who lives in the attic, frequently flashes back to the Civil War.

Quotes

"By this time my mother, still shouting, pursued by Herman, still shouting, was trying to open the door to the attic, in order to go up and get my father's body out of the wreckage. The door was stuck, however, and wouldn't yield. Her frantic pulls on it only added to the general banging and confusion. Roy and the dog were not up, the one shouting questions, the other barking.
"Father, farthest away and soundest sleeper of all, had by this time been awakened by the battering on the attic door. He decided that the house was on fire. 'I'm coming, I'm coming!' he wailed in a slow, sleepy voice—it took him many minutes to regain full consciousness. My mother, still believing he was caught under the bed, detected in his 'I'm coming!' the mournful, resigned note of one who is preparing to meet his Maker. 'He's dying!' she shouted." Chapter 1, The Night the Bed Fell, pg. 6.

"But to get back to the automobile. One of my happiest memories of it was when, in its eighth year, my brother Roy got together a great many articles from the kitchen, placed them in a square of canvas, and swung this under the car with a string attached to it so that, at a twitch, the canvas would give way and the steel and tin things would clatter to the street. This was a little scheme of Roy's to frighten father, who had always expected the car might explode. It worked perfectly. That was twenty-five years ago, but it is one of the few things in my life I would like to live over again if I could. I don't suppose that I can, now. Roy twitched the string in the middle of a lovely afternoon, on Bryden Road near Eighteenth Street. Father had closed his eyes and, with his hat off, was enjoying a cool breeze. The clatter on the asphalt was tremendously effective: knives, forks, can-openers, pie pans, pot lids, biscuit-cutters, ladles, egg-beaters fell, beautifully together, in a lingering, clamant crash. 'Stop the car!' shouted father. 'I can't,' Roy said. 'The engine fell out.' 'God Almighty!' said father, who knew what that meant, or knew what it sounded like it meant.'" Chapter 2, The Car We Had to Push, pg. 12.

" 'When I reached Grant Avenue, I was so spent that Dr. H. R. Mallory—you remember Dr. Mallory, the man with the white beard who looks like Robert Browning?—well, Dr. Mallory, whom I had drawn away from at the corner of Fifth and Town, passed me. "It's got us!" he shouted, and I felt sure that whatever it was did have us, for you know what conviction Dr. Mallory's statements always carried. I didn't know at that time what he meant, but I found out later. There was a boy behind him on roller-skates, and Dr. Mallory mistook the swishing of the skates for the sound of rushing water. He eventually reached the Columbus School for Girls, at the corner of Parsons Avenue and Town Street, where he collapsed, expecting the cold frothing waters of the Scioto to sweep him into oblivion. The boy on the skates swirled past him and Dr. Mallory realized for the first time what he had been running from. Looking back up the street, he could see no signs of water, but nevertheless, after resting a few minutes, he jogged on east again. He caught up with me at Ohio Avenue, where we rested together. I should say that about seven hundred people passed us. A funny thing was that all of them were on foot. Nobody seemed to have had the courage to stop and start his car; but as I remember it, all cars had to be cranked in those days, which is probably the reason.'" Chapter 3, The Day the Dam Broke, pg. 27.

" 'What was the matter with that one policeman?' mother asked, after they had gone. 'Grandfather shot him,' I said. 'What for?' she demanded. I told her he was a deserter. 'Of all things!' said mother. 'He was such a nice-looking young man.'
"Grandfather was fresh as a daisy and full of jokes at breakfast next morning. We thought at first he had forgotten all about what had happened, but he hadn't. Over his third cup of coffee, he glared at Herman and me. 'What was the idee of all them cops tarryhooting' round the house last night?' he demanded. He had us there." Chapter 4, The Night the Ghost Got In.

"Our presence in the room finally seemed to awaken Roy and he was (or rather, as we found out long afterward, pretended to be) astonished and bewildered. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Nothing,' said my mother. 'Just your father had a nightmare.' 'I did not have a nightmare,' said father, slowly and firmly. He wore an old-fashioned "side-slit" nightgown which looked rather odd on his tall, spare figure. The situation, before we let it drop and everybody went back to bed again, became as such situations in our family usually did, rather more complicated than ironed out."
Chapter 5, More Alarms at Night, pg. 40.

"There were others. Gertie Straub: big, genial, and ruddy, a collector of pints of rye (we learned after she was gone), who came in after two o'clock one night from a dancing party at Buckeye Lake and awakened us by bumping into and knocking over furniture. 'Who's down there?' called mother from upstairs. 'It's me, dearie,' said Gertie, 'Gertie Straub.' 'What are you doing?' demanded mother. 'Dusting,' said Gertie." Chapter 6, A Sequence of Servants, pg. 45.

"Mrs. Doody, a huge, middle-aged woman with a religious taint, came into and went out of our house like a comet. The second night she was there she went berserk while doing the dishes and, under the impression that father was the Antichrist, pursued him several times up the backstairs and down the front. He had been sitting quietly over his coffee in the living room when she burst in from the kitchen waving a bread knife. My brother Herman finally felled her with a piece of Libby's cut-glass that had been a wedding present of mother's. Mother, I remember, was in the attic at the time, trying to find some old things, and appearing on the scene in the midst of it all, got the quick and mistaken impression that father was chasing Mrs. Doody." Chapter 6, A Sequence of Servants, pg. 48.

"One morning when Muggs bit me slightly, more or less in passing, I reached down and grabbed his short stumpy tail and hoisted him into the air. It was a foolhardy thing to do and the last time I saw my mother, about six months ago, she said she didn't know what possessed me. I don't either, except that I was pretty mad. As long as I held the dog off the floor by his tail he couldn't get at me, but he twisted and jerked so, snarling all the time, that I realized I couldn't hold him that way very long. I carried him to the kitchen and flung him onto the floor and shut the door on him just as he crashed against it. But I forgot the backstairs. Muggs went up the backstairs and down the frontstairs and had me cornered in the living room. I managed to get up onto the mantelpiece above the fireplace, but it gave way and came down with a tremendous crash throwing a large marble clock, several vases, and myself heavily to the floor. Muggs was so alarmed by

the racket that when I picked myself up he had disappeared." Chapter 7, The Dog that Bit People, pg. 56.

"Muggs died quite suddenly one night. Mother wanted to bury him in the family lot under a marble stone with some such inscription as 'Flights of angels sing thee to they rest' but we persuaded her it was against the law. In the end we just put up a smooth board above his grave along a lonely road. On the board I wrote with an indelible pencil 'Cave Canem.' Mother was quite pleased with the simple classic dignity of the old Latin epitaph." Chapter 7, The Dog that Bit People, pg. 56.

"In order for him to be eligible to play it was necessary for him to keep up in his studies, a very difficult matter, for while he was not dumber than an ox he was not any smarter. Most of his professors were lenient and helped him along. None gave him more hints, in answering questions, or asked him simpler ones than the economics professor, a thin, timid man named Bassum. One day when we were on the subject of transportation and distribution, it came Bolenciecwcz's turn to answer a question. 'Name one means of transportation,' the profession [sic] said to him. No light came into the big tackle's eyes. 'Just any means of transportation,' said the professor. Bolenciecwcz sat staring at him. 'That is,' pursued the professor, 'any medium, agency, or method of going from one place to another.' Bolenciecwcz had the look of a man who is being led into a trap. 'You may choose among steam, horse-drawn, or electrically propelled vehicles,' said the instructor. 'I might suggest the one which we commonly take in making long journeys across land.' There was a profound silence in which everybody stirred uneasily, including Bolenciecwcz and Mr. Bassum. Mr. Bassum abruptly broke this silence in an amazing manner. 'Choo-choo-choo,' he said, in a low voice, and turned instantly scarlet." Chapter 8, University Days, pg. 65.

"As a soldier I was never any good at all. Most of the cadets were glumly indifferent soldiers, but I was no good at all. Once General Littlefield, who was commandant of the cadet corps, popped up in front of me during regimental drill and snapped, 'You are the main trouble with this university!' I think he meant that my type was the main trouble with the university but he may have meant me individually." Chapter 8, University Days, pg. 69.

"I left the University in June, 1918, but I couldn't get into the army on account of my sight, just as grandfather couldn't get in on account of his age. He applied several times and each time he took off his coat and threatened to whip the men who said he was too old. The disappointment of not getting to Germany (he saw no sense in everybody going to France) and the strain of running around town seeing influential officials finally got him down in bed. He had wanted to lead a division and his chagrin at not even being able to enlist as a private was too much for him." Chapter 9, Draft Board Nights, pg. 73.

"A famous old horseman, he approached it as he might have approached a wild colt. His brow would darken and he would begin to curse. He always leaped into it quickly, as if it might pull out from under him if he didn't get into the seat fast enough. The first few times he tried to run the electric, he went swiftly around in a small circle, drove over the curb, across the sidewalk, and up onto the lawn. We all tried to persuade him to give up,

but his spirit was aroused. 'Git that goddam buggy back in the road!' he would say, imperiously. So we would manoeuvre it back into the street and he would try again. Pulling too savagely on the guiding bar—to teach the electric a lesson—was what took him around in a circle, and it was difficult to make him understand that it was best to relax and not get mad. He had the notion that if you didn't hold her, she would throw you. And a man who (or so he often told us) had driven a four-horse McCormick reaper when he was five years old did not intend to be thrown by an electric runabout." Chapter 9, Draft Board Nights, pgs. 74-76.

"The hard times of my middle years I pass over, leaving the ringing bells of 1918, with all their false promise, to mark the end of a special sequence. The sharp edges of old reticences are softened in the autobiographer by the passing of time—a man does not pull the pillow over his head when he wakes in the morning because he suddenly remembers some awful thing that happened to him fifteen or twenty years ago, but the confusions and the panics of last year and the year before are too close for contentment. Until a man can quit talking loudly to himself in order to shout down the memories of blunderings and gropings, he is in no shape for the painstaking examination of distress and the careful ordering of events so necessary to a calm and balanced exposition of what, exactly, was the matter." A Note at the End, pg. 83.

Topics for Discussion

Discuss how the American Civil War remains a living memory on the eve of and during World War I and infiltrates these stories.

How does Thurber deal with his limited vision in these stories?

How does Thurber deal with the issue of race early in the 20th century?

The Thurbers have several run-ins with the police in these stories. How is law enforcement depicted and what would be the Thurbers' likely fate nowadays? Give examples.

How does Thurber depict male/female communication issues? Give examples.

How does Thurber use asides—brief and extended—to enrich his stories? Is there anything detrimental about this writing technique?

In what ways does Thurber's attention to the details of early 20th-century life interfere with reading the book today? Pick one obscure reference, describe what it means to you, and then research its true meaning and context to see how close you come.