The Night the Bed Fell Short Guide

The Night the Bed Fell by James Thurber

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Characters/Techniques

Thurber sometimes combined fiction and nonfiction, as in "The Night the Bed Fell," to create what might be considered a new literary genre. The development of the concept of the "casual" at the New Yorker undoubtedly contributed to this, for the relatively light tone combined with a focus on familiar, everyday occurrences was well matched with the author's personality. The casual was also conducive to the technique of starting with an actual event in the writer's past and then branching off into fiction, extending the plot in order to carry a theme to an unlikely conclusion. Thurber was a master of casting such premises in a purely fictive mode as well. In either case, the writing style remains the same, encouraging a merging of fiction and nonfiction in the reader's mind.

The strong popular appeal of both Thurber's fiction and nonfiction is clearly attributable at least in part to the shock of recognition that readers experience with his work. The audience shares the thoughts, concerns, and even many of the experiences embodied in his characters and the circumstances in which they are placed, and the seriousness of the situation is alleviated by Thurber's humorous approach to his material. This makes the shock of recognition pleasurable, too, thereby enhancing the appeal to his readers.

The relationship between the fiction and the essays is further augmented by virtue of the content generally being presented from a purportedly objective third-person point of view as though the writer is engaged in straightforward, simple reportage.

The genre to which "The Night the Bed Fell" belongs is an interesting one, then, and it also reveals something of Thurber's nature. The tales in My Life and Hard Times (1933) convey a sense of nostalgia as the author reminisces about family life in a quieter, simpler, purer time and place. The incidents are recounted calmly, but a sense of immediacy, of actually being present and observing the action, is pervasive. The tone is that of fond remembrance, even when the happenings portrayed caused discomfort when they occurred, as when the commander of the university ROTC cadet corps berated the author for being "the main trouble with this university!" The persona adopted by Thurber as narrator reflects the tone and themes of these pieces, too. It is not quite the Little Man, but there is a kinship. The narrator is usually somewhat heroic and at the same time the butt of the humor. He is not the cowed individual of many of Thurber's other pieces; he is comparatively bright and competent. Perhaps this is because the narrator is closer to the real Thurber, who was fairly unflappable; perhaps it is because the memoirs seldom dwell on the battle of the sexes, and there is no overpowering female figure to contrast with the narrator, to expose the depths of his inadequacies, and to revel in his awareness of his failings.

Social Concerns/Themes

Over the years Thurber's fiction paralleled to some degree the events in his life. Most of his contributions to the New Yorker were published in the 1930s, and most of the earlier pieces were more light-hearted and innocent than those that were written during his marital difficulties with Althea (whom he divorced in June 1935 to marry Helen Wismer a month later), during social upheavals such as World War II and the McCarthy Era (which he spoke out against on many occasions), and particularly during the bleak periods of physical illness and, in spite of numerous operations, advancing blindness which led to an emotional breakdown as well. The fiction that was produced during Thurber's black periods is terrifying, bitter, cold, and harsh. Closely aligned with the side of Thurber that delighted in cruel practical jokes and the misery of others, many pieces like "The Cane in the Corridor" (January 2, 1943; reprinted in The Thurber Carnival, 1945), a Poesque tale of a hospital visitor, cannot be classified as humorous by any definition.

However, Thurber's best humor is unsurpassed, and he wrote fine humorous fiction throughout his career. One of the writer's earlier New Yorker stories is also one of his best — "The Night the Bed Fell" from the summer 1933 series "My Life and Hard Times" (July 8; the series was subsequently published as a hard-cover collection under the same title). Part of the semiautobiographical, semifictional genre that Thurber excelled in, the piece describes a hilarious sequence of events and misunderstandings that purportedly took place one evening during the humorist's childhood in Columbus. The humor builds as each event in the series compounds what has gone before, and the events come faster and faster as the account proceeds.

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