The Night the Ghost Got In Study Guide

The Night the Ghost Got In by James Thurber

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"The Night the Ghost Got In" is a prime example of the storytelling technique of James Thurber, who is widely considered one of the greatest humor writers that America ever produced. It was published in Thurber's 1933 book *My Life and Hard Times*, a fictionalized account of his childhood in Columbus, Ohio. Like most of Thurber's best works from that collection, the story combines events that are plausible with comic exaggeration and then adds responses that range from exaggeration to deadpan. The characters' inappropriate understanding of their world serves the dual purposes of amusing readers while revealing to them the uneven balances of the human mind.

The story centers on a common situation: the narrator (a first-person speaker, standing in for Thurber as a young man) hears a strange sound downstairs in the middle of the night. He assumes that it is a ghost, but his mother calls the police, who are thoroughly befuddled by the odd characters of the Thurber household and their way of life. By the time it is over, one of the policemen has been shot in the shoulder by the household's senile grandfather, and a local news reporter, told that a ghost is the cause of all the commotion, is left speechless. Since it is a light comedy, there are no serious repercussions in this story, and in the end life goes on in the household just as it had before.

My Life and Hard Times is still in print in paperback, more than seventy years after its first publication. This story is also included in the Library of America volume *James Thurber: Writings and Drawings*, edited by Garrison Keillor.

Author Biography

James Thurber was born on December 8, 1894, in Columbus, Ohio, the town that, throughout his travels and writing, he always referred back to and spoke fondly of as his home. Thurber's father was a clerk and minor politician and was often unemployed, a situation that caused the family to have many relatives living in the house at one time to help share the expenses. It was from his mother that Thurber received his subtle sense of humor. She regularly made up fantastic exaggerations of life in the Thurber household, which she would tell to unwitting guests with a straight face.

One of the most important events in Thurber's life occurred in 1901, when he was seven: While playing in the yard (varying accounts identify the game as William Tell or Cowboys and Indians), an arrow shot by his brother went into Thurber's eye. As a child, the weakness of his left eye drove him from play toward reading and academics; as an adult, his eyesight weakened until he was eventually blind.

Thurber went on to graduate from high school and enrolled in Ohio State University in 1913, where he wrote for the campus paper and became editor of the monthly campus magazine. Thurber did not finish his degree but instead became a code clerk for the State Department, which sent him to France from 1918 to 1920. Returning to America, Thurber worked as a reporter for the *Columbus Dispatch* for a while and then quit in 1924, returning to Paris to write, along with others of the post- World War I generation who are remembered today as the Lost Generation. The novel he wrote was never published, and Thurber took a job reporting for the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*.

In 1927, Thurber was in New York when E. B. White, himself a famous writer, recommended Thurber to the editor of the *New Yorker*. Thurber was hired as a staff writer and soon distinguished himself for his short comic pieces. White was also responsible for taking a few of Thurber's doodles down to the magazine's famed cartoon department, giving rise to Thurber's secondary career as a cartoonist, which in itself would have ensured his lasting fame had he not been such a respected writer. Thurber and White coauthored a book called *Is Sex Necessary*?, a parody of Freudian analysis, which was popular at the time; it was published in 1929. Thurber worked for the *New Yorker* from 1927 to 1933 and continued contributing stories and drawings to it for the rest of his life.

Thurber continued to write from the 1930s to the 1950s, becoming one of America's most treasured humorists. Collections of his stories and his cartoons consistently rode at the top of the bestseller lists. As the sight in Thurber's good eye failed, his literary production dwindled. Thurber fell into alcoholism in his later years and died of pneumonia following a stroke on November 2, 1961.

Plot Summary

"The Night the Ghost Got In" is a fictionalized account of life in the Thurber household while its author, James Thurber, was growing up. Early on, Thurber gives the exact date when the events related in the story take place: November 17, 1915. The story begins with a short introductory paragraph that prepares readers for the more colorful events that will unfold in the pages to come—his mother throwing a shoe through a window, his grandfather shooting a policeman—and then goes right into the events of that night.

It starts with the narrator, James Thurber, coming out of a bath at 1:15 in the morning and hearing a noise downstairs in the dining room. It sounds to him like footsteps, like someone walking quickly around the dining room table. He assumes that it is his father or older brother, just home from a trip, but after a few minutes have passed and the walking has not stopped, he goes to wake his brother Herman. Wakened suddenly, Herman is frightened when he is told that there is someone downstairs, although the story never does indicate whether he hears the same sound the narrator does. He goes back to bed, slamming the door. The noise downstairs is gone, and, Thurber explains, "None of us ever heard the ghost again." However, the slamming door brings their mother out into the hall.

The mother asks about all of the footsteps she has heard and then comes to the conclusion that there are burglars downstairs. Because the telephone is downstairs where she thinks the burglars are, she devises a scheme to contact the police: She throws a shoe through the window of the house next door, which is close to the Thurber house, waking Mr. and Mrs. Bodwell, who live there. At first, Mr. Bodwell thinks that she is telling him that there are burglars in his own house, but after a momentary confusion he calls the police and tells them to go to the Thurber house.

The arrival of the police blows the whole event out of proportion. Their group includes "a Ford sedan full of them, two on motorcycles, and a patrol wagon with about eight of them in it and a few reporters." They call out for the front door to be opened, and when no one in the house goes downstairs, they break it in. They go upstairs to find the narrator, still not dressed after his bath, and the mother insisting that there were burglars in the house, even though all of the doors and windows are bolted from the inside. To justify their trip, the police set about searching the house, moving furniture and emptying closets. At one point, a policeman's curiosity gets the best of him, and he points out an unusual old musical instrument, a zither, to another officer. The narrator adds to the confusion by adding the useless information that the family's old guinea pig used to sleep on the zither. The police are suspicious of this strange family. One points out that the son, Thurber, was "nekked" when they arrived and the mother was hysterical, or, as the policeman puts it, "historical."

When the narrator's grandfather, who sleeps in the attic, makes a slight noise, the policemen spring into action. They race upstairs to investigate. The narrator knows that this will lead to trouble because his grandfather is "going through a phase" in which he thinks that the Civil War is still going on. Grandfather is obsessed with the retreat of the

Union army under General George Meade from the forces of Stonewall Jackson's Confederate army. When the policemen arrive at his door, he is convinced that they are Meade's army. He calls them cowards and tells them to go back to the battle. He slaps one of the policemen across the back of the head, sending him to the floor, and as the others leave their fallen comrade and run away, he takes the man's gun from his holster and shoots at him, hitting him in the shoulder. He fires twice more and then goes back to bed.

Back downstairs, the police are upset that there is nobody to arrest, but they are not willing to go back to the attic and risk being shot at again. The wounded officer's shoulder is bandaged, and they start looking around the house again. A reporter approaches the narrator, who has not been able to find one of his own shirts and is instead wearing one of his mother's blouses. When the reporter asks what all of the commotion is about, the narrator answers, in all sincerity, that the problem is that they have had ghosts in the house. The reporter thinks about that for a while and then just walks away quietly.

The policeman who has been shot declares his intention to go up to the attic and get his pistol back, but the other officers just mock him. The narrator promises to get the gun from his grandfather in the morning and bring it down to the police station. When the narrator's mother is told that Grandfather shot a policeman, the only reason she is disturbed is that the officer is "such a nice-looking young man."

The next morning, the grandfather comes down to breakfast looking cheerful. Nothing is said about the commotion of the night before, and the family assumes that he has forgotten it, until he asks, "What was the idee of all them cops tarryhootin' round the house last night?" Thurber does not say when the grandfather realized that it was policemen, not soldiers, in his room, but the fact that he understands reality is accepted as a sign that all is fine in the house, and the story ends on that lighthearted note.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story begins with a remembrance of the night of November 17, 1915. The narrator expresses remorse for not going directly to bed after a misunderstanding sends the house into chaos. Considering what is about to happen – that his mother will throw her shoe out the window and his grandfather will shoot a police officer – the narrator apologizes for acknowledging to the footsteps he heard.

He begins to hear the footsteps around one o'clock in the morning. His mother and Herman, his brother, are asleep in their respective rooms. The grandfather is upstairs asleep in the attic. The narrator gets out of the bath and dries himself off when he hears footsteps. Since they sound like a man downstairs, this causes alarm. At first he starts to dismiss the possibility by thinking that it must be his father or his other brother Roy, who are expected back from Indianapolis at any time. However, when he begins to think that it might be a burglar he says, "It did not enter my mind until later that it was a ghost" (pg. 55).

He goes to Herman's room and wakes his brother. Herman has always been fearful that something would get him during the night, so the narrator identifies himself as his brother and tells him that he thinks there is someone downstairs.

Together they go to the back staircase and listen. At first, it is quiet and Herman decides he wants to go back to bed. The narrator will not let him, insisting that there is someone downstairs. The steps begin again. Startled, Herman goes running back to bed, slamming the door behind him. The narrator slams the door at the top of the stairs shut and waits. After a moment he checks and finds nothing on the other side of the door; the footsteps are never heard again.

However, the slamming of doors wakes the mother. She asks what the boys are doing and they tell her nothing. The mother wants to know about the footsteps downstairs. The boys are surprised because she had heard the steps as well. The mother shouts out that it must be burglars and the narrator quiets her and starts tiptoeing downstairs. She stops them.

The mother insists that they should call the police, but the phone is downstairs. Not sure of what else to do, she opens her bedroom window, picks up a shoe and throws it, breaking the next-door neighbor's window. She wakes the Bodwells and the mother tries to explain to them that there are burglars in the house, but Mrs. Bodwell is threatening to sell the house. When Mr. Bodwell finally understands that the mother threw the shoe through the window because of burglars, he misinterprets it to mean that there are burglars in his house. Finally, the mother conveys that there are burglars in her house and that she needs him to call the police.

After Mr. Bodwell goes to call the police, the mother gets it in her head that she enjoyed throwing the shoe through the window and aims to throw another shoe. The narrator prevents her from doing so.

The police arrive – in cars, motorcycles, a patrol wagon, along with reporters. They pound on the door and shine their flashlights around the house and yard. The police demand that the door be opened, but everyone is upstairs. The narrator offers to go downstairs, but the mother will not let him because he is naked from the bathtub. He wraps a towel around his waist and the police break the door down. The police catch the narrator at the top of the stairs in his towel. They ask who he is and he tells them that he lives in the house. The narrator then goes to put on proper trousers.

The police go through the house, looking all over for intruders. The mother tells them that there must have been two or three burglars and that they were slamming doors and carrying on. The police find this odd because all the windows and doors are locked.

As the police continue searching the house, they go through drawers, open and close windows, and check behind and under furniture. They uncover a zither and the narrator explains that his brother Roy won it in a pool tournament and that their guinea pig used to sleep on it. The police give the boy a strange look and continue.

The police draw the conclusion that no one was in the house and comments on the boy being naked and the mother hysterical. Suddenly, they hear a creak in the attic. The narrator knows that this is his grandfather, but the police burst upstairs.

Having woken the grandfather from a sound sleep, he mistakes the police for war deserters. He jumps out of bed in his long underwear, nightgown, nightcap and leather jacket. As the police, now realizing that the grandfather is a member of this crazy family, start to retreat, the grandfather grabs hold of one of the officer's guns and fires.

He shoots one of the officers in the shoulder. He fires the gun two more times, as the police run downstairs and then goes back to bed as if nothing happened. The narrator explains that the grandfather thinks the police are deserters.

The cops are reluctant to leave, beleaguered that they were not able to apprehend a suspect. They decide that something about the report seems phony; they continue to look around. A reporter talks to the narrator and asks what is really going on in the house. Finally, he relents and tells the reporter that there were ghosts. The reporter stares at him vacantly for some time and then walks away. The cops follow suit and the officer that was shot curses that he is going to get his gun from the grandfather. His fellow officers chide him about making an attempt. The narrator tells them that he will bring the gun to the police station in the morning.

After the police leave, the mother asks what happened to the policeman and she is informed that the grandfather shot him. When she is told that it was because the grandfather thought he was a deserter, the mother is shocked, thinking that he looked like such a nice man.

The story ends the next morning at breakfast. The family thinks, at first, that the grandfather has no memory of the night's events. Over coffee, he looks at his grandsons and asks what the police were doing at the house in the first place.

Analysis

James Thurber is probably best known for his work with *The New Yorker*. "The Night the Ghost Got In" is excerpted from his book *My Life and Hard Times*, a semi-autobiographical work. The story is told in typical Thurber fashion, with an emphasis on humor.

The story begins with a comedic – anything can happen – type of situation. The narrator, who serves as the only true voice of reason in the story, is at the center of the episode. He serves to ground the story in all of its absurdity. Through the narrator's eyes, we can see the whirlwind of activity that will involve a mother throwing her shoe to break a neighbor's window, a grandfather shooting a police officer, and the mystery of the sound of footsteps. This information foreshadows all that comes later in the story. It also serves to let the reader know that the events to follow are not to be taken too seriously.

The believability of the story is in question: could ghosts really be causing the noise downstairs? The story is well layered and this is symbolized by the introduction of the narrator. When we first meet the narrator, he has just gotten out of the bath. Throughout the story, he acquires different pieces of clothing: a towel at first, then trousers, until he finally puts on his mother's blouse. As the story becomes more ridiculous, the narrator's appearance does as well. Mirroring the narrator's layers is the grandfather. When he is first introduced, he is dressed in multiple layers: he has on long underwear, nightgown, nightcap and leather jacket. The grandfather does not shed these layers. Because of his dress and his reaction to the police coming into the attic, the grandfather symbolizes absurdity. He is an old man who overcomes a police officer, takes his weapon and shoots. When the officer later indicates that he will get his gun back from the grandfather, he is mocked. None of the other, armed officers wants to take on the grandfather.

Furthering the absurdity is how many police officers, in addition to news reporters, respond to the call. Through all of the night's events, the only person who actually asks what happened in the house is a reporter. When the narrator is asked directly, he responds with the simplest answer, knowing that any other answer would only add to the confusion. He replies that there were ghosts in the house. It is only after the narrator admits what has happened that the police and reporters leave.

The story concludes the following morning. The family sits around the breakfast table as though nothing has happened, or at least no one is willing to discuss what occurred. The boys think that perhaps the grandfather does not remember what happened. Finally, instead of acknowledging that he shot a police officer, the grandfather asks what were the police doing at the house in the first place? Certainly, had the police not been

called, the grandfather would not have shot the officer. The boys respond by looking at him as if to say, what did happen? Yet, like the ghosts that they cannot prove were there in the first place, the boys have no real way of knowing what happened. They just know that the night's events got out of hand. In looking back, the narrator can only laugh at the absurdity.

Characters

Mr. Bodwell

Bodwell is the Thurber family's neighbor, a retired engineer. He is "subject to mild 'attacks,'" like most people whom the family knows. When the narrator's mother throws a shoe through the Bodwells' window and shouts to them that there are burglars in the house, Bodwell is momentarily confused, thinking that the burglars are in his house, before calming himself and calling the police.

Mrs. Bodwell

Mrs. Bodwell lives, with her husband, next door to the Thurbers. When a shoe comes through their window, before the Bodwells have a chance to realize that the narrator's mother threw it to get their attention, Mrs. Bodwell is heard shouting, "We'll sell the house and go back to Peoria."

Joe

The only policeman referred to by name, Joe does nothing that distinguishes him from the others. He examines an old zither with another policeman, and he is the one to say something when they hear the grandfather making noise in the attic. When the policeman who has been shot talks bravely about going to retrieve his gun from the grandfather, Joe mocks him and reminds him of the danger of approaching an armed and unstable suspect, which makes him change his mind.

Reporter

Near the end of the story, a newspaper reporter shows up and asks the narrator, "Just what the hell is the real lowdown here, Bud?" Told that the problem with the house is that it has ghosts, he just stares for a long time and then walks away.

Grandfather Thurber

The narrator's grandfather is a veteran of the Union army of the Civil War, which ended fifty-two years earlier. His bedroom is in the attic. When the police come to the house to search for an intruder, the grandfather thinks that they are soldiers who are deserting because they are losing to the South. He calls them "cowardly dogs" and "lily-livered cattle" and then reaches for a policeman's holster and shoots a man with his own gun. The police retreat, afraid of the crazy old man, but at the breakfast table the next morning, Grandfather seems perfectly aware of the previous night's situation, asking why so many police had been "tarryhootin" around the house.

Herman Thurber

Herman is the brother of the narrator. He generally sleeps uneasily, always fearful that something might come and "get him" in the night. When the narrator comes to wake him, Herman hears the sounds in the dining room, which drives him to run back into his room and slam the door.

James Thurber

The narrator presents himself as acting reasonably, although his actions are unusual enough to raise the suspicions of the policemen. He is the first person in the household to hear the unidentified sound, as he is stepping out of the bathtub at 1:15 in the morning. After waking his brother Herman, he is the one who decides that the cause of the sound downstairs must be a ghost. When his excitable mother decides that the sounds must be caused by burglars, the narrator stays with her, thinking that she is beyond reason. He is still wrapped in a towel from his bath when the police arrive and only puts on pants when they point out his nakedness; later, when the reporter comes around asking questions, the narrator puts on one of his mother's blouses, explaining that it is the only thing that he can find. He decides to be honest with the reporter and tell him that the problem was caused by ghosts, but the reporter does not take him seriously. Later, when the policeman who has been shot by Grandfather wants to confront him and take his gun back, the narrator intervenes with calm sensibility and volunteers to take the gun over to the police station in the morning.

Mother Thurber

The narrator's mother is a highly excitable woman, scatterbrained in some regards yet practical when she needs to be. Hearing a sound in her house and suspecting that it is a burglar, she thinks of the clever plan of alerting a neighbor by throwing a shoe through his closed window. After he has gone to phone the police, however, she considers throwing the matching shoe, "because the thrill of heaving a shoe through a window glass had enormously taken her fancy." She is surprised to hear that Grandfather has shot a policeman, not because of the daring violence of the act, but because "He was such a nice-looking young man."

"Zither"

One of the policemen who search through the house finds an old zither and strums it in curiosity. The story later refers to this officer as "Zither," as well as "the zither-cop." When this officer goes to the attic to see what the noise up there is, Grandfather pushes him back and then shoots him with his own gun. Wounded in the shoulder, the zither-cop is upset, but he is logical enough to leave his gun with the angered grandfather so that the narrator can retrieve it for him the next day.

Themes

Supernatural

This story asks readers to accept the existence of the ghost mentioned in the title as a plausible, if uncommon, explanation for what occurs in this article. Many times, ghost stories offer readers evidence for natural explanations for the events that the characters themselves believe are caused by the supernatural. Although it seems very unlikely that a real ghost would have created a disturbance in the house, Thurber gives readers overwhelming evidence that the sounds that he heard were indeed supernatural. For instance, the police check the house and say that all of the doors and windows are locked from the inside; nothing in the house is said to have been taken by burglars; and the father and brother, who are at first assumed do have come home from Indianapolis early, do not in fact appear in the story.

Like more traditional ghost stories, this one touches upon several possible explanations that would not force readers to accept supernatural causes. Herman's nervousness suggests that he may have been in a state of mind that would make up sounds and would accept things that go outside the bounds of normal reality. A nervous disposition is often used in ghost stories to explain why someone would make up the idea of a ghost, but, in this case, it is not only Herman who hears the ghost; it is heard by three people, including Thurber's mother, who shows no sign of believing in the supernatural. Also, Thurber makes a point of mentioning that it "did not enter my mind until later that it was a ghost," indicating that the supernatural interpretation is an act of his wandering imagination. Still, though he casts doubts on the idea of there being a real ghost, the evidence that he presents leads to the conclusion that there was.

Absurdity

The humor in "The Night the Ghost Got In" derives from the story's ability to show a world where absurdity rules. There are forces working to bring about order in this story, but they are easily outweighed and outwitted by the forces that struggle to create nonsense out of sense.

The sense of order is represented here in the authority held by the police force. When strange sounds occur in the dining room, both Thurber, who thinks the cause is a ghost, and his mother, who thinks it is burglars, rely on the police to take control. Their ability to impose order is far outweighed by the absurd elements in the house, though. These elements include the narrator's inability to find any clothes; the mother's urge to give in to the "thrill" of throwing a second shoe through the neighbors' window, even though the first had done its job; the grandfather's demented certainty that the policemen are deserters from Meade's army; and the grandfather's reversal of that dementia the next morning, when he implies that he knew they were policemen all along. The police themselves add an absurd element by their eagerness to find something amiss: They

arrive at the house with too many men and are overenthusiastic about tearing through the family's front door and their personal effects, proving themselves to be a threat to the people they are there to protect.

The element that readers might expect to make sense of these events is the narrator. Because he is writing as an adult, Thurber might have, in a more serious work, explained that the absurd events that went on in his house may have seemed normal at the time but that he sees them differently now. He does not distance himself from them in this way, though; instead, he calmly asserts that it was indeed a ghost in the house. The narrative voice is just as involved in the absurdity as the members of the household.

Defiance

Though the characters in this story seem to be members of an ordinary family, they are defiant to forces from outside of the house that come to change them. The most obvious example of this occurs when Grandfather actually shoots a policeman. His remarks at the breakfast table give readers good reason to believe that the senility that excused his violence of the night before was just a ruse, that he may well have known what he was doing all along. He knows how to put up enough resistance to the police who have disturbed his sleep to make them go away, mixing the frightening prospect that he might shoot again with just the right balance of rationality so that they believe he will cause no more trouble if they leave the matter for his grandson to handle. In this way, he is successful in subverting the authority that the policemen show themselves so anxious to assert.

The narrator of the story shows his defiance in a more subtle, less confrontational way. His lack of clothing is explained insufficiently by the fact that he could find nothing to wear, in his own house, over the length of time that the story covers. It can also be read as an act of defiance against the representatives of society's authority. The fact that it bothers the police officers is clear when one of them mentions, after the narrator is dressed, that he had been "nekked" when they arrived. Later, he wears one of his mother's blouses, which shows a mocking attitude toward social gender norms that perplexes the outsiders. Lacking the respect that society would show to an aged war veteran like his grandfather, he is even less obvious about his defiance, explaining it to readers as if it were quite natural, but his casualness about it hides the fact that, in his own house, Thurber was free to flaunt society's customs.

Comedy of Life

Despite the eccentricities of the Thurber household, this story is drawn from the tradition of comedy that laughs at common, everyday occurrences. Most readers will not have had a ghost in their house, but they will know the experience of hearing a strange noise that has no rational explanation. And, while it is uncommon for carloads of policemen and reporters to arrive in answer to a call, almost everyone can identify with the idea of

things spinning out of control, with officials, stuffed by their own self-importance, working hard to find more trouble than is actually there. And the grouchy old grandfather living in the past is a character familiar throughout the world's cultures, even though such a character is usually "ornery" or "cantankerous," not violent. American humor has a gentle strain, poking fun at the middle-class household that fits poorly into society's norms, and this story is a classic example of that type of humor.

Style

Folktale

Most ghost stories fall into one of two categories: horror or folktale. The main purpose of horror stories is to thrill readers. Folktales, on the other hand, serve to amuse readers while telling them something about the culture that is being described. In the case of "The Night the Ghost Got In," readers are introduced to the tiny subculture of a Columbus, Ohio, family where strange noises in the night are explained by acceptance of the supernatural. Most ghost stories from the folktale strain inform readers about the culture's relation to its dead members: The ghosts are manifestations of mourning, or guilt, or some other unfinished business. Thurber does not offer any explanation about why this ghost might choose to appear in this particular house at this particular time, but once he does introduce the ghost, it does, like ghosts in traditional folktales, illuminate the prevailing social situation. Of the younger members of the household, Herman fears it and Thurber is fascinated by it; the mother interprets its disturbance as a burglar, representing a threat from outside the house; the grandfather, to whom the ghostly armies of the Civil War are part of everyday reality, does not hear it; and the police and reporters think that it is just a sign of the Thurbers' mental instability.

Persona

The book that this story comes from, *My Life and Hard Times*, is based on Thurber's childhood, although liberties have obviously been taken with the facts. Many details in this story, from the number of policemen and reporters who show up to the existence of the ghost at all, are clearly exaggerations. The first-person speaker of the story should similarly not be mistaken for an actual representation of James Thurber himself, but should be looked at as a comic persona that resembles him.

The word "persona" comes from the Latin word for "mask." In most first-person short stories, the writer's persona is clearly recognizable as a different person. Usually, a character in a short story will not even have the same name as the writer. In this case, however, readers can become confused by the fact that "The Night the Ghost Got In" claims to be from Thurber's memoir and that the setting and events are similar to those he experienced in his life. The "I" who tells the story has much in common with the author of the story, but he is still a mask that the author created.

Stereotype

A stereotyped character is one that is written to represent some particular type of person, oversimpli fied, so that the character shows no internal depth. In literature, writers try to create their characters with the same range of emotion that ordinary humans have. It is also necessary, though, for literary works to be filled in with stereotyped, or "stock," characters who have little to do with the main story but interact

with the main characters. Humorous writing, in particular, relies on stereotypical characters because it is easier for readers to laugh at the misfortunes of hollow representations of people than it is to laugh at characters who are wellrounded.

In "The Night the Ghost Got In," several of Thurber's characters represent familiar stereotypes. The policemen, for instance, are boorish and selfimportant, determined to justify their own authority by finding evidence of criminal wrongdoing even if it does not exist. None of them is able to understand or appreciate the quirky behavior of the people in the Thurber household because, as written, they lack the psychological depth to see beyond their own limited characterizations. The grandfather, as well, is humorous precisely because he plays the "senile old man" role. Shouting about a war that ended fifty years earlier, confusing the policemen for an army, and living out his faded glory by firing at an imagined enemy are all traits that would be considered pathetic, not funny, in a realistic portrayal. The ditzy mother who fails to recognize the seriousness of a man being shot is the same type of well-meaning, scatterbrained matron that shows up in situation comedies today. As long as the central character, the narrator, is psychologically complex, it is not necessary that any of these secondary characters should be, and in fact adding more depth to them would slow the story's humor down.

Epilogue

In the last paragraph of the story, Thurber adds a brief epilogue that tells readers what happened the next morning, when the daylight had come to shed light on things and the confusion had died down. An epilogue is usually not a part of the story but is included to let readers know what happened to characters as a result of the events that have taken place. Since this story is a comedy, there are no serious consequences to be faced in the morning. There is no sign of a ghost or whatever caused the initial disturbance; Mr. Bodwell from next door does not demand that his window be fixed; and the law does not show up to arrest the grandfather for shooting an officer. In fact, Thurber has the grandfather speak coherently (if angrily) about the policemen who were there, showing that he is not permanently out of touch with reality. The last line—"He had us there"—shows that the narrator is willing to consider the night's events baffling and inexplicable, but not serious.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

Thurber first published this story at the height of the Great Depression, when America was in the midst of one of the worst economic crises that it has ever known. By that time, about one-third of the labor force—16 million people—were unemployed. The country's gross domestic product, which is one of the main indicators that economists use to measure economic health, had shrunk nearly in half between 1929 and 1933, from $104 billion to $56 billion. Hundreds of people died of starvation every year, and thousands avoided starvation only by relying on government handouts.

The Great Depression had many causes, but the main factor that started it was the stock market crash on Thursday, October 4, 1929, a date that has come to be known as Black Thursday. During the 1920s, economic prosperity had given people a false sense of security, leading many to invest foolishly in stocks, often with borrowed money. When the value of the stocks fell sharply, debt holders were forced to default on their loans, which caused a rippling effect throughout the economy. Businesses folded, laying off workers who then had trouble paying for goods and services, forcing other businesses into bankruptcy, and so on. The economic crunch was worldwide, blocking any hope for relief: In Germany, for instance, despair over the runaway economy gave Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party a platform for their rise to power.

The economy worsened for the first years of the 1930s. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president and initiated a long list of policies, collectively known as the New Deal, that were meant to stimulate the economy and help Americans deal with the problems of chronic unemployment. The economy rose slowly, and the depression never fully lifted until 1939, when World War II began in Europe.

Americans coped with the economic situation by finding ways to spend less. One way they did this was by moving into more cramped quarters. It was not uncommon for several generations of family members to live in one house, as older members, who once may have been able to afford to live on their own, found that their savings would not stretch, their pension plans were bankrupt, and the few employers who did have jobs gave them to younger workers. People also relied on their neighbors more to help out when they came up short, whether it was in borrowing cooking ingredients or calling for a hand in putting together food or furniture that they could not afford to buy from the store. Thurber's audience, therefore, would have been well familiar with the kind of household and community that he describes in "The Night the Ghost Got In," many of them having been pushed together into similar close circumstances themselves.

Domestic Comedy

"The Night the Ghost Got In" gains its humor from several trends in American humor. For one thing, it is the sort of family-oriented story that was popular during the depression. The major strains of humor throughout the country's history had always been political humor—as might be expected of a democracy that was built on the principle that those who govern are no better than those whom they rule—and racial or ethnic humor, owing to the country's immigrant nature. The late 1880s and early 1890s, however, saw the establishment of the middle class, a new category that was neither high nor low but was prime material for satire. Though satires of the upper and lower classes usually had an outsider's perspective, middle-class humor was gentler, if only for the reason that most writers and their readers were members of that category themselves. Thus, there was no audience for humor pieces that would portray homeowners and housewives as corrupt or inherently ignorant. The humor tended to laugh with them, not at them.

The *New Yorker*, for which Thurber wrote for most of his life, was a main influence for the growth of this type of writing. The magazine began in 1925 as a sophisticated journal for an urban audience. In writing for that audience, however, Thurber's mentor and friend, editor Harold Ross, assembled a stable of writers who wrote droll, understated pieces about the quirks of family life. Writers like Robert Benchley and S. J. Perlman spun witty stories about their difficulties as decent, ordinary fellows in coping with modern expectations. Clarence Day, whose version of the same material was collected into the book *Life with Father*, took a somewhat more sentimental view of the same material, whereas James Thurber was more likely to venture into the absurd. But at the core of the *New Yorker* style of humor in the 1930s was the bumbling middleclass man.

Domestic comedy grew over the years. The latter part of the decade saw the extravagant musicals, with which Hollywood had kept people amused during the beginning of the depression, give way to screwball comedies based on the idea that ordinary life was anything but ordinary. In order to develop continuing characters that people would want to revisit week after week, situation comedies were developed, placing their stars in ordinary households that home audiences could relate to. Movie studios started churning out series with low production budgets, such as the *Blondie* movies, based on the popular comic strip, and the *Andy Hardy* series. These, in turn, have given rise to the domestic comedies that proliferate on television today about ordinary, working-class people with eccentric family members.

Critical Overview

Throughout his long career, and ever since, James Thurber has been considered one of America's great humor writers, and *My Life and Hard Times*, the book that "The Night the Ghost Got In" comes from, is widely considered to be his best work. In 1933, the year that the book was published, Robert M. Coates wrote in the *New Republic* that it constituted "the pleasantest mixture of fantasy and understanding, one of the funniest books of recent times." More than half a century later, Robert Emmet Long writing in his book *James Thurber* still referred to that particular volume of Thurber's work as "one of the most striking and original books published in America in the 1930s."

The public never seemed to lose its appreciation for Thurber's comic pieces and his drawings, which came less and less frequently as his eyesight failed. What was unusual, however, was the sustained approval of literary critics. As he aged, critical appreciation for Thurber grew to almost mythic proportions. Three years before his death, Robert H. Elias wrote in the *American Scholar*, "For more than a generation James Thurber has been writing stories, an impressive number of them as well shaped as the most finely wrought pieces of Henry James, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway." Elias went further, comparing his prose to that of H. L. Mencken and J. D. Salinger, his insights to those of poets E. A. Robinson and Robert Frost, pointing out the unfairness that Thurber had never been nominated for a Nobel Prize. The excess of such enthusiasm was recognized by Melvin Maddocks, who wrote in the *Sewanee Review* that "The superlatives applied by Thurber's colleagues and contemporaries seem excessive to the point of embarrassment today." Looking back on Thurber's career, Maddocks was able to identify a formulaic pattern to his stories, one that applied to other humor writers who wrote for the *New Yorker* as well. Like most critics today, Maddocks appreciated Thurber's comic innovation while accepting his limits.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at several Illinois colleges. In this essay, Kelly questions the description of this story as "autobiography," considering what it should properly be called.

In his "Afterward" to the current paperback edition of James Thurber's *My Life and Hard Times*, noted essayist and *Masterpiece Theatre* host Russell Baker calls the book "possibly the shortest and most elegant autobiography ever written." Now, generally, the words "biography" and "autobiography" are used to describe factual accounts of an individual's life. There are, in fact, cases in which a work of fiction is written in the first-person voice and the narrator refers to herself or himself as "I"; there are even such narratives that use the author's name for one of the characters in the book. But no matter how close they come to the facts of the author's life, these are still considered works of fiction, though their narrators quite naturally insist that the events they relate are "real."

It would seem that Baker did not take into account the whole scope of Thurber's book. One powerful clue to whether the book is actually an autobiography might be the chapter titled "The Night the Ghost Got In." The factual presentation of a ghost, in the title as well as in the story, is not the kind of thing that fits well into a memoir. Here, it should be enough to show that, regardless of how much the details of the book resemble the details of Thurber's own life, this is a work of fiction.

But there is one more element that has to be added to the assessment, as Baker most certainly knew. This book belongs in the category of "fiction," but it is also clearly meant to be humorous. Humor changes the responsibilities of the author, as well as the expectations that are held by his readers. In an autobiography that is presented without any irony, giving a twisted version of the events that occurred amounts to a criminal act, breaking a sacred trust between author and audience. In a work of fiction, readers actually expect events to be filtered through the author's imagination: The whole point of fiction is for readers to identify what has been spun from the author's imagination and to think about why particulars were added or left out. With humor, the audience is invited to join the author in a cooperative adventure. It is quite unlikely that Russell Baker actually believed that a ghost haunted the Thurber household in 1915, but acting as if he does believe it, because Thurber's narrator presents it as a fact, is all part of being a good sport.

So, if Baker's use of the word "autobiography" is not exactly correct, it just shows that he is going along with the spirit of the book. The confusion is not his fault; he is just going in the direction pointed out by the author. Still, critics and readers ought to take the responsibility straight to Thurber, and when reading his book, demand to know, Why *isn't* this book an autobiography, or at least a fictionalized facsimile of one? If the presence of the ghost creates such a drastic change in the type of book this is, then maybe Thurber should have gone against his humorous inclination and not let it stand in the book.

Right away, care should be taken to point out how little this would change the overall story. Thurber could easily have added a line, or half a line, anywhere in "The Night the Ghost Got In" that would have given readers enough reason to believe that the ghost was just the projection of a youthful imagination. A simple mention if a stirring dog downstairs, or a family member that might have been in the dining room at the time of the incident, or a draft down the chimney would have more clearly made this an imaginative autobiography, instead of a work of pure fiction.

It is very likely that Thurber might feel that he gave exactly such evidence, that his comic narrator is unreliable enough that readers certainly would not trust him when he talks about a ghost. Perhaps careful readers are not supposed to think that the author is telling them that there was a ghost in his house, only that the narrator, who witnessed the events as an impressionable young man, thought that there was. There are several good reasons not to believe the narrator's claim.

For one thing, *My Life and Hard Times* is chock-full of exaggerations, which Thurber uses to show the sort of humorous exaggeration that was common where he grew up, or at least the sort of comic exaggerations that mark his style of writing. In other chapters, the young Thurber tells such tall tales as electricity leaking out of sockets into the open air, a rumor of a crumbling dam stampeding a whole town, a man catching chestnut blight from a tree, and a car dropping its engine on the road and then driving back to get it. These are the sort of things that various characters believe, as if the Columbus, Ohio, of Thurber's youth was in the grips of a mass hysteria. Readers are not expected to believe that any of them are true.

The ghost claim is different, though. For one thing, there is the conspicuous absence of a rational explanation. As mentioned before, it would have been a simple thing for Thurber to include something that might really have made the noise that the characters in the story attribute to the ghost. Most ghost stories do in fact include something to show readers where the idea of the ghost came from. It almost seems as if Thurber, as author, went out of his way to insist that his narrator is right in claiming a there is a ghost. The cleverness, the sense of fun, diminishes if the author has to force it like this.

The main problem with this, though, is that it breaks faith with the reader. The voice in which Thurber tells this story is not the voice of a teenage boy from a Midwestern town at the turn of the century—that is just the person that this grown-up narrator remembers once being. The voice that tells "The Night the Ghost Got In" is polished and sophisticated. It is the kind of complex voice that can weave together a phrase like "the thrill of heaving a shoe through a glass window had enormously taken her fancy," combining the low vocabulary ("heaving") and high ("enormously") with the whimsical ("taken her fancy"). It is the kind of voice that knows to whet its readers' appetites with an introductory paragraph that lays out all of the high points of what is to come, as he does in several of the book's chapters. It is a voice that knows when to refer to the lawmen as "police" and when to call them "cops." In short, it is not the kind of naïve observer that actually would believe in a ghost.

For this narrator to claim a belief in ghosts is dishonest, which might not necessarily be something that, if asked, he would deny. He probably would not admit to it either. A wink would have to suffice. The dishonesty is part of the humor of this piece. An intelligent writer like Thurber swearing that a ghost invaded his house has the same basic design as a bald-faced lie, but a lie ceases to be a lie if no one is expected to believe it. That is when it becomes a comic exaggeration. The aforementioned effect that humor has to bring the reader in on the trick forces Thurber's readers to supply the information that he refuses to give them, making them draw a conclusion (that he, of course, does not think there was a ghost in his house) that his comic persona will not let him say out loud.

Calling *My Life and Hard Times* an "autobiography" still seems to be taking the joke a little too far. After all, critics and reviewers have a greater responsibility to the truth than writers and readers. It is easy to see, however, how anyone reading Thurber's wild exaggerations would want to join in on the fun. "The Night the Ghost Got In," in particular, represents a case in which Thurber's narrator, normally the cool observer who keeps readers informed about the bizarre behaviors and beliefs of the people who surrounded him in childhood, throws caution to the wind and joins in on the fun, stating beliefs that are just as daffy as, for example, his grandfather's. That old man, in fact, may be the best example of the spirit with which readers should take Thurber's narrator. He seems completely out of touch with reality, shouting that the policemen in the house are Civil War deserters and even shooting one, but the next morning, when they are gone, he is not confused about who they were and shows no sign that he ever was. If his family can accept his switch between delusion and clarity so quickly, then readers of "The Night the Ghost Got In" should probably follow their lead and accept the idea of a ghost as a "phase" that Thurber was going through when writing this particular exaggerated comic piece.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Night the Ghost Got In," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Morsberger discusses Thurber's philosophy of fantasy.

Critical Essay #3

"Dis morning bime by," said his hired man Barney Haller, "I go hunt grotches in de voods." Such a statement set Thurber's mind on fire. "If you are susceptible to such things, it is not difficult to visualize grotches. They fluttered into my mind: ugly little creatures, about the size of whippoorwills, only covered with blood and honey and the scrapings of church bells." The grotches turn out to be nothing more than crotched branches of trees, but a world without grotches is a duller place. "There is no person," wrote Thurber, "whose spirit hasn't at one time or another been enriched by some cherished transfiguring of meanings"; and he gave as an example the youngster who thought that the first line of the Lord's Prayer was, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Halloween be thy Name." "There must have been for him in that reading a thrill, a delight, and an exaltation that the exact sense of the line could not possibly have created."

A militant realist might scoff at such a mind as Thurber's; but, in so doing, he would miss much of the charm of life—like the patient bloodhound who went through the world with his eyes and nose to the ground and so missed all its beauty and excitement. The realist worries about heredity and environment, depression and taxes; Thurber too knew that life is perilous, but he worried about being "softly followed by little men padding along in single file, about a foot and a half high, large-eyed and whiskered." (For a picture of these little men, see *The Seal in the Bedroom.*) "Fantasy is the food for the mind, not facts," wrote Thurber; and one of his cartoons shows a social gathering in the midst of which sits an austere, scholarly looking man, chin in hand, scowling; while behind his back, one woman explains to another, "He doesn't know anything except facts."

Robert Louis Stevenson expressed what is essentially Thurber's position:

There are moments when the mind refuses to be satisfied with evolution, and demands a ruddier presentation of the sum of man's experience. Sometimes the mood is brought about by laughter at the humorous side of life. . . . Sometimes it comes by the spirit of delight, and sometimes by the spirit of terror. At least, there will always be hours when we refuse to be put off by the feint of explanation, nicknamed science; and demand instead some palpitating image of our estate, that shall represent the troubled and uncertain element in which we dwell, and satisfy reason by the means of art. Science writes of the world as if with the cold finger of a starfish. . . .

Thurber recognized the dangers of carrying the imagination to extremes. While commenting that "Realists are always getting into trouble," he went on to say that "I do not pretend that the daydream cannot be carried too far." "You can't live in a fantastic dream world, night in and night out, and remain sane," he explained. Charlie Deshler in "The Curb in the Sky" tried to do just this and ended up in an asylum. In "A Friend to Alexander," Mr. Andrews, who took to dreaming constantly about Aaron Burr, withdrew farther and farther into his imagination, dreaming of finally wreaking vengeance on Burr, for whom he felt an intense hatred because the face of Alexander Hamilton resembled

that of Andrews' dead brother. When he finally faced Burr's phantom in an imaginary duel, Andrews, identifying himself with Hamilton, dropped dead.

For all of his fantasy, Thurber satirized those who mistook illusion for reality. In his study of soap opera, he told of listeners who thought that radio characters were real and sent in wedding gifts and layettes to the studio when "Big Sister" got married or the daughter on "Just Plain Bill" had a baby. When another actor took over the role of the husband in "Pepper Young's Family," "Indignant ladies wrote in, protesting against these immoral goings on." Another woman listener, recognizing that Kerry Donovan, the husband in "Just Plain Bill," and Larry Noble, the husband in "Backstage Wife," were played by the same actor, wrote to the studio that she was aware of this double life and threatened to expose the bigamy. Such a confusion of fact and fiction Thurber found pathetically absurd.

Thurber himself was certainly well grounded in reality. His work even more than Wordsworth's is full of concrete details and observations, sometimes interesting and informative, sometimes dead wood. Thurber had total recall, and once commented about himself: "He can tell you to this day the names of all the children who were in the fourth grade when he was. He remembers the phone numbers of several of his high school chums. He knows the Birthdays of all his friends and can tell you the date on which any child of theirs was christened. He can rattle off the names of all the persons who attended the lawn fete of the First M. E. Church in Columbus in 1907." As a result, he filled his work with a mine of incidental information which, while sometimes irrelevant, helped give his writings verisimilitude. Henri Bergson noted that "Humor delights in concrete terms, technical details, definite facts. . . . This is not an accidental trait of humor, it is its very essence."

The Romantic element is only one aspect of Thurber's work and is balanced by a great deal of skillful satire, a genre traditionally associated with Classicism. However, Thomas Wolfe observed that "The best fabulists have often been the greatest satirists. . . . Great satire needs the sustenance of great fable." As examples, Wolfe cited Aristophanes, Voltaire, and Swift; to these we might add Rabelais, Samuel Johnson, Mark Twain, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Thurber himself. Sometimes Thurber combined romanticism and satire, as when he attacked the excesses of scientists and psychologists in their efforts to direct or control the imagination.

Perhaps psychiatrists have helped bring about the decline of fantasy (except in science-fiction) by making it too much a subject for analysis. One psychiatrist told Mrs. Thurber that if he had her husband under treatment for a few weeks, he would cure him of all his drawings. Thurber shrugged this incident aside, but he was highly incensed when the psychiatrist Dr. Paul Schilder analyzed Lewis Carroll and concluded that *Alice in Wonderland* is full of "cruelty, destruction, and annihilation." If carried to their illogical extreme, views such as Dr. Schilder's would destroy imaginative literature almost entirely. "Dr. Schilder's work . . . is cut out for him," wrote Thurber. "He has the evil nature of Charles Perrault to dip into, surely as black and devious and unwholesome as Lewis Carroll's. He has the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen. He has Mother Goose, or much of it. He can spend at least a year on the Legend of Childe Rowland,

which is filled with perfectly swell sexual symbols— from (in some versions) an underground cave more provocative by far than the rabbit hole in Wonderland to the sinister Dark Tower of the more familiar versions. This one piece of research will lead him into the myth of Proserpine and into Browning and Shakespeare and Milton's *Comus* and even into the dark and perilous kingdom of Arthurian legend. . . . When he is through with all this, Dr. Schilder should be pretty well persuaded that behind the imaginative works of all the cruel writing men . . . lies the destructive and unstable, the fearful and unwholesome. . . ." Dr. Schilder would probably think that Lewis Carroll would have done better to devote himself solely to mathematics or to some other aspect of Reality; but Thurber believed that *Alice* is more valuable; and he wrote that, after all of Tenniel's political cartoons, the illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* had given him something important to do. In reply to Dr. Schilder, Thurber quoted Dr. Morton Prince, "a truly intelligent psychologist," who says of the creatures of artistic imagination that "Far from being mere freaks, monstrosities of consciousness, they are in fact shown to be manifestations of the very constitution of life."

Certainly Thurber, an extremely careful craftsman and conscious critic of his work, which often underwent two dozen revisions, would not endorse the Freudian theory of the unconscious origins of art as a product of sublimated neurosis. As for Freud's study of humor, Thurber wrote in 1949: "I strongly believe that the analogy between dreams and wit rests on a similarity more superficial than basic, and the psychic explanation of wit fails to take in the selectivity of the artist whose powers of rejection and perfection are greater than his vulnerability to impulse." "Don't you think the subconscious has been done to death and that it's high time some one rediscovered the conscious?" he wrote as caption for a cartoon advertisement of S. N. Berhman's *Rain from Heaven* (1935).

"I have not always, I am sorry to say, been able to go the whole way with the Freudians, or even a very considerable distance," he wrote in 1937. His first book, *Is Sex Necessary?* spoofs the sort of sex books that transform love into nothing more than an inherited behavior pattern with a heavy dose of neuroses. Never caring for the attitude that cherishes neuroses and even considers them a sign of superior sensitivity, Thurber wrote that through the early part of this century "neuroses were staved off longer, owing to the general ignorance of psychology." Accordingly he found little use for the theories of Dr. Louis E. Bisch, the "Be-Glad-You're-Neurotic" man, whose concepts he dismissed as mere mysticism. Thurber refused to indulge in psychic hypochondria and maintained that the analysts could not have him while he still kept his strength. "We worry so much about being neurotic that we never really delve into our minds," he told W. J. Weatherby in 1961. "Modern psychology and psychiatry have made us all afraid of ourselves," he wrote in the same year. "*Angst* is spreading, and with it mental ailments of whose cause and cure, one authority has recently said, we know little or nothing. But the terminology of psychiatry proliferates to the point that almost everybody now seems to think he is schizophrenic, schizoid, or schizo."

Source: Robert E. Morsberger, "The Romantic Imagination," in *James Thurber*, Twayne Publishers, 1964, pp. 55-59.

Adaptations

Thurber's collection *My World, and Welcome to It* was adapted to a television series starring William Windom, Joan Hotchkiss, and Henry Morgan. It ran from 1969 to 1970.

Thurber's play *The Male Animal* ran on Broadway for 244 performances in 1940 and is frequently revived today.

Students can find references to books and articles by and about James Thurber at http://www. budgetweb.com/heather/thurber/Thurber.html.

Topics for Further Study

Interview a member of your local police department about what the proper procedure would be when responding to a call about a strange noise in a house, and report on it to your class.

Take a tape recorder around with you for a few days and record any sounds that you have no explanation for. Create an audio essay about contemporary ghosts.

If there is a ghost in the house that Thurber describes, it does not talk. Write a short story to function as a sequel to this one, explaining who the ghost is and why it is haunting this house.

Research a contemporary culture that would not find the idea of a ghost in the house unusual, and write a report on the history of this belief among that culture's people.

Discuss this short story with a lawyer, and find out what might be the modern legal ramifications of the mother throwing a shoe through the neighbors' window, the police breaking down the front door, the family turning in a false alarm, and so forth.

Compare and Contrast

1915: Mack Sennett's *Keystone Cops* comedies are popular at the movies, featuring a large group of bungling policemen running around and creating mayhem.

1933: A string of movies about hard-boiled gangsters, including *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932), has given policemen a sense of self-importance.

Today: The trend in police dramas is toward the collection of minute pieces of evidence, in direct contradiction to the brutish destruction wrought by the officers in "The Night the Ghost Got In."

1915: In the middle of World War I, many of the young men of Thurber's age are off in the trenches of Europe.

1933: In the middle of the Great Depression, many family members who would otherwise have gone their own way are still living at home, unable to afford separate housing.

Today: The past decade has brought a dramatic rise in the number of people moving back home after college, unable to find jobs and burdened with student loans.

1915: Fifty years after the end of the Civil War, a veteran like the grandfather in the story can still use it as a point of reference.

1933: Having been through World War I, the Civil War seems like a quaint antiquity to Thurber's readers.

Today: Nearly thirty years after its end, Vietnam still remains America's point of reference for large-scale conflicts.

1915: Spiritualists and mediums are popular and have achieved some credibility in upper-class social circles.

1933: Many tricks that spiritualists have used to create the illusion of unworldly occurrences have been debunked. Magician Harry Houdini, in particular, has spent years revealing how such mysteries as phantom knocking and music from nowhere are created.

Today: Spiritualists seldom use elaborate special effects but instead just make unverifiable claims about speaking to people who have died.

What Do I Read Next?

Charles S. Holmes is considered one of the preeminent scholars of Thurber's literary career. Holmes's 1972 biography of James Thurber, *The Clocks of Columbus*, is a detailed examination of both the writer and his works. It is accepted by many as the definitive biography.

Among contemporary humor essayists, Sarah Vowell and David Sedaris are among the most respected. Vowell's most recent collection is *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, published by Simon & Schuster in 2002. Sedaris's masterpiece is "The Santaland Diaries," a Thurberesque account of his stint as an elf at Macy's one Christmastime, included in the 1994 collection *Barrel Fever.*

Essays that Thurber wrote about the writing profession have been collected in *Collecting Himself: James Thurber on Writing and Writers, Humor and Himself*, edited by Michael J. Rosen. It was published in 1989 by Harper & Rowe.

Most of Thurber's best humor pieces, including "The Night the Ghost Got In," were collected later in his career in *The Thurber Carnival*, which is still in print in paperback, from Perennial.

Robert Benchley was another *New Yorker* humorist, so keen of wit that Thurber once remarked, "One of the greatest fears of the humorous writer is that he has spent three weeks writing something done faster and better by Benchley in 1919." *The Best of Robert Benchley* was published in 1996 by Random House.

In 1989, the University of Missouri Press brought together a collection of previously published interviews with Thurber in the book *Conversations with James Thurber*. It was edited by Thomas Fensch.

Further Study

Burnett, Michael, "James Thurber's Style," in *Thurber: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Charles S. Holmes, Prentice-Hall, 1974, pp. 75-86.

Burnett examines the contradictions in Thurber's use of language that lead to the humorous effect of his stories.

Holmes, Charles S., "James Thurber and the Art of Fantasy," in *Yale Review*, Vol. LV, No. 1, October 1965, pp. 17-33.

Holmes, probably the best known of Thurber's biographers, gives an overview of the author's career.

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

At 1,238 pages, Kinney's biography is one of the most recent and most thorough studies of Thurber's life available.

Morsberger, Robert E., *James Thurber*, Twayne Publishers, 1964.

This book, part of Twayne's "United States Authors" series aimed at the level of high school and college students, presents a concise overview of Thurber's literary career.

Bibliography

Baker, Russell, Afterword, in *My Life and Hard Times*, by James Thurber, with an introduction by John J. Hutchens, an afterword by Russell Baker, and commentary by Michael J. Rosen, 1st Perennial Classics ed., Perennial Classics, 1999.

Coates, Robert, "James G. Thurber, the Man," in *New Republic*, Vol. LXXVII, No. 993, December 13, 1933, pp. 137-38.

Elias, Robert H., "James Thurber: The Primitive, the Innocent, and the Individual," in *Thurber: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Charles S. Holmes, Prentice-Hall, 1974, pp. 87-100; originally published in the *American Scholar*, Summer 1958.

Long, Robert Emmet, *James Thurber*, Continuum, 1988, p. 107.

Maddocks, Melvin, "James Thurber and the Hazards of Humor," in *Sewanee Review*, Vol. XCIII, No. 4, Fall 1985, pp. 597-601.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535