The Thirteen Clocks Short Guide

The Thirteen Clocks by James Thurber

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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".

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Overview

In his foreword to The Thirteen Clocks, Thurber says that he wrote the story in a fit of escapism and self-indulgence, but then also says, "Unless modem Man wanders down these byways occasionally, I do not see how he can hope to preserve his sanity."

The Thirteen Clocks is a delightful fairy tale filled with magic and absurdity, swordplay and wordplay. In this fantasy, the invincible prince, Zorn of Zorna, rescues Saralinda, a radiant princess, from the cold-hearted Duke who stole her when she was a baby.

Within this light-hearted story is a serious moral lesson. There are coldhearted forces in the real world that, like the evil Duke, try to grasp power by belittling love and imagination, self-indulgence and escapism. Thurber wants to release the reader from those forces into simple mental recreation. This tale opens the byways of play and turns the reader loose upon them.

About the Author

James Grover Thurber was bom on December 8, 1894, in Columbus, Ohio. His father depended upon political appointments for employment. His mother was a strong and talented descendent of a well-known Ohio family.

Losing an eye in a childhood accident influenced his entire life and led to nearly total blindness in the 1940s. Thurber was a successful student in public schools, and after a difficult beginning, did well at Ohio State University, although he did not complete a degree. At the university, he met Elliot Nugent, who encouraged Thurber's writing and participation in student theatrical productions and with whom he later collaborated. During this period, Thurber became familiar with the works of several of his favorite authors, most notably Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and Willa Cather.

Thurber left the university in 1918 to contribute to the war effort, working as a code clerk at the American Embassy in Paris. After the war, he sought work as a journalist. In 1922 he married Althea Adams. His career languished until 1927 when he went to work for Harold Ross of the New Yorker magazine. There, under the influence of Ross and E. B. White, Thurber developed his style and tried new forms of humorous writing.

Thurber came into his own as a writer in 1929, when he published a best-seller that he co-authored with White, Is Sex Necessary?. His daughter, Rosemary, was born in 1931, but his first marriage ended in 1935. He then married Helen Wismer.

Thurber achieved international acclaim as a humorist and cartoonist. His most famous pieces, many of which are collected in The Thurber Carnival (1945), are humorous short stories and sketches based on his experiences with his family, friends, and various employers. His favorite "cartoon" was The Last Flower (1939), a parable of his pessimistic faith that, although mankind seems bent upon self-destruction, there seems to be a force at work to prevent total annihilation. Many of Thurber's works remain popular today, none, perhaps more so than "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," the story of a small, ineffectual man who daydreams a succession of heroic acts while involved in mundane affairs, such as trying to park his car or buy dog food. Thurber's Walter Mitty has passed into common usage to describe a particularly mousy individual who seems out of touch with reality.

Later in life after his vision worsened, Thurber developed a stronger interest in the quality of his stories and began writing a series of fairy tales. The White Deer (winner of the Ohioana Juvenile-book Medal) is one of the best, alongside Many Moons (winner of a Library Association Prize), The Great Quillow, The Thirteen Clocks, and The Wonderful O. He received numerous awards during his lifetime, including honorary degrees from Kenyon College (1950), Williams College (1951), and Yale University (1953).

Thurber remains one of America's most popular authors with both adults and younger readers. Along with the fun of his humor, he offers satire and criticism of modern follies, especially the ways modern Americans try to restrain imagination and love.

Setting

"Once upon a time, in a gloomy castle on a lonely hill"—this is the setting of The Thirteen Clocks. Though the prince comes from distant Zorna and, with the Golux, wanders on a quest to win Saralinda, the center of the story is this gloomy castle. Here lives the "cold, aggressive Duke," with the princess whom he claims is his niece. Here are the thirteen clocks that will not run because the Duke has murdered time within Coffin Castle. The cold and dark castle is the ideal setting for the Duke, with its silent clocks; its sinister spies; its cavernous, dimly lit rooms; and, outside, the man-eating geese who devour whomever the Duke executes.

This is a fairy tale setting, where magic spells are cast and mythical beings such as the Golux and the Todal live. In this land lives Hagga, placed under a spell that turns her tears into jewels. Tears of sorrow last forever, but tears of laughter only a fortnight. Princess Saralinda is also under a spell. This spell decrees that no one can marry her until she is twenty-one and that the one who marries her will have a name that begins with X and yet does not begin with X. This surrounding land is ruled by the tyrannical Duke, although it resists him through magic and love.

Social Sensitivity

As in many of his stories, including his fairy tales, Thurber here responds to the many aspects of modern culture that threaten love and imagination. He traces unrestrained desires for power and material wealth to their roots in an impossible desire for immortality. Though the tale contains little that explicitly makes this connection, Thurber points to it in his foreword. He implies that this book did not begin as a commercial venture and that as it became of commercial value, it gave him and others more trouble. Nevertheless, its chief value is that it began in a spirit of playfulness and is meant to foster that spirit in readers.

There is little in this tale that is likely to offend young readers or parents. At the end of the foreword, Thurber thanks his wife for waking him out of nightmares, "some of them about the Todal .

. . but the worst ones, on the darkest nights, about the whole enterprise in general." One meaning of "the whole enterprise" may be the human condition in an indifferent universe. Thurber's implied answer in this, as in most of his fiction, is that the only sources of meaning are the human heart and mind, affection and imagination.

Literary Qualities

The Thirteen Clocks is, on one level, an allegory of the struggle of humanity to create and sustain meaning in an indifferent universe. On a more accessible level, the story is an amusing and suspenseful fairy tale. Thurber has worked out both levels artfully. Characteristic of all his fairy tales, this story is replete with wordplay and humor.

On the allegorical level, the Duke seeks immortality by stopping time and collecting jewels. He hopes to crown his possessions with Saralinda, the warmth of human love and the radiance of mortal beauty. He fails to understand that he cannot have both, that he cannot warm his heart and light his soul with another's life. To receive from another, he must give, and he cannot. Only the tears of sorrow last forever. The tears of laughter are mortal, and so must be repeatedly renewed. To realize their love, the Prince and Princess must be guided toward each other and must make time run, accepting their mortality and its limitations.

As a fairy tale and as an allegory, The Thirteen Clocks relates to the myth of Persephone in which this daughter of Demeter, taken to the underworld by Hades for a wife, returned to her mother each spring, bringing new life to the upper world. The marriage of Zorn and Saralinda brings the castle back into time and causes flowers to bloom there for the first time in seven years.

Suspense in the story is mild, but sustained by Thurber's whimsical handling of Zorn's quest. How is he to find one thousand jewels in a land where there are none? How is he to revive the castle clocks after the Duke has slain time?

Thurber's style is finely wrought, varying from eloquence to humorous word coinage. Many passages are rhymed.

Hagga says of her jewels, "For there's a thing that you must know, concerning jewels of laughter. They always turn again to tears a fortnight after." When Zorn arrives at the castle village he is warned that if he approaches the Duke, he will most likely be slit from his "guggle" to his "zatch." In a mood of confession, the Duke says, "We all have flaws, and mine is being wicked." To make Hagga laugh, the Golux invents silly limericks.

Incorporating elements of allegory, fairy tale, and myth, Thurber has written his tale in a style both attractive and funny, making it a delight to read aloud.

Themes and Characters

The central theme of The Thirteen Clocks concerns the opposition between the forces of light and warmth and the forces of dark and cold.

Although the Duke loves jewels above all things because their radiance is eternal, he seems to know intuitively that jewels are in reality cold, their radiance borrowed from mortality. The jewels of Hagga's tears of sorrow last forever. That he is drawn to Saralinda's mortal radiance—her hand is the only warm thing in Coffin Castle—shows that at the beginning of the story the Duke has not yet completely surrendered his humanity.

Ultimately, the Duke chooses death, represented by the Todal—in German Tod means death. He hopes to marry Saralinda himself when she turns twenty-one. He stops the thirteen clocks in the castle by slaying time, to make "then" eternal and prevent the arrival of "now," when a prince might arrive who can win Saralinda away from him. When he tells Zorn he may win Saralinda by bringing a thousand jewels and restarting the dead clocks, the Duke seals his own doom. Seeking eternal life, he finds only cold, dark death.

Implied in the story is the view that the cosmos is cold, dark, dead, and eternal.

Humanity brings warmth, light, and life only temporarily into this void. Mortality and love are tragically intertwined. The imagination is the one source of the beauty and truth that make human happiness possible. This tragic world view stands behind the story, providing the shadow against which Thurber's light shines so brightly.

Assisting Prince Zorn is the Golux, a befuddled being who is never sure of what he knows, but who usually is close enough to guide the Prince and Princess well. The Golux—in Latin lux means light—is the Duke's main thematic opposition. While the Duke darkly plots wickedness and commands his agents to carry out his designs, the Golux guides the Prince and Princess on their quest for love and Ever After.

Zorn is a typical fairy tale prince. In battle he is undefeated. Though he is a minstrel and a poet, he lacks the knowledge of myth and magic that the Golux supplies him. Saralinda appears only briefly at the end, when she restarts the clocks. The Golux helps her with his "logic" rather than his magic: "If you can touch the clocks and never start them, then you can start the clocks and never touch them." Her warm hand can start the clocks only when held just the right distance from them.

Of the several minor characters, the Duke's agent, Hark, is perhaps the most important. Hark behaves as a sort of conscience to the Duke until the spell is broken. Then, he resumes his true identity as a servant of Saralinda's father, good King Gwain of Yarrow.

All of the characters take sides in the major thematic oppositions. While the suspense centers on Zorn's rescue of Saralinda, the thematic center is the opposition between the

Golux, representative of mortal truth and beauty, and the Duke, representative of eternal death.

Topics for Discussion

1. What are the main features of the Duke's character? What does he seem to want from life?

2. Why does the Duke want to marry Saralinda?

3. Why did the Duke stop the clocks in the castle by slaying time?

4. What are the main features of the Golux's character? What does he seem to want from life?

5. How can we explain Thurber's choice to have the Golux also be Listen, the Duke's spy? Why is his name Listen?

6. Why does the Duke call the Golux a mere device?

7. While the Duke awaits Zorn's return, some strange objects come down the stairs. What is happening then?

What do these objects suggest?

8. Why do the tears of sorrow last forever while the tears of laughter last only two weeks?

9. Why is the Duke finally done away with by the Todal? What do you think the Todal is? What does its name suggest?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Golux tells the story of Hagga at some length. What connections do you see between Hagga's story and the whole tale?

2. In the first sentence of the story, Thurber sets up an opposition between the cold Duke and the warm Saralinda.

How is this opposition worked out in the story as a whole? What meanings does it suggest?

3. In the foreword, Thurber says that this tale is an example of escapism and self-indulgence, then goes on to say, "Unless modern Man wanders down these byways occasionally, I do not see how he can hope to preserve his sanity."

How can a story like this one help us to preserve our sanity?

4. If you have a faithful copy of the original edition, you can study Mark Simont's illustrations. Choose one that you think especially good, and explain how it contributes to the book.

5. Thurber is known for his humor.

Choose a passage or an incident that you think is especially funny. Describe it and then explain how Thurber has made it amusing. Explain, if you can, what makes it funny.

6. Saralinda, perhaps because she is under spells for most of the story, has quite a small part. What do you think she would have said to the Duke if she could have spoken freely. Write your own chapter for the book in which Saralinda and the Duke explain to each other what they want and why.

For Further Reference

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Though the balance of this biography has been challenged, it remains the most complete life of Thurber.

Blair, Walter, and Hamlin Hill. America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Blair and Hill place Thurber in the context of a history of American humor, giving special attention to "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."

Gale, Steven. "James Thurber." In Popular World Fiction, edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer.

Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1987. Gale summarizes Thurber's career, including interesting new information, and discusses three short works.

Holmes, Charles S. The Clocks of Columbus. New York: Atheneum, 1972. This literary biography covers Thurber's life, with attention to the circumstances in which he wrote his major works.

It includes a number of photographs of Thurber and his associates as well as a chapter on the fairy tales.

Holmes, Charles S., ed. Thurber. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

This collection of twenty-five pieces includes critical discussions of Thurber's work and style, biographical discussions, an interview, a chronology, and a bibliography.

Morsberger, Robert E. James Thurber.

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Scholl, Peter A. "James Thurber." In Dictionary of Literary Biography, edited by Stanley Trachtenberg. Detroit: Gale, 1982. This is an excellent short summary of Thurber's life and career, with photographs and illustrations.

Thurber, James. The Thurber Album.

New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952.

This autobiographical work contains sketches of Thurber's family and friends during his youth in Columbus.

——. The Years with Ross. Boston: Atlantic Monthly/Little, Brown, 1959.

Thurber recounts his years working for the New Yorker.

Tobias, Richard C. The Art of James Thurber. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969. This discussion of Thurber's literary art includes a chapter on the fairy tales.

Related Titles

Thurber wrote no other stories with these characters. Thurber's other fairy tales show similar themes and qualities.

In Many Moons, a sick princess cannot get well unless she is given the moon. In The Great Quillow, only a scorned, but highly imaginative toymaker can save the town from a dangerous giant. The White Deer tells of the appearance of a beautiful princess when hunters corner a white deer. King Clode's three sons undertake quests to win her hand, but the true test of their love comes when they learn she may be an enchanted deer rather than an enchanted princess.

In The Wonderful O, the evil pirate, Black, makes the letter "O" illegal on a small, once happy island. Love becomes unpronounceable and poet becomes pet. The efforts of poets and lovers banish Black and restore the "O." In each of these, as in many of Thurber's other stories, artists with words and music most often are able to restore love and hope to wasted worlds.

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