

# The White Deer Short Guide

## The White Deer by James Thurber

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# Contents

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The White Deer Short Guide.....</a>   | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>                     | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Overview.....</a>                     | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">About the Author.....</a>             | <a href="#">4</a>  |
| <a href="#">Setting.....</a>                      | <a href="#">6</a>  |
| <a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>           | <a href="#">7</a>  |
| <a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>           | <a href="#">8</a>  |
| <a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>        | <a href="#">9</a>  |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>        | <a href="#">11</a> |
| <a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a> | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>        | <a href="#">13</a> |
| <a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>               | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>        | <a href="#">16</a> |



## Overview

The White Deer concerns faith in love.

Love depends upon the will of lovers to believe in each other despite all obstacles. Though the story is playful, fastpaced, funny, at times satirical and at times absurd, the theme is serious, as are the obstacles thrown up before the lovers. Secrets of the past and fears of the future, prejudices and the lack of imagination, accident and sorcery—all threaten love's survival.

Loosely adhering to fairy tale conventions, Thurber invites the reader into an imaginary world where an enchanted white deer, cornered in a magic forest, is suddenly transformed into a beautiful princess without a name. She sets King Clode's three sons—Thag, Gallow, and Jorn—tasks to perform to decide whom she will marry. The tasks she sets for Thag and Gallow are perilous but she chooses an easy task for Jorn, her favorite. In the meantime, the king's advisors discover that in every previous case in which a transformed deer cannot remember her name, she is truly a deer and returns to her original shape when love fails her thrice. When all three princes succeed and return simultaneously, however, they must decide whether to accept her, despite the discouraging precedent. Although their quests test the princes in various ways, the final test of their faith in love rests on their decision to accept or reject the princess.

The single most important quality that fosters faithful love in this story is imagination. Jorn, as a poet, can succeed where his brothers fail because the good he imagines rules over the supposed facts. As a master of words, Jorn is also aware of his power to shape reality to his desires. Though Thurber presents this power in a fairy tale setting, he knows it to be a true power, limited as it may be in real life. Of all the shapes and meanings people can give to the world, the best are those that foster love.

## About the Author

James Grover Thurber was born 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 York *Jermagazine*. 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

The world of this tale is fantastic in virtually every detail. The narrator says that on certain April days, when near sounds seem distant and distant sounds near and when smoke goes down instead of up, one may find a way to the enchanted forest. However, it was "once upon a time" that Clode was king there. Most of the tale takes place in Clode's castle, which contains an unusual group of retainers, but few women. Clode's kingdom is a hunter's paradise, except that periodically the king and his sons deplete the game and must wait about three years before they can hunt again. During this period, the kingdom is like a waste land, going through a long winter. The hunt for the white deer takes place during one of these periods, and the tale ends with spring's return and the promise of new richness. Another aspect of the setting is revealed during the elder sons' quests.

They enter two different worlds. Thag finds a world of dangers and obstacles where courage is the main virtue. Gallow enters a bureaucracy, where cunning, wealth, and the power to bribe, lead to success.



# Social Sensitivity

This story shows that Thurber cared deeply about fostering love and imagination. He implicitly criticizes those aspects of American culture that undervalue imagination and subvert love.

Commercialism and other forces that distort language for selfish purposes are targets of his scorn. While these social themes pervade the story, they do not dominate it. Jorn's example illustrates that imagination and truthfulness undergird faith and love, while loving faithfulness stimulates the imagination and the desire for truth.

Though Thurber is often described as a misogynist, there is little in this particular tale to support the charge. There are few female characters, and their portraits are not generalized. Princess Rosanore appears mainly as a young woman worthy of Jorn's love. While her character is consistent with the stereotypes of fair maidens in fairy tales, it reveals no special animosity toward women. A gamekeeper's wife is a minor character who fits the stereotype of the envious older woman, disapproving of the princess when she first appears. According to Jom, the woman who casts the spell on the knight he fights may show love that continues in spite of faithlessness.

Overall, *The White Deer* shares most of the child-like and innocent qualities of fairy tales, but with a minimum of violence. It is suitable for elementary students, but likely to interest and entertain adult readers as well.



## Literary Qualities

Thurber manipulates the simple forms of fairy tales, with their conventional characters, frequent three-part structures, and love-quest plots, to produce a richly entertaining story with a serious moral intention.

Like "Snow-White" and "The Sleeping Beauty," *The White Deer* tells how a handsome prince breaks the spell that binds a beautiful princess. Within this structure Thurber includes the three perilous labors, quests to earn a maiden's hand. Each quest serves the overall theme of faith in love, testing the quester's suitability. Thurber places over this entire structure yet another, the renewal of the waste land by means of the rebirth of love that leads to marriage.

In addition to devising an intricate structure out of simple elements in support of a thematic goal, the tale abounds with wordplay. On their way to find the fabled white deer, Clode and his sons meet a wizard who plays tricks with their tongues. Clode warns him, "Try twice that trick on Clode my mousey man of magic, and we will wid these wids of woozards." As the wizard predicts, they pursue the deer "past the barking tree, across the musical mud, in and out of a flock of wingless birds." When Jorn requests a riddle of the sphinx, he is asked, "What is whirly?/ What is curly?/ Tell me, what is pearly early?"

Much of the narrative is in rhymed verse, but because Thurber does not set it off in lines, readers may not notice.

Thurber has carefully worked out each sentence to maximize its beauty or wit.

When Jorn accepts the as yet unknown princess, he says, "What you have been, you are not; and what you are, you will forever be. I place this trophy in the hands of love. . . . You hold my heart."

Almost every character shares in this elegance as well as in wit and fun. Pointedly contrasted with the eloquence of Clode's associates is the language of the Forest of Willbe, where Gallow pursues his quest: "Giants Killed While You Wait.

7 League Boots Now 6.98. Let Us Waken Your Sleeping Beauty. . . . Consult Panting & Young." Thurber provides a feast for reading aloud that enhances appreciation of his deft manipulation of fairy tale conventions.





## Themes and Characters

Thurber's characters are deftly sketched but not deeply revealed. King Clode lives for hunting and dislikes magic because it interferes with his pursuits. He has lost his wife, also an enchanted princess, probably because he failed to love her as much as the hunt.

He is impatient with stupidity and has a touch of the poet in him, but he distrusts imagination and prefers to live simply and firmly anchored in the real world.

Thag and Gallow are like their father, but with even less imagination. Jorn, the youngest son, has all of his father's poetic side and his mother's power to imagine and love.

Especially entertaining is the cast of clowns that makes up Clode's castle staff. Paz, the new Royal Astronomer, uses rose lenses in his glasses and telescope—everything he sees is pink.

Tocko, the former astronomer, has retired to clock-making because of his failing sight. As the world becomes darker to him, he forecasts an increasingly bleaker future for all. The Royal Wizard juggles badly, and Clode wishes he would stop appearing in clouds of smoke that smell up the castle. The Royal Recorder always speaks in legalese, and when drunk recites laws of mortmain and chancery to himself. The Royal Physician is ill and spends much of his time testing himself, but he refuses to look at the results because he believes that a doctor should never tell a patient what is wrong.

The beautiful enchanted princess reveals her royal nature by insisting that all her suitors be told that she is probably a deer before they decide whether to take her hand in marriage. Behind the scenes is a wizard of the woods, more expert than palace wizards, who controls much of the action. Other characters include Quondo, a dwarf who undergoes an interesting transformation, and several minor witches, knights, citizens, and domestics.

The thematic center of the story is revealed when all three princes return simultaneously from their quests. Then, in order of age, each must decide whether to accept or decline the princess's hand. Thag and Gallow find they cannot accept her out of fear she will turn back into a deer, but Jorn, who has undertaken his quest out of love, accepts her. His act finally breaks the spell cast over her by an envious rival for her father's hand, Yaf Nagrom (Morgan Fay backwards). She then remembers and reveals her true identity as Rosanore, a princess of Northland.

At this point, it becomes clear why Thag's tests of physical courage and Gallow's tests of cunning did not make them worthy of her. Each was told by the disguised woods wizard to grasp what seems truly worthwhile today without considering the fears of the past and the future. Because they are not acting out of love, neither understands what this means. Thag and Gallow continue to see her as prey, the object of a hunt. Only Jorn, sent on an easy quest, desires a hard riddle, a terrible task, and a knight to



vanquish—difficulties commensurate with his love. The knight whom Jorn defeats once abandoned his faith in love when the object of his quest proved a sham. For his failure, the knight must fight every prince who follows Jorn in the perilous labor. Jorn's success ensures that love, miracles, and magic will continue in his world and implies that in the real world, love produces whatever there are of miracles and magic.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the differences between Jorn and his two brothers. How do these differences relate to the characters of their parents?

2. Discuss the differences between Tocko, the former astronomer, and Paz, the current astronomer. How do their views of the world differ? Which is more correct?

3. Discuss the perilous labors of Thag and Gallow. How do their quests reveal their worthiness for Princess Rosanore?

4. Prince Jorn's perilous labor is more complicated than those of his brothers.

How do these complications come about? Why are they important? Think especially about the Knight's story of how he failed and what his punishment was.

5. At the end of the story, it becomes clear that the woods wizard has spoken to each prince while he was on his quest.

What does he say to each? Of what importance are these conversations to their success with Rosanore?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. James Thurber drew his own illustrations for this story. Choose a few that interest you and discuss how they contribute to your enjoyment and understanding of the story.

2. In the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Peter Scholl says this of Thurber's fairy tales: "Thurber's questing heroes manage to break the withering forces of evil and restore order, meaning, and purpose to the world." Is this statement true of *The White Deer*?

What are the forces of evil in this story?

How are they broken? How would you describe the order that is restored?

3. E. B. White described *The White Deer* as "exhibit A in the strange case of a writer's switch from eye work to ear work." White refers to Thurber's having become blind before he wrote this tale.

Choose and discuss one or more examples that show Thurber may be working more for the reader's ear than for the eye.

4. There seems to be some mystery about why King Clode's wife died so young. Think about what the characters say on this topic, then write a short chapter that might be included in this tale as a flashback to show how Clode and his wife got along.

5. Thurber uses many elements of the fairy tale in his story. Read a tale like this one in which a handsome prince frees a princess from a spell. Examples might include "Snow-White" and "The Sleeping Beauty." Write about one or more interesting ways in which Thurber's tale is like or different from the fairy tale you read.

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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'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 toymaker can save the town from a dangerous giant. In *The Thirteen Clocks*, the wicked Duke has driven love and warmth from his land, and a minstrel prince is needed. *The Wonderful O* joins *The White Deer* among the most satisfying of these tales. In that story, 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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