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JAMES THURBER'S LITTLE MAN IN THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES:  
THE HUMOR OF GENDER AND CONFLICT

by

Andrew S. Jorgensen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

August 2006

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Andrew S. Jorgensen

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the dissertation of Andrew S. Jorgensen in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements;(2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### JAMES THURBER'S LITTLE MAN IN THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES: THE HUMOR OF GENDER AND CONFLICT

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Master of English

James Thurber, along with others who wrote for *The New Yorker* magazine, developed the “little man” comic figure. The little man as a central character was a shift from earlier nineteenth-century traditions in humor. This twentieth-century protagonist was a comic antihero whose function was to create sympathy rather than scorn and bring into question the values and behaviors of society rather than affirm them, as earlier comic figures did. The little man was urban, inept, frustrated, childlike, suspicious, and stubborn. His female counterpart was often a foil: confident and controlling enough to highlight his most pitiable and funniest features.

Contradictory gender roles and stereotypes are essential to Thurber's humor. This thesis thus reads Thurber's work as critical of gender roles. Thurber's humor demonstrates that expectations for men and women to be socially masculine and feminine are often incongruous with their capabilities and natures. Often his work is funny because of the way it portrays gender as performance and as expectations

imposed upon people instead of as inherent qualities in men and women. These roles create conflicted characters as well as conflict between the characters that Thurber draws in his stories, often a quarreling husband and wife.

Also characteristic in Thurber's humor is the element of neurosis. Thurber often played with the vernacular concepts of neurosis, and he capitalized on public obsession with Freudian psychology with his satires and with fiction and essays about various anxieties and daydreaming. Neurosis works well as comic material because it also catalyzes the battle of the sexes. To support my interpretation of Thurber as a critic of societal gender roles, Freud's book *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* is useful at illuminating a deeper "tendency" in Thurber's humor. Thurber is often thought of as a misogynist, for his personal behavior and for his unflattering literary portrayal of women as unimaginative nags. This thesis also examines the complexities and developments of Thurber's attitudes toward women. Most importantly for Thurber, his little man figure and the battle of the sexes was a way to express the importance and power of the liberated human imagination.

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## Introduction

[Thurber's writing] is a form of humor which is also a way of saying something serious. There is a criticism of life at the bottom of it. It is serious and even somber. Unlike so much humor, it is not merely a criticism of manners—that is, of the superficial aspect of society at a given moment—but something more profound. His writings and also his illustrations are capable of surviving the immediate environment and time out of which they spring. To some extent, they will be a document of the age they belong to.

—T.S. Eliot, in an interview with *Time* magazine.

James Thurber's literary career began in 1927 with the sale of a short piece to *The New Yorker* magazine. Shortly after, Thurber was hired as a managing editor, and later became a staff writer. Harold W. Ross created the weekly magazine in Manhattan only two years before Thurber showed up. Inspired by regular witty conversation with a group of New York friends and writers who met often for drinks at a room in the Algonquin hotel, Ross's magazine sought well-wrought humor—educated, upper-middle class, “not for the old lady in Dubuque”—as primary material for the magazine. Ross boldly pursued the endeavor after its tenuous success during the first years. Ross's interest in and dedication to humor was crucial to the magazine's success. This dedication might have been a part of his uncanny ability to attract talented comic writers and cartoonists even before the magazine had clout.

Ross's timing and location were also right on. Near the beginning of the 20th century, many philosophers and social and literary critics were taking humor very

seriously. Works like Sigmund Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* published in 1905, and Henri Bergson's 1911 *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, as well as Constance Rourke's *American Humor* addressed the importance of humor in the mind, in society, and in literature and culture. An intellectual interest in humor paralleled the popular appetite for humor. Also, by 1941, New York City was the cultural center of America, with an estimated 10% of the country's population (12 million of 120 million) in the area in 1941 (Armstrong 561). Before and after World War II ravaged Europe, New York was becoming the cultural and literary capital not just of the U.S., but of the world. By the late 1940s, *The New Yorker* was part of the literary and cultural vanguard.

From the beginning, the intended readership of the *New Yorker* was urban, cosmopolitan, and refined—an audience to whom the magazine could advertise expensive products. The first few years were difficult for the new publication, which struggled to stay financially afloat, but by the mid-thirties, it was an established business success: It sold only 14,064 total copies in 1925, but in 1935 sold 128,210 magazines. Revenue rocketed in ad sales (\$36,000 in 1925 to near \$3 million in 1935) as advertisers had much success using the magazine (Yagoda 96-97).

The creation of *The New Yorker*, the early world views and styles to which Thurber undoubtedly contributed and helped shape, marked a major point in the development of humor in twentieth century America. By the end of the thirties, *The New Yorker* was a nation-wide publication, with distinct New York City and national versions. In the cartoons, editorials, and fiction of *The New Yorker* there emerged significant class and gender stereotypes. However, stereotypes might not be an apt term; these were

original and developing figures—in a way, proto-stereotypes. Rea Irvin’s Eustace Tilley, shown here, is an example. *The New Yorker’s* web site describes the gentleman who has graced many covers. “Who is Eustace Tilley? Well, he is the top-hatted twit, invariably described as a ‘Regency dandy,’ who appeared on the cover of the first issue of *The New Yorker*, dated February 21, 1925” ([www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)).



Other gender stereotypes could be seen early in the cartoons of Helen Hokinson, who often drew large, pampered, upper-middle class women making comments betraying their naiveté, and in the drawings of James Thurber, whose crudely drawn, bald men reflected the ineptitude and anxiety of the characters in his stories. Along with such characters came a man versus woman conflict. Within the pages of *The New Yorker*, the battle of the sexes became a recurring and rigid narrative in itself.

In this text I will look first at the development and defining traits of Thurber’s male and female characters in the battle of the sexes. The second part will discuss how Thurber’s men and women characters are in conflict with the expectations of their gender and subsequently between themselves. Then I will consider the function and use of neurosis in Thurber’s humor and how this relates to gender. The last part will analyze Thurber’s attitudes and portrayals of women.

James Thurber’s skill for writing humor was singular, and a feeling of singularity and charm in his experiences is the effect of his lively writing—a sign of his gift. This

thesis will focus on how Thurber turned the values, behaviors, and happenings of his society and his own life into humor that is entertainingly profound. In this way, it will focus on aesthetic and humanistic elements in his writing and it is not my primary intent. But, pursuing these questions also shows how James Thurber and his work were products of his historical context, and it also leads to interrogation of the problems and successes of Thurber's treatment of gender. I do not feel it is important to justify humor as a serious literary concern, but I hope to show that such justification is not necessary when written humor is well-wrought in the first place.

This thesis analyzes many of Thurber's short stories that treat the battle of the sexes. I also discuss some essays and many cartoons. Thurber was primarily a writer but is also remembered for his cartoons, which are perhaps most notable for their alarming simplicity. I do not mean to critique Thurber for his techniques as a cartoonist as much as I use the cartoons to further analyze how Thurber developed and continued his themes in the medium of cartoons. My approach focuses on how Thurber illuminated social and intellectual problems and movements rather than on how social and theoretical issues inform Thurber's work. In short, I want to analyze why and how Thurber makes the battle of the sexes funny.

## Humor in the Conflict of Gender



*"I love the idea of there being two sexes, don't you?"*

James Thurber had an intense interest in the nature of gender. He examined and dramatized the challenges of being women and men, the relationship between a man and a woman, and the relationship between men and women. Few other writers have taken as much interest in or drawn as much attention to the complex relationships between the sexes. The cartoon "I love the idea of there being two sexes, don't you?" (*W&D* 599) illustrates this well. As a *New Yorker* writer, he undeniably played a formative part in a modern concept of literary humor. He especially shaped the art of humor about gender and conflict between men and women. His insights and representations of the battle of the sexes are valuable and insightful to human struggle in and beyond the time period in which he wrote. Thurber was very successful at probing and having fun with the joy, suffering, and frustration of human experience, especially in regard to life as a man or a woman. Through this, his writing celebrated the life of the mind, sometimes with delicacy, sometimes with hyperbole, and always with wit.

Much that has been written about Thurber in anthologies, reviews, and encyclopedia entries simplifies Thurber's dynamic between men and women. At times this type of commentary is accurate, but it is often incomplete. It generally goes like this: the little man is inept and intimidated by a domineering and joyless wife. Such summary judgments do not take into account the many variations and dynamics within the war between men and women in Thurber's works. Part of this hasty simplification of Thurber's work likely comes from a disproportionate focus on two of his most well-known stories, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and "The Catbird Seat," both about pathetic men at odds with pushy women.

In a broad perspective of Thurber's portrayal of the war of the sexes, there are alliances, traitors, treaties, varied battles with sometimes unclear winners or double losers, and hope for a tranquil future. I want to see beyond the simplified reading of Thurber's men and women, and examine more carefully the nuances in his views and representations of male-female interaction. Though many stories feature battle-axe wives and the little men whom they stifle and boss around, there is variety among characters and conflicts. There is more at work in Thurber's humor than simple exaggerations of one type of female and one type of male human being. His stories are explorations and criticisms of cultural notions of gender as well as affirmations of human imagination and autonomy for both men and women. I attempt to illustrate how Thurber's work shows gender expectations as problematic, and that Thurber's humor often makes fun of these expectations and roles rather than simply making fun of women. In Thurber's literary world, both men and women seem to have paradoxical and incompatible parts to play in

masculinity and femininity. This creates and adds to the conflicts between men and women.

A recurring issue in literary biographies and criticism of Thurber's work is that he supposedly hated women. Though he joked about his legend in a piece describing a woman who approached him at a party to ask, "Why do you hate women?" and admitted it for the sake of self-effacing jokes ("I hate women because they always know where things are"), many who analyze Thurber find that there was more to this than kidding. Thurber's personal bitterness about relationship failures or jealousy is noted, and his humor at times makes fun of women, especially by making the wife or the female co-worker in stories the bad guy. But interpreting Thurber's work in the context of gender also shows that he criticizes and rethinks values and relationships and in fact undermines sexism through comic irony. I do not mean to say that he undermines misogyny. Thurber was not so much interested in that as a social agenda as he was interested in pointing out what was funny: ridiculous incongruities between what humans say they value and what they actually do, alarming incongruities normally hidden from perception, and outrageous and futile conflicts humans have in a changing society.

Thurber's own comments in an interview with Max Eastman reveal contempt towards women:

America is a matriarchy. It always has been, it always will be. The American Woman is my theme, and how she dominates the male. It became obvious to me when I was a child that the American woman was in charge. . . . I think it's one of the weaknesses of America. . . . The mother dominates the son. . . . He says: "Hey—Mom! Can I do this—can I do that?" Permission from 'Mom' is the big thing. .



. . . I don't think there will be any revolt by the American man. In the series I did, "The War between Men and Women," the woman surrenders to the man, but you'll notice in the drawings that each woman has a big rock . . . behind her back. In other words, the war is not over.

--Thurber interviewed in *The New Republic*, May 16, 1958. (Kinney 532, ellipses in original quotation)

Though he may have disliked women, he also envied them and loved them, and he certainly needed them in his writing. One critic writes that "Thurber is much more interested in women than in men" (Kenney 51).

I will not attempt to contradict Thurber himself on his themes. But I notice in the comment above that he does not imply that man instead should be in charge. The problem for Thurber is that one gender is in charge of another, and the notion that gender has something to do with having total control. I will neither vilify James Thurber for his often unflattering portrayals of women nor try to redeem James Thurber the woman-hater. His personal attitude toward women would be hard to decipher and pin down anyway: at different stages of his writing career his attitudes were different toward women in general, and undoubtedly he felt differently towards individual women. Though it is at least interesting if not fruitful to analyze what others have said about his behaviors and attitudes toward gender and women, it is most productive to study his writing along with what he has said and written about his writing. The battle of the sexes was for Thurber more a matter of art and social commentary, than it was an area for promoting his personal agenda. Certainly Thurber did not spend his career trying to get even with women through his art. Well-crafted humor, in fact, is never an effective tool for

attacking another group—it isn't meant to be. As folklorist and joke scholar Elliott Oring says,

[I disagree that] jokes are attacks against groups of people; that interpretation consists in identifying the target groups of people; that interpretation consists in identifying the target groups and the motives for the attack; that these targets of aggression are hidden from consciousness and identified through symbolic interpretation. While one or more of these assumptions might hold true in a particular situation, they are unacceptable as a *program* for interpretation. Furthermore, their interpretation itself depends upon overlooking some contrary evidence. (18)

Thurber vilifies women at times; but he also makes them victims in as he makes men; he is ambivalent and envious in tone toward women; and he praises them. Just as his attitude is sometimes complex, his characters are complex, and his insights regarding relationships between men and women are complex. Marriage is complicated, and integrated into this are very complicated expectations for masculinity and femininity.

The lead role in Thurber's humor is often called the Thurber man, the Thurber husband, and the little man. I will use the latter, more descriptive and universal term as I discuss the genealogy and function of this type of character in Thurber's writing. Are the "little man" and the typical "Thurber wife" mere reductive types? If so, are they problematic or less aesthetically successful? I want to show that Thurber's characters are composites of comic figures used in order to make general conclusions and connections. It is more fair and productive to look at the little man as a new, twentieth century paradigm in the technique of humor, rather than as a stock comic figure. I'll analyze the

traits of both the male and female characters Thurber draws, and how he uses these characters' qualities to elevate his funny and insightful writing and drawing concerning the battle of the sexes. This will also give insight into Thurber's use of gender as comic material, his representation of women, and the developing role of women in humor in the twentieth century.

### The Development of the Little Man and Thurber Wife

Humorist and scholar Walter Blair writes of the type of humor that was nascent with *New Yorker* writers Thurber and Robert Benchley: “And though they did not entirely break with the past—no humorist is likely to do this—they wrote humor based upon assumptions quite different from those of older humorists and employed techniques contrasting with older techniques” (169). Central to the big shift was the character in humor’s lead role. The little man proliferated by the 1930s, a product of the alienation and frustrations of modern urban life, global war, social and political tension over civil rights and economics, and the Great Depression. The defining nature of the little man was not that he was an underdog who overcame or a slacker who evaded, like the longtime frontier heroes of earlier humor, but that he was a victim.

This was a radical shift from the previous assumptions and techniques of creating a funny protagonist. American humorists of the nineteenth century relied on a different type of conflict and pathos. Alfred Habegger identifies bad boys, like Tom Sawyer; practical jokers; and “slovenly vernacular males” like Artemus Ward, Bill Arp in the South, and Petroleum Nasby in the North, as objects of satire for Civil War era newspaper writers (884-885). Blair also refers to the “poor little men” of the Civil War era. These characters were a blend of the traditional “irresponsible” figure and a straw man. There are also the con men, like Twain’s King and Duke of Bilgewater; the loafers, like Irving’s Rip Van Winkle, as comic figures and protagonists in earlier American humor. Northerners laughed *at* Arp and Southerners laughed *at* Nasby, for their opinions and behaviors were so ridiculously different from what the audience valued that they

were funny (120). The modern little man changed this. He was also ridiculous, but won sympathy instead of scorn.

Homespun maxims, small town newspaper columnists, hillbilly slackers, and folk heroes grew obsolete in the twentieth century. Hamlin Hill generalizes the folk humor, newspaper satires, and southwestern humor of the nineteenth century as native humor. Though the humor of *The New Yorker* was similar in its initial development as regional, the conflicts and values of this urban humor diverged greatly from earlier humor. Native humor's protagonists admitted and faced their reality's ugliness and brutality, but in the twentieth century humorists questioned and laughed at values and avoided reality through a humorous treatment of neurosis, escapism, and ineptitude. The traits of the new comic antihero, the little man, defined and characterized the new "dementia praecox" (a Latin term for schizophrenia, in common use in the early twentieth century) school of humor (Hill 171). Walter Blair points out that the transition from nineteenth-century American humor to twentieth-century urban humor was a shift from affirmation of societal values to questioning and criticizing them (121).

In other words, in the 1800s, a joke was likely to show scorn and mock an outsider, reinforcing normal behavior and creating solidarity among those who laugh. But with the new "dementia praecox" type of humor, the laughter is aimed at the values and practices within society, showing how crazy the world is, and how it is making people crazy. So in the twentieth century, humor replaced its tricksters and bad boys with little fellows like Charlie Chaplin, henpecked husbands, and nonplussed car owners. An important difference in what Blair calls technique of humor is that these types are not straw men to the values and tensions of 1930s society. Though hyperbole and caricature

were still techniques of the dementia praecox and little man humor, these characters are funny representatives of life with whom readers identified, instead of satirical representations of fools. The new, little man was not a device of target humor based on solidarity and exclusion; he was a protagonist and a frustrated victim to whom readers could relate.

Dramatic political, social and domestic changes beginning at the end of the nineteenth century altered everyone's way of life. After World War I, these changes mixed with a despair and alienation that compelled literature, including humor, to deal with interior realities instead of universal values. In Thurber's time, humor could not operate as it had before, labeling misfits and exaggerating in its representation of unconventional opinions so that they looked ridiculous. Instead, it had to pit the individual against the world at large. Whereas before, laughter formed a bond among the group telling and laughing at the object of a joke, by the 1930s, laughter formed a bond not among a group sharing a laugh, but between the audience (now often a reader) and the object of the joke. A newspaper reader in the 1860s laughs at Petroleum V. Nasby because he is ignorant, violently prejudiced, and (contrary to mainstream Northern values) pro-slavery. Because many readers can identify themselves against this other, they feel more connected to their community. A *New Yorker* reader laughs at a Thurber little man because he feels sympathetic for the little man who might be trapped in a revolving door, stranded at a cocktail party with nothing to say, or told what to wear by his urbane wife. Because this little man is essentially a loner and because readers identify with the little man instead of against him, the humor both highlights and reinforces the individual's rather than the group's struggle in life. This lack of solidarity could be called

a loss of inter-subjectivity. It was a serious concern to thinkers like Walter Benjamin, who wrote about it in the essay “The Storyteller.” In other words, the story telling of native humor was going extinct:

It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. (Benjamin 83-84)

Thurber takes this large crisis of alienation and sets it in the smallness of the bedroom, the office, the automobile, and the cocktail party—perfect places to laugh at the predicaments of the little man. The real connection between the anxieties that Benjamin expressed and Thurber’s writing is the disorientation of a person in a world that seemed to have just changed overnight. The optimistic faith in science and humanity that thrived at the turn of the century was dissipated by the early 1930s, after the unimaginable new lows of the Great War and the onset of the Great Depression. The brief story “A Box to Hide In,” shows Thurber’s concurrence with Benjamin’s vista of “bottomlessness.” The narrator tries unsuccessfully to purchase a box big enough for him to hide inside. “It’s a form of escape” he repeats to those he inquires about a box, as if this is the best and only option. “It circumscribes your worries and the range of your anguish.” And best of all, he says, “You don’t see people, either” (*Writings and Drawings [W&D]* 304). At the end of the story, Thurber appends the mantra, “Maybe it will get worse. It’s hard to say” (306).

But humor for Thurber is also resistance to nihilism; humor provided connectivity, even if it was just between Thurber and his reader via the fictional character—an ironic sort of bonding based on mutual isolation. Readers could relate to wanting to hide in a box. Thurber talked about this in a 1936 interview with Max Eastman:

Other people laugh because they've been through it too. . . . I think humor is the best that lies closest to the familiar, to that part of the familiar which is humiliating, distressing, even tragic. Humor is a kind of emotional chaos told about calmly and quietly in retrospect. There is always a laugh in the utterly familiar. . . . People can laugh out of a kind of mellowed self-pity as well as out of superiority. Human dignity, the humorist believes, is not only silly but a little sad. So are dreams and conventions and illusions. The fine brave fragile stuff men live by. They look so well, and go to pieces so easily. (qtd. in Blair 174)

From these needs and functions of humor, it is easy to see why a powerless and unfortunate male was central in Thurber's work: he was at once silly and sad in his striving for dignity, his world was often one of chaos, and readers could pity him and themselves in the pleasant moment of laughter. Most of James Thurber's visual and literary representations include little man characters. In fact, the first story Thurber ever published in the *New Yorker*, in May of 1927, "An American Romance," is about a man who achieves news stardom and offers of riches by making frantic revolutions in a circular door. The first sentence starts by describing the "little man," who had just suffered "a distressing scene with his wife" (*W&D* 943).

Though Thurber was a primary developer and a master of portraying the little man, the little man was not an invention of James Thurber, but a product of his literary



context. For example, humorists writing before and after Thurber, like Clarence Day, and Robert Benchley—both *New Yorker* writers—depicted pitiable and laughable protagonists. A 1934 German novel by Hans Fallada was titled *Little Man, What Now?* It treated the social and personal problems of interwar Germany and became a bestseller world-wide. Others have noted the Thurber little man's resemblance to T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock (Kinney 821), and in many cases he is like Herman Melville's helpless and unhelpable Bartleby the Scrivener. This suggests that the little man was neither solely an American nor only a humorous figure, and that he had roots earlier than the twentieth century.

### **A Description of the Little Man**

Wes Gehring writes that the little man of the twentieth century came to fruition in the *New Yorker* in the 1930s, thanks in large part to Thurber. Gehring's "The Comic Anti-Hero in American Fiction: Its First Full Articulation" is a short article, published in 1979, and provides a delineation of the little man that is worth analyzing and building upon. The "comic anti-hero" Gehring discusses makes five characteristic departures from nineteenth-century antiheroes. The following is a summary of his list of the traits and some of his illustrations, along with my analysis.

(1) *He has ample free time.* Most of Thurber's men don't have a clear occupation, and they are seldom if ever at it. Consider the Monroe couple from a series of short stories in *Owl in the Attic*: In the series of stories, they go to a tea party, they pick up bags at the port, he waits alone in the house for the workers, and they go to their summer home. The little man is often window shopping, driving, vacationing, playing or dancing with his dog, or even hiding in a box. The notable story, "The Catbird Seat," takes place

at work, but the narrator and central character has so few tasks as to give him ample time to indulge his fears and enmity as he plots against his female nemesis.

(2) *His concerns are not political but domestic.* Thurber's little man is not found in bread lines or labor rallies or agitated by politicians or international affairs, though all this was broiling as Thurber wrote. He is instead found in a car arguing with his wife. This was a preference of Thurber's, who himself was not extremely political, according to biographer Harrison Kinney, though he did support Adlai Stevenson and was adamant about expressive freedoms and the necessity of art to be free from political baggage. Thurber was disenchanted with the intellectual and often Marxist combination of politics and art that sucked the blood out of life's joy. But he also despised McCarthyism for its encroachment on creativity and liberty. Many little men, like Fallada's, were seriously trapped in larger societal troubles. Rather than grapple with the abstractions of politics and address how colossal oppressive forces rendered man little and powerless, Thurber found ample thread in the chaos of his own life to spin into humor. There was more humor in the exaggeration of domesticity for Thurber, who lamented how some writers who cultivate too much interest and passion in the external world neglect the nourishment of a creative inner life. "What we need is writers who deal with the individual plight," Thurber wrote in a letter. "It occurred to me today that the world only exists in my consciousness. . . . The only possible way the world could be destroyed, it came to me, was through the destruction of my consciousness. This proves the superiority of the individual to any and all forms of collectivism" (Kinney 673). This philosophy compelled Thurber to explore the little man not just in the context of the world he must face, but in

the inner life of the mind. He wrote the following to E.B. White, in a letter from Paris in 1937:

It is the easiest thing in the world nowadays to become so socially conscious, so Spanish War stricken, that all sense of balance and values goes out of a person. Not long ago in Paris Lillian Hellman told me that she would give up writing if she could ameliorate the condition of the world, or of only a few people in it. Hemingway is probably on that same path, and a drove of writers are following along, screaming and sweating and looking pretty futile. This is one of the greatest menaces there is: people with intelligence deciding that the point is to become grimly gray and intense and unhappy and tiresome because the world and many of its people are in a bad way. It's a form of egotism, a supreme form. I've toyed with it myself and understand it a little. (qtd. in Kinney 673)

Thurber felt that to sacrifice creative gifts and efforts on futile politics was not just in vain, it was vanity. The domestic and the internal were far more fertile plots in which to cultivate his humor.

(3) *He is in a state of constant frustration.* Much of the brilliance of Thurber's writing is his ability to turn a mundane situation into one of insurmountable complexity or hostility and peril—through daydreaming, marital arguments, misapprehensions, or a combination of the three. Ghering notes that women and machines are the main sources of the frustration. Women vex the little man with both their demands for efficiency and their frivolous desires. I will discuss this conflict more in depth later. The other source Ghering cites is machines. In Thurber stories and essays such as “Sex Ex Machina” and “The Car We Had to Push” and “I Break Everything I Touch” we see the little man in

direct conflict with humanity's own inventions. In the latter story Thurber looks forward to leaving the "highly mechanized world" someday: "I can only hope that in Heaven there is nothing more complicated than a harp and that they will have winged mechanics to fix mine when I get it down and break its back" (*W&D* 971). *The New Yorker* had a fascination with machines that went beyond humorists' battles between man and machine. Many *Talk of the Town* pieces—a section of factual journalism that aroused and satisfied curiosities—were based on mechanics, like tidbits about elevator operation or the physics of bridges. Ben Yagoda explains that this was because the questions of mechanics had "definite, obtainable answers," unlike human concerns of economics, politics, and personal relations (131). Thurber manages to cast everything from cigarette vending machines to medicine cabinets to airplanes to telephone numbers to automobiles as little man's frustrators and oppressors.

(4) *The antihero is childlike.* Ghering uses Mr. Monroe as an illustration. Mr. Monroe attempts to be assertive and autonomous with the moving men. We see the little man's vanity and bravado in his insular world of thought contrasted with his childishness in the physical world. He wants to be the boss, but they end up calling him "sonny" and "scout" as he grows nervous and helpless as he forgets all of his wife's instructions and cries because "little Mrs. Monroe was away, unavoidably away, terrifyingly away." This is not a groundbreaking observation on Ghering's part or a new development in humor, I think, for most humor in which the audience laughs at someone involves their gullibility, ignorance, or innocence.

(5) *The little man usually finds himself in an urban setting.* Ghering finds this an essential difference because much of the earlier humor was rural, based on agrarian and

independent values, and was set in close communities. The new comic antihero was born in *The New Yorker*, an avowedly urban publication. It is interesting to note that in Thurber's memoir of his Midwestern upbringing, *My Life and Hard Times*, neurotic men and women characters abound, but most of these seem more like a handful of eccentrics in the town of Columbus than a norm. It is when a little man is moved to a city that his traits are more like adaptations than eccentricities. A city also provides ample opportunity for the little man to become a victim.

There are important traits of Thurber's little man that Ghering does not bring up. Some traits he does not mention perhaps because they are not direct departures from the old comic antihero, and some traits Ghering should not have overlooked. I will add to his list. First, Ghering fails to note that the little man is essentially a loner, and much of the humor comes from the antihero standing alone against his world. The little man is curious, though it is often about trivial matters. Curiosity is illustrated well in "The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery," Thurber describes the little man: "middle aged, bewildered, sedentary." The man and his wife create a peculiar scene trying to resolve a curiosity about whether humans' eyes shine like cats' in headlights. The little man has passionate imagination, juxtaposed aside his actual impotence. This goes along with a propensity for vanity in daydreams, as in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," "The Lady on 142," and John Monroe in *The Owl in the Attic*, which will later be discussed. These introverted traits of loneliness, curiosity, passion, and imagination are crucial to Thurber's ideal of an alive and rich inner life, which I will also discuss later. Also notable but not mentioned in Ghering's list is that the little man's battle with women springs from more than frustration; it is often one of overt hostility. Three more little man traits that I want to

highlight are the little man's asexuality, suspicion, and stubbornness. These weaknesses are actually a part of the male arsenal in the battle of the sexes.

*The little man is not sexual.* Though this theme may not have been developed in the funny heroes of the nineteenth century, Thurber's stories don't just avoid it; they address it by showing the little man as an active avoider. Consider Dr. James Thurber's description of the male type with the psychological "recessive knee" disorder in *Is Sex Necessary*, whose fear of commitment and intimacy causes him to shrink away at the touch of a romantically interested woman's knee on his. He scientifically ascribes the reaction to 93% suspicion, 4% ignorance, and 3% tiredness (*Is Sex Necessary* 117-118). Or consider another little man (nearly 100% ignorance) of a cartoon set in a hotel lobby, who instead of using the excuse to invite the woman up to his room, tells her to wait in the lobby while he brings the etchings down. This cartoon's dynamics of romance as an aspect to the battle of the sexes will be discussed later.

*The little man is suspicious* (of more than women and sex), such as in "The Lady on 142"; "The Black Magic of Barney Haller," where the narrator's misunderstanding of Barney's dialect leads him into an angry frenzy and to lose his best hired help; and in Thurber's satire of psychology in "Sex Ex Machina," in which airplanes, cars headed at pedestrians, and vending machines are real physical threats instead of symbols of sexual neurosis.

And *the little man is stubborn*, as in "A Couple of Hamburgers" in which he continues arguing with and jibing at his wife. He insists that the roadside diner (where the counters were too filthy for her to eat) served him some "damn fine" coffee. "It was swell," he tells her, when the narrative has just revealed that the coffee was in fact terrible

(*Carnival* 95-96). “The Curb in the Sky” is another showing of resilience in his plight. Charlie’s new wife loves to correct everyone’s speech, a problem he has blindly overlooked during their courtship. Soon after marriage, she undermines Charlie’s storytelling skill and eventually robs him of his favorite pastime by always correcting his details. Charlie does not do what the narrator claims most men would by succumbing to her control of his anecdotes. “Charlie did not become beaten. . . . What he did was rather ingenious” (*Carnival* 133). Charlie begins only relating his dreams, which presumably his wife cannot know how to correct. Yet somehow she is at Charlie’s side in an insane asylum as the story ends. He persists in monomaniacally sharing the same dream, and she continues interrupting him to correct the narrative, because his dream airplane made of telephone wires could not have pulled over to a curb when there are only clouds in the sky.

Some of the little man’s traits combine to catalyze the conflicts that he faces. In “Lady on 142,” one of several stories involving daydreaming, the narrator is paranoid and inept, in contrast to his dismissive and confident wife. The little-man narrator sees her snapping and stringing green beans as armed thugs abduct them from the train station. The problem is that though they are different in that one is imaginative and paranoid and the other is complacent and collected, the husband and wife are alike in being very stubborn. “We know too much,” he fears. “Oh shut up,” she replies (*Carnival* 6). The reader knows that abduction was just an elaborate plot that he had merely daydreamed while waiting for their train. But the narrator still insists at the end of the story that the catalyst to his paranoid flight of fancy (an overheard announcement over the radio about a problem with a lady on 142) was more than a sick lady that caught the railway’s

attention. This combination of traits in the little man—that he can be stubbornly suspicious—is a quality important in a world of hidden threats and machinations; it is also important in the battle of the sexes.

The length and detail of this list of traits suggest that the little man is not really *a* character, but many dissimilar characters. It is true that the little man characters in Thurber's stories are not all one stock persona, and they are not one continuous character from a novel or series. Unlike a character in a novel, the little man characters all have different names and identities, yet they still evoke complex crises of modern life and pathos like a novel would; they are all still consistently Thurber little men. Thurber's writing is concise; almost all his pieces are under a few thousand words. Each short work vividly builds one neurosis and victimization at a time without overwhelming the reader or destroying the soul of wit. Still, the brevity of his stories and essays builds and builds on consistent themes, and these themes are always related to the characteristics and crises of the little man.

An illustration of Thurber's consciousness of the continuity of the little man figure as well as the ubiquity of the sympathy the character gained with *The New Yorker* audience and writers is found in an anecdote about editor Wolcott Gibbs. Gibbs, whom Thurber portrays as a flustered spoilsport in his memoir *The Years with Ross*, received a fiction piece that began, "Mr. West had never been very good at machinery." Thurber writes, "Here was the little man, a genus sometimes called, around the office, the Thurber husband, popping up for the thousandth time, and it was too much for the Gibbsian nerves." Gibbs was weary of the many submissions of writers "unfortunately influenced by Mr. Thurber, [who had] come to believe that the ideal piece is about a vague, little



man helplessly confused by a menacing and complicated civilization” (*Years with Ross* 129-130). The long profile above of Thurber’s little man suggests that this protagonist is more of a continuous composite than a non-dynamic figure, becoming richer with each re-articulation rather than being reduced. Indeed, the little man is not an easy way out of the task of developing a character in literature. Instead of a reduction, the little man is a composite by a complex writer and ingenious humorist. Richard C. Tobias states that the problem a writer faces is to “cross the barrier between his perception and the reader’s experience” (164) And whereas Thurber contemporaries, poets and novelist Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce “connect their interior vision with the ideas of Byzantium, grail myths, or the Oddysey,” Thurber makes the connection with a different and more familiar archetype: he “crosses the barrier by writing of generalized types: husbands, lonely men in cities, servant women” (164).

The above list of characteristics is true to Thurber protagonists with very few anomalies. The characters who are not little men tend to be the exceptions that prove the rule of Thurber’s principal figure. The most prominent of which is the man in “The Greatest Man in the World,” a story about the first of what Thurber considered America’s two unhealthy obsessions (aviation and sex). Thurber creates a male character entirely different from the little man—in fact more like old-school frontier funny men. Jack “Pal” Smurch is not diplomatic and handsome, as the world wants its aviator heroes. He looks and speaks roughly: “Unshaved, smoking a rolled cigarette, Jack Smurch listened with a leer on his lips.” He responds to the editors and politicians who are trying to reform him into heroic presentability: ““I get ya, I get ya,” he cut in, nastily. ‘Ya want me to ack like a softy, huh? Ya want me to ack like that --- ---- baby-faced Lindbergh, huh? Well, nuts

to that, see?” (*Carnival* 158). He is bold, brash, rural, cocky, vulgar, lusty, and successful—the opposite of the Thurber little man. But Jack Smurch is the exception that proves the rule. Because he wasn’t a little man—vague, skittish, middle-aged, insecure—he meets his death. Society, including his own mother, finds him entirely unacceptable, and so the President of the United States subtly orders him thrown out a window to his death.

Doc Marlowe, a character from the 1937 collection *Let Your Mind Alone*, is certainly not a little man. Thurber, as the narrator reminiscing on childhood, remembers Doc as a medicine show man who peddles a liniment with secret qualities, though all the ingredients came from the wholesale chemical company. Marlowe dresses like a frontier hero, though he is from Brooklyn and has “never been in the Far West in his life” (*W&D* 400). The ointment he sells is literally named “Snake Oil”; he unscrupulously sells an “ancient, wheezy Cadillac” (404) to a trusting, traveling couple; and he cheats at cards and even cheats in coin tosses with the youngster Jimmy Thurber. This trickster, a con man with occasional compassion for the poor, is clearly Thurber’s homage to the nineteenth century comic hero. “Never let the other fella call the turn, Jimmy, my boy,” is the advice that Thurber recalls several times in the story. Nowhere does the little man offer bits of sagacity in the form of aphorism, epigram, or memorable sentence. The age of maxims and adages, like Mark Twain, is gone, and that is why Marlowe is treated with such curiosity in the story. Thurber recalls Doc Marlowe’s eye twinkle and his chuckle in the same way that he both wistfully and whimsically remembers the humor of the past. “I still have the two-headed quarter,” Thurber writes of the coin Marlowe used to dupe him

and which Marlowe gave to Thurber as he died. “For a long time I didn’t like to think about it, or about Doc Marlowe, but I do now” (405).

Another exception to the little *man* is the hastily hired cook in the story “The Departure of Emma Inch.” Emma Inch is a notable character in that she is the only little woman that Thurber creates. She carries her ugly and asthmatic bull dog with her everywhere. Her fear of car and boat rides and lack of adaptability to new surroundings leads her to a pathetic little-man-like predicament. She ends up figuratively and literally up the river, having to carry her sick dog back to New York City from Connecticut. The story, told through a somewhat detached and reasonable narrator (a technique learned from Henry James, of whom Thurber was admittedly fond) allows the funny pathos to belong to a woman for once. It also opens gender limitations and allows the possibility of a little woman. This reveals that Thurber knew he was not making realistic and fair portrayals of the genders, but that he was using a technique. In other words, he knew that the traits of the little man and the battle-axe woman were not essential to them as men or women, even if they were essential to his battle of the sexes.

### **The Thurber Wife**

I’ve typified, with reservations, the Thurber little man. Thurber’s females can be typified in similar fashion as demanding, confident (if not always competent), and unimaginative—all qualities opposite of the little man’s. Her demanding nature is seen in the story “A Couple of Hamburgers.” Both a husband and wife are hungry on a long drive home. She demands that he find some place they can eat, but she is dissatisfied with all the options, because the diners are not cute enough, or they have a nickname she

doesn't like, or they are in a "factory kind of town," (*W&D* 383) or they are set at an odd angle to the street. Her demands are insatiable.

The Thurber wife is more capable than her male counterpart. E.B. White, in his explanation of Thurber's illustrations in *Is Sex Necessary*, typified the female, in contrast to the man: "The women, you will notice, are quite different: temperamentally they are much better adjusted to their surroundings than are the men, and mentally they are much less capable of making themselves uncomfortable." (*Is Sex Necessary?* 136). The Thurber woman and wife knows where things are, how to get along with people at parties, which weapons are best for murder, how to control a mean dog, where to pick up luggage, and she doesn't waste time trying to figure out things like pigs in clover hand-held ball rolling puzzles, like George Smith of *Is Sex Necessary?*.

The Thurber wife has no capacity for imagination. And if she has curiosity, it is not the disabling confusion of the male. Two cartoons illustrate this lack of mental play, flexibility, and creativity combined with the trait of being demanding. One shows a little man at the haberdasher, his large wife watching from a chair as he is dressed in baggy pants and a striped t-shirt. "I don't want him to be comfortable if he's going to look too funny" (*W&D* 600), she says

in the caption. She has no problem imposing because her fashion preferences outweigh his comfort or autonomy. Thurber is playing with the common notion that she



"I don't want him to be comfortable if he's going to look too funny."

probably knows what's best for him anyway when it comes to these things. In another cartoon scene, a man in pajamas approaches his wife who is sleeping. "It makes a difference to me!" she says from the bed as he stands outside waiting to get in, wearing a mismatched polka-dot shirt, striped pants, and a tear in his eye (I further discuss this cartoon on page 77).

Mrs. Preble, from "Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife" is a characteristic figure of the battle-of-the-sexes stories. Mr. Preble, "a plump middle aged lawyer," wants to run off with his stenographer, and he blames this marital failure on his wife. "My wife would be glad to get rid of me," he tells the stenographer (*W&D* 232). Somehow, even as a scapegoat, she is in charge of everything, and her will motivates even his infidelity. At home he unpersuasively tries to talk his wife into coming down into the cellar, so that he can "get rid of" her. Though she is unaware of his intentions, she wouldn't do what he asked for any reason, even if he were asking her to do something enjoyable, like "to go to the movies or some place." "I'm not going in the cellar," she tells him flatly. "You may as well make up your mind to that" (233).

In frustration Mr. Preble discloses that he wants to kill her and that he loves his stenographer. This leads to an argument, not about the homicidal betrayal, but about how she knew what he was thinking. Rather than being terrified and heartbroken, she is annoyed with his stupidity and predictability. Thurber's ingenious dialogue between them is at once outrageous and understated, as if they were discussing domestic bills. Mr. Preble mentions divorce. "That's a laugh," she replies, "*That's* a laugh. You may bury me, but you'll never get a divorce" (234). She tells him he will get caught, that he's worked up over nothing, and to go to bed. Here is a typical dismissal from the Thurber

wife: his physical weakness is causing him to be susceptible to irrationality—an interesting reversal of stereotypes on the feminine physical disposition. Here Thurber's irony overturns the notion that women are the incapable sex when it comes to dealing with stressful and emotional situations, and Mr. Preble is the one getting "all worked up over nothing." Much like Dr. Weir S. Mitchell's rest cure was imposed on the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman in Thurber stories imposes rest as a matter of protecting the man from his own feebleness. Thurber ingeniously turns the tables on gender so that the man can be the victim for comic, not tragic ends. In other stories Thurber uses the threat of being cared for, often in the form of the taking of temperatures, as another threat to a man's autonomy.

Somehow, the couple ends up in the cellar, but Mr. Preble's murder method isn't good enough for his wife, so she sends him out the door to find the right weapon. The story ends with her yelling at him to shut the door behind him. "Where were you born—in a barn?" (*W&D* 236). Even when the marriage has gone violently wrong, the couple still shares the bond of quarrelling, with the wife knowing better and winning the argument even though all else, even her life, is lost. The wife of these types of Thurber stories tells the husband what to do and how to do it. She is peevish and stubborn. In these traits she is not entirely different from her husband, who is also annoyed and has his mind set. But there is a difference in the authorial tone toward these flaws. She does not have his capacity for frustration. She does not have any amusing desires or curiosities. There is no romance in her vices. She is no fun at all. Yet Mr. Preble is somehow endearing as he talks about love and tries in vain to use his persuasive arts rather than talking tough. In this story it is easy to see why the typical Thurber woman is this way.

She can not be a pathetic character; that would steal sympathy from the main character. The conflict needs a villain. Also, at the same time, she has to act as a foil to the frustrated, pathetic little man by being competent and in control.

Before Mr. Preble first comes home and when he goes out in search of a weapon, Mrs. Preble is stuck at home waiting for her homicidal and unfaithful husband. This is also typical of the Thurber wife. She is bound to the domestic. Nothing illustrates this better than a Thurber cartoon simply captioned “House and Woman” (605). The man’s house and the man’s wife are one and the same. They are a singular threatening and enveloping force against which he must stand alone, like two versus one, or one enormous enemy against a tiny protagonist. The core of the idea for the cartoon is the

merging of the woman with the building, but Thurber, as he does in all of his cartoons, adeptly adds more to the conflict in just a few simple lines. We sense the little man’s doom evoked in the slant of the woman’s eyebrow, as if aimed at the man,



House and Woman

and the slant of his posture, as if he is staggering backward in fear, or at least approaching with requisite caution. This illustrates Thurber’s variation and repetition as

well on the petticoat tyrant figure of nineteenth century humor, who was always a woman who ruled the house with such authority as to emasculate the man in his own castle.

These are the stereotypical qualities of the Thurber woman. But just as there is more to the little man than can be described in a few adjectives, the Thurber woman is similarly complex, and there are many exceptions to the rule. In fact, if there is a rule for a type of woman, it is less of a rule than is the case for the Thurber little man. The above reading of Mrs. Preble was an attempt to illustrate the consistencies of a Thurber woman, a relative equivalent to his little man, but Thurber's female characters are much harder to reduce to a type than the little man. Although many find the bossy battle-axe wife the most memorable type, it is just one kind of woman in Thurber's writing, and within the "Thurber wife" type there are variations. For instance, Mrs. Ulgine Barrows, an abrasive and oppressive type, is not a wife or domestic at all. She is Mr. Martin's superior in the office.

At this point it is appropriate and necessary to address the continuity of Thurber's characters. In a way, this feels like an attempt to describe a character in a novel. But there are numerous characters in numerous stories. Still, with Thurber there is a consistency that is a strength in his short pieces: by having a continuous battle of the sexes, Thurber can develop larger themes with many nuances while offering the best qualities of short works: witty brevity, ease of reading, clarity of prose style, and the distillation of humor into memorable moments.

Some of Thurber's females are funny in the same pathetic way that Thurber's males are. Emma Inch, the exceptional little woman type mentioned earlier, who departed in stubborn incompetence, illustrates this. Other Thurber women are funny because of



their outrageous antics, like the women of *My Life and Hard Times*. This 1933 book is remarkable because it deals with the Midwest rather than Manhattan. The neuroses of the characters are eccentricities in Columbus, Ohio whereas in an urban setting they would be adaptations. Its women characters especially make the book different from other Thurber works.

For example, “A Sequence of Servants” describes a number of women who display a neurosis similar to the little man’s: paranoia, but with bravado rather than passivity. Vashti, one house servant, fabricates a menacing stepfather and uses him to create anxiety in her suitor, Charley. When the truth comes out, Charley leaves her. Instead of feeling sad, she feels proudly vindicated and justified, saying, “Neither one ob ’em is messin’ round me any mo” (*W&D* 177). Thurber’s Mother in “The Car We Had to Push” actively protects her family from becoming “victims and martyrs of the wild-eyed Edison’s dangerous experiments” (151) by warning them to not drive the car without gas and by taking the phone off the hook during storms. Her mother puts light bulbs in all the sockets and turned the switches off to keep electricity from leaking all over the house. With this Thurber highlights another difference between the male and female. Rather than becoming paralyzed by the modern threats of technology and hiding in a box, the woman does something about it, and then gets on with life. Aunt Gracie Shoaf, who suffers from a phobia of burglars, is also aggressive instead of passive in her reactions. Some nights she throws all of her shoes down the hallway at the imaginary intruders, some nights only a couple of pairs, Thurber writes.

Some of Thurber’s women are mere obstinate counterparts to the males, like the wife from the story “A Couple of Hamburgers,” collected in *Let Your Mind Alone!* Also

in the same 1937 collection is the story “The Breaking Up of the Winships,” in which the woman easily rivals her husband’s stubbornness. The Winships separate because of an argument over the aesthetic superiority of Greta Garbo over Donald Duck. And though the detached and well-meaning narrator tries to reconcile them, the battle over the trivial matter grows more and more serious. Gordon Winship “had convinced himself that the point at issue between him and Marcia was one of extreme importance involving both his honor and integrity” (*W&D* 374-375). Marcia Winship maintains that her belief in Garbo’s greatness “was part and parcel of her integrity as a woman and as an—as an, well, *as a woman*” (376, italics added). In the story Thurber demonstrates the significance of the trivial and minor, and laments how honor and integrity are things that people, in this case husband and wife, have to invent and define, sometimes even as they go. They claim that honor and integrity are the things of their identity, of their gender. Then they must defend their own invention of integrity because it is a source of insecurity. The story is humorous by showing that such things are not inherent in these characters’ manliness or womanliness, but completely false pretenses for selfishness and spite. In other words, Greta Garbo’s greatness is not a conviction essential to womanhood, and neither is it a matter of honor, but a ridiculous quarrel. The story is humorous because the Winships try to use gender to cover up and justify these flaws.

Some of Thurber’s women are truly victims of their little men, like the wife in the story “The Unicorn in the Garden,” who is confined to an asylum through her husband’s scheme to make her look crazy; like Mr. Preble’s wife; or like the Ulgine Barrows in “The Catbird Seat.” From the funny, twisted, and pathetic perspective of the little man, these women are perhaps deserving of their defeat. But though the men are made to be

more likable, they are not made to look justified in Thurber's stories. Using women as scapegoats is one social convention that Thurber illuminates in his work which critically, humanely, and comically examines other gender roles.

## Gender Roles

Thurber's characters have a diversity of characteristics to complement their consistency as male and female figures. This is not contradiction but syncretism, a blending of multiple symbols and roles into one artistic figure. In other words, characters can fill an assortment of functions in the conflicts and in the comic personalities that Thurber needs in his stories. Man can be oppressor and victim; woman can be oppressor and victim, and this playfulness with the dynamics and positions of the male and female characters—in another word, gender roles—is a strength of Thurber's art. Having discussed the diversity of characters, I want to look at the diversity of conflicts. I will show both the conflict of man and woman with masculine and feminine roles and then how these men and women, in their roles, conflict with each other. For this analysis, I have classified four roles: the know-it-all and protector for men, and the helpmeet and scapegoat for women. I want to look at examples of each of these four roles in Thurber stories. Thurber's little men are forced into roles of know-it-alls and protectors. This forces the women into the problematic roles of helpmeets and scapegoats. Because of this forced dynamic between the two genders, women seem unimaginative, domineering, and even vicious. These roles do not allow men and women many options for getting along, for to do what it would take to get along would require the compromise of the role that is expected of them. Also, when taken to extremes, masculinity and femininity are not virtues of men or women but vices that require them to infringe upon one another.

### Protectors

In *The Owl in the Attic* stories, much of the humor in John Monroe's persona comes as his phony bravado is contrasted with his inept, frightened actions. In "Mr.

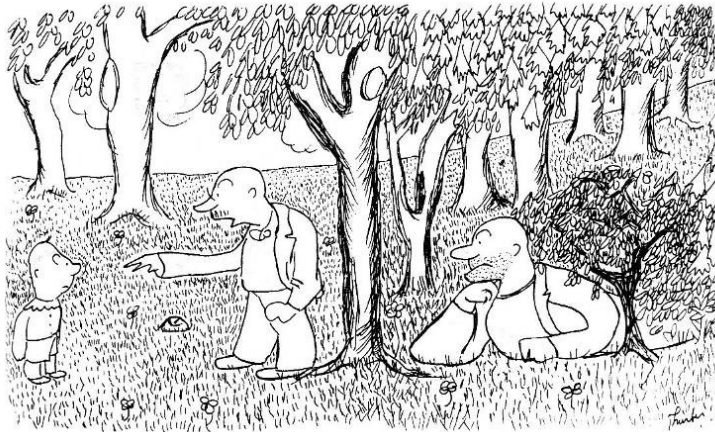
Monroe Holds the Fort,” he stays at home alone in the country house and assures his wife, “There’s nothing in the world to be afraid of.” (*W&D* 33). He even has know-it-all explanations for the funny noises the house makes at night. He has a confident air with a pistol he finds, but his wife immediately knocks this audacity down by correcting him on gun terminology (34). The situation changes when Mrs. Monroe has to take a train to see her sick mother. Left alone with noises and magazines that report alarming stories, Monroe ends up in a paranoid frenzy with a loaded gun in hand, convinced there are burglars or murderers upstairs. When his wife calls, thinking of coming back that night, he maintains his manly courage in conversation with her and with the reader in the narrative, but Thurber allows his actions to reveal his cowardice. He leaves the house two hours early to pick her up at the train station. “After all, he could read just as well at the station, and he would be sure of being there on time—might fall asleep otherwise” (37). Mr. Monroe is the only one not thinking, *yeah, right*.

In the Monroe stories, there is more of a benign self-effacement of masculinity than masculinity on the run from femininity. As I mentioned earlier, Mrs. Monroe is a foil. She provides the prompts for her husband to try to perform the actions of masculinity. She also often has and displays the traits he lacks. Though he is the comic, she is the enabler to the irony. By not needing a paternalistic protector, Mrs. Monroe makes the notion of the male responsibility of protecting seem silly. The incongruity in gender roles is how Thurber successfully creates humor in the stories about the Monroes—he is never the strong chauvinist he expects himself to be, and she is not the lilting demurrer she pretends to be.

In the story “The Dog Who Bit People,” the mother of the Midwestern Thurber family is the only person with the nerve to stand up to the family dog, a ferocious Airedale named Muggs. No man can stand up to Muggs. The mother alone has the brains and the fortitude to make an artificial thunder device out of sheet metal, and the family uses this to scare the dog inside when visitors come. Also from *My Life and Hard Times* is the account of failed male protectors in “The Day the Dam Broke.” The author reports that when everyone begins to flee the impending flood (impending only in their imaginations), his mother puts out all the fires and brings eggs and bread to sustain her family when she arrives at her reasonable and planned place of refuge. The only male gesture toward protecting family and community comes from the grandfather, whose response is to flash back to the Civil War and try to organize a group of men to “stand off the rebel dogs” (*W&D* 159). When he hears that the pandemonium is about the dam breaking, he flees, outrunning even the younger people. The firemen, policemen, and army officers likewise do not go to any brave lengths to save or protect anybody else. Thurber reports that as they joined the collective panic, their uniforms “added color to the surging billows of people” (159) in flight. The story shows an imaginary threat to which men are unable to respond and fulfill their duties as protectors of their families. Instead, women are doing that job, and the only manly response is to the even more ridiculous and imaginary threat of General Lee’s troops. The rest outrun the women and children on their way to safety. The entire human reaction is funny because of the irrationality, but Thurber adds another layer to the humor by overturning the male gender role of guarding home and family.

In “Lady on 142” readers see the little man, who has fantasized a grave danger of criminal intrigue, contrasted with his wife, who acts unimpressed and bored when thugs point guns at them. The husband invents fear all alone; she is completely unfamiliar with fear and vulnerability. The

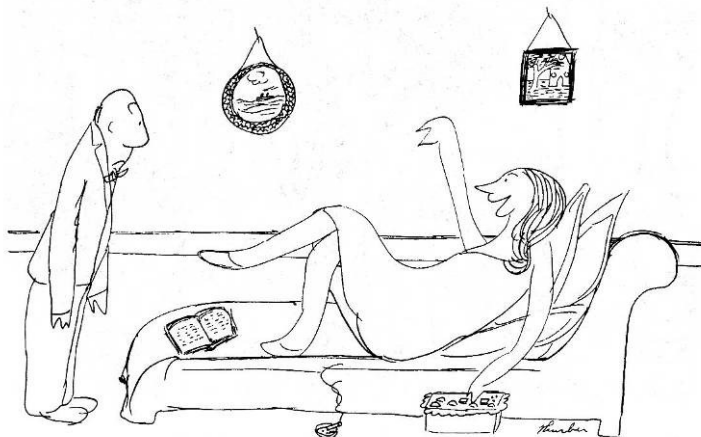
cartoon here, “No Son of Mine is Going to Stand there and Tell Me He’s Scared of the Woods” (W&D 77) from the 1932 collection *The Seal in the Bedroom*, makes another



“No Son of Mine Is Going to Stand There and Tell Me He’s Scared of the Woods”

joke out of man’s courage. When danger is only an imaginary threat, as in the case of Mr. Monroe or in “Lady on 142,” the little man comes undone. When it is not a matter of misperception but of principle, as it is with the father inculcating manly virtue in his son, the little man is wrong again. He’s capable of a show of bravado to his son, but the cartoon is funny because we know what would happen if the father were facing the other

way.



“Hello, Dear!—How’s Everything in the Marts of Trade?”

Closely related to the role of protector is the man’s job to be a provider. The cartoon below, “Hello, Dear!—How’s Everything in the Marts of Trade?” (W&D 78)

also from *The Seal in the Bedroom* illustrates a familiar scene of middle-class domesticity, a husband returns from work. But instead of a confident business man coming to his respite after a day of carving out his empire, we have a fatigued little man. Instead of giving a graceful, feminine greeting in a clean home in which dinner is waiting, the woman is lounging, eating chocolates, and smoking a cigarette. The cartoon illustrates an egregious but funny violation of conventional household expectations. Neither one of them is very good at fulfilling their marital and gender duties.

### **Know-it-alls**

Thurber uses numbers, the perfect abstractions of information, for humor in two works. “The Civil War Telephone Number Association,” an essay of sorts, plays with some celebrity’s idea of making better use of the mind and exercising the memory by associating telephone numbers with the start of the Civil War. Thurber explores every twist and exaggeration of this method to create a dire mental predicament. In “The Vengeance of 3902090” Thurber imagines a motor vehicle department bureaucrat as a “fat gentleman with thinning hair and octagonal glasses,” who wants to do everything he legally can to make remembering driver’s license numbers hard, especially James Thurber’s. This easy number is Thurber’s last ground of information competence, but it is important ground to keep: “This frailty, this preoccupation with, and affinity for, the smaller enormities of life, permits him to be overwhelmed by minor tyrannies and persecutions. . . . I happen to be intensely dedicated to opposing the perilous wrongs and injustices of this bad earth, but right at the moment all I can worry about is my troubles as No. 3902090” (*My World and Welcome to It*, 155). Thurber also resorts to language and its grammar, usage, and punctuation as a body of knowledge that can baffle the modern



man in such works as “Here Lies Miss Groby,” a brief memoir about his English composition teacher who loved to “crucify” sentences on the blackboard. He also parodied of H. W. Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (which he supposedly stole from *New Yorker* owner and editor Harold Ross) for his series of short pieces on correct writing called, “Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Guide to Modern English Usage.”

There is much a little man is up against in trying to figure out what is going on around him, from conspiring men to the mysteries of language to mathematics to all of history. Automobiles, cigarette vending machines, typewriter ribbons, medicine cabinets, and card tables can also be added to this list of things that might outsmart the little man or contribute to his baffling predicament. Many Thurber pieces illustrate the predicament of the little man in conflict with the masculine expectation of knowing-it-all. The conflict of man versus machine seems to be a humorous trap set exclusively for males (with the exception of *My Life and Hard Times*—and here it is different: the women don’t do battle with the mechanical, they just avoid it). Females don’t have the little man’s capacity for frustration, or, as E.B. White said it, “they are much less capable of making themselves uncomfortable” (*Is Sex Necessary?* 136). Though man-versus-machine conflicts do not always require a female, there are other stories that do use women to complicate and illuminate the difficult role of mastering modern technology. “Sex ex Machina” makes fun of the psychoanalytical conflation of sex and machinery. Thurber cites the example of one woman who buys a combination card table and ironing board that the irritated husband eventually stuffs in the attic, only to hear it repeatedly transforming itself on windy nights.

Mr. Monroe is an example of a little man who fails as a protector and as a know-it-all. “Mr. Monroe and the Moving Men,” mentioned earlier as an illustration of the little man’s child-like quality, also treats Mr. Monroe’s attempts to assert his autonomy in his household. He initially daydreams of bossing the movers around with phrases like, “I’m in charge here—get that!” (*Owl* 38). Instead, the movers end up patronizing him like a child, and Monroe gives up and does nothing of his job.

In “The Imperturbable Spirit,” Mr. Monroe’s fixation on words and phrases is a perfect example of “phallogocentrism,” a word created by French philosopher Jacques Derrida to describe the patriarchal dominance of sexuality and the legal system, which demands subjugation of things into categories. Words themselves, as these categories, become patriarchal authorities. Monroe, pondering the philosophical books he reads, repeats the word “imperturbable” until he starts to believe himself so. Thurber, by making fun of fascination with impressive words, shows that talk of male dominance (over anything) is cheap. The irony is heavy. The Monroe stories are funny because the husband is the exact opposite of the “imperturbable” that he fancies himself to be. Thurber mocks Monroe’s chivalric sense of power as he smugly kills a spider but later cowers before a bat and imaginary burglars in the attic. The reader laughs at Mr. Monroe, but the deeper tendency of the humor is to attack this ideal of a man who knows it all, who is constantly stoic in the face of mysteries and oppressions, and who needs to identify himself with that ideal. The joke is on phallogocentrism.

This is also self-effacement of masculinity, a laughing at the character and the self insofar as the self (Thurber or a reader) identifies with the character. The irony, the mocking, and the contradictions allow a useful ambivalence in this commentary on life.

Maybe it is good to be imperturbable, and Mr. Monroe is simply incapable, and so we laugh at him. Or perhaps it is funny because trying to be this adjective (imperturbable)—to identify oneself with a ridiculous group of mere syllables (as Thurber emphasizes the word through repetition)—is ridiculous; for language itself is ridiculous, and to be alive means to be perturbed.

The short story “The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery” illustrates curiosity at work. This is the little man’s feeble effort toward a masculine knowing-it-all. The story is about what happens when this curiosity has to mix with woman. Interviewers for the *Paris Review* commented to Thurber, “Some critics think that much of your work can be traced to the depicting of trivia as a basis for humor. In fact, there’s been some criticism—” Here Thurber cuts them off with a question: “Which is trivia—the diamond or the elephant?” (Holmes 114). Perhaps his question alludes to something unfamiliar to me, but the paradox evoked seems to deny the category of trivia and instead favor the concept of curiosity and appreciation. He goes on in the interview to explain that interest in “trivia” is a necessity for a humorist.

This attitude makes “The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery” not just a story about the mundane or trivial but a story about fascination with the mundane and trivial, and the ramifications of such fascination. A “motorcycle cop” approaches a couple on the side of a highway. The husband is crawling on his hands and knees, barking at the wife who is shining the car’s headlights in his face. When the cop gets to the bottom of it, he finds that they were experimenting to see if the husband’s eyes would shine like a wild animal’s. Though the cop offers his experienced knowledge on the matter, he cannot engage in the argument that follows—not because it is so intense, but because he is not

fluent in their method of quarrelling. The two veteran arguers continue the dispute even after the story ends, indicated by Thurber's ellipsis in the last line of dialogue.

Thurber creates humor, of course, in the hostile dynamic between the husband and wife, as well as by unwinding the complication of the story gradually through the cop's questions. By the conclusion, Thurber reveals the futility of seeking mastery of knowledge. The notion of males dominating science for the sole sake of knowing is ridiculous. The end in this game is never reached; the "middle-aged, bewildered, sedentary man" never can conclude if human eyes shine like beasts', even though at one point he makes an irrefutable argument about a wildcat. The woman, by persisting in her doubts, thwarts resolution on this unimportant matter, at least between the two of them. But considering the big picture, even if he had reached a conclusion about the reflectivity of humans' eyes, it wouldn't matter.

Instead of reaching a scientific conclusion, the little man internalizes the argument, continually convincing himself. Thus he retains his imaginative autonomy in spite of his wife, which is perhaps an even better option than to be resolutely convinced. This way curiosity and imagination can live on. This is an important theme and variation in many of Thurber's stories. Robert H. Elias comments on this tendency in many of Thurber's little men:

Consistently they are engaged in self-preservation—struggling to keep inviolate the realms of chance, individuality, reflection and purpose, which give the will of substance to work with and freedom occasion for exercise . . . The most interesting aspect of Thurber's artistic development is in terms of his search for a place where the individual can finally reside—or preside. (88)

Thurber creates intense comic pathos in “The Private Life of Mr. Bidwell,” a battle-of-the-sexes story about a husband who infuriates his wife by practicing holding his breath at home, at parties, and in bed. When he moves on to multiplying numbers in his head in complete silence in a corner, it is too much for his socialite wife to bear, and the “curious bond that [holds] them together snap[s]” (*W&D* 230). Thurber describes Mr. Bidwell’s solitary life afterward (his wife remarried) with a stark mixture of humor and melancholy:

He never goes to parties anymore, and his old circle of friends rarely sees him. The last time that any of them did see him, he was walking along a country road with the halting, uncertain gait of a blind man: he was trying to see how many steps he could take without opening his eyes” (*W&D* 231). Ambivalence is the genius of the story. Is Mr. Bidwell happier now, absorbed solely in his own curiosity, or is his blindness game a form of self-castigation and despair? Was he trying inconspicuously to make himself content, or was he simply egging her on? The mystery improves the humor because the character is both victim and antagonist. Good literature reveals to readers something about themselves. Thurber provides a frail and cute Mr. Bidwell who hopes to be understood or at least left alone as he shyly amuses himself at the McNally’s party. At the same time, Thurber gives us a vindictive and selfish Mr. Bidwell who feels “vaguely contented” at daydreaming of yelling at his wife to get out, forever. No person is perfect; like Mr. Bidwell, everyone has their endearing quirks and their mean streaks. Thurber’s hyperbolic ambivalence in this story allows a simultaneous view of both sides of human nature.

This ending is also important because it shows at once playfulness and desperation. Bidwell's condition is eerily prescient of Thurber's own life. Thurber went mostly blind in 1941, and it sent him into despair. Though he tried handwriting in large letters twenty words to a page with a soft pencil, or drawing on enormous sheets of paper, many critics think he was unable to produce as prolifically or generate works as artistically successful as he had earlier. In Mr. Bidwell's not-so-secret life we also see the Thurber ideal of inexhaustible curiosity and imagination that lives on despite all suppression, discouragement, and loneliness. Thurber himself seemed to have an unstoppable and inexhaustible imagination. There are anecdotes of E. B. White's astonishment at Thurber's effusion of creative energy, both in his writing and in his prolific drawing that would use up reams of paper in their office. There is another anecdote of Thurber standing in the middle of a room at a party, completely spaced out until his wife approaches him to say, "Thurber, stop writing." To exercise this imagination was, for Thurber, to be alive and to be happy. This is why in his stories he saw the exercise of creativity as so essential—if everyone wasn't able and doing it, everything would be miserable. Even if imagination, the exercise of creativity, or discovery was as ridiculous as pure daydreaming or practicing holding your breath, this inner life was still crucial. Thurber said in an interview in his later years, "I write basically because it's so much fun—even though I can't see. When I'm not writing, as my wife knows, I'm miserable. I don't have that fear that suddenly it will stop. I have enough outlined to last me as long as I live" (Holmes 116).

Resolution of the little man's curiosities and conflicts would be disastrous. Ironically, this theme can be expressed well through the Freudian concepts of *eros* and

*thantatos*. *Eros*, simply put, is the life force, but also an urge to create, keeping chance alive and embracing the synthesis that comes with conflict. *Thanatos*, the death drive, is an unconscious urge to have everything resolved—to take the mystery and possibility out of life. Walter Mitty retreats to his imagination where he readily faces death and hell, ironically, to avoid the death of complacency with his life or the death of permanent resolution. Mitty fills the role of expert male (know-it-all) only in his imagination, but there he has completely mastered himself and his relation to his world. But when reality interrupts Walter Mitty the world's top surgeon, most competent bomber pilot, and best pistol shot, he doesn't even know how to keep himself dressed warmly, according to his wife, or park his car. Remembering car keys and buying toiletries and puppy biscuits seem to be difficulties, but what would be the real accomplishment in solving these problems? It is better to be incompetent by choice, thereby avoiding the ignominy of domesticity and certain defeat by the feminine antagonist, and escape into fake success. There the imagination can thrive and escape the threats of society in the "remote, intimate airways of his mind." (*W&D* 545).

In "The Lady on 142," also mentioned earlier, the husband fantasizes a threat and fixates upon it as he becomes the victim of his wife. This earlier piece does not work in the same way and does not work as well as "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" because, though the man's fantasies do lead him away from the dull time spent waiting for a train, they do not lead him away from the control of his wife. In fact, they lead him into arguments with her, arguments she will win. And his fantasies of gangsters and intrigue include her, but she is indifferently snapping string beans.

While Thurber seems to be criticizing the expectation for men to know it all, he is not dismissing the importance of a mind at work and especially at play. Mitty's and other characters' escapism—whether it be through fantasy or withdrawal from an unresolved conflict—opens up a space for the individual mind, for the man's soul to be free, or as the ending to “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” goes, “Undefeated, inscrutable to the last” (550).

### **Helpmeets**

Alongside this frightened and confused man, Thurber creates a woman who feels obligated by her gender to help this little man. But he feels obligated to never need any help. This is why characters like Mrs. Monroe and Mrs. Mitty become more than helpmeets; they are mothers to helpless children, or they are alien oppressors. By the term alien I mean unfamiliar outsiders, but the scary, inhuman connotation is not completely inappropriate: Thurber joked about females being nonhuman, having long ago separated from the human species and evolved into their own. He also makes a similar jibe regarding prehistory in his introduction to *Thurber's Dogs*. “It is conceivable that the primordial male held the female, as mate or mother, in no aspect of esteem whatsoever, and that the introduction of the dog in the family circle first infected him with that benign disease known as love” (*W&D* 799-800). Thurber makes the woman playing the role of helpmeet funny in several stories. It is in trying to assist that a woman becomes the notorious battle axe known as the “Thurber wife.” Thurber's humor comes by corrupting helpmeet into an oppressor.

A woman's care for a man becomes a form of punishment. She can use the taking of his temperature as a threat, as in this example from “The Lady on 142”: “Sylvia gave



me her temperature-taking look, a cross between anxiety and vexation” (*The Thurber Carnival* 4). This is followed later in the story with an aside from the narrator, “I have a theory that we would be celebrating the twelfth of May or even the sixteenth of April as Independence Day if Mrs. Jefferson hadn’t got the idea her husband had a fever and put him to bed” (5). This sort of one liner, unrelated to the narrative, is rare from Thurber. But its use of exaggeration is characteristic, elevating the threat of the excessive helpmeet: women are interfering with history. When Walter Mitty complains, “Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?” trying to do his job as a know-it-all, Mrs. Mitty responds with, “I’m going to take your temperature when I get you home” (*W&D* 549). She does not say “when you get home” or “when we get home.” Even the syntax Thurber chooses evokes the domination. Walter Mitty is a direct object of the woman’s verbs.

An excess of care becomes control. In many Thurber stories and drawings, the wife is a bossy annoyance, a termagant, and an oppressor—a prohibiter of his fulfillment and happiness rather than a provider of care and sympathy. The little man’s pitiful pathos has been pushed so far that he’s unreachable to the reasonable aid of a companion. Help only disturbs the introverted and jumpy man, and worse than that, destroys the comic function of the hopeless little man. The only option the wife has to do the little man any good is to control him. She has to change her performance as helpmeet in order to adapt to the helpless and unhelpable male.

In “The Whip-poor-will,” Thurber creates a wife who knows better than to indulge her husband’s obsession. Mrs. Kinstrey tells her husband, who can not sleep because of a whip-poor-will’s noise, that “It’s a notion . . . Don’t let your nerves get the best of you. Use your will power” (*W&D* 528). The help function of this role has become devoid of compassion; it is pure instruction. Consider the cartoon here, captioned “Why Don’t You Get Dressed,

Then, and Go to Pieces Like a Man?” (*W&D* 71).

This brilliantly illustrates the humor that Thurber finds in masculinity. It is notable that the cartoon seems a reversal of another cartoon wherein the



*“Why Don’t You Get Dressed, Then, and Go to Pieces Like a Man?”*

cartoon wherein the husband approaches the supine wife. This time the male seems a formidable physical match for the woman, and his face features the aggressive Thurber eyebrow. Usually this facial expression belongs to the woman, but this cartoon shows that personality traits are not exclusive and essential to gender. This shows diversity in the conflict between men and women and in their visual portrayals. Thurber’s drawing palette was always minimal. Thurber’s cartoons can be analyzed with different approaches. The most likely way that readers of his time period and even many now look at his cartoons is to see them as short gags. For that purpose, Thurber is adequate as a cartoonist as long as one concedes that

there is a certain charm to his doodle-ish simplicity of detail and dimension, and his almost iconic and recognizable repetition in the looks of the men and women.

Thurber received critical acclaim for some of his work, even being compared to the painting and drawings of French fauvist artist Henri Matisse in retrospective references today. It was rumored that Henri Matisse said, “the only good artist in New York is a man named Thurber,” but Thurber admitted in a 1951 letter that Matisse was never a fan (Teachout). However, one biographer reports that after World War II, Matisse did recognize Thurber’s drawings in *The New Yorker* as great American art (Bernstein 194). Thurber even had his drawings exhibited in a one-man show of his drawings in London in 1937. However, another cartoonist could easily draw the cartoon above, and as a gag it would be equally successful. Another way to analyze Thurber’s cartoons is to consider them in the context of all of his writing, and as illustrations to his battle of the sexes. Often his drawings were illustrations for stories. Those cartoons that stand alone extend Thurber’s themes and his “war between men and women” (also a title of a series of cartoons) into the visual medium. The textual and the visual little man is remarkable in his consistency: he is vague and sometimes blank on the surface, but seeking an inner comfort that always seem to elude him.

In the “Go to Pieces Like a Man” cartoon, there is a change in the situation but the woman is still there giving orders, doing the part given her to keep the conflict alive, and reminding us of the terms and roles of gender. The last thing the guy on the bed needs as he goes to pieces is to have to prove his manliness, but masculinity is always at stake in the battle of the sexes. His wife reminds him that she is being wife, and he must play husband.

Thurber uses humor to undermine this social expectation of the woman suiting herself to the needs and direction of her man. Thurber contrasts Mrs. Monroe with her husband, ironically describing her through her husband's eyes as "tiny and helpless" (*Owl* 55). She adeptly interacts with society and solves problems, outwitting Mr. Monroe and his mistress, commanding and ordering taxi drivers and moving men. She shows up her pseudo-confident husband and calls into question her gender expectations of gentility and subservience. And it is especially funny because the reality of her competence and his ineptitude is obvious to the reader while the characters try to save face and keep up the performance. It is like a grand pun: the helpmeet for the helpless.

### **Scapegoats**

The paradox of the helpmeet progresses into the role of scapegoat; it has a cause and effect relationship. Because the bossy wives of Thurber fiction are not suited to the role of helpmeet, they must become scapegoats. When Mr. Preble wants to "get rid of his wife," he first cites *her* distaste for him, but in a way that gives her the control—thus by calling her a helpmeet run amuck, he turns her into the scapegoat for *his* lack of love. And when Mr. Preble's actions suggest that he is taking control, the ironic humor of the narrative comes from his wife's bossing him about how to murder her. Thurber's blame bearers cannot be pitiable and funny. Even in the peril of death, she has no shot at comic victimhood.

In "The Catbird Seat," Erwin Martin is the meticulous head of the filing department, known publicly for his dependability and for neither smoking nor drinking. Privately, he is full of hatred for Ulgine Barrows, new special adviser to the company president. Martin gets a phallogocentric thrill from the words "rub out," which he plans to

do to her. She has a “quacking voice,” a “braying laugh”—bumptious, unladylike traits—and an annoying tendency to use Southern colloquialisms not fitting with his taste for words. Though he tries to find professional crimes to justify killing her, he keeps returning to her “peccadillos as a personality. . . . The faults of the woman *as a woman* kept chattering on in his mind like an unruly witness” (*W&D* 636, italics added). Thurber points out that crucial to her aggravating traits is her trait of being a woman. In other words, Barrows is annoying because she is a woman with masculine personality traits. If she were a man, perhaps her repeated catch phrases and her superior authority and influence in the office wouldn’t perturb Martin at all. This personality and role doesn’t fit what is expected of a woman, and for that annoyance, she must be rubbed out. Indeed, the problem is that she annoys him, and this somehow leads him to the fear that the “obscene” woman is a threat to his filing department. In his living room one evening, he convicts and sentences her to death in the imaginary courtroom of his mind. At the same time, it becomes clear to the reader that Martin, lonely and obsessive, is dissatisfied with life. His only joy comes from remembering a boss’s compliment from years before: that he was a “most efficient worker” (*W&D* 638).

“Come over here, you odd little man,” Mrs. Barrows says when he shows up at her house to beat her to death (*W&D* 640). Martin is a little man figure, but not all little men are pathetic and harmless. Yet they are incapable; he loses his nerve and changes plans. Martin drinks and smokes and threatens that he’ll get high on heroin and blow up the company president. When she alarms the office, she looks crazy. He transfers his insanity to her. As his scapegoat, she is found guilty of not his sins but of his insanity. Though Thurber’s development of the character of Ulgine Barrows does not show

fondness, the story clearly shows that Mr. Martin has the problem. Martin is crazy. She is simply annoying to the peevish sensibilities of her homicidal male coworker. “The Catbird Seat” reveals the scapegoat role of women for what it is: a way for men to ignore their own inadequacies and malice.

I argue that rather than propagate, Thurber’s stories often expose the fallacy of using woman as a scapegoat. In many cases the male character’s unhappiness is the source for his conflict with women rather than women being the source of his unhappiness. True, in “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” and in stories like “The Curb in the Sky,” this unhappiness seems to be the woman’s fault, but this state of being had been arrived at through a long period of time in which the players struggled in their incompatible roles. And in many stories, his misery and problems are the result of his own flaws. Men are vicious. Mr. Martin does have an endearing little man pathos about him as he struggles to overcome his harmless nature, but if this sympathy lasts through his murderous intentions, it likely comes from a darker side in the reader. It is a deep insecurity and self-loathing that leads Martin to his hatred of Mrs. Barrows. Similarly, Mr. Preble wants to murder his wife because of his flaw—he is selfish; he wants to run off with his stenographer. And though the wife in Thurber stories is often a killjoy, there are many male examples of what Thurber calls a “curmudgeon.” And ill temper also belongs to the man. The female may boss and take the fun out of things, but she can keep her cool.

A man who expects to be needed by a woman; a woman who doesn’t know how to help him; a man who doesn’t know what he is supposed to be doing anyway; a man who needs to both worship and blame her; and a woman who can only be identified by

her relationship to the man: These paradoxical roles are the ingredients in Thurber's recipe for the ever-funny and everlasting battle of the sexes. It can be a battle of mutually stubborn, unlikable characters in a cold war; it can lead to arguments and murder attempts; it can be manifested in endearing male personae and threatening females.

The roles men and women have to play are paradoxical and incompatible, causing internal tension in a man and in a woman as well as between them. A man who needs a more capable partner has to act superior. A man who needs compassion has to act detached. A woman who is able must act passively. And a woman who means well must be guilty. It is a recipe for certain tension between the man and the woman. Thurber's battle of the sexes shows that men and women have no options: they have to "be" their gender, and in doing so, they can not get along. As one critic wrote: "His exploitation of conventions marks him as a superior comic artist" (Tobias 5). His exaggerations undermine and exploit as much as they reinforce. It is not as simple as *woman, overbearing; little man, pathetic*. And Thurber did not intend it to be that way. Not all of his stories were "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." But even in this story the laughter Thurber creates comes from the incongruity of gender. By undermining what is expected of his male characters qua masculine men and of his female characters qua feminine women, Thurber complicates the construct of gender.

It is undeniable that Thurber exaggerates the roles and tendencies of his characters for humor's sake. But at the same time, Thurber's humor could not really work if there were not something funny, in the odd or peculiar sense, about the way that men and women are supposed to act in order to be masculine or feminine, or to act as a husband or wife. Thurber didn't create the paradoxes, incompatibilities, and tensions to invent his

humor. Instead, he magnifies what is already there, helping readers to see and appreciate and re-examine their own experiences as men or women.



### **Gender, the Psyche, and the Joke**

Sigmund Freud's ideas on humor support the conclusion that Thurber's writing is a criticism of societal gender expectations. Of course, to make a claim like this, I must proceed with irony. Thurber's use of Freud and Freudians was not for artistic or theoretical support for his ideas and narratives but for satirical fodder. Thurber has even been referred to as that "old Freud-baiter," and one critic notes that Thurber was "appalled by Freud" (Tobias 166). Likely, Thurber never actually did much primary reading on Freud's ideas, though he had keen and witty insight into the vernacular public consciousness of Freudian psychology. A Freudian reading of Thurber's humor might be expected to ingeniously uncover unconscious phallic images and sexual symbolism and imagery in the short stories, as does the article "Coitus Interruptis: Sexual Symbolism in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'" (Blythe). But Thurber would certainly have loathed this. However, Freud's theories on the social and psychological work of humor can add another level to Thurber's humor, showing that Thurber was not merely a misogynist taking out his frustrations with women in his writing, but was making astute observations about social behavior.

What Sigmund Freud, in his 1905 work *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, calls the "tendency," the true object of the humor, is often not the true object of the joke. Instead it is a conflict on a deeper topographical level. In this light, Habegger's description of American humor as "the literature and cinema of bad boys" defying feminine society suggests that perhaps women were not, in Freud's words, the tendency or "nodal point" where tension and expression truly intersect in such defiant humor. Freud's theory suggests that gender roles were the tension, just as labor roles and

capitalism were the true subject matter of slacker humor, and political idealisms were the true subject matters in jokes about Petroleum V. Nasby in the pre-civil war polemical newspaper satire. The Freudian theory of a deeper tendency also suggests that in Thurber's targeting of the controlling wife, the tendency (the object of the humor, the true subject matter) of the joke is not women but gender roles. "The content of a joke is separate from the joke," Freud writes, "and is the content of the thought, which is expressed as a joke by a particular contrivance" (87). In other words, a joke is like a casing for the thought, and the thought is the joke-work or real meaning. In Thurber's work, this means that the laughter comes not because Walter Mitty's wife intimidates him and he must escape into fantasy, but the content—that is, the thought of the joke—is that there is something wrong with masculinity and femininity and the way the husband and wife are supposed to interact within the genteel tradition. The story is effective in humor not because it is a veiled attack on women, but because it acknowledges and expresses the insecurity that accompanies trying to act like a perfect man: romantic, brave, heroic, indomitable, and "inscrutable."

Most important to Freud's theories is the idea that humor also represents a "saving in expenditure." People delight in the economy of simple puns, etc. because the analogy allows us to think less critically about objective categories. And so it is with Thurber's humor. Stories about marital arguments allow an immediate apprehension of a complicated aspect to human relations: the need for identifying with one's gender and fulfilling society's performance expectations for that gender, especially in marriage. Laughter is a humorist's and a reader's pleasurable self-congratulation for cleverly navigating these complications. Similarly, typified "little men" and "Thurber wives" are

economized categories that function a lot like group-based jokes (E.g., how many English majors does it take to screw in a light bulb?). People like such jokes and laugh because it feels good to not have to think so hard about how complex and how very difficult to understand every single human being is. Thurber turns these sources of his distress and confusion into pleasure for himself and his readers. To economize the tangles and challenges of marriage and human interactions as well as gender identity and all its demands into pleasurable experiences, like Thurber does, takes masterful artistry.

The joke will “get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible,” Freud writes, describing how humor often functions to trick the psyche’s censorship (98). These restricted sources of pleasure are, as Freud sees them, sex and violence repressed by society. Here Thurber would likely disagree and say that the things that have become inaccessible in the modern world are ways to escape from becoming stifled and discouraged. So instead of scatological or perverse themes, Thurber’s humor is centered on the quest for an autonomous zone for imagination. Still, Thurber successfully treats subject matters that would otherwise be taboo or unappealing by dealing with them in humor. A humorless story about Mr. Preble getting rid of his wife would likely be unacceptable in Harold Ross’s *New Yorker* in the 1930s, and at best would be forgettable, as is his non-humorous short story “The Whip-poor-will,” which describes a man who murders his family and then kills himself in his own home.

Freud’s *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* also can illuminate how Thurber brilliantly uses and shows woman-blaming as a “logical façade”: “It is only its use of sophistry for the hidden representation of the truth that makes [something] a joke in character, one that is, mainly dependent on its tendency” (103). Jokes conceal

cynicisms, Freud contends. The reality is that Thurber's hostility toward women in so many of his stories is not concealed; rather, it is the plot and very premise of so much of his humor. And like Folklorist Elliot Oring said, jokes are rarely simple and straightforward or even thinly veiled attacks on the object of the joke. By using a Freudian interpretation of Thurber's humor, we must assume that Thurber's joking conceals something else. His cynicism is a suspicion and psychological tension about the expectations of marriage, especially those that require a little man to act contrary to his imaginative, undisciplined, and inept nature or those that require a woman to act contrary to her capabilities.

Freud also touches on self-deprecation in jokes and humor. By making fun of bad marriages in many of his stories, Thurber deprecates his little man character and himself, but also the collective values and expectations of man and wife interaction. "A situation particularly favorable to the tendentious joke is set up when the intended criticism of protest is directed against one's self," Freud writes, "or put more circumspectly, against a person in whom that self has a share, a collective person, that is, one's own people" (106). Self-effacement or deprecation is not essentially personal, according to Freud; one can efface the values of his or her society in general. Thurber, a married man, was a member of a society largely invested in marriage and its routines. Without humor, it would be very hard for Thurber to vent about and criticize his own and society at large's stresses regarding making marriage work, and fulfilling gender roles. This humorous and rhetorical pose of self-deprecation followed a tradition pioneered by Mark Twain and continues in many forms of American outdoor humor today.

### **Women Drive Him Crazy**

*But in those days men were unable to develop a neurosis because they didn't know how.*

–Is Sex Necessary? p. 29

Thurber loves to laugh and evoke laughter about the connection between the clash between men and women and psychology. Both women and psychological trouble are forms of scapegoats. This teaming up is seen in another little man who punishes a woman for his own flaws: the husband from “The Unicorn in the Garden” in *Fables for Our Time*. Of him and his wife, he is the insane of the pair. But through his scheme, his wife ends up being hauled off to an institution, “cursing and screaming” like a maniac (*W&D* 494). Neurosis works as a scapegoat, at times in coordination with the woman, in Thurber’s stories. Because mental trouble took on a vital importance in their work, *The New Yorker* humorists like Robert Benchley, Thurber, White, S.J. Perelman, and cartoonist Charles Addams owe a debt to Sigmund Freud. Without a public consciousness of the unconscious, there would be no little man because there could be no retreat into a deeper level of the personality. Without the concepts of Freud’s psychology, there could be no mental victimhood, and the only real passive antiheroic victimhood would have to resort to physical slapstick, ineffective and largely unavailable in written humor. Without Freud, there would be little awareness of an unconscious, and the scapegoat of neurosis or “mental inadequacy” (Thurber’s word) simply would not have been available.

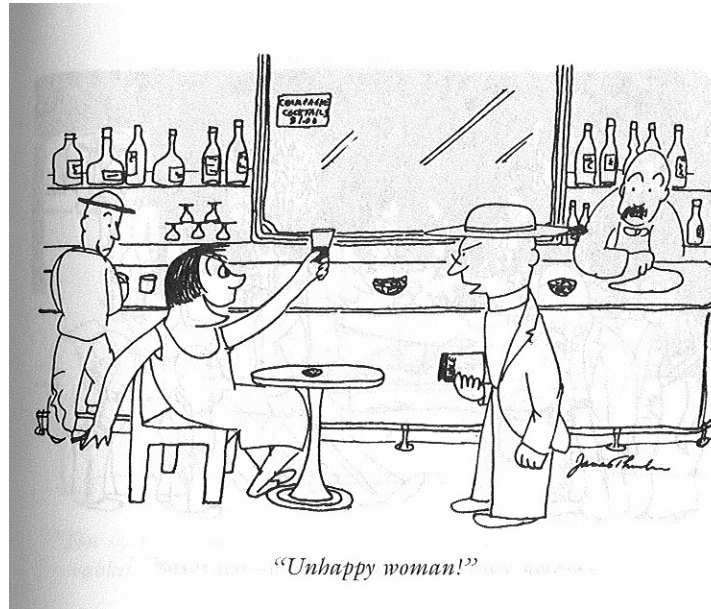
“Mutual suspicions of mental inadequacy are common during the first year of marriage” explains Dr. James Thurber in *Is Sex Necessary*. Such psychological

dimension adds much to the humor and drama of the battle of the sexes, allowing contention to arise from perceptions of others' *unconscious* inadequacies, with no way to dispute these consciously. For example, in "The Catbird Seat," Mr. Martin convinces himself that Mrs. Barrows is guilty of "willful, blatant, and persistent attempts to destroy the efficiency and systems of F & S" (*W&D* 636) in their workplace, with no evidence except for projections of his own malevolence.

Often the real problem is a lack of communication and candidness between man and woman, but it is funny and it allows the battle to escalate when there are hidden motives and compulsions to blame. Also, neurosis is new ground for more funny misapprehension, also a staple in Thurber's humor. The wife in the case of one new marriage discussed in *Is Sex Necessary* suffers from the "lilies and bluebird delusion." She takes euphemism about sex literally, and the man has to resort to talking in French on their wedding night because they are both so neurotic about sex.

One funny irony that Thurber highlights is that Freud's hopes to lessen the repressive social strictures on natural human tendencies of sexuality and aggression eventually created a different tension: obsession with unconscious mental inadequacies and neuroses. In other words, his works on the unconscious created a lot of neuroses about neurosis rather than dissolving it. Psychology didn't open the door to candidness but to more excuses for obfuscation. Thurber capitalized on pointing out this absurdity. He also turned neurosis into a passive-aggressive way to score points in his vast battle of the sexes: his little man went crazy because a domineering woman drove him there. Many of his stories and cartoons make fun of notions of neurosis. Or, as much or more than Thurber's works make fun of pushy women, they laugh at men who blame their

mental inadequacies or misery on women, such as in the cartoon here, “Unhappy Woman!” (W&D 601), that features a puritanical male who is a killjoy.



When talking about neurosis in use in humor at

this time, some questions must be raised about what neurosis is, and how Thurber used the word and the notion neurosis. Neurosis probably meant something slightly different in the 1930s than it does today. The 1932 *Universal Dictionary of the English Language* defines neurosis as “a functional disorder of the nerves or nervous system without organic disease.” The 2005 *New Oxford American Dictionary* gives a less clinical definition though it does list depression, anxiety, obsessive behavior, and hypochondria as examples. It also includes what it calls a “nontechnical” definition: “excessive and irrational anxiety or obsession.” From this contrast, two things might be inferred. One, neurosis had a medical and anatomical connotation which is no longer relevant. Also, this nontechnical definition indicates that the word has become more a part of our vernacular culture than a professional term. (Much like I used the phrase “he goes crazy” to earlier describe what happened to Walter Mitty). One online dictionary, [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), notes that “neurosis” is no longer in scientific use (Dictionary.com). Likely, the humorists specializing in neurotic little men, from Benchley to Thurber to Woody Allen,

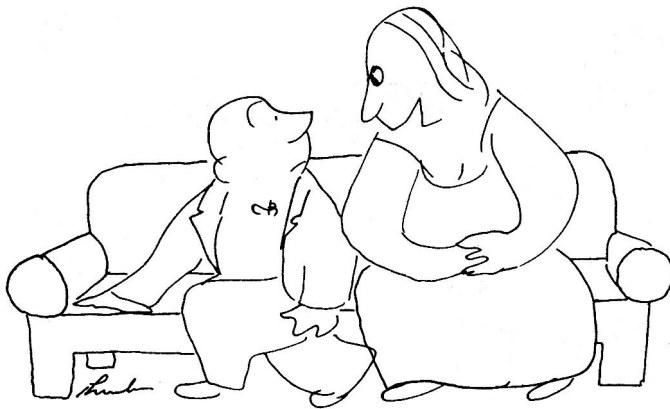
have had something to do with this transformation in the meaning of the word. It is also important to note the minor changes in the word to be aware of what Thurber was describing in his neurotic little men.

But how often does Thurber invoke neurosis? In the memoir *Years With Ross*, worry addict Harold Ross gripes about neurosis: “White and Thurber both mentioned Novocain in their casuals. We’re getting neurotic” (*W&D* 888). Here his work is exoterically labeled as neurotic rather than by Thurber himself. The word is actually rare in his writings, except for where he references other sources in *Let Your Mind Alone* and in *Is Sex Necessary*, such as Dr. Louis Bisch’s “Be Glad You’re Neurotic.” In these books, rather than lamenting neurosis as a symptom of the times or finding fun in the condition of those suffering from it, Thurber mostly mocks the very notion of neurosis. Anxiety about anxiety, meta-neurosis, is the bigger problem as Thurber sees it. In other words, he points out neurosis as a phony scapegoat, and the notions that develop from psychology as greater problems than those they are trying to address. In *Let Your Mind Alone*, Thurber assesses multiple mental help guidebooks and their various tips for finding happiness that only one in a thousand attains, for “worrying successfully,” for “streamlining the mind,” and for dealing with other of life’s stresses such as a mentally undisciplined wife. The expert suggestions lead him to greater worries about his worries: “I try out all these suggestions. They have taken up most of my time and energy for the past six months and got me into such a state that my doctor says I can do only three more of these articles before I go to a sanitarium” (*W&D* 344).

And it doesn’t take much to combine the scapegoats of neurosis and women. One draft of a cartoon that uses the word neurosis shows a large woman looming over a man



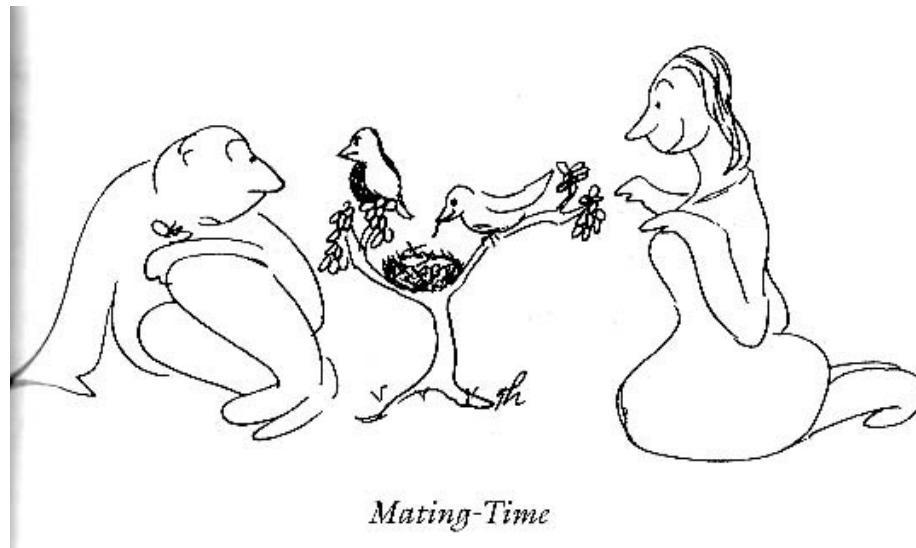
whom she sits beside on a couch. "I have a neurosis," she says while glaring at the obviously frightened man. A later-published version of the cartoon, seen above, is captioned "If you can keep a secret, I'll tell you how my husband died" (*W&D* 595). The



*"If you can keep a secret, I'll tell you how my husband died."*

little man's problems with women and with neurosis are interchangeable. The battlefield of courtship is the perfect place for psychological troubles and women troubles too meet and maximize Thurber's comedy of conflict.

## Love and Romance



(W&D 107)

In Thurber's humor, the burden of romance belongs to the man. And it is truly a burden, and like so many other things, it becomes an anxiety. Like the car that has to be pushed or the inescapable revolving door or the spider-web-like typewriter ribbon, love becomes another frustrating modern stressor in Thurber's works. It can also be an inconvenience or a task, but it is ever the man's predicament and challenge. The woman is on the receiving end of the benefits of romance, and the man must figure out how to do things right. If she is not in the mood or has something else she wants to do at the moment, his efforts will be in vain.

Thurber establishes the predicament of the male in the game of romance early in his writing as well as early in the history of humankind. Man's romantic troubles are well illustrated with *Is Sex Necessary's* term "begoniaism," a clever satire and word play on the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism. Thurber defines begoniaism as the "tendency of the male to raise small potted plants, and not go out" (131). Doctors James Thurber and E.B. White write of George Smith, who channels his frustration with his girlfriend

into a neurosis involving “pigs in clover” hand-held ball rolling games. Playing the games leads Smith to throw an old-fashioned fit. In 1929, when White and Thurber’s psychological report was written, they note that such a fit would “ordinarily prove the first step toward a physico-psychic breakdown, . . . [for] in those days neuroses were staved off longer, owing to the general ignorance of psychology” (33). In this case study, humor works to point out the problem of psychology as a crutch. But at the same time, the humor celebrates human foibles and the will of George Smith who wants to keep searching to solve some little problem, any little problem, if he can’t work out his current romantic dilemma.

Thurber wrote a chapter titled “A Study of Pedestalism” in *Is Sex Necessary?* He coins the term “pedestalism” to make fun of the societal attitude related to the cliché about putting a woman on a pedestal. Catherine Kenney proposes that Thurber sees and criticizes pedestalism as an “unnatural, enslaving reverence for women” (62). The pedestal is enslaving because it is a small space not affording freedom of movement, as well as endangering because a pedestal makes anything an easier target. Thus Thurber uses humor as a corrective force, drawing attention to the problem of idealization of women as flawless objects.

“The Masculine Approach” is a collection of cartoons illustrating various strategies taken by males to woo females. This is one of my favorite graphic or prose works of Thurber because of its simultaneous absurdity and accuracy. If considered one at a time, each drawing depicts a very different kind of man: a dramatist, a lustful youth, a stoic, a skeptic, a drunk, a strong and silent type, an emotionally needy child, an imperturbable spirit, a chivalric hero, etc. But when looked at as a whole series, as

Thurber's title suggests ("Approach" not Approaches), it seems that these are not inherent tendencies in the males' characters, but emotional-rhetorical strategies that must be learned, perfected, and executed by any male who would take the effort to bother to be in love with a woman. Each cartoon is part of a vexing system. One man uses the "Continental Manners Technique" by bending down to smooch a woman's hand, while another resorts to the manipulative "You'll-Never-See-Me-Again Tactics" as he throws on his coat before a frightened and saddened woman. Some men are good at certain techniques, and some are good at others. The cartoons suggest that all of these tricks and strategies entail masculinity. This is the big joke: it's impossible to be a man these days.

Certainly Thurber would not call himself a feminist, but I find it hard not to read these cartoons as excellent illustrations of what postmodern feminist critic Judith Butler called "gender performance," making James Thurber indeed an unwitting feminist. Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, "Laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism" (x). The "Masculine Approach" cartoons, though they don't subvert or reverse any traditional gender roles, illustrate masculinity as a performed and contingent surface, bringing Thurber's audience into the presence of what Butler calls "three contingent dimensions of contingent corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance" (137). Thurber unmistakably marks anatomical sex on their bodies: almost all the men in his cartoons are bald, and all the women have hair and ample contours. Gender identity can be seen in the people's simple choices of dress: the men wear bow ties and suits and the women are in dresses. And gender performance is found in this game of romance: the masculinity exists only in the act of approaching the feminine.

“Courtship through the Ages” fully articulates the pathos of the little man in Thurber’s insightful humor on the battlefield of romance in the war between men and women. The premise of the essay is that Thurber was reading through the encyclopedia and was overwhelmed at the lengths male animals went to in order to impress and mate with females. From whiskers to quivering plumage to gifts of food and colorful found objects to construction of elaborate nests, the males of many species wear themselves out just trying to get the attention of females. After which, the female might just be in a silly mood anyway, or want to cook fudge instead of engage in romance. Romance leaves the male nonplussed and tired. Thurber suggests we consider the bowerbird which ends up in the same place as Mr. Monroe did when he thought of romance with a mistress. He makes plans to escape to see his mistress, but is too sleepy. The Monroe story illustrates the weakness of the little man’s libido as well as the value of love: it’s worth risking his marriage in order to have an affair, but it’s not worth staying awake for. Fatigue is also the effect of love on the bird: “I imagine that many a bowerbird, after chasing a female for two to three hours, says the hell with it and goes home to bed” (*My World—and Welcome to It* 12). As ridiculous and funny as it all is, it is hard to say that Thurber does not make a strong argument by analogy to the animal kingdom: the man is the one who has got it tough and who has to do a lot of work for little reward when it comes to the early stages of love. No wonder the little man is ineffective at winning the woman’s love—he has ages of learning his lesson. He has evolved into helplessness.

When I first read the cartoon captioned “Wait here while I bring the etchings down” (*Carnival* 347), I did not understand it at all. I was unaware of the broader context of Thurber’s male/female relationships in romance (I thought the joke had something to do with etchings). A man

might get a woman up to his room with such a pretext—perhaps it is a mildly deceptive trick or perhaps a sort of euphemism to make the invitation less awkward.

But the little man in the cartoon is not interested in

being alone with her; instead he is truly interested in or obligated, by previous promise, to showing his etchings to the lady. The look of eager excitement in the woman’s eye rivals that of the excitement expressed in the faces of the more aggressive males in “The Masculine Approach,” but the little man’s face here makes him look as if he were merely fulfilling a duty. The humor comes at the expense of the nonsexual little man who has misunderstood how to use the pretext.



“You Wait Here and I’ll Bring the Etchings Down”

## **Thurber's Changing Attitudes toward Women:**

### **Misogyny, Envy, and Admiration**

By illuminating the war between men and women, Thurber found himself with a subject matter that worked for his humor. A chapter in Thurber's memoir *Years with Ross* shares an experience about Ross worrying that if Thurber's second marriage was too happy, it would end the funny battle of the sexes. Thurber notes Ross's relief: "he was . . . reassured when a piece called 'A Couple of Hamburgers' indicated no lessening of tensions in my prose war between men and women" (W&D 936). Though his second marriage to Helen Wismer likely didn't provide Thurber with as much material to write about as did his first marriage, Thurber kept the battle alive with his imagination. Biographer Harrison Kinney notes that "However well things may have been going with him and Helen, his professional pose required him to go on playing the put-upon male, discontented with marriage, plagued by women not quite worthy of him. There is little Woman can do that will please him" (665). As personal situations changed and as his imagination developed, Thurber's attitudes toward women developed. It is inaccurate and lazy to label Thurber as a woman hater by taking his stories literally or as personal expressions. In addition, I want to point out Thurber's treatment of the relationship between women and men is complex and variable.

### **A Life and Hard Times with Women**

Thurber's early letters to and about women reveal the obsessive infatuations of a romantic dreamer. He couldn't live with women or without them it seems, but he was certainly passionate. His first relationships were unfulfilling and frustrating. F. H. Buckley directly equates James and Althea Thurber with Thurber's written

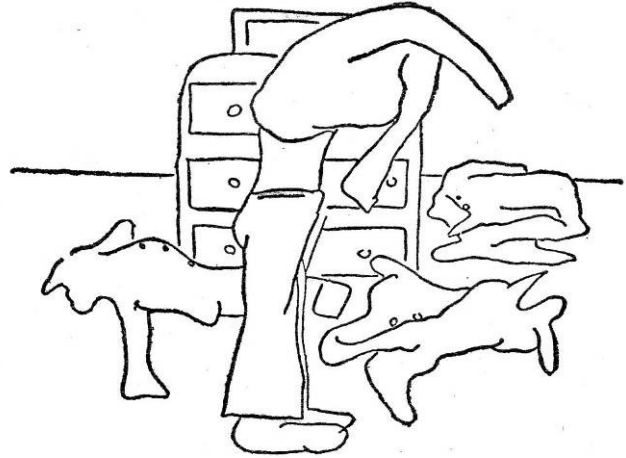
representations: “The Thurber male is a romantic daydreamer and a disorganized bumbler; the Thurber female is a condescending manipulator and a domineering monster of efficiency. Together they were Thurber and his first wife, Althea” (62-63). Here is an example of hastiness and simplification that I lamented earlier. Thurber in fact was a brilliant professional. He had a prodigious memory, and was considered by many of the wits and intellects among his acquaintances to be an incomparable conversationalist. Though he claimed to be inept at many things, he in fact worked for the U.S. government deciphering codes in France, as a newspaper reporter and editor, and even briefly as managing editor of *The New Yorker* before Harold Ross became convinced that his talents were more suited to writing. I think Buckley is confusing the Thurbers, married in 1922 and separated in 1929, with the fictional Mittys who came to be in 1939. One might more accurately liken Thurber to his character Elliot Vereker, the brilliant, overbearing, insulting, and moody socialite, conversationalist, spendthrift, and writer from the story “Something to Say.” In fact, most of Thurber’s close friends characterize him as more of a Vereker than a Mitty: a temperamental and creative dynamo. But a daydreamer and disorganized bumbler is much more likable, and probably funnier. It is likely that much of this image of James Thurber as a little man was self-cultivated. Biographer Charles Holmes describes such persona-constructing efforts made in an interview Thurber gave in 1934:

Interviewing Thurber in the World-Telegram on the occasion of the Valentine Gallery show [in which Thurber’s sketches were exhibited], Joseph Mitchell portrayed him as mildly eccentric, absent-minded, basically incompetent in the face of practical demands of life. Such observations as, “His apartment at the



Algonquin is full of drawings and old shirts. . . . When he needs a clean shirt he goes out and buys a new one,” show Thurber (with Mitchell’s help) creating a public character for himself. (Holmes 164)

“Character” is an appropriate word indeed. The idea of buying new shirts instead of doing laundry was in fact an idea first introduced in 1929 as an answer to the question, “Should a woman live with her husband after they are separated?” in *Is Sex Necessary?*



(125). Thurber illustrates the household consequences of a separated little man, living on his own, with the drawing here.

Buckley also cites Thurber’s malice, which he had “in buckets”—a claim he illustrates through the following anecdote, the source for which is not cited.

He was particularly unpleasant to women. One day some lady tourists from Thurber’s hometown approached him for an autograph. Get lost, he told them. They persisted. “We’ve just been to the theater and it would be just so perfect if you would sign our napkins.” Thurber picked up the telephone from the table and threw it through a glass wall. “Have I convinced you?” he asked. The women ran sobbing out of the Algonquin. (61-62)

Thurber’s moody cruelty was legendary. “Thurber was two people. Of the after six sadist I had only the meagerest of inklings—a sudden contentiousness midway the third martini, barbed retorts, jabs and jibes . . . I was spared the bruited shambles made by the legend in

action,” said *Poetry* editor and friend Paul De Vries (Kinney 821). Thurber was close to E.B. White, and fond of *New Yorker* editor Katherine Angell before they were married, but apparently resentful of them together. Kinney writes of this antipathy and includes a comment by Katherine White:

After blindness helped turn Thurber into a shorter-fused personality, the Whites found it necessary to avoid him socially, for he was less and less able to control his animosity toward Katharine. (“Sooner or later,” says Katherine, “Jim seemed, because of his deep antipathy to women, to attack his friends’ wives when he was drinking.”) (Kinney 446)

Thurber, who died in 1962 after having a brain tumor removed, likely suffered many small, undiagnosed strokes (*W&D* 984) as well as from a thyroid condition, and the effects of heavy drinking. In the early 1940s, he endured five painful and traumatizing eye operations, over the course of which his eyesight deteriorated almost completely. His health made him ill-tempered in the later years of his life, which is apparent in his many disagreements with editors, colleagues, and friends. Still, his biographies indicate that the numerous paranoia and neuroses he joked about having are mostly exaggerations for comic effect. Rather, his psychological problems were emotional difficulties and adjustments, often related to his health.

It is possible that much personal bitterness and fear towards women, due to his personal life with a difficult first marriage and perhaps his parents’ marriage, could not but come out in his stories. This reveals Thurber’s foibles, his humanity, rather than an artistic flaw. Perhaps he identified with his little-man creations. But in saying so, it must also be kept in mind how complex and variable a little man could be in his works.

Perhaps their spite, incapacities, and suffering at the hands of women were real feelings Thurber expressed in indirect, literary attacks on women. Like all writers, he had to collect his material from his experience; he had to write what he knew. However, I note that the harshest satire and comic attacks are in his fiction but not in the voices of observing narrators and never in essays. This suggests that Thurber felt personally removed from the more acerbic portrayals of women; it was an exaggeration he couldn't make in his own voice and mostly a necessity of dramatic effect and not a personal attitude.

In domestic stories, Thurber's funny deprecation of the husband certainly shows his awareness of the imperfections of man. Still, these little husbands and office workers are usually endearing, or at least laughable. Yet the humor that comes at the expense of the woman does not endear her to readers. Nancy Walker points out the favorable paradox that humor like Thurber's constructs. "Men are at once heroic and pitiable, capable of great feats, yet oddly childlike" (106). But where is the little woman? The role Thurber gives woman is also paradoxical but completely undesirable. She is expected to be meek when she is naturally strong, which in itself seems possible, but Thurber doesn't allow that. For some reason she can't pull this off without shrewishly driving man into physical or fantasy escapism, or insanity. The stories reduce (or inflate) women to the status of another baffling external force in the little man's world. Telephone numbers, cars, cigarette vending machines, medicine cabinets, and women. She is rarely a protagonist herself, but a tyrant, a nag, and a termagant—in contrast to the little man. For the woman there is no room to be pathetic and endearing in her faults. The irony and humor is not at work. This brings me to an essential question in a feminist inquiry about

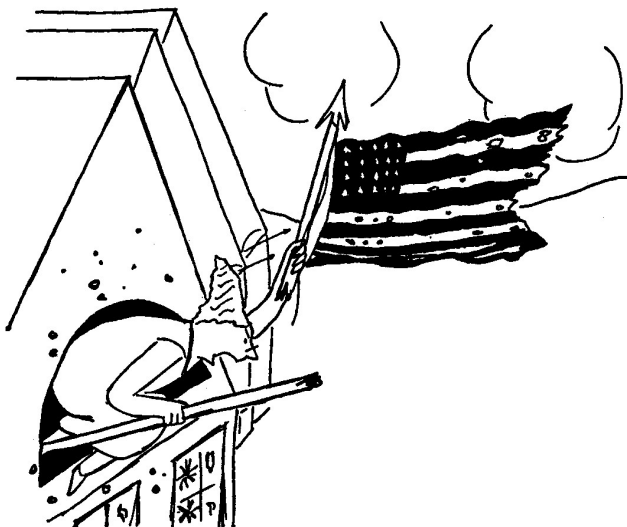
Thurber. It is sometimes difficult to determine if the absurd hostility toward women is a societal criticism directed at women or at the expectation of masculine autonomy, power, and confidence, and of feminine refinement and dependence—that is, gender roles.

### **Admiration of Women**

Thurber creates sympathy for some women. John Mortimer points out two examples from *My Life and Hard Times*. Thurber felt for the women who sit bolt upright every hour till dawn, “cry Hark! and throw their shoes down the passage to deter intruders. He understood the housewife who takes a shotgun to bed, convinced that, each night, the insurrection will break out” (Holmes 182). In these women we see some of the phobic symptoms of the little man, but not the impotence. In *My Life and Hard Times*, the women repressed and threatened do something about it, even if it means putting light bulbs in the sockets to keep electricity from leaking out or throwing all her shoes down the hall at the intruders, she is capable of acting. And then she can get on with things. The same can be said of Emma Inch, the hired cook and owner of a sick dog who cannot adapt to life but possesses resolve that allows her to not adapt, even if it means walking from Connecticut to Manhattan. Many of Thurber’s stories create an envy of this

feminine resolve.

An illustrative example of this admiration is in Thurber’s illustration of “Barbara Frietchie” (*W&D* 522) by John Greenleaf Whittier, a narrative poem describing a 90-year-old woman



who dares to fly the Union flag when General Lee marches through her town of Frederick. Thurber's choice to illustrate the poem could not have been ease and effect of illustration alone—his technical drawing skills favored a cartoon of a man and a woman and maybe some dogs, not armies marching. Thurber chose the poem because he admired its admiration of the woman, Barbara Frietchie. Like the other women Thurber draws, she looks indomitable. The only difference from the typical Thurber woman is the upright cone of grey hair on her head.

Thurber's twentieth-century portrayal of women in humor was a step forward from the earlier function of women in humor. Alfred Habegger describes American humor's misogynist genealogy in his essay, notably titled, "Nineteenth-Century American Humor: Easygoing Males, Anxious Ladies, and Penelope Lapham." "American humor," he says, "is the literature of bad boys defying a civilization seen as feminine" (Habegger 885). Before the twentieth century, there had long been a tradition of using irony and sympathy for the persecuted male protagonist to get back at the "humorless, irrational, and exacting wife" (888). The female figure is not very different in many of Thurber's stories, but the protagonist is changed. The difference is that Thurber's little man is no longer able to defy civilization or his wife, whichever way the synecdoche works—civilization reduced to the symbol of woman or the symbol of woman extended to civilization. It is now the male who is not easy going and who is anxious, and more passive. The dynamics between the old hero and woman and the new little man antihero and woman are also different. The little man depends more on such a wife as a binary opposite. Not only does the comic antihero change, but it likely necessitates a change in his female counterpart, and the dynamic between hero and feminine antagonist changed

at the same time. Thurber's writing started an important shift in how women are treated in literary humor.

And even in Thurber's writing, the relationship between little man and woman developed over the decades. Compared to the early Monroe couples' interaction, where the wife was a foil to the phobias and ineptitude of the husband, the wife in late 1930s and 1940s Thurber stories often has a greater role in the conflicts of the story. It is interesting that Thurber dedicated *The Owl in the Attic* to his first wife Althea. Perhaps the male self-effacement in his writing at this time was a sign of fear or hopes at diplomacy. This marriage was unstable, and they separated in 1929 and divorced by 1935. His second marriage to Helen Wismer in 1935 was more successful, but, surprisingly, the women of later stories are portrayed as more threatening. This might indicate less anxiety and more willingness to play and exaggerate on Thurber's part, and also that unflattering portrayals of women were not personal revenge, but humorous devices. In the Monroe stories, the husband goes crazy because he doesn't have his wife, and in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," he goes crazy because of his wife.

In the latter part of his writing career, from the mid-forties to the sixties, the battle of the sexes was not a central theme. Thurber was writing fairy tales, plays, fables, and memoir that focused more on a fairy-tale-like hope for a better world or that focused more on language play (as he was mostly blind). In these works woman is often heroic rather than an obstruction or oppressor. For example, Kenney points out female figures like heroine Princess Saralinda in "The 13 Clocks." Thurber calls such women Elaine Vital, a word play Thurber does with Henri Bergson's French term *elan vital*, the life force. He explains this in *Lanterns & Lances* in 1961: "I am more interested in Thurber's

theory of Elaine Vital, the female life force, than in Bergson's theory of *Elan Vital*, the masculine life force. . . . Elaine Vital, if properly directed—that is, left alone—may become the hope of the future” (Kenney 71).

Kenney writes, “Thurber . . . celebrated Woman's strength, resiliency, and vitality; over the years, he became increasingly inclined to regard her strength as a cause for hope, not fear, and as a generator for joy, not sadness,” (64). Kenney also points out that Thurber's battle of the sexes highlights the confusion between males and females—confusion that needs to be resolved (71). His worst female characters, like Ulgine Barrows or Mrs. Mitty, are bad because they take on the worst hostile traits in men (72), which traits Thurber doesn't approve of in either gender. Kenney claims that Thurber's views approach feminism: “Thurber saw the great energy and vitality of the female eventually bringing life and order to a chaotic, destructive universe. If one needs to label it, this is perhaps a sexist view of men and women, but it is one that is at least as close to contemporary feminism as to traditional misogyny” (71).

Richard Tobias suggests that Thurber's humor involving women is a drastic change in comic technique. In the past, women in comedy were objects, used “only for atmosphere” like brief humorous interruptions, or “as a prize to be awarded the hero” (69). And, as Habegger points out, women did not often take an active part in or create their own humor. In Thurber's works, on the other hand, she is elevated to the status of a rival, and this immortalizes her. “The good for comedy is obvious,” Tobias writes. “Woman is no longer a prize awarded, an animated trophy who bears children. She is a liar, a threat, and a strong opponent to the comic hero. When he has triumphed over her,

he has indeed accomplished something. If the comic mask represents a kind of immortality, she has indeed gained immortality” (70).

This is interesting. Representation of women in art and literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often flattered women by admiring their qualities, praising and celebrating their physical beauty, such as in Victorian ideals and paintings that evoked unattainable love of the *femme fragile* or self-destructive love of the dangerous and alluring *femme fatale*. Though some such representations of women are flattering, they restrict women to existing in the perceptions of men only, who decide how to interpret her body and behavior. The role of rival for women in literature, especially humor was a twentieth-century, and largely Thurber-influenced development. There are no *femme fatales* or *femme fragiles* in Thurber’s work. Thurber’s male characters do not have the gazers’ liberty to interpret and praise the meaning of women; they have to deal with the woman and her ideas and her strengths because they are in battle with women. In other words, they do not have the option of only gazing because they have to be on the lookout. Though women are made into enemies with often villainous traits, the woman as a rival is progress. For an object, no matter how praiseworthy, is powerless; but an opposite, a rival, is an equal.

The following is a Thurber comment on women:

Somebody has said that Woman's place is in the wrong. That's fine. What the wrong needs is a woman's presence and a woman's touch. She is far better equipped than men to set it right. The condescending male, in his pride of strength, likes to think of the female as being 'soft, soft as snow,' but just wait till he gets hit by the snowball. Almost any century now Woman may lose her



patience with black politics and red war and let fly. I wish I could be on earth then to witness the saving of our self destructive species by its greatest creative force.

If I have sometimes seemed to make fun of Woman, I assure you it has only been for the purpose of egging her on. (The Thurber House Online).

This statement is fascinatingly loaded with irony. It must be asked, how much of the irony is intentional? The patronizing tone makes Thurber sound, even at this laudatory statement, “sometimes seeming” to make fun of women while he claims to honor their strength. Yes, this is sincere praise for women who have capabilities lacking in Thurber’s little men or in himself. But his comment relies on the ironic deprecation of male strength and makes men the unsuspecting victims of women. It says, Woman is great, but I don’t want to mess with her and indirectly asks women to ease up on the poor little men—to try directing their scorn and temper at the world’s problems, problems that men have had to face and haven’t been able to solve. The statement is a defeatist “good luck.”

### Conclusion

To conclude my analysis of Thurber's battle of the sexes and his representation of men and women therein, I want to consider a statement by *New Yorker* journalist Emily Hahn, a feminist, intellectual, and acquaintance of Thurber:

Thurber stayed lovable by dealing in inconveniences rather than in serious social commentary and tragic emotions. You've got to be tough-mean to tackle some of those. Thurber later got into some of that, but his attitudes toward women, however painfully arrived at, always remained boyish, harmful to nobody but himself. His treatment of women in books is too bizarre to be anything but funny. (qtd. in Kinney 535)

This statement brings up three important issues. First is the lasting endearment of readers to Thurber's humor, his "staying lovable." I agree that Thurber owes some of his lovability to his choice to treat domestic inconveniences in his writing, but I disagree that this is an easy way out of more "serious social commentary and tragic emotions." Tragic emotions are very present, but they are treated as a humorist treats them—with humor. This is a strength, not a weakness. I earlier mentioned Mr. Bidwell's loneliness and pretended blindness. Thurber called humor emotional chaos remembered in tranquility. By this apt definition, humor is not an avoidance of tragic emotions, but a mastery of them. His "American Romance" (Thurber earliest published story) and "The Greatest Man in the World" (Collected in the 1935 *Middle Aged Man and the Flying Trapeze*) are indeed effective commentary—which spanned throughout his career—on social tendencies to frenzy around its self-created heroes, on the themes of heroism, media, and the value of a human life.

Are they “serious” social commentary? The simple answer to this question is no; it is humor. This word trap is a deep pit for humorists who for ages have been working against the supposed diametric opposition of funny and serious. We have created a genre called literary humor, which is a noble attempt at validating humor. But this is operating within the binary, a way of awarding it a prestigious term (literary) to mitigate the inferior (funny, humor), as if that changed the nature of something. Yeah, it’s still humor, but it’s Literature. This merely adds another validation requirement. For humorists like Thurber, this was a faulty binary. Thurber suggested once, in a statement of both ego and artistic ideology, that there should be a Nobel Prize for humor, “leaving little doubt that he had himself in mind as the first recipient” (Kinney 1039). There is no such prize, nor is it ever likely that a writer with the label humorist will win the Nobel Prize for literature, though many who win write with humor. In 1988, humor columnist Dave Barry won a Pulitzer Prize for his commentary, a journalistic division of the awards rather than for *belles lettres*. It was awarded Barry “For his consistently effective use of humor as a device for presenting fresh insights into *serious* concerns” (Pulitzer Prizes, italics added). The adjective serious works fine as a synonym for both important and of high quality, but the word is often misleading when talking about humorous literature, for serious can mean opposite of humorous or playful, which are crucial.

The question that Thurber brought up during an interview comes to mind again: What is trivia? And is the laughable synonymous with the unimportant? Laughter is an appropriate critical response to tackling “serious” issues, and for philosophers from Aristotle to Edmund Burke to Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, the question of humor was very important. But for the critic and philosopher, it was always a question. I am not

certain why laughter must always be a tool for exploring “serious” issues? Is humor only good insofar as it is a means to another literary end? If introspection into one’s own behavior, revelation of social incongruity, emotion, intellect, and artful linguistic presentation are already built in to what makes readers laugh, why must humor be also required to justify itself by dealing with some other, external “serious” matter? Thurber said, in interview, that “In anything funny you write that isn’t close to serious you’ve missed something along the line” (Holmes 114). This may seem to contradict what I am saying, but I argue that it supports the idea that to demand an illumination of a serious issue from what is already good humor is missing the mark. In other words, Thurber is saying, if something is truly good humor, it is already serious.

E.B. White wrote that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog: “Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it.” Thurber the humorist gets past the interrogation of humor and uses it for what it was good for: seeing acutely the ridiculous incongruities of life, discovering the importance and the conflict in what is normally dismissed as inconvenience and minutiae, and choosing to laugh and to continue smiling at what tries to defeat us.

I return to the principle issue brought up by Hahn. Whether Thurber’s misogyny is to be taken seriously is a challenging question. There is no simple way to



“Well, it Makes a Difference to *Me!*”

categorize Thurber's literary tone, let alone his personal attitude. At times Thurber, through the little man, mocks the masculine dominance associated with misogyny. He repeatedly accuses women of taking the fun out of everything by controlling male protagonists and stifling their imaginative endeavors, such as mismatched pajamas, or as another cartoon woman complains of her man, looking too funny in order to be comfortable. At other times Thurber debunks through satire such unhealthy traditions as "pedestalism."

Thurber's office mate, collaborator, and friend E.B. White commented on the drawings in an endnote to their collaborative 1929 book, *Is Sex Necessary?*

In almost every instance the man in the picture is badly frightened, or even hurt. These "Thurber men" have come to be recognized as a distinct type in the world of art; they are frustrated, fugitive beings; at times they seem vaguely striving to get out of something without being seen (a room, a situation, a state of mind), at other times they are merely perplexed and too humble, or weak to move. (135-136).

White highlights discomfort and need for escape. Again, the little man is funny and earns his sympathy because he doesn't fit well into his world, but I say White needs to add another line to this paragraph: "a distinct type in the world of art; *they are forced into roles of composure, social politics, and time task-oriented culture to which their wives are better suited*, they are frustrated, fugitive beings. . ." One of the great successes of Thurber's battle-of-the-sexes humor is his illumination of the difficulty of the game that must be played in marriage, in the workplace, in being masculine and in being feminine.

The central theme reflected in Thurber's work is certainly not a hatred of women, but a longing for freedom from the stifling influences of the world, that isolate the spirit and kill the imagination. Thurber often uses women as a symbol for these, and his male characters at times make women a scapegoat for his inadequacies in facing all his modern challenges. But at other times and in other ways Thurber points out the problems of gender and marital expectations for both men and women, and he celebrates the determination and vivacity of women at the same time that he celebrates the human power of imagination and advocates its freedom.

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