

論詹姆士梭伯：男人與女人的「戰爭」

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摘 要

本文由美國幽默作家詹姆士梭伯的文學創作及漫畫中探究其對男女及婚姻關係的詮釋。隨著時代變遷，梭伯刻劃的男人與傳統的「大男人」大異其趣；此時「大」男人變「小」，「小」女人反倒變「大」了。面對新時代的來臨，梭伯的「小」男人窮於應付與女人的衝突與戰役；然而，這些「叫失敗太沉重」的梭伯男人，即使在復仇中亦是一敗塗地，無奈走到其命運盡頭—孤立無助、精神失常、死亡。其實梭伯本身並不似我等所想那種輕蔑婚姻或厭惡女人的人，他在一篇寓言漫畫【最後一朵花】中寄語男女應親蜜合作一起經營充滿希望的新生活，其用心良苦可見一斑。

關鍵詞：詹姆士梭伯、美國幽默作家、父權至上、厭惡女人的人

On James Thurber: The “War” between Men and Women

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Abstract

This article presents an American humorist writer, James Thurber (1894—1961), with a focus on the realization of the relationship between man and woman and their marriage in his literary works or comics. With the change of era, Thurber’s men deviate from the traditional roles of being “great.” “Great” men now become “little” while “little” women become “great.” In facing a new epoch, Thurber’s little men take actions on the conflicts and battles among themselves and their women. Since failure plays very much a part of Thurber’s men—even in their revenge, they go to their ending fate in despair—isolation, insanity, and death. In fact, neither was Thurber himself contemptuous toward marriage nor was he a misogynist—as he was often thought to be. What he tried hard to pass on in his works, e.g., *The Last Flower*, is the intimate cooperation of man and woman in dealing with a new hopeful life.

Key Words : James Thurber, American humorists, patriarchy, misogynist

Introduction

“All Right, Have It Your Way—You Heard a Seal Bark!”

(Thurber, 1945, p.326) (See Appendix)

The war between men and women starts in such a way—women lose faith in men whereas men win humiliation from women. As far as the war is concerned, most will say it has been a war greater than all the wars between nations.

James Thurber, a great American humorist, coming after the traditional horse-sense humorists and before the black humorists of the post atomic era, with his humorous tone, satirically gave his interpretation of marriage: “Marriage, as an instrument, is a well-nigh perfect thing. The trouble is that it cannot be successfully applied to the present-day emotional relationships of men and women” (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 66). We can see that he was not hostile toward marriage itself even though in many of his works, he recorded the development of matrimonial fights and incompatibilities.

Who said that marriage is the tomb of love? Is it true? It is possibly true for Thurber’s men and women. Thurber’s men, as E. B. White wrote, 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” (as cited in Scholl, 1982, p. 506). Thurber’s women, as we realize from Thurber’s own life, are an amalgam of two women—his mother and his first wife—domineering, aggressive, practical, and competent.

This paper aims to look into James Thurber’s works, including his marked short fictions and cartoon series, with a focus on one of his themes, i.e., the war between men and women. It presents how Thurber portrayed men and women of his time and how he characterized the relationship between men and women and their marriage. Starting with a search of the background with which the so-called Thurber man is associated, this paper demonstrates the development of the Thurber man’s emotional feedback toward his counterpart, the Thurber woman. Finally, as suggested in some of Thurber’s works and his own comments, Thurber’s real attitudes toward marriage and male-female relationships have been discussed in the hope that the war between man and woman may end up with a peaceful context.

The War between Men and Women

Facing a New Epoch: “Great” Men Become “Little”

There is a consensus throughout the world, especially in China and Japan, that most traditional societies prove to be based on patriarchy. The man stands in front, and behind every

great man is a woman. Behind Thurber's man is still a woman, but something is wrong. She is not standing behind supporting him. She is belittling him, shaming him, and frustrating him. Why do "great" men become "little" while "little" women become "great"? In Thurber's eyes, the difference between what the world expects of men and women offers some answers. Our common sense says that men are expected to be strong, to have a no-nonsense attitude toward life. The symbols of men are success, leadership, and protection. Men face off with other men to deal with the problems of running the world, and have a great deal of highly specialized knowledge to meet the challenges of a rapidly developing world. By the turn of the century, however, under the deep influences of the industrial revolution, the world made greater progress than what men could easily keep up with. "In Thurber's case, the Little Man is bothered most of all by Sex, with its marital concomitant, but also by all disciplines whose names begin with "psych"; by mechanical devices; by the upper-middle-class ceremonials of suburbia; by the bureaucratic organization of modern society, and by the deterioration of communications between man and man and between man and woman" (Yates, 1964, p. 278). It was understood that "in the new industrial system it was wholly impossible for more than a small minority of the total population to achieve what society regarded as success" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 71). Men's failure to succeed is often seen as a lack of virility and results in nervousness and mental breakdowns. As a result, the emotional immaturity of so many American men led to further increase in the relative influence of American women. Given that the world evolved under Darwin's theory, men who could not keep up, could not survive their traditional roles as leaders. They fell behind. This had a profound effect on the marriage relationship. Thus, not only men but also women face a new epoch.

Many old fairy tales tell us that "women are innocent, creative, cautious, interested in cultural things; they wish to make their homes 'sanctuaries' to which their husbands can retreat from their struggles to carve a living from the world, 'heavens' in which their children can be protected from life until old enough to deal with it. Men, they say, are optimistic, analytical, protective, practical, aggressive" (Black, 1970, p. 25). It is men that set forth on the race of life with their women and children behind them. Men are the leaders. They are the explorers, eager to see what lies beyond the next hill. They are confident that food and shelter are forthcoming. Nothing can shake their assurance, even though the future is unknown and the journey is very long. In Thurber's eyes, it was a great lie.

At the time of Thurber, women in some radio soap operas became nobler than ever. They showed no complaints of their husbands even though the men were cripples, going blind or bedridden. "She is capable of twice as much work, sacrifice, fortitude, endurance, ingenuity, and

love as before" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 69). Thurber found the soap opera's fiction rather disgusting and recognized these cases were "symbols" of what women expected. Thurber made his frontal criticism on the traditional lies in some of his works. In Thurber's version of *Fables For Our Time*, the little girl is amazingly different from the one in the original "Little Red Riding-Hood" fable. She in good time discerns that "even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge" (Thurber, 1940, p. 247). The result is that the little girl shoots the wolf dead with an automatic weapon. Thurber gave his new moral to us: "It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be" (Thurber, 1940, p. 247). Thurber tried to make us understand that the time of the old clichés is gone, and we need new myths to describe things as they are now; we need an entirely new appraisal of modern men and women.

Men and Women in Thurber's Drawings

A strong comment on Thurber's themes, especially on men and women, is in his drawings. As Nelson (1988) stated, "Neither the males nor females in the drawings are particularly attractive; they appear bemused or fixed in special problems or attitudes that an outsider would hesitate to intrude upon" (p. 449). In these drawings, most of Thurber's men are far from the characters of manly heroes, and the women are in reverse, large and muscular, aggressive and merciless. The women look capable of outwrestling their mates. The difference between the "real nature" of men and women and "what they imagine they are" is highly ironic. In one cartoon, an oversized woman, reading a novel, looks self-satisfied and makes an ironic comment to her "little" husband, "It's *Our Own Story Exactly!* He Bold as a Hawk, She Soft as the Dawn" (Thurber, 1945, p. 353). "Yoo-hoo, It's Me and the Ape Man" (Thurber, 1945, p. 346). The "ape" man she refers to is her husband, a timid and undersized little man. Not only in appearance but also in their roles in the real world, Thurber's women do appear "greater" than the men. In the cartoon series "The War between Men and Women" (Thurber, 1945, p. 362, 363), one frame is Men's G.H.Q. (general headquarters) and another is Women's G.H.Q. The women look smart and confident in discussing strategies to win the war, whereas the men look desperate and worried. Satirically speaking, the cartoon suggests women concern themselves with war in the manner of war between nations. On their wall hang pictures of great leaders and military strategy charts. On the other hand, the men's war room no longer resembles the traditional war room (no charts or portraits, only posters of wanted women). Now women are kings, leaders, military strategists and even criminals. They play the leading roles in the stage of human life. It appears to Thurber that "socially, economically, physically, and intellectually, man is slowly going... to hell. Man's day is indeed done; the epoch of woman is upon us" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964,

p. 70).

In “The Race of Life” (Thurber, 1932), the woman is more competent than her man. With a hopeful look in her face, she is always gay and persistent. Her man, with a look of uncertainty and hesitation, staggers behind his woman. When he is out of breath, it is the woman that carries him; it is also the woman that confronts all the dangers. The woman bravely steps forward to fight, leaving her man to shrink behind with their child. At night she is on guard while her son and husband sleep. At the end, “she races on with whoops of joy, pointing to the angelic gates, while the man behind her collapses on his knees in a rainstorm” (Morsberger, 1964, p. 69). “Race” here can mean a contest as well as a journey. Woman is the winner in the race of life. The man is perplexed, not only with evident dangers which seem not to bother his wife, but also with the myths that say he is the one courageous in danger. “The male is also the little boy who sees his mother succeed where his father has failed” (Black, 1970, p. 27). Failure is the burden for Thurber’s little men. Fear of failure makes men bewildered and frustrated in facing women and reality.

Failure: Too Much a Part of Thurber’s Men

“Thurber’s little men frequently have a considerable fear of women, based on the refusal of women to take seriously things that wear a great deal to men.” (Black, 1970, p. 28). These things vary from sexual prowess to simple daily problems. Mr. Monroe in “The Owl in the Attic” is dominated by his cool and domineering wife (Thurber, 1931). Mrs. Monroe controls her husband. She treats him as if he were a little boy. She looks down upon him. She teases him whenever chances permit. One day, Mrs. Monroe destroys his affair only by telling the other woman that her man’s childish and foolish yell, “woo! woo!” happens when something goes wrong with the shower faucet. Woman often hurts her man in this way, lacking thoughtfulness to man’s dignity. Yet Thurber does not blame women to the extent that men are equally at fault by dejectedly accepting their weakness. It is noted that most of Thurber’s accounts of man’s frustration and failure were written during the Depression when the lives of his men seemed pointless and unrewarding. “Thus wives nag because the husbands are not aggressive enough, not sufficiently competitive” (Morsberger, 1964, p.19). Sometimes, men’s irresolution just forces women to make the decision to get things done. Thurber’s men, like Mr. Monroe, are always confounded by many simple and practical problems. Since women are not expected to do the same practical things that men are believed to be able to do, the world seems to show contempt for those impractical men.

Impracticality is another failure for Thurber’s men. In “A Couple of Hamburgers” (Thurber, 1937), a man and his wife, having been driving all day, feel too fatigued to be patient with each

other. The wife assures her husband that she hears a strange noise in their car while the husband feels defensive, since it is man not woman who should have been alert to the mechanical trouble. On the way the man goes into a restaurant to take a break, whereas the woman stays in the car because she would not like to eat in a dirty place. The man, after enjoying his hamburgers, comes back to tell his woman that the coffee at the restaurant is very good (good coffee is her favorite), implying she has missed out. The temporary self-satisfaction is gone as soon as the strange noise is heard again. The wife gets another chance to nag at her husband. She allies herself with the machine against her husband—there is no threat for her since it is not she that needs to keep the car going. Woman sometimes, on purpose, tries to embarrass her husband to do some daily practical things and thus she teases him when he appears to bungle. That Ann Thorne in "Am Not I Your Rosalind?" (Thurber, 1948) tests her husband to deal with a wire recorder is such a case. Thurber's man makes so many mistakes that he is rendered totally harassed and ineffective. Thurber's woman "often appear(s) both purposeful and forbidding" (Nelson, 1988, p. 449). In this case, Thurber's little man seems married to his own mother-in-law, as a result.

Most of Thurber's little men give way to their women. Henry Bamford Parkes claims, "The man of the industrial age was apt to have a neurotic dependence, first upon his mother and afterwards upon his wife, owing to his own insecurity and lack of masculine self-assurance" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 71). Thurber's little man is middle-aged. He is enslaved by time in addition to being the slave of his wife and his own deficiency. Ambition to struggle for a better life is passing away, and a better life seems too far to be reached in time. They feel tired. It results in sexual and marital problems. When his wife is not in, Mr. Monroe just toys with a bold idea of calling up an attractive lady whom he knows from a party. Yet immediately, he invents a series of excuses to do nothing at all. It is because he does not wish to run the risk of encountering another frustration. Failure is too much a part of Thurber's men. As for Mr. Andrew in "A Friend to Alexander" (Thurber, 1942), fear of failure makes him regard her invitation as a test to his masculinity when Mrs. Andrew wants him to sleep in her room.

Little Men's Revenge

Do little men willingly yield to a series of nags and contempt from their wives? Sometimes, Thurber's little men become aggressive, too. In one of Thurber's cartoon series called "Men, Women, and Dogs," a Thurber man, with his wife sitting near, shows some pictures to his son and says, "And This Is Tom Weatherly, an Old Beau of Your Mother's. He Never Got to First Base" (Thurber, 1945, p. 340). Thus, he tries to show his revenge. Mr. Thorne in "Am Not I Your Rosalind?" (Thurber, 1948) has a great idea to set his wife and the other woman against each other by having them read the same speech. He knows well that "women, after all, are expected

to compete only with other women” (Black, 1970, p. 39). Both the women read the speech in the same bad way, but each is convinced that she is better than the other. He calms his wife’s desire to compete with him by giving her an illusion that she is better than the other woman. Thus, he wins that day, but only that day.

Sometimes getting drunk will make a little man bold enough to take his revenge. In “The Interview” (Thurber, 1953), George Lockhorn, an eminent novelist, gets bold enough to complain to a visitor that sexual intercourse is only for holidays. In this way, he makes his wife embarrassed. Getting drunk enables him not to take seriously the domestic values, which are important and private to his wife. Another infrequent victory happens in Thurber’s fable “The Unicorn in the Garden.” A typical Thurber husband sees a unicorn eating roses in the garden, and he goes to tell his wife. The woman, of course, does not believe him and says, “The unicorn is a mythical beast” (Thurber, 1940, p. 247). Furthermore, she calls her husband “a booby” and declares to put him into a “booby hatch”. She even calls a psychiatrist and the police to deal with her husband. At the end, it is not the husband but the wife, who is carried away screaming, for the husband denies ever having mentioned a unicorn, and tells the authorities, “The unicorn is a mythical beast.” It is true that Thurber’s men “seek escape from the battleground of married life by imagining a triumph over their humiliations” (Morsberger, 1964, p. 72). They try to find shelters in their own imaginations or dreams. In “Mr. Pendly and the Poindexter” (Thurber, 1935), Mr. Pendly, suffering from eye trouble, while his wife chauffeurs his car, recovers his feeling of inferiority by dreaming of flying into a party in an “autogyro”, sweeping his wife away, and zooming fearlessly off into the sky. Yet escape could never be permanent. Like Charlie Deshler in “The Curb in the Sky” (Thurber, 1935), he imagines some outlandish story about a dream he has had, thinking that his wife cannot correct him on his own dreams. His dreams prove to be a failure, “for his wife visited him at the asylum and corrected even the details of his dreams” (Morsberger, 1964, p. 73). In “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (Thurber, 1942), the little man is baffled by the automobile as well as his wife. He retreats from everyday problems by imagining himself as a fiction hero, but at last he is defeated in the dream as well as in reality.

Little Men’s Ending Fate—Isolation, Insanity, and Death

Since dreams still cannot make Thurber’s men win the war, occasionally, the repressed husbands break out violently. However, little men are depressed even though they want to take murder actions. Even at murder, little men are still “botchers” or “bunglers”. “I am wearing gloves because I don’t want to leave any fingerprints around” (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 73), one husband explains to his wife. The Prebles in “Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife,” as in many others in Thurber’s works, are explicitly fed up with each other. One day Mr. Preble

decides to kill his wife in the cellar. His wife, knowing his intrigue, agrees to go down in the cellar and to prepare to be buried. In order that he should not leave a clue, she advises her husband on a better choice of a murder tool, "some piece of iron or something" (Thurber, 1935, p. 86). The exasperated man finds no way but to follow her command. The weird fantasy ends with her screaming after him to shut the door—"Where were you born—in a barn?" (P. 86). The man's fantasy is unfulfilled and the woman gets in the last cutting word.

Murder in the war between men and women is treated comically in some stories like Mr. Preble's, but in "The Whip-poor-will" (Thurber, 1942), it is too seriously tragic for the readers to accept. The process from conjugal quarrel to insanity and even murder proves to be too horrible. "I never heard such a spectacle—squalling like a spoiled brat" (P. 311), the wife ridicules the husband's furious yelling and cursing at the whippoorwill at midnight. When he threatens to kill the bird, she scolds his fear and impotence to do anything. She describes him as "fussing about nothing at all, like an invalid in a wheel chair" (p. 312). Mr. Kinstrey finds no retreat at all. "There is no magic to save this Thurber man" (Scholl, 1982, p. 516). Insanity and death are the only alternatives. The next morning, friends find that he has killed his wife, two servants, and himself. In the case of "The Whip-poor-will," Thurber admitted that it just revealed his angry reaction to his five unsuccessful eye operations. On the whole, Thurber's marital tragedies result from constant exchange of quarrels between husbands and wives. "Mr. And Mrs. Bidwell knife each other with their eyes after Bidwell persists in holding his breath for his own amusement, thus exasperating his wife" (Scholl, 1982, p. 512). Hostility stands between men and women. Separation or divorce is the end. Does it mean, however, the war ends with a better life for the little man? In fact, divorce does not bring freedom or happiness, but isolation—"George Bidwell lives alone now (his wife remarried). He never goes to the parties any more, and his old circle of friends rarely sees him" (Thurber, 1935, p. 74). This is seen most clearly in "One is a Wanderer." Mr. Kirk, a middle-aged divorced writer, lives alone in a hotel, where he fills his closet with dirty and soiled shirts. The only thing he can do is to drink and drink. He desperately looks for something to do to ease his solitude, but he would not like to intrude on friends because "Two is company, four is a party, three is a crowd. One is a wanderer" (as cited in Scholl, 1982, p. 513). He makes himself isolated from the society, the real world. At last, such kind of little man tries to find somewhere to hide himself as the one in "A Box to Hide in": "It's a form of escape. hiding in a box. It circumscribes your worries and the range of your anguish. You don't see people, either" (Thurber, 1935, P. 225).

Thurber's attitude toward the War between Men and Women

In spite of his awareness of the conflicts between men and women, Thurber was not contemptuous toward marriage. Willie, a cabman, tells Mr. Kirk, "But I got a home over in Brooklyn and a wife and a couple kids, and boy, I'm tellin' you that's the best place, you know what I mean?" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 79) "You're absolutely right there. A man wants to go home" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 79). It is the case that Thurber seemed to recognize Dr. Johnson that "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasure." (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 79). Though remarriage would not be so easy for Mr. Kirk, Thurber himself did marry again and it proved to be successful.

In view of the lousy behavior and dowdy appearance of the female in his books, Thurber was regarded as a woman hater, a misogynist. Of course, he did dislike the arrogant, intolerant, and insensitive ones like Mrs. Mitty, Mrs. Bidwell, Mrs. Lockhorm, etc.. He thought the female, who lacks the male's adventurousness, "is inclined to adjust herself to her state, whatever it may be, whereas the male would like to adjust his state to himself" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 80). It was intelligent women that he admired, however. As featured in his early work "The Race of Life," the male-female relationship lacks the negative feeling of hostility and alienation that characterizes most of Thurber's earlier pieces. Thurber's respect for woman's strength and courage is revealed to some extent. It seems that Thurber has an inner longing for a place where men and women would work together, not against each other, as they do in the modern world. In this case, Thurber hoped wives would be intellectuals and "be helpmates to their husbands" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 81). As a matter of fact, not only we but Thurber himself know that such women are not easy to find. The problem is that there are still many little men in the modern world. In fact, Thurber did not hold the woman entirely to blame, "for his men are equally at fault by apathetically accepting their weakness" (Morsberger, 1964, p. 70). If asking a lady why the American woman is a failure, the answer will be "Because the American man is a failure!" (as cited in Morsberger, 1964, p. 70)

Thurber expanded some old Fables into his *Fables for Our Time*, whereas a modern feminist Georgiann Carlson has given new twist to traditional fairy tales. "Ms. Carlson has been rewriting the fairy tales and giving them different endings" (Royko, 1990, p. 4). In these rewritten issues, Snow White rescues the prince instead, turns down his proposal, and lives happily as a single woman, while Cinderella turns down her prince's suit, and marries a stable boy instead. In that case, we think, given too much emphasis on the respective independence of men and women, the chances are that peace will be in peril of collapse for good. After all, a good marriage should be based on intimate cooperation of man and woman. Without intimate cooperation, there is no

chance of a peaceful marriage. In fact, not all marriages are like those miserable ones in Thurber's stories and drawings. Thurber "maintained not only that genuine love is possible but that it is the only solution for the human predicament" (Morsberger, 1964, p. 77). In *The Last Flower* (Thurber, 1939), World War X destroys all but one man, one woman, and one flower for them to nurture. "Here we can see Thurber's faith in renewal of life, his feeling for the beauty and fragility of life on earth" (Scholl, 1982, p. 515).

Thurber always perceived woman as strong, vital, and determined as was the model put in "The Race of Life". This recognition of woman's merits is often presented in most of his early works by a sense of fear and horror. In *The Last flower*, however, the Thurber woman moves beyond aggressive domination of her man. At this point, Thurber became increasingly inclined to perceive woman's strength as a positive force which constructs the last hope for the rebirth and continuation of a ruined world. It is apparent that Thurber did not despise either woman or marriage as he suggested woman indeed is the source of life, joy, and love in *The Last flower*.

Conclusion

Nobody can know when the war between men and women will come to an end. Yet we would rather feel the same as Thurber, neither in easy optimism nor in the black despair, and accept his admonition: ".let's not look back in anger, or forward in fear, but around in awareness" (as cited in Scholl, 1982, p. 525). In other words, we should involve ourselves in it and concern ourselves with it. To hope for an end to the war between man and woman is like asking for a definite answer to "Is there a god?" but we believe that man and woman will be getting better and better along with each other, scrupulously dealing with the new hopeful life—the immortal flower they nurture.

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Appendix: A Cartoon from The Thurber Carnival (Thurber, 1945, p. 326)

