

Tales of aggression pacified: A reading of James Thurber's "The Gentleman is Cold" and "The Glass in the Field"

Contos de agressão apaziguados: uma leitura de "The Gentleman is Cold" e "The Glass in the Field" de James Thurber

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ABSTRACT

The American James Thurber (1894-1961) wrote many fictional stories with a strong biographical tone, in which he gracefully exposes real-life circumstances involving different types of interrelations, including insults and abuses, ranging from simple reprovals coming from familiar faces to aggressive comments made by complete strangers. His literature shows, through the attitudes of the characters, ways to deal with such situations in a dignified and respectful manner. It also demonstrates how the world is in constant flow and how actions bring consequences and how antagonists, sometimes, naturally meet their fate. The *corpus* for investigation is composed of the short story "The Gentleman is Cold" and the fable "The Glass in the Field". The scientific literature on the dynamics of aggression and the behavioral studies of perpetrators and victims serves as the methodological framework for the analysis. Results demonstrate how, ultimately, humor and compassion are valid and useful ways to deal with offenses and contempt.

KEYWORDS

James Thurber. "The Gentleman is Cold". "The Glass in the Field". Aggression. Behavior. Fable.

RESUMO

O americano James Thurber (1894-1961) escreveu muitas histórias de ficção com forte tom biográfico, nas quais ele graciosamente expõe circunstâncias da vida real envolvendo diferentes tipos de interrelações, incluindo insultos e abusos, variando de simples reprovações advindas de rostos familiares até comentários agressivos feitos por completos estranhos. A sua literatura mostra, por meio das atitudes dos personagens, maneiras de lidar com tais situações de forma digna e respeitosa. Também demonstra como o mundo está em constante fluxo e como as ações trazem consequências e como os

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antagonistas, às vezes, naturalmente, encontram seu destino. O *corpus* para investigação é composto do conto “The Gentleman is Cold” e da fábula “The Glass in the Field.” A literatura científica sobre a dinâmica da agressão e os estudos comportamentais de perpetradores e vítimas operam enquanto arcabouço metodológico para a análise. Resultados demonstram como, em última análise, o humor e a compaixão são formas válidas e úteis de se lidar com ofensas e menosprezo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

James Thurber. “The Gentleman is Cold”. “The Glass in the Field”. Agressão; Comportamento. Fábula.

INTRODUCTION

James Thurber’s works can serve as cautionary tales about the pitfalls of societal behavior, which makes reading his literature an enriching and educational experience. Encouraging discussions about his texts in a school setting would be a valuable way to enhance learning, thus, it is plausible that this form of exposition could serve as a model to be emulated. Assuming this concept holds true, then mimesis, in fact, holds the potential to both demonstrate exemplary or ideal behavior and facilitate the understanding of an individual’s location in culture. From this, social relations can grow and reading Thurber would prove highly beneficial. The idea, naturally, is not to define or inculcate patterns of behavior, but to use literature as illustrative examples of what to do and of what not to do, “as a matter of presenting youth with literature filled with [...] aspects of [...] experience, economics, language, geography, and manners” (Brown, 1997, p. 115) that are valuable in developmental stages of character formation. Especially when manners, kindness, generosity, and compassion are concerned. This proposition, however, is only logically sound if one accepts the premise that a society benefits and thrives in the presence of compassionate and empathetic individuals.

Samples of that premise are spread all over Thurber’s fiction. The sheer volume of poignant and heartbreaking stories in his collections makes for a deeply moving reading experience on the one hand, and quite enjoyable for many other reasons, on the other. The quite biographical *My World – And Welcome to It* (1942) is a fine instance of such an anthology (and definitely a reading suggestion). One of the reasons Thurber’s literature is so enjoyable is, of course, its humor. His comedic genius enables him to portray social relations that would otherwise be abusive or insulting in a kind and whimsical manner. As Black puts it: “no significant literature can exist which does not reflect somewhat more directly the problems of man and society.” (1970, p. 14) Thurber’s literature does just that

the newer comedians turned their backs on society to seek out the individual, suggesting that the private ordering of experience can make one less vulnerable to external

forces, less subject to the despair and disillusionment which cripple those who depend on public illusions and institutions (Black, 1970, p. 15).

Few writers possess the ability to capture the complex duality of human experience, simultaneously portraying the profound sadness that arises from the disillusionment of hopes and the fragility of established structures, while simultaneously imbuing their work with such vibrant and evocative style. Occasionally Thurber's writing elicits such complex emotional responses that the readers are unsure whether to feel amusement or sorrow. The two narratives investigated in this analysis provide compelling evidence for this complexity; in both, characters who have been doubted and laughed at live to see morally congruent outcomes to their plights, as balance and equanimity eventually prevail.

The short stories that comprise the corpus of analysis are "The Gentleman is Cold" and "The Glass in the Field". The former was originally published in the print edition of the February 2nd, 1935, issue of the *New Yorker*. That same year it featured in the celebrated anthology *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, published by Harper & Brothers in New York; the latter is not actually a short story, but rather a fable (though in length it is, in fact, quite short); "The Glass in the Field" was published for the first time in the print edition of August 26, 1939 issue of the *New Yorker*. The following year it was collected in *Fables for Our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated*.

The objective is to better understand how Thurber's writing deals with confrontational attitudes and how his narrative eventually vindicates events. His stories are not about vengeance or retribution (though some character's behaviors merit that) but are rather about patience and enduring suffering without submissiveness or resignation. This research explores the interplay between subtle aggression and its impact on both perpetrators and victims, seeking to understand its underlying mechanisms. The origin and propulsion motor of the idea comes from: "the need to construct new and more durable means for living with what Thurber calls 'the Awful.'" (Black, 1970, p. 15) – the 'awful' being how people frequently treat each other. It should appeal to those interested in the area of interpersonal relationships, social psychology, social work, school and organization managers, and hopefully, literature students and literary critics.

"THE GENTLEMAN IS COLD" (1935)

"The Gentleman is Cold" is a simple story. It tells of the urban adventures and mishaps of a man who has difficulties wearing a hat and an overcoat, and of how he is harassed simply because of that. It is filled with examples of an assortment of burdensome, unjust, and unnecessary harassments. Many other stories could have been chosen in its stead, but the fact that it is the very first in the captivating collection *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* speaks not only about the randomness of its choice, but also as evidence for the argument that examples of such questionable behavior permeate Thurber's fiction throughout in a very pervasive manner. The subtle forms of aggression can be found in the very first lines of the story:

In the first chill days of November it was the subject of sharp and rather nasty comment on the part of my friends and colleagues that I went about the draughty streets of town without a hat or overcoat. Once even a stranger who passed me in the street snarled, 'Put on your hat and coat!' It seemed to annoy people (Thurber, 1935, p. 13).

The emotional weight of being criticized by someone you know and trust can be overwhelming enough but, once in a while, the admonishment comes from total strangers, and that just adds to the *pathos* and to the poignancy of the narrative. Accusations are frequently accompanied by rationales:

They began to insinuate under their breath, and even come right out and say, that I was simply trying to look strange and different in order to attract attention. This accusation was made with increasing bitterness when my hair, which I always forget to have cut, began to get very long. It was obvious, my friends said, that I walked about the city cold and miserable in the hope that people would nudge their companions and say, 'There goes Jacob Thurman, the eccentric essayist' (Thurber, 1935, p. 13).

The protagonist's unconventional behavior provokes strong negative reactions from those around him. The unkindness (as can be observed in the first excerpt) comes from friends and colleagues. The main argument (in the second passage) is that the protagonist's behavior is enacted with the intention of attracting attention. Something which is not substantiated by any kind of evidence in any part of this specific narrative (nor it will be in other stories of the same anthology which boast similar contexts).

The story is not shy about hinting at its biographical qualities. It keeps its fictional *façade*, however, in instances such as the naming of the character, Jacob Thurman, the writer's self-appointed *nom de guerre*, whose profession is none other than that of an "eccentric essayist" (Thurber, 1935, p. 13), of course.

The narrative does allude, nevertheless, to a veritable *faux pas*, a compassion failure or a compassion deficit in the social interactions among the members of the peer group that surrounds the protagonist (described in the story by the narrator sometimes as friends, sometimes as associates):

A week or so ago, however, the smirking remarks and mean innuendoes of my associates forced me one day to put on my overcoat (I couldn't find my hat and I wouldn't buy a new one, because when I try one on and peer in the triplicate mirrors they have in hat shops, I catch unexpected angles of my face which make me look like a slightly ill professor of botany who is also lost) (Thurber, 1935, p. 13).

The professor of botany allusion can be fetched on a likewise biographical text from the 1933 collection *My Life and Hard Times* entitled "University Days." As the title suggests, the story is a fictionalized account of Thurber's days attending The Ohio State University, where he was a student from 1913 to 1918 (where he wrote for *The Lantern*, the college paper, and was editor-in-chief of *The Sun Dial*, a humor and literary magazine). In the referenced short story, Thurber tells of his botany professor's reaction to the writer's real-life severe sight impairment (reaction that would never be forgotten by Thurber throughout the remainder of his life and would finally be immortalized in this narrative),

all botany students had to spend several hours a week in a laboratory looking through a microscope at plant cells, and I could never see through a microscope. I never once saw a cell through a microscope. This used to enrage my instructor. He would wander around the laboratory pleased with the progress all the students were making [...] until he came to me. I would just be standing there. 'I can't see anything,' I would say. He would begin patiently enough, explaining how anybody can see through a microscope, but he would always end up in a fury, claiming that I could *too* see through a microscope but just pretended that I couldn't (Thurber, 1933, p. 63).

To examine this topic with a focus on its descriptive aspects, rather than its prescriptive implications, it is more efficient to hence separate individuals based on their behavior (whether systematic or circumstantial) into two groups (solely for didactic purposes): Those who are victims and those who are perpetrators.¹ The term 'victim' is rather problematic on the account that it has, in recent history, become a loaded term. For the lack of a better term ('the injured party' seems hardly any better), 'victim' will henceforth be understood exclusively as someone who has suffered as a result of someone else's actions or beliefs, or as a result of unpleasant circumstances.²

Reasons behind the aggressor's (group) behavior are varied. One of the most likely is the need for assertion of power. The same need that can lead an individual to repeatedly and intentionally target another individual he sees as weaker (socially, emotionally, or physically). Age, gender, and social position become risk factors in this subject that should not be overlooked. This kind of behavior also increases the likelihood of diagnoses of psychiatric disorders both in adults and in children (though not exclusively in the victims).³

During the last decade of the 20th century there was an extraordinary rise in interest in the subject of bullying. What had been a largely neglected area of study rapidly became a focus for hundreds of scholars and sundry writers from different parts of the planet. The media fastened on to it. Here was an issue that not only intrigued and challenged empirical researchers, counselors, and theoreticians in psychology, education, and sociology, but also offered some kind of hope to thousands of people for whom bullying was a grim, everyday reality (Rigby, 2002, p. 13).

Perhaps what the aggressors do in the story does not fit standard concepts of bullying (there is no overt ridicule and/or name calling; no physical aggression). Rigby (2002) explains that although some form of aggression is a necessary condition for producing bullying behavior, it is by no means sufficient. He references indirect forms of bullying remembering that as long as 1939, John Dollard already associated aggression with frustration⁴, once: "it

1 Peter Randall, who is an authority on the subject of adult bullying (is senior lecturer at the University of Hull, director of the Family Assessment and Support Unit in the UK, and has interviewed over 200 adult victims and bullies) uses the victim and perpetrator separation as subtitle for his book. Understandably, however, the separation in itself can be problematic due to the possibility of the fluidity of roles in complex and dynamic social contexts (today's perpetrator can become tomorrow's victim and vice-versa).

2 Definition provided by the Collins online dictionary of the English language. Alternatively, "the UK Government Code of Practice for victims of crime acknowledges that the terms 'complainant' and 'survivor' are often used in the criminal justice system to describe a person who has made a criminal allegation to the police. However, for the purpose of this Code, the definition of a 'victim' is: 'A person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offence.' " Full text available at: <https://www.wpsms.org.uk/definitions.html>.

3 Not all researchers agree with the distinction. Some, like Copeland *et al.* (2013) group bullies/victims together as a sort of unit, referred to in their studies with the more encompassing term 'bullying involvement.'

4 Dollard does not mention bullying, but rather aggression. Research on bullying, as is understood in the

has been widely accepted as a reasonable explanation for most, if not all, expressions of anger and aggression” (2002, p. 195).

Though simple, this theory accommodates much complexity within it, yielding the conclusion that some social contexts are more conducive to bullying than others. In the case of children, more bullying occurs when and where there is the least amount of adult supervision.⁵ Among adults, the same rationale does not apply. Randall (2005) clarifies that for adults, bullying occurs mainly in two locations, the workplace and the community. Rigby maintains that “some turn to bullying as a means of breaking the monotony”, others to satisfy “the drive to establish one’s position in the hierarchy” (2002, p. 198).

The experimental literature in the area of social psychology is rife with examples of how the adoption of a role (even in a made-up situation) is favorable for and even promotive of bullying behavior. Classic experiments such as Milgram’s “Behavioral study of obedience” in the 1960s and Zimbardo’s “Pathology of imprisonment” in the 1970s are illustrative cases. Wells, Graham and West’s “The good, the bad, and the ugly” in the 1990s categorized adults into four types:

The ‘good’ - those who intervened to prevent aggression through identifying problem situations and reducing provocative behaviour; the ‘neutral’ - those who failed to anticipate problems but dealt firmly with aggressive behaviour when it arose; the ‘bad’ - those who showed poor judgement and acted unfairly or inconsistently; and the ‘ugly’ - those who were described as actually bullying or harassing patrons, provoking aggression and being physically aggressive (Rigby, 2002, p. 200).

Of the 84 interventions, 29 (*i. e.*, 35%) were categorized by the researchers as ‘ugly.’ Although generalizations in this area are difficult to sustain, examples of aggressive behavior in adults who work as police officers or as military personnel, or even as schoolteachers, are not hard to find (not surprisingly, positions that involve power and the implementation of rules and order).

Studies on obedience carried out after the Second World War (as well as other studies) have shown that, even though it is easy to think that the real bully is the individual who give the orders, and not the compliant executioner, this point is moot:

We are inclined in our rush to judgment to attribute the bullying behaviour of these people to their personalities or characters, rather than to the situations in which they found themselves. It is easy in fact to underestimate the situational pressure that seems to force individuals to act obediently and carry out inhuman orders (Rigby, 2002, p. 200-201).

Less extreme examples (but not less significant) are found in the instances of bullying in the workplace. Workers find themselves under pressure to keep their jobs when policies of downsizing are under way:

present, can be traced back to the 1960s; Prior to that it was referred to as ‘mobbing’ and was described as “collective aggression against others of the same species” (Copeland *et al.*, 2013, p. 419).

⁵ The effects of having such context taken to the highest level can be read about in William Golding’s 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*.

Survival needs may come powerfully to the fore – especially if it is unlikely that another job will be available if one is dismissed. Pressure to ‘bully people out of work’ may be seen to be at the initiative of middle managers who have to deal directly with employees, and gather, or fabricate evidence, to justify a dismissal (Rigby, 2002, p. 203).

This all leads to the question of whether competitive situations create bullies. Those who believe this generally also believe that creating a less competitive and thus more cooperative environment should greatly reduce the problem. The truth is that there are several angles to this issue, and while some of them have been satisfactorily researched, others have not.

Randall (2005) acquiesces that aggression is all too commonplace in modern society, which is both pluralistic and competitive. He recognizes that most people are fortunately spared the lethal violence of a war zone, the constant fear of terrorism and, on occasion, the barbarity that comes with modern crime. Nonetheless, everybody, at some point in their lives, has encountered behavior identifiable as aggressive. Aggression comes in all shapes and sizes. Ranging from verbal unpleasantness, being on the receiving end of rumors or vicious gossip or maybe outright rejection by family or colleagues at work, to the threat of physical violence. In any way it comes, be it as life-threatening violence or as devious harassment, aggression is always a regrettable part of human nature.

The lack of a clear definition is evident. Treating painful physical contact and subtle continuous derogatory glances with the same term has not helped academic research on the matter. The lack of general agreement regarding operational terminology has not stopped researchers, though. One of the points of convergence has to do with the reiteration of behavior. The other factor is the necessary presence of noxious intent.

For descriptive purposes, it is helpful to consider two particular types of aggression as covering, for the most part, the majority of circumstances in which aggression is evident; namely ‘affective aggression’ and ‘instrumental aggression’:

Affective aggression is that which is accompanied by strong negative emotions. Anger is a particular emotional state which stimulates aggressive behaviour, and anger is often thought of as an intervening condition which at first initiates and then guides and maintains aggressive behaviour [and] instrumental aggression, which is behaviour that does not have a strong emotional basis and yet can be extremely aggressive. People may attack others with every intention of harming them without necessarily feeling any anger at their victims. Thus instrumental aggression is a means to some desired end which is other than the intent to cause harm (Randall, 2005, p. 14).

The issue of ‘power’ is central for the understanding of instrumental aggression. And so much so that it has become hard to find any instance where bullying has not involved an imbalance of power (irrevocably in favor of the bully, of course):

The overcoat, which I bought in 1930, after a brief and losing battle with a sharp-tongued clerk who was taller than I am, does not fit me very well and never did fit me very well. That’s one reason I don’t like to wear it (Thurber, 1935, p. 13).

Superior verbal dexterity and an imposing figure (which provides physical clout) are used even by the salesperson to upset the balance of power. The effects involve negative emotional attachment to anything (and to anyone) related to the matter at hand:

Once, in grabbing for my hat [...] I knocked my glasses off [...] right at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-fourth Street [and] couldn't see a thing. Several people stopped and watched the struggle without offering to help until finally, when everybody had had his laugh, a woman picked up my glasses and handed them to me. 'Here's your glasses,' [...] I put the glasses on [...] and walked off with as much dignity as I could, leaving my hat swirling along the street under the wheels of traffic (Thurber, 1935, p. 13).

Importantly, even bystanders are not immune; nor are they innocent from its occurrence (Vanderbilt; Augustyn, 2010). The effects of remarks and innuendos such as those seen in Thurber's story can be wide reaching. They can impact school life, the work environment, familial and peer relationships, psychological well-being, and physical health (Brank *et al.*, 2012). Randall put it best when he stated that "the scourge of workplace, community and family, adult bullies create polluted environments where self-esteem withers, confidence is lost and talents are stifled" (2005, p. 7). He explains that the term 'bullying' is almost detrimental to academic studies of the issue, mainly due to its strong association with childhood and school difficulties: "This leads to it being denied as a stressful circumstance within the realities of adult life. 'It may happen to children but it doesn't happen to grownups' could well be the underpinning attitude" (2005, p. 15). Fortunately, psychologists, social workers and academics of all walks of academia have demonstrated serious scientific interest in the subject. Always with a disposition to offer assistance, relief, guidance and support for the victims. One of the worse things that can happen to victims, and that do happen, is not being taken seriously by the people they confide in:

Victims are often not dealt with in a supportive fashion; instead of being assisted in freeing themselves of the attention of the bully they are often expected to 'pull themselves together' and 'not take any nonsense'. What to a victim may seem to be a horrendous, stressful form of persecution may to the observer be nothing more than two or more people who do not get on together (Randall, 2005, p. 15).

The man who does not like to wear an overcoat in Thurber's story, Jacob Thurman, only wishes the people who really know him could grasp the extent of the animosity he harbors towards that specific item of clothing. He tells along the course of the story of his various mishaps in several places around town where the accursed overcoat placed him in embarrassing situations:

I would never have brought out all these humiliating revelations had it not been for the fact that even those persons who know me best, for a modest, unassuming man, had really come to believe that I went around town without an overcoat in order to make the same kind of impression that Oscar Wilde made with his sunflower or Sean O'Casey with his brown sweater. I simply want to be mentally at ease, and I have found out after years of experience that I cannot be mentally at ease and at the same time wear an overcoat (Thurber, 1935, p. 16).

Hopefully, the people who really know him will understand that his aversion to that specific piece of attire has nothing to do with a desire to draw attention, but it is a peculiarity meant simply to be respected and endorsed. This kind of 'live and let live' attitude seems to be lacking in the people who made those demeaning remarks at the beginning. The ultimate consequence hinges on how individuals interpret the world and navigate their social relationships.

In the same vein, Copeland *et al.* (2013) admits that bullying is still viewed by some people as simply as a harmless rite of passage and, sometimes, as an inevitable part of growing up. They also note the increase in the risk of adverse outcomes. They include: a) physical health problems; b) behavior and emotional problems; c) depression; d) psychotic symptoms; e) and (in the case of children) poor school achievement.

One of the most distressing outcomes is associated with an increased risk of suicide ideation and suicide attempts. Copeland *et al.* (2013) show some evidence of both victims and bullies being at higher risk for suicide.

Finally, although Thurber is quite open (and many times even humorous) about the various aggressions he suffered in his life, his literature demonstrates the work (even though biographical, fictional all the same) of an individual that does not seem to fit the profile of victim, at least not the kind described as "withdrawn, unassertive, easily emotionally upset, and as having poor emotional or social understanding" (Woods *et al.*, 2009, p. 307). Thurber's writing does not correspond with this delineation. It does not show a withdrawn, unassertive, easily emotionally upset individual, and much less one having poor emotional or social understanding. Quite the contrary. His emotional and social understanding secrete through his words, and thus gifts the world with the most emotional and social understanding characters the most demanding of readers could expect. Thurber's narratives, often unintentionally didactic, also employ the fable format, as explored in the following section.

"THE GLASS IN THE FIELD" (1939)

The setting necessary for the story to unfold is the outdoor work of some builders of a studio in Connecticut. They leave a huge square of plate glass standing upright in a field when one day:

A goldfinch flying swiftly across the field struck the glass and was knocked cold. When he came to he hastened to his club, where an attendant bandaged his head and gave him a stiff drink. 'What the hell happened?' asked a sea gull. 'I was flying across a meadow when all of a sudden the air crystallized on me,' said the goldfinch. The sea gull and a hawk and an eagle all laughed heartily (Thurber, 1940, p. 79).

As expected, humor in Thurber goes a long way. Fables almost always have talking animals - no news there - but a club for birds with attendants who offer first aid and serve alcoholic beverages is a first. The protagonist is the goldfinch. The reaction of the sea gull, the hawk and the eagle, however,

is what is at stake here. They pay no heed to the goldfinch's version of the accounts (though the evidence of the bruises is right in front of them) and immediately discard it, with derision.

But not the swallow. The swallow does not laugh. He listens attentively to the goldfinch's story, for as wild and far-fetched as it might seem. The eagle, the hawk and the seagull, however, dispense their wisdom with the assuredness their experience has provided them:

'For fifteen years, fledgling and bird, I've flown this country,' said the eagle, 'and I assure you there is no such thing as air crystallizing. Water, yes; air, no.' 'You were probably struck by a hailstone,' the hawk told the goldfinch. 'Or he may have had a stroke,' said the sea gull (Thurber, 1940, p. 79).

This type of behavior is uncommon in individuals, whether human or animal, as they typically do not seek others' opinions, unless it is for the purpose of mockery. Nonetheless, they ask for the swallow's opinion, who replies that he thinks the air actually crystallized on the goldfinch, thus validating the goldfinch's narrative. Once again, the reactions of the eagle, the hawk and the sea gull are the focus of attention:

The large birds laughed so loudly that the goldfinch became annoyed and bet them each a dozen worms that they couldn't follow the course he had flown across the field without encountering the hardened atmosphere. They all took his bet; the swallow went along to watch. The sea gull, the eagle, and the hawk decided to fly together over the route the goldfinch indicated. [...] So the three large birds took off together and they hit the glass together and they were all knocked cold (Thurber, 1940, p. 79-80).

Before taking off together and heading for their (karmic) fate, the three big birds instruct the swallow to follow, but he refuses the summoning and thus saves himself from the damage the others are subjected to. The swallow's refusal is what informs the witty moral of the story, *i.e.*, "He who hesitates is sometimes saved" (p. 80). It is Thurber's good-humored way of taking measure of the situation. According to Black:

Thurber's very lack of commitment saves him, for the most part, from the bitterness of Melville or the disillusionment of the later Twain. What we have in Thurber is neither the easy optimism nor the bleak despair. He admonishes us neither to look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness (1970, p. 15-16).

The group laughter, the comfort of group conformity, the ensuing feeling of power converted in exacerbated self-assurance; all these behavioral aspects denote the same tropes used by the perpetrators of bullying described in the previous section. For treating the goldfinch so arrogantly, the big birds finally get their comeuppance. Thurber sees that justice is served, if not in real life, with the real bullies, at least, in his fictional literature.

The fable genre lands itself to this task ideally. As Caruth (1994) puts it: "The fable has long been treated as a kind of stepchild within the broader discipline of folklore where from the beginning it was not distinguished as a separate genre" (1994, p. 225). To study folklore is to meditate on human

social relations. That goes as far back as the study of myths - mythology, for that matter. It is not accidental that one can learn much from human history through the interpretation of myths (Freud believed mythology should be an integral part in the training of young psychoanalysts). After all, there are psychoanalytic metaphors hidden (more or less conspicuously) in the morals and in the lessons brought about by fables:

The fable, through depictions of scenes in everyday life, primarily addresses conscious interpersonal and group conflicts that may frequently involve ethical and moral issues. In contrast, myth reflects the unconscious intrapsychic struggles of the individual and may serve multiple functions, including instinctual gratification, defense, and adaptation (Caruth, 1994, p. 225).

To the psychoanalytic school of thought, fables relate to self-preservative instincts as well as other narcissistic issues. In addition, the fable is not meant to reveal transcendental mysteries of life, but to disclose, in a clever and compelling manner, political and ethical perspectives as part of the human effort to accept and cope with the self in isolation and in civil interactions.

The fable, however, possesses qualities that distinguish it from other kinds of folk narratives. Bettelheim, in his seminal book *The Uses of Enchantment* describes the fable as a cautionary tale that “by arousing anxiety, prevents us from acting in ways which are described as damaging to us...” (1976, p. 38). Furthermore, the use of animals in place of humans is a classic distinctive feature that works so well because:

[...] persons both identify with and emulate representational forms of persons. The power of representation thus derives from the degree of either recognition or desire that a given representation arouses. [...] representations may incite desires and, to govern this phenomenon, stress the familiar aspect of mimesis: The resemblance between reality and representations (Brown, 1997, p. 115).

Some readers do show a predilection for the reflective and reproductive capacity of representation, mainly due to its suggestive power. Not all fables lend themselves easily to instrumentalization for didactic or satirical purposes. Not all fables are, in fact, meant for children in the sense that their content is above a child's extant capacity of comprehension. Some fables tackle issues of alcoholism or political turmoil or war (as the ones present in *Fables for Our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated*). Depending on the age, a child can understand (not exactly in so many words) peer pressure, contempt, ridicule, and/or mockery, and even concepts such as karmic retribution, as is the case with “The Glass in the Field.”

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: ACTS OF COMPASSION

Thurber did not enjoy universal popularity during his lifetime. The situation following his passing in 1961 remains largely unchanged. Though celebrated by some, the American academy and the literary universe are not exactly generous with his legacy either. Complaints about “the apparent exclusion of

Thurber from the canon of American literature” (Black, 1970, p. 7) are not infrequent. Markel claims: “few younger Americans may know the name James Thurber, *let alone* his wonderful work and art” (2020, p. 1). Even his remaining eye, which he willed to science, has disappeared (Ravin, 2002) - and this is not an anecdotal remark, it is a legitimate occurrence.

Perhaps he has received more praise for his humorous drawings than for his writing. During his lifetime, readers of the *New Yorker* loved: “The cartoons - weird, wobbly portrayals of husbands and wives arguing over all sorts of things, wonderful pictures of dogs, and many other creatures - always accompanied by even weirder and funny captions” (Markel, 2020, p. 1). This made him, from the 1920s up to his death in 1961, one of the most famous American humorists.

Those who know his work generally see the significance and the reach of his literature: “Thurber was almost the only comic writer of his generation whose fiction has consistent literary excellence” (Black, 1970). His biography demonstrates that his comedy not only helped him, but also helped others. Besides, comedy can be a writer’s last line of defense.

It is a known fact that the world is a tough place, and that comedy produces relief and generates comfort and sometimes, as previously mentioned, even promotes guidance:

By the turn of this century, the disillusionment which accompanied all the manifestations of progress had begun to influence the new generation of writers [...] The boast of these writers seemed to be: I know that the dream of democracy has foundered, that man is trapped in a hostile universe [...] Being alive was a grimly serious thing; comedy, under these circumstances, seemed almost an impudent repudiation of the newly discovered uncertainty (Black, 1970, p. 13).

Some rebel with violence, some rebel with laughter. Thurber adheres to the latter. In the search for understanding how Thurber deals with polished harassment in his fiction, the scientific literature on aggression (and how it works for both victims and perpetrator) offered original insight with which to examine the two stories chosen to comprise the *corpus* of investigation. Both “The Gentleman is Cold” and “The Glass in the Field” deal with insults and derision. At the same time, they are educational classes in compassion and tolerance.

Thurber also wrote many fables. Both traditionally and conceptually, fables have a moral at their endings. The moral from fables is generally different from the moral philosophers’ study, which is often paired with ethics (and usually these operational terms are defined in the beginning, so that the reader knows what the writer is - and is not - invoking when using that term elsewhere in the text). The point about morality, which is coincidentally one of the polysemous elements it shares with ethics, is that “both terms are concerned with ideas of right and wrong; with good and bad actions, outcomes and/or intentions. What makes something a matter of morals or ethics is that it is evaluated by proscriptive or prescriptive norms” (Clayton; Myers, 2015, p. 131). What is interesting here is not so much the proscriptive (prohibitive) part, but the prescriptive (and that, not in its obligatory aspect), in it being a

matter of duty. This feature of the concept paves the way to another quality which is closer to the present analysis: the concept of ‘supererogatory,’ an adjective used to describe actions that are considered ‘beyond the call of duty,’ e.g. acts of compassion, like picking up the eyeglasses from the street and handing them back to its rightful owner.

And that is what Thurber’s fiction does. It involuntarily and graciously teaches the attentive reader that which is supererogatory. And teaches it by example. There are actions which are praiseworthy and are endowed with special significance. Thurber was kind enough to show his readers of all ages some of what these actions are.

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