

James Thurber's Humor and Pathos

- His Works during the Great Depression -

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ジェームス・サーバーのユーモアとペーソス

- 大恐慌時代の作品の分析 -

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大恐慌時代、アメリカ文学的ユーモアが繁栄し一世を風靡した。この時代に代表されるユーモア作家としてジェームス・サーバーが上げられる。彼はこの経済的乱世に数多くの作品を残している。サーバーの作品の中には、家族という組織内の妻と夫の役割の移り変わり、この転換期におけるアメリカ労働者の役割などの要素が含まれている。ここでは、サーバーの作品を通して大恐慌時代にアメリカ文学的ユーモアがどのように展開し、アメリカの意識の変化とその形成にたずさわったかを考察する。

. The Great Depression

America's Great Depression is regarded as having begun in 1929 with the Stock Market Crash, and ended in 1941 with America's entry into World War

. The Stock Market Crash isn't only the cause of the Depression but also hoarding money, the gold standard, malinvestment, etc. The Great Depression was by no means the first depression America ever had, but it was clearly the worst. The Great Depression was the worst economic slump ever in U.S. history, and one, which spread to the entire industrialized world.

The extensive stock market speculation and the resulting stock market crashes acted as a trigger to the already unstable U.S. economy. Due to the maldistribution of wealth, the economy of the 1920s was one very much dependent upon confidence. The market crashes undermined this confidence. The rich stopped spending on luxury items, and slowed

investments. The middle class and the poor stopped buying things with installment credit for fear of losing their jobs, and not being able to pay the interest. As a result jobs were lost, and soon people starting defaulting on their interest payment. Radios and cars bought with installment credit had to be returned. All of the sudden warehouses were piling up with inventory. The thriving industries that had been connected with the automobile and radio industries started falling apart. Without a car people did not need fuel or tires; without a radio people had less need for electricity.

On the international scene, the rich had practically stopped lending money to foreign countries. With such tremendous profits to be made in the stock market nobody wanted to make low interest loans. To protect the nation's businesses the U.S. imposed higher trade barriers. Foreigners stopped buying American products. More jobs were lost, more stores were closed, more banks went under, and more

factories closed. Unemployment grew to five million in 1930, and up to thirteen million in 1932.⁽¹⁾ The country spiraled quickly into catastrophe. The Great Depression had begun.

In the Great Depression the American dream had become a nightmare. What was once the land of opportunity was now the land of desperation. The American people were questioning isms on which they had based in their lives – democracy, capitalism, and individualism. The depression began in late 1929 and lasted for about a decade. The main cause for the Great Depression was said to be the combination of the greatly unequal distribution of wealth and the extensive stock market speculation as mentioned earlier. The maldistribution of wealth in the 1920s existed on many levels. Money was distributed disparately between the rich and the middle class, between industry and agriculture within the United States, and between the U.S. and Europe. This imbalance of wealth created an unstable economy. The excessive speculation in the late 1920s kept the stock market artificially high, but eventually lead to large market crashes. These market crashes, combined with the maldistribution of wealth, caused the American economy to capsize. This imbalance of wealth created an unstable economy.

The financial emergency created by the stock market collapse in 1929 led to the Great Depression. This made close to a third of the nation undergo the devastating psychological dilemma of long-term unemployment. By the mid 1930s, millions of Americans had bottomed out on the last stage and could not foresee a time when their lives would change for the better.

The arts and literature, like everything else, in the 30s, were dominated by the Great Depression, too. The wealth of land and opportunity in America provided a perfect outlet for humor. Although the road to

recovery was definitely arduous, humor offered an alternative cure for many. Many writers including James Thurber busied themselves to restructure America with humor as their tool. James Thurber's humor culminated during this period. "Laughter of despair"⁽²⁾ became a trademark of many of the Depression writers.

. Humor to James Thurber

Humor is a medium, which gives literature a form. It penetrates in national life, and strongly sticks to the elements in the life. To James Thurber humor was an expedient way to express his feeling. He was a funny, delightful and favorable man. As many books written about James Thurber have mentioned, his sense of humor came from his mother and his grandmother. Many people admire his unique gifts as a writer. He carried through being an important role to play in pointing out the absence of goodness and intelligence in the world.

Thurber's sense of humor was extraordinary. He had his own style of humor. He found humor to be a very serious thing. Thurber's wry sense of humor showed great sensitivity to human fears and follies. He once said that humor was emotional chaos remembered in tranquility.⁽³⁾ Humor turns to misery with time. Humor is what happens when you describe something awful and confusing after some time has passed and you are finally able to laugh about it. Emotional chaos is a typical James Thurber's idea. Here is a man who wants his world orderly, safe and sane. Of course, during the Depression the world is crazy and chaotic, and doesn't slow down for anyone. Although within that moment of emotional chaos, such a man would be upset and unhappy; however, later when he tells of what happened, he can add details to the story. When he relieves the event, he will discover how ridiculous the whole story was.

Thurber's humor increasingly reflected the growing feeling among American men that their wives wished to subdue their husbands. In his famous "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," the husband is prone to daydreaming and escapes to an imaginary world where his skill and daring beat all odds. Thurber said that Mitty was based on "every other man I have ever known."⁽⁴⁾ His technique of humor is to find a way for the person narrating the event to be exactly the wrong person to be participating in the event. When millions of battered husbands all over the world associated with the hapless character, it brought Thurber worldwide recognition. His skills at drawing cartooning, to embellish his own writings, proved to be the icing on the literary cake.

. Pathos to James Thurber

Pathos, a multifaceted Greek word, is often translated as passion or emotion. However this too is an insufficient rendering of the full meaning of the word. Other facets include experience, soul and intuition. In the religious realm, both passion and emotion are necessary to live wholly and completely. These experiences are vital and hold significance in our lives.

Pathos linguistically means the quality or property of anything which touches the feelings or excites emotions and especially that which awakens tender emotions, such as pity, sorrow, and the like; contagious warmth of feeling, action, or expression; pathetic quality; as, the pathos of a picture, of a poem, or of a cry.⁽⁵⁾ Pathos is a quality in life or art that evokes pity, sadness, or compassion. Pathos is an argument based on emotion, playing on sympathy, fears, and desires. Pathos is suffering experience and emotion.

Pathos works effectively when it draws up the

sympathies and emotions of the readers causing them to accept the ideas, propositions, or calls to action.⁽⁶⁾ James Thurber effectively used pathos transformed into humor, to entertain his readers. Pathos of men depicted by James Thurber is similar to today's man. Men are always lonely. Men can't stand being alone, and always need company. Along with the radical development of IT, it becomes much easier to communicate with others. The diffusion of cellular phones makes people available to others, whom they have never met. People can become acquainted with strangers, and make friends through cellular phones. Are they veritable friends? The answer to this question is no. Solitude of a man is the basis of man's pathos.

Thurber's humor came from pathos, which must come from his childhood experience and the lessons of both his first and second marriages. He blended pathos with laughter. To him pathos was a means to represent humor. Ultimately, pathos could be apex of humor. Humor derived from pathos makes the most ironic and best humor.

There are many stories with pathos, which eventually turn into Thurber's ultimate. Thurber expressed the pathos of human life in his works. He was too shy to openly show his feeling towards pathos even if he had wished to. He escaped into a world of humor. He combined humor with the deepest pathos. Fables abound in humor as well as pathos, and show the delicate insight of men. He perfected the art of plucking humor from daily life.

James Thurber was in pathos of the first marriage. He experienced a sorrowful life. Although he mentioned that Walter Mitty in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" was based on every other man he had ever known, Walter Mitty could be James Thurber himself. Though he wouldn't want to admit it, the story reflects on his life. Walter Mitty's life as well

as James Thurber's life applies to an image of present-men or husbands. As if he proposes to men not to take women seriously but make fun of them and themselves.

"Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven."⁽⁷⁾ Mark Twain placed such aphorism in *Following the Equator*. Mark Twain wrote it during a dark period in his life. Twain's publishing house had failed and he entered bankruptcy before he left, and his daughter Susy died while he was on his tour. He, too, saw humor in pathos. He knew a thing or two about both humor and suffering. James Thurber did seek something upon which to throw off his burden. Humor is the most powerful force for change in the world.

. James Thurber during the Great Depression

Within the realm of human behavior, humor is a form of delight somewhere between the sigh of relief and the tears of joy. Humor is the sudden awareness of an alternative construction of a distressful situation, which dissipates that distress. Humor is the discovery of safety within fear, just like laughter is relaxation from stress. Some people may cry when another falls; other people may laugh at another's misfortune.

Humor is appropriate during times of crisis. The economic troubles of the decade gave rise to one of the richest periods of American humor. Part of what makes humor so powerful is the fact that it nearly always deals with pain. Writers used humor to diffuse its effects. It's probably best to find humor in ways that help us take our minds off the tragedies of our time, like James Thurber did for Americans during the Great Depression. Literary humor evolved during the Depression and how in conjunction with

the Depression it helped shape and change the American consciousness.

Humor during the Great Depression reflects the changing roles of husbands and wives within the family, the reinforcement or rejection of traditional ethnic stereotypes in racial humor, the questioning of the validity of the opinions or sentiments of America's professionals, and the role American labor played or was expected to play during the national crisis.

The rise of literary humor in the writings of James Thurber and others are considered as an alternative to the economic and political solutions offered to battle the Great Depression of the 1930s. William Schechter, a writer of African American humor, wrote in his book *The History of Negro Humor in America*, "The slave eased himself into a pattern of becoming a comic creature. . . a simple, obedient, obsequious soul."⁽⁸⁾ People find humor in their financially, physically, and mentally difficult times.

James Thurber wrote about the absurdity of life in the world where there is a little hope and everything is determined. James Thruber fused tragedy and comedy. Black humor shares some traits with theatre of the absurd, satire, existentialism, surrealism, and Southwestern humor, but it is distinguishable from them.⁽⁹⁾ Thurber's humor is darker and more bitter. Irony of fate is his typical feature. His works combine pathos and humor while revealing how absurdity and predictably man behaves when faced with the possibility of receiving good fortune.

As individuals we tend to experience humor by either "getting it" which tends to be cognitive or intellectual response, by feeling it, which tends to be an emotional response, or by laughing at it, which is more of a physiological response. There is a wide range of experiences in life that are humorous. Like beauty being in the eyes of the beholder, humor is in the

“funny bone” of the receiver of the experience.

In “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” he uses the black humorist technique of blurring the line between dreams and reality. He suggests that what people think of as reality is actually nothing more than a bad dream. Thurber's humor is emblematic of his view of life as a mixture of lightness and darkness, joy and sorrow, humor and tragedy, happiness and sadness.

The term “black humor” may be defined as a literary mode containing stylistic, structural, and thematic elements that may elicit laughter and tears simultaneously from the reader by presenting events or situations that are at once humorous, absurd, and horrible.⁽¹⁰⁾

During the Depression 25 percent of American's labor force unemployed, close to two hundred thousand children abandoned and homeless, and over seven hundred thousand vagrants in search of a job or a home.⁽¹¹⁾ The terrific growth of humor during the thirties has been well documented. Humor's unique ability allowed the readers a means by which it could defuse the anxieties plaguing them.

The Depression created tyrants and heroes. The heroes were essentially doomed men, unable to achieve their objectives. Walter Mitty of “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” could be one of those. The message always had to be clear and direct because it had to be truthful and from the heart.

. The Background and Significance of Thurber's Works

James Thurber crafted pessimistic outlook in his humor, but it tends to be a bit more internal and psychological in focus. His panoramatic view was subtle dialogues between men and women and even human and animals dealing with this age of the

Depression. For Thurber, it is an age of that has forgotten how to laugh or laugh properly. He pointed this in one of his stories from *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* titled “The Funniest Man You Ever Saw” considered to be the sweet anguish. The story is humorous antics of the main character “Jack Klohman” and reflects the aforementioned melancholy view of life. Unlike the title, he isn't funny at all. As the story goes, all his jokes are not funny, and tired. He is nothing but a bore. However ironically his weary jokes make him the center of attention. This story became a big hit in the 1930s. Times accepted Jack Klohman. During the Great Depression, people could laugh at anything, no matter how tired and stale it is.

Another story in *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, “One is Wanderer,” displays an even darker side of the Great Depression – loneliness. The protagonist, Mr. Kirk, finds himself at the crossroad of his life, which is the “midlife crisis.” He encounters the mixed feeling and confusion. His crisis reflects not only his own life and the world where he lives but also Thurber's mental anxiety and bouts with depression. The story begins with “The walk up Fifth Avenue through the slush of the sidewalks and the darkness of the air had tired him.”⁽¹²⁾ The darkness represents the Great Depression and the slush of the sidewalks depicts people out of work being at a loss on the street. The hotel room where Mr. Kirk is staying is in disorder. His soiled shirts piled up on the floor of the closet, his papers disarranged on the top of the tables and on the desk and his pipes lying around. The room is like the world in the Depression – Chaotic, utterly and confused.

Like thousands of people who were unemployed or disposed by the Depression, Mr. Kirk is wandering the streets of the city, and becomes a frequenter of bars, conversing bartenders, hotel clerks and taximan. All

his solicitous are strictly personal. He wonders if he would be welcome in the company of any of his married friends. However he decides not to bother their evening because he doesn't want to spoil their conjugal happiness. He also doesn't receive any messages or phone calls; therefore, he doesn't have anybody to visit. He has two characteristics, an analyzer and a rememberer, that dominated in the politics and social consciousness of the mid 30s. Hence in the end, he isn't an unhappy man in the city. It isn't a reflection of any personal dilemma for Thurber either. It is a document of the decade and sense of futility that underlay the most frantic efforts for recovery.

This sense of futility can be found in escapism in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," a story from *My World and Welcome to It*. Walter Mitty is often viewed as Thurber's exponent of the henpecked husband. I think Walter Mitty is undefeated as it says in the story. In "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," the main character's secret life is an opposite of his real life. In Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," which in 1947 was made into a classic movie starring Danny Kaye, a timid middle-aged man, dominated by his wife, creates a fantasy world in which he is an intrepid pilot, a brilliant surgeon, a brave soldier -- all life situations much more appropriate to his true inner nature than the dull existence he really has. In the following excerpt, Mitty is driving his car and simultaneously daydreaming that he is a world famous surgeon: "A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. 'The new anesthetizer is giving way!' shouted an intern. 'There is no one in the East who knows how to fix it!' 'Quiet, man!' said Mitty, in a low cool voice. He sprang to the machine, which was now going pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-queep. He began fingering delicately with a row of glistening dials. 'Give me a fountain pen!' he snapped. Someone handed him a

fountain pen. He pulled a faulty piston out of the machine and inserted the pen in its place. 'That will hold for ten minutes,' he said. 'Get on with the operation. . . .' -- 'Back it up, Mac! Look out for that Buick!' Walter Mitty jammed on the brakes. 'Wrong lane, Mac,' said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely."⁽¹³⁾

The "pocketa-pocketa-pocketa" noise of the anesthetizer in Mitty's daydream actually emerges from the sound of the automobile he is driving. Mitty's daydreaming also gains comic power from its grandiosity; nothing in the everyday personality of Walter Mitty would ever enable him to be the bold and fearless surgeon, or the intrepid bomber pilot, of his imagination. Yet through tiny connections like engine noises, Mitty's "real" world and his "fantasies" have melded into one, which is in fact the only way Mitty keeps sane. The world of his illusions fulfills his spirit as his daily life does not.

Real sanity, Thurber suggests, comes from the ability to bring both worlds together -- to use the creative faculties we practice in our fantasy life into our "real" one. This is the place in which we leave Walter Mitty at the end of his story -- for one brief, shining moment the two halves of his life have conjoined as he dismisses his wife so he can finish his daydream -- and even though we know his groundedness is as illusory and as temporary as the phantasms of all his other lives, it is a good place to be while it lasts.

Walter indulges in extravagant daydreams, wherein he performs prodigious feats of courage and skill. Reading a humdrum shopping list transforms the innocuous young man into fighter pilot or a surgeon saving a patient's life. All this takes place while he is waiting for a traffic light to change.

We all lead a double life: an outer life that is visible to the entire world, and an inner life we can't share with

anybody even if we want to. There are many who would deny the reality of consciousness.

During the Depression the changing roles of husbands and wives can be seen. Taking a look at one of Thurber's most popular cartoon titled "Seal in the Bedroom," it is clear. A seal perches on the headboard of the married couple's bed. The husband hears the seal barked but the wife doesn't. While she doesn't believe in him, he maintains his claim that he has just heard a seal bark. She gets irritated by his attitude and yelled at him, "All Right, Have It Your Way –You Heard a Seal Bark!," which is the drawing caption.

A seal is really there, and the absurdity of its presence on the headboard is expected to enjoy. Paying attention to the seal, it has very fresh, youthful and appealing look contrary to the married couple. Their wedlock becomes mediocre and dull. Although they aren't attracted to each other, they don't intend to get divorce. The wife gets shrewish with the husband; however, they are still together. The wife is comfortable with him and vice versa; therefore, they can be mean to their partner.

Thurber sees realism in her. She expects reality to conform to reasonable assumptions. The married couple is presumably representatives of the average, middle-class, American couple of their age.

. James Thurber as Literary Humorist

James Thurber contributed to the growing preoccupation with the modern man, specifically married man, when he consolidated his views in one major work of 1935, *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*. Thurber prefers not to concentrate on the modern man's interrelationships with the physical, natural, and social world around him. For Thurber, the world is primarily domestic and

dominated by women who enjoy their superiority over their spouses.

One way they are superior is verbally. Unlike the women in former time who rarely spoke unless they were spoken to, the modern women are determined to exert themselves. Although a woman may not be able to exceed her husband physically, she can make him stupid or silly by using language verbally.

James Thurber among other literary humorists such as Benchley composed a distinctive genre dealing with the "little man." His principal characters were unknown, unheroic little people who came to difficulty because of social or economic circumstances beyond their control. Even if the "little man" became successful or powerful, his success was marred by an evil within the system he couldn't control. For the humorists such as Thurber, there was only one way out, which was humor.

The literary humorists such as Thurber attacked what family was during the age of the paterfamilias. Values had changed, and the roles traditionally played by men and women had shifted. Some of the changes were considered as beneficial while other were not. However all were unpredictable, and set the foundation for ideologies and beliefs. Thurber showed us in his works, the best way to weather through these turbulent times was with a sense of humor. H. L. Mencken observed that a sense of humor was the indispensable attribute of any successful marriage. "woman who is amused by her husband, even if her amusement involves condescension, is not going to end by hating him. Nor is the man going to hate his wife who finds a trace of clownishness in her"⁽¹⁴⁾

Notes

(1) Gusmorino

- (2) Gates, p. 8
- (3) Wilson, p. 12
- (4) Grauer, p. 77
- (5) Parks, p.1051
- (6) Covino, p. 17
- (7) Twain, p. 119
- (8) Schechter, p. 41
- (9) Mandia, Preface v
- (10) Mandia, p. 1
- (11) Gates, Preface x
- (12) Thurber, p.196
- (13) Thurber, pp. 56-57
- (14) Hicks, p. 229

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