

James Thurber

“The Day the Dam Broke” and Other Stories

Overview

James Thurber’s book, *My Life and Hard Times*, may just be the shortest (and funniest) autobiography ever written. In this book, Thurber tells far-fetched tales of his eccentric family and his youth in Columbus, Ohio. Using these stories as a model, students will write humorous stories about their own families or friends. They will learn about the elements of humor writing (“what makes a story funny”), as well as plot, setting, character development, and parody. They will also have opportunities to write and illustrate their own stories and fables, mirroring Thurber’s style.

Getting Started

Lesson Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Write a humorous story and analyze its use of the elements of humor
- Write an essay that compares and contrasts the use of humor in multiple stories
- Rewrite a Thurber story to demonstrate the relationship between setting and plot
- Write a story or poem that demonstrates personification
- Write a fable inspired by another work

Grade Level Indicators

In meeting the above lesson objectives, students will:

- A** Use the text to demonstrate reading comprehension strategies, including the ability to make predictions, compare and contrast, point out any gaps or contradictions, and make inferences
- D** Identify and explain the writer’s technique in describing characters, characters’ interactions and conflicts, and how these interactions and conflicts affect the plot
- E** Identify and analyze the importance of setting (time, place, and situation) in relation to other literary elements of the text (plot, character development, etc.)

F Identify the main and minor events of the plot, and explain how each incident leads to the next

G Generate writing ideas through discussions with others and from printed material, and keep a list of writing ideas

Reading Strategies

Setting a Purpose, Visualizing, Activating Prior Knowledge, Comparing and Contrasting Multiple Texts

Time Required: 11 class periods or more

This lesson is designed to be used in its entirety or in part. The first class should be devoted to writing humorous family stories, and introducing the elements of humor and James Thurber's life and writing. This instruction will provide background for any or all of the Thurber works you choose to teach. Instruction for each story asks students to find examples of the elements of humor. Teaching multiple stories will reinforce learning and give students the opportunity to compare and contrast the writer's technique in each. Teaching the fables also incorporates parody, another element of humor.

Activity	Pacing	Activity	Pacing
Introduction to the Lesson (1 class period)		"The Night the Ghost Got In" (2 class periods)	
Write Now! Family Story.....	25 minutes	Read the Story.....	20 minutes
Discuss Elements of Humor.....	20 minutes	Discuss Elements of Humor.....	25 minutes
"The Day the Dam Broke" (3 class periods)		Compare and Contrast Stories.....	20 minutes
Making Predictions.....	5 minutes	Assessment.....	25 minutes
Read the Story.....	25 minutes	"The Dog That Bit People" (2 class periods)	
Discuss Setting.....	15 minutes	Make Predictions; Introduce Story....	15 minutes
Discuss Elements of Humor.....	15 minutes	Read the Story.....	20 minutes
Early 1900s Columbus Background....	20 minutes	Discuss Elements of Humor.....	25 minutes
Review Venn Diagrams.....	10 minutes	Writing Activity.....	30 minutes
Write Now! Short Story.....	25 minutes	Fables: "The Little Girl and the Wolf" and "The Unicorn in the Garden" (2 class periods)	
Assessment.....	20 minutes	Present Background on Fables.....	20 minutes
"The Night the Bed Fell" (1 class period)		Read the Fables.....	15 minutes
Read the Story.....	20 minutes	Discuss Elements of Humor.....	20 minutes
Discuss Elements of Humor.....	25 minutes	Writing/Illustration of Fables.....	20 minutes
		Assessment.....	15 minutes

Materials Needed

- Overhead projector, chalkboard, or whiteboard
- Folders for storing Thurber materials
- Student copies of "The Day the Dam Broke" (found in this lesson)

- Student copies of the Short Fiction Glossary (found on page 196 of this Instructor’s Guide)
- Stories and fables not included in this lesson: “The Night the Bed Fell,” “The Night the Ghost Got In,” “The Dog That Bit People,” “The Little Girl and the Wolf,” and “The Unicorn in the Garden”

Additional Resources

- (optional) Access to computers with word processing and printing capability
- (optional) Internet access
- (optional) The *Ohio Reading Road Trip* DVD/videocassette and DVD player or VCR

Prepare to Learn

Elements of Humor

Have students take notes during the following instruction on the elements of humor.

Surprise: unexpected or out-of-the-ordinary events in a story that keep it from being predictable and often make a story humorous. For example, a group of characters having a conversation about what they will eat for lunch would be surprised if a bear suddenly walked into the room and started dancing. The reader would be surprised as well.

Exaggeration: overstatement or magnification of a situation; for example, someone might say, “I need a truck to carry all of my homework!” instead of a more literal statement like “I have more homework than usual tonight.”

Situational Irony: Irony is the use of words or actions to express the opposite of what the character or narrator really means. Situational irony is the form of irony found in many of Thurber’s stories. It occurs when a character’s actions do not match what we expect him or her to do. For example, we laugh when a puppy outwits its owners because we expect humans to be smarter than their pets.

Differentiated Learning: Additional Instruction

If students have difficulty understanding the concept of irony, **then** brainstorm examples found in television shows, movies, cartoons, song lyrics, etc.

To get their ideas to flow, ask students to offer an example of a character from a book, a television show, or a movie. Write the character’s name on the board, and then make three columns beneath the name, labeled “Role,” “Expectations,” and “How Character is Different.” For “Role,” ask students to name the job or identity the character is known for, such as *teacher*, *mother*, *student*, *doctor*, etc. For the “Expectations” column, ask students to brainstorm predictable behavior or attitudes associated with people who occupy that role. For example, students might say a teacher is expected to be professional, concerned about his or her students, interested in learning, etc. Finally, have students offer details about how the character in question deviates from expectation. Add these details to the “How Character is Different” column.



TEACHING TIP

The stories and fables not reprinted in this lesson appear in “The Thurber Carnival” by James Thurber (Perennial Press, 1999, ISBN# 0060932872). The stories (but not the fables) can also be found in “My Life and Hard Times” by James Thurber (HarperPerennial Press, 1999, ISBN# 0060933089).



TECHNOLOGY LINK

Visit the Ohio Reading Road Trip at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/thurber.html> for more information about James Thurber’s life and Thurber House, the organization in Columbus that is dedicated to the author and his works.

Tell students that irony occurs when characters do something that is the opposite of what we expect them to do, based on what we've already learned about people who share all or some of their characteristics. Point out that, in order for these actions to be ironic, we have to have certain pre-determined expectations about them. Otherwise, a character's actions may be funny, but not ironic. You may wish to repeat this activity using other characters to reinforce the concept.

Write Now!

Ask each student to write a humorous story that has been passed down in his or her family, or one in which he or she has taken part. As students read their stories aloud in groups of three or four, ask them to look for similarities that make the stories funny. Have students identify any elements of humor found in the stories by asking them to think not only about *what* is funny, but also about *why* something is funny. Keep track of these examples on the board.

"The Day the Dam Broke"

Prepare to Read

Using the book, an overhead transparency, or another source, show students the illustration "Two Thousand People Were in Full Flight" from the story "The Day the Dam Broke." Ask them to make inferences based on what they see, in order to predict what they think the story will be about.

After students have learned all vocabulary words, distribute copies of the story. As you read aloud, ask students to look for details that set the stage. (Details: 1913 flood in Ohio, cook stove, newsboy, a little old lady in "an electric," harness shops, rebel dogs, militiamen, motor lorries, the piano in the orchestra pit playing while a W.S. Hart picture is shown, all cars had to be cranked, etc.)

Elements of Humor

Ask students to review their notes and find examples of each element of humor.

Base class discussion on the examples that students volunteer, such as:

Surprise: Dr. Mallory, fearing for his life, is surprised when the "rushing water" he hears behind him is actually the sound of roller skates. Aunt Edith is surprised by the doctor's lack of composure.

Exaggeration: 1. "We were passed, in the first half-mile, by *practically everyone in the city*." This is most likely an overstatement. 2. When Grandfather takes charge, directing people to the east, he likely does not carry a child in one arm and "a slightly clerkish man of perhaps forty-two" in the other. 3. Dr. Mallory was "expecting the cold frothing waters of the Scioto to sweep him into *oblivion*," but even a raging river could not erase the doctor from everyone's memory.



"The Day the Dam Broke"

assuage
authentication
clarion
coherent
conviction
demoralized
desperado
dispel
engulf
ennobled
exhort
grotesque
inert
oblivion
placid
portly
prophet
refuge
rout
seething
sheepish
thoroughfare
throng
trifle
turmoil

Definitions for these words can be found in the Short Fiction Glossary on page 196.



Strategies for using vocabulary words are found on page 184 of this Instructor's Guide.

A test for "The Day the Dam Broke" can be found at the end of this lesson.

Situational Irony: Since adults usually scold young people for going along with the crowd and for jumping to far-fetched conclusions, the adults in the story do the opposite of what one might expect. Dr. Mallory's behavior is ironic because we generally expect doctors to be calm and composed.

Write Now!

Ask each student to write a two-paragraph response that compares and contrasts Thurber's use of humor with the family story that the student wrote at the beginning of this lesson. Ask students to address how the setting of each story affected the plot.

Homework

Working individually or as a class, have students create a Venn diagram that compares life in Columbus in the 1910s with life there now. Have students consult almanacs, census data, and other sources to locate statistics about the population, the size of the city, the types of industry in which people worked, and other interesting information that can be used to compare and contrast the two time periods.

Display the finished Venn diagrams in the classroom.

Write Now!

Based on what they have learned while doing research for their Venn diagrams, students will write their own version of the story "The Day the Dam Broke," set in the present day. To help them get started, ask students to talk about ways in which information is communicated today. They will likely talk about the Internet and cell phones as options for sharing information quickly. Others may mention television news broadcasts that many people may see. Tell students that when Thurber and his family fled the "flood," television was not yet invented, and would not be invented for more than 25 years.

Students should write their first drafts and hold peer conferences in small groups to share their stories and seek suggestions from other students. They will then revise their drafts and proofread them. Have students share stories orally and put final drafts in classroom collection notebooks for all to read.

"The Night the Bed Fell"

Depending on the time available, have students read the story aloud or independently. While the primary focus of this lesson is the use of humor in the works of James Thurber, the stories lend themselves well to discussions of literary concepts like plot and setting. The worksheet found at the end of this lesson, "Short Story and Humor Elements," contains questions about these terms as well as the elements of humor.

Elements of Humor

Ask students to review their notes on the elements of humor and then find examples of each in the story. Base class discussion on the examples that students volunteer, such as:



"The Night the Bed Fell"

allay
batter
camphor
chloroform
crotchet
dissuade
endeavor
extricate
fortitude
ominous
passel
perilous
premonition
pungent
racket
recitation
verisimilitude

Definitions for these words can be found in the Short Fiction Glossary on page 196.

Surprise: At the end of the story, Thurber’s father emerges from the attic, having no idea that the house was in a panic over his safety.

Exaggeration: Many members of the Thurber family (Briggs, Aunt Melissa, Aunt Sarah) have phobias that they deal with in far-fetched ways.

Situational Irony: Thurber, whose cot did fall on him, slept through the crash. This is the opposite of what we would expect because of his mother’s belief that a fallen bed almost certainly means death, and also because of the commotion that the crash caused.

“The Night the Ghost Got In”

After they have learned all vocabulary words, have students read “The Night the Ghost Got In,” taking turns reading aloud.

Students will likely be surprised by the turn of events in this story. Because it begins at one o’clock in the morning, readers will probably expect very little to happen in the house. After all, everyone but Thurber is asleep. As they read, ask students to keep track of their reactions to the events that unfold. After students read, ask: *Are you surprised by anything, especially since the story occurs in the “calm hours” of the night?*

Students might react to the speed at which things happen. The plot in this story moves very quickly, based on the chaotic situation in the Thurber home. Ask students to point out events that occur very quickly, such as:

- Thurber hears footsteps downstairs as he is getting out of the bathtub. He listens for a few minutes but does not have time to get dressed. He spends most of the story wrapped in a bathrobe until he hastily grabs one of his mother’s blouses to wear.
- Mrs. Bodwell, who lives next door, says, “We’ll sell the house and go back to Peoria,” when Mrs. Thurber throws a shoe through the window to get the Bodwells’ attention.
- The cops break through the front door so quickly that it seems like they didn’t even knock first.

Elements of Humor

Ask students to review their notes on the elements of humor and then find examples in the story. Base class discussion on the examples that students volunteer, such as:

Surprise: Grandfather seemed to have no recollection of shooting a police officer, but after sitting a while at breakfast, he said, “What was the idee of all them cops tarryhootin’ around the house last night?” That he could sit there so calmly takes the family, and the reader, by surprise.

Exaggeration: The force with which the cops searched the Thurbers’ closets and drawers seems far-fetched. They probably didn’t “ransack the floor,” but it might have felt that way to the family, who weren’t comfortable with strangers rifling through their possessions.

Situational Irony: Mrs. Thurber’s desire to throw a shoe through a neighbor’s window is the opposite of what we’d expect from her, or anyone old enough to know better.



“The Night the Ghost Got In”

advent
aroused
blaspheme
commendable
despondent
engrave
fancy
gruff
hullabaloo
indignant
intuitive
quick-cadenced
rending
trod
zither

Definitions for these words can be found in the Short Fiction Glossary on page 196.



Have students complete the vocabulary matching test for “The Night the Ghost Got In,” found at the end of this lesson.

The Short Story & Humor Elements worksheet found at the end of this lesson can help you evaluate students’ understanding of terms and concepts taught in this lesson.

Compare and Contrast Two Thurber Stories

As a class or in small groups, compose a Venn diagram for “The Night the Ghost Got In” and “The Night the Bed Fell.”

- Details in common: setting (the Thurber house at night); characters (Thurber, brother Roy, mother); references to Grandfather and his conviction that he is still fighting the Civil War; humorous misconception of reality.
- Details specific to “The Night the Ghost Got In”: neighbors; throwing of the shoes; the cops and reporters; the cause of the confusion is unknown.
- Details specific to “The Night the Bed Fell”: characters not mentioned in the other story; the cause of the confusion is known; the two beds are important to the plot.

“The Dog that Bit People”

Show the illustration from the story of the dog with the caption “Nobody Knew Exactly What Was the Matter with Him.” As a group, speculate what was wrong with the dog.

After students have learned all vocabulary words for this story, ask them to read “The Dog that Bit People” silently.

Personification

Personification, or associating human characteristics with things that are not human, can be very humorous. Ask students to scan the story, looking for examples of this literary device. In addition to making the story funnier, personification makes Muggs less of a family dog and more of a family member. This tells us quite a bit about his temperament—and the Thurbers.’ Ask students to address what each of these examples says about the dog, the family, or both. Examples include:

- “. . . he always acted as if he thought I was not one of the family.”
- “He was sorry immediately, mother said. He was always sorry, she said, after he bit someone but we could not understand how she figured this out. He didn’t act sorry.”
- “Muggs came wandering into the room like Hamlet following his father’s ghost.”

Elements of Humor

Ask students to review their notes on the elements of humor and then find examples of each element in the story. Base class discussion on the examples that students volunteer, such as:

Exaggeration: Thurber’s description of the poodle, which wore a red rubber bib and needed protection from the rain while riding in an open car, is a far-fetched example of the care and attention that people generally give to their dogs.

Situational Irony: Allowing the dog to eat at the table (because the family “was afraid to put his plate on the floor”) is not typical behavior; most owners are not afraid of their dogs, and they also generally try to keep dogs away from the table at dinner time.



“The Dog that Bit People”

imitation
ingenious
irascible
vigorous

Definitions for these words can be found in the Short Fiction Glossary on page 196.



The worksheet found at the end of this lesson contains questions about general literary terms, as well as the elements of humor. It is suitable for use with this story to assess student understanding. For additional instruction to reinforce understanding of plot and setting, see the Relevant Literary Terms section which begins on page 185.

Write Now!

Have each student write and illustrate his or her own dog story, set in the present day. Encourage use of personification.

Thurber's Fables

Discuss characteristics of fables that students already know: the animal characters have human characteristics, the stories are short in length, and there is often a lesson to be learned. (You may want to read a few of Aesop's fables to the class.)

Tell students that some of Thurber's fables parody Aesop's fables or familiar fairy tales. Define *parody* as a literary or artistic work that imitates the style of a particular author or artist, for comic effect.

"The Little Girl and the Wolf"

After reading this fable aloud, ask students to compare and contrast it with "Little Red Riding Hood." Discuss how the fable is an example of a parody. (Possible answer: *It pokes fun at the original story, which assumes that readers will believe that the girl really cannot tell the difference between a wolf and her grandmother.*)

"The Unicorn in the Garden"

Review the elements of humor presented earlier in this lesson. Ask students to find elements of humor that are at work in this fable. (Possible answer: *Surprise; the people whom the wife called to take her husband away took her instead.*)

Write Now!

Brainstorm as a class some moral or practical lessons that might make interesting fables. Then have each student choose one lesson to include in a fable, as well as a main character who will learn this lesson. Ask students to briefly outline what will happen in their fable and then write the fable. They should leave out the moral of the story so they can exchange fables with a partner, who will then supply the moral for the ending. If the suggested moral is not the one the writer had in mind, compare and contrast the writer's intention with the moral supplied by the reader. Revise the fable to be sure that its action points clearly to the moral the writer wants to teach. Use peer conferences again, edit, and write final drafts. Finally, illustrate the fable, Thurber-style.

Assessment

Ask each student to write a paragraph that offers a definition of parody and explains one example of parody as shown in a fable by James Thurber. Have them turn this paragraph in for a grade.



TECHNOLOGY LINK

Photographs of the unicorn statue near Thurber House can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/thurber.html>



TEACHING TIP

To assess students' paragraphs on parody, you may want to use the Ohio Graduation Test's 6-point writing rubric, found on page 183.

Answers for the vocabulary portion of "The Day the Dam Broke" test:

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. e | 7. v | 13. s | 19. p |
| 2. x | 8. c | 14. n | 20. j |
| 3. a | 9. t | 15. i | 21. l |
| 4. b | 10. o | 16. f | 22. q |
| 5. w | 11. d | 17. h | 23. k |
| 6. u | 12. g | 18. r | 24. m |

Answers for the vocabulary portion of "The Night the Bed Fell" test:

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. m | 6. n | 11. k |
| 2. o | 7. c | 12. g |
| 3. f | 8. e | 13. j |
| 4. a | 9. l | 14. h |
| 5. i | 10. d | 15. b |

Name _____ Date _____

Short Story & Humor Elements

Name _____

Title of Story _____

What is the setting (place and time) of this story?

List the main characters and briefly describe each of them.

What external or internal conflicts do the characters face? How are these conflicts resolved?

What is the climax of the story?

What are the elements of humor in this story?

Surprise:

Exaggeration:

Situational Irony:

Name _____ Date _____

James T. Thurber

“The Day the Dam Broke”

Directions: Match each vocabulary word with its definition.

1. ___ unable to move or resist
2. ___ state of being completely forgotten or unknown
3. ___ state of extreme confusion
4. ___ excellent or dignified
5. ___ strong belief
6. ___ orderly or logical
7. ___ bold outlaw
8. ___ to dishearten or confuse
9. ___ proof
10. ___ intensely hot or agitated
11. ___ something of little value or importance
12. ___ main road or public highway
13. ___ to drive off or make vanish
14. ___ shelter or protection
15. ___ to make milder or to calm
16. ___ embarrassed or bashful because of a mistake or accident
17. ___ to swallow up or overwhelm
18. ___ someone who predicts the future
19. ___ large group of people or things
20. ___ odd or unnatural
21. ___ peaceful and calm
22. ___ to urge, caution, or advise
23. ___ loud and clear
24. ___ very heavy, or comfortably fat

a	turmoil	i	assuage	q	exhort
b	ennobled	j	grotesque	r	prophet
c	demoralize	k	clarion	s	dispel
d	trifle	l	placid	t	authentication
e	inert	m	portly	u	coherent
f	sheepish	n	refuge	v	desperado
g	thoroughfare	o	seething	w	conviction
h	engulf	p	throng	x	oblivion

Name _____ Date _____

James Thurber

“The Night the Ghost Got In”

Directions: Match each vocabulary word with its definition.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. ___ filled with strong displeasure | 10. ___ feeling hopeless or discouraged |
| 2. ___ walked on, over, or along | 11. ___ tearing or splitting something apart |
| 3. ___ low and harsh | 12. ___ insightful or perceptive |
| 4. ___ loud noise or uproar | 13. ___ worthy of praise |
| 5. ___ imagination or fantasy | 14. ___ to cut marks into a hard surface |
| 6. ___ to speak negatively about sacred things | 15. ___ arrival or coming into being |
| 7. ___ having a fast rhythm or flow | |
| 8. ___ excited or stirred to action | |
| 9. ___ a musical instrument made of a flat box with strings | |

- | | | |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|
| a hullabaloo | f gruff | k rending |
| b advent | g intuitive | l zither |
| c quick-cadenced | h engrave | m indignant |
| d despondent | i fancy | n blaspheme |
| e aroused | j commendable | o trod |

Directions: Complete the following on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Write a paragraph that describes how three of the characters' interactions result in gaps of understanding and contradiction.
2. Choose three events from the story and write a paragraph that explains how one leads to the next.